



**JEFF
SOMERS
COLLECTIONS**
a novel

Collections

A Novel

© 2023 Jeff Somers

www.jeffreysomers.com

Cover photo courtesy of Aleksandar Pasaric via Pexels

Author's Note

Well, another year, another novel posted one chapter per week on me wee blog. Thanks for reading along! Or for waiting until you could download this hastily-assembled eBook. Either way, I appreciate your interest and I hope you enjoy this weird story about a legbreaker, alternate universes, and dopplegangers.

I wrote *Collections* in 2010 and thought it might be a follow-up to the *Avery Cates* series, and put some subtle connections in here that place this story in the same universe, just many, many years before Unification and Avery's bloody adventures. Ultimately, my agent and I decided this one wasn't quite right, and I shelved it for some future purpose. And now its purpose is fulfilled!

We'll do this again next year. Until then, enjoy *Collections* and feel free to share it with anyone who might find it interesting.

Jeff

1.

Take The Bumble, for example: A man designed for his job, as if his creator had known all along. Short, but broad in the shoulders, the sort of magic metabolism that took beer and fried sandwiches and turned it into a massive slab of muscle. A man who breathed loudly through his nose no matter how much exertion he was putting out. Shovels for hands. Not particularly bright—The Bumble was never going to write his memoirs—but not exactly stupid, either, and you treated him with contempt at your peril. People were designed for things. If you figured out what you were meant to do, you were happy. Otherwise you ended up doing the wrong thing and were miserable.

Me, I was happy.

The Bumble peeled off and took a seat at one of the fragile-looking wooden tables, the chair creaking under him as he planted himself. He immediately took out a pack of cigarettes and sucked one straight from the pack to his lips. In his suit and overcoat he looked like a fucking sausage packed in, his flat, expressionless face like a mask called Generic Russian Gangster you bought at a store: Bulbous, red nose, sad, sulky eyes, not even a hint of a smile line anywhere.

I went to the bar. McHale's was an old place, cool and dark inside because back in the good old days bars didn't want windows. The bartender was a fancy gent in a clean white shirt and tight black trousers, thumbs hooked into the front of his pants as he chewed a toothpick, deciding on how to treat me as I slid out one of the stool and climbed aboard. To break the ice I Pulled out my money clip and

tossed a hundred bucks on the bar.

He glanced at it and kept his excitement so under control I thought maybe he was blind. Or that a Sultan had been through Hell's Kitchen the day before, leaving diamonds as tips.

Finally, he pushed himself towards me, floating slowly on currents only he could see. He picked up a towel along the way, wiped down the bar in front of me, and made the century disappear.

“What can I get you?”

I looked around. There were two other people in the bar at eleven fifteen in the morning: An old lady in thick, clownish makeup, sipping a straight gin with shaking hands, three bulging handbags arranged around her feet, and my dapper-looking fellow at the other end of the bar, drinking a Bloody Mary with a wilted-looking piece of celery sticking out of it. He was wearing a nice blue suit and his hair was combed back meticulously, but his cheeks were blue with a day's beard. He wore a huge gold ring on his pinky, simply absolutely fucking massive, and I decided I'd have to kick him in the balls an extra time for that.

I shot my cuffs, feeling the starch in my shirt and liking it. The suit had been made by a Romanian guy over on eighteenth, didn't speak a fucking word of English and wasn't too interested in anything you had to say anyway, but he cut cloth like a master. It was black and the lines could split atoms.

The rows of bottles behind the bar were depressing: Bad bourbon, Scotch by way of Scotland, Pennsylvania, and dusty liqueurs, forgotten, reviled. And then, with a little patch of sun lighting it up like a diamond, way up high on a shelf over the ancient manual

register, a squat bottle of dark whiskey, wide and flat on the bottom. I stared for a moment, and then looked back at the bartender; he was a softy, a fucking Jumbo Softy, six feet of beer gut and sweat stink. The guy would hurt, I thought. He'd hurt nice and easy, and my heart started pumping a little. He'd hurt without me breaking a sweat, and there was no fucking way he knew a Dalmore '62 when he had one in the bar with him.

I pointed, keeping one eye on the Dandy. "That," I said, pulling my gloves from my coat pocket and laying them on the bar. "A double."

He blinked and followed my finger, staring up at the bottle like he'd never seen it before. He probably hadn't. Someone had put it there years ago and it had been forgotten, a fucking shame. People who collected good Scotch were fucking assholes. I thought about breaking the bartender's legs and burning the place down around him and my mood started to get all giddy.

"I dunno," he said. "I don't even know how much to charge you for it."

I put a smile on my face. Making this shitbag hurt would be a lot of fun, but I controlled myself: He wasn't on my list, and I was going to be able to exert myself on the Dandy in a few minutes. The urge to make him squeal was thrumming inside me like always, but I told myself I was better than that, smarter. I had discipline.

"I just paid you a hundred," I said. "Gimme a fucking double."

He thought about it, which was obviously not too easy for him, his Adam's Apple bobbing as he pushed his hand through his thinning black hair, dyed and bristly, a huge bald spot like the fucking moon shining in the gloom of McHales. Then he reached the end of his

personal decision-tree, which was about three steps long, and shrugged, reaching up on his toes to pull the dusty bottle down. He examined it, suddenly cheerful, as he carried it over to me.

“You sure, man? This shit looks like it was here when they built the place. It maybe isn't—”

Bartenders who didn't know shit about liquor pissed me off. I saw myself taking a handful of his greasy hair and smacking his face down into the bar, felt the impact in my arm, heard the crack of his nose, smelled the geyser of easy blood, and I had to struggle to keep my hands down, my arms on their best behavior.

“I'm sure,” I said as he flipped a tumbler onto the bar in front of me. With a smartassed smile, he worked the cork with something approaching skill and poured a sloppy double into my glass, a bit more than necessary, which didn't earn him any points. The smell was fucking heaven, and I closed my eyes to savor it, imagining what it was going to be like. A hundred dollars. I couldn't fucking believe it.

I opened my eyes and took the glass, swirling the booze around a little. I took another sniff, this time with my nose in the glass, and then I tipped the glass back and drank it off, the whole fucking thing, in one swallow. The waste felt wonderful. The whiskey tasted like gold.

I opened my eyes and made sure the Dandy was still sitting there. He'd made a dent in his Bloody Mary. Fucking mixed drinks. People who ruined good booze with mixes deserved what they got.

A flush spread through my middle, happy and warm, like autumn leaves in the sun. It even made me forgive the asshat bartender. I was filled with love and kindness. The Dandy, he was on my list, and that

made me even happier.

I rapped my knuckles on the bar and picked up my gloves. “Thanks,” I said, and turned to nod at The Bumble. He rumbled up off his chair and followed me back towards the Dandy as I slipped my gloves on, crisp and black. My hands felt normal inside them, like they belonged.

He looked up as we approached and I put a big smile on my face, pointing at him. “Miiissteerrr Falken!” I said, throwing my arms out. I ran my eye over his suit: Expensive, but a piece of shit. Off the rack, something assholes bought because they didn't know what the fuck the word *tailor* meant. Gobs getting on and off the train every day to scrape themselves off behind a desk, that's who wore a suit like that. No self-respecting man would. The Dalmore baked in my belly, home at long last after its long bottled nightmare.

He looked up, his eyes going from me to The Bumble and back to me. He was a good-looking guy, a little chubby and suffering from a catastrophic razor burn under his fast beard, his fat face tanned and flushed. He looked prosperous enough, which made me happy. He had a dark face, with a heavy brow and an elegant nose I was jealous of. I rubbed the big round thing on my own face self-consciously as we approached: The Dandy was good-looking, and I was: Not.

“Do I know you fellas?” he asked, easy, leaning back and lacing his hands across his belly. The Bumble ignored him and scooted around behind him, sliding into the stool to his right and angling himself so as to block any attempted escape in that direction. I slid into the stool around the corner of the bar from him, which let me look right at him without twisting my body. I crossed my legs and put my hands in my lap, and pushed that smile.

“No, Mr. Falken, we never met,” I said, leaning forward slightly, crowding him a little more. Ease it on. I took my time. I could feel it squirming inside me, wanting to take hold of him, feel his flesh and bones, make him hurt and *feel* that through his vibrating skin. I wanted to do it so badly. But there were rules, and rules were what had kept me sane all these years, so I stuck with them. Rules also let me do my job the right way, which so far had kept the black spot out of my hands. “But I represent someone you *have* met. Someone you owe a lot of fucking money to.”

Usually this was when they got real serious and pious, real polite. This guy just grinned.

“I owe a lot of money to a lot of people,” he said, that oily grin making him look like a goddamn monkey.

I lifted my hands a little and tugged the gloves on nice and tight, my heart singing in my chest. He was going to be an asshole about it. It was like a gift. “Frank McKenna,” I said. “That ring any bells?”

He nodded cheerfully. “Sure, sure. Frankie.” He twisted around to look at The Bumble, who sat like a sack of potatoes, staring at Falken with a steady, lifeless expression, chewing a toothpick. Falken looked back at me. “So you’re the legbreaker, huh?” He put up his hands. “Let me guess,” he pointed at The Bumble without looking at him. “He’s gonna break my fingers while you play Good Cop and tell me there’s an easy way to avoid this sort of thing.”

I shook my head, trying to match his smile for insincerity. It was no challenge. “Mr. Falken, let me tell you something about myself.”

I paused and let him look back at me. I searched his face; he wasn’t afraid, that was for sure. Because he thought this was just

scare tactics. He thought this was just the first try, shake him up and see what kind of loose change fell out. Just when he lost patience and opened his mouth to ask me what the fuck I was waiting for, I spoke up.

“I was a big kid, Mr. Falken. And I was stupid as the fucking day is long, so I got left back in school couple of times. So I was a fucking giant in my class. When I was eleven years old I figured this out. Shit, I could pick up the other kids in my class and throw 'em around.” I leaned forward a little. “So I did. I beat the shit out of everyone. I *enjoyed* it. I got suspended, so I beat up the kids in my neighborhood. I liked sitting on some little shit's chest, my knees pinning his arms, I liked the soft crunch when I broke a nose, the wet sound, that lucky moment when a tooth went flying. I fucking *loved* it.”

He composed himself, leaning back a little, forcing a nonchalant attitude. An asshole. My mood was lifting with every hot beat of my heart.

“My Dad, he didn't like that. Took the stupid old fuck a while to figure it out, but once he knew what I was doing with my free time, he knocked me down and *he* beat the living shit outta *me*, and asked me how I liked it.” I shrugged a little. “What do you think?”

Falken was smiling faintly, but his eyes were wary. “You didn't.”

I shook my head, remembering that ecstatic feeling—I could *take* it, I could feel my own nose turned to pulp, my own arms pinned under his impossible weight, his whisky breath, and I could *take* it. It was a license to do it to other people, because I wasn't doing anything I couldn't handle myself.

“I *did*. I fucking *loved* it. It hurt, sure, but it's the way of the fuckin'

world. But my Dad was a fucking huge slab, y'know, an' he put me in the hospital. Broke both my arms, my nose, three ribs, and I bled when I shit for weeks." The doctors saying I should have died, it was a fuckin' miracle the drunk old bastard hadn't killed me. I made a comical face of horror. "Oh, Da' was fuckin' broke up. Felt terrible. An' he taught me, right there in the hospital, the only lesson I ever needed to learn: You need rules. If I kept up just beatin' the snot outta everyone I could, eventually I'd hit into someone who could beat me back, and I might not make it. You had to have *rules*."

Falken had hooked on, and didn't say anything while I paused. I leaned back.

"I haven't hurt a fuckin' fly since then," I said slowly, "who didn't *deserve* it. Y'know how I know when someone deserves it?"

He shook his head in a hazy way. "How?"

I nodded. "Mr. Frank McKenna tells me. I get a list of Bad People, an' I go around and do what I love." I jerked my head at The Bumble. "He's here to *pull me off you*."

Falken blinked and we stared at each other for a moment, eye to eye. The color was fading from his cheeks, and I thought maybe I was getting through. He opened his mouth to say something, and I cut him off.

"The rules say, however, that you can buy your way off my list, Mr. Falken. You're two weeks over on your interest. You bring yourself current and pay up this week's, we walk away and I go home blueballed."

Sometimes they made a move here. It happened, and I thought I

was ready for it. This was a desperate moment; these shitheads didn't *have* the money, or they'd have paid their juice. They saw a beating in their immediate future and some of them had the spirit to run, to try and get in a sucker punch, to scream and yell and try to get the attention of some Bull wandering around on the street. I made a show of checking my watch, and for a second I was distracted, because it was twenty minutes behind. I was frowning down at the glinting diamonds on the face when Falken surged forward and shoved me in the chest, overbalancing me on the stool and sending me crashing to the floor.

I scissored my legs and kicked myself free, rolling over and pushing myself up into a low crouch. The Bumble was just sitting at the bar, all alone, looking bland, his hands folded in front of him, like a newly erected statue of The Bumble.

“What the fuck?” I asked.

The Bumble shrugged. “He was fast.” He jerked his hand over his shoulder, indicating a flimsy swinging door marked PRIVATE.

The urge to hurt The Bumble sang in me, sweet music, but I leaped up and pushed past him with just a slap on the shoulder, because experience had taught me that The Bumble could not be hurt.

The door led to a short hallway, white plaster and scratched-up wood paneling, at the end of which was a more formidable-looking door. Falken was crouched over the lock, working it, and twisted his head around to look back at me as I ran. It was only a flash before he turned away again, but he didn't look scared. He looked like he was enjoying himself.

I was three steps away when he popped the lock and spun behind it, yanking the door shut behind him. I crashed into the door and bounced back, staggering back a few steps, off balance. A sudden piercing, keening noise filled the air. I couldn't place it, but it hurt my ears. I started laughing, launching myself forward again. This was just giving me permission to hurt Falken *extra*, and my mind was churning with ideas. I was getting *creative*.

I tore the door open and the noise stopped suddenly, like I'd tripped a switch somehow. I dashed into a small office, cluttered and dark, and skidded to a halt, spinning around and smacking into a huge old wooden desk that almost filled the room completely.

The fucking room was empty.

I stood there, panting, a dumb grin on my face. There was no other door, there was no window. The room was paneled in horrible dark wood, and had a low dropped ceiling of white foam, speckled everywhere with brown water stains. Aside from the desk, which was piled with papers and phone books and manila folders and a fucking ocean of gray dust, there were four wooden filing cabinets that looked like they were holding together out of ancient habit. The walls were covered in framed newspapers and photos. I started to choke; the room was a desert of dust and wood.

.oOo.

I adjusted my tie as I burst back into the bar. The Bumble was still sitting at the bar, happy as a clam. I pointed at the fucking skinny

fuck behind the bar, who was staring at me with the phone pressed against his ear, calling it in.

“Oy! Skinny Fuck!” I shouted.

He dropped the phone and backed up into the back of the bar. “Wh-what?”

I stepped up onto the footrest and threw myself over the bar, taking hold of the skinny fuck’s shirt and pulling him forward as I dropped back to the floor. Then I took hold of his hair and smashed his face down onto the bar, medium style, not hard enough to knock him out.

He screeched like a pig, and I smiled.

“How do you get out of that back office?”

He stood there swaying, both hands flat on the bar. “Wh-what?”

I took hold of his shirt and yanked him forward again. “The back office. In the *back*. Exits.”

He blinked. “Just one door!” He shouted. “I swear, man. There’s no way out from it!”

I stared at him, trembling with the sweet desire to tear into him. He was soft. A Jumbo Softy ripe for a bust out, and I wanted to put my hands on him in the worst way, and if he was lying he would be on the list. I searched his face, careful. He wasn’t lying. He was terrified.

I let him go and leaned back against the bar, breathing hard. I looked at the skinny fuck, and waved him off. “Give me another double,” I said, pulling cash from my pocket and dropping a dollop on

the bar. “And one for yerself, eh?”

I looked over at The Bumble. The motherfucker shrugged. “What you gonna say to the boss?”

I blew hair out of my face and shrugged back. “The fucker disappeared.”

2.

I went home and took a shower, changed clothes. Even when they gave you the slip, tracking down deadbeats was hot work. My apartment wasn't much—nice enough, but just five rooms and a nice terrace, and I'd never gotten around to buying any furniture. I had a card table in the kitchen, warped and unsteady from water spills and heat, a pile of bedding on the floor of the tiny bedroom. I spent about four hours a week in my place. All I had in the kitchen was booze and all I had in the closets was cash in sturdy canvas bags under a fake bottom beneath the floorboards.

I poured myself a drink to keep the three I'd had at McHales company and stood on the terrace with my shirttails out, feeling my hair dry as the sun sank in front of me. After the Dalmore my hundred-bucks-a-bottle Scotch tasted like piss and I got depressed.

I put on a good black suit and a pair of tough black shoes with special steel toes. You had to get them custom made if you wanted dress shoes with a steel toe, but all my clothes were custom anyway. I didn't look at myself in the mirror; it didn't matter what I fucking looked like. All that mattered was that I felt good in them. No one understood that. If you felt good in your clothes, you would *look* good in them.

Leaving, I paused to look around the kitchen, the floor covered in dust except for the pathway from the liquor cabinet to the bathroom to the living room, and when I left I didn't lock the door. There was nothing obvious to steal, and if someone was coming for the cash, was going to tear up floorboards, then the fucking door wasn't going

to stop them anyway.

.oOo.

The Templar Social Club was a run down old tenement on Spring Street, a sagging pile of bricks with a sad old iron sign hanging outside the door. Members only, with no membership process—you either were or you weren't, and if you had to ask about it that sort of answered itself. The club did nothing. It had sponsored a Little League team for a few years, and sometimes they put out a table during the street fair and had four or five fat old man stand there handing out cheap shitty toys to the kids. But mostly it was a place where the Friends of Frank McKenna—a large and diverse group of men and, these days, the occasional woman—gathered any night of the week to play cards, drink coffee, shoot the shit, and do absolutely nothing illegal whatsoever.

The goon standing guard outside the front door was doing his level best to look like a guy who'd stepped outside for a cigarette four hours ago and lost track of time. I'd seen him hanging around, probably someone's nephew or cousin, and guessed someone had finally given him a job. We hadn't been introduced. I was pretty sure his name was Bob, but I was also sure some bright bulb had already nicknamed him Tiny.

"Evenin'," he said, civilly enough. "Can I help you?"

I blinked, stopping short. He crowded the doorway like he'd been trained to it from an early age. A wave of tired irritation swept

through me, and I found myself leaning forward, imagining this fat fuck squealing on the sidewalk, but pushed myself back. The kid, I told myself, was just doing his job. He didn't know me, but he did know that he'd been told to watch the fucking door.

I breathed in deep and nodded at the door. "Gotta go in, see Frankie, okay?"

He nodded. Not completely stupid, at least. "Gotta frisk you."

I smiled, actually amused this time. "Ask around, kid. I don't carry a barker." I held open my coat and let him step up to me. Stupid after all, as he came in close like a sack of shit, all exposed arteries and soft spots. I let him move his tiny hands over me, imagining twisting his arm until his shoulder popped out of its socket, slamming his perfectly round head into the brick wall, the smell of his blood as it poured out of his nose, the feel of the gristle when I pinched it just to make him hurt.

He stepped back after the most spectacularly bad frisk I'd ever been party to. I could have had a fucking Howitzer hidden up my ass for all the good his hands did him. But he stepped aside with a sheepish grin that was almost charming and waved me in. I took a step and then paused, turning to put my hand on his shoulder. I could feel his blood pulsing under all that flab, all those nerves, sharp little buttons to push.

"Now you know me," I said. "Next time, you don't move the fuck out of my way I'll break your arms."

I didn't know if he believed me; I stepped inside. There was a moment, a split second, of suspension when I walked in, conversations stopped for just that half a heartbeat, then resumed

with something approximating their original volume. I felt eyes on me. I liked to pretend it was the suit; no one saw a good cut any more, these days. A suit tailored for you, cut exactly for your build, it was striking and people couldn't even put their finger on what it was about you they found striking. But it wasn't the suit.

The Templar was just a big empty room, cheap wood paneling and ancient, horrible greasy-looking plastic tables and folding chairs. Four televisions rumbled in different spots, and a couple of radios battling it out too. The TVs were all tuned to different news stations, reporting about riots in Chicago where some bigwigs were meeting, deciding the next ten years of pork futures or whatever it was rich fucks from all over the globe got together to decide. The National Guard, bunch of assholes had nothing better to do with their time except play soldier, had been called in and the city was under curfew.

Framed pictures lined the walls: Every President of the United States, with a tiny brass plate under each one with their name. Kennedy's twice as big as everyone else's, with a tattered black armband still pinned in one corner after all these fucking decades. A deep haze of smoke filled the whole room, the smell of cigarettes mingling with the smell of cheap booze and burnt coffee and stale sandwiches.

As I walked, everyone stole glances at me. A couple of guys nodded at me, and I nodded back, but no one said anything, which was how I liked it. These mopes were fucking Lifers, and they had all the imagination of houseplants. I walked steadily down the center aisle towards the back office, a half-smile on my face, my black gloves on. The door was open, and I put myself in the doorway and leaned against the jam.

Frank was, as always, behind the big metal desk. For a guy who pulled in half the dirty money in the city, he looked like a mope. He was heavyset, with a bush of dark hair sprouting from his head and a perpetual shadow of a beard linking up to his uneven mustache. He had dark bags under his eyes and a belly that made him look like he'd swallowed a small animal whole, like a python. He was wearing a pair of cheap slacks that rode up too high when he sat, exposing his pale calves, and a dark red shirt over a cotton T-shirt, buttoned haphazardly. Frank McKenna was worth fucking millions, but if you passed him the street you'd have the urge to give him a dollar, tell him you hoped he straightened his life out.

He was sitting with his cheap black shoes up on the desk, his fat fingers laced over his belly. His main people were standing around with him: Chino, fat and smiling with these delicate metal-rimmed glasses perched on his nose, his long dark hair epically braided, his big oversize white dress shirt untucked, as always, as if we couldn't imagine his gut if we couldn't see it outlined in Rayon. Mikey D—there was *always* a Mikey D, in every crew—who was better-dressed, his white hair cut short and combed, his face clean-shaven, wearing a sports jacket but no tie, burning a cigarette between his lips as usual. Frank's kid, Frank Junior, a slightly thinner version of his Dad except where Frank smiled all the time, made you feel good about him picking your pocket and then slapping you in the face, his kid always looked sour, and wore a diamond earring his Dad didn't approve of. It was flash.

The three of them shut up and looked at their shoes when they noticed me, but Frank smiled and threw out his arms.

“What, you lose a bet, that suit?” He shouted, grinning.

The other three eyed me from under their brows as I stepped forward, pulling a thick manila envelope from my jacket pocket and tossing it onto the desk.

"Today's collections," I said. "I hit everyone except Falken."

Frank put his hands back on his belly, protectively, like he was proud of that monster. "He was the big tuna today," he said philosophically. "You can't reel him in by Friday—"

I nodded, dropping into one of the cracked vinyl chairs across from his desk and pulling out my pack of cigarettes, unfiltered, Gauloises. "I'm on the hook for it. I know our fucking arrangement, Frank." I crossed my legs and tapped the pack against my palm. "He gave me the slip, is all."

Frank nodded. "I know. Bill gave me the word earlier."

That The Bumble served as both my backup on runs and as Frank's snitch on me was not news, but I still didn't like hearing it. The Bumble was a good egg, though, and we'd long ago agreed he'd just tell Frank nothing and we'd be friendly about it. I looked around the room. No one was looking at me yet. These were tough guys, each of them, unafraid of a fight. But I knew how to break them, each one. The kid was easy: Take that fucking earring and tear it out of his ear, he'd go down like a princess. I'd seen Chino get hit in the head a dozen times and just shrug it off, but go for his eyes and he freaked out. Mikey was the easiest: A solid kick in his balls and you had a punching bag in human form. These were guys who weren't much without a gun, or three of their guys standing behind them.

"Give us a moment, fellas," Frank said, looking at me steadily. Frank was another story; he didn't bother with the hardcase bullshit.

He *looked* soft, but Frank was tough. Frank knew that you gave in just once, you tagged out just *once*. You never got back in.

The other three still didn't look at me as they filed out of the little office. I was used to it. Junior shut the door behind him with a glance at my shoes, probably wondering what they were, since I'd never seen the kid anything except running shoes. Not that he *ran*.

With the door shut, Frank leaned back tapping his belly and staring at me. I stared back, lighting my cigarette.

"We lost the kid today," he finally said, wiggling his nose and reaching up to scratch it. Frank always gave the impression of being out of breath. "Aubrey whatshisname. Got a fucking straight job."

I pictured the kid: Seventeen, skinny, friendly and not too bright. "Best thing for him. He wasn't good for this." I shrugged. "Too nice."

He nodded. He was breathing through his nose, and it was loud and rapid. Finally he pointed at me. "You sure you got Falken? He's given you the slip twice now."

I blinked, picking tobacco off my tongue. "This time I at least got eyes on him. Closer and closer every time, Frankie."

He shrugged, grinning a little, amiable. "It's a big nut. You get socked with it you're going to have some fucking trouble payin' it off. You got a perfect record all these years, be a shame to crap it out."

I shook my head. "I can handle it."

"You salvage a lot of money. If we called it earnings, you'd be my top guy. You don't kick up dust and you do what your told. But that don't mean you can piss on my shoes. Close that shit out."

I shook my head. I got five points on every dollar I brought back from the cold for Frank, which meant he got ninety-five percent of what would otherwise be complete write-offs. Getting people to pay their debts was always an uphill battle, but I always won.

I pointed my cigarette at him. “I said I can handle it. I’ll find that cocksucker.” I smiled. “And I’ll *beat* every dollar outta him.”

He stared back at me for a moment, breath whistling. Frank stared. It was a management technique; as a younger man he’d preceded just about every savage beating with one of these coldhearted stares, and it made tough guys search for the exits. I stared back, sucking in smoke, until he finally smiled, throwing up his hands.

“All right, you stupid cunt. Tell you what, you bring in the white whale here and I’ll give ya ten points on it, if you bring it in—no arguing. Ten.”

I nodded and stood up. “Good. The Bumble out front?”

Frank nodded, amused. “Yeah. Doing whatever it is Billy Bumbles do on their own.”

“Burn ants with a magnifying glass,” I said, spinning away and waving over my shoulder.

“Hey!” Frank shouted, and I turned with my hand on the door. He had his hands on his belly again, his favorite possession. He nodded at me. “You don’t find him, you can cover the nut?”

I shook my head, thinking of the bags under my floorboards. “Nope.”

The Bumble was dozing in the driver's seat of the Mercedes, his flat ugly face peaceful, kind of childish. I tried to imagine The Bumble as a kid and could only see him as a shorter version of himself, dressed in short pants. The image made me shiver. The idea of getting into the car and betting my life on his driving again kept the shiver going.

I scanned the street, drawing on my cigarette. A few tourists and strollers were making their way down the sidewalk, unaware of all the fucking tough guys cheating at penny-ante poker inside the Club. There were four people I didn't like: Two Hispanic guys wearing sunglasses and tight suits, trying to look casual as they stood in the street between the Mercedes and a rusty old Ford Van, a tall, gangly white girl in the same outfit, her red hair in a tight bun on her head, and the old maid in the white suit. Also in sunglasses, pretending to read a newspaper in the dark. With sunglasses on. She leaned against the metal vending machine, grinning down at the paper like there was something funny in it, old enough to be my grandma, her gray-white hair loose and curly.

I didn't like them at all. When I stepped for the car, the matron in the white suit let the paper drop and cut me off, tucking the paper under her elbow and reaching out.

“Excuse—”

I had never been impressed by old women. I didn't help them across the street and I didn't pay any attention to their opinions of me. I took hold of her outstretched arm with both hands and pushed

down, hard, forcing her to bend down slightly, a squawk escaping from her. I stepped to the side and twisted her arm cruelly behind her, getting a knee into her back and pressing her down. She screeched in sudden pain, and then went nice and limp, panting on the sidewalk. A thrill went through me: I had an exact calibration of how easy it would be to cause this bitch more pain than she could stand. And it was a *low* number.

I glanced to my right and left. I had a gun in each ear. If I had to be psychic, I'd guess the third was somewhere behind me. I also had a holy vision of The Bumble, still dozing in the car, twitching one leg like a dreaming dog.

"Ease up," the younger woman hissed in my ear. "Ease on up."

I looked down at the top of White Suit's head. No one was going to come pouring out of the Templar, muscle to back me up. I wasn't liked, and their interest in gunplay that didn't involve their money ended at the door. So I nodded, accidentally ashing on top of White Suit's head.

"Easing up, boss," I said, letting go and putting my hands up. White Suit sprang up from the sidewalk with surprising agility and bounded a step away, turning to smile at me, rubbing her shoulder. I expected to be grabbed and manhandled, but nothing happened, except the guns slid away and disappeared.

"Please," White Suit said, her lips twitching, rubbing her arm. "I merely wish to speak with you." She sounded smooth and educated. "Haven't you ever heard of bone thinning?"

I nodded, flicking my cigarette away and exhaling smoke into the air. "What in fuck could we have to talk about?"

She nodded as if I'd just agreed with something he'd said. "Mr. Falken," he said.

3.

“Where are you headed?” White Suit asked. “We can drop you.”

I was crowded between the two big guys in the back of the limo. It was old-school, the limo; big and chrome-laden, an old car but in fantastic shape, the leather seats supple and soft. White Suit and the Ginger were seated across from us, a little more comfortable. I kept my hands in my lap and a smile on my face.

“The Porterhouse,” I said. “Columbus Circle. Steak and a whiskey. Good chopped salads. But I have my own driver—he gets emotional if I leave him in the car too long. And I should have cracked the window.”

White Suit smiled. “Do not pretend you do not know your driver is following us at a discrete three-car distance.” She nodded. “We’ll drive you there, and have a conversation.” She held up her hand to forestall an interruption I wasn’t going to give. “Just a conversation.”

I shrugged as the limo pulled into traffic. “All right.”

We all stared at each other for a few moments. It was cold in the limo, the crank air pouring in through a million tiny vents.

“You are searching for a man named Falken,” White Suit suddenly said.

I stared back at her and said nothing, and she smiled.

“The silent treatment?”

I shrugged again. “We ain’t been introduced.”

She smiled. "I see. My name is Cornelia Rusch. Doctor Cornelia Rusch."

Awkwardly, she leaned forward, extending her hand. I stared down at it for a moment, and then looked back at her. I lifted my head and sniffed the air, turning right and left, then leaning down to smell the big guy on my right. He smelled like aftershave. A lot of fucking aftershave.

"You don't smell like cops," I said, straightening up. "And I don't recall too many doctors working a shield anyway. So who the fuck are you?"

Rusch seemed amused by this. "Police!" She said with an odd upturn on the pitch at the end. "He wonders if we are police. No," she sobered instantly, looking at me seriously. "We are not police. We do not, in fact, have any authority at all in this. . .locality."

"All right," I said, looking at Ginger. She wasn't pretty.

Silence hung between us again. I sighed.

"Look, you snatched *me*. You want a conversation, you're going to have to supply it."

She smiled and nodded. "Ah! Yes! *Yes!*" she clapped his hands and looked around. Her three employees were the worst audience ever; they didn't even pretend to give a shit, and I was momentarily glad that she at least didn't go for the dry-heave high-five. Lowering her arm, she beamed at me, unconcerned. "You *are* searching for this man Falken. I also seek an audience with him." She spread her hands. "I am merely proposing cooperation."

I nodded, and stared back at her. After another moment, she

sighed.

“I do not care about the sum of money Mr. Falken owes. You are welcome to it, and I hope you recover it. If I can assist you in recovering it, I will gladly do so.”

She grinned at me. After a moment I realized she thought this was enough to get me talking.

She blinked. She'd switched her sunglasses for a pair of thick prescriptions in the same frame, her eyes swimming huge and bleary behind the epic lenses. Time was slowed down by those lenses, every blink taking an extra second to get to me, occurring in the past.

“So,” she said, sounding suddenly unsure of herself. “Since we both seek Falken, I am suggesting we pool our resources. Share information. I want Falken himself—his physical being. You wish only his funds. Therefore we are not at cross-purposes, and could benefit from combined strategy.”

I nodded and sat forward, jostled slightly by the smooth motion of the limo through the streets, zooming uptown on Third Avenue. “Is that it? That the pitch?”

She blinked again, Morse code from the future. “Well,” she said, twiddling her fingers. “Well.”

I gave her another few seconds, puzzling it out. She had muscle. Three heavy hands with barkers crowding their armpits didn't make an empire, but it was muscle. She had money. Not cops, but Feds, I wondered, or some *agency* maybe you didn't hear about too often. Or just someone with money who had a hard-on for Falken, although you didn't meet too many independently wealthy assholes who had

time for shit like this—they had *lawyers* for shit like this. I turned and looked out the tinted window, watching the Mercedes containing The Bumble suddenly accelerate past us, and then leaned forward and smiled at Rusch again.

“Then listen: I don't give a fuck why you want Falken. I don't care to have terms dictated to me. When I find that motherfucker, I will need use of his *physical being* in order to extract my money from him, follow? When I'm done with him, if there's much of him left, you can scrape him up and do whatever you want with him, because I won't care any more. Until then, you better put on your fucking seatbelts.”

Rusch blinked again. “What?”

The Mercedes swooped into the lane in front of us and the brake lights came on red and angry as The Bumble shuddered to a sudden stop. The limo swerved and braked, spinning and slamming into the trunk of the Mercedes, sending us all tumbling violently around the back, smacking into each other. I hit my head on something that didn't like me, and everything went gray and woozy for a moment. A piercing, painfully loud noise erupted in my ears, a harsh buzzing that grew and grew until I wanted to twitch and shake and bang my head against concrete to make it stop.

And then, it stopped.

I realized I was on my back on the floor of the limo, the stink of spilled liquor everywhere, and when I pushed myself up my left hand found broken glass that sliced in, sending a burning spike of pain up my arm, which I ignored.

I blinked, something wet and burning in my eyes. I looked around. Aside from me, the limo was empty. Everyone else had

disappeared.

.oOo.

I stared down at the Ribeye and my double bourbon. Bourbon was a good, steady drink when your heart was pounding and your head aching; bourbon was basically moonshine allowed to age and thus was all natural and unfussy. When my stomach felt tender I went with good old American bourbon instead of Scotch. I was on my third, double neat, and hadn't touched my steak.

Sitting at the bar at The Porterhouse, I felt confused and burned cigarettes one after the other, forgetting to smoke them. They'd tried to ban smoking indoors a few years ago, but cooler heads had prevailed. The noise of the restaurant and bar was subdued and mellow, just people having conversations. The bartender was a sweet young girl in black pants and a white shirt, her blond hair up in a bouncy ponytail, and most nights when she was working I tried flirting with her, just for the hell of it. Tonight I didn't have the mental energy and it worried her. The gash on my head and the bandage damp with blood on my hand might not be helping either.

On the other end of the bar, The Bumble sat with a newspaper, pretending he could read and glancing up at me from time to time, his face blank. I kept buying the impassive bastard drinks—he was, I knew, partial to Gimlets—but he hadn't touched them, all three just sitting there, sweating and wet. The Bumble didn't drink when he deemed himself to be on duty.

A tall black man in a really good suit, carrying a really nice black overcoat over one arm, stepped into the bar area behind The Bumble, who spied him in the mirror and nodded, once, politely. Detective James made a gun out of his massive hand and fired at The Bumble, once, grinning. James found The Bumble amusing, and so far had not had any occasion to be disabused of the notion. I watched him walk over to me in the mirror, his alternate self grinning as he slid into the stool next to me, the massive gold watch on his wrist glinting in the light, his diamond rings glittering like tiny flash bulbs. His tiepin, I noted, was a big ruby, somehow not gauche or oversize on him. It was probably because Detective James was the size of three men forced into the same suit.

“Thought I'd find you here,” he rumbled as he leaned towards the bartender. “Hello, sweetheart. You're getting better-looking every time I come in here. Still not dating brothers?”

The blond, whose name I never learned on purpose, kept her face blank. “I date lots of *brothers*,” she said archly. “I don't date *cops*.”

He grinned, his teeth perfect, white and straight. “All right, then. A Coors.” He turned back to me, still grinning. “The fucking Banquet Beer, eh?”

I shrugged. Coors had tasted like dirty water a hundred years ago, and it tasted like dirty water today.

“Shit, you look like hell,” he said, folding those shovels in his lap. “Crawl out of any limousines lately?”

I shut my eyes. “Shit.”

“Someone noticed your plates as you fled the scene of an accident.

I got a flag on that plate. I like to keep an eye on you. So you're lucky; I quashed the note for now. Thought I'd see what was going on.”

I nodded. Detective Stanley James, called The Executioner by his admirers due to an unfortunate shooting record, was the smartest fucking cop I knew. He wasn't adverse to bribery—took them eagerly—but he always chose the moment, the time, the place. McKenna had put hundreds of thousands into James' pocket, but we didn't really have a hold on him, at least nothing permanent. Nothing you could rely on. You could sometimes buy your way through things with him, but if he chose to jam you up, he just magically turned back into a real cop, and he was fucking unpredictable in that regard.

He had a philosophy: He figured a lot of crimes were self-induced. You borrowed money with a thirty-five percent interest rate, you got what you deserved, and he was willing to let someone like me operate unobstructed. It all depended on victimhood with The Executioner. If he saw a victim, there wasn't an amount of money you could pay him to step aside.

The bartender brought his beer, a lot of spiteful foam on top. He stared at it unhappily for a moment.

“So?” he said, turning in his stool to lean against the bar, his long legs spread wide, surveying his new kingdom. Detective James annexed any room he entered, conquered it, and ruled it, then abdicated as he left, freeing the slaves. “Wanna tell me why I shouldn't release your name to the Dicks on the file?”

I smiled. “As a favor?”

He laughed. “Shee-it, kid. I don't owe you any favors.”

“You could set me up to owe you one.”

“Sorry, kid. The chances of you ever being in a position to help Mister Detective Stanley James out of a hole is fucking *unlikely*, so that cash ain't got no gold behind it.”

I sighed. “Then you're gonna have to arrest me.” Frank wasn't going to stretch out his arm for me on this, since it wasn't anything to do with him, and I wasn't going to waste good money on buying my way out of something that happened *to* me. I hadn't done anything.

He turned back around and picked up his foamy beer. He studied it unhappily for a moment, then drank it off in one gulp, setting the empty glass down with a smack of his lips and standing up. I watched him in the mirror again. Detective James was a good-looking guy, and he dressed well. His suits were midrange—expensive for normal cops, but not crazy. A man on a detective's salary who was careful with his money could conceivably own a few of those suits, and The Executioner had a reputation as a dandy, so no one raised any eyebrows.

“All right,” he said. “I'll let it worm its way through, so someone's gonna come by and have a chat. But since you're so fucking innocent, a virgin in the bad old world, I guess you got no worries.” He grinned down at me, but I still didn't turn to look at him; I just watched him in the mirror. “You know that limo was stolen, right?”

I blinked, but kept my face blank. It wasn't surprising, of course, but I hadn't thought about it. Instead I'd been thinking about all those people in there with me, tossed around, and then. . . gone. I forced myself to shrug. “Cars get stolen, Detective. You know that

ain't my bag. I don't carry a gun and I don't steal cars.”

He shrugged his overcoat on. “It's interesting.”

I frowned, touching my aching head. “That it was stolen?”

He grinned. “*When* it was stolen. Which was thirty-two years ago.”

4.

We sat, The Bumble and me, in the waiting room, on the little plastic seats bolted to the wall. I sat in continuous fear that the seat might collapse under The Bumble's bulk; a catastrophe like that would ruin the impression of blank menace The Bumble usually projected. The receptionist sat behind her cheap metal desk tapping dolefully at a keyboard, stealing glances at us. She was middle-aged and matronly, with no discernible figure, wearing a floral sack of a dress and big round glasses with bright red frames she probably thought were daring. She didn't like us sitting in the waiting room, but I'd made an appointment and this flustered her.

For his part, The Bumble was glad to be back on rounds. He didn't like uncertainty and breaks in our routine. He appeared to doze next to me, eyes half-closed, at peace.

The waiting room was just bare drywall painted an unenthusiastic shade of off-white; you could still see the tape on the seams. A single, gloriously terrible painting, huge, had been hung behind us on the wall, stretching the length of the bolted-on seats, and a tall potted fake plant a shade of green that was almost, but not quite found in nature squatted in the corner behind the receptionist. That was it for decoration, aside from the jerkoff's law degree in a frame on the wall over her desk. There was no music, no magazines, and no conversation with a pretty thing—this was, I decided, the worst Reception Area I'd ever been in.

Rounds were tedious, most days. Most people paid up, making ninety percent of my job just a long boring errand. Even the ones who

tried to get cute usually never pushed me to the point where I gave myself permission to have some fun, so the whole fucking day was usually me, blue-balled, reduced to glowering and making threats. I went home at night pissed off and grouchy, fantasizing about getting a real fight, someone my size with some training, some passion, who would simultaneously owe Frank McKenna money and be ready for me. It didn't happen often.

Then, there were days like this, where one name glowed hot and red on my list, a punk who was three weeks behind and thought he could get away with it. I wore my best suit, double-breasted and formal.

Something buzzed on the desk, and the Receptionist heaved herself forward to mash a finger. "Yes?"

"Send in my three-o'clock, Gladys."

Gladys. I smirked. Sometimes parents had a supernatural sense of exactly what their kid was going to be. I stood up, and The Bumble snorted and startled upwards.

"You can—"

I waved a gloved hand at her as we headed for the office. It was silly, maybe, to sit and wait for an appointment, but I liked the idea. I pictured Mr. Lawrence Teller, esq., in his office, having an afternoon cocktail and scrolling porn on his computer, thinking there was business in his lobby, happy and calm. And then we walk in. Keeping your subjects off-balance was a big part of the job.

I turned the knob and stepped into the office, The Bumble behind me like a ghost. The office was exactly the same as the reception area,

just smaller. The walls looked like props, the carpet was stained and worn down to a theoretical layer of shag, and the desk was exactly the same sort of remnant bought from the back of a truck. Our guy was sitting ramrod straight, a big smile on his face, fat in a too-tight shirt, his tie knotted a bit too high up, sitting on his belly like a dead fish. He had a wide, florid face, perpetually pink, and a long nose, a mop of happy brown curls on his head. He would have been kind of good-looking when he'd been young.

Again, there was just one piece of decoration on the wall, this one right behind the desk, up a little too high. The frame was just barely not big enough to totally obscure the fact that something was set into the wall behind it.

“Mr.,” he glanced down at his desk, “Smith.” He heaved himself up and extended a hand. “How are you today, sir?”

I paused in front of the desk while The Bumble circled around behind him. I stared at him and made no move to take his hand. “Mr. Teller,” I said, pursing my lips. “You’re a fucking deadbeat.”

He let his hand drop and glanced nervously around at The Bumble, then back at me, trying to frown all stern-like. “Who are you?”

“I’m Frank McKenna’s nephew,” I said. “You owe him fifteen thousand dollars with interest due every week, and you’re three fucking weeks late.” I smiled. “As a service to our professional white-collar clients who maybe don’t have time in their busy days to troop downtown to make a payment, I show up and pick it up for ‘em.” I nodded. “So let’s have it.”

That was my due diligence. I eyed Teller clinically, looking for soft

spots, places he would hurt best. He was *all* soft spot, as far as I could tell, one big bruise waiting to happen. He looked like a guy who wore slippers in the house to spare his tender feet. Electricity buzzed through me. I was going to get the chance to beat the tar out of this bastard, and it would be entirely justified.

He smiled, looking at The Bumble and then back at me. “Ah, I see. Gentlemen,” he indicated the two dusty-looking chairs opposite his desk. “Have a seat. Let’s discuss the circumstances.”

I nodded. “Do you have the money?”

He shrugged. “I’m afraid not.”

I looked at The Bumble and made my face into an O of shock. “Hot Christ, he doesn’t have it, Billy. What the hell do we do *now*?”

“My secretary has already called the police,” Teller said calmly, sitting down in his big leather rolling chair and sweeping his hand towards his guest seats. “Let’s give up the tough guy routine and come to some terms—a payment plan. I fully intend—”

Joyfully, I leaned forward and punched him in the nose.

I didn’t have much leverage; I sent him rolling back into the wall behind him, made him yelp and throw his hands up to his face, but there was no satisfying crunch of broken cartilage. Grinning, I leaped up on top of his desk as The Bumble caught hold of his chair and sent him rocketing back towards me. I set my weight and lashed one foot at him, a steel toe smacking into his hands and sending him and the chair ass over tits. I jumped down on top of him, barking my shins on the chair’s arms as I got a knee on his throat, making him shoot his hands from his crushed nose down to my leg, where they grabbed on,

sticky with blood, and feebly tried to push me away.

I felt light. I felt like I was weightless, floating, and everything around me was just made of sand: moldable.

“I don't give a shit about police, Mr. Teller,” I said gaily, raising one fist and just letting it hang there in the air. I could hold it there forever, for centuries, without getting tired. Power coursed through me, golden and liquid. “I've spent plenty of nights in holding cells, and I'm not a fucking lawyer like you but I've *got* lawyers who make, apparently a lot more fucking money than you do.” I feinted my fist down at his face, making him twitch and yelp again, spitting up bubbly blood. “Since you called this in, we've got about ten minutes. Ten minutes we can spend either beating you to a fucking raw pulp, or gathering cash from your fucking wall safe.”

He was moving his mouth, a grotesque, slithery sight. After a moment I realize I was putting too much weight on his neck and he couldn't breathe. I let up half an inch and he sucked in a damp, bloody breath. His nose pulsed like a swamp every time he breathed.

“Don't have ... don't—”

I leaned down a little. “Shhh, now, shhh. You don't have it all, huh? That's okay. You got at least a week's interest?”

He nodded miserably, and I smiled. “All right. That'll buy you one more week. Ups-a-daisy.”

I sprang up off him and held one gloved hand down to him. Slowly, panting hard, he took hold and let me pull him up. The Bumble took his cue and snatched the painting off the wall, revealing a pretty sad-looking wall safe embedded roughly into the wall. The

Bumble tossed the painting aside savagely, smashing it against the far wall, and I leaned over and smoothed Teller's bloody shirt against his paunch, adjusted his collar. His nose was flat and leaking blood, and his eyes had already darkened to black circles.

"You're fine," I said heartily, still high, feeling powerful and happy. I gave him a friendly slap to the cheek and indicated the safe. "Have at it."

.oOo.

Back out in the lobby, the receptionist watched us emerge from the office with wide, frightened eyes. I winked, stuffing the large bills into my envelope.

"You really call the cops?"

She nodded, slowly, tracking us as we passed her.

"Tell 'em you were robbed," I said as The Bumble called for the elevator. We stepped into the cab and let the doors slide shut. I looked at myself in the shiny, scratched steel and couldn't see any bloodstains. I handed the envelope to The Bumble.

"Do me a favor," I said. "Hand this in for me."

He took the envelope, stared at it for a moment, then looked at me. "Where you going?"

"To the library."

I watched her from across the huge room for a few minutes. For a library reading room it felt noisy, even though there wasn't much sound at all—but the sound there *was* felt layered and deep. Big wooden tables filled the floor, the walls two stories high covered in bookshelves. At the far end was a row of windows like in a bank—Teller's windows—but these handed out books. You filled out a form and handed it in, a few minutes later someone brought the books up and slid them across to you. Every few minutes I saw her: Beautiful brunette, her long hair pulled back into a silky pony tail, all curves in her ankle-length skirt and cardigan, smartassed glasses on the tip of her nose. She was beautiful, she was young, she was fucking brilliant, and she chose to work in the goddamn library.

I smiled as I walked up the wide center aisle, feeling noisy.

The place was pretty filled; you kept hearing about how no one read any more, how everything was going to the dogs, but here we were in the fucking library and it was packed. Most people were slobs, though, dressed like they were in someone's living room having a beer, watching the game. People didn't know how to fucking dress any more; they wore whatever they found on the floor when they woke up.

She saw me as she brought a stack of books up to one of the windows, and looked over the head of the tiny old man who collected them, staring at me with a half smile on her lips. She turned and said something to the people working with her and when I stepped up to the window she turned and smiled at me.

“Well, if it isn't my favorite Uncle who isn't my uncle,” she said.
“How have you been, Unc?”

“Alive,” I said. “How are you, Rache? Got a minute?”

She hesitated, then nodded. “Sure. Come on back.”

I stepped over to the heavy door on the side of the windows and a moment later she opened it and passed me through. I followed her back to a tiny office, keeping my eyes off her ass, and ignored the looks from everyone we walk past. She dropped into the squeaking chair behind a pile of paper in the general shape of a desk a computer screen poking out from one end and glowing ominously. I barely had space to lean against the wall across from her. I put my hands in my pockets for safe keeping. The office smelled like her, some flowery perfume.

She leaned back, her straining cardigan somehow worse than if she were naked. “Been a while.”

I nodded. “I figured you'd let me know if my company was ever wanted again.”

“Have I been sleepwalking again? Dropping postcards in the mail in the middle of the night?”

Looking down at the floor, I shook my head. “No. I came to ask a favor.”

She didn't say anything. When I looked back up, she was chewing on her glasses and studying me, cool and collected. After a moment, she nodded. “Okes, maybe. Depending on what you need. For old time's sake.”

I nodded, pulling a slip of paper from my pocket and handing it

over the desk to her. “Two names.”

She smiled, taking the paper. I imagined a spark of static electricity as our fingers almost touched, but it was probably just the dry office air. She looked at the two names and quick bullet lists of information I'd printed on it. “They have this thing now called the Internet, you know.”

I shook my head. “Too random. I could spend all day running down bullshit. You're good at this shit, Rachel.”

She looked back at me, raising one eyebrow. She'd always been a cool kid: She never laughed or reacted unless she wanted to, and getting her to react had always been a thrill for me. Finally she stood up, graceful.

“All right. Wait in here. Don't step outside this office, and if anyone says anything to you, you're mute. Got it?”

I smiled. “Can I make one of those signs begging for money because I can't speak?”

She turned and walked out of the office, but I was pretty sure I'd made her laugh. As a reward I watched her ass as she walked away.

.oOo.

When she came back about half an hour later, I was still standing there where she'd left me. She had a bunch of papers in one hand and paused in the doorway, squinting at me, as if she thought maybe I'd rifled her desk while she'd been gone. But she'd know that was

ridiculous—I played by the rules.

“All right,” she said, breezing in, sassy. She dropped back into her chair and held onto the paper for a moment. “You gonna break their legs or something?”

I shrugged. “One, maybe. The other put me through some trouble,” I touched the bandage on my forehead, “and I just want to find out why before she shows up again.” I decided not to mention that each one had pulled a disappearing act on me.

She studied me again, fanning herself with the paper. “All right,” she said finally. “First, Rusch. I found three women who fit the general data you gave me.” She leaned forward and handed me three sheets of heavy photo paper. The second one was a good crisp picture of the Doctor, without her thick glasses. She was smiling and looked a little younger, but it was her. I handed that one back. “That’s one.”

She nodded, glancing down. “That one’s down at Rutgers University in Jersey. Physics Department. Published a lot up until about a decade ago, then dropped off the scene and if she wasn’t tenured probably would have been let go.” She shrugged and handed over a single sheet of copy paper, several bullet points and paragraphs of information, including a phone number and address. I smiled and folded it up.

“You’re a goddamn angel, you know that?”

She looked up at me from under her eyebrows. “And you’re a violent asshole, you know *that*?”

I stiffened and looked away. She would tear like paper. I swallowed a surge of adrenaline, imagining, for one quick, dirty

moment how she would just disintegrate in my hands, like tissue. Then I forced a smile onto my face and locked down my breathing, forcing steady, deep breaths. "You wouldn't know, Rache," I said. "Remember that, okay?"

We held each other's eyes for a moment, and then she looked back down at the last bit of paper in her hand. "There's only one Elias Falken who fits your description that I can find. Which is too bad for you." She leaned forward, giving me a view of her neck as she handed the page over.

"Why's that?" I said, glancing down. The photo was exactly right: Falken smiled back at me in what looked like a Driver's License shot.

She finally gave me a full-on smile, her whole face lighting up as she cocked her head, eyes shining. "Because he's been dead for two years."

5.

I lay in bed smoking, which they tell you not to do, but they also tell you not to drink liquor, not to eat red meat, and not to gamble, have sex, or dance on Sundays, so fuck 'em. I'd taken off my shirt to keep from wrinkling it, and lay against piled-up pillows with my shoes and pants on in just my undershirt. The apartment was hot from the steam heat and I was sweating there despite the cold wind coming in from the window.

I was running the events of the last few days over in my mind. Falken, dead. Rusch from fucking *Jersey*. A limo stolen thirty fucking years ago. And me, suddenly and officially, owing Frank McKenna a boatload of money, because Falken, poor dead Falken who'd been nursing a hangover in McHales just a few days ago, had skipped and that was on *me*.

There was a knock at the front door. I frowned and didn't move for a moment, cigarette burning in my hand. It was a sixth floor walkup in an old building, it was quiet, stuffy, and I had an easy way out the bedroom window, up the ladder to the roof, across six buildings with easy jumps, and down the fire escape to the street. I glanced that way, watching the yellowed drapes blow in for a few seconds, and when another knock came I sat up, snuffing my cigarette in the crowded ashtray as I stood.

Passing through the living room, they knocked again, harder and more rapidly, making the door jump. The kitchen was dark and I left it that way as I crossed to the door; the hallway would be dim and there was no reason to light myself up. I paused just inside the door

as they pounded again. I squinted through the peephole and saw two men: One a round, big black kid with a dopey smile on his fat face, the other taller, skinnier, with a big bushy mustache like a caterpillar sitting on his upper lip. The black kid was wearing baggy jeans and a dark T-shirt, lots of gold chains hanging off his neck that I was pretty sure would turn his skin green soon enough. The other guy was wearing a black suit, all attitude, but he pulled it off. Black shirt, black tie, black pants, black jacket. He had the shoulders and posture to make it work.

As he reared back for another pound, I opened the door and stepped into the doorway, leaning against the jam and pulling my pack of cigarettes out.

“Evening, Miggsy,” I said. “Selling Girl Scout Cookies?”

Miggs settled himself, folding his hands in front of him. The kid kept smiling like something was tickling his ass. I thought about asking Miggs about his taste in muscle, but thought better of it. Miggs didn't look like he was in the mood to kid around. He was a little older than me, and worked Frank's lesser debts, but he was steady.

He pulled a toothpick from his mouth and shrugged. “You buying Girl Scout cookies? You buyin' 'em, I'll find some to sell ya.”

With the pleasantries over, I lit a match and sucked in smoke. “What can I do for you, Miggs?”

He winced a little, looking a little embarrassed. “Frank put Falken's debt on you today, kid.”

I studied him. “And, what, you couldn't wait to come down here

and break my balls about it?”

He shrugged, not looking embarrassed any more. “It’s a lot of money.” He twisted his head until his neck popped, loud, like a gunshot. “You got the two weeks? Maybe the whole thing?”

I smiled, a golden ball forming in the pit of stomach. My heart started pounding, and I felt adrenaline and power pouring into my limbs, everything loosening up. I looked at the Smiler and then back at Miggs, who stood there with the easy posture of a man used to violence. He understood the equation.

I thought, for a second, of the money under my closet floor, and then pushed the thought aside. The easy thing to do would be to hand over every fucking dime I had to Frank McKenna and hope I found Falken and twisted the money out of him, that would let me get back to work, back to normal. It would save me money in the long run, too, because Frank was going to pile on juice to the debt every week no matter what I did.

I shook my head. “Go fuck yourself, Miggs. Tell Frank he wants his money, he can come here like a man and ask me nicely.”

It was hard to keep the smile off my face. Not only was this *allowed*, not only was this fucking okay, but Miggs was a man who could handle himself, and would give as good as he got. This was going to be *fun*.

He got sulky, frowning and letting his hands hang free in preparation. “Just business. No need to get sticky about it.”

I exhaled smoke and flicked my cigarette away. “Sticky? Fuck you, sticky. I own this debt for three goddamn hours you’re here like a

fucking roach to see what might fall out of my ass as I walk around?" I stepped forward, into the hall, crowding them, the narrow, shadowy stairs a few feet behind Miggs to his right. "You know what you just did?"

Miggs didn't back away, just narrowed his eyes. His mustache was fucking majestic, with a healthy sheen, thick and glorious. "What?"

"You just gave me *permission*," I said, and jerked forward, smacking my forehead into his nose.

He took it well, staggering backwards a step or two with a grunt and then putting his head down, meeting my rush with his shoulders, grappling my waist with his big arms. I pushed him into the railing at the top of the stairs, making it creak and lean outward dangerously, then sprang back half a step and clocked him nice and solid on the chin, spinning him onto the wobbly railing with his ass pointed at me.

He took hold of the railing and kicked, catching me in the stomach with a shot that felt like lead, knocking the breath out of me. I tried to laugh, uncontrollably, my whole body clenching and shuddering painfully as it tried to vomit up guffaws. Spots danced in front of me as my lungs burned.

He spun around and saw me just swaying there, shaking, and lunged forward with a haymaker. I ducked, easy, and he smacked his fist into the wall, old lathing and plaster that didn't even crack. He howled and danced back, clutching his fist, and I managed one wet, coughing breath as I reached out and grabbed onto one of his ankles, giving it a yank with my knees planted firmly on the floor. He toppled over and hit the floor with a crash, making all the boards jump, and I

leaped atop him, smacking my fist down into his face, angels singing, the white light everywhere, truly happy for the first time all day. I was working his face, like an artist works clay, re-arranging it and putting my stamp on it. It was what I'd been put on the earth to do.

I sat up suddenly, panting, my chest tight and feeling like someone had pushed splinters into my lungs. Miggs lay there moaning, his nose and mouth bloody and soft, his face already swollen. I looked up, feeling my shirt clinging damply to my torso, and found the Smiling Fool still just standing there. He wasn't smiling any more; his face was concentric circles of fucked-up shock.

"You're the worst," I managed between heaves, "fucking muscle ... I ever saw." I gestured down at poor Miggs, for whom I was already feeling sorry. "Why didn't ... you jump in?"

He looked at me and blinked. "Shit, he didn't tell me to."

I nodded. "You and the fucking Bumble ought to form a club." I pushed myself up to my feet and pointed at him. "Stay here."

I staggered back into my apartment, blowing like a beached whale, and grabbed my shirt and overcoat from the bedroom, then went back into the hall, where Miggs had rolled himself onto his belly and had pulled himself a few inches towards the stairs. I shut and locked the door behind me and fished for my cigarettes again. Stepping over Miggs with a cigarette in my mouth, I glanced back at the Smiler and pointed at Miggs.

"Don't help him," I said. "Make him crawl down."

The streets were empty and the cab dumped me outside The Oak Room off of Central Park in about half an hour. My chest still felt like I'd strained some fundamental muscle and stabbed me every time I moved, but I'd stopped panting and trembling. I'd smoked three cigarettes along the way and discovered four open cuts oozing blood on my face, but felt fantastic. I needed to get into fistfights more often. The problem with the people I worked with was their disappointing tendency to pull a gun on you if you pushed them too far.

I paid the driver a fifty and told him to keep it, and pushed my way past the flunkies at the front and stood in the dining room a moment. I saw Frank just as his mopes did, and they rushed forward to meet me when I was still a few steps away from his table, where he was eating alone. They were just two kids, fat assholes who had all the imagination of the cheap suits they were sausaged into.

"Touch me and I'll break both hands so bad you'll never be able to jerk off again," I said, putting another cigarette in my mouth. Bad for me, but so was getting into fights outside your own fucking apartment. I looked past them to where Frank sat leaning back in his chair, napkin tucked into his collar, studying me with a grin on his face. "You seriously want a scene, Frank?"

He shrugged. "I can cover the damages. And I can get ten more guys in here in thirty seconds."

My heart leaped in instinctive joy. I smiled. "Do it."

Frank studied me again, then leaned forward to his plate again, shaking his head. "Fucking crazy bastard. Let him come."

The mopes stepped aside, shooting their cuffs and giving me their best hardcase looks, and I pushed past them and dropped into the chair opposite Frank, lighting up. I stared at him until he looked up from his steak dinner. He blinked and leaned back again.

“Jesus, you look like hell. You want somethin'? Hey, Ginny, get him a bourbon,” he said, waving his hand in the air randomly. “Get him a Wild Turkey, neat.” He looked back at me and spread his arms. “What?”

I waited a moment, then leaned forward, pushing smoke out through my nose. “Your cash flow drying up, Frank? That why you sent that fucking grocery clerk to try and collect on *me*?”

He popped his eyes at me. “Send him? Send who?”

I controlled myself with effort. I felt so good I wanted to leap across the table and keep my adrenaline up. “Miggs. Miggs Bender.”

Frank smirked. “That moron. Look, you inherited a debt. You inherit the juice on it too, and you don't get a reprieve just because it's got a new owner.” Someone crept up behind me and placed a nearly-full tumbler of whiskey on the table in front of me. Frank shrugged. “I didn't *send* anyone after you. But you can't be surprised. Miggs has got you on his list now. He don't get you to pay, *he's* in dutch, right? So he's just bein' enterprising.”

I leaned back and picked up the tumbler with my bandaged, aching hand, crossing my legs and pursing my lips. It could be, I figured. Miggs was greedy and ambitious like everyone else, and he maybe just thought he might find me soft. I sniffed the whiskey and took a gulp. “All right,” I said. “Maybe.”

Frank nodded and picked up his knife and fork, bending over the plate. “Besides, you bring it on yourself. You earn good, kid. You don't bet, you don't spend. The fuck you do with all your money, who knows? So it's natural to think that you've got a nut hidden away, that you could clean up a debt like that easy.”

I stared down into my drink, going calm and still, knowing the truth: I'd been fucked over the side for money. It was a big nut, sure, but nothing compared to what Frank McKenna pulled in every day. But he figured I had money stashed somewhere and he'd let Miggsy come at me hoping to break something loose. I took a deep breath and bolted the glass of whiskey, forcing it down and sitting for a moment, making sure it stayed down.

“I'll handle it,” I said. “No need to send fucking poodles to bite my ankles, okay?”

I stood up, but Frank reached out and put a hand on my arm, making me pause. “Listen,” he said, letting his hand slide off me and picking up his fork again. “No hard feelings. You pay off the debt, all is forgiven, everyone's friends.”

I nodded. “Yeah, okay.” I wanted to smash the tumbler into his head, make him bleed.

He nodded without looking up. “Until then, Billy's gonna stick closer than usual. No offense.”

“Fuck you, no offense.” I took a few steps away, then paused. Without turning back to him, I said “Fine. Tell Bill to pick me up tomorrow around nine. We're taking a trip.”

“A trip? Where to?”

I grimaced as I pushed my way through the mopes again, giving them both some shoulder. “Fucking *Jersey*.”

6.

We were inching down 30th street in the tunnel lane when the cherry-top bloomed into red life behind us, a dashboard model, dim and hard to see in the harsh daylight. I wasn't used to the sun; I spent most of my time crawling through bars and underground card parlors in the wee hours of the morning, lungs rough from cigarettes and poorly ventilated illegal clubs, my eyes squinty and red from smoke and low-watt mood fucking lighting. The car felt tight and hard, the radio droning on about something at the U.N. that had everybody hot and bothered, some treaty half the world wanted and half didn't.

"The Executioner," The Bumble muttered, putting the Beamer into park and making sure his hands were visible. "I'll bet you."

I shook my head. All my wounds throbbed deliciously, giving me a hard-on. "That's a sucker's bet."

He strolled over in a beautiful, understated gray suit, and when he put his hands on the door and leaned in I noted that his fingernails, yellowed and thick, were perfectly groomed. His rings clinked against the side of the car.

"Mornin' boys," Detective James said, grinning behind sharp sunglasses. "Takin' a trip?"

"Making a run for it," I said, giving him a smile calibrated to match his own. "Gonna start a new life in New Jersey where no one will ever find us."

James liked that. "Start a pizza shop," he suggested. "Change your

name to Gino. You'll fit right in."

I didn't laugh. "Anything we can do for you? You yanking our passport?"

He shook his head, shooting his bright white cuff to check the time on his Rolex. "Naw, just making sure you know I'm paying attention. You gonna be gone long?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. But it ain't a permanent change of address, if that's what you're worried over."

He laughed again. "The idea of you and Billy Bumble here shacking up for the rest of your lives like the Pink Mafia don't have what they call *verisimilitude*, so, no. Just remember, they got brother police on that side of the Hudson, too." He straightened up and tapped the top of the car. "This is new, huh?" he said. "That Mercedes got all scuffed up, huh?"

There wasn't anything to say to that, so we just sat there with our hands visible. James got testy if your hands got obscured. The fucking cops—they all played these little games. I didn't mind, usually, but sometimes I couldn't see the fucking point. We knew he was keeping his yellow eye on us, looking for an opportunity to profit from us or jam us up, he knew we were working angles. I'd prefer to just let us all do our fucking bit and leave it at that.

He tapped the roof again. "All right. Carry on, boys."

The Bumble waited until James was back in his craphole Ford before putting the car back into gear. We got lucky at the light and were able to make the right turn without having to sit there with James staring at our ass.

“Fucking cops,” The Bumble was moved to say. “Spend half their day wasting everyone's time.”

Those were the last words we spoke for the next two hours. Through the tunnel onto the Turnpike, through the toll booths, and then south, south, south, Jersey transforming from the oily smell of Elizabeth to trees and trees and trees. We took exit nine and coasted into New Brunswick, a scrubby slab of concrete with a university and a hospital and twenty thousand assholes to recommend it, and found Hamilton Street more or less by complete accident. The address Rachel had given me for Rusch turned out to be a big corner house, stained white siding and a slab of cracked driveway for a backyard. It sagged there in the sunlight like the fucking town in miniature: worn-down, mistreated, and not even that attractive to begin with.

“Stay in the car,” I suggested to The Bumble. He nodded, then got out with me and followed me up the sagging wooden stairs. The tiny front yard was filled with trash: broken furniture, three cases of empty beer cans, four or five warm and moist-looking trash bags of uncertain vintage. The screen door had no screen in it, so I just reached through to knock on the door.

The door opened and a tall, older woman blinked at me. “Yes?”

It took me a moment to recognize the woman in the white suit from the limo; she was wearing a baggy sweater and a pair of faded, torn jeans, and no shoes or socks. Her hair had somehow gotten about four inches longer, and hung in her face in a stringy mass of salt-and-pepper curls, wearing a different pair of thick glasses. I smiled at her, a weird feeling of sudden uncertainty gnawing at me. I'd been planning to just slap her in the face when I found her, but my internal auditor wasn't giving me the green light.

“Remember me?” I asked brightly.

She frowned, cocking her head at me. “No,” she said, finally, and sounded like she meant it.

I wasn't prepared for this. I'd intended to just menace her until I felt better, then ask her about Falken, but I just hung there, unsure. Finally I decided on a half-measure, shouldering her aside with a brusque “Mind if I come in?” that made me feel like I'd regained the momentum.

The Bumble, silent as always, followed me into a narrow, oppressive hall, the wood paneling waxy-looking. A set of narrow stairs led upwards, covered in a dusty carpet, but I followed the hall until it opened up into a bright living room. Three windows faced me, giving me a glimpse of the side street we'd parked on. The kitchen squatted to my left, and a set of pocket doors hid another room to my right. The living room was furnished lazily; the couch was floral and ancient, the coffee table scratched and battered, the television old and dusty. *Dusty* was the word of the day: It hung in the air, covered everything, like she hadn't been in the room for weeks.

“What is this?” Rusch asked, rushing into the room to stand in front of us. Her puny fury was kind of amusing; I suspected she was a woman who had never been hit, not once in her life, and who imagined men did not strike woman. You couldn't be afraid of something you'd never felt, and I shrugged my coat onto my shoulders and peered at her. I'd hit plenty of women. It came up in the job.

“Cornelia Rusch?” I asked. Somehow it seemed possible there had been a mistake.

She nodded. “Yes!” she snapped with something approaching authority. “Now—”

“*Doctor Cornelius Rusch?*”

“Jesus, *yes*,” she snapped again. I looked at The Bumble, but he’d suddenly discovered the floor, and stood there staring down at it, swallowing a grin. I looked back at the good doctor, at sea. I couldn’t give myself a pass to beat the snot out of her—enjoyable as that would be—until I was sure what was going on.

“You’re telling me you weren’t in New York two days ago?”

She threw up her hands, her arms skinny and nonthreatening. “No. Now why are you in my house?”

I frowned. I believed her, for some reason. She really had never seen me before. “Well, shit, I’m not sure now,” I said, then paused. “You don’t have a twin sister, do you?”

Her whole manner changed. She went still, and glanced nervously at The Bumble as he pushed his hands into his pockets. After a moment she pursed her lips and rocked back on her heels. It was easy to picture her in front of a class, lecturing.

“Why do you say that?”

I caught the scent again and leaned forward, feeling myself swelling back to full size, sensing the hollow bones under Rusch’s skin, her soft, open stance, easy to unbalance.

“Because someone who looked just like you took me for a ride yesterday, *doc*, and poked her nose into my business. Which I do not approve of.”

Before I could transition to the threat portion of our conversation, she surprised me by stepping forward and leaning in, presenting me with a gorgeous glass chin that would shatter on impact in a spectacular and satisfying way. "Tell me," she demanded, "did she look *exactly* like me?"

I paused, picturing the woman in the white suit sitting across from me in the back of the limo, and then nodded. "She was wearing glasses, and had better fashion sense. But otherwise exactly."

She nodded, looking off to his right in a dreamy way, letting out a noncommittal grunt. I let her hover for a moment until I was sure she wasn't going to volunteer anything useful, then I stepped to my left and inserted myself into her line of sight, putting a hand on her shoulder and grabbing hold.

"Now, let me explain something to you, Dr. Rusch. There's a lot of things I don't generally like. White shoes. Menthol cigarettes. The Second Avenue Subway. Number one on my list, though, I have to say, is *going to fucking New Jersey*." I pushed her gently and she backed away from me towards the couch. "So I'm running out of patience. I don't care if you have a twin sister, or if it was *you* in that car with me in Manhattan and you're just being cute." I pushed her down onto the cushions and she fell there easily, staring up at me. "I'm looking for a man who owes me a lot of fucking money, and in return for your help in finding him I will consider not breaking both your legs."

She blinked up at me, then at The Bumble. "Jesus, what are you, *gangsters?*"

"I'm the guy who's going to break your legs," I said, spreading my hands. "What else do you really need to know?"

She looked glum. "I knew this would happen," she muttered, and I stepped forward suddenly, looming over her. The couch smelled like stale dust. I was offended by the whole fucking room, which had all the taste and cleanliness of the college kids who'd lived here before my good professor.

"Dr. Rusch," I said slowly, forcing myself to hold back. "I'm going to ask you this once: Where is Falken?"

She stared at me without any reaction aside from a slight furrowing of her brow. She slowly shook her head. "I have no—"

I decided she needed a little more encouragement, so twisted back and kicked her in the left shin, light. She howled and collapsed forward, rolling off the couch onto the floor in a cloud of disturbed dust. I looked over at The Bumble as Rusch rolled on the floor, screaming and clutching her leg, and rolled my eyes. He shrugged back. The Bumble didn't understand anybody, or anything. The world was simple to him, and he got annoyed by anyone who found it otherwise.

"Dr. Rusch—"

"You broke my leg!"

I sighed. "No, Dr. Rusch, I didn't."

"You broke my leg!"

I leaned down in a rush and took hold of her shirt, yanking her up and throwing her back onto the couch. People didn't know how this was done, professionally. Most people didn't experience violence in their lives, and when it was used on them their reaction was almost always fucking amazement. That was why assholes willing to take

and dole out punishment were always in charge.

“Where the fuck is Falken?” I asked again, thrusting a finger under her nose. “And if your next sentence begins with *I have no* I will break your leg.”

She shook her head violently, her eyes closed like not seeing me might make me disappear. “I don't know! I don't know that name!”

I stepped back and threw my hands up for The Bumble's benefit. He was the only one in the room who might appreciate the subtleties of our profession anyway. Thing was, I believed the old bag. She wasn't the Rusch I'd met the other day—as impossible as that maybe was. She didn't know who the fuck Falken was. It didn't hang together right, but I realized I wasn't going to feel right about beating the snot out of her unless I got rid of the itchy feeling that she didn't know what the fuck was going on.

“All right, Dr. Rusch,” I said, nodding over at The Bumble. “We'll leave you now before anyone gets curious about your screaming. But we'll be back. Think about I've asked you today, see if you can't jog something free.” I turned towards the door, and The Bumble preceded me down the hall again, retracing our obvious footprints in the heavy dust on the floor. If the good doctor actually lived in the house, or at least the main floor, I would be amazed, and I eyed the small, tight cellar door as we moved alongside the stairway.

The Bumble didn't say anything as we walked down the steps and around the corner to the car. “Gimme the phone,” I said.

He fished out the cell and handed it over to me. “What're we doing now?”

“We’re going home,” I said, punching the numbers carefully, my fingers too thick, the phone feeling delicate in my hand, like it might snap into pieces if I twitched. Rachel answered on the second ring.

“Hey, Unc,” she said, sounding breathless. “Am I gonna need a restraining order?”

“I need another favor,” I said. “I need someone watched for a couple of days. The old rate, when you were freelancing steady, if you want it.”

There was silence for a few seconds while The Bumble and I stood around outside the car like a couple of assholes. “Paying expenses?”

I smiled. “You’re gonna be sitting in your *car*, kid. What kind of expenses are you gonna rack up?”

“All right. Give me a few hours to make some calls, make some arrangements. I’ll check in later.”

“Thanks, Rache.” I snapped the phone shut and tossed it to The Bumble. “Let’s go.”

He grunted and the doors unlocked. “You’re gonna have the *stripper* watch the house?”

I kept my face blank. “Hey, she *actually* paid her way through college that way. Besides, she’s not a stripper any more. And you don’t get paid to think, Billy.”

He shrugged and sank into the driver’s seat. “And we’re going home.”

The universe clearly made less sense now to him than it had thirty seconds before. “I gotta show my face or Frank’s gonna fucking push

a button on me,” I said, twisting around to look back at the shabby white house as we pulled smoothly into the street. I didn't tell The Bumble that I had exactly one friend to ask favors from. The Bumble didn't have any, and I didn't want to make him feel bad.

7.

When I got home, it was dark again, and I knew the place had been ransacked the moment I stepped onto the landing. Miggs' blood was still there on the floor, dull and brown, and my door sagged open, the lock blown and one of the hinges torn off. I stepped into the kitchen and something crunched under my shoes. I wasn't surprised, although when I turned on the light the sheer violence of the search seemed excessive: Everything had been torn up and dumped on the floor, the cabinet doors torn off the hinges and thrown, the fridge left open, all my booze smashed up. The living room hadn't had much to toss and was just a jumble of overturned garbage and torn-up paper. I couldn't even get into the bedroom, easily; I climbed over the overturned bed and cut-up mattress and poked into the closet. They'd found the cut out floorboards sure enough, but the false bottom was still in place. Then I went back into the kitchen, found the one chair they hadn't broken into kindling, sat down and lit a cigarette.

Word moved fast. Frank speculates like a fucking old lady about my thrifty lifestyle, assholes show up and toss my apartment looking for a leprechaun tied up in a cupboard with a pot of gold. I wouldn't move the money now; I had to assume I was under someone's watchful eye. They hadn't found what they were looking for, and they'd expect me to panic and either bolt for where the money was hidden, leading them to it, or pull it out of its hiding place to move it elsewhere, leading them to it. The safest thing to do would be to leave it right where it was, and let them assume they could scratch the apartment off the list.

I spent a few pleasant minutes fantasizing about what I would do to whoever it had been when I found out. Broken fingers and toes, smashed kneecaps, paper cuts on the tongue—all for starters. It was fun, coming up with thing to do to someone I had permission to beat bloody. I usually had to work within parameters, when on the job. Parameters were the whole *point* of the job. These rare moments when I could just let my mind roam over someone's pain points were fun.

I heard the feet on the stairs, and waited with legs crossed, leaning back with one arm draped over the back of the chair, watching the dark hall behind the sagging door. The man who appeared in my doorway was short and round, red in the face from the walk up, his thin white hair looking pink, lit from below by his scalp. He was wearing a good suit wasted on his pudgy frame, tailored for some other man, his cuffs swimming around his shoes, his overcoat a bit too snug around the middle. He stood there breathing hard for a moment, and then smiled.

“Got roaches, huh?”

“Hullo, Phin,” I said. “Funny you showing up like this.”

He blinked and frowned. “Crikey, you don't think I sent the demo team here, do ya? Fuck. I'm here on friendly business.”

I shrugged. “Frank wouldn't like me talking to his competition.”

Phin's smile returned. He was sixty or seventy years old, I thought, but his face was smooth and pink like a baby's. If you just saw his face, and if he colored his hair, he could pass for forty years old, maybe younger. “I hear you and Frank maybe aren't the best of friends right now.”

I shrugged. "Frank and me ain't never *been* friends, Phin."

He stepped gingerly into the apartment on his tiny feet. Phin Lanzmann was a man who should have stayed thin. He didn't have the legs to be fat. "I just thought I'd pay a friendly visit, see if an old man could offer some advice," he said, breathing hard as he made his way carefully over to the sink. "You're an excellent asset, kid. You clear debts like nobody's business, and I could use someone like you. You're steady, you don't kick up dust, you tithe like a Catholic." He started pawing through the cabinets over the sink, his back to me. "I came here personally to let you know that if you were thinking about employment opportunities, if you were, maybe, unhappy with the way that ape of an Irishman treats his people, my door's open. And I could make sure there were no repercussions."

I smiled, bouncing my leg. "I'm touched, Phinny. Though I don't think Frank would see it as the same thing as me changing jobs like a civilian, y'know? More like treason."

He plucked a miraculously preserved glass from the cabinet and spun back to face me. "I didn't say I could make sure he'd be *happy*, kid. I said I could make sure he couldn't *do* nothing about it."

He began picking his painstaking way through the room again, breathing hard enough to worry me a little. I didn't doubt there were three or four of his guys downstairs, standing around alarming my neighbors, and I imagined me going down there to tell them their boss had a fucking heart attack in my kitchen.

I decided to play along a little. "Frank'd want my debt paid off either way."

Phin shrugged. "I'd cover that for you. Not for free, but no juice on

it, you pay me back off the top of your take.”

That was a real offer. I was surprised; I thought Phin was just here to stir shit up. I watched him as he moved, scanning the floor, and suddenly, like an ice fisher with a spear in one hand, he knelt down and came up with a half-full bottle of Scotch, Glenmoranjie, 10 years old. He held it up and beamed at me. Why all the crooks I knew were so fucking happy all the time was a mystery. Still huffing and puffing, he overturned a half-broken chair and dropped onto it across from me. He uncorked the bottle with his tiny yellow teeth, spat the cork across the room, and poured three fingers into the glass—and Phin's finger were fat and sausage-like, meaning the glass he handed me was heavy. I clinked the glass against the bottle and took a sip as he tipped the bottle back and swallowed a healthy dollop.

“Listen, kiddo,” he said when he came up for air, more breathless than before. “I’ve always liked you. You know why?”

I smiled, shaking my head. “Everybody likes me, Phin. I’m charming.”

“No. I like you because you know your fucking place. You know how to interact with people. You’re friendly to me, but you don’t cross lines. You can beat the tar outta just about anyone—I’m not flatterin’ you, it’s just the truth, I’ve never seen someone with shovels for hands like you who knew how to use ‘em like you do—but you *don’t*. Most shitheads in your line of work they beat on everyone, all the time, because they’re afraid people will forget to be scared of them.”

I shrugged. “Anyone wants to refresh their memory on what I can do, they’re always welcome to take a swing.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, I hear Miggs Bender was the last one to take

that ride.” He leaned forward. “Listen, like I said, I like you. So here it is: Let me buy you out. Change religions and let me settle this with Frank for you, because, kid, you ain't *never* gonna collect that debt. Follow?”

I frowned and took a swallow of my own whiskey which he was so generously doling out to me. “You saying this is a set up?”

He shook his head and thrust out his lower lip. “No. It wasn't on purpose. Frank lacks the imagination. Frank got played, you got played, y'all got played. You're never gonna find Falken.”

I smiled suddenly, something dropping into a slot in my head. “Because he's dead, huh?”

Phin leaned back again and smiled. “You're no average bear, kid.” He handed me the bottle and stood up with a groan, planting his fat hands on the small of his back and stretching. “Welp,” he exhaled, waddling towards the door. “I don't want to keep you from your housecleaning, kiddo. Think about my offer. It's sincere.” He paused in the doorway and looked back at me over his shoulder. “I would never let my goons treat you like this over a debt. Frank's a lot of things, but *smart* ain't one of them.”

With that, he stepped into the shadows of the hallway and I could hear him making his graceless way down the stairs.

Dead. Rachel had told me Falken had been dead for years, but I'd seen him a few days ago. He'd taken the loan from Frank's boys a month ago. He hadn't been dead for two years, and I wondered if he wasn't dead now.

It was just my luck that the same bartender was working at McHale's when I walked in. He blinked at me, his eyes still puffy around the yellowed bandage across his nose, and then snatched up the phone behind the bar.

I put up my hands. "Hey, it ain't like that, huh? I paid for the drinks, didn't I?"

He didn't drop the phone, but he didn't call anyone either. The place was a little more lively, a dozen people sitting around listening to Johnny Cash and smoking cigarettes, drinking beers. The old lady with the half inch of makeup troweled on was in the same spot, looking slightly more bleary. I kept my hands up as I approached the bar, then slid into a stool and pushed one hand into my pocket, producing a fifty and sliding it over to him.

"For the trouble. And I apologize."

That was good enough for him. He made the bill disappear professionally and I relaxed, settling in. I'd left my collar unbuttoned and hadn't bothered with a tie, but I'd changed into a fresh shirt and a pair of brand new silk socks. You simply could not overestimate the power of new socks.

"Rye," I said, in a mood. "Whatever you have. A double."

He poured me a healthy dose and I nodded, taking a long pull and setting the glass down carefully. I made another fifty appear on the bar. "The guy I was after the other day, he comes here. He ever here on your shift before?"

You had to start somewhere.

The kid nodded. "Sure." His voice was pinched and nasal.

"What do you know about him?"

He shrugged. "Girl drinks. Fruity shit, Bloody Marys when he's hungover. Doesn't talk much, I don't know his name."

I nodded. "When'd he first show up?"

"Far as I know, couple months ago. Just comes in, reads the paper, sips a drink. Stays a few hours, then leaves."

I sighed, letting my eyes roam the bar. I saw myself in the big brassy mirror across from me; I was slumped and tired, the bump on my forehead still angry and pronounced. I looked around the whole place in reverse, trying to scare up a sensible follow-up question, but I couldn't think of anything. Falken had come here and had a few drinks, said nothing, and gone home, and I wasn't going to walk in and find him sitting there waiting for me, eager to get that beating he'd missed out on. I was no professor of human thought, but when someone came looking for you to break some bones, you displaced.

I paused, studying a figure in the mirror. I leaned forward a little. "Hey—is there a skinny old lady in a white suit behind me, or am I going fucking crazy?"

The bartender glanced over me and then nodded, looking back at me. "Skinny old woman, white suit, check. She's got two guys who might as well have MUSCLE tatted on their foreheads, too."

It never ceased to surprise me: You broke someone's nose, half the time it made you best friends.

“Thanks,” I said, spinning myself around and crossing my legs.
“Doctor Rusch! So good to see you again. How was the drive north?”

She'd either changed into an identical white suit, or she had only one and just wore it whenever the occasion seemed to justify some form of ridiculous formality. She frowned, making smacking sounds with her lips. “North?”

I started to say something smart in reply, but it was robbed from posterity by a half-glimpsed rush from the corner of my vision, an explosion of pain and white noise inside my head, and the floor, rushing up to greet me like an angry old friend.

8.

I woke up into a splash of ice-cold water, lungs surging and tendons straining. Blinking water out of my stinging eyes, I tried to move and found myself tied pretty securely to a simple wooden chair. I tested my bonds once more, pulling hard, and then forced myself to relax. I'd been tied up pretty well, and no amount of grunting and flexing was going to make the knots any looser.

Blinking, I looked around. It was dark, but light leaked from under two wide automatic doors. I was up on a loading dock, the concrete shining damply in the dim light, the air heavy and rotten-smelling, like produce left sitting too long. I was up by the plastic sheets that led into the warehouse, with the driveway where the trucks backed in a few feet below me. A set of steps had been cut off to my left. It was cold; I'd been robbed of my jacket and sat barefoot in just my pants and undershirt. I approved of the theft of my shoes; it was a good psychological trick, to make me feel naked and unprotected. If they'd been serious they'd have spread broken glass around me to discourage any movement at all, but the floor was empty and felt cool against my feet. I wasn't scared, only because if people were planning on killing you they didn't abduct you in front of witnesses and then leave you tied up for hours while they planned your murder—they just followed you to a dark lonely place and shot you. They were maybe planning to beat on me a little, but I'd taken plenty of beatings.

I leaned back on the chair, testing the balance, and it creaked under my weight. I settled myself again and took a deep breath,

looking around the place again now that my eyes had adjusted. A pair of cherry pickers sat off to one side, dormant and cold, and a pile of wooden skids reached for the tall ceiling to my left, an abstract sculpture. A single skid piled high with boxes, wrapped in thick plastic, sat on the lower floor of the dock, forgotten or rejected. The boxes were blue and yellow, but I couldn't tell what was supposed to be in them.

I bent my head down and examined the rope on my legs. They'd tied me a little too high, up close to the knees. I worked my feet flat on the floor, shifting my weight forward, and carefully leaned until I was bent over and standing on my feet. It was a strain to keep from falling over, and my back complained, and my legs trembled as I moved my feet in tiny increments, turning myself around in place so my back was to the bay doors and the four-foot drop to the floor. My breathing seemed loud, but I couldn't hear anything else, and wondered if they'd wandered off to discuss the best way to beat information out of me.

It was slow going; each step was a tiny, wobbly project. Sweat dripped from my forehead onto the floor, and the trembling in my legs made me feel like I was dancing my way towards the edge, the blood rushing to my brain pounding and making me think of aneurysms. When I was just an inch or two away from the edge, I straightened up a little and took several deep breaths. I was going to make a racket, and had to be ready for my minders, whoever they were, to come running the moment I dropped. I craned my head to try and gauge the landing; I didn't want a chair splinter to stab me in the fucking ass, though what arcane geometric equations I was going to use to prevent it were a mystery to me.

When my heart rate approached normal again, I leaned back until gravity grabbed on and pulled me down.

The chair splintered into five big chunks and pain shot through me, radiating out from my back into my limbs. My head smacked back onto the concrete and my vision swam, a shivery feeling of weakness swept through me, lightheaded and happy to just lay on top of a broken, splintered chair. I pushed myself up onto my elbows and kicked my legs free of the broken pieces. The rope on my wrists was loose, now, but still knotted together, so I leaned forward and slid my arms under my ass, then rolled back and put my legs in the air and bent at the knees, pulling my legs between my wrists.

I could hear commotion up above me, beyond the twin doorways separated from the dock by hanging sheets of thick, cloudy plastic. I didn't bother trying to work the knots; I leaped to my feet and had just enough slack between my knees to walk over to the dock and duck down, pushing myself as flat as possible against the edge. I heard the sheets being pushed aside.

"Fuck," someone breathed.

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

I looked up at the edge of the platform right above me, keeping myself still. I didn't know if there were more of them, the whole crew waiting just beyond the doors, but it didn't really factor into the equation. I couldn't huddle against the dock hoping they just left without checking the space out, so I was going to have to deal with them and if that brought more assholes, I was just going to have to deal with more assholes.

A grin tried to twitch its way onto my face. My heart was

pounding light and agile, my limbs were warmed up and ready. So far this had been the best week of my life.

The sole of a shoe appeared above me, just the very toe of it slipping over the edge, a distorted, elongated man in a suit rising up from it. He was one of the guys who'd been with Rusch in the limo with me, his suit a little too tight, his neck exploding from the collar like a mushroom.

I stood up and took hold of his belt, bracing my legs against the dock and giving him a twisting yank as I spun myself. He sailed out with a grunt, landing on his face, gun flying. I launched myself after him and landed hard, putting a knee into his kidneys and my fingers into the thick mop of dark hair on his head; I took hold, lifted up, and smashed his head down as hard as I could.

The second guy crashed into me, and I let out a whoop of sudden delight as we rolled on the gritty floor. I could tell it was going to be easy; he was a big guy but he didn't move well, and he'd been hiding behind a gun for a while, thought it could solve all his problems. He hit me hard in the face with something heavy and unforgiving, leaving a searing cut behind. I pushed him off me and rolled over on top of him, and with a quick jerk got the rope on my wrists up over his head and around his neck. Planting my knees in the small of his back, I pulled my arms back into my chest and choked him.

His big, heavy arms flew up and beat randomly at the air. For a second I gave in and just enjoyed it: The exertion, the application of force, the dry creaking sound of the rope and his abused tendons, the wet noise he made as his tongue flopped around in his mouth. I could have done this all night, enjoying myself, but I reminded myself that I had work to do.

“Go limp,” I said breathlessly. “Go limp, and let's talk.”

No more assholes had emerged from the interior of the warehouse, so I figured we were alone. He kept flopping his arms and legs, hoping for a lucky shot. I gave the rope a quick yank, getting a strangled, chewy grunt out of him in response.

“Go *limp*, you cocksucker,” I hissed. “You're making me sweat.”

After another second or two of struggle, he finally quit, dropping arms and just lying there. I counted to three and then loosed the rope slightly. He took a deep, shuddering breath that informed me he'd had too much fucking garlic for lunch, and started to cough.

“Where's Rusch?” I asked, my heart rate slowly returning to normal.

“Not,” he said, panting hard, “not anywhere near here.”

“What the fuck does she want from me?”

“Falken,” he sputtered. “We need this Falken.”

“Why? What's Falken got this freakshow needs so bad?”

He made more gurgling noises in his throat and then sucked in a deep breath. “Nothin'. We need *Falken*.”

I considered that. I'd only met Falken a couple of days ago and I had quite a grudge against him already; wanting him dead in a couple of more days wouldn't surprise me in the least, and these guys had the feel of people who'd been knee-deep in Falken forever.

I nodded to myself and tightened the rope around his neck again. Instantly he began flopping about, swinging his arms and legs around wildly.

“All right, all right,” I said, breathing hard and straining my arms. “I ain’t gonna kill you. Just putting you. . .out.”

He went limp, and I relaxed my arms, muscles burning, sweat streaming down my face despite the cold. I checked hi pulse and breathing, and pushed him off me with a groan. I wanted to lay on the cold floor for a while, but I didn’t know what kind of window I had, so I sat up, rolled the fat kid over and went through his pockets, eventually finding a set of car keys and a dull penknife just sharp enough to cut my bonds. I thought about my shoes and coat, but decided to gift them; I wanted to be on the road heading somewhere immediately. I groaned up to my feet and climbed up to the dock again, pushing my way through the plastic sheets into a brightly-lit office area, where a coffee maker and two cups sitting on a steel desk, still steaming. I stopped, because my shoes and coat were sitting on the desk too, the coat neatly folded. As I took a moment to slide my bare feet into the shoes, I had a crazy moment where I wondered if they’d shined the fucking things, too.

Out in the parking lot, the limo sat, pristine, not a scratch on it. I stared at it uneasily as I approached. It was big and blocky, and old-style American steel behemoth extended back beyond its safe limits, black and shiny and it should have had scratches and dents, signs of the collision The Bumble had caused. Instead it was perfect. I wondered if there was a fleet of these old mothballed limos, battered ones swapped out as needed.

I slid into the front seat and turned the key, and the engine bloomed into life with a soft purr.

No one was sitting in my smashed apartment when I got home; dawn was just an hour away and the dark had taken on that anticipatory glow that preceded morning. I crunched my way through the debris and snatched up the bottle of Scotch Phin had left, took it into the bedroom, and lay down on the bed with it cradled in the crook of my arm.

For a while I just enjoyed the pleasant feeling of strained muscles, throbbing bruises, stinging scrapes. Everything ached, and I reveled in not having to do anything else, of having no more labors for the moment, just lying there enjoying the pain.

My wrists and ankles burned where the ropes had been, and my lower back throbbed, overextended. I wanted a shower and a change of clothes, coffee until my kidneys floated and eggs, and bacon, and toast with butter. But if I showered my feet would get gritty from the dirt on the floor, and my suits had been tossed on the floor, my shirts wrinkled. And when morning came I was sure Frank would send someone to remind me about my debt, and the good Doctor might want to come and discuss the failures of her hired goons, and all I wanted to do was drink myself to sleep and start over some time after noon.

I didn't get around to lifting the bottle. I had almost fallen asleep when the phone rang.

I let it ring four, five times. I didn't have an answering machine or voicemail, just like I never carried a phone with me. If I wasn't there to talk, I didn't need to hear it. After the sixth ring I stretched out one

arm, wincing happily at the sharp tug it caused in my back, and picked up the receiver.

“Where the hell have you been?” Rachel hissed.

I smiled, picturing her. “Getting kidnapped and beat-up.”

She snorted, sounding fuzzy and distant. “Your preferred evening activity,” she said. “They deserve it?”

I nodded, closing my eyes, liking the sound of her voice. “Of course.”

“Of course,” she sighed. Rachel knew me. I’d never touched her, once, even though I’d wanted to. But she’d never done anything to deserve it.

“Well, put out the good china. I’ve been sitting on your gal down in the *lovely* burg of New Brunswick, and it’s been a hoot. A lot of people in and out, a lot of equipment in and out. No limousines, one red-haired woman that might be the one you mentioned. Then about an hour ago the woman herself got into an Econovan apparently made of rust and started driving.”

I nodded, probing the sensation of a darning needle thrusting down from my lower back into my upper thighs. “Where’d she go?” I said, thinking about the flash of a white suit I’d glimpsed in McHale’s. The professor, or professors, got around.

“Better put on some pants,” she said, sounding amused. “She just parked outside your building and I’m pretty sure she’s on her way up.”

9.

When Rusch stepped through the doorway, she was the same slightly nervous, badly-dressed woman I'd met down in New Brunswick. She was followed by the red-haired woman who'd been with her in the limousine—or who looked exactly like her, since she was also dressed like a schmuck: baggy tan pants, a shapeless T-shirt, a ratty old gray sweater, tennis shoes. If I'd passed her on the street I wouldn't have even noticed her. She was carrying a large, cheap suitcase made of an itchy-looking fabric.

I'd managed to put on shoes and a shirt. It was offensively wrinkled and dusty from the floor, but if these mopes weren't going to dress for the occasion—the good professor had on a tan jacket she might have found on the street moments ago—then I didn't give a shit. I'd also cleaned off my one and a half chairs and put on some coffee, the glass urn miraculously unscathed.

She came in tentatively, shoulders down, and I decided finally that there *were* two women who looked exactly alike. There had to be. Or else Doctor Rusch had a serious mental problem.

I pushed my hands into my pockets and leaned against the stove.

She looked around. “You must throw some parties, young man.”

I pulled one hand free and pointed at her. “You have a twin.” I shifted to point at the ginger. “So do you.”

They exchanged a long, blank glance. There was no fire in it, no spark of any kind. They might have met on the way up the stairs. They were either complete strangers or they'd been married fifty

years. The girl was leaving youth behind, and she wasn't pretty, with a too-long, bold nose and just the wrong amount of freckles.

"We all do," Rusch said, looking back at me. "Everyone has a twin. Hundreds of twins. *Trillions*."

"Does Elias Falken?"

Rusch nodded without looking at me, and began strolling around the kitchen as if nothing concerned her. "Oh, yes. Although I wouldn't say he has trillions of them any more. As a matter of fact, I'd say he's been narrowed down to about two or three." She kicked at the rubble that had once been my kitchen. "Hmmp. Gas-on-gas heat," she said, examining the stove with her baggy eyes. She looked sleepy all the time, like keeping her eyes open was far too much trouble. I looked at her and pictured her in a motorized bed, being zipped around everywhere with some silly sleeping cap on, muttering lazily now and then to communicate her thoughts. "Freezing in the winter in here, yes?"

I nodded, smiling a little. I was amused. So many people either tried to hit me, to beg me, or to run away from me. "Like a meat locker."

She nodded. "Pre-war tenement railroad. People used to shut up half the rooms and live in the kitchen and living room during the winter. If you close the door to the bedrooms, the heat's just enough to keep you alive." Suddenly she looked up at the cupboard over the sink, which now hung slightly askew, one of the screws torn out of the wall. I waited a beat, but she didn't say anything else. She just stared at the wall.

Steps outside, and then Rachel was leaning against the doorway,

arms crossed under her chest. She looked good in her librarian glasses, hair pulled back, in a lush black turtleneck, jeans, and gleaming black leather boots. We exchanged a glance, and she shrugged, somehow making the gesture beautiful, graceful. As usual I wanted to touch her so badly my hands curled up involuntarily, but that was the single, inviolable rule of our relationship: that I never touch her. The redhead glanced her way, but Rusch didn't take any notice of her at all.

"Dr. Rusch," I said, tearing my eyes from Rachel and putting them on her. "I have no imagination, so if you came here to say something, say it fast. My conversations usually devolve into me beating the shit out of people until they start saying what I want to hear."

She turned and blinked at me. "What? *Beatings*?" She said the word as if she'd truly never heard it before, and stared at me in undisguised horror. I controlled myself. I didn't know what was going on, and it wasn't right to just start swinging out of frustration.

"Mr. Falken," I said slowly, turning away and searching for an unbroken mug. "You were about to tell me where he is so I can find *him* and beat the snot out of *him*," I turned and smiled back at Rusch. "Instead of *you*."

"But—but I don't know where Mr. Falken is!"

I picked up a white mug from the floor and blew into it to clean out some of the dust. It wasn't my favorite; it had little black specs everywhere that always made me think it wasn't clean. I turned back and gave Rusch my sunniest smile. "Then I'm confused, because that's all I want to hear. Why are you here, then, Dr. Rusch?"

I grabbed the urn of hot coffee and poured some into the mug.

Little bits of dust floated on top, and I stared down at them, unhappy.

“To try and explain what's been happening,” Rusch said quickly. “I’ll, eh, I’ll admit you *frightened* me a little yesterday. I thought perhaps the best thing would be to remain uninvolved.”

I braced myself and took a sip of coffee. It was not the worst I’d ever had, even with the grit; it did not, for example, choke me to death. I’d bought it in a tin can on the way home a few hours ago; three dollars and a tin can did not, it turned out, make a good cup of coffee. “Well, since you're involved, I have one question before you get started: Does the name *Falken* enter into whatever dissertation you're about to give at all?”

She blinked at me again. “Yes. May I have a cup of coffee?”

I shook my head, leaning back against the stove again and crossing my arms so as to hold the coffee up near my face. “No.” I gestured with my free hand. “Proceed.”

She stared at me for another moment, then looked at her girlfriend. Dr. Rusch had been pretty, once, eons ago. I saw her at twenty, short skirts and a simple, unfussy hairdo, and wanted to talk to that version of her, make her smile. Clearing her throat, she nodded. “I am a physicist,” she began, then paused, cocking her head as if hearing her own words echoed back to her from some vast distance. Shaking her head, she looked at me again. “What do you know about the Many World's Theory?”

I studied her. I took a sip of coffee. I kept a grimace off my face.

“Multiple universes,” she prompted, gesturing at me encouragingly. After another few moments, she blinked. “*Alternate*

universes.”

I looked over at Rachel. I liked looking at her. She was short and slim and still had that freshness to her she'd had when we first met. She smiled briefly and shrugged her eyebrows behind her fantastic glasses.

Rusch took another breath, and I held up my hand. “All right. I've heard the term.” I looked at her. “A million other earths with a double of each of us on 'em, right?”

She scowled. “Well, *no*, actually, not—” She paused and visibly collected herself. “All right. Except, not a million, but infinite. You know what *infinite* means?”

I stared at her. After a few seconds she swallowed and looked over at the ginger again, then down at the floor. She seemed to be figuring out, more slowly than I would have imagined for a professor of some sort, that she was in near danger of having her nose broken.

“Yes,” she finally said. “Every observable,” she paused and looked at me again, apparently assessing my intelligence and not liking the prognosis. “Forget *why*,” she finally said. “Infinite universes. Each diverging from a previous timeline, some running parallel for a while, some diverging wildly.” She glanced up at me intently. “This is the field I've worked in my whole life. The theory of it, but also the *application* of it, how to *touch* these other universes. To observe them. And by observing them create another infinite set of—” she paused again. “Yes. These worlds exist. And yes, there can be other versions of us, depending on when divergence occurs. Since the set is infinite, the versions of us *can* be infinite.” She shrugged. “The math, however, proves these 'doubles' are, in fact, finite. For some of us, millions. For

others, two. For others, *none*.” She nodded as if someone had agreed with him. “*That* is the interesting data.”

I sipped more coffee; drinking this coffee was quickly becoming one of my biggest regrets in life. “I have not heard the name *Falken* yet, doc,” I said. “I’m going to be upset if I don’t hear it soon.”

“Mr. Falken approached me,” Rusch said suddenly as if it had been her plan all along to introduce the subject at that moment. “He approached me some weeks ago concerning my work, and told me a fantastic story—that he was, in fact, a different version of Falken, a man born at the same point in another, nearly-identical universe, that he was completely normal, average, a nonentity, and that a gang of people had suddenly tried to murder him some months ago. He did not explain how, exactly, he transferred himself to this reality. He did, however, indicate that he had been followed here by those who wished to eliminate him.”

I thought about Rachel telling me Falken had been dead for two years. “So you’re telling me, Falken and this other Dr. Rusch I’ve been running into are *alternate* versions? From alternate universes?”

Rusch took a half step backwards, as if she could sense that she was about four words away from that punch in the nose. Maybe three.

“Yes! Though I would use more precise terms. While I believe such travel is possible, I do not know of the exact technology utilized, nor am I aware of any practical way to do so.”

I swallowed the last of the coffee with a sense of relief, set the mug down carefully on the scorched and greasy stovetop, and straightened up, reaching up to unbutton my shirt cuffs. “Sorry, doc.

I'm going to have to beat you a little extra for trying to lay that bullshit on me.”

She blanched, her face literally going white, and skittered around to put the ruined hulk of my table between us. “Young man, I assure you I am not—”

“Assure all you want. I want to know where in *fuck* Falken is, and I think you know.” I started working on the other sleeve. “And I'm going to convince you to tell me.”

I didn't know what to make of all of it—maybe she was crazy, and believed it all. I didn't care.

She sidestepped her way towards the girl. I glanced at Rachel again, but she shrugged. She wasn't going to step in front of this train.

I finished tucking my sleeves up around my elbows, and started to walk steadily around the table to get to her. Rusch touched the redhead on the shoulder and she dropped the suitcase onto the floor and began unsnapping the locks.

“I beg a moment's indulgence,” Rusch said quickly, inching back as I approached. “I can make all of this perfectly clear.”

I nodded. “I know you can, doc. I got faith.”

The girl tossed the suitcase open with a flourish, and plucked something out, handing it up to Rusch. She fumbled for a second, and then brought a gun up, held on me with both hands.

I didn't like guns. I didn't use them; they made you soft. But I came across my share of them, and by necessity I'd learned something about them. This one was an automatic, and it looked like

a good one, though I didn't know much about make and model. I stopped and let my hands hang at my sides.

"That necessary, doc?" I said. "The only thing happens when people handle guns, is someone gets shot."

Before I realized what she was doing, Rusch extended her arms, centered the gun on my chest, and pulled the trigger four times. Each time all she got was a dry click, a misfire, while I stood there frozen in shock, completely unconvinced that it was possible an old lady from New Jersey had just tried to shoot me to death. Then she shifted the gun a foot to my right and pulled the trigger again. A peal of thunder shook the whole room and something exploded into the wall behind me as I ducked reflexively, the noise finally getting me into motion. Then she put the gun on me *again* and pulled the trigger three more fucking times, again getting just a dry click.

"As I suspected," she said. "You cannot be killed."

I surged up and knocked the gun out of her hand, intending to do more, but the shriek of terror that she produced combined with a sudden, grandmotherly cowering brought me up short. I glanced over her at Rachel, who was just staring at me flatly, saying nothing. It was one thing to slap an annoying woman, it was something else to beat an old lady. It impossible to do either with Rachel watching me.

I forced myself to straighten up. "I *can* be pissed off, doc," I said, stepping towards her. "And we're there."

10.

I'd had guns pointed at me before, but the trigger never got pulled. Guns were everywhere in my line of work, and assholes produced them regularly. It was the Asshole Punctuation Mark, really; whenever they felt like you weren't paying them the proper attention, they put a gun in their hands for emphasis. But throwing bullets around had consequences—I worked for Frank McKenna, and even if I hadn't been one of his best earners he would retaliate against any bullets thrown my way pretty harshly, just as a matter of policy. If you didn't get the sign-off from someone up the food chain, bullets had a way of coming back at you.

I stared at Rusch; she was eyeing me like I was on fire. “We're gonna perform a scientific experiment, doc,” I said, struggling to control myself. The bitch had *shot* at me. I felt light and nimble, every chemical my brain had at its disposal dumped liberally into my bloodstream. I knew I'd be sore and stiff tomorrow—not from exertion, but from overdrive. “We're going to see if you can convince me not to punish you for that. I don't like your odds.”

Rusch straightened up and looked wide-awake, finally, her eyes wide, her face hot and red. “I can *explain*!” She said. “Let me *explain*!”

I realized someone was hitting me in the back. It was like a soft drizzle of rain. I turned my head and the redhead was there, tiny, beating her little fists against me. As I looked at her she hit me in the face a few times, like a gnat crashing into a window pane. I took one hand and put it on her head, and with a light shove sent her flying into the sink.

Then, suddenly, Rachel was there next to me, her arms akimbo, her face dark and red.

“Stop it!” She said steadily. “*Stop it.*”

A cold flash swept through me. I frowned down at her. “She *shot* at me,” I complained.

“*Let her speak,*” she commanded, actually stomping her foot. “Jesus fucking *Christ*, let her *explain.*”

I clenched my teeth. “She—”

Rachel stood up on her tip-toes and slapped me across the face, making my cheek sting and my eyes water. I whipped my head back and stared at her in amazement.

“You brought me into this,” she said. “I am not going to stand here and watch you beat another person to death *right in front of me.*”

I stared down at her, my throat working, my arms trembling. She was four-feet eleven inches tall in skintight jeans and shiny leather boots, but she stood there with her lip out and her chest pointed at me like she was certain of besting me in a fight. Which, considering I'd promised to never touch her, she probably would.

With a snarl, I spun away and punched a nice round hole in the wall between the kitchen and the bathroom. Turning back, I wiped my face with my hand, still trembling, and glanced at the front doorway. My neighbor, Mr. Mittra, was peering at me from his own door, his face, as usual, heavily lined and very brown and completely unreadable.

“Mind your business, Mr. Mittra,” I said between breaths. He jumped a little and shut his door. I figured the cops would be here in

about three minutes.

I turned and looked at the girl, who lay on the floor with her back against the sinkbase, staring at me. I swallowed bile and stepped over to her, holding out a hand.

“All right,” I said thickly. “Sorry about that. But you were hitting me.”

She stared at my hand and then up at me. After a moment, I pulled my hand back and looked at Rusch and Rachel. The professor had recovered her posture and sleepy look. Rachel looked like a diamond was about to pop out of her ass.

“I’m pretty sure my neighbor just called the cops,” I said slowly, feeling slow and thick. “Let’s get out of here and ... talk.”

Rachel nodded. “It’s okay,” she said to Rusch. “He won’t do anything else.” She paused, biting her lip. “Just don’t *shoot* at him any more.”

.oOo.

Pirelli’s Diner was an ancient box of greasy laminate and cracked vinyl. It had a thick, sticky menu showing faded pictures of all sorts of interesting food no one had ever ordered. I’d never actually eaten anything solid in the place, wanting to remain alive. I ordered surprisingly good coffees and used their ashtrays.

I sat on the inside corner of the booth, smoking, a cup of coffee going cold in front of me, my arm stretched out along the back of the

booth, an inch away from Rachel's neck. There was air between us, but I could feel her warm and soft there anyway. Rusch and her girl sat across from us. The doctor had ordered a slab of cherry pie with ice cream, and I stared at her in amazement as he devoured it happily, like he hadn't been terrified half an hour before.

Snuffing my cigarette out, I leaned forward, carefully snaking my arm out from behind Rachel without touching even a strand of hair. "All right, Doc—let me apologize for losing my temper. But my temper's short, and you did fire a gun at me."

She nodded, suddenly jolly, and dropped her fork to pick up a napkin and wipe her lips carefully. "I do understand, I assure you. I apologize for the trick. I assumed if I asked you would not consent to the experiment."

I kept my face still. "And if the experiment had gone badly?"

She shook her head, wincing a little. "No, no, no—impossible. I am almost certain of your quantum status. I've been working with this research for thirty years—ever since I received tenure." Her face darkened peevishly for a moment. "The university hasn't let me teach a class in years. They think I'm crazy. But I still have access to the facilities, and I have been working on my research, alone. Quite alone." She sighed, then blinked and looked at me. "I had done my due diligence on you and was certain of my findings, but I required a definitive test. I knew the gun would not fire."

I considered the odds of four or five misfires in a row, then a clean shot, then another two misfires. Certainly not impossible, but unlikely. "And if it fucking *had*?"

She stared at me for a few seconds, her face blank. "I—I admit I

did not have a fallback scenario in mind.”

“We would have run,” the redhead said calmly. “You’re a criminal. The police would have assumed you were rubbed out by some other criminal. Can I have a cigarette?”

I raised an eyebrow. “*Rubbed out*? Did you really just say that without irony?” I tugged my pack out of my shirt pocket, took one out for myself, and tossed it onto the table along with the matchbook. “What’s your name, darling?” I said, leaning back and sticking the cigarette into my mouth.

She just gave me a sour look while she picked up the cigarettes, examining them with a frown, but Rusch gave me a wincing grin. “Forgive Doira. She has been my research assistant for many years, and she is protective. And she knows I dislike cigarette smoke.”

The redhead rolled her eyes.

I smiled and turned my head to look out the window. The BMW sat in a shadowed corner of the parking lot, The Bumble’s squat form a blur in the driver’s seat. I was kind of relieved to have him there.

I looked back and nodded at Rusch. “You were saying?”

She paused, a pie-laden fork halfway to her mouth. Slowly, she set the fork down and cleared her throat.

“In small words,” I said, taking the matches Doira had dropped back on the table. “See if you can get through it in about thirty seconds.” I jerked my thumb at Rachel. “She’s the only thing keeping me polite right now.”

She looked at Rachel and then back at me. “Very well. As we discussed, observ—alternate universes. Yes, let us use that term.” She

placed her fork on the table between us and pointed at the top. “Let us say here is our timeline. You and I, moving forward through time.” She traced a finger up the stem of the fork slowly. “You understand, I am criminally misstating the actual science.”

“Better than getting a bone broken,” I suggested, and Rachel turned to glare at me, adorable.

Rusch continued as if I hadn't spoken. “Every second, every *nanosecond*, you and I, everyone, face decisions, yes? Coffee or tea, pie or cake, smoke or abstain, yes? At the moment of decision, *every* possible outcome exists, because you have not made the decision yet.” She glanced up at me. “Clear?”

I sent a gale of smoke into the world. “As ... mud.”

She winced again, as if my words caused her physical harm. “An example: You could stop smoking that cigarette at any time. Any second, you could crush it into the ashtray. Every second, a world exists where you *do* crush out that cigarette. And this world, where you do *not*, also exists. Every second, universes split off, every conceivable possibility, infinite decisions and actions and non-actions from around the world, spinning off.” Her finger had reached the tines of the fork, crusted with pie and ice cream, and she spread the fingers of her hand. The skin on the back of her hand was thin and mottled by the blue veins beneath, ropy, sinuous. “In each of these universes, you exist. Or perhaps you do not—the actions of *another* person, or the inanimate chance of natural happenings, may have destroyed you, or caused you to not exist in the first place. Yes?”

I nodded, more for effect than anything else. “Okay, so every time I make a choice, there's another me out there. Maybe. At any rate, a

lot of mes running around breaking bones out there.”

She hesitated. “Well ... let us leave it at that. Except that the other “yous” may not resemble you very much, depending. Certainly, at the moment of divergence, perhaps you are identical. But if you diverged thirty years ago, or in the womb, say, you may be very different people.” She picked up the fork again. “At any rate, I do not believe there are any other *yous* out there.”

I blinked. “Why is that?”

“You are what I term a Quantum Terminus.”

I smiled. “Oh, I am going to like this.”

She grinned back at me as if she believed me, as if I hadn't terrorized her just a moment before. “Perhaps you will. As I said, every divergence *can* create an ... alternate version of you. Again, the terms are not precise, but ... However, there are not *infinite* versions of you. You may die. You may never be born at all in a divergent timeline. However, because of the splitting of timelines—consider: Every time you are in danger of dying, there exists one possible world where you die, and one where you live. As a result,” she hesitated suddenly, then leaned forward and spoke in a rush. “There exists, always, *one* version of a given person who does not die. Ever. Every time they face the possibility of death, they are the version that lives. Forever.”

I blinked. “What?”

“She's saying you're immortal,” Rachel said, in the same tone of voice as if she'd said I was fat, or smelled bad.

Rusch shrugged apologetically. I realized I kind of enjoyed her

talking, and thought she was probably a good professor. “Yes.” She leaned forward again. “Imagine this: You sit in front of a gun fitted with an automatic trigger that randomly either fires or does not fire, every second. Each second, the possibility is that the gun fires and kills you, or does not. Thus in every second you split into two: One dies, one lives. Each split then also faces the next second, and splits in turn. Eventually you end up with *one* version that survives *every* second. This version is the Quantum Terminus, because it goes on. Forever.” She relaxed, picking up the fork again. “This is why the gun misfires when I point it at you. You are the last of, well, *you*. In every scenario where you choose between living and dying, you live.”

She plunged the fork into her pie and held it up between us for a moment, gesturing at me with a dollop of cherry filling and vanilla ice cream. “You’re immortal.”

I considered that for about five seconds, then leaned forward and held my cigarette up in front of my face, pretending to examine it closely. “Doc, I didn’t hear the name *Falken* once in that speech. And you know how that irritates me.”

Rusch actually seemed amused, still holding the pie in front of her face. “He’s not immortal, but there’s a version of him—an *alternate* him—that wants to be.”

I shifted my eyes from the coal to her face. “And how does he do that?”

Rusch pushed the fork into her mouth. “By killing all the *other* versions of himself, of course.”

11.

Somehow I ended up with Doira, the redhead, sitting in the back seat with The Bumble pretending we didn't exist, which he was good at. The Bumble, I was convinced, believed we all disappeared every time he closed his eyes, or that we at least relaxed, going out of character, smoking cigarettes and talking shop, waiting for him to come back to us. It wasn't egotism, it was simplicity: The only thing The Bumble understood was himself. The rest of us were perplexing.

"Why is she so sure Falken's here?" I asked, making conversation. The actual process behind the good doctor's intuition didn't matter to me.

"Why is she so sure you won't kill him if he is?" she asked without looking at me. Her voice was sharp and nasal, but there was a grit to it that would be sexy if she took it down a pitch and breathed a little into her words. One of my first jobs for Frank had been security for whores, driving them around, busting noses when guys got too frisky or wouldn't pay. The whores all talked that way to their customers. To me it was their real voices.

I studied the freckles on her neck. The woman was made of freckles, like she would explode into a million pieces if you hit her the right way. "Because I said I wouldn't." I looked out the window at the wet street. "Of course, my promise was based on Dr. Rusch's word that Falken would have the nut, and be willing to pay it out to me."

I felt her turning to look at me. She didn't say anything for a few seconds, and I pretended to brood over the shitty weather.

“You just found out you’re an amazingly rare event in the history of the universe,” she said steadily, biting her words off so fiercely I felt bad for her boyfriends, past, present, and future, “and all you care about is *money*?”

“You know what else is an amazingly rare event?” I said, turning to look back at her. “Me hitting a woman in the face. But, it happens.”

She snorted through her nose and looked at the back of The Bumble’s head.

She was my hostage, though I was pretty sure she didn’t know it. Rusch and Rachel had gone into the place—an old sagging brownstone in The Village, under renovation, everything roped off and boarded up, permits slapped everywhere like wallpaper—to go scare up Falken and talk him into coming out to have a word with me. Rusch assured me Falken had thought I was with the *other* Rusch, the one trying to kill everyone, that’s why he ran. If I’d been dealing with anyone with a brain and some balls, it would have been a hostage swap—Rachel for the Ginger, everyone behaves and no one gets hurt. But since I didn’t see Rusch as a threat to Rache, I was in charge, even if the only one who realized it was me.

“Ask you a science-y kind of question?” I said, leaning slightly towards her. She smelled nice. Not pretty, but not unattractive, really. *Sturdy* was the odd word that came to mind when I looked at her. I was starting to think I might ask to buy her a drink, if she ever got over hating my guts.

She sighed, but didn’t say anything.

“Falken—how’d he just disappear? I chased him into a room with no windows and just one door. I saw him go in. And then I get in

there seconds later, and he's gone."

"You got the part where each alternate universe is different, sometimes a lot, sometimes a little, right?"

"Sure," I said, nodding, going along with it. "Like, in one universe the World Trade Center burns down, or the Red Sox win the world series, or something else incredible."

She gave one curt nod. "Okay, sometimes it's a single concrete thing like that, but every time something happens there are consequences. Like in one universe you get hit by a train when you're fifteen, riding a motorcycle drunk, and because you're dead, all the people you've hurt or killed in your life *don't* get hurt or killed, and maybe one of them cures cancer."

I kept my face straight. I'd almost been killed by a train when I was fifteen. I'd come within seconds. A cold feeling seeped into my bones.

"So, this Falken, this *version* of Falken, comes from a universe where knowledge of the alternates is common, and exploited. He can move between them. That's why he ran, when they came for him. So when you came for him, he ... went elsewhere. Another *version* of that room, a version where you weren't on the other side of the door."

My head was aching. "Uh-huh. Glad I cleared that up." It made sense to me, in a Saturday-morning cartoon kind of way. Falken had come to our little pond in the multiverse trying to hide from Alt Rusch's murderous intentions, and had come to *our* Rusch because he figured the professor might be able to help. It was fucking confusing. And she wondered why I chose to concentrate on my money. At least money made *sense*. I looked at the back of The Bumble's head.

“What do you think, Billy?”

He grunted. “I think we’re workin’ fucking *hard* for this debt, boss.”

I grinned and looked at Doira. “He’s right.”

She gave me a snort.

People were emerging from the basement apartment of the brownstone: one, two, three. I recognized Rachel’s tiny frame and watched them approach the car. I kept my eyes on Rache; I was surprised she’d stuck around this long, stayed involved, but appreciated it, and if anything was wonky I knew I could trust her to give me a sign.

Rusch and Falken followed her. Falken looked a little worn-out; the dandy I’d found in McHales looked tired and wrinkled. He was wearing the same suit as before, and had a stunned, glazed look on his face. I looked from Rachel to him and back as they approached. I wondered if he’d run for it, and was prepared to let him; there was nothing more ridiculous than me chasing someone through downtown New York at two in the morning. I had my dignity to protect.

He didn’t run. Rachel stopped a few feet away and indicated the car, and I rolled down the window, staying in the car to reassure him. I didn’t care about intimidating him or being tough. I wanted my money, Frank’s money, and if Falken was going to hand it over I was prepared to be polite.

“Evening,” I said, giving him a smile. “No hard feelings, huh?”

He hesitated, looking first at Rusch, who gave him a motherly,

encouraging nod, and then at Rachel, who smiled warmly at him in a way she never did at me, hardening my heart towards Mr. Falken, who, I reminded myself, was a deadbeat I had every right to tune up to my black heart's content.

She looked at me, the traces of that smile misting away. "I promised him your hands would stay in your pockets."

I smiled. "What if I have an itch?"

She shook her head. "Don't fuck with me."

I looked back at Falken. "All right," I said. "My hands stay in my pockets. We can talk like fucking animals or you can switch places with Doira here and we'll talk like civilized men. Or we can go somewhere, have a drink. You could have people around, make you feel safer."

He stared at me. "People? Jesus. *Safer?*"

Rachel was shaking her head anyway. "He's not getting in the car with you and Billy."

I glanced at her again, getting a little irritated. She was presuming a lot on our friendship, on our deal. I got the feeling she thought the balance of power was permanently in her favor. I'd have to think on that and make sure she understood otherwise, my promise notwithstanding. Then I smiled at Falken again.

"Look, it's up to you. I'll do this any way you want. Tell me how you want to talk, and let's talk. Hands in pockets, I promise."

He looked around. A night or two spent living in an empty, gutted house breathing drywall dust and listening to the roaches scamper over the concrete would make anyone tired. Finally, he nodded. "I'll

get in the car.”

Rachel opened her mouth, then thought better of it and shrugged. She’d known the man for five minutes. If he was going to be, in her opinion at least, an idiot, she wasn’t going to stand in his way. It *was* a stupid thing to do, really, except that I’d given my word. But he didn’t know me. Stupid.

I looked at Doira. “Do you mind, honey?”

“Jesus,” she sneered, opening her door. “You’re a walking stereotype, you know that?”

I shrugged, examining her ass as she stepped out, and thought that at least my entire ensemble didn’t retail for twenty-seven dollars, *total*, at a local Rainbow Shop.

Falken slipped into the seat a moment later, pulling the door shut. I rolled up my window, and we were snug, the outside world nicely muted.

“You’re a hard bastard to track down,” I said. “You’ve caused me a lot of fucking trouble.”

He snorted. “*You?* Listen, man, those bastards are trying to *erase* me. Or *I’m* trying to erase me. You know what it’s like to have someone want you dead, to *hunt* you?”

I nodded. “Sure. Sure I do. I work with deranged, violent people, Mr. Falken.”

He shook his head. “Not like this. Not just me. Every *version* of me. Someone hunting me down in every universe, erasing me.”

I nodded again, trying to be friendly. “The whole quantum whatsit

thing.”

“Yes,” he said, and got quiet. We sat in companionable silence for a moment. “Can you imagine, yourself—*you*—trying to kill yourself, to murder yourself, so you can be immortal?”

I thought about it, and shrugged. “Why not. It’s not you. It’s some mope who looked like you, maybe has your taste in clothes. It’s not *you*. Only you are you.”

“That sounds kind of philosophical.”

I sighed. “You want to hold my hand, take a long walk on the beach, get me drunk and fuck me at some dim motel, Mr. Falken? We going on a date here, spend a few hours discussing our inner turmoils and regrets while Billy Bumbles here plays the fiddle real slow and heartachy?” I rolled my shoulders, trying to work out a persistent, stabbing discomfort that had plagued me ever since my loading dock adventure with the Worst Kidnappers in History. “I’m here to collect the money you owe, Mr. Falken. I understand you thought I worked for Dr. Rusch’s evil twin and wanted to murder you. A misunderstanding. Now that you know I am merely a representative of Mr. Frank McKenna, from whom you borrowed a large amount of money, be kind enough to bring your fucking account fucking current and let me get on with my fucking life.” I turned to look at him. “Okay?”

He stared back at me, eyes wide, face slack and shadowed. “Jesus, I’m not here to *pay* you,” he said, sounding panicked. “I don’t have the goddamn money.”

I blinked. “Then why are you meeting me?” A small spark of joy sprang into life in my belly, and I imagined myself breaking his

thumbs, justified and free from Rachel's disapproval.

He looked straight ahead, and put a hand up to his face as he sank down in the leather seats. "I thought you were going to *protect* me."

I looked at him, then turned my head and smiled through the window at Rachel, who stood on the sidewalk with her arms crossed under her boobs, scowling. "Well," I said, giving her a little nod, cheerful, "you thought wrong."

12.

"I'm not speaking to you. Just so we're clear."

I nodded. "Duly noted."

Rachel let us walk in peace for another few seconds.

"I promised him you wouldn't hurt him," she said fiercely.

I nodded again. "Actually, you promised him I would be *reasonable*, and fuck, I'm being so reasonable it hurts." I glanced at her sideways. "The Bumble's not going to hurt him. He's just keeping a pin in him, make sure he doesn't disappear again."

"Billy *Bumbles* is not going to hurt him," she spat. "Billy hurts people when he coughs."

I tried a bright smile as we crossed the slick, empty street that ran perpendicular to mine, streetlights spilling dulled orange light. The Bumble wasn't a complex, unpredictable tool: he could be trusted to do what I asked of him and no more or less. Falken was about as safe as any man who owed that much money to the wrong people could be.

"Trust me, Rache," I said, leading her to the low stone wall separating the backyard garden of the corner building from the sidewalk. "You're the one made deals in my name without consulting me. Don't fucking complain about the manner in which I honor them."

She didn't comment on that. "Why the fuck are we going to your apartment?"

"I'm buying time. Go around front and wait outside. If anyone looks like they're looking for me shows up, stall."

"What?"

"I'll meet you around front in a few minutes."

"Why are you buying time?" She asked, putting her hand son her hips again. "Aren't you immortal?"

I tolled my eyes. "You don't believe that horseshit any more than I do. Now go on. I promise you, I'm trying to find a solution to all this. But I need time."

She nodded, softer than I'd expected, and turned to go. I watched her walk for a moment, knowing that if she caught me ogling I'd be in dutch. Then I put my hands on the surprisingly warm, painted stone and pulled myself up and over the low wall, landing awkwardly in the dense, fragrant garden. The corner building's basement apartment was inhabited by a cheery, crazy old woman and her sullen, crazy son, both fat as pears waddling around, doing half-assed superintendent work in return for reduced rent and drinking lite beer in surprising, disturbing quantities on the front steps just about any night it wasn't cold or wet. She was a waste of time, generally, except for the magnificent garden she kept in the back, toiling over it every day. I was sad, sometimes, thinking that someday the old bat would die and her son would let the garden rot and wither.

I crossed the garden and scaled the sagging chain-link fence on the other side, hidden behind an aggressive and strangely sticky-feeling wall of ivy. The next yard over was a neat, clean concrete box with a drain in the exact center. No furniture, no plants, nothing. The wall between it and my building's back yard was about ten feet high,

but someone had embedded thick eyehooks into the blocks, creating a precarious ladder up to the top. The drop into my own backyard was a little frightening, all the dark, overgrown weeds and trees, but I managed to not twist an ankle. From there it was an easy climb up the rusting fire escape to my bedroom window, and then I was back inside my tossed apartment without anyone knowing.

Whoever had tossed my place had found the cutout in the closet floor, probably within seconds of entering the place, but all it revealed was an empty wooden pit. I leaned down and pushed down hard on the bottom of the pit and the wooden panel clicked and came loose, revealing a second box beneath it. I fished out one of the duffel bags hidden in the cool, damp darkness underneath, and pulled two plastic-wrapped cubes of cash from it. Then the bag went back down, I pounded the panel back into place carefully, and slipped the bricks of money into my coat pockets, twenty grand. Then it was back out the window and back the way I'd come, dusting myself off on the sidewalk and straightening my cuffs before swinging around the corner and waving to Rachel. She looked radiant, a tiny sexpot in tight jeans giving me her Pursed Lips of Doom.

“What the fuck—”

“Sorry I kept you waiting. Let's go up. I need a shower and a change of clothes, and then I'll take you to breakfast.”

.oOo.

She didn't want breakfast. She wanted to stand in my ruined

kitchen for twenty minutes telling me I was an asshole, and then she called a cab and left. It was a pretty typical date for me and Rachel: Abuse, no touching, me groggy and covered in silt.

I took a shower with my shoes on the bathroom floor, stepping into them to walk through the ruin of the place to my bedroom, where I spent a distressing twenty minutes trying to find a shirt that didn't look like someone had used it as a towel recently. I'd fallen behind on my dry cleaning. And my housekeeping. And my dance lessons.

Dressed, I called and checked in with The Bumble, who reported that Falken didn't seem to like him very much but wasn't causing any trouble. Then, still damp from the shower, I caught a cab downtown to Rowdy's to have breakfast, careful on the steep stairs down into the basement of 86 Barrow Street. Dumb Benny was working the door, and greeted me with his wet, toothless smile and an awkward, unwanted hug. But Dumb Benny was an avalanche of a man, sixteen tons of jovial weight, and in enclosed spaces you did whatever Dumb Benny wanted you to do.

Inside, I walked quickly through four small, empty rooms that appeared to be dust-filled and long-unused, emerging into the subdued din of Rowdy's gaming room. It was a low-ceilinged affair with no windows and poor ventilation, six round poker tables, a bar, and about twenty men and women playing cards with the sort of grim, loveless determination usually reserved for hunger strikes.

Clarence was behind the bar, thin and Filipino and happy enough to see me. I ordered steak and eggs and a Belgian-style beer. Rowdy's kitchen was a secret; it only existed for a select few. They made their eggs light and fluffy with a pinch of Adobo and Rowdy's cousin was a

butcher. The steaks were fucking *gorgeous*.

"My credit here still good?" I asked Clarence as I lit a fresh cigarette. I didn't want to pay for breakfast by breaking open a brick of hundred dollar bills like some asshole kid trying to impress everyone. Not to mention advertising, in a room filled with criminals, that I was flush. I'd been awake forever and felt scratchy.

Clarence nodded, pouring beer from an amber bottle expertly. "Sure, sure," he said, grinning. Clarence grinned a lot. It was almost a permanent expression.

That was good. Aside from breakfast, it meant Frank hadn't queered me on the street, cutting me off. It wouldn't make sense for him to do that, since I owed him money and to get money I needed to work, but Frank was a vindictive bastard, sometimes. Sometimes he just liked flexing his muscle on you.

As I ate, I puffed my cigarette and considered. Falken said he didn't have the money, and I believed him; if he had resources he wouldn't have been hiding with the roaches in a basement. No one who borrowed money from Frank had money, that was the point. But you could get money *out* of them. It was amazing how people found money, people who'd felt compelled a few weeks earlier to go to Frank McKenna and put up with his bad jokes and acrid cologne to beg for money. You pressed their pressure points hard enough and they found old friends to touch, valuables to sell, houses to mortgage. People didn't borrow from Frank when they had no resources, they borrowed from Frank when they didn't want to liquefy the resources they *had*. My job was to clarify that for them. So I considered Falken to still be an okay risk, and I was going to hang onto him until I figured out how to squeeze him without breaking my word to Rachel.

I considered Rusch and Doira and Falken and their crazy story: Multiple universes, our doubles running around—Dopplegangers, my old grandad would have called 'em in his thick accent. Graps, I'd called the skinny dried-up old drunk, and that was the only thing he'd ever taught me, that one word. Bullshit, had to be, but they sold it. When I'd been a kid, I'd joined the Boy Scouts for all of two weeks, on my Dad's insistence, seeking to socialize me or something. I'd gone on a weekend camping trip, nothing major, just a bunch of shitbag kids in a state park getting dirty water diseases and mud in their underwear. The older kids had a hazing tradition, and all the new kids were given chores as we set up camp; mine was to go around to the other campsites and ask for a gallon of striped paint. I was a kid, I was an asshole, I spent an hour going from camp to camp asking for striped paint. When I finally figured it out I went after all of them at once, just kicking and punching, and I'd broken two noses, knocked five teeth loose, and cracked a half dozen ribs before two adults pulled me off them.

What I remembered, aside from the sweet happiness of beating on the motherfuckers, was the completely straight faces they'd had when sending me on my way. They *sold* it, and I'd believed it, and Rusch and Falken and Doira had the same game faces on when they started in about Quantum Terminals and shit.

I spent a pleasant few seconds imagining what I would do to each of them if it turned out they were lying to me. Then I snuffed my cigarette, swallowed the last of my beer, and thanked Clarence. With my bricks of cash weighing me down, I headed over to the Templar Social Club. Traffic was a snarl because the President was in town, speechifying at the United Nations on some atrocity that had

occurred in Bogota the other day, so I walked.

.oOo.

Bob was working the door, dressed in the same flashy leather duster and smoking the same pack of cigarettes, it seemed. His round, bald head was turning an angry shade of red. I guessed he'd never heard of sunblock, or he didn't think you could get skin cancer when it was cold out. As I approached he adjusted his stance to block the door, and I stopped in honest shock.

"Mornin'," he said, looking at my neck. "Can I help you?"

I swallowed my urge to hook my fingers into his nostrils and pull. I'd give him the benefit of the doubt. "We met already, a few nights ago," I said.

He shrugged, in a worse mood. "Gotta frisk you, first."

It was him not looking at my face that did it. Just being a little shit I could handle, but being a little shit and not even looking me in the face was fucking irritating. I shook my head. "You touch me, and I'll break all ten fingers. Right here."

That brought his fat, round face up. Big guy. Blubber, but big, sort of guy who filled doorways and crowded rooms. You could outrun him, dance away, but if he got you cornered he could smother you, and he was used to it. He rolled his shoulders and stepped forward. "Just—"

I stepped into him and kneed him in the balls, hard, the easiest

move in the world. He tried to crumple up, protect himself, but I caught him under the left shoulder and took hold of his wrist, spinning behind him and bending his arm backwards, my knee in the back of his, sending him into a gasping kneeling position with me on his calves. I took hold of his pinky with my free hand.

“You remember me next time, yeah?” I said, and with a jerk snapped it back until it broke, the sharp sound making me giddy, a rush of pleasure sweeping through me. I could feel him struggling senselessly, could feel his howl through the clothes and our skin. Could sense his heart rate climbing, dangerous, the delicious quiver of his bones under all that thick, red flesh.

He was making an odd huffing noise, wet and vocal, and I realized after a moment's concentration that he was trying to say yes.

“Good,” I said, and with a thrill I took hold of his ring finger.

.oOo.

“Well, Jesus fucking Christ, it's the prodigal son,” Frank bellowed when he looked up from the desk. “Come on in. Have a drink.”

I sailed in, floating, feeling like I'd just come in from a body massage, or a fucking orgy. Alive and flushed. Chino was the only one in the office with Frank this time, and we nodded at each other quick and then ignored ourselves. Chino in his untucked dress shirt, even untucked not loose enough to obscure his gut.

Frank put a bottle of Bushmill's on the desk with his fingers in two old glasses. I didn't think he ever washed them, and hoped to hell the

alcohol killed whatever might be trying to make a living on them. He poured sloppy fingers into each and handed it over to me; we clinked our glasses, spilling some onto the desk, and drank.

"I was worried you might never be seen again," he said, putting the bottle up.

I frowned. "Over a fucking debt?" I blew air out through my lips. "Fuck that. Time comes, you can break my legs, I won't holler." I pulled a thick manilla envelope out of my pocket and dropped it on the desk. "Brings me current on Falken."

Frank studied me, then leaned forward and picked up the envelope without looking at it, holding it up for Chino to take. The fat Puerto Rican tore the envelope open and began counting, fast, holding up random notes to the light.

"I'm surprised," Frank said slowly, leaning back.

I put a smile in place. "What? That I'm keeping current or that I didn't run?"

He shook his head. "That you couldn't squeeze it out of him." He grinned, pointing at me. "You're goin' soft."

"We're good," Chino said flatly, dropping the restuffed envelope back onto the desk.

I nodded and stood up. I kept the grin in place and wished for another shot. "By the way," I said, turning for the door. "You're gonna need a new doorman. The one you have is broken."

Time: It never came fucking cheap.

13.

The world is filled with small fry, if you look close enough. Snitches and junkies and people who just generally don't have any character, willing to sell anything they had for a few bucks. If you walked around the city with a brick of money in one pocket, there wasn't a secret in the universe you couldn't have explained to you in painful detail.

Part of my job was detective work. People who owed Frank McKenna money generally didn't want to be found, so you spent a lot of time wearing the soles off your shoes, slithering through grimy shitcan bars and after-hours clubs asking questions and applying lubrication, either in paper or torn ligaments. I enjoyed it. Not many did. I knew who needed a smack to get them talking and who was better to just pay off; I wanted to smack everybody but I was practical. If a fifty would get things rolling in five seconds, spending an hour tuning someone up was just wasted time, even if I really enjoyed it.

I held up a bill folded between my ring finger and thumb and kept it in the air until Cecilia noticed and nodded at me. Then I put it back into my pocket and waited as he served up drinks to the throng at the bar. I got some dirty looks from people trying to push past me to the bar, and I accidentally put two bridge and tunnel girls on their asses with a well-timed elbow, but I kept my real estate until Cecilia made his way down to my end, his wig kind of askew and his heavy eye makeup running down his face like twin rivers of sewage.

"Hey Big Man," he sing-songed to me, loud over the din, leaning

in to give me a kiss on the cheek. Cecilia was a man named Cecil who liked to wear skirts and wigs and be called Cecilia, and he'd found a place in the world where that was perfectly fine. He ran the bar at The Triage on Christopher Street four nights a week. He was built like a linebacker and refused to do mixed drinks at all. It was shots and beers and if you didn't like it you could go fuck yourself. "You want a drink?"

Cecilia made eyes at me. Him flirting with me was an old game we played. I shook my head. "Business," I shouted over the din of angry patrons waiting for Cecilia to serve them. "I'm tracking down a bad debt. Guy named Falken."

He grinned, his red lips shining in the dull orange light. "Oh, darling, that boy's been *everywhere*. Every damn shylock in the *world* is looking for his ass."

I nodded. "The Phin?"

Cecilia nodded, ignoring his customers. He was making better money per hour talking to me, and he knew it. "Deep. The old Jew's tearing his hair out." His eyes suddenly shifted over my shoulder and then back to me. "Looks like he wants to chat you up about it too."

I made a face and sighed, pulling the bill from my pocket and holding it out to him. "Let me buy a credit," I shouted as he took it. "I'll be back for the rest of the story."

"Any time, sugar," he smiled, blowing me a kiss. I smiled back, startled, and stood there for a moment, waiting for the tap on the shoulder, trying to decide if I wanted to throw some punches, make a scene, or just go see what the old man wanted. Cecilia spun away and planted his feet, shouting in a voice that was all marine drill sergeant

for a moment.

“You fucking cunts’ll get served when I decide, and anyone doesn’t like it can go fuck themselves!”

By the time the tap on my shoulder came, I’d made up my mind, and just turned around, putting my back against the bar, hands in my pockets. I recognized the two men standing there in expensive suits that had obviously been plucked from the back of a truck and tailored by way of cutting the tags off the sleeves. They were two men in someone else’s clothes, the sleeves too long, the shoulders all wrong. At first glance you might take them for twins, each of them hairy and short and broad, with flat noses and single gold hoops in their left ears. The one on the left was Maurice, and he was an inch taller, a year older, and about ten IQ points smarter. The one on the right was his brother Michael, who hardly ever spoke; his one charming trait was an embarrassed knowledge of his own stupidity, and he chose to keep his mouth shut rather than humiliate himself.

“Mr. Lanzmann would like a word,” Maurice said, jerking his head to the side a little.

I nodded. “Hey, Mo. How’s Tricia?”

He blinked several times at me and a sheepish, small grin hit his flat face. “Mad at me. ‘Cause I play cards too much.”

I smiled. “Be careful, or someone in my line of work will come knocking at your door.” I pushed my hands into my pockets and crossed my ankles, leaning against the bar. “The old man in the car outside?”

Maurice shook his head. “Nah, we gotta drive ya.”

I considered this. I didn't want to get into a car with The Phin's guys, let them take me wherever they wanted, and I was pretty confident they could be handled. I'd known Mo and his brother for years, and their pressure points were pretty standard stuff. But if I did that, the Phin would likely send a dozen guys and would make a point of tagging me for disrespect, and it would get complicated.

"All right," I said, stepping forward.

.oOo.

The old man was at one of his restaurants in Brooklyn; we had a scenic ride over the Williamsburg bridge, lights twinkling. The place had been shut down for code violations a few months ago and Phin didn't seem to be in any rush to get it going again; he'd been using it as one of his meeting spots. Phin didn't have an office or a regular place; he moved around all day, doing business over breakfast, lunch, dinner, and every cup of coffee and glass of wine in-between. You didn't like it you could shut the fuck up.

The place was officially closed, but a bartender and waiter were on duty, just standing there in their white shirts and black trousers, patient with their only customer. Phin wasn't eating, just lingering at the bar over a tiny glass of something dark and ominous-looking, five of his goons standing around burning cigarettes and giving the big man space. I was left in the doorway and waited politely to be noticed and gestured over, so as not to get everyone excited.

"You look positively exhausted, kid," he said in his damp,

flattering way as I bellied up to the bar. "What can I get you?"

"Coffee," I said. "Hold the water. Just give me the grounds to suck on."

Phin laughed, sticking his little pink tongue out between his teeth. "That bad, huh?"

I nodded. "I haven't had to work for a living in a long time, Phin." I watched him pick up a teacup and sip daintily, this old fat bastard wearing five thousand dollar shoes and a coat you could stake a mortgage on, surrounded by guys who would break both my legs if ordered to, no questions asked.

The bartender set a cup of black coffee in front of me, a second short glass of dark wine in front of Phin.

"Word is you've got Falken pickled up somewhere, and you ain't sharing."

I picked up my cup and pretended to take a sip, put it down, thinking. I hadn't expected my possession of Falken to be secret for long, but this was setting fucking records. I realized I'd put myself in a windowless room surrounded by The Phin's men, with nothing to negotiate with. I blamed lack of sleep.

Affecting calm, I shrugged. "Someone had to get to him."

Phin nodded, not looking at me, hunched over the bar like the weight of the fucking world was piled on top of him. "Your boss," he said gently, like he was afraid what the words might do in the air, "sold that debt today. Few hours ago."

I blinked, cool, dry shock sprinkling down my back. Frank sold debts all the time, taking pennies on the dollar as a sure thing and

handing a headache off to someone else. It wasn't surprising. Except now that put me up against Frank McKenna—because I had Falken, and he'd sold the debt in good faith, and I'd be expected to turn the poor guy over to his new owner without complaint.

I didn't think Rachel was gonna like that.

"Who bought it?" I asked. It was a stupid question, because it wasn't any of my fucking business, but I was stalling, letting my thoughts catch up.

Phin hesitated, then tilted his head a little. "No official word from that Catholic dungeon you call a *club*, but eyes on the scene say it was the cop. The black one. Detective James."

I blinked again. James sometimes dabbled in dirty shit; he'd bought a few small debts in the past. This wasn't a small debt. This wasn't something a police officer could hide in his back pocket, and it wasn't something his fellow cops could just ignore with a grin—this was serious loansharking, and it didn't feel right. It didn't make *sense*.

"That cocksucker's worth a lot of dublooms to me, kid," The Phin said after a moment. "You turn him out, you turn him over, there won't be any left for me."

I forced a laugh. "I don't think that son of a bitch *has* any—"

The Phin turned and looked at me, his face pulled down in a terrible mask of anger, and he reached up and slapped me across the face. It was like a soft spring breeze had slapped me, but a waterfall of icy cold shock went through me anyway. The fat old man pushed a finger into my face. "Shut the fuck up before you fucking insult me. You turn the screws better 'n anybody. I been *nice* to you, kid. Made

you a good offer. Brought you in like a friend when I coulda had Mo hogtie you and strip you, bring you in like a side of beef. And you stand there and *grin* at me because you've got *my* fucking fatted pig in a poke somewhere and you're gonna turn the screws on him and get all the fucking grease for yerself and yer Mick boss." He shook his head. "No." Slowly, he collapsed back into himself, becoming the dizzy old man I knew. The whole place was silent. I could hear the hairs on my face sizzling. Phin was breathing hard. "No, what yer gonna do is share 'im out. I guarantee you a piece of him. You got my word on that."

I shifted my weight a little. No one had frisked me on the way in, but everyone knew I didn't carry a gun. I could hear men moving around behind me, shifting positions, but I didn't turn to look. I kept smiling at Phin, partly because I was trying to sell innocence and partly because it was a soft spot he'd shown me, something that irritated him, and I enjoyed irritating him.

"You must be in *deep* on him," I said slowly. He'd come selling me a job offer, and I'd been stupid enough to bite the flattery and think he really thought well of me. He was just sniffing around after Falken. "Jesus, Phin, how deep?"

He pounded a fist on the bar. "Tune 'im up," he snapped at the room in general, snatching up his glass and draining it in one wet gulp. Spinning away, he picked his hat up off the bar and strode off without looking at me. "Don't kill him, but make him tell you everything, starting with the first cunt he sniffed in school and ending with where our man is right now."

I looked at the bartender, a big guy with a gut that stuck out from him like he had something basketball-sized growing inside him. He

had thin white hair, a blood-red nose, and a whispery white beard and mustache that drooped off his face, yellow at the edges. He looked back at me with wide eyes, terrified. I leaned forward a little.

"I'm about to get my ass kicked," I said. "Can I get a double Wild Turkey, neat?"

He nodded without blinking, turned, pulled a full bottle off the shelf, and handed it to me wordlessly. I took it, unscrewed the top, and toasted him with it. "Gracias, mi amigo," I said, and took a deep pull.

"Sorry about this," I heard Mo say behind me. "Ain't personal."

I nodded, coughing a little. "Christ," I said, turning to face them. "I know that."

There were five of them, Mo and Mike and three others, Hispanics with long pony tails tied back from their faces, the Puerto Rican flag tatted on the sides of their necks. The Puerto Ricans didn't apologize, but they didn't look like it meant anything to them, either. I put the cork back in the bottle and gave it a tap with my fist. I held it up. "Not for nothin', guys, but the first one into my airspace is getting this on the head."

Michael came first, ducking down and trying to get his shoulder into my belly. I twitched my ass to the left and let him smack his head into the bar with some fucking prejudice as I swung the bottle up with a sweeping motion, smashing it against Mo's head and knocking the poor stupid son of a bitch off his feet. The bottle disintegrated in my hand and sliced it all to hell all over again, deep hot pain lancing up my arm, blood welling up and making my grip slick. I felt a humming inside me, like I was a well-maintained engine

of a classic car, all the moving parts oiled and perfectly cut, precise.

Two of the Puerto Ricans got my arms and pushed me back against the bar with the third one coming up the middle with a blackjack in one hand and bored, bland expression on his face. When he stepped into my sphere of fucking influence I used his two friends as anchors and lifted myself up a little, kicking him sharp in the nose and making him stagger back, bloodied and cursing. My shoulders and wrists ached and my hand throbbed and I couldn't help but smile through it all. I was fucking *alive*.

With a sudden jerk, I tore my uninjured arm away from the guy on my left, spinning myself around and pulling his buddy down to the floor. The silence was shattered, now; there was yelling and moaning—some of that was me. I rolled my new friend until I was on top of him. He punched me in the face, opening up the cut over my eyes again, blood seeping down into my vision, but I hung onto him and slammed my head down onto his nose. I loved breaking noses. So fucking easy, and so rewarding—visceral, the cracking cartilage, the spurting blood. And most people howled when you did it, giving it some lung.

This guy didn't howl. He punched me again, his fist like a wedge of granite, making my head ring, my vision swim. I brought my head up again, ready to smash it into his face until he quit punching me. Then someone hit me over the head with a barstool.

14.

A splash of cold water brought me back online, shivering and drowning, trying to breathe through a thick wedge of snot in my nose, my mouth taped shut. The water stung my eyes, and I blinked rapidly, turning my head this way and that. I was still in the restaurant's bar, and I still had five admirers. Mo and his brother were seated at the bar with bar napkins balled up in front of them soaked red, tending to their wounds. The three Puerto Ricans were standing in the cleared area of the bar, in a loose group, conferring with each other.

I was tied to a chair pulled from the dining room, and it was a much better job than Rusch's folks had managed; a few experimental twists of my wrists told me I wasn't going to be dancing my way off the chair without a struggle. I rocked the chair a little and figured I could hop around a little if they'd let me, and took in as much of the space as I could, quick blurry flashes. The bar, bottles and decorations, all the tools of the trade. Unstable old wooden tables and barstools. The dead neon signs and framed posters on the walls.

As my three new friends turned back to me, I took as deep a breath as my nose would allow, trying to clear my head. I only got a thin stream of clear air through my nose, and my head was pounding like mutant Mexican Jumping Beans were inside, trying to hatch. The bar, I told myself, was my only play.

"We were going to be friendly, *mamabicho*," the leader said, stepping forward. My eyes trailed down his body and landed on the small blowtorch in his hands, the kind jewelry makers used. My eyes

lingered on it for a moment, and then popped back up to his face. “Now we have to be serious with you.”

Adrenaline flooded through me. I could feel the icy touch of that flame, I could smell my own skin burning. My mouth flooded with saliva as I got a little lightheaded, and I told myself I didn't have *time*, this was no fucking place to stop and smell the fucking roses.

I put my eyes past him. His two friends were just standing there a few feet away, talking to each other in Spanish.

The leader reached out and snapped his fingers rapidly in my face. “Hey—hey, *mamabicho*, you look at *me*, okay?” He stepped forward and with a flourish snapped the torch on, a tiny blue flame dancing on its end. He waved it close to my face, and then leaned in close. “We gonna start with somethin' easy, somethin' that'll *heal*. Then we move on to more *delicate* shit. Eventually, we start doin' damage that won't ever heal, *entienda?*”

I winked at him. The hissing sound of the torch was like music, beatless and eternal. My heart pounded with anticipation. It had been a long time since someone had gotten me all hot and bothered, and I fucking missed it.

He nodded, once, and then leaped onto me, straddling my lap. With one hand he tore open my shirt, buttons popping, and then he pushed the torch in close and pressed the flame against my chest just over my heart, holding it there for one, two, three delirious seconds. The pain was clarifying and sharp, opiates dumping into my blood and making me shiver with sudden ecstasy. I loved him. As the smell of my own burning flesh filled my nose, I would have fucked him right there on the floor. When he pulled the torch away a few seconds

later, I shut my eyes and savored the burning.

He slapped me lightly on the face. "Hey. Hey, *mamabicho*, where is Falken? Where you keeping him?"

He hadn't taken the tape off my mouth, and it filled me with glee, this tough asshole who thought he was going to beat something out of me. I started to laugh, howling, and it took him a moment to get it, his face getting a little red. He reached up and tore the tape off me, taking most of my lips with it, the stinging pain delicious.

I kept laughing. "You ... fucking ... moron ..."

He brought the torch in again, savagely, angry now, and pressed the flame against my nipple, a flood of agony pouring into me, sweating popping up on my skin as he just left it there, teeth bared as he pushed his face down towards mine.

"What's that, motherfucker? Falken. Where ... is ... Falken?"

He pulled the torch back and pushed himself up off me. In the sudden relief I started to shiver, putting my head down to let thick yellow snot drip down onto my lap. I started to say something and choked on my own phlegm, spasming into coughs.

"What's that?" The Leader said, leaning forward and cupping his ear theatrically. "You want to tell me something about our friend Mr. Falken?"

"I said," I spat, looking up. "I said I'm gonna kill you for that, and I'm gonna enjoy it, and then I'm gonna burn this fucking bar down."

At the other end of the bar, I saw Mo stand up, say something to his brother, then reach over and pull Mikey up from his seat. They both walked to the front door and out onto the street.

“Oh yeah?” My new friend said, leaning forward. “I don't think so. I think you're going to tell me where Falken is before I burn off something, okay? Like—”

I rocked forward onto my feet and threw myself at him, smacking into his torso and knocking him to the floor, the torch skittering across the floor to the bar, my bones shaking on impact. I leaned down and took hold of an ear between my teeth and bit down as hard as I could, my teeth clicking together as blood poured into my mouth. He screamed, sending a shiver through me, and I rolled to my side and then onto my back, fast, panting. Using every muscle I had, I rolled myself onto my knees and quick-jumped back onto my feet, wobbling backwards a little before catching my balance.

Squinting through sweat and adrenaline, I saw the other two shitheads just standing there, gawking. Their fearless leader had slapped his hands over his mangled ear and was just rolling there on the floor, screaming. I felt like I had all the time in the world, that I could go make a drink, wait for termites to eat away the stool I'd been trussed to, have a smoke. I could take my time and enjoy myself.

I looked down at the leader, fixed him in my mind. Then I took two hobbled steps forward and threw myself down at him, landing my knee on his chest with all my weight behind it, giving me the satisfying snare of cracking bones. I'd missed his throat, but there was no time to correct course. Staggering up and back just as his two friends arrived, I spun around and threw myself at the first one, smacking into him as hard as I could. He staggered, grabbed onto me, and we both went down, the stool shattering against the floor.

My hands were still twisted up in rope and the fragmented remains of the stool. I danced back as the third guy, shorter and

broader than his friends, crouched down, digging a hand into his baggy pants and pulling up a butterfly knife. A ridiculous weapon, but he handled it expertly, flipping it open and lunging forward suddenly, forcing me to jump backwards. My feet landed on some piece of the shattered stool and went out from under me, sending me down onto my own hands like dead weight, pain splintering out through every finger, up my arms, stabbing into my chest. It brightened everything, made me clear, and I rolled away as he jumped at me, blade flashing.

I pushed myself back onto my feet and spun back to face him, and he was already there, a foot away. With a sudden dart he was right up against me, and his arm dove forward, plunging the knife into my belly.

At first, I didn't feel anything. Then it was cold, like someone had pressed an ice cream against me. It was disappointing; I'd expected something searing, something incredible. A wave of tingly exhaustion swept through me, making me feel leaden and slow, and a fresh sweat popped up all over me. He yanked the blade out and then the pain came: A deep, orange throb that felt like it originated in my spine and leaked downward like rust, like rot. As he stepped back I staggered backwards again, working my hands free of the rope and bringing my arms up just in time to catch the bastard trying to sneak in and stick me again. Feeling the warm blood running down my leg, I let him slip a few inches past my arms and took hold of his wrist, angling his arm away from me as I pulled him close and put my knee into his balls.

The pain filled me up, inflating my arms and legs, making me light. I swept a leg under him and yanked with everything I had on

his arm, spinning him off-balance and sending him to the floor with a crash that made everything in the place jump. I took half a step back, elated, like the blood leaking out of me was heavy, and every drop shed made me nimbler, faster. With a yelp of happiness I kicked him in the face, everything going gray and shaky as the blood drained from my head. I steadied myself with a hand on the bar and took a deep breath, and everything slowly steadied, the wonderful lancing pain in my side settling down to a dull ache, pleasant but unremarkable.

I looked around. The leader was still, just lying on the floor; I wasn't sure if I'd killed him or just knocked him out, and didn't care. The second guy was staggering towards the entrance, one hand over his face, blood running down his neck and soaking his shirt. I let him go. I was lightheaded and wobbly and probably would have fallen if I'd tried to go after him. I elected to stand for a moment and breathe; if I sat down I was pretty sure I'd never get up again.

I looked down at the floor. A small puddle of my blood had formed under me. I waited to catch my breath, and slowly realized I wasn't going to.

On the floor near the first guy, the blowtorch lay by itself, gleaming new. I pushed off from the bar, half-fell backwards before righting myself, and walked slowly over to it. Getting on my knees to pluck it up was easy. Getting back on my feet took some unknown amount of time, but I came back to myself leaning over the bar, panting, the exquisite pain settled into my bones now, deep and abiding. I liked it there, and hoped it stayed.

Unsteady, I circled around to the other side of the bar and started pulling some of the bottles off the shelves, dropping them onto the

floor. When I had a good, deep puddle of booze, I circled back outside and turned my attention to the torch, squinting at it. I couldn't concentrate, my thoughts slipping away, and getting it lit took longer than expected, and no time at all, my vision swimming in and out. When I looked down and found it burning, the bright blue flame friendly, asking me to press it against the palm of my hand to wake myself up a little, it might have been hours later, or seconds.

My breast throbbed at the sight.

I turned and oriented myself on the front door, and tossed the torch over my shoulder. A warm breeze pushed past me as I shuffled for the door, the shadows of the room warping and dancing into new and disturbing shapes. I found my coat hanging neatly just inside the door, as if they were planning to stroke me into it, hand me cab money, and pat me on the head when they were done. I pushed myself into it with a twinge of guilt at getting my sticky, warm blood all over it, and fell out the front door, managing to fall without hitting the ground until I found an obliging car to lean against. I flipped myself around and stared back at the restaurant. Through the tiny window in the door, I could see the flames. With a dull rumble, something exploded and the flames laced higher.

I fumbled in my coat and smiled when I found my pack of cigarettes. I stuck one in my mouth but couldn't find a lighter, so I just pushed off from the car and started walking.

"Told you," I muttered, grinning. I felt fantastic.

15.

She opened the door and her face was a marvel: Curiosity, then irritation, then melting horror.

“Jesus—”

“I’m in the wind,” I said, my words thick and slurry. “I just need to sit down for a minute.”

I stumbled into the foyer, forcing Rachel to scamper out of my way. I grabbed onto the wall for balance and left a streak of blood on it, finally bumping into the little console table she had against the wall for keys and cell phones, making everything rattle but finding my feet again.

“*Jesus*,” she hissed, grabbing onto me and putting herself under one arm, pulling me up a little and walking me down the short hall. It was the first time she’d touched me in years, and my head went a little gray again as her perfume and shampoo enveloped me.

“I’m sorry, kid,” I slurred. She kicked open her guest bathroom door and pushed me in. “I didn’t have anywhere else close.”

“Shut up,” she said, getting me to the floor the easy way: By just letting go of me. I sank onto the cool tile and found it to be surprisingly comfortable, like the porcelain had been transformed into tiny cushions. She pushed me onto my back, lifted up my coat, and gasped, rocking back onto her heels. “Oh, fuck,” she said softly, then started to push herself up. “I’ll call Frank. Get him to—”

I flopped an arm out and grabbed her calf. It was the first time *I’d*

touched *her* in years, and the jolt up my arm almost made me pass out.

“No,” I said heavily, letting my hand slide off her leg. “You call Frank and I’m dead. You call Frank and three guys with shotguns are here in fifteen minutes and we’re *both* dead.”

She sat down without ceremony or grace, legs folded under her, and stared at me. “Jesus *Christ*,” she muttered, then look up. “Hospital. Emergency Room. You’re *bleeding*.”

I shook my head, feeling peaceful and languid, like I’d been drinking for hours, but drinking something that didn’t give you a hangover, something that just made you feel good. “Even worse.”

“I have to do something. You’re going to fucking die on my fucking bathroom floor, goddammit.” She stared at me, looking angry, and then she jumped up. “I’m calling Rusch. She’s with Billy and ... your guy.”

She was out of the bathroom before I could say anything. I lay there and stared up at the donut-shaped fluorescent light fixture, and I drifted. Her bathroom smelled clean and fresh, like she’d just cleaned it, or never used it. I drifted. Nothing mattered, I was cool and comfortable and after the endless, terrible trip from the bar to Rachel’s place I was able to just lie there and breath, shallow, easy breaths. I imagined Rachel in here every day, in her pajamas, yellow dotted pajamas, her hair tied back. I imagined her brushing her teeth, taking a shower, toweling off, doing her makeup. It was peaceful. Sun shining in through the frosted window, a radio on, her dancing a little when a certain song came on.

Then I opened my eyes because someone was shaking me. It was

Rusch, the creepy old hen, squinting down at me. She was wearing her usual wrinkled jacket, too light for the weather, and a white dress shirt that had never, as far as I could tell, been dry-cleaned, or even ironed. She waved a hand in my face until I grimaced and swatted it lazily away.

She stood up. "He'll be fine."

"Excuse me?" Rachel said from behind me, out of my field of vision. "He's going to *bleed to death*."

"No," Rusch shook her head. "He'll be fine."

There was a stretch of silence. "Are you going to tell me he'll be fine because he's *immortal*? Because if you are, I'm going to be fucking upset."

"He'll be *fine*," Rusch repeated, sounding amused. "The bleeding's just about stopped. Look at him: He looks like he's getting his color back, and his breathing isn't labored any more." She looked down at me and winked, like a favorite auntie being convinced to hand out candy. "I only had two years of med school, but I think he'll be *fine*."

"Doc," I said, pushing myself up to a nearly sitting position, my arms stiff behind me for support, both of them shaking a little with the effort. "I'm starting to get the feeling you're not as smart as you look."

She cocked her head a little and gave me a strange little off-center smile. "How are you feeling? Take a moment and truly consider the question, now."

I started to say something meanspirited, but realized I *did* feel better. The vibrating fuzziness was gone. I still felt weak, but I didn't

feel like I'd pass out at any moment. When I put a hand on my belly to feel the wound, fresh pain sweeping through me like an invisible laser cutting through me without breaking the skin, I kept myself upright with one arm, no trouble.

“All right,” I said slowly, feeling a strange foreboding fill me up, a dark sense of trouble. “I'm ... better.” I cocked my head to mimic the old bat and smiled. “Maybe you healed me.”

She shook her head. “You're a Terminus, my friend. Whether you realize it or not, I'm sure this has happened before. You can be hurt, yes—possibly even rendered comatose or otherwise non-functioning. You could be paralyzed, or blinded, or your existence could be made a hell—but you will never die, because every other version of you in the universes has already met that fate.”

.oOo.

I heard Rachel behind me and spun in time to hold out my hand. “Leave it,” I said. “She doesn't mean any harm.”

She stared at me. “You're not bleeding any more.”

I paused and felt myself out. I was an expert in pain, a specialist in my own. The wound was still there, and it ached and sizzled like the blade was still inside me, broken off and working its way towards my heart. But I didn't have the fuzzy, buzzing feeling like I was floating an inch above my body any more, and I was able to take a deep breath without wincing. I turned and looked at Rusch again, studying her. The old woman had picked up a tube of something from Rachel's sink

and was peering down at it with a furrowed brow, as if he'd spotted an ingredient that wasn't supposed to be there, like plutonium.

She didn't look crazy. If I'd met her in a bar, I wouldn't have paid any attention to her: A woman who made less than fifty thousand dollars a year, based on her clothes. A woman who didn't value social interactions, based on the lack of care she put into those clothes, who was forgetful and easily distracted, based on her one black and one blue sock. A woman who lived in her own head, but not crazy.

After a moment, I got my legs under me and pulled myself up to a standing position. Rachel didn't step over to give me any help, and I guessed without looking at her that we were back to normal, just like that. I pulled up my sticky, scabbing shirttail and examined my wound, then looked at Rusch again.

"So what you're saying is, I might not die, but it could get infected, right?"

She looked up from the tube as if she'd forgotten I was there. Then she nodded, smiling. "Miss? You have a first aid kit of some kind, you said?"

.oOo.

I sat at Rachel's neat kitchen table of blond wood, smoking a cigarette with my shirt off, watching Rusch as she hunched over my belly, packing on a thick bandage.

I felt almost normal. It still throbbed and burned, but no worse than a million other injuries I'd survived. I thought back on that, all

the times I'd been bleeding and broken, which was plenty. I'd been stabbed before, and shot at, and beaten unconscious—that was my *job*. But I'd always come through it, and never come close to dying.

It didn't prove anything.

I studied the scalp showing through Rusch's thinning white-gray hair, then looked up as Rachel came back into the room, carrying her phone. “Everything kosher?”

She nodded as she dropped into the chair across from me. “Billy says Falken wants to leave and he's had to knock him down a few times, but he'll be okay.”

I smiled. “Billy's an expert at knocking people down. He can calibrate it exactly.” I looked back down at Rusch's head. “You about done, Doc?”

“You are in a rush?”

I put the cigarette in my mouth and reached down to gently push her away. “Time to go have a follow-up conversation with your boy, Doc,” I said, standing up and reaching for my shirt. I glanced at Rachel, who was staring at the bandage on my side, already blooming red with leaking blood. “Don't worry, I won't hurt him.”

I felt weak and jazzed. Immortal or not, I'd lost a lot of fucking blood. I threaded an arm through my shirt, and grunted as I twisted around to thread the other one. I started to say something to Rachel, see if I could make her smile, when there was a thunderous knocking on the door.

Rusch was up on her feet like someone had stuck a needle in her ass. “What do we do?”

I sucked in smoked and shrugged, snapping my shirt into place and working the buttons with my fat fingers. I looked at Rachel. "Ask who it is," I suggested.

"It's Mister Detective Stanley James," he boomed, bouncing that big profundo voice off the hallway walls. "And he can hear every fucking word y'all say, so mind your words."

My heart leaped, pumping air and dust through my sagging, empty veins. Rachel and Rusch both looked at me, head's snapping around in sync. I ignored them for a moment, mind racing. If he'd come looking for his debt, things were going to get ugly, and I couldn't bring that down on Rachel, not in her home. "I'll come out, Detective."

"Naw, I'll come in, son," he boomed back. "You and I need to have a conversation."

I grimaced and looked at Rachel. "Take the doc and go inside," I said. "This isn't your problem."

She smiled at me, sunny and wide and meanspirited. "Fuck you. You made it my problem by dragging your bleeding ass here."

"I thought I was dying."

"So you came to die *here*? Thanks." She stood up and crossed to the door, twisting the knob and tearing it open, turning away without a word and resuming her seat.

Detective James stood framed in the doorway, shoulders butting up against the edges, dressed in a gorgeous blue pinstripe that had been sewn by an artist. His gold tie pin gleamed in the kitchen light as he struck a pose and smiled.

“You’re slippery,” he complained. “For a moment I thought you were running.”

I shrugged as he stepped into the room. “How’d you find me here?”

“Shee-yit,” he drawled, nodding at Rachel. “It doesn’t take a fucking genius. You and the lady here have a history, huh?” He frowned, looking me over. “Hell, man, what happened to you?”

“I took a meeting,” I said, tucking in my shirt, “that I ought to not have taken.”

He stared at me for a moment, then nodded. “All right. None of my business. We’ll let it lay for now.”

“You’re here about your debt,” I said. “I was current with Frank. I’ve still got better part of a week on that.”

He frowned. “A fucking *debt*? What do I look like, a goddamn shylock?” He unfurled a long, dark finger at me. “That’s your business, friend.” He spread his hands and smiled. “I’m here doing what cops do: Keepin’ track of the scum and filth that rots my beloved city.” His smile faded. “I got a couple of dead bodies downtown, a three-alarm fire. I know you had a meeting with Phin Lanzmann the other day; this joint happens to be owned by Phin fucking Lanzmann. It occurred to me to wonder where in hell you’ve been this evening, and as a courtesy I chose to ask you, like a gentlemen, instead of putting your name on the wire. I don’t know anything about whatever debt you have with Frank McKenna.”

I stood for a moment, racing over my conversation with Phin. “You didn’t buy a debt from Frank. My debt. The Falken debt.”

He looked from me to Rachel and back again, ignoring Rusch completely. For a moment I thought he was going to get angry, but then he settled himself and just shook his head. "No."

I looked over at Rusch, who had a twin running around. Then I picked up my coat, shook it out, and looked the blood-stained lining over critically. "All right, let's go."

James cocked his head and pushed his hands into his pockets. He looked like a millionaire. He was a cop who spent half his salary on clothes. "Go where, motherfucker?"

"To see Falken," I said, pulling on my sticky coat. "To see if he recognizes you."

16.

Wincing as a sharp needle sliced up my torso, I leaned forward towards the grating that separated the backseat from the front in James' car. The low squawk of his police radio was constant background noise, and no one had spoken on the drive to Staten Island, where The Bumble had an apartment for no reason I'd ever been able to suss out of him. It was creepy out here, everything damp and dark and lush, the houses spaced so far apart you wouldn't be able to hear your neighbors walking around. I couldn't imagine sleeping without hearing my neighbors.

"Stay in the car five minutes," I said to James.

He turned his head sharply and reached up to remove the gold toothpick he was sucking on. "What? Fuck that."

I nodded. "Let me set it up for him, okay?"

"I think I just said *fuck that*."

"Call it a favor," I said, opening the door and pulling myself out with a grunt, a wonderful shudder of agony slicing through me. Everything ached, deliciously, and I'd spent the ride over prodding the spots that hurt the most, just for the sudden sharp thrills they offered.

"Call it *fuck that*," he said as he emerged from the car after me, buttoning his jacket and smoothing his lapels.

"At least let me do the talking. Don't say shit, we walk in there."

Rusch popped out of the other side of the car as we circled around

to the gleaming sidewalk. "I'll let you run for a bit," James said mildly, completely certain he was in charge of the situation. "You tell me this is gonna pay off for *me*, I know you're a serious man, I'll give you some slack." He put his hand out in front of me, a gentle motion that stopped me in my tracks. "*Some*, follow? Think of me as the Judge and Jury here, and I just told you your line of questioning had better be going somewhere, follow?"

I nodded, and he pulled his hand back. Rachel climbed out of the front seat and shut the door behind her, tugging her sweater down over her belly. James grinned.

"That's a fine girl you got hating your guts," he said cheerfully. "A fine girl. Looks like she was a cheerleader back in school." He turned and jabbed me in the ribs, making a red bolt of pain flash through me. "Limber, and shit."

I swallowed irritation. "Come on."

As we approached the dung-brown apartment building, a box with small windows and landscaping via overgrown weeds, I flipped open my phone and speed-dialed The Bumble. He never said anything on the phone, just pressed the button and listened; you had to pay attention to know he was even there.

"I'm outside. Don't fucking shoot me," I said, and snapped the phone shut.

"You and Billy got a special relationship, huh?" James said, pleased with himself.

The four of us took the cramped elevator to the fourth floor, the machinery wheezing and whining; the cab smelled like cabbage.

Rachel stared at the doors with her arms crossed under her chest, a statue of a woman entitled Irritated. Rusch kept twisting around to smile at us as if we were all chums on some sort of grand adventure, which I supposed was true enough for her—up until a few months ago she'd been a tenured professor at a State University in fucking Jersey, the kind of cruft the school wished would just die to open up the budget slot. Now she was in goddamn *Staten Island*, running around with cops and legbreakers and hot chicks. I itched to make her hurt, to impress on her the way the world worked, but she hadn't done anything to deserve it.

There was nothing specifically wrong with the apartment building; the hallway was clean and neat, the place was quiet. The carpet was a hideous shade of mocha that made you feel like you were walking on a packed-down lane of shit, and the walls were a shade of green you normally didn't see outside of a toilet. The flickering fluorescent lighting added a spice of headache to the whole scene, and the floors under your feet felt soft, like the joists were rotted, and you might fall through at any moment. Every time we made use of Billy's secret place, I felt like I might not make it out alive.

The door opened when we were still a few steps away. The Bumble filled the doorway completely, a mountain of muscle and fat, his red nose almost as big as his face, everything being pulled down by gravity and making him look like a sad clown. He looked at me and shook his head slowly, looking up to the ceiling, and I knew he'd had a long night with Falken. For The Bumble, not being allowed to smack someone around was the hardest thing in the world. He didn't have any other social skills.

I stepped in, James close behind me, and found Falken sitting at

the kitchen table, a cigarette burned almost down to the filter in his mouth. The ash was heroic, almost the entire smoke, trembling there like the memory of a cigarette.

“Jesus fucking hell,” he said immediately, the ash collapsing onto the table. “He’s got me *duct-taped* to the fucking—”

He froze as his eyes landed on James, his whole body going absolutely still. I stepped between him and the Detective and grabbed one of The Bumble’s greasy, rickety wooden chairs, spun it around and sat down. Falken was, in fact, attached to his own chair by an amazing amount of silver duct tape. If the apartment had caught fire, we would have to throw him out the window as a unit. If Phin’s boys had used duct tape, I thought suddenly, I’d be dead.

I thought of Rusch again, and wondered if that still held true.

I reached out and snapped my fingers in front of his face a few times.

“Falken,” I snapped. “Falken—on me, buddy.”

He looked at me suddenly. “Why is—”

“Hey,” I slapped him lightly, a tap on his chin. “On me. Don’t talk except to answer my questions, okay?”

“Hey!” Rachel hissed. I heard her move, and I heard The Bumble move, and then everyone was still again. I held one hand up behind my head.

Falken opened his mouth, and I gave him another gentle tap on the chin. “Okay?”

Most people I dealt with didn’t have to deal with violence in their

lives. The world was a violent place, seemed like it was falling apart even if the news was always telling us it was only a matter of years before every country united under one government, but in the city, behind money and drywall and buzzers on your front door, people managed to go decades without taking a beating. It made them pretty easy to intimidate. A little violence went a long way; a lot of new kids in my line of work set about breaking thumbs and peeling back fingernails immediately. It got results, sure, but it was unnecessary effort. I was an old man now and if I could convince someone to give me what I wanted just by staring at them, then that's what I would fucking do.

He swallowed, eyes flicking from me to James and back. "Okay."

I kept my hand in his field of vision and curled it, pointing a finger at his nose. "I'll tell you what I think, Mr. Falken. I think you've got money. I think you've been fucking with me for a few days now, and I am irritated."

He shook his head, eyes wide. I remembered seeing him for the first time in the flesh, back at McHale's. He looked exactly the same: A little chubby, his beard already getting thick on his jowly face, his hair thinning and his right hand weighed down by a huge gold ring, plain and thick. His suit had been woefully mistreated, and was wrinkled and disturbed, but it was of a fine brown cloth with a nice sheen to it, and cut well. He was still a shiny penny, but he'd been tarnished.

"I swear—"

I tapped him on the chin again. "You got one chance to say it," I said, leaning back. "Don't blow it."

He licked his lips and stared over my shoulder at James for a moment. Then he looked back at me. "I guess it doesn't fucking matter any more." he shook his head. "I don't have a dime. Not one dime left."

I squinted at him. "You're in deep with at least The Phin and Frank McKenna," I said. "No doubt you barnstormed the block, hitting up as many loan shops as you could, probably in the same fucking day, right? Using someone's name as a reference."

He nodded, sagging in the chair. "Maury Levns, out of the Bronx." He looked at me again. "I knew him. Back where I ... come from."

I nodded, pulling out cigarettes. "If you tell me you're from an alternate universe, I'll hit you for real and take my chances with her." I fed a butt between my lips and held one out to him, close enough for him to lean forward and take it with his mouth. "Maury's dead. A month ago."

"In this world, yeah," Falken suddenly struggled mightily with his bonds. "Goddammit! If he's going to do it, just fucking *do* it! I don't have any money left, you fucking bloodsucker. He probably paid you plenty to roll on me, though, didn't he?" He suddenly stopped. Sweat had broken out on his forehead. "Can you believe it?" He looked at me, his eyes hollow. "I'm killing *myself*. Can you fucking believe it?"

I struck a match, let it burn a bit, then lit my cigarette and held it out for him to light his. He hesitated, and the flame burned down to the tips of my fingers, but I just held it there, waiting, the sizzling pain wonderful, head-clearing. It was a favorite trick. After a moment he leaned forward and puffed the cigarette into life, then leaned back and laughed.

“Last smoke for the condemned, huh?”

“Shut up,” I said, “and tell me how it is you’re broke after you borrowed every dime this city has.”

“For equipment,” he snapped back. “For fuel. This shithole of a universe hasn’t figured out passing from Alt to Alt, okay? I have to fucking buy components. Generators. Cable. CPUs. I can do the work, but I need to fucking *reinvent* everything everywhere I go, being chased down by my cocksucker self like a goddamn roach. I got it all in a warehouse in *Hoboken*, of all goddamn places. I finally got the fuel in, I’m finally ready to stay one step ahead of him, and I run into *you*.” He started pulling at his duct-tape bonds again. “All right? Okay? You got your information, you greedy piece of shit. Let him shoot me and get on with it.”

I frowned, leaning forward a little. “Calm down, Mr. Falken. What I want is money. Who exactly do you imagine is going to fucking *kill* you here?”

He looked at me, and then jerked his chin at Detective James. “Him.”

I winced my way into turning around to look at James. He loomed over me stroking the fuzz of mustache over his lip, his eyeballs reddened, the palms of his hands thick and pink. He glanced down at me and smiled, bringing his eyebrows up comically. “Don’t fucking look at me, man. I killed some motherfuckers this morning, so I’m good.”

I grimaced as my side bit at me, and looked back at Falken, thinking of a man who looked like James buying the debt from Frank. “I thought Rusch was trying to kill you.” I shut my eyes and took a

breath. "The *other* Rusch, I mean."

I opened my eyes and Falken was shaking his head, smoke all around him from his cigarette. "Rusch is just the bloodhound. Rusch just *finds* us poor shits and marks us out."

I jerked a thumb at James. "For *him*?"

"For *me*?" James said, sounding amused. "What the fuck is this shit?"

"If it isn't Rusch we should be worried about," I said. "Then who is *he* supposed to be?"

Falken looked at me like I had horns growing out of my head. "He's the guy they hire to hunt down their alternates and murder them, so they can become Terminus," he said. "He's The Executioner."

17.

The Bumble kept a bottle of shoe leather gin in one of the kitchen cabinets along with his antique collection of mouse droppings. Detective James had stood quietly for about twenty seconds, taking it all in, and then he'd turned to The Bumble.

"Billy, man, do me a favor and take the professor and the girl home, okay? I'm gonna have to have a talk in private with these two gentlemen."

"I'm not going anywhere," Rachel snapped.

James grinned at her. "Darling, I admire you. I do. Damn, I need more women like you in my own life. But, sweetheart, I'm asking you to step out for a while. I'm no killer. And I'm making this *police* business, okay? You want, I can have a couple of officers who don't ask too many questions and haven't read this year's procedural handbook come by, book you on suspicion of *something* and hold you for our twenty-four, okay? And I wonder if your jacket comes up clean." He winked. "I only ask once."

When The Bumble had herded them out the door, James let out an explosive sigh and pulled out one of the kitchen chairs, dropping into it recklessly, the old wood creaking under his weight. He pulled a silk handkerchief from his breast pocket, snapped it out, and mopped his face.

"Well, fuck," he said. "Cut the poor man loose."

I considered it, then shrugged. "Why not." I got up and scavenged through the kitchen, finding an old steak knife in a drawer that

sagged crazily in its tracks, knelt down, and began sawing at the tape around his ankles.

“Now that your audience is gone,” James said slowly. “You wanna give me the straight version of this? This motherfucker here owes money, right?”

I nodded, my belly burning with pain, sweat running into my eyes. I felt lightheaded, the dull knife taking forever to cut through the tape. “A fucking mint. To everyone.”

“And you got his file, huh, for Mr. Frank?”

I nodded.

“And the rest of this bullshit is what, trying to convince him to pay up? You too fancy to break a leg these days?”

Falken was free, so I sat back on my feet, wiping sweat out of my face and breathing hard, breathing like a man who'd been stabbed non-fatally not so long ago. I looked up at Falken. “Well, you want to answer that one?”

Falken scowled. “So if this isn't The Executioner, what the fuck is he here?”

James shrugged. “I'm the man who can tell him to tie you the fuck back up, baby, so why not play along?”

Falken scowled, but settled himself and told him the whole ridiculous story in about four sentences. Detective James sat through it all with a stone face, then sat back and rubbed his chin, the scratch of his beard against the palm of his hand audible in the creepy silence that had filled the tiny room. He lifted his hand from his chin and pointed at Falken.

“You're from an alternate universe,” he said, and a wave of weary amazement swept through me.

Falken shrugged. “One way of putting it, yes.”

James shifted his long finger to me. “And you're fucking immortal.”

I shrugged. “I don't feel it.”

The finger went back to Falken. “Because he's the only *him* left in all the fucking world out there. And one of your other selves wants to kill you so *he* can be the only one, and be immortal too.”

Falken stared back at James like he'd expected to be dead ten minutes ago and wasn't convinced it hadn't come to pass. “Yes.”

The finger came back to me. “And he owes you shitloads of cash, because your boss is a fucking moron.”

I nodded. “That's about the whole of it.”

James made a hissing noise between his teeth, raising an eyebrow. “Shit, kid. I'm beginning to wonder if you just wasted a couple hours of my time.” He leaned forward, rings glinting on his hands. “You ever wasted my time before?” he shook his head. “I don't recommend it. I look all jolly and shit, I know, like a guy who could be pushed around, but I can unleash fucking *hell* on you and yours in the form of the uniformed police officer of this great city, pulling over your cars, searching your shit every place you go, fucking carding you at bars. You dig?” He planted his finger on the greasy table top. “I put your name on the list, motherfucker, they're going to be pulling you out of line at the airport. Fucking security guards at the mall gonna be pulling your ass into little windowless rooms for strip searches. It

ain't official or anything, but I put your name on the list every cocksucker with a badge is gonna know your name and face, we understand each other?"

I nodded, lifting my hands up to spread them. "I needed to see if he recognized you."

"And why is that?"

"Because it kind of makes me think he isn't crazy."

James stared at me for a moment, nostrils flaring, and a second or so before he leaped to his feet I knew I'd taken a wrong turn and things were going to get sticky. Then he was up on his feet and his gun, a huge honker that looked like it would turn me into a fine mist if he pulled the trigger, was in one hand and his handcuffs in the other.

"Up," he snapped. "On your feet. I've had about enough of this shit."

I got my legs under me and pushed myself up. "Look, I know—"

"You know shit. Dragging my ass out here to listen to bullshit. Spin around, hands on the counter."

I turned to face the sink and put my hands on the countertop. It felt oily under my hands. The Bumble never lived here, so I didn't know what in the world could be coating it, and didn't want to think about it. I felt dizzy and hot, and could tell my bandage was soaked in leaking blood. I shut my eyes. "Listen, Detective—"

"Shut up." He was behind me, shoving his knee between my legs to spread them, yanking my arms behind me and slapping the cold cuffs on, too tight. "I got bodies and a tear-down, and I can clear a

case for someone by bringing you in, and that'll make this trip here worth it, so we'll be even, and when you get out of jail in thirty years we can be friends again, okay?"

I winced as he put his weight into the small of my back, pressing me painfully against the sink base. I didn't have time for foreplay. *Someone* owned Falken's debt, and if I didn't keep it current I was going to get knifed in jail, and if I was really immortal like everyone had been telling me for the last twenty-four hours it meant I was going to get knifed in jail a *lot*, which might be kind of fun but fucking *exhausting*.

He spun me around. He wasn't smiling. He glanced over at Falken.

"Don't worry, we're taking you in too."

Falken snorted. "I'm dead anyway. You put me in your system, he'll find me, and I won't be able to run."

James considered him. "All right, let's play You're Not Fucking Crazy for one minute. If someone's after you, let's hear it. Whatever else you got hanging on your collar, I'm not in the business of letting people get killed. Just leave the bullshit out of it, okay?"

Fucking Detective James.

"Forget it," Falken said, his voice hollow. "He's fucking *you*. He'll walk in and smile at everyone and shoot me in the fucking head."

James was silent for a moment. "Kid, someone really—"

Someone pounded on the door, hard, and we all paused. "You forget something, Billy?" James shouted.

Someone pounded on the door again.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” James hissed, spinning away from me.

I turned around, finding James heading for the door. I took a step after him and paused. “Don’t,” I said. “Look, I know we sound crazy, but—”

“You don’t want to take a fall on your way to the precinct,” he said, reaching for the doorknob, “you’re gonna want to shut up now.”

With a grunt, Falken was up out of the chair and sprinting, disappearing into the next room as James tried to wheel around and catch him by the collar. The detective stood there for a moment while someone pounded the door again, hard, making it jump on its hinges, then he shook his head.

“I haven’t broken a sweat in fucking fifteen years,” he muttered. “I’m not starting with *that* piece of shit.” He stepped over to the door and glanced back at me. “*You* get your running sneaks on and I’ll take out my frustrations on you, okay? You used to know better than to fuck with police.”

Detective James turned back and opened the door. Detective James stood in the doorway, face blank, eyes red. Detective James shot Detective James in the belly twice.

18.

For the third time in as many days, I came to, this time in darkness, jostled gently this way and that. Pain radiated nicely from the wound in my side and filled me, yellow and thick and wonderful. For a split-second I just stretched against it, enjoying the feel of a controlled burn, all my nerves like embers, red and angry and floating inside me.

I was in the trunk of a car, my cuffed wrists pulled down tight behind me, my ankles pulled up, hogtied like a fucking pig. I wasn't gagged, but the hum of the car was loud, and a thick, bouncing bass line filled the air in-between the thud of tires hitting potholes. I figured screaming would just amuse the alternate Detective James, if he could even hear it.

Alternate. The word flamed red in my mind as I thought it.

The man I'd spied in the doorway, the man who's stormed in, stepping over the detective's body, pointing his monstrous gun at me, looked exactly like Stanley James. The face, the haircut, the suit—he could have sat down at a bar and forced me to buy him drinks all night on threat of arrest and I'd have bought it, completely.

I only had that panicked, amazed glimpse; Alt Detective James had stepped over himself, crossed over to me, and cold cocked me with his gun, my last image his white teeth, perfect and straight, the gums bloody red.

We hit a bump, and I leaped inside the trunk, landing on something hard and unyielding, lighting up my belly like a pitchfork

three inches deep, making me shiver and salivate. The beat from Alt James' speakers ate into me, making my pulse skip and my eyes bulge.

I figured, fuck, if I really am immortal, I was probably about to find out soon. In my experience waking up hogtied in the trunk of a car was the beginning of a very bad end.

My eyes adjusted to the gloom, lit by the faint red light bleeding in from the brakes, and I craned my head around, trying to see what I had to work with. I doubted my innate ability to escape from car trunks, but it felt like I was going to have a lot of time on my hands so why not make a study of it, see if I couldn't do some groundbreaking research on the subject.

The trunk was barren, but roomy, and I found I could roll myself over onto my belly easily, freeing my fingers to at least stretch and strain, their tips brushing against the slick nylon rope he'd used to connect the handcuffs to my ankles. I tried to bend myself backwards, straining to find the knot and maybe, somehow work it open, at least get my legs free. I didn't know what that was going to get me, but it was better than counting seams in the highway or pretending I could hear the difference between a bridge and a dirt road, map it all out in my head.

I rolled my eyes down and saw I was lying on top of the spare tire well, the piece of carpet that fitted over the space curled up and out of place. I stretched my head down and took the edge of the carpet between my teeth, grit and dust suddenly in my mouth, and rolled myself over, taking the carpet with me. With a jerk of my head I tossed it aside and rolled back onto my belly, peering down into the spare well. There was only an undersized solid rubber donut wheel,

bolted down. Sitting next to it, embedded into the soft felt, was the lugnut wrench and the jack.

The thought of having the weight of that wrench in my hands, and sinking it into Alt James' face, made me happy. My imagination served up the crunch of his delicate facial bones and cartilage, the grunt of pain, the sudden shock up my arm as I bit into real bone, hard and thick, the spray of blood from burst capillaries and torn surface skin.

A pleasant burn had settled into the muscles of my back and arms, the steady strain biting in and holding fast. I bent my attention back to straining my fingers towards the knots, even though I wasn't at all convinced I'd be able to manipulate them in any way even if I managed to get the very tips of my fingers near them.

The ride suddenly got rough, the car banging over something and everything getting jumpy and filled with vibration, my belly spiking and burning and clearing my head pretty thoroughly. I was bleeding all over his trunk, I was pretty sure, the coppery smell of my own fluids thickening the air. The bouncing action made it even more difficult to make any progress, and sweat began to stream down the sides of my head and neck, tickling me excruciatingly.

At least Alt James hadn't known Falken was nearby, I didn't think. For all I knew he'd taken the time to hunt the poor fuck down and put a shell in his ear, but I suspected Falken had bolted the room just in time, and Alt James didn't know he'd missed him—or maybe he shared his twin's resistance to running and had just let him go. Either way, I was glad for it. I didn't want Falken dead—I didn't want *anyone* dead. I wanted his fucking money. Though I guessed if Frank had sold the debt, that wasn't even my problem any more.

The tone of the ride changed again, going smooth and quiet, a low hum the only noise from the wheels, like we were gliding along. After a few seconds of this the car jerked to a stop, tumbling me up against the back seat and then rolling me forward again. Then quiet, the music gone, just the ticking of the engine and my pinched, tight breathing. I heard the car door open, and then nothing. I lay perfectly still, head pounding, side burning, and strained my ears but couldn't hear anything at all.

And then I heard everything.

The noise was unbelievable—a droning, piercing blare that made the whole trunk—the whole *car*—vibrate around me. My teeth chattered involuntarily, and I felt like parts of my insides were boiling off, turning to steam and leaking from my pores. One of my shoes began working its way off my foot, vibrating off my heel in tiny little increments. I clenched my jaw shut as hard as I could to stop my teeth from shaking loose and shut my eyes to keep them in my skull, every muscle in my body taut. It was the same as the noise I'd heard in the limo with Alt Rusch, similar to the noise I'd heard just before Falken had disappeared on me in McHales.

And then it got *louder*.

I pushed my head down into the scratchy, thin carpet of the trunk, trying to block off at least one ear, but the lower pitch of the murderous whine around me bled up through the metal of the car, bouncing into my ear and tunneling into my brain. I couldn't enjoy it, couldn't pick out the nuances of the agony, the specific nerve endings being burned out and browned, sizzling away like candle wax. It was just more than my nerves could handle. I opened my mouth to make my own noise, but I couldn't hear myself, or even feel the vibration in

my chest. It was like I'd disappeared into the noise.

And then it stopped.

I lay there with my mouth open, my ears ringing, every muscle taut and painful. I kept myself tight and still for a moment, waiting, and then slowly let myself relax, my muscles twitching. There was a muffled bang I felt more than heard which took me a moment to identify as someone getting back into the car. A moment later we started moving again, and I felt the steady thump of the bass line jumping under me.

Shivering, I lay still for a while, eyes closed. Then I set about relaxing my muscles one by one as the car took on the old familiar rhythm of street driving. When I'd forced my body to unclench, I opened my eyes again, and spared a few seconds to revel in the burning in all my muscles, like an acid stain on my bones, etched in deep. I was back inside a normal trunk, the bloody glow of brake lights seeping in and offering me the only light, my hands still pulled cruelly down towards my ankles, the thumping beat mixing with the rhythm of the road seams into a complex song that seemed kind of familiar, probably entitled *Fucked Three Ways from Sunday*.

Breathing hard and blinking the sweat from my eyes, I started bending my hands back again, seeking the elusive knots in the rope. I had a goddamn cigarette jingle from the television commercial in my head, running on a doubletime loop, high and squeaky: *feeling down need a lift Luckies'll fix ya in a jiff*. I didn't even smoke Luckies.

My dad had smoked them, I suddenly remembered. I remembered he'd smelled like smoke all the time, a strangely earthy and acidic smell that had fascinated and repelled me at the same time. Nicotine,

alcohol, and aftershave, the smell of adults. Dad had shown me once the circular burn marks on his forearms, starting just above the wrist and ending at the elbow, where he'd pressed his cigarette against his skin for as long as he could stand it. It was a standard bar bet he liked to trot out when he'd run out of cash. Sometimes he'd spend the whole night burning himself for shots, and wake up the next day stuck to the sheets, his arm leaking and inflamed. I remembered the feel of pushing the cigarette into his skin, the satisfying way he would suck in his breath and tense up. I remembered smuggling a pack into the hospital, risking our lives to light them up and burn him.

Alt James drove slower this time, the car inching along, and hit a lot of potholes, tumbling me around. I tried to redouble my efforts at the rope, trying anything that came to mind, my wrists burning nicely where the cuffs bit into them, bending myself backwards as far as I could manage. I tried to clear my head and get all zen on the fucking problem, but before I could take some deep breaths and center my thinking, the car stopped, the music cut, and I heard the front door opening and slamming.

Shoes on gravel, a key in the lock, and then the trunk lifting up. Framed against a burningly bright, cloudless blue sky—somehow we'd skipped some hours and arrived at noon—was Alt James, gun held slackly in one massive hand, disturbingly white teeth bared for me.

“All right,” he said cheerfully. “We're here.”

19.

“There's a couple of ways to deal with cats like you, a Terminus,” Alt James said, encouraging me to shuffle forward with his gun pressed into my back. “This is one of them.”

We were in Hoboken fucking New Jersey, which I knew well enough because Frank did plenty of business with the remnants of the old Italians who still worked out of the town. It was right across the river from Manhattan, it was where Frank Sinatra had been born, and it still had three or four old Social Clubs fronting crews. They'd seen better days, and they didn't run City Hall like they used to, but they were there, and there was enough old money in suitcases lying around to keep Frank and Phin and the newer boys interested.

We were, I thought, the *only* people *in* Hoboken New Jersey.

Walking down the middle of the main drag, Washington Street, I could hear our steps echoing back at us. Most of the store windows had been shattered at some point, but aside from that and the sad state of the cars everything looked normal enough, though details nagged at me. On Fifth street, Sullivans wasn't there, replaced with a place called Maroon. The cars were all old, too, big iron slabs from old Detroit, tiny little rice burners from Japan, the kind you didn't see much any more.

The air smelled weird, sweet and thick.

“I could put a bullet in your head,” Alt James continued after a moment. “But it wouldn't kill you. I could probably put you in a coma, leave you that way, sure, that might work. Coma ain't *dead*, the

universe might allow that. Except, I could never be sure. You can't die, man. So let's say you're laying there in a coma, and I think I solved this little problem.”

“Let's say,” I said, earning myself a prod from the gun into my backbone.

“A large caliber bullet in the back still going to *hurt*, man, okay?”

I nodded, moving my eyes from deserted storefront to rusting car to deserted storefront. “Okay.”

He'd adjusted the knots to give me just enough slack to shuffle along, bent backwards slightly so I felt like I was going to fall over at any moment. It was slow going, and the sun was making me hot and sweaty.

“You might be that way for years, decades. But then, something happens—the power goes out, and the machines breathing for you quit. Or the hospital catches on fire. The universe decides the only way you can survive is to *heal*, so you wake up, good as new. You're a Terminus. Any time you might die, you'll find a way to keep on truckin'.”

I didn't say anything. I was enjoying myself, a little; my back burned and my legs ached and my hands were numb. I was fucking miserable. I didn't feel immortal in the least.

“So, the problem is the fucking solution, kid,” Alt James continued, strolling along behind me. “There are infinite universes. There are universes where everything's fucking different, universes where everything is practically the same. They're *infinite*, so good luck cataloging them, but as you come across them you can make notes.

Like this one. Empty as a tin can. Completely fucking *empty*.”

I let that drift for a moment. “How come you're so sure I'm a—” my tongue tripped over the word. “A *Terminus*?”

“I can smell 'em. It's a talent I have.” He jabbed me in the back. “You're one.”

“How do you know you can even shoot me?” I asked, a pulse of excitement pounding through my chest. “Rusch pointed a gun at me and it misfired.”

He laughed, and it was awesomely strange: It was Detective James' laugh, the same deep, wet rumble I'd known for years. “Your Rusch is kind of a beginner, man. You get a feel for the odds. You got to know how far you can push the universe, you know? Sure, you put a gun to your forehead, you ain't giving the universe much choice—coma or death or misfire. Push it too hard, the gun blows up in your hand. Push it even harder, a fucking safe falls out of the sky and crushes you before you can pull the trigger.”

He stopped talking and I huffed and puffed my way through ten feet of street. I squinted my eyes and looked around. It sure felt empty. Everything was covered in a thick layer of white-gray dust, like ash. It swirled around us as we walked. “What happened here?”

“Fuck if I know,” Alt James said, sounding friendly. If I closed my eyes and ignored the misery, it was like me and the Detective were just having a friendly stroll. “Found it this way. No bodies, no bones. No dogs. No cats. No fucking *squirrels*. It's as dead as the world can get. It's perfect: I can't kill you, but I can *leave* you here. You can sit here forever, no way off, safe and sound.”

Rotting. The stillness and silence of the place was oppressive. Our voices echoed back at us and then fell dead and flat on the ground. As we disturbed it, the air was getting choked with dust, and I could feel it on my skin, coating me, scratching under my collar and getting into my ears, my nose—I knew if I blew my nose right then it would be dark and muddy, filled with the fine mist. The stores with their empty, smashed windows and dark, shadowed interiors crept me out. Anything might be hiding in there, watching us move past.

I didn't like begging, and had to swallow a few times before I could spit out more words. "Listen, this is ... this is fucking unnecessary, chief. I'm just looking to collect a debt. A debt you bought from my boss, so I don't even have to do *that* any more. I'm ready to walk away from this. Let Falken take his chances."

There was something about being hogtied and marched through a deserted town that smelled like dust and dry kindling that took all the sass out of you.

"Sorry, hoss," Alt James said, sounding the exact opposite of sorry. "First of all, I'm aiming to become a Terminus myself someday—a hobby of mine—and you might get in my hair if I do it. Second, I'm a killer. It's what I do. I can't kill you, but I can come *close*. Besides, I didn't buy your fucking debt. I made a deal with your boss to get information, but he's gonna be sorely disappointed when next week rolls around and he's looking for all that money I promised him. Take this left."

I hobbled in a wide arc to the left, turning down third street. The pavement had cracked and crumbled, weeds poking up atop huge cairns of blacktop, and I had to sweat it to stay upright, my balance all fucked up as I tried to scale each lump in the road. *Hobby of mine*. It

sounded like he'd done this before with other ... other assholes like me. I kept my eyes moving, looking for a chance.

I asked myself if I was ready to chance his gun, if I was starting to believe everyone's sunny belief that I was the Ever Living. I ducked the question, and kept walking.

"What do you get paid?" I asked, instantly curious as I thought about it. "For killing people?"

"I don't just kill people. I make people immortal. It's tough work. Long hours. Research. Violence. They pay me whatever I ask. Sometimes it's money, sometimes it's something else. It's worth it, no matter what. I could ask them for their balls, they'd hand them over. Their kids. Their wives, husbands, daughters." He laughed in a way that was completely different from Detective Stanley James—nasty and cold, no humor at all. "Sometimes I don't even do it for money. It's just revenge."

I thought about that. Erasing someone from not just one universe, but *every* universe. Methodically hunting down every *version* of someone. "Jesus fucking Christ, how do you have *time*?"

"Most of us die young," he said quietly. "Every other possibility is your fucking death, and then a second later you got another split chance at fucking death. By the time someone seeks me out, there ain't but a handful of you left."

As this was quickly becoming the most depressing day of my goddamn life, I thought about *that*. About me, dying. Me at six months, suffocating in my crib. Me at twelve, chasing a Spalding and getting hit by a car. Me at twenty-two, stabbed to death in the alley behind Rudy's. Me at thirty, shot in the head by Chino over fifty

fucking dollars lost in a card game. All these things could have happened, but hadn't—except everyone had been telling me for the past few days that they *had*, just to some other version of me, a version that had been dead since that moment.

The quiet was smothering. Our steps were loud scrapes that rattled everything like earthquakes, and the wind was a constant mutter in the center of my ears. I could hear water, too, lapping, as we got closer and closer to the Hudson, crawling along Third Street. But there was no other noise. No sirens, no shouts. No dogs, no music leaking from fourth-floor windows. No car horns or tire screeches, no distant conversations bubbling out of the bars. It was just me and Alt James, and we weren't making nearly enough noise.

I could see the river as we headed downhill over the broken pavement. It smelled crisp and clean, not the oily scent I remembered. I could see from a distance that the esplanade had partially collapsed into the river, pavers dripping in after the edges one by one every few weeks. I walked with my hands cuffed in behind me and could feel time running out; I hadn't seen anything that looked at all useful, and the gun I got jabbed into my back every few steps still felt too fucking real for me to chance turning around and trying anything. The last two blocks floated by—a ruined building on my left, a jumble of bricks and iron that still held the ghostly outline of a building, like it remembered what it had been for so long, and a spectacular crush of bent-up, rusting cars completely blocking the street to me right.

“Head right on to the edge,” Alt James said as we got close to the water.

Across the river was Manhattan, looking more or less like I

remembered it—something nagged at me, something missing or different, but I couldn't place it, and as I shuffled forward I had an uneasy, unhappy feeling of disorientation, like everything had been reversed in a mirror.

I almost lost my footing as the pavers gave way under my feet, and had to shuffle backwards hastily to avoid sliding right down into the dark, steel-colored water. Most of the walkway was already in the river, but a thin line of it still clung to land, the old sidewalks next to it as broken up as the roads, the trees heavy and overgrown around us. The world turning back into one huge forest.

“Stop.”

I felt Alt James doing something behind me, tugging at the rope holding my handcuffs to my ankles, and then the gun was pushed into my back again.

“All right. Step off.”

I blinked. “What?”

The gun became more insistent. “Walk forward until you drop,” he said.

My heart raced, and my hands were shaking behind me. I couldn't see him, couldn't see what he was doing, and it got to me. I liked pain. I didn't want to die, and I didn't like not being able to grab everything in my hands, no matter how deep it bit into my skin, and wrestle it down. I took a step forward, and the fucking pavers let go underneath me without warning, and I slid down over a crumbling edge into the air.

I stopped with a jerk a foot or so above the water, and swayed

there, suspended. I hung, panting for a moment, listening to the lap of the waves, the plop of chunks of the pavers hitting the water, and the creak of the rope I was suspended from. My side felt like it had split open while my shirt was made of salt, and I imagined kidneys and liver and lungs oozing out, draining me.

Craning my throbbing neck, I could just make out Alt James' dark silhouette leaning out over the edge above me.

“Got to be careful,” he said. “If I put you in any kind of mortal danger, fate will fucking *intervene*. I can fuck with you all I want, just got to toe that line, you know. You’ll work your way free of this soon enough, but by then I’ll be gone, and you’ll be ... *here*.”

He waved. The motherfucker waved *goodbye*.

“So this is it—you’re just gonna leave me here alone forever?”

He’d disappeared from view, but I heard him laugh. “Shit, I never said you were *alone*. I done this before.”

I listened to his steps scraping away, greedily. After a while it was just lap lap, creak creak, and my own labored breathing.

Startling awake, I let out a little cry and flailed my arms and legs, ridiculous. My arms were still numb, my shoulders aching painfully, and breathing had become painful, every inhalation sending a slice of burning red agony up and down my side and in the deep pit of my stomach. I wasn't sure how long I'd been hanging there, but my stomach also told me I'd been there at least past lunch, past dinner, and probably past midnight snack.

I hung there for a few seconds, smelling the clean air and listening to the lap lap, the plop plop, the creaking of the rope ... and slowly realized that the creaking had startled me awake, because it had shifted in tone. Instead of the dry, regular groan I'd come in with, it had transformed into something irregular and higher-pitched. Twisting my head up and around with some painful effort, savoring the tinges of fresh discomfort, I could see that at the edge of the crumbling walkway where the rope went over it had rubbed down to a few stubborn strands.

Just as I pictured myself falling into the river with my hands bound behind my back, the rope snapped and I plummeted.

I sliced into the water and sank, my form perfect, the water freezing, so cold I was amazed it wasn't just ice. I convulsed, the air exploding from my lungs as I bent this way and that, trying to swim with my hands and ankles tied behind my back, water clawing down my throat. I thrashed and wriggled, sinking, the water like jelly around me, until my lungs started to burn and twitch, the sudden new pain burning through the panic and clearing my head, a rush of

euphoria surging through me and making me light; I relaxed and stretched myself out flat, floating on my back, and closed my eyes.

Seconds, minutes, years later, I broke the surface, floating placidly on my back, drifting. I held my breath a few seconds more, savoring the burn, and then opened my eyes and mouth, sucking in the sweet, clean air and staring up at the blue-gray sky.

I floated for a while, trying to give myself little kicks that might steer me slowly towards the shore. I knew *my* river pretty well, and knew there was a small beach not too upriver where I could climb onto shore even with my hands bound, but I wasn't sure I could direct enough energy into my thrashings to propel myself there. And I wasn't sure if *this* fucking river had the same outline and personality. I took a deep breath and let it out, took another and held it, and curled myself into a ball, sinking slightly under the water but brings my fingers close to my ankles. In the water it was an easier maneuver than in the trunk, and the rope had been stretched out a little, so I managed to get my fingertips onto the knot that held my ankles together.

The rope had swollen, and the water was cold, and I couldn't see what I was doing, but I got the knot between my thumb and forefinger, paused for a moment to relax again, and began trying to worm one strand out from under the other. After a few seconds of fumbling, I managed it, one fat finger somehow worming its way into the middle of the knot, and a moment later my legs were free.

I rolled over again and popped back to the surface. Taking three deep, coughing breaths again, I oriented myself—surprised by how far from the Jersey side I'd drifted—and started kicking. For a moment I considered kicking towards Manhattan, which loomed on

my left silent and massive, but I thought better of it. I *knew* Hoboken was more or less empty—I didn't know anything about *this* Manhattan. And Alt James had brought me in through Hoboken. On the off chance he was still there—car trouble, I thought with a smile—I wanted to be on his trail. A moment later I thought again, and tucked myself into a ball, sinking slightly as I pulled my arms up and over my feet, bending my knees and almost getting stuck in a ridiculous pose for a moment before popping free, my hands still cuffed but now at least in front of me.

I got on my belly and started doing the world's most awkward and horrible doggy paddle, slapping my bound hands in front of me, angling as best I could against the current towards Jersey. The current wasn't strong, a peaceful flow I cut through pretty easily, but I was blowing like a beached whale by the time I made it to the scrabbly little shore a few hundred feet from where I'd been trussed up. I crawled through the slimy sandy dirt and flopped onto my back on the rocks, gasping and groaning.

Suddenly, I caught my breath and froze. Someone was singing, not too far away.

It was a song I remembered from when I'd been a kid, though the title and band escaped me: *Come on, baby, set me free ... you know you ain't afraid of me*. The voice was female, low and smoky, a woman who'd smoked unfiltered cigarettes for years, I thought. A few blocks away. I sat up and stared down at the handcuffs and thought about Rachel. About never touching her again—different, somehow, from simply being forbidden to. At least I'd had the option, the mad option, of breaking the rule.

My wrists were already sore and scabbed from the cuffs, but I

started working them anyway, tucking my thumb and pinky in order the other finger and pushing my hand backwards through one loop. The pain felt good, and kept my head clear as I worked the metal back and forth, stealing centimeters of skin back each time. I had nothing better to do but sit and listen to the off-key singing and the water lapping, tearing up my wrist, blood dripping onto the sandy dirt.

Come on baby, set me free ... all this talk don't satisfy me.

After ten minutes or so the pain washed out, everything going numb and senseless. If I'd been doing this just for fun, passing the time, I would have stopped and changed it up—salt in the wounds or a different material. As it was it just made it easier to stare at the blue-gray water and work the cuff up and down, tearing the skin and smearing blood everywhere. I started matching the rhythm of my movements to the lapping of the water, back and forth, push and pull, until suddenly the cuff slipped off my hand and dangled from my other wrist. My whole arm throbbed, my palm slick with my own blood, but I had my arms back.

I realized the singing had stopped, and stood up, blinking, looking around and coming back to myself.

There were signs of erosion and age everywhere. Aside from the crumbling walkway by the river, rust and collapse was every other thing, once you started looking for it. I left my wrist bloody and raw, enjoying it again, and started climbing back up towards the street. I knew which way we'd come; I was going to retrace my steps and see what I found. Probably nothing, but it was a place to start.

I got back on Washington Street and walked right up the middle, weaving around the occasional old rusted-out car or pile of debris.

The stillness and quiet was like being in a box at the bottom of a very deep closet, insulated and forgotten.

I heard the steps a few seconds before she appeared and was ready for it, but when she caught up with me all she did was match my stride and walk alongside me for a while. I turned and looked at her, then quickly looked around, checking for an ambush, but it was just her: a middle-aged woman, stick-thin, gaunt, with sunken cheeks and long, stiff-looking white hair. She was wearing a pair of ragged, torn jeans, several layers of torn-up, fraying T-shirts and a pair of Converse Chuck Taylors, blue and looking like they stayed on her feet because they didn't have any better ideas.

I kept looking around. It was an old mugger trick—you started walking with someone, strike up a friendly chat, and when you turn a corner or pass close to a wall, someone comes from another direction, fast, and jumps you. But I didn't see anybody else. It was just her, and she was so skinny, her skin so thin and pale, I couldn't take her seriously.

"I'm so *hungry*," she said suddenly, sounding almost cheerful. "You know how long I been here? Four years. You know what there is to eat here? Nothing."

I kept walking, keeping my eyes moving. I didn't say anything. I didn't know what the Rules of Polite fucking Society said about conversations with ghostlike women in alternate universes, and I figured I could always claim ignorance if it turned out I was being rude.

"Nothing," she continued. "Not a dog, not a pigeon, not a fucking plant. I'd eat fucking moss if I could find any."

I turned left at eighth street, and she turned with me like we were a flock of birds or something. I was still braced for an attack, still keeping my eyes open, but she just kept walking, not looking at me.

"There's not even canned stuff," she said. "Fucking stores are *empty*. Wrap your head around *that*."

We walked down eighth for a while, chummy.

"I can't wait to eat *you*," she said quietly.

I stopped and watched her take two steps without me. When she spun around, startled, I pointed at her. "Walk some other street," I suggested. "Or I'm going to have to break your legs."

She smiled, and I wished she hadn't. Her teeth were green and moldy, a few missing, her gums a bright red. "I'm going to wait until you fall asleep, and eat you," she said happily. "I'm going to eat you *forever*." She clasped her hands together in front of her chest. "Forever."

I snapped my arm out and smacked her in the face with the free end of the cuffs, hard enough to make her yelp and stagger back, but not hard enough to even break the skin. "Walk some other street." I looked around and listened. If this was a distraction, if she was just freaking me out to help some partner sneak up on me, I was going to be ready.

She began backing past me, smiling, her hands clasped in front of her again. "Oh, *yes*," she said in a breathy little whisper. "Forever."

I watched her back away from me, taking her time, her hands clasped, her thin face screwed up into a terrible smile. She just kept backing away until she'd disappeared beyond the rise of the street,

and I turned away and started walking again, heart pounding.

By the time I arrived at the beat-up old warehouse on Monroe Street, the sun was sinking and I had the uneasy feeling I'd be spending a pitch black night in an empty world with just the Gray Ghost back there for company, waiting for her to show up with a fucking bib on and a jar of barbecue sauce in one bony hand. I'd emerged from within it some unknowable time ago with Alt James at my back, but I didn't remember much about how I'd come there in the first place. I stood for a moment in the middle of Monroe Street staring at it: Two buildings, really, squat square lumps of concrete and rebar, connected by a shattered bridge that started off on one side filled with promise and exuberant optimism and ended about four feet later in shards of rock and metal, only to spring up again on the other side as if nothing had happened. The buildings sat on a scrubby patch of gravel and crabgrass, weeds shooting up in odd spots like trees, taller than me, swaying slightly in every weak breeze.

It looked dark inside. I circled around, finding plenty of hollow, sagging doorways leading into complete darkness. My wrist had gone from the searing, clarifying pain I liked to the dull, throbby kind of pain infections heralded, and which I enjoyed less. My head was starting to ache in sympathy, as well as my back, and the idea of stumbling through the darkness inside that building was about as attractive as going to church.

I suddenly wanted a cigarette very, very badly.

Rushing, I stepped through a wide double-doorway and into the greasy shadows. The dimming sunlight illuminated a few feet, and then it was all grays and blues and shadows. A wide, empty lobby led to a narrow hall, then to a small elevator room with two yawning

holes where the elevators had once stood. I kept walking down the darkened hall, following my vague, sleepy memories, and found my way to the loading dock. My life had brought me into more loading docks than usual, lately, and I was starting to take it as a bad sign.

When Alt James had pulled me from the trunk, his big black Cadillac had been parked right there on the cracked concrete pad. I jumped down and walked back to the metal garage door that hung by force of habit, heavy and rusted but very much in place. I gave it a good shove and found it difficult to even shake, much less get up off the ground. I didn't see how Alt James had pulled the car in or out unless he was carrying a fucking generator around in his pocket and could wire the ancient motor up.

I stared at the corrugated metal for a moment, one hand resting on it, handcuffs dangling from my wrist. I'd never felt so fucking alone in my life.

I heard her breathing a moment before she moved, a squeaky kind of low-volume mewling as she crept towards me. I forced myself to wait a moment in the failing light, forced myself to stay still and keep one hand on the garage door despite my screaming nerves: She was there, behind me, swallowed in blackness and creeping, but I knew that it was never the right move to give in to panic, to move the second you wanted to. Your brain was ancient and dumb. You had to be smarter.

When I couldn't take it any more, I dropped into a squat and fell back onto my hands, sweeping one leg out and catching something. She went down with a yelp and I pushed myself up and tried to spring forward onto her, managing something more reminiscent of falling. She was already scrambling back away from me but I

managed to get a hand on her ankle and drag her back to me—she didn't weigh anything. I gave it all my strength and she flew up towards me like she was made of paper.

I realized too late that she'd let me pull her, and then she was on me, light as a feather, her bony hands pulling at my clothes, and before I could change gears and start *pushing* instead of *pulling*, she'd bitten into my neck, hard, pain lancing up into my brain, direct route, no detours, my vision flashing red and every hair on my body suddenly standing up on edge.

I half screamed, half growled and pulled her from me so hard she flew down and away. I heard a crash off in the shadows and felt blood pouring down my neck, soaking into my clothes. Trying to keep on her trail as she melted into the darkness, I staggered forward but caught my foot in something and slammed down onto my knees, panting.

For a moment all I could hear was my own breathing. I couldn't believe I'd just gotten my ass handed me by an old woman who's clothes weighed more than her, and was momentarily glad The Bumble had not been here to see it.

Then, faintly, out in the hall, I heard her whispering. At first I couldn't make out what she was saying, then something clicked in my head.

She was saying: "*Delicious.*"

21.

I was being eaten alive by an old woman in the dark, one fucking bite at a time.

So far she'd nailed me three times: The first nip in the neck, and once each on my already-bloody hand and arm. She kept creeping up on me in the dark, and her green, muddy teeth were surprisingly sharp, like dogs' teeth.

The dark: I'd never been in such complete darkness before. The sky had scummed over with clouds, and the moon was hidden away. There were no lights anywhere, and I'd been crushed under a thick, complete blanket of *nothing*. No noise, no light, my eyes finding the vague, indistinct edges of things and sending me crashing into walls and tripping over every bump. Alt James had cleaned out my pockets; I didn't even have my lighter.

The skinny bitch, she could fucking see in the *dark*, the way she moved.

I'd stayed inside the building, figuring that having a wall to back against was better than wandering the streets in pitch dark, where other ... people might be lurking. I at least had a vague memory of the layout of the immediate room and hallway, and I'd found something that felt like a rusty metal pole, maybe three feet long and more comforting than effective. I hunkered down in one corner down near the rusty garage doors and stared blindly into the murk, eyes aching with the effort to spot her white hair a second or two before she darted in close, teeth snapping, hands pushing.

I told myself that all I had to do was survive the night without being entirely digested. It didn't make me feel any better.

I was not a good man. I knew that, but I certainly did not deserve *this* bullshit, and the fact that the universe—all of them—saw fit to dole this out to me made me want to burn the world down. I'd spent my life seeking rules, ways to do what I wanted, needed to do without being a virus, without being destructive. To find a way for it all to serve a purpose. If this was my reward, I'd wasted my time. I could have been enjoying myself.

I heard her, suddenly, a snuffle across the room, muffled but not before I'd heard her. She was right in my line of sight, up on top of the loading dock, three or four feet higher than me, creeping close to the floor. I got up onto the balls of my feet, balancing, but didn't try to displace; she'd shown me she could see better in the dark than I could, so there was no point. I had wall to my back and sides where I was; she could only come at me from the front. If I was patient and lucky I might finally clock her in the head, be able to fall asleep before sunrise.

I sat and listened, trying to keep my breathing slow and shallow, kept my hands loose and let one end of the rusty metal rod rest on the floor between my knees. I kept my head turned towards the spot I'd heard her, making her think I was stupid, and waited, tense, holding my breath. I didn't have much experience with this sort of thing; my gig was to intimidate people with The Bumble crowding them from behind, then making them hurt professionally, expert pressure, sudden violence, and you walked out onto the street to have a smoke and get in the car while your client lay in a pool of their own piss, screaming. Clean and professional, purposeful. Not shivering in the

dark forever, fighting off this crazy bitch.

I heard her again, somehow *above* me, and tried to roll away from the wall. I was too slow, and she was on me, light as air but pushing her snarling, greasy mouth towards me, enveloping me in a cloud of rot and copper. I swung the rod straight up, not managing much force, but connected solidly with her and got a squawk of rage for my trouble. I pushed myself to my feet and swung it again in a descending arc, but I hit the concrete floor and nothing else, a shock slamming up my arms and settling into my lower back in the form of a nice, burning ache.

Spinning slowly, I held the rod out in front of me, trying to see some sign of her. Then I froze, cocking my head, and heard it again: Voices, whispered, inside the building.

It spooked my little cannibal, too; I heard her moving quickly for the first time as she rushed out of the room, a startled stray cat, and for the first time all night I was confident of being alone in the darkness. After a second of triumphant relief, I realized that this hadn't actually improved things all that much, and started taking slow steps towards the raised platform of the loading dock, where I could use it as a guide to the short flight of steps leading me up towards the exit. I had to move carefully, but I tried to hurry, because I wanted to reach the doorway before anything else did.

It was sweaty work, trying to hold your breath and drag yourself silently through the murk. I didn't hear anything else by the time I found the lip of the dock and started to my right, one hand on the cold stone to make sure I didn't go sailing off into the corner, but after a few steps I heard them again: More than one person, hissing at each other, a group of people trying to stay stealthy and quiet and

failing almost completely. I wondered if my friend the Cannibal might not reach out to them first, drop in on them for a little snack. I'd know by the sudden and persistent screams of horror and *what the fuck*.

The steps were pretty much where I expected them to be, making me think I might even get used to being blind, given enough time.

I took them slowly, careful, sweat and blood sizzling on my skin. When I reached the smooth floor of the dock, I inched my way to the right until my outstretched hand found the wall, tracing my fingers along the rough cinder blocks until I found the corner. A few fumbblings to the left and I had the open doorway in front of me, the air somehow feeling thinner, less dense than in the rear. I made sure of my grip on the rusty metal rod and hesitated; whoever this was, they probably saw better in the dark than I did, probably knew the layout of the building better—were used to living in this craphole abandoned world. But I couldn't hide in the loading dock—as the frail old woman who'd been fucking *eating* me for the last few hours had proven, that was a recipe for getting my ass kicked.

Swallowing bile and fear, I stepped into the chasm that was the hallway, pitch black and endless.

I could hear them again, tense whispers, several voices. Knowing that I could hear them but they had no idea where *I* was gave me some comfort—if I managed to stay quiet and kept my ears open, I might survive. Then I imagined spending the rest of my life—fuck, the rest of *forever* like this, being hunted every night, starving until I was hunting the old bitch right back. It got me depressed again.

Creeping along the hallway, I tried to picture it and estimate how

far the small elevator lobby was. The yawning, empty shafts might be useful if I had a group who weren't much better in the dark than I was—get their back to them and menace them, try to make them take that fatal step back, let the building do some work for me.

It wasn't a very good plan, but it was the best I could do with my available tools: a rusty metal rod, the possible element of surprise, and some open airshafts.

I didn't have a lot of time; I had to get to the elevator lobby before my new friends did. Fixing my memory of the hallway in my mind, I started forward at a steady pace, swinging the rod in front of me like a blind person to catch any obstacles or fucking vampires or what the hell before I stumbled over them. I felt raw and bloody, festering infections starting to boil under my skin—my new friend did not, I was pretty sure, have the best dental hygiene, and apparently being fucking immortal didn't do anything for your overall upkeep. I wondered if people broke bones and spent eternity limping.

After ten or twelve steps I felt the space around me change, and figured I'd found the lobby. I changed the rod to my right hand and swung it out horizontally from my hip and kept walking, smacking it into the far wall after a few more steps. I found the wall with my hands and moved in carefully, judging the approximate center of the room by memory. With my back against the wall, I had the hallway to my right and the airshafts directly in front of me. There was no time to double check my memory. I took the metal rod in my hands and banged it hard against the floor. Just once.

The voices, separated from me by a couple of walls, stopped.

I gave it a few seconds more and then let the jagged edge of the

pipe drag across the floor a little, the scraping sound loud and clear. Then I hefted it in both hands and stood there, staying still, waiting. I knew the noise might draw my biggest fan back to me for another bite, but I was banking on the Gray Ghost being more afraid of the unknown group than she was hungry—one half-blind asshole was one thing, five assholes who maybe saw just as well as you did in the dark was something else completely.

They were trying to be quiet again, and failing pretty spectacularly, completely unaware how sound traveled in the empty concrete box we were in. I could track them pretty easily just with my ears, but a minute or so later I realized I could see the hallway a little—lights were dancing along the floor and walls, clean blue electric light, bouncing like a handheld flashlight would. I wouldn't remain hidden against the wall if they were able to fucking put a light on me, so I started creeping towards the hallway. I would just have to let them move past me and try for a lucky shot, knock in some heads, maybe score a flash for my trouble and have a way of getting around that didn't involve breaking my neck.

There were four of them. They moved past me in a vague group, two flashlights in the front lighting the way, no sense that attacks could come from somewhere other than directly in front of you. I waited until the last two were a few steps past me, then picked a spot that seemed like it might reasonably be someone's head and rushed forward, taking a swing.

I didn't hit anything, cutting through air and losing my balance as someone smacked a shoulder into my belly, knocking me over with ease, the rod springing from my hands and clattering away. I tried to kick and roll, but someone had my legs trapped under theirs and then

there were hard, confident hands on my wrists, weighing me down.

“Get a light!” Someone yelled from the hallway. I knew the voice, and froze, watching the bouncing light approach and then turn directly on me, burning into my eyes and skin.

“Holy shit!”

I squinted up into the creased, red face of The Bumble. He was grinning down at me, and his grin was horrible, like a mistake, and I loved the sight of it.

22.

“Well, Mr. Falken,” I said slowly. “Looks like you're my hero.”

He shrugged without turning around to look at me. “No. I knew where he was going to take you.” He looked around, as if he could actually see anything without the flashlight aimed directly at it. “I couldn't leave anyone in a place like this.”

I could just make out everyone around me as we made our way through this silent, dusty Hoboken. Falken was the same chubby shlub in a suit, his head shaved down to a fine point, his jowls just beginning to blossom. He'd be a fat fuck in a few years if he didn't cut down on the fruity mixed drinks and the steaks, the double lattes with whipped cream. Right now he just looked abundant. Moist and fertile, the sort of guy who had vast civilizations of bacteria growing in the darkened folds of his skin. He had a pinched expression on his face, very serious and unhappy, and I took it to mean he was really going out of his fucking way for me, breaking his stride to come save me from my own stupidity. I wanted to hit him, but owing my life to him made that seem impolite.

Rachel kept turning her head to glance back at me. In the old warehouse she'd stepped up to me suddenly, *oh! You're bleeding!* And reached out a hand, jerking it to a halt just before she actually touched me. Since then we hadn't spoken a word to each other. She twisted back to look at me and then twisted back around, biting her lip.

Rusch was delighted. Fucking-A *delighted*. She more or less danced

down the street, ogling this alternate world, a place she'd been and not been, recognizable but different, the apparent proof of every theory she had ever floated at a faculty retreat and seen laughed out of the room. I could see her looking out of the corner of her eye at everyone as we walked, trying to catch our attention and start a conversation, like an excited kid.

The Bumble had gone back to his blank-faced expression, walking steadily along with his hands hanging by his sides like shovels, his eyes sleepy. Since he'd just displayed more emotion to me than I'd ever seen in him before, I figured he was exhausted.

Rubbing my torn-up wrist to break the scab a little, the pain cutting through my overloaded nerves and soaking a little more adrenaline into my blood. I was jittery and achy, grinding my teeth, all signs that I was a few moments away from collapsing. I pushed myself to catch up with Falken, who didn't look at me as I matched his pace.

"What's he doing now?" I said quietly, not looking at him either. "James. The Executioner."

"Still looking for me," he said immediately. "He wouldn't think of me coming *here*, but he's still working me. Won't give up until I'm dead, either. Don't worry, he won't bother to check on you. Keep your head down and you're fine."

"Fuck that," I said, turning to accept a silently proffered cigarette from The Bumble. "That piece of shit put himself on my To-Do list." I inhaled smoke, letting it leak from my nose at its own pace. "What's he *doing*? Where can I find the son of a bitch?"

Falken didn't turn to look at me as we walked, turning in towards

the cliffs at the rear of Hoboken. “He’s playing cop, pretending to be your James,” he said suddenly. “He’s using the cops to look for me. He’s walking around pretending to be him, going through the motions, using the system to track me down.”

I thought about that. I wasn’t a scientist and I didn’t know how to jump between universes. I did know how shit like that worked. “Why don’t you displace?” I asked. “Get out of town. Get out of the fucking *world*.”

“I *can’t*, goddamn it!” he snarled, his hands bunching up into fists. He visibly forced himself to relax. “The energy needed for ... for traveling between—it’s enormous. In some places it’s easy to come by. Not here. here it’s expensive and difficult.”

I closed my eyes for a moment. “So you borrowed money. As much as you could get.”

“And I managed to scrape together enough material to make two jumps.” I opened my eyes again and forced myself to look at him. He was staring at the ground as we walked. “And I just used half of it.”

I let that ride. I had nothing to say. He looked up and stared straight ahead, his jaw clenched, like he wished he could burn people to death with his eyes. After a second or two I nodded. “Playing cop. Sure. Everyone thinks he’s Detective James, and he gets the whole fucking city to look for you. But it also means we know exactly where the motherfucker is.”

I saw The Bumble nod his head in agreement. We were slowing down, approaching the fucking Beamer, parked right in the middle of the street. It looked scorched, black scars running along the sides, like it had driven through a fire.

“You *drove* here?” I said, then instantly regretted it, worried that Rusch might take this as an opportunity to give me a lesson in theoretical physics. “Forget it.” The Bumble and Falken stepped forward and opened the front doors, and then we were all getting into the car as if this was a trip to the fucking mall or something. I paused, my hands on the top rim of the door, feeling the heat of the metal.

“How much?” I asked Falken. He stopped, bent awkwardly, half in and half out of the car.

He told me. It was an amount of money I didn’t think you could actually amass in one place.

He sank into the leather seats and I ducked in too, finding myself next to Rachel, Rusch sitting up straight and excited on the other end. There was a good three inches between Rachel and me; it would have been completely natural and easy to lean my leg out and let it touch her thigh, but I didn’t. She might excuse it, she might not. It didn’t matter. I’d promised never to touch her, and until she released me from that promise there was going to be three inches between us.

Falken twisted around in his seat, holding out a pair of what looked like white gumdrops. His face was still stiff and shadowed, his eyes distant. “You’re gonna want these,” he said, dropping them into my palm. “Earplugs.”

I remembered being tied up in Alt James’ trunk, and nodded, stuffing them into my ears along with everyone else. I felt the Beamer fire up, the low rumble in my bones, and settled back, enjoying the near-total silence the earplugs offered. I shut my eyes for a moment, wondering when the last time I’d slept had been.

.oOo.

“Wake up, slugger.”

I opened my eyes and was awake instantly. I felt raw and bruised; every part of me ached. It was bright sunlight outside of the car, making Rachel into a tiny silhouette.

“We're back?”

“We're back,” she said, stepping back as I pulled myself, slowly, like an old man, from the car. We were on Hudson Street downtown, crowded with people having lunch and shopping, just strolling in the sunlight. When I got to my feet I wobbled a little, everything going hazy, my joints stiff and my mouth filled with cotton. I felt like I'd been in a coma. When I felt steady enough I climbed onto the sidewalk and leaned back against the door to shut it, sweat pouring down my back. My side burned like someone had injected my wound with acid.

We were parked right outside the White Horse Tavern. I pushed off from the car and staggered over to Falken, The Bumble, and Rusch.

“Jesus Christ, who's buying me a drink?”

A kid named Carlos was working the bar—slow this time of day, old codgers sopping up domestic beer, mostly—who I knew from a few collections last year. Nothing major, and the kid had cheerfully handed over what he owed, apologizing for making me come out and find him, and I'd let him go with some slaps and shoves. He didn't

exactly smile when Billy and me walked in, but he slapped napkins down onto the bar as the five of us settled in and waited politely to hear what we had to say. I ordered boilermakers for everyone, and an extra one for myself. Rachel made a face, Falken ignored me completely, and Rusch steeped her fingers in front of herself as if expecting a delightful new experience.

When our drinks arrived Billy and I dropped a shot glass each into our pints, clinked glasses, and downed them as fast as we could. We were old pros, and didn't spill much. Rusch watched us, smiling, her whole face lit up.

I picked up my second shot glass as the alcohol warmed me up, eased my nerves. I felt like I could sleep for days, but there was no time. I stepped out and around Rusch and leaned in to Falken.

"Bygones," I said slowly. "You and me, we're even, right? We start fresh. I can't cover or forgive your debt—Jesus, it's too much fucking scratch—but I can *help* you. I know this town, I know the players. I'm on your payroll now." I popped a finger free from my grip on the shot glass and wagged it at him. "That's for swinging around to pick me up back ... there. Wherever *there* was. Okay?"

He looked me up and down, then nodded. "Okay."

I nodded back and swallowed the second shot: Wild Turkey, rough and country, swagger and burn. It wasn't sophisticated, but it had character, and sometimes that carried you through. "James, The fucking *Executioner*, is on my list now. I can't have that fucking doppelganger running amok in *my* town." Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Carlos on the phone behind the bar, his back to us. I twitched my head and focused on Falken. "You got your own troubles,

but I could use your help, if only because you're the only one here who has any fucking idea what's going on. I'm *asking*, not telling."

I'd left my beer by The Bumble, which had been a mistake. I really wanted it before whoever Carlos was calling arrived, and I knew from bitter experience that The Bumble considered abandoned alcohol up for grabs. I'd seen him snag glasses when I was standing a foot away.

Falken stared at me silently for a moment, then nodded. "All right," he said. I translated helpfully for myself: *I've got nothing to lose*. He was anchored to this world for the time being, he had no more money, and no friends. If I was going to step up to the line with him, why not let me? I might draw some bullets my way. And fuck, I'm supposed to be immortal.

I turned and tapped The Bumble on the shoulder, and he turned around, grinning, and my goddamn beer was in his paw, already half gone. "Billy," I said, and his grin disappeared. "What I'm planning to do might go against Frank's wishes, I don't know," I said. "At any rate I'm not asking the old man for permission. You still in this with me?"

He shrugged and nodded. "Fuck Frank," he said. "Asshole hasn't skinned a knuckle in fucking decades."

I smiled and looked back at Falken. He looked at The Bumble and back to me. "What do you plan to do?"

"What I get paid to do, Mr. Falken." I winked, feeling jolly and limp, ready to fall over at any moment. "Make them hurt."

23.

The Bumble nodded once and turned for the entrance of my building. It was noon, the sun hidden behind a scum of dark clouds, the air still. He crossed the street and climbed the front steps without hesitation or even a glance back at me; Billy's greatest flaw and asset was a complete faith in everything he did. I'd told him I'd do my part, so he did his, and it never occurred to him to doubt success. It was going to get him killed someday, and I hoped today wasn't it.

I spun away and crossed the street, working my way around the corner and up into my apartment via the back yards and fire escape, swinging silently into my old bedroom and setting my feet carefully on the painted floorboards. I could hear voices from the kitchen—The Bumble, right on cue, raising his voice and making a scene, demanding to know who the fuck they were, who'd posted them here, sitting in my apartment like spiders. I listened for a moment, trying to recognize the voices, but these were either out of town talent or not Frank's guys at all.

Creeping on small feet, I walked over to the closet and stepped into it, feeling better once I was inside its darkened confines, the walls and floor muffled by my own clothes, torn up and dumped. I was showered and I'd bought myself a new suit, off the rack and horrible for all it cost five hundred dollars. The five of us were living down in a motel by the Holland Tunnel on the Jersey side in three rooms, me and The Bumble fulfilling our destiny of platonic marriage. I didn't feel right, and the sight of all my beautiful suits in rags on the floor made me angry and sad.

I started to sweat. It was close and hot in the apartment.

Crouching down, I worked my fingers under the floorboards, catching splinters. The Bumble was giving it all he had—all I could make out were shouts, but I knew anyone in their right mind would hesitate to do anything more than shout at Billy Bumbles. He'd be able to stretch this out as long as he needed just by throwing around glares and pretending to not understand English, which was a favorite trick of his.

One by one the boards came up. I lay down on my belly, feeling exposed and vulnerable, and reached down into the void. Four canvas bags, heavy and thick, one by one. They came up with a cloud of dust and a musty smell, and I had to huddle for a moment on the floor, hand clamped over my nose, struggling against the strong urge to sneeze. In the kitchen, the voices had become louder, with three or four people shouting simultaneously. When I felt like I had myself under control, I started bringing the bags over to the window, and with a heave I sent them falling down to the overgrown yard one by one, silent. The voices had gotten even louder by then, and I turned, sweating, and crept back to the bedroom door, pulling it inward a half inch.

“—the fuck *down*, Billy. You think you just fucking disappear for a few days with your fucking pal and Frank ain't gonna *notice*? Fucking sit down, Billy. Frank put your name out.”

I recognized Mikey D's voice now, pictured the white-haired bastard preening there, a jumbo softy, the sort of guy who had a lot of stories about the beatings he'd handed out over the years, but who never seemed to graze a knuckle in real life. I stole back from the door and got back down on the floor, reaching through the shredded

clothes and torn-up books under the bed and casting about until I found my trusty aluminum bat. Fucking heresy for the actual game, but metal felt better when smacked across someone's back. I'd put a few layers of spiraling electrical tape around the grip, a callback to my days playing stickball on the corners at the Four Sewers over on North Street.

Bat in hand, I stepped back to the door and pushed my foot gently into the gap, pushing the door just wide enough for me to slip through. I knew my apartment well, and I knew that if no one was in the living room, I'd be able to slip to the left and approach the kitchen without being seen. I leaned my head out and looked forward: Aside from Mikey D I could see half The Bumble, standing with his hands up lazily, hovering in the air like he might change his mind at any moment. Assholes like Mikey liked guns, because there was no way they would ever take on a slab like Billy Bumbles by hand; Billy would turn Mikey into a memory. I couldn't see anyone else, but Mikey wasn't holding the piece, so that meant at least one other guy. And since Mikey liked to play cards while he did shit details like this for Frank, that meant at least one *other* other guy.

Moving slowly, I crept into the dim living room, bat held low. I looked around, but I was alone in my ruined living room. I kept glancing at the floor, picking my way through the debris, and angled my way left until I couldn't see Mikey any more.

"You guys think you're *clever*," Mikey was saying. It came out *clevah*. "You and your colored cop friend. I told Frank—Pinks, didn't I say it?—I told him when your husband there came in and did his little dance about Falken, I said, bullshit. Bull-fucking-shit. You guys squeeze the tar outta everyone. You collect *everything*. And this skinny

fuck from nowhere puts you off? Naw, ain't happening. I told Frank —Pinks, right?—I told him you boys were running a scam. And then this cop strolls in and buys the debt. The *cop* buys the debt. This fucking cop's been kneeling us in the balls for years, and now he's buying a huge debt, using his badge as collateral. I said naw, no fucking way. And here you *are*, Billy, and now the cop's dropped the debt and told Frank to suck it. So I don't know if it just fucking fell apart for you and your boyfriend, or if you're getting skulled on this one, and who gives a shit. So sit down and we're gonna call Frank and find out where he wants you.”

I pushed myself against the wall just to the left of the doorway and raised the bat up, feeling its weight and balance. Then I stepped around the doorway and swung, connecting solidly with Mikey D's shoulders.

It felt good. Sharp pain shot up my arms into my shoulders, and Mikey fell to the floor like he'd been held up by wires. I stepped into the kitchen; Billy was already moving, barreling into a stocky old man in a terrible, untucked western-style shirt that hung off his man-boobs like a dress, knocking him back into the sink with a crash that sounded like cracking laminate. I spun to my left and swung the bat without looking, catching a skinny, tatted mope in a wifebeater and a fucking *pork pie* hat on the shoulder and whipping him around into the stove. I rushed forward and slapped him hard across the back of the knees before he could recover, sending him down to the floor with a moan. I considered hitting him again a few times just because of the fucking hat, but stepped back, searching the floor for the gun. I found it under what was left of the kitchen table, a much-used little thirty-eight that probably had a string of liquor store robberies tied to

it.

I glanced at Billy, who was holding up his unconscious victim by the scruff of his flabby neck, then looked down at Mikey, who was crawling towards the front door, making about an inch a year, and pissing and moaning all the way.

“You fucking *broke* my fucking *back*,” he wheezed. “You *motherfuckers*.”

I walked over and put the barrel of the bat into the small of his back, pushing down like I was pinning a bug to a card. He wailed and thrashed his arms and legs.

“Stick around, Mike,” I said. “We can discuss your fucking skill set as one of Frank's best and brightest.”

He stopped writhing and twisted his head to squint up at me. “I shoulda known you wouldn't let your lover here out of your sight.”

I pushed down on the bat and he groaned. I liked that, so I lifted the bat up and brought it down hard on the spot right above his bony ass, making him howl. I liked that even more, so I did it again.

“Tell me something, Mike, did you bust out my apartment?”

He didn't say anything, just lay there breathing hard, sawdust scattering away from his open mouth.

“What the fuck did you have against my suits, you stupid cunt?” I ground the bat down into him, making him squeal, and smiled, sweat dripping down off my chin. “You think I had cash sewn in the fucking linings?”

Mikey made a noise that might have been speech, filtered through

the floorboards. Fucking peacock. Put him on his face and he lost all his feathers.

I pulled the bat up and dropped down onto him, knees spread to either side. He groaned again, a drawn-out, rubbery sound. I got comfortable on him. "I got a message for Frank, you listening? Tell him he can stop sitting on my apartment. I'm not coming back again. Okay?"

Mikey made a noise I chose to take as acknowledgment. I gave him one last slap on the back of his head and stood up, hefting the bat. "Tell him we don't work for him anymore, either. If Frank's got a beef, he's gonna get a face full of cops." I smiled at The Bumble, who let the guy he'd been holding up crumple to the floor with a shrug. "Meet you round the side," I said, and turned for the bedroom.

"You're fucking dead," Mikey managed to spit up. "Frank's gonna push your fucking button."

I paused and half-turned back, flipping the bat into the air and catching the fat end. "Haven't you heard, Mikey?" I said cheerfully. "I'm fucking unkillable."

24.

The Holland Motor Lodge wasn't the worst motel I'd ever stayed in; the rugs were a horrifying green and yellow pattern that clashed with the drapes and bedspreads, which were tropical in flavor, and the whole place smelled like car exhaust, but it was pretty clean and the furniture was in decent shape. It was right outside the tunnel, five minutes from midtown on a good day, and since Frank's world ended at the borders of Manhattan it was as safe a spot as any.

My suits didn't fit right. They didn't fit badly, but they were off the rack and were snug in the wrong way and loose in the wrong way and I felt like I was eight again, taking my First Communion to make Ma happy and swimming in some cousin's hand-me-down suit. We'd taken three rooms and everyone but Rusch was in Falken's, the middle room, filling it with cigarette smoke and half-empty Chinese food boxes, everything mixing with exhaust fumes and honking horns from the cars trying to stuff their way into the tunnel's tubes, forming a brown haze that obscured everything. Falken was back to his overstuffed self, blooming out of a shiny green suit, his jowly cheeks shaved red and raw, digesting a disturbing amount of sweet and sour pork, forked endlessly and joylessly into his small, greasy mouth with robotic regularity. I didn't like Falken. My hands itched to slapped him around, but I reminded myself that he had a lifetime pass.

I consoled myself by thinking of Alt James. That bastard had left me in an abandoned *world* to be *eaten* for the rest of eternity. My future was a bright golden vision of being able to do whatever I

wanted to that son of a bitch without even a flicker of guilt.

Pacing, I pushed my foot down onto the sharp pebble I'd placed in my shoe. Walking around, it dug painfully into my foot, soothing me. Everyone was sitting around the tiny round table that wobbled in every directions, threatening to spill the mess of food, ashtrays, and half-filled glasses of booze everywhere. They watched me pace for a few seconds, patient.

"All right," I finally said, sending a plume of smoke into the brown air. "We don't have any muscle. Even if we had the money to hire an army—and my wad will carry us for a while but it isn't going to buy us an army—no one in this town would touch me now that Frank's put the kibosh on me. James is playing cop—who knows how long he can pull it off. He *looks* like Captain Stanley James, he *sounds* like him, but he's not a fucking cop and it's gonna get noticed."

"He'll pull it off for a long time," Falken said flatly. He looked like an overfed pig, his girly little hands steeped under his chin. I owed him my life. I hated that.

I nodded. "Long enough. And while he does pull it off, he's got the cops. He's got all the resources of the police department, plus the Feds if he takes the trouble to dream up something big to feed them. Not only the normal cops he would have under his direction for operations, but every fucking dirty cop in the city he can slip an envelope to is his now, too. And we got Frank McKenna standing on my balls, to boot." I put my cigarette back between my lips. "Thus I am in fucking Jersey."

"I was born in Jersey," The Bumble said contemplatively, studying his cigarette.

I blinked. The Bumble, I'd always been sure, had been grown in a lab vat somewhere. The thought of him with a mullet in some suburban Jersey high school disturbed me.

The door opened behind me, and I turned to find Connie Rusch struggling with several overstuffed brown grocery bags. I'd been hesitant to trust the dotty old professor with our food supply, but it had gotten her out of the room and away from the cigarette smoke she deplored.

Ignoring Billy's sudden moment of introspection, Rachel sat forward fiercely, setting her glass of bourbon on the table. I mashed my foot down onto my hidden pebble and forced myself not to wince.

"So, what, we hide out here, grow old together?" she hissed. "I go get a fucking job as a hostess at some Hoboken dive, get five dollar bills stuffed between my tits all night?"

I shook my head, trying to keep a straight face. Rachel's rage was endlessly entertaining. She always thought I'd volunteered for all those drives because I wanted to hurt her—my way of hurting her, anyway. But I'd just liked seeing her angry, and she was always angry.

"We're just here to stay out of the light," I said. "James no doubt has us on the wire. Frank's people all know me and Billy on sight. We walk around the city, we're fucked in an hour, tops. But I have a plan. We're going on the offensive."

She shook her head. "What about Elias? How is he getting out of this?"

I frowned, putting all my weight on my one leg, letting the stone really dig in there, maybe even puncture the skin. "We take out

James, he—”

“How does he get *home*? Get back?”

I looked at Falken. *Elias*. He was staring out the window at the traffic, all noble pain.

“I have an—an idea.”

I blinked, and then we all turned as one to look at Connie Rusch. She was standing by the bathroom, which was doubling as a completely unsanitary kitchen, holding in each hand a jug of milk. She was wearing a floral print dress that hung on her like a sack and had probably cost about thirty cents for two or three South American children to sew from a pattern, no stockings, and sensible black shoes, the kind they put on senile old men who liked to wander the grounds. Her eyes were made ridiculously huge by her thick glasses, which had sunk down to the tip of her nose. The old broad had proven tougher than I’d imagined, but looking at her now I couldn’t believe she was even in the same room.

“I think I can help Mr. Falken with his energy needs.” She hesitated, then rushed on. “This has, after all, been my life’s work. Although seeing the practical application of it so advanced in other, other *dimensions* is frustrating and demoralizing. I understand the concepts. I have contacts in the scientific community, and the use of such synthetic elements in research is not unheard of. I can make inquiries.”

We stared for another moment, and then Rachel clapped her hands together. “Oh, *Connie*,” she sighed happily. I grit my teeth.

“We can’t afford it,” I said bluntly. “*Elias* borrowed enough fucking

money to run New York for a week. We can't buy what he bought."

Rusch shook her head. her arms were trembling from the weight of the milk but she didn't seem to notice. "We won't need to *pay* for it," she said in a horrified tone. "These are scientists I'm talking about. We'll beg, borrow, and trade. Darling, in my field *none* of us have any money."

Rachel clapped her hands again. I wanted to slap her. And then throw Falken out the window.

I pushed a smile onto my face for Rusch's benefit. "All right. How long is that gonna take you?"

She frowned, obviously considering the question for the first time. "A week. Perhaps two. To make inquiries. Another week or two to make arrangements. I may have to do some cross-trading, pull some strings, apologize to certain folks ..."

I snapped my fingers at her viciously as she looked down at her feet, doing sums in her head. "A *rough* idea, Connie," I said. "Give it to me in a round number in the single digits."

She looked up at me and blinked. "Perhaps three months." She did a little wince-shrug. "This stuff is closely tracked, you see."

A thick silence fell over the room. I turned back to the table. "All right—it's a time line, at least. It doesn't change anything. We still need to deal with James."

Falken didn't look away from the window as he spoke, softly. "I can't go back, go *home*, unless James is gone. He'll just follow me. And then he'll be on familiar ground again."

Rachel sat back again, her hair a delicious mess around her face.

“All right. We have no muscle, not enough money, and he has the whole city to hit us over the head with. What do we do?”

We make them hurt, I thought. Swallowing an unformed anger I didn’t want to explore too closely, I pressed the sole of my foot against my pebble and took a breath. “We sic them on each other.”

They stared at me.

“Billy,” I said suddenly, pointing at him. “You know every Collection run in Manhattan, Queens, Brooklyn, right?”

He blinked. “You mean Frank’s? Or everyone’s?”

“Everyone’s,” I said, feeling excited. “Frank’s, The Phin’s, Durby uptown, The Marcos Brothers, Perez and Hildy—all of them.”

He nodded slowly. “Yeah, sure. We gotta stay out of each other’s way, so I know.”

I nodded. “We’re going on a spree. We’re gonna hit them all. Fast, two or three a night, all in one week. We’re gonna clean them out.”

He blinked again. “We’re gonna *rob* them?” He blinked again, a faint slick of alarm spreading over his rocky face. “*All* of them?”

I nodded. “Frank already thinks we’re working for James. Let’s make it true. We kick him in the balls, we tell him James told us to. We tell him James is fucking with him, taking over, his worst fucking nightmare: A cop using his badge to run the fucking rackets.” I smiled. “What’s Frank gonna do?”

Billy’s face was comical, a mask of contemplation sitting uneasily on it. “Go after us.”

“After *James*. All we gotta do is lead him there, let him take the

Executioner out.”

Rachel was shaking her head. “He isn’t going after *cops*,” she said flatly. “He can’t. He’d have every cop in the country on his ass, he did that.”

“Shut the fuck *up*,” I hissed, my hands balling into fists “Jesus, you don’t know shit about shit here. You don’t *know* Frank.” I uncurled my hands by force of will. “You go after cops, you have to. He thinks James is going to take everything from him, he’ll go for him.” I nodded. “I know Frank McKenna. You don’t.”

I looked at The Bumble. If he was with me on it, that’s all that mattered. If Falken wanted in, I had to let him, I owed him, but this was about me surviving the week, and I needed Billy.

He smiled. “Well, shit,” he said, reaching for the Wild Turkey. “Let’s make ‘em hurt, boss.”

25.

“You okay?”

Falken nodded without looking at me, eyes fixed on the road, hands tight on the wheel of the clunker. “I’m ... great,” he said slowly, licking his lips. “It feels good to be moving, to be doing something other than running.”

He was driving the burner, an orange Chevy with more rust than paint, four tires whitewalls out, blue smoke leaking from the rear. Four hundred bucks as-is and a ripoff at that: its seats more springs than foam, the radio nothing but static, the heater a thing of the past.

I nodded and turned back to look at the street. “You,” I said to the windshield, “should not be here.”

“Too bad,” Rachel said from the back seat, sounding chipper, relaxed. “You should not have walked into my apartment bleeding like a stuck pig. I’m going to help Elias and you can quit worrying about me, because I can handle myself.”

I grimaced, jealousy shooting through me. *Elias*. She didn’t even use *my* name. I glanced at Falken and then righted myself, forcing my hands to untense. “I know you can handle yourself, Rache. That’s why you have the shotgun.”

I put my palm against the hard, inflamed slice on my belly. Still red, still angry, leaking yellow pus from time to time, but it looked like I’d been stabbed weeks ago, with something that had been sterilized first.

She snorted. "You didn't need to take care of me five years ago, and you don't have to take care of me now."

I left it at that and watched the traffic. I could see the Lincoln two cars ahead of us; Falken was a quick study and he'd taken my instructions on staying with the car to heart. We were coasting up St. Nicholas Ave, passing the Four Stars, the main drag heavy with people at night, the side streets empty, shadowed.

"Hundred forty-seventh," I said softly. "Be ready."

Falken nodded but didn't say anything.

"Remember, if someone turns in front of you, don't panic, we're just gonna go with it."

He nodded again. "I was *there* at the meeting, remember?"

I controlled myself. "I don't know you," I said simply. "I don't know what you can and can't do. So fucking keep your mouth shut and just nod when I ask you if you *understand* me, okay?"

Behind me, Rachel leaned forward suddenly and flicked my ear with her fingers, a shock of pain cheering me up.

"Be nice."

At 147th Street, the Lincoln turned left like I knew it would. The street was tight, with double-parked cars lined up along the right side, forming a narrow lane for traffic. We rolled a few doors down the street when the Beamer suddenly pulled out of a doubled spot, cutting off the Lincoln. Billy hit the brakes hard, the Lincoln hit the brakes hard, and Falken threw the burner into park, and then we were all on the street.

The driver of the Lincoln was a guy named Bernie Spaz, younger than me, blacker than me, and a much worse dresser than me—he was standing behind the Lincoln's door wearing a tan turtleneck and a creamy coffee-colored leather trenchcoat, the collar and cuffs of his sweater pillowing out from under the coat like fucking cake icing. His head had been shaved shiny and single gold hoops hung from each ear. His partner, who was probably Leon Hines, a nobody whose only recommendations were that he could give and take a beating, sat in the passenger seat.

“What the *fuck* is wrong wit' you?” Bernie shouted as we walked up behind him, Rachel on the right between the cars, shotgun still in its brown wrapping paper and held low, me with Falken trailing on the left. Bernie paused and leaned forward slightly. “Jesus, is that Billy fucking *Bumbles*?”

“Hullo, Bernie,” I said.

He spun, and I smacked my palm into his nose, feeling oiled up, like I'd been drinking some good stuff, some Glenlivet 40 year so light it floated out of the glass onto your tongue. He staggered back into the car door, and I heard Rachel say *Sit—sit down* nicely, not shouting it, just saying it.

Blood spurting between one hand clasped over his face, Bernie moved his free hand towards his coat, so I stepped forward and kneed him in the groin as hard as I could. It wasn't kung fu, it wasn't a pretty move, but it was effective and we were on a public street. There wasn't *time* for pretty.

He doubled over, sneezing blood everywhere, and I knelt down and helped him slide to the street. I pushed him up against the door

and slapped his face.

“Bernie, I apologize for this. I do. But listen to me, we’re taking your collection.”

He squinted at me, his eyes already puffy and red, his nose flattened, blood streaming down from it over his lips and chin. His head was an oval on its side, like Charlie fucking Brown. He worked for a consortium of Harlem gangs—some Latin Kings, some just neighborhood clubs—and usually had an easy time of it. I couldn't remember the last time he'd broken a sweat.

“What?” he said, sounding all sinusey. “Frank McKenna is fucking *robbing* me?”

The Bumble could be heard going over the car professionally with Falken, grunting instructions, as they searched it thoroughly. In my head I counted down the seconds: Only forty-three of them since we'd hit the brakes.

“I don't work for Frank,” I said. “I work for Stanley James, and Detective James says anyone owes money in this town, they owe it to him.”

He stared at me for a beat. “That is the fucking most bananas thing I ever heard, man.”

I winked. “I heard worse.”

“Got it, boss,” Billy grunted.

I stood up, keeping my eyes on Bernie. “Sorry about the smack, really,” I said. “Someday we meet in a bar, I'll give you a free hit.”

He scowled. “Fuck *you*.”

Falken pushed past me and I followed him towards the Beamer, Billy already hustling into the driver's seat. I turned in time to see Rachel, tiny, pretty little Rachel, step in front of the Lincoln, brace the shotgun against her hip, and fire once into the Lincoln's grill, the paper dissolving into fiery embers, the car making an ungodly noise as steam shot up out of the engine. She backed up to the Beamer with the shotgun still braced against her hip, then we all crowded in and Billy hit the gas, screeching down the street.

“Fucking *ouch*,” Rachel said, panting. “I think I broke something.”

.oOo.

The Ear Inn was almost as old as Charly, the grizzled bartender who greeted us with a snort and a tick of the head at an empty table in the back of the room. It was wobbly, sticky, and meant for no more than three people, but we crowded around it and ordered drinks from the waitress. I knew that in The Ear if I ordered Scotch I'd get Dewars, so I ordered another Wild Turkey instead, neat, warm and flat.

There was a low buzz in the room, no music, just some after work imbibers and a few old codgers shooting everyone nasty looks. There were two small televisions on elevated platforms on either end of the bar, the volume off, both tuned in to the news, which was reporting a revolution somewhere in Africa, everyone terribly concerned.

“Everything's going to hell in a handbasket,” Rachel said, staring up at the screen.

“Nah,” I said. “We’re all gonna be under one government soon enough, and that’ll be that.” I paused, looking at her, letting my eyes roam, taking in everything I hadn’t been able to lay a hand on for years. “You did good out there.”

She snorted without looking at me. “Ain’t the first time I’ve handled a gun.”

Falken leaned forward, a lit cigarette magically between his fingers. “Are you sure this is going to work?”

I shrugged. “What am I, a fucking criminal mastermind? Fuck if I know if it’ll work.” Leaning forward, I put my hands flat on the table. “We don’t have any muscle. James has the fucking police, for a while, until they figure out he’s not right any more. We’ve got me, and The Bumble, and Rachel and you and the old man. We need muscle.”

He frowned. “And pissing off every criminal in the city helps us?”

I put up a finger. “One, it gets us money, and money makes up for a lot.” Another finger. “Two, Frank thinks I’m working for James, that we screwed him somehow—he can’t even figure out *how*, but he’s certain of it—so let’s let him think it. Let’s let him think we’re *still* screwing him over. And let’s invite everyone else to the party. Pretty soon they’re lining up to take on The Executioner.”

Falken nodded slowly. “Muscle. All right. But not working *for* us.”

I shrugged again. “Working in our *interests*, though. Ride the lightning, kid.”

As I spoke two more people entered the bar: A distinguished-looking older man with dark, leathery skin and gray hair, a pencil mustache unfortunately cultivated on his face, and Chino, wearing

an oversize red polo shirt and tan work boots, looking like some streetcorner runner, this piece of shit handling my collections, giving me and Billy Bumbles a bad name.

Our drinks arrived, conveyed by a broad middle-aged woman with the fiery fake red hair of a much younger if equally classless woman. She stood between us and Chino as she handed the glasses down. I snatched mine and swallowed it in one breath, and stood up, The Bumble popping up and buttoning his jacket, falling in beside me as we crossed over to where Chino and the dandy with the porn star mustache were bellied up to the bar, accepting a thick yellow envelope from Charly.

We crowded in behind them. "Hi Chino." I shot a hand out and pushed his shoulder as he tried to turn around.

The dandy tried to whirl around, but The Bumble had him pinned close to the bar, and surged forward, slamming the Dandy's gut into it. He made a *whooshing* noise and his eyes bugged out of his head, his arms trapped between his own body and the bar.

"Behave your fucking self," Billy whispered.

Charly was scowling with the complete lack of fear only idiots and really, really old farts possessed. "The fuck," he muttered. "None o' this shit in here. I'm payin' my tab."

I nodded. "Nothing to do with you, old timer," I said. "You're marked off for the week. Isn't he, Chino?"

I gave the fat man a little shove.

"I marked him off," he said without trying to turn around. "I marked *you* off, too, shithead. You step out on *Frank*? You ain't gonna

have no friends any more.”

I nodded, reaching around and taking the envelope from his chubby hand. “Yeah, I had friends last week and it was fucking great. My apartment got tossed, I got beat on, half-eaten, and insulted. I'm trying out living without friends for a while, see if the number of beatings gets less.”

“Fucking funny,” Chino growled. “You're *hilarious* when you get the drop on people, huh? Have them pinned to the wall.”

I stepped back a foot or so, tucking the envelope into my jacket. “Turn around, then,” I said, smiling, blood pouring into my arms, my hands. “No one's pinning you.”

He didn't turn. “Fuck you.”

I nodded, and The Bumble released his friend, who I didn't know. “Tell Frank if he's got a complaint, he can bring it up with Detective Stanley James,” I said, winking at Rachel and Falken. “Until then, you don't need to work collections any more, understand?”

“You're fucking dead.”

I turned for the door and paused. Outside, through the misty, melting windows, blue and red lights flashed, a million of them.

“Cops,” The Bumble whispered, sounding strangely satisfied.

“Shit,” I muttered, and turned back to Chino. “You may be right.”

26.

I spun around and with a surge of glee I leaped onto Chino's back, both hands on his head, and slammed him down onto the bar, knocking him cold. He slumped under me like an avalanche, and I tried to surf him down and failed, slipping backwards with a tearing sensation slicing along my side and cracking my head on one of the tables, sending it up and over, its former tenants scrambling out of the way. Feeling like a knife had been shoved into my belly all over again, I pulled myself up to my feet and turned myself around, breathing heavy. The Bumble stood over the Dandy, who was crumpled on the floor unconscious next to Chino, his hands spread.

"Cops," I said, staggering forward. The place had gone quiet and staring as The Bumble and I walked briskly back towards our table, where Falken stood next to Rachel, their drinks untouched. I waved my hand back and forth, indicating the rear of the bar. "Out the back, out the back," I hissed.

Rachel spun immediately—I'd flushed her out of too many shitholes in our past life for her to ever forget the instincts that kept her alive—but Falken stood there gaping at me until she stopped a few steps away, spun, and took hold of him by the shoulder, giving him a yank that got him into motion. As we caught up with them, The Bumble and I simultaneously paused to kick over our table and the empty one next to it, and a war whoop burst out of me. We crowded into the tight, dark vestibule outside the kitchen and the single toilet while Rachel struggled with the heavy steel door marked AUTHORIZED PERSONELLE ONLY, finally dragging it open with

some help from a wide-eyed Falken, who appeared to be experienced the longest sustained elevation in his heart rate ever.

We burst into the alley behind the bar just as a blue and white police cruiser turned the corner, and we took off to our left, towards the pair of slimy green garbage bins set back against a high cinder block wall. I felt ridiculous. Normally when the cops took an interest, I kept my dignity: Let the motherfuckers frisk you, give you a few pokes, maybe even arrest you just to hold you for twenty-four hours and sweat you out a little. Here I was scrambling for a fucking wall climb like I'd just gotten caught tagging some car on the Bowery.

Falken leaped up on top of the dumpsters like an athlete despite his belly, like he was connected to some invisible wire, and was up over the wall in a flash. I didn't blame him. Billy, no stranger to rushing out of places just ahead of the heat, crashed into the dumpster like he hadn't seen it, bounced back, then heaved himself up onto it in a messy, awkward scramble that left his suit a stained, greasy mess. I took a little jump, hearing shouts behind us, and put my palms flat on the black plastic lid and vaulted up onto the slick surface, the smell, hot and rotten, enveloping me instantly. I got to my feet and glanced over my shoulder down the alley, where two fat uniforms were running towards us like their shoes were made of glue. I smiled—I knew these guys. In my business you met every cop in the world, eventually. Breathing a little heavily, I looked down; Rachel was still on the ground, looking at the Dumpsters like they were fucking Mount Everest, one hand on her chin like she was doing equations in her head involving the curvature of the earth or some shit as our tiny window of advantage closed up.

I dropped back down next to her. “You fucking midget,” I

whispered, smiling at the cops and shooting my cuffs. I started towards them, spreading my arms wide and smiling. "Jesus, they're scraping the bottom of the barrel for uniforms, huh? All this for little old me?"

The cop in the lead was named Murray: fat, pale, and hairy, his face covered in a massive graying beard/mustache combination that swirled out into whimsical handlebars. No one ever made fun of his whiskers, though, or if they did they found out that a baton could be worse than a fucking gun in the right hands. His blue shirt was stained with sweat already, and I wondered how long it had been since the academy for him.

"Sorry, pal," he said, grinning, everyone friends. "The boss says pull him in, we pull you in. You got any complaints, file 'em with James."

I nodded. "You can let her slide, though, right? I mean, James wants me, right?"

We were a few feet apart by now. Rachel, smart even if she wasn't tall, remained back by the dumpsters. I hoped she was shedding a tear for me, manfully acknowledging my sacrifice, because I was about to flush a decade of good will between me and the crushers down the fucking toilet. Cops were all just failed hoods, people who wanted to crack heads and walk into rooms and make them go quiet. All your average cop wanted was respect: If you treated them well, shook their hand, and let them run the show, they loved you. Piss them off once and you arrested every Thursday for drunk and disorderly like fucking clockwork.

Murray shook his head but his partner answered. Ruiz was a

slimmer version of Murray but with just a porn mustache hanging on his upper lip like a well-fed caterpillar that matched his eyebrows in fucking disturbing ways. "Sorry, word o' God is, take everyone," he said.

I shrugged. "All right," I said, stopping a foot or so away from Murray, who was fishing out his handcuffs. All very gentlemanly, all very civilized. A week ago that's exactly what would have happened: I'd have let them cuff me, we'd have cracked jokes all the way to The Tombs, and I'd have asked them to order me Chinese food around seven, and they would have been happy to do it.

As it was, I stepped forward and punched Murray in the gut.

There was a lot of gut to try and impress, but I'd compensated for every pastry Murray had absorbed in his career and he doubled over like he was on a spring, letting out a wet moan and suddenly becoming a dead weight hanging on me. I drove him forward and crashed his bulk into his partner, knocking them both to the ground. I sprang back and danced around to the left, aiming a solid kick at Ruiz's face.

This was fun. This was exercise. Ruiz's head snapped around and sent a spray of blood onto the greasy pavement, and I was eleven again, breaking Tommy Dukone's nose, feeling the cartilage break, the gummy gritty feel of it against my knuckles, the sad squeaking noise he made in the gutter. And every time I kicked him, I got a spray of blood and a squeak. I kicked Ruiz and I got a spray of blood and a squeak. I turned to see what I could make Murray do, Murray who probably thought we were fucking friends or something up until ten seconds ago. I took his head by the mustache and gave it a yank, slamming his skull back down onto the uneven pavement.

I kicked Ruiz and got a spurt of blood straight up into the air, beautiful in its way. I could feel every part of me working in concert, every system and vessel clicking in, smooth and strong. It was like dancing, floating, like I weighed nothing, like all my mass and fatigue was transferred to Ruiz with every kick.

Then Rachel's hand was on my shoulder, weighing me back down until my feet were back on the ground, and I was panting, my chest burning, my suit jacket sweated through, my hip sore and stiff. It had only been thirty seconds.

"Jesus," she hissed. "Come on, you fucking psychopath."

She sounded exactly like she had all those years ago, me saving her life, her horrified at the manner in which I was saving it. I wanted to laugh, but I swallowed it and followed her, feeling so good I actually stared at her ass as she hustled ahead of me. I settled my jacket onto my shoulders and felt good, young. We took a left at the mouth of the alley, next to the empty cruiser with its doors open like wings, and walked around the block, circling back around to The Ear on the other side of the street, ducking into a shadowed doorway, our collars popped up and our chins down in our chests. Three cruisers sat at crazy angles in the street, lights flashing, three uniformed cops standing around chatting. As we settled in, an ambulance pulled up to add its own shade of cherry to the lights, the EMTs scurrying out and around the back.

"*Psychopath*," she breathed suddenly, but it sounded affectionate, or so I told myself. I smiled, but then we both froze, watching as six cops, looking angry and sweaty, led Billy in handcuffs up the street towards the cruisers.

“Shit,” Rachel breathed.

James emerged from The Ear smoking a cigar. He looked the same: Flash, a beautiful dark green suit and a gold watch you could see from the fucking Moon. He glowed. He stood for a moment, watching as Billy was pushed into one of the cruisers. He scanned the street, his eyes moving right over us, and then flicked his smoke into the street, said something to the cops around him, and climbed into the back of another car. We watched the cops drive off, lights going dead, a small crowd of The Ear’s regulars emerging to gawk on the street.

“They can’t charge him,” Rachel whispered. “They can only hold him for twenty four hours.”

I shook my head. “Hell, Rache,” I said. “He’s the fucking Executioner. In twenty-four hours Billy’ll be dead.”

This was how it would happen. This is how it was done.

I sat in Pirelli's explaining it to Rachel, a cold cup of coffee in front of me, an uneaten hamburger between us. We'd shared not taking a bite. Instead of eating we'd smoked an entire pack of my cigarettes, the ashtray packed full of our butts and the air dense with the heavy blue smoke.

"He timed it," I said, staring down at the vaguely pink surface of our table. "He must have been watching us, and he called in the bulls just when it would be too late to be booked, so he won't go in the system until tomorrow morning. So only James and his team know Billy's on ice."

This was how it would happen. This is how it was done.

"During the dog watch, only a supervising sergeant on duty, James will just walk on in and flash his badge, and tell everyone Billy's a witness and he's got to take him upstate. No paperwork. It'll be weird, but there'll be nothing in the system, so no one's going to argue with a Detective. It's his badge, his career—if it was really James, he'd worry about that, about getting away with something, because the next morning there'll be an arrest report entered into the system and no criminal to go with it, and questions will be asked and six months, a year from now Detective Stanley James is charged with something after weeks and weeks of newspaper stories. But what does Alt James care about that? It's not *his* job." I swallowed bile. "Detective James is already dead."

Rachel was staring at me with red eyes, her arms crossed under her breasts, looking puffy and beautiful. She was maybe thirty now, I wasn't sure. Some lines had crept onto her face, a gray hair here and there. She was beautiful and always would be, but she'd had some hard years, some traffic. I wanted to reach over and take her hand, but didn't. She didn't think I could be gentle. She was probably right. I could be gentle if I concentrated, but we moved in different ways, felt in different ways, and the fucking universe got its cruel jollies by having me show up as her driver all those years ago.

"Please stop," she said, her voice hoarse, one leg bouncing under the table. "I know. I get it. Billy's a friend."

I nodded, but I didn't stop. "So he'll walk Billy right out of The Tombs in a few hours and no one will bat an eye, say a word, ask a question. Cops do it all the time. Take someone on a ride, beat the tar out of them, get information, revenge, whatever, then slip him back into his cell, and no one ever asks any questions. Everyone knows, but no one says anything, that's how it works—the cops are worse than the fucking mafia. Except Billy won't come back: James'll take him somewhere and he'll make a call. He'll make me an offer: Falken for Billy. He won't accept Falken's location because he doesn't trust me. He'll want me to bring Falken somewhere physically, make a trade."

Rachel was shaking her head. "You can't do that."

"I *can't*?" I felt sick and sludgy, but wanted another cigarette anyway, just to have something to do with my hands. "Billy's ... important to me."

The words were oversize, and I had trouble speaking, my throat

throbbing.

Rachel suddenly leaned forward. “He’ll kill Falken. Falken is—”

I pounded the table with my fist. “Not my friend. *Billy’s* my friend.”

We stared at each other. She didn’t blink. After a few seconds I leaned back against the vinyl. “All right. Then I have to go get Billy out.” I stretched and fished into my pocket for cash, tossing some on the table without looking at it. “Tonight. Before James fetches him.”

She nodded. “All right. Let’s go.”

We stared at each other again. I put my hands flat on the tabletop and took a deep breath. “You ever been in The Tombs?”

She shook her head. “I never did a bit. Not even overnight.”

I nodded. “We’ll have to hit it before the shift change, before James comes by for him, which means there’ll be more cops to deal with.” I paused and ran through my thoughts, getting them organized. “There’s a cop, a kid, in deep with Frank and I been letting her ride a little, doing her a favor because cops got credit to burn other folks don’t.” I waved a hand. “I don’t collect on Frank’s book any more, but she don’t know that. I can press her and she can get us in without notice.” I closed my eyes. “There’ll be at least eight or ten guards—this is the holding level, not the fucking booking office. We’ll go straight down. So say—a dozen. A dozen fucking armed cops.”

Her stare was steady and dry. “Guns?”

I shook my head.

She blinked, slow and languid. I loved her. I could watch her blink and be entertained. “So, we’re going to sweet-talk them into letting us walk out of there with him?”

“No one said you couldn’t shoot some people, you wanted.”

And there it was: She smiled.

.oOo.

The face that appeared between the door and the jamb was old and wrinkled, squinting despite the darkness. “Who the fuck,” he said with a thick accent, a complete declarative sentence, not a question. Then his shrunken pale face puffed out suddenly into a balloon of surprise, and he tried to slam the door. He moved in slow motion, though, and by the time he got his body behind it I’d had my foot in the gap for about six hours.

“Be friendly, Anto,” I advised as he grunted and huffed, trying to shut the door despite my foot. “This, by way of reference, is not friendly.”

“You trying to get me hurt?”

“Anto.”

“You fucked up, you trying to get everyone in your trouble?”

“Anto,” I repeated patiently.

He gave up with a snarl and backed away from the door, throwing up his hands and turning away. “Fine. Come in and get me killed. Frank—”

“I know,” I said, stepping into the hot, dim apartment foyer, followed by Rachel. “Frank put the black spot on me. So I’m a customer, and I’ve got cash.”

The old man was short and stocky, the body of an old dock worker under a bright white button down shirt and a pair of dark trousers held up by fraying leather suspenders. His white hair spurted from his pink scamp in thin, wispy shrubs, like clouds circling his skull. He paused just before the narrow entryway widened into his living room and cocked his head. “Cash, eh,” he said.

I turned my head and nodded at Rachel, who bit her lip and shut the door behind her. We followed the old man into his living room, a large green couch and matching chair facing a huge television that still flickered the news at us, the sound off. It was cozy, the tiny kitchen behind us and another short hall leading to the rest of the apartment—the bedroom, his office, the bathroom. A tidy place, excepting the office, no dust, no mess. No booze. I’d been in Anto’s apartment plenty of times before, picking up packages for Frank in my spare time.

Anto glanced at Rachel as she stepped around me and straightened up. “Forgive me,” he said suddenly, the words mushy. “Welcome to my home. My name is Anto Picinich.”

She smiled a little shyly. “It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Picinich. My name is Rachel Murray.”

He nodded, smiling, then looked at me and his smile fell away instantly. “Come,” he grunted. “I make tea in the kitchen for the young lady and you tell me why you have killed me.”

“No tea for me?” I asked as we followed his compact frame.

“Ha! You hear how he jokes about my execution. You watch, I will slip away and make a call and some men will come to take him off my hands, give me a reward.”

I shook my head at Rachel. Anto was always like this. You were forever waking him from a nap, or interrupting dinner, or getting him into trouble, or, if you were unfortunate enough to be black or Spanish of some persuasion, you were always stealing things from him.

The kitchen was so small Rachel had to work hard to keep from touching me as we tried to stay out of the old man's way. I gave him a minute, and as he filled an ancient kettle with tapwater I said “Anto, I need to buy some documents.”

“Running?” He said. “Frank has pushed your button, and you run. Passports? Driver's license? Birth Certificate? Very expensive. You have brought photos? If I must take your photos myself, it costs extra.” He shut off the water and turned towards the stove. “And when you are found living in Mexico under an assumed name and they bring your documents back to Mr. Frank McKenna, they will say, no one but Anto Picinich does such quality work, and I will be in trouble.”

“Not passports,” I said, ignoring his ranting and glancing at the time on the battery-powered clock on the wall. “Badges. Detective, NYPD. Manhattan precinct, preferably way north – 34th Precinct, maybe.” I held up my hand with fingers splayed. “Two. In an hour.”

The old man turned from the stove and looked at me, then at Rachel, then back at me. “Jesus,” he said. “How much cash did you *bring?*”

28.

Officer Carol Beering was thirty-six, divorced, lived in Queens with her three children, and had a father dying terribly slowly in a private hospital that bled her dry. She was six weeks behind on her payments and the terror in her face every time I mentioned her kids was wonderful. I made a call and asked for her, had a thirty-second conversation with her, and then Rachel and I were standing outside The Bernard B. Kerik Complex on White Street, trying to look like cops.

I was wearing sunglasses at night like a fucking asshole, and found it was kind of fun. Being an asshole. Being an asshole was also pretty much the sum total of my Cop Costume.

Officer Beering emerged from the front doors with wide, terrified eyes, seeing me and crossing over to us, looking in every direction as she walked. She was short and ridiculously big-chested, looking like she was going to topple over.

“Jesus Christ,” she hissed, pressing in close to us. “I can’t fucking believe this.”

I pushed my finger into her chest. “You’re standing here, so you already made your decision, so forget the theatrics.” I pulled my hand back and dialed it down a little. “All you have to do is escort us down to the holding cells. Then you go back to your desk and forget all about it.”

She studied me. “And the whole debt, it’s forgiven, right? Because this bullshit could get me—”

I nodded and waved a hand. “Forgiven. The whole thing.”

Rachel shook her head. “You can’t say that.”

I looked at her and grit my teeth. “Rache—”

She leaned in to my ear. “You *cannot* tell her that.”

I shut my eyes and took a deep breath. I ran numbers through my head. I’d never kept any written records—writing things down tended to swing around and bite you in the ass. When I opened my eyes, Officer Beering looked about ready to attack me.

“You’ll be seven weeks on the 23rd,” I said. “She’s right, I’m not associated with Frank McKenna any more. I can’t forgive the debt.” I sighed, holding up a hand. I looked at Rachel and stared at her as I spoke. “So what’s in it for you is cash, exactly what you owe plus all the outstanding juice on it. You get it tomorrow morning, and if you deliver it to Frank by the 23rd you’ll be free and clear.”

Rachel nodded, once. It was the most expensive nod I’d ever seen.

Beering looked at Rachel and then nodded. “Okay. How do I get it?”

“Delivered,” I said. “To your address. Eight o’clock. It’ll be cash. It’ll be exact. Don’t skim any, and don’t be late paying, or you’ll nail yourself another week of interest.”

She didn’t trust it, I could see, but it was too good a deal to just pass up, and she struggled for thirty seconds, biting her lip and muttering to herself a little in her throat. Finally, she nodded. “All right,” she said, suddenly decisive. “Follow me. Don’t stop. Don’t talk to anybody. I do the talking, I do the door opening. The minute you step off the elevator, I’m back up and I don’t hear from you any

more.”

I nodded. “That’s the plan.”

The Tombs was always filled with undercover cops, dropping off arrests, following up on investigations, hanging around for a free cup of coffee or visiting old associates. She took us around back where the buses and vans and cruisers pulled up to unload the penny-ante crooks, drunk tourists, and unlucky idiots from the various precincts. It was like a loading dock, a tall metal garage door, a slab of concrete, three fat cops in uniform drinking coffees and smoking cigarettes, eyeing us up and down as we approached and then dismissing us like they’d seen every kind of asshole in the world and weren’t impressed.

I was nervous. Cops fucking everywhere, and I realized I didn’t know any of the codes or the secret handshakes. I might say or do something to raise suspicions at any moment, so I elected to keep my mouth shut, my face blank.

We passed through a checkpoint where we were expected to disgorge our weapons into a bin for retrieval upon our exit; I made a dumb show of placing something in the box and the two cops working the gate didn’t even glance at me, and buzzed us through without another glance. It suddenly occurred to me to worry about meeting some cop who knew me by sight, and I started watching my feet as we walked, keeping my face down, then realized I’d never know how to get out again once Beering dumped us off and forced myself to look up with the blank expression on my face.

She led us down a dizzying sequence of concrete halls, through steel gates with flaking glossy paint rubbed down by thousands of sweating hands, down narrow, winding stairs and up narrow,

winding stairs. The place was a fucking maze and smelled uniformly like piss and fried chicken. I'd spent a few nights in the Tombs over the years sleeping on narrow wooden benches or disturbingly damp stone floors, being woken up six times to change cells and arraigned at four in the morning just to have the charges dismissed immediately, but I had no interior map of the place in my head. Finally we started descending down some fire stairs, the shaft hot and stuffy, all the heat of Manhattan pumped into it, and pushed open a dirty yellow steel door, holding it open.

"In here. He was in cell three last I checked, but he might have been moved. We gotta keep shuffling people as more come in, trying to keep the incompatibles apart. We good?"

She started to turn away but I grabbed her arm, squeezing just a little too tightly, an expert calibration. "How many cops?"

She blinked, wincing a little. "Four. Two at the desk, two on the block."

I let her go. I thought about asking her which one was fucking cell three, but let it slide, and she was gone, almost running back up the stairs, leaving us to bluff our way through the four guards on our own. I looked at Rachel, she nodded crisply at me, and we stepped into a narrow, dim corridor. I felt like the whole building was leaning in on me, the walls shifting in a few centimeters with each step, subtle and suffocating. At the desk, a young, good-looking cop in a neat, crisp uniform sat leaned back in his ancient green mental swivel chair, the cushioning all long gone, his hands laced behind his head as he chatted up his partner, a middle-aged woman who still looked good in her trousers and buttoned-down shirt. Rachel stepped forward and flashed the ID Anto had sold us. I didn't bring mine out,

and kept my head turned away from them. I wanted to seem uninterested, bored, and unconcerned with protocol.

“We need to talk to someone in cell 3,” she said. I studied the female cop's shoes. They looked comfortable, and my toes ached suddenly in my own pinching pair.

“Well, hello, darlin’,” the kid said, and I heard his chair squeak as he sat forward. I glanced up under my brow; he was leaning forward with her ID pinched between his thumb and forefinger, pulling it closer so he could copy her fictitious badge number into his log book. She hadn't let go, and they were linked by the little booklet. “You're too pretty to be a detective from fucking *Inwood*,” he said, smiling down at his desk.

I looked down at my hands and worked a nonexistent hangnail. Rachel had heard something along those lines every night I'd driven her around town, and it had always seemed vaguely threatening. Somehow this kid with a badge and a gun made it sound ridiculous.

“Born Staten Island,” she said, striking just the right tone: Not interested, but not nasty, either. Nothing to get his blood up, nothing to make him think he should come back there with us. “I think I finally got the accent chiseled off.”

He laughed and let go of her badge, glanced at me, and then nodded. “Go on back. Officer Hunt will escort you back and remove the prisoner to an interview room. Give a shout if you need anything.”

We followed the trim Officer Hunt down another narrow, grim corridor, the smell of piss and sweat baked into the walls, trapped under layers of glossy gray paint. We passed the first two holding

cells—the first filled with tired, unhappy-looking women of various ages and circumstances who watched us silently from their spots on the narrow wooden benches, the second filled with what looked like a single group of Hispanic men in nice casual clothes, looking like they'd been out to the clubs and gotten into a scrape. Cell 3 was packed with an assortment of assholes—you had your crackheads, scratching themselves and muttering, your run-of-the-mill mopes trying to get some sleep, your angry, drunk tourists in their Midwest-nice outfits looking dazed and horrified. And then The Bumble, watching us with clear, steady eyes as we approached. His face never wavered from the blank, sleepy expression I was used to, but he stood up slow and casual and edged towards the front of the cell as we came near. All the benches were filled with sleeping forms, and the floor was covered in bodies, people just laying down in the slimey dirt and passing out.

“That's him,” Rachel said, pointing. “We just need five minutes.”

Officer Hunt didn't say anything. She made a racket waking everyone up and ordering them away from the entrance to the cell, one hand on her taser as they sleepily complied, red eyes turned on us for one incurious moment before they shifted to another spot on the floor. The Bumble stood a few feet back as ordered, hands down at his side, and seemed to be impersonating a shrubbery. Officer hunt was formidable, and spun Billy around, slapping cuffs on him with a jerk of her wrists, and leading him back out into the hall.

She opened up a tiny interview room, just eight square feet with a small desk and two chairs, a camera mounted in the corner, and pushed Billy in and around to the back of the desk, where he obligingly dropped into the hardbacked metal chair and let her recuff

him directly to it. She breezed for the door, all efficiency in her snug trousers, and paused with one hand on the knob.

“Just leave ‘im here when you're done,” she said. “We'll collect him.”

The fucking lazy cops. You could move a circus through the place one monkey at a time and no one would look up from their newspapers to notice.

As the door shut, The Bumble jerked his arms and rolled his shoulders and tossed the cuffs onto the desk. “Fucking bitch doesn't know how to do it,” he said, grinning. “The assholes on the street, *they* knew. Almost lost my hands shit was so tight. I still got pins and needles.”

I smiled. “We got to move, Billy,” I said, peeling off my coat. “Strip.”

He blinked, shrugged, and started pulling off his shoes. The Bumble thought questions were a burden. I emptied my pockets onto the desk, placing the fake badge on top, and stripped down to my boxers, tossing The Bumble my stupid Detective costume.

“You're walking out of here with Rache,” I said, threading one leg into Billy's pants. They were warm and kind of damp, facts I studiously ignored.

He nodded, pulling on my shirt. “And you?”

I shrugged, buttoning up. “He can't kill me.”

The Bumble picked up the ID and examined it. “We don't look anything alike.”

I sat down behind the desk and picked up the cuffs, slipping them on and cuffing myself to the chair. "If anyone actually looks at it," I said, settling myself and wiggling my toes in Billy's dirty socks, "I'll eat it. Now go."

They looked at each other and then at me. Billy looked a little rumpled and wrong for the clothes, but when he slipped on the shades I thought he looked like every other douchebag undercover in the building, and no one was ever going to notice the difference. I looked at Rachel and our eyes met.

"Don't worry," I said. "He can't kill me, and it's not like he's going to beam me out of this room into an alternate universe. I might catch a charge, but I'll be out of here in a day, tops."

She looked away and then turned and opened the door. The Bumble waved at me with a grin, and followed her out into the hall.

I took a deep breath. The room smelled like coffee. I settled in to wait.

29.

When I woke up, I was still in the holding cell. My back ached nicely, and my arms had both gone to sleep under my own weight, numb and useless. As predicted, Officer Hunt hadn't even looked at me when she'd finally come back to retrieve me from the interview room; I was the right size and physical type, wearing the same clothes. Two detectives had gone in, and two had come out. The math didn't worry her.

I sat up, suddenly, realizing that James had never come for me. Or if he had I'd slept through it, and he'd left me to rot. I looked around, a shooting pain in my neck my souvenir from the night; the cops had about fifty people in the cell now, everyone just taking up whatever real estate they could find, everyone exhausted. The steel toilet and sink combo on the raised cement pad in the rear had overflowed at some point and the whole place smelled like other people's shit. But it was quiet, and cool, and I sat for a moment chewing over the fact that Alt James hadn't come for The Bumble, or had decided to leave me be if he had. Both possibilities were distressing.

Moving quietly, I stood up and stretched, wincing. I felt like everything had been removed over night and shoved back in at a slightly wrong angle, wires connected to my muscles pulling in weird ways. Limping a little, I worked my arms to try and get some feeling back in them and walked over to the front of the cell, where a payphone was just within reach. Keeping the greasy-feeling receiver a half inch from my ear, I dialed The Bumble's cell collect. When he answered, a wave of relief swept through me.

“I’m still here,” I said, looking over the wheezing forms. “What fucking time is it?”

He told me it was four in the morning. He was with Rachel, Rusch, and Falken at an all night diner in Queens, keeping their eyes open with the worst coffee he’d ever tasted.

I sensed someone standing near me, looming, their gravity pulling at me. I turned and found a skinny piece of tatted-up trash at my elbow, looking hollow-eyed and jittery; a fucking junkie. He hadn’t been in stir when I’d arrived, and I hadn’t heard him sneaking up on me. He had yellow-brown skin stretched taut over his bones, and his face was all brow and chin, his nose receding into shadow, his limp black hair hanging like curtains on either side of his face.

“Need the phone,” he mumbled.

I held up one hand towards his face. “If James doesn’t collect me,” I said, keeping half an eye on my new friend. “They’re just gonna arraign me as if I was you. I doubt he’s gonna show up to press the charge, so they’ll probably dismiss the case in about five seconds. I’ll let you know when I’m out. If you don’t hear from me in a couple of hours, make some fucking inquiries, okay?”

The Bumble said he would. The Junkie suddenly leaned forward.

“Didn’t ya hear me? I said—Frank McKenna says *hello*.”

I let the phone drop and stepped back quickly, letting his weak jab with the knife slice the air between us as I reached out and took hold of his Adam’s Apple, pinching it hard between my fingers. He staggered backwards, coughing and heaving, his head down in his chest. I snatched the phone back from the air.

“Billy? Yeah, OK. Someone's trying to kill me. I'll talk to you later.”

I hung up the phone and turned back to the skinny fuck. A couple of other people had woken up, but everyone just watched us sleepily, disinclined to worry about it.

The Junkie was still trying to remember how to breath, the knife held loosely in one hand. I stepped over, the wound in my side burning now as if in sentient sympathy, sized him up—weight, height, the extra drag the layer of dried sweat and dirt would cause—and gave him a jab to the ribs. He hadn't gotten his breath back, so he didn't make any noise as he smacked backwards into the bars of the cell. They didn't move or rattle for him. The knife popped out of his hand and I bent with a wince to pick it up.

It wasn't his, I figured. It was a good hunting knife with a sold wood handle, smooth to open and close, the blade sharp and oiled. Someone had cared for this knife until about three hours ago when they'd made the criminally neglectful decision to hand it over to Stinky Rodriguez here. I folded it up and slid it into my pocket, walking over to him. His eyes had bugged out of his head and his hands were wrapped around his own throat, his mouth open and pale tongue sticking out. He'd locked up and couldn't breathe. He'd pass out soon enough and wake up in a few hours feeling groggy, so I knelt down in front of him.

“Frank McKenna?” I said. He nodded, comical with his mouth open and his eyes wide, staring past me.

“Jesus, what's he doing, hiring shithheads like you. I'm fucking insulted.” I wagged a finger at him and leaned forward, holding my breath as I pushed my hands into his pockets, coming up empty. I

leaned back on the balls of my feet and studied him, looking at his pain points. He blinked dreamily at me, still struggling to force his seized lungs to work. I brought out the knife and unfolded it, holding it in my hand and studying this asshole, tracing with my eyes where I could cut that would produce the most pain, the most blood, without really hurting him, where I could cut deeper and leave a scar, how I could approach it to keep him alive for a long, long time.

After all, he'd tried to kill me.

Slowly, I folded the knife up and got to my feet. It didn't feel right. He hadn't come here for me personally; he'd been pushed into this cell by Frank fucking McKenna and told if he did this, he'd be forgiven something, something broken would be fixed. He'd have it hard enough when he got popped from the Tombs and had to explain me walking around.

I pushed the knife back into my pocket and turned around, feeling tight and sweaty, feverish.

.oOo.

Two hours later two new cops came in with a clipboard and shouted out fifteen names, including Billy's. We were herded into an elevator and then into another cell, where we sat for another forty minutes or so. Everyone just stared around, numb. Most of them had been arrested fifteen, twenty hours ago and had gone through hungover to angry to plain tired.

One by one we were called out. I was the sixth name called, and

shuffled between two cops up a flight of stairs to the courtroom, an uninspiring place with a dropped ceiling, cracked plaster walls, and a few rows of dirty-looking pews filled with relatives and friends and curious gawkers. I stood for a few minutes while the judge, a fat woman with flat dark hair on her head like someone had ironed it there, handled the case before mine, firing questions at the attorneys and the plaintiff. Then they were done and I was led to the big table, where a young man who looked like he'd borrowed his father's suit sat behind a huge pile of tan file folders, writing into a legal pad.

I stumbled a bit as I scanned the pews; all the way in the back, staring right at me, was James. He was huge compared to everyone else, wearing a blue pinstripe suit that looked like it had been painted onto him, the cut so perfect. He smiled a little and nodded his head.

"You have your own lawyer?" the kid asked as I sat down.

I shook my head, which was suddenly beating with an intense headache. "Nope," I managed to croak. I didn't know what James was up to, and it bothered me. After a second I twisted around to look back at him, but he was gone.

"My name's Simms, and I'll be representing you," the kid said, still scratching away at the pad. He finally looked up at me, his eyes red and tired, and I felt a rush of mellow feelings towards him this kid who was trying to defend five hundred morons from their own stupidity, for free. "In thirty seconds, tell me what happened."

I shrugged. "Don't sweat it, kid. They're dropping the charges."

He raised an eyebrow. "Humor me," he said with a faint smile.

I winked. "Watch."

He gave me The Stare for a few more seconds, then shrugged, clearly thinking he'd seen it all and if his own client was hostile, he couldn't be blamed. He decided to get caught up on some other casework, and we sat in silence for three minutes before the judge barked at us. Simms stood up and did his best, working from the file he had. There were paperwork problems, and the judge demanded that the arresting officer explain themselves, and was annoyed when none of them were present, and dismissed the case with a rap of her gavel. As the guards undid my cuffs, Simms smiled up at me.

"You cheated. You've been in this room before."

I laid a finger alongside my nose and winked again, and walked away, looking around for Alt James or Alt Rusch or anyone else who might be from another fucking universe, looking to kill Falken and make me a very poor man.

.oOo.

Outside, it was nearly dawn, everything getting bright, and James was leaning against a lamppost, smoking a small brown cigar and smiling.

"You were pretty cool in there," he said, pushing off from his post and falling in next to me as I walked. "All certain you were getting the boot."

I shrugged and kept my eyes open, made sure he was between me and the walls of the buildings, so I wouldn't get trapped. I watched the traffic, looking for a car that would swoop in and gobble me up.

“We should talk,” he said. “You could help me.”

I frowned, but kept my mouth shut. This was distraction. This was keeping my mind off what was happening around me. I was tensed and ready to move. We took a few steps in silence, and then a car *was* pulling over, a sleek big black SUV gleaming in the pre-dawn light. But it was coming up to the curb slowly, and when I stopped on the corner across from it nothing happened.

Alt James held a white business card out to me. “All right, playin' it cool, I understand,” he said, sounding reasonable, smiling at me. “Here's my cell. Call me any time, day or night, you decide you might want to help me out. I'll make it worth your while, no doubt.”

I reached out and took the card like I was in a dream. This motherfucker had left me for *eternity* in a dead world—a dead fucking *Hoboken, New Jersey*, of all fucking places—and now he was all smiles and handshakes. I looked down at the card; it was just a phone number in bold in the center of the card: **PE6-5000**.

I looked up, and the SUV was pulling away, leaving me standing on the corner. I was starving. Shaking myself, I stepped to the curb and raised my hand to hail a cab; one that had been sitting on the corner idling pulled out into the street and zipped over to me in a moment. I pulled open the back door and paused to stuff the card into my pocket and found the pocket empty. I quickly patted myself down and sighed—someone had picked me clean when I'd been sleeping in the cell. I had the Junkie's knife and Alt James's calling card, and the clothes on my back.

“Sorry, pal,” I said, slamming the door. “Guess I'm walking.”

There wasn't a pay phone left in the entire city. The city woke up as I walked, carts appearing on the corners serving up hot coffee and buns, donuts and bagels, trucks pulling up to the curb and tossing stacks of newspapers onto the sidewalks, people out cranking up the metal shutters on their businesses. I kept walking, thinking I'd find a phone and give The Bumble a call, get a pickup, but by the time I realized there wasn't such a thing as a pay phone in the city any more, I'd noticed a pair of professionals tailing me, two middle-aged guys in pretty good shape, dressed casually in sports jackets and corduroy pants, ignoring me pointedly but always about a block behind. Out of town, I thought, freelancers. Frank spending a little money now trying to get his revenge, save his good name.

The bits of business impressed me. Every time I paused to check on their progress, they were buying coffees or browsing fruit at a bodega, or studying newspapers intently through the thick glass of a vending machine, or waiting for a bus. Waiting for a fucking bus every six or seven blocks when I suddenly noticed my shoe was untied. They were good at it, making it look almost natural, and I never caught them looking at me, or even moving towards me. There was an art to tailing someone on foot, and these guys were maestros.

The streets were still pretty empty. I'd made it to the meat-packing district where no one even owned an alarm clock, and I realized with a chill that if someone wanted to choose a neighborhood to abduct you off the street, this one was perfect. I headed east towards Hudson, and figured if I could hook onto Eighth

Avenue I'd have plenty of people around me. For a few blocks as I cut up Greenwich Street I didn't see my new friends behind me, but when I got to the corner of Bank Street they were on Hudson already, somehow, fucking psychics. I squinted up into the brightening sky, looking for helicopters. It was creepy.

Lingering at a newsstand on thirteenth street, I took stock while amusing myself by watching their cycle of pantomimed business: Scanning magazine covers in a store window, buying packs of gum at another newsstand, having a conversation that involved a lot of hand gestures and very little looking in my direction. My blessings were refreshingly sparse: I had a knife they'd likely be surprised by, and I still had my clothes on. And I wasn't in deserted Alt Hoboken, being eaten one nip at a time. On the down side, I was tired and hungry and didn't have a friend left in the city, and I couldn't walk all the fucking way to Queens without getting into a spot where they'd have me against a wall. I had a quick, dirty vision of having my throat cut in a filthy restroom in some bar in Hell's Kitchen after an unsuccessful attempt to climb out the narrow transom window.

I remembered almost being run over by a car, as a kid. I remembered getting the Mumps and everyone telling me I almost died. There were worlds where that's what happened: I died. I wondered if now there was a world where I died exactly like that: Guttled like a fish in a bathroom somewhere. But I was already the only one of me left, Rusch had said. I was immortal.

Turning away from the newsstand, I looked uptown and immediately spotted another pair of shadows at the corner, two skinny guys in leather overcoats, one in a pink shirt whose cuffs ballooned out of the sleeves like flowers, his dark hair swept up in an

Elvis bouffant, the other wearing just a sweater, a gold chain popped out of the collar so we'd all know he was an earner. They didn't make any effort to hide from me, and when I looked over my shoulder my original pair of tails were walking briskly in my direction. If they got close enough to pen me in, I was going to start my day in the back of a fucking Econovan with plywood nailed over the windows, and end it in a dumpster in the Bronx.

I was a fucking genius. In the course of two weeks I'd acquired an immense debt, had my apartment trashed, and had my button pushed by Frank McKenna.

I spun, ready to give them a chase, and slammed into two more of my fans who'd crept up behind me. I staggered back, off balance, and they lunged forward, each taking hold of my coat as a beat-up white van with blacked-out windows swelled up from the prophetic visions I'd been having for about thirty seconds now, screeching to a halt at the curb, the side door sliding open on cue. There was nothing but dark inside it.

I spun and let them have the coat, sliding it off my arms as I bent down and threw myself backwards under their arms and onto the floor of the van. Turning my head, I found a leg near the door and with a yell I rolled over and took hold of it, pushing up the pant leg and biting down hard into the soft skin just above the heel, rusty blood pouring into my mouth. The owner of the foot howled above me and kicked at me. I let go as the pair on the sidewalk got back to the open van door. Reaching up, I grabbed hold of the third guy's belt and pulled myself up by it, pushing off from him and swimming up towards the front of the van, diving down just as someone took hold of my ankle and getting my hands on the gear shift between the front

seats, pulling it down towards me.

The van, engine running, lurched into slow motion.

I clawed my way up the back of the driver's seat and clapped my hands onto the driver's face, digging my fingers into his eyes. People were mass-produced; they all hurt the same. He freaked out and began twitching and dancing, one leg stiffing out and slamming down the gas pedal, sending the van into overdrive for three seconds. Then we crashed into a signpost at the crosswalk, the van skidding sideways like some invisible giant had pulled a string taut and humping up onto the sidewalk. I bounced off the back of the seat, biting my tongue badly, and landed on the hard plywood screwed down to the floor of the van's interior.

They were on me, two of them, then three. I kicked both legs like a madman, just using my body any way I could to land blows; my left foot smacked into something definitively and one set of hands on my right arm fell away. I swung my freed arm around and laced my fingers into someone's hair and yanked for all I was worth, getting a satisfying scream in return and finding myself held down by just one guy. I rolled into him and reached up, taking hold of his belt and pulling him down onto me with all my strength, then rolling again, getting on top of him.

I spun away, throwing myself at the square of brightening daylight and rolling out back onto the street, knocking my head, hard, on the pavement. A hum set in, a vibrating noiseless sound in my head that spread out to my arms and legs, making me weak and unsteady. I got to my feet in a shuffling stagger, my legs struggling to catch up with my center of gravity, and fell into telephone pole, splinters sinking into my palms and worming into my healing cuts as

they skidded across the rough surface, catching my weight.

Someone was shouting. I turned my head dreamily and saw two men standing in the street next to their cars. Both were short, stocky Middle-Eastern-looking men, their cars black sedans. Car Service guys, cheap suits and bad haircuts, but they didn't care for this sort of daylight abduction-cum-beating thing and were making their feelings known.

I turned around and leaned against the pole. There were three guys on the street moving towards me, and one in the driver's seat of the van, turning the ignition and trying to coax it into running again despite the caved-in grill. The previous driver's legs were visible on the street next to the van—pulled out and dumped by his fellows. I had to hand it to them: They were still trying to make this work. I was obviously a point of pride with Frank.

With shaking hands, I reached into my coat and pulled out the knife I'd taken from the kid in The Tombs. I unfolded it and held it in front of me, grinning, running my bleeding tongue over my teeth.

"Come on, then, you cunts," I said, breathing hard. "First one to me wins a prize."

I hurt, and it felt good to hurt. Every nick and scrape, every cut and broken piece of cartilage felt like it was sucking energy, pure solar energy, from the air and feeding it into me.

The trio hesitated for just a second, and then kept coming. They'd seen knives before, and they'd seen shaking, bleeding desperation before. They did the math and liked the sum. I braced myself against the pole and tried to size them up through my sizzling, blurry vision. Before they got within five feet of me, tires screeched behind me. The

three of them paused, uncertainty passing over their faces.

I turned and found a dented-up Cadillac, dark blue, with Taxi and Limo plates pointed the wrong way down Eighth, a foot or so behind me. The Bumble sat in the driver's seat. Rachel popped out of the back, holding the door open, almost casually pointing a small caliber pistol at my attackers.

"Come on, beautiful," she said. "Time to go."

“Where to?”

I stared out the passenger window and watched Manhattan get classier as we moved through midtown, reveling in the lush agony that had spread all over me. I felt like I’d torn every muscle in my body, and it had settled into me like a pleasant burn, keeping me warm and awake. I turned to look at The Bumble and took a deep breath; the car smelled funny, though I couldn’t place the smell. It reminded me of burned plastic, but the interior was pristine.

I twisted around and glanced at Rusch and Rachel in the backseat, the old lady apparently asleep, Rachel staring coolly back at me, a half smile on her lips. They all looked like they’d gotten a shower and a change of clothes.

“The first Junior’s Papaya you see,” I said, turning back around. “Just pull over. I’m fucking starving.”

Billy frowned. “What?”

I waved a hand at him and closed my eyes. “Hot dogs, Billy, hot dogs.”

After a moment of dark silence, Rachel said “We need to make sure Falken’s all right.”

I closed my eyes and imagined a world where Rachel didn’t worry about Falken. “He was okay when you decided to leave him *alone*, right? I mean, the situation was so calm and relaxed you didn’t even leave the old *lady* behind to back him up.”

“What?”

I held my bloody hand up behind my head. “Hot dogs, Billy. They came through with peanut butter sandwiches. No jelly, just peanut butter. Fucking jail.”

“I like Rudy’s,” he said after a moment, eyes locked on the road. Traffic was firming up around us, rush hour blooming.

“Oh, fuck *you*,” I groaned. “You like Rudy’s because the hot dogs are free, you cheap bastard. You don’t mind breathing in three or four decades of other people’s cigarettes while eating them?” I snorted. Rudy’s hot dogs were store brand bought in plastic packages at a supermarket, boiled endlessly and given away free to drunks. They tasted like dog food wrapped in plastic. I wanted that sizzling, greasy taste of real beef and spices, fresh buns, tart onions.

No one said anything to that, and I kept my eyes closed. I had almost dozed off when Rachel leaned forward and put her face between Billy and me.

“I really think we ought to check on Mr. Falken.”

“Just tell me where to go,” Billy said.

I sighed, something smart on the tip of my tongue, but then I paused. “What time is it?”

“Almost seven,” Rachel said after a moment.

I nodded, smiling, my lips cracking open, tiny slivers of pain shooting through them. “Chinatown,” I said. “Mott Street.”

Frank didn't run any gambling in Manhattan; the city had made too much of it legal enough for it to be worth his time. Small gangs worked neighborhood lotteries and after-hours card games, more or less running them straight just like the casinos and government did, taking their fair cream off the top and otherwise letting the odds go natural. Why not; you didn't have to sex the numbers to make gambling work for you. It was god's natural screw.

Frank *did* like a high-stakes game of old-fashioned poker. He didn't like Texas Hold'em—bellyached endlessly about how that's all anyone wanted to play any more. But put enough money on the table and you can find a bunch of guys willing to play you at anything, anywhere, and Frank's weird obsession with five-card stud was easy enough to cater to. A Dominican gang had a couple of basements rented under restaurants in Chinatown; one grand buy in, free cocktails, professional dealers, custom-made chips. Couple of mornings a week you could find Frank still playing as the sun rose, moving thousands of dollars back and forth between him and the house.

We pulled up outside Lee's Empire and I stepped out onto the sidewalk. The Bumble was in the street immediately, coming around the front. "Where is he?" he asked.

I waved him back towards the car. "Stay here," I said. "I'm just going to break Frank's balls a little. Bring it on home what we're doing. Make sure he sees it the way I want to, so he'll dance the moves I want." I smoothed down the grimy lapels of my jacket and smiled at the tall Indian man leaning casually in the doorway of the restaurant. I sensed Billy hesitating, and then fading back towards the car.

I spread my hands and grinned. “Henley,” I said. “How the fuck are you?”

He smiled, extending a hand without shifting the rest of his body. “Hello, mate—you’ve looked better.”

Henley had a round accent that was sort of English, sort of something else. Each word fell to the ground like it had been carved from ice, melting through the air and tinkling around you, little tinny echoes everywhere. He was young and rakish, well-dressed in last year’s suit and shoes shined to a mirrorlike finish. He was one of those rare people I’d inexplicably liked the moment we’d met and continued to like. He was Middle Eastern of some extraction I’d never bothered to clarify, and had perfect coffee-colored skin and a bush of thick, lush black hair that grew straight up and then did interesting things.

“I’m in the air,” I said.

“So I’ve heard. Your former boss is downstairs. I suppose I shouldn’t let you in.” He put his hand on his chin and rubbed, looking off into the distance. “Then again, no one has ordered me to keep you *out*.”

I grinned. “I’m supposed to be dead. I’m going to haunt the son of a bitch. Can I owe you the cover?”

He nodded. “Sure, darling, why not. They’re closing up shop down there anyway.” He pushed his hands back into his pockets and looked up the block. “Rumor is you’re a dead man anyway. Can’t stop a ghost.”

I walked into the dim restaurant, through the empty dining room

and kitchen and down the back stairs. As I descended I could hear the murmur of voices, and I could see a layer of bluish smoke literally hanging in the air around the halfway point of the staircase. The game room was a damp cellar, but it was done up in style, with a full bar at the far end of the room shining and glittering like a jewel, manned by a sleepy-looking black kid in a white dinner jacket. There were just six people aside from the barman: Frank, slumped at a green felt table with a feeble pile of chips spread out in front of him, his two bodyguards, seated at the next table over and trying hard to look attentive, two old men in suits sitting opposite Frank and sporting large piles of chips I assumed had once been his, and the floor manager, a big dark-skinned guy in a terrible light blue suit. He was bald and heavy-chested, like a guy who worked his arms constantly in the gym and did nothing else. He glanced at me as I entered and closed his eyes.

“We closin’,” he said, and shook his head a little, murmuring “Fucking faggot shouldna taken yo’ cover.”

“I just came to have a chat,” I said. Frank went noticeably still.

The fat manager sighed. “Then I gotta take yo’ weapons,” he said, pushing aside his jacket to show his holster off. “Even if it’s jus’ for a second.”

I held out the knife towards him; there was no point in being fancy. I wasn’t a killer, anyway, even if slitting Frank’s throat was kind of an appealing option. Fat Man looked at the knife, then at me from under his eyebrows, and finally plucked it from my hand like it was made of dead spiders, dropping it into a strongbox on the table beside him. He didn’t bother frisking me, and looked disgusted.

I circled around and took the seat next to Frank; his security detail rippled a bit, but he held up a hand and they both sat down again. I smiled at them. I didn't know them, but they didn't look like anything special.

"How you doing, Frank?" I said, still smiling at his bodyguards. "How's your cash flow?"

He didn't look at me; he stared down at his cards. His hands were shaking. "You got a lot of fucking balls, coming here like some asshole, to clown *me*."

I looked around at Frank's fellow players and winked. "What's the matter, Frank? You can't stand the competition?"

He slowly raised one hand and planted a finger on the green felt of the table and began tapping it slowly. "You had it good, kid. You earned, you were on your way up the ladder. Now you fucking steal from me. You work with that piece of shit cop. You *fucked* yourself up, kid. And now you come here and disrespect me?"

That pissed me off. Frank had fucked me over—needed my cash, maybe, or just didn't like me much, and the moment I had a hiccup collecting on someone he'd hung me out, tossed my apartment, and now he was rewriting history—but I reminded myself that I'd come in to bait Frank, to make sure he was primed to jump after me wherever I went. I leaned forward a little.

"I came here with a message: Back off, or you're gonna have more cops up your ass than you can handle. James will shut you *down*, Frank." I sat back and thought I'd done my bit, it was time to stop pushing my luck and get going. "Back off, and there's plenty of this city to go around."

I started to stand, but Frank twitched, one of his hairy hands diving to his shoulder and coming up with a small automatic, pointed right at me.

“You piece of shit!” Frank snarled, his face dangerously red. “You’re gonna fucking *steal* from *me*?”

“Hey!” The useless guy working security in his borrowed suit said mildly, startling a little. “You supposed to hand over your fucking guns.”

“Shut up,” Frank spat.

“Hey!” Useless Guy said, a little more loudly, like he was actually getting pissed. “You can’t fucking waste a guy in here. Faison’ll fucking *flip out*.”

“My guys’ll handle it. It’ll never touch Faison.” Frank said, his eyes on me. This wasn’t potbellied, lazy-looking Frank you couldn’t believe ran half of Manhattan’s numbers. This was Frank McKenna, suspect in thirteen unsolved homicides. This was Frank McKenna who, if you believed the rumors, had killed his stepbrother when they were nineteen years old because he’d gotten in his way. I forced myself to look back at him and kept still. I told myself I was immortal. Everyone said so.

The gun looked bigger every time I glanced at it.

Useless stepped forward, producing his own gun, a nickel-plated cannon. He was smart enough to just show it, and kept it pointed down at the floor for the moment. “No way, Frank. Not *here*. Take it outside.”

“I’ll make it up to Faison,” Frank said, breathing hard. “I’ll pay him

a tax.”

I promoted Useless as he rolled his shoulders—maybe a guy who’d earned his bones and a soft job because he’d done hard things. Because I suddenly very much believed he was willing to shoot Frank and Frank’s two slabs of muscle because those were his standing orders: Any trouble in Faison’s joint, put the fire out fast and heavy. “Sorry, Frank,” he said. “You want to waste someone in here, you talk to Faison, you get a permission slip. You got a permission slip?”

I took a deep breath. *Immortal*, I thought, and I stood up.

Frank twitched and pulled his trigger. There was a flash and a dozen sharp pinpricks of pain appeared over my face and neck, hot blooms. Frank was still sitting there, the gun in his hand smoking, fragmented, the hand itself a pulpy mess of blood. He just stared at it dumbly. My heart thudded in my chest as tiny rivulets of blood dripped off me—shrapnel, I realize, tiny fragments of Frank’s gun.

I stepped past him. I felt numb, like I was floating along—unreal. I’d stood up, with a gun two feet from my head, I’d stood up, and instead of being just another asshole mope killed while leading a dirty, criminal life, I was a Terminus. For the first time since I’d heard the word, I started to believe it.

Behind me, Frank started to scream, and then there were a collection of blurred, overlapping voices. I pushed myself up, floating on a humid cloud of numb air. When I passed Henley, still standing his post at the door, he didn’t look at me. I could just hear the shouts from below, but if I were Henley I wouldn’t want to know, either.

As I approached the car, The Bumble snapped his cell shut and turned to me expectantly, then blinked in surprise.

“What the—?”

I waved him off. Rachel leaned against the car with her hands in the tight pockets of her jeans, looking sleepy. Beautiful, warm, sleepy. The sort of thing you liked to wake up to. As I got close, I realized I was shaking. She squinted at me and then stepped forward.

“You okay?”

I shook my head. “I’m fine,” I said. I did feel good—alive, energized, healthy. But I was shaking like a lead in the wind and couldn’t stop myself.

She stepped up close to me and before I knew it she was pressed against me, her hands on my neck, her face close. The feel of her against me was electric, and a shock rippled through me, her hands burning on my skin. She smelled like soap.

“C’mon, baby,” she said quietly, looking down at my chest. I wanted to lean forward and smell her hair. “Let’s go check on Falken and get you cleaned up.”

My eyes stung like there was smoke, and I pushed away from her, the unfamiliar feel of her hands on me lingering like burns. I spun towards The Bumble. “Give me your cell,” I snapped.

He reached into his pocket. “Where we goin’, boss?” he said, tossing the phone at me. I snatched it from the air and turned away from them, looking back at Henley. As I dialed Rachel’s cell number, we stared at each for a moment, and then he shrugged and smiled a little, looking away. Enjoying himself.

Rachel’s phone didn’t ring anywhere near me. After a moment, Rachel answered.

I hesitated, a fuzzy feeling of shock and indecision settling over me like something heavy, hot, and wet. Behind me, I could hear steps coming up—Frank and his boys, guns reclaimed, and Frank so fucking enraged he might even pop me right on the sidewalk in full view of everyone. I looked at The Bumble, an eerie feeling of displacement rippling through me—he was standing right in front of me but it wasn't *him*, and even though I'd spent the last two weeks with my head in this situation I still felt dizzy thinking about it. If this wasn't Billy Bumbles, who the fuck *was* it? Doubles, brought by Alt James to trick me, sure, but that didn't feel like an answer. It felt like a story.

Angry voices pushed at me from behind, though. I could run, but my legs felt rubbery and blood dripped onto the sidewalk where I stood, a dozen tiny wounds sizzling nicely, making me look like a lunatic. I still didn't have a dime to my name, though I had a phone—I saw myself sprinting somewhere and hiding until Rachel and Billy—*my* Rachel and Billy—came to get me. Then I saw myself being shot to death in some booth in a dive bar, and leaped for the car.

"Let's go," I said without looking at either of them. "I think I may have irritated Frank a little."

Just as Alt Rachel slammed the door and Alt Billy put the car in gear, three loud bangs made us all jump. Alt Billy gunned the engine reflexively and the car darted out into traffic, smacking into a beat-up old SUV with jersey plates.

“Go!” I shouted, mashing my foot into the carpet, gunning my phantom accelerator. “Go fucking *go!*”

Alt Billy steered the Caddy smoothly around the SUV and its screaming driver and punched it into traffic, goosing it up to fifty in a matter of seconds, eating up blacktop. I twisted around to look through the back windshield and saw Frank and his guys standing just outside Lee’s Empire, getting small. At the red light he tapped the brakes once for luck and popped through the intersection, and made his first right. I sat back and felt my heart pound, thinking if nothing else these fucking dopplegangers knew what the fuck a gunshot sounded like.

.oOo.

“Pull over,” Rachel said from the back seat. “Come on back here, let me clean you up.”

“Don’t stop,” I said immediately. I sucked in air and tried to look relaxed. “Frank’s got the word out,” I said, plausibly enough. “He’s got guys in cars trying to spot us.” I thought of Alt Rachel’s hands on me again and shivered at the memory: I could still feel where she’d touched me, like she’d left a slime trail.

“Where we going?” Alt Billy said again. On to me, a little; he’d nonchalantly locked all the doors when he’d put the car in gear. Falken, I thought. Alt James had set me up here so I could lead them to Falken, thinking we were all friends, that I’d just lead them straight there. I knew I couldn’t string them along forever; I needed

to think of a place to take them where I could give them the slip, now that we'd shaken Frank for the moment. I'd done a pretty fucking good job of baiting Frank; I figured when he got the idea I'd be somewhere, he'd come running for some personal revenge, and that was exactly how I wanted him.

I pictured Alt Rachel in the back seat, the spitting image of my girl, but different. She was wearing makeup, for one, dark eye shadow and fake lashes, lip gloss—lip gloss, for fuck's sake. And her manner—hard edged but sexy, fake sexy. I'd met a lot of girls like Rachel back when I'd been driving them around, and seeing her like that was fucking depressing.

The Bumble was more or less the same. More beard. A scar under his right ear that shouldn't be there. A little more nervous in his manner than I was used to. But basically the same guy, it seemed. That was depressing, too, for some reason.

"Back to Queens," I said, trying to make it sound casual. "Take the 59th Street bridge, I think, this time of day."

Alt Billy nodded, steering smoothly. I settled back into my seat and hoped I looked sleepy and relaxed. I didn't want to talk to them, and I had the feeling they didn't want to talk to me, to try to guess what I was thinking, keep dancing. We floated along in uncomfortable silence, each one of us pretending it wasn't.

The silence became almost unbearable as I pretended to nap. I wanted to open my eyes and make sure we were going where I'd told them to go, that I wasn't going to find myself in another fucking deserted alternate world. I rode it out, my whole body tense as I strove to make it roll and pitch with the car like a disconnected

puppet, ignoring every shift and noise they made even as I imagined them slitting my throat. Every time the car stopped I slit my eyes and tried to gauge where we were, and when I thought we were paused right outside the toll booths on the bridge, I sat up and stretched, looking around. Traffic was just a little clogged; Alt Billy inched the car forward a few feet here and there, never coming to a complete stop.

I realized with a start that I'd never gotten my knife back from Mr. Useless back at the restaurant.

I wrote a eulogy to that knife in my head, a second or two of powerful regret. Then I leaned over and put both hands on Alt Billy's knee, mashing his foot down on the gas pedal.

The Caddy surged forward three feet and smacked into the bumper in front of us, a rusty old Nova from a previous age. Not hard enough to cause any real damage, but hard enough to jerk us in our seats and get the guy in front of us to pop out of his car, red in the face, arms in the air. I looked around, satisfied—unlike the streets of Manhattan, there was no place for Alt Billy to drive us, keep us moving, gain some speed. We were blocked in on all sides by the traffic.

“Pop the fucking lock,” I said, reasonably enough, I thought.

The Nova guy was outside Alt Billy's door, tapping on the window gently, but calling him a motherfucking asshole in a stern if controlled voice. Alt Billy ignored him, smiling at him in such a perfect imitation of The Bumble I almost wanted to hug him. “Ah, shit,” he said. “How long you knew?”

“Fuck you, and open the fucking door.”

He looked around, tapping his fingers on the wheel. Stalling for time. I clenched my teeth, pulled my arm in towards me, and with a gleeful expectation of pain I slammed my elbow into the passenger window, shattering it. My arm went numb, fuzzing and vibrating, and the Nova guy shut the hell up, taking a cautious step back from the car as he realized with a sudden pulse of brainpower that this maybe wasn't a routine fender bender.

I flipped myself around and pulled myself up and out of the car ungracefully, half expecting them to grab my feet. But we were in the middle of the highway, surrounded by people and cops just a short jog away. Grunting and twisting, I got my feet under me and staggered back from the car. I had a long way to go, but at least I was under my own power again. I looked around—the sun was up and the skies were clear, the air was crisp and smelled like gasoline and asphalt. Horns, a sad chorus, had started blaring around us as traffic choked up.

Before I could turn away, the back window slid down, and Alt Rachel leaned out a little, looking up at me.

“Too bad,” she said. “I woulda laid you. For free.”

33.

The door opened and I smiled at Rachel, hands in my pockets.

“Jesus,” she said, making a show of looking me up and down. “You were in jail or the sewers?”

I smiled, making no move to enter. I glanced past her into the room; The Bumble was sitting on one of the beds, reading a newspaper with the frown of a the barely literate, and Rusch sat at the greasy little table, smoking cigarettes and staring out the window. “Jail’s a lot less pleasant than you might think,” I said. “And I wasn’t sitting here, taking like fifteen showers a day.”

She made a face. “Well, at least you’re better at showering than *Billy*.”

This last in a mock whisper, with a comic face of horror. I laughed.

“Got a second?” I said, stepping aside and waiting. She blinked, cocked her head in an adorable way I liked, and then nodded, stepping out and closing the door behind her.

“Let’s get a coffee,” I suggested.

The World’s Tiniest Coffee Shop shared floorspace with the office in the motel; you turned around at the front desk and found yourself facing a strange kitchen-like area. In the mornings they set out a selection of continental fare—muffins, cereals, coffee urns. The urns were kept hot and filled all day and night, sluicing out a bitter, thick coffee that made me want ham sandwiches and cigarettes. There were two tiny little tables with squeaky plastic chairs in a space that

was *just* too small for four people to occupy comfortably. We trooped there in silence, made our complimentary coffees under the eyes of the desk attendant, a skinny black kid with a blooming Afro he spent a lot of time grooming, wearing a clip on tie that was almost, but not quite, the color of rust—and took them outside to watch the traffic worming its way into the Holland Tunnel.

“Wow,” she said, sipping her coffee, the wind pushing her hair around. “New Jersey really is awful.”

I shrugged. “This is just up here. It’s been poisoned by New York—this is where all the toxic runoff gathers. Down south its nice. Farms and shit.”

“Which you know because of your extensive travels.”

I didn’t look at her. I sipped my coffee, laden with fake milk and fake sugar, sweet but horrible, and tried to feel my way around her. I’d been out of physical touch for hours and hours—long enough for Alt James to ferry in a pair of ringers to play head games, long enough, maybe, for him to ferry in some insurance.

“Do you remember,” I said, watching a beautiful late-1960s Mustang convertible edge its way past us, the driver yelping on his cell phone, gesticulating wildly. “The first night I drove for you?”

She was quiet for a moment. “Now, why are you bringing that up?”

This was dangerous ground for us, I knew—and on top of that she didn’t like being reminded of how she’d made her way. But I needed something that no one else could know.

“You remember what happened.”

She nodded, not looking at me. "I remember."

"Tell me."

She kept her face turned away from me, standing there with her arms crossed, her coffee held by her shoulder, like she was hugging herself. For a second I thought she wasn't going to answer me. "You didn't say two words to me for the first hour, just drove and ignored me. I liked you. Most of the guys driving always chatted us up, like they were going to get a tip at the end of the night, keep us company. Then that guy in the hat got frisky and I hit the panic button. And you almost beat him to death. Literally almost *to death*." She finally turned a little to look at me. "And you fucking *enjoyed* it." Away again, studying the gentle slope of highway on-ramps off to our left. "You looked up at me, blood droplets all over your face, and you were grinning. I've tried to get that grin out of my head, but I can't. Sometimes even today I look at you in the right light, or rain'll be shadowed on your face from the car window, and I see that grin again."

I nodded. "I saved you," I said.

She nodded without looking at me. "Yes."

Sipping coffee, I took three precise steps away from her. "Rusch, Billy, and Falken—any of them out of your sight?"

"What?"

"Any of them out of your sight for an extended period of time? Any of them acting weird?"

She turned back to me. "Weird?" She shook her head. "No. Everyone's been in and out, but no one for very long—coffee runs,

cigarettes. We're fucking bored to death and Elias's terrified—he's trying to look tough but he jumps at every noise like James is going to appear in a puff of blue smoke and strangle him—but aside from *that* everyone seems normal. Why?"

I nodded. "Last night I got picked up by you and Billy. 'Cept it wasn't you and Billy, right? It was *another* you and Billy."

She stared at me for a second, then bit her lip and looked down at the ground. "Oh, shit."

I felt awkward, standing there, this huge black memory between us, like I'd pulled it, wriggling and alive, from a box and dropped it onto the ground, where it twitched and bled, begging for mercy. We'd spent the last few years burying it, long, slow work, and now here it was again. I remembered the look on *her* face as our eyes had met: A last glimpse of fading, electrifying admiration, affection, *joy*, crumbling and collapsing into a singularity of horror and disgust.

We walked back to the room in silence, that night hanging around us, heavy and immobilizing. When I'd delivered her to the first address of the evening, I'd taken her hand and helped out of the car. Her hand had been small and dry, the nails lacquered and softly pink. I could remember the feel of her hand in mine, the way her small fingers moved as she shifted her balance and got to her feet, the way they slipped out of mine. It was the last time I'd ever touched her casually, when I wasn't bleeding out from a knife wound.

I touched my abdomen where I'd been stabbed. I could feel the hard line of a scar, but felt nothing. It was like I'd been stabbed many years ago, in a *another* life.

When we stepped back into the room, everyone was standing and

staring at us like they'd just been talking about us—about me. The Bumble grinned, conveying a general satisfaction that I was alive and at liberty. Rusch pursed her lips at me, eyes swimming behind her thick glasses, liver-spotted hands washing each other nervously. Falken, looking bloated and pale, like a guy on day three of a Vegas bender who's just realizing he's going to have to win big if he's going home to the wife, just stared at me with his mouth slightly open. He was at the end of his endurance, I thought. He'd been running—between fucking *worlds*—for who knew how long, and this was the last bit of energy he had.

I smiled at The Bumble, I couldn't help it. "Make the call, Billy," I said. "Let's get this over with. I'm tired of being hunted like a dog."

He hesitated, then shrugged his eyebrows and fished for his cell phone. We all stood very still and quiet while his thick fingers worked the buttons, and watched him as he put the phone to his ear, looking around nervously.

"Give me Frank," he said, looking down at the greenish carpet. We all waited, making a dumb show of examining things, looking into dark corners, inspecting the housekeeping.

"Frank, Billy. Yeah. Yeah. Hey, fuck you."

I smiled down at my feet.

"Listen, I want out o' this. I got into—I made a mistake, Frank. Lemme buy my way. Pay a fine."

I turned and walked slowly over to the window. The traffic seemed unchanged, as if the same cars were still sitting there, props for our amusement.

“Yeah, okay, I get that. Sure, I—I mean, I don’t feel good about it, y’know. But yeah, okay, if I haveta I can give him up.”

I nodded. Frank would have one price for Billy: Me.

The Bumble grunted a few times, assenting to terms. “Right. Okay, Frank, we’ll be there. And me? I’m wiped clean, right?” He nodded to himself. “All right, Frank. Thanks.”

I heard his phone snap shut and turned. The Bumble looked sad, his sagging eyes heavy, his face blank. He looked down at his phone.

“Tonight. Ten-thirty, a warehouse Frank owns in Newark. I’m supposed to bring you out there for some reason, he’ll grab you up.”

I nodded. “Give me the address,” I said, reaching for the phone. I pulled out the card Alt James had given me on the street outside The Tombs and dialed the number. He picked it up on the second ring, the familiar, smooth voice.

“Yeah?”

“It’s me. You still want to hear from me?”

“Sure, why not? We can always do business. I’m a businessman, where I come from. Why not?”

I nodded, turning away from everyone and looking back out the window. “All right. Good. Let’s make a deal, then, okay? I’ve got what you want.”

He chuckled. “Oh yeah? Okay: You’ve got him. What you want in return?”

I shrugged. “You leave me and mine the fuck alone.”

There was a moment of silence. “That’s it? Shit, man, I don’t trust

fucking philanthropists.”

“The money I’m out. The debt. That has to be paid off, with interest, so I can level everything off.”

The chuckle again. “That’s more like it. I’ll even throw in a bonus. You take your lady out, show her a good time. How we do this?”

I gave him the address of the warehouse. “Ten thirty,” I said. “I’m going to lie to him, give him a story, so we won’t be coming in tied up and kicking, okay? Don’t spook him.”

“Sure, sure. I get it. Keep it smooth until the last minute. I’ll be there.”

The line went dead. I turned to face everyone, snapping the phone shut. They were watching me like I was supposed to do something dramatic. A smoke bomb, a flash of lightning, something. I grinned.

“Well, we’re all sold out.”

34.

The Bumble handed me the binoculars and leaned on his elbows, snapping gum in his mouth as he shifted his weight, leaning it all on the old yellow stone of the overpass, hunching down so that his head was even with my shoulders. The warehouse Frank had given us was a straight shot away, bathed in orangey streetlights, an empty parking lot out front, a single window glowing with yellow light on the second floor. A faded, splintered sign on the wall proclaimed it to be the home of Dawson Wood Treatments. I held the peepers loosely in my hands and proclaimed it to be the home of several million termites, cockroaches, and fat, lazy spiders.

Newark smelled like it was built on the dried up carcasses of their ancestors.

“You got the number for the motel, right?”

The Bumble snorted. “I got it, Boss. Don’t worry. I’ll check on ‘em.”

I opened my mouth, but as I did so two black vans appeared suddenly in the parking lot, moving smoothly to the center of our field of vision.

“Jesus,” I said, awed. “They’re fucking rape vans.”

They were cheap cargo vans, all the windows blacked out so that once you were inside no one would ever know. I couldn’t see, but I was certain the windshields were tinted, and there was probably some sort of soundproofing too. The kind of vehicle designed for snatching people off the street and swallowing them whole. Billy chuckled as the two vans came to a stop. Immediately all the doors

opened as if on one automatic cue, eight guys spilling out into the night. One, I could tell from his pot belly and sloped shoulders, was Frank. Chino and Mikey D I knew from the stiff way they moved, their bandages gleaming in the fake light. Frank Junior, of course, unfolded from the front seat next to his father and bobbed about, light and airy, smoking a cigarette with his hands in his pockets. Through the binoculars he looked bored.

They extracted several big green duffel bags from the vans and headed for the warehouse door, which opened mysteriously as they approached.

“Jesus,” I said again.

“They’re lookin’ to have a little fun with you, I’m thinking,” The Bumble said, then paused for a second. “Before killin’ you, I mean.”

This was The Bumble’s idea of a joke, I knew from bitter experience. I didn’t look at him, because I knew he’d have a sly, amused look on his face, holding in the mirth and wondering if I’d gotten the joke. Seeing it would make me want to hit him, so I kept my eyes on the warehouse.

As I watched, three more vehicles arrived, all black SUVs of some sort, with tinted windows. They screamed plain-clothes police, and the dozen or so men and one woman who emerged from them confirmed my suspicions: The guys were all in sloppy T-shirts and jeans, baseball caps, with handcuffs hanging from belt loops and neat little thirty-eights tucked into the back of their waistbands. The lone woman was short and had her brown hair pulled back into a pony tail that erupted from the back of her own baseball cap, and wore sneakers instead of boots. Alt James had a squad of dirty cops on his

payroll and I was looking at them all right now.

I didn't see James himself, though, and the cops all milled about around the SUVs like they were awaiting orders. I wondered if Frank's people would spot them from inside, if things were going to erupt a little too soon.

"Call the motel," I said. "Just make sure we're not missing something." I didn't like that he wasn't there, in sight. It made me jumpy.

The Bumble sighed and pulled the cell from his pocket. Flipping it open, he dialed the number, asked for our room, and waited a moment. "Me," he said. Another second. "Okay."

He snapped the phone shut. "They're fine."

We'd set up a simple code just in case: If everything was fine, whoever answered the phone would say they were *fine*. If there was anything wrong at all they couldn't talk about (say, Alt James standing there with a gun on them) they would say they were *okay*. It wouldn't sound weird to anyone else, but we'd know right away. I had a moment of terrible doubt that The Bumble could keep it all straight, but calmed myself down. If he couldn't keep a *two word* code straight, we had bigger problems.

I squinted back at the cops in the parking lot. They'd noticed the Rape Vans and were going over them, but showed no real initiative or ambition—they were waiting for James, I guessed, and since he'd told them to be there they didn't suspect anything out of the ordinary. That made me feel better; if they were waiting on James then I figured he was coming.

Tires on the road made Billy and me startle. We turned and watched a black SUV, part of the same litter as the ones down by the warehouse, roll slowly towards us, lights on, music dimly thumping out of the microscopic gaps between the steel. I watched, dumbfounded, as it rolled to a stop directly across from us, and just as I managed to think *how in fuck did he know we'd be up here* the driver's side window rolled down, revealing Alt James, his teeth white and straight.

"Hello, boys. I thought we were meeting down at the spot. I came up here looking to park, and here you are. That's fucking *fate*."

My brain felt like it was in slow motion, filled with syrup. I looked around, but there was no sign that anyone else had followed James here. I spun around, trusting Billy to keep an eye on James' doppelganger, and looked back down at the warehouse with the binoculars. Nothing had changed; the cops were still milling about, chatting, Frank and his people were still inside, apparently oblivious. I looked around again, but there was absolutely no sign that James had brought anyone else to the ambush.

Paranoid, I just watched as James opened his door and stepped out onto the cracked pavement of the overpass, lugging out a sizable briefcase as he did. He slammed the door behind him and then started walking towards us, his posture relaxed, still smiling.

"I don't see my boy anywhere. Maybe he's invited to the party down there?" He cocked his head. "You didn't maybe plan on me walking into a trap or anything right?" He stopped a few feet away from us and stood there, shaking his head, grinning. "Naw, you're a straight shooter, I can see that. That's why I said to myself, when I saw you in court, I said, just hand this man your card, Stanley, just

hand him your card and go have a good dinner, get some sleep, because he's gonna call you and make a deal." He set the briefcase down on the ground and pushed his big hands into his pockets, spreading his coat back enough to reveal a pair of shoulder holsters, each crowded with large guns. The cut of his suit was dramatic. I liked the way it moved on him, and wondered if the tailor lived here or ... somewhere else.

He made a show of looking around. "So, where's my boy? I brought your cash." He nudged the briefcase with his foot.

I looked at the briefcase and then back at James. I started to say *wait, you actually brought money?* and then stopped myself. I swallowed and shrugged, struggling to kick my brain back into gear.

"I didn't trust you," I said slowly. "So I thought I'd play it safe and see what you did."

James smiled. "Well, see, you ain't a fucking bitch. That's clear. Not going to wander in like some five-and-dime hood from Bayonne or some shit, thinking you're tough. I get it. So, here I am. I'm keeping my end of the deal. Where's my boy?"

I licked my lips. I was trying to see the angle. He wasn't possibly *really* just going to pay me and walk away. There was something I was missing. "Let me see the money," I finally said.

He laughed. "My *man*," he said, shaking his head and bending down to pick up the case. He flipped it over and popped the clasps, revealing neat stacks of crisp-looking bills. If it wasn't just cut-up newspaper with a single bill on top, it looked like plenty to cover Falken's debt and even leave me something left over as a reward or a finder's fee. I stared at it until he snapped the case shut again, trying

to figure this out. Alt James had gone to some extremes to get rid of me, and now he was polite as hell and offering to buy me off. Maybe it made sense. I reminded myself that I didn't know this man.

"All right," he said, setting the case down again, relaxed and completely confident that any attempt by The Bumble or me to take it from him by force would fail. "Where's my man? I drove all the way to *Newark* for this shit."

I hesitated one more second, luxuriating in it, and then shrugged. "Falken's not here," I said, figuring I'd see where he took us from that, play for time. In the end, I could lead him to the warehouse myself, hope my supposed immortality kept me alive.

He nodded, thrusting out his lower lip and looking around, as if considering things carefully. "Falken's not here," he said slowly, then snapped his eyes back to me, his face blank and hard. "Who the fuck," he said slowly, "*is Falken?*"

I blinked. Whatever Alt James' game was, I waved at it sadly as it sailed over my head. "The man you came here to kill," I said slowly. "He isn't here. He's—" I hesitated again, trying to think through the possibilities, and suddenly decided to take the risk. "He's down in the warehouse."

James nodded again. "Okay, Falken's in the warehouse. That's good news. But I don't give a shit. I ain't here to kill anyone named Falken." He pulled one of his guns from its holster slowly, smoothly. "So let's quit the bullshit, right? I'm here to become like *you*, to become a Terminus. And to do that, I need to kill Stanley fucking James."

35.

I knew The Second Coming of Alt James was going to ram the cops the moment he herded us into his sleek, stolen SUV with the heated seats and the individual television screens, and winked at me as he backed away to slam the door, gun trained on us. “Let’s see if we can’t draw my twin out from the shadows with a little rumpshaker, huh? Fasten those seatbelts, y’all,” he said, smiling.

“Shit,” The Bumble said, sounding happy. “He’s going to fucking ram them.”

We both sat there with ridiculous, inappropriate smiles on our faces. I wasn’t sure what The Bumble was thinking, but my heart was racing as I pictured it: Bodies in the air, sparks grinding between the vehicles, the thud and thump of the tires rolling over people, the chaos, the pain, the excitement of it. The glorious part of it was that I was a prisoner, powerless, and thus free from guilt.

The Second Coming of Alt James put the SUV into gear and it rolled soundlessly down off the overpass. With a little goose of the gas pedal he hopped the curb and cut over a small island of sidewalk, popping out onto the main approach to the warehouse parking lot. The lot was surrounded by a chain link fence sprouting from a low concrete wall, but the entrance was a double gate thrown wide open. Headlights off, he moved at a crawl towards the huge structure ahead. We could see the cops clearly enough; there were evenly spaced streetlamps sprouting from the blacktop every twenty feet or so, giving off an eerie orange glow. The cops, still milling about like they owned the fucking world, secure that their badges and guns

would protect them from anything, didn't notice us. For a few seconds we glided along in silence, wrapped in darkness. The Second Coming held his automatic up in the air so The Bumble and I could see it, one hand casually on the steering wheel, his own seatbelt cinched tight over his wide chest.

When we were half a long block away, he hit the gas, and we all jerked back into our seats.

It was eerie, but no one noticed us until right before we slammed into them. At the last second there was this moment of stillness, shock, paralysis, where all of them turned almost as one and stared into the grill of the truck. A surge of adrenaline swept through me, carrying away all the pain and aches, all the weariness, filling me with electricity and making my mouth dry up like a desert. Then we crashed into a knot of people as the night erupted into screams, and time snapped back to normal speed, everything in flashes. The SUV clipped the butt end of one of the Rape Vans and we spun, moving sideways and scraping over three or four bodies before smacking into the side of the warehouse, my teeth leaping in my mouth.

The Second Coming was out of the SUV before I could even orient myself, popping out with guns in both hands. I watched him feeling something akin to awe as he moved low and easy, throwing shots. With one hand he almost casually put bullets into the prone bodies littered around the truck, while with the other he tracked the surviving cops as they ran for cover behind the vans and trucks, pulling their own weapons and shouting. He put down one more with an impossible shot before he'd chased them all behind cover.

The Bumble started to move, but I put my hand on his shoulder. "Wait. No one but James knows we're in here, and this is the whole

damn point: Let them kill each other.”

He sagged back into the leather, grimacing. “Yeah,” he said, and turned his head to watch out the passenger window.

Almost casually, The Second Coming moved behind one of the vans between us and three cops who’d gathered behind one of their own SUVs. Two more were using the other van as cover. I counted five of them down, most likely all dead, and wondered how fucking lucky we were as a universe to have gotten *my* Stanley James, who hadn’t been above a shakedown and been kind of a pain in the ass, but generally a good enough cop, a good enough person. Reasonable. Not a bloodthirsty killer like every other Stanley James I’d met so far.

The Second Coming was moving, then, gingerly backing his way down the length of the van, popping out from behind it on the other end, completely exposed to the five cops crouching ten feet away. He poured fire at them, hitting two of them almost instantly and flushing the other three up and out, firing back as they scrambled to the next truck for new cover, their shots wild. The Second Coming took his time, following them to their previous spot.

Suddenly, some distance away, there was a second or two of a loud, eardrum searing noise, like static from the world’s largest radio. It there and gone, making my whole body tense up. When I focused on the parking lot again, James and the cops didn’t seem to have moved, but Frank’s men were pouring out of the warehouse, shouting, moving behind the SUV we were in for cover. Mentally I set my stopwatch for police involvement at about five minutes, with all the noise going on. Although it was *Newark*. That was a variable I couldn’t handicap.

Frank's guys didn't know what to do, at first. They didn't know who any of these other assholes were. Just as Frank himself emerged from the warehouse, smoking a cigarette and holding his bandaged hand up like a talisman in front of him, his men spotted The Second Coming. With shouts and yells they started firing at the SUV he was hiding behind. The cops—who I was actually starting to feel sorry for—started firing their weapons more or less in every direction at once, displaying the sort of training and calm I'd come to expect from city police. I had to admit, in all fairness, that your Captain and chief dirty cop suddenly ramming into you with a truck and shooting at you was probably unsettling, and probably hadn't been covered at the fucking academy.

Bullets slapped into our SUV, surprisingly loud, sending a shuddering vibration through the whole chassis that made The Bumble and me sink down in our seats, cursing and jerking. Frank's men as one unit decamped for the Van The Second Coming had recently been using as cover. Peeking up over the dashboard I could see Frank just standing there smoking, like nothing in the world could ever hurt him.

I leaned over and eased the lock of my door open. "Stay here," I said to Billy. Without waiting for a response, I pushed the door open just enough for me to slip out onto the pavement, silently pushing it closed behind me. Not ten feet away, Frank stood watching, red in the face and puffing away at his cigarette. It was amazing, but no one was paying any attention to him. The idea that I'd gotten everyone together just so Frank could miraculously survive was a sudden and heavy anxiety, and I thought if there was ever a time to get over my phobia of guns, this was it. All or nothing.

I dropped to the greasy, gritty pavement and pushed myself under the SUV. On the other side lay one of the dead cops, a big guy with a shaved head burned red and angry from the sun, peeling in spots, his gingerish hair in a monk's halo just over his ears. His gun was still holstered in the small of his back, and I crawled under the car towards him, reaching out gingerly as shots banged out just a few feet away, making me cringe and wince each time.

Another drawn-out second of ear-bleeding static filled the air just as I managed to unsnap the holster and take hold of the gun, a snub-nosed revolver of some sort. By the time I'd rolled back towards the other side of the car, the noise had stopped again. I didn't pause to think on it. I had a few moments while everyone was busy, while Frank was distracted, in which to enact a little insurance.

I crawled out from under the SUV and pushed up onto my feet. Moving slowly, I crept over to where Frank stood, holding the heavy gun down by my leg and angled away from me so if it went off I wouldn't shoot myself. I'd fired a few guns in my time, when circumstances had forced me to, but they always seemed to vibrate in my hand like an unexploded bomb, waiting for one more little jerk or tremor to set them off. My heart was beating fast and my hands shook a little as I angled my way back towards the warehouse wall in shadows created by the amber streetlights I got myself lined up directly behind Frank's pudgy, slump-shouldered form. Reminding myself not to get in too close where he could grab at me—Frank had gotten fat, but he was a scrapper, and knew how to fight—I crept forward until I was close enough to reach out and push the gun into the small of his back.

"Hi, Frank."

I felt like an asshole. He went stiff and jerked his arms a little, then caught himself and went still, not turning around to look at me. I felt the moment draining away even as I arrived. I should have just shot him, I knew it. I told myself to just do it, to not stretch this out and let him think. But I couldn't. I found myself frozen. I'd never just killed a man like that, cold, mechanical. I'd had a few moments where I knew I *could* have killed someone, but I'd warmed up to it, the violence boiling up and over and carrying me along until The Bumble or someone pulled me away, dragging me off. This was clinical and I found I didn't have the belly for it.

"Jesus," Frank said loudly over the roar of gunshots, turning his head finally to get me into his peripheral vision. In front of him, The Second Coming dashed behind the other rape van, dropping clips from his guns and crouching low, hunted by a dozen people but still looking like *he* was in charge. "You're fucking supernatural, you know that?"

"Shut up," I said. Ridiculous. I'd *started* the fucking conversation. Sweat rolled into my eyes and I thought I should just start beating him, get the blood flowing, and then I'd be able to do it. But I wasn't angry. I didn't feel angry and strong, untouchable like I usually did when I got into the mood to hurt someone. I felt stupid and hollow.

As I watched The Second Coming, the original Alt James walked into my vision behind him, like my vision had blurred.

He was wearing full police riot gear: SWAT uniform, body armor, helmet with visor up. A semiautomatic rifle was slung over one shoulder, and he held an automatic in one hand. He didn't hesitate or say anything; he walked up behind The Second Coming, put the auto to his head, and pulled the trigger. There was a brief geyser of red

jetting from The Second Coming's forehead, and then he crumpled to the ground. I stared in dumb shock; it was like one Stanley James had been plucked away, rubbed out of the picture, replaced by a new version.

I heard something behind me, and then the barrel of a gun was pressed into *my* back.

"Drop it, *asshole*," Chino breathed into my ear, his breath smelling like cigarettes and hot dogs. "I don' wanna have to shoot you, and miss out on knockin' your teeth out, *entienda?*"

Alt James looked over at us, and smiled, pointing his gun at Frank carefully. All the noise had suddenly stopped.

"What do you say, Mr. McKenna?" he shouted cheerfully. "How about a truce?"

Alt James noticed me looking at him and winked, making my leg twitch with the desire to kick him in the teeth. I imagined there might be an alternate universe where that would be possible, where I might take someone's magic car through the noisiest invisible tunnel in the universe and track down some unsuspecting version of James and just assault him, but it wasn't *this* universe. In this universe I was unarmed and standing next to The Bumble, and we were surrounded by Frank's men on one side and the remnants of James' cops on the other, guns fucking everywhere, dead bodies still staring in shock, chaos and open wounds.

I wasn't entirely clear how Alt James had gotten his band of dirty cops to trust him, although having a dead body of his twin probably helped a little. There were only three of them left, led by the now-grimy and disheveled woman, short, a deep cut on her forehead and strands of dull brown hair hanging in her face. She watched everything from under her pale eyebrows, head tilted down, and looked fucking crazy, like she was going to go home and arrest some graffiti kids in her neighborhood and beat the living shit out of them just to relieve some stress.

It had started to rain, an annoying misty drizzle that you could ignore until you realized you weighed an extra fifty pounds because of the water your clothes had absorbed. Everyone else stood like they had more important things to worry about, like a fresh gunfight breaking out and everyone getting killed, so it didn't seem smart to complain. I just stood there with the rain making me blink, getting in

under my collar and dripping down my back. Everything had gone to fucking hell, but there was always hope things would go to hell again and all my problems would end up killing each other as planned.

About two blocks away, a car turned the corner, headlights washing over us. Everyone stiffened, but Alt James stepped forward immediately, hands up in front of him.

“These are my associates, is all. Mr. McKenna, let’s stay calm and do some business.”

Frank raised a hand and his crew did absolutely nothing, but that at least included not shooting at me, so I was pretty happy with the result. Everyone kept telling me I was immortal, but I had little desire to find out by direct experiment.

“All right,” Frank said laconically, smiling a little.

We waited in silence as the car pulled into the lot, rolled to a halt, and killed its lights. Everyone twitched a little when the doors popped open, but no one moved as Alt Rusch and the young red haired woman I’d met in the back of a car outside the Templar emerged, looking clean and pressed. They didn’t approach right away, just hung back.

“Go to this truck,” Alt James shouted over his shoulder, keeping his smile on Frank, “and bring me that suitcase.”

His version of Rusch glanced at the girl, shrugged, and set off, unlit cigarette dangling from her mouth. She looked thinner and more wasted than my Rusch, her skin looser, more brown spots on her. She opened the passenger door of The Second Coming’s SUV and rummaged around, finally emerging with his suitcase full of

cash, holding it with both hands and dropping it at Alt James' feet like a lead weight. He grinned and glanced down at it.

"All right, Mr. McKenna, let's make a deal. I got a lot of money in this case you can have. It'll clear up your losses, and make up for your trouble to boot."

Frank's eyes flicked down to the suitcase and stayed there. "I'm curious what a bunch of civil servants thinks is a lot of money."

James nodded and kicked the suitcase, sliding it forcefully into Alt Rusch's legs. She yelped and jumped; all of the assembled goons snickered a little, eliciting a venomous glare from Alt Rusch I tried, and failed, to imagine on my own version of the woman. *This* version of Rusch would slit your throat for gas money, I thought.

The old woman knelt down and snapped the case open. The bills were still neatly stacked inside. Frank stared at it for a second too long, and then shrugged, looking back up at James.

"All right," he said with the same careless drawl. "What would you want for that kind of money?"

Alt James gestured at Alt Rusch without looking at her, and she closed the case again and stood up to kick it back over to him. He was an impressive sight, tall and armored up, a big chrome-plated auto tucked in his waistband, the god of fucking war. I saw the cops behind them exchanging some looks—not liking that James was giving away that much cash, not liking that they didn't know what the fuck was going on, not liking any of this shit.

"Wait a fucking second," the woman said, stepping around to cut between Frank and Alt James. "Wait a fucking *second*. Captain, you

got *dead cops* back there. Right behind you. That your fucking *twin* killed. And you're just conducting business as fucking usual with this piece of trash?"

She was livid, and a small fire of hope lit inside me. Maybe this was going to go off the rails and get bloody again after all.

Alt James didn't look at her. "Walker, we can discuss this later, okay? You all came into this knowing there was risk. You all are gonna retire young riding on my back. You got complaints, go talk to Internal Affairs, see where it gets you."

She shook her head. "This shit—"

"Fucking *cops*," Alt James snapped. "You're all fucking the same *everywhere*. Think you can take the money and still set the tone. But the money *sets* the fucking tone. You want to take a vote and walk on out, go on ahead, but be fucking quiet about it, huh?"

She didn't seem inclined to move. "This isn't what we signed up for. This isn't what *you* used to be all about. Now, we—"

With a fast, almost casual move of his arm, Alt James drew the shiny chrome automatic from his waistband, pushed it against her shoulder, and pulled the trigger. The noise was terrible, like a sonic boom, and her shoulder exploded, red pulp sprouting like a geyser. She seemed to think about it for a moment and then spin around from the impact, her other hand fluttering up to clamp down on the wound as she stumbled and staggered, falling over her own feet and landing with a wail of pain on the floor.

Behind him, the other cops all jerked as one. He pointed the gun at the sky and pulled the trigger again without turning around. "Any

of you feel like you gotta express your displeasure, this ain't the time or place." He waited a beat, then lowered the gun and shrugged a little at Frank, rolling his eyes and grinning.

"What I want," he said evenly, like he hadn't just shot a cop in front of witnesses, "is your boy. Falken. Bodily." He shrugged. "Alive or dead, don't matter."

Frank glanced at the cop on the ground, being helped by two of the burly, bald cops in jeans and tight T-shirts, both of whom looked like they'd just lost their cherry on shitting their pants. I was enjoying the show, seeing these assholes who strutted around like their badges made them untouchable feeling a little heat. I liked watching them squirm.

"All right," Frank said, looking back at Alt James. I could almost see the thought bubble above his head: He thought this was the easiest money he'd ever make. "That works for me. One little problem, though, Captain: I don't have Falken. I gave up on that shithead a long time ago."

A feeling of hot frustration started to burn in me. All this, and both these motherfuckers were going to walk away, and I'd likely end up with a bullet in my head for my trouble.

"These two know where he is," James said, cheerful. He looked around. "Looks to me like you were planning on beating some shit out of them tonight anyway. Why not see if that shakes loose? I can wait. I'm a patient man."

Frank looked at us, his face still. His Thinking Face, I knew. He chewed on something for a few seconds, and then smiled. "Chino," he said. "Billy Bumble, bring 'im over here, okay?"

I tensed up. Chino, daydreaming, took a moment to get his fat ass in motion, and came up to Billy gun in hand, which was bright. Under normal laboratory conditions, The Bumble could bend Chino into interesting shapes and use him as furniture. The gun evened things out. Billy gave him a shrug as he approached, and stepped over to Frank without assistance, his jowly face blank, his eyes sleepy. The Bumble wasn't going to let some fat asshole like Chino manhandle him.

Frank nodded at The Bumble. "How you doin', Billy?"

The Bumble shrugged, massive shoulders rolling. Frank nodded cheerfully. "Chino, give me your piece."

Chino handed it over. Frank made a show of weighing it in his hand for a moment, then raised his arm, putting his shiny automatic against Billy's forehead. Everything got quiet; even the cops stopped their cursing and muttering to stare. I stiffened and started to take a step forward, but Chino and the rest of Frank's mutts turned and covered me, almost casually. Chino even had the balls to wag a finger at me, shaking his head with a grin.

"Billy," Frank said, sounding almost tired, his injured hand cradled up by his chest, his belly straining the faith of his shirt buttons. "I'm fuckin' tired of this, and I hate bein' in fucking *Newark*, so tell me where the fuck you got Falken stashed and then we all go home."

The Bumble's eyes had opened slightly when Frank had put the gun against his head, but now were their usual sleepy slits. He shrugged. "Can't do that, Frank."

I put my eyes on Frank and kept them there, trying to judge his

body language. I couldn't believe he would fucking shoot Billy Bumbles like that, but then Billy had been cast out; he wasn't part of Frank's crew any more, so it wasn't against the rules or any bullshit like that. And then it occurred to me that this was a process: He'd ask Billy, and if Billy refused to answer he'd shoot Billy in the head, and then he'd *ask* me, and Billy would be proof that he was serious. He'd chosen Billy because he thought Billy was the tougher one between us. And he was probably right.

My heart started pounding.

Frank nodded, and shoved the barrel of the gun hard against Billy's forehead, making the big man wince. "Sure you can. One last chance, or I fucking blow the top of your head off."

Billy shrugged again, but didn't bother answering. Frank's whole body kind of sagged, a defeated sort of movement, and I realized immediately he was going to do it.

I took a deep breath, told myself I was immortal, and launched myself at Frank.

Frank went down easy, collapsing under me like he was made of papier-mâché with an undignified squawk of shock. The gun went off between us, and then it was just gunshots in the air, a drumline of them like bombs going off, punctuated by shouts, like dogs barking. Frank was stronger than a lifetime of rare steaks and bourbon would have led you to believe, struggling beneath me, trying to bring the gun to bear on me again. I had no leverage; with both hands on his wrist I put my weight into play to hold his arm down. After a few seconds of this he reached around and took hold of my hair, yanking back suddenly and viciously, tearing a clump out by the root and jerking my head back painfully.

Then The Bumble crashed into my field of vision, leaping onto Frank's chest with surprising grace and speed, bending over him, big arms working. Frank started kicking and twitching beneath us like a madman, the gun in his hand leaping like it had a brain of its own, wriggling and twisting in my hands while the noise level grew and grew around us.

Then, with a sudden heave, The Bumble's shoulders rolled and Frank jerked beneath us, then fell still. His arm went limp under my hands and the gun slipped from his fingers.

I stared down at it, panting, sweat pouring into my eyes. I looked up at The Bumble's back; he remained turned away from me, shoulders heaving as he sucked in breath. I'd always known Billy had come up the ranks, just like any other big guy with no skills except his muscles and a willingness to take orders, but I'd never really thought

about what that meant.

As I stared, Billy whirled and took hold of my arm, scooping up Frank's gun and dragging me behind one of the Rape Vans, bullets digging up the pavement at our feet as we scrambled behind it. We leaned against the van and struggled for breath, and suddenly The Bumble was laughing. We looked at each other, and I found myself smiling back into his red, boulder-like face.

After a second, his eyes started following something over my shoulder, and the smile faded. Silently, he pointed.

I followed his gaze and saw Alt James, suitcase in hand and Alt Rusch a few steps behind, struggling to keep up with the big man's long strides. They were just running away. The cops and Frank's boys were spitting bullets at each other, popping up from behind cover in a weird little ballet, oblivious, and Alt James was just walking away. I suddenly remembered the strange, distant noises I'd heard right before Alt James had shown up.

"Motherfucker," I breathed. He was using an alternate world to teleport around. Someplace like where he'd tried to leave me, empty and abandoned, with no traffic or cops to slow him down, but with the same infrastructure and layout. Zap himself over there, drive wherever he wanted to go, then zap himself back. Avoid obstacles, get the drop on people—he was going to disappear into the night like a ghost and show up again on my doorstep, grinning, implacable.

I looked up and grabbed the door handle of the van, hauling it open and throwing myself inside, scrambling over broken glass to the driver's side. The keys hung in the ignition; as I turned them, the passenger door slammed and I found The Bumble sitting there,

carefully buckling his seatbelt. I had a moment of affection for Billy: He smelled like onions and he thought hot dogs were food, and maybe he'd started off life as Frank's eyes and ears on me, but fuck if he hadn't turned out to be my best friend in the whole fucking *universe*.

The van started up, smooth and powerful. Trust criminals to always have tip-top vehicles. A spray of bullets ventilated the side door as I put it into gear, making me jump. I slammed my foot down on the gas and we lurched into a skidding, screeching motion, clipping one of the cops' SUVs as we staggered out of the OK Corral, another spray of bullets trailing us and shattering my driver's side mirror. I reminded myself that even if I was, in fact, some sort of weird immortal, Billy wasn't, and I didn't want to end our freshly minted love affair by getting him shot to death in Newark.

I eased up on the gas and circled the van around, searching for Alt James. I spotted him on the edge of the parking lot, a hundred feet away, getting into his Cadillac.

"Hang on," I said, and spun the wheel, goosing the van into a tight turn until I had the Caddy in my sights, then mashing the pedal down and fishtailing for a few seconds, the van leaping forward just as I saw Alt James and Rusch slamming their doors, brake lights popping on. The van felt like a coffin rattling towards the incinerator as the speedometer inched past forty, fifty, fifty-five, but I kept the gas on and clench the wheel until my knuckles hurt.

The Caddy leaped into life and immediately peeled out, turning sharply left and accelerating. I started to turn the van and cursed, feeling it lose its grip, pulling my leg up and tapping the brakes a little, easing it into a wider turn and loosing seconds on the deal. The

van ran like a top but it was a fucking box on wheels and didn't want to do anything strenuous. By the time I had the Caddy's brake lights in view again he'd gained twenty or thirty feet on me, and at sixty miles per hour I wasn't gaining on him. We were both, however, gaining on the fencing around the parking lot. We'd crash the chain fence easy enough, but I tried to imagine the van's suspension surviving the low concrete wall at sixty miles and hour and I couldn't do it.

The streetlamps flashed by like silver trees, the noise of their passing roaring in through the shattered door windows.

Suddenly I could see an arm poking out of the passenger side of the Cadillac, quickly retrieved. As I watched, the suitcase of cash was thrust out and held for a moment out the car window.

"Ah, shit," The Bumble said.

The suitcase flew back towards us, and I jerked the wheel but too late, the windshield disintegrating into a mist of shards. The suitcase clipped my shoulder and tumbled into the empty rear of the van as we went into a spin, tires squealing. We smacked into one of the streetlamps and everything came to a sudden stop, my internal organs swimming around with unspent inertia, the engine dying with a wheeze.

I looked over at Billy. He was looking back at me, his big calloused hands held up in front of him in a comical gesture of shock.

"That motherfucker just threw a half million dollars at us," he said.

I started laughing, grabbing hold of the keys and turning the ignition. After a gurgling hesitation, the engine roared back into life.

I floored the gas pedal again and the van staggered forward with a groan of tearing metal. Mashing my foot down hard on the pedal, I crept up on the Caddy, the whole van shaking and shuddering, air blowing in and moving around us like a living thing, connected and sinuous. We pulled up alongside the Caddy and I looked down at them; Alt Rusch stared back at me in abject terror, her wrinkled face white, her mouth open. She was saying something, her mouth just moving in silence, as she stared up at me. Her arms were spread, like she was trying to hold herself inside the car despite a pressure trying to expel her.

Beyond her, I could see Alt James' hand moving over something between the front seats, something with glowing lights.

The moment I saw it, the noise began: A deep, loud screeching noise that sank into my chest and vibrated my bones, smacked into my head and gave me a headache. I winced and the van veered and wobbled as I lost control for a split-second. Grabbing the wheel tightly, I checked the speedometer—ninety-five—and leaned forward, watching the fence approach at disturbing speed.

“He’s going to pop!” The Bumble shouted suddenly.

I looked back at the Caddy. It suddenly looked ... blurry, as if it was fading away. The noise got louder, piercing—I imagined it was shaking the van even more, that we were going to start popping bolts if I didn’t shut it down soon.

I looked from the Caddy to the fence. Then I looked over the Cadillac and saw one of the lampposts zooming towards us, a few feet past the Cadillac. I sucked in breath and wrenched the steering wheel to the left.

Tires screaming, we veered sharply and hit the other car with a hollow thud, bouncing me in my seat. The wheel jerked and moved under my hands as the Caddy turned with me, the lamppost right there, immediately in front of it. The noise had reached a volume that made me want to stick pencils in my ears, and then there was an explosion, or the sound of an explosion, and the lamppost flashed by and suddenly there was nothing resisting the van and we spun.

In sudden silence, I felt my stomach lurch inside me and I realized we were in the air. The sky flashed by, and then a streetlight, like a dim, orange moon. The silence was wonderful, the sense of weightlessness was wonderful. It was like I'd hit a ramp at seventy-five miles per hour and launched myself into orbit.

We hit the ground with a bang and the steering wheel hit me in the face with a wet snap, pain flashing through my head like a spike being driven home, wonderful, clarifying. The van skidded on its side for five seconds or so, then smacked into another lamppost and stopped dead, glass shattering and raining down on me, my whole body flopping once like a ragdoll. Then we were still, and everything was silent.

I unbuckled my seatbelt as The Bumble pushed the passenger door up and open. He climbed up onto the side of the van and reached down, taking hold of my wrist and hauling me up. I felt jittery and weak, like I'd been in a coma for a year and was trying to walk. My head was ringing, and blood was pouring down from my shattered nose in a disturbing way. The pain felt good. I wanted to reach up and squeeze my nose, see how bad it was, but resisted. There would be time enough for scab-peeling and bruise-squeezing later.

Dizzy, I patted Billy on the shoulder and jumped down to the pavement. My legs gave out and I fell, hitting my head again and making my vision swim. I started to laugh a little, and tried hard to swallow it as I pushed myself back to my feet, my hands, I realized, cut up and bloody. Glass clung to my coat and fell off in random showers as I moved, limping heavily towards the lamppost I'd steer him into.

The Caddy was gone. Tire marks started about fifteen feet away and stopped abruptly right before the concrete base—he'd managed to jump into some other place, some other version of Newark. Was there a lamppost there? Had he suddenly materialized out of nowhere and slammed into it at full speed and killed himself? He had to have. He would have been heading for a Newark he could still navigate, a Newark with the same streets, the same layout—the same lampposts.

I turned and staggered a few steps to my left, almost losing my balance. Billy was walking towards me, smiling. He looked like he didn't have a scratch on him, like he'd been sitting on the sidelines watching.

"Well," he said, "we got this, at least." He held the battered but still-closed suitcase up in front of him. It was silence for a second as I stood there shaking and laughing, no gunfire or shouting behind us. And then, dim, distant: Sirens.

Epilogue

“Well,” Rachel said, glancing down at her watch. “I gotta run. Job interview.”

I blinked. “What happened to the library?”

She smiled at me, standing up and gathering her purse. I leaned back and stirred my civet coffee in its white cup. I reached up and touched the thick bandage on my nose, and wished I healed faster. Then I shot my cuffs in my new custom suit—full canvas, one-fifty thread count, double-breasted, notched lapels—and looked around McHales, which The Bumble and I had made into our unofficial clubhouse. We’d footed the bill for Falken to move on and still had plenty of scratch to live on for a while between what I’d scraped from my own apartment and what we’d picked up in Newark, though it wasn’t a retirement plan. We were the only people in it aside from the bartender, who was a young musician of the usual sort struggling to stay awake in the afternoon sun, a coffee cup on the bar in front of him.

The Bumble sat at the bar, engrossed in the sports page. A tiny cinnamon-colored kitten with long fur sprouting from its ears sat on the bar between The Bumble’s beer glass and a bowl of milk. Billy had found it out back and adopted it, and named it Stanley.

Rachel looked like a million bucks in a nicely-cut suit, big cuffs spilling out over her jacket, her hair pulled back in a long, shiny tail. She looked expensive, but that had always been Rachel’s main grift: She just looked expensive, no matter what. “They fired me the third

day I just didn't show up, dummy. That tends to happen. You can't take an unannounced vacation at the Holland Motor Lodge in New Jersey and just go back to your job whenever you're ready."

I nodded. "You need anything?"

She shook her head and slung her bag over one shoulder. For a moment she stood there looking at me. "No," she said. "Connie and I are having lunch next week, if you want to join us."

I frowned trying to place *Connie*. Then I blinked again. "You're having lunch with *Rusch*?"

Rachel smiled again. "Why not?"

I shrugged. "No reason. Just seems ... random."

"We spent days locked in a motel together. You get to know each other a little, that way. Anyway," she said, and hung there awkwardly for a moment. I had a feeling that with anyone else, this was where Rachel leaned down and kissed their cheek. Instead, after a moment she just nodded and turned away. "I'll stay in touch," she said as she walked out of the room, not meaning a word of it.

For a moment I sat there feeling blue, bored and restless. Then there was a noise out in the main bar and Billy stood up, glanced at me blank-faced, and went out to investigate, returning seconds later.

"It's the Jew," The Bumble said, resuming his seat at the bar and picking up the sports page.

As The Phin entered the back room of the bar, I sat up a little and pushed a smile to my face. He looked exactly the same and was trailed by Michael and Maurice, blank-faced in their standard-issue black leather coats. They pretended they'd never seen me before and

stayed up near the door, visibly irritated that The Bumble paid them no attention at all.

The Phin walked briskly back to me, carrying a stout-looking walking stick with a solid-gold lion's head as a handle.

"You look like someone tried to kill you, kiddo," he said, breathless, his face pink. "Can I have a seat? Talk a little business?"

I gestured at the chair. "Sure thing, Phin. How's tricks?" This was protocol: The Phin had tried to beat money out of me not so long ago, and I'd burned down one of his joints, but even so you started off every meet with polite chat.

He settled himself in the chair with some grunting and heavy breathing, setting his walking stick on the table and folding his hands in front of him.

"We're fine, thanks. Any chance of a drop of something? It's thirsty work, tracking you down. You're off the grid."

I shrugged. "There's a chance of anything," I said, gesturing at the bartender. "But he lacks a certain enthusiasm for his job, you know?"

The Phin waved his hand over his shoulder, and Maurice strode purposefully towards the bar.

I eyed him carefully, and produced a thick yellow envelope from my pocket. "This is what we took from your people during the, uh, disturbance," I said. "Plus fifteen percent over three weeks, to be fair. I thought you might think of it as a loan you forgot you approved."

He reached out and took the envelope, weighed it in his hand theatrically, and nodded, stuffing it into his coat pocket. I watched him carefully. The Phin could choose to view this as a closed episode,

or he could decide I owed him a tax. I didn't have any backing any more, there was no one to intercede for me, so if The Phin put my name in the books I was going to have trouble.

Mo arrived with a full glass of whiskey and set it gently in front of him. The Phin waved him back to his perch with an irritated gesture and took a swallow, wiping his gleaming lips with the back of his hand.

"I'm inclined to go along with that, and here's why," he said. "Since Frank McKenna's untimely demise, it's fucking chaos. Where's Frank junior? No one fucking knows. Chino's dead, Mikey D's dead, the kid's *missing*. It's fucking chaos." He shook his head, then leaned back and laced his fingers over his belly, staring at me from under his eyebrows. "It's also an opportunity."

I raised my eyebrows. My nose throbbed. I wasn't taking anything for the pain. I hadn't seen Frank Junior after he'd entered the warehouse, and I didn't know where he'd flown to. It hadn't occurred to me to check up on him.

"Frank's little kingdom is still there," The Phin said. "It's still in one piece, for a few more days, maybe. Because the kid's missing. Frank Junior might come back with fresh muscle, put the house in order, so people are hesitating. Who cares if he comes back. Someone could step in there, and just take over." He shrugged. "Wait another week and it'll be five thousand kingdoms, each a fucking block long."

I frowned. "You're thinking *I* step in there?"

He threw his hands up. "Why not? You know Frank's operations. You know *everything*. And you *collect*, kiddo." he waved his hands again, leaning forward to reclaim his drink with a moist-sounding

grunt. "We had our differences, sure, and you *do* fucking owe me restitution. But for years you paid that fat Irish bastard like interest on a bank account. He used to *brag* about you. You know how to make people pay you when the last thing in the fuckin' world they want to do is pay you. That's the secret, kiddo. You cracked the code."

I nodded, thinking it over. It was ridiculous ... but it wasn't. It was what I did, just writ large. "And you want to back me?"

He winked. "Sure. I can't take on Frank's territory, his people wouldn't like it. I'd spend more fuckin' money and time conquering neighborhoods than anything else. Fucking gunplay, body bags, my friends on the force getting cold feet." He made a disgusted noise and snorted. "You'll have some unhappy folks, but most of 'em know you and could work for you. But you don't have enough seed money, or muscle. You don't have political contacts. You were never sitting at the table, huh? So, I'll be your fairy godfather. I'll stake you. You need muscle, call me and I'll send you more legbreakers, gunmen, whatever. You get into a spot of trouble, I can clear it up. All you do is step into Frank's shoes and keep things runnin', and be my vassal."

I nodded. "And tithe to you. How much?"

"Thirty beans," he said immediately. "I'll be workin' *hard* for you, kiddo. Thirty off the top to me. But I'm *giving* you a fucking territory it took McKenna twenty-five years to build. All you gotta do is not fuck it up." He shrugged, slugging back his drink. "It's worth it, I think. You think on it. Let me know tomorrow."

He stood up, and the kitten suddenly leaped up onto the table in front of me and sat down, sniffing the creamer and trying to figure out how to get its snout into it. I watched The Phin huff his way

through the bar towards his goons. At the doorway leading to the outer bar he spun, raised his cane, and winked.

“Good to see ya, Kiddo,” he said. “If Billy Bumbles ever learns English, tell him I said hi.”

Billy snorted and extended a crooked middle finger over his shoulder without turning around.

The Phin and his boys trooped out, and I picked up the kitten and leaned back in my seat, putting Stanley in my lap and dragging a hand over him. The cat rolled onto its back and grabbed my hand with its paws, pulling me to its tiny mouth and biting. It’s tiny teeth didn’t hurt at all, and I could feel it purring. I looked over at The Bumble, who looked back at me, shrugged and returned his attention to the paper.

It could be done. I hadn’t thought about it at all, but now that someone had said it to me, I could see it, how it would work. I knew everything I needed to know. I thought about the work involved in getting everyone in line, everyone paying up the right amounts on time, and my heart beat a little faster, saliva flooding my mouth. It was bloody work, but it was work I was good at, it was work I enjoyed. And there would be a lot of it.

I looked down at Stanley, who had rolled back onto his belly and suffered me to pet him, still purring, his eyes almost closed and his pink nose wet and glistening. I rolled him around in my hands and felt their power, the energy I had in me. I could hurt the cat, I knew. It would be easy; I could feel him vibrating with energy, nerve endings and blood vessels. I opted instead to scratch behind his ear, making him rub his head into the palm of my hand with pleasure.

I could hurt him, but I chose not to.

THE END

About the Author

Jeff Somers began writing by court order as an attempt to steer his creative impulses away from engineering genetic grotesqueries. His feeble memory makes every day a joyous adventure of discovery and adventure even as it destroys personal relationships, and his weakness for adorable furry creatures leaves him with many cats. He has published nine novels, including the Avery Cates Series of noir-science fiction novels from Orbit Books, the darkly hilarious crime novel *Chum* from Tyrus Books, and most recently tales of blood magic and short cons in the Ustari Cycle, including the novel *We Are Not Good People* and the novellas *Fixer*, *The Stringer*, *Last Best Day*, and *The Boom Bands* from Pocket Gallery. He has published over forty short stories, including “Ringing the Changes,” which was selected for inclusion in *Best American Mystery Stories 2006*, “Sift, Almost Invisible, Through,” which appeared in the anthology *Crimes by Moonlight* edited by Charlaine Harris, “Three Cups of Tea,” which appeared in the anthology *Hanzai Japan*, “The Company I Keep,” which appeared in the anthology *Life is Short and Then You Die* edited by Kelley Armstrong, “Zilla, 2015,” published in 2019 by the Lascaux Review, and “The Little Birds,” published in 2023 by Alfred Hitchcock’s *Mystery Magazine*. He also writes about books for BookBub, everything and anything for Lifehacker, and the craft of writing for *Writer’s Digest*, which published his book on the craft of writing *Writing Without Rules* in 2018. He lives in Hoboken with his wife, The Duchess, and their cats. He considers pants to always be optional.

Also by Jeff Somers

The Avery Cates Series:

The Electric Church

The Digital Plague

The Eternal Prison

The Terminal State

The Final Evolution

The Shattered Gears

The Burning City

The Machines of War

The Ustari Cycle

Fixer

We Are Not Good People

The Stringer

Last Best Day

The Boom Bands

Idolator

The Bleeder

The Red Line

Magic is Violence: Three Ustari Cycle Short Stories

Other novels:

Lifers

Chum

Novellas:

The Ruiner

Nonfiction

Writing Without Rules