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The Dunning Man

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The Dunning Man

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
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts
Creative Writing

By

Kevin Fortuna

B.A., Georgetown University, 1993

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Chuig Fiona, Aoife, Niamh agus Áine

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Abstract

The following pages contain six stories, one of them a novella of forty pages. The people within come from all walks of life and include a violent hip-hop star, a devoted single mother who makes a living dealing blackjack, an aging adolescent drunk living off his inheritance, and an empty nester housewife. The stories are set mostly on the east coast of the United States, in Washington, D.C., Atlantic City, the Hudson Valley and New York City. The common thread in these stories, if there is one, is the clash between society's expectations and the chaotic arc of individual destiny. *Age quod agis.*

Atlantic City; Ireland; 82nd Airborne; Sergeant; Shane Macgowan; Sullapalooza

Weddings and Burials

The Irish family had come over in full force for the latest Cahill wedding. When I got to the reception, Dee Dougherty and her sister-in-law Nan Cahill were huddled in front of one of the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the golf course, sipping from clear plastic cups of white wine and whispering to each other about my husband. They stood with their backs towards me. I'd just fetched my own chardonnay from the nearby bar, and was heading towards them to say hello when I overheard them talking.

“That’s it? That’s where he did it?” Nan said.

“Yes—over there. I don’t know the exact spot, but he dug the hole over there, by that bunch of trees. There behind the green of the eleventh hole.”

“Imagine such a thing. Jesus. Jesus in holy heaven.”

When Dee Dougherty said “Jesus” with her Cork accent, it sounded like “Jay-zuhss.” Like some kind of drunken banshee. She always was a loud one, and she liked her wine. I circled around them and saw them before they noticed me. Dee’s sister, Nan, had a warm, kind smile on her face—which was still quite beautiful despite her more than sixty years. Her straight gray hair pulled back in a tight bun, those Audrey Hepburn cheekbones, that tiny pinky of a nose, those teeth lined up perfectly like a row of tiny white bricks—it all still did the trick for her. She’d always been a great beauty. I couldn’t blame Eddie for picking Nan back in Cobh, when we were all just kids. As he put it, Nan got the face and I got the tits, and he was a face man. True enough. My tits got me into all kinds of trouble when I was young. Boys went crazy for them. Brian used to crack that my tits arrived home about ten minutes before the rest

of me. Oh Brian. Nobody ever laughed at that joke of yours. Nobody laughed at any of your jokes.

So there I was, frozen in place, thinking about my tits and Brian's dumb joke, trying to decide if I should veer off or go talk to the Cahill sisters as I'd planned. Fuck it, I thought. Coming here, I knew there'd be jokes and sly looks and clucking tongues, and I promised myself I wouldn't let any of it get to me. I took a swig from my glass, put my head down, and walked towards Dee and Nan, bracing myself for the jolt of embarrassment they'd feel when they saw me.

Dee saw me first and hugged me like she meant it, a little too fast and rough. "Oh, look who it is! Our little Rosie!"

Nan pulled me to her and air kissed me, but her smile seemed genuine and never left her face when she saw me. "Rosie, you never get older," she said. "You don't look a day older than forty."

"She *is* like a bottle of fine wine that gets better with age," Dee said, then threw back what was left in her cup. A splash of wine missed her mouth and streaked across her cheek, glistening with reflected light from the chandelier above us. She couldn't feel it through her thick makeup, but it was all I could see while she blathered on. "What is your secret, Rosie? Wheat germ? Fish oil? Or is it one of those exotic fruits everyone is raving about now? Do you know the ones? Pomegranate. Kiwi. Cactus, maybe? Some Yank on the plane over talked Eddie's ear off about something called a Nonni. From Tahiti or someplace like that. Swore it cures cancer, stops the flu, destroys fat and builds muscle. On and on. Talked about it like it's the bloody fountain of youth. He was a salesman for it, and tried to tell Eddie he should be one, too—*ha! Imagine! Eddie!* Anyway, we got stuck on the tarmac in Shannon for an hour with

some kind of mechanical problem and Eddie had his fill of the Yank and his Nonni, so at one point he says to your man, ‘Look. Why don’t you go and give some of that Nonni juice to the pilot, so he can pour it in the tank of this bloody plane and get us on our way?’”

We all had a laugh about Eddie taking the piss out of the Yank. I could just see him saying it, with the whisky in his hand, the crafty smile on his face. I considered telling Dee about the droplet of wine on her face but decided against it.

“Now where’s your Brian?” Dee asked. Her eyebrows scrunched with charmless curiosity.

“Oh, he’s around here somewhere.”

“Well, I need to say howdy. Haven’t seen his handsome face yet. How’s his work?”

“Good, good,” I said. Brian hadn’t had any kind of real job since being fired from this golf club, and Dee knew it full well. “I need a refill. What about you girls?”

Nan and Dee nodded, and I took their empty cups and headed towards the bar. As I walked away from them the air on my face felt like freedom, and I started to unclench. Wouldn’t it have been nice if someone slipped a little something in Dee’s cup of wine? Nothing too crazy or dangerous. Maybe one of those party pills the kids had been talking about—a roofie or whatever they call it. Just something to put her over the edge, make her wobbly enough to lose her legs a time or two before the end of the night. I’d do it, if I had one in my purse. I had some Paxil, but that would probably just make her more alert and happy. That wouldn’t do. Maybe if I crushed up six or seven pills and put them in her drink it would get her. But, no. The thought of it made me smile. But that was more the chardonnay talking than anything else. Chardonnay was my best friend right now, and I couldn’t wait to have another. I got in line at the bar behind a bunch of strange young faces. Friends of the bride and

groom, in a hurry to get drunk. My own children couldn't be here, or so they said. I knew better.

Now I'm no great defender of my husband, but I do think if another man had done it—if, say, Eddie Cahill had done it—it would have been looked at as a funny stunt, a feather in his cap. But not so with Brian. Brian got crucified for it, and they still hadn't let him come down off his cross. Everyone asked why he did it, but it has always been pretty plain to me. He felt trapped and figured he could get away with it. He'd been getting away with things all his life. The lifelong fireman's pension that followed the Irish football injury just before his twenty-sixth birthday, the girls he had before—and probably after—meeting me. Part of it was chance. Part of it was his good looks (when we were vacationing in Key West one time, he won a Hemingway lookalike contest and we drank for free the whole weekend). God knows it wasn't his personality, which had kept him unemployed and isolated for years. He couldn't get along with his own children, even now that they were grown. Brian got the face all right, but Eddie got the balls and heart and sense of humor.

The lease terms on the BMW weren't fair, Brian said after he got caught. Who drives a car only five thousand miles a year? How did they let them offer such terms? There should be some kind of law against it. We didn't have the money they wanted for it, more than the car was worth. I can still remember the day he came home and told me it'd been stolen. Bloody stolen, he said. Right off the street in Poughkeepsie, where he'd gone to pick up supplies for a big Christmas party IBM was holding at the club. I remember the weather that day, how the snow had just melted leaving patches of black ice on the roads. I remember thinking about how my old Buick wasn't safe to drive on those slick roads. Brian put on quite a show of indignation for me. Rehearsing for the real thing, I guess. At the time, I knew nothing about the

lease terms, or what had really happened to the car. I had no reason to doubt his story and just started worrying immediately about how we'd pick up the kids from school and basketball, and how long it might take to replace the car.

Disgusted by the memory, and the shame and ruin that followed it, I decided to take a break before rejoining Nan and Dee. I got one wine refill instead of the three and headed to the far side of the banquet room, towards a hidden patio I knew about from the old days.

It took me back, being there. Back then, the Millbrook Club felt like the world we'd never be part of, the world of the old people I nursed. And this enormous banquet room seemed like a Cinderella dream. With its twenty-foot ceilings, dark wood floors, massive chandeliers, white table cloths and views of the rolling hills of the golf course—the course that Brian would manage. I remembered when Brian first got the job more than a decade ago. One of the Cahill cousins from our county owned a big interest in the club, and he knew Brian had been an okay golfer back in Ireland. He gave him a chance, even though he resented him from their time playing football together. Probably on Eddie's say-so, born of some misguided feelings of guilt or regret about me, he made Brian the assistant general manager.

I had such hope for the future then, for a brief time. I never deluded myself to think that Brian would suddenly become the dream husband—after all, we'd been living pretty separate lives for years. But I did think he might've found a job he could keep for a while, and that maybe I wouldn't have to keep doing the private duty nursing, cleaning up the shit and piss of rich old people, to put the kids through college. A better life seemed possible. I imagined first communions and confirmations and graduations and the girls getting married here in this banquet room. Thinking about it now was pure silliness, though. It was too good to be true and the unreality of it made me wonder from the start when Brian would find a way to fuck it all

up. But I'd let myself hope against reason that it could last. And I guess I didn't expect him to blow up in such spectacular fashion.

I walked out a side door of the ballroom. I needed to be alone for a few minutes more. I needed to finish this cup of wine and clear my head before going back to the reception. I went past the ladies' room, took a right and found the small patio off the kitchen. Good. None of the smokers had found it yet. The sun had set. The patio was unlit and stood some distance from the ballroom, but I could see the wedding party through the ballroom's big windows. I could see the wedding people but they couldn't see me. The newlyweds had been summoned for their first dance and they were moving around, to and fro, eyes locked on each other, self-conscious smiles on their faces. They looked positively miserable. Poor things. If they thought this was bad, wait till they saw what they'd let themselves in for. I thought of the other couples I'd seen dance on that same floor over the years, at the wedding receptions held at the club when Brian still worked here, and at the other family weddings of the Cahill kids and two of the Moran family kids. Brian stopped coming to family events after he lost his job here, but I kept coming, maybe out of spite. Right here on this very patio, at Joanie Moran's wedding, only a little more than a year after his brother fired Brian, Eddie Cahill invited me out here for a smoke and professed his love, drunk as a priest. I could still remember his red eyes and his unsteady voice. The sadness of it. The exhilaration of being wanted like that again. The way he grabbed me and pressed up against me, like he was doing his best imitation of a movie star. The whiskey on his breath. The touch of his coarse, stubby carpenter's fingers, like big nail files scraping across my face and neck when he kissed me.

"Hello, Ms. Casey," a man said behind me.

Startled, I turned around and saw old Rodney Meeks, the club's groundskeeper, sitting in a dark corner of the patio, smoking one of his trademark menthol cigarettes.

"My god. Rodney? Rodney Meeks? Is that you?"

"Yes, ma'am. In the flesh."

"Well, you're a sight for sore eyes," I said, still shaking from the fright he gave me.

"Nice to see you, too, Ms. Casey."

Funny how Rodney always addressed me as "Ms" instead of "Mrs." I used to wonder if it was a subtle dig against Brian. All these years later and Rodney still worked here. Amazing. I always loved Rodney Meeks. He had a kind of stoic wisdom. He always seemed glad to see me.

Brian and he didn't get along too well, from what I remembered. I think it had something to do with the fact that Rodney once beat him at golf. Apparently Rodney had made good use of his free golf privileges and had become a scratch golfer.

"Nice day for a party," he said.

"It is, indeed."

"So it's the old man Cahill's granddaughter getting married?"

"Yes."

"She sure is pretty."

"Yes. She got the Cahill looks."

Suddenly I wondered what Rodney knew. I wondered if he knew the whole story about Brian. I wondered, irrationally, if he knew about me and Eddie, if he could see the memory of our kiss that had just left my head.

“How have you been, Rodney?”

“I can’t complain. An’ nobody would care if I did. My health is okay. Doctor said I should quit the cigarettes, but I can’t see how it makes much difference now. I only got so much time left anyhow. Only so many more weddings and burials before my own time come. Figure I might as well enjoy what’s left.”

“How’s your family, Rodney? How’s your wife?”

“Betsy’s been gone now about five years, Ms. Casey. But my boys are good. Both in college now.”

“Oh, Rodney. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry about Betsy.”

He nodded and looked down and we were both quiet for a few seconds. Then he raised something to his lips—a silver flask. He took a long sip from it. He saw me following it with my eyes, which locked with his for a moment, and then he lowered the flask from his lips and passed it to me in one smooth motion. I drank from it and the cheap whisky filled my sinuses and warmed the back of my neck. I passed it back to Rodney and thanked him and we watched the people dance on the other side of the glass as if they wouldn’t see tomorrow.

“Let me ask you something, Rodney. Now that all this time has gone by. What happened with Brian and that Rogers girl? Why did she tell the Cahills what he did with the car?”

“Been a long time. Let me see what I remember. Armando and Brian planned the thing with the car. I suppose you know all about that. What you might not know is that I drove the backhoe...” He smiled and shook his head. He took a drag from his smoke and leaned back in his seat. I got the sense that he felt he might’ve said too much.

“Rodney, you don’t need to worry,” I said. “This is ancient history. All is forgiven. In fact, Brian’s here tonight.”

Rodney’s eyes widened. “He is? Well, I’ll be. Guess time heals, like they say. Anyhow, yeah. So I drove the backhoe because I was the only one that knew how to get it up there behind them trees and also the only one who knew how to dig cold earth and, uh...well... Ha. And because Brian paid me two hundred bucks to do it, which was a lot of money for me then. Yep, sure was. I’m not sorry. I needed the cash. But I didn’t bargain for the job we had in front of us. Had I known, I wouldn’t’ve done it for *five* hundred dollars. We waited and waited for a warm day, so the backhoe would be able to get into the ground. Finally I told Brian he had to go rent a breaker to get through the cold part. Then we had our one warm day and we took it. We met at the club in the middle of the night and buried that thing good and put all the grass back the way it was. And everything was fine for a few weeks until the Rogers girl did what she did. Armando told her what happened, because he wanted to get in her pants. Hell, Ms. Casey, *I* wanted to get in her pants, too.” I laughed at that, which encouraged Rodney. The whiskey had gone to my head. “Every damn man in this club did. She was *that* pretty. Not nice, you understand, but real good looking and saucy. Anyhow, the Rogers girl told on Brian because she said she would sue. She claimed Brian was harassing her...” Rodney paused to see how I’d react. I didn’t say anything, and he kept going: “...or some nonsense like that. I never liked her, to tell the truth. Never trusted her. But I can’t really say what happened for real and what was made up, Ms. Casey. Sure caused a lot of trouble around here till old man Cahill paid her off. But that’s life. That’s just life.”

“Yes, that’s just life,” I said. Then I took the last sip of my wine. “Thanks, Rodney. It was really good seeing you. Take care of yourself.”

“Ms. Casey, there’s one more thing. Do me a favor. Tell Brian ‘thank you’ for me, would you?”

“For what?”

“Well, the way I see it, I owe him a lot. I’m still here at the Millbrook because of him. He took the blame for the whole thing. Covered for Armando and me both, and I’ve never gotten the chance to properly thank him. He told old man Cahill that he made us help him by threatening to fire us. He really did right by us.”

“Okay, Rodney. I’ll tell him.”

When I went back in, people were fanning out to find their assigned tables. To my surprise, Brian and I were seated Table Five, the same table as Eddie and Nan Cahill. Who assigned the seating? Oh Lord. I made my way over slowly, scanning the crowd for Brian.

“There she is!” said Eddie, standing up to greet me when I reached our table. “How have you been, Mrs. Casey?” He gave me a tight, lingering hug. He held me too long and I let him do it. My head rested on his shoulder for a second and my eyes found Brian walking towards our table, watching us embrace. I wondered what he was thinking—and what Nan was thinking. Brian stopped where he was, about twenty feet away. He stared at me intensely, looking angry, defeated and somehow satisfied all at once. I felt Eddie wrapped around me still. He was on his way to being drunk. I could smell the whiskey on his breath, and I could hear the raspy sound of him breathing. I remembered the sweet poison taste of his mouth when we kissed, the whiskey and tobacco. I let go, pulled away from Eddie, and sat down. I only

turned my head for a second, just long enough to find my seat beneath me. But when I looked back, Brian was gone. I scanned the room but didn't see him. I wondered if he'd left.

For a few minutes, it was just her and the Cahills at the table. To keep things light, I asked Eddie about the Nonni juice and he told us the whole story of getting buttonholed by the American salesman on the plane from Shannon. The story was much funnier coming from Eddie. He had Nan and me laughing.

A few minutes later, the table had filled up. A few minutes after that, Brian finally came and sat down with us. Everyone was polite, but I could tell Brian wanted to disappear.

Eddie didn't make eye contact with him until the dessert came. Then he raised his knife and clinked it against his wine glass to silence the table. "I'd like to raise a glass to the lovely bride and groom, my niece and new nephew-in-law. May they live long lives together and make lots of babies. Hear, hear!"

Everyone raised their glasses and toasted the bride and groom. Then they started talking among themselves again, thinking Eddie had finished his toast. But he hadn't. He tapped his wine glass again, and the table fell silent a second time. "I'd also like to make a toast to someone who is making a homecoming of sorts. Mr. Brian Casey, who used to work for this fine club. He stayed away for a while, but he's finally come to bury the hatchback—err, hatchet. To bury the hatchet, that is."

Someone laughed. I don't know who. The hair on the back of my neck stood up. My face flushed. I looked at Brian, who was looking down at his untouched dessert plate. He looked stricken and suddenly old, and my heart went out to him in that moment. I reached out and took his hand in mind. Without thinking, I stood up and led him onto the dance floor.

For a while, we were the only ones dancing. We danced slowly and did not speak. By the second song, the dance floor had filled up around us. We danced and danced for what seemed like hours. I can remember Eddie and Nan dancing right next to us, and I can remember Nan looking at me with an apology in her eyes. All beauty and grace. I can remember slow dancing with Brian to “Unchained Melody.” I can remember trying to imagine what went through Brian’s head the night he buried the car. I could picture him there in the dark, struggling with the machine and the cold ground, shivering with his nose running like it always did at night in the winter. I could see him cursing and digging and having words with the men who helped him, talking down to them, and them hating him for keeping them there. It must’ve taken them hours to do it all. What drove him? Did he do it to just get one over on the car company? Or did he do it for me? The possibility that he had some kind of a noble purpose, however twisted, had never occurred to me until this moment. Maybe he needed to assert himself. Everyone had gone out and made their way in the world, but, for reasons he would never understand, Brian got left behind, stunted, working for the brother of a man who had scorned his wife back in Ireland.

At one point, they started playing the old songs, and the women started step dancing. A few songs into it they played an old rebel ballad called “Kitty” about a man who runs away and abandons his lover to escape prison. Before the first verse was sung, Eddie came over and poked Brian on his shoulder, hard. It was more of a shove than a poke, and I could feel the weight of it. “I’ll have this next dance with your beautiful bride,” he said. It wasn’t a request.

I could feel Brian’s heartbeat quicken with rage, and it scared me. He let go of me and tried to move away. But I held onto him and leaned forward and put my mouth up to his ear

and whispered, “Wait. Please wait.” Then I turned to Eddie, met his eyes, and said, “No, Eddie. I don’t think so. Not now.”

Brian and I finished that dance together. Then, before the next song started, we left for home without saying goodbye to anyone.

Flogging Maggie

There she is in her glory, sitting in my torn-up La-Z-Boy, wearing nothing but the bra I lent her. Her legs are drawn up sideways so her knees sit just under her chin. She's sipping a strawberry Nesquik—*my* strawberry Nesquik. She always wipes me out of my Nesquik. Says it reminds her of being a little girl and having no stress. Says the fact that I keep it in stock is one of the things that made her fall for me. Her red-brown hair hangs over the deep, scabbed-up gash on her cheek, almost covering it like a picture over a long crack in a wall. I'm looking at her through slits in my eyes. I'm in a bad way, not ready to talk. She takes a gulp and stares at me, letting the pink mustache stay on her upper lip. Is that supposed to make me switch teams?

I know what's coming, the unstoppable force. Those wheels of hers spinning, she's wondering if I'm awake, wondering when the action will begin. She expects me to go to Atlantic City with her. She expects that, once there, I'll get carried away by the occasion, the spectacle of the night and her reunion with Damien and her performance in front of the crowd. And we'll kiss in front of everyone. No tongue but our mouths open, we'll linger. We'll leave them wondering. We won't care. Then we'll disappear into an elevator to a bed we'll share. We'll spend the night together. We'll discover each other.

Maybe she's right. I don't know. I don't know much of anything with this hangover. My mouth tastes like an ashtray smells. Nausea erupts in my gut and pushes up my throat. Feels like someone pounded a skewer through my temple. I see now that Maggie is smoking a fat joint and has filled up my little apartment with its stink. I look at the neon numbers 9:43 on the clock radio, and I want to pick it up and beam it at Maggie's head.

She smiles at me. “Hello, Love. How’s the head?” Her London-Irish accent peeks out. Her crooked smile tells me she’s going to mess with me, her favorite hobby. You tease the ones you love, and Maggie says she loves me. But she really just wants to screw me, or do whatever it is that girls do to each other. I’ve told her no but I haven’t said no, *never*. She’s fun and sexy and mysterious and sings like her voice was meant to fill stadiums, and I’m glad to have her off the road and back in my company. And I can’t seem to find a guy who makes me feel half as good as she does. All that makes me wonder if I might let her do it. For a millisecond I wonder if she tried anything on me last night, but no. She wouldn’t.

“Hey, Jen. Question for you—where’d you park?” she says. I’m hit with panic. I’ve got no clue where my car is.

Maggie throws her legs down and apart, as if to make room for the cackling that starts to come out of her. I can see clearly between her legs now. Can’t keep from looking. No thong. No hair. Bare lips pursed open between her legs like a nether mouth that’s laughing at me, too.

“You need some Miracle Grow for your frontal lobe,” she says.

“Huh?”

“You see, Miss. I’m a year older than you. My frontal lobe is bigger, more developed than yours. I’m in touch with death. That’s why I did my best to take your keys away last night. But you’re a strong little slut when you’re drunk.” She kicks herself off my chair and begins to dress. “Get up,” she says. “We’re going to Atlantic City. Just got a call from Damien. He got us a comp room at the Borgata. It’s going to be legendary.”

On the way out, the big Christmas tree in the lobby of my building makes me feel dirty, with its white taffeta angel crowned by the paperclip halo made by someone’s child.

We go out into the cold December air. Maggie tells me not to worry. She walks with purpose, Nesquik in one hand, burning spliff in the other. I'm not sure I can be in a car with her for the next four hours. Where is the car? Maggie seems unbothered. "I don't know if Atlantic City is such a good idea for me," I say. "I might need some detox after we find the car." My thoughts keep breaking up like lines on an old Etch A Sketch. I'm trying to calm myself down. I'm lying. I'm pretending. I know we're going, assuming I didn't kill someone last night or total my car.

"You're pissing on my buzz," she says. "We'll find it. And then it will take us both to Atlantic City."

She's right. We round the corner of W Street and Maggie turns right into the driveway of a big apartment building. I know the building. Sophomore year, all alone, no boyfriend to protect me and Maggie dropped out of school to go out on tour with Damien. A serial rapist struck twice by crawling through windows on the first floor of this building. I hate this fucking building, a constant reminder that I lived alone and unprotected. I had nightmares of him coming through my window and tearing off my clothes at knife point. Told my dad about it and he told me to get a dog. A *dog!* Big prison-looking building, Vatican II style. Parking gate smashed clean off its hinges and my little Ford jammed in between two other cars, diagonally.

I'm calming down. Maggie's plan seems inevitable now. Of course we're going. We've got to go, especially with Damien playing the Borgata and inviting Maggie to share the stage. Especially after the night we'd just had. After I saw Dirk out with another girl I got fall-down, punch-throwing drunk. Became a mission. Over a lacrosse asshole who told me the first night we met that he thought Africa was a great country. I asked him if he meant "South Africa" and he said, no—Africa, the *country* where the African Americans come from. He was reading

James Baldwin at the time for one of his classes, and he fell in love with all the black anger, anti-establishment stuff. I said my favorite country was Europe, but South America was a close second. He agreed that Europe was nice, but said he thought South America had more than one country in it. Then it's more like a planet, I said.

Maggie says she'll drive. I'm asleep before we hit the highway.

Next thing I know, we're stopped someplace and Maggie is staring at me, stroking my hair like a mother waking up her child. For a few seconds I stare back at her, frozen by the hunger in her green eyes and the way her head is tilted to one side, mirroring mine. She's looking for something. It's too intense. I turn away.

"Come on, Babe. Gotta eat," she says. Then she pulls her hand away and she's gone. I stumble out of the car behind her. The sun feels like a flashlight in my eyes, and the cold air whips against my face. I realize where we are: the Chesapeake House, the last rest stop before the bridge, less than two hours from Atlantic City. On the way inside I think about Maggie driving all this way and letting me sleep it off. She's ten times tougher than any guy I've known, hard often to the point of nasty. But she's also got this beauty that comes out when you least expect it, like a fresh rose petal on a city sidewalk. Like her singing voice. The voice she's convinced will launch her into some kind of proper music career. The voice that got her a personal invitation from Shane MacGowan last Christmas to come sing with him in Dublin. I thank her for letting me sleep but she waves me away. "You thank me, but I thank *god*," she says. "I was just sick of your bullshit. What should we eat?"

We agree on Burger King. A Salvation Army bell ringer greets us at the main entrance, along with a swirl of overweight tourists, truck drivers, and retirees. At the edge of the food

court, a black teenager in a hoodie is putting on a show for his friends. Maggie slows down and points him out to me. He's attracted a small crowd. Can't be good. The teen's eyes dart everywhere. His feet never stop, and his hands shake to a song in his head. He's hopped up on something potent. We get closer, and I see that he's harassing a security guard sitting in the next booth. Wants the guy to look at the words on his sweatshirt, the big white letters on black cloth: "Fuck the Police." The rent-a-cop keeps his head down, keeps chewing his food. I see the redness in his ears, the sweat dripping down the side of his face, the way he refuses to move his head in anything but a vertical motion. He looks more than bothered. He looks scared. The teenager's three friends are laughing and pounding the table.

"Classy crowd we got here," Maggie says, loud enough for them to hear. But the teens either don't hear or they ignore her. "We're definitely eating here instead of the car. Need to soak up this ambiance."

Whoppers and fries and onion rings and Pepsi to settle our stomachs, tastes like a dream. For a while we eat in silence. Halfway through my Whopper, I look up and catch Maggie staring at me again. I look away and ask her to break down the events of the previous night for me.

"What's the last thing you remember?" she says.

"Sitting at the bar, ordering a double martini."

"So you don't remember slapping your man's friend in the face and calling her a whore and a cunt?" Maggie's accent, partly an inheritance from her Irish parents, and partly a result of living the first ten years of her life in London, has been worn away by twelve years of living in the States below the Mason-Dixon line, but it creeps out sometimes when she's drunk, and

she sometimes uses the old words and phrases like “feck” and “shite” and “your one” and “your man.” In this case, “your man” refers to Dirk, my ex.

“Well,” she says. “The manager there comes over and asks us to leave and lays hands on you. I grab his balls and squeeze them until he almost passes out. I tell that little fat fucker that we just got a round of drinks and we intend to finish it. I tell him we’ll be no trouble if he can just keep the Whore Cunt away from us.”

“You really did that?” I stuff a fistful of fries in my mouth. “And then what happened?” “Well, I look around that bar and see that the whole place is staring at us. So I lift up my shirt and give them a good look at my fun bags. You should have seen the look on your man’s face when I did *that*.”

Now I’m pretty sure Maggie is messing with me. But not positive. I grab more fries. She says nothing and eats her food. She can tell I’m anxious, and we go on eating in silence. “Ah, no—I’m just fucking with your head, Babe. None of it happened. You saw your man there with the new girl, and you did the right thing. Left your drink there on the bar and headed for the door. Very dignified and ladylike. We didn’t pay the tab but you left your card so it’s no problem. You did drive home, though, which is worse than any of that other stuff.”

Before I can respond, some kind of janitor kid comes over to show us his new pair of sneakers. Something isn’t right. He’s dragging one foot behind him and has some kind of braces on his legs. “Ch-ch-check out m-m-my new shoes,” he says. His head bobs up and down when he talks, as if he’s trying to shake out the words. A foam-mesh Burger King hat sits way too high on his head, and a huge ketchup stain on his shirt looks like a gunshot wound. But his sneakers *are* gorgeous. Maggie makes a big fuss over them, how nice and white and handsome

they are. She nudges me, and I ooh and ahh, too. A grin opens up the kid's face, and he giggles and blushes and thanks us. He says goodbye to us at least four times.

Then he turns with his broom and dustpan and starts walking towards the group of teens who want to Fuck the Police. They're getting ready to leave, but I see that the poor kid will reach them before they're gone. Maggie sees it, too. She doesn't hesitate. She jumps up, runs over and cuts him off. She leads him by the hand back to our booth. One of the teens looks over and points and says something. Maggie pretends not to notice. She asks the kid how long he's had his new shoes and how he keeps them so clean and who got them for him. When he says his mother got them for his birthday, Maggie says, "She must really love you." Then she grabs this kid and gives him a hug. She holds him for what seems like a full minute, looking over his shoulder at the teens the entire time.

All clear now. The teens are leaving.

When Maggie pulls away from the embrace, I see that the kid's eyes are wet. He's not used to this kind of contact. I think about how that poor kid must have shown those goddamned sneakers to a hundred travelers and how nobody gave him the kind of reaction Maggie just did. I think about how it's almost Christmas and how Maggie will spend it: Alone. Makes me want to bawl.

Instead I stand up and hug the kid. We pick up our trash and leave the place. Just as we reach my car, I touch Maggie on her shoulder and say, "Hey. That was really nice. What you did back there."

She turns towards me. She looks at me but also through me, her eyes dead. "Whatever," she says, and tosses me the keys. "Your turn to drive."

Out on the highway, I ask her to stay awake and talk to me for a while to fend off my road trance. “Carcolepsy,” as Maggie calls it. I ask her about the plan for the night. Will she definitely sing with the band? She says she doesn’t know, probably not, that they’ve gotten legit and have another girl to do the Christmas song now, since she and Damien broke up. Bullshit. I know plenty of girls can sing the song with him, but nobody sings it like Maggie. I’ve never seen him use another girl when she’s in the audience. Damien is London-Irish like Maggie, but he lived over there until he turned eighteen and never lost his accent. He used to be hardcore in love with Maggie. For a while before Maggie moved in with her girlfriend, she and Damien gigged together.

Maggie owned him. She’s the one who convinced him to rename the band Damien Henry and The Charm. I was there that night and will never forget that conversation. It went like this: Maggie told Damien she refused to sing with him anymore unless he changed the name of his band, which was then called The Rogues. He hated being thought of as a Pogues cover band, but that’s exactly how people thought of them because of the name and because they did start out doing a lot of MacGowan songs. When he argued with her that all the good names were taken, and he had lived on “Rogues Lane” in London, giving him a real personal connection to the name, she said it didn’t matter. Beside the point. She said that would be like if she started a band and called it Flogging Maggie and ignored that there’s another famous band called Flogging Molly. Later that night, after we’d been drinking, Maggie referred to that conversation and declared her feelings for me—sort of. She leaned over and whispered this to me: “Hey, you. If I started a band called Flogging Maggie, you’d need to take up an instrument and be in it with me, because you have me totally whipped, Babe. Ha ha. Flogging Maggie, featuring Jen Tierney on the whip.” That’s what passed for romance with Maggie.

Half an hour from Atlantic City, Maggie has fallen asleep and I'm driving, fighting to stay awake. The painted stripes on the asphalt keep putting me under their spell. My head keeps bobbing down into micro-naps on the straight stretches. At one point, the rumble strip catches my left tire and jars me back awake and I swerve back into my lane. I open my window all the way so the cold air can help keep me awake. Maggie doesn't move.

I let her sleep. I see the cut up side of her face, now fully exposed. Her head is tilted back against the seatbelt harness so that her hair falls back behind her ear. The gash is long and deep across her cheekbone, scabbed up with raised pink edges and a thin black line of dried blood down the center. It curves around towards her ear as if someone was trying to cut her face in half and take her ear off.

I remember the night it happened. We'd been drinking at a club downtown, one of those places with ten different rooms that turns into a rave late at night. Maggie's then-girlfriend was with us, and they were fighting as usual. I'd dragged Dirk along, so I had my own problems. I watched the melee develop out of one eye and kept the other one on Dirk. At one point, after a lot of cajoling by the club's manager who'd seen her at a Charm show in New York, Maggie agreed to sing "Nothing Compares 2 U." The DJ turned the dance music off and introduced her. Nobody knew her. The crowd started making noise entertaining itself and ignoring Maggie. But then the first sung words came out of her mouth: "It's been seven hours and fifteen days... Since you took your love away..." The place went silent as an empty church and stayed that way. Maggie had them. She nailed every high note, bended the low ones and gave the song new life. Every guy in the place fell in love with her by the end. When she

finished, she disappeared into a crowd of her newest fans. At one point, when her girlfriend wasn't looking, she snuck down into the basement of the club with some guy.

She wasn't gone more than half an hour, and she came back alone. But her girlfriend guessed instantly what had happened. She walked right up to Maggie, ripped open her jacket, stuck her head in and smelled her. Then she took the beer bottle in her right hand and shattered it on Maggie's cheekbone. Maggie began to laugh, and she kept right on laughing, blood running down her face and streaking down her neck and her white shirt. Driving home that night, she told me what happened with the guy. They went outside and blew a couple of lines off the dashboard of his pickup truck. Then she let him pull up her skirt and screw her in his backseat. No big deal, she said. A little fun, that's all.

Breakup complete. She moved out of the girl's house the next day and she'd been kind of homeless ever since. She refused to go to the hospital and never got the stitches she probably needed. The scar would be a reminder, she said. I didn't know what she meant, and she wouldn't explain. Maggie would never explain much. For someone so wild, her past didn't add up. She blamed it all on Maggie May, her namesake, from her parents' favorite song. Her main role model, she said.

An hour later we're inside the Borgata. The room is a dream: a wet bar, enormous floor-to-ceiling windows with views of the casino strip and the ocean behind it, a couch and sitting area, and an enormous king-sized bed.

Maggie sheds her clothes and starts jumping on the bed wearing only her bra and underpants. I head for the bottle of Jameson Damien has left for us. I pour two big glasses and sip out of mine while watching Maggie jump higher and higher on that bed, her breasts

bouncing as she goes. She looks good. Can't keep her down. Not Maggie Dunne. I stand, mesmerized, watching her hair flying, her arm waving ecstatically, the muscles in her thigh tightening up when she lands on the mattress. I think of her back at the rest stop, protecting the kid with the sneakers. I feel a rush of love for her and all of her gorgeous flaws. She sees me watching her but pretends not to notice.

Five minutes later there's a knock at the door, but it opens before I can reach it. The compact form of Damien Henry comes rushing through like a battering ram, and Maggie jumps off the bed, lands in his outstretched arms, and wraps herself around him, her legs corkscrewing his waist. He goes with her momentum and spins her around and around and they hug and kiss, open-mouthed. I'm invisible, but at first I don't mind. I enjoy the show, the flash of lightning between these old lovers. I'm happy for Maggie, and I wonder for a second if that's what love is, or should be. Being happy for someone who has grabbed some bliss on their own terms, even if it's fleeting.

Finally they untangle from each other, and Damien notices me. "And how is this one? Ah, a sight for my eyes. The beautiful Jennifer Tierney. My long, lost love." He gives me a big, lingering hug. I've always liked him, and Maggie knows it. I told her more than once she shouldn't have let him go. He's at least fifteen years older than me and always treated me like a princess when we went up to see him play in New York. He looks weathered, but still has the dark eyes and the lean, hard-angled face. And the accent. A thought hits me: Is Maggie setting up a threesome with Damien? Huh. Maybe she figures that's the way.

I offer to pour him a drink of Jameson.

"Well. Maybe just a small one. I need to keep my wits about me for the show. Can't be forgetting lyrics, you know. I do have party favors if you's're interested," he says, reaching

into the inside pocket of his frayed black suit coat. Two minutes later, he and Maggie are doing lines off the black marble top of the bar, whispering to each other. I don't want the cocaine on top of what I've already had these past 24 hours. So I give them space and move over by the windows, where I stand smoking the rest of Maggie's joint and looking at the bright lights of the Atlantic City skyline spread out before me with the ocean behind it.

"Jen, Babe, come over here. Damien has something he wants to tell us."

I walk over.

"Right, now that we're properly fixed up, I want you girls to be among the first to know. Sony has sent one of their top scouts to tonight's show. They're close to signing us."

Maggie gives him a big hug and congratulations.

"Wait. There's something else. One of these guys used to come see us play Paddy Reilly's in New York, and he wants to see the Late Great Maggie Dunne work her magic. Been a long time in the desert, Love. What do you say?"

Maggie just stands there a few seconds, her mouth open, her arms limp at her side.

"Jesus, Damien, what can I say? Why didn't you tell me? Look at me. I'm a disaster. We were out until four last night, and we drove all day. Will you look at my face? Jesus."

"Eh. Nonsense. Your face is fine. Adds to your stage presence. Don't worry. I was afraid you wouldn't come if you knew in advance. Plus, I didn't know about the bit with you until a few hours ago. It's very last minute."

She shakes her head. "Well, fuck it. I'm not going to say no."

"Grand. That's grand. You'll kill 'em, like you always do, Maggie. I know it. I've got to go get the boys and get ready. 10 pm sharp. Don't be late."

The door shuts behind Damien, and I turn my back on Maggie and walk back over to the bottle of Jameson and fill my glass to the top. I want it to knock me out for good. I stand and drink and stare out at the lights and the blackness of the ocean. Fuck this, I think. That ocean is mine, along with the stuff on the other side. I want to do something great. I want to find my own Damien, or ten of them.

Maggie comes up behind me. I feel the heat of her skin, the feather brush of her breath on my neck. She stands in articulate silence, letting me absorb her. I know what's coming, the unstoppable force. Her hands trace across my shoulders, my arms. Her fingers lace around mine. She turns me, pulls me against her, threads her fingers through the thicket of my hair and brings me to her lips. As we kiss for the first time, I wonder what the night will bring and what it will take away.

Sullapalooza and The Hand of Fate

This day is made for mayhem. You know it like you know the taste of your third whiskey in the back of your throat means you shouldn't be at the wheel of your beat-to-shit truck. And that your hand won't stop shaking until you get your fourth in you, calming and warming you with its vapor like a hot wash cloth on the back of your neck.

You drive down the winding two-lane road of Hyde Park, past all the mink and manure, the rich and poor, the giant houses built with Wall Street and Mayflower money and the trailer park nobody can get rid of. Past the opening of the long tree tunnel that led you to the group home where that black retard shared his joint with you last summer after you wrecked your new truck into a giant oak tree and wandered in the woods for hours. You thought you'd die there, abandoned, until that black boy found you and put his hand on your shoulder and asked you why you were crying. That *hand. Resting. Lightly.* Like he knew all about you. Like some kind of dope-smoking angel of mercy.

Carnage. Trouble. You roll down your window and you can smell it in the cold, wet, tree-muddy air.

You start down your little brother's driveway and the first thing you see is a flipped-over car in his front yard, one of its wheels spinning and flames shooting up from behind it. It takes you a few seconds to believe your eyes, but that *is for goddamn sure what it is.* Big ole Cadillac. Black and long, banged-up to hell, one of its huge doors open to show its cream-colored seats, and the fire rising behind it. Could be that '78 Sully kept out back, up on blocks. You wonder how it got here. How he made it happen.

Truck and tractor parts are scattered all over the yard. The tail pipe, the radiator and what looks like an engine block from an 18-wheeler. And your brother's house, the blue rain tarps on the roof, three corners anchored by bricks, with the fourth blown up loose, flapping wildly in the wind. The three windows boarded up with mismatched planks of wood.

You drive faster, and what you see in front of you and the crunch of gravel under your tires makes your blood pump faster, make you feel that cringe in your guts. You want to make some kind of an entrance but you know that's the whiskey talking. Nossir. No kind of time for an entrance. Be smart. Be normal.

You go through the front door almost unnoticed, and it depresses you until someone sticks a big glass of Jim Beam in your hand and you realize that someone is Sully. "Hey, Big Brother," he says, in that mocking way of his.

"Hey, Fuckstick," you say back, swallowing and breathing deep.

"You're drunk, already. Good for you," Sully says. *Smug little piece of shit.* You look at him and remember tying his Cabbage Patch Kid to the ceiling fan when you were young, when the age difference meant something. You remember Sully howling in pity for the tortured doll and you, laughing.

"What's with the Cadillac?" you say.

"Nice, right? Wait till you see the rest of it. Come with me."

You follow your little brother through the front hall and into the library. Jerry Springer plays on his huge flat-screen TV, on mute, closed caption streaming across the bottom of the picture. A massive black woman holding a chair over her head is chasing a stick-thin white woman around the stage, calling her a whore and a home wrecker. The black woman charges like a gladiator finishing a kill. Her chest heaves. You read her words and think about how

Jerry could get those chairs nailed to the floor to prevent this if he wanted. You stare at them all, at the screen, unable to turn away. The white woman kneels. The black woman picks up the chair again and raises it over her head like an axe above a log. Then two beefy guys restrain her and the fun ends. Sully is waiting, watching you watch. “Great, huh?” he says. You nod. Sully the Choreographer.

The next room is full of people, a couple of dozen of them, dressed up for the occasion. Overalls and wife beaters and John Deere hats and all the boots. Everyone has shit-kicking boots on. Men have construction boots or cowboy boots, and most of the women do, too. You look at the women, starting with their feet, and your eyes stop on a pair of black, stiletto heeled boots. She’s turned the other way, but you’d know her profile anywhere, the way those ass cheeks look in tight jeans, round and perfect like two halves of a melon. Katie Fee, the girl who got away, the girl too good for you and what you’ve become. Will you talk to her? You don’t know. It’s been almost ten years.

Your palms sweat.

You’re on your own now, exposed. Sully has moved away from you, into the crowd. He high fives a guy you don’t recognize, a guy wearing a foam-mesh Nascar hat with Dale Earnhardt’s face and a big #3 on it. Ugly as hell hat. Sully loves it. Everyone here turned out for Sully, for “Sully,” like they always do. The heir apparent.

You’re on your own now, with Katie Fee standing twenty feet away, wiggling her ass at you. Anne and the kids might or might not be coming. She screamed at you when you left, calling you a drunk and a bad father, after refusing to let you drive her and the kids to Sully’s place. You started to argue, telling her that you could drive these back roads with your eyes

shut and a whole bottle of whisky in you. You knew you sounded like a perfect dickhead saying it, but you didn't care. Not today.

You need another drink. You throw back what's left of the Beam and look for your next one. In the corner is a big metal basin, more of a tub, the kind used to bob for apples. Instead of apples it's full of iced-down Miller High Life. In cans, of course. You reach in deep and get one off the bottom, open it and suck down half of it in three big swigs. Right. Okay. That's better. You breathe deep and relax a little. Maybe you will talk to Katie.

Just then Jake Montford walks up to you and starts jabbering in that fake way of his. He tells you about the latest toy he bought himself, a Ducati Multistrada. He wants to know when you're going to take your Harley out with him on the open road. That's what he says. He sees you looking at Katie Fee's ass, winking at you from just a few feet away. "You like that, huh?" Jake says. You look away, take another pull off your beer, pretend not to hear him. He wants to think you two have a bond, some kind of pact among the guilty, but you won't let him put you in his company. The sick fuck.

The first time you saw the pictures of his wife on the internet, Bill Mason showed them to you. You said you didn't believe it and he whipped out his cell phone, fired it up and Jake's wife's tits were staring you right in the face from that little four-inch screen, under that cheesy orange cartoon logo of the website, the guy with the big bug eyes and binoculars next to the letters: VoyeurVillage.com. You saw all of her. The next picture showed her posing with a banana. You couldn't believe your eyes. Jake had a deviant side, sure. Hell, he got three hookers for his bachelor's party and had two of them snort lines of cocaine off his dick before they blew him. He'd been to Thailand a couple of times "for business," though you couldn't see what kind of business his law firm would have in Thailand. And his favorite movie was

The Ice Storm, the one where all the bored suburban couples use car keys in a bowl to swap partners. But the thing with his wife went way beyond what you thought he'd do. Nobody knew the whole story. Nobody knew for sure if Jake did this on his own or with Kerry's permission. Nobody discussed it. How could they?

"God, I'd love to have just one night with her," Jake says. "One hour even." His mouth hangs open too much, and he leans forward, nose up, as if he might sniff the air in front of him like some hungry, panting dog. Katie has him in knots. As drunk as you are, you can tell Jackie Boy is drunker. Seeing him standing there gawking puts an idea in your head.

You think you might have some fun. You let yourself watch Katie for a few seconds. Her hair hangs in a tight ponytail, pulled back above her ears, so you can see the sharp angle of her jaw and the laugh lines when she smiles. She has a black lace blouse that creeps up whenever she leans forward, showing the small of her back. You can remember touching her there and running your hand up and down over it—slowly, so nobody would notice, right there in the middle of the hourglass—when you danced with her at reunion almost ten years ago. Human League. Don't You Want Me. You almost passed out from the rush it gave you. The delicious curve of it. How solid it felt, lean and tight. She hadn't changed a bit, through all her troubles. The husband with the ball cancer that turned out to be fatal, the subsequent miscarriage that stole what was left of her life.

"Jackie," you say. "Let's go get a shot of something."

Jake eyes you suspiciously, then looks at Katie. "No," he says. "Let's go talk to her."

You knew that was coming. You shake your head, but your brain nods. You think about the first words you will say to her.

"C'mon. What's the harm? We'll just mingle with her a little."

“Fine. Whatever.”

“Great,” Jakie says. “I need something harder than beer for this.” He disappears in pursuit of alcohol.

While Jake is gone, you survey the room. Jimbo Hagan, who’s running for County Controller, standing with his pea-brained wife, sister of Sully’s wife, Jill. Jimbo followed Sully back after college, like some lost puppy, and has fed himself ever since with the crumbs from Sully’s table, including Jill’s poor sister. You were amazed that he actually had a chance to win the election. Two Christmases ago, he brought the eighteen-year-old daughter of one of the partners in the little accounting firm where he worked to Sully’s Christmas party. He got her all hammered up on tequila and high on acid, then took her upstairs and had his way. Someone said she’d already passed out before Jimbo started in on her. You see George Battaglia, the big fat ex-cop turned real estate agent who had just been indicted on racketeering charges. Everyone knew where his money came from, but nobody talked about it. He’d been indicted once before, and everyone thought he’d beat this charge, too.

And Bobby Beck, the builder who made this house for Sully. You remember the long boozy conversations he and Sully had about the project. Way back, when your opinion on counted for something and you were invited to such meetings. Twelve bedrooms and four distinct architectural designs, each specific to a period of the local history. Georgian, Colonial, Victorian—and one more you can’t remember. Bobby has good looks and a kind of aura about him, like he can do anything. He and Jill get on well, too well you think. You wonder if something has happened between them. Probably not. It’d be career suicide for Bobby to mess with the Great Sully’s wife. You look around the room where you stand, the library, with twelve-foot-high tray ceilings lined with eighteen-inch crown molding, the wide plank,

reclaimed wood floor. You have to hand it to Bobby: he's an artist. The house still knocks you out. You remember the house-warming party, after hours, when Sully took you all up to the cigar balcony. He shut off all the electricity at the circuit breaker, the generator kicked in, and then Sully gave a long speech about leaving the safety on until he said go. Then he went inside and came back out and handed out loaded rifles to every one of us. Yours was a Browning A-Bolt, but the rest got Winchesters. You stood out there smoking for half an hour or so, not knowing what he had in mind. Then he flipped on the flood light and trained in on the dark woods that behind his house. The light bounced off what seemed like hundreds of nickels suspended in mid-air. Then you saw the deer feeder and realized what you were looking at. "Let 'em have it, boys" Sully said. The five of you on that deck must've killed fourteen deer, including three mature bucks, the largest of which was a twelve-pointer.

Antlers on the wall, above the fireplace. Your eyes drop and you notice Uncle Pete, the one who had the FBI crawling all over the whole family for years after threatening the building inspector publicly, at a hearing, just three months before the inspector ended up at the bottom of the Hudson. Uncle George, the one who did the deed, was dying by then, of liver cancer. So they did have some kind of plan. You see your mother, already more than half pissed, slurring her words as she speaks to David Mack, head of Hudson Electric. You see Sue Baker, who will give almost any guy with a hard-on and a hundred a quickie if there's a bathroom or a closet nearby. She calls it cab fare, like she's Audrey Hepburn running off to meet that A-Team guy at Tiffany's.

Fuck 'em all. You can tell the way they look at you or avoid looking at you. You can tell that they have loaded up all their Judge Guns and pointed them straight at your head and fired away until you're dead to them all. Well, so be it.

Speaking of judging, there's Judge Wilkins, the one your dad paid off to keep you out of jail after the second DUI. Wilkins stood about six feet two, and had lean, chiseled features like he belonged in some sepia photo essay about the Great Depression. There he stood, at the Second Quinquennial Sullapalooza, sipping scotch and looking all high and mighty. Thank God Wilkins caught your next case, too—the one that had you wandering in the woods and smoking the spliff with the retard. The Hand of Fate, Wilkins called it when you went to go see him about it. “Son, do you believe in God?” he asked you. You saw the cross around his neck and said you did, of course. “Well, He must have some kind of plan for you, because you really shouldn't be standing here. You should either be locked up or dead. The hand of fate intervened, though. Along with your good family. So you're getting yet another chance. Do something with it, Son.”

Bullshit, you remember thinking. Hand of Sully, not fate. Sully and your father arranged to pay off this crooked Atticus Finch wannabe motherfucker and guarantee him a win in the next election if he made the trouble go away. And that's what he did, in return for twenty thousand dollars, wrapped in a brown paper bag, just like in the movies. Later you started thinking about what Wilkins said: The Hand of Fate. You had to admit that Fate had played some kind of role in your life, on that night and before. Fate made you a member of the Sullivan clan, heir to the largest land-owning family in Dutchess County. Fate made you bad at school and only so-so at organized sports. Fate made you want more sex than you needed or was good for you. Fate gave you a taste for booze and drugs. Fate gave your little brother, the one you used to beat on and defend at school, the one you taught how to play soccer and football and French kiss and fuck, all the business genes in the whole family. Fate made it possible for Sully, whom everyone now called Sully after the original John Daniel “Sully”

Sullivan, the one who built up this twisted fortune in the first place, to put the pieces back together after the loan defaults of the eighties and FBI investigation of the nineties. Sully, Sully Junior, the Boy Wonder, The Fixer, *El Jefe*, from whom everyone in the family now takes orders, gladly, so long as the family fleet of Range Rovers got paid for and the monthly allowance keeps flowing. Fate gave the family Sully to save it from its self. Fate put you at your ten-year reunion with Katie Fee just after she was widowed. And Fate saved your ass, too, on the day you smashed your brand new black Range Rover, your second one in two years, into the minivan full of kids out on Route 9.

Crazy how little of it you remember now, almost exactly five years later. You know that because it happened after the first Sullapalooza and coming here today you had some vague notion that this would be your triumphant return to the scene, a way to show all these people that you might be down but not out. Not yet. But you should be, and you knew it. You left here in a hurry, running off to meet Tina, the little waitress at Charlie Brown's Steakhouse you'd been seeing on the side. You swerved your way over there fine, without incident, and you took her to the usual spot: Courtyard Inn by Marriott. Not a rent-by-the hour place, sure, but not the Ritz, either. But to Tina, it was the ultimate luxury. And it made you happy that it gave her such a thrill. So you went there and put down a whole bottle of red wine and got your own kind of thrill with her, and within minutes you were dressed and back behind the wheel of the Range Rover, heading towards Route 9. You stopped at the 7 Eleven on the corner of Old Post and Route 9.

You can actually remember seeing the cop car in the parking lot and thinking to yourself how very fucked up it would be if you drunk drove right into that cop car. What you didn't know then is that the car belonged to the guy standing beside you at the coffee machine,

the fat guy in the jean jacket, an out-of-uniform cop who had kept an eye on you while he was paying for his fat cop meal at the cash register. Thank God he also worked part-time as a security guard at one of your family's self-storage locations, the creatively-named Sully's Storage in Hopewell. That's how Sully got to him and convinced him he didn't ever get a good look at you.

You started shoving that muffin down your craw with one hand and started up the Range Rover and cranked up Dexy's Midnight Runner's on the stereo with the other hand, but both your eyes fixed on that cop and his holstered gun, and stayed on him until you felt the sickening crunch of metal as you smashed into the minivan. In the muffled cockpit of your Range Rover, the impact was more felt than heard, but you rolled down your window in time to hear the sound of the bumper come loose and hit the blacktop to the soundtrack of "Come On, Eileen." You whirled around and saw the terror on the woman's face. You heard her scream. You put the Rover into drive and started to pull away, but hesitated. You saw Fat Cop break into a run towards the cop car. You must've telegraphed your intentions somehow. Some vigilante dude ran over and stuck his hand in your open window to try to grab the keys, but you pulled it deeper than he wanted it to go and smashed him in the face with your open hand. Enough to be rid of him. And you were off.

Ten minutes later you led Fat Cop on the first high-speed police chase in twenty years in Dutchess County. You remember the moment you decided to go for it, thinking irrationally about Fat Cop's size and how you used to run cross country and how you knew the trails from when the family owned horses. Your Range Rover was black and built for off-road driving. You remember thinking you had no choice: one more DWI would take your license forever and put you in jail for a long, long time. The adrenaline kicked in, made you feel piss-drunk

and doomed and invincible. You heard the squeal of your tires and their impact on the curb as you jumped it, and figured Fat Cop wouldn't follow and you'd gain a few seconds. You were right.

Everything is a blur after that, but you could piece it together later on, and memories surfaced over time became indistinguishable from what you read and what people told you had happened. The chase covered five miles in Route 9, and the police report said it took under three minutes. You found the turn you wanted, the one that led you to the ass-end of Netherwood Road. You'd been there before. You knew that stretch of the road. You knew a trail not far away that led deep into the woods. Don't crash, you told yourself. Focus. And then you turned onto Netherwood and shut your lights off and hit the four-wheel drive button and minutes later you drove through an opening in the woods, hoping that the chrome on your bumper didn't catch any passing headlights. At one point your right two tires went flat, but that was about the time you realized that you didn't hear the siren anymore. You listened to your own breathing, trying to think and stay calm. You stopped the truck and got out and you ran. And ran. You stayed in those woods all night, then you called Sully as soon as the sun came up. He picked you up and took you to the bus station. You ran your mouth at him the whole time, but he said nothing but this, "Here's two thousand in cash. It's all I have. Get on a bus and go someplace far away. Don't call me. Not this week. Give me at least a week to figure things out." You eventually catch a bus to one place, then another, then out to the North Fork in Long Island, where Anne has relatives. That's where you were when you found out why the cop siren stopped. A parking garage collapsed at the Poughkeepsie Galleria Mall, and all police within fifty miles got called to the scene. So soon after 9/11, they assumed it was a terrorist attack, so they all went running over there for their piece of glory. Ha. The Hand of Fate. And

here you are, five years almost to the day, back at the scene where that night began. No more family-issue Range Rover, but you still have your freedom; and, after a nine-month suspension, your driver's license is yours to lose again.

Somebody tugs your shirt. "Hey, wake up. I know you said you didn't want one, but this is the good stuff. Johnny Walker Blue. Compliments of Sully." Jake Montford has returned, ready for action. He nods in the direction of Katie. You take the drink from him, ditch your beer can on a nearby table, and take a big sip of whiskey. "Okay," you say. "Let's do this before I change my mind."

But Katie has moved away from you. She's in the next room, the living room, next to a roasted pig suspended on a spit over the biggest Sterno flame you've ever seen. She's talking to another woman you don't recognize. You and Jake move towards them. Before you reach them, Sully's wife Jill and their son, Sully Junior, stop you to say hello. Jill hugs you and so does little Sully and you remember the invitation said this party was doubling as a birthday party for the tyke, who turned three last week. You have no gift. "Look what your idiot brother gave little Sully for his birthday," Jill says. You look down at his little moon face and you breathe slowly, trying not to seem drunk as you. "His shirt," Jill says. The shirt says "HUNG LIKE A 10-YEAR OLD" in big black letters. You laugh out loud.

Jill moves away, probably happy to escape Jake Montford, whose little photography fetish has become an open secret. On the other side of the buffet setup in the living room are the big floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the pond. You can see the fading sunlight bouncing off the water and a bunch of kids, with nannies in tow, feeding a flock of Mallards at the water's edge. As Jill and Sully Jr. walk away, you remember the wording on the invitation: The Quinquennial Sullapalooza: A Redneck Revival – plus birthday bash for SullyBoy! 2pm

‘til whenever. Kid-friendly ‘til dark. Redneck attire only. Dress like you mean it.” You pull out your phone and see it blinking back – four text messages from Anne. You put it back in your pocket.

It’s almost dark, and you’re in no shape to talk to Katie Fee. Words won’t come easy, especially after you finish this next whiskey. You think about breaking off but decide against it, afraid to leave her alone with Jake.

When you reach them, Katie and her friend are talking about the party, marveling over Sully’s stagecraft. Apparently there are hayrides and a huge Moon Bounce for the kids out back, and the Wine Barn has been turned into a Mooshine Barn, complete with a functioning still and authentic poteen shipped in from Ireland. Introductions are made, and Katie smiles at you and kisses your cheek. A cloud of her smell hits you like a drug. Grit and glam--less like perfume and more like soap and sweat. You feel suddenly bolder. You decide to ignore the trace of pity—or regret?—you see in her eyes. Given what she’s been through, it probably has nothing to do with you.

“Ladies, meet Jake Montford.”

Jake bows like he’s some kind of nobleman meeting debutantes. You throw back the rest of the Johnny Walker Blue in a single gulp. Katie’s friend looks you and Jake up and down and excuses herself to go find her boyfriend.

“It’s good to see you, Katie,” you say, hoping you can control where this goes.

“You, too,” she says, and she seems sincere. You want Jake gone. You want to tell Katie everything you didn’t say that night at reunion. You know it’s the idea of her more than it is *her*. It’s her looks and the way she talks softly, and the fact that she still seems innocent after all the living she’s done.

Jake breaks the silence. “Katie, if my wife weren’t standing across the room, I’d make a move on you. How is it that you’ve stayed single? Don’t any of these guys have any balls?” He’s looking at her hand. He doesn’t know about her dead husband.

You hear your name being called. You turn around and see Anne coming towards you. Your children, Andrew and Lily, Irish twins at six and four, are on either side of her, each holding one of her hands. “There you are,” she says. You are at once glad to see them and deeply depressed. You force a smile and gather up both kids in a big hug. “You smell like medicine,” Lily says. Anne says hello to Katie and Jake.

“Come on,” you say. “Let’s go for a hayride while we still can.”

You say quick goodbyes to Katie and Jake and lead your family out the back door, past the pig on a spit still getting its ass roasted by that giant Sterno and the catered buffet and the tubs of beer and bar tended by an overalls-wearing employee of the catering company. You enter the backyard through huge French doors and you step out onto a slate patio. The patio fire pit is already going, stacked high with burning logs cut from the surrounding woods. You see the hayride in the distance behind the pond, a giant wagon towed by a John Deere, making a broad, slow circle. Then you see a bunch of the older kids playing what looks like some kind of a football or rugby game. They’re all chasing in a circle inside a makeshift pen made out of garden fencing. Then you realize – they’re chasing a greased pig. Lily and Andrew love it and they beg you to join the chase. You tell them to ask their mother. Anne says yes, and the kids go running.

Now you’re alone with your wife. Neither of you speak for a minute but just watch your kids run off to chase the pig. “It’s great fun,” Anne says. “I’ve got to give your brother credit. He knows how to throw a party.”

You nod.

A minute later, Anne says, “So how drunk are you?”

You don’t answer.

“Are you coming home tonight?”

You stay quiet.

“Well, please be careful. I’m going to say goodbye to your family and take the kids home as soon as this pig thing is over. They’re going to be covered in mud, and I’m not in the mood to hang out with a bunch of drunk parents who’ve offloaded their kids to the help.”

“I hear you,” you say. And you really do hear her. She’s right and you know it. This scene is twisted. But it’s your scene and you can’t get away from it. “I’ll be okay. I’ll stay here tonight and I’ll see you guys first thing in the morning.”

“Sure you will,” Anne says, and she walks away from you towards the pig pen without looking back.

You stand there watching her and your children move away from you, and you think of Katie. You think about how you have everything Katie has lost. You let them go.

You find the nearest beer tub and fish one out. This time, it’s a Pabst Blue Ribbon. You turn and head back inside, looking for Katie.

When you reach them, Jake has his arm behind Katie, not quite touching her, and is explaining how Sully pulled off the stunt with the Cadillac in the front yard. They can’t see you. The sacrificial pig is still bathing in Sterno flames beside them. You pause and listen.

“Right,” Jake says. “It’s amazing. So the guys down at Wayne’s Salvage owed him one, and he

got them to come flip the Caddy over and put a little motor on the axel so the front wheels keep spinning. The fire was just a burn barrel full of fire wood. He put it behind the engine hood so you can't see it when you're coming up the driveway..."

"Brilliant," Katie says, just before they both notice you. Then she excuses herself to go to the bathroom.

"You're coming back, right?" Jake says, touching her hand. You could kill him right here and now.

Katie smiles and nods and lets her hand rest on his for an extra beat.

Jake turns to you. "Goddamn, she's hot," he says, but you can hardly hear him. You lift your beer and pour half of it down your throat while Jakie Boy keeps talking. "Thanks, man. I think you're right. I think she really might be into it."

"Into what?" you say.

"You know. I think she might be into hanging out later with me and Kerry."

You ball up your fists, trying to focus and think about what to do. Your lips burn. You want to kill him with your bare hands. You wonder what kind of time you'd do if you strangle him right here. With your history, you could definitely plead insanity. Do the math. You can hear yourself breathing. You say nothing.

Jake takes half a step away from you and looks at you funny. Scared. "What's up, man?"

He's looking at your hand, which is balled up and cocked back, waiting for you to decide what to do with it. You realize what you're going to do, and you try to make your face calm. You smile. You breathe. You think about angles and distance and how you need to make it count. Then you shake your head a little and say, "You know what this is, Jakey?"

“What? What do you mean?” he says, taking another step backwards.

“This is the hand of fate.” You swing as hard as you can, a homerun swing, but you pop it foul, barely clipping the bottom of his chin. He’s stunned. You rush him. You try to recover some control. “It’s okay. I didn’t mean it,” you say over and over again. “We’re okay.” You hug Jake Montford, your hands on either side of his head, then his shoulders, then his head—like you’re two worn-out boxers in the ninth round. “It’s okay. I’m a little drunk.”

You’re standing there, now just a couple of feet from the pig on a spit, and you can see its pig eyes looking up and the flame still hitting his blackened skin as the spit turns. You’re out of breath. Your hands still rest on Jake Montford’s head, and you bring them forward, down his neck, then up again to his cheeks. You stare into his eyes, then the pig eyes, and back to Jake. You can feel sweat on the back of his neck and his pulse going wild. “It’s okay, Jakey. I’m a little drunk, is all.”

Jake starts laughing, but it’s more of a cough, meant to diffuse the situation. He’s terrified. He knows what you’ve done, what you’re capable of. Time is short. You say, “Hang on. Wait a minute. I want to talk to you about something. It’s important. Seriously.”

“What?” he says.

“No big deal,” you say, still trying to figure all this out. “It’s no big deal. It’s just... just that...” You hang your head, as if gathering your thoughts. As if you might cry. You breathe deep. It’s time.

“What, man? What? Are you okay?”

“It’s just that if you ever so much as look at Katie Fee again, I will kill you.” Then you grab his ears tight enough so that there’s no way he can break loose, and you pull your head back, bend your knees, and launch yourself at him. You snap your neck forward at the same

time and ram the top of your forehead as hard as you can into his nose. Bullseye. You feel the impact, solid like a hammer against a walnut. You feel it crunch, and it makes you happy. You laugh. Then you push Jake Montford head first into the flaming pig on a spit and you begin walking towards the French doors, where the last hayride is just returning.

Poor Jimmy

“It’s gonna get weird,” Jimmy said. “It’s about to get really weird.”

I looked at him but said nothing.

“Check out the gazelles,” he said, pointing with his chin.

Three women had gathered at the far end of the bar. Jimmy calls unescorted women in bars “gazelles.” If they’re drunk or otherwise vulnerable, then they’re “wounded gazelles,” like the ones that get taken down by hungry lions on National Geographic. These women at the end of the bar weren’t drunk and looked anything but vulnerable. Safe bet that they were models or actresses, given where we were, an unmarked members-only club in downtown Manhattan that caters to the professionally beautiful. The women fit the room, which had twenty-foot ceilings, huge windows overlooking the meatpacking district from a high floor, long leather couches, and a massive stainless steel bar. The women, two brunettes and a blonde, were almost young enough to be Jimmy’s daughters and were drawing cro-magnon stares from all the slobs in the place, us included. They seemed inured to it.

Jimmy had the perfect setup. The L-shaped bar hadn’t filled up yet. The women stood at the corner of the L, as if on a small stage, while we sat on stools half way down its long stretch. Jimmy already had a beer and two tequila shots in him, even though we’d only been there an hour or so. When he wants to drink, he doesn’t mess around. By now I knew that I’d gotten Fun Jimmy tonight, not one of the other Jimmys, and it gave me hope that my plan might actually succeed.

“Be right back,” Jimmy said, dismounting his stool. He grabbed his drink and sashayed towards the three women. Just before he reached them, he turned to me and grinned like an idiot. He licked two fingers, turned and reached them out towards the blonde’s head, moving them to within inches, then withdrew them quickly as if he’d touched a flame. A guy behind me laughed out loud. Then Jimmy tapped the blonde on the shoulder and started talking, and I could see them clench up and look at each other. Jimmy always says that it’s tough to be a really pretty girl: you’re screwed no matter what. You don’t want to be cat called and bothered by the males of the species, but you want to dress up and feel pretty, like any girl. If you go through all the trouble of making yourself look as good as you can look, and no guy pays attention to you, you’ll be upset about it. So you want the attention but then you get annoyed when you get it. Screwed no matter what.

Sure enough, the women looked like they hated Jimmy’s guts when he first approached them. But minutes later, whatever nonsense came spilling out of his mouth started putting them at ease. One of them laughed, then cupped her hand over her mouth and ran it down her chin, as if trying to wipe away her amusement. The other two also loosened up. Jimmy kept going and quickly had them all giggling and shaking their heads.

After a few minutes of this, Jimmy signaled me to come over. I moved over a couple of stools and joined the edge of the group.

“Murph, let me introduce you to Katie, Allison and Rayna, the three best-looking girls in New York City. We were just talking about how embarrassing it is to buy condoms. You know. Because the checkout girl knows exactly what you’re going to do with them. And she’s actually got to touch the box so she can scan it. The whole thing is weird. Plus, what if she needs to call over the store intercom for a price check? Anyway, ladies, let me introduce you to

Will Murphy, my gay army buddy. Murph here was by far the bravest homosexual in our battalion. He also happens to be an avid consumer of condoms.”

The women didn’t know what to do with that—so they just laughed. One of them asked about my wedding ring, and Jimmy said, “Don’t ask, don’t tell, but he’s from Massachusetts where that sort of stuff is legal. Good thing, too. The ring is what kept him from getting his ass kicked in Iraq.”

I thought about going along with it but instead I said, “Don’t listen to my homophobic, misogynist friend here. The army part is true. But the rest of it is bullshit. I’m not gay, I’m not very brave, and I am married—to a woman.”

“How long?” the blonde, Allison, asked.

“Ten years this December.”

“Wow, that’s great,” she said. “Any kids?”

“Two boys—four and two.

“Yep. And he’s not done yet,” Jimmy said, sticking an elbow in my ribs.

Allison looked at me, her eyebrows raised. “My wife Jenny and I are expecting our third—a girl.”

They all said congratulations, and Jimmy raised his glass to toast my unborn daughter. His eyes flickered back and forth, a sign of his mind changing channels, looking for better entertainment. He took a huge swig from his third tequila, put the glass on the bar and said, “Speaking of kids, I need to drop a couple off at the pool. Exclude me, ladies. I really need to make Number Two, and Murph tells me this place has bathroom so clean you can eat off the toilet seats.”

“Jesus, Jimmy,” I said. “Did we really need to know that?” But I was talking to the back of his head as he was walking towards the bathroom. The girls shook their head in disgust, but I got the sense that they enjoyed the crudeness.

I ordered myself another beer and told the bartender to bring another round for our new friends. The bar had filled up around us, and I noticed that we’d attracted an audience. Not we—they. The women. People lined the bar now on both sides of us, and all the men were looking, or obviously trying not to look, at Katie, Allison and Rayna—probably wondering why the hell they were letting me stand so close to them.

Myself I found it difficult to make eye contact with them. So I tried making more small talk while staring at my beer. I asked them what they did. Rayna and Katie were fashion models, here for some kind of reality TV show. Allison had an online show about the stock market and called herself a video blogger. At one point, Rayna, who had seemed completely bored up to this point, asked me if I was over in Iraq like Jimmy. I nodded, and she perked up.

“Do you mind talking about it? What was it like?”

“For me, it was boring. A lot of waiting, a lot of paperwork and miscommunication with the Iraqis. I sort of had a desk job within the Green Zone. Jimmy had a different experience.”

“So you didn’t see combat and he did?”

“Something like that.”

“What’s the worst thing that happened to you over there?”

The question surprised me. People hardly ever asked me about Iraq, and, when they did, they focused on the banal stuff, the food, the weather, the anti-Americanism, and so on. I faced Rayna and for the first time met her eyes which were green and full of intelligence. She

had pale white skin and a long neck that the camera must've loved. Her nose was longer than it seemed from a distance, and crooked--pointed slightly to one side. It made her even better looking. It made me wish my wife was skinny again. It made me wish that I wasn't married and Rayna was a wounded gazelle. It made me want to tell her the truth.

"A suicide bomber got into the Zone one time right after the first election," I said. "She was an older woman who'd been coming in for a while to babysit some of our translators' kids. We sort of trusted her. She blew herself up less than ten feet from me, and a First Sergeant standing next to me took the brunt of the explosion. Will Keane. Blew off his leg above the knee and severed his femoral artery. We couldn't help him."

I'd never stopped looking at Rayna while telling this story. I realized I hadn't told the full story to anyone else—not even Jenny. Not even Jimmy. Wasn't supposed to. The incident became classified and had never been reported in the news because the brass didn't want it to get out that Americans were dying within the Green Zone. I'd tried to push the whole thing out of my head.

Right now I looked at Rayna, and she looked back at me, unblinking, her jaw set in a way that pulled back the corners of her mouth into a small smile. "I'm sorry," she said with an even tone. "Were you close to him?" I nodded and looked at the other two women, who were both shaking their heads and looking down at the bar. "He was only 28. He told me I'd be godfather to his first kid if he ever had one. Jimmy knew him, too."

Speaking of, where the hell was he? He'd been gone forever.

The one named Katie reached out and put her hand on my shoulder. "That must've been horrible," she said. "It must still be horrible. I can't... I can't even imagine."

Rayna started to ask me another question, but Jimmy came back and stepped between us, his arm outstretched. He looked at the women, then at me.

“Way to go, Murph. I see you’re keeping them laughing, as always. He’s a barrel of chuckles, isn’t he girls? Watch yourselves now. Make way for me, folks. My mission isn’t over.”

The three women made way for Jimmy, their eyes pinned on him. His face was flushed, and his hair damp, as if from sweat. At first, I couldn’t tell what he held in his hand. He held it above his head and called for the bartender to come over. What was he up to now?

A hush rippled over the bar, as it came into focus for everyone: Jimmy held an empty spool from a toilet paper roll. He waved it at the bartender, telling him the bathroom had run out at the worst possible time. When the bartender reached him, Jimmy leaned forward and said in a mock whisper that was loud enough for the entire barroom to hear, “Sorry, man. This is really embarrassing. But I ran out of this, and well... you know. I need some more. It’s kind of important. I’ve got a five flusher on my hands in there.”

The women, unable to stop laughing but clearly grossed out, started moving away from Jimmy, and everyone at the bar started cracking up. Jimmy pretended not to see any of it and just kept his eyes on the bartender, who was also laughing. It wasn’t just Jimmy’s very public request for more toilet paper at this velvet rope club, or his red face and sweaty brow, or his poop talk in front of three stunningly beautiful women that the rest of the bar assumed he was trying to impress. The real punch line was that Jimmy had come back dragging a strip of toilet paper, about eight feet long, behind him, one end of it stuck to the bottom of his shoe, in plain sight of everyone sitting at the now-full bar. Nobody knew if the whole scene was real or staged, but everyone loved it.

That's pretty much the way it goes. Nobody knows quite what to make of him, but everyone loves Jimmy Dolan. The permanent twinkle in his eye, the barely-contained mania, the buzzing life force that even two wars including more than his fair share of heavy combat couldn't kill. Ever since I met him in Desert Storm, or Desert Drizzle as he derided it, he's been that kind of guy. The kind of guy who walks into a room and right away has every guy wanting to be his best friend and every woman wanting to get naked with him—that is, when he's not talking about five flushers.

But Jimmy had been going through some rough times. He'd made a mess of things the last time he'd come to town, and my plan tonight was to try to clean it up for him. Almost twenty years ago, in the first Gulf War, half a dozen of us grunts from the 82nd Airborne who'd met in Fort Bragg had been shipped out as part of the same brigade and become inseparable. We did everything together—we fought (or at least pointed our rifles occasionally), we drank, we bucked authority, and we bitched nonstop about being glorified prison guards in a war that never was. Jimmy led us in our malaise and often shook us out of it, creating adventures out of whole cloth in the way that only he could. Like the time he got a mad crush on the Kuwaiti translator and went AWOL for a week so he could cross over and meet her family. I was dumb enough to chase him down and bring him back, and it's one of the dumbest things I've ever done. And one of the funnest.

Or the time one of our Kurdish helpers rode his scooter into our camp and got chased by the pregnant dog. Jimmy has a thing for animals, especially dogs, and he'd heard about this guy kicking this pregnant black lab who'd become something of a mascot to us. On one particular day, Jimmy and the rest of us were standing around running our mouths, and the

bitch came around as usual to beg for scraps from our MREs. In comes that Kurd on his scooter, and, sure enough, that bitch took off after him, yapping her poor, stupid head off. The Kurd slowed down his bike to let her come near to him. Then when she was a few feet away, he stuck out his leg, throttled the bike and landed his boot heel so hard in the dog's rib cage that she crashed to the ground, yelping and whimpering like she was dying. The Kurd knew we were watching, and probably meant to fuck with us. He also knew he'd gone too far, and I could see the fear in his eyes when he turned around to see what we'd do. By then Jimmy had already taken off after him in a full sprint, running faster than I'd ever seen him run. The Kurd pushed off, gunned his engine and tried to get away. But he was too late. Jimmy lunged at him and dive-tackled him off his scooter. The Kurd had some size on him but was no match for Jimmy. He didn't even try to fight back—was too scared. He started apologizing and screaming like a girl, but Jimmy didn't hear any of it and none of us tried to stop it for almost a full minute. He straddled the Kurd, pinning his arms back with his knees, so he couldn't get off his back and he couldn't fight back. Then he ripped his helmet off and beat him with both hands, like working on a speed bag, until he knocked him out. He was still swinging when we pulled him off. Put the Kurd in the hospital for a week. Guy had to have his jaw wired shut and lost two of his front teeth. We all covered for Jimmy, and he didn't get into any trouble.

The Kurd got a big dose of Rescue Jimmy, one of the Jimmys who came out a little too often and usually got us into trouble. But we loved him for it. We all wanted to do the same thing to that Kurd for kicking our bitch, but Jimmy is the guy who actually *did* it.

After the war we all stayed in touch and got together at least a couple of times a year. Everyone except Jimmy got married and had kids, and all of us except one went back over to

help finish the job after 9/11. That's when Jimmy and J.O.B and Stevie went north and saw the real deal up in Fallujah, while I was busy designing air fields in Qatar.

That's also when Jimmy started to kind of lose it, I guess. Life had started catching up with him, and he knew it. We got shipped out to different places and rarely saw each other over there, but I'd get email updates from "Harlem"—which was Jimmy's code name for Fallujah, since he couldn't say where he was. During one of the few times we got to see each other while deployed, he admitted to me that reenlisting after 9/11 felt like the meatheaded move of the century to him. He didn't like the war, didn't like the mission, didn't want to kill anymore. He'd just had some incident at a checkpoint where one of the guys in his platoon took out a couple of civilians. It hit him hard. This was after it became clear that the whole war was kind of a sham, and it seemed unwinnable to us on the ground. The hopelessness started eating Jimmy from the inside.

They say you marry the person with when you're ready to get married, and that's what sort of happened with the rest of us. We all had girlfriends before Desert Storm, a few of whom got passed back and forth. Army skanks from Fort Bragg. Three of the guys married their girlfriends between deployments overseas, just so they'd have someone to go home to. I knew Jenny from school and didn't start dating her until after Desert Storm. But we got engaged after only four months, and were married and pregnant within a year. I always thought I wanted a big family. Work went well for me so I thought I could afford it. I'd started a corporate security business after Desert Storm and hired a bunch of guys from the 82nd. After 9/11, I kept the business going while deployed overseas and it really took off. I never thought I'd make that much money.

In terms of settling down, Jimmy was the odd man out. He never married and only recently had a serious girlfriend—a forty-five year-old woman with two teenage sons. At one point he told me he loved her and wanted to marry her, but things went sideways with them. It ended badly, and Jimmy felt terrible about abandoning the two boys. The break-up hit him hard and he started drinking heavily.

All this was blowing up on Jimmy the last time we all got together in New York. The night ended when Jimmy got offended and flew into a rage just like he did with the Kurd. The night had gone along fine, with the usual amount of drinking and the obligatory trip to the strip club that got us all hot and bothered and talking about kids and wives and monogamy and not getting what we bargained for and all that male bullshit that goes along with nights like that. Anyhow, we drank too much and comments were made, and things turned ugly. At the end of it Jimmy got fired up and ended up cracking J.O.B. pretty good in the face. He and Jimmy hadn't spoken since, but tonight was the night they were supposed to hug it out. Only Jimmy didn't know that yet. I planned to get him drunk to wear down his defenses, take him back to that same strip club we went to with the boys, and tell him there, where we could put the whole event into its proper context.

I was doing all this at the urging of my wife, Jenny, who feels sorry for Jimmy Dolan and worries about him a lot. She said I had an obligation to help smooth things over, because J.O.B worked for me. I could bring everyone together and patch things up. Jenny didn't know why Jimmy hit J.O.B., and I couldn't tell her.

“Poor Jimmy,” she always says, no matter what version of Jimmy is showing himself. I used to argue with her about it, telling her that Jimmy had a great life, had everything going for him and didn't need her pity. Jimmy used to call her for advice on relationships and so on. I

wondered what was said in those phone calls. Whatever it was, I think it made Jenny worry more for him. She didn't buy his clown act. She told me it was just a matter of time until he melted down completely. To her, he's always been "Poor Jimmy."

Right after paying the cover charge at Scores, the strip club, Jimmy pointed towards a guy in a suit standing guard over the floor. "I think I know that guy," he said. "Holy shit. It's definitely gonna get weird." Within ten minutes, Jimmy had a new best friend in the manager on duty—Paul, I think his name was. It turns out that Paul had come back from Iraq eight months ago and they knew a lot of people in common.

Within half an hour, Jimmy had his shirt off and was pole dancing on a side stage to a dance remix of "Like A Virgin." At first it scared the real dancers and annoyed the customers, but Jimmy was actually pretty good at it and the crowd began cheering him on and drinking more—so Paul let him finish the entire song.

When Jimmy finished his dance, I had a beer and a shot of Jameson waiting for him at a table away from the stage and stripper poles.

"So you remember last time we came here, right?"

"Sure. It's the last night I spoke to J.O.B."

"Right, well. J.O.B. is going to meet us tonight at midnight. We're supposed to tell him where to go. He wants to talk things out."

"That makes one of us."

"You're really willing to throw away a twenty-year friendship over some stupid drunken comments?"

"I have enough friends. So do you, Murph."

“Look, Jimmy. I know. I’m the one who should be pissed. I’m the one who should have hit him, and I’m okay with the whole thing. J.O.B. has always been sort of a shithead, but I don’t think he meant anything by it.”

Jimmy just stared straight ahead for a moment. Then he took down his shot of Jameson in a single gulp.

“Well, are you willing to meet him?”

“Why are you ambushing me with this now?”

“Because I didn’t think you’d come otherwise.”

“You were right about that. Do you know what he said about Jenny?”

“Yes, Jimmy. I know.” But something in Jimmy’s face made me think that maybe I didn’t know all of it.

Here’s what I did know: that night, with J.O.B. and the rest of the guys from the 82nd, after watching the strippers at Scores for a couple of hours, we moved on to Molly Malone’s, an Irish pub on Third Avenue. Everyone started talking about which stripper he liked best and talk eventually turned to marriage and whether or not it was natural for a man to be with the same woman for the rest of his life.

At one point, I got up to go to the bathroom, and, when I got back, J.O.B. cut right to the chase, “I can say for myself that it’s been eight years with Angie, but it feels like eighty. She’s nothing like she was before we got married, before the kids came. I definitely didn’t sign up to have my balls cut off and be nagged into an early grave.”

The line of conversation made me uncomfortable. J.O.B. worked for me, and Jenny and I really liked Angie. “You always get more than you bargain for with marriage,” I said, trying to find a trap door.

“Yeah, Murph. You got about three times what you bargained for,” J.O.B. said.

Jimmy sat straight up in his seat and pointed a finger at J.O.B. Jimmy has always loved my wife. “What did you say, O’Brien?”

“I said that Murph here got about three times what he bargained for. Jenny has put on some weight, is all I’m saying.”

“You need to take that back, O’Brien.”

“Come on, Jimmy. You have to admit it’s true. She does shake the floor when she walks into the room.”

In a single motion, Jimmy launched himself at J.O.B. and his balled up fist connected solidly with J.O.B.’s cheekbone with a sickening “thwack.”

That was my memory, but sitting here, looking at Jimmy, I knew there was more to it. Suddenly I didn’t want to meet up with J.O.B anymore. I didn’t want to know what else J.O.B. did to piss off Jimmy. I wanted another drink and another one after that. And maybe a dance from one of the strippers. I wanted the night to keep pinwheeling out of control like the best nights with Jimmy often do.

“We don’t need to meet up with him,” I said.

Jimmy’s eyes widened. “Really? Well, let’s take a break from thinking about it and focus on our drinking. We’re not supposed to meet him until midnight, anyhow, right? We’ve got time.”

We ordered another round and then another. A Russian stripper came over and grabbed Jimmy by the arm and offered him a free dance. Two for one, she said. He walked away with her and I just sat there, drinking more. At some point I got some dances, too, but the memory

of it is hazy. I can remember long legs and thong underwear and tits in my face and the feeling of being turned on and repulsed all at once. I remember wanting to get out of there and go home to Jenny. I started drinking water to sober up.

At some point I'd had enough and went looking for Jimmy. He sat at a side table next to a stage where his Russian was dancing on a pole. Her eye makeup had run on one side of her face. She looked like she'd been crying. Jimmy was talking on a cell phone that wasn't his. Yelling, more like it. He was saying something about immigration and deportation and it sounded like he was making threats.

"Jimmy, what're you doing?"

"Talking to Katya's fucknut boyfriend," he said. He didn't sound coherent. "She had a bruise on her shoulder. I asked her what it was. Says he threw her down the steps."

I grabbed the phone and hung up on Fucknut. Then I grabbed Jimmy's arm and stood him up. "Let's get out of this place," I said. "Let's get something to eat."

A few minutes later we walked out of there and I steered Jimmy past crowded bar with a bunch of cops out front, keeping an eye on things. Just past the bar, we found a Dunkin Donuts that advertised a flatbread egg sandwich, served twenty-four hours. Breakfast anytime, it said.

"It's about to get weird," Jimmy said under his breath as we came through the door. "It's about to get really weird."

He sounded unsteady, his words slow and deliberate and a little slurred. The walking around must've triggered the full effects of the last few drinks he slammed down.

The guy behind the counter had dark skin and spoke with an accent that might've been Iraqi. Perfect cherry on top of the night, I thought. We ordered sandwiches and water and sat in a booth in silence for what seemed like twenty minutes.

Then Jimmy told me what J.O.B. had said: "He called Jenny a pig. He said, 'Now that Murph has some money, why doesn't he dump that pig and trade her in for a little hottie?'"

"Thanks, Asshole. Thanks for telling me that. Now I probably need to fire him, and he's one of my best sales guys."

Jimmy took a deep breath, stood up and approached the counter. "Hey, Chiefy, where are the sandwiches?"

"Coming, Boss. Coming."

"We're pretty damn hungry over here."

"Coming, Boss."

"Okay, but it's gonna get really weird in here in a second. In fact, if those sandwiches don't hit our table by the time I count to ten, it's going to get really weird in here really fast."

"Okay. Whatever you say, Boss."

Jimmy started counting to ten before I could say anything. The guy behind the counter ignored him. When he hit ten, Jimmy opened the drink refrigerator reached one arm inside and started clearing out the plastic bottles. They went flying everywhere.

Jimmy backed up to look at what he'd done and he bumped into the poster stand advertising the flatbread sandwich. He stopped and looked at it, and then he screamed, "Where are you?" Then he shoved it. It rocked back and forth and smacked him in the head. Then he punched the sign and knocked it down. He made a terrible clatter and the guy behind the

counter started going crazy and yelling, "Police! Police!" Then he disappeared out the front door to get police.

I reached down and shook Jimmy and told him what was happening. We both scrambled to put the place back together. We put all the drinks back in the refrigerator and stood the sign back up, just as two cops, one black and one white, came through the front door, led by the counter guy, "That's him," he said, pointing at Jimmy.

Jimmy turned around as if looking for the culprit.

"Hey, officers. What's the problem?" Jimmy said, sounding perfectly sober.

They just shrugged and shook their heads.

"Jesus, look at the time," Jimmy said. "Have a great night, fellas."

As we walked past the counter guy, Jimmy grabbed his arm, leaned over and whispered, "Now *that* was weird, wasn't it?"

Dead

I come through the side door of Port Authority that leads to the Casino buses. I'm running late. Rush hour starts at four o'clock, and missing the three-thirty bus means I'd hit North Jersey traffic and be late for my date with Ursula. Being late would snuff out whatever flame still flickers between us. Can't happen. We've made it this far, and I've done so much planning for tonight that my brain aches. Planned it all down to the last penny.

I move away from the stampede, stuff a piece of nicotine gum in between my front lip and my gum like chaw, orient myself.

I board the down escalator. I'm scared. I'm excited. It's not just about the date with Ursula. Coming to this place always gives me the same sense of doom and possibility. This great, crumbling transit dungeon, full of the poison smell of bus exhaust and the swarms of people hurling themselves at dark underground portals to nowhere. My gate is Number One, the farthest of the Academy gates, and I have less than ten minutes to get there. Getting off the escalator, I am cut off by a short thick Latina mother dragging an impossible number of suitcases and shopping bags behind her, plus four small kids. What the fuck? How about a little awareness of your surroundings, *Senorita*? But then she smiles at me, radiating warmth and goodness. Just look at her and her kids. Don't be an asshole. *Lo siento, Mamacita*. The smallest of her children is a wobbly little jammer wearing a stuffed animal monkey backpack with a monkey tail that doubles as a leash and tethers him to mama. The monkey's head is precisely the size of the boy's head, and level with it, and both faces are grinning as if connected by a Siamese brain stem. The boy's eyelids are pinned wide open with rapture, and I believe he's

the happiest human I've seen in months. His little teeth are perfect. I look back up at his saint of a mother and return her smile and get the urge to climb inside the harness of my own monkey backpack and be led around by her. So cozy.

The nicotine has hit my bloodstream and reminds me why I quit the stuff. I'm flying. I love all these people. I'll make my bus. Ursula and I will be fine.

Then I see a twenty-something brunette, pretty as the lobby bar at the Soho Grand, pointing her nose up and away towards a bus that will take her to a better place. She's got a backpack, too, but it's of the tiny black leather variety, probably bought at one of the couture shops deep in the Meatpacking District, an expensive announcement of the tyranny she wields over the males of the species. More powerful than mace. She swishes by me, dismissing me with a flick of her eyes that reminds me of Ursula. An Ursula-in-Training, she is. Shouldn't you already be riding in style to Amagansett, Honey? Shouldn't you be sipping some kind of berry and vitamin-infused mineral water, your perfect bum nestled in a plush reclining seat? Why steerage class for you today, Miss? Daddy's Porsche in the shop? Jitney sold out? Her hair is thick and shiny and jet-black, pulled tight into a ponytail, a curtain opened up to reveal the holy geometry on top of her neck. I permit myself to follow her for a few steps, using up precious time I don't have and wondering where she's going, where she's been, and whether she's ever had a problem bigger than a split end. She wears a form-fitting black dress that stops just above the middle of her thighs and shows off her angrily perfect curves. No small effort to keep up what she's got going on there. Perfection wields its own tyranny.

A guy, some kind of construction worker with a dirty face and a hard hat and an oil can of Budweiser in his hand, walks towards us, and I see Ursula-in-Training give him a much

different kind of look, an eye-locking ‘maybe-I’d-let-you-do-me’ look. Then she catches herself and laughs and walks faster. Oh kids.

I hate all these people, these lost souls.

I stop following her. I’ve got my own Amagansett. Ursula awaits. Can’t linger. Casino bus leaves for Atlantic City in four and a half minutes, and I need to get all the way to Gate One, get my ticket, and get into proper seat-blocking position. I’m screwed. I break into a run, a sprint. I need to catch this bus. I’m out of breath and maybe out of time. The line for tickets is mercifully short, but the ticketholder line for the bus is long, maybe too long for me to get a seat. Just as I’m about to take up my place in line, a fight starts brewing. A huge woman in a floral print smock stomps by me and starts asking loudly where the line ends. Her dyed blonde hair looks like it hasn’t been washed in a year, and she has the zombie-eyed look of a junkie. She just about kills the little octogenarian guy walking up behind me. She sumo-bounces him with the widest part of her girth, knocks him off balance and almost somersaults him over him walker before he regains his balance. “Fuck you, Fatty,” he says to her. Right on, Pappy. The woman turns to him, killing in her eyes, but, when he doesn’t flinch, she seems to realize her disadvantage. She starts searching for other prey.

Luckily she spots her boyfriend or husband in the crowd. She yells at him, “Bo, where the hell have you been? I’ve been looking all over. You idiot. You fucking moron. Come *here*. *Now*.”

He pretends not to see her, though every single person on line is staring at her. It’s going to be a long bus ride. Time for the real thing. I take a tin of chaw out of my pocket, scoop the nicotine gum from my lip and replace it with a heap of Skoal Longcut Wintergreen. That’s the medicine.

“Bo, get your dumb ass over here *now!*”

“I’m coming,” he says, not making eye contact, not daring to peel his eyes off the floor. For the first time I see that there might be something wrong with him—mentally. Keeping his head down, he moves towards her and as soon as he’s close enough, she reaches up and grabs a fistful of his hair in one hand, holds his head steady, and slaps him so hard with the other hand that the whole line goes quiet. The violence is swift and confident, an old habit between them. Someone else says, “Damn, Girl!” Fatty doesn’t come out of her trance. She’s still got a grip on his hair and she’s twisted his head down so she can whisper something in his ear. Some kind of threat, seems like, about what will happen if he wanders off again. He looks like he might cry. He takes it, doesn’t try to pull away. She slaps him again, lightly this time, almost lovingly, and then finally lets him go.

He straightens himself out, shakes his head and looks her in the eyes for the first time. “We’re done,” he says. “I’m leaving you. We’re done.”

“Oh no we’re not. Shut your filthy goddamn mouth and give me those bus tickets.”

She didn’t have to ask. He’s already fishing them out of his pocket. He pulls two tickets out and hands her one, and then he turns around and walks away without another word.

Good for him. Maybe he *is* done. Now the bus ride will be much quieter. The driver stands at the head of the line, counting us up. He walks the line and counts us three times. Then he gets on his radio and calls for another bus. He turns to us and announces that some people won’t get seats, but that another bus will pick up the rest of us within an hour. He starts boarding people. This’ll take a while. I’ve seen it before. People go to the bathroom or reach under their seats and don’t get counted, and the driver needs to start all over again. I turn to the old guy with the walker and ask him to hold my spot, then I walk out beside the bus to a little

cluster of smokers with the same purpose as me. I fish in my pocket and bring out the half a pack of American Spirits I'd been hoarding for this trip. I shake one out and get a light off a young black guy wearing a Yankee cap with the tags still. Not sure how I knew he's a smoker but he is, and he fires himself up a Newport in solidarity. "She a crazy bitch, right?" he says. I just nod, my head a million miles away imagining the reckoning I'll face if I'm late for Ursula.

The driver steps off the bus and announces in a flat tone that he's only got six more seats. I count up the spots in front of me and see that I am one of the six, the last one. I take a long drag off my cigarette, carefully put it out, and put the rest of it back in the pack for later. Just as I start to head back inside I see Fatty's beaten-down boy, Bo, walk up and take up his place in line with her like nothing ever happened. I see the old man screw up his face and start yelling at them and trying to get the driver's attention. Fatty and Bo ignore him. So does the driver. The old man looks at me like a drowning man looking for air. It's him or me. I nod at him and point towards the bus door, telling him he should board. I take my unfinished cigarette out of my pack and bum another light off the black kid.

While walking the six short and two long blocks from Port Authority to Penn Station, I tell myself I am different than these bus people. I have a job, and a profession to which I'd eventually return. I've eaten in five-star restaurants. I've slept with a Landsend model—twice. I will take the train, by God, because I am too good for these people that ride the casino buses from Port Authority. It will be tight but I'll survive without my slot machine coupon. I'll win back the difference at the tables, or skimp on something that Ursula won't notice. The train is so much more civilized. It will calm me down and put me in the correct frame of mind for the night. Plus, no traffic so no risk of being late for Ursula. Should've planned it this way from the beginning.

Penn Station feels like the Louvre to me after Port Authority. Just look at the flipping letters and numbers on the scheduling board. Old school. Look at the Zaros, and the people in suits and dresses. High heels, not flats. Trains, not buses. This is my world. The Amtrak ticket kiosk asks me if I want to upgrade to a first class seat for twenty five dollars more, and I do it. Why not? I'm worth it. Not a frugal move, but tonight's not the night for being cheap. It's the night of make it happen. I find a bathroom and lock myself in a stall. I reach into my pocket and pull out my little bag of tricks. Ziploc'ed for freshness. I need to plan, so A is my man. A is for Adderall, A is for Amphetamine. A is for cerebral cortex in pill form. Hot damn.

First class, Baby, upstairs in the red seats where the fancy people ride, where they hand out menus and mixed drinks. Kettle One and soda, thank you very much. Go heavy on the pour, Garcon, more, more, more... that's it, there she blows. Nice execution. I'd tip you more than a dollar for that there pour, but I'm already fifty-six dollars over budget. Speaking of, I need a four-seater to do my work. There's an empty one, at the far end of the car, that's got my name on it. Look at the high-end peeps in this joint, dude right there with a tuxedo on. Let me get my Kettle on and might need to have a chat with him, see what's up. Then there's the huge Italian bloke who's balding and will be wearing a hairpiece in a matter of months. Atlantic City is his stomping ground, methinks, so he is probably a force to be reckoned with. To my right are some Arabs, and you know they got it going on, they got the harems, the mad paper. No Fattys or Bos around here.

Woah. Hold up. There she is. Look at her. Earth Angel... I'm in love—completely, madly in love, times two (haven't forgotten you, U). No time for losers, her nose in a book, and what a beautiful nose it is. Behold the perturbed way she holds her book, bending its cover as if it will change the story she's reading. She cares about whatever is in those pages. She cares

about the world. About Elvis. She's an animal lover but shaves her legs and doesn't wear patchouli oil. Just look at her. She is my reason for being. Gives me hope for life after death. Can't talk to her yet, though, gotta get set up.

Drop my stuff on the four-seater and push on to the other side of the car to find the bathroom. The train is moving now, and the noise makes a difference. Motion, progress. Rattles my bones, makes the whole thing real somehow. Going to see my girl. Ursula, The Queen. The Girlbomb. The Unattainable. Save me, Kettle. Help me survive. I know, I know, you'll do what you can but it's not enough. Head spinning too fast now. Need a pain killer. Into the bathroom and out of my pocket comes the bag o' tricks. Ziploc'ed for freshness. I need to chill so V is my pill. V is for Vikadin. V is for vacuum up the Adderall, calm me down. Wash her down, Kettle.

Back to my four-seater. I extend the tray tables and empty out my pockets onto them and sit down. There before me against the stark whiteness of the tables is all the gas I have for cooking. Less than a quarter tank. Three hundred dollar bills, a fifty, and four twenties. I have two hundred dollars more on my debit, but need to leave it for incidentals at The Chelsea, the hotel I picked. Couldn't rent the room without it and it cost me five phone calls to the head manager to get it done. He obviously didn't understand how busy I am. All in the service of U. U is for Unattainable. U is for Ursula. U is for un-fucking-believable how gorgeous that girl is four rows up. Those fingers of hers, the frizz of her hair lit up by the sunlight streaking through the windows. Her perfect getaway sticks, curled up beneath her behind. And what a behind it is. I can see it because it rests on her heels and she leans sideways and her painted-on jeans don't leave much to the imagination. She looks up from her book and the laser beams that are her eyes lock into mine and I turn to pudding. Oh kids. No fair. You're not Ursula. You're not

The Queen. If I had a wedding ring, I'd be twisting it. If I had game, I'd be using it. If I had a beer, I'd be drinking it. I see a waitress, just in time. Nurse, give me a Miller Lite, and make me remember high school, please. Thank you, my dear. As I take the beer from her, she leans over, points with a flick of her eyes at the Johnny Three Chins, and whispers this warning: "Be careful around that one. I saw him almost kill a guy on this train once. Smashed his face in. Cops came but didn't even arrest him." The warning is wasted on me. What do I care? I'm an hour on this train now, which means I'm nearly half way home, half way to U is for Unbelievable. So there is the cooking gas, and I'm short and there's no denying it. I can get drinks and dinner tonight, maybe, but that will tap me out. So funny. Once upon a time my money flowed like wine, and a night like this was as easy as sneezing. That's when Miss U couldn't get enough of my confections. I'd be slinging mortgages and CDOs and everyone be gettin out of my way. That's what I'm talking about. That's the thing about it.

So the shortage will just need to be solved, like all things. It won't stand in the way of fate. Speaking of, look at that paisan, fat and alone, but so sure of what he is not, what he left alone when he was three. Just look at him, his guayabera, his pinky ring, his big silver cross chained to his neck. Awesome. Even his red, fleshy earlobes contain pent-up fury. Come on, now. He's some mother's son, he got choked up when he watched ET. He needs a friend. I stand up and move towards him, not knowing why, not knowing what will happen. Next thing I know I'm sitting next to him, invading his space.

"What do you need?" he asks me.

"Nothing," I say. "Sorry. I'm bored and a little drunk and was hoping you'd tell me what to do when I get to Atlantic City."

“Turn around and leave,” he said, and then he smiled and laughed and then coughed a deep wheezy cough.

“Are you from there?”

“Born and bred.”

“I’m Connor.” I stuck out my hand, and he reached out a big meaty paw to grab it. He smiled warmly and seemed in that moment to stop hating me for disturbing him. I noticed the fishhook tattoo on his neck and the Rolex on his wrist.

“What do you do, Connor?”

“Wish I knew. Kind of finding my way. Had a semblance of a career before the markets crashed, but... guess I’m rebuilding now, so to speak.”

“Are you gay?”

“Come again?”

“Are you a faggott, Connor?”

“No. Why?”

“Just have to ask. Gating question. We’re on a train to Atlantic City, where anything goes. You walked up to me and sat down and started talking to me. And I don’t know you from Adam.”

“Fair enough. I’m actually heading down to AC to try to patch things up with the love of my life.”

“Love of your life? What are you, fifteen? Can you even drive a car, Connor?”

“Just about to be middle aged. I’ll be thirty in three weeks.”

“And you love this girl, do you?”

I swallow hard. He looks at me with all his Italian bullshit, the swirl of his dark eyes and the knowing way his fat self spills into the seat next to him. “Yeah, I suppose I do love her. Never known anything like it. Can’t help it.”

“Good for you. Hold on to it. Lightning doesn’t usually strike twice.”

“Really?”

He turns away, coughs. Some kind of meanness passes over him. He doesn’t answer.

Without knowing why, I ask him, “Where do you want to be in ten years?”

“Dead.”

We’re both quiet for a bit. I think about asking him why he wants to be dead, but instead I get up and move back towards my four-seater. I’m wobbly, drunk and staggered by the V is for Vikadin. I should really sleep it off before reaching back in to my bag o’ tricks. I recline my seat and pass out.

I wake up to an announcement from the conductor. The train is stopped, some kind of mechanical issue. We’re deep into the pine barrens, the fetid wilderness of South Jersey. The sun is setting. My cell phone is blinking at me. A text from Ursula. She’s tied up and doesn’t want to meet tonight. She wants to know if we can meet tomorrow night instead. It’s beyond her control, she says. She’s sorry. She really is. And I can hear the lilt of her voice in the words on my cell phone, I can feel the breath that comes out of her mouth when she speaks them. God, she’s so beautiful, so rarified. So lost to me.

I need air. I stand up and move towards the back of the car, wondering if there’s a way to stand between the cars. I see that perfect girl with that perfect behind and her nose in the books, still reading. She looks up at me, holds my eyes for a moment, and looks back at her book. I keep moving towards the door.

The Dunning Man

Got the first complaint from Alice Williams in D103 about nine months after she moved in. Her upstairs neighbor had been throwing all-night parties that kept waking up her and her daughter, Ava. She'd waited a while before calling me, but she'd had enough. When she said it was loud, she meant *l-o-u-d*. Car crash-in-a-tunnel loud. The other night it got so crazy and lasted so long that she and Ava gave up, got out of bed, and watched the sun rise over the Atlantic Ocean through the little kitchen window. Not only that but her air conditioning had quit on her, just in time for the heat wave that was baking South Jersey.

I called the property management company to see who had the unit above her, D203. Belonged to someone named William Jones. I called him, but nobody answered. I really didn't need this brain damage. Two of the four units I owned in the complex still sat vacant, leaving me way short every month. I'd been banging my credit card silly to make up the difference but had hit my limit. Most bills I couldn't even think about paying. A pile of "IMMEDIATE RESPONSE REQUIRED" envelopes sat on my kitchen counter, unopened.

But right now I just needed to keep Alice. I liked her and I thought she liked me—as much as anyone can like the guy who collects the rent. I told her I'd come over and check everything out in person. On my way, I stopped at an electronics shop and bought a white noise machine.

When Alice opened the door and found me on the other side, she looked haggard. She'd just come off an eight-hour graveyard shift dealing cards at the Showboat Casino and was still in her work uniform. Her shiny gold bow tie hung around her neck, unclasped, and she'd

undone the top buttons of her shirt to cool off. All of the weeks of frustration seemed to come out of her mouth in one lump. She bitched like it was my fault: the noise, the heat, the lack of sleep, all of it driving her crazy. Sweat dripped down the side of her face, in spite of the red bandana she'd tied around her head to sop it up. She needed to blow off steam, so I let her. I stood in the doorway, absorbing her rant, and I had to calm her down before she would invite me in. She always invited me in.

She poured me a cold drink of water and we sat down in her living room, where a breeze coming through open windows cut the heat a bit. The place looked much the same as it did when I'd bought it, fully furnished, off an old Italian couple from Philadelphia. I'd given Alice all the furniture when she signed the lease, and she hadn't moved a stick of it. Couch and armchairs still had the plastic faux upholstery on them. Two-foot brass replica of Michelangelo's David still sat on the side table by the window.

I handed her the white noise machine and told her that one of these contraptions had saved my life when I first moved to Manhattan. Drowned out all the street noise. But then she described her noise problem. Not just loud music, though her upstairs neighbor had plenty of that complete with thumping dance beats and high-pitched vocals. Alice also told me about what she called "love sounds."

I laughed. I couldn't help it. "What do you mean, 'love sounds'?" I asked.

"They're having relations up there. All night."

"How do you know that?"

"I can hear them. Ava can hear them."

Fucked up for a nine-year-old to hear that, I thought. But I was confused. I owned an identical two-story unit across the quad and I knew the bedrooms were on the second floor.

"But you're down here," I said, "and bedrooms are on the second floor of their unit. There's a whole floor between you. I don't get it."

"I'm telling you I can hear them moaning and grunting. One girl screams when she's finished. She's the loudest. Someone calls her Mommy and says *Fuck me, Mommy, Fuck me, Mommy*. And she says, *Fuck me, Daddy*. Like that. Over and over. I can hear them clear as day. They did it four times last night, maybe five. I lost count."

"Wow," I said. I couldn't think of anything else to say.

We were both quiet for a moment. I had to let all that sink in. I noticed a new flat-screen TV sitting amid stacks of DVDs, looking out of place. The movie on top, *The Night of the Iguana*, reminded me of the first non-landlord conversation I ever had with Alice, right after she moved in. She'd told me she was nuts about old movies, that she'd named her daughter after Ava Gardner. We bonded over *Mogambo*, which had made me fall in love with both Ava Gardner and Grace Kelly when I was about thirteen. In the funhouse mirror of my imagination, they had to compete for my affection. *Mogambo* was Alice's favorite, too.

"Tell me about the air conditioning problem," I said.

"Gets a little cool downstairs but not upstairs. It's a furnace in the bedrooms. Finally had to just open all the windows."

I told her I'd send someone to fix it right away.

Just then, Ava came home from school. She wore pigtails, a white shirt and a long black skirt. She smiled and waved at her mom and me.

"Come here, Baby," Alice said. "Look at you. Why you never look in the mirror?"

She pulled the tight hair bands out of Ava's hair and redid them both in about two milliseconds. The quick, sure hands of a blackjack dealer.

"There you go," she said. "Now you're good."

"Thanks, Momma," Ava said. And with that she continued up to her bedroom. A few seconds later I heard the sound of a small dog yelping and whining.

I gave Alice a disappointed teacher look. She knew she'd been found out. Her lease contained a \$150 pet upcharge clause.

She gave me the first smile I'd seen on her that day. The dimple on one side, the defiant scrunch of her lips, the lack of any trace of self-doubt. She had a certain power over me, and she knew it. I hoped it came from a true place. I hoped she knew we stood on the same side of whatever line divided us from other people.

I turned to leave, but, as I was getting ready to go, Alice's fiancé came home. I'd never met him, and I instantly knew he wasn't good enough for Alice and Ava or for anyone else. He gave me a limp handshake and failed to meet my eyes, then he brushed past me to get himself a forty ounce of Ballantine Ale from the fridge. He took a long sip of it and came back towards me, but I stood in his path.

"Home from work already?" I asked him. He winced. I was his landlord. It was before four o'clock. He had some lame comeback about being between jobs.

Alice stepped between us with a purpose. "You gonna charge me now for that damn dog, Connor?"

"No. Not yet. Just work with me while I figure out how to fix this noise thing."

She nodded and winked, and it occurred to me just then that Alice might be the closest thing I'd ever had to a female friend. Of course, I wanted to sleep with her, too, but that didn't seem likely under the circumstances.

I left Alice's apartment and walked upstairs to D203, bile rising in my throat. These people sounded rough. Even though the Beachgarden complex sat only a few steps away from the boardwalk and ocean, at the far end of Atlantic City's main strip of casinos, its residents were an unlikely mix of retirees, casino workers and welfare recipients. No telling what awaited me in D203.

The door to the apartment stood open a crack, but I didn't dare go inside. The smell of dope wafted out into the stairwell. I knocked and instantly heard a vicious-sounding dog. I jumped back three feet and prepared to run.

"What you want?" someone said from inside. "Who is it?"

"I'm Connor Ryan. I own the apartment downstairs. I just wanted to introduce myself."

"Come in."

"But what about the dog?"

"He tied up. You're okay. You alright."

He sounded almost jovial. I pushed open the door and looked around the room. The voice had come from upstairs, in the bedroom, and I entered on the bottom level. The dog was chained—literally, with a thick steel chain—to the table in the living room. He railed at his restraint and snarled at me, foam spilling over the black rim of his gums. He was a pit bull, the kind that sometimes mauls small children.

"Nice boy," I said, like an idiot. "It's okay. Nice boy."

"Come on up here," the upstairs voice said.

I stopped being terrified long enough to notice my surroundings. The place looked ransacked, like a crime scene. Upside-down chairs lay everywhere, and one of them had been

thrown against the living room wall with such force that a leg had punched through the sheetrock and lodged there, suspending the chair three feet off the ground. Empty bottles of Hennessy and Coke cans were strewn everywhere--on the floor, the chairs, the table. A half-drunk bottle of Cristal was stuck between the cushions of the couch, and a huge, sinister-looking bong with a red bowl, a three-foot-long chamber, and a black mouthpiece, sat on the table in front of it. Wisps of smoke rose from the bowl and chamber--it had just been used.

Jesus, I thought, if I ever want to fall off the face of the Earth, I know where to find the door. Then I saw why Alice could hear the love sounds: the part of the apartment where the dining room should be had been walled off, creating a downstairs bedroom. I could see an unmade bed through the open door. Clothing and bed linens were strewn all over the floor.

"Where you at, Connor Ryan?" the voice said. "Come on up."

I jogged up the stairs and followed the sound of his voice to the back bedroom. The first thing I saw was a woman's bare ass cheeks. Tall and lean, she stood with her back to the door of the bedroom, bent over an ironing board, wearing nothing but a black thong and red lace bra. The steam from the iron curled around the bare skin of her back and rose towards the ceiling. She turned and glared at me for a long moment, then went back to ironing. At the far end of the bedroom a man I knew I recognized stood naked from the waist up in front of a king-sized bed. It took me a few seconds to put it together. William Jones was actually Stryker Jones, whose latest hit song, "I'll Love You For Now," had been wearing out my ear drums. Beside him, a second woman stood wrapped in a white shiny top sheet she used to cover herself up.

"Wassup, Rookie?" he said to me. He didn't tell me his name--no need.

"Looks like you guys had some fun last night," I said, trying to sound unafraid.

"For sure. If it feels good, do it. That's my motto." He smiled and showed me his gold teeth. "But there's a price, and I'm paying it today." Giggles from the woman beside him.

I nodded. What else could I do? I noticed his bloodshot eyes and thought of the bong.

"Let me introduce my guests. This is Sharon and this is Rhee," he said, pointing at each of them.

Sharon said hello. The one called Rhee couldn't be bothered to turn around again. She gave me a half wave and kept ironing.

"What's on your mind, Rookie?" Stryker said.

"I wanted to introduce myself and also talk to you about a complaint I got about noise from my tenant directly underneath you."

What I really wanted to do was get the fuck out of there and go tell Alice what I'd seen.

"We made some noise last night, didn't we?" He looked at one woman and then the other. They nodded, and the one called Sharon moved behind him and opened the sheet long enough to flash me. She spread out her arms with a corner of the sheet in each hand, then she wrapped her arms and the sheet around Stryker, pressing her naked body up against his back. She whispered something in his ear. He turned his head and kissed her.

I'd become invisible. Meeting over. "Uh. Maybe I'll come back at a more convenient time."

I left.

I didn't make any progress solving Alice's noise problem that day, but I did arrange for someone to come fix her air conditioner. One thing at a time.

And I did get what seemed like good news: Driving away from the complex, I picked up a message on my cell from my agent. A possible tenant had just resurfaced for one of my vacant units, D106. Short-term rental, but good income.

This lease had been almost two months in the making. Right after I closed on the fourth condo at the Beachgarden, my agent had called and said someone in her office knew a woman looking for a furnished place to rent for the performers in a show playing at the Taj Mahal. She thought it could be a four-month rental at three grand per month, almost four times the going rate. The red flags should have warned me off, but it's no coincidence that green is the color of money and Go. One issue was that the renter refused to personally guarantee the lease, insisting that it go in the name of her company instead. She also refused to put the electric in her own name. Not to worry, my agent said. This woman is part of an extremely wealthy banking family. She's good for it.

Tell me more, I said. The woman, Erika Deitz-Hoffman, was the oldest daughter of Alan Hoffman, Founder and Chairman of Savoy Bank of Pennsylvania. The Hoffman family needed no introduction. They had one of the largest homes on the boardwalk, complete with some goofy bronze statues of children and dolphins frolicking together. Her son, Christopher "Bucky" Deitz-Hoffman, was "co-producing" the show, along with Donald Trump himself, at Trump's Taj Mahal Casino, one of the last casinos on the strip. Her son was nine years old. In a certain lens, the kind slathered in Vaseline, this might be impressive. But I knew people with money did a lot of weird stuff to distract themselves from the abyss, so I didn't think too much of it. Nor did I pay much attention to the description of the show--something about animals and magic. The Milosz Brothers: Untamed Illusions. I googled Erika Deitz-Hoffman and a short profile piece popped up from the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, complete with a picture. She looked

like an overfed Madonna, a trust-fund chick used to getting exactly what she wanted. Too much makeup, dyed blonde hair, her extra pounds spilling out of a form-fitting dress that was all kinds of wrong for her. The piece implied that she was first in line to take over the Savoy banking “empire” but apparently she’d lost that battle and had to settle for Untamed Illusions. Another red flag ignored. Through her lawyer, she’d originally offered me \$1500 per month with utilities included. I countered with \$3500 plus utilities, striking her and her entourage silent until I got this most recent call from my agent.

Erika herself had just called back to say that she’d agree to \$3250 a month if I agreed to her other conditions. She demanded an immediate answer, claiming that she had two other apartments she could grab if I turned her down. Since I was only a few blocks away, I told my agent to make the deal, pulled a U-turn and went back to make sure the place was ready for the new tenants.

When I got back to the parking lot of the Beachgarden, I saw Ava walking her little dog around the complex. She smiled and waved at me as I pulled up, and I waved back. The dog yapped. Some kind of a Terrier mutt, with turned-out paws and wire hair and billy goat whiskers about its face. So-ugly-it-was-cute kind of dog. I jumped out of my truck and went over to talk to Ava and pat the dog a little. Just as I reached where she was standing, one of Stryker’s houseguests--I thought it was Sharon but it might have been Rhee--rounded the corner of the complex, trying to restrain the pit bull. Ava’s little dog went apeshit, the way some small dogs do right before they get chewed up by bigger ones.

I put myself in front of Ava, and the pit bull pulled Stryker’s girlfriend ever closer to us, its claws raking against the sidewalk, the muscles of its legs bulging. Ava’s little dog yapped and yapped, taunting the pit to come kill it. I began to sweat, and my heart pounded in

my ears. The man-eater lunged against its chain less than ten feet away. It panted and pulled, making its way ever closer. Clearly the thin woman holding its leash couldn't handle it. Ava froze and her little dog kept yapping its head off. I told Ava to move away, but she didn't seem to hear me.

Just then, Stryker Jones rounded the stairs behind them and jogged up to us. He grabbed the man-eater's leash and yanked the dog towards him with such force that he spun its body around in mid air. Then he landed a knee in the dog's rib cage. It yelped in pain and went quiet.

Stryker wore a bowler hat, pajama bottoms and a robe that said "The Lanesborough Hotel London." After he subdued the dog, he turned towards me and Ava and grinned, showing us all of his teeth, including the twenty-four carats in front.

"There you go, Rookie," he said. "Don't say I never did anything for you."

I laughed, more because of the passing of danger than anything else.

I turned to Ava and saw that she recognized him. Of course she did. Her mouth hung open, her eyes pinned wide with amazement. Then she took a breath and gathered herself with sudden poise. I saw Alice in the knowing look that took over her face..

"You're Stryker Jones," she said.

"In the flesh."

He winked and Ava giggled.

Then he was gone, as quickly as he had arrived, dragging the man-eater behind him.

D106, my vacant unit right across from Alice's apartment, looked fine, ready for the new tenants. I'd bought this one from four retired couples, who used it for weekend beach trips

from Philadelphia. They'd kept the place tidy. I flushed all the toilets, tested the faucets, and wiped some accumulated dust off the countertops.

Only one problem: the air conditioner in this unit didn't seem to be working either. I turned it on when I got there, and the vents still blew warm air a half an hour later, when I was getting ready to leave. Oh well. These people work with tropical animals. What would they care? It would help them get in character or whatever they did to prepare for their show. If they called, I'd send a technician to take care of it, same as with Alice.

As I drove down Atlantic Avenue, away from the Beachgarden complex, I saw a large billboard advertisement. It featured a giant of a man, riding on top of a big tiger. The words "Milosz Brothers: Untamed Illusions" were written in huge block letters below the picture. Then there was the co-producer credits: Donald Trump and Bucky Hoffman, the trust fund kid. Excellent. Anybody with a billboard had to be good for \$3250 a month, and for a while I stopped worrying about the circus and the heiress.

Stryker went quiet for about a month. More than once during this time I wished for more trouble from Stryker—nothing big, just an excuse to see Alice.

But I had other problems to entertain me. The animal people had moved into D106, as scheduled. The first call came in the middle of the day. One of the neighbors whose apartment opened into the quad shared by the animal people had called the property manager who looked after the common areas. The property manager eventually called me to tell me that there was a

flood in D106. I was initially confused since I couldn't figure out how a neighbor could tell if a first floor unit was flooding. Then I realized—the water had spilled into the quad.

I said I'd be right over.

Before leaving I called my agent and told her what had happened. She promised to call Erika Deitz-Hoffman and her agent and try to find some way to get in touch with the tenants.

My cell phone rang five minutes later and there was a breathless foreign voice on the other end of the line. I couldn't place the accent but it reminded me of a hacking cough. Sounded like the guy must be from some part of Eastern Europe, the part where they all sound like aliens from some cloud-covered, desolate planet. Wherever he came from apparently didn't have modern plumbing. The flood had him all worked up. I told him to calm down and call me back when he had a translator. Then I got my agent back on the phone and got more information. She sent me a link to the Untamed Illusions website, which described the two Milosz brothers as refugees from the Chechyen conflict. In what was apparently meant as a sales pitch, the website contained a bio of the older one, Ferdinand, who trained and served in Spetnaz, before the fall of Communism and "killed many enemies." His combat experience made him "a lover of peace and animals." Ferdinand the Magnificent and his little bro, Ramos the Great. Howdy, Neighbors.

I called the last number dialed and plowed through the broken English on the other side of the line long enough to tell the guy to meet me at the apartment. I had no idea if he understood me.

When I got to the apartment, and rounded the D building to the quad entrance, I saw the water immediately. There was enough of it to show me the damage inside could be serious. The unit had two floors, with no bathrooms on the first floor. The front door handle had been

broken clean off. I knocked twice and let myself into the unit and saw a massive swollen and dripping bubble in the ceiling, right over the front door.

I was so distracted that I didn't register the giant cage in the living room until I was already halfway upstairs. I didn't register it at first because I hadn't believed my eyes—and also because the animal lay there, motionless, sound asleep. All I saw was coiled limbs, striped fur and muscles. Above the blood pumping in my own ears, I could hear it breathing, a sound like air being sucked through a wet straw. I coughed to see if I could make it move, and it picked up its giant head and looked at me sleepily through enormous yellow eyes. I stared into its eyes for a few seconds, lost in the absurdity of it all.

I blocked the wild cat out of my head and went upstairs to survey the damage, which, to my infinite relief, seemed manageable. The handle of the toilet had been broken off in such a way that the water had kept running. Must've been the big guy. I felt like I was on the trail of fucking Sasquatch, only instead of his giant paw prints I was finding damage to fixtures made for ordinary men, not circus freak strongmen ex-commandos. The other difference was that I knew just where this beast slept at night—in my new condo.

The apartment was hot as Africa, so at least the cat felt at home. Clearly the air conditioning wasn't working. Screw the air conditioning, I thought, grasping for any meager revenge. Let them sweat.

I called my agent and explained what I'd seen. I demanded all the phone numbers she had for everyone connected to the Hoffman woman. I called every number and the only one who answered was Hoffman's lawyer—Joseph Sandone. When I got him on the phone, any restraint I had left collapsed, and I went berserk.

"Do you know what your goddamn clients have done to my property? They've destroyed it. Thousands of dollars worth of damage. Ruined the toilet, the upstairs sink, the ceiling, the rugs, the front door. Smashed it up, flooded it. What are you going to do about it?"

There was a long pause. "Are you finished?" he asked. His accent was pure Philadelphia Italian.

"Yes. What are you going to do about this damage?"

"I'm not going to do anything."

"Are you kidding? You're also late on your rent! Are you fucking kidding me?"

"The air conditioning doesn't work."

"What? You're going to bring up the air conditioning on this call? Your client is keeping a wild animal in the apartment. In *my* apartment. In my *fucking* apartment."

"The lease states that all the appliances and the heating and cooling systems must be kept in working order."

"Do you know that your client has a tiger in my apartment?"

"No, I didn't know that. But I do know that the air conditioning isn't working properly."

"You're a fucking asshole. And so is your client."

He laughed the laugh of someone who has grown to enjoy making people unhappy.

"That kind of language isn't helpful," he said.

"Pay the fucking rent or I'll shut off the power that you refused to put in your own name. I see your game, but I can play it, too."

"I should remind you that you don't have a certificate of occupancy. I know that for a fact. You go legal on us, and you'll end up with a fine and a legal bill and no ability to collect from us. And we will countersue. Trust me."

I hung up the phone, which was wet from the sweat off my hand.

That same night, or the next morning, I should say, since it was after four am, Alice called me in a panic. She was hyperventilating into the phone and trying to talk but the words wouldn't come. It scared me. Alice impressed me as a pretty unshakeable woman, and she sounded hysterical. I kept telling her to breathe. Don't talk, just breathe. All the while I was thinking the worst--that something had happened to Ava, that she'd been molested by some South Inlet crackhead in that godforsaken neighborhood. Or Ferdinand the Magnificent's wild cat had broke loose and eaten Ava or Ava's pooch.

So when I found out what had Alice so upset, I felt relieved. One of Stryker's boys had just kicked the shit out of her fiancé. The noise had started early last night, around ten o'clock. Louder than ever. Around midnight, her fiancé had banged on the door of Stryker's apartment and asked them to quiet down. They said they would but of course they didn't. More people showed up. The music blasted louder and louder, and the dancing and the thumping shook the ceiling with such force they thought it would come down on them. At that point, Alice called the cops. It took them over an hour to show up and by this point it was two am. Alice watched and saw the police car pull up out front. The lights were off and they didn't use sirens. Two cops climbed the steps and came back half an hour later laughing. One of them said something about not expecting a happy ending. They spent five minutes with Alice and her fiancé telling them that Stryker and his crew had agreed to keep it quiet, but they also said that they had

every right to have a party if they wanted. One of the cops asked Alice's fiancé if he was drunk, which, as she admitted to me, he was. There was another half an hour of quiet, then the noise started up louder than ever. Alice's fiancé kept on drinking and around three-thirty he went back upstairs to confront Stryker himself.

Ten minutes before Alice called me, her fiancé had been deposited at her doorstep, beaten up and left for dead. The ambulance came and rushed him to Atlantic City Medical Center, and she'd called me from outside the emergency room.

I didn't say anything for a few seconds after Alice had finished her story. Then I tried to tell her that it would be temporary, that Stryker was on tour in just a few more weeks. Then he'd be off to terrorize some other city and things would calm down. But Alice was inconsolable. She knew this would happen. Just knew it. She'd told her fiancé not to go messing with Stryker, but he started drinking and yelling. But those people had no right, she said, no damn right to do what they did. I offered to help in any way I could. I told her to stay out of it. I promised to call the police and make sure they were taking the whole thing seriously, knowing it'd be a waste of time. Seemed like one of the cops, if not both, had gotten blowjobs from a member of Stryker's harem. No way they'd go after Stryker now unless he shot someone.

By the end of the call, I'd promised to talk to Stryker, and Alice calmed down a bit. Right before we hung up, she told me that the technician had come and fixed the air conditioner.

"It's nice and cool now," she said. "Thank you, Connor." My name sounded good coming out of her mouth.

I went back to see Stryker, as promised, but first I did my homework. He'd been born William Everett Jones, but his birth name didn't play for long in Baltimore, where he grew up and joined his first gang at age ten. Legend had it that he'd earned his original street name "Sniper" because he used a high-powered rifle with a scope during drive-by shootings. While other bangers sprayed bullets indiscriminately, Jones would patiently aim his long-barreled rifle and rarely miss. When he decided to give up the banging for music, he changed "Sniper" to "Stryker"—probably to avoid conjuring images of Sarajevo. By now he'd sold over twenty million records worldwide. He had a wife but made no secret of his need for "something on the side," as he put it. The women in his videos often pulled double duty as members of his harem, which he modeled after Hugh Hefner's Playboy Bunny farm team.

He had a string of sold-out gigs in New York and New Jersey. He had a huge gambling habit, but had worn out his welcome at Atlantic City hotels after assaulting a bellboy with a champagne bottle and getting tossed out of the Borgata. So his Beachgarden apartment served as his crash and party pad. The previous occupants of Alice's apartment had also complained of the noise—so much that the owner renting to Stryker threatened to evict him. Stryker responded with a cash offer to buy the place that the owner couldn't resist.

It was half past noon when I got to the Beachgarden. Stryker came to the door in his pajamas. His apartment had been transformed. Everything was in its right place, and the place looked clean. No bong, no bottles. Wall had been patched up. An electronic keyboard sat on a stand in the living room. Looked like he'd been practicing or writing music.

"Hey, Rookie. What brings you to my house of fun?"

He knew why I was here. "Well, Stryker, I need to ask you to turn down the volume at your parties. My tenant's fiancé is banged up pretty good. He'll be okay, but he spent the night in the hospital."

He pointed his finger at my face. "That motherfucker got what was coming to him," he said. "Now, I like the girl, the little girl with that ugly dog. I see her around the place. She always smiling. Always says hello. She's intelligent. So's her mama." He paused, looked at me for a couple of beats and then continued. "But that motherfucker she with came in here all drunk and yelling, not knowing what he was up against. And he got what was coming. He's lucky he alive."

"Okay. But can't you just keep the noise down? Put yourself in my shoes, in the shoes of my poor tenant."

"I was about to do that. I really was. Fact, I was getting ready to give your tenants some walk-away money, out of respect for you and that little girl. I was going to give them ten large or more to get them to take a trip and go away until my touring season is up. But then that motherfucker came and ruined the chance of that."

I saw an opening.

"That would be a great solution. Could you ever see your way clear to do that?"

He shook his head. This part of the conversation had ended.

"I'll tell you what. Sit down." He motioned towards a black leather couch, turned away from me, and moved towards a square coffee table in the middle of the room. He leaned over it, put his hand in its center and pushed down. I didn't understand what he was doing until it was done. He lifted his hand up and a circular bar slowly rose up, revealing a bottle of Jameson whiskey. "Have a drink with me, Connor," he said.

I couldn't believe he remembered my name. My surprise must've shown.

"What? I'm not supposed to be drinking this Irish shit? I'm supposed to have Hennessy or Couvasier? Ha. Wait till you see me doing my yoga meditation on the beach. Don't be nervous. Sit down. Let me ask you something," he said. "You married?"

"No."

He poured two shots of whisky and handed me one. "Ever want to be?"

"Kind of."

"I want you to tell me about her. But first I want you to drink that whiskey."

He threw back his entire shot and I did the same. He waited, making it plain that I had to talk.

"She was too good for me."

"Too good *how*?"

"Came from money. Grew up knowing how to act."

"You ain't been to college?"

"No. Well, yes. I've been to college. That's where we met."

"So what was the problem?"

I looked at Stryker Jones, really looked at him for the first time. He wore a black T-shirt with small gold letters centered between his pecks: G R A N D. A web of tattoos covered his forearms, which bulged with Popeye muscles. He wore a small black skullcap and a silver cross in his right ear. His eyes locked onto me, like a scope catching me in its crosshairs. For some reason he wanted me to open up, to confess, but how could I? We didn't just come from different backgrounds—we came from different galaxies.

"What about your story? You're married, right?"

“I’ll get to that, but you’re going first. Just tell me, Connor. Just tell *it*.” He poured me another before I could say no. I drank it mostly just to buy some time. But the first dose of it had started to hit me, and I started to feel like he was inviting me into his world, trying to take me into his confidence for some reason.

“She was the oldest of four sisters, and she was a knockout. Her dad was a rich lawyer, made his money off of chasing ambulances. ‘Personal Injury Attorney’ they call it, but the most injured people in his world are the people he sued. He was damn good at it and almost never lost a case. I got to know him and the rest of her family. Great people, full of life. She had what her dad calls a ‘twinkle in her eye,’ a certain magnetic presence, and when we were together I sometimes couldn’t believe my luck.”

“So what went wrong?”

“Long story. I don’t want to bore you.”

“Why you talk about her like she’s dead?”

“She is. To me. Or I’m dead to her, more like it. At one point she wanted us to get married, and for a while I did, too. She also expected me to do certain things, to make something of myself. I felt pressure to live up to a certain ideal she had, and so I applied to law school, the one where her father got his degree. He was a big deal there and had donated a ton of money. He wrote me a letter of recommendation. I got accepted, but immediately decided I didn’t want to go. She didn’t like that and tried hard to persuade me. Her father did, too. Said I could take over his practice. But he also told me something that made more sense to me: ‘follow your bliss.’”

“So she dumped your ass and you ended up a slumlord. Nice work.”

“Yeah, guess I’ve been trying for the past few years to work my way back to her, though I’m sure she’s moved on.”

“You still love her?”

I had to think about it. It was the first time in a long time that I’d asked myself that question. She used to occupy my every waking thought. I spent months and months mourning our breakup. I used to hear her in every sad song and see her in every curly-haired brunette on the sidewalk. The obsession had faded some now, but she still seemed to me like the best I might ever have.

“No. Fuck her. And fuck you. Let’s talk about something else.”

“What’s she doing now?”

“Don’t know. I think she’s an editor or a writer or something. She doesn’t need to worry about money.”

Stryker seemed to ponder that. “Must be nice,” he said. “Let me ask you this: when was the last time you got laid?”

“Over three years ago.”

“By her?”

“I nodded.”

“Shit. You know what you need? You need what I call a ‘pussy wipe.’ You need you a little freak who can make you feel good and strong again and wipe away all that negative bullshit. Clear your head right up. I can help you with that.”

I laughed nervously and felt my face getting hot.

“How about that little piece you rent to on the first floor? I seen the way you look at her. I bet she’s a handful but I wouldn’t mind getting a handful of that ass. She’s really cute in a crazy bitch sort of way.”

“Alice is a good person, a good mom. And yes, she’s very pretty. But I don’t think I’m her type.” I wanted to change the subject. I reached over and poured us two more whiskeys. “Okay, now you. What’s your story?”

He took a big gulp of whiskey as if it was medicine. “I don’t know if you’ve read anything about me, but I’ve been married for almost twenty years to Florence Waters, who used to call herself Flo-Ride. Flo and me had what you might call a business arrangement. We got together before either of us had much money, and we couldn’t get enough of each other. But we were smart enough back then to know how things might play out. Getting married was Flo’s idea. She thought it would be great for record sales, kind of like JayZ and Beyonce. When I resisted she said all the right things. I’ll never forget this one conversation we had when she was like, ‘Look, I know you’re a dog and you’re not going to stop sniffing around for strange pussy. So we had a kind of a don’t ask, don’t tell thing. And a--what-do-you-call-it? A pre-nup. We kept our finances separate.’”

“So I’m guessing she changed her mind and you guys are splitting up?”

“That’s right. And she wants to steal half of everything I have now and everything I make. Her career has gone nowhere. She lost her best friend to a car accident. Her mom has cancer. Her life is a mess right now. She’s bitter.”

I shook my head. “Can she do that?”

“My lawyer says yes. She’ll have the sympathy of the court because of my so-called ‘lifestyle.’”

“That’s bullshit,” I said, and meant it.

“You know what the funny thing is? I still love the bitch. Even after all this, I still love her. I don’t want to split up. I’m happy with the way things are.”

As I looked at Stryker I could’ve sworn that his eyes glistened and his whole tough-guy façade fell away for just a moment. Then he snapped out of it and took another gulp of whiskey.

"Hey," he said. "You renting to those animal trainer people?"

"Yes."

"You think they’d ever loan me one of them animals—a big tiger cat or something? Just for a night. I’m having a big wrap party, and it would be great to have one of those things to set the mood, you know?"

I thought about that caged killer in the Untamed apartment partying with Stryker and his posse. I had to smile.

"You got his number?"

Without thinking it through, I wrote it down on a piece of paper and gave it to him.

"Thanks. You alright. Let me know if you want some help with that pussy wipe. Best way to clear your head."

The rent on the animal people's apartment was almost a month late on a four-month lease.

None of my calls got returned.

So I harassed my agent until I got the personal cell number of Erika Deitz-Hoffman and started leaving her messages every day. One day I called her from a different number, a borrowed cell phone, and she answered.

"Yes, who is this?" she said, in the voice of someone who was just waking up. It was two o'clock in the afternoon.

"Erika, this is Connor Ryan."

"Oh, hello you! I've been meaning to call you! I'm *so* sorry about the delay in the rent payment. My people didn't tell me what was happening until this morning." All sweetness and light.

"That's okay," I lied. "But can we get it paid?"

"Sure, Honey. In fact, why don't you come by the show tonight? I'll have tickets waiting for you at the Taj Mahal. You'll come as my guest. How many do you need."

"You don't need to do that. Why don't I just meet you beforehand and get the rent that way."

"Nonsense. I'll leave four tickets for you at the box office. It's a great show. See you tonight. Maybe we can even get a drink afterwards." She sounded manic.

"Sure. Maybe."

"Are you married, Hon?"

"Uh, no. Look. I'd rather just get the rent from you. I've actually got plans."

"Have it your way. I'll leave the tickets in case you change your mind, but call me just before the show starts and I'll come meet you."

And that's what I did. But all I got was her voicemail. All I wanted was to collect what I was owed. I was even prepared to blow off the damage and take it out of the security at the end of the lease.

I knew she'd be at the show, and I'd force some sort of confrontation. I thought that her henchman, Sandone, might be there, but whatever. I was right, she was wrong, plain and simple.

At the appointed time, I drove to the Taj Mahal, parked, and walked around to the entrance of the little theater where the animal people were doing their thing.

She never intended to meet me. I rang her phone again and again from the walk from the car to the casino, and it went straight to voicemail every time. Okay, I thought. More than one way to do this.

I went straight to the box office window and said I was a guest of the show's producer, Erika Deitz-Hoffman. The girl behind the counter pushed an envelope at me. "She left this for you," she said. "But you can't go in until the intermission. House rules."

Just then an older paunchy guy walked up and asked if he could help. I explained that Erika Deitz-Hoffman expected me. He spoke on his walkie-talkie cell phone and then led me to a table right near the stage, which was filled with enormous animals that seemed prehistoric.

My first thought when I saw them was how unprotected the audience was. If one of these beasts decided to eat someone, there wasn't much to stop them. But then, I supposed, somebody somewhere in this building was surely planning for such a scenario – and carrying a gun to prevent the worst case. I suddenly wondered if Stryker and his posse had caught this show yet. Then my eyes adjusted, and I saw that the stage was cordoned off by thin wire that the weird lighting made almost invisible.

The place was about half full, and there were a lot of kids around the same age as the Hoffman kid. The co-producer. No sign of The Donald, though. Guess he couldn't make it. I searched the crowd for Erika and saw a group of adults plus one kid seated to my left, atop a

little stadium lift in the theatre. Two men—whom I took to be Erika’s brother and maybe her ex—plus a blond woman with a worked-on face and too-tight dress. Erika. And the kid. He was the kid that all kids everywhere hate. Smug little smile of entitlement, just waiting to take his bows and bask in the adulation of this loser crowd.

The show plodded on, with cheesy jokes and bad magic. The only interesting thing about the whole show was the seediness of it—and the beasts. A huge African lioness and a Siberian tiger and a bunch of tiger cubs who ran in circles and jumped and ate apples out of the trainers’ mouths and so forth. And then there was the animal from my apartment—which turned out to be a Bengal tiger. She was the star, and was introduced by Ramos the Great with a lot of fanfare: Jezebel.

I spent most of the show twisting my neck around to catch Erika’s eye, trying to arrange for some kind of a meet-up to get the goddamn rent. She ignored me.

After the show, her bratty kid got up there and took ten bows, and Donald Trump appeared by videotape to congratulate himself and the kid and the animal people on an incredible, outstanding show. The Deitz-Hoffman crew sat there looking bored. They must’ve already seen this show about thirty times by now, and it wasn’t much good the first time.

Then the curtain fell and the Deitz-Hoffman crew disappeared while I was still watching the curtain. I turned around just in time to see Erika scurry off. The way she bolted made me rethink the dynamics of the situation. Maybe she actually didn’t have the money. I could imagine that she might’ve fucked up the finances and lied to her family about not being under water.

I pursued her but got stopped by a security guard posted at the curtain. After some back and forth that got me nowhere, I saw my man from the door and waved him over. He led me

backstage. I hesitated for a second, but then told him that would be great. He led me behind a curtain.

As soon as I got behind the curtain, Erika saw me and shrieked. I jumped back, startled.

"Get him out of here!" she said, pointing at me, her hand shaking violently. "Him, *him!* That one—somebody get him—security! Call security! Who let him back here? He's come to attack me! It's the dunning man! He has no right to come after me here. Security, security! Get him!"

My poor geriatric escort, who *was* security, looked around trying to figure out who could be making her screech like this. Then he realized it was me, and he looked at me apologetically.

"What's wrong with you?" I said. "You invited me here. You left tickets for me at the front desk. You are a goddamn lunatic, you know that?" At this moment I noticed the people around Erika, the animal people and the roadies, had gathered us to watch. I could tell by the expressions that I'd been shouting. Most of them looked more amused than surprised. One roadie with a shaved head and a *Pogue Mahone* t-shirt actually smiled and nodded. The old rent-a-cop rested a hand on my shoulder and pulled at me gently, but I stood my ground and looked around at my audience. "Wait. This woman, your *boss*, owes me money. She rented my apartment and hasn't paid me for it. She has enough money to put on this show. Her family owns banks, for God's sake." I looked back at Erika Dietz-Hoffman. "What kind of a person are you?" The bald roadie gave me a thumbs-up on the sly. The old security guard grabbed my arm and started pulling me away. I slowly turned around and followed him as he hurried me out the door, apologizing the whole way.

And that was my last face-to-face encounter with Erika Deitz-Hoffman.

The next day, I shut off the electricity in the apartment. Her lawyer called that night, threatening to sue and report me to the city. I turned it back on and started coming up with a new plan. This wasn't over yet.

I called my agent and told her what happened. She was sympathetic but a little scared, I could tell. Then he counseled me to be careful, since it didn't seem like the Deitz-Hoffman woman was playing with a full deck.

Screw being careful. I gave Erika's agent a blow-by-blow account of what had happened. Had to leave five messages, because her voicemail kept cutting me off. I called Erika's lawyer, Sandone, and was told by the receptionist that he was tied up. I said I'd hold for him. Sandone made me wait five minutes before coming on the line. I blasted him. When I stopped, he was quiet for what seemed like a full minute.

"Well, I'm going to get off the phone with you now. And I suggest you calm down and think about how you want this thing to end."

"What do you mean? I'm the victim here."

"That might be true. I'm not saying it is, but let's say it is for the sake of this conversation. Doesn't matter."

"Doesn't *matter*? I can't pay the mortgage without rental income. I just got a foreclosure notice. And you say it doesn't matter?"

"That's right. It's not the relevant question. The relevant question is, does anyone care about right and wrong, victim and perpetrator, in this situation? That's the question. And I think you already know the answer."

"Nobody gives a rat's ass."

"You said it."

"Tell me this: does this crazy bitch have any money to pay the rent? Is she tapped out of her trust fund or something?"

"Look—I can't spell this out for you. Just don't do anything stupid. Think about who's on the other side of this thing and be smart."

"Is that supposed to be some kind of a threat?"

"No, it's not. You seem like a nice enough kid, and I don't want this to get messy. That's all."

"Okay. Thanks—I guess."

"Don't thank me. Just think before you make another move."

I did think about it, and I seriously considered taking the high road to put this all behind me. Instead, I shut off the electricity again. I had to set them straight and use what leverage I had. Otherwise the dominos would fall and I'd lose all of the properties.

Two days later, I woke up to find my truck had a flat tire. I put the spare on and drove it towards a service station. It died half a mile down the road. Had to get it towed. Turns out someone had filled the gas tank with sugar and almost fried the whole engine. The guy at the service station said he'd flush out the fuel system and see if he could save the patient, but no promises.

Fucking hell. What was up with this Rambo shit?

For the cherry on top, Alice called me, panicked again. Her now ex-fiancé's drinking had gotten out of hand. Could I come by the apartment today, Alice wanted to know. I asked her what it was that we couldn't discuss over the phone. She just begged me to come by.

So I did.

She motioned me over to the living room and walked me over to the side table by the window. She opened a drawer, revealing a handgun she'd hidden under some napkins.

"Jesus," I said. "What is that for?"

"He says he's going to confront Stryker and his gang next time he has a party. He's talking crazy. Lost his new job. Been drinking all day, every day. I don't know what to do. I can't have him around here. Can't have him around Ava."

"You need to get a restraining order."

"Already applied for one, but it takes time. I don't have time."

"So I guess the noise machine I brought you doesn't help?"

She gave me a withering look. I held her gaze for a moment, surprised at how young and vulnerable she looked. I don't think I'd ever thought about her age before, but I guessed just then that she was younger than me. She had no lines around her brown eyes, and her lips were full and taut.

"Right. Okay. Keep things under control. I don't know what I can do but let me think about it, Alice. Let me try to come up with something."

I walked over to her and put my hand on her shoulder. She didn't pull away. She was trembling. I pulled her to me and hugged her. She hugged me back and put her head on my shoulder. The feel of her in my arms put a swarm of warm butterflies in my stomach and made my skin dance. I wanted to protect her.

The next day I went to visit Stryker in his apartment, and saw Alice coming down the stairs as I was going up. She was shaking her head and smiling before she noticed me. I stared straight at her, locking eyes, trying to read her expression.

“He ain’t so bad,” she said, looking at me without remorse. “He’s crazy but he ain’t all bad. He’s smart.”

I stared at her eyes and said nothing.

“I had to talk to him, Connor. This has to stop. We’re getting no sleep. I’m worried about what could happen. I’m worried about Ava.”

“So what did he say?”

She smiled, looked down and brushed past me. I turned and watched her go into her apartment and shut the door without looking back.

The door to Stryker’s apartment was open and I could hear Chopin playing on his stereo. I didn’t recognize the man sitting on the couch. He wore a white dress shirt with a buttoned-down collar, a bowler hat, and horn-rimmed tortoise shell glasses. He was reading a page from a sheaf of clipped paper, holding the page close to his face, and he looked like a college professor. When he looked up at me and put down the sheaf of papers. I saw that it was Stryker and an involuntary chuckle fell out of my mouth.

“What? You surprised I can read?”

“No. Just never seen you with the glasses.”

“Yeah, bitches love these things,” he said, taking them off and putting them next to the sheaf of papers on the table. “Speaking of bitches, your tenant lady was just up in here.”

“I know.”

“She’s got confidence. I will say that. She kinda hot, too.”

I said nothing.

“Why you look at me like that, Rookie? Haha. She ain’t your girl. Maybe she needs to be my pussy wipe, make me forget about Flo.”

“I’m here to ask you one last time to hold down the noise, Stryker. Alice and her daughter can’t sleep. Her boyfriend is out of control and might do something stupid. It’s a bad situation.”

“One last time? And then what?”

“Then nothing. I’ll see you.” I turned to leave.

“Wait, Rookie. Don’t go away mad. I’m just messing. Sit down with me. You want a drink?”

I shook my head but took a seat across from Stryker.

“Seen this shit? *Hierarchy. Of need.*” He glared at me as if expecting an apology for something. Then he flipped a few pages, traced a few lines with his pointer finger, and closed it again so I could see the title page and the author’s name: Maslow. Sucked air through his teeth and said the title again: “Hierarchy of Need.” Shook his head and folded his arms. He was having an argument with the text, which has offended him like a woman would, or a false friend. And he is responding to it as if to a breathing person. “Ain’t no *damn* hierarchy of need.”

“Vaguely remember reading that in school,” I said. “Some kind theory of human need, what makes people happy.”

“That’s right. Homeslice says you need food, safety, love, respect, and big thoughts. But I don’t know about all that. I’m reading about how Maslow came up with his theory, and I think his methods are flawed.”

“How so?”

He picked up the sheaf of papers and flipped through it until he found the section he wanted. “Listen to what Maslow said: ‘the study of crippled, stunted, immature, and unhealthy specimens can yield only a cripple psychology and a cripple philosophy.’ Says here that he studied people like Albert Einstein and Frederick Douglass and ‘the healthiest one percent of the college population.’ I say Garbage in, garbage out. I ain’t nothing like those people.”

“Me neither.”

“Been thinking I got a different ‘hierarchy of need.’ Might need to write a song about it.”

“What’s that?”

“I need to forget that I’m gonna die. Feel me? Only two things make me do that. Fucking and getting’ high. I don’t need the rest of that shit.”

“What about your music?”

“You right. That’s number three.”

“You also need to eat to live and you need a house.”

“True enough, I guess, but I think about those things as the stuff you buy with money. And I make the money so I can smoke, rhyme and fuck—mostly to fuck.

“You don’t think the women love you for your good looks and charming personality?”

“Shit no. No way an ugly street nigger like me get so much pussy without the rhymes and the cash.”

“I’m not so sure about that. You’ve got game.”

“Want to see me in action? Come to my wrap party. Three weeks, right here at my humble home.”

“I’ll check my calendar.”

“Your girl Alice will be here. She already told me.”

I didn’t like the way her name sounded coming out of Stryker’s mouth.

I had a new plan forming in my head, but it depended on Sandone. That meant I had to be nice to him, which was painful. I called and left a message on his voicemail, telling him I had time to think and I wanted to work something out.

He called me back within half an hour. I picked my words carefully.

"Look, we both have a problem," I said. "But I think we both want the same thing. You want a happy client who gets what she wants and complies with her lease. Your client wants an air-conditioned apartment. You’re being paid to protect her interests, so you need to do your best to get her what she wants. I want my rent money."

He was quiet, and I let the quiet hang. Sandone was good at Chicken, though. He wasn’t going to talk first.

"Well," I finally said. "Is that right?"

"Go on," he said. "What do you have in mind?"

"Well, I’ve got another apartment in the building, and I know for a fact that the air conditioning works. I’d be willing to let your client have this apartment if you get current on your lease."

More silence. Then he said, "Why can’t you just get the air conditioning fixed?"

"I had it checked out," I lied. "It’s not an easy job. Parts need to be ordered. Could take weeks if not months."

More silence. Then: "Is your other unit furnished?"

Shit, I hadn't thought about furniture.

"The unit will be furnished," I said.

"How do I know the air conditioning works in this other apartment?"

"I knew that question was coming. I'll arrange for you to see for yourself before you pay me. But you'll need to pay me before occupying the apartment."

"That might work. I'll call you back."

He called back in five minutes and we made the arrangement. He'd meet me in forty-eight hours (I managed to buy myself an extra day to implement the rest of the plan). He'd bring a certified check, as good as cash, and verify that the apartment looked okay and had working air conditioning.

Now I had to get Alice on board, which turned out to be easy. She was only too glad to give up her air conditioning temporarily in order to get some peace and keep her ex from killing someone or getting killed. All I had to do was promise her she could keep her furniture. She didn't mention whatever twisted bargain she made with Stryker, and I didn't ask about it. She did stop me as I was walking away from her door and ask me if I was going to Stryker's wrap party. When I said yes, she smiled and said, "Good. I'll see you there."

I paid a moving service called Two Guys and a Truck an extra hundred bucks to schedule the switch for the next day. I needed another day to get all the city permits in order. This time, I wasn't taking any chances. Everything happened right on schedule, without a hitch. The movers came, the apartments were switched. I'd applied for new Certificates of Occupancy.

All was quiet for about a week after the apartment switch, and I started to wonder if that was the end of it. But then I got a call from Ramos the Great. He told me in his broken English that the noise was unbearable, that very bad things were happening and Ferdinand the Magnificent was at his wit's end.

Stryker's partying had become frenzied. Booze, women, dope, the works. And the house party music—so loud it made the wild cat howl and scratch at its cage until its claws bled. Ferdinand the Magnificent was going to hurt someone. Ramos was sure of it.

"You don't know, Mister," Ramos said. "Ferdinand is killer. Ferdinand kill more Russians than anyone in Chechnyan army."

I told him I didn't doubt it for one second.

"And this Stryker Jones, he wants Jezebel. Every time we see him, he asks about Jezebel. He promised to keep quiet if we give him Jezebel for one night."

"So let him have her."

"Give him Jezebel? No way Ferdinand will never..."

"It's just one night."

After the call from Ramos the Great, everything was quiet for a week or so leading up to the end of Stryker's party.

I rang the bell to D203 and seconds later I was afraid for my life. Jezebel seemed to be floating above the floor, and she roared at me so loudly as I walked through the door that I put my hands over my face and dropped to my knees, expecting to die. I stayed down, eyes shut,

feeling like I'd walked into a trap, until I felt a big hand on my shoulder and heard a familiar laugh.

“Come on now, Connor. Have some self-respect.”

Stryker lifted me up by my shirt and I looked around the place, my eyes adjusting to the artificial lighting that I now recognized from the Untamed Illusions show. Jezebel paced back and forth in a wire mesh cage that had been hung from the ceiling.

A woman walked up to me holding a silver tray with a pink drink on top. She wore a red bow tie wrapped around a tuxedo shirt that ended above her belly button, a black leather mini skirt and stiletto heels. “Mr. Ryan,” she said. “Welcome. Stryker would like you to have this.”

“What is it?”

She handed to me, smiling. “It's a drink Mr. Jones invented called Terminal Velocity. Enjoy.”

I took a sip, warily, and looked around again. I saw Ramos standing guard behind Jezebel. He wore his Untamed outfit, complete with a whip, leather dungarees and a matching vest. With his curly mustache, he looked like a cross between Crocodile Dundee and Captain Kangaroo. He seemed nervous. I walked up to him and said hello. On the way the buzzing in my head quieted enough so I could tune further into my surroundings. Some kind of classical music blared from Stryker's sound system.

“Jezebel likes Chopin,” Ramos said, as if reading my thoughts. “It make her calm.”

“So you decided to do it after all,” I said. “Where's your brother?”

“Ferdinand busy. He had to leave town,” Ramos said unconvincingly.

I scanned the room looking for Stryker. I saw him across the room talking to what seemed to be an especially attractive member of his harem—no, wait. Alice! She looked unbelievable in a form-fitting red dress, cut below her knees. Stryker looked up at me and caught me gawking. He moved towards me.

When he reached me he put his arm around my shoulder, leaned his head towards mine, and said, “She’s yours tonight.”

“What do you mean?”

“I set you up. You both need a rebound, and she likes you. You ain’t got much game but you got soul. And I got your back because you got mine.”

“But I thought—”

“Ha. Don’t think. You think too damn much. If it feels good, do it.” He raised his glass and clinked it with mine. “Bottoms up. Courage.”

Stunned, I tipped back the Terminal Velocity and drank the whole thing down. A minute later Alice was by my side. She leaned in for a hello kiss and I thought I might faint. She smelled like lavender and roses.

I took Alice by the arm and moved towards Stryker’s balcony, getting us two more drinks on the way. “It’ll be safer out here,” I said, without explaining.

I looked out at the boardwalk and the ocean and the night sky lit up by the casino lights. Seagulls screamed in the distance. I thought about grabbing Alice’s hand and leaving before it was too late, but then it *was* too late.

A huge man, dressed in black, his face covered by a black ski mask, entered Stryker’s apartment through the front door. He grabbed a chair, moved it under Jezebel’s cage, stood on it, and unlocked the cage. He put a collar on the tiger and led it out of the cage. Stryker’s pit

bull came out of the back bedroom barking its head off. It hesitated for a second but then lunged at Jezebel and landed on the tiger's back. It was over in seconds. Jezebel rolled over, threw the dog off her back, pounced on it, pinned it down and ripped open its neck. The dog struggled for a second or two then went limp. A woman yelled that someone should call the police, and another woman started shrieking. People rushed to leave the apartment. I took Alice by the arm and led her out. When we reached the bottom of the steps we heard the gunshots, muffled but still loud, and, seconds later, Ramos emerged from the apartment, one running, and Ferdinand came hobbling behind behind, his ski mask was gone and his hair was sticking straight up. From the looks of it he'd been shot in his leg. He moved with purpose. He had Jezebel on the leash, and was trying to calm her down. She was snarling and rearing up on her hind legs, blood dripping from her mouth. Then Stryker came out of the apartment, holding a sawed-off shotgun. He raised it and aimed it in the general direction of Ferdinand and Jezebel. Jezebel went crazy when she saw him and Ferdinand lost his grip on her leash. She began to run towards Styker, and he raised his gun up to shoot at her.

Suddenly piercing screams drown out all other noise. A woman came running into the quad, waving her arms wildly. "No, no, no! Ferdinand, nooo!" It took me a minute to recognize her: Erika Deitz-Hoffman.

Everyone, including Stryker, froze where they stood, dazed and disoriented by the screaming. Then Jezebel reared up and turned around and lunged towards the woman. Ferdinand threw his entire body on the tiger and tackled it. He managed to subdue the beast. Meanwhile, while everyone was mesmerized by Ferdinand's struggle with the Jezebel, Ramos snuck up behind Styker and smashed an empty Crystal bottle on his skull, dazing him. Stryker steadied himself and fought back, tying Ramos up in a headlock and hammering him in the

face with his free fist. The blonde woman ran around in a circle, going crazy, but everyone ignored her. Ferdinand put Jezebel away in his apartment and rushed to help Ramos. He ripped the shotgun from Stryker's hands and smashed him in the head with it. Then Ferdinand and Ramos dragged Stryker back into his apartment to finish what they started.

Within an hour the sun was coming up and every cop in the city was there. Police milled about the crime scene all morning, drinking coffee and talking about what had happened. Alice and I overheard enough to know that Stryker had been bound and gagged with his own bed sheets. He'd been shot twice, once in the ass and once in the foot. Then we saw him getting carried out on a stretcher. One of his eyes was swollen shut, and his shirt was covered in blood. As they carried him out, he waved and grinned, showing a gap where one of his gold teeth had been. Reporters saw the whole thing. Photographer's flashbulbs lit up the quad as he passed by on the stretcher, mugging for the cameras. That grin said it all. That's the picture that showed up in every newspaper in the country the next morning. Two weeks later Stryker's hit single "I'll Love You for Now" charted to number one and gave him his fourth platinum album.

Vita

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