

HARD

A horror novel by Jack R Dunn



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CHAPTER ONE

"For anyone to love a man, he must be hidden,
For as soon as he shows his face, love is gone."

—Fyodor Dostoevsky

— **Jerry-Jean** —

January

He has finished hurting her for now. She runs from the house as she always does after this. In the barn she finds the small caliber rifle he bought her for shooting crows.

"Ya get a quarter a head," he'd said, picking at his dentures with a long dirty fingernail.
"Kill twenty, Jerry-Jean, an' ya can take Saturd'y afternoon off."

Most farmers would have used noisemakers, or given her a shotgun, but he wanted them dead and he said the rifle would make her a good shot. It did.

She is sweating as she climbs the steep slope of the levee behind the house. She slips and branches from a stunted maple scratch her ankle, drawing blood. She ignores the wound, leans on her rifle to get her balance, and keeps climbing. At the top of the levee a rough Army Corps of Engineers road winds between the trees. Cicadas buzz above her in the still green. As she walks she kicks stones from the road. Her hands shake as she loads the rifle. It is a small gun, but still too large for her nine year old hands. A couple of rounds fall to the dirt, and as she kneels to pick them up, she begins to sing in a low wavering voice.

"Great big gobs of greasy grimy gopher guts."

She doesn't know the rest of the song, so she just repeats the same verse over and over. A fat green tree slug is making its way across the road in front of her. She steps on it, watching as its insides spurt out on each side of her canvas sneaker.

"Great big gobs of greasy grimy gopher guts."

She is almost a mile and a half from home now. Below her a paved road emerges from the cornfields and turns toward a trailer park that sits in the shade of the levee. Through a gap in the thick summer foliage she can see an old-fashioned Airstream trailer that has been pockmarked by a bad hailstorm. It looks like someone spent an entire afternoon crawling all over the trailer's roof with a ball-peen hammer pounding in dents. In front of the trailer a little girl in overalls is playing with a big-pawed black labrador puppy. The girl has pink glass balls in her pigtails, and her skin is nearly as dark as the dog.

Jerry-Jean raises her rifle and aims. She can feel a drop of sweat roll down behind her ear.

She whispers, "Great big gobs of greasy grimy gopher guts."

The rifle cracks. The puppy yelps and falls. The little girl with the pigtails shakes him, saying something that Jerry-Jean can't hear. Then the girl sees the blood, and starts to scream.

Jerry-Jean sits up with a gasp.

Bad dream again.

The windows are all fogged up. She wipes away the moisture with the orange-brown sleeve of her Carhartt Parka. The smoke doesn't help. Her father is the one smoking. Imperial Menthols; the thick, minty sweet smoke is everywhere. It fills her clothes and her lungs. Her father isn't saying anything. He just sits quietly, arms crossed, staring at the pickup's peeling steering wheel. He sighs, and reaches for his beer. A couple of Blue Ribbon cans already lie

crumpled by her feet. His skin is red. A burnt, wrinkled trophy of decades in the Midwestern sun. A faded blue baseball cap sits low on his head, its bill curled in an arc over his eyes. It mutters "Ford," in a dirty oval. She can't remember ever seeing him without it. He wears it to dinner. He wears it to church. He wears it for other things, too. She really has no idea what the top of her father's head looks like.

She turns back to the window and looks out at the snow, shivering. She is a strong girl. Years of heavy farm work would make anyone strong. But she slouches so the muscle usually dissolves from view. Sun burnt blond hair with the rough thick texture of corn silk falls below her shoulders in disarray. Her narrow face is paled from the long winter, and is so smooth that were it not for her hazel eyes and constant fidgeting, it might be polished stone.

She hears a rumbling, crunching sound and wipes the window again. The bus is coming; huge black tires chewing through the ice crusted plow dogs on the shoulder of the salted blacktop. Steam follows it, rippling like the tail of a kite. She forces open the door of the ice-coated truck with a crack.

"I have to go, Daddy," she says, lifting her pink backpack from among the beer cans on the truck floor.

He is still looking at the steering wheel.

"Sure okay, yer Ma'll write I guess." He pauses, chewing on his dentures. "Don' let no one Jew ya."

She closes the door and lifts an old gray suitcase from where it has been sitting in the rusted truck bed. She stands up straight, rising to her full five seven, taking a moment to stretch and take a deep breath. She immediately regrets the breath as the cold knives into her lungs. The air is bright, and clear, and she has to squint in the glare to see the bus.

It is huge, and silver, and shiny. It has stopped, still steaming, canted into the plow tossed berms of snow. She climbs awkwardly over the ice-covered, crunching, glittering, machine-made little hill. The cold stings her face and ears, but she doesn't feel it, and she doesn't slip. Big silver doors open before her with a hiss, and she feels the warm air rush out at her. It smells like a wet wool sweater. It smells like her brother's wrestling shoes. It smells like hope.

A large, grumpy looking black man in a quilted gray vest is looking down at her. On his chest is a swift silver dog.

"Well com'on girl!" He says. "We can't just sit here with the door open, it's thirty below!"

She stumbles up the grooved wet steps, feeling uncomfortable, and hands him her ticket.

"State City," he says, tearing off part of the ticket and handing it back to her. The bus is only half full and riders are spread out. She sits on the right, two seats back from the driver.

Through tinted glass she can see her father's pickup crawling back up the snow-covered half mile to the house. In the distance is the barn with its gray, sagging roof, and the bright blue vinyl siding of her parents' Hames doublewide. The bus starts forward with a lurch. She clutches her backpack close and watches everything. Rusted steel fence posts and broken stalks of last year's corn puncture the snow. Huge barrel-shaped hay bales sit at odd angles, like the discarded beer cans of giants, long dead.

A big green and white highway sign says, "Prairie Du Chien." Which everyone she knows pronounces, "prairie doo sheen." Little white saltbox houses, some not much bigger than a single-car garage, rise from the snow. Someone has nailed dozens of beer cans to a doghouse in their front yard. It is completely covered with the aluminum cylinders, and it glows in the midday sun. *Beerdog*, she thinks. The bus grumbles past the old brick false fronts of the little

downtown, past the red and yellow sign of Casey's General Store. She sees the big gray towers of the grange and then it, too, is gone, and they are in fields again. Between the fields are drainage ditches marked by stunted leafless trees, and all of it shines sharp and clear, with the white of the snow and the white of the sky.

Jerry-Jean Krvoijac sits back in the gray vinyl seat, pulls her thick blond hair behind her ears, and unzips her backpack. She pulls out a small plastic container. Inside is the fluffy pink cherry marshmallow-cream salad her mother packed for the trip. She smiles to herself as she eats her salad, and thinks; *College is going to be great; I just know it!*

– Tasha –

"What the hell do you mean, 'he's in jail?' Do you know what time it is?"

Dr. Tasha Churel shifts her tan Coach purse from one shoulder to the other, glares at the airport phone as if hoping the rage in her green-flecked brown eyes might reach through the wire, and raises her voice an octave.

"I don't care. Why couldn't you just rent something?"

She looks down at her watch, warm gold against skin the color of stained mahogany, and notices with annoyance, that despite costing more than most people's homes, it can't tell time as well as a twenty-dollar quartz Timex.

"Fine, I'll take the bus. But I expect this transportation problem to be resolved, Dolf. No, I don't care about the cost, just get it done."

Dr. Churel – she tends to be very explicit about being called "Doctor" – throws her ankle-length silver sable coat on top of the cart, already loaded down with gold-monogrammed luggage, and motions to the skycap to follow her.

The airport is filled with young soldiers, college students, and tourists. A small group of tourists walking just ahead of her are bedecked in some twisted stereotype of Americana. Virgin blue jeans, feathered cowboy hats, and elaborate snakeskin cowboy boots. They are speaking German with heavy Austrian accents.

Agitation has her walking even faster than her usual pace. She is more than six-three in the four inch heels that buttress her black leather boots, and long angry strides kill distance fast. The skycap, a rather pudgy middle-aged man, is sweating, and appears as though he might be about to suffer some sort of cardiac episode.

"Would you hurry up! It's not like eleven hours on a bus isn't wasting enough time."

The skycap looks nauseous, but wheezing, manages to catch up.

"Yes, Dr. Churel, right away."

Outside, the air is cold enough to make the skycap wince, but Tasha is unaffected. She elbows a young couple out of the way, and secures an ancient taxi. The skycap shrugs to no one in particular, and begins to load her luggage into the Checker's gigantic trunk.

"I don't suppose you'd consider driving this archaic behemoth to Iowa, driver?" Says Tasha.

"Sorry lady, but that would be a bit beyond my purview."

The cabby looks back at her through the bullet resistant glass partition with a gap-toothed grin.

"The convention caught you at a bad time, lady?"

Tasha smiles, despite a genuine wish to remain pissed off.

"Yes, what's going on anyway? Are they dot-commers or..."

The skycap is hyperventilating through the open window on her right.

"Everything is loaded up, Dr. Churel. Will there be anything else?" He says.

"No. No, thank you. I'm sorry about before, but my limo... um, never mind. Here."

Tasha hands the skycap a hundred, rolls up the window, and pushes herself back into the Checker's giant seat.

"Where to, Ma'am?" Says the driver.

Tasha shivers. She hates that word. It always reminds her of the blue-haired old women that shop for Ben-Gay and cat food at K-mart. *Their wrinkles and smiles hide a darker truth, a wild youth, a diary full of sins. They smell like baby powder.* She restrains herself.

"The Greyhound station, driver. I'm taking the bus."

"Microbiologists," says the driver into the rearview mirror.

"Huh?"

Tasha is spacing out at the Chicago snow. It does not improve her mood.

"Microbiologists. You asked what the convention was. It's Microbiologists."

Still grinning. She is beginning to think he looks like a ventriloquist's dummy.

"Oh...right."

"Say, if you don't mind my asking, Ma'am, why don't you just rent a car?"

That word again. Do I really look that old? She looks at her reflection in the window.

She is still a beautiful woman. Her unstraightened hair is tied back and falls in a fan of tight curls over her shoulders. For the last three years threads of gray have been cropping up here and there, but her hairdresser had easily erased that problem. Forty-seven years of frowns and smiles have

begun to trace thin lines across the dark skin of her face, but they are barely visible, *unless you look close.*

"I don't drive. Now, if you don't mind, I need to do some work."

She takes some papers from a slim monogrammed briefcase, and begins reading. The cabby circles through downtown twice. Tasha pretends not to notice.

– Dudley –

This is the longest he has ever been on a bus. He is tired from sleeping sitting up. His long legs are cramped from being pressed against the narrow seat in front of him. He long ago became used to the smell; body odor, the chemical toilet, dusty recycled air. But now his butt won't stop itching, and at the last rest stop he checked, and it was red and inflamed. He squirms in his seat, trying to adjust the impossible.

The blue-haired woman next to him wakes up and gives him a dirty look. She is wearing a red, blue and white flower-print dress with lace around the collar. She clutches a small cross-stitched handbag very tightly to her chest. She keeps staring at the elaborate Japanese goldfish tattoos on his left forearm, and sniffing. He wonders if the amount of sniffing would double if the goldfish on his right forearm weren't covered with fraying, magenta-colored, fiberglass cast. She has been sitting next to Dudley since Des Moines. She has very thick powder makeup on her face, and Dudley notices that she smells vaguely of fried pork.

Grimacing, he adjusts the volume on the earphone to his portable video player, and returns to watching "The Devil In Mrs. Jones," *Not particularly arousing pornography*, he thinks, *but, for a student of the genre, it is an essential historical masterwork.*

Bam! He feels a sudden and intense pain on the side of his head, and flies from his seat with the force of the impact. He lands, legs tangled, and his head thumps into the armrest of the seat across the aisle. Confused, he reaches up to touch his head. His hand comes away bloody. He is dizzy, but he can see someone with blue hair standing over him.

"You nasty little fucker!" The fuzzy blue thing says. "You disgusting little pervert! You get away from me!"

The driver seems not to have noticed any of this, or at least he's pretending he doesn't notice. *Wise man.* Dudley stands up, and bangs his wounded head into an overhead luggage bin. The pain takes an exponential jump, and he bites his tongue to avoid yelling "Fuck!" *Bitch might hit me again. This bus was clearly not built for passengers over six feet tall.* He still can't see clearly, but he manages to gather up his bag and video-player, mumble something about being a film student, and stumble to the empty three-seat bench at the back of the bus. The bench is wedged up against the chemical toilet, and the stench is strongest here, but Dudley is beyond caring. The blood from his dented head is matting his disheveled mop of brown hair, running down his right ear and dripping onto his torn yellow Dandy Warhols t-shirt. He frowns, but then decides it is no big deal. *They're a fucked up poseur band, anyway.* One of four steel post earrings is missing from his left ear, but his ear isn't bleeding, and he decides it isn't worth the risk to look for it. He directs concrete grey eyes to his DVD player. The liquid crystal display screen is cracked, and has begun to ooze a slippery gray substance onto the deck. *Shit.*

He looks out the window. They are passing rows of houses now. Old, brick, and still lit up with Christmas lights. The snow is deep, but it seems to have been cleared from most of the streets. The bus turns a corner, and crosses a little bridge, and Dudley sees the flickering florescent lights of the State City bus station. It's a squat cube of a building. Through the

oversized bay window he can see three or four rows of molded plastic seats, alternately brown and orange. A lumpy pile of rags, which must be a bum, is lying across one row. Against the far wall, an ancient video game machine called Centipede cycles endless color. A paper banner hangs across the top of the window. It reads "Welcome Eagleye Freshmen," but someone has crossed out the "men" part of freshmen, and scrawled "meat" in its place with a large magic marker.

"This is not a positive omen," Dudley says to himself, as he steps down into the snow. But at least his head has stopped bleeding.

– Lamia –

Lamia Day sits on the long wooden bench tracing the carved words in its surface with her finger. "Fuck, Tre 97', Kill all Pigs, Jesus Loves You, Tyson is a Fag call him at 555-7032 for Head, 22nd Avenue Crips." The bench talks. She thinks it must be like a church pew, but she's never been in a church.

About twenty feet away, in the dark by a vending machine, a young man in a soldier uniform has his dick out. *Penis*, she corrects herself. A person in a black latex skirt, fishnet stockings, and a yellowing rabbit fur coat is kneeling in front of the soldier. She puts his penis in her mouth. Only Lamia isn't quite sure if the she is a she. She has a bit of five-o'clock shadow showing through the rouge. Open sores peek through the fishnets from behind boney knees. The soldier tilts his head back. Lamia shivers and looks away.

The bus station is huge. It feels like the ruin of a castle, with its fifty-foot ceiling and giant columns. There is trash everywhere. A bum lies, passed out, on the bench across from her.

He is cradling a dirty stuffed doll in his arms. She recognizes it. It's the vampire puppet from Sesame Street, the Count. *I want to drink your beer.* She giggles. He has a white button on his coat. It says, "Sharpton 2004," in important blue letters.

Her father is sleeping slumped at the other end of the bench. He is drooling slightly. A tendril of saliva dangles from his lower lip to his shabby wool overcoat. His eyes twitch, and he shakes a little. *He must be having a bad dream.*

Across the lobby she sees a tall, beautiful, black woman. The woman is dressed in the kind of clothes Lamia has only seen on television. Behind her, a cart is piled high with brown suitcases. The woman appears to be arguing with the man at the counter, but Lamia can't hear what she is saying. Finally the man throws up his hands and takes the huge pile of luggage back behind the counter.

"Hey there."

A man in faded jeans and a shiny yellow bowling shirt is sitting beside her. She didn't see him sit down. He looks older than her father. He has unreal brown hair in a crisp crew cut and wrinkles around his eyes. She doesn't like his eyes.

"What's your name?"

The eyes twinkle. He holds out his hand.

"I'm Bert."

She looks up at him nervously.

"Lamia," shaking his hand.

His hand feels warm and sweaty.

"You're very pretty, Lamia. Are you Chinese?"

Why do people always ask that? He's taking too long to let go of her hand.

"I'm from Chicago."

She pulls her hand away. It feels wet. She wants to wash it.

"So where are you going, Lamia?"

He scoots closer. She can smell him now. He smells like cherries – not real cherries – but cherry flavor, like in candy or a Shirley Temple.

"State City, Iowa," her voice small.

"Well I'm going to Wichita."

He puts his hand on her thigh.

"That's in Kansas, you know?"

Rubbing her thigh through her jeans.

"I know."

She tries to push his hand away, but it's not moving.

Something tan hits the man on the side of the head with a crack, and he falls sprawling to the peeling pink linoleum floor.

"Stay away from her, you freak!" Someone is yelling.

The woman Lamia saw arguing at the counter steps from behind the bench and kicks the man between the legs with nearly enough force to lift him off the ground.

"Get the hell out of here!"

The man is gagging from the pain, but he manages to scramble away.

Talamaur Day is waking up.

"What? What's going on?"

The tall black woman glares at him.

"You need to keep a better eye on your daughter, Sir. This place is full of vermin."

Without waiting for a response she wheels around, and walks across the lobby to another bench. She opens her briefcase and begins reading papers. To Lamia it looks as if she's glowing.

"Do you still have the money?"

She starts, and then realizes it is her father speaking. She looks at him. There is not much black left in his mustache and silver whiskers are growing from his cheeks like frosted grass.

"The money, no one took the money?" He asks again.

"No Daddy, the money's still here."

He makes her take it out and count it. One hundred and thirty-seven dollars, mostly in ones and fives. She puts it back in the crumpled envelope and puts the envelope into the front pocket of her Hello Kitty backpack. The mouthless Japanese cat stares up at her with blank eyes. Thirteen is too old for Hello Kitty, at least she thinks so, but it's the only bag she has. Satisfied, her father goes back to sleep. She pulls back her long straight reddish-brown hair, and ties it into a pony-tail with a scrunchy.

The loud speaker coughs and screeches.

"Dubuque, Cedar Rapids, *squeak*...State City, Des Moines, Omaha, *squawk*...points West, gate 6."

The phantom voice repeats itself twice before she realizes it's their bus.

"Daddy, Daddy, wake up. It's our bus. We have to go."

She's pulling his arm. Finally he gets up, still blurry. Her backpack is already on, and he picks up a blue hardside suitcase. It has a bit of duct tape around it because it won't close. She is only a beat over five feet tall, but next to him she looks vertical. His shuffling slumping posture makes him look crumpled even when upright. She leads him through the crowds by the hand. At the gate she smiles, and hands the gray-vested woman their tickets.

"State City," the woman says, not really looking at them.

Lamia sees the tall black woman in the line behind them. She is reading a newspaper, and looks annoyed.

– Whitney –

This really is un-fucking-acceptable. I only wrecked the car twice. It's not like he never wrecked anything. His marriage to my mother, my high school graduation, by showing up with that slut!

Whitney Wellington Spencer is fiddling with her makeup case, and sparkling with rage as the big silver bus pulls into The World's Largest Truckstop. Hundreds of container trucks, flatbeds, and gravel carriers are lined up in loose rows around a collection of single-story glass buildings. Pink neon directs the weary to showers, food, fuel, and tools. She steps out onto icy gravel. The wind, thick with the smell of diesel, has already destroyed her straight blond bob.

Inside, she sits at the long stainless steel counter. Ice Cube is playing on the jukebox. A tall Asian man with a thin Errol Flynn mustache and pockmarked cheeks brings her a glass of water. His nametag says Van Van, which, for some reason, strikes her as remarkably funny. She starts giggling when he tells her the specials. He is reeling off a long list that includes the world's largest deep-fried pork tenderloin sandwich and something called a butt steak. She just can't stop laughing, *Van Van*, she almost falls off her stool. *It's really not funny at all.*

The man looks at her without expression, but his hands whiten against the notepad.

"Well, Miss, would you like to order?"

She has regained some of her composure.

"Yes, do you have anything vegetarian?"

Now it's his turn to laugh.

"Miss, this is a truck stop, we don't serve anything that didn't bleed at one time or another."

"Okay, I'll just have some fries and a diet soda," she sighs.

The waiter turns and clips the ticket to a spinning stainless steel wheel. Whitney looks down the counter. A giant man with a soft toothless mouth is mopping up eggs with a slice of toast. Ice Cube is singing about why you can't trust a big butt and a smile.

"Naw that's the old style," she echoes.

Her fries arrive covered with melted cheese. Puddles of orange oil, leached from the cheese, are collecting in little valleys between the fries. She is disgusted, but hopelessly hungry. She tries to dab each French fry dry with her paper napkin before she eats it. After three fries, her napkin is completely orange.

Someone slaps her hard on the ass.

"Was' up, bitch?"

A huge Indian man in his late twenties sits down beside her. His big square face smiles at her beneath close-cropped black hair. His muscles threaten to shred the black t-shirt he has tucked into worn blue jeans. There is an upside down American flag on the front of the shirt.

"Thud! Baby, what are you doing here?" Says Whitney, throwing her arms around him, and kissing him hard. Behind her someone belches loudly. She turns to see another large man of about the same age, also muscular, but less imposing due to his abnormally narrow shoulders. He is also wearing a black t-shirt, but instead of a flag it screams, "SALAD IS MURDER," in flaking white letters. He is eating her fries.

"Well I see you brought your no-necked snaggletoothed goon, as usual," she says, scowling.

The goon grins – he really is snaggletoothed – then raises a hip and farts in low wet machine-gun.

"Fuck you, Sorority Skank," says the goon.

Thud immediately bursts out in howls of hysterical laughter. The smell is overpowering, and Whitney staggers from the stool, trying to escape. Thud and the goon high-five.

"Four-hundred and eighty-seven duels and you remain undefeated, Grand Master," says Thud, but then, realizing the horror of the smell himself, "Damn bitch! What the hell do you eat?"

The goon just smiles and keeps inhaling Whitney's fries.

Thud moves to escape the fumes, too. Outside he puts an arm around her shoulders. He seems to be reaching down. Her five-foot eight-inch frame looks tiny next to the wall of muscle.

"Sorry, Babe, but you did kind of ask for that one."

She glares at him.

"He's a sick fuck. I don't know why you hang out with him."

Thud just laughs in deep base.

"Hey, where's your Beemer? I didn't see it when we came in."

"The fucker took it. Can you give me a ride back to S.C.?"

She looks up at him, doing her best lost-puppy.

"Nope, me n' Nad are goin' to Chico. Last road trip before school starts."

"But school started this morning!" pleading.

He shrugs, "Senioritis, what's your excuse?"

Nad emerges from the truck stop licking orange grease from his fingers. He hitches up his jeans. Whitney notices he has unusually high hipbones. Almost like a woman's hips. *Freak.*

"Hey Whit, that guy inside says you owe him six ninety-five for the food."

She flares, but then he stops her.

"Naw, just fuckin' with you. I paid."

He punches her softly on the shoulder, and she smiles a little.

She gets back on the bus and sits down just in time to see the boys turning circles in Thud's primer-gray Dodge Charger. They spin out and kick some gravel at a large woman trucker. Whitney sees her mouth moving, and guesses it isn't poetry coming out. The trucker woman takes after them with a tire iron, but they jet, middle fingers extended in a glorious salute.

The reflection in the bus window looks back at her with blue eyes the color of lake ice. She turns slightly to admire her cheekbones. *I could have been a model except for the height thing. Eyebrows, perfect. Nose, perfect. That asshole!* There is some smeared lipstick where Thud kissed her. She takes a compact mirror out of her purse and tries to fix it, failing badly as the bus jerks into motion.

CHAPTER TWO

"I see you and I'm so unsatisfied.

I see you and I die a little."

-Ani Difranco

– **Jerry-Jean** –

It feels like an endless line. It winds back and forth across the gigantic Purge Hall lobby a half dozen times. Jerry-Jean guesses it would be outside too if it weren't so cold. She is close to the front now. She should be, she's been here for three hours. Behind her someone whispers that University Bureaucrats should be eviscerated and garroted with their own intestines. A weak cheer erupts from those near enough to hear. She grimaces.

Not a very Christian way to talk. Think of something pleasant.

She tries to remember what they said about this building during her orientation two weeks ago. The Purge Hall lobby is a huge expanse of indoor-outdoor carpet almost half the size of a football field. Purge was built in the Cold War fifties, and reflects what was considered modern at the time. Its walls are painted with irregular patterns of colored brick, and its interior is lit by huge bay windows that stretch from floor to ceiling across the entire front of the lobby. Faux-prairie style built-in couches sit in purple ovals around the room's circumference. Rising above the lobby, the building is shaped like a large H, five stories high. On every floor, at the end of each finger of the H, there are student lounges for studying. Kitchens, game rooms, laundries, and hundreds of dorm rooms fill the remaining space. A full time maintenance, cleaning, and cooking staff fills the mouths and cleans up after Purge Hall's three thousand student residents.

The line is moving faster now. It winds past the 24-hour desk. A jockish Resident Assistant with his feet propped up on the counter is reading The Wall Street Journal and listening to safe-for-radio hip-hop.

Cool, she thinks.

The RA looks up at her and licks his teeth.

Finally, she reaches the end of the line. In the center of the lobby a large circle drops out of the floor. The circle is surrounded by a steel railing, which opens at one point to a flight of stairs. A large man in a navy blue campus police uniform is guarding the stairs. *He must weigh three hundred and fifty pounds, none of it muscle.* He is scratching his chins, and keeps shifting from one foot to the other. A girl emerges from the depths behind him. She doesn't look happy.

"Next" He says, and Jerry-Jean descends.

At the bottom of the stairs is a little semicircle of windows with counters like a bank. The floor down here is vinyl, and it smells like pine cleaner. On her right, is a large room glowing with vending machines. An irritable looking woman in her late fifties looks up at Jerry-Jean from behind the counter.

"Student I.D." she says.

Jerry-Jean hands the woman her card. She runs the card through a magnetic strip reader. A printer behind her spits out a piece of paper, which she hands to Jerry-Jean.

"You've been reassigned. Your room was reclassified 008-g. You'll be sent to emergency housing until we can find something. Don't call. You will be notified by mail. Next."

Jerry-Jean looks at the woman, stunned.

"But I was just here two weeks ago. They said my room was ready. What's 008-g? I I..."

The woman doesn't even look up.

"We are two-thousand units short. Pilgrim Hall burned down last week. 008-g is an affirmative action transfer. The printout describes how to appeal. It also indicates how you get to emergency housing. Next."

Stunned, Jerry-Jean climbs, her big gray suitcase thumping up the steps beside her. Out in the snow she takes a deep breath. *Ouch, lung burn again.* It's already dark. Twelve blocks later

she is at the State City Rec Center. The Rec Center is a huge flat yellow-brick building filled with sports facilities, swimming pools, and classrooms for clubs and community craft courses. The University has set up hundreds of cots in the indoor basketball courts. The room is mostly dark, but there are small florescents buzzing near the doors, so she can see well enough to keep from tripping over someone. It smells like sweat, and dirty gym shoes. Shadowed forms shift under grey Salvation Army blankets, and from somewhere in the dark comes a wet raspy snore. Most of the cots are full, but she finds an empty one near the bathrooms and collapses, fast asleep.

– Tasha –

"Do you take credit cards?"

The young desk officer says they do, and takes Tasha's American Express Platinum Card. He swipes the card and hands it back to her.

"500 dollars Miss, sign here."

He was already on her good side. *So handsome, it's almost painful to look at him. He couldn't be much more than twenty-one.* She sighs, signs, and he leads her downstairs. As he opens the door she notices the smell of bleach, strong, over a faint background scent of urine.

"The City doesn't keep many prisoners here. We only have six holding cells. Mostly we put 'em over in County. It's only a few blocks from here, but the Sarge figured your boy'd be out pretty quick, and besides there's a ton of Mexicans up at county, 'n your boy looks kinda fragile, if you don't mind my say'n so."

He pronounces Mexicans, Mex-ee-cans. Tasha stifles a wince, but says nothing. Asleep on a narrow bunk at the back of the first cell, is a small young man. They let him keep his skateboard, and he is hugging it like a child might hug a stuffed toy. He is wearing frayed jeans large enough to construct a tent. A neon orange parka four sizes too big covers him, twisted-spike blond hair peeking through the hood.

"Colby, wake up boy. You've been bailed out."

The cop unlocks the cell door. The kid wakes up with a jerk, and quietly follows Tasha up the stairs and out into the snow.

"I'm really sorry Professor Churel. Those cops are assho...um they target people like me without cause." He stutters a little. "I-I-I'll pay you back."

She turns and looks at him. Up close he doesn't look quite so young, maybe twenty-five. He has thick eight-gauge rings in his ears. They flash in the streetlight.

"Why don't you come back to the loft and we'll talk about class. We only have four hours till it starts, anyway."

He brightens; clearly pleased he isn't in trouble.

Tasha's loft is really just the top floor of a stubby downtown apartment building. She has the fourth floor. The second and third floors are Housing and Urban Development welfare apartments, and the ground floor is occupied by a bar.

"So I was just skating in the ramp, you know? And that cop rolls up on me, and bam! I'm in the tank. There weren't even any cars in the ramp."

Colby is gesticulating to embellish his story. A tall blond man with deeply chiseled features pours him some more hot chocolate, and nods in response.

The room is very masculine. Dark oversized leather armchairs. Heavy ancient wooden chests serve as end and coffee tables. Tasha settles into the chair opposite the young man, and begins talking with great animation about the approaching lecture. He takes notes. Sarah Vaughn sings, low in the background. The tall blond man retreats to the kitchen, and begins washing dishes.

"No Dolf, why don't you leave those for tomorrow. You must be very tired."

Dolf returns to the living room and bows, "By your leave Dr. Churel." Then, removing his apron, he disappears down a darkened hallway.

Convinced they are prepared, Tasha leads the young man to the door.

"Oh, I almost forgot."

Colby is digging in his backpack. He pulls out a large padded manila envelope.

"It came to your box while you were in New York. No note, no return address. I checked the postmark. It was mailed from right here in State City. Is it important?"

She tears open the tab and dumps the contents out on the chest in front of them. There is a compact disk marked, "DGSE1993CDS56dhampir" in a jewel case, a square clear plastic cartridge, and a small gold pin. She picks up the cartridge. It has a thick bluish disk inside. The blue disk has writing on it. Cyrillic writing. She translates it.

"Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, 14th People's Navy, 3rd Nuclear Electric Boat Fleet, 1024194507091TK-205-1991."

He grins, seeing her surprise. She defuses his smile with a shrug.

"Probably not. I'm guessing some sort of document file from 1991. That was pretty much the end, so I think it's unlikely it's anything significant. Still, we'll take a look."

He picks up the pin.

"What about this?"

She looks. It is an eagle clutching a trident.

"That is a U.S. Navy SEAL insignia," she says. "They call it a Budweiser. SEALs aren't known for giving them away in letters. Weird."

– Dudley –

"Student ID."

He hands her the card.

"Dudley Eritik?" She looks up at him.

"Yes."

"You don't look so good."

She hands him the Dorm reassignment sheet, and explains about the flood and the fire at Pilgrim Hall. He sighs, and trudges up the stairs.

At the 24-hour desk he picks up his keys. The pixy blond Resident Assistant behind the counter titters, "Wow, tongue stud. I know what those are good for."

He sticks it out at her and wiggles it. She lights up. *Don't look so good, my ass.*

"You're in the 400 West Lounge. I don't think it has a number. Just go to the end of the hall."

He sticks his tongue out at her again, then turns in the direction she pointed. The elevators are right in front of him, but there is a headache-orange out-of-order sign on the door. He pulls open the heavy fire door to the stairs and starts up.

There is a man in front of him. The man is running down the stairs very fast. It looks like Dudley is about to get run over, but when the man is almost on him, he cuts left and keeps running. The man is very short. Perhaps only five foot two, and very muscular, although it's hard to tell because he's wearing a loose-fitting black rubber jogging suit. It squeaks a bit as he runs. Dudley continues up the stairs. But then rubber boy is back, this time going in the opposite direction. Sweat is running down his cheeks and dripping onto the rubber making it glisten. He passes four more times before Dudley finally reaches the fourth floor.

The hall of Purge Fourth Floor West extends toward campus in a perfect straight line. The floor is shabby indoor-outdoor carpet that has been stained so many times it is difficult to determine what the original color might have been. There are dozens of gray steel doors on either side. Some elaborately decorated. Collages, obscene photographs, and complex altars to the beer gods cover doors to Dudley's right and left. Most of the doors have note pads or dry-erase boards. Pens dangle from cords made of chain, piano wire, and even duct tape. It smells like Indian food. *Curry, very hot.*

The thought of hot food makes him thirsty, so he stops at the water fountain. Unfortunately it is filled with what looks like dried vomit. *Not that thirsty.*

From just ahead of him, Dudley hears an ear-punching feedback squeal and then the steady hum of a single cord being played over and over again. As he passes an open door, he sees a very fat girl sitting cross-legged with a metallic-fleck sliver electric base. Clothes and books are piled all around in no particular order. She is sitting between two concert amplifiers, each at least seven feet tall. The cord is thumping in his chest, and for a moment he hopes his heart won't stop. The girl looks up through neon pink hair, smiles at him, and waves. He waves back.

At the end of the hall is a door with a window. Above the window a small placard reads PH4W LOUNGE. An upside down American flag blocks his view into the room. In one corner of the window there is a clear sticker that has a parachute with wings on it. Below the window a small poster proclaims, "I (heart) animals, they're delicious," and someone has scrawled "sick killers" on the poster in pen. Dudley tries the doorknob, but it's locked. He uses his key and opens the door.

It smells clean. Like the spray starch his mother used to put on his shirt collars for Sunday school when he was still young enough to be forced to church. The room is bright. Windows from floor to ceiling dominate three of the four walls. Tan fifties-hip curtains are collected in each corner. The room is open in the center, and on each side it is divided into two parts with purple office cubicle dividers. In the open center sits a couch and a couple of uncomfortable looking armchairs. In front of them, with its back to the windows is a large television.

There are posters on the cubicles to the left, so he turns right. A stained sheet-less mattress on an institutional steel frame greets him. He falls on it, melting into the dirty canvas. *Sleep is a good thing.*

– Lamia –

Lamia is trying to wash her hair with the pink soap from the wall dispenser. It isn't working. She has washed it twice already and it still feels gritty. But she decides she shouldn't complain. At least she is able to shower. Everyone at emergency housing seems to stink, and she had to wait in line for almost an hour to get into the State City Rec Center women's locker room.

The shower area is a big blue-tiled box with chrome showerheads every three feet. There is no privacy.

At first she was embarrassed to be naked in front of all these strangers, but she is beginning to realize that none of them are paying any attention to her. A pale blond girl is at the shower next to her. *A real blond*, thinks Lamia, seeing a gold patch of pubic hair. The blond girl seems even more self conscious than Lamia, and tries to keep her back to the rest of the women in the shower. *It's sad, she isn't horribly ugly, or anything, why is she so embarrassed?* The girl's thick blond hair is out of control, even when wet, and it drips on her shoulders as she wraps herself in a towel and dashes into the changing area. Lamia keeps watching as she leaves, but then decides she has to pee, and forgets all about it.

Later she and Talamaur take the bus to the place to get food stamps. It is a plain cinderblock building a dozen blocks from the rec center in a residential neighborhood that is filled with perfect little ranch houses. There is a machine that dispenses paper numbers indicating place in line. Lamia takes a number, but they are first in line, so it doesn't matter. The woman at the counter is very kind. She has lots of forms for them to fill out. They go and sit in a big waiting room for hours. Lamia fills out all the forms, and then she is bored. Everyone around them looks bored, too. The room is filled with metal folding chairs on peeling linoleum. It smells like correction fluid, and every thirty seconds a loud buzzer goes off announcing that the next number in line may step forward. The waiting room is now so full that a lot of people are standing up in the back. At last, at almost four o'clock, another woman calls them into a cubicle. This one doesn't seem friendly. She won't talk to Lamia, and she keeps asking her Father a lot of questions. Lamia has to kick him under the table to keep him paying attention. In the end, the

woman gives them the food stamps and a big yellow envelope with HUD written on the front. She tells Lamia they can go to their new apartment tomorrow.

Back at the Rec Center, Lamia is offered two comic books by an old man in a Salvation Army uniform. All his buttons and buckles are very brightly polished, and his pants are pressed with a perfect crease. He smiles at her, but his eyes seem very sad. Sad and hurt. *I wonder what happened to him. What he lost.* She takes the comic books. The first is a dog-eared spider-man. It's okay, but it's number two in a five part series. It makes her uncomfortable to not know the beginning or end. The second is better. It is about a girl super hero named Razor. She has big blades on her arms, and she curses a lot.

Across from her, on the second cot over, Lamia notices the blond girl she saw in the shower. The girl is reading a book. Fyodor-something. A long Russian name. Lamia doesn't even try to sound it out. She remembers the Russian family that lived down the hall from her in Chicago. *They always smelled like cigarettes.* The blond girl is crying while she reads. Tears slip down her cheeks and spot the pages of her book.

In the cot to Lamia's left, her father is mumbling in his sleep. She turns to look at him. He farts loudly and rolls over. She sits on her cot and stares at his back for a long time.

– Whitney –

It's late. Almost midnight. The salted slush of the Bobcat plowed sidewalk has long ago turned back into salty ice. It is jagged and slippery, but Whitney is used to ice. She is on Clinton street, two blocks from the State City bus station and eight blocks from home. The bus station

doubles as State City's only taxi company but all the cabs were out when she arrived. *Fucking shit heads.*

She has given up carrying her suitcases, and now she just drags them across the ice. Her hands are numb. The cashmere-lined leather gloves look good, but they aren't very warm.

She is past the Pentacrest, the central hub of State University, which is composed of four large columned buildings styled like the temples of the Greeks, and set around the old golden-domed capital building that serves as a museum and a reminder that State City was once where Iowa's powerful came to pass legislation. On her right are the low-rent frat houses that are closest to campus. They are mostly brick and Victorian. Some have sagging couches on their front porches. She passes the big half-timbered Lambda Ki house, its solemn Elizabethan facade offset by chili pepper Christmas lights and a neon Corona sign in the window. An icicle covered volleyball net sags in the front yard, and a seven-foot tall snowman sits in the driveway. It has bottle caps for eyes, and a giant erect snow dick complete with snowballs. *Typical.*

On her left are the huge north side dorms. She can see students talking and studying in groups through the giant bay windows of the Purge Hall lounge. Now her nose is numb too. Old Brick church, the Honors House, and finally isolated in a sprawling yard, the Undergraduate Advising Center; a small wood colonial with an old fashioned low porch. Finally, shining in the streetlights, Whitney sees the tall white ionic columns of the Delta Delta Delta house.

"Can I help ya, help ya, help ya." She mumbles, mimicking an ancient Saturday Night Live skit.

"Whit! Everybody, Whit's back!"

Sara Masani, all smiles and plaid pajamas, is pulling her into the warm. It smells like perfume and cookies. Someone takes her bags. As she is pushed into a red wingback she hears the thumping of dozens of feet coming down the grand staircase behind her.

"Well?"

She is surrounded by fake-and-bake brown faces, and straight blond hair.

"Well, what? I had to take the bus. It sucked. The asshole," universal code for her father, "...made me go to Martha's Vineyard, and then he took back my Beemer. That's all. It was very fucked up."

Coos of sympathy, and sour looks all around.

Sara hands her a tall nonfat mocha, and air kisses her cheek.

"Sorry sweetie. You didn't miss much. We had the New Years Pageant. Kim blew chunks in the Jacuzzi..."

Kim interrupts from the back.

"I did not. Just because I was passed out, doesn't mean it was my puke. I..."

"Okay, okay. Somebody blew chunks in the Jacuzzi, and there's a rumor the Alpha Thetas had, like, some kind of gay orgy."

Whitney grimaces.

"Eeeew! Some of those guys are really fat. I did not need that image Sara."

Various giggles. Sara starts again.

"Oh, and get this! You remember that book that came out a long time ago The Bridges of Madison County?"

She vaguely remembers a bad movie involving a dumpy-looking Meryl Streep.

"Sure, sort of."

Sara's eyes are wide open, and her voice drops an octave.

"Well they're making a porno from it. And they're doing it here! It's called 'The Bitches of Madison County,' and they're auditioning college students. Isn't that mental?"

Whitney nods, and takes a sip of mocha.

Kim girl speaks up from the back again, "Sara said she might go try out for it."

More giggling.

"What I said, was that I wonder what it would be like?" Said Sara blushing. "I mean I bet it's like bungee jumping, or something. Kind of a scary thrill."

Whitney laughs, and gets up.

"You always were a hootchie Sara."

Sara throws a pillow at her as she heads for the curving grand staircase.

Whitney checks her e-mail, but there is so much she decides to deal with it later. She puts her laptop on the bed, and picks up the phone. Speed dial. Her room is stuffy, but it's too cold to open a window, so she props open her door with a shoe.

"Hey little brother. Yeah, I got back okay."

She sits at the vanity next to her bed, and begins to take off her make-up. The mirror is bordered with dozens of photos of friends. Whitney is in some of them. On the wall behind her plac and academic awards hang in perfect rows below posters showing Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, and a floor plan of Frank Lloyd Wright's *Falling Water*.

"Is Dad back from Singapore yet? Yeah, I guess not."

She's putting on cream now, and soon her face is a white mask.

"You won? Wow! Turning into a real jock kid. In a few years the girls will be all over you... Well you'll like it when you're older."

She puts on thick plaid flannel pajama bottoms and an oversize t-shirt.

"Well Cheshire Hills can't be very good, they only got a lacrosse team last year."

Whitney sits cross-legged on the bed, scratching under her breasts, relief after twelve hours in an uncomfortable bra. She lights a candle on the vanity and the room begins to fill with the scent of vanilla.

"I have to go. Study hard okay. Okay, I love you too, Cassius."

CHAPTER THREE

"Sweet dreams are made of this."

-Eurythmics

– **Jerry-Jean** –

"You can start tomorrow. It's 20 hours a week, six to ten, Monday through Friday. It's a good thing you came along, Miss Krvoijac; I just lost three baggers. Our turnover rate is astronomical. I'm afraid this isn't the most glamorous place to work."

The skinny man in the white apron is smiling at her. She smiles back, and shakes his hand. *A job!* Jerry-Jean feels the panic that had begun to grow in her pull back.

When she steps outside snow is falling in big wet flakes. There are no sidewalks at the Elmdale campus so she walks in the street. Crystals of salt and sand crunch under her boots. At the bus stop she pushes herself into the corner, and looks back at the State University Laundry through scratched Plexiglas. It is a low gray windowless building. Utterly institutional. There are buildings all around her. Most mirror the Laundry in their austerity. Poured-in-place concrete walls and steel doors. She notices cameras mounted on the corners of some of them, moving in a

slow steady sweep. One of the cameras stops mid-arc, pointing at her. She looks at it. It looks back. Then it is moving again, as if studying the snow.

Sitting on the bus, she watches the winter and fills out her forms. W-4, I-9, student laundry liability waiver. The bus driver is a chubby sandy-haired boy about her age. He's playing heavy European breakbeat techno on a little boom box wedged between the bus's dashboard and windshield. A girl is sleeping on the bench behind the driver. Jerry-Jean wonders how the girl can sleep with the music playing. A headache begins to throb at the base of her skull.

The bus is moving slow to compensate for the lack of visibility. It takes almost forty-five minutes to get back to the main campus. She gets off at the student union.

Inside, the granite steps are worn and bowed from years of foot traffic. She walks past a coffee shop, and a large group of students watching Jerry Springer on the lobby TV. Then she runs into the line. It loops through four layers of rope barriers before it even crosses the threshold of the University Bookstore. Some students are sitting on the floor between the barriers. A group of guys are playing Dungeons and Dragons in line. A tall boy with longish dirty hair rolls some clear dice, and suddenly looks frustrated. His friends laugh. Resigned, Jerry-Jean takes out the lunch she bought earlier at BurgerBomb and tries to finish her Neutron Burger and fried cheese.

After a long wait, she is only able to buy books for one of her five classes, Rhetoric 1. All the others were ordered at a private bookstore across the Pentacrest. Since it's private she can't charge them on her student I.D. card. No money, no books.

Walking up the hill, tears freeze in streaks on the collar of her Parka. She walks through the little mall at the top of the hill to warm up. Only a dozen stores and a little theater, but it seems big to her. Two girls with short platinum hair and long crushed velvet skirts are walking in

front of her, holding hands. She speeds up, and walks past them, trying not to look. Her stomach feels funny.

At the Rec Center, she goes to the service desk to ask about her mail. Her University Bill, which she can't pay. A form letter from the Alumni Association asking her to contribute. And a letter from Student Housing. *At least that is hopeful.* She hesitates, says a little prayer, and opens it. *A room! A room!* She quickly says another prayer just to be sure. The letter says she can pick up her key tomorrow at Purge Hall. Smiling so wide it hurts, she runs to her bunk and throws down her books. Crime and Punishment falls from her pillow to the floor. She's been reading it since she got here. *Maybe something less depressing would be better.*

Jerry-Jean gets up to find something on the library cart the Salvation Army has set up in the hall. She finds a Louis Lamour.

An agitated young man dressed all in black is talking on the pay phone next to her. He's holding his University bill in one hand. She remembers the bills she can't pay, and her smile evaporates. She can feel the panic creeping back. She manages to hold back the tears this time, and fingertips pressed numb into her book, she returns to her bunk.

– Tasha –

"No, it won't fit in any of our cartridge drives."

Tasha is standing at the State University Computer Center help desk, and feeling no help. To her left, dozens of mainframes and blinking supercomputers hum behind temperature controlled glass. This place has an antiseptic hard-science atmosphere that makes her cringe.

"Well can't you rig something up?"

The strange, pretty, raver girl behind the desk looks up at her through beaded braids.

"No, we are limited to the equipment we have on hand. You should probably try Computer Engineering."

Tasha is annoyed. *This shouldn't be so difficult.*

"Well can you tell me anything?"

At this the girl smiles. She pulls her t-shirt down over a dark tribal belly tattoo, and sits back.

"Well yes. We know it's a WORM disk. That stands for Write-Once-Read-Many. It means that the disk could have data added to it, but could not be erased or written over without being destroyed. Kind of like a CD-R but totally Jurassic. It looks like it was based on an early eighties IBM designed WORM disk, but the cartridge has different guide slots. Computer Engineering may be able to build a drive that can run it."

"What about the other disk? The CD?"

The girl smiles again and hands her back the envelope containing both disks.

"Actually it isn't a CD. It's a DVD, but we can't play it either."

Tasha is exasperated.

"Why? It's new enough isn't it?"

The girl sighs.

"It's not a hardware problem. The DVD is encrypted. Some kind of algorithm. We tried PGP and some other decryption protocols. Nothing worked. Not that much of a surprise. We aren't really equipped for serious decryption. I don't know what kind of clearance you have, Professor Churel, but if I were you I'd try Defense or NSA. They can decrypt most anything. Otherwise, try to find a cracker."

Tasha takes the envelope and puts it in her brief.

"Okay, what's a cracker?"

The girl leans forward.

"You didn't hear this from me, okay?"

Tasha nods.

"A cracker is a specialized kind of computer hacker. Like phreakers mess with phone systems, crackers break into things, crack codes, destroy stuff. Most virus builders are crackers, and..." the girl leans forward even more, and drops her voice to a whisper. "...you can probably find one at a twenty-six-hundred meeting."

"Twenty-six hundred?"

The girl gets off her stool, and walks around the counter. She takes Tasha's arm, and walks her over by a humming vending machine.

"Look, this is really serious. I mean, I could lose my job. The Secret Service keeps a pretty close eye on our department. I don't know where or when they meet. It's no secret, I just don't know. You need to pick up a 2600 magazine. They list all the meetings. I think they sell them at that store in the Ped Mall."

This girl is genuinely scared. Tasha puts a hand on her shoulder.

"Relax kid. I was never here."

The girl returns to a more natural slouch.

"Thanks, Professor Churel."

The State City Ped mall is really just a couple of blocks of street that has been cut off from vehicle traffic and bricked over. During the summer it is a popular gathering place, but in the ice of winter it's empty. Two story brick buildings line both sides, ground floors occupied by

bars, clothing stores, and cafés. Big planter boxes made of brick or stacks of railroad ties sit here and there, some empty, some sporting scraggly young trees that stand naked in the cold of winter. Tasha finds the magazine store closed. Too tired to be further annoyed, she stops for a latte at a little coffee cart that is strung with twinkling UFO-shaped lights, and walks the two blocks home.

She climbs the stairs, dragging a bit. On the third floor landing she sees a young girl with dark reddish-brown hair and Asian features. The girl is sitting on the stairs reading a comic book. She looks familiar. Then Tasha remembers the Chicago bus station. The girl speaks first.

"Hi. You live here?"

Tasha stops and leans against the rail.

"Yes. They need to put in an elevator."

The girl closes her comic book. Tasha sees a woman in spandex, with blades on her arms, on the cover.

"I thought only poor people lived here. Is there a library in State City?" Asks the girl. "I don't have anything to read."

Tasha smiles.

"Yes, the best. Where's your dad?"

The girl looks down, embarrassed.

"Asleep."

Tasha extends a hand.

"I'm Tasha."

The girl hesitates, then takes it.

"Lamia."

Tasha pushes off the rail and starts back up the stairs.

"I have some books Lamia. You could ask your father, and come upstairs. You can borrow them if you like."

Lamia shrugs, and jumps up.

"He doesn't care. I go where I want."

The girl thumps up the stairs after Tasha with the characteristic awkwardness of early adolescence.

– Dudley –

Dudley is in a white room on a pure white futon. There's a red-haired girl there, and she's naked, and he's about to go down on her, and Colonel Sanders is there. Not the cartoon Colonel Sanders, but the real old southern plantation owner with a pressed white linen suit, white hat, and holding a carved zebra wood cane with a silver rooster's head handle. And Dudley is wondering how many slaves he owns. And Colonel Sanders is asking Dudley if he would like his pussy in Original Flavor or New Honey Barbecue. And Dudley is thinking that actually Honey Barbecue sounds pretty good. But he's feeling really heavy. And he realizes that he's feeling really heavy because Colonel Sanders is sitting on his chest. And Colonel Sanders says, "Should I carve him a third smile G?" And now the Colonel is tapping him on the forehead with his cane; only it's not a cane, it's the flat side of a knife.

"Whaa...?" Says Dudley.

"Maybe an emergency tracheotomy?" Says a voice. "It's always good to practice."

As his vision clears, Dudley sees an inhumanly large Native American man sitting astride his chest. The man's knees are pinning Dudley's arms to the mattress, and he can't move. Worst of all, the man is tapping him on the forehead with this very large knife. The man is grinning, a very wide, bright grin.

"Do you see this?" He asks Dudley, turning the knife so it flashes in the light.

Dudley swallows.

"This is a Vietnam War era Gerber Mark II fighting knife. Marine Force Recon units used them to kill silently on their search and destroy missions. Notice the five degree tilt." He holds the knife so Dudley can see that it is, in fact, slightly bent at the hilt. "An angle precisely calculated by Gerber engineers to reach the heart from under the sternum. Just slip it in and give it a little twist."

Dudley is beginning to feel sick.

"I think it's time for the song, G." The disembodied voice again.

The large Native American turns and looks at someone.

"Ah yes, right you are, Nadley, old chum. Never let it be said that we fell short on hospitality."

Then the large man is no longer on top of him, and he is being dragged into the open area of the lounge. There, he is pushed into a chair by a large Caucasian man with no neck, who he assumes, is the one called Nadley.

The two men face him; arms interlocked at the elbow like some insane homicidal chorus line. The Nadley one takes a long tuning fork from his back pocket, and whacks himself in the head with a resonant bong.

"Welcome: The Riverdance version in the key of C-flat." He says, without much emotion. Then they begin to dance a very bad Irish jig, and sing in perfect unison.

"We fucked your mom for a quarter.

She gave us back a dime.

She said our cocks are so damn big,

It ought to be a crime.

She said she loved your father.

She said she would have stayed.

But she let out a shout,

When she found out

That he sucked dicks all day!"

They finish with a grand flourish and a bow, again in unison. Dudley is so shocked he doesn't know what to say. Then he is clapping, because some how it seems like the right thing to do, and mumbling to himself that he must be losing his mind.

"Stuart Mullo, most recently of Fort Bragg, North Carolina; everyone calls me Nad."

The neckless one has extended a hand, and Dudley shakes it.

"And this is Thud Wardog of the Lakota Oglala Itesica. Don't ever call him a Native American, or he'll rip out your pancreas and make you eat it."

Dudley stares, confused. *They look too old to be college students.*

"Uh, okay...I'm Dudley Eritik, um, Portland."

Thud is puttering in his cubicle, and muttering about Amerigo Vispucci and fucking wops, or something to that effect.

"Hey man, you want a job?"

Dudley is lost in the weirdness of all this.

"Huh?"

Nad thumps him on the back.

"Dud, man, you want a job? Me and Thud work at the University Art Museum; totally laid back man, you don't have to do shit."

Nad flops onto the couch, and turns on the TV. An infomercial for something that slices and dices.

"'Cause of the flood all we really do is sit at the loading dock and study. The Salvation Army even brings us free food. It's pretty good."

Thud emerges from behind the cubicle wearing a navy blue blazer with, "State University Museum of Art," embroidered in gold above the pocket, a white shirt, black clip-on tie, and perfectly pressed blue pants.

"Regnum polyesterum pro fratria Deus," he says, majestically.

"Um, I think you declined that wro..."

Nad interrupts Dudley.

"I declined to let your sister give me a rim job, but she just wouldn't take no for an answer."

Thud titters, and punches Nad in the arm.

"The Rule of Polyester for the Brotherhood of God! Rent-a-pigs. So you want the job, or what?"

Dudley shudders, but he knows he needs the extra money.

"Yeah, I guess. Thanks guys, I am strapped."

Nad changes the channel again. Now he's watching Ren and Stimpy.

"Well get a coat man, we've got to go." Thud is pulling a giant military parka over his blazer.

"What? Now?"

Dudley is putting on his coat. He is vaguely aware that he stinks. He still hasn't had a shower. But before he can finish the thought, he finds himself in the deep snow, and climbing up an embankment through a stand of scrawny trees.

Thud has been talking nonstop since they left.

"...They're like grumpy old women really. They gossip, and argue, and bitch all the time. It's that they live in such a small world, you know? Nad says that the narrower a person's frame of reference, the more significance they tend to apply to small things. Mostly they limit their conversation to food, sports, and office politics. They tend to repeat themselves, but just let it go. Bob is really the one to look out for. He's the lead guard. Just do whatever he says, and stay on his good side. He makes the schedule, and if he decides he doesn't like you, he'll fuck your hours. Always be on time. Never call in sick. You adhere to all that and it's smooth sailing. This really is the easiest job on campus. The full-timers sound a little rough around the edges, but they're really good guys. And don't underestimate them; just because they're in a shit job, doesn't mean they're stupid..."

The two men are walking on the ice-covered catwalk of a railroad trestle. There is no railing, and the walk is only ten inches wide. Below them the flooded, and partly frozen, Iowa River crackles and crunches. Dudley interrupts.

"Is this the only way to get to the museum?"

Thud looks back at him, annoyed.

"Both the ped bridges are out of commission from the flood. Bob says it's worse than '93. We could have gone all the way back to the road bridge, but that adds a quarter mile, and that would make us late. Don't fall in though, unless you want to be your own nightlight, that is."

"What?"

"You don't want to touch the river. The University Hospital's cardiology department did a long-term study using dogs. It lasted like fifteen years. Anyway, they used stray dogs as test subjects. I guess they are big enough, and have hearts that are similar to humans. Basically, the study consisted of them pumping the dogs full of radioactive fluids so they could watch the blood flow, and then inducing different types of heart attacks."

"Oh my God, that's horrible."

"Yeah, fucked up, right? Well by the time the study was finished they had like thirty thousand radioactive dog corpses stuffed in oil drums at the Elmdale campus. When the flood happened, some of the barrels got swept away and ended up down here. It's a real cluster-fuck. There's been a lot of protesting, and the University was forced to come up with a plan to dispose of them."

"What are they going to do?"

"They've already started. They're using a big furnace at the Physical Plant to incinerate them. See that chimney?" Thud points to a tall brick smokestack rising from the river's edge almost a half-mile down stream. "That's where they're doing it. The University president made a big speech to calm the natives. She promised that the residual airborne radiation would only increase regional cancer risks by two percent. The equivalent of drinking a case of saccharine-laced diet soda every day for twenty years, or some such bullshit." Thud sneers. "They only burn them at night so you can't see the smoke, but sometimes you can smell it."

Now they are trudging around a pebble-surfaced building half the size of a football field. The concrete walls are windowless and over twenty feet tall. "State University Museum of Art," is written in large raised lettering on one side. Sandbags are piled up against the front of the building six feet high. Strips of broken ice stick out from the bags at various heights, indicating the rise and fall of the bloated river. They reach the back of the museum, and a bright square of light shines on them from out of the gray. In the light Dudley can see a collection of hard looking men standing around a large green generator. The men are clad in brown Carhartt parkas and overalls. One of them throws a switch, and the generator whines, belches, and starts, issuing a thin tendril of blue smoke, and sounding like the hammers of the gods.

They open the steel door beside the loading dock, and climb a short flight of stairs to the dock. Inside, two men in their mid-fifties are sitting on either side of a cluttered desk. They are both dressed like Thud, with matching blazers and clip-on ties. A large bulletin board covered with notices and schedules covers the wall behind them. Below the desk a small trashcan is overflowing with BurgerBomb bags and cups. Despite the open door, the dock smells like fried cheese. Across from the desk sits a collection of small lockers and a couple more chairs. There are big rubber boots lined up beneath the chairs. The guard with the salt-and-pepper beard stands, and presses a button to close the loading dock door. As the door closes the hammer of the generator outside dulls from painful to merely loud. Thud grins, and throws his parka on a chair.

"Hey Bob, hey Ken, what's going on?"

The larger of the two men shifts in his chair and smooths his gray mustache.

"Same old thing. They got the generator working again, so the pumps should be up. Me an Crazy Ken, here, are gonna go home and do a little work around the garage."

Bob makes a drinking motion with his hand, and guffaws.

"We'll be drunker'n a couple of peach orchard boars afore eight."

He stands up, smoothing his tie.

"Who ya got there with ya?"

The guard is looking at Dudley from under bushy gray eyebrows. Dudley feels like he's being subjected to some sort of boot camp inspection.

"This is Dudley. He's me n' Nad's new roommate. You said you were looking for guys, so..."

Bob stands up and shakes Dudley's hand. His grip is very strong.

"Bob Vukodlak, this here is Ken Kasy. So you need a job?"

Dud does his best to look confident.

"Yes sir. I just started here at State. I'm pretty poor, I guess."

Bob sits down, and begins putting on a pair of the big rubber boots.

"Just call me Bob, and put these on," he hands Dudley a second pair of boots. "I'll take you on the grand tour."

Ken frowns at Bob, takes a sip of coffee, and opens a ragged newspaper. The headline on the front page shouts, "Nuclear Canine Archipelago!"

– Lamia –

The little second floor apartment isn't that bad. The place is furnished, poorly, but furnished. It has a bedroom, a living room with attached kitchenette, and a small but clean bathroom. Talamaur has the bedroom, and Lamia plans to sleep on the couch. It's lumpy, smells a bit like mice, but it's better than the pipe cluttered closet that was her room in Chicago. The

HUD woman said they could get more stuff from Goodwill or the Salvation Army if they needed it. She gave Lamia the numbers to call. The woman even got her dad a job interview.

Earlier, she had unpacked the entire contents of her Hello Kitty bag. She carefully folded each shirt and pair of pants. All together it only took up one of the drawers in the dresser. After she unpacked, she and Talamaur had dinner. Macaroni and cheese. She made it herself, and she didn't even burn it. Lamia thought it was pretty good, but Talamaur had started weeping halfway through and couldn't finish. She cleaned up, while her father went to lie down.

She turns on the TV. It is small, and the picture doesn't come in very well, but the sound makes her feel less alone.

She sits by the window watching the college students roving from bar to bar, and listening to the TV. Her stomach hurts, kind of low, below her belly button. She tries not to think about it. Across the street a girl and a boy burst out onto the street from a crowded bar. The girl looks like she's yelling. She is Asian, pretty, and dressed very well. The boy is afraid. The girl gesticulates, her face contorted with rage. Lamia can feel the warmth of her anger, even from a distance. The TV talks.

"...Flooding continues throughout the Midwest including most of Eastern Iowa..."

The boy extends his hand. He's crying now. Lamia can see the tears shining on his cheeks in the streetlight.

"...inches of snow over the next week. Highs in the twenties, lows in the teens..."

The girl is yelling now. Lamia tries to read her lips. *Fucking bastard*. The boy falls to his knees. He is begging. Lamia looks away.

"...passed the new antiterrorism bill today..."

The boy is sitting in the snow on the curb. The girl is gone. People walk by. She opens her journal and begins to draw him.

"...new government funded research complex at State University's Elmdale campus. Back to you Fred and Terri..."

Lamia changes the channel. Conan O'Brian is wearing a dress.

The broken boy is gone, so she stops drawing, and gets up to explore the building. There are four doors on her floor, and the same on the level below. The bar on the first floor only has doors outside on the street. The muffled sound of music vibrates the walls as she walks by. The hallways are long and narrow. They smell kind of stuffy, but not bad. No basement. She starts back up, humming to herself. On the top floor she finds a small landing and only one door. She doesn't want to go back to the little apartment and hear her father snoring, so she sits on the stairs and rereads her Razor comic book.

The sound of a door opening below her and light steps. She looks up to see the tall black woman from the bus station coming up the stairs in front of her. Lamia can't believe someone like her would live in State City, much less this building. Then she's following the woman, who introduced herself as Tasha, up the stairs to that lonely door. Tasha presses a button on her key chain. Something in the door clicks and she pushes it open.

The room is large and dimly lit. Incandescent bulbs glow under colorful glass shades. Tasha sits in an oversized oxblood leather chair, and points Lamia to its match on her left. Lamia sits, and the chair embraces her. She can smell the leather. It's sweet and clean. Tasha picks up a remote control, and music seems to rise all around them. Lamia recognizes it as Jazz, but she doesn't know what kind. It seems light and fast, and the singer sounds like a very old man.

A very tall blond man with hard cut cheekbones steps into their view. He is wearing a gray suit, which hangs oddly, because he wears it unbuttoned. He speaks.

"Welcome home, Dr. Churel. May I get something for you and your guest?"

Tasha is sitting with her head down and her eyes closed. She doesn't look up.

"Yes, Dolf. Hot Chocolate, and I'll need some books. Twain, Harper Lee, Salinger, Kipling, Stevenson..." She pauses, and looks at Lamia. Dark eyes very serious. "Are you going to school?"

Lamia fidgets.

"No...Not yet."

Tasha returns to her meditative position.

"...Asterix and Obelix – the English versions –, Kung Fu Tzu's Analects, and The Way of Chuang Tzu."

The tall blond man turns and walks down an unlit hallway. Lamia almost expects him to click his heels like some sort of cartoon soldier. As he disappears into the dark she looks down at his shoes, and realizes they aren't shoes at all, but heavy polished boots, boots with a deep lugged sole like army men wear.

She looks at Tasha.

"He's a very dangerous man isn't he?"

Tasha doesn't look up, instead she says something in what must be German. Really it's more of a bark than a statement. Lamia hears a clicking on the hardwood floor behind her. She smells the dog before she sees it. Not a bad smell, but clearly dog. Tasha says something else in German, and the dog walks up to Lamia, sits down, and puts his head in her lap.

"This is Bitch."

The dog is large and black with bits of tan on his chest and eyes. He looks up at Lamia and pushes his nose further into her lap, snuffling. Lamia reaches down to pet him. His ears go back, and he snorts, licking his lips. His hair is short and smooth. Lamia's stomach still hurts, but now she doesn't care.

"He likes to be scratched behind the ears," says Tasha, as she accepts a steaming cup from Dolf.

– Whitney –

"What's this, Nerd Boy? A new toy."

Whitney is sitting on the couch in the Purge 4th Floor West Lounge. In front of her, sitting on the scratched coffee table, is a large, professional-grade, binocular microscope. It has a digital keypad and a liquid crystal display that glows a dull amber. It says, "Nikon Medical Optics," across the base.

"Can I play with it?"

She reaches for the diopter adjustment knob, but Nad jumps in front of her, and pushes her back against the couch.

"No! Don't touch it, damn it! It took me two hours to set the calibration."

Nad glares at her, as if horrified at the very idea.

"This is very sensitive equipment, you can't just go fucking around with it."

Thud comes out from behind his cubicle zipping up his pants, and kisses her on the cheek.

"Ask that fool how much he paid for it."

Nad looks annoyed.

"That isn't important Dipshit. This thing can see crypto spores. It's hard core."

Thud laughs.

"He sold his crotch rocket. It was seven thousand dollars, and that's for a ten year old microscope."

Nad shrugs.

"Yeah well, if your gonna be an asshole, you might as well tell her how much it would have been new."

Thud flops down on the couch by Whitney.

"Okay, okay. He did get a good deal. It would have been ninety-thousand new."

Whitney exhales shock.

"For a microscope? No way! That's fucked up. I could buy two new Beemers for that. Econo-Beemers, but still."

She looks at Thud, reaching up to play with his ears.

"So can we go baby?"

Thud takes her hand, and leads her behind his cubicle. Nad turns on the TV, and fiddles with his microscope.

"I don't think so. I don't have to work that day, but I've got a paper to write, and Nad's got an Organic Chem quiz."

Thud is lying back on the cot, and she's curled up beside him. *He always plays this game.*

"Please?"

She says, unzipping his pants.

"It's gonna be the best rave of the winter. I'll give you a blow job."

She looks up at him with her best bad girl.

Nad speaks from behind the cubicle.

"I'm not going unless I get a blow job too."

Whitney pulls Thud's cock out. It's already half hard. Brown and thick and veiny. She pulls his foreskin back, and kisses the tip. Thud lets out a breath, and manages to say, "Shut up, Dipshit, we're going."

Nad goes back to his microscope muttering about how some people think they're real men, but really they're just pussy whipped Nancy-boys.

Sucking cock is actually a lot of work. Something straight guys never seem to understand, Whitney thinks. She cups his balls as she sucks, pumping with her right hand. He's clean, but he still tastes musky and a little salty. His foreskin slides back and forth over the head of his dick as her hand moves up and down. Her jaw is getting sore. Fortunately, it doesn't take too long. His head tilts back, and he grabs her head, trying to push deeper. She gags, and smacks his hand, trying to get some air, as his semen floods her mouth. It's thick and bitter. A strong squirt hits her left tonsil, and she stops sucking in a fit of coughing. She takes some tissue from the box by the bed, spits out the cum, and wipes off her chin.

Thud looks disappointed.

"You didn't like it, Baby?"

He looks away.

"No it was good. It's just...You didn't swallow."

She wipes off his penis with some tissue, puts it back in his boxers, and zips up his pants.

"Maybe next time." She smiles and touches a cheek. "Remember. The rave's at eleven on Monday. Don't be late."

Nad is stirring on the other side of the cubicle.

"That's funny, Turd Muncher, she always swallows for me."

But Thud is already asleep, and doesn't hear him. Whitney gives Nad the finger as she walks out, but he pretends not to notice.

Kim is waiting for her in front of the department store. She looks like she has been waiting a while.

"Hey girlfriend, ready to hit it?"

Kim looks pleased.

"Hey Whit. Yeah seventy percent off, can you believe it?"

They start into the store. *It isn't much. It isn't Saks, but it's in the front of the downtown mall, so with no car, it's easy.* Whitney sighs. *The smell of perfume and new clothes. Shopping is like meditation.* Kim is looking at capri pants.

"Not a good idea," says Whitney. "Let's go look at hats."

Whitney never really wears hats, but it's always fun to look. The hats are disappointing so they move on. Whitney tries on a gray fitted suit, but decides she would be better off waiting for Chicago.

"So did she do it?" Asks Whitney.

Kim is shuffling through a bin full of colorful earmuffs.

"Huh? Did who do what?"

Whitney looks a little embarrassed.

"You know. Sara. Did she audition?"

Kim giggles.

"Oh that. Yeah, I guess. She said she was going today. The crew is at a motel on the strip. Sara said it's a really big budget European production. They're supposed to be here for months. What do you think they'll make her do?"

Whitney shakes her head.

"I don't know. Fuck some guy I guess."

Kim's eyes widen. They move on to the velvet skirts.

"Really? You think she'll actually have to do it for the audition? I thought they'd just tell here to take off her clothes, or something."

Whitney smirks.

"It isn't Playboy, Kim. It's a porno, you know, with fucking? They'll want to know how she fucks, not just what she looks like naked."

Kim shrugs.

"I guess. Do you think I'd look good in this top."

Holding it up.

"No, too slutty."

CHAPTER FOUR

"You wanted that fast buck, now I gotta light that ass up."

-Ice Cube

– **Jerry-Jean** –

Jerry-Jean puts down the heavy suitcase and takes a breath. *Just relax. Everything will be fine. Exhale.* She knocks on the door. The door opens, and she finds herself staring at a very large man's chest. His chest says, "Kill Whitey!" in red block letters.

"What?"

A deep voice, not friendly. She looks up at his hard brown face. Crew cut.

"I'm...um."

More annoyed. "You're um what?"

She shuffles, and holds out the dorm reassignment form.

"You're...This is my room."

The large man takes the form, and closes the door. She hears people talking behind the glass. Something about goddamned split-tails and clerical mistakes. The door opens again and a tall skinny boy with an elaborate Japanese fish tattoo on his right forearm, and a tattered fiberglass cast on his left, smiles at her. It's a soft smile. He's wearing long shorts five sizes too big, and tennis shoes with flames embroidered down the sides.

"I apologize for Thud. He's a philistine. Welcome to the Bunker. My name is Dudley Eritik, film major."

She tries to smile, and shakes his hand. It is cool, dry, and very soft.

"Jerry-Jean Krvoijac...I, um, I'm in Mechanical Engineering."

He leads her into the room. *It smells so clean.* Her father and brother don't smell clean. She never thought to associate good smells with men. A large pale man with narrow shoulders and no neck is putting up a poster on the cubicle divider to her left. When he finishes, he steps back to admire his work. It is a photograph of a young male chimpanzee urinating into its own mouth.

"And this is Nad..."

The neck-less one belches, scratches his balls, and extends the hand he used for the scratching.

"...the reason for his moniker should be readily apparent," says Dudley.

She declines the handshake, but manages a cheerful grimace, and a nod. Dudley continues the tour. The one called Thud is sitting on the couch, leaning over a campus directory, and talking loudly on a cordless phone.

"This is bullshit. I don't care about coed dorms, but in the same room...No I'll hold."

The large black microscope on the coffee table starts beeping, and the Nad one runs over to it, pushes Thud out of the way, and starts pressing buttons.

"This is the extra cubicle."

Dudley leads her around a corner divider. Her new space contains a cigarette-burn-spotted mattress on a steel frame and a small desk, complete with a Korean war-era florescent lamp, sitting against the big windows. Dudley puts her suitcase on the mattress.

"This is bullshit! Fucking bullshit!" Thud yells, slamming the door, and stomping off down the hall.

She can hear Nad laughing in a low voice.

"It'll be okay you know?" Dudley is looking at her. "They're just a little eccentric, but you get used to it."

Then Nad is in front of her, and grabbing her arm. He's wearing latex gloves.

"What are you..."

He grins, "No, hold still, it'll be good."

Nad scrapes a thin little piece of glass across her forearm collecting tiny flakes of skin.

"Ow!"

Grinning, he runs back to his microscope.

"Nad is our mad scientist in-residence," explains Dudley. "He feels the need to impose his new toy on every one who comes through the door. Yesterday he tried to get me to do a tonsil swab."

Nad is fiddling with knobs and moving a slide around.

"Come look J.J.," says Nad.

Jerry-Jean hesitates.

"Go ahead. Look right there."

He points to the binocular eyepieces.

"You don't wear contacts do you?"

She doesn't understand.

"No..."

He smiles. Teeth like a storm beaten fence.

"Good, it puts off the focus just a little."

She looks down through the lenses. She sees jagged cavernous pale stuff, and what looks like a couple of fat crabs. They have short pointy legs, and they're moving very slowly.

"The pale stuff is flakes of your skin, and the bugs are skin mites."

She jerks back from the scope.

"Bugs! Those bugs are on me?"

She stands up rubbing her arm.

"Actually they're on everyone. Millions of them. They eat your dead skin. You can't wash them off."

Nad is tittering; pleased with himself.

"Ug. Yuck."

Jerry-Jean is feeling ill.

"See, Man, I told you the thousand power would work on skin mites, even without oil emersion. You only need electron microscopes for viruses n' stuff."

Dudley turns on the TV.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever."

Boxing. Sean O'Grady says something brilliant.

– Tasha –

The magazine store is empty except for the clerk. A man in his late twenties is sitting at the counter. He's wearing small, round, wire-rimmed glasses, and a worn olive green army coat. An inlaid soviet flag pin flashes red on his lapel. A foul smelling French clove cigarette hangs, bent, from his teeth. A copy of The Weekly Worker is sitting on the counter in front of him, but he's reading Hustler. She taps on the counter and he looks up.

"Yeah."

She notices the magazine is open to an article about some porn company filming in State City. Girls in Band-Aid swimsuits pose in the snow in front of the Pentacrest.

"Um, 2600. It's a magazine about computers."

He nods.

"Yeah, we have it."

He points her to a shelf on the left.

It's a small magazine. Eight and a half by eleven, then folded in the middle and stapled. *Very amateurish*. On the back there are photographs of pay phones. Inside the back cover is a list of locations and meeting times. Tasha tracks down to State City, Iowa. Last Friday of every month, 5 p.m. by the pay phones at the Strip Ridge Mall. Today is the last Friday in January. She puts down the magazine, and faces the cold. The horny communist doesn't seem to notice.

"Did you resolve our mobility problem."

Dolf looks at her without expression.

"Yes, in a small way, Dr. Churel."

She takes the disks out of the manila envelope, and puts them in the inside pocket of her cashmere topcoat.

"Excellent, we're going to the Mall."

She can almost see a touch of distaste on Dolf's face, but it's gone before she can be sure.

Dolf's gift for understatement remains intact. The gray Ford Expedition is huge. At least seven feet tall. Chunky snow tires grip with confidence. The doors seem heavier than they should be. The windows appear black on the outside, but when she is seated, she sees they actually have a deep greenish hue.

"How much did it cost?"

Dolf looks back at her in the rearview mirror.

"I thought you didn't want to know."

She grimaces.

"Okay, you're right. Never mind."

The Strip Ridge Mall is a large collection of block-like buildings attached to each other and surrounded by a wide moat of parking lot. Dolf stops in front of the largest entrance near a

multiplex. He gets out and opens the door for Tasha. She looks at her watch, five after eight. She walks inside, trying to think of how to handle this. She decides direct is best, as usual.

A collection of young boys is gathered near a bank of pay phones. Some look college-age, some may be preteen. A few have strangely shaped colorful plastic whistles hanging around their necks on chains, or string. Most appear kind of disheveled, unwashed hair and bloodshot eyes. They are talking on the phones, and talking to each other. A few are typing on palmtops. She approaches one of the younger boys.

"Excuse me?"

The boy puts down a couple of cell phones.

"Uh-huh?"

She extends a hand.

"Professor Tasha Churel. I'm looking for a cracker."

He smirks, "Get lost lady. Ain't no crackers here."

This isn't working. She takes out a hundred-dollar bill.

"Let me rephrase that. I'm in a hurry. I need a cracker. This is a 2600 meeting, isn't it?"

The kid looks at her money with disdain, and doesn't move. Then he seems to think of something.

"Your code. You're a State University Professor right? Give me your network access code."

She hesitates. But she wants this data. The harder it becomes, the more she wants it. Besides, she figures she can get the code changed in the morning. *How much damage could he do in one night?*

"Okay. 1026nw20. Now, the cracker."

The boy grins, takes out a pen and writes it down.

"Don't worry lady, they won't even know I was there."

Tasha crosses her arms.

"The cracker."

The boy pushes his way through the group. Sitting at a small table behind them is an immense black man. *Probably early twenties*. He is almost as tall sitting down as she is standing up. His frame has the massive blocky quality of an offensive lineman. He's dressed in baggy hip-hop clothes. A t-shirt proclaims, "Phiber Optik Lives," in seventies-style bulbous computer font. He types, mesmerized, on a little palm top that is connected by cable to a cell phone.

"Logic, hey, Man, this chick's looking for a cracker."

The big man rubs the back of his neck, and sighs.

"I.D."

Tasha hands him her New York State I.D. card. He looks at it and types something. Then he swipes the card through a magnetic strip reader on the side of the Palm top.

"Let's go outside."

They walk past the mall's ice rink and out into the cold.

"Let me see your hands."

He looks at them closely, paying particular attention to her index fingers and her watch. His cell gives off a modem squeal, and he opens the palmtop.

"I need more data, but my impression is that you aren't Secret Service."

She nods.

"Half the guys at that meeting were Secret Service, you know?"

Her eyes widen.

"Yeah, they're like a nasty foot fungus. Probably running your photo on a big fuzzy right now."

He smiles, clearly enjoying the rising tension in her face.

"Don't worry, they're mostly incompetent."

She relaxes, for the moment.

"Hey, you didn't give Lo Res anything did you? Your social, your phone number, anything?"

She's confused. "My SU Network code, but..."

White teeth sparkle.

"That was definitely not a good idea."

Too late now.

She takes out the disks and shows them to him. He rubs the back of his neck some more.

"DVD-R/W, Sony, single-sided. And this, this is interesting. An old WORM disk. Same size as an IBM 10-kilobyte drive, but with different guide slots. I assume they're encrypted."

She nods.

"Have you got a ride?"

She motions to the gray monster idling a hundred meters away. Dolf rolls up slow. They get in.

"Wow, this is pretty cool. Armored huh?"

Dolf looks back at him in the mirror.

"Boy, that is one big scary Aryan-looking mother-fucker. Hey, no offense, Rutger."

Holding up his hands.

"I knew you weren't Feds. They always try to look young, poor and hip."

Tasha sits back, and opens a bottle of orange juice.

"So can you help me, Mr. Logic?"

He laughs, "Adrian, actually, and yeah, I can hook you up. Can we get some food? I'm on a mass cycle."

They stop at a sandwich shop. Adrian has two, foot-long turkey breast subs on whole wheat. Dolf pays. In just a few minutes they're gone.

"Whew, shit. I should have gone for chicken. Now I'm gonna be fucked up on L-Tryptophan all day."

Dolf speaks.

"Where to Mr. Logic?"

Adrian sits back, enjoying himself.

"Purge Hall Jeeves, and make it snappy."

Dolf remains impassive, and makes a smooth u-turn.

They step out of the elevator on the fourth floor, and turn down the west wing. Tasha enjoys the elaborate door decorations, as they go down the hall. They are approaching a huge Native American man who is carrying a laundry basket. Tasha recognizes him as one of her better students, Thud Wardog. He is even larger than Adrian, and so devoid of body-fat, that the tendons anchoring his jaw are visible through the skin of his cheeks. Thud ignores her, but nods at Adrian.

"Was' up Anus? Pop any freshmeat boy cherries this week?"

Adrian grins.

"I'm holding out for you, Injun Joe. You ought to give up on all those so-hos and come over to the queer side. You can be my bitch."

Thud smiles. "If I ever crossed that line, you'd be the bitch, my friend."

Adrian stops in front of a door. A poster of the famous gay bodybuilder, Bob Paris, is in the center of the door. A cartoon voice bubble is glued to the poster. It says: "Sorry I can't play right now, I'm taking a nap with Adrian." Below, another poster is covered with nothing but lines of binary code.

Adrian unlocks the door, and leads them in. The room is a total mess. Piles of clothes and books are scattered everywhere. Two laptops sit side by side on the desk. Packets of various nutritional supplements are scattered across the floor. A couple of hard-core gay porn magazines lie on a pile of towels by the bed. Tasha reads, "This is not your daddy's pussy magazine," across the cover of one. Beside the smut, a gallon size pump-container of Astroglide lubricant rises from the center of an open pizza box that appears to be filled with dirty socks. Adrian throws a dirty t-shirt over the pornography, looking uncomfortable. A tall metal cart sits by the desk in the corner. It is stacked with dozens of drives, encoding, and tap-busting devices, all connected by knots of cable to the two laptops on the desk.

Adrian picks up a flat head screwdriver, and breaks open the WORM cartridge. Bits of clear plastic fly across the room. Tasha gasps.

"Relax doc. Got to pop it to run it."

He handles it carefully, by the edges, and drops it into a drive that looks like it is mostly duct tape. The drive starts humming, and Adrian fiddles with the right computer's track pad.

"Well, I can read it, but it's encrypted. Not very well. Eighties Russian code, I'd guess. I can bust it, but it will take a while. This one will cost you a grand."

Tasha puts five hundred dollars on the desk.

"Half now, half when you finish. What about the video disk?"

Adrian rubs his forehead, opens another drive higher on the stack, and drops in the DVD. He presses play, and opens a video window. Blue nothing. He opens a machine code window, and they watch the zeros and ones roll by.

"This is a more modern encryption, American military or maybe NATO. It's not uncrackable. They have algorithmic encryptions based on the random static of space. Nobody can touch those yet. But this is nonrandom."

Tasha is opening her wallet again.

"How much?"

He removes both disks and puts them in jewel cases.

"Two-thousand."

Tasha leafs out ten more hundred-dollar bills. As She is walking out, Adrian stops her.

"Oh, and Professor Churel, just a little piece of advice, I would cancel all your credit cards, call the credit reporting agencies, and advise the State University Computing Center of a major attack through your account. Just a suggestion."

Tasha feels her blood pressure drop.

"Lo Res?"

"Yeah, he's probably already calling Bora Bora on your long distance."

"Can't you do anything about it?"

"Sorry, we have ethics, too. Can't cross a bro."

– Dudley –

Professor Churel walks into the small amphitheater shaped classroom smiling. Her hair is tied back and she is wearing a beautifully cut, brown Armani suit. Even before she speaks, Dudley is struck by her confidence and intensity. He watches her survey the room and see everything. The room is packed. Fifty students sit at the long arc shaped tables that wrap around the outside of the classroom in four steps.

The murmur of conversation slows and stops as she approaches the podium.

"This is Covert Operations of the Cold War, H16:166. You are in room 162 Shiffer Hall on the Pentacrest. I trust you are all in the right place. Are there any adds?" She asks.

A few students come forward and she signs their surgeon green add/drop forms.

"All right, everyone who is here is on the seating chart. Please take the same seat from now on. I'm not going to take role today. It always changes anyway, but you should know that I expect you to be here..."

She launches in to a tirade about attendance. It must be automatic. Dudley can tell she is trying to sound menacing. The syllabi are distributed. Then she surprises him.

"I realize that many instructors don't give a lecture on the first day, but I am not most instructors. I expect more from you. Although this course deals primarily with American and Soviet covert operations, I have also included '*The French Secret Services*' by Douglas Porch, as well as material on British, Israeli, Chinese, and East German covert operations on your reading list. This course will cover the time period between December 7th, 1941 and the collapse of the Soviet Union."

A dozen hands go up. She looks at the seating chart.

"Mr. Eritik."

Dudley speaks up.

"But Professor Churel, the Cold War didn't start until after World War II. Why do we begin in 1941?"

Tasha smiles, "That is an excellent question Mr. Eritik. Where do you think the CIA came from?"

Dudley says nothing, but feels uncomfortable.

"The Central Intelligence Agency did not develop in a vacuum. It evolved from something. Or some things, more accurately. The CIA is a continuation of the World War II era Office of Strategic Services, or OSS, but it is more than that. When World War II ended we knew that the Soviet Union was destined to be our greatest enemy, but we had no established covert intelligence network in Russia. Do you know who did?"

Blank faces.

"The Nazis did, and we took it over. The U.S. helped hundreds, even thousands of Nazis – many of them guilty of terrible atrocities – to safety. We became their friends, we cultivated their networks, we ignored their crimes. The CIA absorbed institutional culture, not just from the OSS, but from its Nazi counterparts as well. The SS, the SA, the Gestapo. It is institutional culture and not policy that governs the behavior of most organizations. For you to understand this course, you must understand where the covert organizations came from, and the culture that led them to act as they did. Does anyone here read comic books?"

Five or six hands go up.

"Do you remember Captain America? How was Captain America created? Can anyone tell me?"

She is looking at the seating chart again.

"Ms. Montross."

A narrow shouldered, shy looking girl in the first row speaks.

"Super soldier serum. A scientist gave him super soldier serum, and it made him fast and strong."

Tasha smiles at the girl, "Very good Ms. Montross. Now of course Captain America isn't real right? I mean he was just a bit of mid war propaganda dreamed up to sell comic books and help the war effort. But what if I told you that super soldier serum is real?"

The class snickers.

"In the late thirties and early forties there were people who believed in Superman. Any guesses."

Silence.

"Urbemensch. Supermen were a primary element of Nazi philosophy. The Nazis experimented extensively on the development of superior soldiers. They experimented with breeding, with drugs, even with changing human psychology. Nazi scientists killed thousands of Jews and others in these experiments. After the war both the United States and the Soviets adopted most of these scientists. Certainly, some were brought to justice, and still others were assassinated by the Israeli Mossad, but the majority escaped any punishment at all because we needed them.

"Werner Von Braun, the most famous of these Nazi scientists, built the American space program. A space program that really had nothing to do with space exploration at all. NASA was just a public technology demonstrator. A way for us to show the Soviets that we could build the kind of rockets that would take our nuclear weapons anywhere we wanted them to go, even to the moon.

"Anabolic steroids, the super soldier serum of the modern athlete, were the product of covert military research. Can any of you think of any other examples of covert research that affected American citizens directly?"

Nobody is moving, so Dudley raises his hand again.

"Mr. Eritik."

"The Tuskegee experiments. And the exposure of pregnant women, children, and disabled people to radiation by the Department of Energy."

"Correct. Some of you have a good base for this course. Do the readings for Monday and all of you will be up to speed. It's only two-hundred pages, so I don't want to hear any whining."

Dudley feels tired, and this is only his second class of the week. If he is going to survive he knows he'll have to surrender to discipline. At least he's done for the day. He lifts his bag, loaded down with books purchased earlier that day, and heads back to the Bunker. As he drags through the snow he wonders if that poor girl who was assigned to the bunker is surviving Thud and Nad. *She seemed so lost.*

Entering the big lounge on the ground floor, Dudley waves to the girl at the Purge 24-hour desk. She waves back. A couple of students are asleep on the built-in couches near him. Upstairs the halls are empty and quiet. He pushes open the door of the bunker. *My bed. Shoes off. It will be perfect.*

Thud is standing in the middle of the room. He's pointing something at Dudley. *Focus.* It looks like a gun. Thud is smiling. Dudley has come to the conclusion that Thud smiling is almost never a good thing.

"End of the line Bitch!" Says Thud, then he pulls the trigger.

Dudley is thrown backward and blinded by the flash of the gun. His chest screams. He reaches for the pain, and his hand comes away red. It seems too bright. *Almost florescent.*

Blackness.

His chest hurts. But now his face hurts too. It hurts because someone is slapping him.

"Wake up you pussy."

He opens his eyes. Nad is slapping him. Snaggle teeth a little closer than he would like.

"Okay, okay. Stop hitting me, I'm awake."

Thud is standing over him looking mildly concerned. The gun is still in his hand, big, black, and smoking.

"You really are a candy-ass." Thud says, with some humor.

Dudley is still clutching at his chest. *No holes, still, it hurts like a bitch.*

"Why – I'm not dead. Why not?"

Thud drops the magazine.

"It's a real gun. Heckler and Koch Mk23 SOCOM .45 with a Knight silencer. But these are Simunitions. Developed for military live fire exercises, they can be fired from regular weapons, and thus offer more realism than paint balls or that idiot laser system."

He extracts a round and shows it to Dudley. It looks normal. Brass shell, but the bullet itself has a red waxy surface.

"You guys are seriously disturbed. What if I had a heart condition? What if..."

Nad pulls him to his feet.

"Quit the bitchin' man. We've got a party to go to."

Thud sits on the couch and begins to field strip the gun.

– Lamia –

"You got a job Daddy? Really?"

They are having canned ravioli for lunch. Talamaur seems to actually be eating some.

"Yes, they didn't really even ask me much. I start tonight."

Lamia puts some more ravioli on his plate. She isn't eating much herself because her stomach hurts. The night before she had a hard time sleeping because of the pain. She mentioned it to her father, but he said it was probably just her imagination.

"What time do you go?"

He wipes his mouth with a paper towel.

"I'm supposed to be there at three. Two weeks of training, then I go to work."

She picks up the little aluminum camping saucepan, and starts to wash the dishes.

"When will you get home?"

He goes into the other room and lies down on the couch.

"Probably after eleven. I'm supposed to wear a tie. Pretty serious huh?"

She stands in the doorway wiping her hands with a towel.

"You'll do fine daddy. We're gonna be okay."

Lamia helps him tie his tie and reminds him to shave. *He'll be okay*, she keeps telling herself, *he'll be okay*. She asks him about school but he says the same thing as before. People ask a lot of questions. Maybe next fall. She packs him a sandwich and apple for dinner and sends him out into the afternoon cold. It's not as cold as Chicago. *He'll be okay*.

She's reading Asterix and Obelix. Tasha loaned her a huge stack of the weird French comic books. The characters are in Rome, and they are beating up Romans and making snide remarks about Caesar. All the characters in the comics have funny names.

"Oh."

Her stomach is hurting more. She touches her tummy tenderly, and looks down. *Red*. She sees red on her shorts between the legs.

"Oh no!"

She gets up. There is red on the couch. It's dripping down her legs.

"Oh no!"

Panic. She runs into the bathroom and pulls down her pants.

Her underwear is soaked with blood. Blood is coming from her vagina. She sits on the toilet and tries to get it to stop with tissue.

"Apply direct pressure." She says to herself, beginning to cry.

It isn't stopping. She hops into the living room, looking for the phone; pants still down around her ankles, and holding a wad of tissue over her vagina. Then she realizes she has no one to call. She doesn't have Talamaur's work number, or even a phone book.

She hops back into the bathroom. The tissue is soaked with blood now.

"Oh no. I don't want to die."

She thinks that if this keeps up she might bleed to death. There are blood drips on the floor now, and it looks like a lot more than it is because she keeps walking over them.

She gets some more tissue and puts it in her underpants; then she pulls her pants up. Her hands are pink with blood, and she wipes them on her pants. Then she's climbing the stairs to that

single door on the fourth floor. Knocking. Knocking. Tears streaming down her cheeks. Dolf opens the door wearing a gray striped apron.

"Please help me! I'm bleeding."

Dolf turns, and with some alarm, says, "Dr. Churel! We need your assistance!"

Tasha is at the door, and takes her into the bathroom. There is blood on her clothes, even a little on her shoes. Tasha washes her hands.

"Where are you hurt?"

Lamia feels embarrassed.

"Down there."

Tasha pauses.

"From your vagina? Are you having your period?"

Lamia doesn't understand. She just shrugs.

"Someone told you about menstruation didn't they?"

Lamia shrugs again.

"No."

Tasha relaxes. She folds a thick silver towel and puts it on the toilet seat.

"Here, sit there. Don't worry about the towel."

Lamia sits down, and Tasha explains.

"This happens every month? For thirty years?"

Tasha nods, wiping off the girl's face and arms with a wash cloth.

"More or less."

Lamia is indignant.

"It isn't fair. Boys don't have to deal with this!"

Tasha smiles.

"No they don't, but then boys can't have babies either."

Lamia grimaces.

"You say that like it's a good thing."

Tasha calls Dolf through the door.

"Yes, Dr. Churel."

"Dolf, I want you to go downstairs and get Lamia a change of clothes. Then I'll need you to wash these."

"Yes, Dr. Churel."

Lamia hears the front door close.

"Now, we need to decide what kind of protection you need."

Tasha explains the options.

"I want the one that won't leak as much."

Tasha looks concerned. "Tampons might hurt to put in. At least the first few times."

Lamia shakes her head.

"I don't care. This is embarrassing enough. I don't want to leak in public."

Lamia takes off her shorts and Tasha helps her insert a tampon. It does hurt, a lot. But She isn't scared anymore, so she doesn't cry. Tasha gives her a box of tampons, and some mini-pads to put in her underwear just in case. Dolf hands the new clothes through a crack in the door and takes the dirty ones, politely looking the other way. Tasha leaves her to finish cleaning up, and putting on the fresh clothes. Lamia isn't happy about having a period. But, aside from being a little embarrassed, she feels okay.

She steps into the living room. Tasha is sitting on the couch typing on a laptop. Dolf approaches and hands her a glass of milk and a pill.

"Ibuprofen, Dr. Churel's orders. Your laundry will be done in an hour Ms. Day."

"Thank you."

She takes the pill, wondering when she told them her last name. *It doesn't matter.*

"Have you been reading the books I gave you?"

Tasha is looking at her. She looks kind, but very serious.

"Yes. I read the Asterix. It's pretty funny."

"You should read the other books too. After you read them you can come up here. We'll talk about them, and then you can borrow some more."

"Okay."

Lamia feels something warm and wet in her hand. She looks down and sees Bitch, nosing for affection. She sits down on the polished hardwood and grabs his ears. He snorts and licks her cheek.

– Whitney –

"So where's the rave?"

Thud and Nad's skinny new roommate is quizzing her as the group walks in the dark. *The boy is so retro grunge. And what's with the lame-ass tattoos?*

"I told you, it's a tunnel rave. Duh."

Whitney is annoyed. Thud told her about the girl roommate. She doesn't like it. Even if he is right, that the girl is just a plain little hick. Nad catches up, and tries to explain.

"It's a trip dude. State U. is heated, cooled, and powered by steam. When the school was built they put in steam tunnels to run heating pipe to the campus."

They climb over a plowed snow bank.

"The tunnels aren't that big, but big enough to walk through. They even run fiber optic cable, and power through them now. But the cool thing is that the tunnels interconnect, and run to every building on campus. They even hook up with the big nuclear shelters, like the one under Purge. They run under the Iowa River, to the hospital, and even out to the Elmdale Research campus, five miles out of town."

They are walking past the Student Union. A strip of muddy grass stretches out between banks of snow, crossing a field, and driving on straight through a chain link fence.

"See," Nad points at the grass. "That's one, close to the surface. They tend to run pretty warm."

Whitney is ignoring Nad's blathering. She shivers. Planning for the heat below, she dressed light. Too light for a winter night in the Midwest

They lift a hinged grate behind the English/Philosophy building, and descend into the darkness. Nad has a flashlight and leads the way. They're walking down a long tunnel. Pipes run along the walls beside them, and every hundred feet or so cross their path. They have to climb over, or duck under to keep going. It's hot and smells like mildew. Whitney feels sweat trickling down her back and behind her ears. She hears the low rumble of distant music. Nad's flashlight is moving as he walks, flickering across pipes, high voltage cables, and conduit. The music is louder now, and they round a corner into a large open area. It's a high ceiling septagon. Tunnels stretch out from each face. A concrete block platform rises up six feet on one side. Two girl-DJs

are spinning on crates above the platform. Below them the room dances. Portable white strobes flicker in perfect sync with the frenetic jungle techno.

"Cool," says Dudley behind her.

She sees Sara Masani making out with some boy in a Lambda Chi hat. Nad is already dancing with a stoned freshman girl. Whitney pushes through the sweaty gyrating bodies looking for Thud. *He promised*. A group of black frat boys with candy striped walking canes are drinking Full Sail and arguing about Sartre. A girl with spiky black hair and a long shimmery purple velvet dress hugs her, giggling.

"Hey, you want some E?"

Whitney holds out her hand. Nails flash purple and silver. Whitney takes it dry. A skinny boy with giant pants and twisted spike blond hair falls in front of her, and starts puking. She steps over him. *Amateur*. The DJs crank it up a notch, vicious breakbeat.

Thud is leaning up against a wall furthest from the stage behind some sound baffling screens, gesturing and talking with Adrian Zeneu. Adrian is wearing a yellow Adidas running suit. *Ghetto poseur*. Thud is dressed as usual, t-shirt and jeans. His t-shirt has a picture of Chief Joseph crossed out in a red circle. Below the picture it says, "I will fight much more tomorrow!"

She wraps her arms around his waist, feeling Thud's six-pack through his shirt. His waist is so small, almost as small as hers. He touches her hands, but keeps talking to Adrian.

A boy covered in flashing lights and a D.A.R.E. t-shirt is moving between the dancers. He has a bright purple wig and a band of yellow eye shadow that crosses his face like a mask. He's carrying a tray of machine rolled blunts. When Whitney looks closer she finds that they even have filters. The boy sells her one for three dollars, and she lights up. Thud turns and looks at her annoyed.

A few feet away, sitting on a pipe, she sees a beautiful thin Irish-looking girl with natural red hair. Beside her is a huge dumpy looking boy with black hair, small eyes and Neanderthal features. The girl watches the crowd. The boy watches the girl. He touches her like glass. Holding her hand as if it might fall and break at any moment. A gold band glows on a thick finger. The girl's skin is so pale it's almost clear. Touches of oxygen starved blue show through here and there. They sit together motionless. Whitney thinks they look like they are alone in a war. The battle rages around them and they don't smell the gunpowder. The Australopithecine gets up to get his glassine nymph something to drink. Whitney feels a twinge of disgust, but then it goes away.

She's beginning to feel warm and fuzzy. She wants to touch everyone. *The ecstasy must be working.* She pulls on Thud's belt, demanding more attention. He's talking to Adrian, about the Balkans now, and pushes her away.

She sees Dudley trying to dance with a blue-haired black girl. The girl ignores him, and Dud looks dejected. Whitney giggles hysterically, and then she is out on the floor and dancing with him. She keeps trying to rub up against him. She grabs his ass. But Dudley just looks nervous and keeps glancing at Thud. *Nerd. At least he can move a little.*

When the rave begins to fade they all troop up into the snow. It's close to five in the morning, but still very dark. Nad is so drunk he can barely stand up so Thud walks him by the collar. At the corner Whitney sees the Irish girl and her Neanderthal husband again. The girl is buttoning up his coat and he kneels to tie her shoe. *Ick.* But Whitney feels something else too.

In front of the Pentacrest Nad seems to awaken from his stupor. He breaks away from Thud in a rush, and climbs up on the roof of an orange Opal that is parked on the curb. The roof of the little sports car warps and buckles under his weight. He unzips his pants and takes out his

dick. Then he's peeing and singing and spinning around in circles. At some point he loses control and begins peeing all over the front of his pants. Thud grabs his ankle and yanks him onto his ass in a snow bank.

"What? What? You don't love me...Fuckers."

Nad decays into incoherent mumbling. Thud pulls him to his feet, smacks him upside the head, and they walk on.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Qui s'y frotte, s'y pique."

[Whoever touches a thistle, pricks himself.]

-Town motto of Nancy, France

– **Jerry-Jean** –

February

"It's so cold today. When you walk outside sometimes you can feel the death through your clothes. You walk fast, because you know it wouldn't take long. Even all bundled up, in down, in wool, it doesn't matter. Eventually the cold will get through. Find a crack and crawl up beside you like an old dog. Only this dog is dead, and he wants you to be dead too.

"The wind screams and spits. Crystals of ice attack your face. Your eyelashes freeze solid, sometimes sticking together when you try to blink. The breath from under your scarf freezes to your sunglasses, getting thicker and thicker each time you exhale. Soon you can't see at all and you have to take off the

glasses to keep from falling on your face or getting hit by a car. Now you are exposed to the wind and the glare.

"Snow blind you enter a building, trying to quickly strip off layers of clothing. The buildings are hot from the powerful steam heat of the campus physical plant. Sand, salt, and melting snow cover the granite floors. It eats deep grooves in the rock, only to be buffed smooth every night by the maintenance staff. The stone steps in the building are bowed. Worn curved by thousands of feet going up and down, up and down for a hundred years. You're down to a t-shirt, but still sweating. A door opens and you feel the dog. He's still out there, licking his cold dead yellow teeth, and waiting."

Jerry-Jean puts down her pen and looks at the door.

"Office of Student Financial Aid," says the door. "Closed for lunch."

What kind of office closes for lunch? At least she was able to finish her Rhetoric journal assignment. She looks at her watch, five after one. A shabby looking grad student in chinos and a fleece vest opens the door and ushers her in. He exudes the burnt bean and molecular shock odor of microwaved burritos. A line is already beginning to form behind her.

"...a loan councilor."

The boy in the fleece vest is looking at her expectantly.

"You need to talk to a loan councilor?"

She nods yes, and he directs her through a maze of cubicles to the back of the room.

The loan councilor is like so many university bureaucrats, bored, with a vinegar disposition, and a perpetual look that says, "you are interrupting my day." This one is an average

looking man in his mid-thirties. He has a lazy eye, and Jerry-Jean finds herself staring at it. She feels guilty about this and tries to look away, but keeps drifting back.

"Your award notification has been revised. We've had some unforeseen budget problems."

He's looking at her with concern. Or at least she thinks he is. She isn't sure which eye to look at.

"You'll only be receiving half of your original award. If you have a cosigner, you could take out supplemental parent-student loans."

She looks down, thinking of her father sitting in his recliner and throwing beer cans at Sammy Sosa.

"I don't have a cosigner."

The loan councilor nods.

"Well, what about work study? There are several opportunities availa..."

"I'm already doing that. I work at the laundry twenty hours a week."

She's getting up, and picking up her bag. And the loan councilor is apologizing. But she doesn't hear it because of the pain. And then she's out the door and walking up the icy sidewalk. The wind is blowing hard. And students pass her in large groups. They are covered with no exposed skin. Their heads are down against the wind, and they walk as fast as the ice will let them. Tears freeze in her eyelashes and to her cheeks. Her scarf is in her hand, and it trails behind her skipping off the ice. She doesn't know where her hat went, but she can't feel her ears anymore. She doesn't know where she's going. *It doesn't matter.*

She passes a bank clock. The temperature reads thirty-six below. Snot is freezing in her nose and on her upper lip. She is half a mile from campus now. Ancient brick and field stone houses pop out of the snow.

Just keep walking. It won't take long.

She unzips her coat, and tries to unbutton her shirt, but her fingers have stopped working. She can feel the old yellow toothed dog curling up beside her. She imagines he's grinning.

No! She stops, startled. *No!* A voice screams in her mind. She is confused, but she picks up her scarf, and wraps it around her face. And she's walking, faster, faster. Now she's running back to campus, her backpack thumping up and down. She stumbles into the mall, embraced by the warm. It hurts. She's snow blind, and her shins find the bench before her eyes do. *Ouch.* She sits down, still confused. *Why did I come back?* Then she begins to hum the tune to the song from her dream. *Great big gobs of greasy grimy gopher guts.*

– Tasha –

"The Kennedy assassinations mark the most significant turning point in American covert operations culture in the second half of the twentieth century. Can anyone tell me why?"

A half dozen hands go up, all with the wrong answers. Tasha is annoyed. They are clearly not keeping up with the readings.

"Actually it was significant because it changed the way Americans look at government. These assassinations, coupled with the failures in Vietnam, spurred the counter culture revolutions of the sixties and early seventies. Trust was gone. This loss of trust went both ways, and influenced the events of the next thirty years. It led the covert operations community to

adopt a siege mentality. It wasn't just the Central Intelligence Agency verses the Komitet Gosudarstvennot Bezopasnosti anymore, it had become the CIA against the world. The intelligence community became convinced that only they could recognize the threats against American national security, that the American people were naive and dangerous, and that even their own elected superiors could not be trusted with the safety of the nation."

A girl in the third row raises her hand.

"Yes?"

"What does Komatit Gosundnet...um, what's that?"

There are snickers from the back of class. Tasha tries not to yell.

"It's Komitet Gosudarstvennot Bezopasnosti, which is usually abbreviated KGB, and is translated: Committee for State Security, which you would know miss," she looks at her seating chart, "Masani, if you had been doing the readings. This is an upper division class, and there is no homework. I don't usually give pop quizzes. But if you people don't keep up with the readings you will not pass the midterm, and you certainly will not pass the final. When you waste the class's time with inane questions, you are also wasting my time. I will not tolerate that. Clear?"

Sara Masani nods, looking ill. Tasha removes her gaze of death, and resumes the lecture.

"On some levels the intelligence community was right. There were Soviet covert units working with elements of the counterculture in the United States during that period. But the community's warrior-priest-like isolation tended to separate them from reality. The CIA stopped cooperating with our allies in British Intelligence because they believed MI6 was infiltrated. It was later discovered that Langley was just as deeply penetrated as MI6. In some places the American moles had dug even deeper. There is a thin line between vigilance and paranoia.

During this crisis of faith, loyalty to the rule of law was replaced by fanatical nationalism. As a result, serious breaches of the public trust occurred. Crimes were committed.

"In 1928 Supreme Court Justice Brandeis forewarned of the danger of government going too far in his dissenting opinion from *Olmstead v. United States*:

" 'Our government is potent, the omnipresent teacher. For good or for ill, it teaches the whole people by its example...If the Government becomes a lawbreaker, it breeds contempt for law; it invites every man to become a law unto himself; it invites anarchy.' "

She pauses to let them think about it.

Rustling. She looks up from her notes. *Overtime*. The students are putting their notebooks away, and looking anxious. *Slackers*.

"Okay, you can go. But there will be a reading quiz on Thursday, so everybody should catch up. And if anyone is interested in reading more about Justice Brandeis, see me after class."

Groans all around. A few students come up to ask about the readings. Then she is through. No more work today.

She stops by the history office picks up her mail, dumps her lecture notes and books in her small cluttered office, and steps out into the snow. It bites. Ice collects in her eyelashes. At least it's only a block home. There's a white van parked across the street from her apartment building. Its windows are tinted black. As she approaches, it drives away abruptly. Paranoia rumbles in her stomach. *No, be calm. Too much of a cliché anyway*. She jogs up the stairs to her apartment.

Dolf left a note that he has gone shopping. She falls into the sofa, and turns on the radio. KRSU, the University radio station, is doing the news. The news on KRSU is amateurish, and frequently interrupted, but she enjoys it. It makes her feel closer to the students.

"...terrorism bill increases the government's power to wire tap private citizens without a warrant. Can you say George Orwell?"

Laughter in the background. Tasha pulls off her boots. Beginning to fade into the soft of home. Through the growing fuzz in her head the radio hums on.

"In local news, a major security breach has crashed four of SUCCs mainframes. Dean Ramirez said in a press release that hackers are to blame. I guess SUCC sucks!"

More sophomoric giggles. *Hackers, hackers, so tired.*

She sits up with a jerk.

"Lo Res, oh no!"

She's beginning to feel ill. *Adrian wasn't exaggerating.* The phone rings. It's Adrian, and he sounds scared.

– Dudley –

It's five in the morning. Dudley is wandering through the museum's tall concrete galleries. It's dark. Only the building's emergency lighting is on. He can see to avoid bumping into sculptures, but just barely. The building is set up in a large squared ring with several layers. The outside of the ring are the museum's exterior walls, twenty feet of poured-in-place concrete. Within the walls is the carpeted first ring. It's about thirty feet across and surrounds a large slate floored courtyard that is slightly larger than a basketball court. The courtyard is surrounded by tall walls as well, but there are breaks here and there, so people walking in the outer ring can see in. High above the courtyard a ring of narrow windows on the roof let in a few slivers of artificial light. The State University Museum of Art is really quite impressive for a university museum;

Rothko, Matisse, Picasso; even a huge Jackson Pollock called 'Mural'. Bob always pronounces it Poe-lock. They also have a large collection of prints, from Albrecht Durer to Sorayama. Dudley has spent hours studying them by flashlight. But it has been several weeks, and now he is bored. Because of the unusual circumstances related to the flood, Bob has been able to arrange an exemption to the twenty-hour a week rule, so he and Thud are working three twelve-hour shifts a week. Seven p.m. to seven a.m. Nad is only working one because he has another job at the hospital. And still he is bored.

He stops, looking up at the red light on a box-shaped motion detector. The museum was built in 1969, and the motion detectors are vintage. *Not very high tech*. He has been still for almost ten seconds. The red light blinks out. Now he moves very slowly. Creeping. Step, stop, step. He reaches the wall, touching the frame of a Grant Wood. He could lift it off the wall and walk out slowly without ever triggering the motion detector.

He has calculated the range and sweep of all the detectors in the building. Most of the windows are not alarmed. In the fantasy of his mind he could get in when the flood is over, and the alarms are on. He could walk out with a hundred million dollars worth of art, and have an eight-hour head start. It is a silly fantasy. He knows this. But it passes the time. His hand-held radio squeals.

"704 to 706."

Dudley keys the mike.

"This is 706."

Thud's deep base answers back sounding cheerful.

"Foods here, better get some before it's gone."

Dudley is already walking down the long photo gallery that leads out of the main ring and toward the museum's storage areas. He unlocks the double doors at the end of the gallery that lead to the break room and the loading dock.

Thud is sitting at the loading dock desk next to the hydraulic lift. A group of Physical Plant maintenance guys have collected across from him in chairs next to some lockers. Dudley walks through the double-sided freight elevator that separates the break room from the loading dock and flops down in a chair at the other end of the security desk. The smell of barbeque sauce is pervasive. Thud throws him a bag. He tries to catch it, but misses. *Shit*. Thud ignores his pathetic lack of grace.

"Pretty good tonight Dud. Barbecue beef sandwiches."

Thud illustrates this opinion by scarfing down his second one in three bites.

Dudley opens the bag. It's warm. He pulls out a sandwich wrapped in wax paper. Grease has made the paper transparent, and he can see the sauce soaked hoagie right through it. *Yuck*. Dudley looks back in the bag. Chips and a couple of candy bars. He takes out a Twix.

Thud is talking to the Physical Plant guys. Dudley notices how he plays dumb to fit in.

"Yeah she looks pretty good. She's a curator you know. Got both a Ph.D. and a Law degree."

The oldest of the physical plant guys guffaws.

"Yuh-huh, but its her ass I'm lookin' at."

Nods of agreement all around. One of the younger physical plant guys dissents. He's a large pendulous man with greasy black hair that hangs down in his eyes. Yellow sweat stains mark his t-shirt at the neck and armpits. And Dudley thinks he can see curls of wooly back hair crawling up the rolls of his neck. The big man shakes his head as he speaks.

"If it wadn't fur the hairy end ah the gut, we wouldn't have nuthin' to do with them bitches."

Even Thud's mouth drops, and Dudley is speaking before he can stop himself.

"Well you're a regular Allan Alda. Vacuous inbred pig-fucking white-trash pre-hominid."

Silence. For a moment it looks like the big man might make a move. But a look from Thud changes his mind. So they just sit there in silence. *I have broken the circle, the sacred unity of blue-collar misogyny.* He feels the heat of embarrassment and rage cover his face. Finally, the older physical plant guy mumbles something about getting back to work, and a line of brown Carhartt follows him outside.

"He, uh – he just got a divorce."

Thud the apologist. That's a new one.

"It doesn't matter. He's a sick fucking trailer park troglodyte. You've got a mother, a sister. He was talking about them too."

Thud stiffens and picks up a book, Nelson Mandela. *Some irony in that.*

"You're right man. You're right, and I'm an asshole. You spoke up. I didn't have the guts. I..."

Bob and Ken stomping up the dock stairs interrupts Thud's catharsis. Ken is changing his shoes. Bob starts pulling on the big rubber boots.

"Sump pumps still up?" Bob asks.

Thud stands up.

"Yeah, we've got some new leaks on the west wall of the Machine Room though. Big ones."

Dudley and Thud follow Bob down the steep steel stairs to the Machine Room. Hoses run everywhere. Pumps hum, keeping the water a moderate six inches deep. Dudley points to a wall behind some equipment. Long cracks run down the wall like frozen lightning strikes. A steady stream of muddy water flows from the cracks. It smells like mildew and faintly of sewage. Bob climbs up behind one of the boilers to look at the cracks. Thud follows holding a flashlight. There's a vague distant roaring sound. Dudley isn't sure if it's new, or if he just missed it before. He hears another sound too. It sounds like shouting.

Ken is shouting.

Ken is shouting to get out.

The roaring is louder. The water isn't streaming from the cracks anymore. It's a high-pressure spray. Bob is thrown from the pipe where he is standing just as the wall explodes into the room. Chunks of concrete and a shock wave of water blast them backwards. Dudley is thrown up against a pipe. His vision darkens.

He wakes up choking. Thud is holding his head out of the water by the collar.

"Good, you're awake. Hold onto this."

He puts Dudley's hand on the banister of the stairs, and disappears into the dark. Dudley grips it weakly, and has a coughing fit. He's vaguely aware of the Machine Room ceiling just three feet above him. And then he realizes he's floating. Thud is swimming back toward him, bumping through a sea of red milk-jug sized containers. Most of them are covered with florescent stickers that say, "Sharps" or "Biohazard," and are marked with a symbol of converging circles. Hypodermic needles and blue plastic oil drums swell in his wake as Thud swims past. He's dragging something. It's Bob. Thud has him in a lifeguard's headlock. Bob doesn't look good.

"Shake it off and help me get him upstairs, I don't think he's breathin...Shit, shit!"

Dudley is gripping Bob's feet and looks up with alarm.

"What? What? Are you okay?"

Thud looks irritated.

"Yeah, something just stuck me. Let's just get him moved, okay?"

They manage to get Bob up onto the loading dock floor. Over 250 pounds of dead weight. Dudley tries to help, but Thud ends up doing most of the work. Bob is breathing, but it's very shallow. His lips look blue, and he's bleeding from the side of his head. A jagged shard of bone sticks up through an oozing hole in his thigh.

Ken is talking on the hand-held, and taking nitroglycerin pills by the handful. He puts down the radio, and kneels to check Bob's pulse.

"The dam broke. They can't get us an ambulance for half an hour. We'll have to take him up the hill in my car."

Ken opens the loading dock door to chaos. Trees and debris fill the small museum staff lot. The water out back is now almost three feet deep. Fortunately, being an old farmer, Ken had the foresight to park his car thirty feet up the hill above the flood plain. They carry Bob across the water, pushing ice and more of those blue plastic barrels out of the way. "Elmdale Research Campus" is spray-painted in stencil on the sides of most of them.

Ken tells them to go back to the museum and stay till relieved. They wade back through the water shivering, not even stopping long enough to see Ken's pink primer-spotted Pinto chugging up the hill to the University Hospital.

Back inside, Dudley is shivering so much he almost falls out of his chair. Thud opens his gym bag and throws Dud some sweats. They're five sizes too big, and they stink, but at least

they're dry. It occurs to Dudley that he is going to miss his morning class, Film theory, but he's past caring. He picks up his book and begins reading. Thud is talking on the phone with Nad. Embellishing every detail. Dudley nods off. An uncomfortable, dreamless sleep.

He wakes to the phone ringing. Thud answers it. Dudley looks down and discovers he's been drooling, and he has a vicious crick in his neck from sleeping sitting up. Thud hangs up the phone.

"Hey is it hot in here?"

Dudley looks at him, turning his entire body to compensate for the stiff neck. Thud is sweating. Thud is sweating a lot.

"What are you talking about. I can see my breath. It couldn't be more than forty-five degrees in here."

Thud wipes his forehead.

"Yeah, well I'm hot. Our relief should be here in ten minutes. Nad and Chuck are coming down."

Chuck Hogg is a tall nervous man. Nad always said he was like Jimmy Stewart on crystal meth. Dudley had only worked with him once, but that description seemed accurate. Chuck would agree with everything you said, usually twice, and almost invariably before you finished speaking. Bob always calls him The Old Boar Hogg behind his back. Dudley suspects this bothers Chuck a great deal, but knows that he will keep on nodding and agreeing just the same.

Thud really is looking bad.

Dudley puts his boots on. They're still wet, but the liner is wool, so he'll probably be safe on the walk back to Purge.

"How long was I out?" He asks Thud.

Thud is making an odd face.

"Ugh. Um, two hours I think. Jeez. I feel like shit."

Thud stands up and reaches for his parka. He stumbles, and makes a gagging choking sound. Suddenly a fire hose-like column of vomit erupts from his mouth, splattering hard against the wall eight feet away. *Barbecue beef doesn't recycle well.*

"Holy shit!"

Dudley is up and jumping back, trying to avoid the puke. Thud falls to his hands and knees and begins retching in dry heaves. He is sweating so much; it's dripping on the floor. Then he collapses face down in the congealing vomit.

"Shit, fuck. What do I do?" Dudley is shaking. "Shit."

He turns Thud over onto his back. It takes all of his strength, and it is harder because he is trying to avoid touching the vomit. *Still breathing. Good good. Call 911.*

He dials the number. They tell him to make sure Thud keeps breathing and to give CPR if he stops. An ambulance is three minutes away.

Groaning. Thud opens his eyes. They look hazy and unfocused. Then his eyes roll back to white. Dudley can see his muscles tensing. Tendons flex in his neck and arms. His back arches lifting his torso off the ground. His body begins to shake. It seems to start near his face and radiate outward. A pool of urine spreads under him, and the smell of shit fills the room as Thud loses bowel control. His arms and legs are flopping around violently.

Dudley is about to call 911 again when he hears the paramedics on the stairs. Their pants are only wet to the ankles. *The water level must have dropped.* They try to hold Thud still enough to put him on a gurney.

"His blood pressure is 80 over 45," says one of the paramedics.

He's thrashing around even more now, and a pinkish foam is dribbling out of his mouth and down his straining cheeks. Dudley can actually see his pulse near the temples. It's very fast.

"He's going into respiratory arrest, bag him."

And then they're gone, up the hill, siren screaming. Dudley sits down. It smells like shit, and piss, and barbecue beef puke. His mouth is dry. Cold sweat drips down his chest under Thud's huge sweatshirt. Suddenly Dudley feels very weak. Looking down he sees his hands are shaking.

– Lamia –

Bitch is pulling almost hard enough to lift her off her feet. It occurs to Lamia that if she had a sled this could be pretty fun. Tasha taught her some of Bitch's German commands, but "heel" seems to have been neglected. The big dog bounds through a snow bank and up the hill into the park. Lamia is thrown into the powder on her face and loses the leash.

"Mmmph."

There is snow in her mouth and nose, and down the collar of her coat. She spits it out laughing, and yells, "Halt! "

Raising her head she sees Bitch snap to a stop fifty feet away.

"Kommen Sie! "

She's struggling to her feet, and the big dog is on her before she stands up, bowling her into the snow. And she's laughing and rolling around while Bitch snorts and snuffles and licks her face. Finally, she gets control of the dog again, and they walk up into the park. They stop at a bench under some stunted gray trees.

Lamia takes a zip-lock bag full of hotdogs from her pocket. She'd snuck them out of the fridge when her father wasn't looking. She holds one out to Bitch. He fixates on it, and licks his lips, but doesn't move. *Oops, I forgot.* She frowns, trying to remember the right command.

"Essen Sie! "

Bitch inhales the hot-dog in one swift motion. She scratches him behind the ears.

"Sehr gut! Gute Hunde!"

Bitch snorts, enjoying everything.

Back at Tasha's apartment Dolf gives her a towel and some brushes with different kinds of bristles. She spends the next half-hour drinking hot chocolate with homemade whipped cream and brushing Bitch.

Dolf is in the kitchen waxing the floor with some gigantic buffing machine. Lamia takes out another hot-dog and orders Bitch to "Sitzen!" He obeys, and she breaks the hotdog into small pieces. She lifts up his right paw, and shakes it.

"Shake!"

Then she gives him some hotdog. After a few more tries he does it on his own. She rubs his chest, feeling high with pride. Eventually, the big dog falls asleep from the hum of the buffer and all his exertions.

She can't hear the buffer anymore, and becoming bored, she gets up to look for Dolf. He's standing in the kitchen in his socks disassembling the buffer.

"Stop!"

She was just about to step onto the polished floor, and she jumps back, a little frightened.

"The wax isn't cool yet." Dolf explains.

"Oh. Um, is there a TV here?"

Dolf smiles a thin tight smile.

"Ms. Churel finds television distracting. However, if you are looking for something to do, I imagine we can accommodate you."

Lamia almost expects him to put her to work scrubbing toilets, but instead he leads her down a hall, and into a library. The room is small like the kitchen but filled with built in bookshelves from floor to ceiling on every wall. Wingbacks and lounge chairs in dark leather are here and there, and a gas fire glows in a corner fireplace. On a small, heavy table in the center of the room sits a laptop computer. Dolf presses a button and a browser window lights up the screen.

"You may explore the bookshelves of course, and this will allow you to access the internet. Do you know how to use a computer?"

Lamia turns pink and shakes her head. Dolf sits down with her at the desk, teaches her how to use the track pad, and run the search engines. After a few minutes, she is doing it herself.

"If you encounter difficulties, you may come find me."

Dolf excuses himself.

It's amazing. She can go anywhere. She opens sites in Australia and Japan. She looks up dogs, and discovers that Bitch is a Rottweiler. She opens a chat page. It has a whole list of pages where people can talk to each other. She tries some of the functions, but learns that she can't do most of them unless she is a member. To be a member she has to have an e-mail address. She types e-mail into a search engine and finds twenty different sites that offer free e-mail accounts. Lamia sets up an account using the name Michelle Night, and other false information. Among other things, she tells them she is eighteen. Then using the same pseudonym and information she

returns to the chat site and becomes a member. After thinking about it for a while she picks a handle: Darkgrl.

There are so many chat rooms. Singles Chat, Boy Chat, Star Trek chat, Movie Line, chat rooms for sports fans, and chat rooms for parents. She tries a room for people who want to talk about their dogs, but she finds it full of old women discussing the mange problems of their Pomeranians.

Not cool. Okay what next. She tries Teen Chat. This is okay. She doesn't try to talk much, but just watches. The boys are very rude. A lot of people have photos posted, and she wonders how many are real. Every few hours Dolf comes in to ask if she needs any thing, and then he starts asking if her father is expecting her. She waves him away, entranced. Teen Chat has decayed into nothing but boys talking to each other about their cars. She goes back to the menu.

Girl Chat? What sort of room is that?

Tasha comes in.

"Lamia, you need to get home, it's almost midnight."

Lamia's eyes are feeling very dry. *Midnight. Midnight.*

"Midnight! Oh no!"

Panicked she jumps up and runs down stairs without even saying goodbye. She unlocks the door and pushes it open slowly.

"Daddy?"

Talamaur is on the couch. He doesn't look happy.

"Do you know time what is?" Slurred.

She sees the vodka bottle in his hand. He stands up; stumbles up. She tries to talk.

"Daddy I...I'm sorry I just..."

He throws the vodka bottle at her and it smashes against the wall.

"Fucking useless little bitch!"

He drives her up against the wall, and she feels a sharp pain in the back of her head.

"Daddy, please stop."

She can feel his hand slam into her mouth, and something warm is trickle down her chin.

She falls to her knees, gasping, but she doesn't cry. The bedroom door slams, and she's alone.

For a while she just sits where she fell. She can hear her father weeping in the other room.

Finally, she struggles up and goes into the bathroom. A steady stream of blood is flowing from the corner of her mouth. It runs down her chin and neck soaking the collar of her shirt. She takes off her shirt, and cleans up the blood.

Lying on the couch, and pressing a big wad of toilet paper against her mouth, she can still hear Talamaur crying. She stares out the window and wants to feel something. Instead she just feels numb.

– Whitney –

"Where is he?"

Whitney is in the lobby of the State University Hospitals and Clinics. It took her over an hour to find the right lobby. There are more than a dozen. As the largest hospital in the country, the SUHC takes up almost as much space as the Pentagon. Dudley hugs her.

"Upstairs in the Intensive Care Unit. You should be prepared, Whit, he doesn't look good. He's in a coma. Nad said it's a bad one – three on the Glasgow scale, which is no response to sound or pain – and they aren't sure if he'll live."

Dud is leading her to the elevators by the arm. They are marked with a giant 'J'.

"Even if he makes it, there might be brain damage. He's had a fever over 106 degrees for almost twenty-four hours, and they can't seem to break it. Nad said your brain begins to cook at about 104."

An old man holding a wheeled intravenous bag stand with a blue morphine pump gets on the elevator on the third floor. He's wearing a hospital gown, and smells faintly of stale urine and talc. Whitney and Dud get off on four, and she stops holding her breath.

"I hate hospitals."

She hates the smell most of all. *Disinfectants and death.*

"What?"

Dudley is leading her past a nurse's station. The ICU is quiet and dark. He opens a door, and she sees Nad sitting by the window. He's staring at the wall.

"Hey Nad," says Dudley. Nad doesn't move.

Dudley was right about Thud's condition. He lies slightly elevated on a hospital bed. The soft hiss of a respirator pumps his chest up and down. A yellow crusty substance has collected around the tubes that go into his nose. He is naked except for a small towel over his genitals; and dozens of blue chemical ice packs are piled around his armpits, groin, and feet. Intravenous tubes are taped into both arms, and a urinary catheter is taped to his inner thigh. The catheter leads to a large yellow plastic bag that has been velcroed to the end of the bed. A standing gallery of monitors flickers quietly behind him.

She sits in the chair by the bed. *Uncomfortable.* There's another patient in the room, but she can't see behind the curtain.

"Hi baby." She tries to sound positive.

She looks at him. Despite the ice packs he's covered with sweat. The sheet beneath him is soaked. She reaches for his hand, but there's a blood oxygen sensor taped to his index finger.

"Um, I've got to go." Dud is standing in front of her looking guilty. "I have a test. Hitchcock. I...study. You know?"

Dud picks up his pack, and is gone.

Whitney feels wrong. *This is wrong*. She feels like she should cry, or try to talk more. Maybe she should be asking somebody questions. She almost wishes he would die. *It would be less complicated*. But she just sits there, and nobody talks but the hissing machines.

Outside at the nurse's station someone turns on a radio, country western music. The singer is advising his ex-wife to take his quarter, and call someone who cares. *Not me*, thinks Whitney. Then the disc jockey comes back on. He sounds remarkably Southern for a Midwesterner.

"...Eastern Iowa's favorite music, KBOB, BOB country. Remember, where there's fun, you'll find BOB."

As she walks out, she looks at Nad. He hasn't moved.

CHAPTER SIX

"Darling I'll never be true
you see for so long I was blue
and if I hurt then you will too"

-Smashing Pumpkins

– Jerry-Jean –

Yelling and a thump against the side of her cubicle break Jerry-Jean's fortress of sleep.

"...us-Christ shut that fucking thing off! It's four in the morning!"

A size-twelve combat boot bounces off the wall above her head and lands on the floor.

Buzzing. Something is buzzing. It's her alarm clock. She reaches over and turns it off. The cursing and projectiles immediately stop.

Why am I up this early? She is about to return to sleep. Her bed is so warm. It would be insane to leave it now, right? She'd had the bad dream again last night, the one about the rifle and the levee. It scared her so much she couldn't get back to sleep till almost two A.M. Now she is painfully tired. *Just one more hour.* But then she remembers, and sits up with a gasp.

Humanities. She has a humanities paper due this morning. Jerry-Jean has all the reading done, but for the last three days when she tried to get into the Purge computer lab to write it, the lab was so crowded she couldn't find a free computer. Dudley suggested she try early in the morning.

She pulls a robe over the heavily pilling sweats she uses as pajamas, picks up her backpack, and in her frog-slippered feet, stumbles out of the Bunker and down the hall to the elevators. Scratching herself on the short ride to the basement, Jerry-Jean wonders how she is going to write a ten-page paper before nine a.m.

Purge Hall's basement is actually a cold war era bomb shelter. The shelter is deeper underground than a regular basement and it is filled with large halls and chambers for the students of that era to Duck and Cover! Some of the shelter's halls are lined with doors. The doors open to little study chambers large enough for three or four students. As Jerry-Jean walks

past, shadows behind frosted glass show that they are all filled. One darkened chamber breathes the distinct sounds of people having sex. She shivers and tries not to think about it.

Besides study areas, the Purge bomb shelter also contains laundries, freight storage areas, game rooms, large tunnels to other dorms, and the dorm's computer lab where students who are too poor to have their own computers come to write papers and e-mail their friends. Jerry-Jean walks over a freight scale that takes up an entire section of the floor on the way to the computer lab. A large digital readout in the window to her left flashes red, 127.89.

The computer lab is still pretty full, but there are a few open spots. She signs in at the desk, and the lab monitor asks if she needs help with a look that suggests he very much hopes she does not. He is studying what looks like German, and has the entire desk covered with vocabulary flash cards. She says no, and sits down.

Time accelerates with the relative cruelty of a capricious God. At a quarter to nine she just has time to spell check her paper, and print it before running out the door. She is halfway to class before she notices her ankles are cold and realizes she is still in her robe and slippers. It's noon, and two classes later, before she can make it back to the bunker and change into normal clothes. Her hair is a tangled mess, and she ties it back with a scrunchy. She feels sticky, and is vaguely aware that she stinks, but she has no time for a shower. She drops half her books on the bed, *thank goodness for my job or I wouldn't have any books at all*, and with a much lighter backpack, she runs down the four flights of stairs to the Purge cafeteria. She is desperately hungry, and the hot food smells good enough to hurt, but the line is way too long.

Instead, Jerry-Jean grabs a peanut-butter sandwich from salad-and-sandwich cart in the center of the room, downs three glasses of milk, and runs out into the snow hoping to not be late for French. She is late, almost ten minutes, and the instructor scowls at her as she takes her seat

in the back of the room. The first vocabulary test of the semester is handed back at the end of class, D-minus. She learned most of the vocabulary correctly, but she can't seem to keep the genders straight. *Why do words need genders anyway? What a stupid language.*

More classes. She is so tired. She falls asleep during the film in Intro to Philosophy. At five she finds herself having dinner in the cafeteria with her roommates and Thud's girlfriend. Thud is still sick. She feels kind of relieved that he is still in the hospital. He scares her. Then she immediately feels guilty for the thought. *Not very Christian, of course you hope he gets better.* But she doesn't really.

During dinner she watches everyone talk. *They are so intense, so full of opinion, so alive. Thud's girlfriend, I think her name is Whitney, is...there's something about her. She's kind of mean, but she's so smart and beautiful. Well anyway, there's just something about her. She's beautiful, why don't you just admit it?*

"No." She says out-loud interrupting the ongoing conversation.

"What?"

Whitney is talking to her.

"What are you staring at, anyway, Jerry-Jean? Do I have something in my teeth or something?"

Jerry-Jean blushes.

"No. I have to go to work."

She picks up her tray and hurries out before anyone can say anything more.

On the bus to Elmdale she opens her mail. A request for money from Campus Crusade for Christ. A request for money from the State University Alumni Association. *How can they be asking me for money now? I haven't even graduated yet.* A threatening letter from the University

Business office. "You owe \$5,280.00...withholding of grades...may result in further restrictions if payment is not received by..." *Blah, blah, blah.* She is too tired to get upset tonight. As she gets off the bus it begins to snow again, a fine thin snow that spins and whirls in great clouds between the buildings.

She is punching in at the old analog time clock in the laundry break room when the supervisor asks her into his office.

"Half of C-shift is out with the flu. I need you to work a double shift tonight."

"But I have class."

"You'll be off at eight a.m. Look I really need you to work this. If you want to keep this job you need to be a team player."

He is saying this like it is something that has recently been said to him, and without much conviction. Jerry-Jean just nods, and goes to her station.

The laundry always smells like ozone and lint dust, a combination that results in the same sensation as fingernails on a chalkboard for Jerry-Jean. She endures the awful prickling up her spine with gritted teeth and daydreams.

Her job at the laundry involves pulling big canvas bags of wet laundry that hang from a rail guide in the ceiling, and yanking a cord that allows the bags to open, dropping their contents into the mammoth industrial dryers. The steam and dryer dust make her cough, and in the first hour her nose is running so much, she gives up trying to wipe it, and just lets it run down the front of her face. There are a lot of students working in the laundry, but it is so loud there is no point in trying to talk to anyone. During her lunch hour she drinks a Coke from the vending machine and tries to study her French. There are a few times when she almost falls asleep standing up, but by the end of the second she seems to be semi-functional again.

On the bus back into town Jerry-Jean looks down at her hands and notices that they are worn raw and blistered from pulling the wet heavy cord for so many hours. It doesn't really hurt much. She smiles to herself. *I'm tougher than I thought.*

– Tasha –

"No. I think you're overreacting. First of all, we don't know that the items I've asked you to decrypt are American. Since we have no knowledge of their origin, we are not breaking any National Security laws." *Not exactly the truth.*

"Yeah. I know. It's just that idiot, Lo Res. There's gonna be heat now. You have to see it coming."

The boy's voice is wavering. She can feel his fear through the phone.

"I know, Adrian, and that was my mistake. I will take care of it, okay?"

"Okay, okay, but no more communication by phone. They'll have Signals Intelligence pointed in our direction by now, and ever since Patriot Act IV passed they can ramp up with no real delay."

He is sounding a little better.

"I'm well aware of that. I will come see you later in the week and we can work something out. Relax. If this turns out to be American data we – I will turn it over to the appropriate authorities. We haven't broken any laws. Really. Relax."

Tasha hangs up the phone and sits back in her chair. *This is beginning to be interesting.* She picks up the phone again and calls the State University Computing Center to report the loss of her network access code. Then she reports her credit cards stolen, and requests long distance

blocking on her phone so that outgoing calls can only be made with a special code – at least temporarily.

Satisfied that she has done enough damage control, she checks over her lesson plan. Colby should be correcting the reading quiz. He will be bringing his work up for her inspection at eleven.

There's a movie about the life of Genghis Khan at the Bijou. She wants to take Lamia. *The girl clearly has some Asian ancestry- it would be good to begin exposing her to the history of the continent.* She punches Lamia's number into the phone.

"Hello."

She sounds tired.

"Lamia. It's Tasha. If it's okay with your dad, I thought you might like to go to a movie with me tonight? It's about Genghis Khan- lots of battles and fun stuff like that."

Sniffs.

"No, I – I'm sorry I can't. I have to stay home."

She doesn't sound right. She's usually so cheerful.

"Okay. Well if you change your mind, I'm right upstairs. Feel free to come up any time to play with Bitch or use the library. You still have the electronic key I gave you?"

"Yes. I have to go, okay?"

Dial tone.

Well, she is an adolescent; maybe she's just being moody. Something in the back of her mind says, *not this time. Something is wrong.* But she dismisses it as paranoia. Tasha looks at her watch. It's just after four. Time enough to go to the library.

The State University Library is a large imposing brick structure. The five-story building is constructed in a squat cube with occasional slit-like windows as if designed for defense by archers. She loves the library. It is one of the largest in the country, and she always feels powerful when she walks in the door. *All that information, just looking for analysis.* This explains part of her reasoning for coming here rather than going online. The remainder is a product of her intelligence work. She hates doing original research on the grid. *Just because you're paranoid, it doesn't mean they aren't watching you.*

Tasha spins through the turnstile and heads directly to periodical research. At the periodicals desk she requests a Jane's publications index for the years 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991, and 1992. The Russian disk was dated 1991, but it is better to have a range. The librarian hands her a stack of six disks in jewel cases and points to a row of computers in front of shelves filled with academic journals and research magazines.

She wades through hundreds of articles on Soviet Submarines. She skims, as she goes through them, not knowing exactly what she is looking for, but knowing she will recognize it when she finds it. Her eyes are getting dry.

Wait, here's something. On October 26th 1991 the Russians admitted losing a submarine near the time of the coup attempt of August 19th-21st. The article indicated the submarine was lost at or near the Japan trench in 32,000 feet of water. It was an Akula Class boomer, classified by NATO under the code name Typhoon. A nuclear missile submarine. The American government had planned to launch a search and recovery operation with Russian cooperation, but the search was called off after the Russians informed them that there were no missiles on board. *What was a boomer doing less than three hundred miles from Honshu with no missiles?* The article doesn't list the name of the sub or provide any other identifiers. *No problem.*

Tasha gets another set of Jane's indexes from the Librarian. This one is Jane's Fighting Ships for the years 1990 and 1991. She looks up the listing for Akula class submarines. Both the United States and the Soviets tried to keep quiet the strength of their forces, but Jane's always kept a pretty accurate estimate of numbers and classifications of the weapons possessed by both sides. Submarines are easy enough to hide at sea, but they have to come home sometime.

Tasha goes down the list of identification numbers for each of the Akula class subs deployed in 1990; there are only seven. TK-205 matches the last part of the number she copied off the blue disk. She can feel her heart speeding up. Her hands feel cold. She loves research. It's moments like this that she lives for. She switches disks. 1991. She goes down the Akula deployment list, no TK-205. Then, just to be sure, she checks the inactive list; Submarines that may have been docked for refit that year, and therefore were not deployed. TK-208 was listed as under repair at Sevmash shipyard, no TK-205. One more; decommissions. All six of the remaining Akula Class boomers are still in active service, no TK-205. This means she has a disk that may contain information on a missing Soviet era submarine. A lost sub for which there is almost no available information except that it was not armed, and that it was not recovered.

She leaves the library almost running. This could be worthy of an article in Jane's or Defense Review. She could get Department Chair over something like this. *Let's not get ahead of ourselves. No. No, but what a find!*

– Dudley –

Dudley takes some sandwiches and a couple of glasses of milk and winds his way through the jumble of tables in the Purge cafeteria. Sixties style box chandeliers decorated with metallic stars hang from the ceiling. *Mega retro.*

Dudley is beginning to think he will never get a hot meal in college. He has been here a month and every time he goes through the hot food line; the collection of culinary delights under the sneeze guard becomes more frightening. Still, he figures a man can probably live indefinitely on sandwiches. He sees Jerry-Jean and Adrian at a table in the corner and heads toward them.

"Oh my God. What is that? Are you eating that?" He puts his tray down and pulls up a chair.

"It's seven layer salad."

Dudley feels his stomach hitch and churn in horror.

"This place is like another country. It's almost as nasty as British food. How can you eat that?"

Jerry-Jean shrugs. "It's good."

Adrian laughs. "You're just a food snob. What do you eat out West, Dudley? Is it all tofu burgers and cappuccino?"

"No, but this is just weird. I mean potato-chip casseroles filled with pink hamburger, green beans, and Velveeta? Velveeta isn't even a dairy product. You don't even have to refrigerate it, for Christ's sake. Aren't you suspicious of a cheese that doesn't need to be refrigerated?"

Adrian laughs again, taking a big bite of casserole. "Okay, you've got a point, but I still say you're a food snob."

"No, he's right. It's a fucking barbaric wasteland." Whitney puts a tray full of chef's salad and milk on the table, and pulls up a chair.

"Hey Whit."

"Hey Whit."

"I mean how can any community claim to be part of civilization and produce something called a 'butt steak'?" She continues.

Adrian interrupts, "Yes, but 'butt steaks' are actually a product of Illinois."

"You are not hurting my argument, Hip Hop Homo." Whitney laughs.

"What about the whole pork tenderloin thing?" Says, Dudley, pleased there is finally someone at the table on his side.

"Yeah," She grins, turning to Dudley, "You know, I heard they actually compete over those. Different places claim to have the biggest and there are all sorts of contests. Why a piece of pork hammered into a big flat disk, battered, and deep fried in the nastiest grease available would be appealing, is beyond me."

"We should let them eat test loaves instead, Marie?" Says Adrian throwing a carrot at Whitney.

"I never claimed to be proletarian," giggles Whitney, taking a bite of salad and stuffing an ice cube down the back of Adrian's shirt.

"Aaaggh, damn bitch, that's cold." He jumps up, trying to shake the ice out.

Dudley is about to say something brilliant about the demerits of Midwestern creme salads. *Since when is something with no vegetables in it a salad, anyway?* But Nad shows up, and everyone at the table becomes quiet.

Nad sits. He looks like remasticated vomit. His eyes are more pink than white, and his hair is so dirty it looks like it might crawl off his head under its own power. He drinks some soda, and starts gnawing on a sauerkraut-smothered bratwurst. Everyone just sits and watches him eat.

Dudley can't take the quiet.

"Dude, so how is he?"

Nad picks a bit of pork gristle out of his teeth, examines it, and flicks it into the hair of a freshman girl sitting at a nearby table. The girl doesn't notice. Adrian laughs quietly. When Nad starts talking he doesn't look up.

"He's off the respirator. The fever broke. They did an MRI and couldn't find any obvious brain damage. They'll know more when they do a PET scan later tonight. They still don't know what it is. I think it's some kind of virus, although none of the antibody tests came back positive. Micro is trying to isolate an antigen – that's the actual viron – but that could take a while. I took all his samples myself. I sent a second set to the Centers for Disease Control. Anyway, he's stable. We just have to wait and see if he'll wake up."

Nods and words of affirmation all around. Dudley pats Nad on the back. Nad just goes back to his bratwurst. Whitney asks for the pepper, and Dudley hands it to her.

"Are you going to go see him?"

She looks up at Dudley.

"Yeah...I'm going."

She looks angry. Thinks Dudley. I don't get that girl. She should be happy. Everything is going to be okay. Whitney just stares at her salad.

Jerry-Jean is talking to Adrian about barely finishing her paper this morning.

"Hey, maybe I can help with that." Dudley says.

"What do you mean?" Says Jerry-Jean.

"Well my mother just sent me a check, and it's more than I need for school, so I'm getting a video camera and a new computer. You can use my old laptop if you want. It has a printer and everything."

"Wow! Are you sure? That would be great. Really?"

"Really. I'll put it on your desk this afternoon. You know how to use it right?"

She grins. "Yeah, engineering, you know? No problem, thanks."

Adrian asks what he's getting, and they get into a hot debate over the video processing ability of Macs versus PCs. Adrian wins of course, but he's still going to get a Mac.

Whitney says something to Jerry-Jean; he didn't catch it, but it was probably something mean; and Jerry-Jean turns bright red and leaves. *I wish everyone would be nicer to her*, he thinks, but he doesn't say anything.

– Lamia –

Lamia climbs the narrow stairs to Tasha's apartment. She knows everyone is gone. She saw them leave from her window. Tasha walking off down the hill with those long strides that always make her look like she's flying. Dolf drove away in that big truck thing sometime later. He's probably going to the store. He usually goes to the store at this time of day.

Her face still hurts so much it's hard to think. She's hungry, but she couldn't eat anything all day. It hurts to open her mouth. Nausea and dizziness hit her in little spurts. They creep up on her. Everything's fine and then boom, she feels sick. Her balance is failing her too, and she's

having a hard time with the stairs. Every once in a while her vision gets really blurry, and she has to stop and try to hold very still until it passes.

She makes it to the top of the stairs and presses the button on the electronic key. The door clicks, and she pushes it open. Bitch snuffles at her hand. She leans on him and goes in. The loft smells like cinnamon. Dolf must have been baking. All the lights are on, and some kind of soft classical music is playing in the background. Tasha always leaves it on for Bitch.

Lamia walks down the long hall to the library, wobbling a little. She sits in a chair, but then feels that if she doesn't lie down she might black out. There are no couches in the library and she doesn't want to go back out to the living room. It's too open. It makes her uncomfortable to be there alone. Besides, she isn't going to be here long. *I have to leave before they get back*, she feels so embarrassed.

Lamia opens a big mahogany door in the corner of the library behind the fireplace. It opens into a large walk-in closet, and it occurs to her that the library must have been someone's bedroom originally. In the closet are shelves filled with blankets and pillows and boxes. On one side, next to a little window, is a ladder built into the wall that rises up to a trapdoor in the ceiling.

She puts some pillows and a blanket on the floor and curls up with her head on Bitch. He snorts, and nuzzles against her. *Just going to lie down for a few minutes. Till my head feels better.*

When she wakes up her head feels worse. It really hurts a lot, but at least she can see clearly now. She looks up at the window. It's dark outside. Bitch is snoring softly. She steps out into the room. The library door is ajar and she hears voices down the hall. *Can't go out there.* She takes the laptop off the table and winds the cords back behind some of the furniture so it will

reach into the closet. She closes the door most of the way and sits down with her back against the big dog.

She returns to "Girl Chat," the internet page she was about to enter when she left the last time. The people on this page seem more chatty and friendly than on the other pages she had visited. They all greet her when she signs on, and encourage her to talk. She learns that most of the people in girl chat are lesbians. Lamia doesn't think that she is a lesbian, but she likes these women, and talking to them makes her feel less alone. They have all sorts of goofy names like Goaliegal3000, Roses69, Duckymouse, and Vanilla Kisses. She learns that Duckymouse and Vanilla Kisses are online girlfriends. Lamia thinks their back and forth banter is romantic and funny. One of the chatters, named Phoenix Rose, is a Wiccan priestess that believes in vampires. She seems very serious. Lamia talks to her a little, but finds her kind of intimidating. Phoenix Rose has her own web site filled with pictures of gargoyles and pentagrams and runes. Lamia thinks it is the coolest thing she has ever seen. Phoenix Rose suggests she read books by Anne Rice.

The chat room is addictive. There are always people coming and going. She is afraid to leave because she might miss some essential snippet of conversation. She gets into a long discussion about dog training with a woman called L39E. But eventually, her keystrokes get fewer and fewer, and she drifts off with the computer in her lap and Bitch snoring softly under her head.

– Whitney –

He's just lying there, covered up now, but there's still an oxygen tube in his nose, and a catheter tube to the urine bag at the foot of the bed worms up under the sheets. A nurse told Whitney she had been giving him sponge baths, but there is still a pervasive body-odor-hospital-stink in the room.

She sits in the chair by his bed and tries to talk to him.

"Hey, Baby. It's me, Whit. I had lunch at Purge today. Everybody misses you. Nad is a wreck. You'd better come back soon, Baby; it isn't any fun insulting him when he's so sad. Baby...fuck. This is just stupid. You can't hear me."

He looks so gray, so weak.

Whitney takes out a file and begins doing her nails. She files them carefully, and then begins applying a layer of clear coat. A nurse comes in to check the beeping oxygen sensor, and tells Whitney the fumes probably aren't good for the patient. Whitney stands up with a jerk, tells the nurse to mind her own fucking business, and walks out.

Sara and Kim are waiting for her in front of the Meat Market. It is the biggest bar in town and a notorious freshman hangout, but there are supposed to be some good DJs spinning tonight, so she is willing to risk the humiliation of being seen here. It's still early, so the line out front isn't too bad. Large bouncers, pumped up on steroids and Midwestern beef, crowd the door and check IDs. She and Sara get in without a look, and they don't notice nineteen-year-old Kim's fake Colorado license. They find a table near the dance floor and order drinks. Whitney gets a cosmopolitan, and asks for another as soon as it arrives. The waitress, all grins and black vinyl, returns with two.

"So?"

"So what?"

Kim is looking at Sara expectantly. Whitney knows the question, but finds she doesn't care.

"I couldn't do it."

"I knew it!"

Kim is looking triumphant. Whitney is beginning to wonder why the waitress hasn't come back. She can't even feel the three cosmos. *Cheap fucking watered down...*

"I went, I was on the set. They wanted me to, you know, this guy. I just couldn't do it. I don't think it's wrong. Maybe I just wasn't ready."

"Maybe you just weren't ready to make yourself a victim of male objectification," says Kim.

"It doesn't have anything to do with objectification. God, Kim, it's like ever since you took that women's studies class, you've been a total feminazi prude. I told you that professor had a heavy Steinem bias. There is another perspective, you know?"

Kim smirks, and buries her rum and coke.

"What, that sexuality is a tool of feminist empowerment? I'm sorry but that just doesn't float. That whole Maddonafication reaction, 'embracing sexuality' to advance feminism, is just bullshit. Sexuality has, and always will be, a tool of male domination. It is, by its very nature, an act of submission."

Sara begins lamenting that Kim is stuck in the psychology of the sixties and that she should grow up and explore some dogma that is not quite so firmly attached to the assholes of her hippie-dippy parents; followed by a long and incoherent quote that she attributes to Camille Paglia.

Whitney is drowning.

Where is that fucking skank of a waitress? She gets up and pushes through the crowd looking for the bar. Sara and Kim don't notice. There are actually four bars in the Meat Market, two on each floor. She makes it to the one closest to the dance floor. The dance floor is already beginning to fill up. A haze of short skirts, jeans, and entirely too small t-shirts, move in lazy gyration to Korn's *No Place To Hide*. Whitney decides the cosmopolitans are probably not doing it, and opts for a triple Jamesons, neat. It burns, but she begins to relax. *Hospital. Hate. Fucking.*

A cute but kind of lame looking frat boy with frosted blond hair asks her to dance. Out on the floor he moves with typical awkwardness, but she doesn't care. She rubs up against him, and grabs his ass. They grind for two songs, and end up making out against a pillar. Urgent tongue. *What is it with some boys and the need to jam their tongues as far back as they can? It must be a penetration issue.* He's reaching for her bra strap and she's letting him, when he belches in her mouth.

"Yuck!"

Whitney pushes the boy back hard enough to drop him on his ass. She lunges away through the crowd, elbows cutting a path, and ends up in the bathroom trying to wash the smell of Heineken and beer nuts off her tongue.

A dusty brown haired girl is bent over the counter next to her doing blow. She's a Tri-Delt pledge, but Whitney can't remember her name. The girl offers Whitney a line. *Suck-up loser.* Whitney does two, tilting her head back and sucking in the rush. Her face feels numb. Everything looks very clear.

Back on the floor Kim is dancing with a lean pretty Latino boy. *I wonder if she's objectifying him?* Sara has evaporated.

Another boy asks Whitney to dance and she is back on the floor again. This boy is a better dancer and she finds herself struggling to keep up with him. He spins and slides; moving in graceful synch with the electronic foam being pumped out by the club's big concert speakers. He has a more urban style and she likes the way he smells. They find a couch against an upstairs wall and start kissing. This boy is gentle. They're really getting into it, and the boy asks if she wants to go. They get all the way to his apartment, a small brick two-story just a few blocks from campus, before she stops.

"No."

"No?"

"I have to go."

He gives her his phone number, and she turns back toward the Tri-Delt house. She drops the phone number in a trashcan in front of the Pentacrest on the way. It's a long walk, and she's shivering by the time she gets home. Sara and Kim are still out. She is beginning to get a headache. She pukes, blows her nose, brushes her teeth and goes to bed.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"And when you touch my skin I smell disaster"

-Eurythmics

– **Jerry-Jean** –

Jerry-Jean sits at her desk and types. Dudley's computer hums under her fingers. She touches the keys just hard enough to move them. She wants the computer to be real, and not just

some ethereal idea. She's afraid that if she if she types too hard it might break, or worse yet, disappear completely. This morning she turned in a paper for Rhetoric on time!

It's not a great computer. Just an old clunker, nothing like the titanium-cased lightning-tool Dudley bought to replace it. This machine is thick, and heavy, and slow, and four years old, and she loves it.

State University provides all students with free internet access. She spends half an hour setting up her account and an e-mail address. She wants to see the internet. She wants to see everything. The clock on her desk has other plans.

Almost noon. She grabs her backpack and runs downstairs. At the housing office she finds a check from the office of student financial aid. *A check!* There's a note with the check. It says that one of her Stafford loans went through, after all. Her tuition and room and board are paid through the first third of the semester. The check is a refund of the remainder. It's almost four hundred dollars.

She runs up the steps to the Purge lobby two at a time. Outside she waves and greets every familiar face, smiling with such intensity, that by the time she has walked the three blocks to the Pentacrest, her cheeks are beginning to hurt. At her Intro to Western Civilization class she sits in the front, asks a multitude of questions, and participates with such enthusiasm, that the Teaching Assistant, a large angry woman with a penchant for flannel, actually smiles.

After class, Jerry-Jean runs to the bank, almost knocking over several students, and sliding around the corner like a skater on the packed snow. She's almost bouncing when she reaches the teller, who looks at her with the usual forced politeness found so often in banks.

She signs the check and hands it over.

"Cash?" The teller looks annoyed.

"Yes. Yes please."

"I.D.?"

Jerry-Jean hands the teller her student I.D. and her driver's license. The teller writes something on the check, hands back her cards, and counts out twenty starched Jacksons. On the way out the double doors she can't help but raise the bills to her nose, breathing deep the scent of cotton bond and fresh ink.

I deserve it, she thinks, *after all this, I deserve it*. She walks down the long narrow staircase into the basement clothing store. A sign above her says, "Shoplifters will be flogged, locked in an isolation tank, and be forced to listen to Brittany Spears for a week." This is the Dungeon, one of the hipper clothing stores in town. She overheard some of the girls in her French class talking about it.

She buys some new t-shirts, very small ones in bright colors with Eastern European military insignias on the front. She also buys a short blue mechanics jacket and some wool pants.

Loaded down with new clothes she bounds upstairs, and crosses the street to the hair salon that sits next to a very famous ice-cream shop. All the stylists are working, so she gives the boy at the counter her name and sits down. The coffee table in front of her is piled with hair magazines. She picks one up and starts flipping through it. Articles about split ends, and how to keep your man from cheating. Adds for outrageous hair products that promise to change your life by virtue of protein rinse or cream conditioner or nuclear powered hair dryer. She turns a page about feminine freshness, and sees the most perfect woman she has ever seen – *well almost*. The woman has a long delicate face with hard blue eyes. Her hair is shaved close on the back and sides of her head, and is only a few inches long on top.

When the stylist calls her name, Jerry-Jean holds up the magazine and says, "I want that one."

"Are you sure, Darlin'? Are you sure you want to cut off all that beautiful hair?"

Her head feels lighter. *Everything feels lighter.* She doesn't even put on her hat on the way back to Purge, enjoying the cold on the sides of her head.

She bursts into the bunker, smiling wide, and throws her bags on the cot. Dudley and Nad are watching George Carlin on TV. Dudley looks up at her and says, "Holy shit!"

Nad raises an eyebrow, but doesn't say anything.

She grabs her laundry basket and heads for the elevator. The smell of funky clothes reaches up at her. *I can actually afford to do laundry!* The elevator doors open and there is Whitney, looking at her.

"J.J.?" Says Whitney, "Cute hair."

She doesn't smirk. She doesn't scowl. She says it with singular flat honesty. Whitney steps past her, and heads down the hall toward the bunker. By the time Jerry-Jean reaches the bomb shelter she is neon red and grinning to the point of injury again.

– Tasha –

Tasha is nearly finished with her Sunday morning ritual, which involves green tea, fresh croissants, and a huge stack of newspapers. The newspapers lie in nest-like disarray across the sofa, and Dolf has just removed her breakfast tray, murmuring in a low voice that it is nearly noon, and some people – he mentions no names – ought to think about getting up and getting some work done.

The big apartment seems empty for some reason. *Like something is missing.*

"Dolf, have you seen Bitch?"

But he is doing the breakfast dishes and doesn't hear her. *That silly dog. Maybe Lamia took him out before she woke up.* She wanders down the hall in her slippers.

"Bitch?"

The library door is ajar. She goes in. *Something is out of place.* She looks around the room trying to think, but still fuzzy. She is so not a morning person. *The computer. Where is the library computer?*

"Dolf," she says, knowing he won't hear her. "What did you do with the computer?" Tasha walks behind a green leather armchair and sees electrical cords on the ground leading toward the closet. She can feel her pulse in her throat. *This feels very wrong.*

Tasha opens the door and there is Bitch all curled up in the corner of the closet with Lamia sleeping on his chest. The dog looks up at her and licks his lips, looking nervous.

"Lamia." Soft.

The girl looks up at her. Her left eye is swollen completely shut. A black and purple bruise covers her face from her left cheek to half way down her neck. Blood is crusted thick in the corner of her mouth.

"I'm sorry." Lamia says, putting her hand over her face. "I'm sorry."

"No, no, no," is all Tasha can manage, but she picks the girl up, and, Bitch close at her leg, carries her into the kitchen. Dolf looks up from the dishes and almost drops a plate. He pulls out a chair, and Tasha helps her sit down at the kitchen table. "Get the..." But Dolf already has the first aid kit out. He takes out a doctor's light, looks in her ears, and then examines the eye that isn't swollen shut.

"No dilation. Minor concussion at least. She needs a CAT scan. Now."

"I'll call Abed." Tasha picks up the phone and dials the number. She has to hang up and dial again because she is hitting the buttons too hard and messing up the phone.

"It's me. Yeah, I know. I need a favor. Meet me at neuro in ten. Yeah, thanks."

Dolf wraps the girl in a blanket and carries her down the stairs to the truck. Tasha sits in back and holds her head while they drive. The elevator ride to the State University Hospitals and Clinics Neurology Center seems to take minutes.

Dr. Afshen Abed meets her at the entrance. "Domestic?" He asks. Tasha nods. The doctor lifts Lamia onto a gurney and tells her to lie down. He examines her briefly, and motions to a nurse. "Radiology. I need a full head CT series. See if you can get a hold of Abrahmson, that cut on her mouth is going to scar badly if we can't get a face guy on it soon. Asians and Africans are more prone to keloid scars."

The nurse takes the gurney and they follow her down the hall. Lamia reaches for Dolf's hand and he takes it.

"I'm scared."

Dolf looks down at her. "I'll stay with you."

The nurse looks back at him.

"You can't sir. There's a lot of radiation in a CT scan. You need to stay in the other room while the machine works."

Dolf looks at Tasha, and then back at the nurse.

"No." He says, "I'm staying with her."

The nurse starts to protest, but Abed tells her to be quiet.

"He stays, Carol, my responsibility."

Behind the leaded green glass Tasha watches the nurse slide Lamia's head into a white tunnel. She holds very still, following the nurse's instructions and Dolf holds her hand as the machines hums and clicks.

"You know, I'm legally obligated to report this."

"That's the favor."

"Why? Who is she to you? I could lose my license if this comes out, you know that."

"You owe me, Afshin. You know that too. I just don't want her to become a ward of the state. We both know how well children turn out when they have been put into the system."

"So. So what? You let it go?"

She looks at him, very hard. "No."

Abed's friend, Dr. Abrahamson, cleans and stitches up Lamia's face. Abed studies her CT scan on a monitor.

"Here's the concussion," he points to a whitish spot on the screen. "Not a serious hemorrhage. She also has a couple of small fractures. Her cheekbone is cracked here, and she also has a hairline fracture in her jaw here. Nothing we need to pin, but it will hurt for a while. She probably won't have any lasting effects. Liquids only for at least a month. Bring her back if..."

He reels off a list of symptoms. She writes them all down. Dr. Abrahamson gives Tasha a bottle of something called Vistaril that is supposed to help with both nausea and pain. Lamia has already had some, and she is sleeping with a soft, thick, little girl snore. Dolf carries her out to the car.

"We need to talk about your heart," says Abed, after Dolf leaves.

"I know." She doesn't look at him.

"You should schedule the procedure. I can get you in this next week. As I have explained, Tasha, it is dangerous to wait given your history."

"I understand, but I'm not – it's not the right time for this. I don't want to disrupt my classes, and I have a project that's just getting interesting. Summer break, okay?"

"Under my objection. Classes end May tenth. Promise you'll be in my office on the thirteenth, and that you'll cut out the salt in the meantime?"

"I promise. Thanks for your help with this."

"As you reminded me, I owe you. Tajikistan."

She takes his hand, "Tajikistan."

Tasha takes the elevator down to the lobby. Dolf is pulled up in front waiting for her. She sits in front, looking over her shoulder at the injured child.

"I'm going to kill him." She shakes her head. "I'm going to fucking kill him. That worthless son-of-a-bitch."

Dolf's cheeks tense and he presses a button raising a glass partition between the front and rear seats.

"We could. I have no moral objections; you know that. But logically, think of what is best for her. Is that best, to have a dead father? She has no one else, Tasha. Let her hate him. Do not martyr him. She came to us on her own, but we can't help her if she hates us. She would figure it out. You know how smart she is."

"Yes." He's right, and she hates him for it. She bites her tongue hard enough to taste copper.

"Tasha."

She looks at him, vision blurred with rage. "What?"

"Come with me, tomorrow. We'll talk first. I don't propose to let it go."

She stares at the dash, crushing the urge to hit him.

"Fine. Just don't talk to me anymore today, all right?"

"Okay."

– Dudley –

"Crazier n' a screwed sheep. Hotter n' a two peckered billy goat. More useless than tits on a boar..."

"And you're collecting these?" Asks Dudley.

"Sure. Rainin' like a cow pissing on a flat rock. Slicker n' a hog on ice. Too stupid to kick a turd out of bed. Too dumb to pour piss out of a boot." Nad is going down a list in his little black notebook.

"Can I ask why, exactly?"

Nad looks up, amused.

"Call it an anthropological study. These guys won't be around forever. I mean this stuff is great. It's a little slice of Americana. I just don't want to lose it."

He goes back to his notebook.

"Slicker n' dog snot..."

Dudley buttons his polyester blazer and walks out into the galleries. The flood has ebbed over the last couple of weeks and, desperate for alumni dollars, the director reopened the museum even before the carpet dried. *It looks different with the lights on*, thinks Dudley, stopping in front of a bright Matisse. The lights and color make it feel foreign from that place he

wandered for a month in the dark. Students sit on benches here and there, some sketching the great masters, some just looking and talking quietly. People always seem to treat this place like a library. As far as Dudley knows, there are no rules against speaking at a normal decibel level, but something about the high concrete walls and muted lighting leaves people stuck in whisper mode. Only the staff seems oblivious.

"How's your boy?"

Ken is standing behind him scratching his beard.

"Better, Ken. He isn't awake yet, but Nad said they did a PET scan and he has no brain damage. They think he could come out of it at any time. No push though. How about Bob?"

"Ah, well, complaining like an old woman. My wife brought him a casserole last night. Said he couldn't get his cast to sit right in the recliner. Said there weren't anything good on TV. Dirty ol'...anyway, he's tougher n' boiled owl. I expect he'll be up before the doctors guess."

"What? What was that last one?" Nad yells from the front desk.

"Tougher n' a boiled owl." Ken shouts back, not quite as loud.

One of the students taking notes on a nearby bench turns and looks at Ken as if he had just dropped his pants. Ken doesn't seem to notice. Nad is writing with great enthusiasm.

"There are times – don't get me wrong, he's a good kid – but there are times when I think that one isn't quite right in the head." says Ken.

"No argument there. But then, everyone seems pretty much nuts to me."

Ken laughs, a sweet rumbling old man laugh, and heads toward the front desk to relieve Nad. One of the curators, a slender, stunning middle-aged woman with more degrees than fingers, walks past him, leading a group of print club members toward the new Durer show. She nods at Dudley as she passes.

"I'd give her a yard and a half." Nad comes up, grinning like a psychotic hyena. "That's my third today!"

"Old sow."

"Old Heifer."

Having run out of colloquialisms for the moment, they head through the photo gallery to the loading dock. There is an entire herd of physical plant guys lounging around the loading dock, probably here to work on the damaged machine room, although, at the moment, they seem to be observing the same work policy as their road construction brethren. One guy works, while nine others stand around and expound on the merits of Old Style verses Blue Ribbon, or debate the size of so-and-so's weimeraner.

"Really, George, I'm tellin' ya. That thing was the size of a small pony."

Chuck has already arrived. He is taking off his coat and nodding at everything everyone says, even if they are contradicting each other.

"When do you get off?" Asks Nad, peeling off his polyester.

"There's a reception, so probably nine." Says Dudley.

"You still want to see micro? I'm solo till eleven."

"Yeah, that would be cool. I'll bring the camera. Maybe get some cool shots for my video collage."

"Okay, just take elevator J up to five. It's the door right in front of you as you get out. Wave at the camera and I'll buzz you in."

"Cool."

Nad thumps down the stairs and disappears. Dudley settles into the chair at the loading dock desk and starts reading a book on the Israeli Mossad for his Covert Operations of the Cold War class.

Caterers and musicians come in through the dock. Some of the girls on the catering crew are very pretty, and Dudley flirts with them – teasing and laughing and doing his best to be witty. It is good, and he thinks he's doing okay, but then it seems to fizzle out, and they lose interest. *Is it the uniform?* He wonders. He has this suspicion that it doesn't matter how cool you are, in polyester you're still a dork. "Regnum polyesterum...yada yada." He mutters to himself as he walks up into the galleries.

The reception is starting. A quartet is playing Vivaldi in the main gallery. It is a rough, echoing Vivaldi, due to the poor acoustics of the room. Very rich, very well dressed, but mostly very rich, alumni are drifting in through the museum's slate-floored lobby. Ken mentions something about the crowd having just come from a ballet at Harper Auditorium. *Got cash? Five star all the way.*

A number of department heads flit from group to group, shaking hands, kissing asses, and generally behaving like overeducated used car salesmen. Dudley notices Professor Churel isn't here, but then she's not high enough up the food chain to be obliged to brown-nose. For some reason he doubts she would, even if she were. Canapés and wine go around. Not cheap wine, but then not really good wine either. Then there is a slight hush.

The supreme academic brown-noser has entered the museum, complete with a small entourage. The university president, a small delicate woman in her early sixties, smiles, and waves, and throws herself into the crowd. Dudley watches her with fascination. There is a reason she has this job. There is a reason she is queen of the school, and the other ass-kissers are mere

department chairs. She works the crowd with the kind of intensity and thrust he imagines might only be found in heads of state. There are over five hundred people in the room, but she greets each of them by name. She asks about their families, remembering all relevant minutia. For a moment, and he can see this in the alumni's faces, for a moment she makes each one of them her whole world. She makes them feel needed, and valuable, and that they – no one else, just them – can really make a difference. She doesn't push. She doesn't even ask. She seduces. It's almost art. *Maybe it is art*, he thinks. *Hell, I'd give her money, and she hasn't even talked to me.* She ends up surrounded by a group of suits wearing, "Hi! I'm from Neugaul Pharmaceutical," name stickers. They nod, and laugh at all her jokes.

The crowd shrinks in trickles. The musicians stop playing and begin packing up their equipment. The caterers, looking tired, wine stained, but no less pretty, disembark from the loading dock in their delivery van. And then they are alone. Dudley walks from gallery to gallery turning out the lights, and checking for stragglers. Doors locked, hatches battened, alarms activated, and then he is outside, dry powder blowing at his feet as he walks up the hill toward the University Hospital.

Nad is sitting behind an array of beeping, hissing, spinning machines, and reading a thick text on diagnostic microbiology. He smiles at Dudley, looking really relaxed for the first time in several weeks.

"Dudley, grab a chair. He's up. Thud's awake. Whit's taking him home right now."

"Whoa. When? Is he okay?"

"I was down there for an hour before shift. I was sitting there reading him the Times – you know how obsessed he is with the Times – and I was just finishing an article about some leak in yet another Russian nuclear reactor, when he just sat up. Just like that, sat straight up in

bed. I was like, 'holy-fuck!' I hugged him, and he told me to stop being a goddamned pussy and get him something to drink."

"They let him go home? So soon?"

"Well, no, not exactly. The Neurologist said he should stay, at least until tomorrow for some tests. But Thud told him, no. He said he would come back for the tests, but he was going home now. I tried to reason with him, but he is such an obstinate bastard, and besides, I had to go to work. At least I got Whit to pick him up with the Charger. He was just going to walk."

"Tougher n' a boiled owl."

"Yeah, hard-core."

"Ever figure out what made him sick?"

"No. Centers for Disease Control called last week wanting his file faxed over. I still think it was a virus of some kind, but all the standard tests have come back negative. I have some ideas. Virology is really a pretty new field. Less than two dozen known families. Very few treatments. Most research is focused on vaccines. You know some bioethicists don't even believe viruses are alive?"

"Well that's just silly. I mean they reproduce."

"Yes, but early definitions of life required four mechanisms: ingestion, excretion, respiration, and reproduction. Viruses only reproduce, they don't eat, breathe or shit. Still, there are several things that might suggest a toxin rather than a virus. You said he was affected just a few hours after complaining of 'being stuck.' A toxin could have very rapid affects, but I haven't heard of many viruses that move so fast."

"I guess it's moot now. He's better. He must have beat whatever it was."

"Yeah." But Nad doesn't look convinced.

Dudley takes out his new digital video camera and Nad takes him on a tour. Autoclaves, centrifuges, anaerobic hoods, and gram machine-whosawhatsits. Nad pauses to describe the function of each machine in painful, albeit very enthusiastic, detail. They stop at a pressure locked door.

"Do we get to go in there?"

"You don't want to go in there. That's our level three facility. Tuberculosis and other such nastiness."

"How high do the levels go?"

"One through Four. We do level one and two testing out here. For microbes that are more dangerous, we use the level three lab. There are supposedly only two level four labs in the country. One at the Centers for Disease Control and one on an army base called USANMARID. That's where they work with the really scary stuff, Ebola, Hanta, Smallpox. Gotta wear space suits to work in a level four lab. I've heard rumors though."

"About?"

"Well I heard Dr. Sooniyang, he's the head of the Pathology department here, talking to a resident about Elmdale. I guess back in the fifties, the government had more than a dozen level four labs all over the country working on biological weapons development. Dr. Sooniyang said one of them was at Elmdale. The Feds claimed to have shut down the entire program in the seventies, though. Still, you said a lot of the containers that were washed down in the flood..."

"...had Elmdale campus printed on them," Dudley finishes his sentence.

She feels sick. Not with pain, although her face does hurt a great deal. Not from the codeine. The doctor warned it makes some people throw up, but thanks to the Vistaril her stomach is okay. She feels sick with embarrassment. She wants to crawl back into that closet in the library and never come out. The humiliation gnaws at her. She feels angry, and confused, and helpless. Dolf is bringing her hot chocolate with a straw that bends.

She sips some through her closed teeth, and it doesn't hurt too much. Tasha made Dolf go out and buy her a giant TV; it must be as wide as a door, and it's sitting in the living room on a trunk, looking very much out of place. The reception is bad because they haven't had time to hook the cable up yet, but she doesn't want to watch it anyway. The pain drugs have made her very fuzzy. It's hard to concentrate, and the moving pictures on the screen are too much, too fast.

When Tasha noticed she wasn't watching TV, she brought in a book, and started reading to her. It's a very strange book called "The Whale" about a sailor called Ishmael. She likes the captain and Queequeg best. But it adds to her frustration.

She doesn't belong here, with these people, with them taking care of her. *I was very late. Maybe I deserved what happened. It's humiliating being here.* Before, she wasn't really in the way. *Not imposing. Just visiting.* Now she is the central focus of their attention and she can't get past the overwhelming shame of it. But then Bitch noses her hand, and her pity-party is temporarily disrupted.

Bitch climbs up onto the couch with her, something he is absolutely forbidden from doing, but Tasha says nothing, and continues reading. He puts his big head in her lap, and she scratches him behind the ears. Tasha is reading about goblins...*goblins*. She falls into a fitful sleep.

When Lamia wakes up, she doesn't remember her dreams, but she is pretty sure they weren't good. Tasha is gone. Bitch is still asleep in her lap, and Dolf is running the electric mixer in the kitchen. It isn't dark yet, but she can see the sun melting into the rooftops.

There still is no cable for the TV. She shuffles down the hall to the library in her socks. *Kind of dirty socks.* The computer is back on the desk, and she sits down and finds her chat page. Phoenix Rose is on. *Cool.*

She asks Rose more about vampires. Does she really believe in them? Yes. Have you ever met any? Not exactly. Rose knows people who are very into what she calls 'Goth culture,' and like to dress up like vampires. Some of them might even believe that they are, but Rose believes there are real ones too, or at least that there used to be.

Lamia finds a big leather bound encyclopedia on one wall of the library, and looks up vampires. She finds all sorts of information, some conflicting, but all insisting that they are mythological entities. Still it gives her a place to start. She writes down the name of the reference books cited at the end of article.

She types the names of all the books into the State University Library Card Catalogue web page. Most of them are there. Then she begins a search of the Internet itself using key words.

After five hours of searching and sorting through hundreds of worthless web sites, Lamia finds a dozen sites connected to organizations claiming to be involved in legitimate vampire research, either of a historical or immediate nature.

She e-mails all of them from her Darkgrl account claiming to be a student who is searching for credible original source material on the existence of vampires.

Satisfied for the moment, Lamia pockets her reference list and heads for the kitchen. There are cups of chocolate pudding cooling on the counter. The smell of potatoes comes from a big steel pot on the stove. She is about to dip a finger into the pudding...

"Stop!" It's Dolf. His tone softens. "...right there, young lady. Those are for after dinner." He pours her a glass of chocolate milk as consolation, and she shuffles off into the living room.

The Simpsons is on. Laughing hurts a bit, so she changes the channel. Oprah. Oprah is having a show about families that have been reunited after being separated by war. An American father greets his Vietnamese daughter. Everyone cries. *Oprah is like a grief factory.*

She thinks about her father. Downstairs, he is alone in the little apartment. She wonders if he will remember to go to work on time. She wonders if he will remember to shave.

She changes the channel. National Public Broadcasting is doing a show about frogs in the Brazilian rainforest. Lamia likes frogs. Especially the brightly colored ones. A little man with red stuff in his hair is talking about how certain frogs are used to make poison arrows. She falls asleep again. This time she dreams of frogs.

– Whitney –

He smells different. She was worried about the hospital smell coming with him, clinging to him in a toxic vapor like the cloud of patchouli that always emanates from the stoner girl that sits in front of her in Japanese Lit. *But it isn't a hospital smell. It's him. His same musky man smell mixed with baby shampoo, lime deodorant, the pink dispenser soap from the dorm showers, and a faint hint of spray starch. But it is deeper now, not stronger exactly, but more intense, and there's something else...*

He bites her shoulder. Soft at first, but then hard. It hurts.

"Wait..."

She wants to protest. *Is he well enough for this? What if this thing that made him sick is contagious? Shouldn't she make him wear a...*but then the thought of hesitation blurs and evaporates, leaving only raw urgency.

He bites her ear, and she hears the sound of fabric ripping. Her clothes tear, and fall. And she can feel the carpet on her back and his breath on her neck, and she bites him back. His skin sweet and dry in her mouth. His fury lifts her and she comes very suddenly, without the rise she usually feels leading up to it. She shakes a little and bites his arm, very hard. But he just keeps moving, and soon she has nothing left, and he wants her ass, and that's okay, but he's not being gentle, and it hurts. He's growling low, her belly scraping the carpet now. And then it's over. She puts on one of his T-shirts, one with a picture of a very tough looking Crazy Horse, and runs barefoot to the dorm bathroom to clean up.

When she gets back she finds him asleep on the cot. She sits in the chair by the bed and lights a cigarette.

His nostrils flare, and he wakes up.

"When did you start smoking?"

"Just now, this is my first one." She smiles saccharine.

He looks at her, annoyed, but not saying anything. Then rolls over, and goes back to sleep.

She wads up the t-shirt, uses it to wipe a trickle of santorum from her ass, and throws it under the cot. *That should piss him off.*

There's this ideal.

She lights another cigarette.

This independent modern woman ideal. That you can have superficial relationships, and not be hurt. That you can be in control, and do what you want, and have what you're supposed to want. Live the lifestyle. Freedom, isn't that what they call it? No deep commitments, no regrets. Serial monogamy, or almost monogamy, or I don't do monogamy. Do you count? No you don't count, or maybe you do count but you don't tell, or maybe you do tell because you have nothing to hide and anyone who would judge your sense of sexual empowerment is not worth your time anyway.

Clothes on, she walks out.

Only some times it doesn't work.

Whitney stifles a pressing urge to yell "Mother-fucker!" at the snow. She picks up some vodka at the Quik-E-Mart on the way home.

No one greets her at the door of the Tri-Delt house. There is no orange juice in the fridge, just orange Slimfast. She makes an orange Slimfast screwdriver in a tall glass that is very little screw and all driver.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"I don't even know you and I want you dead."

-Eve

– **Jerry-Jean** –

Nad is sitting with his feet up on the coffee table, watching Perry Mason, and eating something that smells appalling from a large saucepan. He's wearing a t-shirt that says, "The

English Department Deconstructed My Cum Stained Sheets," and boxers that have "slut" printed all over them in various sizes and fonts. Jerry-Jean drops her bag and sits down in the chair opposite. She likes Perry Mason.

"Hey J.J."

"Hey Nad."

"Want some?" He holds the saucepan out.

She wrinkles her nose. "What is it?"

"When I started boot I was six foot one and only 135 pounds. I tried everything to gain weight. I lifted weights, ate more. Nothing worked. Then I came up with this. Nad's butt-ninja miracle food." He grins and took a bite. "Thud calls it that cause it gives me gas like Hiroshima. Anyway, it's just a family size box of macaroni and cheese mixed with two cans of tuna and enough diced garlic to make your eyes water. I think it has like fifty-six grams of fat."

Jerry-Jean shakes her head. "Thanks, but I already had lunch."

Nad finishes the miracle food, and washes it down with flat Dr. Pepper from a two liter bottle.

"So are you going to get vaccinated?"

Jerry-Jean looks at him, confused. "What? Vaccinated for what?"

"God, am I the only person in this dorm that watches the news? Dudley didn't know what I was talking about either. The meningitis outbreak? Six students infected. One over at Salter Hall died last week."

"Oh no."

"Yeah, boo hoo. Anyway, the administration freaked cause a lot of parents were threatening to pull their kids out, so they opened up the laser building and they're vaccinating everyone. I'm going in about five minutes; coming?"

"Sure, yeah. What's meningitis?" She feels a little nauseous.

"Well there are several manifestations, but this outbreak is caused by bacteria that infects your cerebral-spinal fluid. Causes headaches, stiff neck, fever, brain damage, paralysis, death. Pretty much a bummer. Close contact airborne too. Pretty fuckin' nasty."

Nad grins, enjoying her distress.

The Laser building shines like a big mirror in the afternoon sun. The entire building is sheathed in plates of polished stainless steel, except for one section that is sheathed in copper. This copper wing sits low, like a large boat turned upside down in front of the building. Patina is leeching from the copper and turning the concrete patio around the building a marbled muddy green. Big windows with irregular shapes appear here and there on the building's face. To Jerry-Jean, it looks like a very young child's drawing. As they go in, Nad tells her that the university constructed this building with plans to establish a world class optical engineering department, but ran out of funding. Now they have a very fancy seventy-million-dollar building that sits empty, and occasionally gets rented out for corporate receptions.

There must be two thousand students in the building's high ceilinged lobby. Some are waiting in four parallel lines that lead to tables. Others are seated at numerous small desks responding to questionnaires from nurses with clipboards. The vast majority, however, are seated in rows and rows of chairs that are lined up behind the desks. Paramedics walk down the aisles of these rows watching the seated students. Sometimes they stop to ask a question or check a pulse. The noise of talk, and gossip, and laughter echoes off the high walls hurting her ears.

Nad points and they stand in one of the lines. She thinks it will take forever, but the line moves pretty fast. At the table she shows her student I.D., and they stamp her hand with a large purple plus mark. Then she is ushered to a desk, and a male nurse with soft eyes and a musical voice asks her, her medical history.

"Are you pregnant?"

"No."

"Allergic to eggs?"

"No."

"HIV positive?"

"No."

He goes down a long checklist, then wipes the back of her arm with a cold alcohol prep pad and gives her the shot.

"Your arm will be sore for a few days. The time is 4:36. Go and sit back there until 5:36. Do not leave early. If you feel nauseous, feverish, or dizzy please notify one of the paramedics right away." He smiles at her. "Don't worry. It's just a precaution."

She sees Nad in the back of one of the rows and sits by him. He's grinning like a lunatic.

"What are you so happy about?"

"You watch, J.J., this is gonna be fun."

"Sitting here for an hour doing nothing?"

"No, no. Just look. Over there, on the left, third row from the front."

Jerry-Jean looks. A girl with brown pigtails is beginning to tilt in her seat. Then she slips and falls on the floor. As one of the paramedics runs over to her, her back arches off the floor

and she begins to shake all over. The paramedic waves at some guys with a stretcher and they carry the girl into another room still twitching.

"What? What happened to her?"

"Relax, it's probably no big deal. They're pumping her full of antihistamine right now. Maybe steroids too. She just had a reaction to the shot. That's why we're sitting here. We should get to see a few more. Anaphalaxis if we get lucky. Fun, huh?"

"No."

Not for the first time, Jerry-Jean concludes that Nad is completely insane.

"I never understand people who can't see the humor in a bad situation. Take nuclear war – not likely at the moment due to our buddy-buddy relationship with those morbid vodka snorters – but when you think about it, just the idea is hilarious. It's not so much schadenfreude, as accidental irony, you know?"

"I don't think so. Do we have to pay for this shot? They wanted our cards..."

"No, they just like to keep track. That way they know who's been vaccinated and who hasn't. Actually the university was given this batch of vaccine as a gift from one of their corporate partners. See all the guys over at the table against the wall that are bringing vaccine to the nurses?"

The men are all severe looking and middle aged. They are wearing golf shirts that say, "Neugaul," in blue letters next to a PRDN logo.

"Sure."

"They work for Neugaul, a big French pharmaceutical company that leases research facilities at Elmdale and gives big bucks to the school. I think the new epidemiology chair is going to be funded by them. Anyway, they gave the school the vaccine as kind of an image

building thing. They've had some bad press lately with the Animal Liberation Brigade raid and..."

"Well that was nice of them. I mean, to vaccinate so many students must be expensive."

He looks at her. No smile this time. "I've heard Neugaul called a lot of things, but never nice. These guys are slash and burn Malthusians. They aren't giving stuff away to be nice."

"No?"

"No. Big pharma doesn't do anything without a reason. Have you ever heard of helicobacter pylori?"

"No."

"Well it's the bacteria that causes stomach ulcers. Neugaul researchers discovered the bacteria almost thirty years ago, but they covered it up."

"Why?"

"Because helicobacter pylori can be cured with a single dose of cheap generic antibiotics. There is no money in curing disease. The real money is in long-term sustainable treatments, preferably for chronic conditions. So Neugaul buried the research. But more than that, they tried to prevent others from doing research in the same area. For decades the corporation poured millions of dollars into the gastroenterology departments of any college that expressed the slightest interest in doing ulcer research. They used their financial influence to convince the universities to focus on other areas. While they blocked research, they sold their high priced prescription treatments for ulcers. Drugs that would reduce pain and stomach acid production, but would cure nothing. They made billions, and people died. Eventually the truth came out. They got some piddly fine. Nobody cared. Ever since Neugaul announced the name of their new

facility, Pathologie Recherche Directoire Neugaul, all the technicians at my lab have been calling it 'Perdition'."

"Okay, so they're not nice. Stop with the sermon. I get enough of that at church."

Nad laughs and farts. Jerry-Jean moves two seats down and holds her nose.

The clock on the wall says 5:38, and she gets up and heads for the bus. At Elmdale the snow is melting. Little piles of white, dirtied with road grime have been scraped into the intersections by the plows. She notices the building across from the bus stop; the one with all the video cameras has a new sign in front of it. The sign has the same logo as on the shirts of the men she saw at the laser building, PRDN. Below the letters it says Pathologie Recherche Directoire Neugaul. As she walks toward the laundry some men in suits come out of a door in the side of the PRDN building. They are big men, and despite the suits, there is something about them that reminds her of Thud and Nad. Something about the way they walk, or hold themselves. One of them looks in her direction, glacier blue eyes. Then a gray Suburban pulls up and they drive away.

Then she is in the laundry and all the day's strangeness disappears in the roar of the machines and the haze of dryer dust.

– Tasha –

"What do you want?"

A wrinkled, scruffy face peers out at them from behind a chained door.

"Sir, we need to talk about your daughter."

"Fuck off."

He moves to close the door, but Dolf's hand is in the way. Dolf pushes and the chain snaps. The door slams open so hard that the knob is buried in the plaster wall behind it. Talamaur staggers back, mumbling and threatening to call the police.

"Perhaps you didn't hear Dr. Churel, Mr. Day. We are here to discuss your daughter. It wasn't a question."

He steps into the room, and Talamaur retreats further.

"It wasn't a request."

He pushes Talamaur down into a chair.

"It is a fact. You don't get to opt out."

Dolf steps back and Tasha enters the room. Talamaur is holding onto the arms of the chair very tightly, and looks as though he might be about to be ill.

Tasha considers sitting down on the dusty sofa, but then thinks better of it, and decides to stand. She looks at the man. He is wearing some dirty sweat pants and an old tweed sport coat with fraying cuffs. He has given up defiance in favor of staring at the floor.

"Mr. Day, I think you know why we are here."

He doesn't say anything, so she continues.

"We are here because we found your daughter in my apartment with serious injuries. Injuries that we believe you caused."

He mumbles, and looks as though he might be about to try to say something in his defense, but then he begins weeping instead.

"Mr. Day, we took her to the hospital. Her injuries are serious, but with the proper care she will fully recover. It could have been much worse. She could have suffered brain damage or died from the head trauma."

He is crying audibly now.

"Mr. Day, I don't know what your problem is, and frankly I don't care. But that girl deserves better. You could be in jail right now, it would only take one phone call."

He looks up, red eyes dribbling.

"But I am not going to do that, not today. Instead, I want Lamia to stay upstairs with me for a while. She will not be any better off with a father in jail. While she heals, I want you to go to counseling to work out what ever it is that you need to work out. I will pay for it. I don't think you should see her for a while. If, after you have been in therapy and your progress is satisfactory, then, with her permission you may have supervised visits."

He's looking at the floor again.

"I need your permission to take care of her, Mr. Day. I would like you to sign this."

Dolf hands the man a clipboard with some forms on it. He takes it, and hesitates.

Tasha kneels in front of him. "Look at me, sir." He pauses, and looks up. Her face is inches from his.

"I will do what is best for your daughter with or without your permission. If you do not sign that form and do exactly what I am telling you, you will find that whatever problems you have in your head are trivial compared to the reality I am prepared to impose. Tell me you understand."

"I understand."

"Sign the form."

He signs it.

"Here is the address of the family therapist I have arranged for you to see." She hands him a card. "She is very good. I understand you work evenings, so I have arranged for you to

have therapy on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday mornings. Your appointments are at 10 am.

And sir," she puts a gloved hand under his chin and raises his eyes to hers again, "I will be informed if you are late."

She stands, turns, and without looking back walks out. Dolf follows her up the stairs, and on the landing in front of her door she stops.

"Well?" She looks up at him.

"That was very measured. I know it wasn't easy, but now you have guardianship. It is best for her."

"No. It wasn't easy."

Tasha feels a sudden, debilitating weakness as she pushes open the big oak door.

Lamia is watching TV, the Power Puff Girls, and reading an Asterix comic book at the same time. Bitch is stretched out at her feet with his legs in the air. She's scratching his belly with her toes.

Tasha sits down in an armchair next to her. The bruise on Lamia's face has evolved from black and purple to a reddish brown. She looks up, tries to smile, and winces.

"Hi."

"Hi. Dolf and I went to have a little talk with your father, Lamia."

"Oh." She looks away, flushing.

"Your father has given permission for you to stay here for a while. Dolf and I would very much like you to stay here with us. Would you like that?"

Lamia nods, and winces again.

"And I'm sure Bitch will be very happy for you to stay."

The big dog snorts and rolls over at the sound of his name.

"There will be rules of course, and you will need to go to school. But we can discuss those things later. Right now, just know that this is your home. The guestroom that you have been staying in is yours now. If you need anything, just ask Dolf. Okay?"

"Okay."

Lamia goes back to reading *Asterix the Gladiator*, looking very uncomfortable, but relieved. Tasha picks up a newspaper and exhales. Dolf turns on the stereo in the kitchen, and the smell of chicken soup comes drifting in. Sara Vaughn's smoky voice hitches a ride on the hints of dinner, murmuring through the swinging door. The Power Puff Girls are beating up a giant three-eyed monster.

– Dudley –

Nad is sitting upside down in the armchair next to the big microscope, with his head pointed at the floor, and his feet hanging over the chair back. He's reading Laurie Garrett's *The Coming Plague* and picking his nose. As Dudley walks in, Nad pulls out a large green booger and holds it out like a prize. Too tired to even balk in disgust, Dudley drops onto the couch and flicks on the TV. Nad shrugs, wipes the booger on the book's library-installed plastic cover, and returns to reading.

Thud is in a corner of his cubicle lying on the floor with his feet up on the bed. He's reading an anthology of Emma Goldman's speeches, and doing crunches at the same time. He appears to have been at it a while, but he's not sweating. Thud gets up, steps on his scale, and grunts with annoyance. He enters the common area pulling the tight thin skin away from his cheeks and staring into a small hand mirror.

"Do I look...Do I look bloated?"

Nad looks up at him and snickers.

"Sure, bloated with vanity, pretty boy. Don't be an asshole. You sound like my sister or something."

Thud looks at Dudley, not convinced.

"You look the same as always to me man." Dudley tries to look reassuring but fails.

"Why?"

"I don't know what it is. Since I got back from the hospital I've been getting heavier. Like a lot heavier. Normally I weigh 280. I'm up to 325. That's a lot. The strangest thing is I'm actually eating less, just never hungry. And when I work out, I can't ever seem to get a burn. I just did twice as many crunches as normal, but I can't feel shit."

"I think you're just a whiney bitch." Says Nad, giggling.

"I'll give you a whiney bitch." Thud grabs his leg and punches him in the thigh, hard.

"Ow, Shit Biscuit!" But Thud is out the door and running down the hall yelling, "whiney bitch, whiney bitch!"

Nad is up and after him, but not as fast, and limping a little.

Dudley doesn't even turn to look. *At some point, the novelty of homicidal lunacy spiked with testosterone becomes trivial.* Stock car racing. He changes the channel. Local news. A bottle-blond correspondent is interviewing Stark Lugat, a reporter from Adult Entertainment News, about the BMOC shoot. Dudley knows Lugat. Well, he doesn't know him personally, but they've had conversations on the phone. Lugat is an associate editor at the magazine, and Dudley did some freelance video reviews for them the summer before he decided to go to college.

Maybe.

Dudley is up and out the door before he completes the thought.

A couple of short-box container trucks are sitting, doors open, in the hotel parking lot. He remembers Thud's girlfriend Whitney calling the collection of motels in Strip Ridge, "Cheaters Fuckstops." He thinks this is probably accurate, but because Strip Ridge is really just a suburb of State City, he imagines there is a lot of hospital and tailgater traffic too.

Grips and lighting technicians are lounging on lawn chairs in the parking lot, eating lunch. Dudley recognizes Sarah Vetala, a former adult performer, and four-time Adult Entertainment News Award winning director. Vetala has been in the industry for thirty years. Dudley tries to contain his awe, and looks for Stark Lugat. He finds him standing next to the little diner that is attached to the motel. Stark surrounded by porn actresses. They fawn and laugh at his jokes. He looks bored, but plays along politely. Dudley is heading toward Stark when a very large man in an immaculate black suit steps in front of him. Not as big as Thud, but with a more polished LA-is-the-world attitude.

"This is a closed set sir. If you would like an autograph there will be a signing at Happy-Slappy's on Friday."

"Dudley Eritik, I'm an AEN freelancer."

It was not exactly the truth. He hadn't written anything for them in eight months, but it wasn't exactly a lie either. Dudley does his best to look like a serious reporter who is used to getting his way.

"AEN? You must be here to see Mr. Lugat. Right this way sir."

It worked. Right name, right line. It pays to know some things. The wall steps aside and he's on his way. He has no idea what to say. Stark looks up at him from a meadow of Golden

State silicone. He is wearing jeans and low-heeled cowboy boots that have never seen a horse. Casual, but he still manages to project enough urban sheik to look like a tourist.

"I thought this was supposed to be an out-of-California experience. These look like some familiar faces to me. Hello ladies."

The talent respond with a rush of nervous titters, still uncertain if he is a player they should know, or just another nobody. Dudley suspects the tattoos help. Not a lot, but some.

"Vetala is doing a full season's shooting in one trip," says Stark. "I still don't know how she funded it. It must be costing a fortune. They're doing twenty features, and setting up a lot of comp footage. She wanted some pros as back up, I guess. Who are you?"

Stark is looking at him now. *Radar's turned on. Pay attention.*

"I did some reviews for AEN last year. Dudley Eritik." He hold's out his hand.

"Yeah. Yeah, okay, sure. Dudley. You use your own name right? More are doing that now. So fucking mainstream, it's lost its shock value. I find that a little depressing, frankly. It used to take something of an iconoclast to make it in this industry, but now we're swamped with MBAs and burned-out dot-commers. So what are you doing out here? I thought you were from Portland?"

"Yeah. I'm going to college. They have a good film school."

"Damn, I imagine in a few years there won't be any smut directors who didn't go the film school rout. The old-school insider's path is eroding. Director's like Sarah will be left behind."

"No, I mean Sarah's great. She's done some rad stuff."

"She was really innovative back when she was doing all anal compilations. I mean, *Stink Pipe Surprise*, did you see it?"

"Yeah, that was raw, Man, better than Dino."

"It's true. With the talent she brought in, and the risks she was taking; I mean there was some serious fisting in *Rectal Responsibility 6*. I just don't know that she's going to do as well with Esoteric Angel. They're more of a cable market."

"Isn't fisting illegal in California?"

"Yeah, pretty much. But she filmed it in Oregon where they don't care if you blow your German shepherd. Anyway, it was only sold online, so she never caught any heat."

"Wow. Yeah, I guess my state is pretty liberal. More porn stores per-capita than any other place on earth."

"Hey, good for you with the whole film school thing, Kid. I've gotta go, though. Give me a call if you want to do some more reviews."

He hands Dudley a business card.

"Thanks. Thanks, yeah, hey Stark, any chance I could get on set? I'm writing this term paper and..."

"Sorry kid, closed set. Vetala is already unhappy about the dozen reporters she had to squeeze into the dorm shoot yesterday. You know Fox News is here? Crazy."

Dudley runs to make the bus back to campus. He should be disappointed. An on-the-set write up would have made a great term paper for film theory, but he can't feel let down. *Stark remembered me. Me!* He is already developing an elaborate plan for pitching an internship his junior summer, and maybe – maybe even scoring a job at AEN for a year before he goes to grad school. *Maybe I should be a dual major, journalism and film.* A heroic image of his potential self floats before him. *Intellectual, edgy, glam player; a Porsche-driving master-pimp of letters.*

"Can we do research on supernatural stuff? Vampires and witches and spells?"

"Ms. Day, you can write your weekly essay on anything you like, as long as it is written using the rules of style according to *Strunk & White*, and so long as it is well composed and spelled correctly, but right now we are working on math."

Dolf informed her that morning that she will have to wait until next fall to be enrolled in public school. The school year is too far along, and it simply can not be helped. Tasha insisted on schooling, however, so she will be home-schooled until September. Tasha set up the curriculum, and Dolf will do most of the teaching. There had been a long debate about standardized tests, which Tasha seemed to think were limiting and barbaric, but Dolf won, and test-specific math and English are to form the core of her studies.

Dolf has a portable dry-erase board, and is writing out algebra problems.

" $2x=4$. So then what does $x=$?"

"2, duh... Dolf, were you a soldier?"

"Yes. $2x-5=7$. What does $x=$?"

"6. Really? Where? Were you in any wars?"

"Very good. I am German, but I was in the Russian army. I was Spetznaz Spetsgruppa Vympel. Kind of like an American Airborne Ranger, or Delta. Yes, I was in wars. $6x-42=(-6)$."

" $x=6$. What wars? Did you kill anyone?"

"Afghanistan, Chechnya. What do you think happens in war? People die. This is the way it is. $5(2+4x)=50$."

"8. Why did you stop? Being a soldier, I mean."

"You don't really ever stop. I left Russia because I stopped believing. When I became Spetznaz it meant something."

"And now it doesn't mean something?"

"Now it's all about money."

"How did you meet Tasha."

"She was with the Agency in Afghanistan. I was a Russian military advisor. We spent a cold night at a listening-post in the Hindu Kush, listening to scratchy Taliban military broadcasts, and drinking very bad Uzbek vodka. Don't ever drink Uzbek vodka." He looks at her, quite serious.

"Was it bad? That war?"

"All wars are bad. The worst thing about wars is not what people do to you, but what you choose to do..." He pauses, looking sad, "but I was not fighting, so I only saw the aftermath. It wasn't pretty. American weapons are very devastating."

"So how did you end up here?"

"Professor Churel, although she wasn't a professor at the time, offered me a job. There was nothing left for me in Russia. I came here. Well, to New York first. I am sometimes her servant, sometimes her friend, sometimes something else."

"Something else?"

Dolf laughs a rare soft laugh.

"You are quite the manipulator little girl – a regular psyche-warfare operative. Aren't we supposed to be doing math?"

"Yes, but..."

"But, nothing. Back to work."

They do another hour of algebra and then Dolf gives her an hour of freedom before the afternoon history lesson. She drinks some chicken broth through a straw and pokes around her new room. It's beautiful, a real bed, a closet, a big dresser made of some dark wood, even a tall mirror on a stand that tilts. It is more than she has ever had, but it is not her. Dolf calls her back to class. She wipes her eyes and slides down the hall in her socks.

History, Dolf tells her about the first emperor of China.

– Whitney –

Whitney wakes up vomiting over the side of her bed into her favorite pair of black suede shoes. Her head hurts and she feels dizzy. She looks up at the half-empty vodka bottle flanked by two empty cans of orange Slimfast on her nightstand. She feels hot and cold, and as she stumbles out of bed, another wall of nausea hits her and she vomits into the waste basket by the door, which would have been okay, except it's one of those fashionable wire mesh waste baskets, so the puke goes everywhere anyway. She spends the next hour curled up around the toilet, alternately puking and fading out of consciousness.

"...eek week. Are you coming Whit?"

Some one is pounding on the bathroom door. Sara Masani is pounding on the bathroom door.

"Go away, I'm sick."

Muffled exclamations followed by a loud, "Eew gross!" and Kim saying that this is so amateur hour. She must have looked in Whitney's room.

"God, Kim, like you should talk. Give her a break, she's fucked up."

Sara is back at the door as if Whitney couldn't have heard all this.

"Honey, are you okay? Do you want us to get you some soda or something?"

"No. I'm fine. Just go away."

She hears them gossiping down the stairs. *This should be fun, and on Greek week too.*

Whitney Wellington Spencer loses control. Great. But she doesn't feel great. She feels like crap.

On top of the nausea, and fever, and headache, her ass is sore.

Why is my ass sore?

Thud.

Thud is out of the hospital.

Did I fuck Thud last night? I must have. But she always has very vivid visual memories of recent sex. *Why can't I remember this?* Thud never would have fucked her drunk. She had tried before, but he always refused. *Righteous shit. I must have gotten drunk after. So why can't I remember the sex?*

The nausea and dizziness fade enough for her to take a shower and clean up the puke. She almost starts to cry when she has to throw away the shoes, but doesn't really have the energy, so it just comes out as a single squeak. Whitney puts on her favorite plaid flannel pajamas and goes downstairs. The floors are covered with freshly painted Greek Week banners politely proclaiming the supremacy of the Tri-Delt sorority. The common room and kitchen are empty. *They must all be at the Greek Week rally at the Pentacrest.* She looks at her watch. She's missing accounting. *Fuck it.* She hadn't missed a class since the first day of the semester. One more day won't hurt her. Besides she already has the notes for all her classes. She always bought notes ahead of time from one of the private note taking services.

She turns on the TV. Assorted vermin are assaulting each other on the daytime talk shows. *No*. News. *No*. Music videos. *No*. She stops on an architecture special on Florence. She loves architecture. When she is alone sometimes she draws floor plans and facades, even drawing out the small sculptural details. She has never shown her work to anyone. Her father would have called it a damn waste of time. The show is focusing on influence of Persian architecture in Florence. She falls asleep, snoring lightly, on the sorority's common room couch.

When she wakes up, all the banners are gone. There's a get-well-soon card on the coffee table in front of her. Most of the girls have signed it. Her mouth tastes horrible, and the fever feels higher, but at least the nausea is gone. The channel she was watching is now playing a biography of John Lennon.

"Old people music," she mutters, and changes the channel.

The Russian channel is playing dubbed Bugs Bunny cartoons. For some reason she finds this very funny and stops.

Arla Pret comes in and asks if she needs anything. Arla is the sorority's housemother. She cooks and cleans and keeps any eye on things. She is a tall thin rather serious woman, but she is kind, and all the girls love her. Probably because she stays out of the way, and never interferes with anyone's privacy. Most of the time they don't notice her at all.

Whitney says that maybe she could use some aspirin. Arla comes back with aspirin and some seltzer on a silver tray. She puts the back of her hand on Whitney's forehead.

"That is a very high fever, Miss Spencer. I will be right back with a thermometer."

Whitney is about to protest, but then realizing that resisting would probably take more effort than going along, she closes her mouth. Arla returns with an ear thermometer and takes

Whitney's temperature. Satisfied that it is not life threatening, she disappears back into the kitchen.

Whitney wonders what would make someone want to be a housemother. She is sure it doesn't pay well. *Arla isn't an alum. Maybe it's some kind of perverted dyke thing, although she seems a little too frigid to be a pervert.* Her headache is coming back. Worse now. The pain is making her nauseous again. *Hey, stock car racing.* One of the television ministries is sponsoring a car this year. It has a big gothic cross on the hood, and an eight hundred number to call in donations. *God loves a hillbilly in a fast car.* She drags herself back upstairs, praying she can get to the sink before the vomiting starts again.

CHAPTER NINE

"Welcome to the fuck shop."

-2Live Crew

– **Jerry-Jean** –

March

Jerry-Jean is eating macaroni and cheese and trying to study her French under the thunder of gossip and debate at the table. If her intent were genuine, she would have gone off to study alone, but she likes it here among the voices. She remains reticent to participate, but being here with them, welcomed into the circle makes her feel less alone.

Thud is back, although he seems quieter than usual. He has been sitting across from her picking at his food for half an hour. He's wearing sunglasses, which is a little odd in the cafeteria, and he seems to be very tense. She can see the tendons in his neck working, but he

controls it well – periodically breaking his silence to laugh at one of Nad’s jokes or throw a cherry tomato at Dudley.

Whitney isn’t here, and this makes her a little sad. She hasn’t seen Whitney for a few days. Thud said something about her having the flu. Jerry-Jean hopes she is okay. She has a flash impulse to bring Whitney some soup or something, but then decides that it would be ridiculous, and that she would just be laughed at. *Besides, they must take good care of her at the sorority house.*

Trays are cleared away and the group wanders off in various directions. Thud and Nad going to the gym, Dudley is taking some Resident Assistant girl to a Hong Kong film festival at the Bijou.

Jerry-Jean finds herself alone in the Bunker. She should be studying for midterms. She wanders among the cubicles opening drawers and looking. *I really should not be doing this.* Yes, she tells herself, but she isn’t taking anything, so there’s no harm. Dudley has a new computer, glowing warm titanium. Hundreds of porn videos are stored in zippered CD binders. She flips through them, wanting to watch one, but not sure how to put them into his computer, and worried that someone will come home and catch her. She picks up a magazine called Adult Entertainment News. It’s mostly text. Articles on the porn industry, product reviews, interviews. There are advertising photos, however. The women look unreal. Too made up. Wearing clothes that no one ever really wears. But some of them are truly beautiful. Jerry-Jean shudders and puts it down.

Nad’s cubicle is filled with well-organized medical texts and boxes of slides. He has one of the small refrigerators so common in dorms, but when she opens it she finds not beer, but dozens of hockey puck shaped plastic containers filled with a red or brown jelly-like substance.

Thud's cube is equally immaculate. T-shirts precisely folded and lined up in drawers. Nothing on the desk except a lamp. Two stacks of magazines sit in tight rows on the end table by the cot. Jane's Defense Weekly, and Natural Bodybuilder. Under the pillow on the cot she finds his forty-five.

She pulls back the slide, ejecting a round onto the cot. It's a beautiful heavy weapon, nothing like the pellet guns and twenty-twos she grew up with on the farm.

Her father started putting her and her brother on crow patrol when they were eight and nine. He would give them a quarter for each crow they brought home, and said he considered it a darn good deal considering the damage they did to his corn. One summer she got a hundred and forty-seven. Enough for movies and licorice all summer long. She likes the black licorice, and has never understood how people could call red licorice, licorice at all.

She drops the magazine, replaces the round, and rechambers the weapon. Keeping guns in the dorms is against the rules, of course, but she's noticed the only rules Thud seems to care about are his own.

In the bottom drawer of Thud's dresser she finds a black Pelican case. Inside, there is an empty space cut in foam for the forty-five. There are extra magazines and a fat cylinder that must be a silencer. On the left side of the case is another handgun. It is longer and narrower than the forty-five. The barrel is very thick, and when she pulls back the slide she recognizes the familiar chamber of a .22 long rifle round. This weapon has "Amphibian II" etched into the barrel in deep block letters. She holds it up and sights the weapon. It feels unbalanced. All the weight is forward. *I couldn't hit anything with this.* She puts it back and closes the drawer.

Under the cot, Thud has a collection of combat boots and running shoes, all in rows, and with their laces tucked in. *And I thought I was anal-retentive.* Behind the shoes is a long black

box. Jerry-Jean knows what's in the box. She has seen Thud cleaning it, but it's getting late, and she's sure they will be back soon. She returns to her cubicle and falls asleep reading Kafka's *Metamorphosis*.

The next morning there is another threatening letter in her mailbox from the University Business Office. She stuffs it in her pocket, hoping that denial will be as effective as it was first time. At the line for breakfast she is stopped. The Resident Assistant at the desk gives her a pitiful not-my-fault shrug.

"Your meal plan has been restricted until you pay your U-bill."

She walks away feeling sick. Back at the bunker she picks up a copy of State City's daily newspaper, Thud calls it the Daily Idiot in reference to its less than Pulitzer reporting, and starts looking through the want ads. She knows she can't get another University job because of the twenty-hour-a-week limit, but there must be something.

Dudley slips through the door with a narrow grin.

"I saw what happened in line, J.J., tough break."

"Yeah, well, I just need another job."

"You'll get one. But until then, I thought you could use something to eat."

Dudley pulls a couple of lint-dusted peanut butter sandwiches out of his coat pocket and puts them on her desk. She hugs him, turning red with embarrassment.

"Thanks."

"Can't let your roommates starve. I'll bring back something for dinner. If you have any requests, let me know. Just no soup." He laughs.

"Thanks."

By the time the clock chases her off to French class, she has a dozen possibilities circled in red on the Daily Idiot's classified page.

– Tasha –

"Professor Tasha Churel?"

"Yes."

"Agent Thurman Kresnik, Secret Service. Do you have time to talk?"

She was intercepted outside her office on the third floor of Shiffer Hall, one of the five buildings that dot the Pentacrest, just after her last class of the day – *and he knows that*. The agent is looking at her with the intense shiftless stare that she recognizes from her early training on the Farm. *Intimidation can cause confusion in an interrogation subject, making them more likely to make mistakes. Push eye contact*. She looks back into gray eyes surrounded by sun-cut wrinkles. He must be in his late fifties. Silver crew cut. A very good suit that is tailored a little wide on the left – *for his gun*. He is not wearing a tie. *Aren't Federal Agents required to wear ties? This should be interesting*.

"Certainly, Agent Kresnik, step into my office."

Her office is small and cluttered with books and papers. There is barely enough room for her desk and chair, but she managed a small plastic chair on the other side for students. Agent Kresnik sits down, bending slightly to keep from banging his head into the overhanging shelf. *Good, keep the subject off balance*.

"Do you know why I'm here, Professor Churel?"

"I'm sure you are about to tell me, Agent Kresnik."

"I understand you reported your SUCC Network code lost shortly after a major hacker attack on the mainframes here, and at the Elmdale research campus?"

"You understand correctly."

"Why did you report the code missing?"

"I saw the report on the news. I keep my code on a slip of paper in my briefcase, after I saw the report I checked my bag and found my code missing."

"And that's it?"

"And that's it. Are you accusing me of complicity in a crime, Agent Kresnik?"

"Should I be?"

"What exactly are you investigating?"

"Wire fraud."

"I assume you know how much money I have."

"Yes."

"And what is the amount involved in this particular fraud?"

"I'm not at liberty to discuss the details of the investigation at this time."

"Do you think I have any financial need to commit fraud, Agent Kresnik?"

"What is your relationship to Adrian Zeneu?"

"He is a student. I am a Professor."

Kresnik pauses and plays with the laces on his shoe. *He's about to make his play. Never ask a question you don't know the answer to.* She pinches her thigh under the desk hard enough to bruise. The pain is enough to stifle her rising smile, but just barely.

"Mr. Zeneu is a hacker known as Logic Bomb, Professor Churel. You were seen contacting him at a 2600 meeting, and again on several other occasions."

"Is Mr. Zeneu a suspect in your investigation?"

"What is your relationship to Adrian Zeneu, Professor Churel?"

"Maybe we are having an affair? Would that fall within your jurisdiction?"

"An implausible theory based on Mr. Zeneu's obvious proclivities. What is your relationship to Mr. Zeneu?"

"I think I have already been quite clear about that."

"I'm not the enemy, Professor Churel."

"No? Are you here to be my new pal? Maybe we can go out for smoothies later?"

"Look, I don't have time to play interrogation chess with you all day. I know about your work for the Agency. If this is related to that, just say the word and I will walk away."

A trick. He knows I haven't worked for them for five years. He's offering an out. Baiting a lie.

"No. I don't work for the government anymore." *Counter bait.* "Look, I was just messing with you. Interrogation mechanics were always a hobby of mine. The truth is I lost my code, probably when I went to meet Zeneu. One of the hackers at that meeting may have picked it up. I'm really very low tech."

"And your relationship to Zeneu?"

"I needed someone who could decrypt some Cold War era Soviet document files." *The best lies are always the ones closest to the truth.*

"Old Russian files. That's it?"

"That's it." He's difficult to read. She can't decide if he's buying this or not.

"How did you know where to contact Zeneu."

"2600 meetings are pretty much common knowledge. You guys show up, don't you?"

His mouth smiles. His eyes don't move.

"Do you know a boy named Philo Alp?"

"Never heard of him."

"He is an associate of Mr. Zeneu. Among the hacker community he is known as Lo Res."

She pauses, measuring her reaction.

"Nope. Never heard of him."

"You were seen talking to him at the 2600 meeting in question."

"I talked to several kids. As I told you, I was looking for someone who could help me with file decryption."

"I trust you will be keeping your Network code in a more secure location in the future?"

"Oh yes, Agent Kresnik. I am being much more careful now, thank you."

"If you think of anything that might help in this investigation."

He hands her a plain white card printed with the Secret Service seal and a collection of office and mobile phone numbers.

"Of course."

He is gone, and she sits at her desk absorbing the moment and smiling to herself. *He didn't try a softball lead. That was respect.* She had forgotten how much she enjoys the game.

Colby comes in with her mail. He has a new nose ring, and it is looking a little swollen and infected. He hands her the mail, and sits down in the chair warmed by Agent Kresnik.

"All the take-homes in?"

"Yeah, except for Sara Masani. She gave me some weak excuse about car trouble in Cedar Rapids. Should I cut her test?"

"No, let it ride. She's not going to break a C anyway."

She sorts through the mail. Assorted bureaucratic nonsense from the department and the University. Requests for letters of recommendation from previous students. *Defense Review*. *The Economist*. There is a small manila covered box with Cyrillic writing on it and a Moscow postmark. She has been waiting for this. She opens the box. Inside is a stack of dark brown microfiche and a folded letter. She opens the letter and reads the loopy Russian scrawl.

"Hope this helps Tasha. *Pravda* for the years you requested. Mostly politics, of course. Miss you, Illian Gergoyavich Erestun."

"Very good. Very good," she mutters to herself. "Colby."

He starts, used to her fading off into her own world, and as usual, surprised when she comes back.

"Yes."

"Are you up for a big nasty eye-straining project?"

"Hooyah, full of joy," he says, with some weakness.

"This is the microfiche archive of *Pravda* from 1988 to 1995. I need you to search the entire archive for these words and people."

She gives him a three-page list of words, and a couple of photographs.

"This is first priority, Colby. I will take care of your other class related responsibilities."

"No more grading papers?"

"No more grading papers."

He takes the materials, clearly pleased to be free from reading reams of mindless undergraduate drivel.

"And Colby," She looks at him hard, "I want this done line by line. This is a no bullshit operation, understand?"

The teaching assistant nods, and skitters away.

Pravda was always pretty lean on real news, but maybe.

– Dudley –

Dudley pushes, and the bamboo wind chime attached to the door jingles, low and hollow. The store has a very distinct smell. Latex, flavored lubricant, disinfectant, and nag champa incense. The Happy-Slappy Porno Parlor is a discrete, low, rectangular building set a dozen blocks from campus in a small industrial part of State City. The small black silhouette of Slappy the Clown on a red background is the only outside indication the store is there at all. On the door there is a sign that reads, "Sorry Kids, Adults Only!"

He walks past a pegboard wall hung with sex toys and several shelves of lubricants. Just before the large video section is shelf of magazines. He stops here and looks for the latest issue of Adult Entertainment News.

Sitting at the counter is a large woman wearing blue jeans and flannel. She is watching a show on the Loir Valley in France on a small television, and eating humus and crackers. She laughs loudly and slaps the counter when the BBC narrator says something funny. Dudley has been in often enough to know her name is Jenny. Jenny is one-half of the lesbian couple that owns Happy-Slappy. Martha is the other half, but it looks like Martha isn't here tonight. Despite being proud butch flannel dykes, Martha and Jenny are hip enough to have escaped the mullet curse. They have short hair, but without a hint of mulletude. On one of his visits, Martha told Dudley that they met in San Francisco while working at Best Vibrations, a woman-owned sex-

toy mail-order business. They were married in Vermont, and moved here because they both always wanted to live in the country. *It doesn't get much more country than this.*

He finds the new AEN and brings it up to the counter.

"Hey, how's it going?"

"Hi, Jenny, good."

"This is a good issue, you'll like the Nina Hartley interview."

"Right on." He notices a three-by-five card taped to the back of the register. It says, "Help Wanted."

"You hiring, Jenny?"

"Yeah, sure, need a job?"

"Well I have one, but this is closer to what I want to do. Can I get an application?"

"Surely. Hey, if you really want the job, come back Monday. Martha and I will both be here at five. We can talk. We don't stand much on formality here – just want to get to know you."

"Cool. Great! Thanks, Jenny."

Dudley pays for his magazine and walks the twelve blocks back to campus. It begins to rain. The snow has been gone nearly a week, and the scenery has surrendered dirty snow to mud and last year's yellow grass.

Purge has taken on a dull glow in the setting sun, and for a moment, Dudley can see it, as it must have been when it was first built, an ultra modern marvel of American style and technology. *Housing for students of the 21st century!*

The line in the cafeteria is sparse. He wades in and grabs a couple of sandwiches and some root beer. Nad, Thud and Adrian are sitting at a table by the windows. He reminds himself to smuggle J.J. some food.

Nad is telling a story, complete with gesticulation and sound effects. Thud looks kind of gray, but amused. Adrian just looks disgusted.

"No, I'm telling you, this shit was two feet long. Not practically two feet long, but really two feet long. It was like five soda cans stacked together. I had to stand up to get it all the way out."

Dudley sits. Manly nods all around.

Thud leans forward. "Nad was just telling us a shit story. Some people tell fish stories. With Nad it's shit."

"Anyway," says Nad, annoyed at being interrupted, "This thing was two feet long. It was sitting there a good eight inches above the toilet seat. Well I couldn't flush a work of art like that. It was meant to be honored, worshiped. I had to leave it as a gift to the next visitor."

"You are a profoundly sick individual," says Adrian, "I mean, what do you have to eat to generate that kind of feces?"

"Miracle food, Anus, it's all about the miracle food. But you're interrupting. I was getting to the good part. So I'm coming out of the can, and Larry – you know the Hungarian janitor, his English isn't great – he's coming in. He always does the bathrooms at the same time. So he's coming in, and I'm going out. I went back to the Bunker, and I heard him yell. Later, when I was going to class I see Larry down in the lobby. He comes up to me all pissed off. He was wagging his finger in my face, and he says, and I swear to God this is word for word, 'I know it was you

Nad, and when I find out it was you, Nad, I'm going to kill you Nad.' I almost pissed a kidney laughing."

Thud snorts, and Adrian laughs in mild disgust.

"You know Nad, Larry may be the Janitor, but he's also a nuclear physics grad student. You better watch out. He might light your ass up by way of revenge," says Adrian.

"Maybe a plutonium suppository." Laughs Thud, then looking at Dudley, "Where's J.J.?"

"Her meal plan was cut off. Didn't pay her U-Bill on time."

"That's fucked up. We bringing her food?"

"Yeah, anything you can. I brought her some sandwiches this morning. Where's Whit."

"I don't know."

– Lamia –

There are students sleeping on the benches that line the wide hallway. Lamia steps out of the elevator trying to be quiet. The library has a low ceiling and is poorly lit. This combines with the arrow slit windows to give the impression of a postmodern gothic fortress. Lamia enjoys this a great deal. It adds an element of atmosphere to her mission. She flips through her notes. She recently added Dewey-decimal codes to the list of books she got from Phoenix Rose. She matches the numbers and letters to a sign above a door. Long rows of steel framed stacks reach from floor to ceiling though out the wing. She wanders down the aisle, looking for a closer match to her list.

She finds the section she is looking for. The library has a large section on occult and paranormal studies. There are books on witchcraft and ghosts and psychics. She sits amid piles

of books between the aisles all afternoon, reading and glowing. She reads an account of the Duke University Parapsychology department's debunking of famed psychic Uri Gellar. She reads about real life ghost hunters, and wiccan priestesses. She finds books on ancient spells from long dead religions with names like zoroastrianism. She collects as many spell books as she can carry, and heads for the elevators. Tasha loaned Lamia her faculty library card, and explained that it is very special. Undergraduates are only allowed to check out books for two weeks. Graduate students can check books out for two months, but with Tasha's faculty card, she can check books out for a whole year.

Lamia piles the books on the checkout counter. A skinny kid with a shaved head and red serpent tattoos on his neck scans her card and the books. He's watching a small portable TV on the counter while he works, and doesn't even look at her. He hands the books back.

"Due back next March, Professor Churel."

And she walks out. It's almost four o'clock, but the sun is still shining as Lamia starts up the steep hill that leads home. The last traces of snow have faded away. Students are leaving class, and wandering home, or moving in groups to the bars. The sidewalks are crowded, but Lamia manages to make her way through the crowds. With her books she fits right in, just another very young-looking freshmen girl on a study bender. *Except for the bruises.* But she tries not to think about that.

The books are heavy, and she finds herself panting at the top of the stairs. The door clicks open. Bitch knocks her sprawling. Big paws on her chest, hot dog slobber on her cheeks. She giggles.

"Bitch, nein. Nein! Sitzen!"

The big dog sits, and she retrieves her books, some of which have fallen down a dozen stairs. Tasha will not be happy. Bitch's discipline has suffered since she came to live with them, but Lamia decides she doesn't care. *After all, shouldn't he be allowed to have fun too?* Dolf and Tasha aren't home, however, and so Bitch is safe for now.

She carries the books into her room, Bitch snorting and nosing at her leg, and dumps her treasure onto the bed. *Candles*. She remembers seeing some candles in one of the cabinets in the kitchen. She gets up, grabs one of the books and runs to find ingredients. *Candles, various common household spices, chalk? There isn't any chalk. Well the book just says to make a design. It doesn't actually specify chalk.* She finds a can of white spray paint that ought to work just as well.

The library closet is just as she left it. It feels warm to her, safe, a refuge. She likes the smallness of it. Supplies stuffed in her backpack, she starts up the ladder. The trapdoor is very heavy, and she has to use both hands to push it open. This is awkward because she can't hold onto the ladder, and she almost falls. She looks down. Bitch is staring up at her, looking concerned and licking his nose.

The roof is black tarpaper. It gives slightly under her feet. She looks over the lip of the brick facade. It seems like a long way down but she isn't scared of heights. All the buildings on this block are built right next to each other, and most of them are the same height as Tasha's building. She could probably get all the way to the next street over without touching the ground. Lamia opens her book and studies the picture. It is a large circle with a triangle in the center and ancient writing at the points of the triangle. She takes out the spray paint and begins drawing the design on the roof. She takes her time, and it turns out almost perfect. She places lit candles in glasses, so they won't blow out, in all the specified places, sprinkles the spices, and recites

almost two pages of very sloppy Latin. She stares at the circle and waits. The candles burn down. Her feet hurt, so she sits down. Still nothing happens. *Maybe there's a time delay. Patience.* She has her back against the facade, and she is trying very hard not to take her eyes off the circle. Vision blurs. She begins to doze.

"Hey! What are you doing up here?"

Dolf. Oh oh. His head is sticking up from the trap door and he looks annoyed.

"Did you spray paint the roof?"

"Um. I just wanted to try something."

"Okay, little witch. But you need to come down for dinner, and tomorrow we are going to get some black paint so you can cover that up. That's vandalism, you know?"

"Okay, sorry. I guess I got carried away. It didn't work anyway."

"Well maybe you just need to try a different spell. Hopefully something that doesn't involve paint." He says, almost smiling.

"Yeah." She climbs down. "Do you believe in magic, Dolf."

"No. But that doesn't mean it won't work for you. We all have to find our own path."

Dolf had prepared a thin, smooth-textured potato soup that works well through a straw. She misses solid food, but the soup is good and filling. After dinner Lamia checks her e-mail. Something from Phoenix Rose about a Goth website she might like. A few responses from some of the inquiries she sent out. Most of them are solicitations to subscribe to newsletters or advertisements for various supernatural doodads. Vampire t-shirts and genuine wolfsbane, only thirty-nine ninety-five plus shipping and handling. The syndication TV schedule for Buffy the Vampire Slayer. She likes that show. It is funny, and she thinks the vampire named Spike is cute.

The last message is not just spam. It's from someone named Beth. She doesn't remember talking to a Beth on girl chat. She opens it.

From: beth@universityofsaintpetersberg.ru

cc:

To: darkgrl@wahoo.com

Darkgrl,

In response to your request I am sending some of the more credible original source material I have been able to find on the subject of vampirism. I am a researcher in the Mythology and Paranormal Studies Department here at USP. I have been researching vampirism for more than a decade. Although I have not found any physical evidence yet, there is significant anecdotal documentation of vampiric manifestations in numerous cultures. This document was just translated from Latin by our research staff. I have translated it from Russian for a presentation I am giving at American University next week. The language of your query suggests you are a serious researcher. I would be interested in your impressions.

Associate Professor Elizabeth B. Estrie

University of St. Petersburg

It takes Lamia a few minutes to figure out how to open the attachment. It is huge. The computer puts up a window indicating the size of the file, and asking if she would like to save it as a document. She saves it, and is about to open it, but then she hears Tasha greeting Dolf in the hall, and remembers Tasha's promise that they would finish the Hobbit tonight.

Lamia is doing the reading this time.

– Whitney –

He hasn't called. She sits in the dark and tries to decide how she feels about that. The fever is gone. *He's such an asshole.* The itchy rash on her vagina and anus that had developed a few days after she became sick has abated. *What if he gave me some kind of sexually transmitted disease? That motherfucker.* Physically she feels kind of good. *No, Thud would never cheat.* *He's such a fucking puritan.* She remembers long diatribes on the failures of moral relativism. More than good, Whitney feels clear. *So what the fuck? Is he sick of me?* She feels the texture of the bedspread under her legs. She smells the thick air of the room. *Maybe I don't care.* All of these sensations seem amazingly intense, like she can feel every thread and smell every nuance. *Just my imagination. Fuck him.*

Whitney is drawing a column with an ionic capital. She finishes the elaborate sculpted leaves and moves on to the supporting block. This would be unremarkable except that she is drawing in total darkness. She pauses and erases a mistake with a soft white gum eraser. She blows off the eraser dust and smiles to herself. *Not bad.*

It isn't just dark in the room; it is completely devoid of light. Whitney had covered the windows with tinfoil earlier in the week. The light was giving her massive headaches. At first that was enough, but then the light under the door began to bother her. She tacked a heavy wool blanket to the crown molding above the door, and that solved that problem. The bathroom was still an issue, but her room has a sink, and she has taken to climbing up on a chair and hanging her ass over the sink to pee. She hasn't needed to take a shit because she hasn't eaten anything in

five days. She kept puking whenever she tried to eat anything solid, and finally gave up. It hasn't occurred to her that her ability to function in total darkness is odd because it doesn't feel like total darkness to her. She sees things as most people might see them in twilight.

She sets the drawing aside, reaching down into her underwear. *Why doesn't he at least come over and fuck me?* Whitney rolls over onto her belly and begins to rub her clit in soft little circles, occasionally slipping a finger into her vagina to keep things slippery. *God, why am I so horny? This is like the tenth time today.* She moans low, slowing down, backing off a little to relish it. She is almost ready, just a little more. She doesn't think of anything. There is no need for fantasy. The power of the physical sensation itself is overwhelming. *Almost. Almost.*

Pounding. Pounding on her door.

"What the fuck! Go away, Goddamnit!" She's yelling.

Muffled voices strain through door and blanket.

"...mmfph worried mffpm class..."

"What? Un-fucking-believable."

Whitney climbs out of bed, puts on a robe and sunglasses, and opens the door. She has to hold her hand over her eyes despite the glasses. The light from the hall is like some corrupt insect burrowing into her frontal lobe.

"What the fuck do you want? I was jilling-off you know? Now I have to start over."

Kim and Sara look at her in shock. Whitney was always blunt, but not a vulgarian.

"Um, we, well we just thought..." Begins Kim, in a very small voice.

"Whit, you haven't been to class for two weeks. You blew off Greek Week. We're worried about you." Says Sara.

"Yeah, I mean why don't you ever come out? And why's it so dark in there? Are you doing meth or something, Whit? I mean we're here for you." Kim pipes up, louder now, as if strengthened by Sara.

Whitney scowls at them, sublimating the pain in her head in favor of the rage that is crawling under her robe. It feels good. It warms her.

"First of all, fuck you, both of you. It is none of your goddamn business how I spend my time. I pay my fucking dues. I have been in this sorority for three fucking years and if I want to spend the next six months in my room whacking-off, or surfing the internet, or sacrificing fucking spider monkeys to fucking Baal the mother-fucking destroyer, it's none of your business." She takes a step forward, and both girls back up, looking terrified. "And if you pathetic skanky vapid herpes-infected little shit swallows ever pound on my door again I will come out here and ruin all that plastic surgery your daddies bought you."

Kim turns and runs, and Sara just keeps backing up, looking very pale. Sara tries to stutter some kind of response, but Whitney doesn't wait for her to get it out. She slams the door, and is back in the sanctuary of her room. She puts on some Ani DiFranco and falls back on her bed. Even on the lowest volume setting it seems very loud. *Good, maybe it will drown out those yammering idiots.*

She begins to masturbate again, and finds the rage increases the sensation. She focuses on it, pushing her anger. She grips the steel bed frame with her left hand as she comes. The rage roars through her like the shock wave of an explosion, fueling her orgasm. She tenses, toes curling, the tingling, crushing rush radiating from her clit outward and swallowing everything. She shudders and then relaxes, lapsing into a doze. She does not notice the steel bed frame, twisted and bent, and where she had held it, crumpled like a beer can.

CHAPTER TEN

"She talked as thirsty men drink."

-Joseph Conrad

– **Jerry-Jean** –

The professor is fighting his smile and losing. *He must enjoy this more than sex.* Jerry-Jean is in Introduction to Engineering, a class specifically designed by the department to weed-out the math-weak and computer-foolish. Professor Algul has a reputation for being ruthless. There is a rumor that he hasn't given an 'A' in fifteen years. He told the class at the beginning of the semester that less than half of them would pass. Professor Algul normally arrives in the classroom with an aura of bitter pathos, a thin poisonous cloud that never wavers or dissipates from one lecture to the next. When students are foolish enough to ask questions, his expression sometimes shifts to abject disgust. She has never seen him smile, until today. Today is the midterm, and he looks positively ebullient. Professor Algul hums to himself as he hands out the little blue essay booklets.

Jerry-Jean notices he has replaced his usual immaculate gray suit with Levi's and a tie-dyed t-shirt. *Fun fun.* The professor taps on his podium and issues what must be his usual speech. He promises that he will use every means at his disposal to see that anyone who attempts to cheat on this exam will be expelled from the university.

"And I realize there are a great many of you who simple don't belong here. This is a culling ground from which only those worthy of our esteemed engineering program will survive. Those of you with unreasonable aspirations to mediocrity will soon find yourselves cleaning

grease traps at BurgerBomb, and wishing you had opted for that nice trade school your high school shop teacher told you about."

He grins, and switches on the overhead projector. A dozen essay questions float on the white screen above them. Jerry-Jean begins to write. Behind her a girl starts to cry in great hiccuping sobs.

Jerry-Jean stumbles out of the engineering building an hour later, not remembering any of what she wrote, but suspecting that it was not good enough. The morning had been quite warm, and Jerry-Jean left Purge Hall without a coat, but now with a suddenness that seems to only appear in the Midwest and at sea, the weather has shifted. It is cold. A light snow begins to fall as she walks toward home. She keeps tripping over her feet, and curbs, and cracks in the sidewalk. It is becoming progressively harder to get her eyes to focus. She has not slept in four days, and she still has two midterms to go. The night before she had ingested gallons of cola in attempt to stay awake, but then, at about four in the morning she began to get heart palpitations from the caffeine overload, and now she is scared to drink more.

The warm stuffy air of Purge Hall wraps around her like a dirty scarf and does nothing to make her more awake. Upstairs Nad and Thud are leaning over the coffee table looking at some book. Nad is looking exasperated. Thud is looking very pale and mildly amused.

"Hey J.J." says Thud. "We brought you some sandwiches. They're on your desk."

"Thanks." She grins. *Maybe he isn't such a colossal jerk.*

"Um, hello? Pay attention moron.""

Nad sucks on the nozzle of a can of cheese whiz and taps on the book.

"Okay, okay. Vectors," says Thud.

Jerry-Jean falls on her bunk, and tries to go over her calculus notes. They are incomprehensible. She can hear them talking through the cubical divider, and the sound fills the half-awake haze between her mind and math.

"It's not just a matter of variations in site specific infection. There are variations in systemic reaction based on the originating vector."

"Oh for Christ's sake, Turd Muncher, speak English."

"Okay, here's a simple example: the plague. The black death that killed two thirds of Europe in the middle ages. The bug that produces the plague is called *Yersinia Pestis*. It's a tough, aggressive bacterium. We can stop it now with antibiotics, but I digress.

"The point is that a subjected infected with *Yersinia Pestis* cutaneously, through the skin, by a rat flea bite, or perhaps physical contact with an infected person, will generally develop the bubonic plague. A version of the infection characterized by pus-filled buboes or large blisters all over the body. The mortality rate for bubonic plague is around thirty-percent without treatment."

"The point, Nerd. You were going to get to the point."

"Shut up. I'm getting to that. Here's the difference. Become infected through your skin, and *Yersinia Pestis* becomes the bubonic plague. A nasty disease sure, but one from which seventy-percent of the victims will survive. But if a person is infected by breathing in the bacteria, something that in the case of *Yersinia Pestis* is possible by simply being in a confined space with an infected person, then the infection takes the form of pneumonic plague. A lung infection with a mortality rate in excess of 90%. Pneumonic plague produces no external buboes and is characterized by rapid build up of fluids in the lungs until the patient drowns. Same bug, same systemic infection, but change something as simple as how the bug gets in, and it can

change everything from potential survivability to symptomology. Vector dynamics in viral infections are just as important, but immune response adds a layer of complication."

"How's that?"

"Suppose you have four people in a room and they are all exposed to a typical rhino virus by the same vector: in this case let's say airborne vapor particles in a confined space. One of them might have a weak immune system, develop viral pneumonia, perhaps even die from the virus. two of them might become infectious and develop conventional cold symptomology: cough, sputum production, fever, etc. After a few days or a week, they are fine. The forth person might have an unusually strong immune response and display a low-grade fever for a day or two, or even no symptoms at all. Same vector, same virus, but each person in our sample had a different reaction based on their individual immune response.

"I hate fucking biology. I should have taken physics."

"Yeah, you probably should have, but then I couldn't help you with physics. That would be fucked up, because with nothing to trade, you wouldn't have helped me with poli-sci."

"I am a ruthless motherfucker," says Thud, laughing.

Jerry-Jean sits up with a gasp. "Oh shit! Work."

"Did you just say 'shit' J.J.?" Says Nad, giggling. "I'd say that's a breakthrough, wouldn't you G?"

"Indeed," says Thud, "perhaps even a catharsis."

But she doesn't have time to enjoy their praise, she is down the hall and running down the stairs as fast as she can. She found another job. It will fill the hours she isn't at the laundry, and today is her first day of training. She is already five minutes late. *Not a good start. Not a good start at all.*

– Tasha –

She usually saves this lecture till later in the semester, but her research has made it more timely. Maybe it will motivate some of her students to use the subject as a jumping-off-point for their term papers. She steps up to the podium and looks over her seating chart. Some of her best students are absent. Mr. Wardog, Miss Spencer, both MIA. This would not be so unusual, except that she has had both students in several other classes, and they are almost maniacally reliable. She looks out at the tired faces that fill the auditorium. *Time to wake them up.*

She taps on the podium.

"I know you're all tired from midterms, but this is important, so pay attention.

"Not all of the Cold War's covert operations were on land. Some of the most important covert operations of the conflict took place beneath the sea.

"Imagine you are standing in the end zone on a football field. Your back is pressed against the goal post. A blind fold covers your nose and eyes. In one hand you hold a gun. Your finger is on the trigger, and the hammer is cocked. In your other hand is a live grenade with the pin removed. Only your hand on the spoon prevents it from going off. You can't see him, but at the other end of the field is your adversary. He is armed just as you are, and he can't see you either. You remember your orders, and take a step forward. You are supposed to walk out into the field and find your enemy using only your hearing. You are not to fight him, just to follow him, to track him, to be ready to kill if the order comes, to know where he is, but try not to let him hear you. If you trip you die. If you make a mistake, you die. What do tennis shoes sound like on wet grass?

"An insane scenario? Perhaps, but on many levels it accurately reflects the life of submarine crews during the Cold War. A single Boomer, or ballistic missile submarine, contains enough force to annihilate a continent. Old submariners walk the halls of the pentagon decorated with combat medals, but they won't tell you how they got them. Stealth began, not at Northrop's Skunk Works at Area 51, but at sea. The world's submarine fleets represent the most covert element of their respective militaries.

"One of the largest covert operations of the Cold War began one February in 1968. This is the story of K-129 and the Scorpion.

"February 15th 1968 the Skipjack class fast attack submarine U.S.S. Scorpion left Norfolk Virginia on a mission to track Soviet Boomers. At the time the Scorpion was the fastest submarine in the world. The Scorpion carried 24 torpedoes, two with nuclear warheads. There were 99 men on board.

"On the other side of the world the Soviet Golf-II Class diesel ballistic missile submarine K-129 was gearing up for its patrol to Hawai'i. On February 24th 1968 K-129 left Vladivostok. In those early days the majority of Soviet Boomers were still powered by diesel-electric engines. Because it ran on diesel-electric power, K-129 had to surface for several hours each day to recharge its batteries. K-129's sail plan would bring the submarine to its patrol area near Hawai'i within two weeks.

"On April 11th, K-129 surfaced to recharge and an explosion of unknown origin blew a 10 foot hole in its hull. The boat sank immediately, crashing nose down into the ocean floor at a depth of 16,500 feet. The Soviet Navy launched a search for K-129, but failed to find her, and on April 18th they called off the search.

"April 30th, 1968, the Scorpion was in the Mediterranean. Its job was to track and record the signature sounds of Soviet submarines as they entered the Med from the Caspian Sea.

"Back in the United States, the Navy Special Projects Office heard K-129 hit bottom using a huge passive sonar array that covers the ocean floor called the SOund SURveillance System, or SOSUS. This network of sensors was set up to cover all the world's oceans, and is designed to listen for enemy submarines. The Navy informed President Lyndon Johnson that they had a location on the sunken Soviet boomer, and he approved plans for a covert recovery operation.

"May 21st at 19:54 Zulu, that's Greenwich mean time for those of you unfamiliar with military timekeeping, the Scorpion sent its last recorded radio transmission. Its next mission was to act as a decoy for the American Boomer Calhoun, which was being tracked by Soviet attack subs. May 27th, at 15:15 Zulu, the Navy declared Scorpion officially overdue.

"Next came the predictable political fallout that always accompanies these incidents – at least the ones that make the news at all.

"The Soviets accused the United States of ramming K-129 with the American attack sub Swordfish. The United States responded by releasing undated file photos of the Swordfish showing no hull damage. Several months later, bowing to public pressure, the Navy actually allowed reporters to examine the Swordfish. There was no visible hull damage. Did Swordfish hit K-129? The Navy could easily have repaired the sub in the time they had. This question remains publicly unanswered.

"On July 15th the U.S. Navy deep sea research vessel U.S.S. Halibut left Pearl Harbor to search for K-129. The Halibut followed a grid search pattern over the area where SOSUS heard the touch down. Halibut scoured the sea floor by trailing dipping sonar, and after locating K-129,

the crew examined wreckage with a remote robot camera. One of the three nuclear missiles that had been aboard K-129 at the time it sunk was still intact.

"SOSUS had limited noise data on the disappearance of Scorpion, but Navy scientists were able to guess a general search area based on course and speed calculations. The Navy research ship Mizar was dispatched to search for Scorpion. On October 28th, 1968, Mizar found the wreckage of the Scorpion broken in three pieces in 11,000 feet of water.

"The Soviet Union denied any involvement in the sinking of Scorpion. Publicly the Navy speculated that an MK37 torpedo malfunction was most likely to blame. Privately they believed Scorpion was shot down in retaliation for the sinking of K-129.

"Having located K-129 with certainty, the Central Intelligence Agency launched project Jennifer. Howard Hughes, the eccentric billionaire and a long time friend to the CIA, agreed to fund and develop the project. Hughes built a giant ship called the Glomar Explorer with the pretext of deep-ocean mining. The ship contained a giant moon pool that was designed to work with the Hughes Mining Barge, or HMB-1, a submersible oceangoing barge with a crane-grabber mechanism called Clementine.

"Nearly six years after K-129 went down, on July 11th, 1974, the Glomar Explorer floated above the stricken boat as HMB-1's Clementine device descended three miles into the deep. As the sub was raised, part of it broke and fell away damaging the Clementine crane. CIA engineers in radiation suits disassembled what remained of K-129 in the belly of the Glomar Explorer. What they found was 38 feet of the bow, which contained two nuclear-tipped torpedoes, Soviet code and cipher equipment, and eight dead crewmen.

"The CIA intended to return and recover the remaining wreckage, but press leaks and Hughes death may have marred their plans.

"There are news reports of at least 16 cold war submarine collisions. The real story behind these reports and the other boats lost during the Cold War has yet to be told. One thing is certain. A lot of men died. If you go to Washington D.C. take some time to visit the Scorpion Memorial at Pier 22 in Norfolk, Virginia."

The class rustles and fidgets. *Slackers*. A skinny kid with Japanese tattoos and a fraying fiberglass cast looks at her, amused.

"Mr. Eritik?"

"Yes." Less amused.

The class is mostly gone now – just a few stragglers collecting their books.

"Aren't you Mr. Wardog's roommate?"

"Sure."

"Well you might mention to him, that if he wants to preserve his A, he should show up to class."

"Sure, I'll tell him. He was planning to be here this morning. I don't know what happened."

"I hope he's okay."

"Yeah, see you later Professor Churel."

She nods, and walks out into the hall. Her cell phone rings. It's Dolf.

"Yes, I'm out of class."

"She spray painted the roof?"

"No, I don't think it's a big deal. Most kids that age go through a phase of interest in the occult. When I was fourteen I tried to summon a demon in my cousin Michelle's basement."

"No, it never showed up," she laughs. "Although I sometimes think you're a bit demonic."

"No, I'm coming home now."

Tasha closes her phone and steps out into a warm rain. Great dark clouds stand like towers above her, and she can hear distant thunder over the hum of traffic.

– Dudley –

The rain runs down his arm and into his cast making it itch even more than usual. He tries to scratch under the edges with a pen as he walks. *Professor Churel is kind of hot in a scary-older-chick-dominatrix sort of way.* Dudley wonders what she would look like wearing latex boots and holding a switch.

A flash lights up the entire sky as he turns down Clinton Street toward the dorms. A few seconds later a great crackling rumble vibrates through his chest. This morning it was warm. At noon it was snowing, and now this. Dudley feels homesick for the perpetually damp, but always predictable, weather of his Northwest.

The bunker is empty. Thud's keys and wallet are on his desk next to the lamp. Nad is at work.

Maybe Thud is at Whit's.

Then he realizes he hasn't seen Whitney for almost three weeks. Dudley drops his books on his bunk, grabs a jacket, and heads for the door. He feels a little twist in his stomach.

Something is fucked-up. But part of him shrugs it off; *Don't be a pussy.*

The Tri-Delt house is an obscene archetype of a Southern slave economy that never existed in Union-loyal Iowa. The huge ionic columns and stark whiteness make it seem more monument than house. He runs up the steps three at a time and rings the doorbell. He almost

expects Scarlet O'Hara's houseboy to greet him with a mint julep. The doorbell plays a metallic clip from Ave Maria. *Not a little pretentious? No.*

Instead of a slave, a pretty girl wearing plaid flannel pajamas answers the door.

"Can I help you?"

"Hi, I'm a friend of Whitney Spencer's, um, Dudley. Is she here?"

"Yes. She's always here." The girl grimaces.

"Well, can I see her?"

"Hold on." The girl picks up the house phone from a foyer table and presses a couple of buttons.

"There's a Dudley here to see you." She pauses, looking annoyed. "Uh-huh, well, yeah but that's not exactly...fine! God!"

She hangs up the phone, hard, and muttering something that sounds like, "cunt."

"You can go up. Her door is at the end of the hall. Maybe she'll talk to you."

The girl walks away before he can respond, and Dudley follows the long curve of a majestic staircase to the second floor. The hall is lined with elaborately carved paddles, photographs of groups of Tri-Delts for at least fifty consecutive years, and oil paintings of particularly famous alums. The hall has a distinct fruity smell he can only identify as clean-rich-girl.

Someone has tacked a sign on the door at the end of the hall. It reads "Psycho-Bitch!" in large black magic marker. He knocks. There are some thumping scraping noises behind the door, and Whitney opens it.

Her hair is tangled and looks like it hasn't been washed in weeks. An inch of black is growing in below the blond. He can't see her eyes behind the sunglasses, but her face looks

drawn and thin. Her lips are cracked. Her robe hangs open, and he can see she is wearing only a dirty t-shirt and a pair of frayed and urine stained cotton briefs. She smells strong, unwashed, musky, but some how very, very good.

"Well, get in here. The light hurts my head."

She pats him gently on the shoulder as he enters. It's the kind of thing his grandmother would do. The door closes and they are in total darkness. The room is thick and stuffy. It smells like sweat and sex and faintly of urine. It smells like her. He stumbles over something and almost falls. She takes his arm.

"Over here, sit here. That's it. I forget about the dark, you know?"

"Whit. I can't see you. Can we turn on a light?"

"Yeah. Yeah, sure, hold on, let me just move this."

More noises like something heavy being moved. A small faint light goes on revealing a bed. Dudley looks more closely and sees that it is a Wonder Woman night-light.

"Is that enough? It's about as much as I can take right now. Do you like it? My father got it for me when I was seven and I had the chicken pox. Spent a week eating ice cream and reading Wonder Woman comic books."

"Yeah Whit, it's great. What's going on? Are you okay?"

"Sure. I'm great. Great, really. Those evil bitches keep banging on my door, that's all. But I'm good. Hey you smell funny. What have you been eating? Oh wait, that's the smell from Professor Churel's class. She always wears Chanel. You must have just come from there. How is Professor Churel? You know she has pretty good taste for an older woman. Although I think that Dior thing she was wearing last semester during finals was a little over the top. She's really more of a fall person don't you think? But of course you weren't here last semester..."

She's talking like someone who hasn't had any social contact in a long time. Like her need to communicate has been building up, and now that he is here, it just overflows, covering everything with no particular direction.

He tries to respond to her questions a few times, but she just runs him over and keeps talking, so he gives up, and just nods politely.

"...Thud took honors astronomy for his science requirement. I was planning to take it with him, you know, but then I found out there would be a lot of calculus, and I never liked calculus, so I took geology instead. But that class really changed him. Not in the sense of epiphany, or some sort of grand catharsis, but a definite realization. He told me that everything we see; everything that is, all the elements, carbon, iron, niobium – everything that made us, and everything around us, is built from the dust of dead stars. That a star, or thousands of stars, exploded and left their remnants floating out there in the frozen dark. That after billions of years that dust coalesced to become our star and planets, and eventually, us..."

Dudley examines the room in the dim light. Clothes litter the floor. A chair is propped up against the sink in the corner.

"...and then my tooth fell out."

She's standing in front of him. He didn't even see her move. She holds out her hand and he sees a pale white tooth with a bloody root.

"Thee," she says holding her lip up with a finger to reveal a gap where her left canine should be.

"Maybe you should go to a doctor, Whit. I mean that can't be healthy. Or a dentist, at least."

She laughs a bright musical laugh.

"No, silly. You know I hate doctors. Hey, have you ever thought about the physics of ice? I mean why would something increase in volume when it shifts from liquid to solid? It's..."

She strokes his hair while she talks. Her hands feel strange. They are cool and very heavy. He doesn't understand how someone so messed up can smell so good.

– Lamia –

Year of our Lord 1470, 17 July

Under directions from the Order of our Blessed Mother I have embarked on a journey to a small town in the Urals called Volksgrad. I am traveling by horse cart with my new disciple Sasha Upyrin. He is an eager and intelligent young man, but I have concerns about his superstitious nature. This will be his first investigation, and my fifty-third.

I have found that few allegations of supernatural phenomena bear fruit. Most are hoaxes or the delusions of simple-minded peasants; easily explained with the application of scientific observation and a measure of reason. I hope that this journey will teach Sasha an appreciation for the value of such applications. I am concerned that this new generation of priests not follow the lunacy unleashed by our Roman brothers on the Iberian peninsula.

The purpose of this journey is to determine if dark forces are at work in Volksgrad, and if they are, to cast them out. The village elders have sent numerous letters to the Order detailing their situation and begging for help. As I have several days ride

to the village, I will have time to review the information and prepare an investigation.

Year of our Lord 1470, 18 July

The documents provided me by Elder Vourdalakov are disturbing, but not altogether unusual. It seems the residents of Volksgrad have decided their village is infested with vampires. Such assertions are ridiculous, of course, but the fear expressed in the letters lends a new urgency to my mission. If we do not arrive soon, there is no telling what the villagers might do. The potential for violence is great.

It seems that a mob of townsfolk have locked several of their citizens in the dungeon of an abandoned keep that adjoins the village. The circumstances leading up to this bizarre imprisonment are most curious.

According to the village elders, all the trouble started when a stranger came to town. This stranger, a woman of noble bearing and the appearance of great wealth, stopped at the inn owned by Piotor Marmeladov and requested a meal be sent to her room. But when Marmeladov came to deliver the food, he claimed she cast it aside and bewitched him. The innkeeper claimed to not remember anything after that.

His wife found him in the woman's bed the next morning in a state of disorientation. He was bruised, and cut in several places, and appeared to be very pale. The woman was gone. Marmeladov told his wife as much as he could remember. He was very weak, and she had to help him down stairs. His wife says she

made him some tea, but before he could finish a glass, he had fallen onto the floor and gone into a fit as if possessed by demons. Madam Marmeladov ran to the door and screamed for help. Several witnesses rushed to the scene, and they described Marmeladov as suffering from dramatic and violent contortions of the body, and the purging of both his stomach and bowels.

I pause to note that I have seen these symptoms more often from the ingestion of bad food or an imbalance of the humors, than in cases of demonic possession.

Several of the townsfolk gathered around the stricken man, but he thrashed so much that they were afraid to touch him. Finally he lay still, and they were able to carry him upstairs and put him to bed. There, he labored for many days with fever, and on the morning of the tenth day, when his wife came in to check on him she could no longer hear his heart when she pressed her ear to his chest.

Being a wealthy man by local standards, Marmeladov was laid to rest above ground on a stone table in the family crypt. A relative peace returned to the town over the following two weeks.

But then Marmeladov came back.

He appeared at the front door of the inn, saying that he was very thirsty, and could he please come in. Naturally there was a great uproar. His wife fainted. His daughters screamed. The whole village was sure he was a ghost. Marmeladov was examined by the village elders and found to be normal. Collective fear was dismissed, and Marmeladov's return was celebrated as a miracle of God.

Their happiness ended after just a few weeks, however. Marmeladov began to behave strangely. He refused to go outside during the day, and was always putting out candles and complaining that the inn was too bright. He would not eat, and became very hostile when questioned. He just sat in a dark corner of the inn, and would shout at anyone who came near him. At one point, in front of several witnesses, Marmeladov leaped from his hiding place like a lion and attacked one of his own daughters, attempting to defile her in a most obscene manner. It was to her fortune, and by the grace of God, that there were a dozen strong men in the inn at the time. It took all of them to pull him off her. Marmeladov was bound, and the elders set to questioning him. He refused to cooperate, lashed out, and tried on several occasions to escape. Fearful of more violence, the elders locked Marmeladov in a cell at the old keep while they decided what to do.

There was some deliberation. Marmeladov is not a serf. Had he been, he would have no doubt been hanged that very day. Although he is by no means aristocracy, Marmeladov is certainly a gentleman of some standing in the community. He is wealthy, and the local lord is often a guest at his inn. It was decided that he must be kept captive. His wife agreed to pay for his food and a guard.

Two weeks later Madam Marmeladov began to exhibit some of the same symptoms as her husband. Her daughters found her in the stables covered in blood and laughing to herself. She had butchered the stable boy and hung him on a hook to drain. He was

eviscerated. The daughters ran to a nearby blacksmith and he organized a party to capture her. She fought fiercely, even after suffering deep sword wounds to the chest and leg. One of the blacksmith's men was killed, and two serfs were seriously wounded in the capture. They bore her to the keep, and locked her in a cell beside her stricken husband. It seemed certain that she would die, so severe were her wounds, but after only a week she seemed to be fully recovered.

Shortly after her capture, a young stable boy, the brother of the one who had died, came forward. He confessed to the elders that Madam Marmeladov had seduced him several days before the murder. The tearful young man claimed he tried to resist, but that she bewitched him. The elders immediately locked him up in the keep for his own safety.

The village priest, a father Wampirov, submitted a report with letters from the village elders. He indicated that he has attempted all the standard rites of exorcism, including dousing the afflicted with holy water, but none of these efforts had any discernible effect. Father Wampirov was forced to leave off his last attempt after Madam Marmeladov took to throwing excrement at him and shouting blasphemies.

Lamia closes the file and puts the computer to sleep. Dolf insisted on dinner at precisely eight. She rubs Bitch's tummy a few more times with her toes, and runs off to wash her hands.

Tasha is already at the table. She is wearing a long silk dressing gown over a starched white shirt. She looks at Lamia, smiling.

"You look radiant tonight, Lamia. Your bruise is nearly gone."

"So when do I get to eat solid food again?"

"Does your jaw still hurt?" says Dolf, carrying in a steaming tureen of soup.

"Yes."

"Well there you go."

Lamia scowls and rolls her eyes.

The soup is a beef broth thickened with pureed potatoes. She sips some of it, but ends up dining on mostly milkshake. Tasha and Dolf talk about politics and the next election cycle.

Boring. Tasha turns to her after the dessert dishes are cleared away.

"It occurs to me that we should get you some new clothes."

"Really?"

"Really. I don't really know what young people are wearing right now, but I imagine you could find out. Do some looking around. We'll go to Chicago when you're ready."

"No."

"No?"

"I'm not going back to Chicago. Not ever."

"Lamia, I..."

But Lamia is already up and running down the hall. Her door slams before her napkin hits the floor. Lamia throws herself on her bed, and turns on the radio. *Something loud.* Anything, as long as it is loud enough to crush out the things in her head.

– Whitney –

"Jesus Christ do all these bitches have to go on the rag at the same time? It's like a fucking vat of bloody tampons in this place."

Whitney has taken to talking to herself. She pounds on the door and yells, "I CAN SMELL YOU, YOU NASTY FUCKS!"

After a few minutes someone shoves a note under her door, and runs away down the hall. Whitney picks up the note and holds it to her nose. *Sara Masani, Eternity isn't covering up anything. Skank.* She opens the note.

"We want you out by Monday or we're calling the cops."

No signature. *Typical.*

She climbs back into bed. It's not just the smell. The noise is driving her crazy. She can hear Kim talking to her boyfriend on the phone. She can hear the hum of the refrigerator in the kitchen. At one point during the night she even swore she heard the wet sound of someone painting their nails.

Masturbation was good for a while. It dulled things. It separated her focus so everything wasn't roaring in at her. She was doing it more frequently, sometimes five or six times an hour. She'd rubbed herself raw, and finally bloody, and when she woke today, her vagina was all scabbed over and she was afraid to touch it. It really wasn't working anymore anyway. She needs something. *It feels like sex, but stronger.* It is gnawing away at her. She wishes Thud was here. *If Thud would just hold me, take me hard.* She thinks of how he smells, the feel of him, the taste of him.

She starts to cry. She has been doing that a lot. She isn't sure why. She doesn't feel sad exactly, just alone. Cassius has left for a year of study in New Zealand. Her father hasn't

returned a phone call since she got back to school. *It was so nice to see Dudley. He just came all on his own.*

She puts on a second sweater. *Always cold. Those cheap fucks. I pay enough. They should turn up the heat.* The phone rings. It's under a pile of blankets at the foot of the bed. She digs it out, frantic.

"Hello?"

The response is a loud resonant belch.

"Nad?"

"Was' up, Sorority Skank?"

"I'm all messed up, Nad. I don't know what's going on."

"Yeah well, you always were a nut-pack. Look, have you seen Thud? He hasn't been home for two days."

"No. No he hasn't even called me for three weeks. I think he's dumping me."

"Huh. That's fucked up. He wouldn't dump you. He's in love with you."

She pauses, and stops breathing. Thud never said that word in his life, not to her. *It has to be a joke.*

"You're joking."

"Hell no, I'm not joking. Damn, for a smart chick, you sure can be a dumbfuck, Whit. So you haven't seen him? His keys and wallet are here. The Charger's out front. He wouldn't go anywhere without the Charger."

"No."

"Shit. Well I guess I'll try calling some people at Pine Ridge. Look, if you do see him, tell him to fucking get his ass home. Churel's pissed he's been missing class. His other profs probably are, too. He's gonna fuck his gpa."

"Yeah."

"And Whit," he softens his voice, "why don't you come by sometimes. We miss you, you know?"

"Yeah."

She hangs up the phone and yanks the cord out of the wall.

"All done," she says, crawling under the bed. "All done. All done."

She begins to cry again, only this time she knows why.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"Tous les jours, a tous points de vue, je vais de mieux en mieux."

[Every day, in every way, I am getting better and better.]

—Emile Coue

— **Jerry-Jean** —

Job two is bad. She didn't think it was going to be bad. It seemed like an improvement initially, no hot machines, no loud noises. But it is a shiny, shit-polished deception. They dress well, and sit in cubicles, and lie to people.

Sometimes people just hang up. Sometimes they yell and call her names. Everything about this place gives her a headache, the smell of the carpet, the fawning pushiness of her boss, a nauseatingly perky young woman named Chloe, who is always popping around the corner of

her cubicle and saying, "Come on J.J., let's sell some long distance!" She says this with such enthusiasm and fervor that Jerry-Jean suspects she might not be real at all, but some sort of evil perky machine. *After all, actual people couldn't possibly be that excited about long distance phone service, could they?*

This must be what it's like to be an employee of Lucifer. Everyone here is on the edge of desperation. Like check cashing stores or pawnshops, telemarketing companies employ those on the edge of the abyss. Without the clawing desperation of: can't pay rent, can't buy food, can't buy smack; no one would work in these places. She sees a haggard, dazed man weeping in the cubical across from her. He is wearing an old tweed sports coat with frayed cuffs. He looks up, tears streaming down his cheeks, and she recognizes him. *He was at emergency housing when I first came to town. He had his daughter with him. Thin Asian girl, maybe twelve?* Chloe, alarmed at the man's outburst of emotion, in the proper, emotionally sterile environment of Worldspawn, tells him that he must go home until he can pull himself together. He shuffles out, still sobbing.

After being told by a middle-aged man, that if she ever called again while he was having dinner, he would fly to where ever she was, rip out her eyeballs, skull-fuck her, and then take a giant steaming shit on what ever remained of her face, Jerry-Jean puts down her headset and retreats to the bathroom. There, she closes the stall door, sits down, and stares at her watch, hoping that if she focuses hard enough, time will actually speed up and free her from this ego-crushing prison. The second hand moves like a stoned tree sloth. She squints, tilts her head to the left, and it almost looks like it's moving faster.

"J.J., are you in here?"

It's the Chloe-bot. Jerry-Jean wants to hide, but forces a, "yes."

"Come on J.J., let's sell some long distance!"

Not even safe in the fucking bathroom.

"Okay, Chloe, I'll be right out."

"There's the spirit! Sell two in the next hour and you'll win a t-shirt!"

As if the privilege of being screamed at and insulted and forced to lie for minimum wage wasn't enough, now she has the opportunity to provide the company with free advertising when she isn't at work by wearing one of their t-shirts. Jerry-Jean stifles a laugh just long enough to hear the bathroom door hiss closed. She sits there for a moment giggling and wanting to run, but remembering her bills, she returns to her cubicle for two more hours of penitence, instead.

She arrives home numb. The bunker is empty and dark. There is a note on her bed from Nad. He is worried about Thud, and wants to be paged immediately if she hears from him. She is too agitated from the trials of telemarketing to rest. Jerry-Jean wakes Dudley's computer from its slumber and instructs it to log-on. If she can't sleep, maybe she can find someone to talk to. She signed up for a chat service a few weeks ago, but with midterms and work there hasn't been time. The last time she visited this chat room she just watched, but now she signs in with her online name: K8_star.

The screen is surging with a flurry of rapid talk. Some of these girls seem to type faster than she can read. There is some sort of lover's spat going on between Duckymouse and Vanilla Kisses. Roses69 has recently decided that she is straight – but continues to attend Girl Chat because she misses all her friends – and Phoenix Rose is being just as imperious and intimidating as she was the first time Jerry-Jean saw her. *It's better than a soap opera.* She is feeling daring after her endurance of Chloe and a hundred extremely unhappy telemarketing victims. She leaps.

"K8_star: Hi everybody, " appears amidst the running dialogues.

No one responds. After a few minutes she tries again. A message appears in a box that floats above the moving dialogue stream.

"PM from darkgrl: K8, you must be new. They won't respond to you unless you have a profile; and some won't even then, unless you have a picture. There have been a lot of boys trying to sneak on and trick people into cyber lately."

Jerry-Jean is so excited someone actually responded that she almost knocks a cup of pens off her desk. *PM, what does that mean?* She finds a box on a bar menu off to the side that corresponds to the letters and clicks on it. The Private Message menu pops up in front of her.

"PM from K8_star: darkgrl, thanks. I am new at this. How do you create a profile and what's cyber?"

darkgrl explains how to create a profile and warns Jerry-Jean not to include any identifying personal information because there are lots of creepy people online. She then explains that cyber is short for cyber-sex.

"PM from darkgrl: typing fast with one hand, is how Roses69 explained it to me. It's pretty silly if you ask me, but some people are really into it."

"PM from K8_star: weird. With people you've never even met?"

"PM from darkgrl: yes, it's demented, lol. So are you a dyke?"

"PM from K8_star: yes, although I don't think I've ever said that to anyone."

"PM from darkgrl: you just did."

"PM from K8_star: I did, huh? I guess I never even said it to myself."

"PM from darkgrl: good for you. :)~"

"PM from K8_star: yeah, you?"

"PM from darkgrl: I don't think so. But I don't really know for sure. I come here because everyone's so nice and open. It's a dyke page, but they are straight-girl friendly. They'll even put up with boys as long as they aren't liars trying to pose for cyber."

Jerry-Jean types "lol, " the online abbreviation for "laugh out loud."

"PM from darkgrl: have you ever been with a girl?"

"PM from K8_star: not really. I had this best friend in eighth grade, and we kissed a lot one summer, but when high school started she wouldn't talk to me anymore. It was like she was ashamed. I guess I was too."

"PM from darkgrl: Everyone's ashamed of some things, but who you are shouldn't be on the list...um gotta go. I think there's a cop in my house."

An alert on the chat page shows that darkgrl has logged off. Jerry-Jean puts the laptop to sleep and sits there staring at the dark screen.

Weird. Dyke. She pauses and then she says it out loud.

"Dyke."

There's something strong in that word, something better than lesbian, or the oh-so-clinical homosexual. She takes a black permanent marker from her desk and writes "dyke" on the back of her hand in big square letters. She pads down the hall to the bathrooms and stops in front of the sinks. A mirror fills the wall behind them and she studies the image. It is the same her. Different clothes. Shorter hair, but still her. She presses her hand against the mirror and stares at the word next to her face. *Dyke.* She smiles and skips back down the hall to the bunker.

– Tasha –

"Professor Tasha Churel?"

"Yes."

"We met before. Your boy Colby Mah'anah."

She remembers the pretty, but politically incorrect young cop from the night she bailed her teaching assistant out of the State City jail, but why he would be standing at her front door looking pathetic, she doesn't know. *More Lo Res fall out?*

"Yes, officer..."

"Jaracacas."

"Yes, officer Jaracacas, I remember. What can I do for you today?"

"Well, that's the thing. I..." He really looks upset. He's younger than she remembered, barely twenty-one.

"Could I come in, Professor?"

She hesitates. It is against her better judgment, but he looks more dangerous to himself than anyone else.

"Okay."

She leads him to a couch in the living room. His radio squawks and screeches. He turns it down.

"Would you like something to drink officer?"

"No. No...I, you recently accepted guardianship of one Lamia Michelle Day?"

"That is correct, but..."

"Daughter of Talamaur Pippin Day, who lives one floor down from you?"

"Yes."

"You noticed the ambulance?"

"No, I was reading, and this floor is soundproof. Is there something..."

"Talamaur Day is dead, Ma'am. We won't get a coroner's report until tomorrow. No wait, that's not right, it's Friday. We won't get a coroner's report until Monday, but there's no mystery, it was suicide."

"How?" Tasha has stopped blinking.

"Booze and pills. He left a note. The original's still evidence but I made a photocopy across the street."

He hands her a page of self-pity from his binder.

"We have grief councilors. Here's my card. If you would like them to talk to Ms. Day, just call. I'm very sorry for your loss."

Then he's gone. Just like that, and she is sitting on the couch holding a letter from a dead man that she doesn't want to read. Tasha is used to death. It holds no great shock or mystery to her. But when she thinks of Lamia, how this child will be affected by the death of her father; a man who was dependent on her; a man who hurt and estranged her; it makes her cringe. *Dolf, I have to talk to Dolf.* She crumples the suicide note and stuffs it in her pocket.

"Dolf." It comes out warbled.

"What's going on? Was there a cop here?"

Lamia is standing at the end of the hall looking at her.

"Honey, go back to your room for now, okay? I have to talk to Dolf."

"Fine, never tell me anything."

The girl stalks back into the library and shuts the door.

"Dolf." A little stronger this time.

He emerges from the hall bathroom holding a toilet brush and an annoyed expression.

"Yes, Dr. Churel?"

"Come sit down Dolf."

He relieves himself of the toilet brush, and sits down next to her.

"What's wrong."

"He's dead. After all this, he's dead."

"Who's dead?"

"Lamia's father. That cop... he killed himself. That selfish son-of-a-bitch. Oh Dolf, she's going to blame herself. You know she will. You saw how dependent he was on her."

"Yes. She probably will."

"What can we do? What can we do? She has... it's too much."

"Tell her the truth. Be here. That's the best anyone could do."

"I can't do this."

"I know."

He gets up and walks down the hall toward the library. Tasha hesitates, but then she follows him and stands at the open door.

Lamia looks up at them and she knows. Tasha can see it in her face even before Dolf sits down. He puts a hand on hers across the little table. It makes her look very small.

"Don't."

"Lamia."

"Don't." She pulls her hand away.

"Lamia, your father is dead."

Then she doesn't say anything, and they just sit there in the little room surrounded by books. There is no sound but breathing, and that is very shallow. Bitch sits up beneath the table and begins to howl. It starts out small, like a low whistle and then builds to a full sad pitch. Lamia reaches down to touch him, and the howl stops. Tasha can't remember him ever howling before.

"Why does it have to be like this?"

Dolf looks at her, sad, serious.

"It doesn't have to. It just is."

"Will it always hurt this much?"

"Yes. Although in time you will adjust. It won't always be at the center of your thoughts."

"I wish I was dead."

"There is no honor in that."

"I don't give a fuck about honor! There is no honor in murder. I killed him, you know."

"No, you are wrong. He was weak, and you despised him for it – that's why you feel guilt now."

Lamia glares at him and says nothing. She begins to tap with her middle and ring fingers. Tears puddle on the table, but she doesn't notice them.

"It is better to be angry than sad or regretful, Lamia. Anger is an action emotion. It can be projected, directed, focused. You can use it. Sadness is good for nothing, and will only damage you."

"You don't know. You don't know what happened to him. What she did to him."

"I don't, you are correct, but I know who he was when he was here and how he treated you. What he did, he chose to do."

"You have no right to judge him."

"No, but you do."

The tapping stops. Tasha steps into the room. She puts her hands on the shoulders of the child and looks down at her.

"Anything..."

"I know." Lamia smiles a very small smile. "I think I need to be alone for a little while, okay?"

– Dudley –

"You're quitting the art museum to work at a fuck shop?" Says Nad, "Dude, that is too funny."

"Just a switch from one art to another," says Dudley. *Idiot.*

"Are you gonna have to clean up the cum in the jerk-off booths? 'Cause ain't no art worth that kind of duty."

"No they have a janitorial servi..."

"How'd you like to be that guy? 'So Bob, what are you doing now?' 'Well Fred I got this new job where I mop up jizz all day.' I mean you'd have to be a sewer worker to get much nastier, and what would they call that guy? Splooge monitor? Semen wrangler? Spunk commando?"

Nad is clearly not appreciating his break in the right way. Dudley gives up on spreading the joy, and plods off to work.

Martha is at the register when he walks in. She throws a bright smile at him and changes cash drawers. Martha doesn't talk much, but her other-half more than makes up for it.

"Thanks Martha, see you tomorrow."

She waves in response, and slips out the door.

Happy Slappy carries the same sweet plasticity smells that are found in every smut shop in America, but Martha has been burning nag champa, so the musk of incense is wrapped and intertwined with the sugary fruits of flavored lubricants and the distinct latex rubber smell from the wall of toys. Some of the toys are completely ridiculous. There is a large rubber arm with a fist at one end, a horror reminiscent of some of the more frightening German porn Dudley has seen. There is a whole menagerie of inflatable farm animals complete with useable orifices. *One-third life size!* Below the inflatable quadrupeds, the usual plethora of sex toys and devices in every conceivable size, shape, and color hang from dozens of slot-board hooks.

Dudley flips on the TV. Martha Stewart is talking Easter cookies. The yellow ones look pretty good. The door jingles and a troop of college girls come in laughing a little too loudly. *Probably here for a gag gift.* They push, and joke, and make a lot of noise, picking things up and giggling, as if trying very hard to show that this is funny, really, and that they would never actually come into a place like this on their own. Not in a trillion years. They come up to the counter with an inflatable sheep and a purple mouth-shaped masturbation toy.

"My brother's bachelor party," explains the blond one.

Did I need an explanation?

Dudley recognizes her darker-haired friend. She came in last week alone and bought a vibrator. She sees him look at her, and looks away. He goes along. *That's how it is. People like to be anonymous. Well, most people.*

As the girls leave, still a bubble, a gray-haired black man in an expensive suit squeezes past them. He waves at Dudley and drops his briefcase behind the counter without being asked.

"Hey Dudley."

"Hey Mike, how's it going?"

"Well, at least the snow is gone. Got any new stuff?"

"Jenny said we were getting some new Colt stuff in this week. I haven't checked to see if they put it out yet."

"Thanks."

Mike drifts back to the gay porn section and starts combing the wall of blue Colt Studio boxes. He comes in almost every day, and usually rents at least six videos. Dudley is a student of pornography, but even he couldn't watch that much, not for fun. Still, if nothing else, he has to admire Mike's stamina.

One of the video units on the wall beeps, and he has to switch the feed over to one of the other units. There are twenty DVD playback units that are all running continuously. The feeds go to the back where there are rooms for people to watch them. Dudley never really understood the principle of the booths. *Why would someone want to do that in a store, when they could be so much more comfortable at home?* But it seems to be profitable. People are always coming in and buying tokens to the booths. He turns back to the TV.

Martha Stewart is explaining the difference between butter cream frosting and icings and the setting qualities of each. *Has Martha gained weight?* Dudley decides she is a little thick

around the hips, but definitely still hot in that sugar-mama-billionairess kind of way. He is willing to bet that Martha actually has a riding crop. *Maybe even a selection of riding crops. You have to match outfits, after all.*

A very small, pink-haired girl with deep somber eyes and a dozen lip rings jingles through the door. She doesn't look at him and goes straight to the toy section.

Mike comes up to the counter with a stack of boxes.

"All set?"

"Yup. Say, this new one, 'Under the Judge's Robe,' looks pretty good."

Dudley looks at the box. The picture shows a very muscular looking judge showing a very muscular court clerk something under his robe.

"The lead's name is even Clarence Tom-Ass, how appropriate."

Mike laughs and pays for his rentals. The store near empty, the tiny pink-haired girl rushes up and puts the largest vibrator he has ever seen on the counter. She doesn't look up, but puts a wad of bills in front of him. She keeps shifting from one foot to the other, and looks very agitated.

"Do you need batteries?"

She shakes her head no. Still not looking up.

"I have to test this because there are no refunds on toys."

Dudley explains, feeling uncomfortable because of her awkwardness. He opens the box and inserts four D-cells. The toy shudders to life, whining like a leaf blower. The girl looks as if she might be about to cry. He quickly turns it off and puts the box in a safe, anonymous black plastic bag. Just in time, too, because as he hands her, her change a group of boisterous college

boys burst in. The girl exits at just under a dead run. Dudley feels sorry for her. *Being embarrassed sucks.*

The boys mill about, act like buffoons, and buy nothing. Martha Stewart has abandoned him. He changes the channel. The President is giving a speech about how every thing good is thanks to him, and all the bad things that have happened to the country over the last fifty years are clearly the fault of that other party. The President's handpicked audience applauds. Dudley thinks the President looks like he should be selling Ronco Turnip-Twaddlers on a four a.m. infomercial.

"Wake up sleepyhead, time to go home!"

He wasn't actually asleep, but Jenny always likes to relieve him with that expression. It is her trademark.

"Hi, Jenny, thanks."

"Hey, we got some new lube samples in. Silicone based, which I think is kind of creepy frankly, but they're free. Want some?"

Dudley takes a couple of the samples, stuffs them in the back pocket of his camouflage pants and stumbles out the door. The flavors of Happy Slappy linger on him, but by the time he has reached the Pentacrest the cool spring wind has blown them all away, and all he can smell is rotting ginkgo berries and the grease traps of the many campus bars. As he turns onto Clinton Street, the contents of his back pocket are already forgotten.

– Lamia –

Cold to any outside voice, Lamia finds the only place she can escape the horror of the present is in her studies. She has stopped talking to Tasha and Dolf, and sits silent in the library, reading. She only pauses to look up words she doesn't understand in the big dictionary. It is piled in several volumes around her on the floor. She has not moved in two days. Bitch remains at her feet, refusing entreaties of food and walks. Dolf even tried a command this morning, but Bitch just growled.

Year of our Lord 1470, 20 July

After an uneventful journey we have arrived in Volksgrad. Father Wampirov was kind enough to meet our coach and provide for our lodging. We are staying in one of the church outbuildings at the North end of town. Father Wampirov tells me it was used as a rectory when there was an abbey here centuries ago.

Wampirov is quite convinced of the situation. "It is the evil one, have no doubt." was the first thing he said to us as we stepped out of the coach.

He seems a learned man, and quite unlike some of the more naive village priests I have met in my journeys. It is a wonder such a man would be so easily convinced by peasant hysteria. We arrived very late, so we will wait until the morning to begin the investigation. Wampirov brought us some excellent local bread and some herb brandy. Combined with the straw young Sasha was able to obtain, I am certain we shall sleep very soundly, vampires or no. The boy is nervous, but I reminded him that our faith would protect us. He seems reassured. Still, I wonder at his nerve.

Year of our Lord 1470, 21 July

It is not such a simple thing, faith. Mine was shaken deeply this day, not my faith in our Lord, but my faith in the tenants of science. The horrors contained in the dungeon of Volksgrad keep are beyond anything I have seen before. It took all of my presence of mind, and the reassurances of Father Wampirov that the beasts could not escape, to keep me from fleeing at that instant. Horrible pale creatures that smelled of death and fornication reached at me from those cells. Their grasping hands stretched out at me from behind the bars, and I could see a deep evil longing in the shadow of their black eyes. What they might do, should those hands find purchase, I dread to consider. The female, I presume Madam Marmeladov, soon gave up reaching for us, and began to defile herself in a most brutal and grotesque manner. The younger male, who must be the stable boy, simply lay on the floor as if asleep. But Piotor Marmeladov just stood in his cell and stared at me, licking his lips like a dog that smells a pot over the fire. At one point he smiled, and although it was only for an instant, I could swear I saw long sharp teeth extending from his upper jaw. We withdrew after some consideration to consult on how best to proceed.

Young Sasha did not attend this first encounter at my request. It is well that he did not. I shall have to prepare him that he might face these demons with courage. Father Wampirov has informed me that the creatures are capable of communication. I should like to take time tomorrow to interview them at length, and see if they understand the nature of their condition.

Wampirov says the stable boy has not moved in several days. I wonder, is he dead?

According to local folklore, there are a number of remedies and weapons that can be utilized against actual vampires. I am not yet resolved that this is a genuine manifestation, but I have instructed the villagers to spend the rest of the day gathering such implements as may prove useful in our investigation. I will list them here: a blessed sword, a large quantity of holy water, holy Eucharist, holy oil, vinegar, garlic, roses, stones from sacred ground, sharp pieces of iron, sharpened wood stakes, red peas, a live cock, and at least two well behaved dogs. We have our crucifixes, of course, although I observed no reaction to my crucifix upon my initial inspection. Still, it may be a matter of proximity. I would also like to test the subjects reaction to sunlight, as the village elder's report made mention of some sensitivity. The cells are below the keep's courtyard, and covered with great iron plates over the bars. Tomorrow I will inquire into having one of the plates removed. I have also instructed Ipat, one of the local serfs, to bring me some chicken and pigs blood. If the mythology has any merit, this will elicit a reaction.

I am having Sasha copy my report up to this point, and send it with a rider to Elder Illyan, requesting instructions and further assistance. May God find you safe Elder, and may He protect us all.

– Whitney –

The lights don't seem to hurt as much now. Pot helps. She scored an ounce from Dudley when he came to visit her, and has discovered that it pushes back the edges a bit. She only took two suitcases. The rest didn't really seem to matter any more. Just clothes. She laughs a little, thinking of the horrid squalor she left at the Tri-Delt house. *It serves them right, nasty noisy bitches.* She left in the middle of the night leaving the door wide open and a note telling them all to fuck off. No one saw her leave, and she left no forwarding address. *Everything is better here. It's quiet here.*

Whitney sits in the center of her new space and examines it. She has been decorating. Smooth heart-pine stretches away from her in all directions. The room is perfectly square and almost the size of a city block. There is no furniture except the king-sized futon she is sitting on, and a stainless steel coat rail on wheels upon which she has hung her clothes. She spent the entire first night painting the windows black. It was hard; there are a lot of windows. Now the only light comes from a dozen strings of novelty lights hung from the net of heavy wood beams supporting the roof above her. She looks up. There are UFOs, and chili peppers, and mini lanterns, and a whole assortment of strange liquid filled bubbling things that she just had to have when she found them on the internet. She presses a button on a remote control and a hundred inches of plasma television lights up above her. She has it suspended with wires from the heavy wood beams that support the roof.

The news is on. A reporter is standing on a sidewalk in Paris. The Arch de Triomphe is lit up behind her.

"...most vineyards use clay or some other material to clarify wine," says the reporter. "But until 1997, several French winemakers were still following a medieval practice which involved

the use of bovine blood as a clarifying agent. Concerns over mad-cow disease have ended this practice, but significant quantities of pre-1997 French wine still exist, both in Europe and North America. French authorities have insisted that this is not a cause for concern..."

She turns it off and stretches her hands out over the smooth pine floor. It's so clean, so free of the organic intensity that had overwhelmed her, angered her, before. She can smell the washed cotton of the futon, the acrid sweet smoke from her pipe, the dry dusty wood of the building, and the sweet hydrocarbon plastic of the lights, but the raw smell of human sweat and breath and sex is very distant here. It's bearable. Better still is the lack of noise. She is almost a mile from campus in the small industrial part of State City. The warehouse she is renting was a machine shop once, and had been heavily soundproofed. She can still hear trains sometimes, and the sound of distant traffic, but all the little sounds that so grated on her are gone.

She lies back on the bed and revels in it, staring up at the colorful lights and humming to herself. It occurs to her that she hasn't been to class in a month. The idea is so funny she starts giggling hysterically.

"Class. Hey professor, could you turn off the lights and make everyone leave – no, I don't mind them, it's just they all smell so."

More giggling, but then she thinks of Thud, and stops.

"He wouldn't approve. He'd say I was being irresponsible and wasting my education. That fucker."

But the last part she says very low, like she's afraid someone might hear. Like she's afraid he might hear. Or maybe, just because she's afraid.

She feels something loose in her mouth and spits it out into her hand, another tooth. She feels around inside her mouth with her tongue. This one is from the other side. She giggles a little more.

"I must look like a fucking banjo tuner. Trailer trash Whitney Spencer, of the New Bedford Spencers. Would you like fries with that?"

She falls back on the futon in more convulsions of laughter. Tears roll down her cheeks into her ears and she hugs herself, rolling from side to side.

A thought breaks through the lunacy, and she sits up.

I should go out. It's brilliant. With the chronic I can stand it. I made it here after all. Besides, I need something...

She stands up and looks at herself. She is filthy. She has been wearing the same underwear and t-shirt for weeks, and she is suddenly aware that she must stink, although for some reason, she can't actually smell herself.

In one far corner of the warehouse there is a small employee restroom. She pushes through the swinging door and flips on the lights. Only one of the four florescent overhead tubes works, and it buzzes and flickers. The bathroom has a cracked, rust-stained urinal and one stall with a broken door that leads to an equally rust stained toilet with no lid. The floor and walls are covered with little pentagonal blue tiles that sit on a plane of grout, once white, but now stained mildew green, with blotches of rust, and crawling with an ominous black fuzz in places. There is a sink and a small mirror with a row of Chiquita banana stickers plastered along the bottom.

Whitney looks in the mirror. Her face is pale and thin. She is so white she can see the faint blue of her veins when she looks very closely. She has almost three-quarters of an inch of black roots growing in below the straight coppery gold of her ruined bob. This is a little strange

since she is a natural blond, but it doesn't seem important enough to worry about at the moment, so she continues her inspection. *Skin looks good. No zits. Eyebrows growing in dark too, that's okay, they need some plucking though. There is the missing teeth problem. No, just smile with your mouth closed, you'll be fine. Lips cracked – moisturizer.*

Perhaps from the weakness of not eating, or perhaps because she simply doesn't want to see, Whitney fails to notice that her eyes too, are a different color. The once silvery-blue irises flecked with gold are gone, and in their place are pools of black, void and utterly without texture or variation.

She spends the next twenty minutes moisturizing her lips and plucking her eyebrows into their usual perfect arch. There is no bathtub or shower in the employee restroom, but she saw something that looked like a shower on the far side of the loft. She strips as she walks, leaving her clothes in little reeking piles behind her. The showerhead is larger than any she has ever seen. It's almost a foot across. It hangs from a pipe above a concave sheet of moldy tin with a drain in the middle. There's no knob just a big metal triangle hanging from a chain. She pulls the triangle. Cold water pours over her in a rush, raising goose bumps and making her teeth chatter. Her nipples harden painfully. She holds her head under the stream and makes sure her hair is wet before releasing the triangle. She left all her shampoo and soap in at the Tri-Delt house, but there was some dish soap and a dirty shrunken sponge in the bathroom, so she makes due with that. It takes almost an hour of painful scrubbing, but eventually she is grime-free. Despite several washes and rinses she can't seem to get her hair untangled. It has developed several flat, dreadlock-like tangles in the back that appear unfixable. She runs back, leaving wet footprints on the pine floor, finds some scissors in her bag, and returns to the little restroom.

Hair cut down to the black; it feels much better. It's kind of uneven and patchy, but hey, some people spend a lot of money to look that way.

As she dresses she remembers a poster she saw in Dudley's cubical at the bunker. It was a photograph of The Garden of Earthly Delights by Hieronymous Bosch. In one part of the painting there are people engaged in all sorts of debauchery; it is a sea of flesh. *I want that*, she thinks, pulling on her boots, *I want to be buried in sweating writhing bodies – anything to satiate this hunger.*

She takes an envelope from her bag and examines the Student Health clinic report within. According to the document she has been tested for a dozen sexually transmitted diseases; the results are all negative. Of course Whitney hasn't been to Student Health. She faked the report on her computer before she left the Tri-Delt house. She stuffs the envelope back in her bag and stands up. *I don't need it yet. Maybe I won't need it at all.* She lights her pipe, takes a deep numbing drag, and heads for the stairs.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"I don't know your fucking name. So what. Let's fuck.

All day I dream about sex

All day I dream about fucking."

-Korn

– **Jerry-Jean** –

"What the fuck, Dudley!?! What the hell are you doing!?!"

"I just thought..."

"What, that because you were nice to me, I would let you fuck me?"

He doesn't say anything. He just sits there blushing. The yellow goldfish on his arms turning blood orange. His lip is bleeding down over his chin and dripping onto his t-shirt from when she hit him.

"You know, you put on this show, like you're Mr. Modern-empowerment-feminist-sensitive-guy, like you care, and then you give people things, so what? So that they owe you?"

Jerry-Jean picks up the laptop Dudley gave her and throws it against the wall. It falls to the floor in pieces.

"Holy shit, J.J., there was no reason..."

"Well thanks, but I don't owe you anything. Sick predatory mother-fucker."

She pushes past him to the door, and looking back says, "At least Nad and Thud are honest."

Doors flash past her. She can feel the heat in her face, and the cold in her hands, and the dry in her throat. *That bastard.* The rage fills her. She feels strong. She feels good.

She is halfway to the Pentacrest before she remembers work. She has to work in less than an hour. She is wearing sweats and flip-flops. *Not the corporate image Worldspawn Telemarketing demands.* She could go back, but she doesn't want to look at him. *Not right now.* Jerry-Jean decides she can just tell them she was locked out of her room. *It's plausible.*

"It's not acceptable."

Chloe is smirking with such saccharine intensity that Jerry-Jean wonders if just looking at her might cause cancer.

"I believe we were quite explicit in our training protocols, Jerry-Jean. WT has an image to maintain. I should send you home, but we are short-handed today."

The turnover rate at Worldspawn Telemarketing is so high that Jerry-Jean sees new faces almost every week.

"You will receive a written reprimand in your file. Now go to your desk, and get motivated! Let's sell some long-distance!"

Jerry-Jean wanders off to her desk wondering if punching Chloe in the face would make her feel as good it had with Dudley.

Her desk is immaculate, as per policy. Worldspawn Telemarketing strictly prohibits decorations or personal items of any kind. She puts on her headset and turns on the computer. The company logo floats up and the computer automatically dials a number from its huge bank of data.

"Hello."

"Mr. Kosac?"

"Yes, who is this?"

"Hello Mr. Kosac, this is J.J. from Worldspawn Long-distance Services, did you know that you could be saving up to 70% on your long-distance by switching to Worldspawn?"

"I'm having dinner right now..."

"But, Mr. Kosac, consider how much better your dinner would taste if you knew that you were saving hundreds of dollars a month. With Worldspawn you have the peace of mind of the lowest rates, and our superior crystal clear fiber optic sound quality. Tell me Mr. Kosac, have you ever made a call and had problems with the sound quality?"

"Well sure, but I really don't use longdis..."

"Even if you only use Worldspawn once a month you will be saving 70% over other carriers."

Her spiel went on for another five minutes before he bit. She raised her hand and heard Chloe hit the sale bell. *Could this place be more lame?*

"Good job, Jerry-Jean, what did you sell him?"

"Standard long-distance."

"Okay, but don't forget to up-sell. We have packages to move, and you are under quota for this week."

Jerry-Jean struggles not to cringe as the mantra pops out.

"Let's sell some long distance!"

She has no more sales. One man from New Jersey spends almost fifteen minutes explaining in torturous detail why she is going to hell for being a telemarketer, and asking why she doesn't seek salvation by finding a more honorable profession. She returns from her break loopy and incoherent, feeling the first let down of her rage-induced adrenaline high. She realizes she probably shouldn't have stayed up all night on girl chat. The room is too warm. She feels fuzzy. She feels...

...Whitney is looking at her with soft blue eyes. She reaches out and touches Jerry-Jean's hair, brushing it out of her face. Her hand smells sweet, like vanilla. The sun is shining, bright and warm, and Jerry-Jean can feel cool sweat trickling down her back. Whitney is wearing blue overalls with no shirt. She takes Jerry-Jean's hand, and they are walking. They are walking down rows of soybeans. The low green plants rustle at her ankles.

"It's coming," says Whitney, smiling at the soybeans.

"What's coming?"

"The thing you want." Whitney turns to her. Her eyes are black.

Whitney leans toward her and Jerry-Jean can smell her breath. It is hot and rough and raw. It smells like...

"...sleeping on the job. This is unacceptable, Jerry-Jean."

Chloe. It sounds like Chloe. Jerry-Jean feels the keyboard under her face, and notices she is drooling. She sits up, feeling stiff, and stares bleary-eyed at Chloe. Chloe is standing with her hands on her hips and looks decidedly unsaccharine. *Without the fake smile she loses some of her machine sheen. She looks more like an actual person.*

"This is your discharge form. You can pick up your check on Friday. Please pack up your things." *What things?* "Mara will be escorting you to the front door."

Chloe turns, and walks away, her robot-tight ponytail bouncing.

Mara is a skinny girl in a brown rent-a-cop uniform with a scarlet eruption of zits the size of a Kennedy half dollar on the left side of her face. The right side seems unaffected. Jerry-Jean wonders what sort of odd genetic phenomenon or failure of personal hygiene would lead to such lopsided dermal vulcanism. Mara shrugs as if to say, that she doesn't know, and for minimum wage, she isn't paid enough to find out.

On the way out the guard leans down to her and says, "Sorry about the job. That chick is a monster bitch."

The most she can give in response is an uncomfortable smile that comes out very lean. She walks out onto the ped mall and sits down on a low brick bench. Warm weather has brought out the hacky-sackers. They stand in a circle flipping the little leather beanbag back and forth with their feet. One of them has a shaved head and dreadlocks in his beard. His shirtless back is covered with crucifix tattoos.

Jerry-Jean feels sick and scared and relieved. She knows her options are shrinking, there are really only two left.

"What's coming?" she whispers to herself.

The bearded Christian rasta-boy drops the ball.

– Tasha –

"At some point she is going to have to move," says Tasha. "I mean she has to eat and take a shower."

"It is getting a little gamy in there," says Dolf.

"Look, I have to go to the office. I can't keep calling in. The Chair is getting pissy."

"I know. It will be fine."

"Are you sure?"

"No, but I am reasonably confident."

"Do you always have to be so goddamn honest, Dolf? Does it preclude reassurance?"

He doesn't say anything, and goes back to doing the dishes. *He always knows when I'm just looking for a fight. Stoic bastard.*

Her office is a mess. She left it a mess, but it was a mess she understood when she left. The week away has erased her organized chaos and left only chaos. Papers are scattered everywhere and books lie in little piles all over the floor. Something orange pops up from behind her desk and she jumps back with a gasp.

"Colby! You scared the shit out of me."

He pinks, extra red around the new piercings.

"Sorry boss, I'm just trying to find a term paper. Sara Masani. She claims she turned it in, but I never saw it."

"Typical. Tell her to bring you a second copy by tomorrow morning or she gets an 'F'.
How's your project going?"

"Good. Good, it's pretty huge, you know."

"And?"

"Give me another couple of weeks, I'm pushing it."

"Okay. Class?"

"Nelapsi filled in on Monday and Wednesday, I taught Friday."

"Really, and how'd it go? Did they behave?"

"Yeah, it was cool. I really got into it. I followed your lesson plan. They even asked questions."

She nods, smiling. He is holding up better than she expected.

"Oh, and check this out."

He hands her a paper covered with red marks.

"Dudley Eritik's paper. Not very well written, but he turned up some information that might interest you."

She flips through the paper. It is poorly written. *The 'C' Colby gave him was generous. Smart kid, though. At least he knows how to dig.*

The paper reveals that the Glomar Explorer, the ship built by Howard Hughes to recover K-129, had a sister ship called the Glomar Challenger. Unlike the Explorer, which had been built in a rush, Hughes built the Glomar Challenger over six years to fill an anticipated need in future recovery operations. The Challenger displaced 96,000 tons and was nearly a thousand feet long,

making it almost twice the size of the Glomar Explorer. In addition, the Challenger had it's own crane mechanism, unlike the Glomar Explorer, which relied on the Clementine crane aboard its teammate, the Hughes Mining Barge. The paper followed the history of the Glomar Explorer, from its transfer to the U.S. Navy on 3 September 1976, to its lease to Global Marine and conversion to drill ship in 1996 for use in the Gulf of Mexico. The Glomar Challenger remained mothballed in Suisun Bay, California until October 24th, 1989, when the Navy sold it to Sucoyan Ocean Mining. The company refitted the ship to operate in depths of up to 38,000 feet, and deployed it to Japan for use in trench exploration. *If the Glomar Challenger was still in the Northwestern Pacific after 1991 it might have been used to recover another submarine. It might have been used to recover TK-205. It had never even occurred to me check. The Explorer was much too small to attempt a Typhoon recovery, but the sister ship... It still might not have any bearing on my research, but maybe.*

She picks up the phone and punches in the number for Roger Ramanga, dean of the business school.

"Roger, Tasha."

"Tasha, hey, I was just thinking about you. Are you coming to the faculty party on the 23rd? You know, Kate was very disappointed when you missed the thing at the museum. Great canapés..."

"Roger, are you familiar with Sucoyan Ocean Mining?"

"Sure, they were the third largest ocean mining company in the world in the early eighties. Why?"

"You said, were?"

"Well they ran into some problems. Invested the pension fund in Milkin's junk bonds. One of their VP's got busted for embezzlement. Their stock dropped below two dollars a share. They ended up in bankruptcy court. The CEO tried to pull it out, but no one would give them enough credit to continue operations. I think the company was broken up among the various creditors and sold in pieces."

"To who?"

"Oh, I don't know. I guess I could find out for you if it's important. What's going on? I smell paper."

"Could you do that? That would be great, Roger, really great."

"No problem, I'll call you when I find something. Look, you should really come over to the house. Kate will make pasta with those little fishy things you like. What are they called? We'll invite Bennet from Econ, and Marni Holt. It'll be just like before we all got fast tracked."

"Sure Roger, absolutely. I'll call you."

Shit. Shit. Shit. That could have been something. Still, maybe. She feels something. It feels like the day before she was scheduled to give her Ph.D. dissertation and she was certain she had forgotten the entire premise. *But then I remembered.* It feels like being on the verge, but not knowing what she is on the verge of. Her mouth tastes coppery and kind of sticky.

She stops for a triple cappuccino on the way home. The caffeine clears her head and the sugar relaxes her. Dolf is sitting on the couch reading *Soldier of Fortune* when she walks in the door. He looks up and holds a finger to his lips.

"She went to sleep," he whispers, "in her room no less."

"Really? Did she eat anything?"

"Not in front of me, but there were some cookies missing."

"You counted?"

"Of course."

She sits down and puts her head on his shoulder. He puts an arm around her, and turns the page. One of the correspondents is standing on an Israeli tank in the Gaza Strip. He is holding up a Kalashnikov and grinning like a toy monkey. Out of focus, in one corner of the photograph, Tasha can see a group of Palestinian children playing soccer in the street. Dolf massages the back of her neck, and a little moan escapes her. He turns the page. Field-tests of the new Franchi shotgun, *Cool*.

– Dudley –

Grace Jones's Demolition Man is playing on the shop stereo. Happy Slappy is packed. Dudley can't remember seeing this many people in the store since he started working here. Of course it isn't very large to begin with, so packed really amounts to about twenty-five people, but still, people are having a hard time getting past each other. And in a porn store, where the normal boundaries of personal space are expanded by embarrassment, seeing people trying to squeeze past each other in the narrow aisles is hysterical.

He touches his lip. It is bruised and kind of stiff from where J.J. hit him, but he thinks it will be okay. He doesn't understand that girl. She was always hugging him, and they were talking so close on her bed; all he did was try to kiss her. *Maybe I did too much with the hands*.

Something blue flashes on the far wall and the crowd freezes. Caught like a Rockwell painting in mid-motion. Of course Rockwell never painted scenes of a fuck-shop for the Post, but if he had Dudley imagines it would have looked like this. The door jingles and a couple of State

City cops come in. One of them walks up to Dudley's counter and leans on it, not looking at him. The other, who is strangely short and has a scraggly mustache, walks to the back of the store and says, "Everybody out!"

The crowd needed no prompting. As soon as the path to the door is open they begin exiting en masse. The cop at the counter looks at Dudley, and grins with very bad teeth. *They're almost British teeth.*

"This won't take long," says the cop, releasing the counter, and walking back outside.

The cop in back picks up a copy of *Hustler's Barely Legal Hardcore*, and begins thumbing through it and licking his lips. *Should I call Jenny? What's the protocol for a raid?* He begins rifling through a drawer filled with bundled receipts, tubes of lubricant, spiky dog collars, batteries, and sparkle nail polish, looking for the paper Jenny gave him with her and Martha's home phone number.

"You want to put your hands on the counter, son."

It was not a question. Dudley puts his hands on the counter and looks up at the Marlboro man. At least it looks like the Marlboro man would have if he had been a marine instead of a cowboy, and never died hacking up blood and chunks of blackened lung tissue. The Marlboro man opens a badge wallet and holds it in front of Dudley's nose.

"Special Agent Thurman Kresnik, FBI. What's your name, son?"

"Uh, um...Dudley Eritik sir. What's this about?"

He smells funny. Some kind of cologne or...

"How long have you worked here, Mr. Eritik?"

...lavender, he smells like lavender.

"Um, almost a month."

Kresnik smiles at this, and takes a small tin of hard candy from his pocket. There is writing in an unknown language on the tin. *French?* He puts one in his mouth and offers the tin to Dudley. Inside are small purple orbs dusted with confectioner's sugar. *They smell like lavender.* Dudley shakes his head.

"Are you sure? I'm not usually fond of candy, but these are really terrific. Helped me break a rather unpleasant habit."

"No thank you."

"Ah, well, your loss. Have there been any problems since you started, Mr. Eritik?"

"No. No, everything's cool." Dudley's mouth feels talc dry.

"What if I told you that we have documented several underage individuals entering this store while you were working, and not being asked for identification?"

"Th-that's not true, I ask everybody."

"We have video of at least two incidents Mr. Eritik. Are you aware that allowing minors access to adult material was recently made a felony in this state? You could get two years. Do you know what happens to delicate young men in the Iowa State Penitentiary? I hear the HIV rate in American prisons is reaching epidemic proportions. And the system won't pay for those fancy drug cocktails that keep people like Magic Johnson afloat. No magic bullets in the pen. Of course you're a smart kid. College educated. Maybe you can talk Bubba and his friends into wearing condoms while they gang rape you dry."

Dudley turns pale.

"Of course there may be a way to avoid such an unseemly future."

Agent Kresnik looks down at his hands. His nails are professionally manicured. He turns them, and the clear polish flashes in the light.

"Wh-what do you want?" Says Dudley, in a voice that sounds like it is coming from somewhere under the counter.

"Something very simple."

Agent Kresnik explains the very simple something, hands Dudley his card, and walks out, leaving him at the counter, shaking and feeling like he is going to faint.

The cop from the back of the store snickers as he leaves, saying, "See you real soon," with a poisoned-candy smile. The magazine he was perusing projects, folded, from his back pocket.

Must be the old police discount.

The day could not get any more fucked up.

No one is coming in. He tries to study, but he is too nervous. Dudley restocks the Anal and Transsexual video sections, and is considering moving the very small Bukkaki section closer to the lubricant spinner racks when the door jingles.

The light outside silhouettes her, and for a moment he can't see her, but he knows who it is, just the same.

"Aren't you supposed to be at work?"

"I got fired."

"S-sorry, that's tough. I thought... Why are you here? I didn't think..."

"So this is where you work, huh? Pretty cool. I never would have come in here a few months ago. Of course a lot of things were different a few months ago."

"Jerry-Jean, I, I'm sorry for what I did. I misunderstood. Maybe you're right about me. Maybe I'm just a coward, a manipulator."

He is having a very hard time looking at her.

"Hey, you have *On Our Backs*. Right on. I met this girl on the Internet who said that most lesbian porn is made for men. Not even real sex, she said."

"That's probably true, although there are some small San Francisco studios that are women owned. Look, J.J."

"I don't want to talk about that." She looks at him very hard. "Okay?"

"Okay."

"I'll pay you back for the computer."

"That's not..."

She stops him.

"I'll pay you back." She starts flipping through *On Our Backs*. "I came here because I am running out of options. You say you are my friend, well now you can prove it. I need some information, and I need your help."

She explains what she wants, and he picks up the phone.

"I left a message, I should be able to tell you something by the time I get off work. Here's the address. J.J. are you sure?"

She doesn't respond, but hands him some money for the magazine.

He feels like a suitcase pimp. He feels dirty.

"At the bunker?"

"At the bunker."

– Lamia –

Her mouth tastes gross. She oozes, rather than crawls, out of bed, and looks in the mirror over the big armoire in the corner. Her hair is in matted tangles, her eyes are pink and swollen, and there's some sort of crusty substance around the corners of her mouth.

I must stink.

Lamia lifts an arm, sniffs, and recoils.

"Oh God, yuck."

She brushes her teeth in the shower, and manages to dislodge most of the crusty stuff with a wash cloth. The tangles in her hair are nearly hopeless, but with three shampoos and two brushes she manages to get them all out.

She opens her bedroom door and finds a silver tray with a domed silver cover, a cut-crystal glass filled with orange juice, and a petunia in a small vase. She carries it into her room and puts it on the table by the window. There is a note under the napkin.

"Ms. Day,

"I trust rest has improved your constitution. Dr. Churel will be at her office until seven. Dinner will be served at eight. I encourage you to join us.

"I remain, at your service in all matters,

"Dolf."

Under the silver warming cover, Lamia finds scrambled eggs, cinnamon oatmeal, and a very soft lemon custard. She eats the custard first, and finds that her jaw doesn't hurt much anymore. The oatmeal has cooled and congealed to a gelatinous glue. The eggs are okay though. As she eats she tries to think about the priest she has been reading about. *It can't be real.* She loves the idea of what she has been studying, but on another level she remains very logical. *It is just a myth.* She no more believes it, then she believed that the spell she attempted on the roof

would work. It was fun, but it wasn't real. She whistles for Bitch, who comes down the hallway, tail a frenzy, and together they retreat to the library.

Year of Our Lord 1470, 22 July

Our first day of investigation has been curious. The villagers were able to obtain all of the implements on my list except for a live cock, which none of the farmers was willing to part with. We have two fine healthy dogs of calm temperament, however.

Our materials were deposited at the entrance to the keep this morning. The peasants refused to help us move it down stairs, for they will not enter the keep, but with the efforts of Sasha and Father Wampirov, we managed. Sasha was quite frightened at first seeing the beasts, but I took his hand, and we said a rosary, and he was soon becalmed.

Madam Marmeladov hissed, spit, and threw excrement or vermin, where she could find it, but she quickly ran out of projectiles, and we were free to continue our arrangements. Unlike his disturbed spouse, Piotor Marmeladov remained, as before, quite calm. He sat in his cell watching us and occasionally sniffing the air. When all our materials were situated, I resolved that he should be the first with whom I should attempt communication. I seated myself on a wooden bench as close to the bars of his cell as I deemed safe and looked at him for a long time. At last he spoke.

"What are you looking at, sir?" Said Marmeladov.

"Are you quite aware of what has become of you?" I asked.

"Entirely, although I don't see that my awareness makes any difference."

"But, sir, are you not concerned for your soul? Your actions against your daughter would surely torment a man with any conscience."

"I am beyond such considerations."

He looked down at his hands.

"You say that you will not be judged?"

"I say that I care not for judgment. No man is fit to judge me. I am weak, sir, can you not provide something to drink?"

"Is there not water in the bucket in your cell?"

"I can smell what you brought with you. What of that?"

At this I was shocked. The chicken and pigs blood was contained in jars sealed with bee's wax, how Marmeladov could smell it from his cell, well, it seemed impossible. But I collected my thoughts and remembered that he knew the mythology as well as any man in the region, and it could just be a logical guess.

"How do you feel about this," I asked him, presenting my crucifix.

"Bring it closer, and I shall be happy to tell you."

His smile was terrifying, and I pulled back with a gasp. He laughed at me.

"You priests are so easily frightened."

"What about this?"

I threw a cup of holy water at him through the bars.

"Decidedly wet," he said, and laughed again.

I motioned to Sasha, and he brought in a cup filled with chicken blood. We placed it on the blade of a shovel and held it within Marmeladov's reach. He sniffed at it, took a small drink, and spit it out.

"No?"

He shook his head.

I nodded at Sasha and he quickly returned with a cup of pig's blood. Marmeladov sniffed the air hungrily even before we held it to him. He drained the cup with urgency and began licking every remaining drop from its surface.

"More."

"There is more to be had, but first you must answer my questions."

"Yes, yes. Just bring more."

"Do you hear any strange voices, or see apparitions?"

"Besides you, you mean?"

"Yes, besides me."

"No, I am quite sane, Father."

"Tell me how you feel. Describe the symptoms."

"I feel very, very hungry. Before it was all of a passionate nature. I wanted. I wanted conquest with anyone. It wasn't important, but immediate. The light from candles hurt a great deal. Less now, although I still do not care for them. But now it is just hunger. A deep overwhelming hunger. A hunger one would do anything to satiate. Anything, Father."

"Can you not eat solid food?"

"It makes me sick. Water and wine are some comfort, but they do nothing for the hunger. But there's something else, Father."

And for the briefest moment I could see the man within the beast, the frightened sinner who has seen what he has become.

"Go on, my son," I said.

"I feel stronger. There was a stone in front of the inn that I had always intended to move. It blocked part of the drive, and I had been planning to borrow a team of horses to move it this summer, but the day before I was brought here, I moved it alone. I was outside fixing a shutter, and I felt strong. It was crazy to try. I had tried before, and never moved it a finger's width, but that day I felt strong. I pushed and it moved. I rolled it across the road and down into a ditch. It was easy Father, it was so easy."

Marmeladov put his face in his hands and appeared to be weeping. I wanted to go to him. To comfort his tortured soul. But then I felt Father Wampirov's hand on my shoulder. It is fortunate that he was there, for when Marmeladov looked up, I saw that he was smiling. Those bottomless black eyes showed no regret, no pity, no fear, just the coldness of a hunter with a deer in range of his bow.

– Whitney –

Oversized bouncers with flattops and black wife-beaters are checking IDs at the door as usual. Whitney doesn't have her ID, and they probably wouldn't believe it was hers, if she did, so dramatic is her transformation.

It won't matter.

She can feel it won't matter with such certainty that she doesn't even slow her step. She just walks up to the door.

"I.D.?"

"I forgot it." She looks up at him and exhales, dragging the back of her fingers over his abdomen.

"Uh, well."

He looks at her stupidly, as if confused. He reaches down and touches her hand.

"Go on in," he says.

The other bouncer looks at him.

"Frank?"

But she's already gone. A shadow in the crowd.

The Meat Market is crowded. Scores of horny freshmen gyrate in epileptic music-fueled copulation on the dance floor. Lasers mix with sweat and heat and testosterone. Whitney climbs a spiral staircase to the second floor. Eyes follow her. The black vinyl dress laced up one side reveals enough to draw openmouthed stares. She stops at the second floor bar. Through the glut of pheromones, cologne, perfume, alcohol, and sweaty ass-crack, Whitney smells something. It's faint, like it's contained somehow, but it's there and she wants it.

"Do you have any red wine?"

The bartender pours her a glass of something crisp and California. She sniffs it.

"No, this isn't it. How about French, do you have any French wine? Something old."

The bartender looks as if he is about to protest when Whitney puts a hundred under her glass. "I know you have some," she smiles.

The bartender uncorks a dusty bottle, and pours her a glass. She sniffs it. Her pupils dilate.

"I'll take the two bottles."

She drinks the first one all at once, and carries the second to the rail over the dance floor. The wine rushes through her. She ignores the debauchery below and leans against the rail, arching her back in precisely the right way. Whitney has always been aware of her sexuality. She knows she is hot, and has always enjoyed the strength that came with that, but now she feels more. She feels powerful. Like she is a weapon. Like she can have anyone. Break anyone.

A young man with an ancient Ramones t-shirt and pale blue hair comes up to her. He looks very nervous.

"C-can I buy you a drink."

She holds up her full wineglass and smiles at him.

"Oh, I. Hi, I'm Kimball."

He holds out a sweaty hand.

"Whitney," she says, as low as the music will allow, and being careful to keep her mouth closed. His hand feels warm, soft and a bit sticky. She drops it, and runs a hand along his arm and up his neck to his ear. He shivers.

She slips her fingers between his jeans and his t-shirt and pulls him into the dark below a pillar.

"W-what?"

"Shut-up."

She pulls his head down to her and kisses him. He tastes like spearmint and clove cigarettes and apricot ale. He puts his hands on her shoulders and then her waist, uncertain, like he hasn't done this before, at least not often. She bites his lip hard enough to draw blood, and sucks on it, looking at him. The sweet salty copper taste fills her mouth and makes her heart rush. She feels high. She feels ecstasy. The sexual desperation that she felt before is flooding back to her. She feels overwhelmed. Her hand slips further into his pants. He is already hard. Not as big as Thud, but she is too consumed to care. She pushes her tongue deep into his mouth and pulls at him. *Hard. Hard. Harder.* She can feel his pulse in his cock and in his lips. She bites his cheek, and neck, and ear, pulling his hand from her waist down. *Lower.* He groans suddenly and comes all over her hand.

"Fuck!"

She pulls her hand from his pants and wipes it on the front of his t-shirt, pushing him away.

"I'm sorry, I just, I."

He's stammering and blushing and looking ashamed.

She jerks past him, almost knocking him down. In the bathroom she washes her hands and looks in the mirror. Spectacular. She is tempted to go into one of the stalls to jill-off, but a bunch of girls come in, so she waits. One of them starts cutting lines of coke on a compact mirror.

"Want some?"

The girl is looking at her and giggling.

"Whitney, right? Amy, I was at that Rush party at Kappa Tau."

White crystals are crusted around one nostril, and Amy keeps making mucousy, sniffing noises. Whitney does two lines and waits for the numbing sparkling rush she always gets from blow. Nothing. She doesn't feel a thing.

That's fucked up.

She decides it must be cheap shit, and heads back to the music. The frenetic break-beat has been replaced by bass-heavy jungle, and the crowd is flowing. Kimball is waiting for her outside the bathroom looking pathetic.

"I-I'm sorry."

"Just get the fuck away from me."

She doesn't even look at him.

There are a couple of large meaty-looking boys in Eagle eye letterman jackets talking at the bar. She walks past the forlorn premature ejaculator and squeezes between them.

"Hi, boys. Buy me a drink?"

The one on the left grins at her with big healthy Midwestern teeth and nods at the bartender. She orders another bottle of French wine and runs a hand down the jock's thigh. *It is hard. Muscular. Promising.*

"So is it true that athletes have endurance in all things?"

She looks at him coquettish, knowing big men like to feel their power. She drinks half the bottle in a gulp.

"Do you want to go?"

He grins. *He isn't saying much. That's good.*

She lets him fuck her four times. It's okay. He's big, and healthy, and puts a lot of energy into it, but he isn't very skilled. He keeps getting the angles wrong, or the rhythm. She loses two

orgasms and begins to be annoyed. By the forth she's getting angry. *This isn't doing it.* He's on top of her thrusting away and she says, "stop."

He looks down at her – those big square teeth.

"I'm not done, just a minute."

"No. I said stop."

She grimaces lifting her shoulder off the futon.

"Just a minute," he pushes her shoulder down with a big rough hand, "don't be such a bitch."

Bitch? Something clicks. Whitney feels very cool. Like she did when she was standing under the emergency shower. Her hands move up, slamming into his chest with such force that he is lifted off her, and thrown almost eight feet across the pine floor. He lands on his sweaty back with a grunt, and slides another couple of feet.

"Wha...?" He says, looking up in disbelief.

But then she is on him, knees pinning his shoulders to the ground, fists hammering into his nose until the blood sprays in a crimson froth across his chest.

It's the blood that makes her stop. It seems to glow. *It is so red.* She just wants to stare at it. Touch it. And then a thought so strong and clear and terrifying flashes into her mind, that she leaps back, and he is free.

"Craythy bith."

Bloody snot bubbles are dribbling out of his nose as he tries to gather his clothes. She stands there shaking, biting her tongue until it bleeds, and praying she can hold on until he leaves. *Just a few more seconds. Get out. Get out, please.*

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"I've got to divide my emotions between wrong and right.

See how close I can get to it without giving in,

and then I've got to rub up against it till I break the skin."

-Ani Difrancio

– **Jerry-Jean** –

It's just where he said it was. She eases the Charger off the blacktop and onto the crushed gravel of the driveway. It's not more than the length of a football field to the house. It looks too perfect in the fading light, too clean. The dual pitched roof of the bright red barn. Cross members painted a bright white. The low fieldstone house with laundry on lines on the front yard. It is like a farm from a beer commercial, a long way from the rusty dirt patch she grew up on. The only thing that brings it back to reality is the collection of container trucks and trailers filling up one side of the manicured yard. Men with tattoos and heavy tool belts are unloading lights and bundles of electrical cable from the trucks. A couple of men are seated on a cooler behind a van marked "camera" in French script. The men are fiddling with a large gas-powered radio controlled car. A huge gray dog notices the Charger and stops ogling them.

Jerry-Jean pulls the Charger up behind the closest truck. When she opens the door the dog pushes his nose into her hand. He is slobbering, and stands almost to her chest on all fours. His neck is ringed with two rows of spikes on black leather. Scary, but she's a farm girl. She knows dogs. "Sit!" The dog sits, and wags his tail playfully. The dog follows her to the van where the men appear to be disassembling the car.

"Lost a gear. Hand me the three-tenths."

"Hi, I'm supposed to see the director."

"Talent?"

"I guess."

"She's in the house setting up lighting. Don't mind Jasper. Owner's dog. He's harmless."

"We're cool. I like dogs."

"Well this one loves us. We've been out here for three shoots and he can't get enough of the car. Chases it till he passes out."

"Is it that fast?"

"Oh sure. It'll do fifty, but he can only run about thirty-five so I keep it throttled back."

Jerry-Jean thanks the grips and walks up to the house. A tall man in his forties with perfect skin meets her on the stairs. He extends a soft but very firm hand.

"Jerry-Jean, right?"

"Yes." She tries to look confident.

"Is it true? Never?"

"Yes." She looks down.

"Excellent. Really, this could be interesting. Do you have the test results?"

She hands him the student health paperwork with the results of a half dozen tests highlighted in yellow.

"Okay. Okay. I'm Stark Lugat, by the way, Associate Editor, Adult Entertainment News."

"Nice to meet you Mr. Lugat."

"Stark, please. Lets go upstairs, Sarah will be anxious to meet you."

Stark projects a kind of frenetic intensity that puts her off guard. It doesn't make her uncomfortable, exactly. She kind of likes him, but his driven attitude is completely foreign to her.

The house is as idyllic inside as from the drive. Old world knickknacks decorate shelves, and Spode blue china plates are lined up above the mantle. A pudgy man in a fuzzy purple cardigan is sitting on the bench seat by the stairs, and talking to an impossibly beautiful black woman who is wearing nothing but a transparent robe. He stands as they approach.

"This is Sandy Ohyn, he's the studio's public relations guru."

"Well, eloquent flack, anyway. Very pleased to meet you, Jerry-Jean. I think you'll find this a very relaxed and supportive environment. Sarah is the best when it comes to working with people who are new to the industry."

He smiles. It is a genuine smile.

"Thank you, I-I'm. Yes."

Then she is whisked upstairs without being introduced to the thinly clad black woman. The stairs are awash with cables. Some are taped down; some are wound round the banister in bundles. The first thing she notices on the second floor is that it is very bright. There are big lights everywhere. Some have shutters directing them. Some are shining through big silver screens that seem to diffuse and scatter the light. A scruffy looking grip is lying on an antique four poster bed that is pushed up against a bay window in the back of the room. Through the window Jerry-Jean can see across the perfect yard and out to the road as it passes through a covered wooden bridge.

"Left, no my left. A little higher. Mike, you want to face camera two?"

The grip on the bed turns to face the camera, but she can't see who's talking. A half dozen crewmembers are moving lights and checking camera angles. A large sweaty man with rolls of fat on the back of his neck is taping down tracks for a camera dolly. A girl Jerry-Jean's age with corn rowed red hair and a dozen rings in each ear comes up to her with a clipboard.

"Jerry-Jean?"

"Hi, I'm Ellen Vetala, the producer's assistant for this shoot. So you've never done this before?"

People keep asking that, looking at her like she's an amusing alien.

"No."

"Virgin?"

"Yes."

"Wow. That's heavy. I mean, really. Sarah will want to talk to you. You can just hang out if you like, or look around, whatever."

"Isn't the shooting supposed to begin in like ten minutes?"

"Oh, you got the schedule, huh? Yeah well, sure, that was the original schedule. We've had some delays though. Caterers were late, then we ran out of c-light fuses. You'll get used to it if you decide to stay in the industry." She laughs, "Nothing ever starts on time."

Jerry-Jean decides Ellen is pretty when she laughs, and wanders down stairs. There is no one on the lower floors and all the rooms are cluttered with heavy equipment cases. Outside the grips are running the radio-controlled car in wide circles kicking dirt and grass into the panting mouth of Jasper. The car cuts left, and the big dog turns almost as fast. It's completely dark now, and the crew is setting up tall lights to illuminate the yard and covered bridge. The girl in the thin

robe, Stark, and Sandy are all lined up at a table in front of a new van. This one says, "State City Catering."

"Hey, Jerry-Jean, the caterers finally arrived. You're welcome to have some."

Sandy is looking at her with professional benevolence.

"Jerry-Jean, no fucking way?"

A girl in a gray t-shirt and black velvet pants steps out from behind Sandy. The girl has choppy short black hair and she is wearing sunglasses, but there is no question. The shape of her shoulders, the arc of her neck. The neck she dreamed of kissing.

"Whit." She says, near whisper.

"Damn, girlfriend, I never thought I'd see you out here. What's the deal?"

"I need the money. For school, you know... You?"

"Nothing so romantic."

"What are they..."

"Jerry-Jean?"

A tall ash blond woman in torn jeans and a black t-shirt that says "Director" in tall white letters puts her hand on Jerry-Jean's shoulder.

"Come inside, sweetie, I think we need to talk a little."

The woman leads her into the house's kitchen, which has been converted into a temporary dressing room with mirrors and portable makeup tables.

The woman smiles at her. She looks kind, but very serious, too. She has a warm face with deep laugh lines around her eyes.

"Do you understand what you are planning to do, young lady?"

"Yes, I think so."

"A lot of directors would not have this talk, but I don't believe in pushing people into things they will regret. This is permanent, you know? Once you've put it on video, it's out there, and it will always be out there. There's no taking it back."

"I-I know."

"Okay, this is really a pretty good job, if you like it. How many people can make a month's pay in an afternoon? You won't get rich, but if you decide to stay in the game you can make a good living."

Jerry-Jean nods, not really knowing what to say. Sarah explains that she will get a thousand dollars a scene, and that she will start with a girl-girl scene because that's where everybody starts. She asks her to take off her clothes, and walks around her with a light looking for flaws. She leaves a note for the makeup woman, gives Jerry-Jean a robe, and tells her to go in the bathroom and shave off all her pubic hair except for a thin patch on top.

"And try not to cut yourself. We can cover it up, but it's a pain in the ass. When you're done, come back here and Yin will do your makeup."

The shaving is awkward, and she almost falls in the tub twice, but she manages to avoid cuts. Yin is a stout Asian woman with a thick Texas twang and a cheerful round face. After half an hour of mascara and eyeliner and a dozen layers of body powder, Jerry-Jean is deemed 'natural looking' enough for the shoot. She goes upstairs and as she expected, finds Whitney, now wearing a cheerleader outfit, lying on the bed.

"Okay, so this is your line, 'Do you need help with your homework?' and then she'll say, 'Yes, especially biology,' then we'll go straight into the sex. Got it?"

– Tasha –

"Solid food, really?"

"You knew about the cookies."

"Yes, well that's good. Have you seen her?"

"No, she's still migrating between her room and the library, but never when I'm around. I did manage to change her sheets and clean up a little. She keeps the doors locked when she's in there."

"Good. Good. I really think she should talk to someone though. I mean this can't be healthy right?"

"I don't know."

"Oh for Christ's sake, Dolf, you've been watching Oprah every day since we got the TV. Don't they have some shrink on there, what's his name, the bald guy?"

"Yes, but how to deal with your abusive codependent father killing himself hasn't come up yet. Maybe next week."

Dolf almost smirks. Almost.

Tasha decides not to notice, and walks down the hall to the library.

"Lamia," she says to the door.

No response, just the slow clicks of hunt-and-peck typing.

"Lamia, I need to take Bitch for a walk."

The typing stops. The door opens precisely the width of the big dog's shoulders, and she can hear, "Aus, Schnel," in a whisper. Bitch squeezes out, looking annoyed.

"Lamia, I want to talk to you."

The door closes and locks with a snap.

"Please, I think you should come out here."

"That was a trick," says the voice behind the door. "If you want me to trust you, you'd better not do that again."

"It wasn't a trick, Lamia. He really does need a walk. Maybe you could take him? But, you're right, I want to talk to you too."

No response.

"Lamia?"

She presses her ear against the door. The mahogany feels smooth and warm against her cheek. She can hear nothing.

"Lamia?"

The door shudders with the impact of something heavy, slapping her cheek and hurting her ear. A thin crack has appeared down the center of the door.

"Why can't you just fucking leave me alone!?! " Yells the voice from behind the door.

Something hits the door again. *A chair?* The crack becomes more pronounced.

"Okay, okay! I'll leave you alone! Just calm down!"

Tasha is shouting. She never shouts. Dolf is standing at the end of the hall looking concerned. Her face is hot, and her ear is throbbing.

She goes to him. He is mixing something in a steel bowl. More cookies. In the kitchen she pours herself a glass of wine, and sits down. Her head hurts. Dolf hands her an ice pack for the bruised ear.

"Are you going to say, 'I told you so'?"

"As I recall, I didn't establish a position either way."

"No, but you knew."

"Sometimes the best treatment is no treatment."

"What are you making?"

"Molasses ginger cookies, extra chewy. I got the recipe from your sister."

"Karyn?"

"Lissa. She says the texture is in the grade of molasses. I found some extra dark at the co-op."

"You'll fix the door?"

"Yes."

Dolf begins to spoon dark brown cookie dough onto nonstick cookie sheets. Tasha pours herself another glass of wine and adds four aspirin to the mix.

– Dudley –

"Are you sure this is necessary?"

"Jesus, shut-up! You are such a goddamn pussy. Hand me the putty knife. It's in the, no, that side."

Dudley hands him a small chisel bladed knife from the backpack and Nad begins chipping glazing putty away from the edges of one of the small panes of glass in the upper sash. They are squatting behind a row of bushes against the wall of a large sandstone building. Dudley looks through a space in the bushes, certain they are going to get caught at any moment.

"Take this."

Nad hands him the pane of glass and he sets it down in the dirt against the wall. Nad is looking around the inside edge of the window with a dental mirror and a flashlight. It's very slow, and he's sweating.

"Nothing."

"Are you sure? I mean are you really sure?"

"It's a good bet. It's like I said, the university adds security by attrition. The new buildings, like the business school across the street, are like Fort Knox, but the older ones are almost never retrofitted."

He reaches in, unlocks the window and slides it open. Dudley holds his breath and waits, but nothing happens. No alarms, no flashing lights, no sirens. They are only a block from the campus police building. Nothing, he exhales.

"Come on Nancy, we've got shit to do."

Nad keys the mike on his hand-held radio; Dudley hears static squawk in his earpiece.

"Hey man, are they gonna have any whiskey at that party?"

"All you can drink baby," responds, Adrian, sounding very distant even though he is only three blocks away.

After Nad explained what he wanted to do Adrian agreed to monitor the police dispatch computer and radio to warn them if something was headed their way. Adrian suggested the party code because if they were intercepted by anyone it would just sound like some frat boys coordinating a kegger.

They climb down over a table piled with flat disks of cut stone. Dudley slips and almost knocks over a column of the lithic coins, but Nad catches him, punches him in the arm hard enough to raise a charley horse, and helps him down. The room is filled with shelves holding

more rock samples. Huge hydraulic drills, and diamond-bladed rock saws are bolted to work benches in the center of the room. They weave between the big machines trying not to bump into anything, and find a door in the far corner. It's unlocked, and they slip out into a darkened hallway. Nad motions to Dudley that he should stay put, flips on a red-filtered flashlight, and starts down the hall, checking doors as he moves. He stops a door with a steel security grate in front of it. The plaque on the grate says, "Scanning Tunneling Electron Microscope authorized personnel only." Nad shines the light up at his face and grins demonic, waving to Dudley to follow him. By the time Dudley comes up, Nad is already down on his knees and fiddling with the lock to the security grate.

"Lock in the knob. Four pin, no less, and loose as your mama's crack, these guys are pretty fucking pathetic."

Nad jiggles a little wire thing in the lock and with his other hand pulls on a wire hook that is stuck in the base of the key hole. After a few seconds the cylinder slips and the grate swings open.

"This the sort of thing you learn in the military? My tax dollars at work?"

Nad grins, "Maybe they teach this in Delta, but not Ranger School. I learned this from Thud. One of his hobbies. I doubt you pay taxes."

He reaches in and turns the knob of the inner door. It swings open.

"Wha..?" Says Dudley.

"Try before you pry."

Nad flips on a light. A number of refrigerator sized machines are humming against one wall. There is a table with a monitor and a keyboard in the center of the room. Nad sits down in front of the computer terminal and keys the mike again.

"How 'bout vodka? My bitch does love a martini before I hit it."

"Just Stoli, none of that cheap ass Polish crap."

Nad nods at Dudley, and he puts the backpack on the table. They pull out a small cooler and Nad opens it, checking over the tray of fluid samples. None are broken. Nad flips a switch on the wall and a low thump-thump sounds begins, vibrating their feet.

"Vacuum pump for the STEM," say Nad, grinning. "Okay, I'm set. I need you to stand watch out front. Do you remember the alert?"

"Dude, I think I'm gonna be sick."

"Right. And the distraction?"

"Puke on the sidewalk on approach."

"All clear?"

"Key the mike twice."

"Good. Go."

"But why are...?"

"I'll explain it later. Get moving."

Dudley turns and starts down the hall. He hears Nad key the mike and say, "Where the fuck are you, Dickwad?"

"On the back porch cooling your drink and warming your girl's ass," responds Adrian.

Dudley keys his mike twice.

Now Adrian knows they are in place.

It takes Nad the better part of four hours. It is a warm night and Dudley is on the verge of dozing off when Nad finally comes back on the radio.

"Keg's dry dude, this is getting lame."

A few minutes later he pokes his head through the window, and whispers,

"Look alive fuck-nugget. Time to jet."

They look out through the bushes, and down the street in both directions. Clear. Dudley keys his mike twice and they step out onto the side walk and start walking toward Purge.

"Get lucky?" hisses in their ears.

Nad laughs, "Just your sister, but she gives it up for all the guys. It was like fucking a wet paper bag."

A rumble of laughter erupts on the other end.

"So you were going to explain why I am out here risking a felony conviction rather than working on my economics paper like I should be." Says Dudley.

"Sure. It's like this. Thud is missing right?" Says Nad.

"Sure."

"Since he turned up missing, all his fluid and tissue samples disappeared from micro. Nobody will tell me what happened to them, and when I called CDC to check on the samples I sent over, they claimed there are no records of tests run on Thud's fluids. The samples were logged in, but then nothing."

"Weird."

"Yeah, exactly. Fuckin' weird. Anyway, I still have my own samples. Some from before he got sick, and some from after. He let me, knew how much I wanted to play with my new scope. I couldn't find substantial differences with my scope, but the blood chemistry must have been different because his blood after the illness was lighter. I'm not that advanced in chemistry yet, but I can do basic tests. I checked his hemoglobin level – which corresponds directly to his

blood's ability to carry oxygen – it was very low. Not kill you low, but close. The kind of level you only see in cancer patients who are on chemo. His blood O2 must be below ninety."

"So what does that mean?"

"Well, first I think Thud is still sick. Maybe really sick. Second, I think someone stole his test results to try to cover something up. Maybe the people that stole the samples know where he is. I couldn't get access to the hospital's scanning tunneling electron microscope, but geology was wide open. If I can get enough data maybe I can find what's making Thud sick, and then we will have leverage with them."

"Who's 'them'?"

"I don't know."

– Lamia –

Lamia found the stationary in a little drawer under the library table. She runs her fingers over it, feeling the smooth cotton bond. She doesn't want to do this. But she will. She picks up the pen and begins to write.

Mama,

he's dead. Daddy is dead. He killed himself. I thought you should know. I saw the note. The people I'm staying with tried to hide it from me, but I found it. In the note he blamed me for taking him away. He said I ruined our lives, and that he was happier with you. For a while I believed him. And maybe part of this is my fault. But he was sick. You made him sick. If he was well, he wouldn't have blamed me. If he was well, he would have seen what you were doing, how you were poisoning him. I know why

you did it now. I looked it up on the internet. You did it for the drugs, and for the attention. I even know what it's called: munchhausen by proxy. They said the afflicted person usually targets children, so I guess I should feel lucky that you chose him instead. But I don't. I saw you putting the lead in his food. You took my father from me so you could get high, so that someone would notice you. I tried to save him, to take him away, but it was too late. He was broken. I know he didn't mean to hurt me. It was his poisoned brain. It was the poison you put in him that made him bad. We had a family. Maybe it wasn't much to you, but it was the only thing I had, and you destroyed it. I'm sorry I couldn't save him, and I'm sorry you're still alive to read this letter. Don't try to find me. I'm with good people now.

Lamia

She puts down the pen, and carefully folds the letter. Addressed and stamped, she shoves the envelope under the library door with a sticky-note asking Dolf to mail it. Her stomach twists and complains, in part because of the torture of writing the letter, in part because she hasn't eaten in days. She ignores it, and crawls into the warm safety of the closet. She makes a pillow of Bitch, and lies there in the dark listening to his heart beating, and trying to imagine the pain gone.

When she wakes the skylight is dark. She rubs Bitch's belly, and gets up. The computer hums on, and she finds her priest.

"Your tricks will not work with me demon," I managed, striving to return the monster's dark look with courage.

"I have no idea what you mean priest," said Marmeladov, laughing.

"I am a tortured soul, is it not your responsibility to help me find redemption?"

I did not answer, but instead examined the list of items we brought with us.

"You will get more of what you want, demon, but only if you cooperate. Is that understood?"

Marmeladov looked away and said he would do what ever I asked.

We spent the rest of the day in testing. Between each test I read from the Book of Saints and the beast looked at us, amused. For our initial series I decided to present some of the items mixed into the pig's blood that Marmeladov so desperately craved. The results are as follows:

Holy water - no effect

Body of Christ - no effect

Blood of Christ - no effect

Holy oil - no effect

Roses - no effect

Vinegar - no effect

Red peas - found mixture distasteful and spit it out

Garlic - became violently ill, purging himself, and writhing in convulsions on the floor.

"You have poisoned me priest," yelled the stricken man, his face contorted with rage and pain, "I will make you suffer for this, if I live."

Satisfied that we had learned as much as we could from Marmeladov this day, I turned my attention to Madam Marmeladov.

She had given off hissing and spitting and was crouched in a corner staring at us.

I motioned to Sasha and he ran upstairs to tell the villagers we recruited to slide the cell cover free. There were bars above, so I had no fear that Madam Marmeladov would escape. As the great plate of iron scraped back, a wedge of light descended into her cell, widening bit by bit with the efforts of the peasants above. Madam Marmeladov cowered before the light, trying to hide beneath her small bunk as if she knew that the sun's grace would injure her. When at last the light fell on her crouching form, she covered her face with her arms and began beseeching us to take it away.

"Please sir, I'll be good. I'll do as you ask. Please sir, it hurts so. Bring back the dark." And then her speech devolved into incoherent whimpering. Wampirov and I leaned forward, eager to see if there was some marked change in her from this exposure, but aside from the whining and a slight reddening of the skin I could see nothing. There was no smoke, no transmogrification into ashes, no spontaneous combustion. Yet it was clear she suffered. I motioned to Sasha, who was leaning over the edge of the pit. He spoke to the men and the great plate slid closed.

Madam Marmeladov sat very quietly now, taking short little breaths as if to control a severe pain. I noticed large blisters forming on the parts of her arms that sheltered her face. Her neck, and other places that she had not been able to hide, also began to blister; some of them bursting open and oozing yellow puss.

I made quick notes on what I had seen and consulted Wampirov on our next course.

"None of the holy implements have harmed them."

"No, we are faced with very powerful demons. What next?"

Said Wampirov.

"We finish the list."

"It will be dangerous. They will resist," he said.

"Yes, but the Lord is with us. What of the boy?"

Wampirov looked at the rotting stable boy in the corner. Maggots swarmed from his eyes and mouth, and I noticed a small rat dining on one of his fingers.

"I do not think he is one of them."

"Nor do I. We should move him from this unholy place. He deserves a Christian burial."

Wampirov agreed, and on Sasha's return I instructed him to remove the stable boy from his cell. Would now that I had undertaken the task myself, for when Sasha entered the cell and knelt to lift the dead boy, Madam Marmeladov leapt at him and grasped one of his arms through the bars. She pulled at him with the strength of the damned, and bit him on the wrist. Wampirov and I rushed to his aid, but it took all our strength to get him away from her. I had to smite her repeatedly about the face with the blade of the shovel while Marmeladov pulled the boy from her grip.

Once freed from the teeth of that abomination, we examined Sasha's wounds. His arm was dislocated at the shoulder and hung useless at his side. The flesh of his hand was torn open at the

wrist, and we could see his bones through the stream of blood. I tore some fabric from my robe and bound the wound tightly. He moaned, and seemed to faint, but by the time we had raised him up to the courtyard, he was speaking.

"No father, you must take me back."

"Back? What do you mean, Sasha? You must rest."

"No father, what if they have infected me with their curse? What if I am to be one of them? It is not safe. You must."

Wampirov looked at me and nodded. We knew the boy was right. Still, I was loath to leave my disciple in that foul place.

– Whitney –

"Nad said I could borrow it."

"Yeah I figured. No, keep going. I don't live there anymore."

J.J. had slowed in front of the Tri-Delt house, but now she accelerates again, not asking why.

"God, you drive like old people fuck."

"Huh?"

"Slow and sloppy." Whitney takes a drag from her cigarette, and looks at her, smiling.

"You really need to lighten up, J.J."

Whitney tells her to go straight for a while, and sits quietly running her tongue over her new teeth. They came in gradually over the last week. They look normal enough, but there is something strange about them. They feel different. They are sensitive and feel kind of loose. The car bounces over some railroad tracks, and she comes back to the moment.

The scene was okay. It wasn't what she expected exactly, but it was something. J.J. was awkward, but she made up for it with intensity. After the dialogue the sex scene was shot straight through. No pauses. No second takes. Every once in a while the director would tell them to change positions. Sometimes J.J. got so into it that Whitney had to pat her and tell her it was time to move. It was strange. It was real sex, but unreal. Whitney came close to coming a few times, but didn't. After the scene they spent another hour doing still-shots and poses for the press.

Whitney lights another cigarette. It is good. She can feel the edges though. She can feel them scratching at her.

"Turn left. Okay, stop here."

J.J. is staring at the Charger's steering wheel and blushing a deep purple. In the pale streetlight she is very pretty.

"Do you want to come in?"

J.J. looks at her, eyes wide.

"Really? I mean, yes."

Whitney keys the remote in her jacket pocket and the big sliding door in the side of the warehouse rumbles open.

"Pull in there."

The ground floor of the warehouse is not as empty as the floor she occupies. Rubble of dead industry is littered here and there. Old machine parts are piled around the dirty wood pillars that support the floor above. The door grinds and squeaks on its return track, and they ascend some ancient rotting stairs along one wall. There must have been a banister at some point, there are anchor points in the steps, but it is gone now, and J.J. clings to Whitney's hand as they

go up. Whitney is slightly annoyed with this. She has never liked holding hands, but she doesn't say anything.

At the top of the stairs they step into black. Whitney releases J.J.'s grip and flips a breaker switch on the wall. Her strings of holiday lights flash on, illuminating the huge open space with muted sparkling color. J.J. runs out into the great expanse of floor, turning under the lights, and laughing.

"You live here? It's beautiful!"

Whitney ignores her, and goes to pee. When she returns, carrying a bottle of vodka, still dripping from the bathroom sink where she'd been keeping it cold, she finds J.J. sprawled on her futon. J.J. has discovered the big flat screen TV that is suspended from the ceiling. The voice of a washed-up actor she should recognize is singing the merits of hemorrhoid cream.

"This is so cool. Don't these things cost like as much as a car?"

"Nearly, a cheap car anyway."

Whitney opens the vodka and drinks almost half the contents. She hands it to J.J. who drinks a little. Then she digs around under the edge of the futon and finds a small wood box. She takes out a small glass pipe and some weed and starts to load it up. Her hands shake a little while she works, but J.J. doesn't notice.

J.J. changes the channel again; some show about eels of the South Atlantic; bad music videos; the home shopping channel; a famous boxer is selling a new version of his electric grill. Sweet earthy thick smoke fills Whitney's lungs and she can feel the creeping edges numbing away. She takes another deep pull, holds her breath, and passes the pipe to J.J.

J.J. looks confused. Whitney releases the smoke a little sooner than she wanted to and holds the lighter up for her.

"Just put it in your mouth and take a deep breath, then try to hold it in as long as you can."

J.J. takes a deep pull and holds it for a second, but then it begins to slip out through her lips in little puffs, and soon she is coughing and laughing.

"Harsh."

"You'll get used to it. Put it on 999, I want to check my e-mail."

A browser window pops up and Whitney takes a keyboard from under her pillow and types in her password. The mailbox opens. Nine new messages from 'Dad.'

"That fucker."

"What?" J.J. takes another drag from the pipe, not coughing so much this time.

"He hasn't said a word to me all year. Then I cash in my trust fund and he's writing me every day."

"That's pretty cold."

Whitney goes to the options section of her mailbox and sets auto-reply to send a message to all incoming mail. In the message box she types, "Fuck off!"

J.J. collapses into hysterical giggles. Whitney lies down next to her and drinks some more vodka. She turns to J.J. and kisses her on the cheek.

"What's so funny?"

J.J. coughs and sputters, trying to stop laughing. "I was just wishing my family had e-mail."

Whitney laughs at this, and J.J. turns to her. Kissing her on the lips, then the cheek, then the edge of her ear, and then she is biting down her ear and along the side of her neck. Whitney shivers and embraces her, filling her mouth with heat. They move together, slipping out of

clothes and into sweat-touched skin. Fingers and tongues find sensitive places that react with moans and tremors to their sweet friction. They find their rapture in true sex, so far from the synthesized sex that dotes on camera angle and position and lighting that touched them before.

They spend the whole night together getting stoned, and fucking, and talking. At eight in the morning J.J. falls asleep mumbling about how she can't anymore, she's raw and her tongue is cramping. Whitney kisses the sleeping girl, pulls the blanket up to her chin, and looks at her for a long time. *She really is beautiful. Why didn't I see it before?*

Whitney looks down at her hands. They are beginning to shake again. She can feel the gnawing beginning to rise in her. She reaches for the pipe, now shaking so much she has trouble lighting it. The smoke rushes into her, pushing back the darkness, but not as far this time. It hasn't disappeared entirely. She can still feel it there, like old wall paper that is curling up at the edges and no matter how many times you try to press it down, it just keeps curling back up a little more each time. Whitney is very tired, but she will not sleep. Not with J.J. here. Just the idea frightens her.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"I could make you happy, if you weren't already.

I could do a lot of things, and I do."

-Ani DiFranco

– **Jerry-Jean** –

April

She wakes to a strange rolling sound. Like balls or wheels or something. Before she even opens her eyes she is aware of the sweet musky scent of Whitney on her lips. She pauses, savoring it, licking her lips, trying to hold it as long as she can. *This is the scent of perfection, of God.* She pulls the blanket up over her head, not wanting to change anything, but knowing.

The rolling sound gets closer, then fades. Resigned, Jerry-Jean opens her eyes and pulls back the covers. Martha Stewart is carrying on a muted lesson on napkin folding on the ceiling. She stretches, looking toward the rolling sound. Whitney is rolling across the floor on inline skates, weaving in elaborate circles, every once in a while pausing to scratch something on the floor with a yard stick that has a fat piece of sidewalk chalk duct-taped to one end. She is wearing a small Power-Puff Girls t-shirt and nothing else. She stops to work on a detail.

Jerry-Jean slips out of bed and creeps up behind her. Bare feet move soundless on heart pine. Just as she reaches out to touch, Whitney speaks.

"I was wondering when you were going to wake up, it's almost four."

Jerry-Jean hesitates, wondering how she could possibly have heard her come up, but then the thought is erased by proximity. She runs her fingers over Whitney's bare bottom. Another hand traces the invisible down of her belly.

"You wore me out."

Whitney turns to her, letting the yardstick fall to the floor with a clatter. She is much taller than Jerry-Jean in the skates, and she bends down to kiss her. Jerry-Jean stiffens imagining her breath must be terrible. She hasn't brushed her teeth. *Whitney tastes so clean. Almost antiseptic.* But Whitney pushes a warm tongue past her doubt and she surrenders. She feels Whitney's hand slide down her belly and slip two fingers into her vagina; wet since the moment

she woke and tasted the night's bliss on her lips. She pushes against the fingers, moaning into Whitney's mouth.

Whitney releases her, rolling backwards, she puts the wetted fingers in her mouth, tasting them, and smiling at J.J. Then she pirouettes, picks up her yardstick, and rolls off in another direction.

Jerry-Jean is about to say something about her being a terrible tease, when she looks down at the drawing. It is an elaborate architectural floor plan that covers most of the loft floor. Hundreds of rooms, gardens, fountains, and in the center a great pool with a rectangular island. The lines are perfect. The scale looks exact. Different materials and surfaces are shown with different colored chalk.

"Oh my God, Whit, this is amazing. You did all this?"

Whitney rolls up behind her and puts her arms around Jerry-Jean's shoulders.

"Uh-huh. You like it?"

"Are you kidding? It's the most amazing thing I've ever seen. What is it?"

"Hadrian's palace. He was a Roman emperor. He built Hadrian's Wall in Britannia to keep out the Picts. Crazy blue-painted cannibalistic Scots that used to make snacks out of unwary legionnaires. Anyway, he was one of the better emperors. He was gay. He had a lover, and when his lover died, Hadrian built this palace as a tribute. He designed most of it himself. He was brilliant."

"And you drew it here? From memory?"

"Sure, I couldn't sleep. It's just a hobby. I never show my stuff to anyone. You're the first. Besides it's not quite perfect. I think the frigidarium pool in the east wing baths might be twenty-one feet instead of twent..."

"Holy shit, Whit. I mean *you're* brilliant. This is so...I am in awe. Really." Jerry-Jean lifts Whitney's hand to her lips; "I'm honored."

Whitney lets go and rolls around to face her.

"It's just a copy, not like an original work," but she looks pleased just the same. "Come on. We should go."

Whitney takes off the skates and starts putting on her clothes.

"Do you have a shower? I'm all sticky." Asks Jerry-Jean.

"I like you sticky. Yeah, just cold though. It's in the corner."

Jerry-Jean sticks out her tongue, winces at its soreness, and heads for the shower. There's a bar of soap on the floor next to a rusted iron drain. She picks it up and looks for a faucet. Nothing.

"How do you turn it on?"

"Pull the big triangle."

Behind her, a big steel triangle hangs on a chain. It looks like one of those things the camp cook rings in old western movies. *Chow's up!* She pulls the ring and a gush of frigid water covers her. She screams in shock.

"Cold!"

Whitney is laughing and putting on her socks.

"I warned you."

"Fuck! This is insane!"

But she soaps up, and manages to rinse without screaming again. She walks back to the futon shivering, and bends down and kisses Whitney. Whitney tweaks one of her nipples.

"I bet you could cut glass with those things."

"Bitch," but Jerry-Jean kisses her again, "you'd think someone who has a TV that costs as much as a car could afford hot water."

Whitney drives. Jerry-Jean sits in the passenger seat and watches her. She torques hard around a corner, and accelerates.

She loves this.

Field stone houses blur to gray walls. There is a little gas station at the line where the chemical green lawns surrender to chemical green fields. Whitney swings the big gray car up to a pump island. Shoots of new spring corn are poking up through little rows at each end of the pump-island. The gas station grows it's own little corn crop as a tourist attraction every year. A puckered corkboard hanging on the wall next to the pay window displays photos of people who have had their pictures taken next to the pump island produce. *Big city people congratulating themselves on being more sophisticated than these po' country folk.*

"Would you pump? I'm kind of sensitive to the sun right now."

Jerry-Jean gets out and pumps the gas, thinking the smells of petroleum, and spring, and exhaust could not be better. A grinning mongoloid with a hole where his missing nose should be, takes her cash, and disappears behind flapping tin signs that advertise a dozen kinds of cancer stick.

Blacktop roars under wide tires. The horizon shimmers. *It's all perfect.* Jerry-Jean runs a finger along Whitney's neck. Whitney smiles.

"There's a quote. I forget who said it, but it's something about actors having no souls," says Jerry-Jean, "Sometimes I feel like that. That I don't exist. That I'm just pretending."

Whitney smile drops, "you have a soul. You'll feel it if you listen. It's harmonic, like a low grade vibration. I wouldn't though. Sometimes if you look too deeply into yourself you find something you don't like."

"Sooo serious," Jerry-Jean laughs, and bites her on the ear. "Where are we going, anyway?"

"Back to the set. Got to make your tuition right?"

"Stop."

"What?"

"STOP!!!" She yells so loud, it hurts her ears.

Whitney sticks the brakes hard enough to smoke all four tires and leave a long footprint on the warm pavement.

"Okay, Jesus. We're stopped. What?"

"No Whit. I don't care about school."

"Well that's pretty stupid."

"Fuck you! You aren't going."

"That's different."

"How? How is it different?"

"It's hard to explain. Something's happening to me."

"Well something happened to me too. I'm in love with you."

"Fuck J.J., you don't want to say that."

"Why not? It's true." Jerry-Jean starts to feel sick.

"Because. Look, I really like you. Last night was the best, but..."

"But what?"

"But I don't think we have a future."

"You really like me, last night was the best, but you don't think we have a future? What the fuck is that supposed to mean? You haven't even given me a fair shot. Am I not pretty enough? Is it the sex? Because I'm just learning. I will get better. Is it Thud? Are you still in love with him? Because he never treated you right. You deserve way better than that asshole."

Tears are making things blurry. Jerry-Jean tries to wipe them away, angry she is showing weakness, and afraid that it will hurt her argument.

"Jerry-Jean," Whitney leans over and kisses her cheeks, "it's not anyone else. You're beautiful. The sex was amazing. But I'm messed up. It's not safe for you to be around me. I'm trying to protect you."

"It's not you, it's me," she glares at Whitney with a sarcastic smirk. "I may be naive, but I'm not fucking stupid. Isn't that like the oldest get-lost line on earth? Fuck you, Whitney!"

Jerry-Jean throws door open, and lunges out onto the gravel shoulder. Then she is running, the sun hot in her face, down the long black stripe toward town. The driver's side door opens behind her and she hears Whitney yelling.

"J.J. for Christ's sake, come back. Fuck!"

Then the door shuts, and the horn blares for a long time. She just keeps running. She isn't crying anymore. The wind and sun have burned away her tears, and all that is left is numb motion. She picks up the pace, and keeps running.

– Tasha –

It might be in her head, but Tasha is certain her office is getting smaller. The overloaded shelves seem to be leaning in on her. She takes four Advil with her triple-espresso. *Chemical overdrive*. She has stacks of term papers from three different classes on her desk. She hasn't graded a term paper since she was an assistant professor. *It's wrong. It's almost obscene.*

She begins to dig through them. *Are these really college students? How did they graduate high school? Aren't there supposed to be standards now? No child left behind, my shiny black ass.* She decides she is going to be forced to grade on a curve, something she abhors, but if she doesn't half her students will fail. The department tends to frown on failure rates that high. *Even if they deserve it.*

Colby is knocking on her doorjamb. The door is open.

"Yes?"

"I'm done. The project, Professor Churel. I've finished the project."

"Oh, great. Come in."

The only free chair is piled with academic journals, so Colby stands, bent slightly, to avoid some oversized books that are sticking out of the shelf behind him.

"Do you think it would be unethical to give the department an endowment in order to force them to give me a bigger office?"

"Huh?"

"Never mind, look, let's go for coffee. I'll buy you a cappuccino. You can fill me in."

"Okay, sure," says Colby, looking somewhat uncomfortable at the prospect of an informal meeting. She notices he has given up the twisted blond spikes in favor of a platinum white Caesar cut. It makes him look much older. He might even look like an adult if it weren't

for the tent-like raver pants and the sequined pink t-shirt that screams "Fuck your social contract!" in electric green helvetica.

They settle on her favorite coffee shop. It has a lot of furniture that looks very comfortable, but feels like a collection of torture devices conceived by a disgruntled chiropractor. The coffee is good, though, and the manager likes to play Harlem renaissance jazz. They find a couple of painfully undersprung armchairs and order drinks. Tasha has another triple-espresso with extra sugar. Colby has a latte.

"Okay, I have it all laid out and indexed. Do you want the long version or a synopsis?"

He takes out an indexed binder and opens it to a picture of a hard looking middle aged man standing in front of a submarine.

"Synopsis. I don't have enough painkiller for the full magillah."

"Okay, here's the deal. Captain Mirian Kovenko's last command was with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics 14th People's Navy, 3rd electric boat fleet. He was lost at sea when the Akula class submarine TK-205 went down, at, or near the Japan Trench in August of 1991. The cause of the accident is assumed to be a reactor failure, but is officially listed as unknown because the sub's emergency buoy was never recovered. According to *Pravda*, TK-205 was undergoing sea trials when it went down which is why it was not armed with ballistic missiles. The submarine also shipped with only a quarter of its normal compliment. *Pravda* makes no comment on this, but does list the names of the lost. Here they are in alphabetical order."

Tasha looks at the list briefly, adds still more sugar to her already insulin shocked espresso, and nods at him to continue.

"In an interview with the admiral in charge of sea trials, *Pravda* lists the last contacts with TK-205. They were as follows: Left Nerpichya Bay, Zapadnaya Litsa, on August 2nd at

04:12, radio contact on August 10th having completed depth trials in the Japan Trench. Next contact August 15th, requested and received permission to put in to Ostrov Rasshua (Rasshua Island), an island several hundred miles North of Japan, for low frequency radio antenna repair after damaging it on an unknown undersea obstacle. No other damage reported. Left Ostrov Rasshua on 18 August, reporting all systems five-by-five. No further contact. Sail plan called for a long return around Honshu and up to Zapadnaya Litsa. There was some heavy storm activity in the vicinity that month, and the admiral claimed that if an emergency buoy was launched it may have been damaged and failed to operate because of inclement weather."

"Good, anything on the recovery efforts?"

"Well, sort of. More hypothesis than empirical, but this was before GPS, so Ivan may have had trouble finding TK-205's last location. Sea exploration was still in its infancy. That guy, what's his name, hadn't even found the Titanic yet, and if TK-205 was in the Japan Trench, it was a hell of a lot deeper."

"True, and I don't think the Americans had a location on TK-205 either," Tasha says, chewing on her pen. "I have a friend at defense who works on the SOSUS array. I gave him a call yesterday, and he said the network was fully operational in 1991, in fact, that was actually the year it was declassified. But the entire Pacific grid was shut off for the month of August because they were doing ultra low frequency active ground sonar tests in Utah. Apparently there was some concern that the tests might damage SOSUS."

"Wow. That means nobody knew where to look."

"Do you have any more on the captain?"

"Yes, actually. A full bio. He won the Red Star, and was named a Hero of the Soviet Union, both for a classified incident in 1985. The circumstances and location of the incident are not given, but they provided an extensive personal history."

"The short version, if you don't mind." Says Tasha.

"Born Mirian Yevgenivich Kovenko, 9 July 1945, in Omsk. Father, Yevgeni, steelworker. Mother, Sofya, pilot, Soviet Air Force. Attended Moscow University, receiving a BS in organic chemistry in 1960 and Ph.D. in microbiology in 1962."

"Prodigy. Interesting."

"I have a copy of his thesis. Pathogenesis of emergent paramyxoviruses, it's really quite interesting if you can deal with technical Russian..."

"The short version."

"Right. Joined the navy in 1963. Rapid promotion. First command was the patrol boat Kask in the North Sea. He won a commendation for saving a crewman from drowning and catching several smugglers. He was then posted to the Military Special Projects Bureau in Moscow from 1965 to 1970. In 1970 he was promoted again and assigned to the North Pacific Meteorological Research Station on Ostrov Rasshua. He remained there until 1987 when he was promoted again, and transferred to the 3rd Nuclear Electric Boat Fleet. I also found some of his political essays. He was a hard-core Stalinist, even after Détente, a true believer."

"What a curious resume. Tell me, Colby, what do you find unusual about our Captain Kovenko?"

"First, he's a naval officer with a Ph.D. in microbiology. Second, he's a naval officer that spent most of his time on land. Third, the last place he visited before he disappeared was a remote island that he commanded for seventeen years."

"Very good. Not complete, but very good."

Colby blushes.

"The fact that he spent most of his career on land is unremarkable. We have lots of officers in our own navy who have never left the Pentagon. But I would also like to know how a career bureaucrat was assigned a submarine command after twenty years on a desk. That's not how it works in our navy, and I would be very much surprised if that's how it worked with Ivan. In most cases officers grow up to commands. Aircraft carrier commanders start as pilots. Destroyer commanders start as destroyer ensigns; submariner captains as submarine ensigns. I'm sure there are exceptions, but I would be much less surprised to find a surface ship officer commanding a sub than a desk jockey. It just isn't logical.

"Your other two points are both valid, and commendable, however. What do we know about Ostrov Rasshua?"

"It's a very small island at the midpoint in the Kuril Island chain. It's about six hundred nautical miles north of Hokkaido, Japan. Besides the mention of a naval weather station in *Pravda*, I could find no indication of any other use or any nonmilitary population, at least in the materials you gave me."

"Our captain won the two most coveted awards the Soviets could give during a year when he was assigned to Ostrov Rasshua for an incident which remains classified. It seems unlikely that he received those awards for accurate weather predictions, particularly in light of his next command. And why would a weather station have the equipment needed to fix a submarine low frequency radio antenna? Is that likely? And why was he that far North anyway, if, as the admiral indicated, he was supposed to be engaging in depth trials? The Pacific is relatively

shallow that far North. There is something in this, Colby. I can almost see it. I want you to find out everything you can about Ostrov Rasshua. Dismissed."

The boy rushes out, looking pleased and relieved at the same time. Tasha sits back in her very uncomfortable chair, sips her syrupy coffee, and for a moment, feels good.

– Dudley –

"I don't understand the lack of distinct tropism. It makes no sense." Says Nad, as Dudley opens the bunker door.

Nad is pacing back and forth between his microscope and the door wearing nothing but skid-marked tighty-whites and one loose tube sock. His eyes are so bloodshot that he looks like he might be suffering from a vicious case of pinkeye, and he smells like he's been fucking something dead.

"Man, you stink. Give it a rest, already."

Nad ignores him and keeps pacing, mumbling words that Dudley doesn't understand and scratching his balls with both hands. Dudley decides it's best not to disturb the insane, and retreats to his cubicle. No sign of Jerry-Jean either. *Is everyone disappearing?*

He strips to tattered boxers, kicking his shoes under the desk, and hits the power switch on the computer. The new laptop spins up silently. *I've got mail.* Something from AEN. Stark wants to know what happened to Jerry-Jean? *Great, so much for my in.*

He climbs onto his bunk and tries to stay sufficiently awake to absorb Malthusian capitalist theory; fuck the poor for the good of the market. *Could this guy be a more colossal*

asshole? Dudley is just settling into a dream about Sir Thomas Malthus as the little match girl, when he is assaulted.

"...ake up! Dud, you butt-slug, get up! I've figured it out, or at least part of it. Wake up!"

"Can you let me sleep until you've figured it all out?"

"No, dude, this is big, like CNN big, Nobel Prize big. No wonder those fuckers took him."

"What fuckers? Are you saying Thud was kidnapped?"

Dudley is sitting up now.

"Just listen, okay? Just listen. I found the virus. The disk I burned from the electron microscope's computer in the geology building had what I was looking for. I don't know why I didn't find it sooner. It's a hell a big bug. You can see it in my scope when I fluoresce it. Candy apple green. Lights up just like a Nevada whorehouse. Anyway, I found it, and it's the weirdest thing I've ever seen."

"Okay, it's weird. Weird doesn't make the news unless it's a very slow day. Explain why it's important."

"Well there are lots of reasons, its morphology alone is enough to write a thesis, but the strangest thing is the distinct lack of viral tropism."

"English, nerd."

"Normal viruses attach themselves to target cells with glycoproteins that extend from their capsid, or shell, like the spikes on a medieval mace, only the glycoproteins aren't really spikes. The virus can't just hammer them into any old cell willy-nilly."

"Willy-nilly?"

"Try not to be such an anglophobe. No, the glycoproteins are actually like keys that will only fit into certain locks. This means that any given virus can only infect certain kinds of cells. For instance, you might be infected with a virus that damages your liver, but leaves your kidneys untouched. This limiting factor is called 'tropism' and it is present in all known viruses infecting humans."

"Okay."

"But not this one. I took samples from every area I could reach while Thud was sick. I have peritoneal fluid, blood, lymphatic fluid, cerebral-spinal fluid, urine, feces, saliva, sputum, liver and striated muscle biopsies, even epithelial scrapings. Every cell in every sample is infected. Universal infection. No tropism."

"Whoa, that's fucked up. So is he gonna die?"

"Well, under most circumstances I would say yes; any minute. But this bug is behaving very strangely."

"How so?"

"It isn't killing the cells it infects. When viruses infect cells they do so to reproduce. Viruses aren't like bacteria; they have no cell structure of their own. Without a host they cannot reproduce. They are inert. Anyway, they reproduce by penetrating the host cell membrane and forcing their own genetic information on the cell, effectively turning it into a virus production factory. The cell will fill with new viruses until it bursts and dies, a process called lysis. Or it will produce and release viruses through the cell membrane by a process called budding. The latter usually weakens the cell gradually until it dies. I found no evidence of lysis or budding in any of the samples I examined."

"So how's it reproducing?"

"I don't know. Some viruses prefer to reproduce in particular cells. Parvoviruses prefer erythroid progenitor cells in bone marrow, for example. It could be something like that. There's something else too. Something I can't explain. Come look."

Dudley follows Nad to the coffee table. He has a laptop set up by his Nikon. The screen is filled with florescent green glowing balls. Nad presses a button and the glow balls disappear.

"I ran a genetic series before Thud left the hospital. I've really just started studying genetics. They don't let you do anything fun till grad school, but I can do the basics. Here's Thud's genome before he got sick."

The screen fills with bars with lines across them.

"And here's the viral DNA imposed over his genome. The viral genes show up as pink."

Dozens of pink lines appear near the black bands that represent Thud's DNA.

"So what does this mean?" It just looks like a bad abstract expressionist painting to Dudley.

"Well I don't know exactly. I mean I'm not a geneticist, and even if I was, it would probably take years to decipher the viral code, but there are a few things that are interesting. First, as you can see, the viral DNA has attached itself in pieces to all of Thud's chromosomes."

"Okay, so what?"

"Well it's weird, is all. And second, and this is significant, his telomeres have gotten longer."

"Uh-huh oh yeah, sure," Dudley sneers, exasperated, "What the fuck are telomeres and why do I care?"

"They are these little things at the end of each chromosome," says Nad, pointing to a smudge that looks like all the other smudges to Dudley. "They act kind of like a clock for the

cell. Every cell in your body has a built in expiration date. It will divide a given number of times and then die. In normal cells, each time they divide their telomeres get a little bit shorter. Telomeres probably don't control cell aging, although that's a matter of contention at the moment, but they definitely measure it. The only cells that have telomeres that stay the same length, or get longer in humans, are cancer cells. Cancer cells are, of course, immortal – until they kill their host anyway."

"Are you saying Thud has cancer?"

"No, although there may be some unknown oncogenic factor that appears over time. So far I've seen no change in his cell morphology that would be indicative of oncogenesis, no cancer. I did get some odd chemistry series results, though."

"Odd how?"

"Well, like so much of this, I don't really have the expertise to interpret the results, but look at this."

Nad pulls up another window that says "spectrograph" across the top. Spiky graphs trace across the screen and little colored circles appear at the peaks of some of the spikes.

"This is his saliva sample. There are a number of chemicals in his saliva that should either kill him, or at least be making him very sick. I found a number of organic ethers, something very similar to lidocaine, and a chemical in the benzodiazepine family that had no match on the medical library's computer, but whose closest chemical cousin is Rohypnol."

"The date-rape drug?"

"Yeah. It might be irrelevant data, though. He was given a lot of stuff in the hospital, and sometimes stabilization drugs will mess up your body chemistry for months."

"So I still don't see the big deal. It isn't killing him, so far as we know. He hasn't got cancer. How does this help you find him?"

"What? You want a bubble-wrapped manifesto?" Nad jams his index finger up his nose to the second knuckle and retrieves something pale and crusty. He looks at Dudley, eyes fever-bright. "Things are not so simple...I, um, well it doesn't help me find him, exactly, but here's why it's important. This virus is the magic bullet."

"Like penicillin? I don't get it."

"Don't you see? A virus that can infect all human cells with no tropism? It's not the bug itself – that appears to be inconsequential – it's the packaging, the universal capsid with keys to all the locks. It's the thing genetic engineers have been searching for, for decades. Using this virus, medicine, or new genetic information could be sent to every cell in a patient's body. It could open the door to a wave of bio-engineering that could cure most genetic diseases. Muscular dystrophy, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's, diabetes, even many birth defects. And that's just the beginning. The possibilities are almost unlimited. It's the ultimate delivery device. This is bigger than aspirin."

"So you think someone kidnapped Thud to get the bug?"

"Or to hide it."

– Lamia –

Dolf left her a note with a bowl of pudding. The note says that he mailed the letter she had written to her mother. The pudding is butterscotch, Lamia's favorite, but she feeds it to Bitch. He slurps and snuffles, and manages to get more of it on his whiskers than in his mouth.

She takes off one of her socks and uses it to clean him up. *He's still sticky, but it's better than nothing.* He curls up at her feet, and she plays with his ears with her bare toes as the computer boots up.

We did as he asked. Sasha is locked in the cell next to the monsters. We buried the stable boy last night in the old graveyard by the monastery. Sasha seemed relatively lucid until this morning, but he has since lapsed into a fever and sleeps fitfully, mumbling to himself as he dreams. Wampirov has agreed to tend to him when I grow too tired. We arranged some straw against the wall farthest from the reaches of that woman, and I am confident he is safe, at least from her.

A rider from the post station brought word from Elder Illyan at tea. I record the contents here.

Year of Our Lord 1470, 24 July

Father Mikial,

I received your letter this morning, and have seen the need to respond with greatest dispatch. You will complete your experiments with haste and destroy the creatures by whatever means seem effective. I would strongly urge the use of fire. I know of your scientific inclinations, but I would remind you that our first responsibility is the protection of the people from the powers of the Dark One. Use caution, and advise me of your progress. The Order is at your disposal.

May the blessings of our Sacred Mother comfort you,
Elder Alexy Vourdalakov Illyan

Alas, his warning came late for poor Sasha. I feel his plight is my fault. Should he not fair well, my conscience will be heavy with the result. Despite the perils and my concern for Sasha, I have decided the experiments must continue.

I have sent Father Wampirov to a neighboring village to find strong men who do not know of our peril. This is dishonest perhaps, but I need help with the next series of experiments. The citizens of Volksgrad will no longer assist us. Since the death of the stable boy, they have become convinced that the church is powerless to protect them. I must restore their faith. The demon that caused this is at liberty, and if we fail to learn all we can then the beast will have won.

Year of Our Lord 1470, 28 July

Wampirov returned with ten men; they are rough types, probably criminals or highwaymen, I did not ask. Wampirov admits he bribed them to come here. They appear strong and fearless. I pray that is enough. I spent the last day and much of the night conversing with Marmeladov and his wife. They both appear to have quite recovered. I told them the incident with the tainted blood was an accident, and that it would not happen again. I have been feeding them often, and after some initial suspicion their thirst overcame them. I do not know if they trust me again, but they drink, and that is all I need. Madam Marmeladov has become quite coherent in the last day. There may be a series of stages in the development of this phenomenon. I must keep better track of time.

I am going down there now. May God have mercy on my soul.

Evening: The day has been a battle. I feel myself the stony continence of a soldier who has seen more than he can stand. There is no expression. I am spent.

I made a mixture of pig's blood and garlic oil this morning. It was quite thin enough that I was certain no detection was possible. I presented the mixture to the Marmeladoves as a matter of course, hardly mentioning it. I have garlands of garlic among my equipment for protection, so it is unlikely they could catch the scent in blood. There was no suspicion, and they drank, immediately falling ill and writhing on the floor spitting curses at me with all the fervor of the damned. I alerted Wampirov, and our hired brigands were ordered to storm the cells and fix the occupants to the walls with shackles and chains.

Despite their poisoned state, the demons fought with desperation. Marmeladov, in a convulsive moment, grasped at the head of one of his would-be captors and crushed the man's skull with a bare hand. The man collapsed dead that instant, his brains pouring out onto the floor. The victim's compatriots redoubled their efforts, however, and with only bruises and a broken wrist among the remaining roughs, the demon was soon immobilized. Madam Marmeladov was in a more weakened state, and although she fought, she was only able to dislodge a few teeth for her trouble. Given Marmeladov's feat of strength, I had some concern with the security of the bonds. I ordered the creatures double shackled, both hand and foot. The dead man's name was Miusov. May God have mercy on his soul.

– Whitney –

Whitney releases the horn after more than a minute. She hit it more from rage than any hope that J.J. would come back. She is angry, angry she exposed herself, angry that she allowed an intimacy she had never permitted anyone, and worse, allowed herself to feel. She fights back tears, but fails.

"Fuck!"

Her voice is loud enough to frighten a murder of ravens in the nearby soybean fields. They rise like a black cloud and fly for the safety of a spinney of stunted trees in the next field.

The tires bark, launching the Charger like a squat gray bullet. Fields flash by in a blur of green. The speedometer climbs to one-twenty and still the big car feels stiff and smooth in her hands. She glances down at the pain in her left arm. It is red and blistering from when she opened the door to go after J.J. A blister the size of a grape splits and a little steam of clear plasma runs down her arm and drips onto her pants. It occurs to her that if the searing pain hadn't forced her to close the door she might be dead now, burned in the heat of Apollo's chariot. Only the shield of Thud's illegally dark-tinted windows protects her.

Apollo retreats behind the rolling green horizon as she trades blacktop for gravel. The dark thing that has been crawling around the edges of her mind is becoming bolder. She feels under the seat and searches the glove compartment for her stash. *Nothing*. She can feel a panic building. She steps out of the car.

Jasper growls at her. It is a low, hollow growl that only she and the dog can hear. Head low, ears back, and tail between his legs, he scuttles under the nearest truck and crouches there, staring at her.

Stark waves at her. He is standing next to a naked man with a cock the size of a toddler's arm. The naked man is eating potato salad from a Styrofoam bowl and talking with his mouth open. Stark notices her injury and his smile changes to alarm, but he doesn't say anything. Whitney bounds up the steps, three at a time. The sudden intense pain of her burn has settled into a dull itch. The safe haze of chronic has left her completely. She feels odd. Energized. Strong.

On the second floor the crew is huddled around a small bath next to the bedroom. The black woman she met yesterday, Monique, or Monica, or Dominique, she doesn't remember, is alternately fellating two men in the shower.

"Camera two, can you move to an overhead?"

Sarah looks up and sees Whitney.

"Oh shit! What happened to you, Darlin'? Cut. Cut! No, never mind. Keep rolling." She taps one of the grips on the shoulder. "Ben can you finish the scene? They can go when they're ready, but no facial, they should cum on her tits."

The grip nods and holds up a thumb. Sarah takes Whitney by her unburned arm and leads her into another room.

"I've given up facial pop-shots, it's degrading," explains Sarah.

"Whatever, look I came for J.J.'s check."

"What happened to your arm? It looks really bad. Have you seen a doctor?"

"Cooking accident. It's fine. No. The check?"

"Of course."

Sarah takes a checkbook out of her pocket and writes out two checks for a thousand dollars.

"She's not coming back, your friend? Because she was really good. You both were."

She hands Whitney the checks. One of them has her name on it. It didn't even occur to her to ask about her own money. As she folds the checks her hands begin to shake again. Sarah takes Whitney's fevered fingers in her own cool dry ones, and looks at her.

"Are you okay, Whitney? Is there anything I can do?"

Whitney bites her tongue hard enough to draw blood, squeezes the director's hand with restraint, and lets go.

"You don't have any pot, do you?"

Sarah doesn't have any. Neither does Stark, or the grips, or even pogo boy with the bad table manners. And she is back on the road, speedo pegged, shaking and shivering and muttering to herself about the obscenity of a porn set with no drugs.

Back at the loft she finds enough scratch in her pipe to keep her from screaming, at least for now. She changes clothes and puts on the blond wig she ordered online a few days earlier without knowing why. She looks at herself in the speckled mirror and still doesn't know, but she doesn't take it off.

She intended to mail J.J. the check, but it now feels wrong. She knows it would hurt her; that it would be an insult. She holds the checks over the sink and burns them, turning them and watching the flame until it licks her fingers and she has to let go. It is at that moment, watching the orange glow in the dark, that she surrenders. She doesn't know yet what she has surrendered to, but she will fight the dark no more. J.J. was her last chance at something innocent; her last refuge from the creeping edges that are crushing her will. *It's okay. It's okay. Maybe I'm fighting the wrong thing.*

Her burned arm has stopped itching, and now it is flaking and peeling like a week old sunburn. Whitney scrubs off the dead skin in the sink with rusty water and her dish sponge. She

notices as she scrubs that her arms feel harder than she remembers. She looks in the mirror and flexes. *I don't look any different.* But she feels different. She runs her fingers over her arms and torso, poking and pinching. Her skin feels tighter and the tissue below has almost no give, like it has become denser. *Whatever, it doesn't matter.* Freshly pinked, she climbs up on the filthy toilet and reaches under the ceiling tiles above the stall. She removes something and puts it in her pocket.

Outside it has begun to rain, and Whitney runs and skips, splashing through black puddles and smiling to herself. At a small cluttered import store in the Ped mall, Whitney buys a wide tin pencil box decorated with a picture of Barbie holding hands with a female friend in front of the Statue of Liberty. A caption at the bottom reads, 'Barbie in New York.' She stuffs something in the tin, puts the tin in a padded envelope and drops it in a mailbox. The rain has slowed to damp mist. Whitney can feel the music in her chest. She has to take deep breaths to keep from running.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"Je me presse de rire de tout, de peur d'être obligé d'en pleurer."

[I make myself laugh at everything, for fear of having to weep.]

-Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais

– **Jerry-Jean** –

"Manhattan."

Jerry-Jean isn't old enough to drink legally, but it's close to closing and the bartender is oblivious. He slides the dark glass across the counter and takes her money. The music is loud

enough to cause internal bleeding, and bad enough that bloating death might be a blessing. Some sort of industrial remix of Eurotrash eighties fluff. She recognizes some Duran Duran, her mother used to listen to them when her father was away, but the rest is foreign. The One-Eyed Monkey is a frat bar, and predominantly male. No one she knows ever comes here, maybe that's why she picked it.

Cheap strobe lights flash. A few very drunk couples dance-stumble about on the tiny square that serves as the Monkey's dance floor. They look tired and lazy. Jerry-Jean asks for another drink. The majority of the Monkey, which is not very large to begin with, is dominated by pool tables, video game machines, and dart lanes. Various frat boys wearing identical jeans, rugby shirts, and Greek lettered baseball caps loiter around the tables, bullshitting at a yell to breach the cacophony. The entire bar is filled with thick resinous smoke. Very nasty cigars appear to be the vogue of the moment and the young men are doing their best to look like soft spoiled versions of Sergeant Rock. An arrogant looking Kappa with a Yale cut approaches her.

"Hi."

"Hi." She doesn't look at him.

"Want to dance?"

"I don't dance."

He turns to leave, but she stops him.

"Buy me a drink?"

He turns back, perfect teeth shining.

"Sure. What's your name."

She smiles, still not looking at him, and reaches out – touching his arm tentatively.

"Does it have to be complicated?"

"I guess not."

He waves at the bartender, and another Manhattan appears at her elbow. The smoke is beginning to make her eyes water. She downs the drink.

"Do you want take me somewhere?"

He takes a sharp breath, as if surprised by her directness, but then regains his starched-in-place cool.

"Yeah. I'm parked out front."

A black Jaguar chirps on the corner. The car looks fast, but the boy drives it slow, and with an almost painful delicacy. J.J. looks out into the dark. The rain has let up. A heavy, thick mist drifts over the campus. The boy starts talking about his car. She says "uh-huh" every few minutes and tries to sound interested, but doesn't hear him.

They pull up in front of a huge sandstone mansion. The driveway is filled with expensive cars. Greek letters hang over a door flanked by marble statues of athletes. Inside dark mahogany wainscoting glows in tastefully low lighting. In a large room to their left, a group of young men, all of whom appear to have been machined in the same factory that made this one, are watching some sporting event on a huge TV and mixing roars of approval with the occasional beer-spilling high-five. The boy takes her hand and leads her up a long marble staircase. They go down a hall and he knocks on a door.

A skinny kid in pajama bottoms answers, looking bleary-eyed.

"What?"

"Dude, can you take off for a while?" He nods in her direction.

"Okay, yeah." The skinny kid disappears for a moment and returns wearing a robe and carrying a couple of pillows under his arm.

"God, it's about time Wilson, I thought you were never gonna get laid."

"Dude, shut-up," says Wilson, pushing him.

The skinny kid goes off laughing and Wilson leads her in. She feels the room, large and comfortable, but she doesn't really want to see it.

"Sorry, he's an idiot," Wilson is blushing. "Do you want something to drink?"

His starch is wrinkling with no one there to watch. She answers by taking off her pants.

"No drink."

She unbuckles his belt. He tries. He even goes down on her, but he's not very good. He pushes too hard, and it just makes her uncomfortable.

"No, no stop. Just fuck me, okay?"

Then he is on top of her. His breath is hot on her neck, and then in her mouth. He tastes like microbrewed fruit beer and a hint of orange tic-tacs. *How considerate*. He pushes into her too fast, and it pinches a little. Then he is thrusting away and pushing his tongue into her throat. She pushes him back gently, and grasps his ass, pulling him into her.

"Just fucking, okay?"

He nods and resumes his rhythm. She tilts her pelvis to meet him and tries to think about Whitney. It begins to feel pretty good, and she is on the verge, but then his face contorts, as if in great pain, and he shudders, collapsing on top of her, and whispering, "Oh God, oh God," over and over in her ear.

She doesn't feel like God. She doesn't feel anything. She pats him on the shoulder and he rolls off, still panting. She feels his sweat on her belly. She stands up, and warm semen dribbles down her leg.

"Do you have any tissue?"

He opens his eyes and leans over, opening a drawer in the end table. She wads up some tissue and mops up the germination goo. He asks if she wants to stay, but she is already putting on her underwear. He asks if she wants a ride somewhere and she says, "the Pentacrest." She could have said Purge. It's actually two blocks closer, but she doesn't want him to know where she lives. He keeps trying to talk to her in the car. She looks at the crucifix hanging from his rearview mirror, and decides to let him.

"...hat's your major?"

"Engineering."

"That's pretty tough. I mean I hear that's pretty tough, um. Do you like it? I mean, I guess you must like it, otherwis..."

"It's okay. You're Catholic?"

"Yeah, I'm, my family is."

"I used to be Christian."

"Why not, I mean, you aren't any more?"

"I don't know. I mean it's not so much a clear decision, as a gradually fading of conviction. You don't really notice it, it just sort of creeps up on you, and then one day you realize that you just don't believe; that faith is meaningless."

"Oh," he says.

He looks like he's trying to put together something intelligent to say about this, but then he seems to give up and just stares at the road. As she goes to step out of the car he makes one last attempt.

"Can I call you?"

She leans back in, kisses him on the side of his mouth, and says no.

The street is deserted. It's almost four in the morning. She walks back toward Purge wondering why she doesn't feel any better. Maybe she won't go home right away. She walks, going in no particular direction, circling, wandering between empty university buildings and down desolate streets filled with darkened houses.

I'm such a fucking hypocrite. Jerry-Jean left Whitney on the road feeling horror at the idea that after their night together, Whitney wanted to return to the porn set for money. *It would have trivialized perfect moments, but now I've done that myself. Just trying to numb the pain. Fucking worthless hypocrite.*

Rage swallows her inner voice, and she picks up a large rock from someone's lawn and hurls it through the windshield of the car parked in the driveway. The windshield collapses on one side, and the car's alarm system starts to howl. Rage submits to fear. Lights in the house are coming on.

Jerry-Jean runs. She is around the corner, and down a narrow alley between buildings, before she slows her pace. Her heart is pounding, and she is pouring with sweat, and she feels great. She walks a zigzag course that takes her farther and farther away from the wounded car. She is careful to walk slowly and keep to the shadows, and eventually she is relaxed again. For a while it feels like she is absolutely alone. She finds a little peace in that.

At about six, things begin to move. People coming out for their morning paper. Students rushing off to early classes. Her peace melts in the rising sun. She finds herself in front of the Hotdog Inn, an ancient State City grease pit. Searching her pockets, she finds ten dollars and sixty-seven cents.

It has just opened, and she sits at the Gerald Ford Commemorative Booth. A small plaque describes the presidential visit. A tie-dyed waiter with little copper bells in his beard brings her a

stained paper menu and ice water in an age-cracked yellow plastic glass. She orders her favorite: chicken fried steak with biscuits and sausage gravy. *A true Midwestern heartstopper.*

She picks up a copy of the State City daily newspaper. She remembers Thud calling it The Daily Idiot. The headline is a drowning. The small dam next to the town power plant claims a half dozen victims a year, almost all suicides. The dam is only six feet high, but the water that comes over it creates a down force that holds anyone that falls in, sometimes for days. This one was a decorated Navy SEAL, veteran of the Gulf and Afghan wars, recently employed at Elmdale campus. *Boring.* She flips through till she finds the comics.

Stuffed to the point of nausea, and feeling very greasy, Jerry-Jean leans on the Purge elevator button, and takes little breaths in an effort to avoid puking. The elevator seems to be dragging, and by the time it reaches four she is longing for her cot.

As she steps into the hall, four large men in University t-shirts push past her and disappear through the door to the stairs. One of them looks familiar. She has seen him somewhere. *Elmdale*, she had seen him at Elmdale. She remembers thinking there was something about him that was very like Thud and Nad, something *military*. That was it, she hadn't been able to place it then, but now.

She walks down the hall to the bunker. The door is slightly ajar, which is odd because Nad always screams if the door is left unlocked. She pushes it open.

The bunker is trashed. The fabric in the cubical dividers is torn. Nad's microscope is on the floor in pieces. The TV is shattered, and pieces of computers and clothes litter the floor. Even the light and electrical fixtures have been ripped open. One of them crackles and spits sparks at her.

Tasha is seated in the food court at the Strip Ridge Mall. She has been here an hour waiting for him, and the seats, specially designed by ergonomics engineers to prevent loitering, are beginning to cramp her lower back. She is about go get something to drink, purely as an excuse to stand up, when he shows, looking nervous.

"There is some seriously fucked up shit going on."

"Are you talking about the SEAL in the paper?"

"What seal? What are you talking about?"

"Never mind, it's not important. What did you mean?"

"One of my friends disappeared. He's a really reliable guy, and bam, gone. I thought he just went home for a while, or something, but we called everyone he knows in South Dakota. Nothing."

"I'm sorry. Have you talked to the police?"

"They don't want to hear about it. Just another college student with itchy feet. They say they get these missing persons all the time; then it turns out the guy ran off to Cancun, or got some hootchie pregnant, or something."

"That's probably true."

"Yeah, but Thud isn't like that. He's hardcore straightedge. So responsible it would make you sick. He hasn't missed more than a couple days of class in four years, and those were always opening week."

"Thud Wardog? He is a good student. I have been missing him as well. Look, I know some people in law enforcement. If he doesn't turn up in the next few weeks, let me know."

"Thanks," Adrian smiles a little, "he's probably okay."

He opens a pocket in the front of his oversized painter pants and takes out a disk.

"Decrypt on the Russian disk is done. At least it looks done to me. I can't read that shit, but it looks like regular text now anyway. Burned you a CD. You want the original?"

"Terrific," She hands him an envelope filled with twenties, "Hold onto it for now, I want to see what it is, and if there is anything missing. You can do data recovery right?"

"Sure, but it isn't cheap."

"Great, great. I really appreciate all your hard work, Adrian."

The big man smiles. "Yeah."

"Can I buy you lunch?"

"Professor Churel, I never pass up free food."

Adrian has a giant pile of stir-fry with rice and Tasha settles for weak mall coffee and aspirin. He talks about new machines he wants to buy and how hot Mel Gibson looks in that new movie, even though he's geriatric. It goes on and on, and Tasha feels obligated to go along and be charming, when all she wants to do is rush home and translate the disk. It eats at her. She begins tapping her fingers and chewing on her plastic coffee stir, and is on the verge of saying something genuinely rude, when it ends.

"Thanks for the chow, Prof., I've got to go."

She manages to say goodbye politely, and forces herself not to run for the door. By the time she arrives home, she is a contained cyclone.

"Dolf, no calls. Lamia, out of the library, I have to work."

Lamia stomps off to her room with Bitch in tow, muttering, and slams the door. Tasha ignores her.

She puts in the disk, fidgeting while it spins up. A black Unix window opens and fills with white Cyrillic text. It is the crisp simple Russian of a military document but with higher level vocabulary than she is used to seeing in military documents. An academic's vocabulary. There are a series of routine log entries noting location, course, depth, speed, and operation notes on the general condition of the submarine's nuclear reactor. On the second day out of port the captain opened his orders.

"Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, 14th People's Navy, 3rd Electric Boat Fleet. Captain's Log, TK-205, Cpt. Mirian Yevgenivich Kovenko Commanding. Left Vladivostok August 2nd at 04:12. Proceeding south at 200 meters and ten knots. Opened directives on August 4th at 10:00. Directives as follows: (1) Follow decoy sea trials course to Japan trench. (2) Conduct simulated depth trials run {radio contact at initiation}. (3) Proceed to Ostrov Rasshua by 15 August, and surface {radio contact on arrival: request stopover to repair damaged low frequency antenna}. (4) Recover stasis capsules and destroy facility no later than August 17th. (5) Follow southerly course as if returning to Vladivostok, and evade American patrols. (6) When certain of security, proceed North at silent running to the Arctic facility on Ostrov Ushakova. (7) In case of war or political instability in the Motherland TK-205 must be destroyed, that no record of this research be allowed to fall in to the hands of the enemies of Soviet Socialism."

There are several more routine entries. The captain indicated when each directive was followed, but added no detail. The last log entry is dated 20 August 1991. It was is two sentences long.

"In accordance with directive seven I am scuttling the boat. May history remember that my crew died for their country with bravery and honor."

– Dudley –

"Well, it's obvious someone doesn't like you." The campus cop is staring at his chest. Nad is wearing his 'now you're a good pig' t-shirt that features a picture of Porky Pig in a police uniform with a gaping bullet hole through his head.

"Look, this isn't just someone pissed at us. I mean, our friend is missing, which you haven't investigated. There's a connection goddamn it!" Says Nad.

The cop strokes his chins and takes a few notes, smiling to himself.

"Look, Stuart, I don't know what's going on here. It looks like maybe you annoyed some people, and they decided to get revenge. As for your little buddy, I don't know anything about that. Missing persons is in State City Police jurisdiction."

Nad makes a fist, and holds it down with his free hand.

"But they did steal stuff," says Dudley, "I mean our hard drives and disks are all gone. Doesn't that indicate something more serious?"

The cop grins. He has very small teeth.

"Sure, it's larceny. I'm taking a report. We will conduct an investigation, but I've seen this before. You aren't likely to get your stuff back. Where's your other roommate? The one that reported this?"

"She went to take a shower after waiting three hours for you to get here," says Nad, "but she'll be back in a minute."

"She shouldn't have left. Anyway, if she has anything to add just send her over to Public Safety."

"That's it? You aren't going to dust for fingerprints or something?" Says Nad.

"This is a dorm break in, it's not exactly priority."

"God, we work for you idiots, you couldn't take a five minute break from increasing your center of gravity to do your job?"

The cop flushes from his usual hypertensive pink to a rather alarming magenta.

"Oh don't worry, Stuart. Your concerns will receive precisely as much attention as they deserve."

He folds his notebook and waddles out.

"Well that was handled well," says Dudley. "You pissed him off, now he won't do anything."

"That fat turdmuncher wasn't going to do anything anyway. Shit! Those motherfuckers. They're trying to scare me. It won't fucking work."

"Nad, just be cool. You don't even know who 'they' are, or even if there really is a 'they.' I mean this could just be a bunch of messed up stuff that coincides. We don't have any evidence of causality. You're operating on theory. When Thud disappeared, was there any sign of a struggle? No. You know him. Would he let anyone take him anywhere without a fight?"

"No. No. But I tell you, this is more than just a smash and grab. Why wasn't the door busted? I mean, I locked the door. You fucking saw me lock the door."

"You can do locks, why not someone else?"

"Dudley, this a Mesco seven-pin offset. You would need a special tool, and even then it would take an hour or more. I couldn't do it."

"Oh, so it's more about your ego than reality. You're just offended that some scumbag has better skills than you."

"Fuck you, Dudley. Fuckin' gutter punk poseur motherfucker. I'd stomp your ass if I thought it would make me feel better. Maybe I will anyway."

But at that moment Jerry-Jean opens the door, and all thoughts of a potential ass stomping are suspended. She is wrapped up in a robe. Her short blond hair sparkles with moisture. She looks very different to Dudley. She stands very straight, like she is stronger than the insecure young woman he met a few short months ago, but there is an aura of shell shock too. He attributes this to the break-in. It has been a shock to all of them.

She drops the robe on the bed, and naked, begins picking her clothes up off the floor.

"Jesus, J.J." Dudley looks away.

She ignores him, and begins putting on her clothes with no particular urgency. Nad doesn't even notice the sudden nudity. He is sitting on the floor mourning his broken microscope. He drops the pieces, stands, kicks them across the room, says, "fuck," and disappears behind what remains of his cubical, puttering and mumbling to himself.

"The cops finally came," says Dudley, focusing on Nad's simian golden shower poster to avoid looking at J.J.

"Cop," corrects Nad.

"Okay, the cop came. They aren't doing anything 'cause our resident etiquette savant decided to be an asshole."

A heavy mycology text zips past Dudley's head, missing him by the width of a page, and smacks against the far wall.

"Yet another example of his eloquent diplomatic gifts."

Nad kicks over his torn cubical wall and hops over his desk; fists clenched and pulse standing out at his throat.

"J.J., please give me one good reason why I shouldn't kill this needle-dicked roach rapist right now."

"Because I know who did this." Her voice is very soft.

Both men stop mid-stride, Dudley about to run, Nad about to strike. Nad relaxes, with great effort, and walks over to her. She is dressed now, and sitting on her cot. She looks up at him with bright clear eyes. Dudley can't remember ever seeing her look at anyone straight in the face.

"You know?" Nad says, "Who?"

"I don't know their names, but I have seen them before, at Elmdale."

"How? When did you see them?"

"Coming out of the elevator this morning. They were dressed like students, but I remember seeing one of them at Elmdale in a suit. He was like you."

"What do you mean, 'like me'?"

"Military. The way you walk, and stand. He was the same."

Nad questions her for almost an hour, writing detailed notes. She tells them that she saw the man leaving the Pathologie Research Directorate Neugaul building, and again just as she stepped out of the elevator.

"Sonovabitch," Nad is smiling, "They took him. They took the samples from the lab. It's all there."

"Why?" Dudley is still confused, "I mean, I'm with you now, but why would some company risk kidnapping someone? The liability exposure alone would be insane."

"Helicobacter Pylori," says Jerry-Jean.

"Exactly," says Nad, "They've discovered the magic bullet, but pharmaceutical patents are only good for a few years. If they use the bullet they can make a lot of money for a few years, but then their patent will expire and anyone can make generic versions of the bullet. No more cash cow. Besides, the bullet might compete with dozens, even hundreds of drugs they already have on the market, so if it works and then goes generic they will lose billions. But if they hide the bullet, and no one ever discovers it, their money is protected. They can go on treating diseases indefinitely that could be cured in a day."

"That's fucked up," says Dudley.

"Yeah, it is," says Nad.

"So what are we going to do?"

"So now it's 'we', Motherfucker?" Nad grins. "Hey J.J., there's just one thing I don't understand. Why didn't you tell us about this when we first came home?"

She looks at him. Hard. "I was upset. I didn't want to talk."

"About this?"

"None of your fucking business, okay!?" She picks up her book bag and slams the door behind her.

"Whoa, she's lost it," says Dudley.

"What are we going to do?" Says Nad. "We are going to stop standing still, and smiling, and saying 'please sir, may I have another,' while they kick us in the balls. We're gonna take the fight to them."

Nad takes the big .45 from under Thud's pillow and begins to clean it.

– Lamia –

It has been a week and she finds the library is hers again. She puts her notebooks and disks on the table and wanders into the kitchen. Bitch walks with her, his head pressing against her thigh. Except for walks, he has not left her side. She has a bowl of water on her bedroom floor, but he hasn't eaten much. She can see his ribs through his sides. She opens the refrigerator, and sits on the floor in front of it with the door open. There is some steak in butcher paper. She takes it out and holds it up to him.

"Essen Sie!"

He takes the steak and lies down next to her snorting and slobbering as he gnaws on it.

"Gute. Gute Hunde."

She pets him and begins digging around for more meat.

"Lamia."

Dolf is looking down at her. He doesn't look angry, but perplexed.

"Lamia, that steak is twenty dollars a pound. Maybe you could give him some cheese?"

"If it's good enough for us, it's good enough for him."

"I'm glad you decided to feed him. He is looking skinny, but he would be just as happy with dog food."

"Would you be happy with dog food? Have you tasted dog food? How do you know he would be just as happy? He can't tell you. He's my friend. I won't treat him differently just because he is a dog."

"Very well, we can talk about this another time. Would you like me to make you something for lunch?"

"Can I have a hamburger?"

"Yes you may. Now wash your hands. I will call you in half an hour."

Lamia and her shadow get up, and head for the library, while Dolf gets out a mop to clean up the puddle of beef blood and dog slobber.

Year of Our Lord 1470, 29 July

God took Sasha today. Dawn was breaking and I went down to look at him. His fever was gone and he lay there cool and still. His breath was very shallow. I prayed over him and gave him last rites, as I have everyday. Then I just sat there with him for a while. The demons screamed and sputtered, but I heard them not. My thoughts were only for this poor boy, so hopeful, so without sin. I was brushing the hair from his face when he breathed his last. He is blessed that the Lord should take him now. I had hoped he would not be victim to these creatures in spirit. Father Wampirov and I buried him at noon. I placed an ikon of Our Holy

Mother on his chest and a clove of garlic in his mouth. I pray that he will stay at rest, and be commended to heaven swiftly.

I will not see more of those monsters today. I must pray for strength, that hatred does not win over my soul. Father Wampirov has offered to stay with me and join me in fasting and prayer. As I write he is reading aloud from the Lives of the Saints that we may take solace in the strength of the great martyrs. God Bless Sasha Vasylianov Upyrin, our prayers are with him.

Lamia closes the file. She is sad about Sasha. That one so young should die, even if long ago. She opens one of the books she checked out from the library, *Dissertatio de Vampyris*. It is very old and the language is strange. She has to look up a lot of words and soon becomes very bored. Dolf comes in.

"Would you like your lunch in here, or in the living room?"

Lamia opts for the living room. She piles pillows around herself on the couch and flips on the TV. The local news is talking about a rash of thefts and vandalism in the dorms. Click. *Cartoons, much better*. A mouse tricks a cat into a wood-chipper. She laughs with a mouth full of hamburger. Bitch licks his lips and she feeds him some German fries. Dolf disappears down the hall and is back moments later with a basket of her dirty laundry. He sorts it and loads it into the kitchen washing machine.

"How's your jaw?"

"Mphhh ish gub."

"Don't talk with food in your mouth."

She swallows with help from a glass of milk.

"Good, it doesn't hurt at all any more."

"You're lucky, being young."

"And why's that? I don't feel very lucky." But she's smiling when she says it.

"Kids have bones like rubber. They heal fast. When I was in Chechnya I broke an ankle. It took six months to heal. Still isn't one-hundred percent."

"Wow, how'd you do that?"

"My Spetznaz division had been in country for seven months. It was brutal. We were fighting house to house. In Moscow there was always a lot of negative propaganda about the Chechnyans. That they are mafia or terrorists, and maybe some of this was true, but they were brave fighters. I never fought anyone tougher.

"I once saw a young boy stop a tank by running out from behind a building and shoving a rock between its tracks. He was killed of course, but what bravery.

"Anyway, I had been there some time. We were all battle hardened veterans. I had seen terrible battles and lived. Spring came early that year. We were camped with an armored division just outside the capitol. I remember the morning was warm, and it had just begun to rain. I got out of my tent to use the latrine, slipped on some wet steps, and when I fell I heard my ankle snap like a gunshot. It didn't hurt, really, it just felt warm."

"You were in a war and broke your ankle slipping on a wet step?"

"Yes, my comrades all thought it was immensely funny. They joke about it even now, when I have a chance to speak with them. Some American's think that German's have no sense of humor, but when I laugh at that, I prove them wrong."

Lamia laughs and takes another bite of her burger. Dolf sits down with her and they watch cartoons together. He tells her he has never watched American cartoons. She tells him the names of all the characters. He says he likes Yosemite Sam the best. When Tasha comes home

they are curled up on the couch with Bitch between them, and Dolf is pointing at the TV and giggling.

"Ach, that Road Runner, he really is too much," says Dolf, laughing so hard, his eyes are watering. Lamia gets up, and without saying anything, puts her arms around the stunned professor. Tasha drops her briefcase, and returns the hug, and they just stand there, very still, for a long time.

– Whitney –

He is a young man, probably eighteen. He has a thin goatee, and glasses that went out of style a decade ago. Whitney pulls out the chair across from him, and sits down without asking. He looks up from his book with surprise.

"Hi," she says, leaning in very close.

His eyes are Lake Michigan blue.

"Hello. To what do I owe..."

"This pleasure?" She interrupts, "Oh, I suspect you owe it to a great many things. Chance, whim, the space-time continuum, your parents – for having fucked at the exact right moment – but mostly you owe it to me."

"Who," he looks a little dizzy. She enjoys this, but is not sure why.

"You can call me Tutula Galaxy, or Vulva Gold, and if that doesn't work you can call me Sadie. But now you have me at a disadvantage."

"Kevin. You smell really fantastic."

"And it's not even perfume, can you imagine? Are you going to buy me an ice cream Kevin?"

He stands up and goes to the counter, but then comes back looking confused. She pulls him down to her by the collar and runs her tongue across his lips.

"Lemon custard in a dish."

He goes back to the counter looking no less confused, and gets the ice cream. She picks up his book. *Empire of the Senseless* by Kathy Acker. *He must be almost as disturbed as I am.* She is laughing when he comes back.

"What's so funny? And who are you again?"

Whitney takes a bite of lemon custard and kisses him, pushing it into his mouth.

"I'm your gypsy princess, your magic carpet ride."

"Huh," he is looking confused again; his pupils are blown like someone who has just done entirely too much smack.

"I think it's time to go, Kevin."

He picks up his book, and taking her hand, follows her out into the mist. She stops after a couple of blocks and pushes him into a doorway, kissing him deeply. She isn't sure why, but it feels very important to do this. After another few blocks she does it again. All along, he just holds her hand and follows mute beside her.

At her warehouse, she leads him up stairs. Her hands shake and that strange frenetic gnawing pushes at her, but yet she feels at peace. A distant voice, the last vestige of her old self says, "Do you have any weed, Kevin? It would really be significantly to your advantage if you had some weed."

"Huh?" says Kevin, looking around.

"You know, endo, chronic, blunt, spliff, mary-jane, shwag?"

"Oh," says Kevin, "sure, you want to smoke out?"

He produces a little plastic baggy of cheap Nebraska stick. She packs her pipe and sucks deep, passing it to Kevin. *Nothing. Flat dry burn and no relief.*

"You know, Kevin, sometimes it's worth it to spend the extra twenty bucks and buy quality."

"Yeah, it's pretty crappy stick. Hey, I know this guy at Salter Hall that has a line into some really primo Oregon bud. Sticky-icky, you know? Wow, this place is a trip. Who are you again?"

She kisses him as a response, pushing him down onto the futon and straddling his waist. She sits up and looks at him, smiling a little.

"Whoa, you are one intense chick."

"Yes, that's true, Kevin, I am one intense chick. Well you couldn't get me stoned, so you know what that means?"

"What," he's laughing low and fuzzy.

"It means now you have to fuck me? Do you like to fuck, Kevin?"

"Whoa, I mean, yeah."

"Because that's important. I'm really not up for any half-assed performances tonight. How about eating pussy, Kevin, do you like to eat pussy?"

"S-sure." He's looking a little less fuzzy now, and slightly nervous. She likes that.

"And I don't mean, do you like to eat pussy because you feel like you're supposed to, or because you think it makes you a better lover, or because it's a way to warm up the place you're going to put your dick later."

"No?"

Maybe even a little frightened. She can feel herself go wet.

"No. I mean do you like to eat pussy for the pure joy of it? For the taste, for the feel, for the exquisite power of having someone's pleasure on the tip of your tongue. I've become a connoisseur recently, so I know of what I speak."

"S-sure. Where..?"

Panic, she can see it pulse in the veins by his ears and in the heat on his cheeks. *Not yet.* She kisses him again, and he relaxes. Then she begins unbuttoning his shirt.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"It was written I should be loyal to the nightmare of my choice."

-Joseph Conrad

– **Jerry-Jean** –

"He was named after a plane, you know."

Jerry-Jean looks up from her chemistry book. Nad is cleaning Thud's forty-five for the tenth time in two days. Tears rise in his eyes as he talks and drip slowly down his cheeks. He makes no effort to wipe them away.

"His grandfather flew F105 Thunderchiefs in the Vietnam War. They were big heavy ground attack fighters – could carry a lot of bombs – but no match for a Mig in a dogfight. So many got shot down that the pilots took to calling them 'Thuds' for the sound they made when they hit the ground. His grandfather was shot down twice, recovered twice. On the third time he didn't make it out. I guess his father thought it was funny.

"He didn't have to join up. There are all kinds of scholarships for Indians. He could have gone to school for free on the white man's nickel, but he didn't want their charity. He used to tell me, when we were in boot, that he wasn't a soldier, he was a mercenary. He said he didn't give a shit about duty, honor or country, he was just there for the college green. To earn it. We did too. Out of boot we got picked for jump school, then Ranger school, then Mountain school. We both qualified so high on the rifle range they couldn't believe it, and they sent us to sniper school. I was good, but Thud was better. He was always better. They tried to split us up, but Thud wouldn't have it. Said he'd peel potatoes for the rest of their goddamned war, so they let us stay together. He was the gun. I was the eyes. We went in with the 82nd. It was shitmare nasty.

"You know what it's like when someone has been in your life for so long? There, you know? Not just sometimes, but every time. It's like all the things you see or do; they're real because of them. And when that person isn't around, it's like no matter what happens, it isn't real. Because without them there to confirm the experience – talk about it – nothing is real.

"I'm gonna get him back. Those frog motherfuckers...gonna get back. Didn't survive four years of popping rag-heads for this. Wish I had my stoner. Fuck..."

He dribbles into incoherent mumbling, reassembles the pistol without really looking at it, and begins doing push-ups.

Jerry-Jean goes back to her chemistry book. Her head hurts and her nose has begun running. Her agony seems to have left her. In its place is a huge black apathy. She feels nothing. She cares about nothing. She picks up the peanut butter sandwich Dudley brought her at breakfast. The jelly has soaked through the bread, and there is blue pocket lint all over it. She takes a bite. *Chewy*. The bread is stale. The lint makes her sneeze, and she blows her nose on her sleeve.

"Damn J.J., you spend much more time with me and you'll be farting and scratching your snatch in public."

Nad is looking up at her and grinning.

She replies by sticking out a tongue covered with peanut-butter sandwich.

Dudley comes in, tossing a pile of mail on the table by the door.

"Mail's up. Fuck, I'm late. Martha's going to kill me." He pauses looking at Nad, "Jesus, man, it's clean already. Put it away. I'm surrounded by homicidal nut-packs."

With that, he grabs some books off his bed and runs off down the hall without closing the door. Nad gets up to close it, saying, "This kind of social barbarism is half the problem." He actually yells the last half.

Neither Nad, nor Jerry-Jean takes any notice of the mail that Dudley left on the table. If they had, they might have seen a fat, padded manila envelope addressed to "J.J." in the looping French script that is taught at the very best Connecticut private schools.

– Tasha –

There is a business size envelope stuffed in the crack between the door and frame. Her name is on it, nothing else. She balances the stack of books and briefcase in her left arm, puts the envelope in her mouth, and reaches for her keys.

Only her key isn't working.

Tasha holds it up in the dim light of the hallway. It is the right key. It slides into the lock, but it won't turn. She jiggles it. Nothing. She pulls it out and tries putting it in again. In the process, her precariously balanced pile of stuff decides to hit the floor. Papers go everywhere.

"Shit."

She jiggles the key again. It still doesn't like her. Then she remembers the envelope in her mouth. *Maybe the department finally came through with a larger office?*

She tears open the envelope. Inside is a single page on State University letterhead. It is from the office of the Dean of Liberal Arts. The letter contains only one line.

"Tasha Churel,

Please proceed to Dean Hanh's office immediately."

No signature. No title. Not "Professor Churel." Not "Dr. Churel." I earned that fucking title. Someone is going to hear about this. She gathers her papers and books from the floor and rushes off toward the Dean's office.

As she crosses the Pentacrest she sees Colby talking to some girls in front of the anthropology building. He seems to see her, but then he looks away. *It's not important. Being locked out is important. Did they lock me out of my own goddamn office?* The thought occurs to her as she steps into the Dean's reception area. Several students are waiting to talk to various assistant deans on benches along one wall. The secretary, a pale, morbidly obese man named Joey, greets her with a cotton candy smile.

"Tasha, the Dean will see you right away."

Still no title. This is becoming downright offensive. She pushes through the little gate and steps through two big oak doors into the Dean's office. Dean Hanh is on the phone, but Tasha is waved in and directed to a chair. The office is nearly as big as her living room. Heavy-glassed bookcases line two walls. They are filled with dusty leather bound volumes that look like they haven't been opened since they were purchased sometime around the end of the civil war. The Dean's desk is cluttered with stamp books and rare stamps in small display frames. A Liberian

presidential series featuring Carter and Nixon stares at her. Dean Hanh has a reputation for rough treatment of faculty, and after dismissing a well liked assistant professor for failure to publish, the Dean earned the title "Philatilla the Hun." Tasha may be the only faculty member in the entire school that isn't intimidated by the Hun, but then Tasha isn't in the habit of being intimidated by anybody.

The Hun puts down the phone and smiles sadly at Tasha. She is a small delicate woman with very thick, almost bushy, gray hair. The Hun takes a bag of licorice out of her desk and offers Tasha a twist.

"No thank you. What is this all about, Wendy?" Tasha intentionally selects an informal address. The Hun frowns at this, but then her sad smile returns.

"I'm quitting smoking. It helps with the oral fixation," the Hun explains, "I'm afraid I have some bad news for you, Tasha."

"Okay."

"I have orders direct from the Board of Regents. You are under investigation, and until the investigation is completed, you are suspended from all activities at this institution."

She takes a bite of licorice.

"Under investigation for what?" says Tasha, trying keep the rage from her voice, and failing.

"They didn't tell me."

"I have classes underway. I'm a tenured professor, not some post-grad lightweight. You can't suspend me."

"That's true. I can't. But the Board of Regents can. As you know, the board is appointed by the governor to oversee all the public universities in the state. Short of the governor there is

no higher authority. They have the power to overrule decisions by the University President, and if you check your contract, you will see that they also have the power to suspend tenured staff.."

"This is bullshit Wendy, I'll go to the press."

"That would be unwise if you plan to teach here in the future. I have a list of specific instructions from the board, if you follow them there is a chance of preserving your tenure."

"I'm listening."

"First, you are not to set foot on any campus facility until the investigation is completed. Failure to comply with this will result in your arrest for trespassing. I took the liberty of having a formal notice of exclusion drawn up. This is your copy." The Hun hands her a crumpled yellow form. "Second, you are not to have any contact with any students or faculty members during the investigation. This includes contact by phone or electronic media. Third, you will suspend all ongoing research activities until the investigation is completed. Fourth, you will not contact the press regarding this investigation. Failure to comply with the aforementioned guidelines will result in your immediate dismissal from State University, and cancellation of all possible appeals."

The Hun takes another bite of licorice. She seems to have forgotten her previous effort to look sad, and now appears quite amused.

"You'll be hearing from my lawyer."

"I doubt it. The contents of your office will be released upon completion of the investigation," the Hun presses a button on her phone. "Okay, Joey."

Two campus cops step into the room.

"These gentlemen are here to escort you off campus, and Tasha," Wendy smiles, showing smoke-yellowed teeth, "have a nice day."

The polyester warriors take her to the edge of the Pentacrest, and then she is standing across the street in the sunshine, watching students flood by, and wondering what this means, exactly. *Am I fired? It feels like I just got fired. I have a class to teach in twenty minutes. What am I going to do now?*

The daze is momentary, however. It only lasts long enough for Tasha to shift the gears of her intellect from stunned to very-fucking-pissed-off. There is a pay phone in front of the bookstore on the corner. She takes out her calling card and picks up the phone.

"Greenstreet, Washington and Young." The receptionist sings with cheerless, but immaculate professional apathy.

"Bernard Washington, please. This is Doctor Tasha Churel calling."

"One moment please."

A bland version of Mozart's Don Giovanni mixes with static in her ear. Thirty seconds. Two minutes. Five minutes.

"Doctor Churel?" A woman's voice, not Washington.

"Yes."

"This is Jane Wilke, Doctor, Mr. Washington's assistant. I'm afraid that the firm has decided to decline representation at this time."

"What? You're on retainer. The firm has represented my family for the last seventy years. How can you just decline?"

"I understand your concern, Doctor Churel, but the firm's decision is final. Your retainer will be returned to you via express mail tomorrow."

"This is ridiculous. Look, just let me talk to Bernard. I went to undergrad with his son for Christ's sake."

"Again, I sympathize with your concern, but that is out of the question. Please do not call again. Goodbye."

Dial tone. Tasha looks down at the phone in disbelief. Something tall, wearing a pink tank-top, brushes past her. A wadded up piece of paper appears in her hands. She looks up, the figure is moving away in a hurry, it's Colby. She unfolds the ball of crumpled paper. It reads:

"Pretty good bump pass, huh boss? Not exactly KGB, but hey. Heat's on. Meet at BurgerBomb, five minutes. Order something and sit behind me. -C"

She laughs. He is probably taking this more seriously than he should, but at least one person is still talking to her. She picks up the phone and makes another call, using change this time.

"Churel residence."

"It's me, Dolf. I've had a very bad day, and I'm feeling like Key Lime pie. Think you can scrape one together for desert?"

"Of course."

She hangs up and starts toward BurgerBomb, feeling slightly better. She has never been oblivious to the risk of the research she does. She understands the potential for pissing off the wrong people, and as a result, she has long had measures in place to deal with the proverbial attack from above. As she crosses the street to the Ped Mall she doubts she will actually have to go, but if she does, she is ready. She knows that in response to her request for Key Lime pie, Dolf will be turning her American assets into dollars or Euros, and preparing everything needed for a rapid departure.

Colby is sitting in an empty corner of the BurgerBomb eating fries and doing his best to look like he is reading a book. She laughs a little, but not out loud. Tasha goes up to the counter

and orders a lemonade and a wilted little salad that comes in a clear plastic cup shaped container. Yuck. She sits down with her back to Colby, and mimics him, opening a book. She talks low over her straw.

"Don't you think this is taking it a little far, Colby? This isn't 1975 East Berlin."

"Okay, the LeCarre bit might be excessive, but I'm scared. The Hun told me that if I had any contact at all with you prior to the conclusion of the investigation, they would expel me and charge back all the scholarship money they gave me, with interest. That's like eighty-k."

"That's just wrong."

"Hell yeah, it's wrong. If it gets any worse I'm going to dead-drops and rotating book ciphers, just so you know."

She laughs, this time out loud.

"Any idea what's going on?"

"No, although the latest rumor among the grad students is that they're going to jack you up on a sexual harassment charge."

"That's almost flattering. What do you think?"

"I think we are digging in someone's favorite petunia patch, and they noticed and got out the shotgun."

"Yeah, me too. Speaking of petunias, did you get anything on Ostrov Rasshua?"

"Yeah. Nothing official. All the Soviet stuff claims weather station, but I found something on the Internet. Both the Sea Shepherd Society and Green Peace claim to have been chased away from the island by the Russian Navy during the eighties and early nineties. Both groups claim the island housed a Soviet biological weapons facility. The Sea Shepherd Society was actually able to land some ecocommandos on the island in 1995 to check it out, but the

photos they posted show only a burnt concrete slab and a long cargo ramp leading to the sea.

Whatever was there, it's gone now."

"Interesting. Good use of outside sources, Colby."

"But that's not even the best part."

"No?"

"No. I did a little more digging on our favorite submarine captain," he takes a drink, slurping air at the bottom of his cup. "I found out how Kovenko got his fancy medals. I know this guy, Vassily, from undergrad. We had macroeconomics at Columbia together. Anyway, Vassily is at Moscow University now doing a post-doc in Game Theory and Applied Chaos, and I was able to find some things out from him."

"The short version."

"Right. Well, you know how the Russians have been declassifying all kinds of old cold war stuff in the name of openness?"

"Sure."

"Vassiliy says pre-1992 KGB files are practically a lending library. They'll give them out to anyone. You don't even need I.D. So Vassily told me that they recently declassified all the files on awards and citations from the revolution through 1990. I had him go down there and ask for the files for citations and awards issued in 1985. He faxed them over, and there was our Mirian Kovenko. It turns out he was awarded both the Red Star and Hero of the Soviet Union for developing a new strain of small pox called 'super pox.' It is just as contagious as small pox, but acts faster, is unaffected by all known vaccines, and in addition to causing external pox, the virus is said to liquefy the internal organs, much like the hemorrhagic fever viruses Lassa and Ebola."

"Nasty."

"Yeah, messed up. But he made the Politburo happy. Besides the awards, Mirian Kovenko got a dacha by the Black Sea and a private dinner with Brezhnev. All the inside player goodies. The file also indicates there were a year's worth of clinical trials on political prisoners that yielded a mortality rate in excess of ninety-six percent. That's worse than untreated pneumonic plague, and nearly as bad as pulmonary anthrax."

"But a weapon that, unlike anthrax, spreads exponentially without the need for complicated delivery devices. Damn, I'd heard rumors about super-pox when I was with the agency, but I never thought I'd get anything real on it."

"I still don't have anything on how the Skipper ended up on that submarine."

"That's okay."

"It is?"

"Yeah, good job, Kid. Look, I'll explain later. I think we are on to something significant. I want you to keep a low profile for now. Go to class. Do what they tell you. Do you know the curtains in my living room? The purple ones?"

"Sure."

"I always keep them open. If you see them closed, try to get up there unseen by 22:00. And Colby?"

"Hooyah, Boss?"

"Try not to enjoy this too much, it may be about to get serious. Read me?"

"Five-by-five."

– Dudley –

The sun warms his back as he rolls down the sidewalk in front of the Pentacrest. The walk signal turns red in front of him, and Dudley stops with a snap, popping his long board up into his right hand. He looks down at his new skateboard. It is a long narrow cruiser's board with black grip tape on the deck and a pinup photo of nineteen-seventies porn legend Veronica Hart laminated onto the underside. After the broken wrist, he had decided to trade in his short freestyle board for this one.

Since his mom sent him that fat check he has been rewarding himself. He even found a decent tattoo artist. He pulls up his shorts and looks at the new tat on his thigh. It's a picture of the Peanuts characters Charlie Brown and Lucy. Lucy is on her knees blowing Charlie Brown, and he's grinning like she finally let him kick the football. Below the image it says, "Skate, Fuck, Die," in a bold gothic font.

The light changes, and he drops the long-board and pushes off. He smiles, remembering how he used to call long boarders 'grandpas' in his freestyle days. *Old at eighteen, is it possible?* He is about to reassure himself when a blue Suburban with dark windows pulls up in front of him, interrupting the thought. One of the rear windows powers down, and he finds himself looking at Agent Thurman Kresnik. Then his hands are sweating and he almost falls off his board.

"Fine day for a ride, young man."

"Uh, uh-huh."

"Why don't you hop in the car. We have some business to discuss."

The door opens. The Marlboro man grins through his net of sun blasted wrinkles. Dudley hesitates.

"That wasn't a suggestion."

He gets in the car.

– Lamia –

Lamia wakes up to the sound of someone knocking on her bedroom door. It is a hard, urgent knock.

"What?"

"Lamia, you need to get up." Dolf's voice. "We have some important work to do."

She struggles out of bed and opens the door. Dolf has discarded his usual gray suit in favor of jeans and a t-shirt. He is wearing a leather shoulder holster over the t-shirt. Inside is a small black automatic. Lamia has never seen Dolf with a gun, but then she has never seen him in jeans either.

"What's going on?"

"We may be going on a trip in the next few days. I need you to pack half of your new clothes in this."

He hands her a small suitcase.

"Why? Where are we going?"

"It will be a surprise. It isn't certain yet, but it might be on short notice, so it is important to pack right away. Plan for warm weather."

She is about to ask another question, but then he is gone, disappearing down the hall with some more suitcases. She feels nervous. *Why is he wearing a gun?* But she doesn't hesitate. Tasha had taken her shopping at the mall, and she now has more clothes than she has ever had before. *They never would have fit in my old Hello Kitty backpack, not even a tenth of them.* Bitch

stretches in the sun puddle at the foot of her bed and rolls over on his back, making a low ‘roo’ sound. She rubs his belly.

"Come on, you. You have to get up too. Maybe we are going somewhere nice. Do you know how to swim?"

Bitch snorts in response, stands up, and shakes himself till his ears snap against the sides of his head.

"Maybe, we'll see."

She fills her suitcase, folding all her new things carefully, and organizing them in little rows. Bitch pushes his head against the case and the backs of her legs as she carries it out into the living room. There are two other suitcases standing by the front door, so she puts hers next to them. Dolf comes out of the kitchen behind her. He is now wearing a colorful Hawaiian-print shirt open over the t-shirt. It conceals the shoulder holster, but she knows it is still there.

"I don't have time to make you a proper breakfast, Lamia. I'm sorry, but you'll just have to find something on your own. I have to go out for a little while."

"Okay, no problem."

"And Lamia." He pauses.

"Yes."

"While I'm gone, if some one calls or knocks on the door, I don't want you to answer it, okay?"

"Sure, okay. What, are you guys in trouble with the Mafia or something?"

"No. It has to do with Professor Churel's research. Just an ordinary security measure."

"I don't see anything ordinary about you wearing jeans and a Hawaiian shirt."

Dolf almost blushes, but the rising pink stops just above his shirt collar. He doesn't say anything more, but starts lacing up his boots.

She sits down on the sofa and flips on the TV. The Simpsons. Nelson gives Bart a wedgie. Bitch hops up beside her and licks her cheek.

"Eew! Dog slobber."

She wipes it off with her sleeve and squeezes his nose. He snorts, and sneezes, shaking his head. The door clicks shut and Dolf is gone. She looks at Bitch.

"You know what that means? Breakfast."

Bitch follows her into the kitchen.

"Cereal, boring. Toast, lame." She opens the freezer. "Jackpot."

Lamia spoons out two huge bowls of ice cream. Mint chocolate-chip for her and vanilla for Bitch. She tries to put Bitch's bowl in her lap, but he comes close to tipping it over and spills some on her pajamas, so she puts it on the floor. There, he promptly tips it over and proceeds to grind ice cream into the nap of Tasha's Turkish kilim with his tongue. Lamia laughs and goes back to the Simpsons. Homer is chasing the dog with a hammer.

She wakes from a doze to Tasha coming through the front door. Tasha looks disoriented. Bitch is lying on his back with his legs in the air, his belly bloated, and his chin and whiskers covered with dried on vanilla ice cream. He looks up at her and belches. Tasha doesn't seem to notice. The rug squelches white goo as she walks across it, and she sits down in the armchair next to Lamia's couch.

"What's on?"

Lamia looks at the TV.

"Infomercial for steak knives."

"Do people really buy that stuff?"

"I guess. Are you okay?"

"Yeah, just a strange day at work. Did you pack?"

"Yeah, Dolf told me. Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise. I'm not sure when we will leave yet, but it could be soon."

"That's what he said."

"Well...Hey, is that what you had for breakfast?"

Lamia looks at Tasha, thinking she might be mad.

"Yes."

"Looks good to me. Is there any left?"

"Sure."

Tasha jumps up and goes into the kitchen. *How weird was that?* Tasha comes back a moment later with a big bowl of ice cream.

– Whitney –

She isn't certain of the moment when she lost control. When edges of rage stopped creeping, and leaped. The urges that had been eroding her will for so many weeks had become her. As a trickle of water is suddenly a flood, she released. The moment is unreal, and yet she smells, and tastes, and feels, and it is all consuming in its intensity.

Death looks sweet to her, and she smiles as she rips out long ropes of his intestines with her bare hands. They fly over her shoulder and land on the concrete floor with a wet squishy sound. Kevin had stopped screaming just a few seconds earlier, and now he just twitches, and

gurgles, and drools. Whitney looks into his eyes as she rips out his left kidney. He looks very sad, and a stream of tears run out of his eyes and down into his hair and ears. He reminds her of her little brother. When Cassius was six, he lost his dog, Mr. Pete. The boy had cried and cried for days. Whitney never liked that dog, but she likes her little brother. At least she used to. Kevin chokes, spewing a great fountain of blood out onto his chin and neck, then he moves no more. His heart, at first roaring in her ears, slows, and stops. She smiles even more broadly now.

"Pretty death. Pretty, pretty," she says, licking the blood off his chin and neck.

The room stinks of blood and urine and shit. Kevin shit and pissed himself when she first tore into him. Now it is spread all over the floor, squished into elaborate patterns of color by her feet as she slid around trying to pin him down.

Whitney gets up and walks to one of the blackened windows leaving a trail of death wet footprints behind her. The floor feels hot on her feet, and she leans against the window wanting to feel the cool of the night. Her skin is flushed and she is starting to sweat. She stands there, masturbating and licking the dead boy's blood from her fingers.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"The basis of optimism is sheer terror."

-Oscar Wilde

– **Jerry-Jean** –

"Library access, registration, and release of grades have been restricted due to your unpaid U-bill, please contact the State University Business Office."

Jerry-Jean stares at the error message on the computer in disbelief. She needs access to the library computers to prepare for finals. The haze of apathy that had swallowed her after her time with Whitney evaporates in an instant. It is replaced by cruel reality. She is in big trouble.

She takes the books she needs down stairs to the checkout counter. Her hands shake as she hands the bleary-eyed student clerk her card.

"I'm sorry, but you can't check these out. It says to report to the business office."

Jerry-Jean takes her card and hikes up the little hill to the Pentacrest. She feels nausea, and the deep horrible panic of her first weeks on campus. Worse still, the sun is so bright that she keeps having to squint. It's giving her a headache.

The sullen bureaucrat at the business office tells her that she still owes more than three thousand dollars, and that her access to all university facilities will continue to be restricted until she pays.

"But finals. I have to study for finals. How am I supposed to study if I can't use the library?"

"Maybe the financial aid office can help you."

The clerk shuts her window and begins investigating a box of donuts in the next cubical.

Jerry-Jean finds her way to the financial aid office, where she waits in line for three hours. She is not the only one with money problems. The financial aid councilor with the lazy eye repeats his suggestion of parent-student loans, if she can only find a cosigner.

"They aren't just for parents, you know." He says. "I mean you could get any relative to cosign. An aunt, a grandparent. That's really all I can suggest. You might try to get some of your restrictions lifted by appealing to the office of the Dean. I understand they sometimes make exceptions."

Unfortunately she can't get into the Dean's office because the doorway is blocked by a horde of reporters. The reporters are bumping and jostling and fighting each other for camera angle. Some of them are shouting questions to the Dean about a body that was found in the Iowa River that morning. The Dean is standing at a portable podium and answering questions with great composure. But it is more than composure, there is a certain light in his eyes. His face is rigid and serious, but his eyes express joy. She gives up and walks home singing softly to herself, "great big gobs of greasy grimy gopher guts."

The bunker is somewhat recovered. They are still all without computers, but the university replaced the cubical dividers and removed the damage furniture and TV. Dudley is sitting on the floor cross-legged, reading.

"Hey J.J."

She doesn't respond, but goes to her bunk and sits there. The panic is so intense she can't think. She blows her nose on her t-shirt and wipes some sweat away from the sides of her head. She is sweating a lot. *Do I have a fever? Can't be sick now. Have to fight.*

She spent her whole life trying to find a way to get off that farm. She sees school as her only chance. *There is nothing else. There is no other out.* Not for her, not that she can imagine. *They can't take this away from me; not without blood.* Her hands whiten against the frame of her cot and she stifles the need to roar. She breathes out long and slow. *There is one more option.* She did not want to do this. A month ago she would have killed herself first. *But what else is there? I can do this. Just hold it together. You used to believe pride was a sin, right? Right. Maybe it isn't a sin, but it stands in your way. I know.* And for the first time since she stopped going to church, Jerry-Jean prays. She prays not to the God of Abraham that she has left behind, but to whatever gods may be; and most of all she prays to herself. She prays that she will have

the courage to be humble. But under the prayer something dark stirs, something that storms against humiliation, that rages against surrender.

– Tasha –

"He always referred to the modern affinity for moral relativism as 'the Oprahfication of America.' He was quite serious. It always made me laugh."

Tasha leans back against a pillar. Whitney takes a drag from her cigarette, lighting her face for a moment in the glow. She looks very different from what Tasha remembers.

"You speak of him as if he were dead," says Tasha.

"He is."

"How?"

"Why does it matter?"

"It matters to me."

"Do you ever wonder what the world would be like if everyone just woke up?"

"Woke up from what?"

"Marx may have been a utopian nincompoop who failed to recognize the most basic elements of human nature, but he was right about religion, you know? It is an opiate. A beautiful fantasy that subverts thought, erases fears, and makes immediate problems seem meaningless, but like opium, it is a tool of subjugation."

"Are you subjugated?"

"I would desperately like to be, but opiates don't seem to work on me anymore. Are you religious, Professor Churel?"

"Religion is like Chinese food. I don't go out for it because I can make it better at home.

Where is Thud?"

Whitney laughs, "Why do you teach, Professor Churel?"

"I find it entertaining, and perhaps I hope to do something valuable."

"Valuable to whom, exactly?"

"Society, my students."

"And where do you suppose this compulsive benevolence comes from?"

"I don't know."

"Sure you do. You can use dweeb-speak, I can handle it."

"My individual morality is derived from environmental factors in my social development."

"Not genetics?"

"I don't think so."

"And whom does your morality benefit?"

"Myself and my group. Group identified variably, of course."

"So you will agree that your sense of right and wrong is an artificial social construction predicated on individual and group benefits?"

"Sure."

"The moral relativists suggest that environmental factors contribute so significantly to aberrant behavior that some ground on society's demands for personal responsibility must be ceded. They want flex in the fabric of social stricture."

"I imagine that 'flex,' as you call it, exists, regardless of what they want."

"Represented by the gray economy, unsolved crime, and activities occurring outside the framework of the social contract."

"I suppose those are some examples, yes."

"Do you believe in free will, Tasha?"

"Yes, although I find that most of my colleagues are scientific determinists."

"But you live within the framework of your 'morality.' A morality that you concede is derived from environmental factors. You have built your career on living inside a box. Where is the room for free will? How can morality and freedom coexist?"

"It's a trade off. Like civil rights for security. Neither can exist in totality without eliminating the other. I am partially free. I surrender some part of my freedom of action for the sake of social stability. My choice to do so is a product of free will; I could break the contract at any time. Anyone could."

"For the sake of a warm fire and a pat on the head, the noble wolf, child of the night, became a mewling dog groveling under the table for scraps."

"The life of a hunter is not so easy as it looks."

"Perhaps, but at least it's free. Without freedom, what's the point? Knowledge, power, wisdom, truth?"

"Is that what you're looking for; truth?"

"People who claim to know the truth are the destroyers of worlds. The Bible, the Koran, the Communist Manifesto, Mein Kampf; there is more blood on the pages of these books than on any slaughterhouse floor. I'm not looking for truth because there is no truth, there is only hard fiction."

Whitney flicks her cigarette into the dark. It bounces off some rubble, shedding cinders.

"Thud used to tell me that hedonism disgusted him. That it made him angry because it represented selfish thought, and a lack of control. Perhaps even a lack of self-respect. I always suspected that was directed at me." Whitney laughs from the dark.

"Do you know where Thud is?"

"I'm going to bed... And Tasha."

"Yes?"

"You're not well. You should really get that heart checked out."

The garage door, which Whitney had only opened about four feet when Tasha came in, begins to grind closed. Tasha feels a sudden panic. As if being trapped in here, in the dark with Whitney, would be very, very bad. She isn't sure why she feels this, but she scrapes both knees crawling under the door as fast as she can, just the same.

She walks back toward campus in a light rain. The trees are beginning to green and she can smell the heady, thick stench of pig farms in the distance. The sewer of spring has sprung.

This morning Tasha woke up with no place to go. She can't remember that ever happening before. She went looking for her missing students for no greater reason than the need to have something to do. It is a risk, but she doesn't care. A depressed-looking blond girl in Thud's dorm room told her where Whitney was living. The girl didn't warn her what she would find.

How could she know I'm sick? Tasha had recently been diagnosed with an irregular heartbeat and high blood pressure. Her friend Dr. Abed had been urging her to get a pacemaker implanted for the last six months. *Not yet. I'm not an old woman yet.*

Cicada bugs buzz staccato in the trees.

Tasha knows she should run, escape this place, but she can't leave without finding out the rest. It is calling to her. *It feels like a mission.* Her sense of reason screams to let go, but she can't. *No apologies, no surrender.*

– Dudley –

"You've got the camera?"

"Yeah, if it hasn't melted. That's the third time you've asked, by the way." There's a tremor of fear in Dudley's voice, but Nad doesn't seem to notice. He bites his tongue, to keep from shaking, and checks the digital camera in his pocket. It's very hot, everything's very hot, but it's still working. They are walking in the dark, tracing their way over wires and pipes with the pale red beam of Nad's tactical flashlight. It is nearly a hundred and thirty degrees in the steam tunnel, and they have been hiking for almost two hours. Adrian, who is bringing up the rear, trips over a pipe.

"Fuck. Damn it, Nad. Why couldn't we bring normal goddamn flashlights?"

"You know why," mutters Nad.

"I still don't think they have cameras down here."

"But you don't know."

"Fine. Fuck. Whatever. Fuckin' punk-ass breeder."

Nad laughs, but only a little. They are all too hot and tired to laugh much. Nad's light dances and moves as they walk. Watching it is beginning to make Dudley nauseous. He's about to ask Nad to hold it steady, when Nad speaks.

"Door."

They stop in front of a white steel door. The door is set in a panel that has holes cut out of its base to allow the steam pipes and conduit to pass through. Nad plays his light over the door. There is a sign in the center with red letters. It reads, "Elmdale Research Campus, Restricted Access."

There is a digital keypad on one side of the door. Nad and Dudley lean against the wall to let Adrian pass.

"What do you think, Dude, can you open it?" Says Nad.

"Just a minute, just a minute. I don't even know if the laptop's working. They don't do too well in the heat you know?"

"Dudley, I think this is where you should start shooting."

Dudley takes out the camera and flips out the view screen. It lights up and shows a dull red picture of the door.

"Just don't show my face, okay?" Says Adrian, who is busy cutting the plastic housing off the keypad with a box knife.

"Hey, I'm a pro, no worries." But he sounds worried – and he feels like he's going to piss his pants.

"Doesn't being a 'pro' imply that you get paid for something? When have you ever been paid for this?" Says Nad, flashing his light on his grin for effect.

"Light, nimrod," snaps Adrian.

Adrian strips the insulation off some of the wires coming out of the back of the keypad and attaches alligator clips on wires that run into the back of his laptop.

"Okay, now pray."

Nad hums a traditional Buddhist chant, and Adrian hits the start button on his computer. The hard drive spins up with its own mystic hum, and the screen comes up happy blue. Adrian opens a window and a series of graphs representing electrical signals trace across the screen.

"I love cold war technology. It's like tinker toys."

"Just open the door, genius fag.," says Nad.

But just then the laptop starts making a clicking noise and the screen goes blank. Adrian hits the start button a couple of times. Nothing. He removes the battery, counts to ten, puts it back in, and hits start again. Nothing. A smell like burnt hair begins to fill the little passageway.

"Cooked. It's too hot, man. I told you. The processor overheated. It's probably dead for good."

Nad slams a fist into his own thigh.

"Damn. Adrian, is there no way to crack the door without it?"

"No, I mean it's simple, but I need to read the code and duplicate it. I can't do that without the computer."

"Shit."

"What now, feckless leader?" Says Adrian.

"Retreat and regroup, we're going to option two."

Dudley muffles a sigh of relief, shuts off the camera, and puts it back in his pocket. By the time they get back to campus they are all so tired and dehydrated that option two is put off till morning. Dudley drinks nearly a gallon of water, and still feeling like burnt toast, passes out on his bunk.

After what seems like no more than ten minutes of sleep, he wakes to Nad shaking him.

"Wake up, Jizz Monkey, we have a meeting in five minutes."

Dudley sits up, feeling like he must have got drunk and lost a fight the night before. But then he remembers, ten miles in the steam tunnels.

"Okay, okay. Just promise. No more hot."

"I promise. No more hot. Come on, soldier, up and at 'em!"

"I'll pay you to go away." Dudley looks over at his alarm clock. It is almost noon. He slept for twelve hours.

Adrian peeks around the cubical.

"Are you decent?"

"Never, and rarely respectable either."

Dudley pulls on his pants and shoes, feeling sharp pains with every movement. Nad leads them out into the hall and locks the door. Dudley doesn't really see the point. *There's nothing of any value left in the bunker.*

"Where are we going?" Dudley asks Adrian.

"Bibi's room."

"Down the hall Bibi?"

"Down the hall Bibi is the head of the Animal Liberation Brigade; an animal rights group so militant they make PETA look like the National Rifle Association. Thud always called them the Veganators." Says Adrian, licking his lips. His lips look very chapped.

"But why? How are a bunch of carrot-nazis going to help us? I thought you guys hated vegetarians."

"Nad does, although he used to bang this one. ALB staged a raid on Elmdale last year. Broke into the animal research facilities. They had some problems. Tried to bait the guard dogs with tofu burgers, and K'uei – he's their point man – got chewed up pretty bad. Still, they got in.

Released all the animals. Neugaul sent out search teams to recover them, but they couldn't find most of them. Still hear about rhesus monkeys turning up in some farmer's barn every now and then."

"So these guys got in." *Shit*. Dudley is beginning to feel nauseous again. His sense of relief at last night's failure is eroding fast.

"Yeah, and Nad thinks they can give us enough intel to get in too."

On the way down the hall Dudley notices students peeling away their door decorations. Photos, posters, and altars are all torn down. It reminds him of some sort of Shinto ritual. A ritual that ends every school year with the symbols of identity removed, and the places so many people called home returned to their natural sterility. He shudders, *it's horrible*.

They stop outside a door painted in rainbow sunburst with a small picture of Siddhartha in the center. Below the tranquil Buddha, a poster shouts, "Meat is Murder!" Bibi has apparently not yet come to terms with her impermanence.

Nad knocks, and a muted voice ushers them in. Bibi is sitting in almost the same place as she was the first day Dudley saw her. Her formerly pink hair is now metallic silver, and the guitar is on a stand instead of in her hands, but other than that, everything is the same. The boy he saw the day he arrived running stairs in a rubber suit is sitting on the bed. He scowls at them as they come in.

"What do you want, killers?" Says the rubber boy.

Nad grins, "Hey K'uei, how's that dog bite healing up?"

"Hi Nad," Bibi looks up though sparkling locks, "What's this about?"

"We think Thud's been kidnapped. We think they might be holding him at Perdition, or at least that Neugaul is involved. We tried the tunnels, but it didn't work. We need your intel to get in and get him out."

"Never much for subtlety, Nad," says Bibi.

"Why? Why should we help you?" Says K'uei.

"Well for one thing, we didn't roll on you when you broke in the first time," says Adrian.

"Oh, so now we owe you for not being narcs? That sounds like extortion to me," says K'uei.

"No, it's not like that. There's more." Nad drops a roll of papers on the floor in front of Bibi.

"What's this?" She asks.

"Security intel and schematics for the animal labs at State University Hospitals and Clinics." Says Nad, "not extortion, a fair trade. Ours for yours."

They spend the next two hours going over Perdition security with Bibi and K'uei. Nad asks questions, Adrian takes notes, and Dudley films it all with a fiber-optic lens punched through a hole in his pocket.

"That's it?" says Nad.

"That's it. We have limited information on the central facility. Like I said, we were only interested in this western outbuilding that houses the animals. What you have should get you in the door, though."

Nad steps out into the hall to talk with Bibi, and they are left with the ever-cheerful K'uei. Dudley looks at him.

"Hey K'uei, aren't you a wrestler? I thought..."

The activist cuts him off, bristling. "What, that because I'm a jock, I ought to be a hate-fascist oppressor like your boy there?" K'uei lunges at Dudley, but Adrian's big hand stops him short.

"Hold up there, Monkey Boy," says Adrian. "We were leaving anyway."

– Lamia –

"...Freshman Kevin Capiz was found in the netting above the dam. Preliminary reports indicate that he was disemboweled, and although the coroner has not yet released his official report, State City Police are treating the death as a homicide. An Iowa State Police special investigations unit has been dispatched to assist the department."

Lamia changes the channel, but finds nothing. She thumps on Bitch's chest to wake him up. He snorts and sits up, pushing his nose against her chin. Tasha comes in limping. Her knees are bleeding. Lamia runs to her.

"What happened? Are you okay?"

Tasha laughs. "Yes, I'm fine. It's silly really. Just an accident with a garage door. Will you get the first aid kit, Lamia?"

Lamia runs to the bathroom and retrieves the kit from the cabinet below the sink. When she returns she finds Tasha sitting in an arm chair watching CNN. Tasha holds out a hand to take the kit.

"I'll do it," says Lamia.

"Okay. You'll want some antiseptic. There's a spray."

"I know. Just hold still."

She sprays the antiseptic on Tasha's knees and wipes away some of the blood with a sterile gauze pad.

"Does it hurt?"

"Not much. Mostly I feel dumb."

"Like Dolf breaking his ankle?"

"Oh he told you about that, did he. He is very proud of being self-deprecating. It is a bit of a stretch for him, you know."

Lamia puts big square bandages on both of Tasha's knees. The package says "flesh" but they stand out like little peach-colored flags against the dark brown of Tasha's skin.

"Hey, you can help me with something."

Lamia looks up, excited. "Really, with what?"

"Well, I'm doing this research project, and I need someone to help me organize it. Let's go into the library, I'll show you."

In the library Tasha has her files all spread out on the floor. Some are marked with Russian names, some with pictures. A big corkboard is hanging from one of the bookshelves. Pictures and notes cover the board with strips of black tape leading from one to the next. Some pieces of tape lead nowhere. Some lead to post-its with big red question marks on them. Tasha explains that she wants to organize the files chronologically. She spends a few minutes explaining how to read Russian dates, and then they begin, one page at a time.

"Wow, you can read Russian?"

"Sure."

"That's so cool. What else can you read?"

"Chinese, Spanish, German, Russian, Arabic, and French. I can only actually speak Arabic, Russian, and Mandarin Chinese, though. My pronunciation in the others is pretty bad."

Lamia lifts the pages she finished; underneath is a sticky note with, "DGSE1993CDS56dhampir," printed on it.

"This is a Romani word, you know?"

Tasha looks up, "You mean like as in Gypsy?"

"That's actually derogatory. They call themselves Romani. This word at the end of the numbers, 'dhampir,' it means, 'child of a vampire'."

"Well this was on a disk I'm having decoded. I think it's part of a covert operation that happened in the nineties. Spies name their operations all sorts of odd things. I was once on a mission in North Africa called 'broken toaster.' The name doesn't usually have anything to do with what's actually going on. That way if anyone finds out the code name, they still won't know what it refers to."

"So this isn't about vampires?"

"Not likely," Tasha laughs, "my research is about a Soviet-era biological weapons scientist and a missing submarine. Much scarier stuff than anything supernatural."

"I guess."

"Although I did see a former student today who might be a vampire," Tasha laughs again. "She used to be one of those squeaky clean sorority types, so full of school spirit you want to strangle them; a really good student too. She took most of my upper division classes. Anyway, now she's sitting in the dark, smoking cigarettes, and waxing nihilistic."

"What's nihilistic?"

"Someone who doesn't believe in anything. Do you want some juice? I'm thirsty."

– Whitney –

Whitney climbs the stairs to her loft with swift bouncing steps. She hits the switch closing the garage door and hears the overdressed professor scrambling to get out. She smells the faint but distinct salted-copper of blood scraped from exposed knees and smiles to herself. *Run. Run very fast. You don't want to stay here with me. I might get hungry.*

She is hungry.

She lights another cigarette and wanders across her huge chalk drawing. In the corner near the shower it is smudged and smeared, images of walls and staircases erased by blood. A few feet above the smudges hangs the cause of this artistic desecration.

The boy is hanging by one ankle. A rusty piece of wire she found in the bathroom punctures the space between his ankle and his Achilles tendon, attaching him to the beam above. His left leg hangs askew at an odd angle. He is a large boy, strong, but not all muscle. Probably three hundred pounds. His eyes are open in a frozen look of fear and shock. The look a reflection of his last thought. His throat is ripped out. A ragged hole exposes torn tendons, arteries, and a yellow flash of bone. Blood has run down his face adding gravity to his frozen expression, and is congealing in gelatinous globules in his hair. A few inches below the boy's head Whitney had set a bucket to catch the blood, but it isn't working the way she had intended.

She picks up the bucket. The contents jiggle like a jello mold.

"Fuck!"

She throws the bucket at the shower. Thickened blood oozes down the concrete wall like pudding. She takes another drag from her cigarette and stubs it out on the torso of the dead man.

"Time to clean your useless ass up."

She jumps straight up, grasps the beam with both hands, and vaults up like a gymnast beginning a routine on the uneven bars. She squats on the beam for a moment, looking down at her drawing twelve feet below. *It will be a shame to leave it*, but the feeling fades quickly. She was never sentimental, and is less so now. She reaches down and grabs the dead boy's foot, lifting the body a few inches while she unhooks the thick wire with her free hand. She lifts him free and holds the body out in front of her, supporting his whole weight with one hand. *It feels light. It feels like nothing*. She lets him drop with a wet thump.

After dark she drives the body, wrapped in plastic in the trunk just as she had done after killing Kevin, a mile up the Iowa River and drops it in. She remembers reading that water tends to eliminate physical evidence. She doesn't care if they find the body eventually. In another week she will be gone.

She returns the Charger to her garage and changes into blond coquette. The night is warm and ripe with deep organic smells. They hit her with the same intensity as before, but rather than recoiling, she breaths deep, reveling in them. Blood has given her control. As she walks from block to block she can identify differing dog territories from the scent of their tree markings. She can smell the spring lust of squirrels rutting in the leaves above. She can hear the squirming of the night crawlers in the Pentacrest turf, and the steady nip-nip of locusts chewing holes in the topiary that is greening on the lawn of the Kappa Gamma house.

A morbidly obese woman in a Jurassic Gremlin with rusted lace for fenders stops at the corner in front of her. She can hear the ping of each valve in its dying engine, and the weak fup of each valve in the driver's dying heart. The woman's breath is thick and wet, the sound of decay. It repels her, and she crosses the street quickly.

In front of the little magazine store in the Ped mall a tall, thin Asian girl with blond dreadlocks is smoking a clove cigarette. Besides this girl, the street is deserted.

Whitney walks up to her, taking out a cigarette.

"Light?"

The girl looks at her, smiles, and pushes a matted golden rope behind her ear.

"Sure."

Whitney leans in to light off the clove. She isn't really certain this is going to work. The effect might be gender specific. She puffs and exhales very hard in the girl's face.

"Oh." Says the girl, looking perplexed. But then the confusion increases to daze, and her pupils expand to the size of dimes. "Oh," she says again, as if to emphasize it.

Whitney takes the clove butt from the girl's mouth and tosses it in the gutter. She pulls the girl's face very close to her.

"You," the girl giggles a little, "you smell so good. What is that?"

"I taste even better," says Whitney, kissing her. The girl resists a little bit, but then surrenders, opening her mouth.

As they walk, the girl can't seem to keep her feet moving in a straight line, and she keeps mumbling to herself.

"Are we going to have sex?" Says the girl, looking a little confused again. "Because I don't really like girls. I mean, I'm straight."

Whitney kisses her hard, pushing her up against a wall and numbing her out again.

"Oh, don't you worry, sex isn't what I had in mind."

The girl is too spaced to respond. She has actually begun to drool. They are in an alley between a bar and a hotel. The alley is very dark, and the only sounds of people Whitney can

hear are distant; distant and sleeping. A tendril of saliva drips from the girl's chin onto her t-shirt. Whitney is still hungry, but it isn't the painful, urgent hunger she felt before. She feels measured. She feels in control.

"Do you want to see something?"

The girl looks at her, her head rolling on her neck like a very young infant's.

"Thure," drools the girl.

Whitney smiles at her, and as she smiles she contracts muscles in her upper jaw, muscles that did not even exist a month ago, muscles that fewer than five anatomists in the world could identify. As the muscles contract her new canine teeth extend, pushing down through her gums until they are almost an inch long. Whitney opens her mouth a bit to emphasize the effect.

"T-t-teef," says the girl. She is shaking a little.

Whitney pushes the girl up against the wall again and licks her neck. She can feel the thick carotid pulse on her tongue, and taste the salty perfumed skin. She is hungrier than she thought.

"Teef," says the girl, now shaking quite a bit. "No, no, no teef."

Whitney can smell the girl's adrenal glands release, pumping fear into her blood. She puts her hand over the girl's mouth and pushes her fangs into the thick warm artery. The hot oil of death gushes into Whitney's mouth, she can feel her throat warm as it flows down. The girl begins to jerk immediately, kicking and pushing, and when she starts trying to scream Whitney squeezes, feeling the girl's teeth and jaw crack and crumble under her hand. No more than a muffled squeak.

Whitney is full. Her skin has flushed a dark pink, and she is covered with sweat.

The girl is unconscious, but still breathing weakly. Her mouth has a mashed, caved in appearance, like it was crushed with a rock or a hammer. Bubbles of bloody foam come to her lips with each shallow breath. Whitney takes the girl's head under her arm and lifts up in a sudden motion. There is a low cracking sound, the girl's heart stops beating. Whitney puts her down and kneels beside her, listening. *No, definitely dead.* She takes a box knife from her pocket and cuts across the holes made by her fangs several times. It begins to look like a ragged knife wound. Then she takes out a small bottle of bleach and pours it over the girl's face and neck. The chemical smell is so strong it makes her eyes water. She puts the bottle in her pocket and retreats at a fast walk.

She is three blocks from her kill and enjoying the cool breeze on her overheated skin when she hears the engine behind her. It is a big engine, but muffled, as if padded by something. The vehicle is coming up slowly, when it is about a block away she can hear the voices of men inside the vehicle, also strangely muffled and with some kind of accent.

"Thermal."

"I'm reading forty-three point five, centigrade. Positive. The subject must have just fed."

"Distance?"

"Eighty meters. Initiating approach."

She can hear the engine revving up and the rush of air as it thrusts toward her. She stops mid-stride, turns and runs directly at the big Suburban, she can hear them under her pounding heart and the fast pad of her feet on the road.

"Wha- *qu'est-ce qu'il ya!?!'*"

"Fuck, *fais gaffe!* Fuck!"

The Suburban is moving thirty-five miles an hour, and she is running nearly as fast. The ground between them disappears in less than a second, and she leaps, landing on the hood in a heavy crouch. The hood collapses in from the impact and the engine begins making a rough banging noise.

"Brakes, *putain merde!*"

Whitney hooks a hand between the hood and the windshield and braces herself as the big truck smokes all four tires. The sheet metal she is holding deforms under her grip, but she manages to hold on. With her free hand, she begins punching at the thick, dark green windshield. She can hear the voices screaming inside. The windshield begins to flake. White chips fly off, and then it cracks, a dent like a deformed bullseye sags inward.

"*Tu te rend compte* – supposed to stop twenty-millimeter!?!"

"Gas, gas. We have to get her off!"

"But the orders!"

"*Je m'en fou!*"

The big tires whine and the suburban jumps forward. She keeps hitting; the windshield is feeling softer with each impact. The suburban weaves back and forth, trying to shake her off and scraping against cars that are parked on both sides of the road, and still she holds on. She hits and hits, and then it gives, and her hand is through. She thrusts her arm through to the shoulder, and feels neck. In one quick motion she crushes the driver's larynx and pulls him forward hard enough to snap his spine against the thick windshield. At the same moment she hears:

"*Nique-toi !*" And a crackle of muffled gunfire.

White spots speckle the inside of the glass as the big car turns, now without a driver, and bounds up onto the lawn of a corner house. Whitney leaps clear just as the car hits a small retaining wall,

flips onto its side, and crashes through the bay window of the little ranch. She lands on the sidewalk in a three-point crouch, and is running before the chaos stops moving.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"You know you won, G?"

Won what?

The wet t-shirt contest, Motherfucker."

-Ice Cube

– **Jerry-Jean** –

May

The air inside the phone booth feels colder. Jerry-Jean knows that's impossible, but she feels it just the same.

She had the dream about shooting the dog from the levee again last night. She remembers dropping her rifle and running all the way home, the screams of that little girl echoing in her head. She picks up the phone, and puts it down again. Tears stream down her cheeks. Her father had been very angry about the lost gun. He made her find a switch, and then he made her. She never told him, though. She never told anyone. Most of the time she wouldn't even admit it to herself; that, that day on the levee she hadn't been aiming for the dog, she had been aiming for the little girl. She picks up the phone again, wiping her eyes on her sleeve.

She uses a calling card she stole from a pocket in Dudley's backpack to make the call. She didn't want to steal, but she only has twenty-eight cents left, and it's a long way to Prairie

Du Chien. *I will pay him back.* She is here because she didn't want to call from the bunker, and even if she had, the University has restricted her long distance code.

The phone is ringing. Her mouth feels dry. All the blood seems to have left her hands and they are the cold, numb hands of someone else holding the phone to her ear. Ring. Ring. Ring. Ring. Ring.

"Yah." The wet sawdust voice of her father.

"Daddy?"

"Yah. You done down there yet?"

"No, Daddy, I have finals."

"So whut ya callin' fur. I'm puttin' out the no-till today. Got a heck of a deal on some Bullet. Could a' used you here fur that."

"Daddy, I...my financial aid didn't come out to as much as they said."

He doesn't say anything for a few seconds, and she holds her breath.

"How much?"

"I need three-thousand five-hundred dollars."

"No."

"No? Daddy, they aren't going to let me register for next semester. They won't even let me use the library. I can't study for finals. I don't want to fail. Please, I'll do anything you want. I'll come home on every break. I'll help you on the farm. I'll do anything you want...anything."

"That don't hold no charms fur me anymore, Jerry-Jean. You were gonna fail anyway. Best you let that go and get back where you belong. I'm not throwin' away any money on this."

A dial tone sizzles in her ear.

She lets the phone drop and fights the booth doors open. A pudgy girl with braces waiting to use the phone is standing in her way. Jerry-Jean slams into her, throwing the girl to the sidewalk, and runs toward Purge Hall. Her face is hot, and she keeps running into crowds of students on the way to class. She punches through them, knocking people aside, and not slowing down. A few yell obscenities at her, but she doesn't hear them. She doesn't hear anything but her own rage.

– Tasha –

Tasha is rearranging the post-its on her board. *Too many pieces are missing.* She has an intuitive idea of what the situation might be, but she is a long way from really knowing. She shuffles through the loose papers in her briefcase and chances on the card of Agent Thurman Kresnik of the Secret Service. Her fingers trace over the embossed phone numbers and e-mail address. She picks up the phone, but instead of the numbers on the card, she dials information.

"What city please."

"Chicago."

"For what listing."

"United States Department of the Treasury."

She is put through to the treasury department in Chicago and wades through a dozen voice menus before she reaches an actual operator.

"USDT, how may I direct your call?"

"Secret Service."

"Hold please."

An automated voice advises that her call is being recorded and then she hears ringing.

"Secret Service, Chicago, this is Agent Pijavica."

"Hi Agent Pijavica, my name is Dr. Tasha Churel. I'm trying to reach an Agent Thurman Kresnik."

"Um, okay, hold for a minute Dr. Churel."

It turns out to be much more than a minute. She is reading over her notes when he comes back.

"Are you sure that was a secret service agent, Dr. Churel? Name spelled T-h-u-r-m-a-n K-r-e-s-n-i-k?"

She looks at the card. "Yes, that's correct."

"Well I checked the computer, and we don't have a Thurman Kresnik here in Chicago. No listing in the national database either. I asked my boss if he was a new hire. Maybe not in the computer yet, but he had never heard of him. Did someone represent himself to be a federal agent, ma'am? Because that's a felony."

"Oh, I probably just wrote down the name wrong. It isn't important. Thank you for your time Agent Pijavica, you've been very helpful."

Tasha looks at the card, and dials one of the numbers on the front.

"Secret Service, Chicago, how may I direct your call."

She hangs up with a narrow smile. *Someone is going to a great deal of trouble.*

"Mail, Dr. Churel."

Dolf comes in with the day's mail on a lacquered tray. She touches his hand for a moment, but then turns to sorting through it.

A notice from the bank that her IRA and accounts have been seized by court order. That's okay, all the assets she needs were liquidated by Dolf the day before. A note from the president of the faculty association apologizing for her situation, but indicating that the association lawyers will not be defending her in this matter. A letter from her sister, complaining about her cheating husband and the discomfort of menopause. Various junk. At the bottom of the pile is a small padded envelope with Purge Hall as the only return address. Inside she finds a stack of crumpled papers and a disk. A note from Adrian Zeneu is taped to the disk.

"Professor Churel, the DVD is decrypted. I haven't had a chance to watch it, but it should be good to go. Sorry I couldn't drop it off in person, but Nad, that's Thud Wardog's roommate, has me running around like a lunatic. Mad conspiracy theories. I would be embarrassed to go into greater detail, but if you see me humiliated on the Daily Idiot's police blotter tomorrow, just know that it was for a pal. Nad asked that I give you his notes. He says it's the magic bullet, and that you would understand. Don't worry about the extra K. You've been cool, and I probably shouldn't have soaked you as much as I did. -A."

She takes the DVD into the living room, and puts it in. The phone is ringing. Dolf answers it.

"Churel residence. Hold please."

He comes out of the kitchen and hands her the phone.

"Dean Ramanga, of the Business School."

She pauses the video just as it is spinning up.

"Roger."

"Hi Tasha, hey, what's going on? It's a regular Orwellian daymare around here. You must have pissed off someone interesting, kudos. I'm calling you from a pay phone, if you can believe that."

She can hear the traffic behind him.

"Oh I believe you, Roger. Did you find out about Sucoyan Ocean Mining?"

"Right, yes, that's why I'm calling. Their ground operations division was sold to Mitsui, the Atlantic fleet went to a Greek company called Rhodes Intercon, and their ships in the Pacific were sold to GHC West, a subdivision of Neugaul Pharmaceutical. Why a drug company would be interested in ocean mining, I don't know. Miracle cures from plankton or some such thing."

"Roger, thank you, really. Look, I can't talk now, but I will call you."

"Sure, okay Tasha, that invitation for dinner's still open. Kate would love to see you."

"Sure, Roger. Soon, I promise."

She is not surprised. Tasha sits back on the couch and restarts the video. Why should she be surprised? As the world switched to a market economy the next stage of covert warfare was bound to be corporate. She had actually been planning to put a class together on it, just not this soon.

A black screen comes up with the words, "*Direction Generale de Securite Exterieur*," and below, "*dhampir*." The French words are familiar to her. It is the name of the France's version of the Central Intelligence Agency. The black screen is replaced by unsteady images from a helicopter at sea. The helicopter is approaching a ship. It circles the ship twice. Tasha can make out "Woods Hole Deep Ocean Research" on the ship's forecastle, some people are waving and smiling from the deck. The helicopter hovers over the deck and a dozen commandos fast rope down. The camera follows them. The commandos, she guesses the French special forces

unit called Service Action from their weapons, split into two groups and move forward at low ready. A bearded man in a Grateful Dead t-shirt, steps through a door in front of the camera. There is a low thup-thup sound, that Tasha recognizes as silenced weapon fire, and the man falls, holding his stomach and looking surprised. The camera cuts out. A new video is spliced in. This one is from the deck of a ship. The camera looks across the deck passing over a life raft canister that is hung on the rail. Tasha pauses the video and rewinds to the life raft. Stenciled on the side of the canister are the words "Glomar Challenger." She presses play again, and the video camera turns its eye back to sea. The Woods Hole ship is almost a quarter mile away. There is a loud cracking sound, and a column of flame erupts from the ship. This is followed by more explosions. The camera turns again, revealing a French flagged destroyer sitting just off the Challenger's stern. It's deck gun fires again. The camera turns in time to see the Woods Hole vessel sink bow first, still burning as it slips under the waves. The video cuts again and the new image is inside the Challenger. The camera pans to show the cables of Challenger's crane straining under a tremendous load. Then it looks down and the hull of a Soviet Akula class ballistic missile submarine emerges from dark water. The camera moves around the hull. TK-205 is printed in black block letters on the mast. Another cut. Men clad in what look like yellow space suits are using the Challenger's deck cranes to remove red cylinders from the submarine's missile tubes. The camera zooms in. The cylinders are covered with biohazard warnings in Russian. There is some pixilation on the video, and a new view appears with a significant decline in image quality. The image shakes a lot, but Tasha can make out the red cylinders that were removed from TK-205 being unloaded from a flatbed truck. A forklift transfers the cylinders to the loading dock of a low concrete building. The camera pans left and reveals a sign in front of

the building. It's hard to read because of the camera movement, but she can make out the letters "PRDN," and below some other writing, "Elmdale Research Campus." The video ends.

"Jesus," her hands are shaking as she takes out the disk.

Tasha remembers hearing about the disappearance of the Woods Hole ship more than a decade ago. It stuck in her mind because it was such a significant loss to the academic community. It was lost with all hands; the news called it the result of a freak squall. She doesn't remember the exact figures, but she thinks there must have been at least a hundred crewmembers.

"Dolf."

He comes out of the kitchen with flour on his hands.

"Yes, Dr. Churel."

"I think tonight is the night for that pie."

"Consider it done. What time would you like desert?"

"I think shortly after midnight would be ideal."

She puts all the materials, including the unread Nad documents, back in the envelope, and goes over to the living room windows. On the street below students flow in little streams to class. She looks at them for a moment. *It has only been a week, and I already miss teaching.* She closes the curtains, and goes off to find out what Dolf is really cooking.

– Dudley –

"Why are we walking? I think we walked enough yesterday."

"Dudley, you are the most colossal pussy I have ever met," says Nad.

"We're walking because J.J. gave the Charger to Whitney," says Adrian.

Nad turns to him; "Did you know she was a crack-snacker?"

"Oh yeah, from the first. We all have gaydar, you know." He punches Nad in the arm hard enough to knock him off balance. "No, I didn't know, you idiot. It's not like she was wearing a pink triangle."

They are hiking across a muddy soybean field. It is twilight, and they can see the lights from the road a half mile away. They are all wearing hunting camouflage, but it is dark enough that it really doesn't matter. The sodium arc perimeter lighting of the Elmdale Research Campus glows in the distance, polluting a near perfect night sky with a halo of artificial florescence. As they walk a cloud of translucent insects envelopes them. The bugs are almost an inch long, with forked tendrils extending from their tails like tiny Man-o-war birds. They are so clear they are barely there at all. They land on clothes, in hair, and on faces. When Dudley goes to brush them away from his face, they crush under his fingers rather than fly away.

"Ugh, God, what the hell are these things. Fucking mosquitoes from hell?" He says, just as one flies into his mouth, and then he is coughing and spitting, trying to get it out.

"Calm down, Dork," says Nad, snickering. "They're Pseudocloen Dardanum. Mayflies. They won't bite you. They can't even eat. They only live one day, as adults, so try not to kill them, okay?"

"Not much of a life," says Adrian, trying to ignore the Mayfly that just landed on his nose.

"How do you know?" Says Nad, looking angry. "Focus on the mission, and let's keep moving."

Nad is wearing Thud's forty-five under his shoulder. Dudley keeps looking at it and fidgeting.

"You're not going to shoot anybody with that thing, are you?" Asks Dudley.

Nad grins, "Don't worry about it, sphincter-boy. We'll be in and out before anyone knows a thing. We have good intel."

They climb over a farmer's three-strand barbed wire fence, down a gully, and across a little stream. When they climb the rise on the other side they are less than a hundred meters from Elmdale. There are stunted trees and bushes around the perimeter.

Nad looks at them. "You remember the hand signals?"

They nod. He crouches, holds for a moment watching the slow sweep of the fence-mounted cameras, and then runs across the gap between their cover and the bushes at the perimeter. He raises his hand, signals, and one at a time, they run to meet him. Nad signals to do a radio check. Adrian does a thumbs up, and whispers to Dudley.

"I don't know why GI Jerk wants me to monitor communications. They're all speaking French. I can't fucking speak French. We should have brought J.J., wasn't she taking French?"

Dudley shivers and checks his camera. Nad sees him fiddling with it, and signals him to start shooting. They circle around the perimeter to the PRDN building. There is a twelve-foot cyclone fence with loops of razor wire around the top. A couple of large German shepherds are pacing behind the wire. They can smell the boys, but can't see them yet. Nad takes a slingshot and some baggies of beef from his backpack.

"No tofu mistakes," he whispers to Dudley, grinning.

Four baseball sized chunks of beef sail over the fence, landing with wet plops in the grass. The dogs go to investigate. There is some hesitation. They are trained not to eat except on command, but dogs are dogs. After a moment the beef is gone.

"How long?" Whispers Adrian.

"Enough special-K to knock out a horse, I'd say ten minutes tops."

Nad is accurate to within a minute, and with the dogs passed out on the lawn, they move to the fence. As Bibi predicted, there are no cameras focused on this part of the fence. Nad takes some bolt cutters from Adrian's backpack and cuts a slit in the wire. Adrian runs to the dogs.

"They're breathing. How long will they stay out?"

"An hour, maybe two. We should hurry. I don't have anymore beef bombs."

They run along a concrete wall crouching low. At a gray steel door that is flush with the wall, Nad stops. There is a keypad next to the door. Adrian disassembles the pad as he did in the tunnel, and hooks it up to the laptop. After a few minutes of quiet typing the lights on the keypad go from red to green and the door opens with a soft click.

Nad pats Adrian on the shoulder and whispers, "You are the magic man!"

They step into a hallway that reminds Dudley of the university hospital. Pale tan linoleum. Bump rails for wheel chairs. There are doors on either side, most with little safety windows above the knobs. Nad moves from door to door looking through the windows and trying the knobs. They pass a chemistry lab and a computer room in which big super computers hum and flicker behind air-conditioned glass. The hall splits, and they turn right. Nad signals to stop. He is looking into a room. He looks very excited, and motions Adrian forward. No keypad this time, just a proximity reader. Adrian pops the cover off the reader, crosses a couple of wires,

and the door clicks open. Dudley notices a placard on the wall next to the keypad. It reads, "Ostorov Rasshua Lot 6."

The room is huge, almost the size of a basketball court. Dudley notices an odd smell as he steps through the door. It is a familiar smell, like a place he has been. The room is filled with large steel tanks. The tanks are painted a flat battleship blue-gray, and are about the size of a compact car. The tanks are attached by cables to dozens of medical monitoring devices, automatic drip machines, oxygen sensors, heart and respiration monitors, and several machines Dudley has never seen before. At the end of each tank is a chart, hanging on a clipboard. Nad is running from cylinder to cylinder checking the charts. There's something familiar about the smell, Dudley just can't place it. It's faint; sweet, *jasmine, no, maybe lavender?* Nad stops at a cylinder near the far end of the room. He is motioning to them frantically.

"Thud, it's Thud," he whispers when they reach him.

Dudley looks at a clipboard hanging from the tank. The attached form looks like a hospital chart. It says, "Wardog, Thud C." at the top. Dudley wonders what the 'C' stands for. *Lavender*. Nad is already pulling at the sensors and drip tubes that lead to a port in the cylinder. He yanks on two IV tubes, and they come out bloody. He has tears welling up in his eyes, but he stops, takes a breath, and asks Adrian about communications.

"I think they just said something about 'key lime pie,' but other than that it's been quiet," says Adrian. He looks at Thud's chart.

"It says he's at 260. He's lost weight," says Adrian.

Nad says, "it's kilograms, you idiot."

Adrian's eyes widen, "well that's...I mean he can't...that's like..."

"Yeah, 572 pounds. It isn't possible. Maybe they mean the weight of the cylinder."

Nad starts releasing the latches that hold the top half of the cylinder to the bottom. The latches are huge, like something one might find on an armored vehicle or a giant pressure cooker. It takes all of Nad's strength to push them back, and Adrian begins helping him. Dudley tries pulling on one, but he can't move it at all.

That smell. It is lavender, but that's what... "Oh shit!"

There's only one latch left, and Nad is coming around the cylinder to get to it when something breaks through the little window in the door and skitters across the floor. Dudley looks at it, stunned. It is a silver cylinder about the size a small fire extinguisher. Something opens at one end and a strange hum, that is really not a hum at all, because he can only feel it, and not hear it, moves over them in a wave. Dudley is on the ground before he knows what is happening. He can't seem to tell which way is up. He can still see, but as hard as he tries he can't stand up. He just keeps falling over. At the same time a wave of nausea hits him with such intensity that he vomits straight up almost ten feet, splattering the florescent light fixture above him with the remnants of this afternoon's tatertot casserole. The room is spinning, and he can't move. With great effort he turns his head and sees Adrian and Nad in the same state. Adrian is lying in a huge pool of vomit and trying to crawl, but he keeps falling, so it just looks like he is swimming in place. Nad is on his knees, with miracle food streaming down his chest. He is holding onto one of the steel struts that supports the cylinder, and trying to lift his head and arm to the last remaining latch. The nauseating hum stops, and as soon as it does, an couple of men in body armor burst into the room.

"Stop!" They yell in unison, as Nad reaches for the latch.

One of the men fires and hits Nad in the stomach. He grunts, and blood belches from the wound, but he doesn't let go, and with a horrible effort, he snaps the last latch open. The armored man

fires again, hitting Nad in the throat and knocking him down. He lies there twitching, and choking, as his blood spreads around him. Dudley can see there are still Mayflies on Nad's clothes and in his hair.

Things are getting blurry. Dudley sees Adrian trying to reach for Nad's gun, only to have a black boot step on his hand. All contrast is gone, and things have begun to appear a colorful haze. Through the haze, he thinks he can see the tank opening, but another wave of nausea hits him, and Dudley loses consciousness in the spinning rainbow dark.

– Lamia –

Everyone is busy. Tasha is perpetually on the phone, and Dolf has been going up and down stairs all day loading things into the car, and in between, asking her if she is sure she packed everything she needs. He must have done so nine times. Lamia is bored. There is nothing on TV. She has read all the Asterix comic books in the library. She has already taken Bitch on five walks. But then she remembers her reading on the Russian priest. Bitch in tow, she skips into the library.

Year of Our Lord 1470, 30 July

My sense of mercy abandoned me with Sasha's life. I have spent all my energies to see that those abominations suffered a thousand times what he did. God forgive me, I was without hesitation this day.

I began the day by ordering the removal of the iron plate over Madam Marmeladov's cell. I am ashamed to say I was much

satisfied by her almost immediate howls of pain. In the next hour I watched as her skin reddened, blistered, and those blisters burst, gushing the liquid of her life out onto the floor. I ordered her stripped that she might suffer more, and I must say that I felt no shame, for I looked not upon the body of a woman, but upon a demon beast. She screamed and writhed, eventually her skin began to blacken and slough off in strips. In places muscle and bone showed through, and at last she screamed no more. Lord forgive me, but I celebrated in every moment of it. I had to use all my strength to overcome the urge to laugh, and mock her, as she twisted there in her chains, burning in slow agony.

Through all of this, Marmeladov just hung there in his bindings and stared at me coldly. He looked as though he might be examining some specimen, or perhaps an ill-bred horse on the auction block. As she died, and I turned my attentions to him, he smiled at me. It was a delicate, cruel smile, and one that pulled at the last thread of humanity I had left.

"We are not so different now, are we priest? You see the joy of it. The power of destruction. Death is beautiful, is it not? Look into her face. Look at the pain you have wrought. There is something profound in that. Something marvelous."

I looked away from him, and did not speak, for he had touched the darkness in my heart, and I was ashamed. I busied myself with arranging implements of torture to avoid his gaze. I could feel the chill of his smile on my back, and he went on.

"You will kill me, priest, and you will enjoy it. You will fill your soul with the fire of rage, and power, and you will

feel ecstasy at my suffering. But then you will gather up your things and leave this place. You will return to whence you came, and forget what happened here, or perhaps you will not forget. Perhaps you will spend many days weeping at confession, and many nights praying that the pain of the flagellant will cleanse your soul, but it won't, Priest. Nothing will take from your memory the joy you feel this day. Perhaps I do not understand the evil I have become, but I know that there is no deception in it. I know that what I am is clear and true. There is no confusion in my soul, Priest, can you say the same?"

The words of that monster found a truth that I would never have seen in myself. A truth I shall spend the rest of my life trying to make right with God. At his last word, I dropped the tools from my hands and fled. And as I ran from that place I could hear him laughing.

I found Father Wampirov's hut, and fell upon the floor, sobbing. I was unreconcilable for hours, and lapsed into a feverish sleep. It was not until long after dark, and with liberal use of the bleeding cups, that Father Wampirov was able to bring me to my senses.

"They must be destroyed. They must be destroyed."

Wampirov tells me I said this over, and over, until he assured me it would be done. I then fell into a deep and dreamless sleep, and when I woke, that good priest was at my side.

"Stay," he said, "It is done. I gave them last rites, and hay was poured into the cells through the bars above. They were burned. There is nothing left. Be at peace."

But can I find peace? I am told God will forgive me, but how can I forgive myself. It is one thing to see evil in monsters. It is another to see it in one's own soul.

That's all I could find on this incident. I encourage you to contact me with your thoughts.

-Beth

Lamia writes a brief e-mail of thanks to Beth, but is too grossed-out to say anything insightful. She blows on Bitch's nose, making him sneeze, and wanders back into the living room. Tasha and Dolf are watching the news, and she sits down next to them.

"State City police are investigating two more homicides at this hour. The body of Eagleye second string defensive-end William Neuntoter was found mutilated in the Iowa River this morning. A few hours earlier, several students discovered the body of bead store owner and popular local musician, Kim Obayifo, also known as D.J. Strix. Ms. Obayifo was found, the apparent victim of a knife wound, in an alley near the Ped Mall. Police are refusing to comment on whether these homicides may be related, but the possibility that this is the work of a serial killer cannot be ignored. We talked to some State City University students who are calling the killer 'the Vampire,' because it is alleged that no blood was found at the site of Ms. Obayifo's death."

The scene cuts to several students clowning for the camera, and a few who look genuinely scared.

"The Dean of Liberal Arts called a press conference today encouraging students to stay in school."

Cut to images of a very somber, and distinguished-looking Dean standing at a podium and spouting calm and reassurance.

"In other news, a driver lost control of his vehicle in West State City late last night, crashing into the living room of a local resident. No injuries are reported, and none of the parties involved were available for comment. State City police have indicated they have no plans to file charges in this incident."

Dolf changes the channel. Cartoons. Ren removes Stimpy's spleen with an olive fork. Dolf laughs. Tasha disappears into the library. Lamia goes in search of cookies.

– Whitney –

They don't know where I live. If they knew where I live, they would have come for me before. Whitney is running. Over fences, down alleys, through yards. Her right hand and arm are bruised almost black, and there are deep cuts and scratches all the way up to her shoulder. The wounds are not bleeding much, but her hand has begun to throb and swell, and it hurts so much she fears it might be broken.

She has circled around almost half a mile, and now she is approaching her loft from the East. She stops a block away and holds very still, watching and listening.

Nothing.

She moves slowly, senses on active search. At the back of the warehouse she finds a cast iron drainpipe and climbs it, injured hand screaming, to the roof.

She finds an access panel, but it is locked shut. She pulls on it, ripping the hinges from sun-grayed wood, and drops twenty feet into the warm dark of home.

She lies there in the sweet gloom, feeling sharp pains in her wounded arm with every heartbeat, and the soothing smoothness of the old heart pine beneath her. *If I could just sleep for a little while.*

Tires moving slowly over dry pavement. The low rumble of a big engine. Panic drags her to her feet and she crouches listening. The sound moves away. *There are people out there that know about me – that know what I am – that want to catch me, or kill me. If they know, it means I'm not the only one.*

Whitney turns on the TV. The morning news is reporting that the girl she killed was found. The accident with the suburban is mentioned, but they say nothing about the driver she killed. *Curious.*

She tears up a clean t-shirt and uses it to bandage her hand and arm. The news shows some live footage of police barricades a block from the crime scene. The reporter does her best to look concerned and not insensitive in her excitement over covering something more interesting than her usual beat; hog prices and pesticides.

Whitney holds her injured arm at her side and begins piling clothes on the futon. A few items, she drops in a bag by her feet. She gathers the wine bottles from the bathroom and her inline skates, and piles everything below the big TV. She hesitates, and throws her laptop on last.

Downstairs, she stows the bag in the Charger, and takes out the can of gas Thud always keeps in the trunk. Fumes from the gas can sting her eyes, even with the lid still on, but she endures it, and runs upstairs.

Pouring fuel over the pile of clothes is almost unbearable. Her eyes are streaming, and by the time she is done she is coughing up more phlegm than she can spit out.

She lights a bit of cloth and the whole room flashes up. She fingers Thud's remote, and below, the Charger bellows to life.

Those men had guns. Whitney is confident in her new strength, but the damage to her arm frightens her, and guns frighten her more. *I can't be caught unarmed in the open again. I need a weapon.* And she knows just where to get one. At a stop sign, Whitney leans over and takes her blond wig from the glove compartment.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"The world is a vampire."

-Smashing Pumpkins

– **Jerry-Jean** –

Sweat trickles down her back in little rivulets wetting her shirt. Her short blond hair is matted with sweat, clinging to her face. The big plastic case is heavy. She just climbed nine flights of stairs, and she feels a little dizzy. The door to the roof is locked. Jerry-Jean leans the long black case against a wall and takes a crow bar out of her backpack. She leans on it hard. Crack, pop. The door opens, and she begins to sing softly to herself.

"Great big gobs of greasy grimy gopher guts."

The roof is dark. Her eyes take a few seconds to adjust from the bright of the hallway. She squints, looking out over the campus. Helios Hall is one of the tallest buildings in State City,

and she can see the entire town. The Pentacrest is directly in front of her; it's golden dome shining in the spots that light the campus buildings at night.

Jerry-Jean takes a deep breath. *Crisp.* It was a warm day, but the air is cool up here. She picks up the case and walks over to the edge of the roof. It opens with a snap and long black steel smiles up at her. She caresses it, feeling its cold power through the latex gloves she stole from Nad's desk. *Pause.*

The door.

She walks back to the roof access door and wedges the crowbar between the door and the soft tarpaper surface of the roof. *If anyone tries to open the door it should stop them for a while.*

Back at the case, she takes out Thud's Barrett Light Fifty sniper rifle and begins to assemble it. She remembers seeing him do it a dozen times. It fits together smoothly with almost no sound. It's cool in her hands, and has a mild sweet smell from a fine layer of gun oil. *A precision machine.*

From her backpack Jerry-Jean takes a box of ammunition. She brought all three boxes, but she picks the one with pictures of red-tipped bullets on it. They look the meanest. The magazine takes five rounds, but there are only four in the box. They are huge. Each round is almost six inches long. She opens a second box. It is marked "DU-armor piercing." These cartridges are dark gray. They seem heavier than the red ones. She picks one and inserts it into the magazine. It feels strangely warm. Then she loads all four red rounds. The magazine spring is very powerful, and by the time she gets to the fifth round she has to lean on it with all her weight to get it into the magazine.

She looks at her watch.

Breathe.

The magazine clicks into the gun. She flips down the bipod, and puts it on the roof. She sits cross-legged on the warm tarpaper. She can feel the grit through her jeans.

Two ravens circle and land on the ledge a few feet from her. They are cackling and nipping at each other. They stop the spring sex play when they notice her. Cocking their heads, first to one side, then to the other, black eyes examine her.

She thinks about Whitney. About how she smelled. About how she tasted. *So exquisite. So beautiful. I have seen perfection. I am ready to die.*

The steam whistle from the University Physical Plant screams, pulling Jerry-Jean back into the now. She lifts the big rifle, propping the bipod up on the ledge. She pulls the butt into her shoulder hard, and presses her cheek to the gun just below the sight. With her right hand she pulls back the action, sliding the first round into the chamber. Then pivots the weapon first left, then right, searching for targets.

Students are streaming out of all the doorways on the Pentacrest. Evening classes getting out. Little groups collect, laughing and talking. Some shirtless boys have begun playing Frisbee on the lawn. Little groups break out of the crowds, heading for the bars, or back to the dorms. A girl stops to tie her shoe. Her friend is talking to her, agitated. She gesticulates wildly to reinforce some point.

Jerry-Jean puts the crosshairs in the center of her forehead, holds her breath, and squeezes the trigger. Crack. No louder than a hammer hitting a nail. The big sound suppressor that dominates most of the rifle's length is doing its job. In almost the same instant a bright orange-red spot the size of a tennis ball appears in the center of the target's forehead, and the girl drops like wet dog-shit. She isn't moving. The slide ejects a smoking case, toppling one of the crows from its perch. It caws at Jerry-Jean, annoyed.

She swings the rifle right. One of the Frisbee boys has stopped, and is looking in the direction of the girl who fell. The crosshairs line up with the center of his back. Crack, he drops, face down. Twitching, he reaches trying to reach the pain in his spine. His friend runs toward him, kneeling to help. She takes the friend in the side of the head. The impact knocks him sprawling. She sees him trying to lift himself up, only to collapse on his face again.

A campus cop gets out of his car, and begins walking toward the commotion. People are yelling. She can't hear what they are saying; she's too high up. The cop sees the girl on her back, and reaches for his radio. Jerry-Jean hits him in the back of the head. He goes down hard, breaking his nose and teeth on the pavement. His radio skitters away into some bushes. A pool of blood begins to spread from under his face. *It looks darker. Why?*

Target.

Students are running. Some are trying to hide behind trees and cars, but no one can tell where the shots are coming from, and no one knows where to hide.

The rifle moves left. A red-haired girl is crouching against a pillar, her cheeks glistening with tears. Jerry-Jean can see her lips moving, praying. The trigger is tight against her finger. She inhales. There's a shadow behind the target. Something moving quickly. Squeeze.

Boom.

This recoil is harder than the others. It bruises her shoulder. She shakes her head and leans back into the sight, trying to reacquire her target. The red-haired girl is up and running. She is covered with blood. *If she's running, she can't be hit.*

So where did the blood come from?

Jerry-Jean brings the sight back to the pillar where the girl was crouching. There is a woman dressed in a short skirt and gray top kneeling next to the pillar. One hand clutches at the

marble for support. The other hand is trying to cover a hole the size of a softball in her side. The hole is ragged, and blood is pouring down her side, collecting in a pool around her knees. There's something familiar about the girl, but Jerry-Jean can't see her face. The girl's head is down from the pain, and stringy blond hair hangs in front of her eyes, obscuring her face.

Jerry-Jean ejects the clip, but can't look away. The girl is vomiting blood now, but in a terrible effort, manages to struggle to her feet.

She should be dead. How can she get up like that?

The girl looks up. She's looking directly at Jerry-Jean. The hair is wrong. The wrong color, but...

Oh my God, it's Whitney. I've shot Whitney.

Jerry-Jean abruptly vomits down the front of her shirt. She drops the rifle and ammunition down the nearest air-conditioning shaft, kicks the crow bar from the door, and runs down all nine flights of stairs. Sobs tear at her lungs, and she keeps having to stop to retch. But then there is nothing left to throw up, and her stomach just convulses on empty.

Outside, people are running and screaming. Police cars howl in the distance, and an ambulance has already pulled up on the Pentacrest lawn. Jerry-Jean runs down an alley behind a bar and then, slowing to a walk, moves toward Purge.

– Whitney –

Whitney falls to her knees again. The loss of blood is too much. It's making her weak. She pulls herself toward a grate near some bushes. *The steam tunnels*. The grate weighs more than two hundred pounds, but, despite her weakened state, she lifts it with one hand. She crawls

down the ladder, choking on thick gouts of blood. The pain in her side is so profound she can barely see. It clouds everything.

Must keep moving. No hospitals. They'll find out.

She stumbles down the tunnel holding onto the web of pipes for support.

That crazy bitch. I saw her. She shot me. Shot me! I'm gonna kill that little hick cunt. Rip out her intestines...

Pain.

Her vision narrows, then everything fades.

Drip.

Pain.

Drip drip.

Something is dripping on the back of her head. Whitney opens her eyes. She is lying face down in a congealed puddle of blood and steam tunnel grime. The blood has turned a crusty rust color. Water from some pipes is dripping on her head. Her side hurts.

Why does my side hurt?

Shot.

She remembers being shot. She remembers blood and pain. She sits up with a grunt, and looks down at her side. The hole is still there, but the blood has clotted, and it isn't bleeding as much. What's more, it seems to be smaller, as if the tissue was slowly beginning to fill in and knit together. It still hurts like a bitch.

Bitch. That little bitch...fuck kill her.

But the pain stops her thought again. This time Whitney is able to take a deep breath and avoid losing consciousness.

I need to get the fuck out of here.

She gets to her feet, with some effort, and begins to work her way down the tunnel.

Hungry. Gun. I was going for a gun.

Her injury is making her desperately hungry. It pulls at her strength.

Whitney finds what she is looking for at Purge.

She rides the elevator back down to the basement wearing a leather biker jacket she found in Dudley's cubical. The sleeves are a little long, but at least it covers her wounds. As she steps out of the elevator she drops the filthy blond wig in a trash can, and walks across the loading dock scale, not noticing the red digital readout that jumps to 280 lbs.

As she rounds a corner, heading back to the junction where the Purge Hall bomb shelter meets the steam tunnels, she runs hard into someone walking the other way. The person she hit goes sprawling and Whitney extends her fangs, roaring in pain.

"Whitney?" Sara Masani is looking at her in stunned terror.

"Hi Sara." Whitney pulls the gun she found under Thud's bunk from her waistband.

"Whitney, please no! I'm your friend Whit, your sister." Sara is crying now, and crawling across the linoleum floor of the shelter. Tears roll black mascara down her cheeks and drip from her chin to the floor.

"What do you think Sara?" Says Whitney, turning around, "You know I always swore I'd never go Goth." She smiles at Sara, extending first one fang, and then the other.

Sara starts to shake uncontrollably, and a pool of urine forms under her.

"Oh God, oh God, oh God!"

Sara is stuttering, and groping behind her for the doorknob to one of the many little study rooms that line the shelter.

"I can smell your cunt, Sara. Don't you know better than to go out when you're on the rag?"

Sara squeaks, but says nothing. Whitney coughs up a little blood and spits.

"No, of course you don't"

Whitney extends both fangs now, and licks them thoughtfully.

"Well this conversation is going no where. Nothing personal, Sara, but I'm hungry, and I just don't have time to fuck around."

Whitney points the silenced weapon and fires with a dull thump. The bullet rips a small hole through Sara Masani's throat. Blood erupts in thick pulses from both sides of the hole. She clutches at her neck briefly, but then the loss of blood to her brain weakens her motor control. She falls on her side and goes into convulsions. Her body twitching and shaking as the blood pumps out. Whitney kneels, grimacing at the pain in her side, and drinks the from the neck of the dying girl.

– Dudley –

Nausea. Overwhelming nausea. Dudley can hear voices and he is vaguely aware that he can't move his arms. They are strapped down and cuffed behind him.

Where?...Perdition. We got caught. Thud...we were looking for Thud.

A machine beeps to his left.

"...said that big Indian destroyed half of sector 6 getting out."

A woman's voice, with an accent. French?

"Did you see any of it?"

A man. Sounds Midwestern.

Dudley opens his eyes. He is in a darkened biology lab. Incubators the size of industrial refrigerators beep and hiss as they rotate their specimens. The lab is lit with dull ultraviolet to kill surface contaminants. He is hand cuffed behind his back and locked into a dentist's chair, or maybe a barber chair. He can only move his head. He looks to the left toward the voices and sees a man and a woman in gray suits sitting at a low table in a small circle of white light playing dominos. He pulls at the cuffs, they are on tight. Another flash of nausea hits him and he suppresses the urge to vomit by taking deep breaths through his nose.

"No, but Benoist was on sweep and recovery. He said those guys were just torn apart. Benoist is an old timer you know? Worked Signals Intelligence with the Americans in the gulf. He said his Fox crew came up on an Iraqi infantry brigade that had been hit with steel rain – artillery submunitions."

The male suit nods.

"Nothing but blood and chunks of flesh left of those sand-niggers. Benoist said it looked like that."

The female suit laughs a little.

"Think they'll catch him?" Says the male.

"Oh hell yeah. He can't get too far right? 'Sides, those crazy spec-war guys at Service Action have never lost a test subject. Permanently anyway."

"Corn's only knee high. He's got no where to hide. Domino!" The male slaps down his last tile. "That's fifty bucks you owe me."

"*Tu rigoles, Henderson? Putain merde!*" The female says with impatience.

Have to get out. How can I get out of these cuffs? He tries to reach his back pockets. *Maybe a pen or something.* The cuffs bite into his wrists hard, but he is able to reach the back pockets of his pants. The left one is empty. He tries the right. His fingers find a tube. It's one of the silicone lubricant samples Jenny gave him at the porn shop. He starts unscrewing the cap. It's hard because he's still dizzy, and his fingers keep slipping.

Just a little more, maybe if it's slick enough, I can just squeeze out...

Dudley sees a slight movement out of the corner of his eye. In the darkest part of the room. Something big is moving in the shadows.

"...others?" Asks Henderson.

"The blond kid was DOS, but they took the big nigger to holding..."

"Hey, that's not cool."

"...data recovery is working on him now. You didn't have any objection to my use of 'sand-nigger', Henderson."

"Yeah, well that's different – I mean they were the enemy."

"*Je m'en fou.* You're a fuckin' liberal pussy, you know that?"

Henderson is sputtering and trying to defend himself, but Dudley isn't paying attention. He's watching the shadow. Something that glows white in the ultraviolet emerges from near the top of the shadow.

It is a smile.

It floats there in the dark, disembodied like the Cheshire cat. It looks familiar, it looks like...

"Thud." Dudley coughs, dribbling saliva down his chin. The tube of hope slips from his hands and bounces under an incubator.

The two suits look at Dudley.

"Well, looks like this one's awake. Call *lleme Choc*."

Henderson puts down his sandwich, and picking up a cell phone, says, "He looks like a wimp. If it doesn't take too long to break him maybe we can catch the end of the Eagleye-Michigan game."

Dudley stares, gibbering at the smile. "Thu...Thu..."

The smile opens slightly and he sees glowing canines extend slowly almost an inch. They seem too sharp, too white, too long. The smile broadens. Dudley says, "Teeth," and begins to scream.

– Tasha –

Yellow flames lick the faucet turning its polished chrome a sooty speckled black. Tasha turns on the water and flips the switch for the garbage disposal. It whirrs on spitting black water, and ashes, and sucking the last traces of her research into oblivion.

Even the Agency couldn't reconstitute that.

She turns on the hood fan over the big stainless steel range and uses a small butane torch and a cast iron frying pan to melt the disks into a silvery gelatinous goo. It smells like model glue and burning erasers.

Earlier that evening, she typed up everything she knew about the recovery of TK-205 and combined all the data with the video onto a single disk. This she has in a small jewel case in the inside pocket of her jacket. She reaches in, just to make sure it is still there, and pulls out the

packet of materials from Nad. Feeling a moment of panic she pats at her side pockets. The disk is in the right one. *Thank God.*

She sits down at the kitchen table and looks at the packet of hand scribbled papers. She hasn't even read at it yet. *I really don't have time for this.* But she opens it anyway. It consists of a dozen pages worth of hand written technical notes, several computer print outs that appear to be the results of medical tests, and a letter from a student named Stuart Mullo. The name is unfamiliar to her, but she assumes that he is the person Adrian referred to as "Nad." She reads the letter.

Professor Churel,

6 May

I am writing to you because I think you might believe me, and because Thud always said he trusted you. "A real no-bullshit operator," that's what he said. On February 8th I believe Thud was infected by an unknown virus as the result of a needle stick from some medical waste that washed down the Iowa River during the flood. Witnesses that were present when Thud was infected say that the waste was marked, "Elmdale Research Campus." While Thud was in a coma (as a result of the infection) I took broad spectrum tissue and fluid samples, and sent half of these to the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta. The remaining samples I kept, and tested myself.

By February 23rd Thud had recovered. Everything seemed to be back to normal. But on March 12th he disappeared, leaving his wallet, keys, car, and all of his personal property behind. Thud has been one of your students since he was a freshman. During that time, has he ever done anything you could describe as

impulsive or irresponsible? He irons his bootlaces, for Christ's sake. It's completely out of character for him. I'm his best friend, and I would know if he had to take off. I called his family in South Dakota, and they haven't heard from him.

I didn't know what to do, so I started a more in-depth study of the samples. The results of my tests are contained in these notes. As a result of my research I concluded that Thud had been infected with a virus that has extremely valuable properties, and that might have the potential to revolutionize medicine as a drug delivery device.

On April 7th my dorm room was burglarized. All my data, physical samples, and computer hard drives were stolen. At the same time, the test results and Thud's file disappeared from the State University Hospital where I work. I also learned that the CDC has no record of the samples I sent them. I had duplicate notes at a secure location, which is why I can give them to you here. A very reliable witness saw the burglars leaving the scene of the crime, and identified them as individuals she had seen at the Neugaul facility at Elmdale.

I believe the people that broke into my dorm are also responsible for Thud's disappearance. I think Neugaul, or someone associated with Neugaul, kidnapped him and stole my data to conceal all physical evidence of the virus. I'm not absolutely certain about why, but I have some ideas.

Initially, I thought the virus might be something Neugaul had engineered. That remains a possibility, but I don't think it's likely. Why would they build something that might make many

of their products obsolete? The pharmaceutical industry has no interest in curing disease. The real money is in long term sustainable treatments.

Another possibility, that they built it as a weapon, also seems far-fetched. Thud didn't die, and no one else got sick. If it isn't very communicable (I'm guessing it's just fluid-borne like HIV or Hepatitis C), and isn't lethal, then it's not much of a weapon. Besides, I took some additional samples after he recovered, and they indicated that he was actually processing oxygen more efficiently on a cellular level.

That leaves the possibility that the bug is naturally occurring. It must be rare. I found no record of anything like it in any of the medical databases I searched, but that's not that surprising. Virology is a new field. What we know now is like 2% of what's out there.

So if it's a natural virus that they just stumbled across, that would explain why they are so desperate to contain it, there might be more samples out there. If it was discovered it would cost them billions. That's no small motive.

Adrian, Dudley Eritik and I are going to Elmdale to find Thud. If you don't hear from me within 24 hours, I hope you'll get this information to the press.

Thank you, Stuart Mullo

Dolf comes in behind her.

"Chemistry experiments?" He says, picking up the scalded pan she used to melt the disks.

"Just cleaning house," she looks up at him, a tear running down her cheek. "Look," she hands him the letter. "Those boys..."

He reads the letter quickly, jaw tightening. "Damn," he says, handing it back to her.

"Those kids, they don't know...we have to find them," she says.

"I saw what they did with the ship. We can't help those boys. Egress is the priority now. If we evade and relocate we may be able to use this information to stop them. If we join the fight now we will end up dead, and there will be no accounting. Is that what you want? We should go now."

"We have to wait for Colby. He'll be here soon."

"I know."

"He doesn't know how serious this is."

"I know."

"I can't leave him behind."

"I know."

Lamia comes into the kitchen and gets a glass of milk from the fridge. Tasha wipes away the tears and smiles.

"I was just asking about dinner," Tasha turns to Dolf. "What are we having?"

"I was thinking of a rotelle alfredo with salad. I found some very good unsalted Roman reggiano at the co-op." He almost smiles.

"You are the only one I know who makes an authentic alfredo, Dolf."

"I must compensate for all the lies spread in this country about German cooks."

This time he really does smile. Big square white teeth. Tasha takes his hand in hers.

Lamia rolls her eyes, and escapes down the hallway. He releases her hand, and runs some water

in the ruined pan. It sizzles and utters a loud spang as the metal contracts. Cooled, he tosses it in the garbage, and begins cutting carrots for the salad.

Tasha goes into the living room and sits on the couch. Lamia comes in with Bitch and lies down next to her, putting her head in Tasha's lap. The news is on.

"...responding to what police are calling a paintball attack at the Pentacrest. Police found a large amount of blood at the scene, but actual injuries from the attack were limited. Three students and one Public Safety officer were taken to the State University Hospitals and Clinics. All were treated and released. Police believe the attacker used some kind of high velocity paintball gun. Because there was unidentified blood at the scene, some are speculating that the paintball attack was a distraction. Perhaps part of a coordinated attack by more than one individual. Police say that besides the blood there is no evidence of another homicide; this is despite the recent deaths that have plagued State City. Officials are urging the public's help in..."

Tasha shuts off the TV, and runs her fingers through Lamia's hair without looking down. They sit there for a long time listening to their own hearts beating and watching dust float through the beams of streetlights that are sneaking through gaps in the closed curtains.

Eventually Tasha gets up to move some suitcases, and the smell of olive oil and parmesan drifts in from the kitchen. Lamia sits up and turns on the TV. Some young men are on an expedition to parachute into a giant hole in the Mexican jungle.

There is a knock at the door.

It is actually more of a thump, than a knock.

Dolf comes in from the kitchen. He stands to one side of the door and presses the intercom button.

"Who is it?"

Audible blubbing.

"Dud – Dudley Eritik. I – I need to see Professor Churel," more blubbing. "Please let me in."

Dolf looks at Tasha, she nods, and he opens the door.

A skinny young man with Japanese goldfish tattoos on his forearms falls into the room. He is wearing camouflage pants, and a torn and dirty t-shirt. There are dead insects in his hair. *Mayflies, I think they are Mayflies.* He is weeping and talking to himself in a high broken voice. Dolf picks him up by the shoulders and puts him in an armchair. Tasha turns off the TV.

"Mr. Eritik, Dudley, what happened? Where are Stuart and Adrian?" Asks Tasha.

He doesn't answer, but keeps rubbing his hands and mumbling incoherently. Tasha notices that he has what appear to be bulls-eye shaped burns on the palms of his hands.

"Dolf, is dinner ready?"

"Yes Dr. Churel."

"Why don't we have dinner. Perhaps some food will help Mr. Eritik calm down enough to tell us what happened."

Dolf disappears into the kitchen.

"Would you like something to drink, Dudley?"

He shakes his head.

"What happened to your hands? They look burned."

"Thu – Thu," he says, looking at his feet.

"Thud?"

He shakes his head, and starts crying again in great hiccuping tremors. Lamia, looking uncomfortable, gets up to wash her hands, and Bitch trails her down the hall toward the bathroom. Dolf comes in with a tray of steaming food, a pepper grinder under one arm and several napkins under the other. Dudley looks up at this. His eyes grow very wide, and he starts fiddling with a pager on his belt.

There is a loud bang and the front door blows inward. It flies all the way across the room slamming Dolf into some bookcases. Five men follow the door into the room. They are dressed like college students, but are moving like soldiers. Dolf throws off the door, and drawing his weapon, shoots one of them in the throat. The man falls to one knee, clutching at the hole. Blood spurts out through his fingers.

Two of the men fire small silenced submachine guns, cutting into Dolf from his knees to his right shoulder. He falls forward, not moving. Dudley has climbed over the chair, and is squealing in a far corner.

"Don't kill me! I did everything you said! Please!"

The two with the submachine guns advance toward him. One of the others says something garbled into a throat mike and runs out the door and downstairs. The one remaining student-soldier is covering Tasha, but he's looking at the two in the corner. She can feel her heart skip and begin to flutter. Her throat feels tight and edges of her vision are starting to blur. *Not, now. God, just give me a few minutes.* She reaches slowly behind her and feels the warm steel of the Sig P220 she has concealed in the small of her back.

Still looking away.

The two men in the corner fire a short burst, and Dudley stops begging. Tasha draws and fires, hitting the one in front of her between the eyes. He falls without a sound.

The two in the corner are wheeling. Firing wildly.

They are scared.

Bullets zip past her and slap into walls, and she is running, running down the hall, running to Lamia. Lamia is standing outside the bathroom, frozen, with her hand on Bitch. Bitch is tense, teeth bared. Tasha pushes them into the library as a dozen bullets rip into the doorjamb.

"The closet. Bitch, schutz!"

Tasha shoves Lamia into the closet with Bitch, pressing the jewel case into her hands. Nad's notes slip from her hands and scatter across the floor. Bitch is growling in a low rumble.

Bullets punch through the door throwing splinters everywhere. She fires back, and starts pushing a chair toward the door to try and barricade it. Her vision has cleared, but nausea and cold sweat are rolling down her back. The flutter in her chest has become more erratic. The door shatters in on her with a blast. Splinters of wood the size of table legs impale her stomach and left thigh. Tasha looks down at them in disbelief. It doesn't hurt. She just feels pressure. Something hard hits her in the chest and knocks her down. Then she's looking at the ceiling.

It's cold.

Why is it so cold? Is that a cobweb? I'm going to have to have a talk with Dolf about that.

Her vision clouds and the dark rushes in.

– **Lamia** –

Lamia sees Tasha fall. The closet door is open, there was no time to close it, and she is crouched in the corner holding Bitch by the collar, and shaking. Tasha is lying very still, and

there is blood all around her. More bullets hit the walls. The guns don't sound like silencers in the movies Lamia has seen. They are too loud, and seem to make almost a burping sound. Two men dressed like college students step into the room.

One of them fires a burst into Tasha's body.

"Nique-toi, Annana," he says, sneering. He ejects his magazine, and reaches for another.

The other student-soldier notices the open closet door and turns toward Lamia. Bitch yanks himself from her grip and leaps at the man, throwing him to the floor. The man's gun skitters into the closet and ends up at Lamia's feet. The man is yelling and trying to push Bitch off, but Bitch snaps at his hands and lunges in, tearing out the man's throat. The other gunman takes two steps back, snapping the fresh magazine into his weapon. He pulls the action and fires, just as Bitch turns toward him. Bullets punch through the big dog's lower back. Bitch falls to the floor writhing, yelping, and turning, frantically trying to bite at the pain in his back.

Lamia picks up the gun at her feet, points it, and pulls the trigger. It jumps in her hand and a dozen spots of blood appear on the gunman's chest. He looks at her confused, and falls to his knees. She fires again, and part of his face disappears in a puff of pink vapor. He falls backward, twitching.

Bitch is still writhing and yelping. The yelps are so loud and so high pitched that they physically hurt her ears. He turns and twists, bumping off furniture, dragging his useless back legs, and screaming. Lamia points the gun at him, but then drops it, and runs. She is up the ladder, and across the roof to the next building, and still she hears him screaming.

CHAPTER TWENTY

"I sent my Soul through the Invisible,

Some Letter of that After-life to spell:
And by and by my Soul return'd to me,
And answer'd 'I Myself am Heav'n and Hell:"

–Omar Khayyam

(from The Rubaiyat, fifth version, translated by Edward FitzGerald)

– **Lamia** –

The concrete shimmers and melts in the midday sun. It is very bright. Lamia is squinting. She has been walking for a long time. She doesn't know why. She just needs to keep walking. Shoots of new spring soybeans spread away from the road in rows of surreal green. At her feet are the corpses of millions of mayflies. Their bodies squish under her shoes, translucent exoskeletons sparkling little flashes of rainbow in the light. Her lips are beginning to crack. A white circle with the number "1" in the center and the word "North" below it glares at her from a tilted post. The road stretches out. It is almost perfectly straight all the way to the horizon. Lamia trips on a frost heave in the pavement and skins her knee. She gets up, blood running down her leg and into her sock, and walks on. In her hand is a jewel case, its contents sparkling like the mayflies in the sun.

She hears a rumbling behind her, and a big gray car rolls past her, and pulls on to the gravel shoulder in a cloud of dust. The car is a dirty sort of gray, and in spite of the intensity of the sun, it does not shine. The windows are tinted a very dark black, and Lamia can't see inside. The passenger door flops open, and she hears Ani DiFranco singing,

"Fuck you and your untouchable face, and fuck you for existing in the first place. Who am I that I should be vying for your touch?"

Lamia gets into the car and closes the door. The driver presses down on the accelerator, spitting gravel out behind them, and straightening the wheel as tires chirp off the black top, and bite, pressing them forward in a rush that is so fast, it is almost violent. Lamia sits for a long time just staring at the dashboard. She sneezes a little from the smoke. The driver is smoking. There is a lighter and a pack of Lucky Strikes on the seat next to her. Lamia takes one and lights it, pulling soft. *It tastes like a Chicago bus station.*

She looks up. The driver is wearing sunglasses, a black leather jacket, and black gloves. Short black hair hangs in her face, heavy with dust and grime. The woman is so pale she is almost translucent. She stubs out her cigarette and lights another, taking a deep draw and coughing a little. It is a deep wet cough. Lamia looks down and sees the woman's waist is wrapped in a thick bandage that has soaked through, dark with blood.

Lamia looks back at the dashboard.

"My dog was screaming. I know I should have... but I couldn't, you know?"

Whitney says nothing.

"You're that vampire aren't you?"

Whitney takes another long drag off her Lucky. A sign on the side of the road announces that the town of Solon is only two miles away.

"Are you going to kill me?"

"I haven't decided yet."

Epilogue I

– Dudley –

Six hours before he died in Tasha's apartment Dudley was screaming at the sight of Thud's smile. Thud emerged from the dark, smile re-embodied, and tore into the two suits at the table with such speed and ferocity that they barely had time to move, let alone draw their weapons. He pinned them against the wall, crushed Henderson's skull with one hand, and let the man fall to the table with a wet thump. The woman began screaming and pleading in French. Thud lifted her over his head and ripped off her left leg at the hip, tossing it aside like a candy wrapper. She went into convulsions immediately, her eyes rolling back to white and her body twitching and shaking like a beached fish. Thud held her up, ignoring the shaking, and drank the hot blood that pulsed from her femoral artery. Blood filled his mouth and ran down his chin and chest.

It was at that point that Dudley realized that Thud was naked.

At last the French woman stopped shaking, and the stream of life waned. Thud belched, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and tossed the body into an incubator, shattering its glass door and sending specimen tubes scattering across the floor.

Then he was in front of Dudley. He leaned in, so close that Dudley could smell the blood on his breath, so close he could feel the heat of it. Thud sniffed him, and snorted in disgust.

"You always were a pussy," said Thud.

And then he was gone.

At some point Dudley had started screaming again. He couldn't remember when. He tried to stop, but only ended up hyperventilating, and fainted.

He woke to someone whispering in his ear, and the scent of lavender.

"Wake up, Sunshine. Come on, be a good boy and wake up."

Dudley opened his eyes hoping that it had all been some unfortunate dream, a product of too much junk food and late night TV perhaps, or maybe some bad acid. But when his vision cleared he saw the Marlboro man, and knew it was still on.

"Oh, wonderful. Do you see, boys? He's back. Welcome back, Dudley."

He looked back at a dozen men in body armor with assault rifles.

"Agent Kresnik?"

"That's not really my name, Dudley, but it will do for now."

"What?"

"That is the eternal question, isn't it? *Tant pis*. The thing is, Dudley, that 'what' really isn't as important as 'who,' and that is something you can help me with."

"But, sure I. Anything you want."

"You know, I must admit, I'm a little disappointed in you, Dudley. You gave me good information about the geology lab, and then again about your little tunnel adventure, but then told me nothing of a second attempt. Friends of mine died, Dudley. How am I supposed to feel about that?"

"I wanted...they left all at once there wasn't time. I tried."

"Well that's okay. I'm sure you did your best. I have a job for you, an easy one. You have a chance to redeem yourself."

Dudley just nods, trying not to cry.

"The thing is, Dudley, I think we need to remind you that there are consequences for failure."

He nods at one of the armored men. The man steps forward, and attaches adhesive patch electrodes to Dudley's palms and the bottoms of his feet.

"Did you know, Dudley, that your hands and feet have more pain receptor neurons than all the rest of your body combined? Our third world brethren have a tendency to focus on the genitals or eyes when utilizing torture, but for my money, extremities are where the subject surrenders."

"I surrender. I surrender. I'll do anything you want. Just please don't hurt me."

"I appreciate your enthusiasm, Dudley, I really do, but I think maybe we should just make sure."

They spent the next hour just making sure.

Epilogue II

– **Jerry-Jean** –

She steps off the bus into the crisp spring morning. It is forty-eight hours since she ran from the rooftop. Jerry-Jean runs across the street, almost getting hit by a cab. The driver leans out his window and curses her in Dari and Uzbek. She buttons up her coat. The wind seems to be trying to crawl up her shirt, in spite of the sunshine. She walks down 72nd street, bumping through the river of people and staring up at the buildings in awe. She had seen this place in movies, but nothing prepared her for the scale of it. She crosses Lexington, with the light this time, and stumbles into a little coffee shop on the corner. The shop is almost empty, and she sits at the counter. A sweating obese Latino waiter comes up with a note pad.

"What?"

"Can I get a grilled cheese sandwich and some milk?"

"Yeah."

The waiter yells something in Spanish over the counter to the kitchen and slaps the ticket onto a wheel. At the end of the dirty linoleum counter a mother and daughter are having a lunch of tomato soup and crackers. The child looks about eight. The mother is holding her tanned forearm out in front of her daughter's face. She turns her arm back and forth exposing the pale underside. As she turns it she says, "Mexican, white, Mexican, white," then she laughs. The daughter laughs too. The Latino waiter appears not to notice, but Jerry-Jean grimaces and turns away. There is a TV above the counter against one wall. It is tuned to the news.

"The FBI and French police are still requesting the public's help to find one Thud Clarence Wardog, the sole suspect to escape after Federal authorities, in cooperation with French police, carried out a series of raids on suspected terrorists in State City, Iowa earlier this week. Connie, are there any new developments?

"Well, Tim, local police are saying that the daring raids, which resulted in the deaths of seven suspected terrorists, may have missed one. Although no police were reported injured, authorities caution that Wardog is considered armed, and extremely dangerous. They have provided a number the public can call with any leads."

A toll-free number flashes up on the screen.

"But authorities are urging the public not to engage the suspect if they see him."

The scene switches to an interview with a very fit looking man in a suit with a crisp crew cut. His face is cut deep with wrinkles. A box at the bottom of the screen identifies him as Lieutenant Thurman Kresnik of Interpol.

"That's right, we're just saying we need the public's help in this, but under no circumstances should this man be approached. He is a known terrorist who was planning assassinations here and in France. We believe him responsible for the killings of four college

students here in State City. We are still investigating the circumstances surrounding these deaths, but the students in question may have discovered something of his activities here."

"Is it true that one of the terrorists killed two days ago was a professor at State University?" Asks the reporter behind the mike.

"That is correct. We believe this professor convinced several of her students to become involved in her terrorist plot. This kind of indoctrination is not unlike what we have seen at the religious schools in Pakistan and Iran. I'm just sorry we didn't have an opportunity to question them."

He smiles a very sad, sincere smile. The scene switches back to Connie, she is also trying to look sad.

"The State City police will be holding a press conference later today. Sources close to the police say that more details will be released concerning two of the terrorists, K'uei Orenthal Jackson, and Bibi LaVelle. LaVelle and Jackson were killed in a gun battle with police late yesterday. Police sources report that the battle began when police attempted to serve a search warrant on their home in Des Moines. Both LaVelle and Jackson were also members of a radical animal-rights group. This connection has led some to speculate that cooperation between anarchist and animal rights terrorist organizations is on the rise. I'm Connie Pisacha reporting from State City, Iowa, back to you Tim."

The image switches back to the anchor desk.

"Thanks Connie, authorities have released a list of the casualties from this shocking event."

Two lists fill the screen. On the left over a pale blue background is the list of innocent victims. On the right over a crimson background is a list of terrorists killed by police. Whitney's name is not on either list.

"In a related story, police are still investigating a mysterious paintball attack that also took place in State City, Iowa."

The feed shows images of Thud's rifle and the roof where she ended her rage.

"The shooter was using high-powered military paint markers that are not available to the general public. The attack caused several injuries, but none of them were fatal. Initially police claimed that this attack was unrelated to the terrorists, but now, sources at Interpol indicate that they believe the fugitive, Thud Wardog, may have been responsible.

"Coming up next, don't miss our Live at Five Investigation; What is the link between rap music and teen suicide? It's an alarming new tr..."

She's not dead.

Jerry-Jean's eyes well up.

"Is there a bathroom?"

The waiter hands her a rusty hubcap attached to a key with some wire, and shoves a thumb in the direction of the restrooms. Jerry-Jean weaves down a long hallway filled with boxes, and finds the bathroom. It has an improvised plywood door with a padlock and "Lavatory" scrawled in black pen in the center. Jerry-Jean goes in and closes the door. She pulls up her shirt and takes the Barbie tin that Whitney mailed her from her sports bra. She opens the tin. Inside are two banded stacks of hundreds. Twenty thousand dollars. She found it just before she left. She had been stuffing clothes in her bag, rushing to leave, and she checked the mail pile on impulse, a whim.

She comes out of the bathroom wiping her eyes and trying to breathe. The fat waiter slaps a plate on the counter. French fries dance and settle into a puddle of pickle juice.