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The Lost

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The Lost

by

Jano R. R. Donnachaidh

A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in
Professional Writing in the Department of English
in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences of
Kennesaw State University

Kennesaw, Georgia

2010

College of Humanities & Social Sciences
Kennesaw State University
Kennesaw, Georgia
Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

Jano Donnachaidh

Has been approved by the committee
for the capstone requirement for

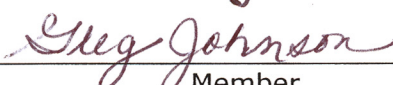
the Master of Arts in Professional Writing
in the Department of English

At the December 2010 graduation

Capstone committee:



Member



Member

Jano Donnachaidh

Capstone Project Introduction

Masters of Professional Writing

Mr. Tony Grooms

Dr. Greg Johnson

Developing Craft

I grew up reading the fables of Aesop, the adventures of Robert Louis Stevenson, the machinations of Alexander Dumas, the intrigues of H. G. Wells, the otherworlds of Jules Verne, and the wanderings of Kipling. These gentlemen became my early teachers. Around the breakfast and dinner tables, and on the porch, my grandmother told family tales and Scottish and Irish legends and mythologies. With such a wealth of story telling, I began repeating my favorite narratives and making up stories of my own. I did not know how to write yet, I was just beginning my formal education, but I was acquainted with oral tradition.

As I learned how to put my stories down on paper, I found that my passion for reading continued into my passion for writing. Naturally, my stories were narratives because the stories that intrigued me, *The Three Musketeers*, *Kidnapped*, *Treasure Island*.

My school published short stories in the school newspaper. In third and fourth grade, my stories became regular features and I found the enjoyment of being published and of my peers commenting on my work. The recognition fuelled my desire to write and to become more creative with my stories, which in turn fed my need to read. I have heard it said that in order to be a truly good writer, you must read constantly. This was not a problem for me; *The Time*

Machine kept me enthralled, *Oliver Twist* kept me guessing, and *The Prince and the Pauper* kept me wishing to explore different lives.

I moved to Georgia from England when I was eight. Life changed completely. My life grew too complicated over the next seven years found to write. The writing I did manage was not worth remembering. My reading became less for enjoyment and more for escape. I read a lot of pulp science fiction and fantasy that offered stock characters, clichéd plots, and stilted dialogue.

At the end of this period, my life took a major turn as I lost my family in a car accident. Reading became a necessity for me, a refuge. I began writing poetry as a means of therapy and of trying to hang onto my sanity. I also found a different genre of books. Required reading in school kept me engaged and going. Utopias and dystopias became a favorite subject, perhaps as a way of looking at my life in addition to getting the grade. Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* mirrored my love for literature. S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* and John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* fed my need for family and redefined my concept of family. Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War*, John Knowles's *A Separate Peace*, and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* helped me understand that I was not alone in my feeling of isolation despite being in a sea teeming with other people's voices.

Books like William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, George Orwell's *1984*, Voltaire's *Candide*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, and Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* helped me understand that life was in my hands. I was responsible for my own destination. All the books from this period in my life encouraged me to look inward and find the stories I had to tell. I began writing again.

Learning Craft

My writing matured. No longer were my stories those of boyhood adventures. Introspective explorations dominated my work as I wrote the events and history of my life into fictional accounts. Writing prose and poetry became therapeutic as the stories wanted to come out, as they demanded attention, as they had to be told, even if no one ever saw them. I was my audience. When I did write for another audience, it was less of what I wanted to write and more of what they wanted to read. I learned the difference between public and private writing just as I learned the difference between my public and private lives. I began looking toward the future.

I applied to the University of Georgia to pursue a degree in English. My writing took another turn as I was introduced to academic writing. I enjoyed the analysis and synthesis of literature and the exploration of themes and characters and the reflection of history in the literature of the era in which it was written. Academic writing became my public writing and my private writing stopped completely. But, for the first time, I was deciding my life's path.

Life took another major change as I met the woman I would marry and for the first time in my life, I found myself content. The subject matter of my reading also changed. I began reading popular pastoral novels like Lillian Jackson Braun's *The Cat Who . . .* series, and Jan Karon's *Mitford* series. The novels were more like character studies that masqueraded as light mysteries. I fell in love with characterization as I watched primary and secondary characters grow from one book to the next over the breadth of multi-volume series. My reading matched the mood of my position in life.

Eventually I would obtain a Bachelor's degree in English Education from Kennesaw State University. Education was my second passion, behind writing. I was in a place to do what I wanted to do instead of what I had to do and I began writing again. The writing was not

anything serious at first, but the passion started to surface again. One of my English Education classes was Teaching Writing as a Process. It was during this class that I believe I truly became a writer. I began writing poetry and while I was not writing prose, ideas for novels kept coming to me. I write them down to explore later when I had more time.

My writing reacquired some of its insistence to get out and to be written. My craft had matured and the stories had a more mature hand. I did not write for escape or for therapy, but to create a coherent story. I wrote for an audience outside of myself and drew inspiration from the pain of my life, and the triumphs. My view on what writing was and what made up a good writer was different from the childhood escape adventures. It was different from the introspective dystopias. It was different from the solitary isolationisms. It was different from the uplifting characterizations. It was all of these things. But, while my writing had matured, the craft was untrained and the necessary discipline did not exist.

I applied to the Professional Writing program at Kennesaw State to learn how to craft the stories I had to tell. While I believed I had talent, I knew I did not know how to craft a story that would engage and enrapture the reader. I did not have the tools to make my writing stand out.

At this point in my education and in my writing, I was of the Victorian Romantic influence and preferred the epic narrative to the modern style. My stories were plot driven, and while they did contain dialogue and character interaction, the conversations gave information but did not truly move the story forward. My first true semester of formal education in the Professional Writing program provided me an opportunity to address this issue in the form of Playwriting with Dr. Aaron Levy and Screen and Television Writing with Jeffrey Stepakoff.

Playwriting and screenwriting rely primarily on the spoken word to tell and relate a story. It is in the conversations between characters that the audience gains an understanding of the plot.

In a manner of speaking, these mediums bring oral tradition and the written word together into a single form. My writing, especially of dialogue benefits from hearing my words spoken. Having other people read my work allows me to hear where something is not working, or where it sounds stilted or forced. It gives me the opportunity to hear it as though I were in the audience at the theater or cinema. In hearing my work read in this way, I gain greater understanding of the value of well-written dialogue and how to improve my writing of characters as the characters are defined in these mediums by their words, their speeches, and the actions that come from them.

Practicing Craft

In my novel, *The Lost*, this served to improve the novel as a whole, and in individual parts. When I first started writing *The Lost*, the first two chapters consisted of ten pages of narrative as we met Beca and Dunk. I had not written a single line of dialogue. When I looked at the pages and read them aloud, I found they did not flow well and became dull. The print on the page looked like bricks stacked on top of each other. It was neither pleasant to the ear, or to the eye. Reviewing what I had learned in playwriting and screenwriting, I broke the wall of bricks with dialogue that gave the characters life and personality. It changed my writing from being an observer distanced from the text, to being an engaged reader experience the text alongside the characters. The character themselves moved the narrative along instead of being carried by blocks of the narrative plot. With dialogue, the characters came alive, the narrative flowed, and I was able to say more with fewer words.

I have never been accused of being concise. Like the Victorian writers, I tend to long passages of over-written prose and poetry. An education in dialogue helped me see that this was not a voice currently favored by readers and writers unless it was well written. Taking Poetry

and Advanced Poetry with Dr. Ralph Wilson helped me look at words with an eye to finding the right words and a conservation of verbiage. It also gave me a lesson in discipline.

In poetry, we were required to produce a poem every week. This was a daunting class to an individual that wrote when the inspiration struck them and not by a regime. Most writers that publish a book, and all of my professors, have said you should set aside a time to write every day in order to hone and make the most of your talent. I never believed this was necessary; however, my poetry classes changed my mind. I sat down to write every morning and every night at designated times. I found that I might not use what I had written during a particular writing session, but when inspiration struck, I had the discipline to write it instead of putting it off for when I felt ready. I also discovered that out of some writings that were not used, a spark of inspiration might germinate and become something worthy of exploration.

The regimen of weekly work and deadlines were not intended to produce the inspiration, they were meant to be to develop discipline and habits so I would be able to sit down and write when the inspiration came. I improved my craft through practice and writing became easier and more concise because I gained control over the necessary skills and made writing a priority in my life. A writer who does not write is not a writer. The deadlines imposed by weekly poetry requirements trained me to make the most of my writing time. Part of that is making the most of each word and not using too many when fewer well-chosen words will do the job.

I continued learning my craft while taking Creative Writing with Dr. Greg Johnson and Advanced Creative Writing with Mr. Tony Grooms. In these classes, I learned how to create an interesting story arc and to tell a complete story in the format of a short story. I found this of great value because in each class because I have a tendency to over-write. The courses forced to

examine every word and detail. If something in the story did not advance the plot or reveal something insightful, it was eliminated.

I tried to bring this experience to *The Lost*. Each individual chapter was designed to tell a complete story and must have a complete story arc. On a broader scope, *The Lost* is told through using multiple third person limited points-of-view. This meant that each character must have a complete story arc. The tale as a whole had to have a story arc. Utilizing the skills learned in the creative writing classes honed my ability to look forward and plan the story in outlines that guided the story and moved it along. Secondary story arcs contributed to the overall arc of the story and to the characters, which in turn drove the arc of the novel. Everything in the writing had meaning and was interconnected to the rest of the story.

The courses gave me the tools to turn my attention to the story I wanted to tell as my capstone project.

My original intent for the *Lost* was to write character studies of the four main characters. I wanted to highlight how the choices people make in their lives set them on their paths and the regrets that can come from these decisions. *The Lost* was meant to be characters study from the beginning.

Beca was the first character to come to mind. The idea of Beca came to me a long time before I started writing *The Lost*. I wrote a character sketch of her in which I explored the recovery of a teenage prostitute addicted to drugs and her road to recovery. She became my central character and I knew what I wanted to do with her from the beginning. I made her an under-age runaway from a middle-class family because I wanted her to be I wanted to make her an every-man to highlight that her situation, while extreme, could happen to anyone.

The character of Dunk was conceived of much later than Beca. I enjoyed writing Beca's profile and story arc in the planning of what I wanted to do for my capstone project. Again, the idea of Dunk had been floating around in my head for some time. I knew from the beginning that Dunk was to be an older homeless man suffering from trauma-induced synesthesia and alcohol-induced amnesia. His story, like Beca's story, was to be a one of recovery and growth as he recovered his past, and fought the burden of alcoholism.

I wanted Dunk to be different from Beca, but the details of his life and how he came into his situation did not emerge until I started writing the novel. In a sense, the character spoke to me from the ages and helped me flesh out who he was. I discovered that he was Muslim. This gave me a point of conflict in that I knew I was going to use the church in some manner as a path to recovery. The trauma Dunk experienced to put him on his path became clear to me as I wrote. Dunk was a fireman in 9/11. I did not know this was a part of his story until I wrote his first three chapters. The more I wrote about Dunk, the more he fleshed out he became and the details of his life became clear to me.

Santiago was another character that was clear to me from the beginning. I knew who he was and what I wanted to do with him. Originally, I did not have him with Luis. Luis was a surprise. He was a character that emerged when I was writing Santiago's first chapter. I needed a foil for Santiago. In creating Luis, I could show Santiago as a sympathetic character. He was going to change the least in the story as he dealt with his decision to join the Perdidos gang. He started changing as I wrote his chapters and I found that his character growth would be the opposite of Beca and Dunk's stories as he became more thug-like and less like the diamond-in-the-rough.

Michael was to be Santiago's foil before I came up with the character of Luis. His story arc has remained unchanged as I write him. His plot altered as I wrote. I was not sure how to end his story and debated whether he was going to be the main antagonist of the story or if he was going to find redemption at the end. With the creation of Luis, a much stronger character, the latter option was chosen.

Andre was conceived of very late in the writing. I debated on whether to make him a support character or a main character with his own chapters. I wrote the first twelve chapters without writing chapters for Andre. But as I wrote, his storyline became more essential to the overall story. I needed to make him a more central character, thus I rewrote some earlier chapters so I could add him into the story.

The intention of *The Lost* was to be a character study and a story of growth and recovery as the characters come to grips with the fact that their choices brought them to their beginning state in the story. The mystery and crime parts of the story came to me after I had written the first twelve cycles. This is where it became important for me to bring Andre up as a main character because he gave me a way to look at crime from a different perspective than the other characters. All of the support characters came from the need to have a comparison/contrast for the main characters as a way to show their growth and to show what the primary characters could have been if they continued on their current paths of life.

As I worked on the project, many lessons from my creative writing courses influenced the telling of the story. Details became more important as I needed to make the characters feel real. I wanted them to be stereotypes because I wanted to break them out of those stereotypes. To do this I needed to pay attention to details and character motivation as they explored

themselves and the world around them. I found that by reacting to their worlds, they could grow and find real growth.

Dialogue has always been a problem for me. When I wrote chapters in *The Lost*, my characters had very little dialogue. Everything was moved along by exposition with a great deal of introspection. In one of my creative writing classes, we studied Hemingway's *Hills Like White Elephants*. As I noticed the lack of dialogue in my story, Hemingway came to mind and I looked at how a story could be moved forward and how details of the world and characters could be expressed and revealed through dialogue. The rewrite became a necessity, as long and tedious exposition would not hold the reader's attention. Dialogue made the story much more engaging.

In chapter ten, Micheal's observations of the world and his conversation with Derek was told in exposition. Changing it to dialogue made it more active and interesting, reveling information organically instead of through a mechanical process. It also breaks up the text making it more pleasing to the reader.

The same is true of chapter eleven, I originally wrote the interaction between Andre and Thad primarily as summary, telling the relationship between the brothers and Andre's dysfunctional family in exposition. The dialogue tells the story better:

“Hello Father.”

“Little brother, the next time you call me Father, I'll give you ten Hail Mary's and twenty Our Fathers.” They shook hands, embraced in a hug, and the priest looked his brother over. “So, not working today?”

“They give us a day off now and then,” Andre said, straightening his shirt and jacket.

“You should take advantage of it and spend some time relaxing, at home.”

Andre's smile vanished, his jaw tightened, his forehead creased. His brother saw the reaction and moved to the altar to light a candle. “Thad . . .”

“Eddie misses you. I was over playing catch with Sam yesterday. He's got quite an arm on him.”

“Does he?” Andre's eyes drifted with his voice.

“And Angie’s almost a young lady. She’s three now isn’t she?”
“Yes, she is.”

The Lost, p. 53

“Andre, you need to spend more time with them.”

“I saw them an hour ago. They’re fine.” Andre looked back at the pews. No one seemed to be paying attention. He didn’t feel comfortable discussing his personal life in the open. Andre took hold of his brother’s elbow and pulled him into a nearby side chapel.

“Andre, Edie talks to me.”

“I know Thad, I know. But she knows this is what I want.”

“I think it might be becoming too much of your life, little brother.” Thad checked to make sure he was not disturbing anyone, “You should be at home.”

The Lost, p. 54

The setting has been left intentionally vague because I wanted to concentrate on the character studies and make the setting an every-town. *The Lost* is a story about choices and the location is generic for that reason. It has been suggested that the setting needs to be stronger. If the characters are going to react to the world around them, then that world must feel as real as the characters themselves.

The strongest aspect of descriptors come in the chapters involving Dunk and Santiago. Dunk’s synesthesia causes him to see colors when he hears sounds: “They had not come to him, neither had his angel. He wanted to see her, to remember her face, her voice, the gentle white glow that soothed him. Somehow, they had taken her from him, along with the alcohol. Now the colors were constant. Every sound, every noise brought a new chromatic scale.” (*The Lost*, p. 59). This is an integral part of his character. It allows him to identify people without seeing them as each person has a color associated with them, and it identifies his world.

Santiago’s vision of the world is seen through an artist’s eyes. He sees things as idealistic and romanticized:

Santiago looked down at the blood on his white t-shirt. It formed an odd misshapen face, a close-up of a rose, a landscape, or maybe a Japanese

watercolor, a crimson mountain and water on rice paper. Santiago could see them all. He wanted the stain to be any of them, just not blood.

He looked back and saw his victim pull himself up off the cold, wet pavement. The well-lit brownstone behind him gave a warm glow even through the rain, an urban lighthouse calling the wayward home and warning against danger. It had failed this time. Santiago smiled and looked up so that the drops seemed to float and sway as little white dots against the streetlight-blemished sky. He felt his face glisten as rain fell upon his skin. He could have lost himself in that moment, seeing the world as a dream, reality frozen, life captured whole and complete, but that was a time lost in his past. Santiago wanted to stand there, to bathe in the light, to let the shower caress him, but he couldn't; he had to put distance between himself and the bruised and broken man.

The Lost, pp. 6 - 7

Santiago's way of looking at the world identifies him and breaks the mold of his gang-member character, giving him a trait that sets him apart from his peers.

The Lost has to be told in an engaging and realistic manner that will compel a reader to continue turning the pages. To accomplish this goal, I pursued the Masters of Professional Writing at Kennesaw State University. The workshop format of the courses in the Professional Writing program helped me come to gain writing proficiency and to raise the quality of my craft. As a result, the story of *The Lost* has become richer and holds the reader's attention. Workshops gave me the opportunity to hear and see reader reactions to my tale and to my writing. Without the workshops, my craft would not have improved. I can tell the tale now, but I have a long way to go in improving my craft as a writer. The most important part is to write and to look at my writing from a reader's point-of-view. Only then, can I polish my skills and write something worth reading.

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The Lost

a novel by

Jano R. R. Donnachaidh

Book I
Chapters 1 - 25
Approx. 27,500 words

The Lost
Michael

I

“Come on man, I only got two-fifty.”

5 “Then you only get two. Hell, why not, I’ll throw in the third.”

“That’s extortion.”

“Then go somewhere else. I don’t need your business. You need me. Got that? You need me.” Michael loved this part. He loved showing off. He loved showing people that he was better than they were, that he lived life by his rules and by his choice. He loved letting
10 everyone know just where they were in the food chain.

“You see, you need me. I have the rocks, you don’t. You only have two-fifty. It’s called economics, supply and demand. That is what happens when you go to Princeton. You get an education, something that makes stupid street-shit like you need people like me. I got the supply; you got the demand. You got two-fifty. I got two rocks. If I had the two-fifty, you’d
15 have two rocks, which is a hell of a lot more than you got now.”

The junkie looked nervous. Even in the drizzle, Michael could see he was starting to sweat. He needed a fix. The nervous little man kept looking around, looking for someone, something, afraid he was about to be caught. Michael knew the park. No one could get to him. This was his kingdom. Here, he was everything: king, lord, and provider for street-shit junkies
20 too stupid to know the crack he sold was going to kill them, or too stupid to care. Kids wanted the euphoria absent from their parents’ prescriptions. They craved more than the numbness of alcohol and the released inhibitions of pot. They wanted what Michael provided, and he loved

the feeling of their desperation. He sold them whatever they could afford and kept them coming back.

25 “You said three. You said I could have three.”

“Yeah well, you got the free version of a Princeton education. That cost you that third rock, inflation.” Michael looked at his watch. Luis would be here soon and he didn’t want trash hanging around.

“Look, you want it or not? You got two choices and I got better things to do than talk to
30 stupid fucks. Two-fifty’ll get you two, nothing more.”

“All right, just give me the goddamn rocks.” Michael tried to palm the packets, but this guy was shaky, coming down from his high and jonesing for a fix. It was sloppier than necessary. Michael hated dealing with junkies, but he couldn’t keep his dealers on the streets.

“Asshole.” The junkie walked down the path into the shifting shadows of trees and the
35 protection they provided.

“A pleasure doing business with you.” Michael watched him rush out of the light of the lamps. Michael looked around, the light mist falling on his face made it feel cooler than it actually was. He enjoyed it, just enough to refresh, but not dampen his spirit, or his business.

The city made all the lamps in the park to look like old gas lamps when they started
40 redeveloping the area around the park in order to reclaim the surrounding slums. They cut a twenty-block section out of the slums of Northside, tearing down the old barely-standing skeletons of too long abandoned buildings. In their place, new buildings, made to look old but well kept, were erected and they named the new district Parkside. Parkside was designating it a historic district complete with a Starbuck’s, an Einstein Bagel’s, Rocky’s Pizza, and Harper’s

45 Restaurant right across from the main entrance to Heritage Park along Oakwood Drive. Shops and boutiques surrounded the eateries and fleeced urban professionals and investors were moving into the overpriced lofts and apartments. Michael lived in one of those lofts.

It was a perfect set-up for Michael. With the cheap rundown tenements, poverty, and society's unwanted only five blocks in any direction, he found Heritage Park a great place to do
50 business. Bicycle cops patrolled Parkside and the immediate neighboring section of the park where the walkways and running paths were well lit and there were plenty of benches to sit on while relaxing from a tough day of doing nothing. This was the oasis to the pretend Parkside urbanites that knew nothing about the real city, nothing about Los Angeles's forgotten, unwashed, and unwanted. These were Michael's people, his customers, but he normally kept
55 his distance letting his dealers work among the true Angelinos.

He had worked the park in the beginning, after he was kicked out of college. Parkside was still under construction then. Michael welcomed the new neighborhood; it meant a higher level of clientele. If he could keep his dealers out of jail, he could relax and enjoy the comfort of accomplishment. He thought of himself as an urbanite success story even though it was far
60 from the truth.

Michael pulled out his cell phone. There were no messages and Luis was late. He punched up Luis's number and was about to call when Luis appeared across the mist-soaked bridge. Michael slipped his cell phone back in his pocket. Michael didn't know Luis. They met once, briefly at a club, where Derek made the introduction.

65 The two men nodded at each other, Luis approached crossing under the park lamps. The drizzle created the yellow-white halos floating in the air above the glistening black poles.

"You're late," Michael said noting Luis's thuggish jacket zipped up against the chill.

Black jeans completed the outfit with work-boots or combat boots peeking out the bottoms.

His clothes made it easy for him to blend into the shadows. Michael knew he was a member of

70 the local Hispanic gang, the one that controlled the LOL. He also knew that Luis had a reputation.

"I had things to do, business to take care of." Luis didn't blink. There was something cold about his black eyes, something lifeless.

Michael looked around to make sure they were alone. "Derek said you're okay, but I
75 don't like to be kept waiting."

"Fine. I'll find . . ."

"Son-of-a-bitch, you're here, let's get to business."

Luis smiled. Even though Michael was half-a-foot taller and of a broader build, he found the smile unsettling. "Word is you're having distribution problems."

80 "No. I'm good."

"Then why'd you make that deal? Why not one of your dealers?"

Michael didn't like the implication. Luis had been watching him. "Never hurts to keep up the skills." Michael smiled a wide-open show of perfect teeth. His eyes steeled as his smile faded. "Derek said you have a proposition."

85 The mist turned to rain flattening Luis's black hair against his stone face. In the back, he wore it in a ponytail. His eyes darted to the side and he refused to look at Michael. "You're losing access. You can't move anything; your dealers're getting picked up."

"And what makes you think you're different?"

“I ain’t white.” Luis’s eyes locked onto Michael’s, challenging his authority, two alphas
90 determining who was in charge. It pissed Michael off.

“I don’t give a fuck what color you are. Black, white, yellow, Hispanic, what the fuck do
we call you anyway, brown? If you work for me, you work for me, not the other way around.
The only reason we’re here is Derek. So cut your shit. Without me, you’ve got nothing to
move. I can always put someone else in there. Got it?”

95 Luis’s jaw stiffened. Michael could see the muscles working his teeth. His eyes darted
to a runner coming in their direction. He watched her, and then his smile returned. The gang-
banger didn’t even look back at Michael. “Okay, amigo, okay. Just checking you out.”

“Don’t. You asked for this. I don’t need you.” Michael pulled his hoodie up over his
blonde hair. The pat-pat-pat of the rain started hitting the maroon cloth. Rain dripped down
100 his face from his already wet hair. He turned to leave and paused when he saw the runner.

Michael followed his gaze and saw the runner duck under the bridge and a moment
later out the other side. He never understood why runners, junkies, and smokers came out in
rain. They were all addicts of some sort or another, leaving safety, comfort, and warmth. He
thought every one of them idiots, but everyone needed a fix.

105 “You do need me as much as you think I need you.” Luis’s turned his head back to the
dealer.

Michael looked up at the rain coming down. They were getting soaked.

“Look, *amigo*, you want to run for me, here’s the deal.”

110

Santiago

II

115

Blood splattered across his strong, square face. Santiago wiped it off with his shirt creating a Rorschach. He needed to change. His jacket would cover it for now. On the sidewalk in front of Santiago, a man sat painfully on his ass. He held his ribs, Santiago knew he had broken a few, had broken his nose, and gave him bruises that would be impossible to hide. Santiago left no question about it, next time it would be worse. He watched the rain wash a small stream of blood wash from the sidewalk into the paved street and pool just before vanishing down the drain.

120

That was Santiago, a Los Perdidos street enforcer. He did his job and he vanished. He wore the gang colors, his badge of faith and status. They identified him and his place in society. The colors signified who and what he was, and would be for the rest of his life. Loyalty was never questioned. A brother was a brother and you could put your life in their hands. If anyone messed with you, they messed with the whole gang. Family was family, and retribution was swift and brutal.

125

As he walked away from his victim, Santiago looked down at the blood on his white t-shirt. It formed an odd misshapen face, a close-up of a rose, a landscape, or maybe a Japanese watercolor, a crimson mountain and water on rice paper. Santiago could see them all. He wanted the stain to be any of them, just not blood.

130

He looked back and saw his victim pull himself up off the cold, wet pavement. The well-lit brownstone behind him gave a warm glow even through the rain, an urban lighthouse calling the wayward home and warning against danger. It had failed this time. Santiago smiled and

looked up so that the drops seemed to float and sway as little white dots against the streetlight-blemished sky. He felt his face glisten as rain fell upon his skin. He could have lost himself in that moment, seeing the world as a dream, reality frozen, life captured whole and complete, but that was a time lost in his past. Santiago wanted to stand there, to bathe in the light, to let the shower caress him, but he couldn't; he had to put distance between himself and the bruised and broken man.

Santiago had a gift. As a child, he spent every cent he could get on paints, charcoal, watercolors, paper, canvas, ink. He'd start fresh letting his mind wander and see the world as it truly was, in illusion and freedom, reality and bondage. The cycle would continue as his hands stained the canvas with a chromatic pallet of captured dreams. Santiago could never afford large canvases, but his brother Angelo managed to get a few now and then. Santiago's eyes came alive as images raced through his mind, each laying claim to the canvas as large as he was. Each challenged him to transfer a frozen illusion to the clean white surface, begging to be let out for the world to see.

Now, he saw that canvas painted with blood. His dreams were faint memories. They no longer cried for release, they just cried. Santiago pulled his jacket tight around him and headed into the shadows of the buildings created by the yellow haloed lights. The night had turned cold.

A familiar whistle brought his attention back to the streets. Santiago quickened his step to meet up with Luis. The cherry of his cigarette served as a homing beacon. Blue and red lights reflected off wet walls. The noise of the beating must have attracted attention. Someone must have called the police. He had to get out of there.

“Where you been?” Santiago asked Luis as they picked up step together.

155 “Had something to take care of. How bad did you beat him?” Luis’s voice floated on his breath.

“He’ll remember that one for a while.”

160 “Good.” Luis tossed his cigarette into the parked cars on Oakwood. It bounced off a windshield before dropping to the wet ground and extinguishing in the tire splash of a passing car. “I hate that son-of-a-bitch. Did he give you a fight?”

165 “No, never does.” They picked up the pace trying to put as many steps as possible between the sirens and themselves and trying not to stand out. Parkside was the wrong neighborhood for them to be in and hope not to be noticed. The people dressed better, there was no graffiti claiming territory, cars were intact and expensive. Luis and Santiago did not belong there, but at least, there was the rain.

Umbrellas protected the huddled heads walking past them; heads bowed as if in prayer. They looked to the pavement for puddles trying to avoid stepping in the water and staining their expensive shoes. It was useless, water was everywhere and the steady din of the rain mixed with the splot-splot-splot of feet splashing with each step forward. If the Parksiders 170 continued to move homeward with their downcast faces, few would notice Luis and Santiago hurrying through their midst. Everyone was eager to find a way out of the rain. Santiago pushed his hands deeper into his pockets as he walked looking ahead. He was content. He didn’t worry about the rain.

175 “Maybe he’ll remember it this time.” A sick grin crossed Luis’s face as he paused for a second to light another cigarette, shielding it with his hand against the small breeze and the rain.

“What’d he do this time?” Santiago stopped to wait for his friend. He felt uneasy about what he had done. He always did, but Luis made those decisions.

180 “Nothing. He just exists.” Luis took a drag off the cigarette. He breathed the smoke into his lungs mingling it with his breath and exhaled. Santiago could see he was working something out.

“Yeah, well he ruined my t-shirt. Blood went everywhere when I hit his nose. I must’ve hit his teeth, cut my knuckles.” The enforcer looked at his hands checking them for wounds.

185 “Good, dental work’ll cost him. Probably make him look better.” Luis looked over at him, measuring the larger man up. “Hey Santi, What’re you going do with that shirt?”

“Trash it I guess.”

“Can I have it?” The smaller man caught up and they began walking again, a little slower now that they had gotten farther away from the sirens.

190 “What for?” Santiago pushing his black hair back out of his eyes. He wore it long on the top and close on the sides. He had always worn it that way. His mother called it a bowl cut because that was how she cut it, with a bowl on her head and just trimmed off anything that was left hanging out.

“I hate that son-of-a-bitch.”

195 “You’re sick Luis, real sick.” In all the years, the enforcer never knew what he expected from Luis. He was always up to something. Most of the time it was just stupid shit like graffiti

where Santiago could use his talents to express himself and the Perdidos. Sometimes it was petty theft or a quick con.

But since his brother died, after his mother's heart attack, things had changed. Luis was more violent and more demanding. Instead of being simple muscle and providing occasional
200 intimidation, Santiago became an enforcer. He didn't like it at first. He still didn't. But Luis took care of him after Angelo was killed and after his mother died. He owed Luis and he was a friend. He was loyal, to Santiago, and to the Perdidos.

"You don't know him like I do. He's a rotten son-of-a-bitch."

Santiago glanced at Luis. He was lean muscle, a scrapper. He had never known Luis to
205 back down from a fight, but he preferred to let someone else do it for him. "He's your brother."

"Yeah? Well blood don't matter much. He ain't family."

He never understood Luis's hatred of his older brother, he wouldn't talk about it. He just always said the same thing, "He's a rotten son-of-a-bitch." They had walked the few blocks
210 into the LOL. Santiago slowed his pace letting Luis get a little bit ahead. He watched Luis smoke his cigarette, walking in the rain, looking around like a feral animal. Luis was always on the lookout for something. Santiago was never sure what.

Beca

215

III

The bed was filthy, but she had been in worse. She barely noticed it before, when her john was on top of her, when he was in her. Crack and ecstasy filtered her senses, kept her mind erratic. She tried to focus on providing him a good time, but knew she had failed. He had paid for her, paid for her attention to fulfill his desires. She was there for his pleasure. She didn't matter. She never mattered.

Beca preferred being stoned when she was working. She preferred being stoned all the time. It shut her mind down, made it bearable to lie there, used for what she was, devoured by lonely men, boys becoming men, cheating husbands, anyone who had the money. She didn't care; all that mattered was that she was coming down and her life needed a rock, and food. Then, everything would be better and she wouldn't care that her life was shit.

Her john was in the bathroom cleaning up. Beca waited, not knowing if he wanted her to dress or not. She looked at the sheets getting lost in the stains; past tricks belonging to her and other girls covered the bed. The mattress was visible through fresh and faded russet and brown-yellow splotches on the cotton canvas, a whitish vague green film covered most of them. At one time, the sheets must have been white, now grayed with time, except for the marks of accomplishments. The motel never washed the flimsy sheets. Why should they? The clientele paid by the hour and they didn't pay to sleep on clean sheets. They paid to fuck.

Beca pulled the top sheet around her. The smells assaulted her nose. Putrid urine fought with the salty taste of semen that echoed the taste in her mouth. She needed something to wash the vileness from her tongue. She dropped the sheet back onto the bed as

he returned to the room. It stood in places of its own stiffness. He was fat in that way middle-age men get when they didn't drink enough beer for the protruding belly, but they had enough money to over-eat at the dinner table and consume too much fast food. Beca figured he was some kind of businessman. His dark blue suit was not an expensive one. It needed a visit to the
240 dry-cleaner. She knew it wouldn't see one. He preferred to spend his money on her.

Middle-aged and middle-class, he drove a dull silver Toyota Camry, no dents but not new, a suburban special full of hope and potential and denial of reality. The Camry would carry a daughter to medical school or a son into business. A mother would be proud of her children graduating high school and then college, something Beca would never have. She knew their
245 dreams. They were as false as his commitments.

Beca had learned in the past couple of years to tell tricks by their cars. Beat-up cars and old models, not yet vintage but past their prime, often held together by tape around the mirrors and brake lights, trunks held closed with bungee cords; they were callous, rough, and sometimes violent. They were the ones to avoid, but sometimes she watched for them,
250 searched them out, wanting to know she could still feel pain and to know she was still alive. Most of the time, she felt she was already dead; a casualty of life, just a stain on a dirty sheet.

Then there were the Cadillacs, the Escalades, Mercedes, and Beamers. The only time they came into this kind of neighborhood was to buy or deal drugs. When they were high, usually on cocaine or some kind of black-market designer speed, they wanted company, never
255 just one girl, but several. These high-ballers always wanted the girls high to make them easier to manipulate and humiliate. They were not her favorite tricks. Most of the time everything

went smoothly, but sometimes things got out of hand and they became violent, more brutal than the vintage customers, and they enjoyed demeaning girls.

Beca knew she took too many of the not-quite-vintage and high-bidders. Even the
260 Camrys couldn't always be trusted. They ripped her off and hit her, and robbed her, always after business concluded. They assumed she was weak because she was small, and they were right. She started carrying a knife and pepper-spray, but couldn't bring herself to use them.

Still, she preferred the Camrys. Usually, they were okay. This one was married, probably with kids. She figured he commuted every day from one of Los Angeles's suburbs,
265 worked less than he told his wife, and welcomed the time away from home. Beca was proof of that. He wore the gold wedding ring on his finger. Most of her married tricks took their rings off out of some sense of guilt, some sort of loyalty to their wives and family. He hadn't. She knew he wouldn't when he picked her up on the street. If she asked, Beca knew he would say he loved his wife and his children. He would've said his wife didn't understand him, couldn't
270 give him what he needed. Beca looked at him. If he hadn't paid her, she wouldn't have given it to him either. Hunger pulled her mind away, she was thinking too much.

He looked at her and she saw the sneer of disgust, his disapproval. He watched her as he dressed. She had not satisfied him and his glare made her feel like trash, worthless. He was right; she was trash, trash he had just paid to fuck. Her johns liked her, especially the Camrys,
275 because she was young. When they asked, Beca told them she was eighteen, but no one believed it. She was the forbidden pleasure he could not have in the suburban world of middle-class homes with football-playing sons and cheerleader daughters and she could tell it

disgusted him. It always made her laugh when she thought about it, a half-cough laugh fueled by cigarettes and crack and not enough food.

280 He said nothing as he finished dressing, a white shirt no longer wrinkle-free, the blue polyester jacket that showed wear, and a red and blue power tie draped around his neck. His shoes made a sick sucking sound as they stuck to the carpet saturated with vomit and bodily fluids. The smell created a stank mustiness that assaulted every sense, but not enough to prevent the hourly rent. There were no words, just his judging eyes. Keys jingled in his pocket.

285 He looked at her, shook his head and left, safe in his conviction of fidelity and devotion, an upstanding example of society. Beca followed his example, dressing and then walking out into the rain and the comforting sounds of the city night.

The lighter chased the cigarette as she tried to light it. Cars from every state filled the parking lot and lined Jackson Avenue like a used car dealership, gleaming as streetlights reflected off the wet metal. Music escaped some of the steamed cars and competed against the drone of rain on steel and pavement. She started walking. Conversations drifted from windows and doorways, people huddled in shadowed recesses and under dim lights. Most of them watched the street and just tried to stay dry. The cigarette smoke warmed her against

290 the cold rain.

Voices drew her attention, a couple in a doorway stoop argued. He owed her money and was coming home late. He thought the money was his and he could always go somewhere else. In another dark alcove, a small cherry light betrayed a smoker. Someone drank a forty in this one, stoners got high in that one, two little kids played in their Salvation Army clothes here,

300 and over there a prostitute was pleasing her customer. In one doorway where the light had been smashed, she could feel someone watching the street, watching her. Each stoop provided shelter, and they were all staying out of the rain. Her clothes were soaked through. Her feet were wet. She was cold. Beca kept walking.

She moved in closer to the buildings, hoping they would protect her from the weather. 305 The walk-up, walk-down apartments of the seven, eight, ten story tenements were nice once. That was long ago. Looking up, Beca saw the cream colored and faded white sheets. Small tears in the fabric held back the yellowed light from trying to escape. This was her world, not by birth, but by an unwanted choice.

The alleys between them were heaped with trash; used food wrappers, cans, beer 310 bottles, condoms, anything. The smell of rotting food polluted her breath. The rain-mixed swill provided food and water for rats, stray cats, and bone-thin dogs. Beca tripped over an abandoned bottle, more intent on staying dry and warm, and being invisible. A car splashed her as it drove by. She stopped, her cigarette extinguished.

Her hands shook as she lit another one, her breath floated with the smoke into the air. 315 She couldn't be sure if it was the cold or crack. Either caused chills. The emptiness of her stomach beckoned. It always called when she was coming down; she had not eaten in two days. Beca knew she needed food, maybe before she smoked another rock. The other girls, the other women were worse. They needed the stuff. That's what she told herself. She still had control.

320 She followed new voices across the street with her eyes. A broken streetlight swung in lazy arcs from exposed wires. Each swing lit the sign over the door. It just said grocer, but

everyone called it Hashim's, after the owner. She looked at the store as she passed, her feet splashing through puddles. Hashim's took up the bottom floor of the tenement, just a couple of steps off street level. Barred windows and a gate failed to keep Cheetos and Pringles from walking out with the Malt 40s and boxed Buds. To make up for the loss, they sold her liquor and cigarettes even though they knew she was too young.

A group of gang-bangers blocked the front of Hashim's. Calls drifted the short distance between them cajoling carnal desires and claims of endowment. Mostly, the gangs left her alone, preferring to use their chicas and bitches. A little lost white girl wasn't worth their time except as a junkie looking for a fix. That gave her some immunity as long as she could pay. If she couldn't, there was always trade, it would be a gang-bang, passed around, and abused, a toy to be played with and thrown away along with the rest of the refuse littering the alleys. Beca had become a part of the neighborhood, background; hassle her, but let her go. She was just a weak little blotch of pasty skin and once-blonde hair who was of no importance, just a neighborhood whore.

Gangs controlled the ghettos, policed it, and prevented anyone else from moving in on their territory and their profits. Beca had been mugged a couple of times, stabbed once before she became part of the ghetto. Since then, she had seen muggings by gangs and street hustlers, and turned a blind eye. The police warned people about coming into this part of the city, but people knew where to find prostitutes and drugs. Many of her tricks came from those neighborhoods where she wasn't welcome, neighborhoods like Parkside. Cops tried, but there was no point in doing anything about crime, risking their lives to arrest dealers, pimps, and gang-bangers that would be back on the street in twenty-four hours; that is if the cops weren't

doing a corrupt themselves. She had learned very quickly that standing up to someone was a
345 quick way to make an enemy. An enemy, here, could be deadly unless you had someone to
watch your back, to take care of you.

She couldn't focus, her mind raced and her heart kept time. She needed to eat and to
get high, anything just to keep her head from pounding as she came down, to still the
trembling, and keep the empty feeling away. Hunger ate at her.

350 The red-orange Winston's sign on the corner called to her. Winston's was a place she
felt safe, just a couple of blocks from her apartment, open all night, and warm, not just warm,
but comfortable. It was like the Hopper painting, *Nighthawks*, the one looking into the window
of the diner. She saw it at an exhibit when she first came to Los Angeles; she snuck into the
museum as a way of getting out of the rain. Once inside, she was sure no one would bother
355 her. She could stay as long as she wanted; they were open all night. The painting was that way.
No one was in a rush. The patrons were content and happy. The old man behind the counter
took his time, enjoying the company.

Hunger won out, she needed to eat, and Winston's was open.

Beca made her way in, stood a moment trying to look normal, not like a junkie. Besides
360 a few others, she saw the four plains-clothes cops having their ritual meal at the counter. She
knew them immediately. They were always there at that time of night. One nodded to her and
watched her closely. She hoped they couldn't tell she was coming down.

Beca thought about her old man, not her father, but the homeless man that lived in the
alley next to the building she lived in. She didn't know why, but she felt compelled to check on
365 him whenever she passed the alley. Sometimes she talked to him, sometimes fed him,

sometimes gave him alcohol. She felt a connection to him. He was another life wasted, another life waiting for the grave.

Dunk

IV

370

His eye opened to bleary weariness. The soft blue plunk, plunk, plunk woke him from his dream. His angel had come to him. Her soft white steps warmed him against the cold, the rain plunking down onto the cardboard he used as a shelter, and then his head. He pulled his blanket close trying to warm himself. It wasn't much, but it would be enough, until it was worn
375 through and useless.

The alley was his home. Brick tenements on either side provided walls and mostly covered the alley. The hard surfaces, walls and pavement, gave him stability, something solid to ground him, somewhat. It was a familiar place to exist. Rain never came hard enough that he couldn't find shelter. It was just the runoff that came in. The alley was just an empty space
380 holding trash. Sometimes they came and hauled the garbage away, leaving it emptier, full of nothing, except him. He was comfortable in his nothingness. It was the only home he remembered.

His angel had come to him from the rain, first her steps, then the golden-yellow glow around her, a halo dividing the mist. She spoke in the comforting tones of some musical
385 language he had forgotten. When she touched him, her hand brought away the cold. He wanted her to stay, but she never did. Like a mother, she pulled his blanket around him, made sure he was safe and dry, kissed his head, and left him nectar and honey, waiting for him to wake. But he did not wake until after she had melted back into the mist. Her halo faded and with it her warm glow. Dunk opened his eyes. The dream was gone. The plunk, plunk, plunk of

390 the rain ran down the side of his face and onto the blanket where it puddled before it spilling
onto a small box.

Automatically, the bottle came to his cracked lips, held in a hand accustomed to the
shape. He opened his mouth and drops of fire quenched his throat, but they were only drops.
The bottle fell with his hand to the pavement. Broken glass filled his sight with a red splatter of
395 noise. His hand and the shattered bottle rested against a small Styrofoam box. He looked at it,
smelled melted cheese, and ham blending with the jaundiced whiskey odor of his own body.
His stomach called to him in a green rumble. Dunk let go of the bottle's jagged teeth and
slipped his hand into the squeaky Styrofoam box. He found the warm crust of a sandwich. His
angel had provided for him.

400 Dunk's mind entered the long malaise that had replaced his cognitive state. Thoughts
careened in slow weathered spirals. He tried to get up off the cold pavement. His body
rebelled, wishing only to lie in the castoff and debris of his home. The familiar wetness and
stench delivered a reminder of his oblivion, the wanton forgetfulness of that cherished bottle.
His hand felt empty, the warm crust of the sandwich forgotten. Knees creaked bone on bone.
405 Back muscles screamed in jerks as they tried to remember their proper use. Vertigo swam in
the flood of pain. He looked up trying to find the ground again. His hand slipped on the
concrete, and his jaw followed.

Pain broke through the emptiness. His soul ached for the numbness, the warmth
against the chill. He regretted standing up. The sandwich lay in a puddle of filth, hunger
410 gnawed at his stomach, Dunk started to fade.

"There he is." A male voice came into the alley.

“Aw, come on, leave him alone,” a second man spoke in a deeper tone. Dunk recognized both.

415 He peered through eyes that would not open. He could see the sharp orange invade his closed vision followed by the temperate green. They grew stronger against the red-black swirl of the back of his eyelids. His demons had found him.

“Why do you have to do this?”

“It’s fun.” There was a childish pleasure in the higher orange voice. Dunk tried to move, to hide. The Orange was nearly on top of him. A foot struck his face.

420 “It’s not. Let him alone.” Green always tried to calm the orange. Usually, it got worse.

“You’re a pussy. Go on to the crib.” Another kick went into his ribs, “You like that asshole? That feel good?”

“Fuck you man.” The Green and the Orange always clashed.

425 “Fuck you. Is that good?” A hard kick flipped Dunk over. His head hit the pavement and sharp white light flashed in his eyes. Dunk could see his demons, fuzzy and unfocused. He knew it was the Orange kicking him. It was never Green.

“Get off him.”

“Let go of me.” Dunk’s face spun as his demon’s foot glanced off his cheek. Mucky water splashed into his mouth and eyes, blinding him, but he could still see his demons’ colors.

430 “Fine, let go. I was done anyway. You’re lucky asshole. Come on, let’s get out of the rain.” Orange stopped his attack.

“I can’t believe you. Why do you always have to . . .?”

He couldn't hear them anymore. Their colors lasted a couple of seconds after their voices. It seemed like eternity. The grey rain fell, plunk, plunk, plunk onto the street. It ran
435 under his clothes and across his skin. His chest burned where the demon had kicked him. Moving was agony, but his throat was dry. The bottle would make the pain go away. He pushed up to his hands, got his knees under him, and struggled to the street, and the cascade of colors that awaited him.

The rain made everything grey with mist. Dunk stumbled into the street; a cacophony
440 of sound hit him. Disharmonized colors and light assaulted through grey rain. Hands pressed against his ears, eyes tightened against the noise, he stumbled forward.

A moment passed as he stood there, leaning against a car. He needed a bottle. Liquid fire always drowned the disheartened symphony of light and sound. Ears held, Dunk squinted through the faint kaleidoscope mist at the glistening cars. Distant red-orange lights called to
445 him.

A sharp ache stabbed his ribs. He braced his side against the pain. The dissonance struck and for a second he was blind, colors blaring for dominance. Dunk wobbled up the street, broken, leaning where he could. He tried to remember why he had left his alley, but the pain pushed him toward the light. He needed a drink.

450 Under the lights, a spasm emptied his stomach. The sting of his side shot through his body and his knees cracked against the street between two cars. He could smell sweet honey, taste nectar in the air. Tears rained on his cheeks. His eyes blurred and consciousness shuffled away.

455

Andre

V

460

They sat in their usual spot at the counter at Winston's on the corner of Jackson and Oakwood. Andre Lawrence sipped coffee and ate his turkey melt. Matthews, his partner, sat beside him. On the other side of Matthews sat Hicks and Walsh, two detectives who used the shop as their personal police station.

"So that's what, third one this month?"

"Fifth Walsh, can't you count?" Matthews always knew their collars, mostly dealers. Andre knew the score, but he didn't feel the need to broadcast.

"You know you're wasting your time. Put one away and two more take his place."

465

"Yeah Walsh, well how many have you and Hicks brought in? Any? At least we're doing something." Matthews had a smug smile on his face. Andre knew he felt superior to the other detectives. He had been there longer, knew more about the streets, and had twice as many arrests than the other two cops.

470

"We do our job." Hicks's voice came from the sports section of the newspaper. He was Walsh's partner. The two suited each other. They had the same sense of humor, the same sensibility, and the same work ethic.

"Hicks, when you bring five dealers in, then you're doing your job." Matthews returned to the plate in front of him.

475

"It's not a contest." Andre grew tired of the argument, again. It was the same every night. Matthews bragged, and Hicks and Walsh wasted time. Andre just wanted to do his job. He liked his job. But they were right. Nothing was being accomplished.

“Two of them walked. This one probably will too.” Hicks could always be counted on to re-ignite the discussion though Walsh usually did most of the talking.

480 “Hicks is right. You can catch them but you can’t keep them.” Walsh backed his partner.

“Hey, that’s the DA’s fault, and that’s still what . . . ?” Matthews smiled, bit into his burger, and looked at Andre.

485 “Forty percent.” Andre looked at his partner as he chewed the burger to one side of his mouth, protruding like a huge plug of tobacco. It reminded him of his father sitting at this same counter with Andre and his brother when they were young.

“Yeah, forty percent,” Matthews didn’t wait to finish chewing.

490 “Can we give it a rest guys?” Andre looked at Paul, behind the counter. Paul rolled his eyes in silent agreement. He had been there as long as Andre had been coming to Winston’s. He owned the place, having bought it from the previous owner who had purchased it from Winston himself. Paul and Winston’s was a landmark.

Hicks looked at Andre, and then nudged Walsh. The latter sighed, “All right Lawrence. But just watch, they’ll walk.”

495 “Yeah, well if they do, we still got one more than you. And the collars still count. Don’t matter what the DA does.” Matthews stiffened in his chair. He pretended to be insulted, but it was all a part of their game.

Andre looked at the three of them, shook his head, and sipped his coffee. Matthews was his senior by several years. It meant that he took the lead on most everything where the job was concerned. He had been working this area, this neighborhood, when they were

assigned as partners a month ago. Only six years out of the academy, Lawrence had done well.

500 The result was a promotion to detective quicker than most, and a transfer to the 76th precinct, Northside. This was where he grew up, on the fringe before it really started to go downhill. They called it the LOL, the Land of the Lost.

The door opened. Andre and a couple of the half-dozen other patrons looked up when the door opened with a slight gust of cold air. A girl came in. She was a regular, he had seen
505 her around, and he knew she was a prostitute. She was shaky and wet, obviously cold, shivering as she waited to order. Beside him, Matthews looked up. Andre went back to his food.

“Hey Hicks, your girlfriend just came in. Should we bust her?”

“Don’t know Walsh, go offer her a twenty.” Hicks looked up from the paper.

510 “Leave her alone.” Matthews never hassled prostitutes.

“Why Matthews, got a date?”

“Fuck off Hicks. She doesn’t hurt anybody.” Matthews sipped coke through his straw.

“If you two spent less time running hookers in and more time on real crimes, we might get somewhere.”

515 Hicks and Walsh chuckled to each other.

“You know what the problem is don’t you, Matthews?”

“No Walsh, what’s the problem?”

“These people just don’t care. They’re lost and they don’t want to get out of the LOL. They like it here.”

520 "I'm going to the bathroom." Andre stood half turning to the back of the restaurant,
"Hey Paul, how about some more coffee?"

"Sure thing Andre." Paul had been calling him by name for twenty-five years. The
detective didn't see a reason to change it. He insisted on paying full price too, not the half off
discount the other detectives received. Andre turned and headed for bathroom. He really
525 wanted to get away from the conversation.

The useless monotony of the banter grated on him. Hicks and Walsh and Matthews
arguing and then the three of them complaining about the people they were supposed to be
protecting. Every night they sat at Winston's protecting the people with a free drink and a half
priced meal while out on the street, out on the street . . .

530 Andre wasn't sure which was the real crime.

"You feeling all right Lawrence?" Matthews watched his partner return to his seat.

"Sure." Paul poured Andre a fresh cup of coffee.

"You took a while."

535 "Too much coffee I guess. Don't you think we should go?" Andre looked at the
steaming cup. He was the odd man out. Hicks, Walsh, and Matthews didn't grow up here. He
had, though he lived in a nicer suburb now. They didn't respect the neighborhood. To them, it
was just a job. With their white skin, they stood out. Northside was predominantly Hispanic
and African-American now. White-flight was just beginning when Andre was a kid and his
540 father walked the beat. Officer Lawrence was one of the few black cops when he first joined
the force, back before they called them African-Americans. Northside was his home when they

still called it Northside. He always said the neighborhood was a friend and you had to treat it like one.

“Yeah, maybe,” Matthews looked at his watch, and then turned back to Hicks and
545 Walsh. “Anyway, Walsh you got to think . . .”

Andre focused out the window. An old man stumbled into view. The light from the shop lit him up against the rainy mist. He looked like a homeless drunk, probably trying to make it to one of the shelters. Then he tumbled to the ground between two parked vehicles and out of sight.

550 “Shit.” Andre grabbed his cap and ran for the door.

“Lawrence, what . . . ?” Matthews’s voice followed after him.

Andre pushed open the door and the cold mist sprayed his face as he turned for the old man. Andre found the man face down in the gutter. “I’m a police officer. Are you all right?”

The fallen man did not answer. Andre’s knee landed in watered-down vomit. He
555 started to turn the old man over, but the drunk winced in pain, his eyes raced unfocused, his arms wrapped tightly around his chest. From inside, in the red-orange light of the Winston’s sign, Andre had thought he was African-American. Now, with the wavy salt-and-pepper hair, his almost fully grey shaggy beard, and deep caramel skin, Andre realized he was Middle-Eastern.

560 “Lawrence, what do . . . Is he all right?” Matthews came up behind him. Hicks and Walsh followed.

“Hicks, call a bus,” Matthews said, and the other officer immediately called it in.

Matthews knelt down beside Lawrence, “Let me . . . Oh god. What the hell has he been drinking?”

565 “I don’t know. Looks like he may be injured.” Andre tried to be careful, but every move made the man twitch. Andre figured it was from pain.

“Probably just drank too much. Hicks, cancel that bus.” Matthew’s tone changed from concern to contempt.

“No, I think he needs . . .”

570 “Forget it Lawrence. He’s just a drunk.” Matthews started to walk away. Hicks and Walsh turned to follow him.

“We can’t leave him here.” Andre heard Hicks tell dispatch not to send the ambulance. Still holding the old man, he turned his head around to face the three detectives. “He needs medical help.”

575 “He’s just a drunk.” Matthews stopped. He looked at Andre through hooded eyes. There was no patience in them. Matthews never wanted to help drunks or the homeless, but saw the look in his partner’s eyes.

“I don’t care. We’re taking him in.” Andre saw Hicks and Walsh trying to suppress their amusement.

580 “Fine. We’ll put him in the car and drop him at a mission.” Matthews gave in.

Santiago

VI

Santiago hated Luis's shit-hole apartment. It smelled old and useless. The rundown
585 tenement knew gasless winters and days of dry pipes while the slumlord collected rents and did
nothing. Santi called it home more often than not these days. He stayed with his mother until
she passed last year, her heart failing after Angelo's death. She just couldn't hold out any
longer.

"Don't you ever clean?" Santiago looked at a days-old pizza box, crust forgotten by all
590 except cockroaches. The question was as much a self-recrimination as it was a comment on
Luis. "You're really disgusting."

"Toss it." Luis looked over his shoulder as he removed his wet jacket. Santiago shook
the water from his head as he picked the box from the tattered couch and dropped it on the
already beleaguered coffee table. Luis's style of cleaning usually consisted of just throwing
595 trash out the fourth-story window. "Get out of those clothes."

"No Luis, I'm all right."

"Well, at least that shirt." Luis peeled off his own t-shirt. Santiago looked at his thin tan
body. Tight muscles moved with deliberation as he took off his wet jeans. Luis got any girl he
wanted, whenever he wanted. Santiago couldn't help but admire his confidence, not that
600 Santiago didn't have girlfriends, he had plenty, but Luis could make them want to be used and
then happy to be thrown away.

Santiago leaned forward on the couch and pulled the bloody shirt over his head. His
body wasn't as toned as Luis's, but the muscles were there, bigger, more powerful. Side-by-

side, it would take two of Luis to measure out to Santiago's shoulders, even more for their
605 arms. The enforcer was all power. The scrapper had speed and cunning. "Where were you
earlier?"

"When?"

"When I was dealing with your brother." Santiago looked around for somewhere to
throw his shirt as Luis pulled on dry jeans from a pile and put them on.

610 "Had to deal with something." The pile was of new clothes from a store, unwashed,
unworn. The pile had more just like them, all with the tags still on them.

"Yeah? What?" The bloody t-shirt ended up on the struggling coffee table.

"Nothing. Here." Luis tossed Santiago a grey t-shirt still in the package.

"Don't tell me you actually bought something."

615 "'Course not. Same discount I always get. Get changed. I need to eat something."

Santiago looked around the room. Luis had been doing a lot of "shopping." Clothes, cell
phones, iPods, microwaves, DVD players, and small electronics were everywhere. "You opening
up a store?"

"Funny, Santi. Just getting ahead. Christmas is coming."

620 "In eight months."

"Los Perdidos got to be ready to move some merchandise. Angelo taught me that."

"Angelo didn't steal," Santiago looked around the apartment, his eyes narrowed and
tense, "The Lost didn't do this shit. Too easy for the cops to make a case."

625 "He did. He just kept you out of it. Out of a lot of things." Luis pulled a shirt over his
head. It didn't muffle his tone. His voice was strong and could cut through most through a

hundred conversations, “Angelo knew how to keep us flush *and* keep us out of the GCA’s sights.” The GCA was LA’s Task Force for Gang Criminal Activity. It was the enemy of all the gangs. They set it up ten years ago to cut into the gang warfare, mainly between the Bloods and the Crypts, and the damage they caused to the neighborhood, especially the people. Open fighting escalated at first, but then it subsided. Thanks partly to Angelo, it all stayed out of the LOL. Their neighborhood was Perdidos territory.

“Yeah, Luis I . . .” Santiago finished slipping the t-shirt over his head pulling it down to his waist.

“Angelo knew how to run Los Perdidos, not like Sanchez.” Luis rummaged through the fridge, pulled out a beer, popped the cap, and proceeded to take half of it in one gulp.

“Luis, I should get going.”

“Where?”

“Don’t know . . .” Talking about Angelo was never comfortable to Santiago. His brother had protected him, he knew that. He had kept him away from some of the things the Perdidos did, and always away from any fighting. A bloods gang controlled most of Northside and had been trying to get into their neighborhood for years, but Angelo had kept them out, mostly without violence.

“Then you’re staying here. C’mon, I’m hungry.” Luis took the rest of his beer in one swallow, shook his head, and ran his hand through his wet hair as he headed for the door. The ponytail was gone and it fell around his face to his shoulders. “C’mon Santi, let’s go.”

Santiago let his gaze float across the room as he stood. The smell of must and soured food filled him. He couldn’t think of eating.

650 “You were lucky having Angelo to look out for you. If I had a brother like that, I’d be grateful. I mean he’s not like my brother. Angelo actually cared about you. He wanted you to be something . . .”

Santiago let Luis’s voice drift into the rain. It was only a couple of blocks to Winston’s. The rain was soft and looked like a black and white Pollock on the pavement, white concentric circles, reflected light around each drop.

655 “You know what your problem is don’t you? You turn up your nose at your own community. That wasn’t like Angelo. He knew where he belonged and he made the most of it. He brought the Perdidos together. That wasn’t easy.” The scrapper was walking a little ahead of Santiago in a rush to get down the street and into Winston’s, out of the drizzle.

“Drop it, Luis. I’m not in the mood.”

660 Luis pulled up short and turned around to “You know Santi; you’re a real fucking pussy.” Luis’s strut started wavering left and right at the shoulder but smooth from the hips down like a snake, his hands in his jeans pockets.

“Just drop it.” The enforcer could tell Luis was in a mood, one where pissing someone off was the intention.

665 “Angelo was like a brother to me, brought me in, gave me family when I didn’t have any. Out there, they don’t give a shit about us. GCA just wants us dead. These people,” Luis took his right hand from his jeans and spread his arm out to the neighborhood, “they respect us. We take care of our own just like Angelo wanted. Everyone looks at the Perdidos with respect.

Angelo knew this was a shithole, and he rose over it. He knew we had to take control if we was
670 going to survive.”

“Give it a rest.” Santiago had heard Luis’s verbal diarrhea so many times it made him
sick to his stomach. He tried to walk on.

“And look at you,” Luis’s left hand pressed against Santiago’s abdomen holding him in
place. “You don’t give him the respect he deserves. After all he did for you, you just shit on
675 him. He was your brother, your real blood. He respected you, brought you in, made you
something.”

“Shut it Luis.” Santiago jaw clenched, a lip raised almost to a snarl. Angelo had tried to
keep him out of the gang. But Santiago followed him, worshipped him, he was good to
Santiago and their mother. It was because of his older brother that they kept their apartment.
680 Their mother’s pay wasn’t enough and she didn’t question where the money came from. She
knew, but it was better to pretend.

“And you just a stupid son-of-a-bitch with some muscle. We’re your family. That’s
something you need to figure out quick.” Luis paused and looked around shaking his head
slowly. “You know some people thought you’d take over after Angelo bought it. Some people
685 thought you could lead.”

Luis was between Santiago and the line of cars on Lincoln Avenue. The enforcer had
had enough. His hands balled into fists and the right one came up striking out at Luis. The little
man slipped between the raindrops avoiding Santiago’s swinging arm. His fist hit the car
behind Luis and it shook under the impact of Santiago’s knuckles.

690 Luis rammed an elbow into Santiago's kidney as he moved behind his friend and then pushed his face into the indentation made by his fist. "You need to figure it out. Give *him* some respect."

"Yeah Luis, yeah? Fuck you!" The metal cooled his cheek. He wanted to wash away with the soothing rain, but the fire of his kidney held him still.

695 "Some people thought you could lead." Santiago slid to the ground holding his side against the pain. Luis's voice was full of contempt.

"What's," his words came between pulses of nausea. His eyes watered, "your . . . fucking . . . problem?"

700 "What a joke. He'd be disappointed in you." Luis leaned against the wall and lit a cigarette. The light from Winston's threw his one side into shadow, a Latino James Dean.

Santiago spat words instead of blood and bile. "What do you know? Angelo was my brother, not yours. You got a brother and what'd we do to him tonight? Just what the hell is *your* problem with him?"

705 "You wouldn't understand. Come on. I need food." They turned down Oakwood headed for Jackson. Winston's stood on the corner.

Beca

VII

Beca made her way into the bathroom. The sixty-watt bulb had been replaced a few
710 days earlier; an incandescent yellow light lit her reflection in the broken mirror. She stared at
the thin stranger's face. Her skin had once been fair and unblemished. Now it was jaundiced-
grey with acne struggling to hide under a poor attempt at make-up. The face looked back, her
hair no longer shined and her dulled bloodshot eyes no longer shone the bright blue she
remembered. Bags and dark circles showed a lack of any useful sleep. She wiped at the
715 smudges under her eyes, but the reflection just shifted left and right until it blurred into a
double image. Her scream drowned her silence as she gave into rage. The image fractured
under her pounding fist. Mirrored glass fell to the floor tarnished with blood.

For a moment, she lost any control that remained. Her body shook unable to maintain
itself and she felt the need to destroy whatever she could reach as she tried to hold herself up.
720 The sink, the toilet, and the shower; they all seemed to jump out of her reach at the same time.
Beca hit the floor bringing everything from the vanity with her. The shower exploded as she
tumbled against it. Ripped from the metal rungs, the clear plastic shower curtain covered her.
Cheap shampoo spilled on the floor. A toothbrush lay just in front of her, but there was no sign
of toothpaste. Tampons had escaped their box and littered the grey-white surface. Nothing
725 was right-sided, including Beca. The tile cooled her face and the shattered pieces of her broken
reflection reminded her of ice.

"Daddy, Daddy."

"I'm coming sweet-heart, hold on." He skated to where she had fallen on the ice.

730 "What happened?"

"I tripped." The tears that threatened to come dried as he leaned down to her.

"Let me see." He lifted her foot slightly from the ice. The skate made it feel heavy, alien, as if it were a bowling ball or one of her father's tools. He smiled at her. His eyes softened the disappointment of her fall.

735 "Does it hurt?" She tried to be brave, to hold still, but she winced when he turned her ankle. "I see it does. Well, I guess there won't be any more skating today. I bet some ice cream would make it feel better."

Her smile bobbed on her nods.

740 "Okay, but let's get this taken care of first." He bent down and picked her up. Her arms went around his neck as she cradled against his shoulder and chest, safe, and happy.

She had managed to sit, the porcelain tub against her back. The sandwich she had eaten covered the floor and the front of her shirt where she had vomited. A reflecting light brought her attention to a shard of silvered glass resting in her hand.

745 *It would be easy.* Her hand trembled as she brought the glass to her wrist.

Just one cut, a deep one would take care of it. Light jumped erratically on the surface. She tried to hold it still to cut through the flesh, but it didn't cut. She tried harder, pressed the glass into the flesh. It blurred as tears crawled down her cheeks. A red line appeared, then a drop of blood followed by several others. *Just a little deeper.*

750 Beca jumped as she heard the front door opened. The shard skittered onto the tile.

“Beca?” She recognized her boyfriend Billy’s voice. The baritone was hard. It always was. She grabbed a dirty washcloth from the bath edge and pressed it against her wrist. It wasn’t deep; she couldn’t cut deep, she couldn’t do it, she wasn’t even strong enough to do this.

755 “Beca?”

“In here.” Blood started to stain the once white cloth. She pressed harder.

“You wouldn’t believe my night.”

She started to stand, but found herself sliding back down the side of the tub.

760 He came into the bathroom. She felt light-headed. Her vision wouldn’t focus. The bathroom light made his blue shirt look green. He looked at the mess and at her. “What the hell happened?”

“I fell.” She lied knowing he would not believe it.

“Fell my ass.” He noticed her wrist, the washcloth stained red, and her hand holding it tight. “Looks more like someone got pissed off.”

765 She did not answer.

“Here, let me see that.” He took her hand in his and pulled it slightly to him taking off the cloth. The bleeding had almost stopped.

“I cut it. I mean I cut it on the mirror. I slipped and fell.”

770 “Well, it doesn’t look bad. Just a scratch.” He looked at her. He knew the truth; she could see it in his eyes. Beca tried to smile, but her lips barely moved. His dark brown mustache bristled slightly as he smiled. Billy was a couple of years older than her father and more than twice her size.

“Let’s get you cleaned up.”

He lifted her up easily, supporting her weight, and took her to the sink careful not to slip
775 on the shampoo or the shards of the broken mirror. Her wrist was tiny in his hands. She felt
safe.

Dunk

VIII

780 His mind pulsed in pain as the drunken delirium faded. Hazy images swam across his vision as white lights assaulted him. He tried to look away, but it hurt too much. Dunk wanted to bring the bottle to his mouth, but his hand was empty and refused to move.

He felt himself fade, floating on a rough bed of clouds, away from his name and into the bright white noise blinding him against other sounds. He was someone else, somewhere else.

785 There was calm contentment, energy flowed from one person to another, they were happy. Sound exploded blinding him. The energy engulfed the people in seconds; their screams deafened his ears. His world trembled, afraid of death. He ceased to exist.

The clouds were soft under his foot as he looked to the light burning his eyes.

Hesitantly, he stepped on the white vapors leading across the sky, looking down, refusing
790 vertigo. He should be falling, but the clouds would not let him, they only carried him closer to that light. A cool breeze caressed him, his tattered clothes gently wafting, peeling off layers until he stood, a naked silhouette against the blue sky. One by one, he felt the shards of his life taken from him, cut open to reveal his soul, the penance he served on earth, waiting for judgment. He reached out, stretching to the sun, finally able to put his existence in the past.

795 Forever he waited for an answer on the too soft cloud. His feet began to fade, to sink. He tried to cry out as he fell, tears floating above him.

Dunk opened his eyes. Bells jingled a mellow cerulean. They echoed against the pounding rebounding around his head. He closed them against the pain. His Saharan throat begged for a drink to quiet sounds dancing with color. The beeping beside him pulsed faint

800 saffron and the squeak of wheels splashed green streaks across the dark red of his eyelids. He opened his eyes again, the sounds continued to color him.

Leather straps held his hands and legs secure against movement. It was hard to turn his head, but he could make out a man sleeping in a bed beside him. Blue walls and pale yellow curtains surrounded him. Dunk started to panic, pulling against his bonds, thrashing and
805 shaking the bed with a chromatic clamor. An alarm sent red waves, saturating his vision. White running staccatos stepped through his sight as tie-died voices broke in.

A female voice called in yellow, but it didn't make sense. They were trying to hold him.

A blue alto broke in and they fought and blended green.

Dunk could see the needle go into the tube over the top of his head, beside his bed, and
810 into his arm. A smoky haze passed across him, and then calm peacefulness. The colors paled to pastel and then to wash, a buzz on the edge of his awareness. Someone, the woman checked on the machines and his tubes. Dunk wanted to struggle, to free himself, but his body relaxed.

A brown voice in a white coat entered and washed over him mixing with the washed pastel smokes to a swirling malaise. He felt a man's hands on his chest, listening, shining light
815 in his eyes. The light leaped around the room and seemed weak on the left. The brown white coat spoke, but Dunk did not understand. He blinked as tears seeped from his eyes.

The man continued but the words did not make sense. Dunk's mind tried to find a way free, but the calm made it comfortable. He wanted to drink, but the colors were quieted. They swirled into upon themselves, overlapped, until there was only white.

820

Andre

IX

Andre walked in not really knowing what to expect. Beds were naturally in rows, six of them, an open ward. The nurse's station was in full view of all the beds except that curtains
825 could be pulled for privacy. St. Mary's was an old hospital that needed updating, but at least it was clean and they would help the homeless.

He started for the nurse's station, but then his attention was drawn to one of the beds. Dr. Potter, a short man in a lab coat examined a patient. "Sir, I need you to try and help me."
He took the stethoscope out of his ears and checked the pupil responses with a pen light. Two
830 nurses stood beside him, one male, and one female. "Can you understand me?"

Andre suspected the patient was Dunk, and when the doctor moved back, this was confirmed. He didn't seem responsive to Andre, but the doctor must have seen something. "Good. Can you tell me your name?"

There was no response. The doctor checked Dunk's pulse. "Do you know where you
835 are?"

A moment passed as the short man looked at the nurses beside him. They gave non-committal shrugs. He turned back to the patient. "Sir, you are at St. Mary's Hospital. You've been here two days. We think you might have been mugged. We are treating you for broken ribs and a concussion. We are also giving you meds for alcohol detox. Sir, can you hear me?"

840 Potter shook his head and looked at the nurses, "How much did you give him?"

"Two ccs. Shouldn't have been enough to put him out." The female nurse answered.

"No, I agree, but we don't know how long he's been out there. Keep an eye on him."

“Yes, Doctor.”

Potter turned, saw Andre, and walked over.

845 “How is he?” Andre asked looking past the doctor, watching Dunk’s still body as the nurse pulled the sheet around him.

“I’m not really sure. Not much has changed since yesterday. We’ve wrapped his ribs, that’s just going to take time. He has a concussion and his heart’s a little weak, but I don’t believe there is any physical danger.” The doctor tightened his lips as his eyebrows creased.

850 “Mentally, I don’t know. He doesn’t seem to understand us.”

Andre looked at the black and grey speckles on the off-white floor tiles. “Do you think you can help him?”

“Mentally? I don’t know. I don’t think so. I believe he’s hallucinating, probably from acute alcohol poisoning. His blood alcohol level was .23 last night.”

855 Andre’s face tightened, his eyes narrowing and jaw clenched. He looked at Dr. Potter, “That’s still almost three times the legal limit.”

Potter nodded and looked back at his patient, “It was much higher when you brought him in, but I have seen worse. He can’t communicate, but somehow he can get alcohol. Do you know who he is?”

860 Andre shook his head. “A John Doe. We call him Dunk.”

“Dunk? Okay, I’ll put it in his chart. We might be able to get him to answer to it. There’s nothing we can really do except continue detox and let him rest.”

“Okay Doc, thanks. I’ll come by again tomorrow.”

“Officer Lawrence?”

865 “Yeah?”

“I can only keep him a couple more days. St. Mary’s may be a charitable hospital, but there’s no insurance and he’s out of physical danger. Detox is the only thing keeping him here.”

“I understand. Thanks Doc, do what you can.” Andre shook the doctor’s hand, took a last look at Dunk, turned, and left.

870 As he walked through the hospital, the squeak of orthopedic shoes and the sanitized smell of alcohol reminded Andre of his father. It was in a hospital that Andre last saw him. Andre hated hospitals. The noon sun blinded him on the front steps. A siren blurp brought his attention to Matthews and the police cruiser.

“Lawrence, what are you doing here?” Matthew’s arm rested on the rolled-down
875 driver-side window. His other hand was on the wheel.

“Wanted to check up on . . . on Dunk.”

“No kidding. Why waste your time on a stupid drunk?”

“Everyone deserves . . .”

“Nothing. He’s a drunk. Better off he drinks himself to death. Get in.”

880 Lawrence walked around the police car. The junior partner traditionally rode lookout. It was a question of experience, but in Matthews’s case, it was control. “Why do you not like drunks?”

“Experience.” Matthews pulled off closing Andre’s door for him. “The captain wasn’t happy you missed briefing.”

885 “I called the sergeant.”

“I’m here aren’t I?” Andre knew the sergeant would tell Matthews where to find him.

Graffiti claimed the bricks and mortar of the buildings. Some called it vandalism. To the LOL, it was art, the expressing of the internal struggle against the external chaos. Lawrence remembered his first day with Matthews two years ago. The veteran officer pointed out the designs and colors. He could read them, gang signs proclaiming affiliations, property, and territory. As they drove, Andre watched word scripts jump from building to building, and then skip one, then two, three. Gold and red bricks built on the broken and painted history of a city denying past foundations. The historic district, Parkside, littered with honor plaques and significance, gutted of substance and polished to appeal to vanity and status. Uniqueness became revisionist history.

“Where are we going?”

“Starbucks. I need some coffee.”

Michael

900

X

Michael sat drinking his Mocha latte outside Starbucks at one of the little wrought iron tables designed to keep you drinking over-priced designer coffee and eating muffins of fat and addictive sweetness. He didn't eat muffins, but he liked the coffee.

905 The city was always different after a spring rain. They didn't happen often in LA. During summer, it was always dry. June got a couple of showers but then July and August went by with smog choking the trees and no rain to help wash it down. They had planted two small elms in front of Starbucks, and all the Parkside storefronts facing Heritage Park. The trees stood proud reaching for the sun, happy to have played in the midnight rains. He knew it was only matter of time before the city could not afford to water them anymore and these trees
910 would depend on the infrequent rains that always came as drowning thunderstorms dropping buckets, and after days and weeks of waiting; battering the trees instead of nurturing them. The strong survived. Michael loved the rains. They had a way of cleaning the filth and trash from the city.

915 Across Oakwood Drive, people came in and out of the main entrance to the park. They had sandblasted the graffiti from the concrete and iron edifice when the city decided on the creation and redevelopment of Parkside. It was all a façade, just another way to convince the people that the government gave a shit about them.

920 He watched Derek come up through the park gate. His charcoal grey suit contrasted the burgundy polo shirt and complemented his toffee skin. Mike had worn a blue button-down, light brown blazer and blue jeans. He always dressed the part. In the park, when he had to

deal drugs himself, he wore baggy jeans, a t-shirt, a hoodie, and if needed a jacket. Here, that would have been inappropriate.

Derek was one of the few people Michael liked and respected. Derek always tried to be one of the crowd, joining in with them as they waited for the red flashing orange man to stop
925 flashing and turn green. The light changed and Derek made his way across the street in the gaggle of lunchtime people and headed for Starbucks.

“Mike, beautiful day. Let me get some coffee.” Michael nodded.

Michael watched the people walking back and forth in front of him, weaving through each other, returning to work from dentist’s drills, doctor appointments, shopping, or whatever
930 they do on their lunch hours. A woman passed and his eyes followed her as she sipped her coffee and walked away. Her business skirt was tight enough for him to appreciate, and it left his mind wandering. He imagined the grey skirt flung from a pole she strangled with muscles only women had as she waited for the gratification of a dollar bill. They were all the same, wanting to seem proper in the day, but at night, they got high at the clubs and raves, ecstasy,
935 and designer pills.

“Mike.” Derek sat down beside him.

“Derek, good morning.”

“Always Mike, always. Mocha?”

Michael nodded, “Yeah.”

940 Derek always had an ease about him. He never seemed rushed or worried about anything. It was one of the things that Michael admired about his supplier; one of the things he tried to emulate. “You’re a creature of habit, Mike.”

“Don’t tell me, plain coffee.” Derek raised his hands slightly off the table in surrender with a slight tilt of his head and smile.

945 The trees across the street in the park caught the mid-day sun. It was almost April. The sun still had the chance to see the trees and the green leaves welcomed its warmth. Squirrels chased each other in and around branches, leaping where no path could follow. They were genetically designed to enjoy life with winter food as their only concern, but in LA, that was eight months away.

950 Mike sipped his Mocha latte. “Next life, I want to be a squirrel in Central Park, no too cold, San Diego.”

“Seventy degrees year around.” Derek looked over the rim of his cup keeping his eyes on Michael.

“Nothing to do but relax, eat nuts and chase each other around.”

955 “That would be the life Mike, but what about this life?”

“Don’t have to go to work. No need for money. Just time to enjoy the world. That’s what I want.” The dealer ignored his coffee companion.

“Wouldn’t last. I know you, Mike. You need the challenge. You need purpose. You need people.”

960 “Them?” Michael motioned to the people walking back and forth with the light. “Fuck them.”

“Yeah them, without them, what would you do?” Derek smiled.

“Whatever I want Derek. Whatever I want. I don’t need them. I got everything I need. I’m just doing them a public service.” He could see Derek was studying him. He always did.

965 Michael rambled and Derek would say just enough to keep him going. Michael really didn't mind.

"Maybe so, but they have lives. They're not all as simple as you think."

Michael's speech had been rehearsed through a dozen conversations. It was rhetoric he believed in and he enjoyed sharing. "You think not? Maybe what, one in ten, one in fifty able
970 to think for themselves? They do whatever you tell them. How many of them have different politics than their parents? Or if they do, they'll change them and be their parents in twenty years. Most of them don't know a damn thing about politics. They just let other people make their decisions for them and follow obediently, blindly."

"You think so?"

975 "Yeah, I think so. I bet you out of these people less than twenty percent can tell you who their Senator is?" Mike looked at the people going in and out of Starbucks for coffee.

"And you could?"

"Yeah Derek, I could." Michael knew his Senator well. He called him father. "They can't make a single decision for themselves. They're told what to do, what to think, how to act,
980 where to shop, even what to like by people like you and me. They're even told what to drink? I mean look at them feeding the capitalist American economy without knowing they've been programmed to do so by major corporations like Starbucks."

"Starbucks?"

"Yeah. It's a temple of conformity. People think they're making choices as they revolve
985 through the door ordering caffè mocha lattes and define their uniqueness, along with the twenty caffè mocha lattes before them. Each of them doing what they're supposed to do,

conforming, because they're too weak to do anything else, all thinking they are individuals. The truth is that every one of them can be replaced with another just like them. All they have to do is look behind them in the line. And they like it because they're too stupid to realize they're

990 sheep."

"That's pretty cynical, Mike."

"Yeah, Derek? I think it is realistic. It's easy to see when you're not one of them."

Michael turned his cup up, and then shook it. Empty.

"I like them that way, Mike. It makes my job easier."

995 "How're you doing? You want more coffee?" He stood looking down at Derek.

"No, I'm good. But you go on."

Michael made his way into the temple. As he waited the five minutes for his latte, he watched the muffins stuff mouths and heard tabloid gossip between bites. Jennifer hated Angelina. Angelina wanted more kids, but Brad was looking old and wanted out. Computers surfed stock portfolios that showed more red than black on their downward slopes. The latest

1000 Clancy King "midnight zombie romance" novel folded around the hands of those lucky enough to know how to read. They were the future. It made him laugh.

He returned to the table, a fresh cup in hand. Derek sat forward, his elbows on the table. The dealer knew when Derek took this position it was time for serious matters. "What's

1005 up?"

"How are we addressing our distribution problem?"

Michael took his seat placing the new cup of coffee in front of him and leaning back.

"I've got it handled."

“I hope it’s not more independents.” Derek’s raised eyebrows were not suggestions.

1010 “They’re easier to replace.”

“Then why haven’t you replaced them?”

“It’s being taken care of.” Michael didn’t like being told how to handle his business, not even by Derek.

1015 “We’re losing profits. I am losing profits. Get it handled.” Derek stood up. Michael followed.

“Derek, I know these people. I know this area. Let me handle it. Let me do what I know how to do.”

“Okay. Did you meet with the guy I sent?”

“I don’t like him,” Michael started to set his jaw

1020 “Use him. It’s not a choice.” Derek finished his drink and looked out over the people and the traffic. “Besides, if you don’t have to be out there, all of this is yours.”

“All this is mine anyway.” Michael stood.

“Just get it done.”

1025 They shook hands in a half-hug, and patted each other on the back. Michael slipped an envelope of money into Derek’s inside pocket. The supplier held Michael close for a moment,

“Are we on for Wednesday?”

“Yeah. Everything’s set.”

“Good. We’re putting in more product. Meth.”

Michael pulled away. “I don’t sell that crap.”

1030 “I didn’t ask. Profits. It’s what they want.” Derek’s smile silenced Michael. He knew if he wanted to stay in business and move up, he needed a supplier. He was the middleman, high enough to make decisions on the streets, but not to refuse Derek. He was the pipeline that kept the other two safe, which meant they needed to keep him protected. It also meant that he needed Derek to stay in business.

1035 Michael could feel Derek studying him. The muscles in his jaw tensed. He looked away at some girl drinking a latte.

 “Okay Mike, good. By the way, I like the jacket.”

Andre

1040

XI

He enjoyed coming to St. Jude's. Andre felt proud and connected to the community, and to the church. He stopped before the steps and looked at the front concrete and brick edifice and the doorway in the base of the central arch. When he crossed through the archway with its massive ornate wooden doors, he felt the outside world became a separate place. This was his sanctuary.

1045

A second set of doors divided the great entrance hall from the nave. Andre slipped inside taking pains not to disturb people praying. Scattered worshipers sat and knelt in rosewood pews, heads bowed and hands folded in prayer. Whispered murmurs of the rosary broke the silence of the nave, and the gentle shush of the heavy door closing.

1050

Andre dipped his fingers in the urn of holy water at the door and crossed himself. He passed twenty pews as he neared the front of the nave before selecting one for himself, stopped to cross himself again, and moved halfway across to the left. Most of the parishioners were behind him. Andre looked at his watch and then knelt for a few moments of prayer.

1055

Ten minutes later, a small door opened on the confessional on the other side of the church. A well-dressed African-American man left the confessional. Out of respect, Andre kept his eyes down. Once he had the opportunity to leave the immediate area, the other confessional door opened and a priest stepped out. Another was on hand to take his place. Andre crossed himself and stood, looking to see if the exiting priest noticed. He had and paused to say something to the priest entering the confessional. The priest headed across the

1060

nave to meet Andre at the votive altar. Andre lit one candle.

“Who are you lighting the candle for?” The baritone voice came from the priest. He stood over six feet tall, a few inches taller than the cop. His face was kind and his complexion was of the same deep coffee tone as Andre’s. Andre smiled as he looked into the familiar eyes. They were anything but dull.

1065 “Hello Father.”

“Little brother, the next time you call me Father, I’ll give you ten Hail Mary’s and twenty Our Fathers.” They shook hands, embraced in a hug, and the priest looked his brother over. “So, not working today?”

“They give us a day off now and then,” Andre said, straightening his shirt and jacket.

1070 “You should take advantage of it and spend some time relaxing, at home.”

Andre’s smile vanished, his jaw tightened, his forehead creased. His brother saw the reaction and moved to the altar to light a candle. “Thad . . .”

“Edie misses you. I was over playing catch with Sam yesterday. He’s got quite an arm on him.”

1075 “Does he?” Andre’s eyes drifted with his voice.

“And Angie’s almost a young lady. She’s three now isn’t she?”

“Yes, she is.” Andre was not there. He was thinking of home and somehow that had taken him to his own youth. His father and his big brother throwing a ball; baseball, football, any ball, it didn’t matter. Thaddeus was the athletic one with good functional muscles he still possessed. He and their father included Andre whenever they did anything and always encouraged him, but Andre had been a late bloomer and had lived in his big brother’s shadow.

1080

He tried to keep up with his brother, and sometimes Thad let him win. Andre loved his big brother.

1085 His memories of his father were full of love, full of compassion. No one ever went shoeless whether family, friend, or some child on his beat. Mr. Lawrence was an officer for twenty-five years before he was killed, not in the line of duty, but in a random auto accident. His father was the reason Andre became a cop. He instilled in his sons a sense of duty, a desire to serve the community. But Mr. Lawrence did not want them to follow his career. He wanted his children to live their own lives and refused to help Andre join the academy. After his death, 1090 despite his father's wishes, Andre entered the Academy as a tribute.

"Andre, you need to spend more time with them."

"I saw them an hour ago. They're fine." Andre looked back at the pews. No one seemed to be paying attention. He didn't feel comfortable discussing his personal life in the open. Andre took hold of his brother's elbow and pulled him into a nearby side chapel.

1095 "Andre, Edie talks to me."

"I know Thad, I know. But she knows this is what I want."

"I think it might be becoming too much of your life, little brother." Thad checked to make sure he was not disturbing anyone, "You should be at home."

"I had to make sure this could happen." Andre looked up at his older brother.

1100 "You need to spend some time at home."

"Then who would look after the old man? Who would take care of him?" Andre raised his voice a little, but it didn't seem to have carried to the kneelers in the nave.

“All right Andre, all right. I’ll drop it for now, but you need to take care of your family too, before it’s too late.”

1105 Andre knew Thad was right. He knew he didn’t spend enough time with his wife and children, but the job demanded his time. People needed his help.

1110 "I should arrange some kind of long-term care." Dr. Potter sat behind his desk, casually looking through Dunk's chart. The office had that clean smell, not like the sanitized smell the rest of the hospital had, but just clean. Sunlight came in from the window behind him brightening the office and making it look the same as it smelled.

“A community ward in a charitable house somewhere isn’t going to give him anything other than physical care Doctor.” Thad leaned forward in his chair, his eyes lit by an inner fire.

1115 "His ribs will need wrapping and there is still a concern about the conclusion. He’s going to be on meds for a while longer and someone will need to see that he takes them. I don’t believe he is able to do it on his own. And I am still concerned about his mental state.”

Thad smiled a smile that meant he understood, not that he agreed with the doctor. “A general psychiatrist once a week will prescribe meds to keep the status quo instead of trying to improve his quality of life.”

1120 “And you think you can do better, Father?”

“Yes Doctor Potter, I do.” Andre watched his brother. When Thad decided something was right, he never lost.

“And you’re sure this is something you want to consider?” Doctor Potter had made the decision. Andre smiled as he looked at his brother.

1125 "I've already considered it and I assure you Doctor Potter, I am capable of helping the gentleman find his way back. We have AA meetings several times a week and there are some unused rooms in the chapel house. We'll be able to keep him on a schedule and provide guidance."

"I appreciate that Father, but his mental state."

1130 "I work with several outreach programs and hold degrees in Psychology and Social Work. My calling requires me to counsel many of my parishioners through many difficulties."

"I think there may be more to it than that." Doctor Potter was still not convinced.

"I understand your concern, and rest assured we are only a mile away." Thad didn't stop, but looked at Andre to confirm he had the name correct, "If Dunk proves more than we
1135 can handle, I will be in touch immediately."

The doctor sat for a moment, looked at the file again, and then at Andre, and then Thad, "Okay, Father. I'll discharge him into your care."

Dunk

1140

XII

Dunk breathed in smoke. It felt like molten sand filled his lungs. He tried to cough it out again, to make room for air, but only smoke and sand entered, and the smell of brimstone. It inflamed his chest even as the heat pressed down on him. Flame seeped through his skin, covering his abdomen, his arms, his legs. It did not consume him, only crackled like a cruel
1145 laugh as it burned and tortured him, caressed him with pain. Dunk tried to raise his hands to brush the fire away. They would not move. Chains held his feet and hands to a boulder that seared the flesh on his back. A sea of fire surrounded his small island. He wanted to escape, but there was nowhere to run. There was only smoke rising over a burning sea.

He closed his eyes trying to block out the nightmare. Against the red-tinged darkness of
1150 his eyelids, he heard screams, alien silhouettes clouded in grey-black smoke. They wanted him to free them. He was held still. Their fear washed over him, smothered hope, and silenced his cries. How could he save them if he could not save himself? They burned into his closed eyes. He could only watch them die.

His eyes opened. Cool, moist, brown soil replaced the sea. The island turned to grass
1155 and the chains holding him dissipated as the sky turned from smoke and fire to clouds against blue. As they spoke, the colors remained.

“He has nightmares.” The man in the white had come over. He had identified himself as Doctor Potter and Dunk had learned he was at St. Mary’s Hospital.

“Are the straps really necessary?” A priest spoke in a pale blue tone.

1160 “They’re just a precaution. We only use them at night. They can come off now.” The doctor moved to the bed and started removing the restraints from his hands and feet. “How are you feeling today?”

Dunk nodded.

1165 “Has he spoken yet?” A green washed over the brown and blue as a third man, black like the priest and similar in countenance stood beside the bed.

“Not to us, but he makes sounds in his sleep, maybe with just a little more time.” He wanted to speak to the doctor, the nurses, to anyone, but he had forgotten how to form the words and the pounding in his head resonating into his hands took all his concentration to subdue.

1170 “Mr. Dunk, we’re going to release you shortly. These men are going to take you somewhere where you can rest and get your strength back.”

He wanted to rest. He was so tired, just wanting to sleep, but afraid to. The nightmares, the explosions haunted him. Whiskey, vodka, whatever his angel brought him quieted the dreams and let him sleep.

1175 “This is Officer Lawrence. He brought you in and has been helping us look after you.” The doctor motioned to the man beside the priest.

“Call me Andre. Can you tell us what happened to you? Can you tell us your name?” The doctor had said he was an officer, but he didn’t wear a uniform. Dunk wished he knew what his name was because Dunk did not sound right to him.

1180 His eyes returned to Doctor Potter’s earth-tones, “This is Father Thaddeus. He’s going to make sure you’re taken care of until you feel better.”

Dunk looked at the priest. He was a big man, but something seemed wrong.

He thought about his demons. They had not come to him, neither had his angel. He wanted to see her, to remember her face, her voice, the gentle white glow that soothed him.

1185 Somehow, they had taken her from him, along with the alcohol. Now the colors were constant. Every sound, every noise brought a new chromatic scale. In his alley, there was always the distant street, and voices from the building, the occasional truck that came to clean the rubbish from the alley and take away the stench of rotted food and waste. The bottle deadened them, but not his demons.

1190 In the hospital, there were new noises, beeps, wheels, and shoes meant to be quiet that squeaked as their owners walked to and from his bed. Pans clinked with a metal sound and there was a constant whirr he could not see in the bed next to him. He had learned to tell the different voices even before he could hear them by their color and pattern. This one checked him in the morning and that one at night. One had taken the tubes out of him and then pushed
1195 him to another room where there was only one person lying in a bed beside him. The color he liked the most was the bright yellow that brought him food.

“I brought some clothes for you. I think they may be a little big for you, but they should manage. Can you get dressed, or do you need help?” The officer laid some folded pants, a shirt, underwear, socks, and some shoes on the bed. Dunk shook his head. He might shake,
1200 but he felt he could dress himself. He remembered how to do that.

Michael

XIII

The church had been Michael's choice. With the police picking up his dealers, he knew
1205 it wasn't safe to make a drop in the LOL. St. Jude's was a perfect place, just on the edge of the
LOL and Parkside. Most considered it part of the more upscale Parkside, but the church had
been there longer than the new historic district. The city removed the bars and the fence that
had once surrounded the church, and cleaned up the graffiti from the church's outer walls and
from the neighboring buildings, those that weren't completely demolished. Thanks to the
1210 revitalization of the area, St. Jude's experienced a resurrection of sorts as the urban
professionals and Trendies that flocked to Parkside also flocked to the church. Michael wanted
to laugh, but suppressed it.

He loved the irony. The dealer knew they held AA meetings and he was about to pick up
a backpack filled with meth and crack. The cops would never have thought of using a church as
1215 a drop-point. People had a certain respect for churches, even if they didn't believe in the
religion. Atheists professing complete freedom from any kind of holiness secretly believed
because even they refused to defile a church. The people responsible for spray-painting St.
Jude's were likely gang-bangers, blacks and Hispanics in the LOL with a few token whites. They
were believers, but like Michael, they knew the truth. It was only a building. If there was
1220 *something* greater than him, *it* hadn't told Michael that *it* was disappointed in what he was
doing, just as *it* hadn't told the bangers not to tag St. Mary's.

A car pulled up behind Michael. A priest got out of the passenger door. He was tall,
black, and handsome. Michael wondered if the priest's sin was pride, or vanity. On the other

side, the driver got out, another African-American. He was shorter than the priest, not as
1225 polished or as well put-together, but their eyes were unmistakably the same. They were
brothers. The pair of them moved around to the passenger side and helped an old man out of
the back door and onto the curb. At first, Michael thought the man might have been their
father, or grandfather, but he was an Arab or something. His grey-black hair was tied back. His
skin was sallow in an odd, deep color Michael didn't recognize and his clothes fit so poorly that
1230 Michael immediately checked his own pants, shirt, and jacket. The old man looked sick. A fall
might break him. The dealer thought they should take him in to confess his sins, give him last
rites, and just take him out back and bury him. He chuckled as he headed through the great
doors of the church and into the nave.

He had come here as a child. His father wanted his White Anglo Saxon Protestant family
1235 to appear as a happy Catholic family, so they converted. It had all been a joke and shortly after
he had been elected, he moved to DC and it all ended. Michael could not stand his father. His
grades were never good enough Michael was not a star athlete. But just like his father, he was
popular, made friends easily, and had girlfriends. About a year after the Senator left, his
parents divorced. At least the pretenses dropped and their affairs were no longer affairs.

1240 Michael's mother was just as bad as his father. Michael believed that she hadn't cared
who she married as long as his money was green and there was a lot of it. She shopped,
travelled, and enjoyed her friends. As a child, she had occasionally said a "good morning" or a
"good night" to Michael, when she wasn't telling someone to look after him.

Michael started dealing as a freshman in high school, a couple of years after his father
1245 left and shortly after the divorce. The jocks wanted human growth hormones and things they

could use without fear of being caught. He made sure the potheads had a steady supply, and there was acid for the trippers, speed when needed, and now and then, cocaine. Private school kids liked the better stuff and he charged for it.

1250 His father pulled some strings so Michael could attend Princeton and he welcomed the chance to get away from both of them. His business went with him. It took a little time to line up decent clientele, but a couple of months later, he was set and raking in the green. He focused on pot and cocaine, some speed. A supplier started providing meth and Michael found a new cash cow. He was riding high until a drug bust resulted in Michael's arrest and expulsion his junior year. He spent a couple of months in jail, but the Senator made sure his sentence was
1255 reduced. Michael was an embarrassment and his father cut him off.

He looked around the church, only a few people knelt in the pews. At the front, a priest checked behind the pulpit and tables, laid a purple sash on the altar, and moved one of the big candles. It was late Wednesday afternoon, he was preparing for mass. Michael put his hand in the holy water and made a motion as though waving flies away from his face before he headed
1260 to the confessional passing Derek in one of the back rows.

The doors to the nave opened behind him and he turned to see his supplier heading out just as the priest, the brother, and the old man came in. Michael decided Methuselah was an appropriate name for the broken man, shambling forward, and holding his arms close, supported by the younger men. They sat him in the back pew. He looked as though he might
1265 die on the spot.

Michael opened the door of the confessional and looked down. He couldn't see anything in the low light. On the other side, a priest sat waiting to hear Michael's confession, "Come in my child."

1270 "Thank you, Father." Michael thought of the stupidity of it all, people believing someone could pave their way to a heaven that did not exist. Good and evil just depended on the side you were on, the side that won. What was the greater evil, slaves captured by whites in Africa, or the blacks that sold their brothers into slavery; Aztecs slaughtered by the Spanish for greed, or illegal immigrants who crossed the border for a new life away from corrupt regimes; Europeans that stole a continent from Native Americans, or Americans who kicked
1275 Britain out of *their* country; or was it the church who waged war, murdered, and stole in the name of their God? Or, was there any evil at all?

"How long has it been since your last confession, my son?" His voice was soft but confident.

1280 "It has been many years since my last confession Father." Michael wanted to tell the priest where he could put his confession, but he couldn't risk it. He would make a mock confessional for his mock place in a mock heaven. "Forgive me Father, for I have sinned."

The Father heard Michael's confession. While he told the priest his sins, some of them true, some made up, he reached under the bench and found the leather strap of some kind of bag or backpack. Slowly, he worked it out trying to hide his actions from the father on the
1285 other side of the perforated veil. The backpack was black to blend into the shadows and in the hollow under the bench, it was doubtful that anyone would have found it. He and Derek were on a timetable to make sure no one else took the package.

A small combination lock on the zipper kept it secure, nothing major, just enough to prevent prying. Only he and Derek knew the numbers required to open it. The Father gave Michael his penance; he thanked the priest and walked out the door, backpack slung over his shoulder. He thought about it. He had been expecting a briefcase, but a backpack made more sense. At least it blended in.

Santiago

1295

XIV

Santiago looked at the sketchpad on the shelf of school supplies. As the ground floor of an apartment building, Hashim's did not have a lot of space. What space there was, he devoted to the things that sold in the LOL: milk, bread, peanut butter, beer and some liquor, cigarettes, and school supplies. Santiago picked up the pad and the charcoal pencils sitting beside it.

1300

"What'd you pick up that crap for?" Luis came over with a case of Corona. "You planning on going to school or something?"

"What if I did? What's it to you?"

1305

"Ain't nothing to me Santi, just a waste of time, do whatever you want." Luis looked around. There was no one else in the store. He chose this time of night, near closing, because no one shopped except in an emergency. "Come on, let's get this done."

1310

Santiago dropped the pad. A broom stood in a corner. He grabbed it and headed for the front of the small grocery store. Luis followed him, banks of fluorescent lights humming overhead. Santiago used the broom to push the security camera watching the register and door up so that its new view was the ceiling, then checked the metal and half glass door, turned the latch with his shirt, flipped the sign from open to closed, and dropped the shades. Only then did Luis approach the counter.

1315

The boy behind the counter looked at Santiago and Luis. He was one of Hashim's sons. He spoke with a middle-eastern accent. The boy was a little taller than Luis, but thinner. Santiago could see there was no muscle under his short-sleeved shirt. While he maintained his composure, Santiago could tell he was uncomfortable. "Can I help you, sir?"

“Where’s Hashim?” Luis laid the beer on the counter and grabbed a couple of bags of Cheetos.

1320 “He is in the back.” Santiago figured the boy was only a couple of years younger than himself, maybe still in high school. He had seen him in the store before, but it was usually Hashim who closed up at night. One of his sons might be sweeping or straightening shelves, but they were seldom alone in the store and never behind the counter.

Luis looked back at Santiago and he could see that smile on the smaller man’s face. That smile meant trouble. “Well, why don’t you ring me up? Give me a carton of camels regular and cash this check.”

1325 “We don’t cash checks.” This was the wrong thing to say. The enforcer knew Luis was going to enjoy the next few minutes even if he didn’t. There was too much about it that could cause problems, the biggest being that this was one of Sanchez’s collections, not Luis’s.

The boy reached under the counter and produced the Camels. He went to scan the barcode, but Luis grabbed the little red-eyed box from the counter, “That’s not the right box.
1330 Look again.”

“Yes sir.” The boy was scared. Luis’s tone was not a kind one. It was full of the menace and venom he used on the streets. While he was small, no one could ever mistake Luis as weak. He turned to look at Santiago and gave a small nod. Andre shook his head. Luis glared at him, narrowing his eyes, anger showing in them.

1335 The boy stood back up, a different box in his hands. “This one sir?”

“No, you stupid little fuck.” Luis turned and grabbed the boy’s wrist pulling him across the counter and sending Bic lighters, Wrigley’s gum, and little bottles of 5-Hour Energy Shots to

the floor. Santiago pushed the wooden handle of the broom into the shelf just in front of him and began shoving bottles of ketchup, mustard, pickles, and relish onto the hard linoleum.

1340 Several broke into a sticky mess, oozing and bleeding on the floor.

“Please, I’ll look, I’ll look again.” The boy shook, his eyes were wild with fear. Luis twisted the captive wrist upward stopping any further protest.

“It’s just one carton,” Luis pushed the wrist back with each word causing the boy to wince in pain and fall to the floor. The boy began sifting through the cigarette cartons, pulling
1345 them out on the floor, frantically looking for something, anything. Luis nodded again to Santiago and he cleared another shelf spilling banana peppers, chili peppers, and jalapenos into the condiment soup below.

“No, no, stop.” The voice drew both the Perdidos attention to the back of the store where Hashim had come through swinging doors. He was as tall as his son and pudgy, waving
1350 his hands in front of him, fear in his face. “You don’t come today. It is Wednesday. You come Friday.”

“Yeah, Hashim? We come when we need to, not when you want us to. Maybe we come Friday too.” Luis gave him one of his feral smiles that even the Santiago found disturbing.

Hashim moved behind the counter stepping on and over cartons to check on his son,
1355 “Mehrdod, are you all right?”

“Yes, I am all right.”

Hashim looked across to Luis. He was angry. “You do not do this to my store, to my family.”

1360 “We do what we want.” Luis turned his head to Santiago and nodded. Santiago shook his head, but Luis narrowed his eyes. He was in a mean mood, as he usually was. The enforcer set the broom on the top shelf and swept the bread and buns on the floor on top of the gooey green, red, and yellow mess.

Luis returned his attention to Hashim, “This is your fault. You need to teach little Mehrdod how to do this.”

1365 “It is not Friday.”

“I don’t give a fuck what day it is, Hashim. It is today and today is payday. How about you pay me for our trouble? We had to drag ourselves from some important business to see you. That should be worth something?” The force of Luis’s anger and the volume of his voice shut off any further protest.

1370 Santiago clenched his jaw as he let his eyes drop to the ground and the groceries that lay there. He raised his eyes back up to the scene in front of him, “Luis.”

“Shut up!” Luis shot a silencing glare with his shout.

“Okay, okay. I pay you. Just let me . . . just give me . . . hold on, I’ll just . . .” Hashim was fumbling with his keys to open the cash register drawer.

1375 “No.” Hashim stopped, unsure of what to do. Luis’s voice dropped to an even more frightening controlled tenor. His down-turned head hooding his eyes, holding Hashim’s gaze like a snake. “Our boy Mehrdod needs to learn how it is done. Ring me up, let me pay for my beer and cigarettes, and cash my check.”

Hashim nodded. He was shaking with fear, which exaggerated the simple gesture and 1380 made him fumble the carton of Camels. Luis pushed the scanner back to its place on the

counter as he smiled at Santiago with a wink. Santiago hated how easily Luis could turn it on and off, the rage and the playfulness, but there was always that underlying anger in everything, just waiting to explode.

1385 When Hashim handed the bills to Luis, Luis had to take his hand in order to still it. He did not count the money, but Santiago could tell it was more than enough. Luis pulled a brown bag from his jacket, put the money in it, and slid it inside the bag with the cigarettes.

1390 “Thank you, Hashim.” Luis started slowly heading to the door. Santiago went to unlock it and open it, then to slip through to make sure everything was clear. Luis stopped in the opening, “Hashim, you might want to lock up. Can’t tell who might be around. And Hashim, Mehrdod is growing up to be a handsome young man. You should teach him how to cash checks. Not knowing could be bad for his health.”

1395 Luis’s laugh carried them out the door. Santiago heard the latch turn and the bar being dropped into place. While he walked in silence with Luis, Santiago could hear the boy and his father yelling at each other. They walked a few blocks saying nothing. At the end of the block just before Luis’s tenement, Santiago grabbed the smaller man’s arm and turned him around, almost sending the Coronas to the ground.

“What’s your fucking problem? We don’t do things that way.”

“Maybe we should, Santi, maybe it is time we stepped things up and quit this small time shit. Maybe it is time we got some respect.”

1400 “We have respect, Angelo . . .”

“Is dead, you stupid son-of-a-bitch. His way got him killed. The Bloods took him out because he was weak. He was just as . . .” A noise down the alley stopped him. Santiago narrowed his eyes trying to make it out. It was a girl stumbling around in the dark.

1405 “Here Santi, hold these.” Luis handed him bag with the carton of Camels and started walking down to her. Santiago was furious. He hung back just inside the alley, in the shadows watching. He knew it was a mistake. He could make the girl out a little, small and thin, very thin. She could barely hold herself up, walking as though she was drunk, slowly coming out to the street, her feet scrapping along the pavement. Luis met her before she had taken more than a few steps.

1410 “Well, what do we have here? You look a little lost, chica.” Santiago didn’t like the sound in Luis’s voice. He was finding that he didn’t like it a lot these days, his voice, his attitude, his abuse. The girl had a brown bag in her hand that Santiago could just make out. It was unmistakable as anything except a bottle of liquor.

“Luis,” Santiago called, but Luis ignored him.

1415 “Maybe we help you find your way.” Luis took her arm in his free one and pulled her to him. He was larger than she was and she didn’t struggle until he tried to kiss her. She turned away. “You don’t want to kiss me?”

“Luis,” Santiago called again, stronger.

1420 “Well, let’s see what you do want to do.” Luis pushed her to the ground. Her bottle clanked against the pavement. He put down the Coronas as his other hand fumbled with his belt.

“Luis,” Santiago slipped the bag in a pocket inside his jacket as he started down the alley. He was seething. Everything seemed to stand still, except Luis. The scrapper knelt and pushed her prone in one motion. She started to squirm as her short skirt went up around her waist. Santiago tried to call again, but Luis was not listening. The girl tried to get away. Luis had her legs pinned under him. As Santiago started to run, Luis pulled at her panties.

“You fucking bitch!” Luis backhanded her; one of her knees must have found a sensitive spot between his legs. Time sped up as Santiago found himself standing over them. His fist caught Luis across the face. A second followed moving the smaller off the girl and onto his back on the pavement.

“What the hell are you doing?” Santiago stepped in between the girl and Luis. The girl scrambled backwards trying to find her feet.

Luis’s grin laughed back at him, “Just having some fun.”

“Fun? You were about to rape her.”

“So what? She’s just a whore.” Luis looked past Santiago.

“I don’t care what she is. You can’t just do that. Even you can’t be that stupid.”

Santiago checked to see if the girl was okay. She had made it out of the alley and was just turning the corner. The look was a mistake.

Luis’s fist came up into his stomach. Another went into his face. Santiago felt the rage grow in him. He struck back sending his friend faltering. His feet kept moving forward with his fists, driving Luis back, scrambling on the ground. Santiago just kept pounding. Luis quit fighting back.

In the background, he could hear something. Then, he blacked out.

Beca

1445

XV

She wasn't sure how she had gotten there, whether it was from some conscious decision, or because she had done it so many times, but she was in the alley looking for the old man. He had been missing for a few days. A bottle lay where he left it the day before. Beca carried another. She had left sandwiches, but feces and tiny marks in the boxes left no question the contents had not made it where intended. Neither had Beca, or had she; she couldn't be sure. The drug haze kept her wondering.

1450

Beca fumbled with the keys. The door had three locks; Billy told her it was safer that way. He made it possible for her to stay here. She paid her rent weekly, or monthly when she could. In the winter, sometimes the gas wouldn't come. In the summer, the electricity would fail, and at anytime the water might stop. Billy always made sure someone got it working. She was glad she had Billy. He had found her wandering the streets, sleeping where she could, or with someone just for the comfort of a bed. She couldn't get the key to go in the lock.

1455

"Beca?" Billy's voice came from the other side of the door. She couldn't respond. She just continued to try to make the key fit the moving lock. There was a click, followed by another, then a third. The door opened, Beca's key still looking for its hole.

1460

"Beca, come in here." Billy pulled her into the apartment, her apartment, the apartment he got her into because she was too young to do it on her own. Her purse found its place on the table, beside Billy's shirt, his belt, his gun. His arms enveloped her. She felt warm, safe, and comfortable. She hugged her lover, trying to reach all the way around him; her hands

1465

did not reach each other. This was where she wanted to be, for the short time he would be there. He always made her feel better, until he left sometime during her sleep.

Her stiletto heel tangled with his large feet. Her weight shifted, but he held her. She just listened to the beat, thump-thump, thump-thump, thump-thump. Beca looked up through
1470 her mental clouds. All she could see were his brown eyes. She smiled. He picked her up and they kissed. His mustache tickled her. Billy carried her to the table and sat her on its edge. The fake wood was cool. Beca thought of the cold, wet concrete.

He smiled, teeth just barely showing, just a touch of coffee stains. Billy kissed her and slowly laid her back. Her jaw tightened. He shouldn't be doing this to her. It wasn't right.

1475 His hand caressed her cheek. Her mind recoiled at the violence, the back of the hand striking her face, and she felt the urge to bite it, but didn't. She decided when she screwed someone, not them.

Billy pushed her skirt up and she smiled at him wanting him as much as he wanted her. Then she felt the need to kick him away. That evil grin looked at her from where it could not
1480 have been on Billy's face. He unbuttoned his pants and unzipped and she could hear a belt chink against the pavement. She struggled to free herself. He was pressed against her knees, imprisoning them.

Billy's protective hands tugged at her panties. Black eyes narrowed on hers, cold, unfeeling, cruel. She flailed, her hands went wide to find any escape, her knee came up and he
1485 went backwards, his hands reflexively covering as her feet came up kicking to protect herself. Beca's hand found something cool. She pulled at it; it was heavy as if her hand had become

something other than her hand. She looked at him and did not know him. She did not know how she got there, was it out of habit? She had done it so many times she wasn't sure.

1490 She embraced the weight in one hand, and then brought it to the other. His eyes widened with shock, with fear.

Billy's hands came up as his mouth shouted something she could not hear. She only knew he would not rape her. No one would ever rape her again. She closed her eyes as she pulled the trigger.

1495

Beca

XVI

“So next year you get to go to the big school.”

“But my friends aren’t going.” She looked out the window at the houses floating along the road. Beca wanted to attend Townsend High School, the performing arts magnet school.

1500

She wanted to be an actor and it provided the training she needed to reach her dream. Her father had only given in as long as she kept up a “B” average, something she barely managed through the eighth grade. Her father had not sheltered her, he always said she had to make her own mistakes, but he was watchful, he was always there when she needed him.

1505

“You’ll see them after school, and you’ve got the summer.” He smiled at her. Everyone loved her dad. Her friends always came over to their house. When her father came home from work, he’d always order pizza and laugh with them, listening to their stories and if they wanted, he took them to the mall. “How about some ice cream? Would that make you feel better?”

1510

“Sure.” She said it half-heartedly and she could see his face as she turned to him. There was sadness in it he tried to hide from her, but she had seen it. She saw it more often the last year as she started hanging out more with her friends and less at home. Puberty had hit and she and her friends spent more time watching boys who were eager to give the girls their attention. Her dad was still her best friend, but he kept saying he wished her mother were still here, she would know what to do. She did too. There were some things she couldn’t talk to her dad about.

1515

Sweat crawled over the goose bumps, down her arms around the almost translucent blond hair. She tried to hold her body in one place, but her tremors continued. Her face was clenched, her teeth, her eyes, everything trying to block out the world, trying to stay in that safe place long ago, before. She could never stay there long.

1520 It was only when she stopped trying to hold herself that she realized someone else was holding her. She pushed her arms out from her body, they wouldn't move. He held her. She felt like a trapped butterfly stuck in a cocoon too small to spread her wings and fly to the heavens. She wanted to fly. She loved flying. It made her forget. But something held her, someone held her. Beca looked up. Billy was looking down at her, his dark eyes wept, chasing
1525 the chilling sweat down her skin. She tried to reach out and found herself frozen, unable to escape his hold.

 He had done this to her. He kept her here. Every time she tried to escape, he was there. Yesterday, today, tomorrow, he would always be there stopping her, keeping her from leaving, preventing her from flying away from her pain. Now he had tried . . . she thought he
1530 had tried . . . it had to be him, didn't it? She didn't know anymore.

 She tried to wrench away as vomit retched from her stomach. His hold loosened as bile and remnants of yesterday stained his pants and the pathetic carpet. Just more stains she thought, just more stains.

 Beca swung an elbow backward. He had let loose. She caught him in the neck. Her
1535 nails dug in the carpet trying to claw freedom out of puke and filth. Her hand shook as she vomited again, she couldn't stop, it just kept coming, she could not see anymore, just heard the retching over and over with every convulsion, and the words, "No, no, no . . ."

Billy went to the sink. She heard the cabinet open and the water run. She ran for the door.

1540

“No. This is not going to happen.”

“But Daddy, it’s only a couple.”

“The deal was nothing lower than a ‘B.’”

“But it’s only . . .”

1545

“I said no.” He had that look in his eyes. It had started replacing the other one. She wished the other one would come back, with it; she knew she could get what she wanted. This one was different. There was no bargaining with this one.

“Can we get . . .?”

1550

“No, no ice cream.” They stopped at a red light and he looked at her, face clenched, jaws, brow, everything. “Do you think this is funny? I knew it was a mistake. I knew sending you there was a mistake. Your mother would’ve known better. She would’ve known.”

He had quit invoking her mother. He only did it when he couldn’t think of anything else.

“It’s my fault. I should’ve never You are not going back next semester. You’re going to your regular school.”

1555

“You can’t. My friends . . .”

“You spend too much time with them. Late rehearsals, boys, parties, and no wonder your grades are It’s done. You’re not going.”

“God I hate you. Why couldn’t you have died instead of Mom?” It was too late. She couldn’t stop the words from coming. They were already out. She hadn’t meant to say it. She
1560 hadn’t meant to think it. It wasn’t true.

He closed his eyes as he waited for the light, just for a moment. He didn’t hold them tight, just closed them. She wanted to say she was sorry, to take it back. But she didn’t know how. He just sat there, his eyes closed. The moment was frozen.

A car honked its horn. The light had turned green.

1565

Michael

XVII

The air felt nice. It was cool, LA still being in the spring. The mugginess from the heat had started during the daytime, but the nights were still enjoyable. The humidity from the rain a few days earlier had dissipated. There were still joggers and walkers about; they would be until after ten and one or two brave ones would run after that. It was Thursday, so people would pass through the lit walkways and paths where the police still patrolled between Riverbend and Northwood back to Parkside coming home from a club, or a late shift at work, or diner. They wouldn't come to where Michael stood, too close to the worn out parts of the city begging for renewal but too broken for anyone to really care.

The spring night brought a couple of customers, but his dealers' regulars were not returning in the numbers he had hoped. Michael shouldered his backpack. Derek had not given him as much as he expected and what was supplied was more meth than crack. That meant a different set of customers. Selling meth to three or four junkies would spread the word and business would pick up. He knew how the system worked.

Michael smiled and was aware of it, an inside joke, a couple of runners go under the footbridge, temporarily out of sight and then reappear on the other side. There were always people running. He watched them disappear around a bend. A kid came from where they vanished, shuffling and alone. Michael wondered at the kid being in the park at this hour. The dealer watched as the youth came up the path, walking side-to-side like a wave trapped in a tube with the edges of the running path providing the boundaries. Obviously, the kid was drunk.

He watched her come closer, he could make out that it was a girl now, thin and gaunt, looking more like a walking corpse under the yellow lights than a human being. He knew she would be coming to him, another junkie wanting to make their death-like outer skin reality. As she came up the other side of the footbridge, he could make her out in the lamplight. He recognized the signs of a crack-whore. He'd be happy to sell to her, he needed the money to prove to Derek that his distribution problems weren't as bad as they seemed and that he didn't need Luis.

She stopped and looked at him. There was nothing in her eyes. He thought she must be already stoned and looking for the next fix, which meant she had started coming down. She was just bones draped with skin. They looked at each other for a long moment, then she started to shuffle toward him again.

"You shouldn't be out here. This isn't a good place for you."

"Where's KC?" her voice was shaky and barely more than a whisper. There was no life in it. If there had been any other sound, he couldn't have heard her.

"Couldn't make it tonight." KC was Michael's dealer in the park. He had been picked up like everyone else. Michael knew then that he was right about her and waited a few seconds as she tried to process the information.

"I need a rock."

"I might be able to help with that. You got something for me." He stepped a little closer as she thought about it. She looked sick at the thought, sicker that she already did. A slow shake of her head confirmed his suspicion. "I can't give you anything for nothing."

Michael turned away and started walking back to his spot, just inside the light at the end
1610 of the bridge. He never made it as he found himself painfully facedown against in the dirt and
gravel.

“I’m going to kill you, you son-of-a-bitch.” The voice was on top of him, a deep baritone;
his attacker’s weight pressed him down.

Michael pushed hard against the ground rolling his assailant off him and scrambled,
1615 rolling the other way trying to get a look at whoever it was. “What’s your fucking problem?”

“It’s because of you that she’s like this.” The guy was built like a linebacker.

“I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.” He lied and moved back as he got to
his feet. His assailant moved toward him as he stood up.

“You son-of-a . . .” He charged. Michael prepared for it like when he played football in
1620 high school, but he was never very good, barely made the varsity team, always hot headed. He
hit the ground on his back, the air exploded out of him, pressed between the solid ground and
the hard muscle pushing him down.

He tried to yell but a hand grabbed his throat as another hit his face. He lost count of
the number of times. Blood flowed from his nose and he could taste the copper from a busted
1625 lip. His left eye was already swelling shut. The iron-like fist just kept coming.

Then it stopped.

He heard another voice, two voices. They could have been male or female, he couldn’t
be sure anymore, but he was glad they were there. The weight lifted off his chest, but his legs
were still pinned. Michael could see the blurry image framed by the light behind him. There

1630 was the glint of a gun, not pointed at him, but pointed at the two runners he had seen a few minutes before.

It took all of his strength, but Michael threw him off again and the linebacker tumbled onto the stairs and down to the running path under the footbridge.

“Are you all right?”

1635 “I’ll call 9-1-1.” They were coming over to him, but his only thought was to get away. He rolled over. The pain was almost unbearable. He worried about his ribs. His chest burned. Blood dripped to the ground. Obscenities climbed from below and he looked over to the steps. Michael knew his time was limited.

1640 Michael managed to get his feet under him and started as best he could to get into the shadows between the trees, out of the light; the calls of the runners behind him, the sound of the linebacker cursing as he came back up the steps. This was Michael’s park. No one knew it like he did.

Michael heard the shots and felt the bullets at the same time.

1645

Santiago

XVIII

1650

1655

“Santiago Rodriguez, you’re free to go.” The cop’s deep voice echoed off the concrete walls and floor as he came through the steel doorway. Santiago could tell he didn’t really care. To them, he was just another street punk revolving through the system, at least that’s how they made him feel. He had gone through booking, having his fingers scanned into some computer, his picture taken, his shoelaces, belt, everything in his pockets removed and given over to some other complacent cop behind a half-door. He was put into a cell with a couple of other prisoners and just left there. Hours ticked by and others were put in with him, others were taken out. He didn’t speak to anyone. He had never been arrested, never been in jail. The feeling was one he did not want to experience and he decided he would not experience it again.

1660

He had recognized the two cops that brought him in from Winston’s. Luis called them the worst kind of cops, but would never say anything else. He just told Santiago to stay away from them. Luis was always telling Santiago what to do. He really didn’t mind, except when Luis was in a mean mood. That was all the time now. Tonight was the last of it for Santiago. All the things he had let go, all the things Luis had forced him to do, came to him. He wasn’t the person Angelo had wanted him to be. Angelo didn’t want him in the gang, and now he felt that he and Luis had become the worst kind of street trash.

1665

His jaw clenched, eyes narrowed looking down on a dirty sidewalk he didn’t see, his feet carried him somewhere as his hands held his possessions shoved into his pockets. They gave everything back to him, everything except the bag Luis had given him. He didn’t really care.

The money in it was essentially stolen. Luis smoked, not Santiago. He was happy to be rid of it, and to be away from Luis. Ever since his brother was murdered, Santiago's life had become a series of hurting people and extorting money. He thought this was what he was supposed to do. It was his place. And Luis told him when and where.

Santiago had been walking for hours, not in the normal places. Actually, he didn't know where he was walking; just that it was in the LOL. The LOL wasn't that large of an area, several square blocks, but it was enough that if someone wanted to get lost, they could. He felt like he had walked the entire territory, except where Luis might have been. He avoided the alley next to Luis's apartment. That was where it had happened, where he and Luis started walking different paths. He avoided Winston's. It was too early for the cops to be there, but it was their place, their hold-up in the LOL. Now that he was in the system, it felt different. He hadn't thought about it before, but they were the enemy. They were the loss of freedom.

He made sure he stayed away from Hashim's. Santiago closed his eyes and sighed as he thought about it. His heart sank into his chest feeling like a cavity was left vacant where his life should have been. His life was not what he had wanted, not what Angelo had wanted for him, but what Luis made him. And Luis hurt that kid, Hashim's son, for no reason. It was not the right day. Hashim had always been cooperative. It was in his best interest. The Perdidos kept the Bloods out, which also meant the violence. But Luis brought the violence to Hashim just because he had been in a bad mood. He hurt Mehrdod just because he wanted to.

Santiago's feet stopped. He looked up at the run-down building. A three-story brick apartment building could have been any of a dozen run-down tenements. The sun reflected off

the windows, starburst eyes winked at him waiting for him to move. He smiled. He recognized the building. It was the Perdidos's. Sanchez was here. They needed to talk.

1690

"I don't care what you and Luis do as long as it don't come back on the Perdidos, but this is too much Santi." Sanchez had a medium build, and Mexican dark skin and black hair. He was watching television on the couch when the enforcer came in. Three other gang members were lounging about the room, but now they were on their feet behind Sanchez. Sanchez's face was inches away and below Santiago's.

1695

The apartment was a two-bedroom in better condition than Luis's, but not like what he imagined the ones in Parkside looked like. "But this is Perdidos business and you had no right to go into Hashim's."

"I know . . ."

1700

"I don't fucking care what you know. I've let a lot of shit go in the past year because of Angelo, but you've changed Santi, you're as bad as Luis." Sanchez pointed his finger into the bigger man's face.

"It's just . . ." Santiago started backing up, his hands in front of him like a shield.

"We protect the LOL, not feed off of it. We have respect because we keep all the crap the other gangs would bring in. That's what your brother fought for, what he died for. And you and Luis are bringing it in. That's it Santi, I'm done with you."

1705

Sanchez waved a hand in Santiago's direction. The big man winced. The other three Perdidos came up. Two of them grabbed his arms while the third let into his stomach and ribs.

When they were done with the body, they turned to his face until he could barely be
1710 recognized as Santiago. Sanchez just watched.

“Enough. Strip him.” They pulled his jacket off his arms leaving him standing there in a
t-shirt and jeans holding his mid-section.

“It’s only because of Angelo that your walking out of here. Get the fuck out, and tell Luis
that I don’t want to see either of you in the LOL.”

1715

Andre

XIX

He stilled himself before putting the key in the lock. She was going to be mad. She always was. But Thad was right; he didn't spend enough time at home. He didn't spend
1720 enough time with his children. It wasn't that he didn't want to; he just had other things to do. Andre knew that wasn't true. It was the excuse he gave himself so he wouldn't have to be home. He enjoyed being with his kids when he could tear them away from the TV, away from the Wii, playing video games all the time. Thad was always able to get them out in the backyard, but Andre just didn't have the knack for it. Other things kept running through his
1725 mind, things like Dunk, and other people he helped here and there with a little pocket money, a meal, just someone to talk to. They were important to him. He was more important to them.

"Where'd you go?" Edie was on her knees by one of the flower beds. Every spring she planted new tulips to replace the pansy that survived the winter.

"I had some things to take care of." Andre walked over to stand behind her.

1730 "What things?"

"Just stuff to do." He knew where this was going. The conversation repeated every time he had a day off.

"There's stuff to do here. Maybe with the kids?"

1735 "It couldn't wait." Andre watched her as she put down the small spade and turned to face him.

"It never can. This is exactly why I didn't want you to be a cop. You never have time for your family. I never know when you're going to be home. The kids would like to have a father."

“Edie, it’s my job.” He looked at her. Her skin was a little lighter than his. Her grandfather had immigrated from Mexico and worked in Texas as a day-laborer and married a young black girl ten years younger. Her mother moved to Los Angeles where she met Edie’s father. Shortly after they were married, Edie was born. Her parents doted on her. They were close. Family was important to her.

“Why can’t you be more like Thad. At least he comes over to play with Sam and Angie.” Andre thought believed Edie secretly wished she had married Thad before he became a priest.

“Do we have to do this now?” It was always a fight with Edie. They hadn’t been happy for about three years. She hadn’t wanted him to be a cop. In college, he majored in social work and she was fine with him working at the local shelter and Boys and Girl Club. She was proud that he wanted to help those who needed someone. It took up a lot of his time, but he was doing something for the community and he still had time for his son Sam. Sam was only two then and it took very little to make him happy. Edie was pregnant with Angie.

“Why couldn’t you just stay with social work. You were happy helping the kids at the shelter.” When he decided to apply for the police academy, they argued for weeks, months. Thad had been against it too. Edie had said she didn’t want her children to grow up without a father, but Andre didn’t feel that was likely. His father had been a cop and he died in an accident with a drunk driver while off-duty.

His father hadn’t wanted Andre to join the force either. Andre respected his father and brother and held off applying to the Academy, attending college instead. When he finally applied after his father’s accident, all he could say was that it was something he had to do, something to be closer to his father, to honor his memory.

1760 “Sam and Angie were looking for you at lunch.”

“I told you, I had to see Thad.” He was tired of this argument.

“That was three hours ago.” She turned back to her planting “It would have been nice if you had called.”

1765 “I was busy.” Andre looked up at the sky. Clouds floated overhead. Birds sang in the trees.

“Did you eat”

“I stopped at Winston’s.”

“I hate that place. You eat more there than you do here.”

1770 Andre looked at her as she turned around, watched her make a decision and stood up, eyes creased in anger. Her voice was flat and tense, “I’m going to clean up. Can you at least put the pine straw around the trees?” She didn’t look back as she walked into the house. He stood there debating whether he wanted to help out, or get back in the car.

Dunk

1775

XX

He was still sitting in the corner when they brought a plate of food. The priest, and another, tried to talk to him, but he wasn't hearing even though their colors washed and skipped through his vision. It had been days; maybe weeks since he ate solid food, since his angel last visited him. In the hospital, his veins sucked in his body's needs, well, most of them.

1780

He wanted whiskey, bourbon, rum, vodka, anything that brought numbness and silence. He knew that wouldn't come, not here.

It was quiet here. There was a gentle rustle whenever one of the priests moved through the hall. The rustling brought the visions, faint phantoms of his alley. The quiet gave him peace, but the peace scared him. He was alone.

1785

They fed him twice before the sun went down outside the window. It wasn't a direct sunlight, but it was enough as he had watched the cross-upon-a-cross slip across the floor, just eight panes of failing light until they became shadows hiding in the darkness of night. Dunk had claimed a corner between the bed and a desk. His back conformed to the angle as he watched the setting sun.

1790

He had drifted off into sleep; a dead sleep.

Dunk remained there, in a right angle as the moon-sign retraced its counterpart's path, watching him sleep, collecting dust like the unused linens on the bed. Dreams finally came, to him nightmares.

1795 He had woken up screaming, still in his corner. The door opened and the black priest came in, his voice rushed and concerned a full piercing splash of color across his vision, “What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

Dunk looked up at him. He seemed different out of his robes. Dunk didn’t see the priest, but a man wearing pajama bottoms and a t-shirt. It made Dunk more comfortable.

“I heard you scream. Is everything all right?” The man came closer, Thad.

1800 Dunk wanted to sink into the shadows of his corner.

“It’s all right. I know about withdrawals.” He watched as the priest sat on the bed.

“You can talk to me, about anything.”

1805 He just looked at the priest, tall, muscular. He could’ve been intimidating, but his voice, his movements were slow and gentle. Dunk wanted to say something, anything. He couldn’t remember the last time his voice escaped from his lips, not since he began drinking to silence his demons.

“Dunk, I know that’s not your name. I am in the room next door. If you need to talk, knock on my door, or on the wall. I’m just on the other side.”

1810 Thad looked at him, pursed his lips, stood up, and left the way he came. As the door closed, Dunk looked at the moon panes on the wall. He wished he could crawl through them, a prisms looking glass to somewhere shadowed in his memory.

Michael

XXI

1815 Michael didn't know how long he laid there, his right shoulder felt like it was exploding. His leg flew out from under him sending him tumbling at awkward angles. They burned and ached worse than anything he could remember. His face twisted in pain as he tried to get up. He was sure he heard footsteps running up behind him. The bastard was coming to finish him off.

1820 "There's been a shooting." It wasn't the linebacker voice; it was a woman's, "The footbridge in Heritage Park."

"Just stay there. We're calling 9-1-1." A man knelt down beside him.

"The one over the running path."

1825 "Are you okay?" Michael thought it was a stupid question. Could this guy not see he had been shot? "Just stay there. It's probably best if you don't try to move."

"They said to try to stop the bleeding." He heard the woman's feet on the dirt and gravel path coming closer. Michael didn't look at them. He kept his eyes closed against the pain. He started to feel cold.

1830 "How long until they get here?" They were pressing something against him. He could feel the pressure on his back, but he couldn't feel what it was.

"Five minutes." Her voice was soft, almost trying to whisper. His head pounded so hard he almost missed her words.

"He's bleeding a lot."

1835 “Try the front. Did the bullets go through?” Her voice started to fade. Michael started to drift.

Searing pain brought him back as the man lifted his shoulder and turned him to get a look at where the bullets came out. Michael didn’t want to know. The pain was enough. Feeling left his body taking consciousness with it.

1840 He remembered hearing a siren, first just a whisper and then climbing to a scream. Everything after that was hazy. There were vague lights, floating voices, and pain. It came and went; mostly it came. Then there was nothing.

1845 Michael didn’t remember setting the alarm on the digital clock beside his bed. It sounded far away, and slow, and the tone was wrong. Michael started to lift his arm to turn off the alarm. Michael cried out as his muscles screamed. He knew where he was.

He’d kill that son-of-a-bitch if he ever found him.

A nurse came into the room. “Is everything all right?”

Michael did not answer. He tried to sit up which was followed by another cry of pain.

1850 “Don’t try to move. You’ll pull the stitches.” She came closer to look at his bandaged right shoulder. “Let me have a look at that.”

She checked under the bandage. “That looks fine. Try not to move it.”

“What the fuck happened? Where am I?”

“St. Mary’s Hospital. The doctor will come in in a bit.”

1855 Michael felt his face with his the hand of the uninjured arm. His left eye was still swollen and his nose bandaged. He tried to settle down, but he was pissed off. He didn't know his attacker. He hadn't known the crack-whore. There was no reason for it.

He remembered his backpack. It was lost in the scuffle. He had it when he ran away. Derek was going to be pissed off. Michael had no way to come up with the money to replace
1860 the drugs, to convince Derek that he had sold them and restore his faith. What if someone had found them? What if cops had found the backpack? He had to get out of here and find it.

"Mr. Hartman, I'm Detective Hicks, this is Detective Walsh. We'd like to ask you a few questions." Two men walked into the room wearing slacks, ties, and jackets. Michael looked out the window on the other side of the room, opposite the door. The cops came over to his
1865 bed and looked back at the nurse, "Can we have some privacy please."

After the nurse left and pulled the curtain, Hicks leaned in closer, "We need to talk. Do you know who shot you?"

1870

Beca

XXII

1875

Billy had stayed with her for days, stopping her from leaving her squalid apartment, forcing her to eat, bathing her, cleaning up her vomit, and watching her shake and sleep. When she was awake, she screamed at him, wanting the drug, and he refused to give it to her. She hated him, wanted to kill him, but she had no strength. She could barely walk and standing up took all of her energy.

1880

The water had turned cold. Billy had put her in the shower to soothe her cold sweats. It did little to make her feel better. She had vomited several times and it went down the drain, not that there was anything in her stomach. It was just blood and bile. Billy had carried her back to the apartment and put her in the tub. She was just barely there, unable to control her body, blood trickling from her nose. Every part of her body hurt. Her tears were invisible as they washed down the drain.

1885

“I can’t do this anymore. I can’t keep taking care of you if you won’t even try.” Billy was sitting on the toilet. She watched him. He just as he sat there holding his head in his hands. He wouldn’t even look at her. She wanted to die and knew he felt the same way. “Do you know what kind of trouble I can get in? Do you have any idea what I did tonight? I can’t fucking do this anymore.”

1890

She wasn’t really listening. She heard him through the droning shower rain, but she couldn’t focus, she couldn’t bring her mind together. There was too much racing through her head, a whirlwind of thoughts too frantic to pull one out of the frenzy, and there was nothing at the same time, just noise.

“If you want to kill yourself, go ahead. I won’t stop you. You can do whatever the fuck you want. I won’t be here. Just go ahead.”

She wanted to say something, but couldn’t bring her mouth to utter anything.

1895 “If I ever see that son-of-a-bitch again, I’ll kill him. This ends now.” He was almost shouting. She winced as if he had raised his hand to hit her. He had hit her before, in the alley, hadn’t he? She wasn’t sure. Billy always took care of her. But he had shot at her, she thought, maybe. She couldn’t bring it into focus. She couldn’t be sure what was real and what wasn’t.

1900 “You’re getting help.” Billy stood up from the toilet and looked at her for a moment, then walked out. She tried to follow him. Her muscles hurt, her body ached, she couldn’t stop shaking. She knew she he was leaving her to die. Her body tensed as she vomited and watched it as it swirled in the drain.

Andre

1905

XXIII

It took some time to find a place to park. Matthews had called around three pissing Edie off. She told him to sleep on the couch when he came back.

1910 Matthews needed help, but wouldn't say anything else. Andre had never heard Matthews sound nervous. His heavy baritone voice lacked its usual bravado. The address he gave was in the LOL, on Hancock. Andre was familiar with it. Hancock was always lined with cars.

1915 It was almost four in the morning and there were people moving about. Some were coming home, others heading out to work. He and Matthews should be sleeping. Their two-to-midnight shift was going to take a toll tomorrow. In the two years he had been with Matthews, he had never called him for help like this. Andre was worried. This neighborhood was in their precinct so he knew it well, and it wasn't one of the best.

1920 He walked up the four flights of stairs. Half of the lights didn't work. The other half were low wattage so he walked in low light and no light. The walls needed paint. Some places were spackled and others still had holes. The threadbare carpet was stained and frayed, and the whole place smelled musty.

Andre found the door. The door had several locks and when he knocked, he heard each one unlock. Matthews opened the door. "Andre, good, you're here."

"Where have you been the last few days?"

1925 Matthews didn't answer. His partner let Andre into the room. It was a mess. A cheap dining table was broken. Chairs were scattered. No cleaning had occurred in a very long time.

The smell was disgusting, food, must, mildew, and smells he couldn't identify. His lip curled under his nose.

"What's wrong?" Andre set his disgust aside, struggling to subdue his nausea.

1930 "In here." Matthews led him to the bathroom. A girl was in the shower, her clothes still on. She was thin, too thin. She looked familiar. Andre moved toward her automatically.

"What's wrong with her?"

"Crack withdrawal. I found her on Hancock." Matthews came up to stand behind his partner as Andre started pulling her out of the shower. She was shaking, wet, and cold.

"She looks familiar." Andre looked back at Matthews.

1935 "Um, yeah, she comes into Winston's."

"Do you know her name?" Andre picked her up in his arms. She weighed almost nothing.

"Beca."

1940 Andre turned his attention to the girl, "Beca, we're going to take you to the hospital. You're going to be fine."

"No hospitals."

"She needs medical attention." Andre half-turned to look at Matthews.

"No hospitals." Matthews's eyes were hard and sad at the same time. Andre knew there would be no reasoning with him.

1945 "What do we do with her?"

It took Matthews a few minutes to answer, "Didn't your brother used to work with addicts?"

“Yeah, why?”

1950 “You took that drunk Dunk to him. Couldn’t he help her?” Andre knew what Matthews was asking.

“She should go to the hospital.”

1955 “I don’t know Andre. I had to fight to get Dunk in. The Monsignor was against it.” The priest leaned down to look at the girl Matthews had laid in one of the back pews. The cop sat beside her.

“Thad, she needs help. You’ve dealt with this before.” Andre knew his brother wanted to help. He could see the familiar concern on his face, the softness of his voice, even his body language echoed the priest’s internal struggle. “If we had any alternative, you know I would take it.”

1960 “I found her on the streets, Father. She has nowhere to go.” Matthews looked at the priest. Andre wondered at his partner’s concern. He was seeing an entirely different side of Matthews, a side he hadn’t seen in the three years they had known each other.

“All right, I’ll see what I can do.” Thad looked at Matthews and at his brother. “Let’s get her into one of the dorm rooms.”

1965

Dunk

XXIV

The only time he moved was when the priest came in to clean him up. The room smelled of his waste. He had soiled the clothes from the hospital and all of the clothes he had been dressed in. The priest, in his soft blue voice, tried to get him to use the toilet, but it was somewhere down the hall. Going there would have meant leaving the safety of his corner. From there, he could see everything in the room.

Every time the priest brought food or came to talk, he brought a bucket. If Dunk was washed, the floor was scrubbed too. For those brief moments, he stood in the paned light of the window, warming himself, saving himself against the darkness he knew was coming. Then he returned to the shadows. He knew his demons would find him.

He tried not to sleep, to keep the dreams away, the nightmares. Before he was here, wherever here was, whenever before was, he drowned the nightmares and the visions, the dancing colors of madness, in whatever drink he could find, whatever drink he was given. He missed his alley, and his demons. He was safe there. For as long as he could remember, he was safe. His demons were his burden, for something he had done, in a time before.

The priest called him Dunk whenever he came in. He could recall others calling him that, but couldn't remember their faces, only their colors. He knew it wasn't his name. His name was something else. Dunk was lost in the corners of his mind, unable to come into his own light, only able to rest in the light of others.

He saw the steps of the priest before he heard them. It was always that way, the colors preceding the sounds. They remained after the sounds had left. They came closer, and

stronger. A familiar green joined them. They mixed with an unknown red. Dunk thought of the window in the setting sun, crawling across the floor like blood. It came towards him every night. He watched it from his corner holding his legs and feet back, keeping the blood away. He felt there was too much blood on his hands.

There was a pulse. He shuddered when it came again, an erratic ghost of a beat in front of him. It was soft, barely visible against the black night of his room. Dunk knew he slept. He only saw her in his sleep. But he felt his arm lift as he tried to touch the light in front of him. She had come for him; it was time. He didn't want to live anymore. He didn't want to remember what he had forgotten. Then she was gone, and he cried.

Santiago

XXV

2000 Santiago spent a week trying to avoid the normal places. He held up in the basement of a tenement, venturing out just to steal food. His face was still bruised, his ribs hurt. He was sure a couple were broken. For the first time, he knew what it felt like to be on the other side of his fist. If they found him, it would be worse.

 He thought about Luis. It was his fault. He convinced Santiago each time he beat
2005 someone that it was necessary. The enforcer wondered how many of them were just because Luis liked hurting people, liked watching people bleed. He always took whatever money they had, jewelry, watches; whatever had any value. None of it counted to their debt and Santiago was sure some of them had no debt. They were just in the wrong place when Luis got in one of his mean moods. He hated Luis. He hated himself.

2010 Luis turned on Angelo. For a year since his brother's death, Santiago listened to his friend talk about how Angelo brought the Perdidos respect. He kept saying that the Perdidos protected the community from other gangs, especially the Bloods who wanted to bring drugs and guns into the LOL. Angelo kept that from happening. Luis said that Santiago should lead the Perdidos, not Sanchez. Sanchez was weak. Sanchez didn't know how to get things done.
2015 Together, Santiago and Luis could make the gang strong enough that the Bloods wouldn't cross into their territory. And for this, all the shop owners paid. It was better and cheaper than paying for their stores being trashed. Angelo had started that, but he never broke anything.

 He knew he wasn't a leader and didn't want to be one. Sanchez had held the gang together after over the past year. He organized them, made them strong again and earned

2020 Santiago's respect. Luis must have laughed at Santiago's stupidity, at how easily he was led.
The thought of it pissed him off.

Santiago got to his feet. He wanted air. He wanted to walk off the fire that was starting to burn. He got angry whenever he lost his temper. Thinking of Luis wasn't helping. Santiago wanted to hit something and yet hated it when he did. It hadn't always been this way. Luis
2025 made him this way. That son-of-a-bitch made him forget who he was.

The air outside felt nice on his skin. Spring petals floated through a breeze and he could smell the blossoms. He wished LA could be like this all year. It was still morning, and it helped him forget about Luis and the anger. People walked along the streets going to work or to some store. In this part of the LOL, they could just be walking around to cure the boredom of sitting
2030 at home waiting for life to pass or a check to come. He thought about painting them, about painting the tenements. This was real life in the LOL, not what they watched on TV. He could paint their skin, their emotions, the tragedy, and truth of the people he had tortured and beaten. He felt sorry for them and himself and proud at the same time. The things he had done to them, and yet they persevered. They deserved the petals and the blossoms.

2035 Santiago started walking. He didn't know where he was going. He only knew he had to feel the pavement beneath his feet, to hear the horns honking as the cars stood still in the streets, to smell pizza, spiced beef, and curry. He wanted to be part of the neighborhood, but the LOL despised him, the Perdidos denied him. This was his home and he was no longer welcome.

2040 A radio caught his attention at a newsstand.

. . . Identified as Sanchez Alvarez, the victim was a known member of the Los Perdidos, a gang in the Richardson boroughs of Los Angeles. A spokesperson for the CGA said that evidence at the scene indicates that there may have been a struggle within the gang. Sanchez was believed to have taken control of the Perdidos last year when Angelo Rodriguez was killed in a drive-by shooting.

2045

Santiago closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Sanchez had barely avoided war with the Bloods a year ago. He kept the Perdidos together, now he was dead. Things were about to get tough and with people like Luis, he didn't know if the gang would survive. Santiago felt guilty. They had been a big part of his life. Even if he hadn't wanted to be in the gang, they had become his family. Santiago and Angelo's father died of a stroke when they were kids. Angelo had become Santiago's father as well as his brother. What was important to him was important to Santiago.

2050

Opening his eyes, Santiago walked away from the newsstand. He was sure that everyone was watching him. He quickened his pace wanting to put as much distance between himself and the LOL. The Perdidos would come looking for him. It was time to run away from home.

2055

He didn't see the park as he ran through it. People turned as he ran by and he barely noticed them. He didn't know where he was going; only that he had to be somewhere other than where he was. The beautiful day was gone. The truth of the people forgotten. His ribs hurt as he tried to breathe. Santiago ran out the other side of Heritage Park. He didn't

2060

recognize anything. He had been here before, but nothing looked familiar. He continued to run.

As his feet slowed down, he looked up. St. Jude's Cathedral stood before him. Santiago
2065 hadn't meant to come here, but as he looked up at the stained glass window, he felt safe. Without stopping, he walked through the huge double doors and up the aisle. Sliding into a pew halfway to the pulpit, the Perdido sat down to pray.

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 Project: Novel: *The Lost*

2075 Continuing Story Plot:

Cycles 1 – 5: The first five cycles comprise the first “book” of *The Lost*, in which the major and minor players are introduced told through the POV of the five main characters.

2080 Note: Andre, Matthews, Hicks, and Walsh have been changed to detectives. This makes them less identifiable visually as officers and gives them more freedom in the story. Some cosmetic changes will be necessary in the narrative.

2085 Cycle 6: Cycle six moves into the three characters, Dunk, Beca, and Santiago getting to know each other and the beginning of their recoveries. Santiago begins living at the church and working as a handy man and janitor to earn his keep. Thad asks him to watch over Dunk and Beca when he cannot. Andre comes to realize that his view of the world, including his partner, “Billy” Matthews, is not as simple as it seems. Michael must consider his situation in light of his recent attack by Billy.

2090 Cycle 7: Cycle seven continues the healing process and the reader gets to know Beca better as she begins to both open up and break down. Dunk begins to come out of his shell and reconnect to the world through helping Beca through her torments. Santiago returns to his art and tries to find meaning in the events of his life as he talks with Thad and Beca and helps Dunk. He and Beca develop a friendship. He encounters Luis’s brother. Andre continues to have issues at home and discovers that he and Matthews are under investigation by Internal Affairs.

2100 Cycle 8: Cycle eight turns the tables on Dunk and Beca as Dunk’s memory begins to return, in part, due to his administering to Beca. Beca continues her recovery and deals with her choices in life. Dunk realizes that he is a Muslim. Beca and Santiago become closer. Santiago discovers the drugs in the confessional and he and Thad have a confrontation with Michael. Michael escapes. Hicks and Walsh are called in to investigate. Michael, Derek, and Luis argue over the fact that Michael was discovered and lost an entire “supply” of drugs. Derek suggests that maybe Michael needs to be removed from the food chain in favor of Luis, but gives Michael a last chance. Michael reveals to Luis where Santiago is, not knowing of their connection. Andre and Matthews discover the reasons Internal Affairs is investigating them. Andre talks with Thad about the issues and breaks down in front of his wife Edie.

2110 Cycle 9: In cycle nine, Dunk remembers part of the events that lead to his amnesia and is traumatized by them. He relapses as he searches out and finds the wine used for services. He and Thad have an argument that turns lightly physical. Beca tries to interfere, as she understands the addict’s side of addiction and argues for Dunk. Santiago tries to mediate and Thad becomes

2115 angry at Santiago because he was supposed to be watching over Beca and Dunk. Thad and
 Andre talk and we discover that Thad has a temper and that is part of why he went into the
 priesthood. Andre is showing stress under the investigation and his unsure home-life, of which
 he begins to question his choices in life. Michael realizes that everything has been orchestrated
 to move him out of Derek's organization and that he has become a liability, one that must be
 eliminated.

2120
 Cycle 10: Cycle ten is the last cycle in book two. The wine is locked up and out of Dunk's
 reach. Dunk has to deal with the realization that he is an alcoholic and a Muslim, and the
 meaning of the two conflicting situations. He begins praying in the church, which creates
 tension between Thad and the other priests. He and Dunk argue. Thad asks Dunk to leave.
 2125 Beca and Santiago become closer and their relationship turns physical. Matthews has issues
 with Beca's growing relationship with Santiago. Thad is discovered beaten and in critical
 condition. Evidence points to Santiago, but Dunk, Beca, and Michael are not ruled out.
 Santiago and Beca run and go into hiding. Hicks and Walsh are officially on the investigation.
 Andre and Matthews investigate unofficially. Andre is naturally distraught and near
 2130 uncontrollable. Michael also goes into hiding as word goes out on the street that he is to be
 made "an example." Luis, now the leader of the Perdidos begins the hunt.

Cycle 11: Cycle eleven begins the third and last book. Dunk cannot bring himself to return
 to the streets, but has little choice. Hungry, he goes to Hashim's and tries to steal food. He is
 2135 caught, but Hashim invites him in instead of reporting it. Hashim and his son Mehrdod argue
 over the elder's decision. Andre and Matthews are suspended pending Internal Affairs'
 investigation. They are suspected of tampering with evidence and trafficking in drugs. Andre
 visits Thad who is comatose in intensive care. He argues with Edie. Beca and Santiago go to
 Beca's apartment. He leaves to find food as everything is spoiled. Beca faces temptation as she
 2140 finds a forgotten cache of drugs. Billy comes in and finds her sitting at the table. Santiago runs
 into several Perdidos on the street beating up Michael. He does not recognize Michael at first.
 He saves Michael, and then beats him up. Hurt, Michael seeks help from Hicks and Walsh.

Cycle 12: In cycle twelve, Hicks and Walsh hold Michael up long enough for Luis to arrive.
 2145 Luis beats the already injured Michael. Derek comes in and stops him before he kills Michael.
 Because they were friends of sorts, Derek gives Michael his life. Dunk finds Michael stumbling
 around injured in an alley. He brings Michael into Hashim's. Santiago returns to Beca and finds
 Matthews there. They argue and get into a fight over Beca. Beca reveals the events that lead to
 her running away and chooses to go stay with Michael. Matthews threatens Santiago, but
 2150 because of Beca, he leaves and tells them to leave the apartment also. Matthews reveals to
 Andre the full connection between him and Beca. Andre suspects that Matthews is guilty of
 stealing and selling drugs and blames him for Thad's attack.

Cycle 13: Dunk tends to Michael's injuries. They talk about their pasts and find common
 2155 ground. Beca goes to Hashim's to get food. She runs into Dunk who is helping in the store.
 Dunk talks to Hashim, who offers to allow her and her "friend" to hide out in the storeroom.
 Hashim does not realize her friend is Santiago. When she returns to Hashim's with Santiago,
 Hashim, Mehrdod, and Santiago argue, but Hashim allows them to stay. Mehrdod leaves. Hicks

2160 and Walsh tell Andre where to find Michael and Santiago. Santiago discovers Michael and starts to finish the job, but Dunk appeals to him by pointing out that he has become exactly what he hates.

2165 Cycle 14: In cycle fourteen, Andre goes to Hashim's and attempts to kill Santiago. Andre points a gun to Santiago's head and has to make the hard choice whether or not to shoot. A fire begins. Matthews has followed his partner and tries to convince him not to shoot. Beca succeeds. Dunk moves into action and begins pulling people from the burning building. Matthews pulls Michael out saving his life. Dunk, now remembering everything, tells everyone that he was a firefighter in 9/11 and saved himself instead of helping others. He was knocked out trying to escape the building. He began drinking to ease his guilt and to calm the "visions" and lights he was now seeing. Michael reveals the connection between Derek, Luis, Hicks, and Walsh, and offers to testify against them if they will cut a deal. He tells them that Derek is a Blood. Santiago goes after Luis, finding him in his apartment. Luis brags about having Angelo killed and murdering Sanchez in order to make the Perdidos part of the Bloods. Santiago throws Luis out the window.

2175 Cycle 15: Cycle fifteen concludes the story. Thad wakes up and tells Andre that Luis attacked him. Andre and Edie talk and Andre agrees to spend more time at home and involve himself less in other people's lives because it nearly cost Thad his life. Dr. Potter tells Dunk he has trauma-induced synesthesia and that surgery may be able to help. Beca decides to return home, Dunk is going with her on the way back to New York. Santiago decides to become a priest. Michael testifies against Derek, Hicks, and Walsh.

2185

Andre

XXXXXXXXXX

Andre watched his partner come around the lockers, late as usual. He had already
2190 changed into his uniform and was just closing his locker up. "Captain wants to see us." The two
officers glanced at each other. One of the other patrolmen caught them as they came into the
locker room.

"This can't be good." Matthews asked as he opened his locker and unbuttoned his shirt
to change into uniform.

2195 "Don't know."

"Only one way to find out." Andre followed his partner to the third floor.

Captain Trainor's office was the standard type, a corner office with half walls with glass
all around. Andre could see two men in suits and Trainor did not look happy. "What do you
think that's about?"

2200 Matthews looked up and then back at his partner with barely a glance at the office,
"Internal Affairs."

"How can you be sure?"

"When you're around as long as I've been, you know IA." Andre noticed Matthews's
scowl.

2205 "Why would they be here?"

"You know Lawrence; sometimes I forget you're still fairly green. Five years and you
don't know IA?"

"I know IA. I just haven't heard anything that would bring them in."

2210 “Well, that’s the trick isn’t it? If someone’s on the take, if someone’s dirty, they don’t
let on.”

The Captain’s door opened. The officers looked up as the two men from IA came out, looked at them and the squad room, and left.

2215 “Lawrence, Matthews, in here now,” the Captain looked at them both. His face was blank. It always was. No one ever knew why they were being called into his office until they got there and closed the door. Andre wasn’t worried, but he also knew that his involvement with the old man, with Dunk, could be frowned upon. Matthews had made it abundantly clear that he did not approve.

They walked into the office. Captain Trainor had already moved behind his desk, but he still stood. “Close the door Matthews.”

2220 Andre’s partner closed the door and joined Andre in front of their boss. Captain Trainor took his seat without offering one to the others. Trainor grabbed a file from his desk. Andre recognized it as a personnel file. “Andre Lawrence, you spent two years on the 53rd...”

“Yes sir,” Andre answered even though it wasn’t a question. The Captain barely paused.

2225 “. . . before coming to the 76th.” Trainor flipped through the pages, “No accommodations, but good reviews. I agree with my predecessors, you’ve done well, but nothing outstanding before being partnered with Matthews.”

Andre wasn’t sure whether to thank the Captain or to apologize.

Captain Trainor traded Andre’s file for Matthews, “William Matthews. You on the other hand, twelve years on the force. You’ve done the round of precincts. Special assignments in

2230 Vice and Narcotics. A couple of recommendations, one accommodation. A good record for the most part, just a couple of blips.”

“Those weren’t . . . “

“Relax Matthews,” Andre’s partner looked at him with a small eye-roll. “Five drug arrests this month, three last month, four the month before that.”

2235 “They keep getting back on the street. Captain, you need to talk to the DA about that.”
Matthews smiled and Andre couldn’t help but smile too.

“I’ll put it on my list of things to do.” Trainor sat down, “Problem is, you two are the only ones bringing in dealers. No one else can seem to find them. The ones you bring aren’t gang-bangers so I have to think that there’s something we’re missing. The chief asked for
2240 suggestions and you two came up.”

“Came up for what?”

“For assignment Matthews. As of tomorrow, you two are plains clothes. Report upstairs to the GCA. They believe something’s on the move and I agree.”

“Sir are you sure about this?” Andre didn’t know what to think. Matthews always made
2245 the busts, always knew where to go. He knew the LOL like Andre thought he never could.

“Yes Lawrence, I am. You’re a good cop. Just don’t let me down. Now get out of uniform and into plain clothes.”

The two men left Trainor’s office. Hicks and Walsh were just coming through the squad room as they came out. Matthews spoke up. Andre knew he couldn’t help it. They were
2250 competitive. “You see Walsh; this is what happens when you actually do something. We’re going to the CGA.”

“No shit?” It was Hicks that spoke up.

“No shit shithead. Now you’ll have to do the LOL on your own.”

Walsh cracked a half-smile half-grimace, “Matthews, you know they’ll kick you back
2255 down here tomorrow. Just as soon as you screw everything up.”

“If they do, it’ll be because you two let the streets get out of hand.”

“Stick it Walsh.” Matthews chuckled.

“Already stuck Matthews, right up your ass.”

Andre really hated their banter. It was tasteless, “I’ll have to head home.”

2260 Andre saw Matthews smiled and shake his head as they walked toward the stairs, “You
don’t keep a change of clothes in your locker?”

“No.”

“You should. It’ll come in handy sooner or later.” The pair of them passed through the
door to the stairwell. Matthews grabbed Andre’s arm. “Andre.”

2265 “Yeah?”

“That bum last week. What did you do with him?”

“I asked my brother to look after him?”

Andre watched Matthews’s eyes crease in thought. “Where?”

“At the church, it used to be a monastery, then a school.”

2270 Matthews wanted something. He had made it very clear to Andre about what he
thought of the old man, of Dunk. “What are you getting at?”

Matthews checked the stairwell to make sure it was clear. “That girl, the prostitute that
comes into Winston’s . . .”

“Yes.” Andre listened as Matthews spoke just a little haltingly.

2275 “I found her last night. She had been beaten up. They really did the job good.”

“Did you get her to a docor?”

“No, no doctors.” Matthews seemed nervous. Andre had never seen his partner nervous. “No insurance.”

“St. Mary’s . . .”

2280 “No doctors.” He grabbed Andre’s upper arm with a tight squeeze.

“Okay, no doctors. What do want to do?”

“I was wondering if your brother might be able to help her.”

Andre’s mouth was open for a moment before words came out. He was stunned and surprised, “Why . . . why would you . . .”

2285 “Because she needs help. She’s addicted. Didn’t your brother . . .” Matthews trailed off. He looked like a kid watching his ice cream melt on the sidewalk, cone still in hand. “He’s worked with addicts.”

It was more a statement than a question. Andre knew what Matthews was asking. He knew he would talk to Thaddeus, ask him to take the girl in. He knew that was why Matthews
2290 was asking. Andre felt it was his obligation to help others.

Michael

XXXXXXXX

2295 Normally, Michael enjoyed watching people from his loft balcony, a foot of concrete and
iron rail standing a foot out from the building in front of double French doors. Today was
different. He had trouble breathing, unable to smell the coffee that burned the split in his lower
lip. His nose, swollen and broken, barely gave him breathe. The swelling joined that of his eye
making the left side of his face look like a black amorphous, bulbous mass. It throbbed with
2300 every beat of his pulse. Aspirin, Excedrin, Advil, alcohol, nothing helped the pain. When he
moved, a sharp stabbing pain told him ribs were broken. He would need to go to a free clinic
and get patched up, no questions. He was not in a good way. He had lost his backpack in the
attack.

He looked at the Park. The foot -bridge was not visible from his loft. It was off in the
2305 distance in the LOL with all its dead tenements standing like dirty tombstones, one after
another, markers of a lost and forgotten war. He turned away from the balcony.

He had been trying to figure out why Derek insisted on using Luis. Michael knew Luis
was dangerous. It was obvious. A gang had power in numbers and intimidation. He preferred
using independents, but they were gone, picked up because they didn't have lookouts to warn
2310 them when someone was coming. But they also didn't know anything more than Michael as
their supplier. Michael had set up a different drop point for each one. No matter what
happened, he always had another dealer. But all of them had been arrested, all of them.

2315

They were bold and ambitious, and they couldn't be trusted. There was always someone looking to make a move up. He wondered if Derek had thought about that.

2320 Derek had skipped Michael in setting up the Perdidos as the street supply. How did he make the connection? How did they meet? Michael respected Derek, but he also needed answers.

2325 The Perdidos were small enough to stay out of the sights of the Bloods and the Crypts, and Michael kept his dealers too small to make trouble. Derek was changing that. Derek was changing a lot of things. He was right. The cops were picking up the dealers Michael had on the streets. Michael was dealing again to make up the difference, and not making up enough. The time he spent hustling the junkies was time he lost building influence, moving up the ladder. And now, meth; it was good business, and bad.

2330 The ease of meth created another issue. It made the already hungry gangs hungrier. Sooner more than later, street sellers figured they could cut out the middleman and the suppliers by making it themselves. Then banger wanted more for himself, cutting money from each deal, shaving himself an advantage. The gang fragmented and the streets turned red. Each bullet cut the gang's strength until the Crypts or Bloods just walked in and fired the last shot into something that was already dead.

2335 Michael liked working the LOL, but maybe Derek was right. Maybe, Parkside was where he belonged.

Santiago

2340

XX

He didn't know completely what had happened. He woke up with a pounding headache and a knot on the back of his head in the holding cell. Hashim hadn't pressed charges even though the cops had originally said he did. He had recognized them from Winston's and their badges gave the names Hicks and Walsh. Walsh had been the rougher one. Santiago figured he was the one who struck him from behind, sending him to the ground. They said that Luis had been sent to the hospital for his injuries; but since he walked out without a statement, no charges were filed. Santiago had been lucky. This was his first arrest and he had gotten off. There was not going to be another.

He knew he couldn't go back to Luis's apartment. Luis had been like a brother to him and together they had always looked up to Santiago's true brother, Angelo. Santiago couldn't understand Luis's sudden condemnation. Something was happening. Santiago had to get to Sanchez and tell him what had happened.

Sanchez took over Los Perdidos after the Bloods had killed his brother. He had followed the same path as Angelo protecting the neighborhood trying to keep Bloods and Crypts out of the LOL peacefully. For the most part the rival gangs left the Perdidos alone and the neighborhood remained safe. But Luis, Luis was up to something and Santiago had to warn Sanchez and find out what it was.

The enforcer made his way to Sanchez's apartment. It was another walk up tenement like Luis's. Even as he approached, he knew. The feel of the street was wrong. It wasn't
2360 something tangible, just a feeling like too much ochre or umber in a painting making it dark despite the daylight trying to wash away grief. The face of the street was pinched, its eyes narrowed.

Seven flights of stairs lead to the gang leader's apartment and the yellow tape criss-crossed across the door. He saw it from the stairwell door. Sanchez was dead. Santiago didn't
2365 have to approach to know that a war had begun, a war started by Luis. Santiago wasn't safe.

He didn't know what happened to the next few hours as the sun fell from the sky leaving a black-blue pallet lit by orange-yellow lights. The fairies slept; their absent vigilance palatable as the shadows reached out to silence him.

Santiago's mind had been blank in those hours. Thought wouldn't come to him. Rage
2370 washed through him. Cancer ate away at his mother until she was empty. Angelo buried her. Santiago had been too young to do anything but old enough to cry at her funeral and to miss her. Dozens of condolences wished her well. Angelo became mother and father as well as brother.

The streets took Angelo and Santiago was sure he would follow. Angelo had wanted Santiago
2375 to become an artist, to fulfill his potential. His little brother was better than the life Angelo lived.

2380

STOP HERE

Michael

XI

2385 “How’s the shoulder?” The cop’s accent betrayed him. It had just a twinge of Boston-Irish. Michael knew him to be from a working class family, probably Catholic, probably the pride of his people. His accent was vague enough that he was probably a third generation. But he didn’t need the accent to know he was of Irish descent. His red hair and light freckles on that cream skin had already told him of his origin.

2390 “You must be the good cop.”

 “No, believe it or not, I’m actually interested. But you’re not going to believe me. You got no reason too.” Michael smiled. He was playing his part well. The truth was his shoulder was killing him. He had hit the pavement hard and snapped his collarbone. As he thought about it, Michael moved his arm involuntarily and winced.

2395 “You need something for the pain?”

 “No, I’m good.” The pain was unbearable, but he didn’t think it was a good idea to give them any kind of leverage.

 “Sleep okay?” The cop sipped his coffee. Michael realized he had neither eaten nor had anything to drink in the last twelve hours. He had spent what was left of the night and most of
2400 the morning at the hospital emergency room under a police guard getting a cast put on to immobilize his shoulder. They really couldn’t do anything about the bone except put it back in

place and hope it set properly. From the look of the cop, he had slept well over the past few hours, had a shower, and gotten some food. He looked very relaxed.

“Yeah fine. What’re you charging me with?”

2405 “Can’t get into that yet.” He was too cool. There was something he wasn’t telling. Actually, he hadn’t really said anything.

“You have to tell me what I’m being charged with.”

2410 “Michael, relax. I got some food coming for you. You haven’t been charged with anything yet. We both know we could, but we both know your record too. Three times Mike, three times. We charge you, it’s a felony, and you’ll do some time. Just can’t understand why someone like you would get yourself messed up in this kind of stuff. If I had the advantages you had, I would’ve stayed far away from dealing this stuff. You’re trust fund must be worth more than you make a year on this.”

2415 “What do you know?” He didn’t like this guy standing there coolly analyzing him some just any other criminal. This Irish cop thought he was better Mike. He didn’t know shit. “You want to charge me with something, charge me. You want to talk me to death, get a gun, and do me a favour. Otherwise, you gotta let me go. I know my rights, I’ve got a phone call coming, I want my lawyer, you can’t hold me.”

2420 “Okay Michael, I don’t think you should say any . . .” A knock on the two-way glass followed by the door opening drew the cop’s attention. Another cop walked in carrying a bag and two cups of coffee. Michael recognized this one easily. He had been the junkie he haggled with before the arrest. This one he knew, they had called him Johnson last night. Johnson had

been the one that turned out to be a cop and had tackled him causing his collar bone to break. He knew Johnson and he didn't like him.

2425 "You son-of-a . . ." He tried to get up, to attack him, but the pain in his shoulder immediately put him back down, lying with his face and chest against the table, his legs wriggling to hold him up until the pain subsided. The red-haired cop was at his side, trying to help.

"Are you okay? Are you hurt?" Michael only grunted and grimaced through the pain, 2430 but his eyes were clear enough. The cop helped him back into his seat. "Michael, you can't be making sudden moves like that. That shoulder needs time to set."

"Fuck you!"

"Yes, I think you're feeling better now."

"Pat?" The other officer called the Irish back to the door. He hadn't moved an inch at 2435 Michael's outburst. The coffee and bag were still in his hands. Pat, the ginger cop went over to the door where they huddled turned away from Michael. He could hear them whispering, but couldn't make anything out. The pain was almost completely faded before they turned back to him.

The red-head sat down opposite him at the table. He took the coffee and pushed it 2440 across to Michael. Two bacon, egg, and cheese biscuits followed. Michael looked at them and then decided he deserved to eat. When he had his mouth full, Pat decided it was time to talk.

"Now Michael, a few minutes back you said you wanted your phone call, you wanted your lawyer. Now if that is what you want, we can't talk to you. We can't offer you a deal. We

can't do anything that might make life a little bit easier for you." Behind him, Johnson just
2445 stood against the door and glared. He was definitely playing the bad cop.

"Your friend, Big D, he lead us to you. He made a deal because he was looking at going
to prison for a while. Big D thought you might be able to help us out and maybe we could do
the same. If you need some time, we'll give it to you, but remember the clock is ticking. We've
only got about ten hours left before we have to enter a charge. Or if you want a lawyer, we've
2450 got even less. But its up to you. We'll step outside and let you think about it. Okay?"

Michael just nodded. He wanted some time to think. Big D had been trying to warn
him, to tell him what to do. He hated that. He might work with D, he didn't work for him, at
least not the way he liked to think about it. D worked for him. Brought him what he needed,
the drugs to sell to his friends, to move on the streets, to get D into the more expensive
2455 neighborhoods and schools, all the places Big D couldn't go. No, he didn't work for D, it was the
other way around. And if Big D rolled over on him, then to hell with their history, he wasn't
going to help Big D out.