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LA RUE HOUSE

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Drama and Communication
Creative Writing

by

Matthew John Peters

B.A. University of Central Florida, 1999

May, 2006

For James Knudsen (1950-2004),
who told me to get emotional.

*He who would do good to another must do it in Minute Particulars.
General Good is the plea of the scoundrel, hypocrite, and flatterer.*

-- William Blake

I renounce the higher harmony altogether. It's not worth the tears of that one tortured child who beat itself on the breast with its little fist and prayed in its stinking outhouse, with its unexpiated tears to 'dear, kind God!' It's not worth it, because those tears are unatoned for. They must be atoned for, or there can be no harmony. But how? How are you going to atone for them? Is it possible? By their being avenged? But what do I care for avenging them? What do I care for a hell for oppressors? What good can hell do, since those children have already been tortured? And what becomes of harmony, if there is hell? I want to forgive. I want to embrace. I don't want more suffering. And if the sufferings of children go to swell the sum of sufferings which was necessary to pay for truth, then I protest that the truth is not worth such a price.

-- Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov*, by Fyodor Dostoevsky
Part II, Book V: Pro and Contra, Chapter 4: Rebellion

Children of the night shall forever find each other in the dark.

-- The Prof in *Blossom* by Andrew Vachss, chapter 158

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Learning to Fish	3
Smiley and B 4-Ever.....	23
It Works When You Work It	40
A Regular Thing	49
Gloria’s Headaches	65
Hunters and Gatherers.....	84
Paisley and Tiffany Versus the Machine	92
The Way It’s Done.....	113
Protocols	139
Love, Cody.....	150
Vita.....	167

INTRODUCTION

La Rue House, Orlando's youth crisis shelter, is located six miles outside downtown, just a little too far from the other homeless services to walk, because the city council felt that crowding all the social services together would encourage the homeless community to loiter downtown and that would ruin Orlando's image as *The City Beautiful*. La Rue House is on the edge of a declining, working-class neighborhood with few jobs because the voters in the prosperous neighborhood said, "Help the children, but not in our backyard." Fortunately, the shelter is near the intersection of two main roads and five bus routes, so the youth can connect with other services and search for employment, with the help of welfare bus passes.

For the runaways and throwaways under 18, the shelter provides a bed and food and entertainment and supervision until a family member or the Department of Children and Families can collect the child. The shelter's main work is done with 18-to 20-year-old orphaned youths, those trapped between legal adulthood and developmental childhood. For these adult-youths, the shelter is their last chance to learn the life skills that most civilians take for granted. In exchange for a few months of room and board, the shelter asks the youths to get a job and save their money so they can escape the streets and live independently.

During this time, the staff teach them how to look for a job and then how to keep it, how to find an apartment and how to keep it, how to save money and how to budget it, and the staff try to reverse the negative values and behaviors learned by living on the street. The shelter also connects youths with substance abuse or mental health services

when they need one or the other; most times they need both. However, the shelter has rules and structure and routine and expectations, and if the youths can't behave themselves or aren't working the program, they are discharged. But only for a short period of time, a few days, a week, a month, occasionally a few months, just until they are ready to try again.

La Rue House is an exercise in last chances.

LEARNING TO FISH

The over-eighteen Boys' Unit smells like feet again - sharp, sweaty, unwashed feet. Robb winces and coughs as he and Mr. Eric make their way to the case managers' office.

Mr. Eric sniffs the air and shudders. He knocks on the door to room number one, then opens the door and flips on the light. "Get out of bed and do your laundry. You're stinking up my house."

"Man, I was sleeping, Mr. Eric." It's Damon, one of Mr. Eric's kids who was working the graveyard grill shift at Steak 'n' Shake last time Robb worked, but who knows if he still is.

"Do your laundry."

"It ain't mine," Damon says, pulling the blanket over his head. "Mine's done."

"Do your friend's laundry."

"He ain't my friend," Damon says from beneath the covers.

"How can you sleep in here?"

"I'm tired from working. Go bother somebody else, Mr. Eric."

"You work tonight?"

"Yeah."

"Good, keep those hours up," Mr. Eric says and turns out the light. "Night, Damon."

"Wake me for dinner," Damon calls before Mr. Eric shuts the door.

“Is that your one-on-one for the day?” Robb asks Mr. Eric as they walk to the case managers’ office.

“That counts,” Mr. Eric says and writes a case note in the air with an imaginary pen, “*Youth was asleep upon arrival due to night job. Case Manager spoke to Youth about hygiene and employment. Youth asked to be woken for dinner so that he’d be ready for another night’s work.*”

“Very nice,” Robb says. The shifts with Mr. Eric are always a little more relaxed and practical than the ones with the young MSWs or the Born-Again Christian Crusaders. He’s a papa-bear who takes no shit from the kids and gets their love for it. He’s been a case manager at the shelter for years. The only person who has more time than Mr. Eric is Ms. Juanita, who runs the shelter.

“There’s nothing to this job.”

Robb wishes it was really that easy. In the five months Robb’s worked at La Rue House Youth Shelter, he hasn’t gotten even one of his kids to achieve independent living. Leeshaun is the only one on Robb’s caseload that has a shot at it. And if he can’t get it right with Leeshaun, he’s going to find a new line of work; maybe he’ll reenlist in the Army, this time as an officer, or maybe just go be a manager at McDonalds; at least he’d earn more.

How much has changed since Tuesday night? Two days is a generation at La Rue House, six shifts of intakes and discharges, two mornings of instigating motivation, two afternoons of outside trouble, and two nights of internal drama. And today? What has gone down already this morning? How many of his kids are left on his caseload? Is

Leeshaun still even at the shelter? How many new intakes have been added, and what baggage are they hauling?

Mr. Eric opens the office with his key, holding the door for Robb, and they swing their satchels under the desk. Ms. Sara from the day shift leans into the office from the girls' side to make sure it's Staff coming into the office, and Robb and Mr. Eric exchange hellos with her.

Mr. Eric takes his personal fan off the filing cabinet and plugs it in under the desk. It whirs to life, and he adjusts it so it's blowing right on his round chest. Mr. Eric is overweight and sweats constantly; if he had his way, the air conditioning would be kept at fifty degrees. Robb throws away the empty cups from the day-shift, stacks the phone books under the residents' chair and puts the resource binders back on top of the filing cabinet.

Robb crosses to the Girls' Case Managers' office to get the communication log and finds three clear trash bags of clothing labeled "Bridget" on the floor of the girls' side. "What happened with Bridget?" Robb asks. She wasn't on his caseload, but she got a job right away and seemed to be doing well. A couple of months pregnant, she couldn't afford to screw around and risk discharge.

"She never had a job," Sara tells him.

"What do you mean?" Robb asks. "We've got her schedule. She was wearing a uniform."

Sara nods. "I called. She was hired, went to the training and picked up the uniform, but never showed up for her first shift."

“I saw her out at West Oaks Mall,” Mr. Eric says, smiling like the cat that caught the early bird. “She was wearing street clothes and hanging out with a bunch of guys like she didn’t have a care in the world. So I called Ms. Juanita and told her to check Bridget’s schedule, knowing she didn’t have today off.”

“She won’t be in until late,” Sara says. “She’ll come in wearing her uniform and complaining about how tired she is from working so hard.”

“I’m sure,” Eric laughs.

“How long is she out for?” Robb asks.

“Two weeks,” she says.

“Hopefully, that’s long enough to get her to work the program,” Robb says, but he doubts it. Nothing seems to get these kids to think about their futures.

The shelter’s success rate is 30 percent, but that number is padded by the kids who reunite with their families. Robb doesn’t count family reunification as a successful outcome. He dragged his ass out of the gutter without any help from his mother, or even a program like La Rue House, if you don’t count the Army, and he can teach these kids how to do the same. It should be easy. But the kids don’t listen because he’s ten years older than they are and clean cut and therefore, full of shit.

Robb’s solution is to push the kids into the military, socialism at its finest: food, shelter, health care, career training, employment, and education. If the military isn’t an option, he tries to get his kids into a decent paying blue collar job rather than some minimum-wage McJob. People can’t support themselves on minimum wage for long. But going back to family is no more independent living than ending up in jail. So the shelter’s real success rate is maybe 10 percent. Either way, Robb’s is zero.

Robb opens the communication log and flips back to Wednesday, reading the entries to get caught up.

Crystal discharged herself on Wednesday. It doesn't say why, but Robb can guess. She went back to her boyfriend but will be back the next time she and manly-man break up. Maybe then Robb can get it right with her, get her out on her own or convince her to go to a women's shelter for some counseling.

And Hector went AWOL last night; he just simply didn't return to property. He wasn't the most motivated kid on Robb's caseload, but he at least followed the rules and acted like he was trying. What happened that made him go AWOL? Did his mother take him back, or did he find some girl to take him in? Did he hitch a ride out of town or get arrested? Did he overdose on something somewhere, or was he killed over some Latin Kings bullshit?

Two more failures, but at least Leeshaun is still present and accounted for.

"How's Leeshaun doing?" Robb asks Sara.

"Fine," Ms. Sara answers. "He should be at work."

"He better be. He make his AA meetings?" Robb asks Eric, holding his breath. Last Friday night, Leeshaun got busted with a couple beers and blew positive on the breathalyzer, but Robb made a special arrangement with Ms. Juanita to keep him from being discharged. He has to go to seven AA meetings in seven days.

"As far as I know," Mr. Eric answers as he adjusts his fan. "He went last night."

Robb pulls Leeshaun's file and reads over the last few case notes. Leeshaun's worked both days at the furniture warehouse, behaved himself on the unit and gone to his AA meetings. Robb finds six attendance verification slips in his file, all with different

signatures. One more to go and then Robb can get back to helping Leeshaun budget for an apartment.

While Mr. Eric works with one of his kids, Robb goes to the Orange County Incarceration Website and runs a search on Hector. His name pops right up; he was arrested for petty theft. He was probably shoplifting sneakers; it's always sneakers. When Robb was on the streets, you needed one pair of combat boots and the more beat up they got, the cooler you were. Today, it's top of the line sneakers, Nike, Reebok, Adidas; a new model comes out every season like they're cars. Most of the time the youth ask Robb for a toothbrush, it's to clean their damn shoes. A permanent discoloration or, heaven forbid, a scuff and the shoes get traded to a less cool youth for an undershirt or a cigarette. Even the gothic-punk kids, the ones Robb should understand best, can't stand to have a mark on their name-brand, mall-bought fashion-boots. It's a generation of kids who'd rather look money and in-style than have food or keep their teeth. "You can't get no love looking like a bum," they tell him. By love they mean sex.

Robb'll probably see Hector again in a few weeks; he'll get a call that there's a new intake coming to the unit, and he'll buzz the unit door, and Hector will come in like a returning champion, expecting to be put back in his old room.

At the boys' dinner, Robb sits with the new residents and gets to know them by answering their questions about how the shelter operates. *How soon do you have to get a job? How many hours do you have to work? and How much of a paycheck do you have to save?* are the questions of a lazy bastard who's going to do just what it takes to stay at the

shelter and not what it takes to get out on his own. *How long do people usually stay here for? Why do I have to go to an employment class? Why can't I just look for a job? and Do you know any good apartments around here?* are the questions of a motivated kiss-ass who'll get a job before getting comfortable and becoming a lazy bastard.

Leeshaun comes back from work halfway through dinner. He's a six-three, black Hispanic with a knobby four-inch afro; at first intimidating, but once you get past his size and roughneck demeanor, he's a great kid. He nods *Hey* to Robb before sitting with Damon and the other cool, tough guys. Robb keeps an ear tuned to their table as they talk in street-lingo about trouble they're not supposed to be involved in. Robb has caught on to most of the kids' slang, but they're laying it on thick tonight. He tries to decode it or nail down one of their pronouns, hoping to pick up a lead, not to bust them, but to understand what's really going on with them and make sure they aren't doing anything stupid.

She still making juice for Jew-Fro? Hundred percent. What it stacking? Double beans. G'd up. That's momma slapping. They need more players? No diggety. There's always other games. Like which? All of them. You got to order something. Whatever takes you home.

It doesn't sound like a drug conversation, but he can't make out if they're talking about girls or gang politics.

After dinner, Leeshaun and his clique head out to socialize with the girls on the smoking patio, and Robb returns to the Boys' Unit.

Shortly after Ms. Juanita gathers the youth for the Friday Night Movie in the recreation room, the phone on the boys' side rings. Robb answers it, "Over-eighteen male."

"Your boy's trying to skip out of his meeting." It's Ms. Gloria at the front desk. Leeshaun must not want to miss the movie.

Mr. Eric covers both units while Robb walks down to In-Take. Robb's worked too hard for Leeshaun to ruin everything now, not with one day left.

"Let me watch the movie," Leeshaun tries when Robb enters the In-Take area. "I'll go to a meeting tomorrow."

"No. It's got to be tonight," Robb tells him.

"Man, come on."

Robb looks to Ms. Gloria, but she just looks back, not interfering, letting Robb work.

"There was a six o'clock at Trinity Baptist," Robb points out.

"I would've missed dinner," Leeshaun says like Robb's an idiot.

"You could have put in for a late dinner," Robb tells him.

Leeshaun shakes his head and tries again, "Man, let me watch the movie. I'll go to a meeting first thing tomorrow morning. I promise."

"No. It doesn't work like that."

Gloria whispers something behind Robb, but he doesn't catch it. He turns to her, and she says, "Choice," low and quiet.

Robb nods and turns back to Leeshaun.

“Okay, it’s your choice,” Robb tells him. “You can go watch the movie if you want.” Leeshaun smiles wide like he’s won. “But you’ll get discharged in the morning for not going to seven meetings in seven days.”

Leeshaun’s smile drops to a frown, and he stares at Robb, pouting.

“You chose to eat dinner instead of going to a meeting, so now you need to choose between the movie and a meeting.”

Leeshaun puffs up his chest and flexes his arms but doesn’t swing on Robb.

“And it’s all because you chose to go to the meetings instead of getting discharged.”

Leeshaun stomps his foot and swings his arms, a gesture Robb has learned is disbelief. “Man, fuck this place,” Leeshaun says and walks toward the front door. “I’m bucking.”

“Buck all you want.” Robb takes a step, following him. “But you have to decide, are you going to go to the last meeting and be done with this crap, or go watch some stupid PG-13 movie and get discharged?”

Leeshaun turns back and tries to stare Robb down. Robb crosses his arms and tries to look indifferent. “Fine, I’ll go,” Leeshaun says, smiling. “But I’m going to get drunk and go.”

Robb smiles back, happy Leeshaun made the right choice and assuming Leeshaun is bluffing about getting drunk. “Have fun at the meeting.” Robb hands Leeshaun bus tickets and the AA meeting verification form. Leeshaun snatches them and turns to go out the front door. “Ms. Gloria,” Robb calls, loud enough for Leeshaun to hear. “Make sure we give him a breathalyzer test when he comes back.”

Leeshaun smacks his thighs and spins around to face Robb. “That’s wrong, yo. It’s Friday night.”

Robb shakes his head. “There’s no rule that says you must party just because it’s Friday night. *Friday night* is relative; it doesn’t mean anything. Hell, it’s like a Monday night for me because I’m just starting my work week.”

Leeshaun looks at Robb like he’s the strangest person he’s ever met and goes out the front door bitching to himself about the crazy cracker who don’t understand nothing.

Robb thanks Ms. Gloria and returns to the Boys’ Unit. Leeshaun hasn’t learned a damn thing. He’s no better off than he was a week ago. It doesn’t do any good to teach him about warehouse jobs if he’s just going to risk getting kicked out of the shelter for drinking. All he has to do is not drink for the couple of months he’s in the shelter. But Leeshaun doesn’t understand that. None of them do.

Robb is doing case notes on the girls’ side when Mr. Eric opens the through-door to ask if the trash bags are still over there.

Case managers don’t change the trash so someone else must be getting discharged. “Who’s leaving?” Robb asks as he hands Mr. Eric the roll of trash bags.

“Damon’s discharging himself,” Mr. Eric says with a shrug.

“What for?”

“Because you people are fucked up,” Damon yells from the male side.

“To take care of Bridget,” Mr. Eric says, passing the bags to Damon.

“What? No.” Robb gets up and enters the male side and sees Damon entering room one. He didn’t even know Damon and Bridget were a couple. “You going to stop him?” Robb asks Mr. Eric.

“It’s his choice,” Mr. Eric answers. “He wants to go, he’s going to go.” He already has the discharge paperwork out and is filling in Damon’s information.

Robb walks down to room one where Damon is shoving the contents of his locker into trash bags. “What the hell you doing?” Robb asks him from the doorway. “You going to discharge yourself for some chick?”

“Some chick? Some chick? That’s my girl,” he says. “She’s my fiancée. I gots to take care of her.”

“You’ve known her what, a week?” Robb asks to remind him.

“What that got to do with it? I know her better than you all do. You people are wrong. Kicking people out who ain’t got nowhere to go, can’t take care of themselves. You suppose to be helping people, but you just adding to shit.”

“Damon, stop and think,” Robb says and steps into the room. “Focus on yourself. Don’t throw everything away for her.”

“She all I need,” he says and keeps stuffing clothes into trash bags.

“You still going to work tonight?” Robb asks.

“It don’t matter what happen to me,” Damon barks. “My girl, my baby, they come first.”

“It’s not your baby,” Robb reminds him, knowing it won’t make a difference.

“That baby mine now,” he says. “I taking responsibility.”

Robb picks some paper off the floor and drops it into the trash can. If Damon masturbated right now, he'd probably change his mind and stay. But Robb can't recommend that. "Fine," Robb says. "But how you going to take care of her without a job?"

"I know how to survive. I don't need this fucking place." Damon squashes his clothes down into the bag and rabbit-ears the top so he can tie it shut.

"Don't forget to double bag it so it won't rip on you," Robb says and walks away.

Back in the case manager's office, Robb asks Mr. Eric, "How could you let him go like that?"

"He'll be back," he says, apparently not caring what happens to him in the meantime.

"But he'll have to start over," Robb says. It took them a month just to get Damon employed, and this was his third visit.

Mr. Eric just shrugs. "Maybe next time he won't let one of these girls drag him down."

"Maybe," Robb says. He surveys the Girls' Unit quickly to make sure it's not on fire and plops into his chair. He tries to straighten a pile of files, but they won't line up.

"God, I'm sick of this shit," he says, shoving the files aside. "I can't take it."

"What?" Mr. Eric asks, finally sounding concerned.

"These kids," Robb says, looking up. "I can't do this anymore. It's fucking pointless."

"What makes you say that? Damon?"

“All of them; Damon, Bridget, Hector, Crystal. We aren’t doing any good. None of them are learning a damn thing.”

“Leeshaun’s doing fine.”

Robb laughs and says, “Night’s not over yet.”

Mr. Eric leans back in his chair and nods in agreement.

“You think he’ll stop drinking just because we sent him to a few meetings?” Robb says.

“Hell no,” Mr. Eric responds.

“It’s like everything else. Job searching. GED classes. Life Skills. It’s pointless unless they want to do it.”

“You got that right,” Eric says and turns his fan so it blows on him while he leans back.

“But they don’t want to do it,” Robb says. “None of them do. And I don’t know how to get them to want to.”

“That’s not your job.”

Robb looks at him. “What the hell is my job then?”

“Your job is to tell them how to get their shit straight,” Eric says. “If they don’t, it’s on them, not you.”

“But how’s that do them any good?”

“Take Leeshaun,” Mr. Eric says, sitting up and leaning forward. “For now, the meetings are just a consequence for drinking. But later, if he decides he really wants to quit drinking, he’ll know all about meetings: what to expect, how they work, how to find

them, and he won't be as afraid to take that first step through the door. We aren't supposed to fix them. Our job is to teach them how to fix themselves."

"That doesn't sound very effective," Robb says.

"Wait until Christmas," Mr. Eric says. He chuckles and leans back in his chair. "Then you'll see."

"Why? What happens at Christmas?" Robb had already thought about what the holidays would bring, kids blowing money on gifts for each other and demanding easier case plans just because it's the holidays. Holidays are another thing that are relative on the streets.

"At Christmas, all the ones who make it call home," he says. "Kids you thought were totally gone just call you up."

"You mean they call here?" Robb asks.

"Where else they going to call?" Mr. Eric smiles. "You can't get any work done; phone rings off the hook. You'll see."

Robb can't think of any of his kids who'll be calling to say they've made it. Most of them will still be here or hanging around begging to get back in.

Robb is passing out night-meds for the kids who need them when the unit door buzzes. With a glance at the security monitor, he sees it's Leeshaun and buzzes him in.

Leeshaun walks in triumphantly, with a Fuck-you-Mr.-Robb smile. Robb tells the kids getting the meds to clear the office and let him talk to Leeshaun.

"You passed," Robb greets him as he stands in the office doorway.

“Man, that weren’t funny,” Leeshaun says, acting offended as he closes the office door behind him. “Treating me like a criminal up-in-here.”

“You’re the one who said you were going to get drunk,” Robb reminds him.

“You people don’t know how to take a joke,” he says.

“I’m a case manager,” Robb tells him. “My job is to be on your case.”

Leeshaun doesn’t laugh, just hands Robb the completed AA attendance verification form. “This too,” he says and tosses a *One Week* sobriety chip onto the case manager’s desk.

“How was the meeting?” Robb asks.

“Stupid.” Leeshaun sits in the hot-seat next to the desk.

“Glad you enjoyed it,” Robb says, conscious that his sarcasm doesn’t go over with the kids well. “Learn anything?”

“No.” Short, sweet, and tough.

Robb squares up the stapler and hole-punch. “Okay,” he tells Leeshaun, “Go get ready for bed.”

“That’s it?” Leeshaun asks timidly, as if he’s afraid asking will remind Robb of what the rest of his lecture was about.

“Yeah, you’re free.” Robb motions toward the door.

“Can I smoke?” he asks, knowing the smoking patio is closed for the night.

“Why didn’t you smoke before you came in?” Robb asks, figuring he probably did.

“She made me come inside and blow in that damn balloon.”

Robb laughs a little as he remembers badass Leeshaun blowing up that little, pink balloon. “Okay,” he tells him. “Make it quick.”

“Thanks, Mr. Robb.” Leeshaun dashes down the hallway and off the unit.

As Robb and Mr. Eric are finishing up their case notes for the night, Ms. Juanita comes on the unit to see how things are going.

“Do the kids really call and check in at Christmas?” Robb asks her.

Ms. Juanita smiles. “You can’t get anything done,” she says with her hoarse voice. Robb’s heard that she has twenty years off heroin and that her damaged voice is a consequence of the overdose that made her quit.

Mr. Eric lightly knocks on her arm and points at Robb. “Tell him about your girl,” he tells her.

“Which one?” Ms. Juanita asks him.

“The dead one,” Mr. Eric says with a sly smile at Robb.

Ms. Juanita smiles with the same smile and nods to herself. “Does Mr. Robb need to hear that story?”

“Yes, he does.”

Robb tries to fix the loose arm of his chair and wonders if this is what the kids feel like most the time.

Ms. Juanita sits on the desk and clears her throat. “When I was still a case manager in Miami,” she says, “we had this girl who was so lost we couldn’t do a thing for her. Her name was Misty, and she was a pretty blonde cheerleader type who ran away from home and got into coke and prostitution. She fought us on everything. She broke

structure, disrespected staff, wouldn't get a job, always came in high but wouldn't go to rehab, always threatened suicide but wouldn't go to the hospital. We'd discharge her and a few weeks later she'd show up begging and crying to be let back in, promising to behave and work the program. We'd take her back in, and most the time she'd go AWOL that night. As time went on, she got strung out on crack and meth and started coming in all beat up. In the two years I knew her, I think she had every venereal disease there was except AIDS. Most of us just gave up on her. We continued to let her in, of course, but didn't really try with her anymore or expect that she'd accomplish anything. And then someone noticed it'd been months since we'd seen her. After a few more months, we gave her up for dead, figuring she must have got killed or finally killed herself."

Robb looks at Mr. Eric and fakes a laugh. "Thanks for the pep-talk," Robb says.

"Just listen," Mr. Eric tells him.

"Well, about ten years later," Ms. Juanita continues, "and by this time I was an assistant coordinator, an older gentlemen came in asking for several people the way a youth would, 'Is there a Mr. Eric here or a Mr. Robb, or a Ms. Juanita' you know. Well, I was one of the people so they called me to in-take, but I didn't know who this man was. He introduced himself as Doctor So-and-So and asked if I remembered a girl who stayed at La Rue House in the late eighties named Misty Robinson. I felt so dizzy I almost fell over but upheld Sanctuary and said that I couldn't reveal that information. But he could tell I knew her and explained that he was a physician from Denver who was in town for a convention and his secretary had asked him to come to La Rue House and deliver a message to anyone who remembered her. Then I broke her Sanctuary because I had to double check that he was actually saying she was alive. He assured me she was and had

worked for him for about four years. I suddenly felt very guilty for giving up on her and, even though I was afraid to actually hear it, I asked him what the message was. He said the message was just, 'Thank you,' and then he asked what type of place we ran. I was so amazed and happy that I started crying and threw my arms around him and asked him all about his secretary."

Ms. Juanita's eyes grow glassy, and she blinks rapidly to hold the tears in. Robb's eyes tickle him a little too, so he looks up like he's reading the clock.

"The doctor said that she'd been going to nursing school the whole time she worked for him. She was a very nice young lady and a hard worker, and he hoped to hire her when she finally earned her RN certificate. He said she was married to a truck driver, and they had a seven year old son. I sent him back to Denver with the message, 'You're very welcome.'"

Robb holds his breath and digests the story. Its point is obvious, subtle as a jackboot to the head, but he's still amazed. "You never heard from her again?" Robb asks.

"Once was enough," Ms. Juanita says.

"You got to relax," Mr. Eric says. "Don't kill yourself or you'll burn out." "We don't always get to see the fruit of our labor," Ms. Juanita says. "But you just have to care and keep trying and believe that one day, they'll get it."

"Yes ma'am," Robb says.

"Their failures are not your failures."

"I understand."

"All we can do is enjoy their successes and know we did good work."

“Yes ma’am.”

On his way out for the night, Robb calls Leeshaun into the hall.

Leeshaun walks out hunched over, like he’s ready to fall down. “What man,” Leeshaun says, blinking his half opened eyes, trying to get used to the light. “I didn’t do nothing.”

“You don’t have a drinking problem, do you?” Robb asks.

Leeshaun’s eyes open up wide, and he stands right up. “That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you people,” Leeshaun says, wide awake. “Just because you drink, doesn’t mean you have a problem.”

Robb nods to get him beyond that point. “Did anyone at those meetings have a problem?” Robb asks.

“Oh yeah. Those guys are fucked up. They needed to be there. But not me.”

“You think one day you might be like them?”

“No way, man. I can handle it.”

“But if you…” Robb doesn’t want to lead him too much. Leeshaun will pick up on it and give Robb what he wants to hear just so Leeshaun can be done. “What if you meet someone who’s got a real alcohol problem? Someone who’s really screwing up their life.”

“I’d tell him to go to one of the damn meetings,” Leeshaun says.

“What if he didn’t know where any meetings were? Or felt weird about going to one?”

“I don’t know.” Leeshaun looks at Robb out of the corner of his eye, like he’s trying to figure out what the right response is. “I’d tell him it’s no big deal, look it up in the phone book and go to one.”

“All right.” Robb smiles and nods. “Thanks.”

“For what?” Leeshaun asks.

“Nothing,” Robb says and waves him off. “Good night.”

SMILEY & B 4-EVER

Damn night-meeting suckin' up smoke-time. My B-time. It all just a waste of time. Staff don't know nothin', nohow. Look at Mr Eric up there tellin' us about scams. *Watch out for the Magazine People. They out there, tryin' to get you. They offer you a job, promise big money, but they ditch you before payday. Move on and leave you stuck some place where maybe there ain't any La Rue House.* It's goddamn bullshit; only reason Staff don't want us sellin' magazines is cause it pay under the table and it actually make bank, so Staff needs to shut up and let me smoke.

Shit, he's lookin' the fool talkin' about scams. B's scammin', and Staff don't see shit. Don't see shit, don't know shit, cause my girl is the shit. She got Staff thinkin' she's workin' at BK, but she just went one day, got the uniform and split away. Now, she comes and goes like she's workin', sportin' the uniform and everythin'. But she's scammin' at the mall all day, sellin' burned discs and DVDs for Jew-Fro, with no job-search-log to do, no curfew to stress about, and no early wake up. There's a scam for you. Check, double check. Staff ain't up on nothin'. All you gotta do is have knowledge, know how to work their system. Makes this cracker-ass shelter a five-star resort. My girl's ridin' free and clear till I get us set up. One more paycheck and we got enough to get a room for a month. Then we outta here. I cut my demo and we get up on our own, without this cracker program. No more Staff, no more curfew, no more *Structure*, no more *Life Skills* bullshit. We gonna be a family, me, her and baby makes three. Us against the world, hustlin' Bonnie-Clyde style.

But Mr Eric's goin' on and on. *When doin' apps, be polite and ask for the manager. Don't waste your time if they say they're not hirin' just to fill in your job-search-log. It's about gettin' a job, not fillin' in the job-search-log. Keep at it, and you'll get that job.* Why don't he shut up so I can see my B and smoke a Port? Worse than a preacher, a fat ass screecher. Forty niggas in here; no one listenin' except Can't-Get-Right, and he too retarded to know he don't gotta have a job. Super-Staff Juanita ain't even listenin'; she's pickin' the cash out from under her nails.

Finally, thank God, Allah and 2-Pac, he shuts it. I'm up outta my seat and gone before he can think of more bullshit to lay on us. I beat it first one out and jet straight for the patio for some lovin' before I go earn my scratch. But before I even get to In-Take, Paladin catches me. "Smiley," she call, and I know it's somethin' important cause she's all worried, and Paladin don't play. "B's dischargin'," she say, and I'm off like a sucka hearin' sirens, knowin' that can't be right. But sure enough, when I hit In-Take, B's sittin' there with all her stuff in trash bags.

"What's up?" I asks, knowin' she ain't leavin' without me. We got a plan; we a team. Her, me and baby make three.

"They dischargin' me," she say, all sad, like she lost and gonna cry. I knew she wasn't leavin' me, so I go to hug her and give her some love.

"Damon," Door Staff calls me from the in-take desk where she's like a damn spy satellite with her intercoms and cameras and shit. "Stay out of it," she tell me. "Go smoke."

"What you dischargin' B for?" I asks Door Staff. "She didn't do nothin'."

“That’s Bridget’s business,” Door Staff say all superior and shit, like I ain’t got a right to know my girl’s business. Man, these people try me, makin’ everythin’ so difficult. They don’t understand that I gotta watch out for her. She all I got that get me through. She calm all the shit, make it all cut out.

“Cause I ain’t got a job,” B tell me.

“She got a job,” I tells Door Staff. “She works at Burger King on University.”

“Damon...” Door Staff start, but everyone else comes through from night-meeting and blocks her out. So I drop in next to B and grab her hand so she’ll know I’ll take care of everything.

She whisper in my ear, “Smiley, they called BK. They know.”

“And they just puttin’ you out?” I asks to make sure, cause that ain’t right for them to put my girl out in the night like this, not with a baby comin’ and all.

“They got me a bed at the Mission, but I hate that place,” she say, still lookin’ scared and worried with her hair down and her make-up a mess, but still all beautiful.

“What’m I gonna do?”

Super-Staff Juanita come in after everyone and look down at us “Come on, Damon” she say to me in her scratchy ass voice. “Let her be,” she say jerkin’ her big-ass head at the door.

I give her the eye cause she know. That whole time in night-meeting, she know they up here dischargin’ B and she don’t say jack to me. I bet she the one gave the word to do it.

B drop my hand, like she could get in any more shit with Staff. I look at B’s sweet face and soft brown eyes and baby belly and can’t let her go it alone. She just got out of

33rd and don't know the streets like I do. I been runnin' it for six months; I know the streets. She need me. I lean down and kiss her on the forehead. Fuck Staff; they can't touch me now.

"Damon," Super-Staff Juanita say, "clear out of in-take." She holdin' the door open like I should just be a good little boy and go to my room. Fuckin' Staff, the way they treat us like kids, make me hate this place so much.

"I be right back," I tells B quiet like, so Staff can't hear, and then jet up to the unit.

When I get there, I hit the buzzer and pound the door till Staff release it. I go straight to the case manager's office. "Give me some bags, Mr. Eric. I'm fuckin' outta here."

"That isn't the way you talk to me," he say like's he my god-damn father. And I've had enough of that shit. Always yellin' at me to do my laundry and take a shower and give him my funds. I've made twenty. I don't need no more parentin'.

"Fuck that, I'm dischargin'," I tells him. "Tell Ms. Juanita to get my money ready."

Mr Eric shakes his bald-ass head. "You're leaving because of Bridget?"

"That's right," I says. "Now, give me some damn bags."

"I'll remember the way you're talking to me when you want something next time," he say so sure I'll be back; mother-fucker can hold his breath.

"I ain't comin' back," I tells him. "I don't need this place. I was just here for B."

He nod and open the door to the girls' side and ask Other Staff for the bags.

"Who's leaving?" Other Staff ask, stickin' his nose in it.

“Damon’s discharging himself,” Mr Eric say, shruggin, like it’s no big thing to him, but I know he sorry. Keepin’ my job, savin’ my funds, I been makin’ him look good, probably got him a damn raise, but do he kick any of it down to me? Fuck no.

“What for?” Other Staff ask, when all I want is the bags.

“Because you people are fucked up,” I yell so even the girls can hear me.

“To take care of Bridget,” Mr Eric tell Other Staff and then give up the roll of bags, so I go to my room without listenin’ to anymore of their shit. Why everyone gotta be all over my business about everything? They ain’t got no right. I pull on the cheap-ass locker so hard it pops open without Staff’s key. I ain’t got no time to ditch my work clothes, so I leave them on and grab all my good stuff out of my locker.

I’m wrappin’ my Timbs in my Tommy’s so they won’t get scuffed when I hear, “What the hell are you doing?” Other Staff at the door. Fuckin’ asshole, why he gotta get in it? Can’t just leave a person alone to do things their own way. I don’t answer; he’ll go away.

“You’re going to discharge yourself for some chick?” he ask like I’m some dense motherfucker.

“Some chick? Some chick? That’s my girl. She my fiance,” I tells him like *he* be some dense motherfucker. “I gots to take care of her.” Fuckin’ Staff don’t know real love. They don’t know what it like to care about somebody if there ain’t some paycheck involved. They don’t see she my girl. She understand me. She know me.

“You’ve known her what, a week?” Other Staff say.

“What that gotta do with it?” I asks, and he ain’t got no answer for that. “I know her better than y’all do. You people wrong. Kickin’ people out who ain’t got nowhere to

go, can't take care of themselves. You suppose to be helpin' people, but you just addin' to shit."

"Damon, stop and think," he say. "Focus on yourself." But I keep packin, not havin' time for his psycho-bullshit. "Don't throw everything away for her," he say, like she ain't worth it. Man, if I had the time, I'd knock him the fuck out.

"She all I need," I says, but he don't get it. Staff so backwards they hopeless. They just don't understand none of their *independent livin'* bullshit mean dick if you ain't got love. What the point without my B?

"You still going to work tonight?" Other Staff ask like I still some resident, like he still gotta report on me.

"Man, I got more important things goin' on than work."

"You'll lose your job," he say, like I don't know that.

"It don't matter what happen to me. My girl, my baby, they come first."

"It's not your baby," Other Staff say, like that the issue.

"That baby mine now," I tells him, closin' it. "I takin' responsibility." But Staff don't understand that either. They'd have me let her go, just forget about her, let her fend for herself out on the street with all them crazies and perverts and crackheads who'd cut you up for a dollar.

"Fine, but how are you going to take care of her without a job?" he ask, tryin' me.

"I know how to survive," I tells him. "I don't need this fuckin' place." I smash my clothes down with my knee and twist the bag shut.

"Don't forget to double bag it," Other Staff say. "So it won't rip on you," Like he so smart as he walk back to the safe-ass office.

Such a fuckin' wise guy, I should make the time to knock his big-ass teeth out. "Fuck you, asshole," I yell loud enough for Staff to hear me down at In-Take.

I scoop all my deodorants and toothpastes and toothbrushes and other freebie shit into my backpack, put on my hoodie, and then I'm gone. I can't get out of here quick enough. I gonna smoke whatever I want, whenever I want: Ports, Black&Milds *and* chronic. I'm gonna get fucked up, and B and I gonna knock it all night, then sleep in way over noon. It be sweet; we gonna run on our own time, our own *structure*.

"Where my money?" I asks soon as I get to In-Take.

"Damon, you're making a mistake," Door Staff say openin' her big-ass mouth.

"Where my money?" I asks again, louder so everyone on the patio will hear that maybe Staff don't give you back your *savings*. Maybe Staff keep it for themselves; maybe that how they buy all their sharp threads and they big houses and they new cars — with our sweat-stained funds.

"It's right here," Super Staff Juanita say, comin' out of her office. She hands me my envelope, but holds tight when I try to take it. "If you do this, you're out for 30 days."

"Don't care. I ain't ever comin' back," I says and snatch the envelope outta her hand. It feel thick enough to be five-hundred, but I open it and double check. Three paper-clipped stacks of twenties, just like it was when I put in last. Plenty funds for a room, no sleepin' in bullshit shelters or woods or store roofs for us. And good-ass food, no handouts, no restaurant leftovers, and no snatch and grab. We gonna live it tight.

I grab B's bags off the floor and go for the door. "Come on," I tells her and shove the front door so hard it crash back against the window, but it don't break. Be so sweet if it broke, even just a crack. I'd be a La Rue House legend then, go down in history.

I barely get out the door with all B's gear; it knock me left and right in the door so I look the fool. Once we're out of the security camera's eye, I drop her gear in the middle of the parking lot. "What you need all this for?" I ask, but she just look at her bags on the ground, three of them, full of clothes and shoes and make-up and shit. "You don't need all that. I only got one bag."

"I ain't leavin' nothin' here," she say and pick up one of the cheap-ass bags.

"No," I says, stoppin' her. "I got it." I grab the bags up. "You want all this, I'll carry it," I says. "But I don't know why all this shit's gotta come..."

"I'm sorry, baby," she say, bein' sweet as we walk on toward the bus stop.

"No big thing," I says, but the bags be strainin' and one rip at the top before we off the property. "God damn it." I drop the rest of them. "Just take what you need," I says and kick the bag that ripped. It roll over and dump some hand-me-down clothes onto the street. "Leave all them shit clothes they gave you."

"Okay, goddamn. Don't yell at me," she say, gettin' in my face, and I'm stunned, but before I can do anythin', she get down to go through her shit. "I didn't mean to take it all. They had it packed up when I came in." She yellin', but her eyes be all glassy like she gonna cry, and I know she don't mean nothin' by gettin' up in my face.

She all small and helpless, and I get down with her, right in the street. "I know, I know," I says and grabs her hands to stop her from tossin' her stuff out. "I be sorry, too. They just got me riled up, you know. Just ready to go off. Fuckin' Staff, do this shit to you. It ain't right. But I gonna take care you, baby."

"We gettin' a room?" she ask.

“Straight up,” I says, pullin’ her close and kissin’ her deep. “A nice phat room. It be slammin’. Spend the whole night together. Be a honeymoon.”

“But you gotta work,” she say. “What about that?”

“We got funds,” I says and pat my hoodie pocket. “Don’t you worry about nothin’.” I pick up her bags. She got them down to two, and we just leave the rest of her shit all over the parking lot. Staff can clean it up.

“But how long that money gonna last if you ain’t workin’?” she ask, still buggin’.

“Goddamn it. Drop it. Okay?” I says and get in her face. “Let me get you someplace first, all right?”

She drop it and we catch the 29 bus down Colonial. It warm and quiet, and we sit close together in peace. She wear my headphones so she can chill out and not have all the worries in her head. When we pass the Steak n’ Shake, I see it busy and know I be stuck there all night if I went in. And I got my girl, and we’re free and gonna kick it all night, so fuck work.

The bus drop us at Magnolia, and we hoof-it to the Travelodge. The honeymoon suite be righteous, but they ain’t got one, and I don’t want the hassle of findin’ another hotel, so I gets us a room with a king bed and a balcony. Forty-five a night, but I ain’t gonna let my girl stay in no 20-dollar-a-night *whore*-tel. No bed-and-blow for my B-babe.

We dump our gear in the room and be safe and in private but she say, “I’m hungry,” as soon as I start kissin’ her neck.

“Come on, B,” I says, kissin’ up on her ear. “Let’s go, then we’ll get somethin’ to eat.” I run my hands over those tits.

But she turn her head and whine, "I gotta eat first." She grind that ass against my dick and kiss my face.

I lets her go and say "Okay," and grab my hoodie off the chair. But before we leave, she kiss me and suck my tongue, and I grabs her by the waist, and we knock it quick-like on the bed without even gettin' our shirts off. And I make that baby mine one more time.

At the 7-Eleven, we buy up half the store. We get chili-dogs and Suicide-Slurpees for dinner and buy chips and candy and sodas for later. We get a pack of Black & Milds and a carton of Newports. And, while the clerk talks B up, I swipe two bottles of Cisco: strawberry for her, black-cherry for me.

Back in the room, I strips off my hoodie and work shirt and kicks off my boots. I crack the Cisco and spread out on the bed, but B start with the *you gotta work* shit. "I'm not goin' to work. Let's party," I says, but she look away. "What your deal? We got funds." I pass her the strawberry Cisco so she can chill the fuck out.

She take it, but drop it behind her on the bed like it not important. I take a swig of mine. Damn, it sweet, like drinkin' syrup, but when I finish, she just lookin' at me.

"You gonna get fired," she say shakin' her head like that such a shame.

"So?"

"What?" she ask and stand up and go all serious. "What you mean, *So*?" She look at me like she never seen me before.

"Why you buggin' like Staff?" I asks, sittin' up.

She take small steps and turn around, goin' in little circles. "How you gonna be the man without a job?" she ask, holdin' the baby in her belly.

I gets up and goes to her. "I'm gonna cut my demo and blow up."

"But how you gonna represent till then?" she ask.

"Fuck. We can lift shit for Jew-Fro. Sell his burns," I tells her. "Or sell skunk to tourists. Shit, we can go big-time." I put my hands on her shoulders to stop her frettin'. "I be Smiley. I got tons of prospects for bringin' in the bills, baby."

She step back, makin' my hands drop off her shoulders, and say, "Till you got them prospects runnin', you better be doin' somethin'."

"Don't worry. I gots it covered," I says and slide my arms around her waist. "Let's just chill for tonight. Get fucked up and party."

She shake her head and step away from me again. "You ain't nothin' but a little player." She point at the door and say, "Get out of my room."

"What?" I asks cause I know she ain't just said that.

"You heard me." She put her hands on her hips, givin' me attitude. "You the same as all them other players. Ain't ready to handle no responsibility."

I shake my head cause she talkin' crazy. "You know that ain't true," I tells her. Them punk-ass niggahs before me got her all screwed up, and she ain't got no faith left.

She point at the door and shout this time. "Get the fuck out of my room."

I step up to her quick and flex my arms like I'm gonna throw on her. "Bitch, I paid for this room," I reminds her, and she flinch, knowin' it's true.

"You got it for me," she say and snap her neck, her hands still on her hips.

"Cause I'm your man." I tells her and taps my chest with my finger tips so she can see.

“You ain’t my man,” she say, shakin’ her head like some poutin’ child. “You just a little boy.”

“Yo, what?” I asks and rush up on her

“That right,” she say, and scoot around the other side of the table. “Get out. We through.” She throw her hands out to the side.

“You ain’t leavin’ me,” I tells her, rushin’ up on her again.

“No, I’m kickin’ your punk ass out,” she say, goin’ round the table again. “You ain’t gonna provide for us,” she say with one hand on her belly.

“I still got over four-hundred.”

“That ain’t gonna last,” she say. “I ain’t livin’ at the Salvation Army. I gonna find me a real man to take care of my baby.”

“Bitch,” I says and reach over the table and push her onto the bed. “Don’t be sayin’ that.” I get around the table and come up on her. If I don’t love her so much, I’d knock her the fuck out.

She jump up and get in my face. “Don’t call me bitch,” she say like she ready to throw. I wait for it, but she solid, like she waitin’ for it from me, but I be a gentleman and shit. “You ain’t my man anymore,” she say calm and steady, lookin’ me in the eyes, like she don’t care if I knock her out for it. She that serious. “Get out of my room, player.”

“No, I ain’t goin’ nowhere.”

She turn and walk quick to the bathroom like she goin’ lock herself in there. I can’t let her do that; she all I got. I grab her and pull her out before she can close the door. “Hold up.”

“Let go of me,” she snap and jerk her arm away, but she stay there.

“You want me to be the fuckin’ man? Here, damn it.” I slap the cash into her hand and hold it there. “Here the funds. You got it”

I let go her hand, and she look at the funds. I can tell she know I’m serious. “Now you see I can provide for you,” I tells her.

She sit down on the bed and rub the cash-money in her hand. I lean against the table and stare her down. She shake her head and say, “You good-time Smiley, just a player. You ain’t changin’.”

“I will,” I swear and get down in front of her and rub her legs. “Give me another chance, all right? I’ll go to work, but you don’t leave me, all right?” She be quiet and won’t look at me. “If you don’t give me another chance,” I tells her, “I gonna get fired for sure cause I ain’t leavin’ here with you hatin’ me.”

She sigh and look away. Look all around the room at what we got, at all I provide for her. She look back to me and ask, “You’ll go to work?”

I nod. “You doubt me?”

She smile pretty and kiss me and say, “Okay.”

“I your man?”

“You my man.” she say all soft and sweet. And she kiss me again, warm and wet and soft, until I feel it in my dick.

With five minutes to catch the last bus, I get ready quick. I stick my apron in my bag and grab a pack of Ports to get me through my shift. I leave her my player and CDs so she can have tunes.

“Don’t do nothin’ stupid,” she say.

“Like what?” I asks, not gettin’ her.

“Like get fired. Or walk out on them or anythin’,” she say, worried with love for me.

I go to her on the bed and put my hand on her cheek and hold her soft face close to mine. “B-babe, quit frettin’. Smiley take care of things.”

“For sure,” she say. “You Smiley.” Then she kiss me good-bye and I gone.

I makes it to work a little late, but no one give me shit. I clears the tables and busts ass on the dirty dishes. I chills to the radio, and it feel good knowin’ I ain’t gots to go back to La Rue, but get to kick-it with B in our own place. The bar-rush is heavy, but all the bitches looks hot and time fly by lickety-split, and then the sun come up, and it be time to clock out. Before I leaves, I grabs four burgers and fills the rest of the bag up with fries so B and I got some hot breakfast; no more stale cereal, no more powdered oatmeal, no more cold Pop-Tarts for my girl.

But the bus home crawlin’, too many stops, too much traffic. And all the way these burgers smellin’ fresh, but I waits for my B to kick it off tip-top. My dick throb, and I’m on hard thinkin’ about everythin’ I’m gonna get from my girl. All-day, all-night, all the time from here on out.

When I gets back to the room, she not there and the room be trashed, the covers tore up, the TV gone, table upside down, chairs gone. Our clothes thrown everywhere. Someone done got in and fucked it up and snatched her.

But I see that on the mirror, it say *Smiley is a Player* in lipstick. And notice just my shit all over the place. Her shit all gone except them hand-me-down clothes from La Rue. Ain’t no food or smokes. Even the Cisco gone. And not all my stuff be here cause I don’t see my Timbs or my Tommy’s or my Iverson jersey or my player or my tunes.

The trick fuckin' cleaned me out. I throw the burgers against the wall and the fries fall all over the bed. Every breath make me wanna puke. I grab a chair to sit down, but it don't slide and fall over, so I sit on the floor, right up against the door to hold it shut.

I sit there, just fuckin' sit there. Empty trash bags and ripped-up bag bits all over the floor. Old-ass out-of-style shoes piled in the corner. Empty shampoos and lotions and shit on the counter by the sink.

I was on the last bus and she sure as shit didn't walk nowhere. Some slick player with plenty of bling picked her ass up in his tricked-out ride. She didn't have enough faith. I crack my head against the door tryin' to knock the sense back into it. She fuckin' played me. Played me out like some punk-ass sucker.

So fuckin' stupid. It's what I get. What I get for givin' a shit. For trustin' her. For takin' care of her instead of me. For lovin' her instead of just fuckin' her. And I got fuckin' shit. No funds for another night, can't go back to La Rue for 30, and I ain't stayin' at Sally's or the Mission or none of them downtown shelters.

Goin' to Jew-Fro's is useless. If she hocked my shit there, she long gone. And if she still there, it cause she fuckin' him, and his crew will beat me down before I even see my shit. So I'm double-done. No place to crash; no place to hock shit. Fuckin' trick. Goddamn fuckin' trick. Need to hook-up my own crew and go over there representin'; then I can take back what mine. Fuck right.

I ditch my work clothes and put on some tore-up jeans. I leave my white-T on from work, but cover the stank with my hoodie. Fuck showerin'. I collect what be worth it and roll. She left me two tanks, underwear, and a pair of socks; it all fit in my backpack. I leave my work clothes and everythin' else for the maid.

I light up a Newport as I walk to the the bus stop. I should just walk all the way to the mall to save some funds. But fuck that, what a dollar gonna get me. Might as well take a damn cab at this point. The 29 come, and I spend the buck for the ride to the mall, but it too early and eveythin' still locked up. So I chill on a bench outside the food court and wait. The La Rue crew be here soon; Paladin and Yada might know where B at.

And when I find her, I'm gonna beat that ho-bitch stupid. Put her ass on the corner till I get my funds back.

K-Dawg and Scrappy gonna love this shit. I gonna hear it, but fuck'em. Fuck all them; like none of them never got rolled, never been played. They better fuckin' stand-up and represent; better not side with Jew-Fro and that ho. Fuckin' Jew-Fro. What he need with B? What she to him? Why he gotta go and try me like this?

A van pull into the lot, and they clockin' me as they park, but no one get out. It just sit there. I light the last of my Ports and recognize that it that van that be parked outside La Rue House that made Staff start talkin' to us about scams. What do Staff know? They ain't never sold magazines. Maybe them kids that got ditched, just couldn't cut it. Got themselves fired. The scam on the folks dumb enough to buy the magazines, and I don't give a shit about them. They got enough and can afford to give me a little somethin'. So fuck Staff. And fuck B. And fuck Jew-Fro. And fuck all them La Rue suckers. I don't need none of them.

I knock on the window and some soft-ass preppie roll it down. "You the ones with the job sellin' magazines?" I asks him and he nod.

"You looking for work?" his partner ask from the bitch-seat.

"Yeah," I says. "I'm lookin' to do that."

Their faces get all happy, but I'm up on them, and if they try to pull any shit, I'll show these motherfuckers a scam.

IT WORKS WHEN YOU WORK IT

Monte puts the cob of corn down without taking a bite and sips his water. He swallows and says, "Let's go to a movie tonight."

"It's Thursday," Juanita says without looking up from her plate. Her voice is rough and grating, not from years of smoking, although it hasn't helped any, but from a blunt trauma to her vocal cords caused by a rushed endotracheal tube.

They sit across from each other at the table, both drinking ice water from wine glasses. The dining room is decorated in an old-world style with an ornate cherry-wood table and high-back chairs. A cherry-wood hutch holds pewter cake plates, punch bowls and serving platters. A large print of *The Last Supper* and a framed bullfighting poster-bill hang on the wall. Above the archway into the sitting room is a framed embroidery of the Narcotics Anonymous *Serenity Prayer*.

Monte looks at the bullfighting poster and frowns. "Remember Barcelona?" he asks with a nod toward the poster. "Getting lost trying to find the gypsy market?" Juanita smiles and nods. He smooths his shirt with his palms and says, "I want us to be like that again."

Her smile goes flat, and in her raspy voice she asks, "What's that mean?"

"We used to do things."

"We have responsibilities," she says. "Sponsees."

"We used to have a great time. Just us."

"People look to us for guidance."

“Dessert and a movie,” he says. He picks a pill of lint off his golf-shirt and places it on the table next to his wine glass. The shirt is white and embroidered with the University of Central Florida’s logo. The shirt is so white it seems to vibrate in contrast with his dark skin. “Like a date,” he adds.

“Maybe Sunday, after the social,” Juanita says. She cuts and eats her steak in a regular rhythm, not hurried, but with purpose. She is thin without looking fragile; her taut muscles are strung like wires on long slender limbs.

“Let’s skip the Sunday Social and make a night of it.” He sits up and leans toward her. “Dinner at Bravissimo and then that new Mel Gibson movie.”

“We can’t skip the social,” she says. “They need us there.”

“They don’t need us there,” Monte says with a shake of his head.

Juanita looks up for the first time and says, “My sponsees do.” She jabs a cube of meat with her fork.

He sighs and sits back. He pokes the cob of corn with his knife. “So tonight. Let’s go tonight.”

“It’s Thursday,” she says and brings another bite to her mouth.

He looks down and takes a breath. He picks lint off his slacks, puts it on the table next to the first piece and says, “I don’t feel like sitting through a meeting tonight.” He lifts his face and looks at her. “Let’s do something else. It doesn’t have to be a movie.”

She puts her knife down and leans toward Monte as if she’s hard of hearing. “What do you mean you don’t feel like sitting through a meeting tonight?” The light from the chandelier reflects off her domed forehead and arched cheekbones.

He breaks eye contact and pinches the two pieces of lint together as if trying to get them to meld into one. “We could go to the bookstore and get café-mochas.”

“There are only two times we go to meetings,” she says, clearing her throat in a vain attempt to smooth her voice. He nods impatiently and mouths with her as she finishes, “When we want to and when we don’t want to.”

Monte shrugs, picks up his water and says, “I just thought we could do something together, like normal people.” While he drinks, he makes eye contact with her. She waits, not looking away. He puts the glass down and says, “You know, enjoy each other’s company for a change.” He watches her for a reaction. She waits for more. “Work on the thirteenth step a little,” he adds.

“Oh.” She nods, smiling slightly and blushing. Then she shakes her head and says, “No, not tonight.” She shrugs her shoulders, smiles at him and shakes her head like a parent. “We can’t miss our home-group.”

“Every night is a damn home-group,” he says low. He leans back shaking his head and tosses his napkin on to the table. “I’m done with the meetings,” he says, then watches her.

Juanita sits up straight as if suddenly awake. She wears her long black hair in a severe ponytail at the back of her head, each hair smooth and straight and secure, but the black is being overtaken by gray. She looks at the embroidery of the *Serenity Prayer* and pulls the band free, releasing her hair. She runs her fingers through it, shakes it loose, slides her palms along her head smoothing the hair out again, gathers it up between her thumb and index finger, and reties the ponytail. “You’re never done with meetings,” she says calmly.

“I’ve got eleven years,” he says and laces his fingers behind his head.

“No. We’ve got today. A twenty-four hour reprieve,” she says. “And without a supportive community, we’ll be closer to using tomorrow.”

He sits up and smacks the table. “Bullshit. I’m sick of that crap. Are you telling me we can’t go for cheesecake and a movie without spiking a vein?”

“What about Bill?” she asks. He looks away and sits back. She continues, “He had almost fifteen years when he relapsed and no one’s seen him since.”

“I’m not Bill,” he says with a shake of his head.

She nods, but with a smile, and says, “What makes you better than him?”

“Why would I relapse now?” he asks. “Bill was in the middle of a divorce and got laid off. But everything’s great with me. I’ve got a good career and a great house and friends at work who’ve never even seen meth. And you. I have you. What would make me relapse?”

“Anything. Nothing. This is the most dangerous time.” She shakes her head at him. “When was the last time you worked the steps?”

“You’re not my sponsor anymore.”

“I’ll always be your sponsor,” she says, her voice a sad whisper. “And you’ll be mine.”

He sits forward and opens his hands. “So why do we need the meetings?”

“Oh please...” She waves him off and looks away, back to the *Serenity Prayer* above the archway.

Monte sighs and looks down at the table. He picks lint out of the tablecloth.

She pulls her hair free, shakes it out, and smooths it down. “You’ve forgotten you’re powerless,” she says as she ties it up. “You need to call your sponsor.”

He shakes his head as he squashes the lint into the other two with his thumb. “Don’t talk to me like that.”

“Like what?” she asks.

“Like I’m one of your kids at the shelter,” he says. “I’m not taking that.” He points his finger at her. “I’ve got eleven years clean and sober, and I’m telling you, I don’t want any meth.” He taps the table with his finger. “I don’t need it. I don’t crave it. I don’t even know where I’d find it. The only time I think about it now is at the damn meetings.” He sits back in his chair and smooths out his shirt.

She clears her throat and leans forward. “I’ve got twenty-three years, and I think about using everyday.”

“Because you’re surrounded by misery,” he says, raising his hands and glancing up. “Between La Rue House and NA, you’re wallowing in it.” She stares at him. He takes a breath and relaxes his shoulders. “You’re still surrounded by junkies, dependent on them,” he says slowly. “You have to remove yourself from the situation” He looks her in the eye. “Why didn’t you apply for that career services position I e-mailed you?”

She straightens up and runs her hand over her hair. “I’m not quitting my job,” she says with a shake of her head.

“It’s killing you,” he says. “It’s killing me, and I don’t even work there. God damn it. You need to move on.”

“And who’d run the shelter if I leave?”

“They’ll find somebody. There’s hundreds of social workers out there.” He points to the UCF logo on his shirt and says, “We crank out fifty a year. You’re not the only one who can help.”

“I won’t leave my kids,” she says, shaking her head.

“They’re not your kids,” he says and sits back. “You didn’t screw them up; you’re not responsible for them.” He leans forward and opens his hands. “You have to look out for yourself. Clean up your own side of the street.”

She smoothes her hair with her palm and glances from the prayer to the wall to the floor and then into the kitchen. “Now, I need a meeting,” she says.

He shakes his head and stands up; he was muscular in his youth, but now he’s soft. “Go to a damn meeting then,” he says. He straightens his shirt and walks away from the table.

“Come with me,” she calls, her hoarse voice cracking.

He stops in the archway between the dining room and the sitting room and turns back to her. “I’m going to a movie,” he says. “Join me.”

She looks down at the table. “I’ll pray for you.”

“Fine,” he says with a short laugh that sounds like a cough. “Pray that the movie doesn’t suck.” He turns to leave the room.

“We’ve built up too much time for you to relapse now,” she calls after him.

He stops and looks back over his shoulder. “I’m not going to use. I don’t need it.”

“Yet,” she says getting up from the table. “Using is just the final step of the relapse process.” She walks toward him. “You’re self-sabotaging.”

He turns to her. “I’m not.”

She reaches to hug him, but drops her hands when he doesn't move his. "Without the meetings, you'll relapse. Only meeting-makers make it."

"No," he says. "Without meetings, we might actually have a life."

"I'm just..." She hugs him and turns her face against his chest.

"I know," he tells her, stroking her back. "I love you too."

She looks up from his chest. "It is okay to relapse," she tells him. "Everyone relapses at some point. Relapse if you have to but don't stop working the program."

"Damn it," he says and pushes her away. "I'm not stopping to relapse."

"Denial," she says, shaking her head. "You need clarity. Let's go to the seven o'clock at St. Joseph's."

"Fuck St. Joseph's," he says and walks toward the door.

"All right," she yells, stopping him. "You want to relapse?" She snatches her purse off the couch and pushes passed Monte into the foyer. "We'll fucking relapse." She sets her pumps upright with her toe and jams her feet into them. "Pick your poison, let's do it." She pulls open the front door.

"That's not what I want," he says, catching hold of her. "I want you. I want us. I want a life." She pulls away and turns a few times in the sitting room before sitting on the edge of the couch and tugs her ponytail free. "I don't need the meetings anymore," he says from the foyer as he pulls on his jacket. "I'm recovered."

"Don't say that," she says, shaking her head. Her hair falls loose and veils her face. "You're an addict."

He adjusts the waist of his pants and tugs on the bottom of his jacket. "Can't we not be addicts, just for tonight?" he asks.

“Never,” she tells him. She looks up at him and pulls her hair away from her face. “Self-deception is the first step to relapse.”

“It’s ancient history,” he says. “I was an addict. Now I’m an admissions recruiter and a husband and a home-owner and an upstanding member of society — who’d like to use his vacation time for something other than a national addicts conference.”

She stares at the floor and shakes her head, shrouding herself once again.

He looks at a portrait on the wall of the sitting room. It’s of him and Juanita with their estranged kids: her daughter who was raised by Juanita’s parents and is an adult now but doesn’t call, and his two boys who live with their mothers in Miami and only get to visit on holidays. “Come with me,” he says, holding the front door open.

She looks up through her hair and asks, “Why are you doing this?”

He sighs and softens. “Because it’s time. If we’re going to go on, something has to change.”

“I’m not going to watch you destroy yourself.”

“And I’m not going to watch you.” He holds his hand out to her. “Come on.”

She looks back down and slowly shakes her head. “We can’t do this,” she says.

“It’s just a movie,” he says. “See how you feel afterward. We could always catch a midnight meeting.”

“Don’t screw with my program.” She turns her body from him. “I can’t.”

Monte sighs and shrugs his shoulders. “I’ll be in the car.” He steps outside and pulls the door shut.

In the car, he calls the theater on his cell phone and listens to the show times and smokes a whole cigarette, but Juanita doesn’t come out of the house. He turns on the

ignition and puts the car in gear. With his foot on the brake, Monte lights another cigarette.

A REGULAR THING

Cody knocks on the open door of the case managers' office, showing me a respect most of the shelter staff never get. "Mr. Eric?" he asks. "You got a second?"

I stop writing case notes and wave him into the office. We slap palms and lock fists, shaking hands like buddies on the street, and I ask him how it's going.

"All right," he says out of reflex and wedges himself into the residents' chair. He shoves the computer table with the back of his arm, trying to make more room between the desk and the table, but nothing has anywhere to go. He sighs, and the case managers' office fills with the smell of burnt tobacco.

I turn my little desk fan to blow between us and keep my air fresh, and look at him, waiting to hear what it is now.

But he just looks back. Shaved head, tattooed and scarred up, carrying just enough fat on him to look solid, he's a real roughneck brawler. If he were black, he'd be a thug. Too tough to need anyone or anything, ever.

Cody is on Sara's caseload, but we've got a history. On his first trip through La Rue House, we got into it over the difference between *asking* and *demanding*. After barking back and forth enough to bring the supervisor, we understood and respected each other. Since then, we've been straight. So he comes to me when he needs to talk.

Cody's been on the streets since he was about twelve, when he split from foster care. He made it on the streets for the first few years as a chicken-boy. Then, when he got old enough and big enough, he survived by rolling the men he used to service. He's been in and out of La Rue for the last three years but never done much. Now he's closing in on

twenty-one, so this visit is his last shot with us. If he doesn't get his shit straight this time, that's it, and he'll end up one of the permanently homeless.

But that can't be what's eating at him now. He's just beat getting kicked out of the shelter by landing a job at Smokey Bones BBQ. He should be boiling over with big plans, but he sits in the hot-seat with no hurry in him, like I called him into the office for something. "What's up?" I ask.

He shrugs in response, so tough.

"Someone sweating you?" I ask, but he shakes his head. "You got a problem with anyone?" I try, and get another shake. "Drugs?" I ask. "Girl trouble?" He smiles at this, like he's embarrassed, but still shakes his head no. The only trouble he has with girls is getting them.

My face gets warm, and the air tastes thick, so I turn the desk fan back on myself. I aim it right at my head and turn it up to medium so it'll cool me off quick.

"You start tonight?" I ask, pointing at Cody's Smokey Bones BBQ shirt. I know he does, but I'm hoping for at least a *yeah*.

"At five," he says, and I get a nod. Then he sits there, looking low, waiting on me for something.

"What's your beef?" I ask. "You got a job. We're off your back."

"Yeah, I guess," he says, slow and heavy. "But... I don't know." He looks down.

"But what?"

"Nothing." He rolls his head away slow, like he's checking over his shoulder, and slowly brings it back to me. "I'm a dishwasher," he says.

"So?" I say with a laugh. "You're just going to cash your first check and split."

He shakes his head. “Not this time,” he says.

“I’ll believe that when I see it,” I say and nod.

“Man, I swear, not this time,” he says. “I got to get out.”

“That last binge get to you that badly?”

He nods short and fast, his eyes serious with fear. His last coke-binge only stopped because his heart did first; evidently, it was just what he needed.

“So, save your money, find a place, and get off the street,” I say, giving the basic *Independent Living* case plan for these kids. *Get a job. Get a place. Get out of here.*

He shakes his head and squeezes his left hand with his right until the knuckles crack. “I can’t wash dishes the rest of my life.”

“Who says you have to?” I ask.

He shrugs his shoulders and cracks the knuckles on his right hand in the same way.

“Washing dishes just gets you in the door,” I say. “You move up to prep-cook after a bit, then get on the line.”

Cody nods but isn’t agreeing with me. He looks at me and then at the office doorway like it’s the last car out of town.

I glance through the office’s panoramic windows at the male unit: the two new intakes sitting on the couch watching afternoon talk shows and Damon ironing his jeans. No one else’ll be back until four when they roll in from job searching. I lean forward and slap the office door. It bangs shut, heavy and solid. The kids on the couch snap to; Damon doesn’t flinch.

I lean back in my chair and adjust my fan so it's blowing across my body. "So what's going on?"

He slumps low in the chair and rests his head against the window. "I'm a goddamn dishwasher."

"What's wrong with that?" I ask. "A job's a job."

"It's a bullshit job, Mr. Eric." He sits up quick and puffs out his chest. "Only losers and Mexicans clean up people's shit. Man, I'm sick of all that."

I shake my head and motion with my hand for him to settle down. "So what'd you rather be doing?" I ask.

He shrugs. "Something better than working in a kitchen."

"So work your hours and look for something else in your off-time. No one's saying you have to stick with this job. You just have to be employed." These kids make everything so complicated.

"But what else'm I gonna do, Mr. Eric?" he asks, looking at me.

I turn my fan back down to low and try to come up with another job. "What about construction... or landscaping..." He shakes his head. I'm blank. This isn't my thing, but as Cody sits there, frowning with his arms crossed, the perfect setting fills in around him like one of those portrait-studio backdrops: the office carpet becomes a sidewalk, the overhead lights shine like blue neon, the window behind him becomes a darkened doorway, and he stands in front of it denying me entrance with that frown and a velvet rope. "I got it," I say quick, sitting up. "A bouncer. Work the door at one of them downtown bars. Maybe some hipster nightclub."

He scowls and shakes his head. "That ain't me."

“Shit it ain’t, you’d be perfect,” I tell him. “Stand around, look mean, be a grumpy bastard for a living. Tell me you don’t dig it.”

“Man, I hate clubs,” he says and sits taller. “I don’t want to deal with all those stupid drunk motherfuckers.”

“All right.” I nod. “I just thought, maybe, I had an idea of what would work for you.” I lean back in my chair again, glad I don’t have to explain that job placement.

He sits back too. “I just can’t be around all that shit, you know.”

“Fair enough,” I say, nodding. “So what’s that leave then?”

He shrugs, but adds, “I just don’t want some bullshit job. I want a regular thing.”

“What? Like a career?”

“No,” he says drawing out the “o.” “I don’t want college or nothing. I just want something that pays enough so I can have a place of my own. And have food and smokes and enough so I don’t have to hustle shit anymore.”

“Restaurant work’ll get you that,” I say, dropping my hands onto the arms of my chair. “Save your money, find an apartment, get yourself a Lay-Z-Boy at Goodwill and a big-ass TV from the pawnshop. Long as you don’t blow your check on smokes, you’ll be okay.” *Get a job. Get a place. Get out.*

“I guess,” he says, looking away like he made a mistake talking to me.

“That’s what you want, right?”

“Well, yeah. Sort of. You know...” Cody stares at me, then twists his head far to the left until his neck pops; a deep hollow sound. He twists it back to the right and gives it a quick jerk; it goes with a sharp crack. “You know how Mr. Robb’s always saying we got to get a real job to keep us on our feet?” I nod, having heard Robb’s *Employment vs A*

Real Job speech enough to give it. “That’s what I want. Something that gives you skills and lets you move up.”

Robb’s a great cat, but he just doesn’t get it. He’s always trying to get these kids to join the military or go into a work program. *Life Planning* he calls it. But street kids aren’t ready for that. Getting laid and high are more important to these cats than eating and having a roof over their heads. We have to get them to give a damn about being self-sufficient before we can get them to care about planning the rest of their lives.

And that’s not even our job at La Rue House. It’s hell enough just to get them to hold a job and save their money; getting them into an apartment is the best we can hope for. You can’t expect them to get their shit straight *and* do something with their lives; these kids aren’t ready for that.

“I want that type of thing,” Cody says.

“So talk to Mr. Robb,” I say, hoping this takes care of my end of his problem. “He knows about that type of thing.” I point my fan down even with the desk and pick up my pen so I can get back to doing my case notes.

“I don’t wanna talk to him,” Cody says and holds his hands in front of himself like he’s holding Robb off. “He thinks he knows everything about us. Always got an answer for you before you finish your question. He tries me.”

“Give him another shot,” I say. “He knows a lot more about where you’re coming from than most the staff here.”

“He don’t know me,” Cody says and shakes his head short and quick, more like he’s blowing off my suggestion of talking with Robb than disagreeing with me. “He’ll

just tell me to join the Army. Shit, that ain't me. I'd throw on the first person told me to clean a toilet."

I nod and drop my pen back onto the desk.

Cody wraps his fingers around his thumbs and squeezes so they pop, then lets his hands go limp. "But I want that type of thing, you know. That regular type of thing."

"Which is it?" I ask, adjusting my fan to blow on me more. "You want your own place or you want something with skills?"

"I don't know," he says and looks away. "I want a place, but I'm sick of it being so hard, you know? I'm tired of fighting all the time, man. I just want to live, you know? Without having to worry about all the day-to-day shit."

"And you figure, with some skills, it'll be easier?"

"Sure it will," he says nodding. "It's got to be. I see it. You don't got nothing to worry about." I cough and shake my head at this, but he comes on. "When you get your check, you've got your rent and food and electricity and cable and all that taken care of with no worries."

He's got me there; I don't have worries anymore, not those worries anyway. I nod, with him. Shit, maybe he is ready, but how ready? "Okay," I say slowly, leaning back and surveying at the unit. All's well. "So what kind of regular, skilled jobs do you think you'd like?" I ask.

He shrugs, and I want to smack him. But we just stare at each other until he comes up with, "I always thought it'd be pretty tight to be a trucker or something."

"A trucker?" I ask.

“Yeah,” he says with a nod. “I watch them when I do day-labor at warehouses. All they do is pick up and drop off. They don’t even have to unload. They just pull up and open the back, then go to the lounge and watch TV.”

“Okay,” I say, seeing him smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee on a late night haul. “They make good enough money.”

“Shit yeah, they do. And they travel all over, see the country, and no one’s hassling them.”

“Get in with a company and they might have benefits too,” I add.

He waves his hands like he’s swatting flies. “I don’t need all that.”

“The hell you don’t...” I want to explain why he should let them take the money from his check for health insurance, but I don’t. It’d kill things.

“Whatever,” he says nodding with me to get beyond it. Then he shakes his head. “But, forget it. Who’s gonna let me drive a truck?” And he laughs, like we’ve been talking shit.

“Who wouldn’t hire you?” I ask, not about to let it go. “Get you a cap and a flannel jacket and I’d hire you right now.”

“I ain’t even got a license for a car.”

“You telling me you can’t drive a car?”

“Man, I’ll drive anything you got,” he says with a criminal’s confidence. “But who’s going let me haul their shit with my record? No one.”

“You don’t think truckers got records?” I ask, but he sits there quiet, so I go on. “Yeah, that’s it. Look around, make some calls, see what it takes to be a trucker.” He looks at me with a flat expression and nods too easily, which means he’s just agreeing to

get out of the office and he'll never do a damn thing about it on his own. "What, you can't do it yourself?"

He shrugs and shakes his head, tough again.

"I got to do everything for you?" I ask, pushing.

He snorts and looks away. "Now you sound like Mr. Robb..."

"You rather talk to him?" I ask, almost getting up. "There's the door."

"No, no. It's okay, Mr. Eric. I just..." Cody shifts in his seat and nods at the filing cabinet. "You think he's got something on being a trucker?"

The case managers all keep a couple folders of resource materials: info on local churches, apartment complexes, secondhand stores, battered women's shelters. Services for single mothers, the mentally ill, and for the gay and lesbian kids. Myself, I keep info on every AA, NA, and CA meeting in the city. And while it's not like I *can't* go in another case manager's files, we usually refer the youth to the appropriate case manger and leave each others' shit alone. But Cody won't talk to Robb, and he's ready now. "Maybe," I say and open the bottom drawer.

In Robb's section, I find a file labeled *Trade Schools*. "Here we go," I say, putting the file on the desk. Cody tries to get a look as I open it. I leaf through brochures for ITT Tech, Job Corps, and the Disney Culinary Institute before finding brochures for Swift Transportation and C&L Truck Driving School. "Hot damn, he's got some."

"What's it say?" Cody asks.

"Here," I say and hand him the brochure for Swift Transportation. He goes through it quick, like he's just taking in the pictures and I can't remember if he can read or not, but then he starts over and takes it slow, eyes scanning back and forth.

“How’s it look,” I ask after I’ve read the C&L brochure.

“You got to work for them for two years afterward,” he says, like it’s a prison sentence.

“That’s not that long,” I offer. “Less than the Army.”

He nods and keeps reading, but soon says, “Fuck,” and tosses the info back onto the desk. “Forget it.” He slouches down in the chair. I wait. “You got to be twenty-three and have a GED,” he explains.

“You can get a GED by the time you turn twenty-three.”

“I can’t wait that long,” he says, and stares at the floor. “Man, why the fuck you got to be twenty-three?”

“Probably like the apartment complexes that don’t rent to anyone under 21,” I offer and put the info for C&L Trucking in front of him. “You only have to be eighteen for this one.”

He looks at the brochure on the desk, then sits forward. “Really?”

I nod. “But you still need your GED,” I say, hoping he takes it well.

He pinches his brow and breathes deep, then he looks away and shakes his head.

“Forget it.”

“Don’t you go soft on me,” I bark. “You want it, you can do it.”

He looks up at me, holding my eye like I’m jiving him.

“Shit, you put half as much effort into the GED as you did hustling, you’d get it in no time.”

“You think so?”

I nod until he's nodding too, then I tap the brochure. "Now, you don't have to work for them, but it costs five thousand," I add, hoping again.

"Five grand? How'm I gonna get five grand?" His eyes get wide, and his breathing quickens as his fight or flight reflexes kick in. And the boy's no runner. "Fuck that." He throws the info onto the desk, and it slides across. "I can't get five grand for no fucking school."

"They'll finance you," I say, grabbing the brochure and pushing it back in front of him. "You pay it back once you start working."

"That'd take forever to pay back five grand."

"Not once you're making good money," I say, to remind him of why we were looking at trucking schools in the first place.

"I guess," he says and leans back in the chair, resting his head against the glass. "But I can't get five grand. Not even working queers."

I hate that he still considers that an option, but to these kids, five thousand might as well be five million. And legit loans aren't even on the table.

He looks down at the brochures spread across the desk and picks up one that says *Jobs. You need 'em. We got 'em.* on the cover in large, extra-bold letters. After glancing at the pictures on the cover, he opens it and reads a few lines, then sits up to read it closer. On the cover, I see a picture of a man in coveralls working on an engine, a woman on the deck of a ship with binoculars, and a man cooking in a large kitchen.

"What's that one for?" I ask him.

"Working on ships," he says without looking at me.

"You interested in that?"

He shrugs. “It’s free.”

“Free?”

He sits up a little. “And they guarantee you a job on one of their ships.”

“Guarantee?” I ask. He’s reading wrong or it’s a scam. “Let me see that,” I say and hold out my hand.

He half closes it to hand it to me, but holds up to read one last thing. “Room and board’s free too...”

“Give me that.” I snatch it from his hands. “Sounds like bullshit to me.”

I look it over as Cody leans in, trying to read upside down. The maritime school is set up by the Seafarers Union. Tuition, room and board *are* free, but he would have to pay for transportation to the school, which is in Maryland, and buy his work clothes and pay for some Coast Guard certifications. All of which, the brochure says, will total about a thousand dollars. The only entrance requirements are that he has at least a GED and not be on probation or parole. Nothing about previous convictions or felonies being a problem. It’s a six month program, three months in a classroom and three months at sea; afterward he’ll be an entry-level mariner. And the brochure does say they guarantee employment through the union for those who finish the program.

“Doesn’t it sound cool?” he asks and takes back the brochure.

“Yes, it does...”

“I bet they make more than truckers,” he says.

“You can move up, too,” I say, pointing to the section about returning to the school for more training. “Get more certifications, earn more money.”

“It’s perfect,” he says while looking at the pictures on the cover.

Okay, he might be ready, but how serious is he? “You going to be able to handle something like that?” I ask and he nods too quickly. “Working on a ship, far out at sea, being gone for months at a time?” I get another nod. “You going to stick with Smokey Bones long enough to save the money?”

“Oh yeah, man. Sure,” he says nodding, then pauses. “How long do you think it’ll take?”

“Month and a half, two months,” I say, extending the time because these kids never work forty hours and always lose money between the check cashing service and the shelter. “Depending on how much you work and how many packs of smokes you buy.”

“Damn, a month...” He smiles and almost laughs, but then his smile dies. “You think Ms. Sara will go for it? I mean, are y’all gonna let me stay here long enough to get the money?”

“Well,” I say and pause like I’m thinking. “We’ll have to check it out, make sure it’s legit...”

“I’m sure Mr. Robb checked it out.” He’s smiling again, but I have to hit him once more.

“You going to go take the GED classes and study for the test?”

He looks up at me, and his expression goes flat; he’d forgotten about the GED. After a second, he curls his lip tough and nods. “Yeah, I’ll do it. Don’t worry.”

“If you say you’re going to go in a month and a half, you go,” I warn him.

“I know, Mr. Eric. I will.”

“No changing your mind later because you met some foxy mama that you can’t live without.”

“I don’t want none of the girls here.”

“What about Paisley?” I ask because he seems to only share his cigarettes with her and is always by her side when she’s on property.

“She’s a dyke,” he says.

I smile at him because, dyke or not, she came into the shelter pregnant.

“We just get along, is all,” he says.

“Okay,” I say, hoping we don’t in-take a girl he likes, and open the main filing cabinet to get his folder. “I’ll write it up and talk to Ms. Sara and Ms. Juanita at the shift transition meeting.”

“Thanks Mr. Eric. Thanks a ton.”

“You better not be jiving me.”

“I’m not.” He shakes his head, smiling wide.

The buzzer for the unit door goes off, and we look at the security monitor. A group of five or six guys crowd on the other side of the unit door. A few look up into the camera; each holds a sheet of paper in his hand. “It’s that time,” I say.

Cody smiles and motions for me to wait to buzz them in. He crosses the office to the intercom and presses the button. “Whada ya want?”

“Let us in.”

“You got your Job Search Logs?” Cody asks, watching the monitor.

“Yeah.” The guys hold up their job search logs for the camera. “Let us in!”

“Anyone get a job?” Cody asks through the intercom, enjoying his power.

“Man, let us in. I got to smoke.”

Cody is about to say something else, but I hit the button, and the door clicks open. The guys come in acting mad and tough. “Damn Cody, that shit ain’t funny...” one says.

“Can you copy this for me?” Cody asks, handing me the brochure.

“Sure thing.” I take it and put it on top of Robb’s *Trade Schools* file figuring I might make a copy for myself. Hell, I’ll copy the whole file. Try a little *Life Planning* on my own kids.

The guys gather outside the office door to turn in their Job Search Logs. Cody slaps palms with them as he pushes out of the office.

“Where you going?” one of the guys asks.

“Work,” Cody says, walking on toward the unit door. “Gotta catch the 4:15 to I-Drive.”

“Take the 4:40. Grab a smoke with us...”

Cody stops in the doorway for a second like he’s calculating the time difference. “All right,” he says. “I’ll be on the patio.”

“Cody,” I bark over the boys crowding at the office door.

“What?” he asks, snapping back around.

I stand up and hold the Merchant Marine brochure over the crowd. “You want me to just throw this away then?” The crowd splits apart so I can see Cody at the end of the hall.

“Oh, right, Mr. Eric,” Cody says and looks to the other guys. “Sorry,” he tells them, “I got to get out of here.” He nods to me, smacks the door twice, and disappears down the hall.

I sit back down, adjust my fan and drop the brochure on top of the *Trade Schools* file.

GLORIA'S HEADACHES

Gloria massages her scalp to ease the dull ache of her regular tension. The pain is similar to when her hair was braided too tightly, before she shaved her head in an attempt to excise the problem.

It's an hour until the end of her shift at La Rue House Youth Shelter, and there's a chance her night might not end in a migraine. All the Headaches with jobs are in from work. No one's out on a late-pass. The only Headache still out is Tonya, who's already an hour and half late for curfew. If Tonya simply goes AWOL, Gloria will avoid the migraine and be soaking in the tub by midnight.

That is if no new Headaches come to the front door seeking shelter. And Out-Reach doesn't lure any in with peanut-butter and jelly sandwiches. Or if none of the boys starts a fight over which radio station to listen to and none of the girls decides they need to go to the emergency room for cramps. But the units are quiet, the census is low, and it's a good bunch of Headaches at the moment. Except for Tonya.

She imagines her arms floating limp in the bath. Feels steam on her face and heat in her muscles. Smells lavender salts. She wishes there was someone at the apartment to start her bath for her. Maybe to rub her feet as she soaks.

But on the security monitor, a Headache approaches the front door of the shelter, and Gloria knows from the slow swaying gait and sparkling purse that it is Tonya. Maybe she'll actually do something to help herself tonight. One of Gloria's psychology professors told her the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again

but expecting a different result. She later found out the definition is a 12-Step-ism, but it still holds true, especially in Tonya's case.

Tonya bangs on the glass front door. Gloria stares at her through the door, waiting. Tonya stares back, huffs and puffs, and stomps her foot. When Tonya finally knocks politely, Gloria buzzes her in.

Gloria stands up to greet her because it's a harder posture to ignore, although she's not much taller once she's standing. "You're late for curfew."

Tonya's gone without Risperdal, Depakote and Zyprexa for at least three weeks, so Gloria anticipates an agonizingly long and involved excuse. "You people need to give me my car back," Tonya says before the door closes behind her.

"We don't have your car," Gloria says, interested by receiving demands instead of excuses. "You wouldn't park it on property, remember?"

"So you went and towed it." Tonya walks right up to the In-Take counter, not to sign in, but to get in Gloria's face. "You better give it back, or I'll call my lawyer and sue you."

Gloria ignores the lawyer threat, stuck on the other thing Tonya said. "You're car was towed?" she asks.

"You know it was," Tonya says. "You towed it."

"We didn't tow it," Gloria tells her and sits down so she can help Tonya with this new problem. It was only a matter of time, but Gloria wonders why it had to be tonight.

Tonya nods insistently at Gloria. "I went to the police, and they said they had complaints about the car so they towed it. You think I don't know who did the complaining? I know."

“We didn’t have it towed.”

“You better tell the cops to give it back. I know my rights.”

Tonya’s rights. Every time someone doesn’t do what the Headaches want, it’s a violation of their rights. It drains her energy and makes her head hurt. Just like every time they don’t get hired for a job, it’s because of the Headaches’ race. The repetition of the lessons is what gets to her.

“Why would we have your car towed?” Gloria asks, knowing it’s futile to try to get Tonya to see the flaw in her logic, but having to try anyway.

“You wanted it.” Tonya shifts her weight from one side to the other and bounces on her feet. “You’ve been trying to get it the whole time I’ve been here.

“No,” Gloria corrects her for the hundredth time. “We wanted you to park it here, where it would be safe and wouldn’t get towed.”

“You weren’t going to let me use it,” Tonya says and crosses her arms.

“It is illegal for you to drive on a suspended license, especially without any insurance,” Gloria reminds her for the thousandth time.

Tonya leans over the desk, stopping just inside Gloria’s space. “But it’s *my* car.”

“Right,” Gloria says without flinching. “And now you have to spend *your* money to get it back.”

“No,” she says, leaning back. “You got to pay because you had it towed.”

Gloria closes her eyes as the tension creeps forward in her head and can only manage to say, “We didn’t have it towed.”

“You can’t play me,” Tonya says shaking her head. She turns to the door leading to the dormitory wing of the shelter, but Gloria doesn’t let her through, so Tonya turns the knob and pushes on the locked door. “Let me in,” she demands.

“Do you want something to eat first?” Gloria asks and points in the opposite direction, toward the cafeteria. She’s stalling to avoid the next confrontation but also making sure Tonya’s eaten.

“I’m not going to eat your food,” Tonya says like she’s wise to Gloria’s tricks.

“There’s nothing in the food,” Gloria reassures her, again.

Tonya shakes her head and puts her palm on the door to the units. “Let me in.”

“Just a moment,” Gloria says. “Before you go up to the unit, you need to deposit the money from your Social Security check.”

“What do you know about that?”

“Today is the first of the month,” Gloria says, hoping it sounds like a statement rather than a question. “You need to deposit your money.”

“You’re not my case manager,” she says and pushes on the door again.

“Yes, but Ms. Sara says you can’t come back on the unit until you deposit your money.”

Tonya backs away from the In-Take desk. “I’m not giving you people my money.”

“To stay here, you must deposit eighty percent of all income, including your disability checks.”

“But I need that money for my car,” Tonya says, clutching her purse. “They say I got to have insurance to get it back.”

“Deposit your money, and then you and your case manager can see about getting your car and purchasing insurance.”

Tonya cocks her head to the side and asks, “If you’re really going to give it back, then why can’t I keep it?”

“Because you might,” Gloria says but stops herself and changes to a less accusatory pronoun. “Because it might get lost. Or someone might steal it.”

Tonya peers through the door’s thin window, looking up toward the units. “Those bitches aren’t getting anything else of mine.”

“That’s why you must deposit it,” Gloria says. “So it’s safe.”

“Bullshit,” Tonya says, snapping back to Gloria. “You’ll say I never deposited it and keep it for yourself. I know it’s happened before. You’re not going to do it to me. I’ll live in my car before you get any of my money.”

“You can’t do that if it’s impounded,” Gloria says, not to jab at her but to emphasize the fact that Tonya needs the shelter. But it came out wrong and from the look on Tonya’s face, she took it as a jab.

“Fuck you,” Tonya says and pushes on the door leading to the units. “Let me in.”

Gloria lets the Fuck You slide because she deserved it but pushes on. “If you don’t deposit the money,” Gloria says, “you are going to be discharged for failing to follow your case plan.”

“That’s bullshit.” Tonya says and kicks the door.

“No, it is the way we do things,” Gloria says. “If you don’t like it, you’ll have to stay at one of the other shelters.”

“I can’t stay there anymore,” Tonya says as if it’s Gloria’s fault.

“Well, to keep staying here, you are going to have to follow our guidelines.”

“I don’t have to do nothing,” Tonya says. “I know my rights.”

“This is your last chance. Deposit the money.”

“You’re not getting my money.” Tonya steps back to the center of the In-Take lobby. “Why can’t you leave me alone? I’m so sick of you people. Let me get a job and live on my own. I’d be fine if you’d just leave me alone.”

“Okay. That’s enough. Have a seat, and we’ll bring down your belongings,” Gloria says and points to a chair in the lobby. She never wants to put a child out on the streets, especially at night. You can always give a kid one more chance. But Tonya’s used them all up, so she has to go — at least for a week. “You’re being discharged.” Gloria picks up the phone and dials the Girls’ Unit.

“That’s not going to work,” Tonya says and clutches her purse close to her side. “I’m not going to give you my money.”

“I understand that. We’re done. You’re being discharged. Have a seat,” Gloria says and talks into the phone. “Sara, Tonya is being discharged.”

“She wouldn’t do it?” Sara asks.

“Nope,” Gloria says. “Pack-up her things and bring them to In-Take.”

Tonya rushes the In-Take counter. “Bullshit. You can’t do that.”

“We just did,” Gloria tells her. “Now, have a seat.”

“She better not touch my stuff,” Tonya says. She shoves the dormitory door and slams her shoulder against it.

“We will pack up your belongings.” Thank the Lord there isn’t a Headache in the hall who might good-naturedly open the door for her.

“That’s my stuff.”

“If you don’t calm down, you’re not going to get an overnight, and then you’ll have nowhere to stay.”

“I ain’t got nowhere anyhow, you fucking bitch,” Tonya screams and shoves everything off the In-Take counter with a few frantic swipes of her arms. Pens ricochet off the desk and walls. Church fliers flutter to the ground. The sign in/out log and the Lynx bus schedule crash into the back wall of the In-Take office and flop to the ground.

Gloria comes from behind the desk and stands in the office doorway. She points to the front door and says, “Go outside and calm down, or I’m calling the police.”

“You can’t do that,” Tonya cries.

“Watch me,” Gloria says and picks up the phone again for Tonya to see.

Tonya stands firm, as if trying to wait Gloria out. She’s still but clenching her jaw and breathing heavily through her nostrils, dangerously close to going-off.

“Go outside now, or you won’t even get your belongings,” Gloria tells her.

“You’ll just go to jail.”

“Fucking Jesus,” Tonya says and backs toward the front door. “You people are worse than any of them.”

Gloria holds the phone up until Tonya closes the door and stares back at Gloria through the glass.

“Have a cigarette and calm down,” Gloria tells her through the intercom. “Your things will be right up.”

“I’m not leaving without my shit,” Tonya says and steps back from the door, out of the light.

The lobby is quiet and still. Gloria droops her shoulders and lifts her head, twisting it left and right, to stretch the muscles in her neck. Hopefully, Tonya won't make Gloria call the police. While it would be nice to see Officer Haynes, Gloria's bath is already half an hour further away because of her. Gloria pulls out a discharge form to get that out of the way.

Gloria hopes Tonya will come back tomorrow to deposit her money and appeal her discharge. Or go to Lakeside and finally get back on her medication. But once Tonya is gone, Gloria will probably never see her again. Maybe with her Master's Gloria could better help the ones like Tonya. She needs to get around to applying to a grad school. She's built up enough experience in the field and won't get any further until she has a Master's. And a PHD would be better. But there's no rush on grad school; she still has two years before her GRE scores expire. And the shelter needs her. The Headaches need her.

The doorbell rings, and Tonya stands in front of the door like she wants in, but Gloria doesn't move to buzz the door open. Tonya swings her rhinestone purse high so Gloria can see it and yells, "I've got it right here."

Gloria presses the intercom button for the front door and asks, "You want to deposit it now?" She shouldn't allow her to do it now. Once a Headache has been told they are discharged, they are supposed to be discharged, but Sara hasn't shown up with Tonya's belongings, and the discharge hasn't been put in the computer yet.

"No," Tonya sneers. "But I've got it, so you can stop looking through my stuff and just give it to me."

“We’re getting it as fast as we can,” Gloria says and goes back to Tonya’s discharge paperwork.

Tonya kicks the door, and Gloria looks back up out of reflex. “If I’m discharged, then you can stop writing notes about me.” Tonya yells at the glass.

“If you don’t stop, you’ll have to leave property.”

Tonya stomps her foot and yells, “I’m not leaving until you give me my shit.”

“Then calm down, or I’ll call the police and have you charged with trespassing,” Gloria says, though it’d take something more serious than just kicking the door for her to actually do it. “Then you’ll never be able to come back.”

“I’m never coming back.” Tonya puffs up and acts like she’s going to kick the door again until Gloria ends the stare-off by going back to her paperwork.

Gloria adds a glass of Chablis to her bath and wishes she had someone to enjoy a whole bottle with. A man to make it romantic. Or simply a girl friend to make it relaxing. Either way, she needs to do more. Enjoy life. But all she ever feels like doing after work is going blah in the bath or in front of the TV.

Gloria calls the Girl’s Unit to find out what’s taking Sara so long.

“She’s got a ton of stuff,” Sara says when she finally comes to the phone. “Why? Is she being disruptive?”

“She went off, so I sent her outside”

“Better you than me.”

“Thanks. I should have gone to dinner.”

“I would have sent the intern to cover you.”

“That’s cruel.”

“He has to learn somehow,” Sara says and hangs up.

Sara is all right for a white girl. She’s a little too cold and clinical with the Headaches, but that’s just her way of protecting herself. Sara would probably warm up and be pleasant with a couple of glasses of wine in her. She also has a degree in psych instead of social work; that’s something they have in common. Maybe Gloria should ask her if she wants to go for a drink after work. But whose bar would they go to? One of Sara’s where none of the men will talk to Gloria because she’s not light enough? Or one of Gloria’s where all the players will come around to talk to Sara’s blonde hair and white breasts?

The doorbell rings painfully in the quiet lobby, and Gloria looks up to see what Tonya wants now, but there are two boys standing at the door. Reese and Jernell, both discharged Headaches that shouldn’t be around property this late. Reese has survived on the streets since he was twelve. He never stayed at the shelter as a minor but has been discharged thirteen times in the last two years, most recently for destroying La Rue House property. He’ll end up chronically homeless if he doesn’t work the shelter’s program soon. Jernell’s grandmother kicked him out when he turned 18; his mother is in prison. He stayed at the shelter for the first few months but was discharged for never finding employment. He’s just young and hasn’t realized it’s time to grow up. Tonight is not the night to deal with them, but it’s nice to know they are still alive. Gloria hopes they just want food.

“What do you need?” Gloria asks through the intercom. If Tonya wasn’t out there, she’d buzz them into the lobby; they’re good Headaches who made bad choices. Maybe they’ll choose better next time.

“We don’t have any money for the Coalition,” Reese says, using the name of the cheapest shelter to make them seem pathetic. “And we used up our free nights at the Salvation Army,” he adds before she can ask.

“Hold on,” Gloria tells them. Neither can come back in yet, but she’ll double check to make sure. She fingers through the catalog of index cards for discharged Headaches and reads both their cards quickly. “You have no overnights left. You’ll have to wait until your cards are up.”

“When’s that?” Reese asks.

Gloria glances back at the cards and does the math. “Three days for Jernell. A week for you.”

“A week?” Reese asks like it’s a surprise.

“Then can we get something to eat?” Jernell asks, sounding desperate, yet still demanding.

“You’re supposed to come before nine,” she reminds them, sounding stern. But she will feed them; food is the last service to be denied.

“We didn’t have any bus passes,” Reese says. “We had to walk.”

“I’ll see what I can find,” Gloria says and pushes her chair back.

Before she gets up, Reese asks, “What was for dinner?” He’s really asking for something besides the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches they keep for discharged Headaches looking for food.

“Peanut butter and jelly,” Gloria answers and manages a smile. She gives them a hard time, but she’ll check for any leftover lasagna. If not, she’ll slip some extra cookies in with their PBJs.

“We need three,” Jernell adds before she leaves the desk.

“Who’s with you?” Gloria asks, wanting to know so she’ll be able to worry about one less Headache. She looks beyond them to the wall, hoping to recognize someone’s hair or eyes.

“My girlfriend,” Jernell says with a smile and glances back toward the wall.

Gloria’s seen that smile on too many Headache’s faces to be happy for him. Love is not a blessing in their situation; it’s a distraction that keeps the Headaches from rebuilding their lives. “Who’s that?” she asks, trying to remember who Jernell hung around with before he was discharged, which Headache he talked to most.

“Someone who’s been trespassed,” Reese answers.

Any girl who’s been trespassed is going to be nothing but bad news for Jernell. He won’t be back in three days, not if he’s still with her. Hopefully, they’ll break up soon. Gloria doesn’t have the energy to lecture Jernell through the intercom, so she leaves the office to get them three dinners.

The hallway is long and must be built on an incline. Or maybe she’s out of shape. She’s not fat, not by a long shot; she’s actually underweight, but she’s definitely out of shape. She’s tired all the time and gets too many migraines. Maybe it’s because she’s too stationary; she sits at the In-Take desk all night and on the couch all morning. Maybe she should join a gym. She could start by exercising at home, crunches and jogging. Or Yoga. But not tonight. A bath and a glass of wine are all she needs tonight.

In the kitchen, Gloria eats a cookie while heating up the lasagna in the microwave. She packs the dinners in a large paper bag and puts in three sets of plastic utensils, three chocolate milks and six packs of cookies.

As she approaches the end of the hallway with the bag of food, there's a deep pounding from somewhere outside her head. And Gloria hears a stream of profanity. She runs the last few feet to the lobby and shoves the In-Take door open.

"Motherfuckers got my shit," Tonya screams as she beats her fist against the glass. "God-damn. My shit." She points into the night with her other hand.

Reese and Jernell are gone.

"God-damn motherfuckers took my purse," Tonya yells.

The tension in the back of Gloria's head flares forward and blooms into pain making the earth tilt as she reconstructs what happened while she was in the kitchen. A snatch and grab. She pinches the bridge of her nose to relieve the pain. They couldn't even wait until they had the food to snatch her purse. Pain spikes right behind her eyes. How could they do this to Tonya? To Gloria? It's a migraine. She presses the sides of her head with her palms and exhales all her breath. Tonya must have told them about the money. Gloria wishes she could pop her head like a pimple, just to relieve the pressure. The huge scar would be worth it. She puts the food down on a lobby chair and goes outside to help Tonya.

Tears and makeup run down Tonya's face. She steps into the parking lot, leading Gloria in the direction she's been pointing. "Make them give it back," she cries.

Pain radiates through Gloria's whole head with each beat of her pulse. She puts her hands on Tonya's shoulders to steady herself and Tonya. "Tonya, Tonya, Tonya," she repeats her name to calm her.

"Get them."

"I can't. They're gone." Gloria points at the parking lot.

“You can,” Tonya says. “You know who they are. Get them.”

“I can’t. I don’t know where they are.” Gloria strokes Tonya’s shoulders.

“Get my money.”

“It’s gone. They’ll spend it before I see them again.”

“Bullshit,” Tonya screams and knocks Gloria’s hands from her. “You couldn’t find it in my locker so you got some god-damn motherfuckers to sneak up behind me and steal my money.”

“Tonya,” Gloria says softly. “Calm down.”

“You stupid, nigger bitch. Give me my money, or I’ll fucking kill you.”

Gloria’s chest goes hollow, and she has to take a deep breath to fill it. Her head throbs as the pain swells in three short waves: *stupid, nigger, bitch*. Gloria backs toward the door. “You need to calm down or leave property.”

“What?” Tonya yells.

“Calm down or leave property.” Gloria slides her key in the door and turns it.

“You think I’m afraid of you?”

“Don’t threaten me, or I’ll have to call the police and have you trespassed,” she says and slips inside.

“The cops? You want to call the cops on me?” Tonya throws herself against the closed door. “They stole my money.” She points into the night. “They did. Not me. You call the cops on them.”

Tonya kicks the trashcan over and punches and kicks the door. “You don’t care. You want me to suffer. You’re trying to kill me. Fuck that, you won’t get me. I’ll kill myself.” slams her head into the glass door. Again. And again. And again.

Gloria feels each impact in her own head and calls the police to have them take Tonya to Lakeside Psychiatric Hospital.

When Tonya sees Gloria on the phone, she shouts, “You better be calling the cops on them. Not me. Them.” And then she backs away from the door.

The 911 operator says the next available car will be there as soon as possible. Gloria hopes Officer Haynes is the one responding, with those blue eyes.

Tonya storms around the parking lot screaming into the night, “You can’t arrest me for getting robbed.” She pounds her fists into her head as she rants. “I know she’ll get her cut after I’m gone. But I’ll be here waiting for them. You can count on that.”

Gloria turns off the intercom and glances at the security monitors, not because she expects the police already, but because she knows they are coming. Sara is in the main hallway bringing Tonya’s belongings to the lobby. Gloria goes to the dormitory door and helps Sara with the suitcase and four heavy trash bags.

“She was hoarding,” Sara says.

“Hoarding what?” Gloria asks.

“Everything: blanks, clothes, hygiene supplies.” Sara holds up a trash bag full of mini shampoos, shaving creams, deodorants and toothpastes. “She must have had thirty unopened toothbrushes. We had to go through her stuff to find it all.”

“Thanks,” Gloria says putting the hygiene supplies behind the In-Take desk.

Sara holds up a bag full of clothing. “And I bet half this came from our clothing closet.”

“Those are mine,” Tonya shouts, at the door again. “Give me my shit.” Gloria and Sara open the door and shove the suitcase and bags at Tonya, trying to keep her from

getting back inside. Tonya drags the things away from the door and goes through them on the sidewalk.

Gloria fills Sara in on what happened with Reese and Jernell and rewinds the security tape. They both watch as the boys come up to the door; the smartasses actually look right into the camera and wave before ringing the door bell. They talk to Gloria through the intercom and then bum cigarettes off Tonya. Reese squats down next to Tonya and puts his arm around her, like he's being sweet and comforting her, but shortly snatches her purse off the trashcan and runs off. He even leaves Jernell behind. It doesn't look like Jernell had a clue what was happening, but he makes himself an accessory by running off after Reese.

The bright monitor hurts Gloria's eyes, and concentrating on the tape is too much for her head. Gloria pinches the pressure point between her thumb and forefinger to ease the migraine enough so she can think. This incident will extend Reese and Jernell's cards for at least a year. And the Residential Supervisor will probably also deny them any services for that time. Jernell's young and desperate; he'll appeal. Reese will appeal too, just because he knows he can, but this was his last straw. He's just as locked into his behavior as Tonya. He'll be too old to return to La Rue House when his year is up. There's nothing else that can be done for him.

Tonya's behavior will also get her banned from La Rue House. Although, due to the circumstances, she might be able to appeal her way back in if she gets herself stabilized on her meds and agrees to deposit her disability money, but Gloria doubts she'll be able to accomplish that on her own.

Drinks with Sara might not be so bad. A drink just might be the thing to kill Gloria's headache. Alcohol certainly couldn't make it any worse at this point. But Sara wishes Gloria luck and returns to the Girls' unit when a police car pulls lazily into the parking lot.

The police car parks in the handicapped space, and two officers get out. The old, fat one talks to Tonya while Officer Haynes comes to the door. Gloria buzzes the front door for him and hears Tonya yelling at the old, fat officer, "That bitch, arrest her. She set me up. And now she's trying to kill me." The officer nods and tries to get Tonya to calm down.

"Is she the one?" Haynes asks Gloria once the door closes, straight to business, no small talk.

"Yes," Gloria says. "But we have something else before you take her down."

He smiles and asks, "Been a busy night?"

Her face warms, and the pain in her head relaxes. "You could say that," she replies, wishing she could have thought of something better.

Haynes listens and nods as she explains about Tonya's purse being snatched and how this is what set her off. He keeps his blue eyes on her but stands formally in the center of the lobby – strong and solid, both legs straight and firmly planted, broad chest out, head up, jaw set, almost like he's at attention.

"Does she still need to be taken in for an evaluation, or will she be okay now?" Haynes asks.

"The evaluation, definitely. She needs to be stabilized," Gloria says. "But she's not going to go willingly."

Haynes nods slowly and looks out the front windows at Tonya, as if he's devising his strategy. Outside, Tonya is dramatically telling the officer about Gloria sending the god-damn motherfuckers to steal her social security money.

"Sorry," Gloria says and feels stupid for apologizing.

Haynes shakes his head. "She said she was going to hurt herself?" he asks.

"Yes," Gloria says, nodding like a fool. "And she has a history of suicidal ideation."

He nods, looks out at Tonya again, then back at Gloria. "Any suggestions?"

She looks out at Tonya and runs her hand over her scalp but there isn't any hair to check. She brings her hand down and pinches the flesh between her thumb and forefinger to clear her head. "Offer her a ride downtown," Gloria says, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. "But take her to Lakeside."

"That simply?"

Gloria looks back at him and nods. "Right now I'm her enemy." He's still got his eyes on Gloria. "If you're casual about it, you'll have no problem."

He smiles and says, "Thank you."

Gloria smiles too. "You're very welcome," she says, but looks down and shuffles Tonya's discharge paperwork.

Haynes cracks his neck and points to the camera outside the front door. "Did the camera catch the crime on tape?"

"Yes, it did," Gloria says. "I've got it ready for you."

H comes around the desk and stands right behind Gloria's chair as she shows him the security tape. She points out which one is Reese and which one is Jernell. Haynes takes down the details and descriptions on a little pad.

Gloria wonders what time Haynes gets off work. Probably eleven or midnight. Just like her. They could go for coffee or a late dinner. Maybe he likes baths. They might have a lot in common. At the very least they could talk about each other's jobs.

When she gives him better descriptions of Reese and Jernell and explains more about their situations, he is impatient and gives short responses, like he'd rather be doing something more important. He must hate the shelter and its Headaches because of all the petty calls it brings to his beat. So Gloria doesn't ask him when he gets off. She just thanks him and apologizes again and enjoys his tight, little butt as he leaves.

Outside, Tonya has gathered some of her belongs but left the rest piled on the sidewalk. Gloria will have to pick these up later and store them in case she comes back. Tonya gets into the police car without any trouble, not knowing she is still going to the hospital.

Gloria pulls out a blank incident report and fills in the basic information: *who*, *when*, and *where*. The page is too bright, and the text spikes into the core of her brain. She pinches her forehead to ease the pain before beginning the long and detailed explanation of *what*. She's got to do something about these migraines.

Gloria calls Sara on the Girls' unit and asks her if she wants to go out for drinks after work.

HUNTERS AND GATHERERS

Reese circles the La Rue House Youth Shelter, staying hidden behind a six-foot brick wall that surrounds the parking lot and main entrance. It's after dinner, but he hopes to pick-up some leftovers, and maybe a safe place to sleep for the night.

He's only twenty years old, but red blotches stain his face, ears and neck, and there are already crow's-feet at the corners of his eyes. The Florida sun eases the hardship of being homeless in winter, but years of exposure to even pleasant elements will leave their mark. Reese's brown hair stands off his scalp as if he's just woken up. It's too thick and clumped and ragged to pass as simply his style and is obviously just unkempt and unwashed. The only time he does comb his hair is when it blocks his vision or pokes him in the eyes, and then he simply paws it back over his head.

Reese is followed by Jernell and Jernell's girlfriend. Jernell is two years younger and follows Reese closely, watching his every move. Jernell's hair is tapered short against his scalp, and his clothes are clean. He carries an overstuffed backpack and pulls his girlfriend along by the hand. She is thin with long dark hair but has dark rings under her eyes and her hollow cheeks.

Reese stops at a stack of pallets that form a small platform next to the wall. He steps up on this platform and easily looks over the wall. Jernell follows him, and they scout out the shelter's parking lot and main entrance.

Ms. Gloria's car is in the lot, and Reese figures chances are good for a real meal. He elbows Jernell and points to a blonde girl on the front steps of the shelter. He

recognizes her from earlier visits to the shelter, Tonya, the girl with a car who would never give him a ride anywhere.

Tonya pounds on the glass door of the shelter. Ms. Gloria looks up from the In-Take desk. Tonya swings her purse high in the air, showing it to Ms. Gloria. "I've got it right here," Tonya yells at the door. The purse sparkles in the overhead light.

Ms. Gloria's voice crackles through the intercom speaker and echoes through the parking lot. "You want to deposit it now?"

"No," Tonya yells. "But I've got it, so you can stop looking through my stuff and just give it to me."

"We're packing it as fast as we can," Ms. Gloria says and goes back to her work. Tonya kicks the door and yells, "If I'm discharged, then you can stop writing notes about me."

"If you don't stop," Ms. Gloria says, "you'll have to leave property."

Tonya stomps her foot and yells, "I'm not leaving until you give me my shit."

"Then settle down, or I'll call the police and have you charged with trespassing," Ms. Gloria says. "Then you'll never be able to come back."

"I'm never coming back anyway," Tonya yells and puffs her body up. She's about to kick the door again but stops and sets her purse on top of the trash can.

Back behind the wall, Reese smiles, dimples appearing in his cheeks. "No problem," he tells Jernell. "Staff's already busy with her. They'll give us something just to get rid of us."

Jernell nods, learning.

“We’ll be right back,” Reese tells Jernell’s girlfriend and pulls himself over the wall.

Jernell sets down his backpack and kisses his girlfriend. “We’ll be right back.”

“Don’t fuck up,” she tells him as he climbs over the wall.

Reese scans the parking lot as they cross to the shelter’s door, but nobody is walking around, and no one’s sitting in any of the cars. They both glance at Tonya as they approach the front door. But her arms are folded across her knees, and her face is buried in them; she’s no threat.

The boys smile and wave for the security camera, but Ms. Gloria doesn’t respond, so Reese knocks on the door.

Ms. Gloria jolts in surprise, then slouches with fatigue. They smile and wave at her. “Hello, Reese. Hello, Jernell,” she greets them through the intercom. “What do you need?”

“We don’t have any money for the Coalition,” Reese says, using the name of the most inexpensive adult shelter to make them seem more in need. “And we used up our free nights at the Salvation Army,” he adds before she can suggest it.

Even if he had the money, he wouldn’t stay at any of the adult shelters downtown. Here, Reese is one of the big dogs, an old-timer with power and respect. At the adult shelters, he’s a puppy, easily pushed away from the food and on the losing end of every confrontation.

“Hold on,” Ms. Gloria tells them and looks through a box of index cards. She pulls out two cards. “You have no overnights left.”

This is no surprise to Reese, but experience has taught him to always ask for something on the random chance that he might get it. He never knows when he might catch a break, so he's always on the look out for the next one.

Ms. Gloria adds, "You'll have to wait until your cards are up."

"When's that?" Reese asks to keep her talking.

As Ms. Gloria glances back at the cards, he scans the parking lot. Tonya is still sitting in the same spot, but now she is drying her face with her sleeves.

"Three days for Jernell," Ms. Gloria says. "A week for you."

"A week?" Reese asks and looks to Jernell, who is looking back at the wall. Reese pops him with the back of his hand.

Jernell starts and looks back at Ms. Gloria and asks, "Can we get something to eat?"

"You're supposed to come before nine," she reminds them, sounding stern.

"We didn't have any bus passes," Reese says. "We had to walk." He knows she will feed them; she never denies anyone food.

"I'll see what I can find," Ms. Gloria says and stands to leave the desk.

"What was for dinner?" Reese asks, hoping to get some real food instead of the brown bag lunches the shelter usually gives people looking for food.

"Peanut butter and jelly," Ms. Gloria answers with a smile.

"We need three," Jernell adds before Ms. Gloria can leave the desk.

Ms. Gloria looks at the security monitors by her desk. "Who's with you?" she asks.

"My girlfriend," Jernell says and glances back toward the wall.

“Who’s that?” Ms. Gloria asks.

“Someone who’s been trespassed,” Reese answers to move things along.

Ms. Gloria shakes her head at them and leaves the office.

Reese scans the parking lot again. Nothing appears to be going on. Jernell’s girlfriend peeks over the wall, and Jernell gives her a thumbs-up. Reese steps off the curb and stands in front of Tonya. “Got a smoke for a quarter?” he asks her.

Tonya nods and digs her cigarettes out of her coat pocket. She passes him a cigarette and her lighter. He slides his hand into his pocket to get the change, but she waves him off and says, “Don’t worry about it.” She gives Jernell a cigarette too and takes another for herself.

Reese notices the lighter is new, still full of fuel. Tonya must have some money if she’s giving away cigarettes and has a new lighter. He lights Jernell’s cigarette but doesn’t pass him the lighter.

“What you doing out here?” Reese asks Tonya, hoping that if he’s nice to her, she’ll leave with them and he might get some of her money and maybe even have sex with her.

“I got discharged,” Tonya says, sniffing short and quick to hide that she’s been crying. “They’re packing my stuff.”

“What’d you get discharged for?” Reese asks. He squats down next to her, getting close. She might even take him somewhere in her car. No more walking. No more buses.

“Not giving them the money from my check,” she answers.

He smiles and nods to Jernell. She's got money. If he can get it, he can buy a dinner at Burger King or get some liquor and weed, or maybe even get a room for the night.

"Where you work?" Jernell asks.

Reese smiles because Jernell has learned this trick. It's always good to know people with regular jobs and to know where they work, especially if it's someone who'll give you free food or let you shoplift while they are working.

Tonya shakes her head. "Social Security," she says.

Jernell steps away from her. "You get a crazy check?" he asks.

"I'm not crazy!" she shouts at him, making Jernell move farther away. "Don't you go thinking I'm crazy," Tonya yells. "It's those fucking doctors..."

Reese scowls at Jernell to make him behave and keep him from ruining this.

"I know. It's cool," Reese interrupts to quiet her. He slides behind her and rubs her shoulders. Crazy or not, if he can snare her, he'll have a way to get around and a safe place to get high and sleep.

"They don't understand," she tells Reese. "I need my money. Stupid staff want me to find a job and save my money. I got to take care of my car first."

Reese looks around the lot for her car. Worried now, because he doesn't remember seeing it when they came up. "Where's your car?" he asks.

"It got impounded," she says. "Cause these fuckers won't let me keep it here."

"Shit," Reese says, sorry to lose the use of her car. "You got a place to go?" he asks, still hoping for a safe place to sleep and to have sex with her.

"No," she says shaking her head.

Reese strokes her back. “You’ll be okay.”

“How much to get your car out?” Jernell asks.

“Three-fifty.”

“Damn,” the boys sympathize in unison. Three hundred and fifty dollars is a fortune. Reese can’t remember that last time he had even a hundred dollars.

“Forget that,” Reese adds. She’ll never see her car again.

“I got the money,” she says, jerking her thumb over her shoulder at her shiny purse. “These fucking people won’t let me use it to get my car back.” She points inside at Ms. Gloria’s empty desk. “They want me to deposit it.”

Reese looks at the purse and can feel the money that could be, that should be, that is inside: three hundred and fifty dollars. Food. Shelter. Warmth. Safety. The money is three feet from him.

He glances at Jernell, who is asking her, “Why won’t they let you get your car?”

“They say I got to deposit the money into saving first. Then I can get it out to pay for my car,” Tonya explains. “But I’m not falling for that shit. They just want it so they can keep it. I know how they work.”

Reese rubs her shoulders again. He doesn’t know how much money is actually in the purse, but he’s got to take this break. Besides, if she leaves with him, she’s going to want to spend it all on getting her car back and won’t spend the money on him.

Reese glances around the parking lot. No cars are pulling in from Colonial Drive or even passing by. Jernell’s girlfriend watches from the wall, but no one else is around. Ms. Gloria isn’t back from the kitchen yet. He looks up at the security camera. Snatching the purse here will get him a permanent card, and he won’t ever be able to come back to

this shelter. But with three hundred and fifty bucks, he won't need the shelter. The three hundred and fifty bucks will be his shelter.

"It'll be all right," Reese says softly to relax her and make her feel secure before he strikes.

"These fucking staff," she goes on, not even watching her purse. "They're so stupid. They drive me crazy."

If he does it, Ms. Gloria might call the cops on him. But with three hundred and fifty bucks, the cops won't be able to find him. Nothing will be able to find him. Not the cops. Not the thugs. Not the crackheads. Not the rain. Not the cold. And not even hunger will be able to find him.

He flicks his cigarette butt into the parking lot to distract Tonya. As she watches the cherry skip across the ground, he strikes without even signaling Jernell.

Reese snatches the purse full of money and runs for the wall. He hears Tonya scream as he runs but only looks back once he reaches the wall. Jernell steps into the parking lot but is looking around like a punk and not running. Tonya grabs Jernell, and he stumbles, pulling her off the curb. They both fall onto the ground.

Reese lands on the other side of the wall and sees Jernell's girlfriend dash behind the back corner of the next building. He smiles. She's cool. If Jernell doesn't catch up, Reese will have sex with her tonight.

PAISLEY AND TIFFANY VERSUS THE MACHINE

I'm ready to give up on financial aid, but Paisley makes me go back inside and explain things to see if they'll cut me some slack.

I finally get to see a financial aid counselor by swearing up and down that I don't have a computer, let alone access to the internet. I'm close to screaming that I don't have shit and am living in a motel full of pimps, dealers, and psychos, but the money's too important. I can't get kicked out of here. I need to pay tuition and buy books and get an apartment and get all the other stuff you need for college. Plus, this money gets Paisley and me away from La Rue House and all the homeless bullshit.

The first thing the counselor says to me is, "Now Tiffany, you'll need a computer if you plan to go to college."

"Aren't there computers in the library?" I ask.

"Well, there are," she says, looking down her nose at me and labeling me poor white trash. I'm glad I said I was unemployed instead of putting down that I'm a dancer at Cabaret; she totally wouldn't understand. "But, it's only open certain hours, and there are only so many computers, so it's better if you have your own."

"Okay. Thanks," I tell her. And I mean it because I hadn't thought of needing a computer. "But a computer is just one of the reasons why I really need financial aid."

When I ask why the hell they need my parents' info, she explains, "Well, your parents are expected to pay for your education."

"But I'm eighteen," I tell her.

“Yes, but the federal aid programs expect them to pay for you until you are twenty-four.”

“What if I only have a mom, and I don’t talk to her?”

“You have to provide your parents’ financial information,” she tells me, “unless you’re married, have a child that is your dependent, are a veteran of the military.” She counts these off on her fingers like I’m an idiot for not knowing this. “Or you have been declared a ward of the court.”

Yet another reason I should’ve stuck it out in foster care instead of caving in and going home. But she’ll kill me if I go back there to have her sign this, and I’ll never get away again. “What if she won’t fill it out?” I ask.

“Your mother refusing to pay for college doesn’t make you independent,” she says like she hears this story all the time. “Not for financial aid purposes anyway.”

“But I don’t live with her. I don’t even talk to her. I’m never going to see her again.”

The counselor opens her hands and shrugs her shoulders as if to say tough shit. Paisley’d have lost it by now and be screaming and kicking holes in the walls with her boots.

“You can arrange to meet with a counselor and explain your circumstances,” she says. “And we’ll see if you qualify for an exemption because of ‘Exceptional Circumstances.’” She makes quote marks in the air with her fingers when she says this.

“But you’ll need documentation and witnesses to back up your claims.”

I leave her office because there's no way I'm telling them all about Fuckhead raping me and Mama making me work the truck stop; they wouldn't let me into college for sure then. I'll just make up her shit and forge her name, but they'll deny me anyhow.

"What's the ups?" Paisley asks when I come outside.

"I'm fucked," I say, walking away from the building. "They still expect her to pay for college even though I don't have anything to do with her."

"Fucking Machine," Paisley says and spits back at the building. She's totally fuck-all. Most of her head's shaved, except for six inches of bangs that she dyes a different color every week. She wears black lipstick and dark eye shadow and too much blush. Her face is all pierced-up with safety-pins and hoops and screws and other spiky-bits; she even has a small padlock in her right ear. She's thin and toned like the girls at Cabaret that have been dancing for years and can do coke without getting strung-out but hides her body by dressing like a boy in ripped jeans and old T-shirts and a baseball hat with a big skull on it. She'd be pretty if she'd take all that shit out of her face and wear her make-up right and dress like a girl.

But then she'd still be covered in tattoos, which are all based off what she remembers of her dads' tats, or the guys she thought were her dads. The main one is a big blue anchor on her forearm with a chain that coils up her arm and turns into a rope before it becomes a noose tied around her neck; the chain-noose is her own addition to remind her of her dads' getting busted for smuggling drugs and being sent to jail forever.

Paisley lights up two cigarettes and hands me one while watching a group of college girls walk by. I'm not sure if she's checking them out or staring them down, but then she asks, "Can we jet now?"

College isn't Paisley's scene. She only went to two years of school, seventh and eighth grade while she was in foster care, and never graduated from high school. She only came to UCF with me because I agreed to go to the abortion clinic with her afterwards.

We walk across campus to the big bus stop near the parking garage. Big green lawns are filled with students reading under palm trees and studying at picnic benches. Students walk along sidewalks that crisscross and wind all over, connecting all the different buildings: *Math and Physics, Library, Education Complex, Arts and Sciences*. More students rush by riding bikes and skateboards.

Paisley and I grab an empty bench at the end of the bus stop, away from the students, to wait for the #30 bus. They all look so busy and smart, and you just know they all are going to get great jobs and have wonderful lives.

I check my makeup in my compact and smooth out my foundation. I only got into UCF because of my SAT scores. Wildwood High's not that good a school, and I couldn't join any clubs or do sports or nothing. And I didn't think my SATs were good enough because I had to spend all my time working the truck stop and cleaning Mom's shit, but UCF let me in; they must have had a bunch of people drop out in the fall. And just when shit is finally going right and I've got a shot, I get totally screwed because I can't pay for it. "What am I going to do?" I ask her.

"Let's go to Australia," she says like it's just that simple. "Education's free there. So's health care," she adds and pats her belly.

"I've got to go to college," I tell her.

“Good luck,” she says with a short laugh. “Because the Machine doesn’t really want you to get an education. The best way to oppress a large group of people is to keep them ignorant. Keep cutting education and no one’s smart enough to know how badly they’re being fucked. That’s how The Machine keeps control.”

My eyes water, and my breath gets short, but I feel it coming, so I turn away, like I’m looking for the bus.

She puts her arm around me and pulls me to her. Not like she’s making a move but just trying to be nice. She knows my deal with sex, and that’s why she’s my friend. I turn into her and wrap my arms around her body. She holds me tight, and I’m safe. We stay like that for a long time, until we see a couple guys smiling at us and the #30 comes.

Abortions were only three-fifty at the health clinic, but they didn’t have any appointments until next month. Paisley can’t wait that long because she’s already three or four months pregnant, so we’re checking out Planned Parenthood, which is supposed to be more expensive but not have waiting lists.

Most of the girls at La Rue think only whores have abortions. I think being pregnant just gives them a sense of purpose and makes them feel special. It’s like how when guys don’t know what to do with their lives, they join the Army; girls have babies.

While waiting for Paisley to come out, I run the numbers. Tuition’s fifteen-hundred bucks a semester. Books are another four-hundred. The staff at La Rue House said we needed at least fifteen-hundred bucks to move into our own apartment and get the utilities turned on and all, but it’ll be cheaper than that because Paisley and I will be roommates. Fifteen-hundred plus four-hundred plus at least another fifteen-hundred is thirty-four hundred bucks.

Three-thousand, four hundred dollars. That's a hundred and seventy lap dances.
And school starts in four weeks.

I've got a grand, but I'm going to have to keep paying for the hotel room and buy dinner every night and clothes and pay for taxies home at night. I usually make about three-hundred a night after tip outs. If I work seven nights a week, which means no more hanging out with Paisley on her nights off, I can make twenty-one-hundred bucks a week. But then minus the room and food and taxies. That gives me at least fifteen-hundred bucks a week. This means, with the thousand I've got saved, I can have plenty of money in two weeks for school and an apartment if I bust ass and don't get ripped off. But the holidays are in the middle of that, and who knows what work will be like that week. So three weeks, unless I start working the customers. But no matter what, I'm going to have to hustle. Or get bigger tits.

The door to the offices is kicked open from the other side, and Paisley comes out raging. "It's going to be eight hundred bucks because I'm in the fucking second trimester," she barks and heads for the front door.

"And it'll take two whole days," she says when I catch up. "Fucking Machine."

"Don't worry," I say to calm her down. "I can put the money down for the apartment. Use yours for this."

I drop behind her when we make it to the road. "You need your money," she says over her shoulder.

"But I can spare it," I tell her. "Just pay me back as soon as you can."

We stop at the next light to cross the road. "It's okay. I should get enough on Friday. I can have it on Monday or Tuesday. "

“If you can’t get it done, give her up for adoption.”

“I’m not going through all that shit just to give her up,” she says.

“It’s an option.”

“There’s always an option,” she says and points her finger at her head like it’s a gun. I reach for her hand, but she points the finger-gun at me and drops her thumb like she’s firing it. I turn away from her, like I’m looking for the bus.

“What?” she asks and nudges me. “Now your problems are over too.”

I put my arm around her and hug her until the #28 bus comes.

As I’m getting dressed for my shift, I ask the other girls if they know of any cheap places to get abortions. One of them tells me I can give myself a miscarriage by drinking a gallon of pennyroyal tea. But she warns me that I’ll be sick as hell for three days and wish I was dead. She doesn’t believe that it’s not me who needs the abortion and lectures me on making the customers use condoms if I’m going to work them for extra cash. She doesn’t seem too bothered about the abortion or that I might be working customers, just bothered that I won’t admit I’m pregnant.

The customers at Cabaret always offer me money to suck them off or to let them fuck me. I’ve always said no because I don’t want to go back to that unless I absolutely have to. I usually push these customers off on the girls I know will take the cash, but tonight, because Paisley and I need the cash, when the customer I’m talking-up offers four hundred bucks for a lay, I let him take me to a VIP booth.

And I fall right back into making story, just like I used to with the truckers only now it’s all about Paisley instead of getting out of Wildwood. *Paisley’s parents were punk rock pirates who lived completely out of the Machine’s reach. Her mom had two*

boyfriends and lived with them on a big sailboat in the Caribbean. They swam and fished and ran drugs and did whatever they felt like. But they never went to doctors or hospitals, so Paisley's mom died giving birth to her. She was raised by the guys who both claimed to be her father, and she called them both Dad, but when the courts made them give blood tests, neither actually were. She lived on their sailboat until she was twelve when the Coast Guard busted them, and she was put in foster care. She only has good memories of sailing around with them, so they probably really loved her, but were just too fuck-all and anarchy for their own good.

The customer pays up and leaves the club. That's all he wanted, which is good, cause I didn't want to have to see him the rest the night. That was the one nice thing about the truckers: they were always leaving.

After my next stage set, another customer offers me money to let him fuck me, so I tell him it'll cost four hundred. But he won't go that high. and I realize I'm stuck negotiating, so we settle on three hundred.

Paisley was shipped from foster family to foster family until she took off on her own and hooked up with a punk guy that reminded her of her dads. But he was a dick, so she split and lived on the streets and couch-surfed until she found a girl who was a bit better. Paisley moved from Naples to Orlando with her, and they were going to be life-partners until her girlfriend invited their guy roommate into bed with them. Paisley was cool with this for the first few times, but then she got pregnant, and when she told her girlfriend, her girlfriend freaked and kicked Paisley out. So she ended up at the La Rue House Shelter.

When I got to the La Rue House Shelter, she was working two jobs, evenings at Starbucks Coffee and over-nights stocking books at Borders, and saving almost all of her paychecks except what she needed for smokes and hair-dye. But La Rue House popped her with a drug test and found out she was pregnant. Then they wanted her to slow down and quit one of her jobs and start parenting classes and wouldn't help her get an abortion, so she told them to fuck off and die, and took her money and bolted.

At last call, a customer offers me two hundred for a BJ. It's not as much as the others, but it's also just a BJ, so we go to a VIP booth.

When Paisley and I first got out of La Rue, we hooked up with two other girls from La Rue House, Niji and B. They were both pregnant, and everything was cool at first. Niji was on WIC and got food stamps, which saved us money on food and B made cash selling bootlegged CDs and DVDs for Jew-Fro, a total creep who she also fucked for weed. The plan was that we'd save our money and all get an apartment together where we wouldn't have to worry about any parents or staff or social workers or baby-daddies giving us any shit. Niji would stay home and be the mommy for the kids while Paisley, B and I worked to support the family; that way everything would be covered, and we'd be one big family with no need for anyone else. It was a good plan, but after two weeks, Paisley and I were ready to kill them because all they did was hang out at the mall and watch TV. Niji never took care of her son or cleaned the room, and all B did was get stoned. Besides, I came to Orlando to go to college, not support another family, and Paisley just wanted to get a boat and be a smuggler like her dads. So when they moved another girl into our room, Paisley and I ditched them and moved to another place.

I leave work with two-fifty in tips and nine hundred in cash. That's a whole week's worth of working the truckers in one night and plenty of money to cover Paisley's abortion.

I wake up when Paisley comes in from stocking books at Borders. It's light outside, but not bright, so it's probably just before sunrise. Everything is quiet and still, just the sound of traffic on OBT. Paisley puts her bag down softly, pulls her pajamas out of her duffel and goes to the bathroom.

She comes back in a T-shirt and pink flannel pants with skulls and crossbones on them. She unfolds her La Rue House blanket to make up a bed on the floor, but when she pulls a pillow off my bed, I whisper, "You can sleep up here if you want."

"You sure?" she asks.

"Yeah," I say and pull back the covers. "You shouldn't sleep on the floor."

She smiles and slides into bed with me, scoots right up against me and puts her arm over my waist and her leg over mine. It's nice, like our hug at the bus stop.

"Thanks," she whispers and kisses me lightly on the mouth.

"You're welcome," I whisper and pull my head back so our foreheads aren't touching. "I've got the money for you," I say before she can kiss me again. "We can go tomorrow if you want."

"No," she says. "You need money for school."

"But this is extra money," I say. "Just for you."

"Extra?" she asks, taking her arm off me and lifting her head.

I hold her face and lower her head back onto the pillow. "I worked a couple of customers for some extra cash."

“What?” she asks and jerks her face away from my hand. “Thought you were done with that shit.”

“I am. I just did it this once, for us.”

I try to put my arm around her so she’ll understand and everything will be all right, but she pushes away and jumps off the bed.

“What the fuck?” she asks from the end of the bed.

I get up too, but she steps over to the table.

“This isn’t twenties from truckers,” I tell her so she’ll see the difference. “One of them gave me two hundred bucks just to blow him.” But she turns away from me, like she’s looking at the stuff on the table. “I made nine hundred bucks,” I say. “That’s three whole nights of dancing.”

She looks back at me. “Nine hundred?” she asks, finally getting it.

“Yeah,” I say and step up to her. “We can get an apartment tomorrow if we want. And then we can go to the clinic, and I’ll take a couple days off and be your nurse.” She looks away again, this time down between us.

But she shakes her head. “We don’t need that kind of help,” she says. “You shouldn’t have done that.”

I move her bangs out of her face with my fingers and wiggle her eyebrow ring. “But we need money.”

She looks up, right into my face, into my eyes and says, “I’m not taking that money.”

I sit on the bed. “It’s no big deal,” I say, leaning back. “It’s just something I do with my body.”

“You’re out. You’re free.” She paces the room, swinging her arms. “You can do whatever you want. Don’t go back to that shit.”

“But I need an apartment and a computer and a car,” I tell her.

“So work,” she says sounding like Staff at La Rue. “Stop buying a new dress for every shift and save some fucking money.”

I stand up and get in her face. “But I’ve got to have time to study and do homework and write,” I explain. “I can’t do all that if I’ve got to be at the club ten hours a day.”

“Whatever,” she says. “It’s your deal.” She grabs her jeans and boots from the closet. “But you’ve got no one to blame this time.” She pulls her jeans over her pajama pants. “There’s no mommy making you do shit.”

“What are you doing?”

She stuffs her feet into her boots. “I’m leaving.”

“Where are you going?” I ask as she stomps to the door.

“Out,” she says and snatches her hat off the table.

“No,” I tell her. “Don’t go anywhere. You can’t leave.”

“Fuck off,” she says and pops the door open, banging it into the wall.

I watch Paisley from the doorway. She walks down the stairs to the parking lot, lights up a cigarette, crosses the lot, checking over her shoulder, and heads down OBT toward the bus stop.

I fall back into the bed and try to wait but fall asleep before she comes back.

Paisley comes back later that afternoon but doesn't say hello or anything, so I act like I'm watching *Jerry Springer*. She scoops up the pile of black pants and Starbucks shirts and leaves.

I follow her to the laundry room. She's busy stuffing the dark clothes in the washer and doesn't see me at the doorway. "Hey," I say.

She jumps at the sound of my voice, just the slightest, but it's enough to let me know I wasn't expected. But then she looks at me slowly over her shoulder, totally cool. "Yeah?" she asks, like I'm bugging her.

I lean against the doorjamb and say, "I heard about a tea that'll give you a miscarriage."

She stares at me for a moment, then smiles and asks, "No shit?"

I nod. "But it makes you real sick. For like, days."

"No shit," she says again, and we both nod slowly that it's bad.

"I'd take care of you," I say, stepping into the laundry room.

She shrugs and shoves the quarters' tray into the machine. The washer jerks and starts filling up with water. She closes the lid, leans against the washer and looks at me like she's deciding my fate. Finally she pulls out her pack of cigarettes and says, "I'm not sticking around to chip in on another week."

I step back and lean against the wall. "But I thought we were getting a place?"

She lights the cigarette and then shakes her head while exhaling. "I got to get back to Naples," she says. "This town's killing me."

“Come on,” I say. “Stick around. What’re you going to do there?”

“Whatever the hell I want,” she says, loud, like it’s none of my business. “Once I get to Naples, everything’ll be cool.”

“What the fuck?” I ask. “I thought being roommates would be cool.”

“Sorry,” she says and hops backwards onto the washer and sits back against the wall. “But I’m not hooking-up with anyone who’s doing illegal shit because when the Machine gets them, you’re on your own.”

“Who’s doing anything illegal?”

She tips her head to the side and says, “You’re fucking customers.”

“But no one ever gets busted for that.”

“Ever?” she asks and laughs at me. “It’ll only take one pissed off wife to bring the Machine down on that place.”

“Yeah, well, what about being a pirate and running drugs?”

“Just like running drugs.” She nods like this was her point all along. “You get busted, and your ass goes to jail, but it’s everyone else that’s shit out of luck. No fucking thanks.”

“But I thought that’s what you’re going to do.”

She looks at me like I’m an idiot and shakes her head. “Grow up, Tif. I’m never going to get a boat. It’s just bullshit.”

“You can get a boat if you want one.”

“Don’t fucking worry about me, all right,” she says. “Take care of yourself.”

I step in front of the dryer across from her and say, “I worry about you.”

“Worry about yourself. No one else is going to bother.”

“Fuck you.” I smack the dryer and stand in the center of the laundry room. “Why do you have to be so damn negative about everything? You don’t have to go anywhere. You could stay here and get an apartment with me, and we could look out for each other.”

But she just sits there shaking her head at me.

“I don’t want to lose you,” I tell her. “I can’t deal with this shit on my own.”

She leans forward and gets in my face. “You have to take care of yourself.”

I feel like I’m going to throw up, and tears come out of my eyes, which is what she wants, I’m sure, so I leave. Fuck Paisley. She wants me to look out for myself, I’ll look out for myself. I go get my shit and head to work early.

None of the men from the other night are at work, but there are still plenty of offers to make extra cash. I make the first one buy me enough drinks, and then let him take me to a VIP booth. Fuck Paisley. I’ll look out for myself. I dance my sets and talk-up my customers and rack-up three more fuckheads and walk with \$300 in tips and \$800 in extra cash. Fuck La Rue House and fuck Mama too; I’m looking out for myself.

Paisley’s there when I get back to the room, watching TV in a fog of marijuana smoke, but I don’t even say hello to her. I just take my shower and go straight to bed. She turns off the TV and goes to bed too.

When I wake up in the afternoon, she’s already gone. Her duffle bag is still in the corner, but she’s not in the room. I doubt any of her stuff will be here when I get back from work tonight.

I’m in the middle of my second song and wearing just my thong when I catch Paisley sitting along the edge of the stage. I try to cover my tits and end up losing my grip

on the pole which makes me fall flat on my face right in front of her.

“Get out of here,” I tell her, but I point at the back corner of the club and not the front door.

“Get Off Your Ass and Jam” comes over the sound-system as Paisley backs out of the stage lights. I try to follow her dark shape, but it gets lost because everyone’s standing to laugh at me and chant along to “Shit, goddamn, get off your ass and jam.” I pick up the beat and prance around the stage, but am just killing time until the song is over. I don’t get any more tips.

I get dressed as fast as I can and go out to find her. When I come out of the dressing room, everyone in the club claps for me again. So I curtsy and flip them off, which makes everyone laugh.

“Sorry about that,” Paisley says, nodding toward the stage as I sit down across from her. The skull on her hat glows in the black light, and her piercings look like Christmas lights.

“What are you doing here?” I ask over the music.

She looks away, like she’s checking out the club, and then looks down at the table. “I’m sorry about yesterday. In the laundry room.”

“No problem,” I say. “Don’t worry about it.”

“You were just trying to help, and I was a bitch,” she says. “The Machine’s pissing me off. Why can’t I just work and do my thing, you know? Why’s everything got to be so fucked up?”

“I don’t know.” I reach out and take her hand.

“And why can’t you just go to college, you know?” she says and puts her other hand over mine. “Why’s it got to be such a hassle?”

“I wish I knew,” I tell her.

“Well,” she says. She pulls her hands away and sits back in the chair. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it.” I look around for the cocktail waitress, hoping she’s close and will bring me some water.

Paisley looks around too but more like she’s watching her back than thirsty. She slides an Orlando Weekly across the table and points to an ad. *Elite Escorts, Central Florida’s Classiest Female Companions* it says across the top and has six pictures of different girls. “Go with some place like this,” she says, tapping her finger on the ad.

“You saying okay?” I ask and take the magazine from her.

“No,” she says like she’s getting sick of telling me. “I just don’t want you going with some shithead pimp on the Trail.”

At the bottom of the ad, under the phone number is *Always Hiring - cell phone and reliable transportation required*. I can get a phone, no problem. And I’ll talk up a salesman and see how hard it is to get a car, maybe even work myself a deal.

“It’s the best way to beat the machine,” she says. “It doesn’t want to pay for education, fuck it, exploit these fuckheads’ lust and use that money to get a degree on your own so you don’t have to fuck anyone ever again.”

“That would rock,” I say, laughing because I can’t even imagine never having to fuck anyone ever again. I go around the table and give her a hug and kiss her cheek.

“Thank you.”

“You tried to help me,” she says, “so I’m paying you back.” She holds me tight and for a long moment. It feels good again.

“It’s pennyroyal tea,” I say, sitting back down. “I’ll still be your nurse, if you want.”

“No. It’s cool,” she says. “I’m going to have her.”

“What?” I ask and look to see if she’s fucking with me or not. “You’re going to keep her?”

“No, I’m going to have her. I’ll give her up for adoption as long as I know she’ll go to a family and not foster care.”

“What if you can’t know that?”

She looks down and twirls the beer-coaster on the table. “Then I’ll put her in a basket and leave her on the front porch of the White House.”

This makes me laugh because it’s pure Paisley. “Why’d you change your mind?”

She’s quiet for a moment and then says, “She kicked.”

“She doing it now?” I ask, getting up and reaching for her stomach.

“No,” Paisley says long and drawn out which tells me not to try and touch her belly. “Just that once. But it was enough to know it’s too late.”

I tell her I’m sorry and sit back down. She nods and spins the coaster again.

“You still cutting out for Naples?” I ask.

“Well,” she says and tips the cocktail lamp to look inside at the candle. “Ms. Sara said La Rue’d hook me up with the adoption people.”

“You’re going back to La Rue?”

She shrugs and puts the candle back. “I’m going by the Day Center tomorrow and

check it out.” She looks me in the eye. “But if they won’t take me back, or give me a bunch of shit, do you still want to be roommates?”

“Yeah,” I tell her. “Of course.”

“No shit?” she asks, looking me in the eye.

“No shit,” I tell her.

“Thanks.” She nods and looks at the stage.

“No problem,” I say and align my dress straps with my bra’s. “You want to stick around?” I ask, nodding toward the dancer on stage. “I can get you drinks.”

“You going to...” She stops, pulls the lamp toward her, and holds her hand over the top. “You going to be working?” she asks.

I lean back and give her some room. “Not if you’re here.”

She drops the lamp and scoots the chair back. “I’ll go.”

“Wait,” I say, holding her shoulder. “Stay and eat with me. We’ve got huge burgers.”

She takes a quick look around the club and back at me. “You sure?”

“Yeah,” I say and nudge her back down into the chair. “As long as I dance my sets, they don’t care.”

After my set, we get burgers with cheese fries and try to come up with a name for her daughter until close.

I’m in the shower burning Cabaret away when Paisley pulls back the curtain and steps in with me. “You care?” she asks, standing under the water, so close I can feel her breath and can’t focus on her face.

I shake my head and step around her, out of the water. “No problem,” is all I can say.

She turns as I slip past her and keeps facing me, staring at me. With all her tattoos and piercings, she doesn’t quite seem naked. She tips her head back so the water runs over her face but isn’t washing.

Paisley steps out of the water. I back up to make room for her, but I hit the wall, which is cold, so I step back toward her. She catches me and keeps coming forward, pushing me back against the wall again. My back and shoulders press against the wall, and I gasp at the cold, and she Frenches me while my mouth is open.

“Don’t worry” she says. “It’ll be different with me.”

She grips my waist and kisses my neck. I hold onto the wall, and she bites my shoulder, and I say, “No marks,” automatically like I’m at work.

“Sorry,” she says and kisses the spot. Her hands slide up my body as her mouth kisses down my chest. I lean my head against the wall and wait. It’s just something I do with my body. It’s all the same. It’s no big deal as long as she doesn’t leave.

But Paisley stops and looks up at me. “What’s the matter?” she asks and runs her fingertips over my hip and thigh. “Aren’t I better than all the fuckheads?”

“Yeah. Sure,” I say. But she doesn’t look like she believes me, so I tell her, “It’s okay. Do what you like.”

“No,” she says with that look in her eyes. “I want to give you pleasure. Show you it’s not all bad.”

I don’t know what she expects. She knows how I am. It’s not like I can help it. But I want her to enjoy herself so I say, “Okay, try it again. Harder this time.”

She smiles and lowers her head.

I moan and act like I'm enjoying it. I'll do that for her.

THE WAY IT'S DONE

Juanita hides in her office. It's between dinner and curfew when the kids relax and socialize. They hang out on the smoking patio and play basketball in the courtyard and can come in and out of the shelter freely. She should be at In-Take with Gloria or on the units with the case managers, but these three hours are ripe for drama and conflict, and Juanita has enough of that in her own life; she doesn't need anymore of it from work. She made an excuse about having to go over La Rue House's purchasing budget and is staring at the phone in her office.

Juanita wants to call home. Wants to know if Monte is there. Needs to know if he's decided to stop being foolish and come home yet. But she can't stand to hear his voice only from the answering machine again. She could call his cell phone to see where he is and what he's doing. More important, to make sure of what he's not doing. But she won't. She doesn't want to seem like she's monitoring him. She can't be his wife and his sponsor, or she'll end up neither. He'll call when he comes home. And he can come home when he's ready to stop this foolishness and go back to the meetings. She hopes that's before he relapses and ends up bottoming-out. But sometimes that is what it takes.

She'd be able to keep her mind on running the shelter if she was sure he wasn't off somewhere poisoning himself with meth. She should have switched shifts and been at home tonight, just in case he needed her to take him to a meeting.

As Juanita's staring at the phone, it rings. She's up for a moment, but the ring is two short bursts, which signals an internal call.

"This is Juanita," she says, her voice a harsh whisper.

“We’ve got a situation on the Boys’ Unit.” It’s Robb, the newest case manager.

She drinks from the water bottle on her desk, lubricating her scarred vocal cords.

“You need me down there?” she asks him. Her voice is louder, stronger but still hoarse, a constant reminder of her own bottoming-out twenty-three years ago when she went on the nod holding a cigarette and set fire to the shooting gallery. The smoke was damaging enough, but when the paramedics forced the endotracheal tube down her throat, they scarred her vocal cords.

“Not yet,” he says. “But I think we’re going to have trouble.”

She closes her eyes in preparation for the answer and asks, “Why?”

“Cody was just in here asking if he still gets discharged for fighting if it’s in self-defense.”

She opens her eyes; a fight is not complicated. And it hasn’t even happened yet. Why is he calling her? She wonders what the catch is. “With who?” she asks.

“He wouldn’t give me any names. But that’s not the real problem.” Robb goes quiet, waiting for something from her.

“Okay,” she says, closing her eyes again. “I’m listening.”

“I told him fighting is fighting and asked what the situation was to try and redirect his thinking. Figured I’d get him to find another way to resolve the issue. But he said it was going to happen no matter what, and he just needed to know if he’d get discharged for fighting if it wasn’t his fault.”

“Robb, what is going on?” Juanita asks to get him to get to the point.

“He said there’s a gang in here, and he’s not going to bow down to anybody.”

She leans forward over her desk, supporting her head with her fingertips. “Which one?” she asks.

“I don’t know. All he’d say was that a *General* came here with a *Minister* and a *First Lieutenant* to establish a *Franchise*.”

She shakes her head. *Minister* would make it one of the northern, Disciple-styled gangs. *Folks* maybe?

“I think we know who that is,” Robb adds. The three recent in-takes from Chicago who said they moved to Orlando for the weather. Yesterday they were involved in some gambling. First playing craps for cigarettes on the patio and then betting chores on a televised basketball game. The Chicago boys weren’t singled out as the instigators but were involved in both incidents.

“How does Cody fit in?” Juanita asks.

“Well, he said they asked him to be a *Chief*, and when he said no, they said that he’d have to start paying them *rent* if he didn’t join them.”

“Rent?” she asks. This is new. “Did he say what the rent was?”

“No,” Robb says. “Money, I assume. He said when he told them he wasn’t going to pay anything, they told him to expect a blanket-party if they don’t get payment by lights out.”

“Did he seem scared?” she asks.

“Does Cody ever seem scared?”

No, Cody never seems anything but angry. “Okay,” she tells him. “Thanks for informing me. Keep an eye on them.” She moves to hang the phone up, but Robb continues to speak.

“Do you want me to come up front and help you discharge these guys?” Robb asks.

“No,” she tells him. “We can’t discharge anyone based on a rumor.”

“This is a pretty serious rumor.”

She nods. “Yes, but discharging three residents without an actual incident will never stand up under review. It’s his word against theirs, and their sanctuary needs to be protected too.”

“Yes ma’am,” he says.

“Cody could have a grudge against them,” she adds.

“Yes, I understand,” Robb says. “But aren’t we going to do anything?”

“Document any gang-like behaviors,” she tells him. “Put a note in the com-log, and have the overnight staff keep an eye on Cody.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s all we can do,” she tells him and clears her throat. “This might not even be anything, idle threats and bravado. It’ll pass.”

“I understand,” he says. “But could you have Gloria listen in to the patio-chatter?”

“Sure,” she says and hangs up the phone before he can say anything else. Gangs and threats and grudges and rumors and discharges and drama, drama, drama.

It’s been a month now. Most dropouts relapse after a month without a meeting, eleven years or not. One year, eleven years, a hundred and eleven years, it doesn’t matter; you’re never cured. You’ve only ever got today.

Juanita can’t concentrate, so she pulls the elastic tie from her bun. She shakes her hair loose and combs it out with her fingers. She breathes easier and turns her wedding

ring on her finger. It's a small solitaire diamond set on a smooth gold wedding band. Simple and clean. Monte's ring is thick with a single small diamond set into the band like an eye in a socket. He used to joke that it was her way of keeping an eye on him. She wishes it was so.

She picks up the phone to call home and stares at the keypad. It's too early. If he went to a meeting, he won't be there yet. Juanita places the phone back in its cradle, twists her hair back into a bun and goes to see Gloria at the In-Take desk.

"Listen in on the patio tonight," Juanita tells Gloria

"Sure thing," Gloria says and pushes a button on the intercom by the side window. The chatter of flirting and gossip and *This one time...* stories fills In-Take. Gloria turns the volume down so the noise doesn't fill the lobby. "What am I listening for?"

"Gang activity," Juanita says. "Or complaints of being bullied or intimidated."

"The Chicago Boys?" Gloria asks, looking up at Juanita.

"Maybe, but not definitely. So just listen."

"Will do," she says with a nod and enlarges the security camera for the smoking patio.

Juanita steps behind Gloria's desk and surveys the courtyard through the back windows; the Chicago Boys and six or seven other boys scramble around the half court playing basketball. Juanita tries to catch who the Chicago Boys pass the ball back and forth with to determine what the teams are. Of the three of them, the lanky one with long cornrowed hair is the tallest, probably six-four. The stocky one with the short fade cut is a

little under six feet but wider than most the other kids. The midsized one is Demitris; he's tall and stocky with muscles that look like they were built in prison. He didn't have any identification when they were in-taken, and she suspects he's over twenty-one, too old for La Rue House.

Leeshaun and Hector seem to be on the team with the Chicago Boys. Both Leeshaun and Hector are big guys, and, like Cody, would make good muscle for a gang. It's the five of them versus a team of younger, skinnier boys. But it's a basketball game and teaming up with the biggest guys on the court is just a good strategy.

Juanita's too tired for this tonight. The mattress is too light without Monte. It moves too much when she rolls over. It's colder too, without the heat of his belly against her back and his legs behind her thighs. It's unnerving not to be able to touch him with her toe, or lay her foot over his. It wasn't so bad when he was just sleeping on the couch, but not having him in the house at all makes her feel lonely, vulnerable, like she's sleeping on top of the covers.

Back in her office, Juanita checks her personal e-mail. She has two new e-mails from NA sponsees and one from Monte, but she makes herself wait on his and reads the other two first.

Both e-mails are forwarded jokes. Neither cheers her up.

The message from Monte is nothing personal, just a recommendation for another anti-NA book she's not going to read: *Rational Recovery: The New Cure for Substance Addiction* by a Jack Trimpey, not doctor, not even an MSW. Monte didn't write anything to her, not even something about the book. He didn't sign it either. The message was sent

at 4:42 pm, so he sent it from work, but nothing since then. The friend he's staying with has internet access. Or he could go to the bookstore or a coffee shop to send Juanita something personal. Even just to let her know he is okay.

She's trying to come up with something to e-mail Monte about when the phone rings again, but it's another internal call.

"Both Neil and Andrew have been told to pay rent," Robb tells her.

This again. She leans forward and rests her elbow on the desk for support. "Did they come to you with it or you asked?"

"They looked upset and were avoiding the Chicago Boys, so I asked if they'd been told to pay rent. They seemed relieved that I knew about it."

"Did they say by who?" she asks. "Did they give you names?"

"Not exactly," he says. "But I found out what rent is."

She sits up and clears her throat. "I'm listening."

"A pack of cigarettes or a weekly bus pass," he says. "Andrew told them he couldn't pay, and they told him he could do their chores instead."

"Dear God," she says and makes the sign of the cross. "Did they pay?"

"They don't have to until tomorrow," Robb says. "But they were told they'd see what happens to people who don't pay their rent."

She takes a sip of water and runs her palm over her hair. "Are the Chicago Boys all in the same room?" she asks.

"No," he says. "We split them up when they came in. They're in rooms one, three and four."

"Which room is Cody in?"

“Four,” he says. “Night staff won’t be able to monitor that, even if they do 15-minute-checks.”

She nods to herself. “And Neil and Andrew?” she asks.

“One and six,” he says. “We need to discharge these guys before anyone gets hurt.”

“Gang activity is a serious discharge. We can’t do it based on accusations,” she tells him. It’d be so much easier if she could just say yes and be done with it. But she must uphold everyone’s sanctuary. She can’t put anyone on the streets who needs the shelter, not until they give her no other choice. It was different with Monte. Quitting NA is the first step toward relapsing, sure as if he’d taken a hit.

“What about for threatening behavior?” Robb asks.

“Yes, we could do that,” she says. “But unless we see the incident or hear it, they’ll get right back in on appeal tomorrow. And then they’ll know we’re watching them. We just have to wait for something to happen,” she tells him. “Then we can discharge them.”

“Like what?” he asks. “Them to beat the hell out of Cody?”

“Of course not,” she says.

“Why don’t we just discharge them anyway?”

“That’s not the way it’s done.”

“We’ll call them to In-Take and say we’re on to their scam. See if they admit to it.”

She switches the phone to her other ear and leans over her desk. “And if they don’t, they are right back in here tomorrow.”

“At least everyone’s safe for tonight.”

“Except for the three boys we put on the street.”

“They’re not homeless. They’ll go straight to a hotel.”

“Discharging them for an incident works best. It’s proven.”

“We have to take a chance on this one. They’re not going to appeal if they know we’re on to them.”

“No, that’s not the way it’s done. We have to witness an incident. There needs to be physical proof, or someone has to name names.”

“Screw the way it’s done,” he says. “We need to adapt to the situation and overcome the obstacle in front of us.”

“This isn’t the Army,” she reminds him. “That’s not the way we do things. Document what you know. Gather more evidence and build our case. We have to be absolutely certain.”

“I am absolutely certain,” he says.

“You don’t hear the appeals. The Omsbud does,” she reminds him, and he doesn’t respond. “You’ve got two hours before lights out. Gather your evidence and build a solid case.”

“Yes ma’am.”

She hangs up the phone and falls back in her chair. She wonders why everybody has to try and do things their own way.

Juanita drinks a sip of water and calls a friend to find out if Monte attended the seven o’clock meeting at the East Side Club or if he’s still out there working his own program.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I can’t tell you that,” the friend answers. “But I can tell you I, personally, haven’t seen him in a while.”

“Thank you,” Juanita says. “See you on Sunday.”

Juanita checks her e-mail again. Nothing but spam. She pokes around on the Department of Corrections Web site, initially making sure Monte hadn’t gotten arrested for buying meth off an undercover agent or something but then looking up past residents. She can play this video game all night.

Sara calls from the Girls’ Unit to tell Juanita that the girls are irked by the Chicago Boys and are avoiding them. Robb’s gotten Sara involved; at least he’s working it.

Juanita clears her throat and asks, “Who’d you speak with?”

“Crystal, Princess and Jackie,” she answers. “They said the guys ask a lot of questions and are just freaking everyone out.”

“Anything specific?” Juanita asks.

“Jackie said they were asking her about the supply and prices for marijuana, cocaine and heroin. She said it wasn’t like they wanted to score but as if they were trying to get a feel for the market.”

“Good to know,” Juanita says, nodding to herself. “What about them freaking the girls out?”

“Nothing really,” Sara says. “The girls are just irked by them. Probably just invading their personal space.”

“You told the girls to make it clear the advances were unwelcome?”

“Of course,” she answers. Sara knows the protocols.

“Thanks,” Juanita says. “Let me know if there is an incident.”

“Anything?” Juanita asks Gloria. There isn’t. Gloria would have called her right away, but it’s better than sitting in her office. Monte’s sure to call if she’s away from her phone.

“The NA meetings seem to have worked for Jackie,” Gloria says, pointing to the monitor.

Juanita nods; at least someone’s doing it the way she should.

“And Crystal’s ex keeps coming around her work but nothing about the Chicago Boys or any gangs.”

“Where are they?” Juanita asks and glances out the back windows.

“They’ve been staying out of range.” Gloria points to a group of kids in the background of one camera and on the edge of the other. Neither camera is close enough to give much detail, and there’s no way the intercom can pick up their conversation over the patio’s chatter.

Juanita goes out to the smoking patio to see for herself. The chatter pauses as soon as the door opens, as usual, but stops entirely when the kids see it’s her.

“Ms J, what’s up?”

“Nothing,” she says casually and gives them a smile.

“You coming to hang with us?” The six kids scoot around the table to make room for her on the bench.

Juanita shakes her head and remains standing. “Just for a smoke,” she says, waving a cigarette. She surveys the patio and courtyard. A few guys play basketball, and

a boy/girl couple sit alone under the tree. The Chicago Boys are smoking by the back wall with Leeshaun and Hector. They're standing in a close circle, not relaxed like they're praying, but stiff like they're discussing something serious and private.

“How's Penny?” Andrew asks Juanita.

Penny? Juanita draws a blank. Juanita looks at Andrew and tries to picture him with recent girls who might be Penny. Nothing. She recalls his previous visits and places him within the different periods of La Rue House's history; at each point, she runs through the names and faces, but can't connect him with a Penny. She doesn't forget her kids. There was a Penny years ago - runaway from New Mexico who came to Orlando to be with the band N'Sync — here for about a week then discharged for family reunification. Was Andrew here back then?

“Penny?” she asks, hoping maybe it's a nickname she never caught onto and he'll use the girl's real name.

“Our kitten,” Andrew says, “Penny.”

The kitten. The kitten's name was Penny. Someone brought it back from job-searching, and the kids managed to hide it on the units for a few days.

“Oh, my brother-in-law's friend took her,” she lies, keeping an eye on the Chicago Boys. To keep the kids from discharging themselves to care for the kitten, she promised she would find it a good home. She kept it the first night as company because Monte'd just left, but it cried and mewed all night and wouldn't use the paper she laid out, so she dropped it off at the vet by her house the next morning. “She'll be all right,” Juanita assures them.

Demitris makes eye contact with Juanita for a second and nudges the others. They each glance her way and tighten their little circle.

“He likes cats?” Princess asks

“Who?” Juanita asks.

“Your brother’s friend,” Princess says. “He likes cats? He’ll give her a good home?”

“My brother-in-law’s friend,” Juanita says, keeping her story straight. “Yes, he loves cats. He’s got two already.” She made up the brother-in-law, so why can’t his imaginary friend have two cats.

She catches Demitris’s eye again, and he drops his cigarette to the ground and rubs it out with his expensive Nikes. The other two Chicago Boys drop their cigarettes and fall in behind Demitris as he heads toward the patio. Leeshaun and Hector catch on and follow suit, all five moving as a group. They nod hello to Juanita as they pass the table and press the patio door bell to be let inside.

As they wait for Gloria to buzz the Chicago Boys in, the table is quiet. None of the kids look at the Chicago Boys, and all wait for them to leave before continuing their conversations.

Juanita calls Robb. “Keep an eye on Leeshaun and Hector,” she tells him. “They might be in it too.”

“Not Leeshaun,” Robb says. “He’s working the program.”

“Just keep an eye on him,” she says.

“I’ll talk to him,” he says. “I’m sure he’s not involved.”

“No,” she tells him, hoping Robb’s not going to turn devil’s advocate just because Leeshaun’s his golden child. “Don’t let on that we suspect anything, or they’ll move everything off-property.”

“But he can’t be involved with this.”

“If he is, he’ll have to deal with the consequences. It’s his choice.”

“I can talk to him.”

“Don’t,” she says. “Just keep a watch on everything. We need evidence.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Juanita e-mails Monte: *Situation tonight, will be late*. If he checks his mail, he’ll know he’s welcome at home, maybe even feel expected. She signs it *Love, J*.

Before, when she’d call to say she was going to be late because of drama or an incident, he’d wait up for her. He claimed he stayed up because she made so much noise when she came in that she woke him anyway, but she suspected it was to hear the story of what happened. If there’d been a real problem, he’d come and pick her up, just to make sure she was safe. And years and years ago, when she was still a case manager and they only had the one car, he picked her up every night. They’d go for sundaes at Denny’s and then catch a midnight meeting.

Robb calls back and says he’s got evidence. “They just came back on the unit and Demitris was making comments to Hector and Leeshaun like ‘You’ve been too easy on the people up in here’ and ‘You’re either a landlord or a tenant.’”

“Okay, that’s good,” she says. “But it’s still not concrete enough.”

“No problem. I’ve got it covered,” he says. “They called Elliot into room three and closed the door. So I went to investigate. When I opened the door, they were all

standing around Elliot, and he looked scared to death. I asked why they'd closed the door; they said they were discussing basketball strategies."

"What'd Elliot say?"

"Nothing," Robb says. "He left the unit with them to *continue their conversation in private.*"

"You didn't keep him back?"

"For what?" he asks. "You told me not to let on that we suspect anything."

"You make something up," she says and smooths her hair. "Without Elliot telling us what was really going on in there, we still don't have enough."

"Bullshit," he says loudly, then lowers his voice. "We know what was going on in that room."

"You saw them all together. You didn't hear anything. Elliot has to tell us."

"You're not using my kids as bait."

She sits up, squaring her shoulders. His kids? "Robb, calm down," she tells him.

"Do you want them out for a night or do you want them out for good?"

"Okay. Yes, ma'am, you're right," he says still sounding frustrated. "But you've got to do something."

"I will," she assures him. "I'll talk to Elliot after night meeting."

"All right. And I'll go over Sanctuary at night meeting."

"No," she says, shaking her head.

"It'll reassure everyone that they're safe."

"Are you listening to me?" she asks, cutting him off.

Robb sighs heavily and answers, "Yes."

“What were you supposed to talk about tonight?”

He sighs again and says, “The importance of good hygiene when living in a community.”

“Stick with that,” she says. “You can do sanctuary tomorrow night.”

“Yes ma’am,” he says and hangs up the phone.

Gloria holds Elliot at In-Take after night-meeting. Once the In-Take lobby is clear, Gloria sends him to Juanita’s office.

“What’d I do?” Elliot asks. He sits across from her, upright in the chair, both arms straight along the arm rests, his legs parallel, and his feet flat on the floor, like he’s a statue. His hands grip the arm rests as if she might reach across her desk and slap him out of the chair.

“What were you boys talking about in your room when Mr. Robb came in?”

He looks at the thin window in her office door. “Nothing,” he says and glances at her office window, but the shade is drawn. “Just basketball stuff.”

“Has anyone asked you to pay them rent for staying here?” Juanita asks.

“No.” He glances at the door and at her window, but doesn’t look at her.

“You sure?” she asks.

“Yeah.” He looks at the window again like he’s trying to see through the window shade. “No such thing.”

“Elliot, one of La Rue House’s guiding principles is Sanctuary.” He nods like he knows this already. “That means we’ll protect you from all the evils of the street. You are safe here.” He looks at her for a second but doesn’t hold her gaze and looks down at her

desktop. “We protect girlfriends from boyfriends who beat them. We protect kids from parents who abuse them. We protect addicts from drugs and the drug dealers.” She gets up from her chair and walks around the desk and leans against it right next to him. “And we protect people from gangs. This is a safe house,” she says softly. “If you have a problem, you can come to me with it.”

He looks up at her, and his eyes are watery. He opens his mouth and closes it. He looks down and says, “There’s no problem.” He looks back up at her. “We got everything straightened out.”

They got everything straightened out. “Okay,” she tells him. “You can go.” He must have paid the rent.

Elliot turns toward the door before he’s fully out of the chair and makes his first few steps still hunched over.

Juanita pulls the elastic tie from her bun and shakes her hair loose. As she is straightening her hair, the phone rings. Robb again, she’s sure, calling to see if Elliot talked and the discharges can begin. She presses the speaker button and says, “Yes.”

Sara’s voice drones from the speaker, “Princess is discharging herself.”

Juanita drops her hair and looks at the phone to make sure she heard correctly. Princess is not the type to prefer the street. Maybe she met a boy at the mall who has an apartment. Or maybe she has finally decided that paying rent at her parents’ house and living under their rules isn’t so bad after all. “Why?” she asks.

“I don’t know,” Sara answers. “She was crying and packing her bags as fast as she could. She’s spooked about something. I couldn’t get it out of her.”

Juanita slumps over her desk. More drama. When it rains, it pours. Monte had better be at home when she gets there; she needs to sleep tonight.

Juanita takes a deep breath and gathers her hair. “Where is she now?” she asks, twisting it back up into a bun.

“On her way to In-Take.”

“I’ll catch her. Find out what happened.” She disconnects the call by dropping her palm onto the keypad and sprints out of her office.

Princess comes out from the dormitory wing shoving and pulling her luggage through the doorway. She’s loaded down with her backpack, a duffel bag, a large standard suitcase and a rolling suitcase. Her face is soaked with tears, and her eyes are wide like a scared animal.

“Princess, honey,” Gloria calls to her as she comes from behind the In-Take desk. “What’re you doing?”

Princess jerks her rolling suitcase free from the doorjamb and beelines for the front door. “I’m going,” she says quick and desperate.

Juanita steps to the front door, blocking her way. “Where you going to go?” she asks.

Princess stops and drops her suitcase. Her duffel bag shifts from behind her hip and hangs heavy in front of her like an anchor. She sobs and her body quakes.

“It’s not safe out there,” Gloria says from behind her.

Princess turns and screams at Gloria, “It’s not safe in here.” She wipes her face and picks up her suitcase.

As Princess moves toward the front door, Juanita steps aside and says, “Princess, you’re safe now. We’re here with you, right now.” Princess stops at the door and leans her head against it; she’s listening at least. “We won’t let anything happen to you.”

“Stay here tonight,” Gloria says, stepping closer. “You can sleep in the chapel. I’ll watch over you.”

“We’ll take you someplace in the morning,” Juanita says, trying to soften her voice so it’s comforting, but it just comes out quieter, a dry whisper.

Princess rolls her forehead back and forth on the glass, shaking it in the negative. Juanita looks to Gloria for an answer or an idea, but Gloria shrugs. Princess sniffles deeply and pushes the front door open.

“Let’s call your parents,” Juanita says. “See if they’ll let you come home.”

“We’ll even take you there in the van,” Gloria adds, which is why Juanita calls her the Queen of Overtime.

Princess turns back to them and lets the door close. She sniffles again and nods. Juanita hugs her and walks her to a bench in the lobby. She strokes the hair out of her face. Gloria fills a plastic cup with water from the cooler and brings it to Princess.

The In-Take phone rings, two short bursts, and Gloria answers it while Juanita sits with Princess. “It’s for you,” Gloria calls to Juanita from the In-Take desk. “Ms. Sara.”

Juanita doesn’t get up until Gloria is sitting on the other side of Princess and has her arm around her.

“This is Juanita.”

“I know what scared Princess,” Sara says.

“I’m listening.”

“Jackie and Crystal were told to meet *some guys* at the Citrus Motel after breakfast so they could *party* and *pay their rent*.”

“I’m getting sick of hearing that.” Juanita shakes her head to herself. “Did they say who?”

“I asked. All they said was *Who do you think?*”

“And are we pretty sure we know what rent is?”

“Oh yeah,” Sara says. “The girls were warned that if they didn’t come, the guys would find them and collect the rent anyway, but that it won’t be a party.”

“So…” Juanita starts but pauses and crosses herself.

“Prostitution or rape, yeah,” Sara finishes for her.

Juanita’s tempted to let the Chicago Boys collect *rent* from Jackie. They’d get so much more than they bargained for; she’s HIV positive. But that’s a sin to even think, let alone wish for. And they’d spread it to too many innocent others before succumbing to the virus themselves. She crosses herself again. Adapt and overcome.

“Get me names,” she tells her.

“I’ll do my best,” Sara says and hangs up.

Juanita pulls the band from her bun, smoothes out her hair, getting it all straight and back, then lashes it down again. She goes to Princess and sits down next to her.

“Princess,” Juanita says, stroking her back, “were you asked to pay rent?” Princess looks around the lobby and out the front door. “Did it involve meeting some guys at a motel?”

Princess nods. “Will you tell us who so we can get them out of here?” Princess is still, but her eyes dart about, as if she’s mapping out all the consequences of her next move.

Finally, she shakes her head.

Juanita places her hand on the girl's knee. "You're leaving the other girls in danger," Juanita tells her.

Princess searches the floor again. "I can't," she says softly. She looks out the door and back at Juanita. "I can't. Will you just call my mom?"

Adapt and overcome.

"Sure," Juanita says and nods to Gloria to let Princess use the phone. They've been trying to get Princess to go home for weeks. Too bad it took something like this to make her go.

"And get Mr. Robb on the phone when she's done," Juanita adds.

Princess cries and apologizes and sobs and explains into the phone but finally asks to come home. Gloria gives her parents directions and then calls the Boys' Unit.

"We're discharging them," Juanita tells Robb.

"About time," Robb says. "Princess talk?"

"No," she says, shaking her head. She looks at the ceiling and clears her throat.

"We're going to try it your way."

"Oh," he says. "All right. Good."

"Only because this is an extraordinary situation," she tells him. "We aren't changing the protocols. We are just making an exception this once."

"Understood."

"And if it doesn't work," she says, trying to point at him through the phone, "you'll be working doubles all week as security."

"Sure thing," he says and chuckles a little. "Glad to."

She shakes her head at his joy and runs her hand over her hair. “When the overnight staff get here, send the guys to In-Take one at a time. We’ll pack up their belongings once they’re all outside.”

“Divide and conquer,” Robb says. “Who you want first?”

“Demitris.”

Princess’s parents pick her up around ten-thirty and complain that every time they called looking for her, they were never told she was here. Juanita explains that to protect the youth’s sanctuary, it’s the shelter’s policy not to confirm or deny the presence of any resident over 18, but assures them that their messages were passed on to Princess each time they called. She chose not to call them back.

Juanita recommends they seek family counseling to resolve their issues. They tell her not to tell them how to raise their daughter. As they leave, Juanita reminds Princess that she’s welcome to come back if she ever needs to. Princess comes back in and hugs her goodbye.

The overnight staff arrives a little before eleven with their magazines, books and mini-coolers. Juanita fills them in and sends them to the units.

Ten minutes later, Demitris paces the lobby, not acting surprised by the discharge, but demanding to know who said he was participating in gang activity. “Under the constitution, I get to face my accuser.” Demitris argues with Juanita. “It’s one of my civil rights. You got to tell me.”

“This is a private shelter, not a court of law,” Robb tells him. He stands by the door to the dormitory wing, arms crossed, to let Demitris know he’s not going back to the unit, although Robb’s Hawaiian shirt keeps him from looking too intimidating.

“We’re not telling you who they are,” Juanita says, making the accuser plural to confuse and intimidate him. “Forget it.”

Demitris crosses his arms and shakes his head, like he’s not going anywhere.

The In-Take phone rings, two short bursts. Gloria answers it and calls to Juanita from the desk. “Sara.”

Juanita takes the phone, and Gloria steps into the lobby to explain to Demitris how to appeal his discharge, but he ignores her and watches Juanita closely.

“The cat’s out of the bag,” Sara tells Juanita when she picks up the phone. “They’re all packing up and heading your way.”

“What’d you say?” she asks.

“We didn’t say a thing. Just sent Demitris down to talk with you.”

“They giving you a problem?”

Demitris smiles to himself.

“No,” Sara says. “Just dirty looks.”

“Have both the overnight staff follow them down,” Juanita tells her.

“You want me to call the police?” Sara asks.

“No,” Juanita tells her and looks at Demitris, who’s still watching her. She clears her throat and speaks into the phone loud enough for him to hear clearly. “I don’t want to involve the police unless we absolutely have to.” She cocks her head and raises her eyebrow, asking, *Is that cool with you?*

He nods to himself and steps back against the wall like he's just going to wait there peacefully.

Juanita hangs up the phone and points to the front door. "Outside," she tells him. Demitris cocks his head to the side and looks at her like he didn't understand. "Wait outside."

Demitris shakes his head and strolls out the front door. He stands under the front light and lights a cigarette. He stares back in at them all through the large plate glass window.

The other guys, including Hector and Leeshaun, arrive at In-Take in a rush, hauling their backpacks and gym bags, the overnight staff right behind them. They look around the In-Take lobby like they're lost.

"Are you all discharging yourselves?" Gloria asks.

The one with the long cornrows looks at her and spits out, "Shut your bald ass up."

Demitris knocks on the front window and waves the guys outside.

"Leeshaun," Robb calls out, his arms open, like a victim.

"Man, fuck off," Leeshaun says and steps toward Robb like he's going to attack him. But he just says, "I'm sick of your bullshit," with a swooping flare of his arms and turns back to the rest of the gang.

Demitris holds the door open for them as they leave. Once they're all safely outside and lighting cigarettes, he sticks his head in the lobby. "You can't blame me," he says, smoke polluting the lobby with each word. "You're either a landlord or a tenant."

"Not in here," Juanita says.

“Everywhere.” He laughs. “That’s the way the world is.”

“I’m sorry you believe that.”

“You all have a nice night,” he says and waves broadly.

“Godspeed,” Juanita says.

Demitris laughs at her and pulls himself back outside. The door closes slowly on its hydraulic arm. The gang walks through the parking lot toward the main road. Robb moves to the front windows to watch them as they go.

“Thank you,” Juanita tells the overnight staff, and they go back to the unit.

“It worked,” Robb says, stepping away from the window. “You just have to fit the solution to the problem.”

“They didn’t admit to it,” Juanita reminds him.

“That wasn’t an admission?” he asks.

“Sounded like one to me,” Gloria says.

“Maybe,” Juanita says, still looking out the front windows. “Regardless, be very detailed in your incident report.”

“Yes ma’am,” Robb says.

“Think they’ll come back?” Gloria asks.

“I don’t know,” she says. “Call Tampa and Miami,” Juanita says to Gloria. “Warn those shelters that these guys might be coming their way.”

Gloria nods and goes back to the In-Take desk.

“It worked,” Robb says again and heads back to the Boys’ Unit.

Juanita nods to herself and goes into her office to write up her report. But before she takes out the incident report sheet, she calls Monte on his cell phone.

“I got your e-mail,” Monte answers. “You all right?”

“Yes, I’m fine,” she says, leaning back in her chair and smiling. “We just had a little trouble with some gangbangers, but I think it’s over now.”

“Anything serious?” he asks

“No, not really,” she says. “Not anymore.” She closes her eyes so she can better hear his voice. “How was your day?”

“Fine. The same as always. No gangbangers or anything, just student workers.”

“That’s nice.”

He’s quiet, and the hum of the connection is almost as nice as his voice. She clears her throat and asks, “You want to come escort me home?”

“I thought you said it was nothing serious.”

“It wasn’t,” she says, smiling to herself.

“Are you... Are you asking me to come home?”

“Maybe,” she says. “I think so.”

He’s quiet again, only this time it’s not so nice. “I’m not going back to NA,” he finally says. “I’m done with the meetings.”

“I know,” she says, nodding at the phone. “That’s fine.”

“You sure?”

“Yes,” she says. “But if you ever relapse, we’ll be having meetings at the house.”

“Okay,” he laughs. “I’ll come escort you home.”

She smiles wider, revealing her teeth. “Only if you take me for sundaes first,” she says.

PROTOCOLS

Sara stops at the In-Take lobby and rests the pile of blankets on the edge of Gloria's desk. Gloria had asked Sara to go out a few weeks ago, but Sara declined because she doesn't want to become one of the La Rue House family. Tonight, though, has been a good night; it'd be nice to get out and forget her thesis for a while. "Want to go out for a drink tonight?" Sara asks.

"Babies getting to you?" Gloria responds.

"No," Sara says with a slight shake of her head. "It's been quiet, so I'm up for going out."

"Sure," Gloria says. "I'm meeting up with Mike and the guys at Hearst's Pub. Want to join us?"

"Oh." Sara forgot that Gloria was dating one of the local cops. "Well, I don't want to intrude."

"It's no thing. There's a bunch of us" Gloria says and waves her off. "They've got even better stories than us."

"Okay," Sara says, remembering. "I'll think about that." She picks up the blankets and steps toward the door to the dormitory wing of the shelter.

"Hope you come out." Gloria reaches for the button to buzz her through the door to the units but stops and stares at the security monitor. "Damn," Gloria says to herself and looks out the front windows.

Sara turns from the hall door toward the front.

A youth staggers up to the door, more like he is hurt than intoxicated. His body is lost within the fabric of his baggy jeans and oversized, white T-shirt. His face is hidden by the bill of a baseball cap. But Sara recognizes the eight-ball embroidered on the front of his hat.

“Kipp,” Sara says, reminding herself. Kipp Roman. Twenty. Relinquished from foster care at eighteen. In and out a few times but a good kid: no attitude, smart and clean. Fry-cook at TGI Fridays, came in late smelling like chicken and shortening. Left the last time two, three months ago. Planned Discharge; Independent Living. Got a one-bedroom apartment down Semoran, decent complex by the Wal-Mart. No trouble, just full of bad luck.

One of Sara’s success stories. An example she plans to talk about in interviews when they asked her to explain why she would make a good guidance counselor.

Gloria presses the button to open the front door. It buzzes loudly in the still lobby, and Sara realizes she’s not breathing. Kipp pulls on the glass door like it’s made of stone and shuffles inside.

“Hello, Kipp,” Sara says, trying to sound warm and welcoming. He holds his left arm with his right hand as he comes in. “You okay?” she asks.

“I need a Band-Aid,” Kipp says sounding like he’s talking in his sleep. He holds out his left arm; blood drips from under his right hand. His arm is dark with dried blood and dirt.

“Jesus.” Sara dumps the blankets into the closest chair. She takes Kipp by the shoulders and sits him down.

Gloria grabs the first-aid kit from the filing cabinet, sticks the roll of paper towels under her arm, and comes around the desk to help. She sets the first-aid kit down on the chair next to them and tears a few paper towels off the roll.

“What happened?” Sara asks him. She places her hand on his, trying to get a look under his hand.

“I got a cut,” Kipp says. “I need a Band-Aid.”

“Let’s get it cleaned up first,” Sara says and Kipp lets her lift his hand. A dark blob covers most of his forearm, looking more like road rash than a cut. Gloria hands Sara a few paper towels folded into a pad. She presses the pad lightly against his arm to absorb the blood.

Gloria looks out the windows and scans the parking lot. “Is anyone after you?” she asks Kipp.

He doesn’t answer, so Sara asks, “See anything?”

“No,” Gloria says, shaking her head. “No one’s out there. There aren’t any strange cars, either.”

Sara lifts the bloody paper towels; four long slices across Kipp’s forearm quickly refill with blood. “Oh God,” she says.

Gloria turns back to see and gasps.

“Just a cut,” Kipp says, his head rocking against the wall behind him.

“I’ll get gloves,” Gloria says and goes back to the In-Take desk.

Sara pulls on the gloves and presses the towels to Kipp’s arm. “Is there anyone we can call for you?” she asks and remembers there isn’t. It’s a stupid question, and he shakes his head no.

“You want us to take you to the hospital?” Gloria asks.

“No.” Kipp sits up in the chair.

Sara stops him with her palm and gently pushes him back against the wall. “Stay still.” He sighs and relaxes against the wall, no fight in him. “Who cut you?” she asks.

“What happened?”

“Nothing,” he says slowly with a little shake of his head. “I just need a Band-Aid.”

“We have to get it cleaned off first,” Sara explains as Gloria rips off a fresh paper towel and shakes the bottle of hydrogen-peroxide. “Where were you tonight?” Sara asks.

“At a party,” Kipp says and gasps as Sara pours peroxide over his arm. It splashes on the floor and sizzles.

“Whose party?” Sara asks, sopping up the blood and peroxide around his wound. “We didn’t hear about any party.” She glances momentarily at Gloria.

Gloria shakes her head and adds, “Not a word.”

“At Jessica and Maureen’s... Just people hanging out...”

Sara looks to Gloria who matches her concern with a sigh. Jessica and Maureen: cutters. Jessica cut to control her pain; Maureen cut to relieve her guilt. They bonded over razor blades in the shelter and got an apartment where they could kill themselves in peace.

“What kind of party was it?” Sara asks, pretty sure she knows but still hoping she’s wrong.

“Just a party, you know...” He flinches as Sara pours more peroxide over his arm. “With people.”

“Did you get in a fight?” Sara asks, pressing fresh towels to his arm.

“No, it was just fun,” Kipp says. “Nothing went down.”

“So you did this to yourself?” Sara asks to make sure. She shakes her head; he’s ruined everything with this one party.

“It’s okay,” he says watching Sara clean up his arm. “I just went too deep.”

“Yes, you did,” Gloria says.

“Let us take you to the hospital,” Sara tries. “You probably need stitches.”

“No, I have to work...” He moves to get up again but doesn’t. “All I need’s a Band-Aid.”

She glances at his hand. “Can you move your fingers?”

He looks at his left hand and watches his fingers flex. He moves slowly and is way too amazed by watching his fingers move.

“Kipp, did you take anything at the party?” Sara asks, hoping he’s high and not acting this way because he’s lost too much blood. “Drinking? Any drugs?”

He looks up at her to hear the question but looks away when he says, “I don’t do none of that stuff, Ms. Sara.”

“Kipp, it’s all right,” Sara says softly. “We just need to know so we can take care of your arm. We don’t want to give you anything that would react badly.”

“Did you smoke anything?” Gloria asks, hoping for the truth this time.

“Couple puffs off a blunt,” he says, his head down.

“Anything else?” Sara wipes Kipp’s arm with a cotton pad. Most of the dried blood and dirt is gone from around the gashes. They are deep and pink, like four new

mouths opening in his arm. They are also parallel, which makes them look very deliberate.

“A couple Xanie-bars,” he says. “To relax.”

Sara shakes her head; the bitches gave him Xanax to help him *relax*, to keep him from feeling any anxiety at the sight of his own blood. He was over there, hanging out and getting high and just joined in the mutilation, probably trying to get laid. At least he’s not really a cutter, not a *clinical* one; that’ll help him at Lakeside.

The In-Take phone rings, and Gloria returns to the desk to answer it. “She’s held up. Can you send one of the girls to get them?” Gloria says. “Nothing big. Just someone needing services. She’s talking to him.”

Sara opens the sterile pad from the first aid kit and tells Kipp to hold it firmly to his arm until the bleeding stops.

“That was Mr. Robb,” Gloria tells Sara from the In-Take desk. “Wondering where you were with the blankets.”

Sara looks at the pile of blankets in the chair by the door and back at Kipp.

“He’s going to send someone to get them,” Gloria adds.

“Thanks for not telling him what was up,” Sara says and picks up the bloody paper towels. She goes behind the In-Take desk and drops the towels in the trash. “We don’t need him up here too.”

“You don’t want The Army’s help?” she asks, smiling.

Sara smiles too and shakes her head. “Sir, no sir.”

They look at each other, and their smiles disappear. Kipp has his head against the wall and his eyes closed. Sara jerks her head toward him and asks, “How’re we going to do this?”

“As soon as overnight shift gets here, we’ll take him to the ER,” she answers.

Sara cocks her head to the side and asks, “We’re not going to Baker Act him?”

Gloria looks at Kipp in the lobby, like she’s considering him, then shakes her head and says, “He’s not a cutter.”

“You think I don’t know that,” Sara tells her. “He was on my case load. But he cut himself. That’s self-injury, clear and simple.”

Gloria shakes her head. “But he’s not really a cutter.”

Sara shakes her head back at Gloria. They have the same degree; Gloria’s just as un-qualified to diagnose him as she is. Gloria just thinks she knows better because she’s In-Take Supervisor. Sara could have been In-Take Supervisor, but she’s just doing this until she completes her Master’s. “That’s what the three days at Lakeside will determine.”

“He’ll lose his job,” Gloria says.

Sara looks at Kipp; it only took him a week of really looking to get this job, and he’s held it for the last five months. “He can get another one,” Sara tells her.

“He’ll miss a paycheck and lose his apartment and be right back in here,” Gloria lays it out like Sara’s an idiot.

“I know,” Sara says and breaks eye-contact with Gloria. Kipp holds the sterile pad to his arm loosely, and his head nods as if he’s falling asleep. “We have to follow the protocols,” she says. “He got out once. He can do it again.”

The door to the units opens, and Jackie comes into the lobby. She stops cold when she sees Kipp and the first-aid kit. Kipp limply waves *hello* to her.

“It’s all right,” Sara says and points to the blankets. “He just had a little accident. We’re taking care of him.”

Jackie gathers the blankets in her arms, and Sara holds the door for her.

“Keep this to yourself, okay?” Gloria tells her as she passes. “It’s nobody’s business but his.”

Jackie nods and goes through the doorway with a last glance toward Kipp.

“He’s not a resident,” Gloria whispers once the door closes. “We can drop him at the ER, and it’s his business if he tells them he did it or not.”

Sara picks up the hand sanitizer and squirts a little in her hand. She rubs it into her hands, rolling them over and over. “But we know,” she says finally.

“We also know he’s not really a danger to himself,” Gloria reminds her.

Sara keeps rubbing even though the sanitizer has dried. It’s just a job. All she has to do is work the protocols. He got out once, and so he can do it again.

“The ER?” Gloria asks.

“You want to call Ms. Juanita and clear that with her?” Sara asks, knowing the director will lean toward Baker Acting him to protect the shelter from any legal repercussions.

Gloria pinches her forehead and shakes her head at Sara. “Okay,” Gloria says. “We’ll follow the protocols.” She picks up the phone, dials and hands the phone to Sara. “But you make the call.”

Sara takes the phone and explains the nature of their emergency to the 911 operator and stresses that Kipp needs to go to Lakeside Psychiatric for an evaluation after receiving medical attention. The operator tells her an ambulance will be there right away and to remain calm. She was calm.

Gloria looks at Sara and nods toward Kipp to say, *Tell him.*

Sara nods that she will and rubs sanitizer over her hands again.

Sara steps over by Kipp and paces between him and the front door. “Still bleeding?” she asks him.

He lifts his head from the wall to look down at his arm. The sterile pad is soaked through with blood. “I don’t know...” He looks under the pad, nods and says, “A little...”

“Well, keep the pressure on it,” Sara says, and then paces the lobby again.

“When do you work next?” Sara asks Kipp.

Kipp turns his head halfway toward her. “Tomorrow... At three...”

She nods with him and then idly looks out the front windows.

“You want to call and tell them you might not make it?” Sara asks.

“Why wouldn’t I make it?”

“Because of your arm,” she says. “You can’t work like that.”

“I’ll be okay,” he says. “I’ll just take some Band-Aids for later.”

“Kipp, you have to have it looked at,” Sara pushes on. “You need stitches.”

He shakes his head. “No, I’ll be cool.”

Gloria coughs to get Sara’s attention and nods at the front doors. A deep breath later, flashing lights fill the lobby.

Kipp looks fascinated by the dancing colors at first, then sits up in a panic.

“They’re here to help you,” Gloria says.

“No, no, no.” Kipp pushes himself up out of the chair with his back, bucking like a fish on shore. The sterile pad plops onto the floor. He dashes to the door leading to the units. It’s locked, as always. He pulls at it and slams his body against it, then scrambles across the lobby and tries the door to the cafeteria and Day-Center. It’s locked too, but he pulls harder.

It’s too much to watch, so Sara focuses on the doors, relieved that something works the way it’s supposed to. It’s a shelter, not a prison: hard to get into, easy to leave.

Kipp stumbles to the center of the lobby and glances around for another door to try. His arm drips blood onto the floor. There’s no where for him to go except out the front door, but that is blocked by Gloria’s officer and two paramedics; they already have their gloves on.

Kipp tries the unit door again. “Buzz me in,” he cries. “Buzz me in.”

Officer Haynes smiles to Gloria and points at the door. The door clicks loudly and Kipp turns toward the sound and then kicks at the unit door.

Officer Haynes steps inside. “Calm down, son,” he says. “Let these guys look at you.”

Kipp stops kicking and glances left and right, at the corner he’s in. He pants and runs at the open front door.

Officer Haynes hooks Kipp around the waist and is pulled over by Kipp’s momentum. As Officer Haynes breaks his fall with his hands, Kipp scampers between the paramedics on all fours. Officer Haynes’s shoes squeak on the tile floor as he sprints outside after Kipp.

The paramedics step aside as Gloria and Sara come to the door to watch. Officer Haynes's partner has Kipp pinned to the ground in the parking lot, and Officer Haynes is trying to get cuffs around Kipp's wrists.

"Careful of his arm," Gloria calls to the officers.

"Let them help you, Kipp," Sara calls to him. "It's for the best."

Kipp looks up at her from under the officers; tears pour down his face. "Ms. Sara," he cries. "Tell them I didn't do nothing."

Sara's chest empties, and her face feels heavy. She looks away and is staring at Gloria.

"Hope you're happy," Gloria says and steps away from her, going back inside.

Sara watches quietly as the officers hold Kipp on a stretcher so the paramedics can strap him down. Once Kipp is in the ambulance, the officers go inside, but Sara stays and watches the ambulance leave.

When the officers finally come out, laughing and telling Gloria they'll see her later, Sara slips back inside.

She avoids looking Gloria in the eye as she crosses the In-Take lobby, but turns to her once she reaches the dormitory door. "I'm sorry," she says. "I was just... I don't know. I didn't mean to..." Sara looks down and puts her hand flush on the door to push it open. "I'm sorry," she tells Gloria. "You were right."

"I'm not the one you need to apologize to."

"I know," she says, nodding to herself. "I know."

Gloria buzzes her in, and Sara walks slowly back up to the Girl's Unit.

LOVE, CODY

The Hindi kid comes back into the Zombie Hut a little after eleven in the morning with a fist of hash wrapped up in brown paper. He puts it on the bar cool as ice, like he's delivering sandwiches. He's young, eight or nine, and too short to see over the bar but old enough to drop dope and collect cash. It figures. No matter how far you travel, it's the same shit all over the world. I was about his age when Mama put me to work running and dropping junk for her. Hope it works out better for him.

I look at the bartender to see if he cares. Marc said the cops don't give a shit, but hash is still illegal in India, and I'm sure the company'd fire us if we got busted for possession. But the bartender just snaps-to and goes to get me another Foster's like nothing's up, so I wave him off. Aside from him, we've got the bar to ourselves, so I stop giving a damn and get ready to get high.

Marc rips back the paper and sniffs at a corner of the block. "What do you think, Cody?" he asks, holding it out for me. It smells straight, strong as hell, and I almost cough it's so ripe. I nod, and Marc passes it to Buddy who crosses himself, sniffs, and then rubs his nose in it like a cat.

Marc gives the Hindi kid a couple of rupee bills. The kid glances at them, his eyes getting even wider than they were before, and then looks at Marc. Marc nods, and the kid bolts out of the bar.

"What'd you give him?" I ask.

"Two thousand rupees," Marc says, ripping open the package.

"Wasn't that too much?"

“What do you care,” Marc says with a shrug. “Consider it a delivery charge.”

Two thousand rupees - forty bucks, for a block of hash that'd easily go for a thousand dollars from a good friend in the States. India rocks.

Marc passes some rupees to the bartender and asks if it's cool for us to smoke up. The bartender takes the money and passes Marc a lighter. Marc pinches off a corner of the block and stuffs it into his pipe. The bartender holds out his own pipe, and Marc gives him a little pinch too.

It's good shit, spicy but smooth. Maybe it's from being stuck on the ship for a month, but it tastes better than anything I've ever smoked in the States. After a few tokes, we order another round of one dollar beers to kill the time until the Funky Monkey opens.

Marc's an AB-Unlimited on the Mary Jo IV and been a mariner for the last fifteen years. Before that, he was in the Navy. Captain Frank gave Buddy and me to him for training, so he's taking us to the Funky Monkey to get tattoos cause it's our first foreign port call. Marc's covered in tattoos: a portrait of Neptune holding out a conch shell on his back for crossing the equator, a map of the world on his chest for circling the globe in one voyage, and he's slowly building a full set of sleeves and pants, one port at a time. He looks like the sailor in those old John Wayne movies about WWII, not John Wayne's sidekick, but the one John Wayne gets in a bar fight with to win the girl. Buddy says he looks like Bluto from *Popeye*.

For this visit to Bombay, Marc's getting an elephant with eight arms on his Asia leg, and Buddy's getting a tattoo of Gandhi as a symbol of his new enlightened ways, but he's not covering up any of his old gang tats. I'm going to get the ghetto tat on my forearm covered up with a proper tattoo. It was my first one, a crystal-shaped cross done

with a needle and India ink in juvie. All the guys in our family got one, but it looks like shit, and I don't run with any of them anymore. Maybe I'll have it turned into a dagger that's stabbing through a heart with *Mom* written on it.

As Buddy tries to explain to Marc why Gandhi's being a pacifist is so cool, I write my mom a postcard. I do it every year around her birthday to let her know I'm alive. Not that she gives a shit about me; I just do it to piss her off. And this year, I'm going to blow her mind cause the last she knew, I wasn't doing nothing and was living at a shelter in Orlando. On the back of a postcard of the Taj Mahal, I write:

Prisoner #428421

I'm in India, and the hash is great. Bet you wish you were here. Glad you're not. Wishing you another shitty birthday. May it be your last. If not, worst of luck with the parole board.

Love, Cody

That'll fuck up her day, make her lose her shit and pound some fish for no reason and get thrown in solitary.

I show it to Marc and Buddy. Marc laughs and then goes to the jukebox to keep it playing rock and roll instead of that Bollywood crap. But Buddy shakes his head. "That's cold," he says.

"Fuck her," I tell him cause she deserves it. "She's lucky I'm writing her at all."

"That ain't right," he says. "Not to someone in the pen."

I shrug, and he shakes his head again.

"It wasn't her fault," he says because he thinks he knows all about it from what we've talked about at sea. "You play with fire long enough, you get burned."

“She shouldn’t’ve been playing with it,” I tell him. “Not with kids to look out for.”

“She was doing what she could for you,” he says like I’m hopeless and takes his beer over to help Marc with the jukebox.

I read the postcard again and squeeze in *Your littlest bastard* under my name. I could tell her about being in the Merchant Marines, about finally having a regular thing and not having to scrounge and hustle anymore, about getting 3k for one month’s work and how I will get another 3k for the trip back, that I’m doing something with my life and how I’m going to see the world, but she doesn’t deserve to know any of that. She got busted, and I had to do it on my own, so fuck her.

And screw everyone else who said I’d never do nothing; I’m in India. Port Mumbai to be exact, the largest port on the Arabian Sea, second largest city in the world. It used to be Bombay, and most everyone on ship still calls it that except Captain Frank and the Chief. From what Marc says, most the Indians still call it Bombay too. So screw it, I’m in Bombay, India. Fucking India!

At noon, we go out into the street to find a cab. It’s loud and crowded, like all of Bombay. Trucks and taxis honk at everything to get the fuck out of their way, and street vendors yell jibberish at all the people shopping for outdated crap. Kids and dogs and pigeons run all around. Tourists too. They stick out worse than they ever did in Orlando with their backpacks and T-shirts and cameras and stupid sun-hats. I bet they can’t figure out why they’re being hassled by the beggars so much. Shit, we stick out enough just being white-assed Americans, except for Buddy who sticks out as a black-assed

American cause he's darker than the darkest Hindi. But looking like a tourist is advertising that you got money to blow.

It's too hazy to see the sun, but the haze glows like the sun has been blown apart and scattered across the clouds. The weather forecast for today is *Smoke*. Not *Sunny* or *Showers* or even *Fog*, but *Smoke*. Marc told us one day of breathing the air in Bombay is the same as smoking a pack of cigarettes. But after being under the blazing sun out in the middle of open ocean, I'm glad for a little haze. The sea's great and all, I'll zone out on it for hours, but some days it's just too damn bright.

We grab one of the little yellow and black taxis that are like old British cars and just a little bigger than a Mini. Marc gets in the front and tells the cabbie to take us to the Funky Monkey Tattoo Studio. Buddy and I squeeze in the back seat and crank down the windows, cause, of course, there's no A/C. The street's crowded with scooters, trucks, bicycles and other taxis, so it's stop and go and going to take us forever to get there.

Every time we stop, some beggar holds a hand or cup in the open window. There're hundreds of them, thousands. I've never seen so many in one place before, not even when they were passing out free lunches at Lake Eola Park. Being on the streets in Bombay'd suck; the competition here's killer.

And Buddy's passing out money. He's giving a hundred rupees to every beggar that sticks his paw in the cab. After the fourth one, Marc tells him to stop wasting his money.

"It ain't a waste," Buddy says.

"Listen to him," I say. "That was me." I point to two beggars fighting over some tourist's dollar. "I always blew it on drugs and shit."

“You was a crackhead,” he says. “Them people is hungry.”

“Hungry for your money,” Marc says, and we laugh at Buddy.

We stop near an old man in ragged clothes who is playing a flute with his nose. Next to him, a little brown monkey breakdances to the music. A few tourists watch and drop money in a wooden bowl; the locals walk right by him.

“That’s the guy you give money to,” I tell Buddy. “He’s working for it.”

“I think he’s working for the monkey,” Marc says. “You should pay it.”

“Well, you got to have an angle,” I say.

But Buddy keeps at it, so Marc gets serious, like he’s our sea-daddy again, and warns Buddy, “You’ll go broke if you try and help every beggar in India.”

“I’ve got plenty money.”

“For now,” Marc says. “Every port’s got people shit-out-of-luck. You got to ignore it and just be glad it ain’t you.”

Buddy just shrugs and looks out the window, his rupees ready in his hand.

Luckily, we didn’t exchange all our pay for rupees.

When we stop again, a little girl approaches the cab. She’s only about five and has smudges of dirt on her face like a mechanic. The tiny ponytail on top of her head is lost up in a red scrunchie; just an inch of hair pokes out the top of it. She’s wearing a burlap T-shirt that hangs on her like a dress; she doesn’t have any pants or underwear on, not even any shoes. She babbles at us in Hindi and points toward a boy sitting on the curb. He’s eight or ten but is all fucked up. His right arm and leg are twisted and knobbed like oak branches that tried to grow through power lines. Not just at the joints, but where it should be straight no matter what.

“What’s she saying?” I ask the cabbie.

“You don’t know?” Buddy asks me as he stuffs three or four bills in her hand.

The cabbie looks back and says, “She says she is needing the money because her brother is crippled and cannot work.”

I pull out my money and give her a couple hundred rupees. Marc shakes his head at me. “What?” I ask him. “He’s crippled. That’s legit.”

Marc laughs at me as we pull forward again.

“What?” I ask. “Why’s that funny?”

“You got conned.”

“No way,” I say looking back, but I don’t have a chance of seeing the boy through the taxis and bikes and all the people in the street. “You can’t fake that. He was fucked up.”

“Oh yeah, he’s really fucked up,” Marc says. “But it was done on purpose.”

I look at the cabbie in the rearview mirror, and he nods to back Marc up.

“What happened?” I ask the driver.

He glances back and then talks to me through the rear view mirror. “The parents, they break the children’s bones when they are very young and set them to heal in that way.”

I look at Marc who nods. “It makes them better beggars,” Marc says, pointing at Buddy and me like we’re suckers.

Buddy shakes his head and crosses himself.

“Why didn’t they do it to the girl then?” I ask.

Marc shakes his head slowly. “They’ve got other plans for her,” he says. “For when she’s older.”

And I get it. I knew she’d end up a whore, but I didn’t think her parents decided that for her when she was born. It’s something you do when you don’t have parents. When there’s no one left to take care of you and begging isn’t enough anymore. “So where’re their parents?”

Marc shrugs like he hadn’t given it any thought, so I ask the driver.

“They are being beggars too,” he says. “Or they are being ragpickers. Or they are taking care of newborn babies.” He looks in the mirror to see if that is enough information for me.

I look away. I’ve heard some fucked up stories on the streets, but this shit takes it. If I could get a hold of those kids’ parents, I’d break every bone in their bodies. We’d see how they fucking like it. Let them try and pick rags or whatever with their arms coming out their asses. I crack my knuckles one finger at a time and look out for the next broken beggar kid.

A twisted arm holds a cup up to the window, and I shove past Buddy to get out of the cab. The boy turns to run, but I hold up my wad of rupees, whatever’s left of the five hundred bucks I exchanged, and his eyes lock on it. Big black eyes focused on the money; the whites look a little yellow like he’s got jaundice, and there’s dark rings under them. He’s small, six or seven, and both his arms look like they’ve got extra joints, four bends instead of two. He grabs for the money, but I jerk it away.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Marc yells from inside the cab.

“Nothing,” I tell him and turn back to the boy. “You speak English?” I ask him.

He gets excited and babbles in Hindi and points to another boy with all four of his limbs twisted; I guess that's the older brother who can't work cause he's crippled.

I look at the cabbie, who tells me, "He asks what you want him to be doing for the money. He and his brother are needing it for food."

"Tell him," I say to the cabbie, "that I feel so bad for him and his brother, that I want to give them all this money." I shake the wad of rupees at the boy, who grabs for it again.

"Damn," Buddy says, like I've out-sainted him.

"Are you fucking crazy?" Marc yells and pulls himself out of the cab.

"No," I tell Marc. "I got it." I get in his face so he knows I'm serious. "It's my money. I'm cool."

He holds my stare until I get distracted by the boy who's going apeshit because of what the cabbie told him I said. Marc leans back against the cab, practically sitting on its hood. "Stupid puppy," he says, shaking his head.

The boy's so excited, he's hopping up and down. His arms wave around like he's a dying cockroach. "Tell him," I say to the cabbie, keeping the wad out of the kid's reach, "that I'm worried about him getting robbed or spending all the money on candy, so I want to give it to his father in person."

"What are you doing?" Marc asks. "We got to get tattoos before the whorehouse gets crowded."

"I'll catch up with you later," I say like we're just in New York or Chicago and it's no big deal to split up for a couple hours then find each other.

"Stupid-ass, sea puppy," Marc says.

When the cabbie's done translating, the boy goes ballistic and calls to his brother. He pulls on my pant leg and runs a few feet away and then comes back and does it again before running over to tell his brother what's up. "The boy says," the cabbie translates, "his home is very close. If you will follow him, he will take you to his father."

"You aren't doing that," Marc says. "You'll get killed."

"Don't care," I tell him and tuck my money back in my pocket.

"The slums are very dangerous, sir," the cabbie adds.

"I'll go with you," Buddy says. Buddy and I exchange nods and walk over to the older brother, who has got a fierce unibrow and a mouth too small for all the teeth that are crammed into it.

"Shit," Marc says behind us and slams the cab door, but before I can get the older, and more crippled, brother on my back, Marc is standing with us. "You're buying the rest the day," he says, and the look in his eye dares me to deny it. I nod that that's fair by me, and we set off after the little brother to meet Dear Old Dad.

The little brother wears cheap rubber flip-flops like they give you in jail but hauls ass in them. His legs make up for his arms cause he weaves through the crowd fast as a Tom cat on fire. We run after him, knocking people aside to get through the crowd. The boy on my back yells in my ear and points over my shoulder, directing me with his finger more than his twisted arm.

The boys lead us through the bazaar and down an alley to a street of taller buildings without open storefronts. The street's lined with regular businesses, like repair shops and pharmacies or offices, even apartments. It's not the tourist section, that's for sure. The crowd is thinner, and people are taking notice of us as we chase the little

brother. Not like they'd actually do anything about it but in a curious, what-the-fuck kind of way.

I yell at the little brother to slow down, but he doesn't understand, and I sure as hell don't know how to say it in Hindi, so he keeps going.

Marc laughs at me. "You asked for it," he says between huffs.

I look at Buddy, but he's fine and motions to take the older brother off my back.

"I got him," I say, and we follow down another alley and street toward Daddy.

I'm going to break this motherfucker in two. Buddy better not stop me. He can keep me from killing the bastard, but he better not try and stop me. The motherfucker's mine. Maybe I'll actually give him some money after I stomp him, but I'm stomping him first.

We break out of the city and into a dark alley lined with shacks, just as quick as if we'd crossed a police barrier. The little brother keeps moving, going deeper in, so we follow him through what seems like a neighborhood of nothing but back alleys.

As we go, the brothers call out and wave at people. I don't know if they're saying hello and that we're okay guys or telling everyone that we're rich and to get their machetes and guns and follow us to the sacrificial altar. I look back and see that Marc and Buddy are watching their backs too.

"Hey, man," Marc says, grabbing my arm and pulling me to a stop. "Just give the kids the money. It'll be all right."

Buddy nods with Marc. The kid on my back yells and waves his arms, upset that we stopped. Up the alley, his brother stops and turns back to us, waiting.

"No way," I tell them over the kid's yelling. "I'm giving it to him in person."

“Why?” Buddy asks. “What you going to do?”

“Nothing,” I say. “It’s okay. Go on,” I tell them and nod back the way we came in. “I’ll catch up with you later.”

Marc shakes his head. “Anything happens to you and Captain’ll have my ass.”

“I can take care of myself,” I say and walk toward the little brother. They don’t have to do shit for me. This is my deal, but when I look back, Marc and Buddy are following me, and I’m glad they’ve got my back.

We follow the brother deeper in where everything is gray and brown like all the bright colors left for somewhere they had a chance of being cheerful. Even the clothes the people wear are rubbed out. You can tell they used to be colorful, but it’s been covered up by stains and dirt. Everything’s covered with a layer of dirt so fine that it’s like ash. If it rained, it’d pour down mud.

The sounds of children yelling and dogs barking and people calling to each other echo up and down the alley. Somewhere close someone is tearing down an old shack or building a new one. I can’t tell; all I hear is hammering. And it smells exactly like the dishtank at the end of Saturday night at Smokey Bones BBQ, the stench of my sweaty ass mixed with hamburgers, ribs, fries, chicken and fish that have been soaked in beer, coffee and Coke and all smothered in a ketchup-mustard-mayonnaise-thousand island-ranch dressing sauce. A thin river of brown water flows past us through the center of the little street. It’s probably all piss and shit and stank-water. I do my best not to get any of it on my boots.

What a fucking dump. Take out the people and that’s what it’d be, Bombay’s city dump. Worse than any projects or squat I’ve ever been in.

As we go, the women pull their children into the shacks, but the men give me a look like they wonder how much money I've got and how many people it'd take to bring me down. Luckily, when the men see Marc and Buddy, they stop wondering, stop hoping, and go back to their tough-shit, miserable lives.

"You better be glad they still fear the white-man," Marc tells me.

"Shit," Buddy laughs. "They're afraid of me."

"No shit," Marc tells him. "You're probably the darkest thing they've ever seen."

They laugh, but just a little and keep checking their backs. I'd better not of fucked up.

After weaving our way through blocks and blocks of India's ghetto, the little brother stops at the edge of an open space between shacks and his crippled older brother squirms down off my back. It's a small lot lined with shacks whose doors all open onto it. There's a couple of trees, a bunch of chickens, and, in the center of the yard, a water pump.

The boys call out, and even though I don't understand a word of Hindi, I recognize *Dad* when I hear it. The hammock strung between the trees moves, and the dumb bastard sticks his head up out of it and looks like he's mad at his boys for coming back from work early. And above all the shit-smells of these slums, I smell the hash in his pipe. The lazy motherfucker gets to chill in a hammock all day getting stoned while his kids are out begging for money cause he was smart enough to break their arms and legs.

I bum-rush the bastard and spill him out of the hammock like the sack of shit that he is. As soon as he hits the ground, I kick him in the gut with my steel-toed boot. This

flips his scrawny ass over and lets me get a good stomp on his kidneys. He'll piss blood for a week.

"God damn, motherfucker. Don't you know shit about kids?" I yell as I kick him across the yard. "Motherfucking piece of shit!"

But when I get him cornered at the edge of the yard and he holds his hands up to protect himself, I see that his arms are broken and mis-set, too. I stop, and his boys run in and lie on their father to protect him.

He's just like them, the same as his boys. "Fuck," is all I can say. Marc and Buddy grab me and pull me back, and I manage to add, "I'm sorry."

But the man doesn't understand and starts yelling for help, something else I don't have to speak Hindi to understand. A woman comes to one of the doors, sees him huddled and beaten in the corner, his boys crying and hugging him, and she screams louder than he is yelling. This brings other women to the doors of their shacks. Men too.

"You better give him that money," Marc says and turns his back to me, but to cover our asses rather than disrespect me.

"Yeah," Buddy says. "That'd be good." He crosses himself and does the same move as Marc.

"Here," I say, holding the money over my shoulder for Buddy to give to him for me.

"You beat the niggah down," Buddy says, looking at me like I'm crazy. "You give it to him."

I look over at the family in the corner and try to figure out how to do it.

"Go."

I go, holding the money out in front of me, as far out as I can get it, and slowly walk up to them. “I’m sorry. Sorry. Really, I didn’t. It’s a mistake. Sorry,” I say, hoping he at least understands my meaning, if not my words.

His wife and boys hug him tighter as I get up on him, but he looks calm, like he understands, and reaches out for the money. I let him take it and back away, telling him I’m sorry one last time. He nods.

Marc, Buddy and I walk slowly out of the yard in a tight group. Once we clear it, the boys run up to the edge and shout curses at us. Their twisted arms flapping furiously as they give us what I’m sure is the Indian finger. I’m glad I don’t know what their curses mean and hope there’s no power in them.

“How do we get out of here?” Buddy asks as we head down the narrow street.

“Follow the water,” Marc says, like he gets lost in foreign slums all the time. But, since Buddy and I don’t have a better idea, we do it and make it back to a wide street where there’s the bright haze and plenty of taxis. It’s not the street we came from, but it’ll do.

Once we’re in a cab, Marc breaks out the hash. “God damn, that was fucking stupid,” he says as he puts a pinch of hash in the pipe.

“What were you thinking?” Buddy says and pushes my ribs with his fist.

“He deserved it,” I tell them.

“Shit, you can’t blame him,” Marc says. “He’s just doing what he knows.”

“It’s like when your dad beat you cause his dad beat him,” Buddy says.

“He should know better,” I say. “They can’t be nothing but beggars now.”

“This is India. That’s all they can ever be,” Marc says. “They might as well be the best beggars on the street.”

“Fuck that,” I say. “I’d do it again.”

“Next time, you can do it alone,” Marc says and turns back to the front to hit the pipe.

“Violence is never the answer,” Buddy tells me, lifting up his nose and rocking his head like he’s some kind of prophet.

“I wasn’t looking for an answer,” I say. When we get back to the ship, I’m going to throw all Buddy’s books overboard. “That motherfucker had it coming.”

“You better keep that shit below deck at the whorehouse,” Marc says, smoke coming out of his mouth with every word. I nod that I will, and he passes the pipe back to me.

I hit it and stare out the window wondering if I’m even going to bother with the whorehouse. The little girl’s in my head, and I don’t know if I’m going to do it knowing they’re all sent there by their families. Doing it on your own is one thing, but being raised for it is another.

I shake that shit off and try to focus on what tattoo I’m going to get, but I end up thinking about the broken father and his dumb ass kids. They loved the bastard. They fucking protected him. I don’t believe I gave them the money. I shouldn’t have given them shit. At least I beat his ass. I’m not going to feel bad about that. Someone needed to do it. I would do it again.

When we get to the Funky Monkey, it’s a legit shop. Clean and new with all the modern shit you find in the high end shops back home. Stereo’s playing ambient-techno.

Everything's white and chrome like a hospital, and the artists are wearing gloves. After Marc and Buddy explain what they want, I just decide to cover up my ghetto-cross with an anchor. Marc says that's too cliché and that if I get an anchor on my first port call, I'll quit the Merchant Marines before I can make another one. So I choose a mermaid, which he says is also cliché, but that clichés are allowed when they have tits.

While Marc's under the gun, Buddy and I go to the corner store for more beer. They've got a rack of postcards by the register, and that reminds me of what I wrote to my mom. Maybe Buddy's right. It is a little cold cause as bad as she was, she wasn't half as bad as the parents here. All she did was get busted trying to provide for us; she never broke our arms or put our asses up for rent.

I throw away the postcard I'd written in the Zombie Hut and pick out another one. One of Chowpatty Beach at sunset so she can put it on her wall and have a nice view of something.

VITA

Matthew John Peters was born in Cocoa Beach, Florida in 1973. He earned a BA in Creative Writing from the University of Central Florida in 1999. From 2001 to 2002, he worked for Covenant House, a youth shelter after which La Rue House was modeled. In 2002, he and his wife moved to New Orleans and he entered the Creative Writing Workshop at the University of New Orleans. In 2005, Hurricane Katrina destroyed his New Orleans' home, forcing him to return to Florida. He currently works at Covenant House in Orlando and hopes to teach in an alternative high school for at-risk youth in the fall of 2006.