

Caster

by

Thomas Raven

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Letters From Krampus

Creech

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Dedicated to the memory of Mr. Riley B. King

"Hey, Dell? You seen my leather pants? The ones with the laces?" Joseph Miles stood in the master bedroom that he shared with his wife Della and their eleven month old son, Jimi. They'd named the child after Hendrix as a compromise after Della had vetoed Joseph's first choice, Geezer. Could he help it if he was a huge Black Sabbath fan?

He dug around in the pile of clothes on the floor, looking for the elusive black leather pants that would somehow make tomorrow night's show at Ole Miss alright. It was going to be a night to remember. His band was breaking up and this was their final gig.

Ten years ago, Caster had hit the charts with a couple of singles. They'd done alright, but the band never broke wide. That was music industry talk for finding the pot of gold at the end of the musical rainbow. At first, Joseph had allowed himself to dream the dream, but then he came crashing back to reality. If his experience working at the Needler, the coolest record store in Memphis, had taught him anything, it was that bands came and went like hamburger wrappers. Rock and roll (or punk, or hardcore, or R&B, or shoegaze—whatever the latest trend was being called) was rarely a limitless font of fame and fortune. Most of the time, record companies got rich by milking the talent pool dry. The French revolution of music, AKA Napster, had changed some things, but the fact remained that records usually had short shelf lives. Musicians either burned out, dried up, or simply quit because they were tired. Caster had avoided most of the more common pitfalls, but time wasn't on their side. Joseph knew that. He'd sort of known it all along but he'd only recently admitted it to himself.

A year ago, he'd plopped down a considerable chunk of that one hit wonder nest egg on the Needler. Everyone thought he was crazy. "The music industry's drying up," they'd said. "People steal music now," they'd said. It didn't matter to Joseph. He could see the writing on the wall. Caster wouldn't last much longer and he loved music too much to be completely out of the scene. His gamble had paid off. He'd somehow managed to turn an ailing record store into the vinyl and collectible center of the midsouth universe. He didn't get a rush from the work, but, hey, how many people ever did? His fifteen minute fame clock

currently stood at 14:59. All he had to do was to get through one last show.

He'd had no doubts about ending the band. It was the "adult" thing to do. After this weekend, he could focus more on the Needler and on putting away money for Jimi's education. He could always make time to write a song now and then. It'd be good enough. It'd have to be.

He pushed the piles of clothes around on the closet floor for the umpteenth time. Black silk, black cotton, black denim, but no black leather pants. He was about to give up when Della stuck her head into the closet and held up the missing pants. "Found 'em!" she said with a smile. She looked like a goth-hippie hybrid in her dyed black hair, peasant shirt, and ripped jeans. She'd repaired one particularly large hole in the thigh with a piece of tartan flannel and something about that patch always made Joseph horny. He grabbed his wife and drew her down into the black sea of dirty laundry beside him. She laughed and pretty soon they were going at it like a couple of sophomores under the bleachers. Then Jimi started crying.

Della rolled off of Joseph and tucked her hair behind her ears. "What's the matter, Jimi? Mommy's coming!" she shouted as she darted off with a longing glance back at Joseph. Maybe they'd pick up where they left off later, but he doubted it. They were both so busy.

Della ran a local feral cat conservancy called Kat Kit that occupied her for 60 or 80 hours most weeks. When she'd become pregnant, Joseph had suggested she let someone else take the charity over for a while. She'd responded by moving her office to the house and working even longer hours. After Jimi was born, she'd lugged him around everywhere. To the shelter, to fundraisers, even to community outreach sessions. The windfall from the handful of hits Joseph had written with Caster lead singer, Milt Ray, had bought them a decent house in the suburbs, but the greatest benefit had been that Della hadn't had to find a J.O.B. right out of school. Instead, she'd followed her passion, and her passion was cats. She'd single-handedly obtained the 501(c)3 that had made Kat Kit tax exempt and she'd written the grants that had filled their garage with humane traps and cartons of literature. She'd designed the Kat Kit web site herself, giving it that pseudo-punk flair she loved so much. She'd even wiped off the black eyeliner and put on conservative

business suits to meet with the Memphis City Council to educate them on the whole trap-neuter-return game plan. In a word, she was dedicated. That was one of the many things Joseph loved about her.

He climbed to his feet and made a half-assed attempt at straightening up the mess they'd made in the closet, then he folded up his leather pants and stuffed them into the backpack that sat open on the bed. A black silk shirt landed in the pack next, followed by his toiletries bag. The folks down at Ole Miss had set them up with a suite at a local hotel but he was planning on trucking back to Memphis as soon as the gig was over. Stuart and Bryan, the bass and keyboard players, would agree immediately, but the other guys would dig in. Milt and Shy were more the partying sort. They were also more the lady killing sort. Joseph loved his wife, but her presence in his life had diminished the appeal of the road by a factor of 10,000. That was okay with him. Well, most of the time it was.

He zipped his pack shut and carried it out into the living room where he tossed it down beside a ratty, black guitar case. Inside was his pride and joy—a black 1972 Fender Telecaster Custom that he'd bought when he was 17. Back then, Milt had spent his summers working maintenance at the local Holiday Inn. An old guy who was living out of his Buick had rolled into the parking lot looking for a handout. When he hadn't gotten one from the blue collar stiff around back, he'd pulled that guitar case out of the back seat. After a couple of phone calls, Joseph had shown up with the \$300 the guy was asking. The instrument hadn't been in great shape, but it was an honest to goodness Fender and it was all his. He'd spent the rest of his summer break tweaking it and learning how to get it to sing. These days he never let the instrument get packed up with the rest of Caster's gear. He had forty-seven guitars. Of those forty-seven, this was the one. He'd heard of guys like Clapton giving their favorite guitars names, but he'd never thought to do that. It was just his guitar. It was the one that had inspired him to play and the one that hadn't given up on him when he wanted to hurl the goddamned thing out the window. It didn't judge him or berate him. It could wait patiently in its case or on its stand while Joseph tended to other things and it would still be there when he got around to playing it again. It had become as much a part of Joseph as any thing could be, and he loved it.

He went to the fridge and retrieved an Amstel Light. He was developing a little belly on his otherwise skinny frame and Amstel was the only light beer he could stomach. He plopped down at the table and began sifting through the day's mail just as Della came in.

"Jimi alright?" he asked as he opened the gas bill.

"Think so. Just hope he's not getting sick."

Della sat down across from him, looking as world weary as he'd ever seen her. He slid his freshly opened beer over to her. "Looks like you need this more than I do," he said with a smile.

His wife caressed his fingers as she took the beer from him. "Damn straight," was all she said before taking several deep swallows.

Joseph got up and got himself another bottle. When he returned to the table, it looked different somehow. The whole room did. It was like he was seeing everything around him for the first time. The refrigerator, the gas bill, the antique table, his wife. This was his life. He hadn't exactly planned on suburban bliss.

"What is it, baby?" asked Della.

Joseph shook his head but the cobwebs remained. "Nothing. Just tired, I guess. Been working too much." He thought he sounded like his father, but his father had never had granite countertops or a Sub Zero refrigerator. The old man had worked at the Brown and Williamson cigarette plant until it got shut down, leaving him with a tiny severance package and an addiction to nicotine. So how come Joseph didn't appreciate what he had more?

"You need to promote another one of those kids to assistant down at the store." That was what they always called the Needler. The store.

"I'm not sure I can handle the extra payroll right now. Business isn't that good." Maybe he wasn't that different from his father after all. The old man had staked his career on tobacco and then it had gone out of fashion. Was that what was happening to music now?

"Maybe you need new marketing. If so, better get it lined up before dead Elvis week. God knows, we need the income from the store now more than ever."

"Yeah, well, I've been thinking about that. Maybe breaking up the band is a mistake. We could always ride out the summer festivals and pick up some extra cash before blowing out the pilot light."

Della rolled her eyes. "I've heard this one before, sweetie."

Joseph smiled. "Yeah, I know." He looked into the eyes that he sometimes forgot to see.

She smiled back at him. Her father had warned her about dating 'one of them rocking rolling assholes' from the get-go, but she knew a good thing when she saw it. "We'll sort out the money."

"Yeah. I just...I was thinking about that solo record."

"Since when?"

"Since always."

"Bullshit."

"No, really." He said it, but he knew she was right.

"I guess that's why you spend so much time down in the shed," said Della sarcastically. The shed was what they called Joseph's basement recording studio. It hardly ever got used.

"I'm just too tired by the time I get off work, but once I stop gigging, maybe me and Milt could get back to writing. We might even be able to sell some tunes in Nashville. Carno's cousin reps songwriters out there, you know."

"Nice try," said Della with a weary smile. "You know better than I do that the only real money any band makes these days comes from touring and licensing, not publishing. And don't give me that 'Nashville's different' line. It may be for now, but not for much longer."

Joseph chuckled. "You should've been our manager."

She'd always had a better head for business than the guys in the band. Their heads were too filled with dreams. When you ran a not-for-profit, dreams were the last thing on your plate at the end of the day. "I could still make it to the show tomorrow. I mean, if you want. End of an era and all that."

Joseph shook his head. "It's just another show, and a shitty one at that. Those Ole Miss kids don't want to hear us. They don't know who the hell we are. I'd rather you remember the band the way it was."

Della shrugged. "Fine. Just don't lord it over me for the next forty years, alright?"

Joseph nodded and finished his beer.

Joseph slid his guitar case into the back seat of Milt's jacked up Tundra, then climbed in himself.

"This is going to fucking rock," said Milt. "I can feel it already."

"I think that's just the engine," said Joseph with a smile. "How long since you changed the oil?" Milt revved the motor in response.

Della appeared at the side door and shouted, "Hey, Jimi's sleeping!"

Milt hung his head out the window and yelled, "Sorry, Della." She responded by flipping him off and going back inside.

"Now I see why you married her," said Milt.

"Yeah, yeah. You're just afraid that she could kick your ass."

Milt thought about that a second before nodding and putting the truck in reverse. Della wasn't mentioned again.

They crossed the Mississippi state line in silence. Milt kept looking over at Joseph, trying to figure out what was going on with him. They had a little over an hour left to Oxford and he was getting tired of shuffling through the tunes on his phone. Finally he shut the music off and lit a cigarette.

Joseph looked over at him like he'd been poked with a stick. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing. I just want some peace and quiet before the gig."

"You? The Ray Lewis of rock and roll?" Joseph smiled. If there was a true cheerleader for the band, it was Milt. A goth cheerleader, but a cheerleader all the same.

"Dude, we're post-rock. Didn't you get the memo?"

They both smiled and each relaxed a bit, but they were still unwilling to let their conversation take place. They tended to sneak up on the important stuff, slowly circling it until their feelings were out in the open. It was one of the reasons why they were still friends.

After a few minutes of road noise, Milt cleared his throat. "Hey, I was checking out the map this morning and I saw a little pawn shop that's just a little bit out of our way. Between Batesville and Oxford."

Joseph rearranged himself in his seat. If there was anything that he liked better than trolling pawn shops for guitars, Milt didn't know what it was. The internet had pretty much made sure that the collectible gems were either overpriced or totally MIA, but it was still fun to dream about finding a real 50's Telecaster for \$100 because the finish was worn off in a few spots. Joseph and Milt made it a point to stop at every pawn shop they could find.

"What's the name of the place?" asked Joseph.

"You're gonna love it."

"Come on, man. Tell me."

"Let's just say that it's the best one yet." He peered at Joseph over his sunglasses.

"Fine, don't tell me then."

"I won't," said Milt with a smile.

An hour later, they pulled into a gravel parking lot in front of a yellow, cinder block building with a large, hand-painted sign that simply proclaimed, "PWNED". Milt and Joseph climbed out of the truck, their boots grinding on the sun-bleached stones. Joseph pulled out his phone and snapped a picture of the sign.

"Was I lying, brother?" asked Milt.

"Fucking awesome," was all that Joseph could say.

Theirs was the only car in the lot—a fact that made Joseph worry that the place was closed. Milt was eager to get inside, but Joseph was still taking it all in. The front of the building had no windows. Just one door that led to...what, exactly? At the moment, that screen door held every possibility imaginable and Joseph didn't want to ruin it by rushing in to find that there was nothing interesting inside. That had happened more times than he could remember. No, as long as the potential big find was still tucked away behind those dirty, yellow walls, he felt happy and excited.

"Come on, dude." Milt glanced at his phone to see what time it was. "I want to have time to look around."

Milt pulled the creaky screen door open and Joseph followed. Once inside, his optimism waned, just as he'd feared it would. The place was a dump. Being in retail, Joseph knew salvaged store fixtures when he saw them. They hadn't made pegboard like that since the eighties. The shelves were mostly lined with worn out tools, with the occasional obsolete computer

thrown in for good measure. There didn't appear to be a single guitar, let alone any closet classics.

"Shit," said Milt. "I thought maybe some of the kids from the university might've gotten out this far."

"Guess not," sighed Joseph. "If they had to sell their Christmas presents, they probably did it on Craigslist."

They turned to leave, but stopped short. A middle-aged, African American gentleman stood between them and the door, his grip steady on a sawed-off shotgun with duct tape on the stock.

"Can I help you with something today, gentlemen?" His tones were smooth but there was an undercurrent of nervous energy that told Joseph that this guy had the potential of accidentally killing them.

Joseph raised his hands. "You robbing this place, man? You can have whatever you want. We were just on our way out."

"I'll bet you were," said the man.

Joseph noticed that the guy was wearing chinos and a purple Polo shirt. What the hell? He knew the economy in Mississippi was shit, but he had no idea the suburbanites had taken to robbing pawn shops.

"You can have my wallet, but I gotta tell you—the credit cards are maxed out and I don't carry a lot of cash."

"Shut up. I've had just about enough of you tattooed hoodlums coming up in here and stealing from me. Now, I'm going to ease back over to the counter and while I do so, I want you two to stay put. I'll let the sheriff decide what to do with y'all."

Milt finally found his tongue. "Dude, we just came in here to shop. We're playing a gig at Ole Miss tonight and were in the area so we decided to stop in and see if you had any old guitars."

"You kidding me?" asked the man as he leveled the gun at Milt's chest. "Don't much like kidders around here."

Milt, who rarely knew when to stop talking, had a moment of inspiration and stayed quiet.

The man gestured at Joseph with the gun barrel. "You. What's the name of your little singing group?"

Joseph tried not to be offended by the man's question but he failed. "First off, old timer, we're not a 'little singing group', alright? We're a band, as in rock and roll. Ever hear of

Loving You Lover? Midnight Last? We're in the band Caster." He pointed at the computer behind the counter. "Go on and look us up if you don't believe me. My name's Joseph Miles and I play lead guitar. This here's Milt Ray, our lead singer."

The man nodded and slowly backed his way behind the counter. He worked the keyboard and mouse with one hand while cradling the shotgun with the other.

"That's C-A-S-T-E-R," said Milt. "Or you can take a look at the Ole Miss web site. We're playing at the Grove tonight." He looked over at Joseph and muttered, "If we live that long."

The man, who Joseph had decided was the proprietor of PWNED, took his sweet time looking them up, but once he saw their pictures he lowered the gun and wiped away the sweat that was accumulating on his brow. "Fellas, look here...I'm...I'm sorry." He fell back onto a stool he had behind the register and stowed the shotgun before extending a hand. "If y'all will accept my apology, I'd be happy to give you a discount on anything you might want to buy."

Joseph and Milt could see that the man was more shook up than they were, so they played along. They just wanted to make it back to the truck without getting shot.

"Sure," said Joseph. "No problem, Mister...?"

"Dexter Forrest. Gosh darn it!" The man seemed to be angered by his own name.

"Did I say the wrong thing?" asked Joseph. He thought that backing away might agitate the man even more, so he stayed put.

"No, son. I just...gosh DARN it!" He shook his head. "I just...some boys robbed me here last week. Boys not too unlike yourselves. And I've foolishly let that turn me into a paranoid, prejudiced so and so."

The man's inability to curse was amusing Milt but he tried to keep it hidden. "So you thought we were their friends, coming back for more?"

"Yeah, something like that. Look, I truly am sorry to have pointed that gun at you. Mavis—that's my wife—she warned me about bringing that gosh darn thing in here. Turns out she was right, darn it!"

"It's cool, Mr. Forrest. No harm done, except for my shorts." He laughed but Dexter Forrest didn't join him. Milt didn't either. He was too busy watching the police cruiser roll up outside.

A minute later, the screen door screeched open and a trim, black man of about fifty strode into the shop. He removed his state-issued sunglasses and eyed Joseph and Milt as if they were cartons of milk that might or might not be past their expiration dates. "You having some trouble with these two, Mr. Forrest?" asked the black lawman in a southern twang that made him sound like a redneck.

"No, Jerry. No trouble. If there's any trouble in here, it's me. These boys are playing some music tonight over at the University and they stopped in here to check out the pawns. I took them to be thieves and, gosh darn it, I misjudged the whole situation."

Jerry was giving Joseph and Milt a once-over when he suddenly looked like he'd been hit in the face with a freshly pawned sawsall. "Hold up now. What outfit are y'all with?"

"Outfit?" asked Milt. It was times like these he wished he'd worn a long sleeved shirt. His tattoos always seemed to prompt the worst from law enforcement types.

"Yeah, you know. What music group do y'all play with?"

"Uh, we're with Caster, sir. You heard of us?"

Jerry the law snapped his fingers and smiled. "Damn straight!" Mr. Forrest protested the profanity with a little bout of throat clearing but Jerry the law ignored him. "Y'all gone play Midnight Last tonight?"

Joseph was completely taken aback. "Uh, yes, sir. It's on the set list as an encore."

"Well, I'll be damned!" More throat clearing from Mr. Forrest. "Hold up now. I'll be right back." And with that, he ran out the door, letting the it slap shut behind him. A few moments later, he returned with a CD. Just the disc. No case.

"Would y'all sign this for me?" He was beaming now, his thick moustache stretched into a straight line by his smile.

"Um, sure, Officer," said Joseph. At that point, he would've done anything to get back on the road. Milt was really going to have hell to pay later.

"Would you just sign it to Jerry? That's me. Jerry. I'm Jerry. Jerry LaVant."

"Yeah, sure, uh...Jerry. You got a Sharpie or something?"

Jerry looked over at Mr. Forrest and snapped his fingers. "You got a magic marker these boys can use for a minute, Dexter?"

Mr. Forrest nodded and handed Jerry a fat Sir Marks-A-Lot. "Will that do?"

Joseph took the marker from Jerry's hand and smiled. "That'll do just fine, Mr. Forrest." He then proceeded to sign the CD and hand it off to Milt for more of the same. Milt handed it to the lawman and Jerry seemed mesmerized by the new marks on the disc's surface.

"Haven't seen that pressing for a while," said Joseph. "The full-color screen on the disc means it was from the first release. You've had that one for some time."

Jerry nodded as he held the CD by its edges. "Got it on a trip up to Memphis. Listening to it always puts me in a good mood."

Milt was starting to get into the ego stroking that Jerry was laying down. "We sure do appreciate you saying that, Jerry. It's not every day we meet a genuine fan. These days, they're few and far between."

Jerry beamed. "Well, sir, you boys sure make some good music."

"Why don't you come to the show tonight?" asked Joseph. He turned toward the counter and added, "You too, Mr. Forrest."

That flustered Mr. Forrest to no end. Joseph half expected another round of goshes and darns, but they never came. Before Mr. Forrest could respond, Jerry grabbed the two of them by the shoulders and administered an involuntary massage.

"I'd love to!" he crowed. "I'm gonna call in right now and see if I can swing it," and with that, Jerry was out the door once again.

Joseph sighed and Milt turned back to Mr. Forrest. "What about you? You and Mavis want to take in the show? We don't cuss much."

Mr. Forrest chuckled. At least he was finally letting himself relax a bit. "No, sir. I'm sorry but the rock and roll music isn't exactly my cup of tea. I'm more of a blues man, myself." Joseph started to protest but Mr. Forrest jumped in ahead of him. "And don't you try and tell me that the music you play is based on the blues, because it isn't. Not exactly. At best, it's a streaky

photocopy of the blues. It's got a lot of the mechanics but none of the soul, if you take my meaning. No offense, of course. I'm sure y'all sound real good."

"No offense taken," said Joseph. He looked out the screen door, hoping Jerry would be on his way so they could leave too, but the lawman was talking on the radio in his car. Joseph turned back to Mr. Forrest. "I'd sure appreciate it if you'd answer one question for me though."

"If will if I can, young man."

"How come a pawn shop so close to a college hasn't got a single guitar in it. Not even a handful of Epiphones and Squiers."

Mr. Forrest opened his mouth to answer when Jerry piped up from behind Joseph. "Show 'em," was all he said. Mr. Forrest smiled and turned toward the little shop's back room. He motioned for the others to follow him. Joseph and Milt exchanged glances, wondering what they were getting themselves into now, but they went along anyway. Mr. Forrest reached into his pocket and withdrew a wad of keys as big as a softball. He carefully selected one and used it to unlock a large steel door at the back of the storeroom. Inside, a set of old, wooden steps descended to the basement. The only source of light was a little, plug-in, night light at the bottom of the stairs. Joseph looked at Milt with an "I think we should get the fuck out of here, but this sure is interesting, isn't it?" expression on his face. Milt didn't see it because he was too busy trying not to fall down the stairs. The railing, such as it was, had pulled loose from the wall ages ago.

Once the entire party reached the bottom of the stairs, Mr. Forrest hustled out into the darkness. There weren't a lot of basements on the delta. The ground was too wet most of the time for the masonry to hold up, and if it did, the places were usually breeding grounds for molds and funguses. The air in this one didn't seem damp at all, though. In fact, it was unusually dry and cool.

Moments later, Mr. Forrest clicked a handful of breakers and a bunch of fluorescent tubes buzzed to life overhead. Joseph's eyes adjusted pretty quickly but it still took a minute for his mind to accept what he was seeing. The wall that ran the length of the room was covered in guitars. At first, Milt and Joseph assumed they were old Sears catalog models, like the

Silvertone Joseph had had as a kid, but then they stepped closer.

The harsh lights illuminated the unlikely history of the six-stringed, American-made, electric guitar. It was like a museum display. They were all there, from an honest-to-god Fender Broadcaster to a Gibson Les Paul that was shaped like an SG. Not all of them were in good shape—in fact, most of them were showing their age—but that was part of their charm. Every note had taken its toll and left behind something special that was permanently etched into the bodies and fret boards of the instruments.

“What the fuck?” said Milt.

“No, sir. I will not tolerate that kind of language in this house! Is that understood?” Mr. Forrest had extremely dark skin, but Milt could see that it had turned slightly red.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Forrest. I just... I’ve never seen anything like this.”

“And you ain’t likely to, ever again,” said Jerry. “Dexter, here’s, been collecting these guitars for forty years now. Won’t sell them or play them. Just collects them.”

“Say what?” asked Joseph as he tore his eyes away from an early Bluesouth guitar with ornate fretboard inlays. “You mean these aren’t for sale? I thought you were running a pawn shop here!”

“I am,” said Mr. Forrest. “Upstairs. That’s my pawn shop. This is my church. Jerry’s right. These aren’t for sale, and I’d appreciate it if you didn’t touch any of them.”

Joseph looked to Jerry as if the lawman might be able to snap Mr. Forrest out of the trance he was obviously in. “I know, I know,” said Jerry as he raised his hands. “You boys aren’t the first ones to drool over these here guitars and you sure won’t be the last.”

Joseph and Milt were walking the length of the room taking in each of the instruments they saw. It was clearly one of the premiere guitar collections in the country, if not the world, and every last six-string showed the signs of having earned its many years on this Earth. This wasn’t a rich man’s investment. No, it was a testament to the work of many hands and the music that had flowed out beneath them. Guitars could be magical things. They enabled skilled hands and hearts to do their work. Work that couldn’t be achieved without them.

"Mr. Forrest, I want to thank you for sharing this with us," said Joseph in a hushed voice. "This is truly one of the greatest things I've ever seen."

"Thank you kindly, son. These guitars hold a lot of energy in check and I aim to keep it that way."

"I can feel it," said Joseph. "So much pain and so much joy."

"That's the blues," said Mr. Forrest. "THIS is the blues," he added, extending his arms.

Joseph nodded and inhaled deeply. The old guy was right. There was energy in this room and it was coming from all those guitars. Somehow, they were holding it all in check. He looked to Mr. Forrest and it was as if Mr. Forrest had read his mind. "Some pain runs too deep, son. We have to corner it and let it die. It's attractive, so lots of folks would rather wallow in it. These here guitars belonged to some great men, but even some of them were wallowers."

"You saying these belonged to famous players?"

"Fame doesn't matter. What matters is the ability to hold onto the energy."

Joseph nodded but he didn't understand. His heart got it, but it was inarticulate in its understanding. It just felt like it was swelling in his chest when he stood close to those instruments and their beautiful scars. He pointed at a battered National steel guitar. "Whose was this one?"

"Son House. That was his first."

Joseph whistled between his teeth. It took all of his willpower to keep him from reaching out to strum the strings. He pointed at a strange one without a recognizable logo on the headstock.

"Nathan Beauregard," said Dexter. "That was his last instrument from the years he was playing electric on the festival circuit."

"I'm sorry, but I don't know who he is," said Joseph.

"That's alright, son," said Mr. Forrest with a smile. "He don't know who you are neither."

"So all of these guitars were played by real musicians?" asked Joseph.

"Real or not, they played and were played. These were all blues guitars and they, each and every one of them, carry the weight of the real deal."

"I don't understand," said Joseph.

"Yes, you do," said Mr. Forrest. "I think you understand it better than most."

"Joe, we need to get going," said Milt. The vibe of the place was starting to creep him out.

Joseph held up a hand. "Hold on, man. This is a big deal."

Milt laughed but stopped when he saw that Joseph wasn't kidding. "You saying you understand this heebie-jeebie nonsense. It's just some beat up guitars! They might be worth something, but most of them are in really bad shape."

Joseph could feel himself getting angry, but he didn't know why. "Wait for me upstairs."

"But, Joe..."

"Go on, now. You and Jerry go upstairs while I have a talk with Mr. Forrest here. I'll be up directly."

Milt nodded, not a little hurt, and headed for the stairs.

Milt cruised past the guard shack and found a parking spot behind the stage. Joseph hadn't spoken to him since leaving PWNED. He was completely taken with the crap guitar the custodian of that joint had sold him. It was essentially a Les Paul Special, but Gibson hadn't come anywhere close to that guitar. Epiphone either, as far as Milt could tell. It was a cheap copy and it looked like it had been left to rot somewhere. The body looked like it had been cut out of old, grey barnwood and left unfinished. The frets were so worn that they had to be practically useless. The headstock had some kind of bird carved into it. And yet, despite all these things, Joseph had bought the pitiful thing and now he sat in the passenger's seat cradling it like a newborn.

"Look, Joseph, maybe you should leave the new axe in the car for now. Get it all set up before you play it on stage. What do you say?"

Joseph said nothing. He got out of the truck and headed for the backstage area with the guitar in hand. Milt sighed and sprinted after him.

"Look who finally decided to show up!" said a thin, bald man dressed entirely in black and sporting a large, Burt Reynolds moustache. Joseph ignored him.

"Um, yeah...sorry, Stuart. We had a stop to make on the way in," said Milt as he nervously watched Joseph disappear backstage.

Stuart Michaelson, Caster's bass player, wasn't in a very good mood, and waiting for his band mates had soured what little good will was still stuck to the soles of his shoes. "Do you guys think you get to skip sound check because you're so much better than the rest of us?"

Milt wasn't bothered by his friend's temper. Not this time. He was preoccupied with Joseph.

"Hey, asshole! I'm bitching at you!" shouted Michaelson from the other side of the amps. No response. He looked to his cohort in the rhythm section, drummer Shy Ely, and gave him his best WTF look. The drummer, a geeky guy with longish blonde hair who looked like a cross between Buddy Holly and Kurt Cobain, pushed his glasses up and slapped his snare with his

sticks. In his experience, the best policy was to keep your head down and let everyone else fight it out.

Michaelson walked over to Joseph's microphone and was about to enlist the sound guy in his one-man argument when Joseph appeared onstage with his battered new instrument strapped into the wireless rig he usually reserved for his Telecaster. The guitar's fresh, untrimmed strings bobbed in the air at the end of its headstock like antennae on a nervous moth.

"Shut up and play, Michaelson," said Joseph.

"Fuck you, man. We already did a sound check and..." The rest of Mick's sentence was drowned out by thick guitar noise courtesy of Joseph. He cranked his amp up to ten and let loose a barrage of sound that would have put the Sex Pistols to shame. The guitar's single coil pickups were sucking in interference from every power line in Mississippi. When Mick stopped trying to talk, Joseph stopped playing. When Mick started up again, Joseph started too.

"I can do this all night, brother," said Joseph. "Now, you going to play something or you just gonna keep trying to shit with that asshole in the middle of your face?"

Even Shy was shocked by that one, and he let out a loud, raucous laugh. To cover it up, he started playing the drum intro to one of the cornerstones of their set—a hard rock number called *Faster Than Fire*. Joseph was the first to jump on the train with his rapid-fire lead intro, followed quickly by Milt who came running in from backstage while trying to get his guitar strap over his head. Within just a few measures, the guys were a band again, if only for one more night.

The last encore of the evening, Officer Jerry's personal favorite, "Midnight Last", was still echoing around the Grove when the guys left the stage. The mercury vapor lights above the crowd slowly crept to life signaling the fact that, yes, honest-to-god, there weren't going to be any more encores. Caster was done. As a parting gift from the gods of rock and roll, they'd ignited the crowd like they had back when they'd first gotten radio play. Milt could see a lot of the faces out there and he knew that most of them had been little kids when Caster had ridden the airwaves. So why were they so into it? It was weird, but he wasn't the sort to look a gift horse in the crotch.

"That was fucking awesome!" shouted Michaelson, his earlier disdain for his friends washed away by the ebullience of the meeting of this band with this crowd on this night. That was what it was all about, right? Not money or contracts or even recording. It was about this feeling. It had been sorely lacking of late.

Joseph was smiling too, clapping the others on their backs and generally whooping it up. At first, Milt thought his funk had finally passed but then he noticed that Joseph was sweating more than usual. He was soaking wet and he'd never even put on his stage clothes.

"That last lead break was amazing," said Milt in a ploy to get close enough to touch his friend. He embraced Joseph with a bear hug and felt like he was hugging a space heater.

"It was good," said Joseph, his breath turning to steam in the air between them.

Milt pulled him aside and quietly asked, "You alright, dude? I mean, you feel like you've got a fever."

Joseph pushed him away with a smile. "Probably picked up a bug from Jimi. You know how kids are."

Milt nodded but he was far from satisfied. As Joseph walked away, Milt noticed that he was still clutching that skanky, old guitar. It was the only guitar he'd played all night. He'd even kept playing it after breaking a string. He'd just compensated by moving his leads around the fretboard. That couldn't have been easy, but Joseph had made it look like child's play.

"Hey, you're Milt, right?" It was a cute black girl with short dreads. "My name's Chrissie. Can I ask you something?" Normally, Milt looked forward to the sexual shenanigans that could be had after a college show, but this night he was as ready to get on the road as Joseph was. "Sorry, sweetie. The hip-hop show's next weekend."

The girl's happy demeanor darkened considerably. "What the fuck, old man? I just wanted to ask... See, unlike you, I actually play the guitar and I... Oh, fuck, never mind." She turned to go but then thought better of it and shoved her face in close to Milt's. "Good riddance, you has-been," she said softly, then she spat in his face and stomped off.

"What the fuck?!" shouted Milt. "How the hell did she get back here?" He looked around and realized the girl was gone. After wiping the spit off his face, Milt looked for Joseph. When

he didn't find him, he gathered his things, said his goodbyes, and made his way to his truck. He found Joseph sitting in the passenger seat, staring off into space. There had been talk of a toast and all kinds of ceremonial bullshit to make the end of Caster official, but Milt never cared much for funerals. He climbed into the driver's seat and got the hell out of Dodge.

On the drive back to Memphis, Joseph crashed, his arms still wrapped around his new guitar. His obsession with it reminded Milt of the way some kids clung to objects that gave them a feeling of security. Was that what was happening to Joseph? Maybe he was just down about the whole Caster thing. Milt could relate. They'd had been at it for a long time but lately they'd been going nowhere fast. At a certain point they had to acknowledge the fact that they were never going to be the Stones. Hell, they weren't even going to be Big Star. They were going to be forgotten. Milt knew that to be true, but it didn't make giving up on the dream any easier.

He turned on the Tundra's radio and tried to find some music that would soothe away his bad feelings. All he could pick up were gospel stations. There was something soothing about those old songs, though, so he left the Jesus music on and thought about his days growing up in the Methodist church.

Milt wasn't much of a believer. So many of the things he'd been taught to believe in had turned out to be bullshit. Santa? Bullshit. Easter Bunny? Bullshit. Jesus H. Christ? Major fucking bullshit. All Jesus was good for was convincing old timers to part with their pensions. Milt had watched as his mother and father had given just about all they had to a TV minister in a glass church in California. What had it gotten them? The grace of God? Hardly. More like a destitute life in a trailer park until they were killed in a car accident a year ago. They had refused their son's money, calling it "the devil's riches" so Milt had hardly seen them for the last ten years. That made their deaths even more difficult to bear, but bear them he had.

Milt had made peace with the fact that life was mostly a bitch. Yeah, there'd been some good times, but the closer he got to the big 4-0, the fewer there were. The rest of his life was probably going to be a game of diminishing returns. He didn't have a serious girlfriend because he enjoyed playing the field too much. But the older he got, the less likely it was that he'd ever find someone to settle down with. He envied Joseph's family.

His friend really did seem to have it all figured out. So why had he gone so batshit crazy tonight?

The street lights became more plentiful as they got closer to home and Milt turned off the radio. It was a little past two when he eased the Tundra into Joseph's driveway.

"Hey, dude. Joseph. Wake up."

Joseph didn't budge. For a split second, Milt thought his friend was unconscious or maybe even dead, but then Joseph moved his arm and groaned something. Milt reached over and shook Joseph's shoulder. The guitar player woke with a start and looked around, letting his new guitar fall beside the seat.

"Why're we stopped? Something wrong with the truck?"

"No, man. We're at you're house."

Joseph stumbled to his feet and let the door fall closed behind him. He held up a hand to say goodnight and shuffled up to the front door as Milt backed out and sped away. Joseph felt a pang of sadness as his friend left but he had no idea why. He'd probably see Milt tomorrow. Hell, the guy spent more time at Joseph's place than he did at his own. So why did Joseph feel so depressed when he saw those taillights disappear over the hill?

Once inside, Joseph grabbed a beer from the fridge and sat down at the kitchen table. His ears were ringing like crazy. Once upon a time, he'd heard about Pete Townshend's hearing problems and he had vowed to do something to protect his own. He'd tried every kind of earplug from those cheap, fluorescent, foam jobbies up to the expensive, marksman models, but the results were always the same. He couldn't hear the music. He could hear some of the sound, of course, but something important had gotten filtered out. It made him feel like he was at mission control playing guitar on Mars via a set of robot arms. Not only did it feel odd, it made him a bad player.

He thought back to that night's show but he couldn't remember much. He took another swig from his beer and started feeling panicked. What had happened to him? He didn't remember the drive to Mississippi or the sound check or anything. If he didn't know any better, he'd have thought that the guys had slipped him some roofies. Was he getting old? Is this what happened when you reached forty? Just last week, he'd seen a documentary on that shark week channel about how

people developed weird memory problems out of the blue. Was that what was happening to him?

He looked around the room and thought that it looked pretty much the same as it had that afternoon, but it wasn't the same. Now it was the kitchen of a record store owner. That afternoon it had been the kitchen of a guitar player. Joseph glanced at the cat-shaped clock. Maybe the late hour was getting to him. The refrigerator kicked on and added an annoying serenade to the pity party. Joseph pressed his palms against his eyes. He ached all over, but that wasn't unusual after a big show. What was unusual was this descent into depression.

He pulled off his boots and carefully tiptoed into the bedroom. Della was sound asleep and as beautiful as he'd ever seen her. Her long hair was fanned out on her pillow forming a frame for her face. God, how he loved seeing that face. He fought the urge to kiss her. He couldn't remember ever having had such a need to be held and reassured, but it was best to let her sleep. If he woke her up, he'd have to explain why he was crying and he wasn't sure he could. He took off his clothes and slid into bed next to Della. He watched as her chest rose and fell in the moonlight and felt as if he'd lost everything. He didn't sleep at all that night.

"Jimi!" Della rushed to her boy's high chair just in time to stop the Cheerio rain from becoming a bona fide storm. "Little man, you need to settle down so your daddy can sleep, okay?"

The little man didn't appear to agree but he stayed quiet for the moment. He was slapping the Cheerios around on his tray like a hockey forward when Joseph shambled in. Jimi squealed and reached for him, knocking his sippy cup onto the floor. The top popped off on impact and orange juice splattered all over Joseph's bare feet.

"Well, good morning to you too," said Joseph as he picked up his son. He'd never imagined what fatherhood would be like before it was thrust upon him. All in all, it wasn't too bad, but the kid wasn't pot smoking age yet either.

Della grabbed a towel and started cleaning up the juice. "Did he wake you up? I'm sorry. I know you got in late and..."

"Nah, he didn't wake me up. I couldn't sleep so I figured I'd join the fun." He sat at the table and bounced Jimi on his knee while Della dabbed the juice off his feet.

"Was the show that bad?"

"Huh? Bad?"

"Was it a bad turnout or something?"

Joseph couldn't decide how much to tell Della about his memory loss. "No, the turnout was fine. Good crowd, good promotion, and even..." For a brief second, the image of a cop asking him to autograph a CD popped into head.

"Even what?"

"Um, even a cop who was a fan." *I think.*

Della nodded and went back to tending her breakfast on the stove. "That's cool," she said. "I was making some eggs-in-the-hole. You want some?"

Joseph smiled at her. "Sure," he said. "That'd be nice."

They ate their breakfast without any conversation beyond the half-formed words that Jimi spouted at random. Joseph had wanted to teach him swear words right off the bat, and he'd gotten away with a few. Della put an end to that the day Jimi shouted "Daddy fuck!" in front of the neighbors. She wanted to make sure Jimi didn't grow up to be yet another

Memphis redneck. She didn't have anything against rednecks per se. She just didn't want her son to be one.

Since Della had made the breakfast, it was Joseph's job to clear and clean. He was busy scrubbing the French skillet when he offered up a question. He intended for it to sound casual, but it didn't quite come out that way. "You ever have trouble remembering things?"

Della put down the spoon she'd been using to feed Jimi. "Like what? Like people's names?"

Joseph shook his head. "No, like when you drink too much and can't remember what you did."

"What's wrong? Did you drink too much last night? You didn't... You said you weren't going to..."

"No. No drinking. And no drugs." He didn't think so, anyway. "It's not a big deal. I'm just having a hard time remembering the show is all. It went so well that it's all just a blur. You ever feel like that?"

Della stared across the table and shook her head with her mouth hanging open.

"Yeah, well, it's a first for me too so don't go getting all Mama Duck on me." Mama Duck was what they'd named a duck that had decided to nest in their backyard a couple of years back. She'd apparently liked the pond that lay a few hundred feet beyond their property line. Once the ducklings were born, that duck had pampered and cleaned those little ones within an inch of their lives and all but one of them had survived. That one had fallen victim to a cat Della had been fostering. He became an indoor-only cat after that.

"I'm not going Mama Duck on you. I just want to make sure you're okay."

"You are, and I am. Case closed, alright?" He knew it wasn't. So why did he bring it up?

"That why you couldn't sleep last night?"

Joseph didn't turn around. He just kept doing the dishes. "It's bothering me a little bit. That's all."

"Well, if you ask me, and I think you did, I'd say you ought to see a doctor. Just in case." She looked at her little boy and felt her heart sink inside her chest. "You know, we'd sure as hell miss you if something serious happened."

"HELL HELL HELL!" shouted Jimi, breaking the somber mood that had befallen the otherwise cozy kitchen.

Joseph laughed loudly and Della laughed in spite of herself. She threw a Cheerio at him and it landed in the sudsy dish water. He watched it bob in and out of sight and wondered if she was right. Maybe he should get himself checked out. But who did you talk to about something like this? A shrink? A neurologist? He decided that he'd take action if he had another blackout. Until then he'd just let it ride.

He was rinsing out the sink when his cell phone rang. He ran back to the bedroom and grabbed it off the nightstand. It was Milt. "Hey."

"You feeling better?"

What did Milt know about last night? Jesus, had he done things he was going to be hearing about for the rest of his life? "Yeah, I guess so. Didn't sleep so good, but other than that..."

"You slept pretty good on the way back from Mississippi."

"I did?"

"You don't remember?"

Joseph started to ask Milt what had happened but then Della walked in. She gave him the look that asked 'who is it?' so he mouthed Milt's name.

She nodded and leaned over to whisper in his ear. "Jimi's down for the count and I was thinking of taking a long, hot shower. Why don't you join me, mister?" She tickled his ear with her tongue and that sent Joseph right through the roof.

"Look, Milt, I gotta go. I'll call you back in a little bit."

Milt was saying something, but Joseph didn't hear him. He was already running after Della.

Joseph rolled over and looked at the clock. It was after four. At least he'd finally gotten some sleep. He sat up and peered out the window beside the bed. His neighbor, Will Matthews, was out in the blazing hot afternoon sun planting pansies in the flower beds along the side of his house. Joseph sighed and shook his head. His idea of yard work was paying the gardener.

Will looked up and saw Joseph staring at him. He waved, thinking that the whole rock and roll lifestyle sure must be great. Joseph waved back, thinking that Will was probably judging him for being a slacker who slept all day.

The newly retired rock star got his rock star ass up and realized that he needed another rock star shower. He smiled, remembering how sweet the morning sex had been, and poked his head out into the hallway. "Dell?" No answer. She must've taken Jimi over to Belinda's. As far as Joseph could tell, Della's best friend was cut from the same conservative cloth as his neighbor. She was nice enough. He just couldn't put his finger on why she and Dell had become so close.

He padded off to the bathroom, finally feeling like himself again. By the time he was shaved and dressed, he felt positively perky. He grabbed his phone and called the store. He took off most days after shows, but this was a Saturday and he knew they'd be busy.

Victoria, the goth girl he'd promoted to assistant manager, answered the phone. "Needler."

"Hey, Victoria. It's me."

"Hey, Joseph. How'd it go last night?"

"It was alright. Y'all busy?"

He could feel Victoria scanning the large store. "Nah. Just the regulars. Robot and Smiley made an appearance." Robot and Smiley were a pair of black guys. Robot was seven feet tall and never said a word. Smiley was always cracking jokes that only he laughed at. The two of them were inseparable.

"Either one of them buy anything?"

"Yeah, right."

"I'll stop by in a bit. If you need me to do a cash drop, have the bag ready."

"Will do, boss."

"Thanks, Vic." He was about to hang up when he heard something in the background that piqued his interest. "What's that playing in the background?"

"Um, I don't know," Victoria lied.

"Vic, tell Susan to stop it with the 80s hardcore in the store. Stormtroopers of Death CDs aren't exactly flying off the shelves."

"Got it. No more S.O.D. Anything else?"

"Yeah, get Bernard to do a poster inventory if he's just going through the vinyl in the blues section for the umpteenth time today." Bernard was a hipster who was obsessed with three things—his waxed moustache, blues music, and vinyl. Word was that he had a kick-ass Bang and Olufsen sound

system in his midtown apartment, but Joseph hadn't been brave enough to visit yet. He'd heard that you had to sit in the sweet spot and lean your head at the appropriate angle before Bernard would drop the needle.

"Get Bernard to stop being Bernard. Check."

Joseph laughed. "Thanks, Vic. See you in a bit."

"Later."

Joseph dropped his phone on the bed but then thought better of it and picked it up again and called Milt.

"You back in the land of the living, dude?"

"Something like that."

"Good. Then how about coming over here tonight and watching the Preds game with me? Puck drops at seven."

The Nashville Predators were one of Milt's hobbies. Joseph wasn't a huge fan but he was definitely interested in chilling out with his buddy without having the band on the agenda.

"Sounds good. I've got to run by the store but I'll be there before seven."

"Cool. See you then."

After texting Della and locking up the house, Joseph climbed into his black Dodge Challenger and cranked up the first Caster album. Normally, he frowned on the idea of driving around blasting his own tunes. It was a little like wearing your own tour swag—it just wasn't done—but today he felt like listening to that record again. He wanted to go back to a time when life had been lighter. Before the internet had gutted the music industry and turned all the pros into buskers again.

The Needler parking lot was mostly empty when he pulled in. The spiky neon sign was needing an expensive tube replacement but it wasn't in the cards this month. Joseph picked up the trash in the parking lot before heading inside.

There was no reason for him to be there other than keeping the staff on their toes. Over the years, he'd learned that random appearances discouraged pilfering, among other things. It wasn't that he distrusted his staff. Most of them were good people. He just knew human nature and he wanted to do his best to remove any temptation. If they thought he might stop in at any moment, they'd be less likely to do something stupid.

Victoria waved at him from behind the register. Record stores always attracted oddball employees and Victoria was no

exception. She was notoriously closed-mouthed about her home life. Joseph knew that her father had been a stunt driver back in the day and that she mostly spent her free time taking care of him now that he was incapacitated, but he didn't know what exactly was wrong with the old man. Vic was tight-lipped about her private life most of the time.

Bernard took over at the front counter while Victoria and Joseph ducked into the office. He helped her count out her drawer and saw that it had been a busier day than she'd let on. "I thought you said the traffic was slow," said Joseph.

"It was. We just had a couple of guys come in and clean out a bunch of picture discs. You remember that stuff we bought off that dead head?"

Joseph nodded. How could he forget? The old dude was tripping his ass off while he sold them his whole collection for pennies on the dollar. Joseph had tried to talk him out of it, but the guy wouldn't be dissuaded.

"These guys didn't even bitch about the prices. Hipsters! Hrmph." She made a twisty-mouth face that was particularly amusing because of her heavy makeup.

"Hey cool it, Draculina. You're scaring the civvies."

Joseph pushed the door closed, nipping the tips of Bernard's fingers.

"OW!" yelled Bernard in mock pain.

"You'll live," said Victoria as she strapped up the last of the twenty dollar bills and locked them inside a zippered bank bag. She handed it to Joseph and asked, "You don't mind doing the drop?"

"No problem. I'm headed over to Milt's and the bank's on the way."

They emerged from the office to find that Bernard had wrapped the tips of his fingers in Scotch tape.

"You done with that poster inventory yet?" asked Victoria.

"No." said Bernard while eyeing Joseph.

"Then I'll stay on the register until you're done."

"Um, okay." Bernard grabbed a pen and a legal pad and trudged off toward the stock room, his fingers still taped up.

A group of giddy girls arrived at the counter and Victoria went to deal with them. She rang up their purchases, periodically turning back to Joseph and rolling her eyes. Joseph smiled and headed for the door.

It was nearly seven by the time Joseph pulled the Challenger into Milt's driveway. The house was just like many others in midtown Memphis. It didn't have much of a yard, but it had a big porch, high ceilings, and hardwood floors. It was a charming place that dated back to the 30s, so the electrical was for shit. Milt's demo recordings were almost always plagued with hums and buzzes. He called it midtown charm.

Joseph pushed the front door open to find Milt sprawled out on his sofa with three pizzas on the coffee table in front of him. "I couldn't decide," he said with a grin.

For the next couple of hours, Joseph was able to relax and enjoy himself without any thought of the night before. It was only after the game was over and the pizzas were mostly gone that he worked up the courage to ask Milt about the previous night's show.

"Dude, you were on fire. Seriously. Craziest thing I ever saw."

"Crazy? What do you mean?"

Milt looked at his friend sideways. "You don't remember any of it, do you?"

Joseph shrugged. "A little."

"Like what?"

"Some cop asked for an autograph, I think."

Milt laughed. "Yeah, that weird guy at the pawn shop. Jerry, the black redneck."

Joseph suddenly felt like the room was tilting. "Pawn shop?"

Milt just stared at him. "Are you serious? How could you forget that place? We almost got shot!"

Joseph shook his head. Something very strange had happened last night, and it was about damned time he found out what it was.

Milt took Joseph through the events of the previous day step by step, frequently interjecting things like, "How could you forget that?" and "Surely you remember!" But Joseph didn't remember. It was as if his Saturday afternoon and evening hadn't happened at all. Milt was clearly fascinated by his memory loss. Joseph was the reliable one—at least he was after he'd stopped doing drugs.

When Caster was big, every show was a party. It was fun for Joseph at first, but even partying can become a bore. He began to feel like his life was being leeches away. He'd started playing in a band because he didn't want to work at a real job, but then Caster had become a real job. Once money became a part of the equation, Caster found themselves on very short leashes.

The label wanted to protect its investment, so the band was assigned a publicist named Jackie Winstead. She was an aging groupie who always wore a little black dress, a heaping helping of makeup, and a lipstick-coated cigarette. She'd landed the Caster gig in a last ditch effort to raise her status within the record company. Her weapon of choice was flattery. She often succeeded in winning folks over with it, but it didn't work with Joseph. He hated her from the word go, but he put up with her because that's what the label expected of him.

Jackie planned every moment of every day, from their 6 AM radio station appearances (during drive time, darling!) to the after-show get-togethers for friends of the label brass. It was all choreographed, pitched, and planned to the nines, and it ultimately became mind-numbing. Only the shows themselves made the days worth living, and slowly, but surely, the excitement was whittled out of them as well. The same songs. The same crowds. The same promos. The same parties. The same hotels. The same highways. Joseph started feeling like he was sleeping through his waking hours. Days became weeks and he felt like he hadn't experienced any of it. That all changed when he found Jackie snorting meth in the bus bathroom one overcast afternoon on I-20.

She quickly covered up what she'd been doing but Joseph was curious. He pressed her and eventually she shared her stash with him. It happened innocently enough, but looking back on it Milt was certain she'd planned it all. Joseph needed a

pick me up and she sure as hell had given him one. At first, the meth actually helped. Joseph found new excitement in the same old material. Yes, he rushed the tempos a bit, but the rest of the guys didn't mind. They were just happy to see that their lead guitarist was getting back into the swing of things. Of course, it didn't last. Joseph eventually came crashing back to Earth, and the drop nearly killed him.

Once he was back at home, he found he couldn't function without the meth. When Della confronted him about it, his response was to offer her a snort. She freaked out and flushed his entire stash down the toilet. That argument had been one for the record books. It ended with Joseph bedding down at Milt's place and Della having the locks on the house changed.

She vowed not to speak to Joseph again until he was clean. Once he conceded, she took him back in and helped him shake the addiction once and for all. He'd gotten his head straight, but a part of him had died in the process.

For most of his waking life, he'd wanted to be Keith Richards: The Next Generation. What better way to tap into that whole oeuvre than to abuse whatever substances were handy? He'd ignored the fact that Keith had always been a user, never an abuser. It wasn't the drugs that had made Keith into "Keef". It was the fact that the top of Keith's pyramid of needs was playing live music. Not a wife. Not a child. Not making a living. The gypsy, rock and roll lifestyle suited Richards, but it had nearly eaten Joseph for lunch. He couldn't hack it. Rock and roll was a surreal stew of supreme boredom and ego strokes. Only a select few could hack it for more than a few weeks at a time. Even fewer could thrive on the road.

Joseph made sure that Caster never went on another extended tour. He eventually found a bit of peace in the fragile balance of a real world job and his rock and roll fantasy world, but he wasn't satisfied. He wasn't a music legend like his heroes, and he wasn't ever going to be one. He'd had his chance to focus 100% on sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, but when it came down to it, he hadn't made the cut. Yes, he was alive and well and he had a family and friends who loved him, but sometimes that just wasn't enough.

Milt snapped his fingers at his friend. He had to get him focused. "Hey, man. Don't drift off, now. Tell me the last thing you remember from last night."

Joseph leaned back into the puffy sofa cushions. "I remember not being able to sleep. I got into bed and just lay there, staring at the moon through the blinds."

"Okay, good. What about before that? Do you remember me dropping you off?"

Joseph thought about it then shook his head. "I have that one weird memory of the cop asking for an autograph, but it seems like a dream. I can't place it, you know?"

"Jerry."

"Huh?"

"His name was Jerry. He was at the pawn shop I told you about. Where you got that piece of shit guitar you were all in love with."

"Yeah. You mentioned that." Joseph was getting frustrated because he couldn't very well defend actions he didn't remember taking. "And where is this turd of a guitar now?"

Milt held his breath for a moment, trying to remember what had happened to it. "You didn't take it in the house with you?"

Joseph shook his head. "I don't think so."

Milt shrugged and stood up. "Must still be in my truck."

A few minutes later, Joseph was checking out the beat up guitar. "Well, you're right about one thing," he said. "It looks like shit." He turned the instrument over in his hands, feeling the rough texture of the body. "Tell me again why I bought this?"

Milt was relieved that his friend was no longer in love with the thing. "No idea, man. You spoke to that pawn shop guy alone for a few minutes, then you came out of the basement holding onto that like it was a life preserver on the Titanic."

"Weird." Joseph looked it over again. It was obviously a cheap copy of a Les Paul Special that hadn't been treated well over the years. The hardware was cheap, the pickups were cheap. Hell, it even had open tuners with a couple of bent pegs. He doubted it would stay in tune for an entire song.

"I played this onstage? Seriously?"

"If I'm lying, I'm dying, man. Wouldn't play anything BUT that guitar. You even kept playing after breaking the B string."

None of it made sense to Joseph, but sure enough, the B string was MIA. He looked the guitar over one more time as if a magical explanation would appear on its surface like the words inside Frodo's ring in that movie. There were no serial numbers

or markings except for the crude shape of a flying bird that was engraved in the headstock.

"You ever see a design like that? Maybe a Paul Reed Smith?"

Milt shook his head. "Dude, that guitar's a lot of things but it ain't no old man guitar." They both laughed. They called just about any guitar made out of highly polished wood an old man guitar. Flame tops were particularly susceptible to this moniker. To guys like Milt and Joseph, guitars were meant to be played, not polished. The more wear and tear a guitar had, the better it looked and sounded. It meant it had history—your history—and it would eventually learn to sing for you if you let it. This guitar was different, though. It had no mojo. It was just cheap junk.

"I give up. Never been partial to P-90s." He pointed out the old-school pickups. "Too noisy." He tried to hand the guitar off to Milt.

"No way, man. I can't be seen anywhere near that thing. I got a reputation to uphold."

Joseph snorted laughter. He took the guitar over to his car and slid it into the back seat, then they both went back inside. Milt wondered why they didn't hang out like that more often, but the answer was obvious—Della and Jimi. Having a family was serious business. Milt still lived like a college kid while Joseph had moved on to adulthood. In some ways, Milt envied his friend and in others he thought Joseph was batshit crazy. Settling down wasn't high on Milt's to-do list, a fact that was driven home when Joseph's phone beeped.

"Shit, man. I gotta get going. I told Della I'd be home by 11." He quickly texted his wife back to tell her he'd be on his way soon.

"Relax," said Milt. "She'll be okay on her own for a bit. I was hoping we might jam a little. What do you say?" He knew what the answer was going to be but he had to make Joseph say it.

"Maybe next week."

"Uh-huh."

"Why don't we plan on next Saturday?"

Milt crossed his arms. "That's cool, as long as we can go late. No clocks, dude."

The very idea of that made Joseph nervous, but he agreed. "Fine. No clocks. I'm going to be working all day so how about I come over after?"

"Fine by me."

"Alright, man." Joseph stood up and took his keys out of his pocket but he didn't leave. He looked around the room and took in Milt's surroundings. Part of him wished he was still on his own, but when he thought of Milt all alone in that apartment, he understood why his friend wanted him to stick around a while longer. "Look, I'm sorry I have to go."

Milt smiled. "It's alright. Really. Tell Della I said hello."

"Alright." He opened the door and moved one step closer to his car. "I'll see you Saturday?"

"Sure thing. Now close the door. You're letting bugs in."

Joseph smiled and let the door fall shut behind him. He got into his car and drove around the corner, then he parked and walked back. He stood on Milt's porch and watched through the blinds as Milt cleared the pizza boxes and shut off the TV. He was still standing there in the darkness when Milt turned off the lights and crawled into bed.

Milt could hear something. What was that? It was making the damndest racket, but it was as far, far away as Luke Skywalker. Why was Luke making all that goddamned noise?! He rolled over in his bed and realized that his phone was ringing. He grabbed it off the nightstand and slid his finger across the screen.

"Yeah?"

"Milt?"

"Della?"

"Milt, I'm sorry to bother you but..."

"Della, what is it?" He sat up in bed, now wide awake. He glanced at the clock and saw that it was only 12:30. He hadn't been asleep for very long.

"Is Joseph there?"

Milt's heart sank. Should he lie for his friend? "Um, no, Della. He left a while back. Right after he texted you."

Silence. That had been almost two hours ago. When Della didn't say anything, Milt got up and turned on the lights in the living room. He went out onto the porch and looked up and down the street. Nothing. Joseph's black Challenger was nowhere to be seen.

"Milt, I'm scared."

"He never made it home?"

She inhaled sharply then replied, "No."

"Did you call him?"

"He didn't answer. He always answers when I call unless he's on stage or recording or something." She sounded like she was about two seconds from a total meltdown.

Milt walked back into his house and looked for the jeans he'd shucked earlier. "I'm coming over. I'll trace the route Joseph usually takes. Maybe he just got in a fender bender or something. His phone might've gotten busted up." It was a lot of ifs and maybes but it was all the optimism that Milt could muster.

"Okay," said Della softly. She knew better. If Joseph had been involved in an accident that he could walk away from, he would have found a way to contact her.

"I'll be there in fifteen minutes. Call me back if you hear from him." He wanted to add "Don't worry", but he knew better.

Della was already plenty worried and she'd stay that way until they found Joseph.

Milt finished getting dressed and bolted out to his truck. He roared out of the driveway and headed east on Poplar, scanning the side streets as he went. Luckily the tail lights on the Challenger were recognizable from a distance. Joseph had blacked them out so they glowed with a purplish hue. Milt's mind raced with questions. Had Joseph run out on his family? If he had, where the hell had he run off to and why?

The fifteen minute trip passed without incident. There were no cop cars or tow trucks to be seen anywhere. Memphis had rolled up the sidewalks for the night and had apparently rolled Joseph up right along with them. Milt slowed down as he approached Joseph's house.

Della ran out to the truck as soon as he hit the driveway. "You find him?" she asked through the driver's side window.

Milt climbed out and pocketed his keys. "Sorry. No sign of him."

"What the hell?!" screeched Della. Now that another adult was present, she allowed herself to feel some of the awful suspicions she'd been bottling up inside. "What's going on, Milt?! Tell me!"

"I don't know. I swear. I didn't come across a single accident, but that doesn't mean he wasn't in one. We need to check the hospitals. If he crashed a couple of hours ago, that's where he'd be."

Della's eyes lit up slightly, but Milt thought her optimism would be short-lived. If Joseph had landed in an emergency room somewhere, chances were that someone would have checked his ID and gotten in touch with her. An hour later his fears were confirmed. Joseph wasn't in any emergency room. Where the hell had he disappeared to?

"He's a big boy, Dell. He can take care of himself."

Della could feel herself starting to tear up when she heard something that made her heart leap with joy. Joseph's Challenger had just pulled into the driveway! There was no mistaking the sound of that engine or the way Joseph always eased it in when it was late. She jumped up and ran out the front door.

The high beams from the car spilled around the edges of Milt's truck, blinding her as she ran forward, crying. Jesus, she'd

been so scared. Milt followed, feeling like he should get the hell out of there before the inevitable fight started.

"Joseph?" screamed Della. "Where the hell have you..." She stopped short and nearly collapsed. Two Memphis city cops were climbing out of the patrol car in the driveway.

"Mrs. Miles?" asked the first one. He was a big boy and he had the obligatory skinhead haircut that so many of the young cops sported, but he had a kind face. A baby face.

Milt saw the cops a nanosecond after Della did. He ran up to support her as she wobbled in place. Too many highs and lows for one night. "Della? You okay?"

"Who are you, sir?" It looked suspicious and Milt knew it. The cop probably thought Joseph's old lady had been shacking up with him.

"Milt Ray, officer. I'm Joseph's best friend. I came over to help Della look for her husband."

The cop looked first at his partner on the other side of the squad car, then down at his shoes. "Mrs. Miles, could we speak in private? Inside maybe?"

Della nodded and Milt helped her to the front door. Once there, chub cop went in ahead of him. "Just Mrs. Miles for the moment, sir."

Milt sat on the porch and waited. He was nodding off when the door swung open suddenly. He could hear Della crying. Chub cop stepped outside, leaving his partner inside to comfort Della.

"You known Mr. Miles for very long?" asked the cop.

"Yes, sir," said Milt to a guy who was 10 or 12 years younger than he was. "Known him nearly...20 years." Had it really been that long?

"You co-workers? Friends?" He let that one hang out there as though there was an unspoken third option that he didn't want to say out loud.

"Both. We're in a band together. Caster, maybe you heard of us?"

Chub cop shook his head. "No, sir. You have any idea what Mr. Miles did this evening?"

"I do. He was at my place watching the Predators game until 10:30 or so. Then he left and I assumed he drove here. Della called me around 12:30 asking if I'd seen him."

"Had you?"

"No. I drove over here and looked for him along the way, but no dice."

"Uh huh." Chub cop was making notes on a memo pad that looked especially tiny in his big, beefy hands.

"So where is he, officer? You obviously know something or you wouldn't be here."

"Thank you, sir. You've been very helpful, but I'm afraid I can only share that information with immediate family members."

"Are you fucking kidding me? You're pretty good at asking questions, boy, but you need to answer a few too!" Before Milt realized it, he'd grabbed the cop's arm.

"Sir, I'm going to excuse this as an act of passion given the current status of your friend, but if you do not remove your hand from my arm immediately, I'm going to be forced to charge you and take you into custody. Do you understand?"

Milt had already let go. "Yes, sir. Sorry...I just..."

The cop smiled. "No need to apologize, sir."

"Well, I'm sorry anyway." Milt was surprised to realize that he really was sorry. He had nothing against chub cop. He seemed like a standup guy as cops went.

"Thank you, sir. Excuse me, please." Chub walked back to his car to use the computer and left Milt alone in the darkness. It was so quiet. There was a low, ambient roar—the sound of the city at rest—and nothing more. Not even so much as a dog bark. And then it started to rain.

Milt huddled on the porch until the front door opened and the second cop stepped outside. He nodded to Milt and dashed over to the squad car. Two minutes later, it was as if the cops had never been there at all. Milt knocked lightly on the front door and it swung open on its own. He poked his head through the crack and saw Della sitting with her head down on the kitchen table. He went in and sat next to her at the kitchen table.

"Dell, what'd they say? Is Joseph in trouble?"

Della raised her head and Milt could see that she'd been crying. She looked him in the eye and started to speak, but then she just started crying again.

"Della, please. Those cops wouldn't tell me shit."

She wanted to tell him what chub cop had told her, but saying the words made it too real.

Jimi's cries erupted from the bedroom so Milt went back to tend to him. He figured Della wouldn't be tending to anybody

anytime soon. He came back shortly and said, "I don't know thing one about babies, but it smells like shit in there. I figure he crapped himself." Milt was proud of how many things he could tackle on his own, but dealing with shit that hadn't come out of his own ass wasn't on that list.

Della got up and stumbled back to the bedroom. Milt was relieved, but he still didn't know what the cops had told her. Several minutes passed and Milt looked around at the stark, white kitchen. He turned on a few more lights, hoping to chase away the tiny demons who were telling him that his best friend was dead. Jesus, that had to be it, right? Why else would the cops be so tight-lipped? Why else would Della be nearly comatose?

He opened the fridge and took out a beer. He opened it and was about to take a slug when he noticed the label. Amstel Light. He was about to drink one of his dead friend's last beers. Lord knows, no one else wanted to drink that skunky stuff! He plopped the bottle down too hard and foam started flowing out all over the countertop. Great. He grabbed a hand towel and was soaking up the spilled beer when Della came as far as the doorway and stopped.

Milt didn't dare speak. He hardly breathed as she played with her fingers like a sulking child. Her voice was little more than a whisper. "They found Joseph's car in the river. They're going to try to pull it out in the morning, but they think he's..." She was crying again. She grabbed her face with both hands and collapsed onto the floor. Milt ran over with his wet beer rag to comfort her.

"Dell? Seriously? THE river?"

She nodded and sniffed hard in a vain attempt to stop her nose from running. Milt used the beer rag to wipe her face. She smelled Joseph's beer and pulled back.

"Oh, sorry," said Milt. He jumped up and grabbed a handful of paper towels.

Della was laughing through her tears. "It smells like a goddamn brewery in here."

Milt laughed with her, then two people who had nothing more in common than their connection to a man who was presumed dead, held each other until the sun came up.

By the time Milt and Della arrived at the boat landing on South Main, the dirty work had been done. Joseph's Challenger had been extricated from the filthy waters of the big muddy and had been loaded onto the back of a large flatbed tow truck from city salvage.

"That's Joseph's car," said Della.

The patrolmen were waving Milt off to one side so he was taken aback when Della popped her seatbelt and bailed from the moving truck.

"Della?! Jesus Christ!" he yelled, screeching to a halt.

Della hit the ground running and bolted over to where she saw chub cop and his partner drinking coffee. "Please tell me y'all didn't find anything!" pleaded Della. Maybe, just maybe, Joseph wasn't dead.

Chub put his coffee on the hood of his squad car and extended a hand to Della. "Mrs. Miles. Like I told you last night, I would have called you if we'd found anything conclusive."

"I just couldn't sit still at home. Milt and me stayed up all night," she said, pointing out Milt in his pickup. "I just needed to see if he was down here or not."

"Well, ma'am, there's no body. The divers are in the river now, just in case, but the windows were up and the doors were locked." He shrugged.

"What does that mean?" asked Della.

Chub knew better than to give a family member false hope. "It's my guess someone pushed the car in."

Della's tears began to flow again. No whimpers, just tears. They flowed out her eyes despite her best efforts to hold them in. "But y'all don't know if it was Joseph or not? No cameras saw anything?"

Chub shook his head. No, ma'am. The dock surveillance cameras were down for repairs." He looked at his watch to keep from looking at Della. 7:20. "It's been almost eight hours. A lot could have happened in that time."

Della's heart skipped a beat. She couldn't think straight. The possibilities were overwhelming. Despite her love for Joseph, she'd have felt better if the cops had found his body. At least she'd have closure.

"You alright, ma'am?" asked Chub's partner. He handed Della his fresh cup of coffee. When Della hesitated he said, "Go

on. You take it. I haven't touched it yet and I've got a feeling you need it more than I do." These were seriously the nicest cops she'd ever met. She might have to reevaluate her whole world view after this.

"Thank you. That's sweet of you," said Della as she accepted the warm, paper cup.

Milt stayed put and watched from the safety of his truck. No need to interfere. The cops might not be so sympathetic with him around. Hell, they might not have been sympathetic if they knew what Joseph looked like. Rock and roll types rarely got cut any slack by the Memphis PD.

A few minutes later, Della climbed back into the truck. "He wasn't in the car, Milt."

Milt smiled but his gut told him that Joseph probably wasn't going to turn up anytime soon. He put the truck in reverse and maneuvered it around the heavy equipment that had been brought in to extract the car. He was about to drive off when a nagging question forced its way into his consciousness. He put the truck in park and popped his seatbelt off. "Be right back," was all he said as he jumped out.

He strode over to chub and company and nodded a hello. "I know I got no rights to any information, so if y'all just tell me to fuck off, I will, but I have to ask. Was there a guitar in that car when you opened it up?"

Chub put his coffee down. "Guitar?"

"An old electric guitar. Shaped like a Les Paul, but it wasn't no Gibson. Joseph picked it up the other day at a pawn shop down near Ole Miss. Place called P-W-N-E-D. No case. Just an old, grey guitar."

The two cops shared a glance. Milt saw it but he couldn't for the life of him figure out what they were thinking.

"No, sir," said chub. "There wasn't a guitar but I can have the divers look out for it."

"Alright, then. Thank you. Sorry to bother you."

"No bother," said chub.

Milt high-tailed it back to the truck. "What was that all about?" asked Della as Milt turned the truck onto Main.

"I don't know, Dell, but you need to know about our last show."

On the drive back to Della's house Milt told her everything. From the experience at PWNEED to Joseph's strange

affinity for that beat up old guitar, to his mysterious memory loss. Della listened, trying to understand what any of it had to do with Joseph's disappearance.

"I asked the cops if they'd found that guitar inside the Challenger. They said they hadn't, but when I mentioned us getting it at that pawn shop, they perked up and started paying attention."

Della shook her head. "Milt, nobody cares about some shitty pawn shop guitar."

"It was just weird is all," Milt's decided it would be better for everyone if he kept his mouth shut until he had something solid to go on. He didn't mention it again.

Della leaned her head against the truck window and stared up at the clear, blue sky. Last night she'd felt that Joseph was gone forever. Now she wasn't so sure. Joseph might just be alive out there, but her thoughts never raced on down the road of whys and why nots. She put her brain on cruise control and tried to keep it between the white lines for the time being.

Milt glanced over at her as he pulled the truck back into the driveway. She looked shell-shocked. She might be okay in the long run but it was going to be one hell of a rocky road getting there.

"Dell, I need to run home for a little bit. Will you be..."

"Oh, yeah, right. Sure, Milt," she stammered, wiping her eyes and trying to remove her seat belt. "I appreciate everything."

"You got anybody that could stay with you for a little while? I won't be long. Just got to run to my place to clean up and get a change of clothes." He tried to smile but it looked more like a grimace. It was the empty look on Della's face that was doing him in. She looked like a jack o' lantern right after its candle had been blown out.

"I'll be okay. I have a ton of work to do for Kat Kit. I've got a grant proposal due..." She looked at her phone and dropped it back into her purse when she realized that the battery was dead. "What day is it? What fucking day is it?! Jesus!" She began to cry again.

Milt wasn't sure what to do so he just offered Della his hand. She folded herself around it, allowing her body to collapse in on itself. She cried hard, her chest heaving against the strength of Milt's arm. Why couldn't things go back to the way they'd been just 24 hours ago? She never expected to avoid

bad things in her life, but she had always hoped that the particularly horrific ones would reveal themselves while they were still down the road a piece. She needed time to prepare herself before disaster poked its crusty fingers into her chest and pried out her heart.

They sat in the car for what felt like an hour. The truck windows fogged up and Milt thought back to his teenage years when he'd been caught necking in his father's Gran Torino with Suzy Colquitt. He suddenly felt self-conscious about being so close to Della. Her hair. Her breasts. He extracted his arm and gestured toward the house next door. "Your neighbor said she'd keep Jimi all day, right?" Della nodded as she dug some tissues out of her purse. "I want you to go over there too. I'll be back in an hour. Until then, I don't want you to be alone."

"I need my phone charger. I'm going to call Belinda."

Milt had no idea who Belinda was, but he was glad he wasn't going to be the only one Della had to lean on. "Is there anything you need me to do?"

She shook her head. "No, you go on home. Take a nap if you need to, alright? I'll be okay."

"You need me to go get you some groceries? How about I fill up the gas in the Exploder for you?"

Della leaned over and kissed him on the cheek, then she climbed out of the truck. "I'll be okay," she said. "Thank you so much."

Milt nodded and backed out of the driveway, determined to get back as soon as he could. He drove down streets that he knew well, but they looked different now. Less important. Devoid of joy. He had to find out what had happened to Joseph. If he'd run off, Milt was going to find him and kick the living shit out of him. If he was hurt or dead, well...then he wouldn't. Milt had seen those TV shows where folks would just up and disappear. Trouble was, Joseph hadn't acted like he'd been about to pull the rip cord. He'd acted as normal as ever last night. His weird spell had happened the night before.

Milt tried to imagine ways that the two things could be related but he kept coming up empty. So what if Joseph had forgotten the previous night's show? Milt repeated it like a mantra, but he couldn't convince himself. It was a big deal. Joseph had gone to la-la land and he'd left his brain behind. That wasn't an everyday occurrence for a guy who'd been a

teetotaler for a long while. Milt shifted around in his seat. Was that it? Was Joseph doing meth again? If so, he'd been awfully slick about hiding it from everyone. That thought plagued Milt until he pulled into his own driveway.

A shower and a bowl of Captain Crunch later, he picked up his phone and called the other ex-members of Caster to see if they'd heard from Joseph. None of them had, but the question set off a chain of events that ended with Milt letting them in on everything that had happened. They deserved to know, of course, but he felt like he was wasting precious time.

After he got off the last call, he texted Della to let her know he was going to be a little later than he'd planned, then he climbed into his truck and headed for downtown. It was turning into an overcast, muggy day. The thick air was pressing in on him, telling him to stop what he was doing. He didn't listen.

South Main Street had been the object of a revitalization push a while back. Now it looked good from the outside while it continued to crumble within. Incentives had lured businesses to the area just long enough for many of them to fail. In the end, all the developers had done was to make it okay for white kids to be in that part of town without raising any eyebrows. If there was one sure way for the cops to sniff out drug deals and johns, it was by tailing white kids in black neighborhoods. That no longer worked on South Main.

Milt parked on the street near a seldom-used trolley station and hiked over to the Wiltern Fisk Gallery. Wiltern was an old hippie, and a nice guy by most accounts. He also cooked up some furious meth and sold it discreetly. If Joseph had been using again, Milt was pretty sure the crank had come from Wiltern Fisk.

Milt tried the door to the gallery. Locked. He knocked on the window that had "Y'all Come On In" painted on it, but no one arrived to act upon the invite. The street was deserted and Milt found it to be oddly chilling. He pulled out his phone and looked up Fisk's number. If memory served, the old guy lived upstairs. While it rang, Milt looked inside and took in the strange paintings that currently graced the gallery's walls. They were large, sepia-toned works that mashed up carpentry tools, withered vaginas, and 30's cartoon clowns. The more he stared at them the more they freaked him out.

After the fifteenth or sixteenth ring (Milt had lost count due to the clown vaginas) he heard the receiver pick up and hit

the floor. The echo of the clunk bounced out into the street and Milt backed up to look into the upstairs windows. Sure enough, one of them stood open, it's dirty curtains flapping in the breeze.

Finally, he heard a man's voice over the phone. "Yeah?"

Milt had to think fast. "You holding?" he asked quietly.

"Who is this?" asked the gravelly voice. Was it Fisk?

"Milt Ray." Why lie? "I'm a friend of Joseph's." There was no response, so Milt tried again. "Joseph Miles?"

The gears in Fisk's head were almost audible as he put two and two together and found his way to four. "Oh, right. Joseph. Hang on."

A moment later the front door to the gallery emitted a distorted buzz. Miles pushed it open and waited inside, unwilling to get any closer to the clown paintings.

"Come on up, son. Be right with you after I drain the snake." That particularly distasteful comment was followed by a pastiche of coughs and wheezes that echoed down the stairwell.

Milt climbed the ancient stairs, careful to avoid the runners that had holes in them. Fisk might be making money off the dope and the art snobs who bough his shitty paintings, but he obviously wasn't spending it on home improvements. When Milt reached the top of the stairs, he lingered in the wide hallway, gripping the newel post for support. There was a skylight directly above him. Through it, he could see the constant churn of vapor trails from the FedEx planes overhead. It was mesmerizing sober. Milt could only imagine how entertaining it would be if he were stoned.

The toilet flushed, then there, ten feet in front of him, stood Wiltern Fisk. The years hadn't been kind to the old hippie. His eyes were sunken and his grey beard had turned yellow. He was wearing an enormous pair of black basketball shorts and a tie-dyed tank top that exposed his sallow shoulders and upper arms. His chest was a rat's nest of curly grey hair. Yep, this was the guy.

"So, you looking for some crank, son? I'd suggest you go on your way if I thought it would do any good, but you young folks don't want to hear that, now do you?"

"Fisk, I don't want any of your shit. I'm just looking for Joseph. I thought he might've come by here recently." Milt wasn't even sure that the old man remembered who Joseph was.

"Naw. Ain't seen him, and that's a good thing." He looked at his feet as if he'd never seen them before, then he wandered down the hall muttering something about his flip flops.

Milt followed and asked, "You do know who I'm talking about, right?"

Fisk laughed. "You're obviously confusing my outward appearance with my mental condition, boy. I remember your friend, alright." He eyed Milt as he made his way into the spare bedroom he'd converted into a makeshift kitchen. "You too, for that matter. You were here the night those university kids did that performance art show. You were chasing after a young redhead if I'm not mistaken."

Milt's jaw fell open and Fisk laughed. "I don't use my own merchandise, son. Got enough trouble with the lung cancer." He coughed while he dumped some stale Folgers into the basket of his coffee maker.

"Oh. Sorry to hear that."

"What you gonna do, huh?" asked Fisk with a sad grin.

Milt forged ahead. "Do you remember the last time you saw Joseph?"

"I do indeed," said Fisk. "He came by here to tell me he was getting straight and that he wouldn't be around any more." He paused and caught Milt's eye with his own bloodshot peepers. "I was glad for him, son. Some folks are meant to burn on their way out of this life but I never thought Joe to be one of those sorts. He obviously didn't think so either." The old man sighed. "Missed seeing him and listening to him play, though." He pointed at a beat up acoustic guitar that sat in the far corner of the room. "He could sure make that thing sing."

When Milt said nothing more, Fisk pulled up a chair and sat down. "Have a seat, young man," said Fisk as the coffee maker began to hiss and pop. Much to his surprise, Milt did as he was told and sat at the old Formica table that was pushed up next to the window.

"Joseph's missing. I think he's probably dead," said Milt.

"That's not a good feeling, son. Been there myself a number of times." He cleared his throat and recited like a school boy. "If a problem is fixable, if a situation is such that you can do something about it, then there is no need to worry. If it's not fixable, then there is no help in worrying. There is no benefit in worrying whatsoever."

"What's that from?"

"The Dalai Lama."

Milt smiled. "Smart guy."

"He certainly is," said Fisk as he stood up and headed for the fridge. "Now, what all you want on your omelette?"

The world was filled with strange sounds. Everywhere he turned, Joseph heard new and interesting things. Bees buzzing in the grass. Water lapping at the shore. Jets roaring across the sky. Jets. Jets. Jets. What the hell were jets? He could see them up there, but he couldn't quite conjure up a mental image of them. He sat up in the tall grass and saw the mighty Mississippi before him, filthy and tranquil. All was at peace.

The nap had made him feel much better. Energized. He looked down at his lap and his battered guitar embraced him with its warmth. What had life been like before he found that guitar? He was pretty sure he'd been lonely and miserable. No longer. It had grabbed him by the balls and hoisted him out of the hell of his own mediocrity. That was what he'd been before! Mediocre! No one wanted or needed mediocrity, did they? No-sir-ee, Bob. What the world needed was power—the spiritual power that flowed out from under his fingers when he was playing that beautiful guitar. He hadn't even realized it, but he'd been playing that guitar the whole time he'd been sitting there.

“Hey!”

Joseph looked up to see two darkly tanned faces leaning down to get a closer look at him. In his mind, he spoke volumes, but all the two vagrants saw was a smiling, long-haired fool.

“You hear me, freaky deaky?” asked the bigger of the two.

The second guy chimed in. “He didn't hear you, man. Better speak up.”

The big guy turned toward his companion and his hands became enormous fists. “You telling me what to do, you little shit?”

The little shit promptly backed away. If he'd had a shell he most certainly would have retreated into it. “No, Big Charles. Hell, no! Just trying to—you know—play along.”

“Yeah, you fucking play fucking along. Fuck!” If Joseph was aware of this virtuoso linguistic performance, he showed no sign of it. His passivity in the face of a certain ass-whooping was pissing Big Charles off.

“Look like you got ears but with all that hair it's hard to tell!” Big Charles laughed like that was the funniest thing he'd ever said. The little guy kept his response to a chuckle. “You

not supposed to be down here, hippie boy. You know that?" Still no response. "Samma, looks like we got us a deaf mute, here!" More laughter.

"Maybe so," said Samma.

"Abso-fucking-lutely, we do! And if this sumabitch is deaf, he sure as hell ain't got no use for no git-tar!" There was more laughter and then the big man reached down and made a grab for Joseph's precious instrument. "Why don't you let us take care of that for you, deaf boy?" He didn't expect an answer. Unfortunately, he got one.

Joseph gripped the guitar neck like a baseball bat and swung the heavy wooden body directly into the face of the descending giant. Big Charles' nose exploded in a spray of blood and snot and gristle. Samma took a step back and Joseph grinned up at him with Big Charles' blood running down his face.

"Jesus fucking Christ!" shouted Big Charles, sounding like he had a bad head cold. "That mother fucker done gone and broke my fucking nose!" He put his fingers to his face to see if it was still there.

Samma backed away. "I think we ought to leave this one be, man."

"Shut up and help me hold him. This mother fucker's going to pay for fucking up my face!" He didn't realize it yet, but Joseph had also knocked out three of his front teeth. It made Big Charles' hard consonants sound like creamed corn.

Samma tried one last time to reason with his friend. "Seriously, man. Let's head down to Will's place and play some cards. We don't need this shit!"

"NO! You the one don't need this shit!" shouted Big Charles. "I, on the other hand, have a true to life, serious need to fuck this freak's shit UP!" He was grinning now and Samma knew he'd lost the debate. Rage trumped logic every single time.

Big Charles ran at Joseph, screaming the whole way. He stumbled a bit when he stepped in a shallow hole and that was all the opportunity that Joseph needed. He sprang to his feet and wedged the guitar against the ground under the big guy's frame. The headstock dug deep into Charles' gut and stopped the big man's fall. Charles looked down to see that the guitar's headstock had penetrated the twist of intestines that he usually used to digest barbecue down at his sister-in-law's

restaurant. Those innards might not do such a good job after this.

Joseph smiled and pushed saliva out between his teeth until it ran down his chin, then he let loose a roar of pleasure.

"Shit, Charles. He's got the rabies or some shit."

Charles almost chuckled. Almost. He fell over onto his side and moaned an incomprehensible sound as his life blood watered the dying weeds. Samma crept closer to see that his friend's eyes were wide open—twin moons hewn from lifeless rock. The corpse smelled of shit and copper, just like a sweaty child with a soiled diaper. Samma caught one whiff and he started to hyperventilate. He'd had asthma his whole life, but he refused to carry an inhaler. In the parts of town he frequented, any sign of weakness invited death. Today, Samma realized that his lack of an inhaler might be the very thing that killed him. *Ain't life a bitch*, he thought.

Joseph tried to pull the guitar free but the tuning pegs were caught in some of the vile human equipment that had previously gone by the name of Big Charles. Samma saw this and realized that he'd been given a rare gift. He had a head start.

Samma ran confidently at first, certain that the hippie wouldn't be able to disentangle his guitar very quickly, but then he looked back over his shoulder and saw that the guy was gone. He tried to catch his breath, but his airway had constricted so much that very little air could get in. *Be damned if I'm going to go out like this*, he thought as he forced his legs to push him further up the hill. He was almost at the top. If he could just make it to the access road, someone would surely see him. Just a few more yards. His lungs ached for oxygen as his blood cells suffocated in his veins. He forgot about Charles and the guitar and even the wigged out hippie. All he thought about was breathing.

He was almost at the top when he began to black out. He fell against the embankment, face first, unable to inhale or exhale. His eyes swam as he rolled over and grabbed at his neck. Maybe he could poke a hole in his neck to breathe through. Just like his neighbor, Mr. Chiles, had done back when he was a marine. The old guy used a cancer kazoo to talk these days but he seemed to be able to breath alright. The thought made Samma chuckle, and that tiny bit of relaxation opened up his windpipe just enough to let in a little gasp of precious air.

Thank you, Jesus, thought Samma as his previously imminent blackout faded away. *Thank you thank you thank you tha...*

Samma's prayer of Christian gratitude was cut short when the body of an old, grey guitar swung into view and crushed his face into the back of his head. Joseph pulled the guitar free of the bloody mash that had been Samma's face and laid it on the ground with great reverence. He sat and watched as a tugboat plowed its way upstream. If he'd had a pack of cigarettes and a lighter, he'd have smoked, but he had neither so he just sat there. He stayed like that for six hours, hardly moving as the corpses he'd mangled baked in the afternoon heat.

Once the sun set, he climbed to his feet and picked up his guitar. The blood caked surface was dry now. He walked back down to the bank of the mighty Mississippi and turned south. Something inside urged him forward. It was like a homing beacon had been activated in his soul. The riverbank wasn't easily traversed, but it was child's play to Joseph. He was lit from within with a burning clarity. If you'd asked him what his new purpose was, he couldn't have told you, nor could he have understood your fear when you realized that his hands and arms were covered with dried blood. As far as he was concerned, life was good. He made his way through the brambles at the river's edge while whistling the theme to Hawaii Five-O.

Della looked out her living room window just as Milt pulled into the driveway. She opened the door before he could ring the bell. "Hey," she whispered. She felt like hugging him but she wasn't sure if she should. He'd always been sort of standoffish around her. Milt made up her mind for her by leaning in and enveloping her in his arms.

"Jimi asleep?" he asked as he released the long embrace.

"Yeah," whispered Della. "Mrs. Hayes is taking a nap back there too. Jimi can wear out anybody."

They went straight to the kitchen and sat at the table like they were getting ready to put a new jigsaw puzzle together. Maybe they were. They just didn't have any of the edge pieces yet.

"I did something I probably shouldn't have," said Milt softly. "I just..." He sighed. "I thought that maybe Joseph was, um..." He didn't want to open up old wounds, but he suspected that Della had been thinking the same thing.

Della reached across the table and took Milt's hand. "Just say what's on your mind. Isn't that what Joseph would say?"

Milt chuckled. It was funny how married couples picked up one another's phrases. "Yeah, I guess so." He looked around at the brightly lit kitchen, then back at Della's bloodshot eyes. "I thought he might be back on the meth, Dell."

Della let her fingers slide out of Milt's as she leaned back in her chair. Her gaze went glassy as she thought about the hell that Joseph had put her through.

Milt leaned forward. "But he isn't...or wasn't. Not as far as I can tell. I went down to Fisk's place." Della crossed her arms. That was a name she hadn't heard in quite some time. "He remembered Joseph. Said he hasn't seen him since he got off the crank." His eyes met Della's. "That's a good thing, Dell. Dead or alive, at least it's not the drugs doing the thinking for him."

She looked away and her gaze rested on the large magnolia tree that was right outside the kitchen window. Out there, everything was okay. A mockingbird landed on one of the lower branches and screeched at a crow that was perched nearby. They were caught up in their own life and death

struggles but somehow they seemed happy to Della. She'd always had a soft spot for animals. Truth be told, she liked animals better than people. Animals didn't lie to you or talk about you behind your back. They had a purity that Della admired. Right now, she wished her life was as simple as theirs.

"Maybe it would have been better if he was using, Milt. At least then I'd have something to blame. At this point, if he is alive there's no one to blame but him." She fingered her wedding band.

"It might not be like that, Dell. You don't know."

"That's just it. I do know. No matter how this turns out, I've already lost Joseph." She could feel her tears welling up again so she willed them down. If she was going to end up raising Jimi on her own, she was going to have to learn to appear strong. It wasn't any different than rescuing cats. One of her volunteers had once found a cat that'd had her legs tied together with cable ties and her fur set on fire. The asshole who'd perpetrated that particular ugliness had gone to jail because she'd been strong. She'd dug in and fought back. Eventually one of the neighbors let some information slide and they had the scum. Even better, the cat had survived and was currently living a charmed life with a woman from Canada who'd driven all the way to Memphis to pick her up. It was like the universe tried to balance out the cruelty with kindness. What was it they'd taught in physics class? For every action there was an equal and opposite reaction? Della believed in that. It was the only thing that kept her going some days.

"What is it?" asked Milt.

Della realized she'd been staring at him. She cleared her throat and got up to find a notebook and a pen. When she sat down again, she was a different woman.

"What's Fisk's full name and address?"

Milt looked at her nervously but the determination in her eyes made him answer without a single question. "Wiltern Fisk. Stays at that gallery of his down on South Main. I don't know the address but I could find it."

Della opened her laptop and slid it over to Milt. A few minutes later she recorded the address. "Who else?"

"Huh?" Milt wasn't sure what was happening but the new Della sure as hell beat the weepy one.

"We're going to start looking. One by one. We have to see if we can find anybody who knows where he might be. The more remote the connection the better."

Milt sat up in his chair. "There's everybody in Caster, of course. I already spoke to them, though."

"All of them? Crew too?"

"I didn't talk to Wild Bill and Carno."

Della scribbled the names on the page even though these were all people she knew well. "What's Carno's last name?"

Milt thought for a moment, then shrugged. "Jesus, I don't know. It's not like Carno's his real first name either. He's a sound guy. You know how they are about stupid nicknames."

Della continued to write. "His real name is Carnosaur. His parents let him pick it himself right before he had to start school. Before that, they'd called him Five."

"How the hell do you know that?"

"He told me one night after a show."

"Well, I'll be damned. Carnosaur. Strike one for lenient parenting."

"That's a full three strikes if you ask me," muttered Della and the two of them laughed. It felt good, but it was followed by soul-crushing guilt.

"Damn," said Milt.

Della stared at the notebook on the table in front of her. "Who else?"

"Well, there are the other techs, like..." He was about to rattle off the other guys in their little circus when Della's phone rang. She slid the notebook over to Milt and he wrote while she took the call.

"Hello?"

"Mrs. Miles?"

Her blood ran cold. It was chub cop. "Yes," she answered.

"Mrs. Miles, this is Officer Payton Evanson. We met this morning."

"Yes, officer. Do you have any news?" Della took a deep breath.

"Yes and no, ma'am. The divers haven't found anything at the crime scene yet."

So far so good, thought Della. "What else?"

There was a pause before Officer Evanson answered. "This might not be related at all, mind you."

"Tell me," said Della. She wasn't interested in coaxing information out of the young man.

"Well, ma'am, two bodies were found down by the river just a little ways south of where your husband's car was." Della's ears perked up but she didn't say anything. "They were both locals. I'm sorry but I can't tell you any more than that."

It was that last line that ignited Della's fuse. She liked this cop just fine but now he was holding something back. "So then why the hell did you mention it at all, officer?!" shouted Della. She was wearing a veneer of control but it was very thin.

Chub cop wasn't phased. He continued in hushed tones. "Ma'am, this is an ongoing investigation. If I..."

"You're goddamned right, it's ongoing!" hissed Della. "You don't have to spell that shit out for me! The thing I do need you to spell out, however, is how the death of two random guys down by the river might be related to Joseph's disappearance!"

"Well, see, ma'am, I'm not supposed..."

"Uh-uh. Wrong answer."

"I understand how you feel, ma'am. I do. I just...if I tell you anything, I could lose my job. My wife and me, we just bought a home and we have a baby on the way and..."

Della wasn't sure, but the young man sounded like he might be about to cry. She suddenly felt like a bully. She needed this guy on her side, but instead of enlisting him, she'd tried to draft him into service. "I'm sorry," she said. "I just need to know why those murders might have anything to do with my husband. Please? What if it was your wife who was missing?"

"Well, the thing that I might be okay telling you is that those two guys were found by the K9 squad. You know, the dogs?"

"Yes. Go on."

"They were given the scent from your husband's car and it led them straight to the bodies. That's more than I'm supposed to say, Mrs. Miles. Will you please just leave it at that? Please? If anything else comes up that I'm allowed to talk about, I promise I'll call you."

Della nodded even though she knew the cop couldn't see her. "Okay, officer Evanson. I appreciate whatever you can do."

"No problem, Mrs. Miles. I know you're stressed out. What I want you to know is that I'm just as stressed about this case as you are. I promise you that I won't rest until we find Mr. Miles."

It was a sweet, albeit ignorant, sentiment coming from a young man who was barely more than a boy. "Thank you. I know you'll do your best." She spoke to him like she was speaking to Jimi. God, how she hoped that Jimi wouldn't grow up to be a cop.

She hung up and went back to the table to brief Milt on what chub had told her. "Might not mean anything," she said, hoping Milt would argue against her.

He came through with flying colors. "Yeah, but it could mean an awful lot. Depends. Maybe those assholes robbed Joseph. Maybe a third asshole took the car and then dumped it before he killed those guys. He paused and looked Della up and down, trying to ascertain whether or not she could handle the one other possibility that had popped into his head. Sometimes he wished he had a less vivid imagination.

"What?" asked Della.

Milt shook his head. He couldn't say it.

"You're thinking that Joseph might've rolled his car into the river then killed those guys before taking off. Right?"

"Joseph's not a murderer, Dell."

"But that's the other possible connection."

"Yeah. Pretty much. Did the cop tell you how they were killed?" Della shook her head. "Then maybe we ought to head down there and see if we can poke around a little bit before the daylight's gone."

As if on cue, Jimi began to cry in the other room.

The tree branches were heavy with leaves but they didn't do much to protect Joseph's skin. It was late afternoon and the sunlight blasted him in the face from the far side of the river as he continued to make his way along the shoreline. He didn't know exactly where he was going but he knew it was down river.

A small tug was anchored up ahead, less than fifty feet from shore. By the looks of things, the crew was working on the engine. Thick diesel smoke belched out of the little boat and blotted out the sun. Joseph waved at the men on board. Eventually a young man with the face of a junior high student and the build of a longshoreman noticed him.

"Hey there!" the boy shouted, waving back. "You need help?"

Joseph grinned. "Y'all headed south? I need to get down the river a piece! My wife's having a baby and I don't have transpo!"

The boy on the small boat conferred with his crewmates before responding. "We can take you as far as Rosedale!" he shouted.

Joseph's heart leapt for joy. Rosedale! What was it about Rosedale? He had no idea, but the thought of going there made him extremely happy. He nodded to the deckhand and, much to the young man's surprise, he strode right out into the river, guitar and all. The young man pulled a cord on a yellow inflatable and rowed out to meet the stranger. Whoever he was, he appeared to be determined to drown himself.

"Come on up here," said the boy as he grabbed at Joseph's arms. The water had washed the dried blood away so there was nothing about the guitar man that was particularly alarming. Joseph nodded his thanks and climbed aboard the tiny raft.

"You either love or hate that guitar, mister," said the boy. A knot formed in Joseph's chest that told him to kill the boy then and there. It was followed by a kinder, gentler voice that told him it might be better if he waited until they went aboard the tugboat. That assuaged the knot for the time being.

"Cap's going to be mad at me for inflating the raft but I couldn't very well let you drown out here, could I?"

Joseph shook his head. "Thank you," was all he said.

"You're welcome," said the boy with a grin. Nobody ever thanked him for anything.

They pulled up alongside the tug and he flung a line up to the deck. The smell of the rubber tires that lined the side of the boat was overwhelming. Joseph couldn't smell anything else. Not even the funk of the river itself.

Once on board, he was introduced to the handful of crew members. The young one was Mark, the captain was Rogers, his mate was Mrs. Rogers (though Joseph had originally thought that she was a man with good skin). The engineer, who refused to poke his head above deck, was Mr. Krieg. The boat was named the Guff. The captain said it was because it was the only guff he'd ever taken off of anybody. They all seemed to think that was right funny so Joseph forced out a husky sound that approximated a laugh.

"My name's Carlton," said Joseph. "Are we going to Rosedale soon?" He could hear himself speaking but his voice sounded far away. He looked down to see that his long hair was dripping dirty water all over the clean deck.

The mannish woman grabbed an old towel and wrapped it around his head. "You poor thing. Well, we got a radio if you want to try a call your wife. Phone will probably work this close to shore too."

Her husband, who everyone called Cap, stepped in and waved his wife off. "Let him be, Millie." He then raised his eyebrows at her in an attempt to communicate the fact that he thought the newcomer was suspicious. Instead, Mildred took it to mean that Cap wanted a roll in the hay. That was what most of his looks meant most of the time. "Now, Cappy, that'll keep. Let's get our guest some chow."

Joseph didn't care about food, but the thought of the word "wife" gave him pause. Did he have a real wife somewhere? He could picture someone. She was pretty. Thinking about her face made him happy and that happiness made his legs give out. He hit the deck and his wet guitar slammed into the railing beside him with a clang.

"Dude, the water totally ruined your guitar," said Mark.

He was right, of course. Guitars and muddy river water weren't a good combination. Nevertheless, there was something about the guitar that Joseph knew he had to protect. Something that had nothing to do with pickups and tuners and volume pots.

Something primal that tugged at his soul. The pleasant glow that had been filling his mind's eye was immediately extinguished. In its place, suspicion and anger arose.

"Don't touch it!" Joseph yelled as he hugged the instrument close.

"Um...okay. Don't worry. I won't." The young man backed away, feeling that maybe bringing this Carlton guy on board had been a bad idea after all. He was always having bad ideas. He wondered when he was going to have a good one for a change.

"Don't any of you come anywhere near this guitar!" shouted Joseph. The little voice in his head urged him to calm down. Images of red flashing lights and angry dogs dominated his mental landscape. Those were the things he had to avoid. Smart things and their pointy parts. He had to settle the rage in his chest or pretty soon he'd be standing on a blood covered deck with no way to drive the boat where he needed it to go. The quiet voice got louder. It was Della's voice. It said, "Go on now, honey. Let the boy have a go at our guitar. Play it off like it was a joke. You remember how to do that, don't you?"

Joseph grinned and then busted out laughing. The crew of the Guff exhaled but remained on their guard. Cap had pushed the others behind him and Mr. Krieg had appeared above deck with a pipe wrench in his hand.

"I got y'all, didn't I?" Joseph laughed. "I'm sorry. I just like practical jokes. I didn't mean to scare anybody."

Joseph's grin was contagious, but Cap was still suspicious. It wasn't until Joseph invited Mark over and showed him a few chords on the wet guitar that he started breathing a little easier.

Cap pulled his wife aside and whispered, "We got to get this fella off our boat ASAP. You read me?"

"Awww, sugar. He's just an odd one is all. From the looks of him, he might even be homeless. You know how that messes with people's heads. The first thing to go is the ability to talk to folks." She watched as Joseph tried to teach Mark how to make a D chord. It wasn't easy what with the missing B string.

Joseph could feel the woman's gaze on him so he poured on the charm, laughing it up with his student and slapping him on the back. He then took the guitar into his hands

and wailed on it, beating a blistering lead out of those damaged strings.

“Wow!” said Mark. “I bet that’d sound sick through an amp!”

Millie nodded to her husband and marched over to where the music lesson was taking place. “Carlton, you’re full of surprises.”

Joseph nodded and smiled but he was just as amazed by his performance as the tugboat crew was. That guitar was so far out of tune that he shouldn’t have made anything but noise. “Thank you,” was all he said.

Millie looked around and whipped a kitchen towel at her husband. “If it’s not too much trouble, why don’t we reconvene in the galley before our dinner gets cold. Carlton, you’re welcome to join us.”

Joseph nodded and climbed to his feet before helping Mark up. He wanted to take his guitar with him but the Della Voice told him not to. He reluctantly consented and laid it on a pile of rope before joining the crew in the boat’s little galley.

The Guff was a small tug by modern standards. The deckhouse contained a couple of bunk rooms, the galley, and the captain’s quarters. There was also a little bathroom that they called the head for reasons Joseph couldn’t fathom. Space was at a premium and for someone Joseph’s size, things were cramped. Still, going south on this boat made sense for a couple of reasons. First, it was easier than walking. The river banks were overgrown and difficult to navigate. If Joseph had stayed on dry land, he’d have eventually had to walk the highways where he’d likely be picked up by the red flashes and teeth. Better to stay low. The second reason was in front of him. Food. If these people kept feeding him, he’d be in primo shape by the time they landed. He’d been feeling a bit weak since leaving the shore but the roasted chicken dinner in front of him was already making him feel better.

The meal period was filled with the small talk of a tight-knit group that unexpectedly had a stranger in their midst. Joseph didn’t contribute much himself, preferring to listen and keep an eye on Cap. Several times now, he’d seen the captain giving him the once over.

After dinner, Joseph was assigned a bunk and given the rundown on how the bathroom fixtures worked. Millie asked him if he’d like to take a shower and get all that river water out of his

hair. Joseph agreed simply because the old gal seemed to expect it, then he got in the shower and stood there until he thought enough time had passed.

When he came out of the bathroom, Joseph saw that everyone but Mr. Krieg had gathered in the galley again. They'd turned the lights down and were watching a TV that was ratchet-strapped to the wall. Mark slid over and patted the red upholstery next to him. The group was watching something familiar but Joseph couldn't quite place it. It seemed like a tragic story but he could hear laughter in the background. He heard Della's voice again as it prompted him. "It's a show called Seinfeld. Tell them you remember this one."

"I remember this one," said Joseph.

"Yeah, it's one of my favorites," said Millie as she leaned back into her husband's arms. "No soup for you!" she said in an voice that puzzled Joseph.

He sat next to Mark and stared at the TV with the others. It was little more than an inefficient light source, but it seemed to be entertaining them. Joseph smiled each time they laughed and looked at him. Did they want his approval? Was he now in charge of when these people laughed? He didn't think so, but they kept looking to him. It made him uncomfortable.

There were other TV shows to be stared at and some discussion of the course they'd set in the morning, then everyone was off to bed. Joseph watched Mark to see what he should do and the Della Voice chimed in with occasional advice as well.

"Good night," said Mark with a smile as he bounded into his bunk.

Joseph smiled back. "Good night," he said. Mrs. Rogers slid past him toward the captain's quarters. He coughed and realized that he was parched. In fact, he felt like he hadn't had a drink of water in days! He called out to Mrs. Rogers. "May I have a drink of water?"

She turned around in the narrow hallway—not a small feat—and said, "No need to be so formal, hon. There's a cooler there in the galley. Just don't use them Mickey Mouse cups. Those are Cap's. Other than that, what's ours is yours."

Joseph smiled and thanked her, all the while thinking that more fitting words had never been spoken.

The jacked up black Tundra had become familiar to the cops working on Joseph's case. They waved Milt and Della into an area that had been cordoned off for police vehicles. None of the uniformed cops knew much about Milt, but Della was the sort they liked to help. Mother. Wife. Respectable clothes. Back at home, Della had pulled off her Misfits tee and ripped jeans and replaced them with a conservative, plaid blouse and khaki shorts. "Flies and honey," she'd muttered to herself as she'd pulled the tag out of the armpit of the shirt. She'd never even worn the damn thing before.

Once parked, Milt wandered down to see if he could get a look at the crime scene while Della talked up the black plainclothes cop who was obviously in charge.

"Officer?" She held out her hand. "I'm Della Miles. Joseph Miles' wife."

The cop quickly stubbed out his cigarette on the bottom of his shoe and shook Della's hand. The tobacco smoke lingered in the air and reminded Della of how much she'd once enjoyed smoking. "*Detective Massey, ma'am.*"

Did all the cops get testy when you got their rank wrong? Jeez, it wasn't like they had it tattooed on their foreheads, thought Della. "Nice to meet you, Detective. Any news?"

The detective had rolled up his shirt sleeves and now he rubbed his hairy forearms nervously. "Ma'am, please don't take this the wrong way but we have officers who are supposed to be keeping you abreast of any and all developments. Were you given the name and number of..."

"Yes, Officer Evanson has been very nice to me so far. No complaints. I just get restless waiting around at home. Everything there triggers memories and before you know it I'm crying again. I'm getting tired of it, Detective."

"Yes, ma'am. I didn't mean the officer in charge. I meant your advocate. There are also victim support groups and..."

"My advocate?" She said it like it was an STD. "Look, I didn't come down here for counseling. What I need is information about the whereabouts of my husband!" The cops within earshot glanced over and then quickly looked away, fearful that they too might get sucked into the Della shit storm.

"Officer Evanson told me about your determination, ma'am. I appreciate that you want more info, but you have to appreciate the fact that we have a job to do."

"And I'm just going to get in your way? Is that what you think, Detective?"

Massey sighed. It was one of those days. A car in the river had turned into a missing man and that missing man had turned into a missing man and a couple of dead guys. "Look, you seem like an intelligent person so I'm going to give you the unfiltered version. I need you to leave this crime scene and never come back. Do you hear me?" Della started to protest but Massey's bloodshot eyes and wagging finger stopped her. "Uh-huh. This is how it works, Mrs. Miles. You are not a detective or a peace officer or even a beat cop. As far as I'm concerned, you are a victim, and while I feel for you on a great many levels, I cannot do my job if I'm feeling sorry for you or thinking that you might enjoy hearing about my progress over a cup of ginseng tea every day at two. If some..."

"Detective, I..."

"No, ma'am. You had your say. Now it's my turn. If some information is made available to you, it'll be done through the advocacy group or, if he's still willing, officer Evanson. No information whatsoever will ever be served up for you at this or any other crime scene. Do I make myself clear?"

Della felt like biting the guy's head off but she also knew that this was the first time anyone from Memphis PD had shot straight with her. It was a weird thing to get blessed out as an adult. It was oddly stimulating.

"Alright, Detective. I obviously can't do anything to change your mind so I'll follow your rules. Thank you for your candor."

"Mrs. Miles, I'm truly sorry for what you're going through. I hope this turns out for the best."

Della noticed he didn't offer any false hope for a particular outcome. "For the best" could mean any number of things. She nodded and walked back to Milt's truck. Milt remained silent until they pulled away.

"If you were hoping to piss off the whole police department, congratulations. You did it," he said.

"I know. I never have been able to stay in my place." Her phone rang and she pulled it out of her purse. It was Belinda.

"Hey, Belinda," said Della, holding up a finger to tell Milt the call wouldn't take long.

"Della! Are you alright? I just got your message. My phone was on all night and I forgot to charge it so when I got to work I tried to find a charging cable but there wasn't one that would fit my phone and my computer doesn't have the right, whatdyacallems...USA ports, so..."

"Lindy? Lindy! Don't worry about it, okay?"

"Any word from the police?"

Della snickered. "Yeah. 'Stay away' pretty much sums it up." She could feel Belinda's preppy little frown through the phone.

"Those rats!" said Lindy. It was the worst thing she could think to call them. "Well, I intend to call the mayor's office and see if we can't..."

"Lindy! Down girl. It's okay. It's how it's done. What kind of progress can they make if they spend all their time reporting to me?"

Lindy huffed. "I don't like it, Dell."

"Join the club." Della looked at the time displayed on her phone. "Where are you right now?"

"At the Arts Council. I was just getting ready to leave but then I remembered that I'd left my phone on charge in the break room and I went in there to get it but then the whole charging nightmare..."

"So you're heading home soon?" Della interrupted.

"Yeppers."

"Then how about meeting us down at the Arcade? We're just a few blocks away." With a single, forlorn look, Milt begged her not to do this to him, but Della had already made up her mind.

"Sure. Jimmy's got some surgery thing at St. Jude's scheduled tonight so I'm on the lonely stool."

"Great. We're headed there now. Come on down once you're done."

"Okay. See you soon."

Della ended the call and faced the music with Milt. "I know what you're thinking but she'll be helpful."

Milt eased back in his seat, a smug look on his face. "She's not the only one."

"You found something? When the hell were you going to tell me?"

"Jesus, I was trying but you answered your phone and..."

"What is it?" Della was suddenly as serious as a missing husband.

"I wandered down the hill while you and that detective were going toe to toe, and I saw the place where those guys were killed." He sighed, uncertain of how much to tell her. She was a tough one, but even the toughest could get weird when you started talking blood and guts.

"And?" pressed Della.

"And, I can't imagine a human being doing that." Milt cleared his throat. "Those guys were ripped apart, Dell. One of them looked like he exploded from the inside. No way did Joseph do that."

Della quietly pondered the new information while Milt parked. Once inside, a waitress who was doing double-duty as hostess escorted them to the only open table toward the back on the left.

Milt immediately protested. "Hey, if it's alright, could we sit somewhere else. We can wait."

The waitress eyed him up and down like he was an annoying insect that had buzzed a little too close. "It ain't alright, Shugah," she said. "You gone be just fine right here." She plopped a couple of menus down and headed back to her safe zone behind the counter.

"What's wrong with sitting here?" asked Della.

"Nothing. It's just that." Milt pointed out the little Elvis plaque on the wall. "This was his booth. It's hard to eat thinking about a dead guy on the toilet."

Della shook her head. "I think we'll be okay."

They were about to order when Belinda showed up. She hugged Della and shook Milt's hand, then she told them about every little thing that had happened to her since she and Della had finished their phone conversation. The waitress had to come back three times before they placed their orders, and even then, Della ended up ordering for Belinda.

"I'm glad you're here, Lindy. Thanks for coming," said Della with a sad smile.

"Don't you mention it, sugar beet. You'll see. Joseph's going to turn up and your most pressing issue will become how many nights you're going to make him sleep on the couch."

"Yeah, well if he walked through those doors right now, I doubt I'd have any desire to punish him."

"Maybe so, maybe no," said Belinda. "If he's up to something stupid, all I can say is that I'll do him in if you won't."

"Let's just see him safe at home first, okay?" asked Della with a little snip in her voice. She was usually amused by her friend, but having Milt sitting nearby made her a little more sensitive to Belinda than usual. It was like she was seeing Lindy through Milt's eyes despite her best efforts not to.

Their food came and Belinda went on about how cute the restaurant was, then she shifted gears effortlessly and began to grill Milt on his history with Joseph and Caster. By the time the check came, Milt was more than ready to get out of there.

Once outside, Belinda offered to drive Della home. Milt felt a little uneasy about it but he couldn't quite put his finger on why. Maybe he was just becoming protective of Della in Joseph's stead.

"You sure you don't want me to come over?" he asked. What he really wanted to tell her is that HE'D feel better if he stayed over at her place.

"It's okay, Milt. Belinda's going to stay with me tonight. Let's touch base tomorrow."

"Alright." He turned to Belinda. "Nice to meet you."

Belinda shook Milt's hand. "Likewise, Milton." Milt laughed. No one had called him Milton since the second grade.

Della hugged him close, thinking about how her husband's best friend had so rapidly become her friend too. Why had they kept their distance all those years? Had it been because they felt like they were competing with one another for Joseph's time? "You get a good night's sleep, alright? I'll call you in the morning."

"Alright. Bye." Milt climbed behind the wheel of his truck and eased it out into traffic. He waved at the women as he pulled away, but he didn't go home. Not just yet.

The Guff started downriver at first daylight. The river was cresting, so Cap kept his eyes peeled for obstacles in the water. Higher waters were a blessing to the little boat, but spring rains sometimes drove debris into the river too. Tree branches could lurk just below the surface and tangle up a propeller faster than you could say "What was that sound?"

"Fair weather. We should make good time," said Cap as Joseph entered the bridge.

"Great," was Joseph's curt response.

Cap glanced at him out of the corner of his eye but he couldn't watch both Joseph and the river. He had to decide which one was more dangerous. He chose the river, but it was a close vote. Something about the young man pinged his fuckup receptors, but he couldn't quite pinpoint it. Maybe it was the fact that this guy been roaming along the river bank looking for a way to get to Mississippi. Hitchhiking on one of the many highways leaving Memphis would have rendered much better results unless Joseph was on the run from the law.

Joseph studied Cap's hands as the older man made several minute course corrections. There were three levers on the console along with a couple of screens, a big compass, and some other electronic equipment. There was a beaten up chair in the middle of the room but Cap preferred to stand. It gave him a much better view over the bow.

"Those turn the boat?" asked Joseph, pointing at the two levers that Cap had his left hand on. He seemed genuinely interested, but it was the Della Voice that had told him to ask.

"Nope. Throttles."

Joseph had no idea what that meant, so the voice told him. "Those are for making the boat go faster or slower, like an accelerator pedal in a car. That other one must be the steering."

The big screen in the middle of the console showed little black streaks moving against a white background. It was mesmerizing to Joseph and he soon lost himself in the constantly changing patterns. He watched them until the Della Voice snapped him out of his trance.

"Ask him if that's good for fishing," it prompted.

Joseph didn't understand. He wanted to ask the Della Voice for clarification, but he wasn't sure how to talk to her without speaking out loud. "That good for fishing?" he asked.

Cap's face brightened considerably. It was the first thing that Joseph had said that he could relate to. "Yep, but you don't want none of the fish out of the big muddy. Catch your death from all the pollution!" he said with a chuckle.

A raspy, rhythmic sound came out of Joseph. He still wasn't any good at imitating laughter. The Della Voice told him that he'd need to practice that later. Maybe in the shower.

"What does that screen tell you?" asked the Della Voice through Joseph.

"That shows what's underneath us. The surface only gives us a little bit of information. It's what's underneath that usually does you in. The river's kind of like a person in that way." He smiled and Joseph took his cue to try another laugh. It was better this time.

"How long to Rosedale?"

Cap shook his head. "If you're in a hurry, you picked the wrong way to get there. This here pushboat ain't going to ever go faster than ten knots. You'd have been better off in a car."

Joseph hadn't even heard him. "How will you know when we reach Rosedale?"

"Don't you worry, son," said Cap as he tapped a little screen that was bolted to the wall above the center window. "We got GPS. We'll be going a ways south of Rosedale then back up a little inlet to the Rosedale harbor waterway." He clicked the screen on the GPS to enlarge the area south of them. "Got to get some repairs done and the shop down there is a hell of a lot cheaper than the ones in Memphis."

"What is GPS?" asked Joseph.

"No idea what it stands for. Global something. Shows us where we are. See?" He hit a couple of buttons and the screen changed again. This time it showed an arrow in the middle of a big blue stripe. "That there's the river and that arrow is us. It's good to within a few dozen feet."

Joseph nodded but he didn't understand a word of it. He stared at the screen and watched as the map slowly changed around the arrow. The arrow was persistent, just like Joseph. He felt like he was standing still while the world churned around him.

The sunlight suddenly broke over the trees and spilled onto the bridge and its occupants. Cap grabbed a pair of wraparound NASCAR-branded shades and put them on over his prescription glasses.

The warmth of the sunlight had a strange effect on Joseph. He steadied himself by grabbing the arm of the captain's chair. Summer was upon the Mississippi early this year and its heavy hand was choking Joseph's heart. He swallowed hard and tried to hold back his tears. For the first time since leaving Milt's house, he questioned what was happening to him. Why had he hurt those men on the riverbank? Why had he come aboard this boat? Why was he thinking about killing these...

"Honey, you need to go find your guitar. Right now." It was Della's voice again. Della but not Della. Joseph wanted to ask her how she was talking to him telepathically, but his mouth wouldn't work. His eyes were brimming with tears and one finally overflowed.

Cap turned just in time to see Joseph wipe his face with the sleeve of his freshly-laundered shirt. He quickly turned away, embarrassed for the young man. *What the hell is he crying about?* he thought.

The Della in Joseph's head whispered, "Fucking allergies."

"Fucking allergies," said Joseph.

A knowing smile spread across Cap's face. "Don't I know it?! They'll sure as hell get to you out here on the water." Cap felt a queasy sensation in his belly, deep down where he could always distinguish the truth from bullshit. For the time being he ignored it. Sometimes bullshit was easier to accept.

"Go find our guitar. Now." Sometimes the voice was alluring but now it was insistent. Joseph nodded and quickly backed down the ladder. "Thank the man," said the Della Voice, and Joseph promptly did as he was told.

"No problem. If you see Mark, would you ask him to bring me up a fresh Thermos?" Cap shook the ancient, tartan bottle to indicate that he'd run out of coffee.

"I'll tell him," said Joseph. After he said it, he couldn't recall if the words had been his idea or Della's. She'd been asserting herself a little more each day. In a way, it was

comforting. He didn't have to worry about anything when she was in charge.

Joseph made his way to the stern where he sat in the shade and watched the dirty water recede. The guitar was there in front of him on a large coil of rope. The Della Voice had assured him that the river water wouldn't damage the instrument and she'd been right. It looked just like it had the day he'd gotten it.

Joseph saw the face of an older black man when he thought of that day. Who was he? Trying to remember most things was like trying to remember his birth. No one could do that, could they? And yet, there were flashes of frightening images that pushed their way into his consciousness from time to time. The Della Voice usually drove them away. Sometimes, however, the bad things lingered in his mind and enraged him. That was what had happened down by the river. That guy...or had it been two men? No, he was pretty sure it had been one man with four arms. No, not a man. A demon! Joseph had been forced to kill him before he got to Della.

"You protected me, dear heart," said the Della Voice. Della had never called him that before, but he liked it. He wanted to be her dear heart. "You lived up to your obligations and I shall live up to mine."

"What obligations?" asked Joseph. It was the first time he'd spoken out loud to the voice. He looked behind him to see if anyone had heard.

"Shhhh. Let me worry about that for now. All you have to worry about is playing your beautiful music on our guitar. You can still do that, can't you?"

Joseph smiled as he picked up the guitar and strummed it. To his ears, it was in perfect tune. No, it was better than perfect. It was like listening to the voice of God. He leaned over and pressed his ear against its upper bout so he could hear the sound resonating through the body. He giggled as he worked the strings.

Behind him, Mark peered through a porthole at deck level. He watched Joseph rock back and forth, giggling and moaning as he played the damaged instrument. The guitar wasn't plugged in but its sounds were permeating the lower deck. Mark wondered how he could hear them so clearly seeing as how he was so close to engine one. And then, as quickly as they'd started, the guitar sounds stopped.

Joseph turned and sniffed the air like a dog looking for a scent. Mark slowly—ever so slowly—backed away, into the noisy darkness of the engine room.

The morning sun warmed the cabin of the Tundra and woke Milt up. He took in his surroundings and looked for a place to take a leak. A few yards away, there was a narrow alley where several dumpsters had been left to die. Perfect. He climbed out of the truck and relieved himself behind the dumpsters. When he was done, he zipped up and considered the second order of business for the day—food. He wasn't far from the Ole Miss campus so he thought about heading that way. Lots of cheap, student eateries around there. Trouble was, Caster had just played a show there so he'd surely be recognized. It'd be better to stay in Oxford proper.

He drove through the normally quiet streets and found them bustling. It was what the fine people of Oxford called their "rush hour". The thought made Milt chuckle. Memphians often thought of themselves as a rung or two further up the evolutionary ladder than their neighbors to the south (or east or west, for that matter), but Milt couldn't deny the charm of the small Mississippi town. He lost himself in a fantasy of retiring there but was soon brought back to reality by the scowl of an old man crossing the street in front of him. He had to remind himself that long haired, tattooed, rock musicians weren't exactly welcomed in places like Oxford. While that might put the kibosh on his retirement plans, it could actually make his current mission a bit easier.

There was a gas station up ahead on the right. The sign, which was hand-painted in the worst way, proclaimed the name of the joint to be Willy's. It was obviously not a name-brand kind of establishment, but Milt thought he could get some info there. He pulled in and found that he had to wait for a pump to open up. Maybe there was something to Oxford's rush hour after all. When he finally got his turn, he shut off the engine and walked back to the pump. It was no big surprise that it didn't come equipped with a credit card reader. He sighed and went into the mini mart to pay.

The place was busier inside than out. Milt stepped back as a lady bustled out of the front doors, her arms filled with coffee cups and pastries. There was a wait at the counter, so he got in line. He tried to make eye contact with the older woman who fell into line behind him, but she took one look at the inverted cross that was tattooed on his forearm and refused to

glance in his direction again. Once at the counter, he handed over his debit card.

"Pump three. Can I just leave the card and fill her up?" asked Milt.

The young black woman behind the counter had the opposite reaction of the older woman from the line. She shook her head and her short dreadlocks bounced around her face. "Oh, look who we have here. Everyone, gather round. It's God's gift to women!"

"Do I know you?" he asked. The question was second nature in circumstances like this.

"Ole Miss? Saturday night?" She made a sound like she was hocking up a loogie. "Ring a bell or have you done too much blow this morning, grandpa?"

The other people in line suddenly busied themselves with other tasks, like looking through the cold drinks and examining the local newspaper.

"Jesus. Who shit in your cereal?"

"You, you pompous ass. You don't even remember, do you?"

Milt grimaced and shook his head. "Sorry, honey."

The girl gritted her teeth and continued. "I came up to you and that other asshole and wanted to see if you might come down off of your mountain far enough to give me your manager's name. But no! You had to insinuate that I wanted to 'hook up' with you! YOU! Don't nobody want a nasty old guy three times their age! Jesus, you must've really been wasted. You don't even remember that I spit in your face, old man!"

"Yep. Alright. That part, I do remember," said Milt, now eager to move on. The last thing he needed for breakfast was a reminder of his own mortality. "You think I could skip the rest of this feminist manifesto and get that gas?" The woman in line behind Milt cleared her throat, seconding the singer's request.

"Sure" The young woman snatched his card from his hand and examined the name. "Milton? Seriously?" She snorted out a bitter laugh.

"It's Milt," he said, then he pointed at the door and made his way out to his truck with the strut of the righteously indignant. How dare she? Fucking girl! Hardly out of diapers and she had the nerve to call him old!

He removed the Tundra's gas cap and started filling the tank. His mind was no longer on Joseph. Now it was on Little Miss Dreadlocks and her indictment of him. He wasn't old! Not yet, anyway. How many old men had long hair and tats and played rock and roll for a living? Exactly four, and they were all in the Rolling Stones. Scratch that. Three. Charlie Watts had short hair these days and he'd probably never bothered to get any tattoos.

He finished with the gas and realized that he was going to have to go back inside to retrieve his card. He checked his reflection in the side glass and saw the chick magnet he wanted to see. Satisfied, he marched in to regain the dignity Little Miss Dreadlocks had stolen from him.

The line had diminished considerably so Milt walked right up the counter. He didn't even notice that he was holding his stomach in. He rang the little bell and was surprised when a bald, middle-aged, Asian guy with a considerable spare tire popped up from behind the counter.

"Yessir! What-can-I-do-fer-ya?" spouted the guy whose name tag indicated that his position was "MANAGER". Either that or his name was Manager and his position was Steven.

"Um, there was a girl here before," stammered Milt.

"Very good memory retention, sir. You are correct! Five bonus points if you noticed that I am not her." He smiled, beaming good will in every direction like a Christian lighthouse.

"Uh, right," said Milt. "I just...I just wanted to pay for my gas."

"Then you, sir, are in luck, for I just happen to be possessed of the skills needed to run the complex electronic contraption you see here before me." He indicated the cash register with a laugh.

Milt was so perplexed by the man's demeanor that he just pointed at the Amex card that was propped up by the activation button for pump three. "That's mine. Me. I'm pump three."

Steven the Manager laughed again. "Well, I hope you're not the pump. If you were, you'd be leaking gas all over my freshly mopped floors." He smiled broadly and Milt sighed.

"Can we skip the jovial banter and get on with this little transaction? Please?" Milt was trying not to be rude but in the last ten minutes his virility had been questioned and his grip on reality had been challenged by Steven the Manager.

"Oh, now, Mister Frowny isn't coming out, is he?" asked Stephen as he rang up Milt's purchase and handed him the receipt.

Milt signed the curled up piece of paper and took his copy. "No, but I'll send him this way if I see him."

Steven the Manager busted out laughing and pointed at Milt, his finger not six inches from Milt's face. "You got me there, buddy! HAAAA!"

It was as good a time as any to escape. He waved at Steven without looking back and found the tinkling of the bells on the front door to be the sweetest sound he'd ever heard. Soon his was back in the safety of his truck pondering his next move. It didn't take him long to decide to return to PWNED. If he saw Officer Jerry on his way there, even better.

Milt was checking the map on his phone when a gentle tap tap tap broke the privacy bubble around him. He looked up to see Little Miss Dreadlocks standing beside his truck making the universal "roll down your window" gesture. She had on a snug black hoodie that was a considerable improvement over the polyester frock.

"Need a quarter from Grandpa for the vending machine, little girl?" asked Milt with a sneer.

"Jesus, you're not one of those guys who wants to be called 'Daddy' are you? I have pepper spray."

She was backing away as Milt held up his hands in surrender. "Look, I don't know what your damage is but I just want to get as far away from you as possible, okay?"

The girl took a look around and saw that the other patrons were giving her the eye so she settled down. Maybe she was overreacting. "Fine," she said sheepishly.

"Fine," repeated Milton, then they both waited for the other to say something more. Anything. Milt finally got tired of the game and asked, "Did you need something? I mean other than giving me more shit?"

The girl kicked at the side of the Tundra's front tire. "I need a break."

"Well, you've got a funny way of showing it."

"Yeah, well." More dead air.

"Look, I'm going to take off," said Milt as he started the truck's engine.

"Alright, alright. I'm sorry I gave you so much shit, but you say one more goddamn thing about me liking rap music and I'm going to spit at you again."

"Okay. Sure. I just thought... You know lots of white kids listen to rap these days. Hispanic kids too."

"Stop it. Just...stop."

"Fine. So what's your deal? I'm on a bit of a schedule here."

"I play guitar," said Little Miss Dreadlocks sheepishly. "I'm pretty fucking good, too."

"Blues?" ventured Milt.

"No! I don't particularly like Prince either. Or Michael Jackson. Got any more racial clichés up your sleeve, grandpa?"

"Sorry. Book. Cover. That's how it is," said Milt unapologetically.

"Yeah, I guess that's right. Sorry. It's just that it's not every day that I run into somebody who's actually kinda sorta made it in the whole music game, and..."

"And you want me to hook you up with Kanye!" said Milt.

"Eat shit!" shouted the girl before turning heel and stomping away.

Milt eased the truck into gear and powered down the passenger side window as he rolled up beside her. "Sorry. I didn't mean to be such a prick. You were just busting my balls pretty good back there. I figured you could take it if you dished it out like that."

The girl stopped and turned to face him. "For your information, I've got my own band and it's fucking awesome. So awesome that we can't play at any of the shitholes around here. I only wanted to know if you could give us a listen and maybe refer us to your manager or somebody at your label."

Milt was about to make another joke but then he reconsidered. He saw something of himself in her. For people like them, music was more than just fun. It was a religion.

The long pause made the girl think he was about to brush her off, so she quickly continued. "We're seriously good. Like an all-female Clash without the reggae shit. In your face, raw, power rock and roll that..."

"Hold up, now," said Milt. "If you really want to talk about this, I'm going to need some breakfast. You interested in joining me down at The Biscuit?" He'd seen it on his way to the gas

station and figured that a place called The Biscuit had to make pretty good ones.

A look of trepidation suddenly crossed the girl's face as she thought about every single time she'd been warned about getting into a car with a stranger. She took a good, hard look at Milt and made up her mind. "Driver's license."

"What?"

"Give me your driver's license."

Milt was so taken aback that he reached in his hip pocket and withdrew his wallet. He handed the girl the whole thing. She pulled out her phone and shot a quick pic of his ID and handed the wallet back to him.

"My phone's synced. In a minute or two the picture of your license will be uploaded. You fuck with me, and the authorities will know exactly where to start looking."

Milt nodded. Technology had certainly changed things since he'd been a kid. Maybe she was right to call him grandpa.

The girl climbed into the cab, now all smiles. Her oversized, rubber messenger bag with the Plymouth Fury logo on it took up more space in the truck than she did. "Let's go, but not to The Biscuit. Let's go to Big Bad instead," she said. "Just turn right on Lamar and head north."

"Aye-aye, captain," said Milt as he pulled away.

"I'm Chrissie, by the way," said the girl as she extended her hand.

"Milt, but you knew that."

"Yeah. Milton Ace Ray." She was looking at the pic she'd taken of his license. She laughed before she could stop herself.

Milt nodded. "Laugh it up. My father was in Vietnam with a guy they called Ace and when that guy died saving my dad's life, he decided then and there to name his first kid after him. Trouble was, he didn't know the guy's real name. Just 'Ace'. Guess I should be grateful he used it for my middle name. Not that Milton's any better. That one was courtesy of my mom's side of the family."

The story sobered Chrissie right up. "My brother was killed in Afghanistan five years ago, so I kind of understand." She looked over at Milt. "That was a nice thing your father did."

"Yeah, one of the few," said Milt.

They rode along in silence until Chrissie pointed out a little strip mall. It didn't look like much to Milt, but he pulled in anyway. Milt got a good look at his passenger as she tumbled out of the truck. She really was just a kid. The blue Doc Martens she was wearing looked like they almost reached her knees. He opened the restaurant door and paused for her to enter first, but then thought better of it and slipped in ahead of her. "Age before beauty," he quacked. She gave him the 'I've heard that old man shit a thousand times before' look, but she didn't mind one bit being referred to as a beauty. Not even by Milt.

Della awoke to find Belinda asleep on her couch. She tiptoed through the living room with Jimi, whispering, "Let's be quiet for mommy now, okay baby boy?" It didn't work. By the time they reached the kitchen, Jimi had concluded that a couple of good hoots and a holler were in order.

"What?!" It was Belinda. She leapt to her feet, her big-ass hair smashed over to the left like a palm tree in a hurricane.

"Sorry, Lindy," said Della with a grimace. "I was trying to keep him quiet."

It took a moment for Belinda to figure out where she was. Once that was accomplished, she plopped back onto the sofa. "I was having the strangest dream. I was living in a house made out of wine bottles."

"Empty ones or full ones?" asked Della with a smile.

"Empty. I think. Maybe I was the one who emptied them but I don't remember that part." She yawned and dug her phone out of her purse. "Goodness gracious!" she exclaimed. "It's after 10!" She stood and bumped her shin on the coffee table.

Della watched from the safety of the kitchen. "Careful over there," she said.

"I couldn't tell you the last time I woke up and didn't know where I was. Did I call Jim?" She scrolled through the call history on her phone.

"Calm down, alright? You're scaring Jimi." Jimi's smiling face was anything but scared.

"I should not have had that last margarita," said Belinda.

"You? I shouldn't have had those last three!" replied Della. She pulled some eggs out of the fridge and was cracking them into a glass measuring cup to scramble them. She'd gotten the whisk going pretty good when she suddenly remembered her manners. "Um...Is scrambled alright?"

Belinda shook her head. "Sugar, I've got to get home and get cleaned up before anybody sees me. Besides, I don't think I can hold anything on my stomach right now."

"Come on, Lindy. Have breakfast with me. You're not going to lose your seat on the cotillion committee just because you slept on my couch for one night." For the first time in days, Della felt like her old self.

"Oh, alright, sugar beet. I can never say no to you." She wobbled into the kitchen and reached out for Jimi. He climbed into her arms willingly. "You're getting to be a big ol' boy, aren't you?" she said in her sing-songy, southern drawl.

"Bigger every day, isn't that right, Jim-Jim?" Jimi roared with laughter.

"My goodness. I never put two and two together but y'all named him Jim! Don't tell me you did that on account of my Jim."

"God, no," said Della, hoping to cross this particular mine field at speed. "We named him after Joseph's grandfather." A dark twinge of guilt poked her in the belly at the thought of Joseph. She suddenly got lost in an inner debate about whether or not it was okay to allow herself to feel anything positive before Joseph returned.

The smell of eggs cooking turned into the smell of eggs burning and Belinda spoke up. "Hon? Della?"

"Wha?" Della looked up, dazed until she noticed that the frying pan was smoking. The smoke alarm began screeching and Jimi promptly followed suit.

"Oh, shh, shh, shhhhh," said Belinda, walking the boy into the living room. "It'll be alright. Yes. Yes it will." Belinda didn't have any children. She and her husband had been deemed "unable to conceive" by the fertility specialists. None of her husband's doctor friends ever figured out exactly what the problem was, but it was a done deal. The only way they'd ever have children was to adopt. That simple fact had drawn her even closer to Della when her friend had become pregnant with Jimi. If she couldn't have her own children, she was sure as hell going to participate in her best friend's child rearing. She was looking forward to being called Aunt Lindy one day.

Della dumped the burnt eggs into the sink and climbed up onto one of the kitchen chairs to shut off the smoke alarm. When she got down, her whole body was leaning to one side just like Belinda's hair.

"Tell you what," said Belinda. "Why don't we go out for breakfast? How about Brother Juniper's? It's on me."

"I don't know, Lindy. I'm not really in the mood to go out."

"Come on now, girl," said Belinda. She looked around the room and found one of Joseph's baseball caps on an end table. She plopped it on and was instantly identifiable as a

Titans fan. "If I'm willing to go out looking like this, the least you could do is go with me for emotional support!"

Della laughed in spite of herself. "Alright. Just hold Jimi a minute while I run to the bathroom."

Belinda hauled the toddler up onto her knee. She was making up more baby talk words for him when Della's phone started ringing. "Dell? Phone!" No reply. Under normal circumstances, she'd have never picked up her friend's phone, but in this case, she thought it might be news about Joseph.

"Dell?" she shouted again as she ran into the kitchen with Jimi to see who it was. Milt's name was displayed on the face of the phone so she picked it up.

"Hello" said Belinda.

"Hey, Dell. I just wanted to check in and see how you were." Since befriending Della, Belinda had sometimes fantasized about being the type of woman that a rock and roll guy like Milt would go for. She knew those were silly indulgences that she'd never act upon, but that didn't stop her from wandering through those woods in her mind now and again.

"Hey there, Milt. This is Belinda. We met yesterday at the Arcade."

"Oh. Hey, Belinda. Sorry. You sounded like Della."

"My apologies for not informing you when I picked up." She looked up as Della walked in. "Anyway, nice to chat with you again. Here's Della." She handed the phone over and whispered, "Milt."

"Hey, Milt. You up for some breakfast? We're headed over to Brother Juniper's."

"Thanks, but I drove down to Oxford last night."

Della felt a surge of panic in her gut. "What's going on? Did you hear something about Joseph?"

"No, nothing like that. I just..." Milt wasn't sure how much to tell her. "You remember that guitar I told you about? The one that went missing with Joseph?"

"Milt, did he contact you?"

"Joseph? No! Jesus, I'm trying to tell you that I'm down here looking in on the guy that he got that guitar from."

Silence. Cell phones didn't make that dead air sound when the person on the other end stopped talking. "What's that got to do with anything?" asked Della.

"Probably nothing. I've just had a feeling about that guitar ever since Joseph bought it. In lieu of sitting on my ass and doing nothing, I decided to come down here and poke around a bit. That's all."

"Milt, how can a guitar have anything to do with Joseph's disappearance?"

Milt suddenly sounded like he was a million miles away. "Look, Della, I'm sorry to bother you with this. I get it. It's a stupid hunch." He paused, not knowing what else to say. "Look, I gotta go. I promise I'll call you if I find anything." And with that, he was gone.

Della looked over at her best friend and threw the phone down onto the couch. She wasn't crazy enough to hurl it onto a hard surface like the floor or the coffee table. Not yet, anyway.

"What was that about, hon?" asked Belinda as she rocked Jimi in her arms.

"I don't know. Milt went to find a guy who sold Joseph a guitar. I don't get it." She tried to sound like it didn't bother her, but her eyes betrayed the worry in her heart.

"I don't mean to pry, of course..." started Belinda.

Della fiddled with her purse strap and looked off in the distance at nothing in particular. "He's chasing ghosts. No big deal." She came back to earth and focused on her little boy. She had to stay rooted for him, didn't she?

"Then we're still going to breakfast?"

Della smiled as best she could and said, "Well, what does Jim-Jim think?" Jimi answered with his usual baby blather, happy as could be. Della stared at him and wondered if she was going to have to raise him by herself. She wanted to believe that there was still a chance that Joseph might return, but what was once a wellspring of hope had slowed to a trickle. *Dear god*, she thought, *what am I going to do?* And then she began to cry. Not light weeping. Deep, heart-wrenching sobs.

Belinda plopped Jimi down on the sofa and embraced her friend. "It'll be alright, honey. It's going to be alright."

"He's dead, Lindy," cried Della. "He's never coming back and I'm going to have to face being a single mother for the rest of my life! I don't think I can handle that!"

Belinda felt like her own heart was being torn in two. Her friendship with Della had begun as both a walk on the wild side and a sort of hobby for Belinda. She'd considered herself above this heathen girl in many ways until she realized just how

much she envied her. That had leveled the playing field and opened her up to the possibility of a true friendship. But never, in all their years together and all their ups and downs, had she ever imagined this.

She sat Della on the sofa and rubbed Jimi's belly to comfort him. "Dell, I'm not going to lie to you. Not even to make you feel better. You're the one person in my whole life that I feel that way about. You're so strong. So much stronger than I could ever be."

Della shook her head. "I'm not, Lindy. I might look that way, but I feel like the weakest person on Earth right now. I just want things back the way they were."

"Well, sugar beet, that isn't going to happen. Even if Joseph shows up okay, things won't ever be the same in this house. All you can do is ride the wave life gives you."

"Nice cliché," said Della with a sneer. Her hurt was turning to anger despite her best efforts to rein it in.

"Make fun all you want, but it doesn't change the fact that life shits on all of us eventually. Some more than others, of course, but if you're not willing to wipe it off and keep on keeping on, then you might as well just walk into a propeller."

Della wiped her nose with the back of her hand. "Wait, you said 'shit'."

"Yes ma'am, I reckon I did, and in front of your young-un at that."

"But you never cuss. Never."

"Maybe you're just rubbing off on me. Jim's warned me about that." She smiled and both women laughed. It was just what Della needed.

"I'm sorry," said Della. "I know the only thing I can do is to go forward. The trouble is, all I want to do is curl up in a ball and sleep."

Belinda picked up Jimi and bounced him on her thigh. "And that would be your basic clinical depression, sugar beet. Look, none of this is new except to you. I know that's harsh, but think about all the horrible stuff that goes on in the world every day." She put her free hand on Della's leg. "It's really awful when it happens to you, isn't it?"

Della put her hand onto Belinda's, realizing just a moment too late that it was the hand that had the snot on it.

Belinda didn't pull away. Instead, she just pulled Della over onto her lap and kissed her forehead.

Milt pulled into the parking lot of PWNED and gave the place a good once-over. It looked different than how he remembered. Dirtier. Optimism sure could color your perceptions.

"This is the place you were telling me about?" asked Chrissie.

"Yep. You ever come here?"

Chrissie shook her head. "Pawn shops don't have bargains anymore."

Milt pulled into a parking space and sat there with the truck in gear and the motor running. Something about the place was making his Spidey sense tingle.

"What's wrong?" asked Chrissie.

"I don't know. Something feels...wrong."

Chrissie looked at the cinderblock building. "Looks okay to me."

Milt nodded and switched off the engine. They got out and walked up to the screen door. Locked. From the looks of things, the place had been closed for some time. A little sticker in the front window proclaimed their business hours to be 10AM to 7PM Monday through Saturday.

"I guess Dexter took the day off."

"He the guy who nearly shot you?"

"Yeah." Milt walked around the end of the building, looking for signs of life. When they found none, they continued around the back of the building. There was a back door amidst the overgrown weeds but it was rusted shut.

Chrissie waved at the gnats swarming in front of her face and said, "Well, if we're not going in, I'm getting the hell out of here."

They continued their circle around the building. When they reached the front again, they were surprised to see a sheriff's car parked next to Milt's truck. The deputy was crouching down to get the plate number.

"That's my vehicle, officer," shouted Milt. "Is there a problem?" He hoped that the deputy would turn out to be Jerry what's-his-name, but it wasn't to be. A bearish white guy stood up and eyed Milt with suspicion.

"Keep your hands where I can see them, sir," he said as he unsnapped his holster and rested his hand on the butt of his pistol.

"No problem, officer." He held up his hands like a prisoner in a western. "We just came by to see Dexter. Do you know why the shop's closed?"

"Dexter?"

"Yes, sir. I bought a guitar from him here a few days back. Well, my buddy bought the guitar. I just drove him here." The deputy was eyeing Chrissie. "Oh, sorry. She's with me. We came by here to take another look at the guitars."

"Uh huh," said the cop. "You mind showing me some I.D.?"

Milt and Chrissie quickly complied and handed the deputy their licenses. "Something wrong?" asked Milt. "Like I said, we thought the shop would be open."

"One moment," said the deputy. He went to his car but Milt couldn't see what he was doing.

"What's going on?" asked Chrissie. Milt shrugged.

The deputy got out of the car and came back to return their licenses. "You two don't watch the news, do you?" Milt and Chrissie shook their heads. "The Forrests are missing."

"Damn," said Milt. He sure as hell wasn't going to be talking to Dexter about that weird guitar now. "Deputy, uh..." He looked at the name tag but couldn't make out the cop's name. The cop was oblivious. He was too busy looking Chrissie up one side and down the other. "Deputy? Are we being held for..."

The deputy took a quick step back and drew his sidearm. Cocked it, even. "Why don't ya'll just get on down on the ground for me?" When they didn't respond immediately, he added, "Now."

Milt's inner voice, the one that always got him into trouble when he let it out into the open, begged him to ask 'Was it something I said?' Instead, he complied and got down on his knees and laced his fingers behind his head. Chrissie followed suit, the whole time looking at Milt like he'd just farted at a funeral.

"All the way to the ground," said the cop. "Face down." When he was satisfied that they weren't going anywhere, he keyed the microphone that was clipped to his shoulder epaulet. "Myrtie, I need Georgie down at Pawned. Over." The speaker spat out some static that Deputy Briarson apparently understood.

"Nah, ain't nothing going on down here. Just want him to meet me for lunch. Over and out." The cop looked down at his two prisoners and grinned. That was when Milt knew they were well and truly fucked.

"Look, Deputy," he stammered, "if I go missing, there'll be an awful lot of heat. I shit you not."

"And just who the fuck are you supposed to be?"

Chrissie jabbed Milt in the ribs. The gravel was beginning to dig into her breasts. "What are you doing?" she whispered.

"You ever heard of the band, Caster?" Milt couldn't say those words without beaming with pride. He still suffered from the illusion that everyone knew who he was.

"Nope," said the deputy. "I take it that ain't a country band."

"Not exactly," said Milt.

"Should have known. You here to make trouble for the good people of Oxford, son?"

Milt wondered why it was that the people who had you in a compromising position suddenly wanted to be your daddy. "I'm not your son," he muttered. Chrissie jabbed him again.

The deputy smiled at that one. "Looks like your nigger girlfriend don't like it when you an-ta-go-nize the local law enforcement. Isn't that right, honey chile?"

Now it was Chrissie's turn to get belligerent. "What did you fucking call me?! You have no right to hold us!"

"The hell, I don't," said the deputy, looking her up and down. "We going to have us a lot of fun once Georgie gets here. Ya'll just sit tight."

Milt knew that their only hope was that someone would stumble onto the scene before Georgie arrived. When he heard a car approaching, he thought that his prayers had been answered. When that car rolled into view, his hopes withered. It was another cop car. It pulled up to the left of the prisoners and stopped with a squeal of its brakes. Chrissie watched underneath the car as a pair of cowboy boots hit the gravel.

"And just who the hell are you?" asked the deputy as he crossed toward the idling police car. Milt couldn't hear the rest of the conversation, but he certainly took notice when the deputy fell to the ground.

"Get in your truck," shouted the newcomer.

Milt rose to see a familiar face. "Jerry?"

Jerry raised his eyebrows. "Get in your truck unless you want me to leave you here with an unconscious cop and a lot of explaining to do."

It was hard to argue that point. Milt grabbed Chrissie's hand and started toward the Tundra.

"Nah-ah!" shouted Jerry. "She rides with me."

"What's this all about, Jerry?" asked Milt. He wondered if he'd just traded a bad situation for something worse.

"We're going to drive down to Bolivar county and meet up with your friend, Joseph. Can't leave your truck here so I'm taking the girl with me. That way I know I won't lose you." Jerry just let that hang in the air while Milt processed it.

"You know where Joseph is?"

"Not exactly, but you and me are on what you might call parallel trajectories." Jerry smiled and got into his car.

"It's okay," said Chrissie.

"You're kidding," whispered Milt.

"He's here to help us. At least he thinks so."

"I don't think he helped us that much by assaulting a deputy."

"Maybe, but there's only one way out, as the Allman Brothers said."

"You listen to the Allman Brothers?"

Chrissie grinned and ran over to Jerry's old cop car.

"Step it up, hon!" shouted Jerry. "Wheels are turning." Once Chrissie was situated in the passenger seat, he rolled forward and watched as Milt got into his pickup. "Follow me close," he shouted through his open window. "Like really close. Don't drop too far back or bad things might happen."

Meaning what exactly? thought Milt, but he didn't have time to ponder the possibilities. He flashed Jerry a thumbs up and started his truck. What the hell had he gotten himself into this time?

The Guff floated up the narrow barge lane and toward a log loader. That's where it grounded itself and where it would be found the next morning, its propeller still churning up mud. A slim figure jumped off the boat in the gathering dusk and the red stains on his clothes soon bled out into the river water.

Joseph clawed his way ashore carrying a plastic trash bag and his battered guitar. The brambles pricked his skin and showed him that, yes he was still made of flesh and blood. He didn't care. He gently washed the guitar at the river's edge then worked his way up the bank looking like a crazed meth addict. While it was true that he was becoming addicted, it wasn't to meth. His new girl was better than any meth amphetamine high he'd ever had. This high had the sweetness of love.

He brushed his wet hair back and stood at the top of the bank to observe the considerable operation that lay before him. "Logging," said the Della Voice. "This is where they load the logs and where the push boats refuel." Joseph hadn't noticed the large fuel tanks to the north, but the voice had. Thank goodness for Della. She'd see him through this. "We need to rest, dear heart," she said. "We're tired, aren't we?"

"Yes," said Joseph out loud. He no longer had any reservation about speaking to the voice. In fact, he assumed anyone standing within earshot could hear her too. "There's a lot of work to do."

"That's right, dear heart." The Della Voice was beaming with pride, like an owner whose pet had just learned a new trick. "We need to get to high ground and rest. Then we'll make our plans."

Joseph nodded and looked up at the fuel tanks. The nearest one had stairs that twisted their way to the top. He knew what he had to do. It took a while, but Joseph eventually made it to the top of the biggest fuel tank of the bunch. The last light of day was disappearing over Arkansas and Joseph was glad to see it go. His skin was blistered from the time he spent on the deck of the tug and now he was attracting a swarm of mosquitoes. He didn't notice that each one died in mid flight after feasting on his blood. The voice made sure that she was the only one feeding off of Joseph.

Joseph awoke the next morning refreshed and self-assured. The deaths of the tug boat crew were like dreams that he couldn't quite remember.

There were whistles being blown down below so Joseph slid over to the side of the fuel tank. The Guff was still there in the river. He watched as a tiny speck of a man climbed aboard and stopped the engine. A few minutes later, that same man stood at the bow and puked into the water. Joseph didn't judge the man. He simply watched.

One man became four and four became a dozen. It wasn't long before the shoreline was rippling with activity. Joseph watched while he ate from the provisions the voice had instructed him to salvage from the boat. There was a can of Spam that he desperately wanted to eat but he had broken the tab off in his hurry to get it open. He slammed it against the metal surface of the fuel tank repeatedly, the clanging sounds echoing across the river.

"Shhhh," admonished the Della Voice. "Look in the bag, sweetie. There's something even better in there. Toss that one over the side."

Joseph did as he was told, hurling the difficult can as far away as he could with no concern whatsoever about being seen. He bit into a Slim Jim and contentedly watched the goings on down below.

Four body bags were eventually retrieved. That was the coroner's guesstimate as to how many bodies the parts they'd scooped up belonged to. He told the officer in charge, Sheriff Alan Woolworth that he'd need at least a couple of days to sort it all out. That made Woolworth unhappy but the aging lawman understood. The largest piece they'd found was smaller than a dollar bill. How anyone could have torn these people into such small pieces was beyond him. Until he knew more, he was going to try and keep it quiet.

Woolworth walked over to the bearded dockmaster, whose title just meant that he was the poor bastard who had to get up first every morning. The local boys had nicknamed the old guy Speedy on account of his bum knees. He'd been a paratrooper in Vietnam. How old had he been? 19? 20? When you were young you shrugged that shit off, but not any more. He'd been fitted for leg braces last summer. He'd promised his daughter that he'd look into knee replacement surgery, but that was just talk. Speedy had always been afraid of doctors. Now

that he'd seen the scrambled insides of the people from the tug, he was pretty sure that his fears wouldn't diminish anytime soon.

Speedy pointed at the canned Coke that Sheriff Woolworth was nursing. "Mind if I have a sip of that?" Woolworth handed the older man the lukewarm can and Speedy took a couple of swallows. "Oh yeah. That's better. Still had the taste of vomit in my mouth." He went to hand the can back to Woolworth but the Sheriff waved him off.

"You finish it, Spee...Mr. Grimes."

Speedy nodded his thanks and turned the bottom of the can skyward, then he tossed the empty under the little trailer he called his office. "Recyclables," he explained with a grin.

Woolworth ignored him. "I'll need you to help me keep this quiet," he said, using just the right combination of "you'd better not tell anybody" and "I'm trusting you with this" in his tone to render the desired effect.

"Naw, sir. I won't tell nobody. Who the hell am I going to tell anyway?" He laughed it off but Woolworth knew who the old man could tell. One conversation down at the barber shop and every housewife in Bolivar county would know about the diced tugboat crew.

"Just keep it to yourself for now. If anyone asks, the docks were shut down because of a fuel spill," said Woolworth.

Speedy nodded and struggled to his feet as Woolworth made a beeline back to the boat. By the time the coroner's wood-paneled station wagon drove off with its gelatinous cargo, the only ones left on the scene were Woolworth and his men. The sheriff knew, deep down, that he had no idea how to proceed. That was why he had to make damn sure that everyone on scene believed the exact opposite.

"Alright, listen up," he shouted. "Travis and Green, I need you to go back to town and watch the kettle." There were moans from the men who'd been singled out but they were just as fake as Woolworth's confidence. Both deputies were still rookies and the last thing Woolworth needed was to scare them off the job in their first few months of service.

"No bitching, goddamnit! You'll do what I tell you to do. No more. No less. You read me?" Nods all around. "Good. Now, get going you two. It'll be a long day for you so don't think you're getting off easy." The young men took off and Woolworth eyed the remaining officers. "Butch?" he shouted.

"Here, Sheriff!" shouted Butch Regan from the far side of the tug. Butch was the Bolivar Under Sheriff and, as such, was Woolworth's right hand man. Folks getting gas at the Double Quick could sometimes be overheard speculating on whether or not Butch performed certain obscene duties for the Sheriff in order to keep the job. Woolworth had heard the jokes, but he'd always let them slide. Being in an elected position meant that certain things had to roll off your back.

"I need you to go through this boat, stem to stern. I mean be thorough, you read me?"

"Will do, Sheriff," said Butch as he adjusted his hip waders.

"And don't any of you forget that we got to do this all quiet like before a bunch of lookie-loos show up."

All the men nodded again. Woolworth wanted to keep the public far away from this until he had a handle on the situation. It wasn't always the most effective tactic, but it had kept him in office for 27 years. He wasn't about to change it now.

Joseph watched from above as Butch and the other deputies went about the task of gathering evidence. He couldn't hear what they were saying, but the Della Voice could. She relayed the parts that helped her control Joseph. No more, no less.

"Sweetheart," she whispered in his ear, "it's time for us to go."

Joseph nodded like a schoolboy who'd been momentarily distracted by the TVs on display at Target. He gathered up his things, paying particular attention to the guitar, and began the long hike down the metal steps that circled the towering fuel tank. When he reached the bottom, he turned north and marched off through the dense brush without even a glance back at the cops.

"Della? Oh my god!" Victoria practically jumped over the counter in her rush to get to Della and hug her. "Have they found Joseph yet?"

Della hugged Victoria and puzzled over her odd perfume. She'd always had a soft spot in her heart for the girl but it was tempered by the fear that one day Joseph might just bag this cute little thing. Seeing her wearing a black latex mini dress didn't help matters. "No word yet. I was just wondering if..." She looked up and saw the rest of the staff drawing near like wolves around an injured rabbit.

"Not to be rude," she said, "but can we talk in private?"

"Sure," said Victoria. "No problem." She swept Della toward the office while glaring at her coworkers. She'd explain Della's reaction to them later. Some of them were so socially retarded that they probably thought eavesdropping was a good way to express their concern.

Once inside the office, Victoria dropped into Joseph's old desk chair. This girl was barely out of high school and she was running the store in Joseph's absence. If the strain was getting to her, it didn't show.

"Look, I don't want to be 'the wife' in all of this, but I have to ask. Was anything weird going on with Joseph?" Victoria looked at Della as if she'd just turned into a pork chop. "You know, like something he didn't want me to know about?"

Victoria sat back and actually thought about her answer before speaking. That earned her a lot of cred in Della's book. "Nothing comes to mind," said Victoria. "He wasn't that sort of guy, you know?" Victoria's caked on eyeliner grew wide. "Oh shit, I'm sorry. I meant he *isn't* that sort of guy! Isn't! Seriously, that's what I meant! Fuck!"

"It's okay, Victoria."

"Vic."

Della had resisted the urge to use the nickname, feeling that it would be easier to hate the girl if they never got too close. Now it seemed she might never have the need to hate her. "Fine," she said. "So, Vic, you think you could ask around?"

Victoria nodded. "I'll ask but I think we both know the answer. Joseph didn't color outside the lines. I think he wanted to sometimes..." She waved a hand at the walls around them.

They were covered in multiple layers of posters. So many that it was hard to know what you were looking at unless you recognized the fragments that were visible. The Clash. Stones. Zep. Pixies. Bowie. Even an old Kiss poster. From Dynasty, she recalled. They all had one thing in common. They represented people who didn't live by the rules of convention. Joseph had so wanted to be like them but he'd ended up being just like his parents—working long hours at a day job only to come home and hang out with his family in a tract house in the suburbs. The fact that he got to play at being a rock star might have made it better for a little while but that was over now.

"Vic, do you think he hates me? Maybe blamed me for holding him back? Could he have hated me enough to run away?"

Victoria took Della's hands and leaned in close. "No way," she said. "He loves you, Della. He loves you more than *music*."

Della caught her eyes and saw just how significant this statement was to Victoria. Like Joseph, Vic lived and breathed music. That was true of just about everybody who worked at The Needler. Most of them loved it so much that they would have gladly worked there for free.

Della nodded at Vic. Funny, how small she looked in Joseph's chair. She wasn't a big girl but Della had built her up into a formidable enemy of sorts. Why had she done that to someone who could have been a good friend? "I'm sorry, Vic," said Della with a sob as she hugged the girl. Vic's latex dress squeaked against the vinyl chair as she buried her face in Della's hair. It smelled of patchouli. Victoria usually hated that smell—she said it reminded her of hippies rolling in the dirt—but this day it gave her comfort.

"If I hear anything, I promise I'll call you."

"Okay, thanks," said Della as she stood to go. She opened the office door but paused before going through. "Do you like cats, Vic?" she asked.

Victoria smiled. "I have three kitties at home."

"Well, my rescue is having a big spay and neuter event in south Memphis next weekend and we could use extra volunteers if you're interested."

"When and where and I'll be there. You know...if I'm not working."

Della smiled. For the first time in many years, she felt like she'd just made a new friend. She nodded and closed the door behind her, wondering how Victoria could get away with wearing that skirt around cats.

The sticker-covered front door of The Needler closed behind her and Della strolled over to her Mini Cooper. Belinda was in the passenger's seat playing with her phone.

"Well?" asked Belinda.

"Nothing. I feel bad for doubting Joseph, even for a second."

Belinda turned sideways in her seat. "Better safe, you know, sugar beet?"

"Maybe." Della watched as Victoria give her coworkers the scoop inside the store. "She loves him in her way," said Della.

"What?!" asked Belinda angrily.

"No, not like that. She just admires him like an older brother." She turned to look at Belinda. "I should have had her over more often."

"So what's next?"

"I don't know," said Della with a sigh. She was worn out and it wasn't even lunch time yet. Was every single day going to be a struggle?

Belinda recognized the look on her face. "Nope. No ma'am. You've used up your allotment of tears for one day. Now it's time to heave ho."

Della took a deep breath. "Then what the hell am I supposed to do with myself? I can't just hang out and wait for the cops to find his body."

"Yes, you can. Wait, I mean. Not the rest of it. Don't you have some work to do?"

Della thought about all the prep work that was needed for the Kat Kit event she'd told Vic about. Volunteers needed hand holding. Donors needed stroking. Cats needed neutering. Or maybe she had it the wrong way around. Maybe it was the donors who needed neutering. That thought made her laugh.

"You want to let me in on the joke?" asked Belinda, amused at her friend's sudden turn of emotions.

"Let's go get some breakfast, Lindy."

Belinda looked at her diamond-studded watch and said, "It's too late for that, honey. It's time for brunch."

Della smiled and started the car. She was about to pull out of the lot when her phone rang. She grabbed it like it was a winning lottery ticket and saw that the caller was Milt.

"Hey, Milt. Any luck?"

"Some. I...that ought to...think...and...ford..."

"Jesus fucking Christ," muttered Della.

"What is it?" asked Belinda.

"Milt, you're breaking up. Hello? Hello?"

"I hear you, Dell. We're on our way to Bol...in...oseph..."

"Goddamn it!" shouted Della. "Did you say something about Joseph? Milt, please. Please talk to me. Is Joseph there? MILT?!" Before Milt could utter another word, the call ended. Della immediately hit the callback button. Voicemail. Della tried again. Then again. It just wouldn't connect.

"What did he say, Della?" asked Belinda softly.

"I couldn't make most of it out. Something about Oxford and something else that started with a B."

"That's all, sugar beet?"

"No. It sounded like he said something about Joseph. I just. I can't be sure."

Belinda sat rooted in her seat and stared out across the empty parking lot. She took a deep breath before asking, "So what do you want to do?"

Della put the car in gear and pulled away from The Needler. "I'm going to Mississippi."

It wasn't easy for Belinda to confront people, but she figured if there ever was a time for it, it was now. "Della, slow down."

"Lindy, every second I wait, Milt and Joseph are getting further away."

"Sugar, you don't know that. Just tell me why you feel like you have to take this on by yourself."

"I have a feeling in my gut, Lindy. I can't explain it better than that. And now Milt's gone missing."

"Sugar, we don't know where he is but that doesn't mean he's missing. Why don't we go to your house and wait for him to call back. If he doesn't, we can drive down to Mississippi tomorrow." Belinda felt like a hostage negotiator. Just ease her back from the ledge a little at a time. No sudden movements.

"Because I don't want to chicken out." She stopped the car at a railroad crossing and revved the engine as a freight train

approached the intersection. They were in a particularly bad part of town. Everywhere she looked she could see the refuse of humanity stumbling about, wallowing in its no-place-to-go-ness. "Lindy, out here the shit's real. There aren't any church circle meetings or arts council fundraisers. There's just life and death. That's where Joseph is, if he's still alive, and I don't think I'll ever see him again if I just sit back and wait."

Della was covering her tracks with rationalizations. Belinda recognized the tactic, but she also recognized her friend's devotion to her family. It wasn't just Joseph that Della was fighting for. It was her own life. Thinking back on the sixteen years she'd been married to Jim, Belinda couldn't say for sure that she would be as willing to fight for him if he'd gone missing.

"I hear you, honey. Now, you tell me how I can help. You hear me? I just need to know that you're not going off to get yourself added to that missing persons list. I'd feel better if I went with you."

"Mrs. Hayes said she could keep Jimi this morning but she's got some circle meeting or whatever this afternoon. If you want to come with me, we'll have to bring him too."

Belinda thought about it. Was this the smart thing to do? Probably not. Was that why it excited her? Probably so. "Then let's go get him," she said just as the caboose rumbled past.

The old cop car made a sudden hard right and Milt pegged his truck's brakes. "Where the fuck is this guy going?" he asked out loud. He'd followed Jerry closely, just as instructed, for over an hour. It had been easy to stay close on highway 278 because most of it was divided four lane. The road Jerry had just whipped onto without so much as a signal was a tiny, two-lane affair. It'd be impossible for Milt to stick with him if he started passing other cars at his current speed. Milt struggled to stay with him, all the while keeping his eye on Chrissie. He could see her in the car and every now and then she would turn to look back at him.

How much further? Milt thought. If this cop had a jurisdiction, he had to be out of it by now. Milt realized that he'd never gotten a good look at Jerry's badge or the emblem on his car. As far as he was concerned, a cop was a cop was a cop. It didn't matter much who they worked for when they had guns and badges. He vowed not to make that mistake again.

The road rolled on. More sharecropper houses. More fields. Milt picked up his phone and tried Della again but he couldn't get a signal. He was still trying when Jerry slowed down and eased his squad car off the right side of the road beside a large tree. He missed it by inches. Milt swore under his breath and pulled off the road behind him.

There was a quiet knock on the car's side window and Jerry looked down to see Chrissie motioning for him to let her out. In gentlemanly fashion, he unlocked the door and offered his hand to help her to her feet. "Sorry, ma'am," he said. He turned to Milt as the younger man approached with a questioning glance at Chrissie. She nodded from behind Jerry. "We're on foot from here," said the cop with a smile. "Go on and get whatever you might need out of your truck and lock her up. We won't be back for a while."

"Where're we going?" asked Milt, trying to make it sound like a nonchalant query. *Just a few friends standing by a road contemplating a long walk in a field.*

"Home. From there, we'll be better able to ascertain the current situation. If we don't catch up with your friend soon, this could snowball into one hell of a problem."

"This?" asked Chrissie.

"The situation with Joseph, or what's left of him." Jerry closed his eyes and sniffed the air like a bloodhound looking for a scent. "He's headed this way. The sooner we get home the better."

"So you actually know where Joseph is?" Milt was getting excited.

"Not exactly," said Jerry, content to leave it at that. He stared at the large trees that had been planted in a circle beside that road over a hundred years ago. It was odd seeing old growth trees in that area. Most of Mississippi was as flat as a preacher's wife.

Chrissie looked around. Besides the aforementioned trees, there wasn't much to see. A few oversized rocks on the ground between the trees and a dilapidated feed and seed across the street. "Think I could run over there and use the bathroom?" She could sense Jerry's reluctance so she added, "You wouldn't make a lady squat in the bushes, would you?"

Milt hadn't expected Chrissie to play the fragile female but he also hadn't spent the last hour riding in the car with Jerry. She'd obviously determined which of his buttons she could successfully push.

"Ma'am, we'll need to go together. I don't know about Mr. rock and roll over here but I'm pretty sure us black folks will be less that welcome in such an establishment."

"Trust me," said Milt. "I'll have a harder time in there than you will."

"Is that right?" asked Jerry, mock surprise on his face.

"Look," said Chrissie with growing impatience. "I'm either going in there or I'm peeing right here. Your choice."

Jerry looked up and down the road then back at the feed and seed. Milt wondered what he was so worried about.

Chrissie didn't care. She threw up her hands and stormed off across the street.

"You heard the lady," said Milt as he ran off after her. Jerry followed reluctantly.

The front door to Roundlake Feed & Seed was a steel slab with a square window that was embedded with wire mesh. Chrissie grabbed the silver door knob and tried to turn it but it wouldn't budge. It was as if it wasn't designed to be turned at all. She cupped her hands against the glass and peered inside.

There was a chest-high counter to the left, behind which sat an enormous white woman wearing cat's eye glasses. Chrissie knocked on the window and waved but either the woman didn't hear her or she didn't want to look up. Either way, it was starting to look like Chrissie might be peeing in the bushes after all.

Jerry walked up behind her. "Try again," he said.

Chrissie reached for the doorknob once more. This time it turned easily in her hand and she was able to push the heavy door open. She looked back at Jerry with a smile then went inside.

"Go in with her," whispered Jerry. "I'll wait out here." Milt nodded and followed along.

The woman behind the counter looked up, her mouth hanging open to expose the neon green chewing gum she'd been working on. "Help you?" she asked halfheartedly.

Chrissie stepped up to the counter and took her at bat. "Yes, ma'am. My name's Chrissie Archer and this is Milt..." she paused and whispered a quick question in Milt's ear which he answered in kind. "Milt Ray. He's with that band Caster. Ever heard of them?"

The woman just sat there with her mouth hanging open.

"I can see by your expression that you haven't. Anyway, see, we don't know this area real well and we're about out of gas. More to the point, I seriously need to visit the little girl's room."

There was still no response from the woman, but she did put her pen down. Milt thought that was progress of a sort.

"What I'm asking here is would you mind terribly if I used the facilities? You know? The restroom?"

At last, the woman spoke. "I reckon it'd be ah-ight. She pointed at a swinging door across from the counter. "Just go through there and straight on. The bathroom's on the left."

"Oh, thank you thank you thank you!" gushed Chrissie, then she pushed her way through the door and bolted down the hall as fast as she could, leaving Milt at the counter.

"You looking for the bathroom too?" asked the woman.

Milt stepped forward. "No ma'am, I'm fine."

The gum chewer nodded her head at that but offered nothing more. Milt smiled and nodded. "This a busy time of year for y'all?" he asked.

"No."

"I see. Is planting season over?"

The woman stared at him and blew a bubble with her gum. It popped and stuck all over her lower lip. She tried to use the remaining gum to clean it off but it didn't work very well.

Milt studied the room looking for something to talk to the woman about. It wasn't that he particularly wanted to chat her up. It was that he thought of himself as a charmer of women and he saw this rather large, middle-aged woman as an easy mark. He didn't want to be proven wrong.

"There much to do around these parts?"

The woman remained impassive. "No."

"How about a bar? Any juke joints in the area?"

"No." She leaned forward to try and get a better look at Jerry as he lingered outside the front door. "Y'all with the law?" Before Milt could answer, she continued, "This ain't no dry county and we ain't even close to a church or funeral home, unless you count that little cemetery 'cross the street and we're more than a hundred yards from that, I reckon."

Jerry tapped on the window. Milt just smiled and turned back to the feed and seed woman. "Cemetery?" he asked, leaning in and resting his elbows on the counter. "Is that what that is?"

"Yes, sir. I'm told some of my kin is laid to rest there but ain't no way to be sure. Most of the writing's done wore off what grave markers is still there."

Chrissie walked up behind Milt. "What's this about grave markers?"

Jerry knocked on the window again and Milt opened the door for him. Surprised, he slowly stepped inside the office. He glared at Milt and said, "Y'all don't need to be worrying this fine lady with your tourist talk, now." He smiled at the woman behind the counter. "You've been most hospitable, ma'am. Most hospitable! We'd best be getting on, though. Thank you for your time!"

Chrissie allowed herself to be led to the doorway but Milt resisted. He'd finally uncovered something interesting about the area and he wasn't about to let it go so easily. "You know, Miss..." He let the word hang out there as a question.

"Ruby Bee, but my friends call me Rube."

Milt took a deep breath. Apparently irony hadn't arrived at that little corner of the world just yet. "Well, Rube, I happen to collect gravestone rubbings. When I used to tour a lot with my

band I had to stop at every interesting cemetery I could dig up!" he slapped the counter to emphasize his joke but Rube just stared at him.

Jerry used the pause to approach Milt from behind. "Son, we need to be going," he whispered.

"Then go!" said Milt. "I'm not stopping you!"

"It doesn't work that way." Jerry was sounding exasperated but Milt couldn't figure out why. He was the one who'd dragged them to that little patch of nothing in the first place, wasn't he?

"I just want to learn more about the little graveyard across the way. Anything wrong with that?"

Jerry leaned in and hissed in Milt's ear. "Could be a hell of a lot wrong with that!"

Milt looked at him like he was crazy but something in Jerry's eyes made a believer out of him. He turned back to Rube. "Sorry, ma'am, but as it turns out we actually do have to be on our way. It sure was nice meeting you. I'll be sure to stop back by as soon as I need either feed or seed."

Jerry hushed him up and scooted him toward the exit, then waved to Rube as he closed the door behind them. Once out in the daylight, Jerry relaxed a bit.

"What the hell's your problem?" asked Milt, now genuinely pissed off.

"My problems are legion, young man, and far too serious to get into here and now."

"But..."

"I'll explain everything in time. For now, I just need you to follow my lead for a little while longer. Think you can manage that?"

"That depends."

"I'm listening."

"Why'd you bring us here?"

Jerry looked up at the sky as if he were praying for patience. "Can't say just yet."

"Fair enough. Then we can't go with you just yet."

Jerry aimed his bloodshot eyes at Chrissie. "What about you? You willing to trust me a little while longer? I promise you..." He looked back at Milt. "BOTH of you, that you won't come to any harm. If I'd wanted to, I'd have taken care of you back at the pawn shop."

Chrissie took a deep breath and flashed a glance at Milt before turning back to Jerry. "Does this really have something to do with Milt's friend?"

"In a manner of speaking."

"Jesus, old man, can't you just give us a yes or a no?!" shouted Milt.

"I certainly can do so when a yes or a no is warranted. In this case, they are not. Something you got to get clear on is the presence of change in every moment of our existence. I no more thought I'd be standing here today than you did, but I'm rolling with it. All I'm asking is that you roll along with me a while longer. If you decide to go on your way, I'll hold nary a grudge." He leaned over to Chrissie, fully aware that he was charming her. "Not that grudges have ever been my thing, you understand."

Milt wasn't unsympathetic. He recognized Jerry's sincerity, but he wondered if the dude was flat out crazy. "The only way I'm going any further with you is if I get you to truthfully answer at least one of my questions. A straight answer. So far you've slithered out of every single hook I've laid down."

Jerry pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and mopped his sweaty brow with it. It was made of fine linen but the edges had yellowed with age. On it were two embroidered initials. G L. "Son, I've answered truthfully so far. You've simply been dissatisfied with my answers."

"Well, then I need at least one answer that satisfies me. Not a riddle. Not a 'maybe this maybe that' kind of response. One direct answer to one direct question."

"Satisfaction, much like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder, but I'll do my best." He paused and suddenly became dead serious. "Once," he said loudly, then he leaned back against the railing that surrounded the entry to the feed and seed.

Milt considered his question. Chrissie was bored with the whole dick measuring thing but at least both men recognized it for what it was—a contest of wills.

"Where specifically are you going to take us?"

Jerry pointed over his shoulder toward the trees that surrounded the tiny cemetery. "Over yonder," he said.

"You saying you're taking us to that cemetery or to the cars or to the road or what?"

"I suppose this means you continue to be dissatisfied."

"You suppose correctly," said Milt.

"Alright then," said Jerry, drawing near. "I intend to take you to my house. To the house of darkness. It's in that field beyond those stones a far piece, and yet not so far at all."

"Say what?" Chrissie suddenly found the conversation interesting.

Jerry nudged her but maintained eye contact with Milt. "Now, do you know any more than you knew when you got up this morning?"

"The deal is that I ask you questions until I'm satisfied with one answer, and satisfaction continues to elude me."

"Thought it might. Three out of four blues singers agree." He smiled with his eyes locked on Milt's.

"Milt, let's just go see what he wants to show us," said Chrissie.

"I'm going to give him one more chance, and this is an easy one."

"Joy of joys," said Jerry. "Can't possibly be any easier than the others."

"What's G.L. stand for?"

Jerry's jubilant expression turned cold and his features hardened as if they'd been blasted by arctic winds. Once more, he spoke to Chrissie while continuing to maintain eye contact with Milt. "Girlie, your friend here's smarter than he's letting on."

"What?" Chrissie turned to Milt. "That's your question? What's G.L. stand for?"

"It's on his handkerchief," said Milt. He had no idea why Jerry was reacting the way he was but he was happy to have the old man kicked back on his heels for a change.

Jerry patted the pocket that contained the hankie and relaxed. Even though he thought it best not to share the answer to the young man's query, he decided that fate had shown the boy the way and it might have a hand to play in all of this just yet. "Gerald LaVant."

Milt nodded. He knew he'd just won something. He just didn't know what it was.

"Can we go now?" asked Chrissie.

"Okay," said Milt, still looking at Jerry. "I believe you were in the lead?"

Jerry nodded and started off across the road. He didn't look back to see if they were following him.

The wind was singing softly in the tree tops. Joseph stood up so he could hear it better and the Della Voice immediately told him to sit his ass back down. He was at the edge of a patch of forest watching an old black woman as she hung her wash out to dry.

"We'll wait for her to go inside, then we'll move on," whispered the voice. Della knew everything. If not for her, the crew of the tugboat would have murdered him in his sleep and thrown him overboard. She'd heard them discussing it and had dutifully passed that information on to Joseph. Now she was successfully guiding him through an area where there were even more people who wanted to hurt him. She'd explained that they wanted his guitar for themselves. Just thinking about the possibility of that made him grip the guitar's worn neck a little tighter.

"Dear heart, can you hear me?" It was the Della Voice again.

"Yes," he said out loud.

"We can go now."

Joseph nodded and climbed to his feet. His sunburned skin was beginning to hurt. As if she'd read his mind, the Della Voice said, "I can help you with that pain," and just like that, it was gone. Joseph rubbed the water blisters on his bright red arms and felt nothing. Smiling, he picked up his pace and even leapt over a dead tree that had fallen in their path.

"Merg! MEEEEEEERG! Come here, boy! Mergie!" Someone was in the woods with them. It was looking for something called a Merg.

"Get down," said the Della Voice, and Joseph did as he was told.

A man appeared up ahead. Joseph watched as he placed two fingers in his mouth and whistled loudly.

"He's calling the police to come and get us, Joseph. 'Merg' is the code word for police in these parts." Joseph's heart rate increased but he stayed put. The last time he'd jumped up before being told to, Della had become angry with him and she hadn't talked to him for a long time. He couldn't take that. He didn't want to be alone again.

MEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEERG, come here, goddamnit!”

“He’s coming this way,” said the voice. “When he gets close enough, you take him.” Joseph nodded but it wasn’t enough for the Della Voice. “Say it. Say ‘I will take him.’”

“I will take him,” said Joseph. As he said each word, he could feel energy pumping through his veins. He grasped the neck of the guitar, ready to use it as a weapon against the interloper.

“Yes! We’ll take him together!” shouted the Della Voice. It occurred to Joseph that she might ought to keep it down, seeing as how they were supposed to be hiding, but he didn’t say a word.

The man was drawing near when suddenly a large, brown mutt ran up and started sniffing Joseph’s shoes. Without thinking, Joseph grabbed the dog’s ears and twisted its head sideways. A tiny yelp and a muffled snapping sound were the only evidence of the dog’s passing. Joseph smiled as he lowered the canine corpse to the forest floor. Surely the Della Voice would be pleased.

“AAAAAAAAAAAH!” screeched the voice. It’s piercing tone felt like it was boring into Joseph’s brain.

Joseph held his ears but the sound didn’t diminish. “I don’t understa...” he began, but he was cut off by a tremendous force that now grasped his throat.

“Did I tell you to kill that animal?!” asked the Della Voice.

Joseph still had enough sense to understand that the voice was mad at him. But why? Hadn’t it just made him pledge to take the dog? “Yes,” answered Joseph.

The grip around his throat tightened and Joseph felt himself being lifted from his seated position. “No!” shouted the voice. “I told you to kill the man! THE MAN!”

The tips of Joseph’s shoes barely touched the forest floor. He couldn’t think, let alone talk. He was sorry that he’d done something wrong but he hadn’t the faintest idea what that might be. Just as he was about to black out, he saw the man the Della Voice had spoken of. He was standing about twenty feet away, a leash in one hand and a Budweiser in the other. Joseph inventoried the man and his possessions like he was balancing his checkbook. No weapons. A faded, denim jacket. A Memphis Mad Dogs cap.

The voice whispered its hatred into his mind. "You will take this evil soul! Do you understand?!"

Joseph couldn't speak so he nodded. The grip on his throat lifted him and moved him toward the man. The old guy looked at Joseph as if he'd never seen a man floating in midair before. "Have you seen my dog?" he asked nonchalantly.

"Yes," said Joseph, then he gouged the man's eyes out with his thumbs. Blood ran down his forearms as the invisible hand lowered his weight back onto his own two feet.

"Yes! Yes!" shouted the voice.

Joseph pushed the screaming man down on top of his guitar and attacked him with a zeal rarely seen outside a National Geographic special. Not even grizzlies attacked their prey with such a wanton lust for blood. He dug into the man's stomach cavity as his screams turned into gargling sounds. Blood ran down the man's belly and over his love handles onto the guitar below. He bled out ten feet from Merg's lifeless body and the guitar absorbed his liquid offering gratefully. By the time the feeding frenzy was over, the only blood left in the forest was the splatter on Joseph's clothes.

"Good boy," said the Della Voice, now much more gentle and relaxed. Joseph preferred her that way. He made a mental note not to upset her again. "We need to go back to the house we passed earlier. The one with the clothesline."

"Will we take her too?" asked Joseph, now eager to please.

"No!" shouted the voice, suddenly annoyed again. Joseph's mind swam. He couldn't figure out what he'd done this time. "No," she repeated more calmly. "The washer woman's blood isn't marked for us."

Ohhhh, thought Joseph. There were some kind of markings on the evil people that he couldn't see. It was all becoming clear now.

"We have to get you some new clothes. She won't mind if we borrow the ones on her clothesline for a while. She's on our side, after all."

Joseph smiled, relieved that someone else would be around to help the Della Voice in its mission. He quickly backtracked to the little yard, as instructed, and waited for the Della Voice to tell him when it was okay to snatch the clothes. When she finally spoke, he sprinted to the line and grabbed

everything there, including dresses and an enormous brassiere. He took it all and dove back into the cover of the forest. That was when he realized that the Della Voice had been speaking to him. He'd thought it was nothing more than a ringing in his ears, but it turned out to be her. She was getting pissed off again.

"Can you hear me?" the voice yelled. "Joseph?!" He looked up at the sky and nodded. "How is she supposed to go to work without her clean clothes?! Take a man's shirt and a pair of pants and put everything else back!"

Joseph knew nothing of the lady nor her job. All he wanted was to make the Della Voice happy. He sorted the damp clothing and picked out the two items the voice had told him to take, then he rolled the rest into a ball and quietly eased his way toward the clothesline. The screen door squeaked on the back of the shotgun shack and he rolled the ball of clothes across the yard before sprinting back to the dead man and his equally dead dog. Once there, the Della Voice told him to change his clothes.

The work shirt fit okay but the forest green Dickies were a little large on him. The Della Voice told him to cinch his belt. Once he did, he could feel her smiling upon him once again.

"Good boy," she said. "Now, let's move on. We have a lot more work to do."

There were seven oak trees surrounding the little plot of land that the woman at the feed and seed had called a cemetery. Jerry stood at the edge of the circle, looking in, as Chrissie and Milt walked up behind him. There were some large rocks poking up out of the ground amidst the weeds. It looked like there was some faded writing on one of the rocks. Milt couldn't read it from where he stood, so he moved past Jerry to get a closer look. Jerry quickly grabbed him and pulled him back.

"What the hell, man?!" yelled Milt.

Jerry held a finger to his lips. "It'll be dark soon, so we got to move this along. Step only in my footsteps. Nowhere else. Be careful not to step where the dead are and we may cross without incident." He looked at Milt's shoes, then at Chrissie's. "You got to take off your shoes."

"Seriously, man?" asked Milt.

Again, Jerry held that finger to his lips. "Respect, young man," said the cop, then he removed his own shoes and set out across the clearing.

Milt pulled his boots off, scoffing as he did so. Even if this was an old cemetery, it was surrounded by roads and open fields in broad daylight. Anyone could wander into it at any time, so how the hell could it be dangerous? Maybe the old guy was just trying to scare them.

Chrissie, on the other hand, was fascinated by the place. She quickly removed her shoes, tied the laces together, and slung them over her shoulder.

Jerry slowly picked his way into the circle, taking care to hold each position long enough to leave an impression that the others could see. Chrissie first and then Milt. The old man acted like it was a mine field.

"Jerry!" Milt called out. The cop turned and gave him a quick hard-ass stare, then got back to the business of picking his way around invisible obstacles. "We could just walk around the outside if you don't want to..."

A leathery hand was clapped over Milt's mouth before Milt even saw Jerry move toward him. "Be. Quiet," said Jerry through clenched teeth. Milt wanted to tell him that his hand smelled like sandalwood, but given the expression on the older

man's face, he decided to hold off on that little tidbit. He nodded and Jerry let go.

After what felt like an hour of wandering around that circle of headstones, Jerry finally turned and guided them out the north side. Milt turned back, half expecting to see zombies clawing their way out of the ground, but there was nothing. He was about to take the last step outside the circle when he blacked out.

Chrissie turned back to find that Milt was frozen in place just inside the border formed by the trees. She yelled, "Jerry, something's got Milt!" She reached for his arm but Jerry held her back.

"Oh, no, ma'am. You don't want to be doing that! Can't be losing both of you." Jerry felt her relax in his arms so he let go. "Now, let's us see what we're up against here," he said. He walked up to the tree line and looked Milt up and down. The younger man's hair was hanging in midair, as if frozen in time. Jerry turned and spoke softly to Chrissie. "Girl, you might have to help me out here. Not just yet, though. I don't want to touch him unless there's no other way. Could come out on his own but I can't be sure there's enough time for that."

"What's wrong with him?"

At that moment, Jerry noticed just how young Chrissie was. It was easy to be deceived by her fierce demeanor. Inside, she was still a little girl. He found himself taking pity on her. "Think of it as a burglar alarm. This whole place is a key. To use the key, you have to have eyes for the path. Nothing bad happens unless you stray from the path and set off the alarm system."

"I don't understand. Key to what?"

"Never you mind. He's froze. He was almost out so he's still got some sense about him. If you stand and watch long enough, you can see his hair moving slightly. It's like watching the minute hand of a clock move."

"Jerry, please. You're talking crazy."

"Is that so?" asked Jerry, more amused than annoyed. "Well the long and the short of it is that he can get out himself if he does it before the sun comes up tomorrow."

"Okaaaaaay. And if he doesn't get out before then?"

"Then he's lost, girl. They'll keep him."

Chrissie wanted to laugh at the old man, but the fact remained that Milt was frozen in place for no apparent reason. "Then why don't we just grab him and pull him out?" she asked.

"No, ma'am. Do that, and we could get caught too. It's a little bit like a spider's web. You know what that is, right?"

"Jesus, Jerry. What am I, in kindergarten? Yes, I know what a spider web is!"

"Good. Then you understand."

"No, I do NOT understand!"

"Well, I told it about as clear as I could." Jerry shrugged. He needed to think. He sat down and began drawing symbols in the dirt. He stopped to look up at the sky for a moment, then he continued scribbling. The time passed slowly. Finally, Jerry stood up and angrily swept his makeshift slate clean with his foot.

"What?" asked Chrissie.

Jerry was shaking his head. "Contemptible nonsense! That's what it is!"

"That's what WHAT is?!"

Jerry harrumphed. "I don't think he can get out on his own. Ain't enough time."

"So, what's that mean?"

"It means, missy, that I'm going to have to get his ass out of there myself. I've heard of it being done. Trouble is it messes up your wiring but good."

Chrissie took Jerry's weathered hands into her own and looked him in the eye. "Look, you believe whatever you want. I say all we have to do is grab his hands and pull." She had the vague notion that Milt was being hurt by whatever had a hold of him. If Jerry had only let her grab him before.

"What'd you say?" asked Jerry, jerking his hands away from hers.

"The same thing I've been saying all along," said Chrissie, but Jerry didn't hear her. He'd gone back to making marks in the dirt with his stick.

"Might be alright," he muttered.

"Jerry?"

He stood up and said, "Give me your hands again. Both of them." Chrissie complied and Jerry held them palms up. He leaned in and sniffed each one before letting them go. "Alright. Fine. You can try it. It'll either work or it'll fry your..." He was

about to say “brain” when Chrissie dove at Milt, wrapped both hands around his right wrist and yanked . Her hands and arms felt like they were being shocked. She let go, involuntarily, and fell back, Milt’s body falling after her.

Jerry moved quickly and caught the young man. He lowered him to the ground and looked over at Chrissie. “You alright, girl?” Chrissie nodded. “That was a damn foolish thing to do.”

Instead of arguing the point, she looked over at Milt. “Is he okay?”

Jerry ignored her. He took Milt’s right hand and kneaded it like he was breaking in a baseball mitt. “I know this hurts,” said Jerry, “but it’s got to be done.” He looked at his watch and then up at the street light next to the cars. He motioned to Chrissie. “Find a rock and see if you can put that damned thing out. It’s feeding them.”

“Wait. What? Who’s feeding what exactly?”

“Do it, girl. I don’t have time to explain every little thing to you!”

Chrissie started to tell the old guy that so far he hadn’t explained even one little thing, but she resisted the urge. She found a couple of good size rocks and tried hurling them up at the light. It wasn’t an ordinary street light like the ones they had in Oxford. This one was practically an antique. It’s exposed bulb hung low, only ten feet or so above the ground. Chrissie thought she had a pretty good chance of hitting it, but then what? They’d be in the dark and Milt would still be paralyzed.

“Jerry, tell me why I’m doing this,” she said as she hurled another rock and missed by a good six inches. “Jerry?” When there was no answer, she turned back to see that Milt was lying there alone. She ran over to him. “Milt?” He didn’t budge. She stood up and shouted, “JERRY! JEEEEERRRRRRRRYYYYY!” The only response was from the local cricket and frog populations. She went back to Milt and saw that his eyes were wide open. Was he waking up? She grabbed his wrist and felt for a pulse. He was alive, alright, but his pulse was racing.

“Can you hear me, Milt? Can you blink or something? Twitch a finger? Can you do that?”

No response.

She looked back at the road. Where the hell was Jerry’s car? She hadn’t even heard the engine start up. How had he gotten away from her like that? The answer would have to wait.

For the time being, all she knew to do was to try and get Milt to a doctor.

She felt around in Milt's pockets and found the keys to his truck. Now she just had to get him over there and loaded in the back. She tried to hoist him up off the ground but he wouldn't budge. It was like he weighed ten times his normal weight. She grabbed his bare feet and tried to drag him. Same result. He was rooted in place. She could lift his arms and legs but his body wasn't going anywhere. She sat down next to him and ran through her options.

"I'm going to go and get help, Milt. Do you understand?"

Milt just stared up at the sky like before. Chrissie laid his hands on his chest and stood up to look around. The feed and seed was dark but somebody had to live around there.

She ran to the truck, climbed inside, and slid the key into the ignition. When she turned it, it didn't even click. "Shit!" she shouted, then she tried again. It was no good. She looked around her, certain that all of this was some bizarre dream. She felt like she wasn't there at all. What if that was it? What if she was the one who'd been trapped by the cemetery? What if she was dead? The possibilities flooded her mind and created a nervous panic.

"Girl, what'd I tell you about that light?"

"Jerry!" she shouted as she leapt from the truck. "Where the hell did you get off to?! Would it kill you to fucking say something?!"

"Hold up now, girl. I didn't mean to rile you." He strode over to the street light and grabbed a rock. With one well-placed throw, he plunged the area into near total darkness. "Now, where were we?" he intoned sweetly.

"You were about to explain why you left us here to die, you asshole!"

He skittered over and knelt beside Milt, ignoring her fury. "You got nothing to worry about now."

"Get away from him!"

"Shush up."

"We need to get him to a doctor," said Chrissie, but this time she spoke less forcefully.

"I'll do you one better, but we got to get going. We're going over yonder way." He waved his hand toward the field that lay to the north of the cemetery.

Chrissie almost laughed. "We're going out into that field? You can't be serious."

"Just get his legs."

"But he's stuck to the..."

"Girl, the clock's ticking! Do as I say!"

Jerry had Milt by the armpits and was dragging him toward the field. Chrissie ran over and grabbed Milt's knees.

"But, he wouldn't budge before," she said as they wobbled forward together.

"That's 'cause you didn't do as I said."

"He's going to make it, right?" she asked between deep breaths.

"Might. Might not. If we can get him home, his chances are better."

"Home? Jerry, there's not any houses out here." She looked around, suddenly afraid all over again. Maybe she should go back and try the truck one more time.

"Missy, look here," he huffed. "You just got to trust me and do what I tell you, when I tell you to do it." He paused for a moment to catch his breath, then he stated emphatically, "You agreed to that much already."

"I didn't agree to this!" yelled Chrissie. "I hardly know either one of you and here I am carrying a dying man across an empty field in the middle of the fucking night!"

Jerry cleared his throat and continued. "When we reach the house, you need to mind your language. Stay put when we go inside and don't speak unless you're spoken to. Can you do that for me? It's going to mean life or death for Milton here."

He was serious! The old guy actually believed they were going to a house even though they were in the middle of a freshly-plowed field. She broke it to him as gently as she could. "Jerry, like I said before, there's not any houses out here."

Once again, he ignored her. "We're almost there."

"Jesus Christ, Jerry! Will you listen to me? There's nothing out here! Not even a goddamned tent! We've got to get Milt to an emergency room before it's too late!"

Jerry's nose was suddenly a millimeter away from Chrissie's. "Now you listen to me and you listen good, girl. I am not going to have this young man pass on my watch, you hear me? You're going to help me whether you like it or not. Once you've done the job I need you to do, then you can bitch at me

all you want. But by then, I'm thinking you ain't going to have it in you no more."

He grabbed Milt's shoulders and Chrissie did as she was told, but she was certain that Milt was doomed to die in that field. When the sun came up, the cops would find her there alone with the body. Milt would be dead and she'd be stuck trying to explain what had happened to him.

Jerry's brisk whisper jolted her out of her thoughts. "Remember to mind your tongue, like I said. No curses. We're almost there."

Chrissie started to laugh but the sound caught in her throat. There, not twenty feet in front of them, stood a two-story, clapboard house with a large wraparound porch. It was painted black, or it might've been dark blue. It was hard to tell in that smothering darkness. The windows all stood open, their dark draperies made visible by the amber light within. When they got closer, Chrissie could feel sweet, cool air coming out of the house through those windows. It was as if the house was exhaling comfort. She got one last warning look from Jerry as they carried Milt up the front steps to the porch.

The first thing Joseph noticed when he woke up was the stench in the air. It turned out to be the only thing he could sense. The world moved around him like he was in the belly of a shark. He stood up and his feet nearly slid out from under him. The floor was wet and slippery. He carefully shuffle-stepped in one direction, hoping to find a wall. He found an open doorway instead. Once in the next room, he felt a sopping wet rug beneath his bare feet. He tried to remember what had happened before he'd fallen asleep, but the only things he could recall were the Della Voice and his guitar.

GUITAR! Where was his guitar? He ran back into the slippery room and his legs flew out from under him. He landed hard with an audible splash that sent shudders of pain up his spine. He felt around on the floor, sloshing the goo all over himself as he went. The guitar was nowhere to be found. He grunted his frustration as he felt his way across the floor with outstretched arms. What the hell was he going to do? Without that guitar, Della was sure to forsake him, and without her guidance, he was doomed.

He searched the room a third time before giving up and moving back into the rug room. The guitar had to be there! It had to! He'd have never left it behind, no matter what. He felt his way across the floor and ran into a table and chairs. He stood up and ran his hands across the tabletop. Someone was there! Were they sleeping? He grabbed the shoulders of the person and shook them violently.

"Where's my guitar?!" he screamed. "Give it back!" The sleeper's body flopped around and refused to wake up. Joseph dragged it off the table and it hit the carpet with a squishy splash, followed by the sound of vibrating strings. The guitar! He felt around and discovered the neck sticking up, perpendicular to the floor. He hugged it to his body, nuzzling the headstock and cutting his face on the ends of the steel strings.

"Oh, thank you, thank you!" muttered Joseph to no one in particular. He grasped the guitar and stood up, but it was stuck to the floor. He pulled and pulled, but his prize wouldn't budge.

Joseph ran his fingers through his hair and tried to think. It wasn't easy. Between his panic at being abandoned by the Della Voice and his fear of losing his guitar, his nerves were a

wreck. He stumbled toward the window that was faintly visible on the far side of the room and slid open the drapes exposing a large sliding glass door. He saw nothing but darkness outside. He stumbled back over to the body and damn near castrated himself with the neck of the guitar. The headstock jabbed into his groin and sent pain skyrocketing into his brain. Frustration roared through his eye sockets and made him scream out loud.

"Keep going, Joseph." It was the Della Voice. Joseph's anger instantly subsided. She hadn't left him after all.

"Della!" he cried. The two syllables echoed off the sheetrock walls.

"We have to leave this place, dear heart. There isn't much time. The dark house has been opened and they will be coming." Joseph's nod went unseen in the darkness. Of course, he had no idea what the Della Voice was talking about, but that didn't stop him from giving her his vote of confidence.

"I need to find a light," said Joseph.

"No!" For the first time ever, the Della Voice sounded frightened. That confused Joseph. Didn't she always know what to do? "You can't turn on the lights. We shorted out the fuse box, remember?"

Joseph nodded again even though he had no memory of doing anything with any fuse box. "I'll find a flashlight," he offered.

"There's no time, love. We have to leave!"

"But my guitar," he said, practically hyperventilating when he thought that she was suggesting that he leave it behind.

"You have to roll the body over, dear heart. Then you can pull the guitar free."

The Della Voice was so smart. Joseph wouldn't have ever thought of that on his own. He stepped back and reached down to twist the body sideways using the guitar's neck as a lever.

"Good boy. Now, get behind it."

The smell in the house was getting worse. Joseph tried to ignore it as he struggled to find a handhold on the slippery instrument. He finally got more purchase and pulled. The dead body heaved up off the floor right along with the guitar.

"No," said Della gently. "Put your foot on it like it's the last piece of steak on a shish kabob, then pull."

Once again, Joseph grabbed the guitar, but this time he stood on whatever part of the dead body was closest. The guitar popped loose into his hands and he fell backwards against a large china cabinet. The dishes inside crashed into one another, but Joseph didn't care. All he cared about was rescuing his precious guitar.

"Now, we have to go," said the Della Voice. "Quickly." When Joseph didn't respond with the urgency she'd expected, she became more frantic. "Joseph! Now!"

She'd never spoken to Joseph that way before. His joy at recapturing his guitar was instantly dulled by her anger. Couldn't she allow him one moment of happiness? He'd done everything she'd said, after all.

"JOSEPH!" she screamed inside his head. "GET THE FUCK OUT OF HERE RIGHT THIS VERY FUCKING INSTANT OR I'LL GO FUCKNUTS CRAZY!"

Panic grabbed Joseph by his bruised balls and seized his heart. Yes. YES! He had to get the fuck out of there! Right this very fucking instant! Their survival depended on it! He thrashed his way around the room but he couldn't find the door! Where the hell was the door?!

"JOOOOOOSEEEEEEPH!!!!" the Della Voice screamed in agony. Something in the house was hurting her. Joseph had no idea what to do until his addled brain rendered a single, golden word. Window. With that image in his mind's eye, he turned and ran toward the sliding glass door in the dining room.

"NO!" shouted the Della Voice, but it was too late. Joseph slammed into the glass with all of his weight. At first, it simply bowed outward like a transparent trampoline, but then the guitar body struck the cold, quivering pane and added just enough stress to puncture the surface tension. The glass splintered into thousands of pieces, many of which embedded themselves in Joseph's flesh as he flew out onto the patio of the little house.

He lay on the concrete, feeling pain from every inch of his body. It was intense and it was real. Then, suddenly, it was gone.

"That's better, isn't it?" asked the Della Voice. She was calm again.

Joseph sighed, "Yes."

"Then get to your feet. Our work here is done for the time being. Come daybreak, a lot of people will be looking for

us. We can handle that. It's the hours before daybreak that we have to be careful of. The house of darkness wants to stop us, dear heart. But we don't want to stop, do we?"

"No," said Joseph with a smile as pieces of glass fell from cuts on his face. He felt nothing. The Della Voice would take care of everything. How could he have doubted her? Joseph marched across the street in that moonless night, leaving behind the little brick house whose walls and floors he'd painted with the blood of over two dozen men, women and children.

It was almost midnight when Della and Belinda rolled into Oxford with Jimi asleep in the back seat. Getting there had been the easy part. Now that they were there, the possibility of finding Milt seemed less and less likely. Most Memphians thought that smaller cities and towns were actually small. They weren't. They were smaller. Not small. Oxford proper occupied about ten square miles. That was a lot of ground to cover when you had no idea where to look.

"This was a dumb idea, wasn't it?" asked Della.

"Yes," said Lindy. She eased the blow with a smile.

"Look, I have to do something and this is it."

Belinda nodded. "I know, sugar. It's one of the things I love about you. All that stuff you do for those cats..."

"Oh god, I completely forgot. We have an event this weekend! We have to canvas the neighborhoods. Shit, shit, shit!" The "we" was Kat Kit. Della could delegate some things but when it came to the big neighborhood sweeps through the poor parts of town, no one could rally the troops like her. "How could I forget that?"

"Well, your plate's not exactly empty."

Della sighed and pulled into the first parking lot she saw. It was adjacent to a local tanning salon called Grillers. If she'd felt better, she'd have laughed out loud. As it was, the sign barely earned a smirk. She whipped the car into a parking space and slammed it into park, then she turned on Belinda like she was confronting a belligerent jury.

"Okay. Time for straight talk, alright?"

The air inside the car was cool and dry. Belinda began to perspire anyway. She wasn't big on these reality check moments that Della seemed to need from time to time. "Alright," she said reluctantly.

"Am I crazy? Am I risking my sanity for a dead man?" asked Della. When Belinda didn't answer right away, she continued. "Should I just accept what's happened and move on? That's what they say on TV. Move on. Don't get hung up on the past. Attachments. That's what they call them. I'm attached and I shouldn't be. Is that it?" She stared expectantly at Belinda.

"Sugar, I can't answer that for you and you know it. Is it crazy to drive your child and best friend down to Oxford

Mississippi in the middle of the night? Probably. Is it dumb to think your husband might still be alive? Absolutely not. You just need to stay focused on the things you can do without Joseph. That's a lot, you know?"

No response.

"Dell, you're more than Joseph's wife. Maybe this is the universe reminding you of that. Together, you're a good couple but that doesn't make you any less of who you are when you're alone." Belinda paused and let her gaze drift out across the parking lot. "When I married Jim, I felt...well, I guess I was just plain stupid. I thought landing a doctor was the best thing that had ever happened to me. I loved him. Still do, for that matter. I just let myself get absorbed into the relationship. I lost who I was. For a while, I was just Jim's wife. Nothing else. If he'd disappeared during that time, I'd have felt so lost that I'd have probably killed myself. I sat alone in that big house figuring out ways to spend our money—his money, really—and I felt like a jerk. I wasn't contributing to the world in any meaningful way. I was on the verge of swallowing a handful of pills when I saw an article in the Commercial Appeal." She stopped and took a deep breath and Della came out of her own funk long enough to see that Belinda was crying.

"It's okay," said Della, taking Belinda's hand.

Belinda shook her head and smiled through her tears. "No, Dell. You don't understand. That article I saw was about you. Not you directly, but about Kat Kit. I read it and I learned how to get on the road toward being a real person. I went online the next day and registered as a volunteer. When I met you, I felt like I was meeting the queen of England. You gave me hope, sugar beet."

Della flung her arms around her friend and asked, "Why didn't you ever tell me that?"

"I don't know. Maybe because I didn't want you to feel weird about our friendship."

"Jesus! I thought I chased after you!"

"Me?"

Della smiled. "Benefactors are hard to come by."

The friends sat quietly for a moment, afraid to speak. They each hoped beyond hope that they hadn't just screwed it up. Finally Della broke the silence. "Which brings us back to the original question. Am I crazy?"

"Not crazy. You just need to let the idea of Joseph go for the time being."

Della nodded. "I just...I feel like finding him is my responsibility. Like you'd feel if Jimi went missing when you were babysitting him."

"Joseph isn't a toddler, Della."

"I know. It doesn't make sense. It's just how I feel. Ever since the whole drug thing, I've felt like I had to keep an eye on him. It's not that I didn't trust him. I did."

"But you didn't trust the addict in him."

"Yes! Fuck, Lindy, that's exactly right. It was like I was on guard but I was guarding him against himself. Against that little part of him that might not be able to say no."

"Dell, you have no idea how sad that sounds."

"What? Why?"

"Because, sugar, it means you weren't living for you."

Della leaned back against the car door and shook her head. "That's not true. Would you say that I'm not living for myself when I'm taking care of Jimi?"

Belinda looked at the sleeping toddler in the back seat. "But you aren't taking care of him now, are you? You dragged him out here in the middle of the night."

"Don't you make me feel guilty about that! He's safe and you know it." said Della.

"So you're saying that driving down here was something you were doing just for you? This was the most fulfilling thing you could find to do on a day like today when cats were being gassed down at the pound?!" With that, Belinda unhooked her seat belt and flung herself out of the car. She didn't often let her temper show, but when she did, it caught people off guard.

Della turned and stared at the Shell station that was illuminated like a UFO on the other side of the street. The scene took her back to her school days when she and her friends would unexpectedly end up at odds. In those cases a bottle was usually to blame. In this one, there was no one to blame but herself. She'd asked for this dose of reality and now she had to find out if she could actually take her medicine.

Della got out of the Mini and walked across the parking lot to where Lindy stood. She stood behind her friend but didn't touch her. "Lindy, you're right. I'm sorry about how I am. I'm sorry I can't let him go. When I look at Jimi and imagine him growing up without a daddy, my insides hurt. When I think about

never talking to Joseph again..." She paused. She was doing it again—wallowing in her self pity.

In the early days of Kat Kit, she'd often sit in the car for ten or fifteen minutes after a particularly difficult shelter visit. She'd cry her eyes out for those poor kitties. They were so helpless in those stainless steel boxes, finding their only refuge in their own soiled litter boxes. It was like cat Auschwitz. It was in those moments that she'd learned how to be strong. She'd learned to accept the fact that she wouldn't be able to save all of them. Some would have to die in that awful animal prison. Some would have to die unloved on streets that showed them no mercy and no glimmer of the natural order that they belonged to. But to help, to truly make a difference, she'd learned to forgo her own indulgence in those sorrowful feelings. In their place, she put her resolve. By God, she might not be able to help them all, but she'd sure as hell help as many as she could. She'd learned to wear emotional armor like a triage nurse. Was that the answer now?

"Dell? You okay?" asked Belinda. She placed her hand gently on Della's shoulder, not sure whether the gesture would be accepted in the kindness with which it was offered.

Della hugged Belinda with all her might. When she released her, Belinda noticed that she'd stopped crying. "Lindy, let's go home. I can't do anything for Joseph or Milt down here. I'm sorry I dragged you all this way just to figure that out. Goddamn, this has been a day." Lindy hugged her tighter and this time Della didn't let herself slide into that embrace. No, it was time to stand on her own. As she pushed Lindy away, she saw a cop car roll into the lot ahead of her. The car stopped and the redneck cop of the year rolled down his window. He had a huge wad of tobacco in his mouth that made it difficult for him to enunciate certain syllables.

"I hear the Best Western's nice." He grinned as he swept his Q-beam across the two of them, letting it pause on their breasts.

Della folded her arms over her chest and stood her ground. "Shows what you know. We're both married."

"Didn't look that way from where I was sittin', honey," said the portly doofus. Della would later remember to her friends that she could smell the guy's crew cut from where she was standing. The scent almost made her retch.

"Your patch there on your shoulder says Highway Patrol, right?" asked Lindy, stepping forward.

"What about it, bitch?" he snarled.

"You're outside your jurisdiction, *officer*." She made the word sound like an insult. "My brother in law is Mike Myerson. That name ring a bell in that dim bulb brain of yours?"

The cop's face turned red in the glow from the Shell UFO. He sure as hell knew who Myerson was. Mike Myerson was the Colonel in charge of the Mississippi State Trooper program. The cop's limited intellect didn't even allow him a retort.

"I can see that you've finally figured out that you've picked on the wrong people this evening," she said, pausing to examine his name tag. "Dewey, if you have any sense at all, you'll apologize to the two of us and then you'll get as far away from here as you can, as quickly as you can. How's that sound?"

Dewey nodded without saying a word, and put his squad car in gear.

"Where's that apology? Spit out that chaw and get on with it."

Della was beaming with pride. She had no idea Belinda had it in her to do something like this.

The giant wad of gooey chewing tobacco tumbled out of Dewey's mouth and he was about to deliver a pathetic "sorry" when his radio suddenly broadcast an alert. "Seven Charlie, come in. Seven Charlie."

Dewey grabbed for his radio. "Seve..." his voice cracked and he cleared his throat. "Seven Charlie here, over."

"Code 12 at the pawn shop on highway 278. You're the closest responder. Local FD has been dispatched and needs support. Over."

"10-4. Seven Charlie responding. Out." The officer looked over at the women. "Sorry, ladies. We'll have to continue this another time."

Belinda mumbled, "Lord, I hope not," but Della wasn't paying attention to her.

"Code 12. That's a fire, right?" she asked.

"None of your goddamned business," said the cop. He hit the lights and siren, and peeled out of the parking lot.

Della's eyes lit up. "Come on, Lindy. Let's go!" She ran toward her car and Belinda followed.

"Dell? He's not going to come back. Not after..."

"No, we need to follow him!" she said as she started the car.

"Why would we want to do that?"

"Because, he's headed to a pawn shop. A town like this can't have more than one or two. It might be the one that Joseph and Milt stopped at."

"Are you thinking he's going to pawn his badge?"

Della smirked at her friend. "No. The pawn shop's on fire."

The clapboard house looked like it was coated in darkness itself. The moonlight danced across its surface creating constantly changing patterns that practically begged to be touched. Chrissie let go of Milt's legs and let her hand slide along one of the window sills. It gave her a chill. It was so smooth that she could barely feel it at all.

"Leave the house be, missy, and help me put this young man down. My picking up and carrying muscles work just fine but I ain't so sure about the lowering ones."

"Oh, sorry," said Chrissie. There was a large, oval rug in the middle of the front porch so she helped Jerry lay Milt on that. The rug had a strangely seductive texture just like the house. She ran her hands across it, soaking up its soft undulations.

Jerry pulled her to her feet. "Listen here, now. This is some serious business. I can't let you come in with me unless you keep a grip on yourself. That means you got to pull back and focus on your thoughts. Can you do that for me?"

At first, she was confused by his statement but it slowly became clear. Even as she stood there listening to him talk, she was drawn to the beautiful black drapes that billowed out of the open windows. Everything associated with the house was alluring. She wanted to push her face into all of the different materials and wallow in their luxury.

Jerry's words pierced her desire like an arrow. "Chrissie?"

She shook her head to clear the cobwebs and nodded. "Yes, sir," she mumbled, more to herself than to Jerry. "I don't think I should touch anything else."

The old black man huffed. "That's the first smart thing you've said all day."

She didn't notice the slight. She was too busy gazing inside the open windows. All of the rooms she could see had white walls and dark, hardwood floors, and all of them shone with a warm, amber light. The house was completely empty except for a few white, wooden chairs that held white, wooden doors open or sat next to white, wooden fireplaces. The cool air from within smelled familiar but Chrissie minded what Jerry had said and resisted the urge to inhale it deeply.

The front door was painted the same mesmerizing color as the rest of the house. There was a black doorknob too.

Instead of reaching for it, Jerry bent over and exhaled onto its surface, revealing an intricate texture. Jerry exhaled again and again, slowly working his way around the doorknob, making sure that the entire design was visible. Once finished, he grasped the ornate, black sphere and turned it.

Chrissie held her breath, expecting either something miraculous or something horrifying. All she got was an open doorway. "That's it?" she asked.

Jerry shook his head and said, "Threes sure can be hard to please." He stepped to one side and Chrissie saw that there were two women silhouetted in the doorway as if they'd been there all along. The one in front smiled past her long black locks and stepped out onto the porch. Her simple, black gown was covered in intricate, textural patterns that were similar to the ones on the rug. The woman was older than Chrissie by at least ten years and she held herself with a regal elegance. Not haughty. Just confident. In charge.

"Threes can be difficult. That's true," said the woman. She didn't look directly at either Chrissie or Milt.

Chrissie was about to introduce herself when Jerry stepped in and blocked her. "We could sure use your help with this young man, Hek. We need him." He reached back to squeeze Chrissie's hand.

Hek laughed. It sounded honest and that comforted Chrissie. "Maybe we do, Geryon."

"Not maybe," said Jerry.

"I do love an optimist," said Hek. She drifted toward Milt. Her beautiful, young friend remained a silhouette in the doorway, silent and still.

"Young man got caught in the key," said Jerry. "This girl here pulled him out."

For the first time, Hek looked at Chrissie. Really looked at her. Chrissie wanted to explain who she was and what had happened but Jerry had made his point. He obviously thought it best that she not speak. She waited quietly while Hek observed her like an ornithologist who'd found a species of woodpecker she'd never seen before. After a few moments, the woman moved closer and reached out to clasp Chrissie's fingers. She spoke softly. "Does it hurt?"

Chrissie matched Hek's gaze and shook her head slightly. Hek's hands were surprisingly rough, like a ballerina's

feet. When she released her, the younger woman felt as if the Christmas tree she'd been admiring had been unexpectedly unplugged. The world dulled a notch or two.

"You're a brave young woman," said Hek. "And strong." She turned to Jerry and said, "You have a way, Geryon." He beamed with pride as she turned her attentions back to Milt.

"What's his name?" she asked casually, as if she'd been handed a new puppy.

"Milton," said Chrissie, taking her cue from Jerry's insistence on calling Milt by that.

"She has a tongue after all," said the woman in the doorway. Her voice was the opposite of Hek's—coarse and gravelly.

"Nyx!" hissed Hek. The shadow in the doorway immediately withdrew. "Forgive her, Christine. She has much to learn." Chrissie wasn't surprised to hear her name spoken despite the fact that she hadn't shared it with the woman.

Hek knelt on the thick, black rug beside Milt's head. She exhaled her hot breath onto his face in much the same way that Jerry had addressed the door knob earlier. She leaned in close and observed his skin. Chrissie leaned in to look as well, but she couldn't see any changes to his complexion.

"He's not going to last until morning in his present state," said Hek. She looked up at Jerry. "Will you vouch for him?"

Jerry said, "Yeah. He's a pain in the ass. You'll see that soon enough if he comes to. But he's a good guy. He's the one with the connection to the host."

Chrissie raised her eyebrows at that, asking Jerry to elaborate.

"Joseph," said Jerry. "Milton's friend is the fulcrum on which both our worlds teeter."

"What? Jesus, Jerry, but you..."

"You will not curse in my house," said Hek with gentle power.

Chrissie thought back over what she'd said. She'd allowed herself to think, for just a moment, that these were normal people on a normal porch in a normal field. Nothing could have been further from the truth. She wouldn't forget it again. "I apologize. I didn't mean any disrespect."

The crackly tension faded from the air and Hek's soft smile returned. "Apology accepted." She stood and turned to

Jerry once again. "Do you officially vouch for this man, Geryon of the seventh and eighth?"

"I do, Hekate of the crossroads," said Jerry.

"Good. I look forward to the new day." With that, she fell to her knees and rubbed her face in Milt's belly. Then she pulled back and dropped her face to his belly again. Chrissie could hear her singing something in a language she didn't understand. The melody was beautiful, as was Hek's voice. Each time the woman pushed her face into Milt's stomach, her voice faded and disappeared, only to swell again when she rose to her kneeling position. After several minutes of this, Jerry pushed Chrissie to the edge of the steps without looking back at her. His eyes remained locked on Hek. The woman's tune was turning into a roar and Jerry whispered, "Close your eyes and keep them closed." Chrissie did as she was told, squatting with her face against her knees.

She felt a woosh of cold air, followed by a blast of heat and a total lack of sound. Then, just as suddenly as they'd been squelched, all of her senses returned. It was overwhelming. The sounds and smells pushed in on her as if she'd never had senses before. She smelled the smooth floor below her feet and she instantly knew where the wood had been harvested and what its entire existence had been like. She rose with a smile on her face, feeling a little bit drunk.

Jerry took her by the shoulders. "Alrighty, girl, it's time for us to go inside."

She looked around but Hek was nowhere to be seen. She looked out at the sky and saw that it was just a tiny bit lighter. The sun would be coming up soon! "Jerryyyyy!" she whined.

"No, ma'am. You couldn't handle it and I couldn't handle you. Let's find you a quiet place to lie down and sleep it off."

Chrissie let Jerry guide her inside to a day bed. Like the other sparse furnishings, it was painted white and was dressed with a beautiful, white quilt. Once Jerry got her tucked in he leaned over and kissed her forehead. "You done good," he whispered. She wanted to smile at him and ask him what the hell that meant but she couldn't. She was already asleep.

PWNED was completely engulfed in flames. Even the swampy area behind the pawn shop was burning. Della pulled off the road a good 500 feet from the flashing lights that sliced through the haze like little, red lighthouses. She could still feel the heat from inside the car. She'd seen house fires before but they'd been nothing like this.

Belinda had a sudden chill. "Dell, I think we ought to get out of here."

Della's phone chimed and she dug it out of her purse. Her face went pale in the light from its screen.

Belinda grabbed her arm. "What is it, hon?"

Della shook her head. "This is the right place. This is where Milt was headed."

"Maybe it's just a coincidence," said Belinda, hoping to convince herself as well as her friend.

"We can talk about it on our way back to Memphis." Della started the car and turned around. When she looked up into her rear view mirror, she saw nothing but flames. In those flames, however, she thought she saw a face. By the time she'd turned around to get a better look, it was gone.

"Della, what's going on?"

Della couldn't breathe. Her heart was beating a mile a minute and she couldn't catch her breath.

"Della?" Belinda shook her friend's arm. "Della, you're scaring me! What did you see?"

After forcing her panic down, Della said, "Joseph's face was in the fire." She said the words calmly, as if that would make them make sense. It didn't work.

"What?" asked Lindy. She didn't know what else to say.

Della didn't answer. Instead, she slammed the little car into gear and drove back the way they'd come as fast as those four wheels would take them. The Mini's speedometer was in the middle of the dash so Belinda didn't have to work hard to see that the needle was hovering near 90.

"Ease up, sugar beet. You're going to get us killed, and lord knows, Jim'll have a field day with that one!" Della was gripping the steering wheel like it was the last life preserver on the Titanic. "Slow down, okay?" said Belinda softly. Della took her foot off the gas pedal and the little car coasted to a stop in the middle of the highway. Della laid her head on the steering

wheel as Jimi began to cry. Belinda unbuckled him from his car seat and hoisted him up front to sit in her lap.

"Lindy, it was him! I swear to god, it was him!"

"It's okay. Tell me about it. You thought you saw Joseph?" Belinda spoke slowly like she was coaxing information out of a child.

"Uh-huh. In the fire."

"You sure your eyes weren't playing tricks on you?" Belinda wanted to be more diplomatic, but this wasn't the time.

"It was him, Lindy. He did something that only we share. Something private."

"Something that's been on your mind, sugar beet." Belinda let that hang out there on its own. No need to belabor the point.

"So you think I imagined it?"

"I don't know. You've been under a lot of stress lately and..."

Della interrupted her. "You think I'm crazy! I know goddamn well what I saw!"

Belinda had never seen Della like this, especially not in front of Jimi. She'd seen her speaking her mind on behalf of her cats at numerous council meetings, but those tirades were always tinged with the kindness that was at the core of everything Della was. She was firm but she always remained respectful.

"Dell. No. I don't think you're crazy." *At least I didn't before*, Lindy thought. "I just think that sometimes people see what they want to see."

Della's head dropped to the steering wheel again. When she raised it, she was calmer, but confused. "Huh? What?" she muttered. At first Belinda thought her friend was coming around but then a fresh wave of anger swept over Della's features. "Get the fuck out of my car, you stupid cunt!" she screamed. "RIGHT NOW! RIGHT MOTHERFUCKING NOW!" Della was losing it and Jimi was joining her, screaming at the top of his lungs. Her face was blood red and pulsating with rage.

All Belinda could think to do was to get away. She stripped off her seat belt and flung the door open, but Della had already punched the accelerator. The little car's tires squealed as Belinda was pinned back into her seat. She wanted to jump

out, thinking that she'd probably roll to safety in the weeds, but then what would happen to Jimi?

Della was screaming incoherently, "OUT! GET OOOOOOOUT!"

The little car was steadily accelerating. Della swerved toward the right side of the road and Belinda took her shot. She popped the door, curled her body around Jimi's, and rolled. She hit the grassy embankment and discovered there was mud underneath. It cushioned her fall but she couldn't stop sliding. She tumbled down the hill into the wet marsh below and finally came to a stop with Jimi in her arms.

She sat up in the muddy patch of weeds and listened as the Mini roared off down the highway. She felt numb. She wanted to cry but nothing came out. Had her best friend really just cussed her out and dumped her on the side of the road in the middle of the night? Really?

She eased Jimi away from her chest, fearful that he might be injured. At first, she was sure he was dead, but then his plump face popped up and he began to cry again. Belinda checked his little limbs, slowly testing for breaks and cuts. Once she'd determined that he wasn't hurt, she hugged him with all her might.

"Jimi, I'm so sorry, honey," she whispered as tears streamed down her face. Once she was all cried out, Jimi followed suit. He grabbed handfuls of mud while she pondered her next move. It was up to her to save the both of them, after all. She realized that her purse was still in Della's car. No cell phone meant that she and Jimi were on their own until someone found them. She got up and brushed off her bedazzled Roberto Cavalli jeans and made a sling for Jimi out of her jacket.

"Little man," she said to the ever-attentive Jimi, "we've got to get back up there to the road and I don't want any arguments, understand?" Jimi smiled at her and Belinda took that as a yes. She hauled both their asses up that muddy slope little by little. She kept thinking of that song from an old Christmas special. Something about putting one foot in front of the other. Who was learning to walk in that show? Was it Rudolph? It didn't matter. If claymation people could do it, so could she. She sang softly to herself as she slowly made her way up the slippery embankment.

When she reached the top, she fell forward onto the warm pavement. It felt like a victory but it was really just the first

leg of a much longer journey. She sat up and tried to decide which way to go. She wasn't certain but she thought that the pawn shop was closer than the Shell station. It also happened to be swarming with cops and firefighters at the moment, so she stripped off her Alexander Wang boots and began walking north.

As she walked, she caressed Jimi's head and played her conversation with Della over and over again in her head. Had she said the wrong thing? She had a knack for doing that sometimes, but she didn't think this was one of them. Della had simply flipped out.

The moon rose slowly into the sky and painted the roadside with its cool light as Jimi fell asleep in her arms. She was still thinking about Della when she heard a car on the road behind her. She turned to wave and the sedan slowed down. The vehicle rolled to a stop and Belinda could see that there was a single bubble-gum dome on top. Her heart soared! It was a police car!

The officer opened his door and got out. Belinda couldn't see him in the glare from the headlights, but she heard his stiff shoes on the road. She held a hand up to shield her eyes and she thought she saw the flat brim of a trooper's hat.

"Hello, officer. I've been stranded out here with...um...my child, and we could sure use some help." She tried to smile but it looked more like a grimace.

The man stepped forward and said, "Well, ma'am, I'm glad to be of help. I'm Officer LaVant, but you can call me Jerry."

The cell phone on the bedside table rang and Sheriff Bill Woolworth squinted so he could make out the numbers on the digital clock. It was a quarter of six. He'd gotten a whole four hours of sleep after assisting at the scene of a structure fire up near Oxford. He rolled over and grabbed the phone. "Woolworth."

"Sheriff, it's Michael Travis. You know, at the station? You said me and Darrin were to mind the kettle, so to speak, so I stayed the night here while you were up at..."

"Travis, you just woke me up. Now, you either get to the point pronto or you're going to need to start polishing up that resume, you hear?"

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry, Sheriff. I just haven't dealt with nothing like this before."

Bill could tell that the rookie was genuinely scared, and it wasn't because he'd just had to wake up his boss. "Just tell me what's going on, son." Bill sat up in bed, now wide awake. There was a groan from the other side of the bed and he reached over to pet his old mutt, Lucy.

"I got a call from Mrs. Jenkins. You know, Trolly's mom?"

"I know her."

"Well, her circle at the church delivers meals for shut-ins. Says she starts down at the south end of town and works her way north. Today was her day to deliver breakfasts and she started with the Coopers. They're early risers because of their days as farmers. Kind of a habit they can't break says..."

"Travis, there better be a point to this real fucking soon."

"Yes, sir. Sorry. Well, Mrs. Jenkins showed up at the Coopers but they weren't there."

Bill rubbed his scruffy face. "Could be down visiting the grand kids. They don't have to stay put 24-7-365."

"That's what Mrs. Jenkins thought too, but she had a weird feeling about it. She poked around and found the back door standing wide open. Stuff was scattered all around the kitchen like there'd been a fight." Bill got up and grabbed his pants. "But that ain't the worst part, Sheriff. She ran next door to the Meyerson's place and their backdoor was standing open too. She went in and..."

Bill waited a moment but his deputy-in-training remained silent. "Travis?"

"I'm here, Sheriff. Sorry." He'd studied criminology at Ole Miss, hoping to one day make it to law school. He was bright but not articulate enough to win a scholarship. That was why he'd taken this job. First-hand experience had seemed like a good idea until today.

"Tell me, son." Bill was strapping on his gun belt and scrounging through the cupboard looking for something to wolf down in place of his usual breakfast of toast and egg whites.

"Sir, she found stacks of bodies. She says a hundred but that can't be right, can it? They were people from the neighborhood—people she said she recognized. A big old dog was in there so she shooed him away, then she went outside and threw up. Says it stinks like the dickens. The house, not the throw-up." He paused to take a deep breath before asking the one question that was foremost on his mind. "Sheriff, you don't need me to go over there, do you?"

The Pop Tarts Bill had found went right back into their box. No need to eat when a bloody crime scene was out there waiting for you. "Son, I need you right where you are. Call Butch and have him meet me at the scene. I'll call Dr. Mayes. Don't mention this to anybody else. No one. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'll be out to the Meyerson place directly. If anybody wants to know why, you tell them to go fuck themselves."

Travis muttered something about not thinking he could do that and he clicked off the line. Bill chuckled. He needed that tiny bit of humor in the face of such serious shit. His was a laid-back county. Mass murders might happen up in Memphis or over in Little Rock but they didn't happen there, at least not since the days of the real KKK. Yeah, there were still some good old boys who said they were white supremacists, but they were mostly dumbasses who didn't know when to shut the fuck up. Bill understood prejudice. It was best kept under wraps. Everyone harbored some form of prejudice, didn't they? He sure as hell did. That's why he hadn't added a single black man to his police force. He wouldn't, either, until the government made him do it. It just made for a smoother running operation. That didn't make him a bad person, did it? He didn't necessarily think white folks were better than colored. Not necessarily. Hell, he kept

getting re-elected, didn't he? Only seventeen percent of the county was white so the black folks must have thought he was doing something right.

He refilled Lucy's food and water bowls. "If I'm not back before dark, let Mrs. Watkins know about it, okay girl?" he said to the dog. His neighbor loved Lucy and brought her treats all the time. He suspected that she let her into her house when he wasn't around but he hadn't caught her doing it yet. Lucy was all the family he had left so he tended to be overprotective.

Bill's wife, Sharon, had died of breast cancer three and half years back and they'd never had children. Sharon had said it was God's will. She'd said the same thing when the chemotherapy and multiple surgeries didn't fix her titty problem. God bless her. She sure was one to walk the walk. That was one of the hundreds of things he'd loved about her. She'd picked Lucy out at the local pound. Said she had sad eyes like Bill's. Bill didn't think his eyes were sad at all, but he'd have given his left nut if it would've made his wife happy. Adopting the puppy she took a liking to was a no-brainer. They'd treated that dog like it was their kid, and in a way she was. Bill had tried to bring Lucy into the hospital room when Sharon was near the end up in Memphis. The doctor didn't like the idea but he eventually caved when Bill showed up in uniform, sporting his sidearm. That dog had rested by her side right up until the bitter end and Bill was damned and determined to do the same thing for Lucy when her time came.

His phone rang again and he realized he'd drifted off down memory lane. Had to watch that. Another election was coming up.

"Woolworth."

"Sheriff, it's Butch. I'm down at the Meyerson's. It's a fucking situation we got here."

Bill patted Lucy and left the back door open for her to come and go as she pleased. Nobody was going to bother breaking into the sheriff's house. Besides, it looked like rain. Maybe those summer popcorn showers would be getting an early start this year. He was in the car before he answered his under sheriff.

"What's all the fuss about? Is somebody actually dead? Travis said the Jenkins woman found bodies. Plural. That so?"

"That ain't the half of it, Bill. We got what looks to be twenty or thirty bodies in the house. Some of them's in little pieces so it's hard to get an accurate count."

Sheriff Woolworth hit the siren and tore ass out of his driveway. All he could think about was the son of a bitch who'd killed that tug crew. That man, and it most certainly was a man, was now in his county doing harm to registered voters. This, he would not stand for.

"Butch, as far as you know has anybody talked up the tugboat thing? Anybody at all. Maybe somebody down on the docks?"

The radio crackled. The under sheriff's response was direct. "No way. If they had, we'd have a mess of reporters in town by now. Ain't nobody said nothing, Bill."

"Alright. I'll be there in five minutes. Do not touch a thing, you hear me, Butch?"

"Yes, sir. I'll leave well enough alone."

True to his word, it took Bill five minutes to get to the scene. Strangely, no one was out on the street except for his deputies. Not a single dog walker or jogger had stopped to see what the hubbub was about. His men hadn't even bothered with crime scene tape.

He parked on the street with the rest of the police cars so as not to drive over any tire marks that might've been left in the dirt driveway. Once out of the car, he stood at the boundary between the street and the yard and took in the surroundings. It was still early and most of the neighbors' cars were parked in their carports and driveways. So why weren't they at least peeking out their windows? It was downright weird.

Butch Regan saw Bill and carefully made his way across the front yard. "Sheriff," he said with a nod.

Bill nodded in return and waved his hand forward to tell his undersheriff to lead on. The younger man remained silent as he walked his boss through the carport to the back door of the house. There was a red white and blue basketball resting on the hood of the Meyerson's late model Prius. It struck Bill as odd, but he forgot about it once he was inside the house.

The smell of rancid blood and human shit hit him the second he opened the door. He'd have preferred a wet rag but since there were none to be had, he covered his face with his

shirt sleeve and went inside. It was dark so he looked for a light switch.

Butch shook his head. "Power's out. Don't know if it's just a breaker or..."

"Then go out to the utility room and check it out. We got to have some light in here."

Butch gladly hustled over to the utility closet, leaving Bill alone in the darkness. One wall had a big picture window whose lacy curtains were spattered with red dots. Just as he was walking over to examine them, every light in the house came on all at once, exposing a nightmarish scene. Everything in sight was coated in a dark red patina. Then, just as suddenly as they'd come on, the lights flashed off, accompanied by a blast of sparks from one of the overhead fixtures. They blinked on one more time and the sheriff got a second glimpse of the carnage before they went out for good. Bodies were stacked chest high along every wall. He immediately hightailed it outside for some fresh air. It was extremely bad form to vomit on a crime scene.

"Lights won't stay on," said Butch.

"I figured," said Bill, his voice heavy and thick.

"You seen it, though?"

"Yeah. I saw enough. Mrs. Jenkins still here?"

"Yes, sir. There's a picnic table on the patio out back. She's there now, weeping up a storm. Don't figure she ever saw nothing like this before."

Bill shook his head and clapped the younger man on the shoulder. "Son, ain't nobody ever seen shit like this before. You got your camera in the car?"

"Yes, sir," said Butch, wondering if the batteries were charged.

"Then go in and get some pictures. Just don't walk any further into that mess than we already have." He looked down at his shoes and saw that the soles were coated in what he presumed to be blood. He wiped them on the fluffy, yellow, door mat before walking around to the back of the house.

Faye Jenkins was just where Butch had said she'd be. The large, African-American woman had been attractive back when Bill had first noticed her in high school. She was still a looker in the eyes of her husband despite her weight gain of recent years. They never stirred up any trouble and they always voted democrat, so they were good folks in Bill's eyes.

"Hey there, Faye," he said as casually as he could. How, exactly, were you supposed to act around someone who'd just found a house full of dead bodies?

"Bill! Thank the lord," said Faye. She stood up to give the sheriff a hug. He accepted it and even hugged her back, but he looked around to see who was watching when he did it.

"Any idea about what happened here?" he asked.

Faye sat back down on the redwood bench and wiped her bloodshot eyes. "No, sir. Just found it like it is now." She took a deep breath and blew it out, hard.

Bill looked to the driveway and saw Faye's car parked there. "I take it there weren't any other cars here when you arrived?"

"No, sir. Just that electric thing." The Prius. The whole town had made fun of the little car when the Meyersons had brought it home from the dealer down in Greenville. Most of them were just jealous.

Bill saw Dr. Mayes walking up the property line toward him, so he cut the questioning short. It was clear enough to him that Faye wasn't involved in what had happened there. "Faye, is Dickie at home?"

"Yeah, he's there. Probably asleep."

"I'd like to ask you some more questions, but it can wait until after you've had time to pull yourself together."

Faye looked up at the sheriff with grateful eyes. She knew he wasn't really a good man, but he was better than most of the white folks she'd known over the years. At least he pretended to care for her well being. "Okay, sheriff."

"Maybe you and Dickie can go down to the diner and get some breakfast."

She nodded and very nearly smiled. "That's a nice idea and all, Sheriff, but I don't think I'll be eating anytime soon." With that statement, her face suddenly lit up. "Oh, shit! The meals!"

Bill patted her thick shoulder. "I don't think the Meyerson's will be needing them. Why don't you take them home."

"No, sir. That wouldn't be right, but I appreciate the sentiment."

"Alright, then. How about I have one of my boys drive you home?"

"I'm okay, sheriff. Really. I just need some time to myself."

"That's fine, Faye. I just need to ask one little favor." She looked up at him like a racehorse at the starting gate. "I need to stay hush-hush about all of this for now. We don't want to tip off the killer. As far as he knows, you were never here, and we want to keep it that way."

"Whatever you say, sheriff. I don't know if I could explain what I saw anyhow."

"Good. I'll be in touch."

Faye nodded and scooted off to her car. Dr. Hayes passed her on his way to find Bill. "She the one?" he asked as he approached the picnic table.

"Yep." He looked at his watch. "I figure we got about an hour before we start getting inundated with reporters from up the road a piece. Did you bring some help?"

"Roscoe and his boy are on their way. How many would you say there are?"

"I didn't get a good look. The electricity's out."

"A guess?"

Bill didn't like guessing but he knew what the doctor was after. "Twenty. Thirty at the most."

"Jesus H. Christmas. Where the hell did all those folks come from?"

It was then that Bill realized why none of the neighbors had been poking their noses into his crime scene. They were already there.

Chrissie woke up and rolled over to look out the window. At first, she didn't know where she was, but then she remembered the fantastic scene from the night before. Her head hurt so bad that she wondered if she'd been drugged. The thought made her angry and her anger propelled her up and out of the daybed. She ran her hands through her hair and looked around for a mirror but there was none. The white room was sparsely furnished, containing only a fireplace with an ornate mantle, an empty quilt stand, and the daybed from which she'd just risen.

Waking up in a strange house was a new experience for Chrissie. She didn't date much and she'd hardly ever slept with any of the guys she had dated. She wasn't sure how to behave. At first, she thought that climbing out the window was the way to go, but then what? She was in the middle of nowhere and those goth women would be able to see her crossing that field from a mile away.

She reached into her pocket and pulled out her phone. Dead battery. She put it back in her pocket and strode over to the door, half expecting to find it locked. The knob turned easily and the door glided toward her. The adjoining room was just as bare as the bedroom she'd been in. The only furniture was a white, wooden chair that sat beside a window that opened onto the porch. She walked over and poked her head outside. No one was out there either. *Maybe they'd all returned to their coffins before daybreak*, she thought with a smile.

She moved cautiously toward the closed door that led to the east end of the house. It was a swinging door like the ones diners always seemed to have on their kitchens. She paused and pressed her ear to the dark wooden surface. Nothing. She finally convinced herself that she had nothing to fear and she pushed her way through.

The kitchen took up the entire east end of the house and had windows on three sides. In the middle was an island with a rough-hewn, wooden counter and to the left was a gigantic, stone fireplace. All along the far wall was a long, wooden table at the head of which sat Hek. She saw Chrissie and smiled at her.

"Morning," said Chrissie, trying not to look as surprised as she felt.

"Good morning. Would you like something to eat?"

She was starving but Chrissie has been raised right. "No, ma'am. I don't want to be any trouble."

Hek smiled again. "It's no trouble. I'll have Dexter whip you up something." She'd only just mentioned it when an older, black man, who Chrissie presumed to be Dexter, appeared in the doorway. "He's paying penance so the additional service will do him good. Won't it, Dexter?"

"Yes," said the former proprietor of PWNED. "It's my pleasure, Miss..."

"You will address her as Christine," said Hek and Chrissie felt her anger surge unexpectedly.

"Chrissie will do just fine, thank you."

"Do you not like your name, Christine? I find it to be..."

"It's Chrissie, alright?"

There was a palpable static charge in the air for a few moments as Hek reined in her emotions. It had been a long time since anyone had spoken to her like that. "Very well," she said softly. "Forgive me. I don't fully understand your ways."

Chrissie was surprised to see real regret in her host's eyes. "It's okay. Really. I just don't much like being called that. It brings up bad memories is all."

Hek brandished a closed-mouth smile this time. "I've become complacent. Inflexible. I need to better understand you and your world." Dexter clanked a pan on the stove as if on cue.

Chrissie shot a glance over her shoulder at Dexter then back to Hek. "My *world*? Don't tell me you're fucking aliens!"

The curse word clearly bothered Hek but she regained her composure quickly. "You certainly have a brash way of expressing yourself." Chrissie stood up and slid her chair away from the table, ready to make a run for it. Hek held up her hands in supplication. "I am not from another planet. I promise that I began my life on this Earth in exactly the same way that you did. Now, please...take your seat."

With that, Dexter reached around Chrissie and served up a huge plate loaded with eggs and pancakes and grits. The smell was heavenly and it teased a long growl out of Chrissie's empty stomach.

"Please. Enjoy your breakfast. While you eat, I'll do my best to explain who we are. If, after you finish your meal, you still wish to leave, I'll have Geryon drive you back to Oxford."

Chrissie slowly sat down at the table. "What about him?" she asked, nodding at Dexter. "I thought slavery was a thing of the past."

"Not so long gone from my perspective, but you have the incorrect impression. Dexter isn't a slave. He's my dog."

Chrissie choked on the first bite of the most delicious omelette she'd ever tasted. She coughed and reached for the glass of orange juice that Dexter immediately provided. "Are you fucking kidding me?" she asked.

Hek's countenance darkened and there was another chill in the air. Dexter cleared his throat and leaned over to Chrissie. "You should apologize to the mistress. You've broken words at her table while enjoying her hospitality. This is not allowed."

"I'm sorry," said Chrissie. "I just talk like that sometimes. Nothing personal."

Hek's face warmed as quickly as it had iced over. "All is forgiven. Just give me your word that you'll watch that forked tongue in my house."

Chrissie nodded, not sure whether to be more upset that she was dining with weirdo alien vampires or that she'd just made one of them crazy mad by using an everyday curse word.

"Words have power here," said Hek. "You'll soon learn that for yourself."

"Where is here?" asked Chrissie between mouthfuls.

"This is my house. It has no other name."

"No, but there's something different about it. You can't tell me that this house was built out in the middle of this field."

"May I explain in my own way? I think it will be less upsetting." Hek smiled.

"Okay," said Chrissie, thinking that she was already upset enough for one day.

"Dexter owes penance due to a terrible mistake he made. As such, he holds the position of dog until I say otherwise. It's a humane punishment. I'm sure he prefers it over the alternatives of the past. Isn't that true, Dexter?"

"Quite right."

"Where your people torture, murder, and isolate the wrongdoers in your society, we try to help others see their way to

enlightenment through the gift of service. Giving of oneself is the greatest act of charity, is it not?"

"I guess so," said Chrissie.

"Dexter here will give of himself, sacrificing his personal needs until he decides his debt is paid. Then there will be no grudge between us and we will continue in harmony."

"That's great and everything," said Chrissie, "but what if a person doesn't think they were wrong? Or what if they don't give a...what if they don't care that you think they did something wrong?"

Hek leaned forward ever so slightly and pressed her palms onto the dark, wooden tabletop. "Then we return to the old ways. Fire and brimstone and all of that nonsense. It's cruel but I daresay it's effective. The only problem with the old ways is that the punished very rarely emerge intact." She dismissed Dexter with the wave of a hand and he skittered out through the swinging door. "Why are you so interested in Dexter's punishment?"

"I don't know."

"You may speak your mind here."

"Okay. I think it's awful for a white person to treat a black person like that. Like how his grandfather or great grandfather was treated by the assho... the jerks who used to run the farms in this part of the country." She wiped her mouth and placed her linen napkin on the table.

"But it would be acceptable if he were white?"

"No, but it wouldn't be so cruel."

Hek sighed. "What if I told you that Dexter has spent most of his life defending the white Threes?"

"I don't understand."

"If you'll allow me to, I'll strive to make it as clear as I can. It will be difficult for you to understand. You may choose not to believe me, but I ask that you not interrupt me again unless you seek clarification."

Chrissie nodded and Hek poured herself a steaming cup of tea from the dark silver pot that sat in the middle of the table. "Oh, where have my manners gotten off to? Would you care for a cup of tea?" she asked.

"No. Thank you. I'm full as a tick," said Chrissie, pushing her empty plate away.

"Then we will begin. How many dimensions are there?"

"What?" Chrissie looked around, half expecting to be on some hidden camera Dateline exposé. This was getting weirder by the minute.

"In your experience of the world, how many dimensions are there?"

Chrissie thought it was a trick question but she answered anyway. "Three, I guess."

"You guess?"

"X, Y, Z and time, if I remember my high school physics. Oh, that's four, isn't it?"

Hek smiled in spite of herself. This girl might be inexperienced but she wasn't stupid. "Time doesn't count. It's non-linear."

Chrissie laughed. "Try telling that to my boss." When Hek sipped her tea, Chrissie took the opportunity to discreetly glance down at her watch. She was relieved to see that the second hand was still circling the dial.

"So, can we settle on there being three spatial dimensions in your experience?"

Chrissie felt like she was being railroaded but she agreed anyway. "Okay. Three dimensions."

"If that's the case, then where we are now could be defined as a fourth dimension." Hek paused, waiting for more objections.

"Yeah, and the 5th Dimension had a pretty good song with that whole Age of Aquarius thing," said Chrissie with a straight face.

It was Hek's turn to be confused. "I don't know what that means, except for the obvious reference to the water carrier."

"I'm sorry," said Chrissie. "I agreed not to interrupt. Please continue."

Hek was obviously perturbed by the fact that Chrissie knew something that she didn't. She wanted to pursue it but she reconsidered and continued on her original line of questioning. "What do you imagine the fourth dimension to look like?" she asked.

Without even the hint of a smile, Chrissie answered, "A lot like this place."

Hek let her tea cup clank against the saucer. "I thought you were going to keep an open mind."

"My mind is open. It's just that you're talking crazy."

"It's the truth, Christine. There are many dimensions. You exist in three. We occupy an additional fourth. There are those who exist in many others as well." She paused to consider another tactic. "Are you well-versed in the sciences?"

"I did okay in science class if that's what you mean."

Hek smiled. "Then you understand. Some say there are four dimensions. Others say there are an infinite number. String theory is dependent on the existence of at least ten. Possibly more, depending on which version you're a proponent of."

Chrissie swung her palm over her head and made a whooshing sound.

"What does that mean?" asked Hek, now openly frustrated.

"It means that your words went right over my head like a low-flying airplane."

Hek considered the image and laughed loudly.

"Okay, it's not that funny. It's not funny at all, come to think of it," said Chrissie.

Hek wiped her eyes and tried her own version of the whooshing gesture. Chrissie thought she had the basics down alright but it lacked finesse. "Yeah, that's it. Over my head. No comprende. W. T. F."

"What does that mean? Dubya-tee-eff."

Now she'd done it. Hek hated curse words and Chrissie had all but used another one. "Nothing. Just someone's initials."

Hek shrugged. "Very well. Your delightful gesture is telling me that you don't know much about cosmology or theoretical physics. Is that correct?"

"Correctamundo," said Chrissie.

"Alright. Then let me explain another way. I experience life in four dimensions. That means..." A knock on the swinging door interrupted her. "Yes?!"

Dexter sheepishly poked his head into the room. "You asked to be informed when the young man awakened."

"Can he speak?" asked Hek. Chrissie thought it was a hell of a question.

"Yes. He asked for her," he added, pointing at Chrissie.

"Very well," said Hek. "We can continue this later. I want you to consider my words, Chrissie. Please. It's difficult to understand if you've not experienced it."

Chrissie wasn't really listening. "Was he talking about Milt? Can I see him?"

Hek sighed heavily. This wasn't going to be easy.

The Mini Cooper's gas gauge indicated that Della wouldn't be driving much further without a fill up. She didn't notice. Her mind had receded into a quiet place deep inside. She hid there as the thing that had been manipulating Joseph reached out and worked her body like a marionette.

It was difficult for the Thing to split its focus between Joseph and Della, so it had put Joseph to bed. It had found a good hiding spot across the street from the killing house and it had parked his mangy body there. It considered killing him instead, but it had decided that it could only do that after it had inflicted as much suffering as he could endure. It grinned at the thought and Della's face grinned too.

As they got closer to Rosedale and the killing house, the Thing got stronger. It began toying with Della to pass the time. It would allow Della to reconnect with her body for a few moments—long enough for her to think that she'd be able to break free—then it would clamp back down and scare her to the depths of her soul. The drive was an awful lot of fun.

The Thing made Della pull into an open garage a couple of blocks away from the crawlspace where Joseph lay sleeping. The owners of the house wouldn't report them because the Thing had killed them the night before. Della fell out of the car leaving the keys in the ignition. The warning chime ding ding dinged as she stumbled off toward Joseph's location.

Joseph woke up suddenly. He smelled something. Was it her? Was the Della Voice finally returning to him? He hoped so. There was so little of himself left untouched by the voice. All that remained was a single, warm place deep in his heart. The voice didn't know about that place and its Caretaker because Joseph had all but forgotten them himself.

He stared out through one of the wrought iron grates that allowed the underbelly of the house to breathe, and watched as the local law enforcement went about the grisly task of gathering clues in the killing house. That's what the Della Voice called it. When they'd first arrived, she'd made him clear the house, after which she'd guided him to the home of each victim. She'd made him bring them back to the killing house, one by one. None of them had lasted very long. He'd done as he was told, alternating the bodies as he'd stacked them. Head to toe. Toe to head.

He was jolted out of his memories by a sound! "I have something for you, dear heart." She was back! Joseph was eager to greet her but he'd learned not to speak out loud without explicit permission. She felt his need and she almost granted his wish, but then she changed her mind so as to satisfy her own deep-seated cruelty. Only after his suffering became boring did she allow him to speak.

"I'm glad you're back," he mumbled pathetically.

The Della Voice ignored his words. "Come outside," she said. He did as he was told and he found Della standing there in front of him. The real Della!

For a brief moment, the voice let Della back into her own head. "Joseph?! Oh my god, JOSEPH?!" She ran up to her husband, eager to embrace him. Joseph urged her to hide with him under the house and the voice took control of her once again. The Thing reached inside Della's heart and clamped down on her last bastion of warmth and light. Della screamed silently and was finally silenced. Her face stopped moving and the Thing made her lie down beside Joseph in the musty dirt under the house. Joseph didn't notice any change. He was just happy that Della was there with him.

He watched through the grate as one of the deputies ran across the killing house's yard to vomit in the shrubs. The Caretaker pushed him to be curious about the man. The Caretaker had to work around the edges of the problem instead of tackling it head on. If Joseph was made too aware too quickly, the voice would catch on and shut the door on him completely. The Caretaker was tending a weak flame and he knew that he couldn't allow the Della Voice to find it.

The vomiting deputy went to his squad car and retrieved a hand towel. He wiped his face and chewed a peppermint candy that had been in the car's center console since last Christmas. How did Joseph know that? Something about the thought of Christmas acted as a key, opening the man's mind to him. Without warning, Joseph suddenly experienced all of the man's thoughts. He could taste the spicy sweetness of the candy and feel the uncomfortable surges in the man's intestines. Then he saw the killing house as the deputy saw it. It was a genuine house of horrors! *Whoever did that was some kind of sick fuck*, thought the deputy. He called someone a perp and swore that he'd kill him if given half a chance. The man was

frightened out of his wits and the person he was most frightened of was Joseph!

A cold hand grabbed Joseph's shoulder and pulled him away from the grate. It was Della. For a split second, Joseph saw her face as it really was—vacant—but then her countenance transformed into the face he'd fallen in love with. "Stay down, honey," said the voice. Della's lips didn't move. "We'll wait until dark and then we'll continue our work. We won't have long, so you'll need to work faster next time."

Joseph nodded. He needed to...

"Speak," said the voice.

Joseph wanted to ask if she was really his Della, but he didn't. The Caretaker urged him to keep those thoughts to himself. Instead, he introduced a genuine concern for their safety. "There are so many police out there," said Joseph.

"Are you worried that we'll get caught, dear heart?" Della's face twitched. Her mouth slowly twisted into a gruesome semblance of a smile.

Joseph heard a noise outside so he turned back to the grate. A large white woman wanted to go into the killing house but the peppermint-chomping deputy was holding her back. The deputy unsnapped his holster and told the woman to back off. The crime scene had made him more than a little bit jumpy. If the large woman had noticed, she might have done as she was told, but she wasn't the type to notice anything unless it was covered in nacho cheese. She pressed in closer, taking the deputy's space with her large head and even larger hairdo. She waved that pile of hair toward the man while she screeched something about her missing niece. Her belligerent words echoed around the neighborhood, informing the empty houses of the woman's plight.

"Miss Shaughnessy, I'm going to tell you one last time to step back. Do you understand me?" asked the deputy. His bile was rising rapidly.

"Oh, I fucking well do NOT understand why I can't go in that there house and see if my baby's inside! She's like a goddamn daughter to me! You know that, Ed!"

What Deputy Ed truly knew was that he needed backup. After he looked around and confirmed that he was the only officer on the scene, he did the only thing he could think to do. He drew his weapon and shot that loud mouth bitch right in her pie hole. Her cantankerous expression remained chiseled into

her face as she fell backwards, spilling the contents of her skull into the gutter. Ed looked around and his anger became pain. He knelt over the body and cried as Joseph realized that he could no longer access the man's thoughts.

Della slid closer and whispered, "Go to him."

Joseph looked at her and saw the smiling, generous face he remembered. It was the one from their wedding pictures. He smiled back and kissed her on the lips, then he made his way outside. He stood upright and stretched to loosen up his sore muscles. Turns out that killing a whole neighborhood full of people in one night was a hell of a workout. He strode toward the street and saw that the deputy was now seated beside the woman he'd just killed. When he got a little closer, he could hear what Deputy Ed was mumbling.

"I'm sorry, Miss Shaughnessy. Really, I am. I don't know what came over me. Oh, God! God, please help me! Please!"

Joseph laid his hands on Ed's shoulders and felt the man's muscles tense under his palms. He was inside the deputy's head again. The man was scared. He was thinking about his fiancé and about how he was going to go to jail and get cornholed every day because he'd been a cop on the outside. Joseph didn't know what corn had to do with anything but the man's terror was palpable.

"Ease his pain," whispered the Della Voice.

Joseph nodded and reached into Ed's mind to pluck the fruits that Della directed him to take. He hid those away and Ed's torrent of desperate thoughts was reduced to a trickle.

"Bring him to me, dear heart," said Della.

Joseph helped Ed up and guided him across the street to the crawlspace, leaving Miss Shaughnessy to rot in the gutter.

Milt was sitting on the side of a large bed, rubbing his temples with his fingertips when Hek and Chrissie came in.

"Hey," said Chrissie as casually as she could. Part of her wanted to run over and hug him but another part—the more reasonable part—thought better of it.

"Hey, yourself," said Milt softly.

"Do you remember what happened?"

Milt sighed and looked out the large picture window at the overcast sky. "I remember walking across that cemetery with old numb nuts. He still around?"

Chrissie nodded. "Jerry? Yeah, he's here."

"Great."

"It wasn't his fault, Milt. I mean, he saved us at that pawn shop and drove us down here, but..."

"The pawn shop is gone," said Hek. She eased herself into a white wicker chair just inside the doorway.

"What's that supposed to mean?" asked Chrissie.

"We were attempting to salvage Dexter's work there when we were interrupted. The building and all of its contents have been destroyed. The only remnant is the vessel currently being carried by your friend, Joseph." Hek sat perfectly still and waited for the inevitable outburst from the Threes.

"Vessel? You mean that guitar, don't you?" asked Milt.

Milt was more perceptive than Hek had expected. *Good*, she thought. *We can use that.* "What do you know of that guitar?"

"Not a whole lot. Joseph bought it at that pawn shop. The guy who ran it was a little strange."

"Thanks," said Dexter from the open doorway.

Milt stood up and pointed. "That's him! That motherfucker's the one who started this whole shit storm!"

Hek tensed up. Why did so many of the Threes insist on speaking in this foul manner? Chrissie eased him back down and sat on the bed beside him. They both looked expectantly at Hek.

Hek considered her words carefully. She found communicating with the Threes most difficult. "What your friend has acquired, along with that guitar, is a spiritual debt. Both of you are here because we need your help to rein it back in."

Milt looked like he'd just smelled some bad milk. "Hold on a second, sister. Back that horse up a bit. Can we start with how I got here?"

"Jerry and I brought you here," said Chrissie. "We had to drag you because you were paralyzed. Hek saved your life."

"How the hell did I end up paralyzed?"

Hek was about to answer when Jerry came in and beat her to it. "You got paralyzed, young man, because you didn't follow my instructions!"

He'd barely gotten the words out of his mouth when another person appeared in the doorway.

"Belinda?" said Milt.

Belinda forced a smile, just like her Mama had taught her, but she obviously didn't feel like smiling. "Hey there, Milt," she said. She was cradling a sleeping boy in her arms.

Hek stood and commanded the attention of everyone in the room. "I am Hekate," she said to Belinda. "Welcome to my home." She'd hoped to involve Joseph's friend in the battle. Now, instead of a single Three, there were four of them. She was slightly annoyed by their presence, but she hid that annoyance because she knew how much she needed their help.

"Thank you," said Belinda. "It's lovely." She looked around at the empty rooms and thought about how she would have decorated every corner of that place to the Nth degree.

Hek motioned for Dexter to come to her. "Would you please prepare a meal for everyone?"

Dexter nodded and scooted off towards the kitchen. Milt got up and gave Belinda a hug and the woman he'd only known as Della's friend hugged him back. "It's good to see a familiar face," she said.

"Hold up," said Milt, pushing her back to arm's length so he could get a good look at her. "If you're here with Jimi, where's Della?"

The name drew Hek's attention but she said nothing. She preferred to wait to see what was revealed by the newcomer.

"I think that should wait until after we've eaten," said Belinda with a nod toward Hek.

These Threes aren't all dumb, thought Hek as Dexter's cooking turned the house into a maelstrom of delicious scents.

After all of the food had been eaten, Hek gently tapped her spoon on her empty teacup. "It's been a long time since this house has felt so warm. Don't you think so, Geryon?"

"You're right," said the cop, now dressed in what looked like a black kimono. "I forgot what it was like to break bread like this. Feels like family." He waved at Jimi and the boy flashed him a smile.

"Yes, it does," said Hek. "Even Nyx has joined us." She glanced over at the corner where the beautiful young girl was curled up in an upholstered nook in the wall. Her eyes flashed when everyone looked in her direction but she remained silent.

Hek waved Dexter over and offered him her seat. "We are a family," she said as she stood and poured the cook a cup of coffee. "Sometimes we forget that and it is during such times that we make mistakes." She looked at Dexter and smiled. "We mustn't forget again." She caressed Dexter's graying hair and sighed as she looked over the group that was assembled there. She called the roll in her mind as she looked at each one. *Geryon, Dexter, Nyx, Milton, Christine, and the newcomers, Belinda and the child. Four Threes and four Fours. It must be an omen.* For the first time since her ordeal had started, Hek felt confident that it would all work out for the best.

Milt was the first to break the silence. "You were going to explain how I got here, if I remember correctly."

"Yes, of course, Milton. Geryon was leading you through the key and you strayed from the path. The key trapped you between dimensional planes and you were brought here to be massaged across into our world."

Milt laughed. "Oh, now I understand completely."

Hek smiled. These people weren't stupid—they just lacked a layer of perception that she'd come to take for granted. She'd tried explaining it to Chrissie but that hadn't gone well. "I'll show you," she said with a mischievous smile. With the wave of a hand, she transformed into a cacophony of light and dark shapes that whistled and wailed like a banshee convention. The Threes all covered their ears and leapt to their feet while the others simply sat and stared. Then, just as suddenly as she'd started the light show, she became the beautiful Hek again.

The Threes remained on their feet, shell shocked. "Now you've experienced what you could of the part of me that exists in the fourth dimension. At least, that's what we call it. It could just as well be the tenth or twelfth dimension."

Chrissie slowly sat back down despite Milt's attempts to stop her. "I don't think they'd have saved you just to hurt you now, Milt." She turned her attention back to Hek as Belinda sat down and propped Jimi up on her lap. No one noticed that the child hadn't been bothered by Hek's display.

"We won't harm you. We're just not the Threes we appear to be."

"Why do you keep calling us that?" asked Milt.

"You exist in three dimensions. You have no frame of reference for our four-dimensional state so it scrambles your senses."

"That's Greek to me," shrugged Milt.

"Oh, do you speak Greek?"

"What?"

Maybe it was the breakfast or the warm feelings they all felt from the Threes, but whatever it was, Hek's annoyance with these people had faded. "Come and sit beside me," she said.

Milt looked to Chrissie and she nodded. He eased his way over to the table and the other occupants shuffled around so he could sit next to Hek.

"The premise is simple." She unfolded a napkin and laid it out on the table. "If we ignore the thickness of the fabric, we can imagine this to be a two-dimensional square, yes?"

"Yeah, I guess," said Milt.

"And if all you knew was the two-dimensional world, how would you ever understand how a third dimension worked?"

"Um, well, couldn't I just look up and see it?"

"You'd think that because you can see it now, but if you are only two dimensional, all you could see is a two-dimensional world."

Milton shook his head. "I still don't get it."

Hek grabbed her teacup and put it down on the napkin. "If this cup were next to 2D Milton, all he would see is a circle." She lifted the cup revealing a circle of tea on the napkin. "2D Milton can only see what exists on this plane." She touched the table top. "That's his reality." She sat back in her chair. "You Threes are like that to us."

Milton laughed and shook his head. "Those are fighting words!"

"Yes! You understand!"

"Not entirely," said Milton. He looked over at Chrissie who shrugged back at him.

"You're saying we'll never see the world the way you do," said Belinda.

"Yes," said Hek. "That doesn't mean we can't..."

Belinda interrupted. "Which means that we can never entirely trust you. It's all well and good to lay out this spread for us in the hopes that we'll become putty in your hands, but for all we know, you're the ones who took Joseph and Della from us!"

"What happened to Della?" asked Milt.

"Who's Della?" asked Chrissie.

"Joseph's wife," said Milt. "Belinda, where is she?"

Belinda picked at the food on her plate. She'd hardly eaten anything. "I don't know. We came down here together and we ran into this cop..."

Hek shot Jerry a glance made of ice and the older man held his hands up as if to say, 'not me, not me!'

"...then there was a fire and the place we were looking for was burning down and Della saw Joseph in the fire and she went crazy. She called me all kinds of names and threw me out of the car without even slowing down. I walked a long way with Jimi before Jerry was kind enough to pick us up and bring us here. Except now I think maybe his being there was a little too convenient." She eyed Jerry suspiciously.

He started to protest but Hek intervened. "I sent him to retrieve you, Belinda. We've been watching Della for some time now. Ever since Joseph was taken."

"Taken?" asked Milt. "So you know where he is?"

"I do," said Hek.

"Jesus fuck, do I have to ask?!" screeched Milt.

Hek turned on him and then looked at Jerry. "Did you not warn them?"

Jerry nodded. "Oh my, yes. They use these words so often that they don't mean nothing to them any more."

It took an obvious effort for Hek to calm herself. She took several deep breaths and spoke through her teeth, "There will be no more curses invoked in this house. Is that clear?"

Milton didn't get that this was no game. He asked, "And by curses, you mean..."

"IS THAT CLEAR?!" shouted Hek. She was losing her patience again.

Milt thought it best to agree for the time being. "Yeah, yeah. Got it." The others nodded as well.

Hek stood slowly. She looked weak. Chrissie wondered if their words actually hurt her in some way. Their host said nothing more as she stumbled across the kitchen. Dexter followed and put his arm around her for support. They left the room and the door swung shut behind them, leaving only frightened and confused faces behind. Chrissie looked over at the niche in the wall and saw that Nyx was gone too.

The Sheriff pulled into the parking lot behind the high school. Dr. Hayes was inside, filling the school's walk-in refrigerator with the bodies that weren't sent to the hospital morgue in Cleveland.

Bill strode into the cafeteria and quickly found his way back to the kitchen. "Willie?" he called.

The door to the fridge creaked open and fog billowed out, followed by the good doctor. He closed the door behind him and sighed. "We've got one hell of a mess on our hands here, Bill."

"You didn't call me down here to tell me that, did you? Shee-it! Willie, I got better..."

The doctor shook his head. "Let me rephrase. You're fucked. Feel better?"

Bill was angered by the comment but he held his feelings in check. It had been a rough day for everyone. "What's gnawing at you, Doc?"

The doctor held out a latex-gloved hand and said, "This."

The sheriff bent over and stared at the little piece of metal in the doctor's palm. "Looks like a bullet."

"Yep."

"So?"

"Your boys at the crime scene found one Arlene Shaughnessy dead in the street behind Ed Macklin's car. Shot once in the face with this." He kept his hand extended.

"Somebody shot her? Jesus, there had to be at least one of my boys on duty. Where's Mack?"

"Nobody knows. When Butch found Arlene, he went looking for Ed but couldn't find him."

"Let me see the bullet."

Dr. Hayes tilted his palm and the small piece of lead rolled into the sheriff's hand. The lawman held it up to get a closer look. "It's got a code."

The doctor nodded.

"Did you run it?"

"Didn't have to. Your department's the only one in the area that's coded."

Bill thought back to his decision to include his department in a new ammunition test. A big ammo vendor had come up with a way to uniquely code the projectile and cylinder

of every weapon. They needed a small department to be their guinea pig and Bill had volunteered after a little cash had passed under the table. Now that decision was either paying off big time or it was biting him in the ass.

"Any chance some of the coded rounds got out in the wild?" he asked.

"I was going to ask you that."

The sheriff looked around the school kitchen wondering how he was going to spin his way out of this one. If Mack really had shot the Shaughnessy woman, he couldn't let the town know. He'd be out of a job lickety-split.

"Anybody else know about this?" asked Bill with a grimace.

"Naw. Butch and one of the other deputies brought her in but they didn't see the bullet."

"Then best we keep it that way," said the sheriff as he slipped the lead fragment into his breast pocket.

"Understood," said Dr. Hayes. He could be a pain in the ass but the man sure as hell knew how to keep a secret. "Any idea why he did it?"

Bill shook his head. "It'll be the first thing I ask him," he said as he left the cafeteria. His first impulse was to put out an APB for Mack but that might draw unwanted attention. No, best to go back to the crime scene and work outward from there.

Butch was crawling around on his hands and knees with a flashlight when the sheriff pulled up. "Find something?" asked Bill.

"Casing. Some spatter. Just looking under Mack's car to see if there's anything else." He stood and handed his boss the shell casing in a plastic baggie.

"Any identifying marks?" asked Bill as casually as he could.

"Don't know yet. Just bagged it as soon as I found it."

Smart man, thought Bill. "I'll take it back with me. Any other indication as to what happened?"

"Naw. Maybe Mack was taken hostage but I don't think any other shots were fired. The blood pattern indicates just the one wound to Miss Shaughnessy. She fell backwards and hit the pavement. Shot came from in front of the car. No weapon. No tire marks or footprints beyond the ones we already found in

the yard. And no Mack. I sent a few of the guys out into the woods to see if they could find him.”

“And?” asked the sheriff.

“Nobody out there. We could try again in the morning.”

“Maybe. Sounds to me like he don’t want to be found.”

Butch studied his boss. He’d seen the code on the shell casing and figured that Mack had been the one doing the shooting but how much did the sheriff know? How receptive would he be to an open and honest discussion of the matter? “You think Mack ran off?”

“Wouldn’t you run if you’d just shot a civilian in the face with your department-issued sidearm?”

“I reckon so,” mumbled Butch.

“Like we didn’t have enough shit to deal with, now we got one of our own gone feral.” He looked around at the surrounding houses. “I don’t suppose anybody saw this go down?”

“Ain’t nobody left around here to see shit, Sheriff.”

“Alright, then. This is what we’re going to do. First thing tomorrow, we’ll start a manhunt for Mack. Canvas these woods real good. Get volunteers in on it too. Tell them that Mack was ambushed while trying to save that Shaughnessy bitch. Get the dogs on his trail and everything. If he don’t turn up, that’s fine. He’s another victim to add to the tally. If he does, then we have to make sure nobody talks to him until we can get him back to the station. Comprende?”

“No problem, Sheriff.”

“In the meantime, are we done inside?” He led the younger man up the driveway to where hardware store work lights had been set up to illuminate the blood soaked house and its contents.

“There’s a lot of evidence, Sheriff. We got all the bodies out and started the blood work. There’s just...it’s a lot.”

“Heard from Major Crimes yet?” The Major Crimes unit was the arm of the Mississippi Bureau of Investigation that was notorious for stepping on toes in high-profile cases. Bill was expecting a call.

“Not yet, Sheriff, but the news hasn’t gone wide yet. Should make the six o’clock tomorrow up in Memphis. That’ll stir them up.”

“Well, get what you can while the scene is still ours. That means overnight.”

"Yes, sir." The undersheriff paused before he asked the big question that was on his mind. "Sheriff, can I ask you something off the record?"

"Son, as far as I'm concerned, this whole goddamned conversation's off the record."

That didn't comfort Butch very much. "Well, sir, I was just wondering. Do you think Mack did all of this by himself? I mean the house and everything?"

Bill went over the evidence in his mind, bit by bit. The bodies stacked in the house. The dead woman in the street. The missing cop he'd first met as a teenager in trouble for drag racing with some friends.

"Son, all the best criminologists say that a genuine psychopath—a man without any conscience whatsoever—excels at one thing above all else. He keeps people from knowing the truth he lives with every day. They say he fools his friends and neighbors into thinking he's just a regular Joe. We hear it time and time again whenever some crazy shit like this happens. None of the neighbors ever suspected John Wayne Gacy or Jeffery Dahmer, at least not on record. But those folks got questioned after the shit done hit the fan."

"You saying you don't buy their stories, sheriff?"

"I can't say that I do. See, I think the neighbors say those things to ease their own guilt because they know that they could have stopped the killer if they'd just picked up the phone. But no one ever does. They sense that something's wrong. Might even talk about it amongst themselves, but what can they do? After all, this is supposed to be a free country. Folks are allowed to be weirdoes. But there's still that little tingle behind the ears that tells them something's seriously off about this guy."

"I don't know about you, but I never felt nothing weird about Mack."

"No. Can't say that I did, either."

Butch nodded and the two men parted company without another word between them.

Chrissie and Milt sat on the porch of Hek's house in a pair of rocking chairs that Dexter had brought out for them. He took his penance seriously and he bore no grudge against Hek for administering it. It was an odd arrangement, to be sure, but one that had a certain civility to it.

Chrissie held her dreadlocks off her neck. "Christ, it's hot out here."

Dexter cleared his throat and rested a gentle hand on her forearm. "Best to get out of the habit of cursing. One more infraction, and I figure you're both out of here whether we need y'all or not."

"What exactly does Hek think we're going to help y'all with, anyway?" asked Milt.

"Got to mind my own affairs, young man," said Dexter. He turned to open the screen door and Milt jumped up to grab his arm.

"Please, Dexter. All of this is a little hard to swallow. You can see that, right? Try looking at things from our point of view. If that witch hadn't mentioned Joseph, we'd be long gone already."

"Speak for yourself," said Chrissie without bothering to look in his direction. "Whether you believe it or not, these people saved your life. Didn't your mama teach you anything about gratitude?"

Dexter removed Milton's hand from his arm. "I remember being all twisted up inside like you are now. It hurts. A lot. Life over here ain't like that. If you really want to know why we're all in this here predicament together, take a look in the mirror."

"More riddles?"

"No. They only sound like riddles to you because you're not listening right."

Milton took a deep breath and leaned back on the porch railing. His insides were churning like an ice cream maker at a Sunday social but he'd lived through enough shit to realize when he was banging his head against a wall. "Alright," he said softly. "I'm asking you to help me to understand. At least tell me what you know about Joseph. Is he still alive?"

The old man eyed Milt through weary eyes. They used to ache, those old peepers. Dexter could remember that feeling

from way back when. They didn't ache any more and that was because of Hek. She'd recruited him to do a job and he'd be darned if he wasn't going to see it through. She'd advised everyone to withhold the facts of the situation from the young Threes until they knew they could trust them, but wasn't trust a two-way street?

"Some years back I had what I figured was a pretty nifty idea. You Threes think you got to hook up with other like-minded folks. Folks that don't agree with your group, well, they get left out. Around these parts, that usually means blacks huddle up with blacks and whites with whites. That's been the way of things ever since I can remember, and my memories go way back." He paused and made his way over to Milt's rocking chair and plopped himself down. "I decided to take a swing at fixing that. Now I'm paying for that mistake."

"And Joseph?" asked Milt.

Dexter shook his head. "Patience, son. I'll get to it in my own time. Besides, what else you got to do right now?"

Chrissie piled on. "If you let the man talk he might actually tell us what's going on."

Milt held out a hand to Dexter, giving him the floor.

"You're too generous," said Dexter with good-natured sarcasm. "So anyway, I got it in my head that I might be able to use music to sooth this particular savage beast. Since I don't know nothing about white folks, no offense, I thought that I could leech those bad feelings away from the ones like me. The people ya'll call coloreds."

"Yeah, we don't say that any more," said Milt.

"Well, good for you," said Dexter. "As I was saying, I figured I'd tap in somewhere familiar. Somewhere communal. Music was the best place to start. The blues does the unfathomable—it feeds the bad feelings until they turn into good ones. A great blues tune can turn a riot into a homecoming. Songs like that can touch a person deep down in a way that no one really understands."

He looked out across the fields and watched as a large crow flew down and plucked a grasshopper out of midair. *These folks is that grasshopper and Hek could be that crow*, he thought.

"Dexter?" prompted Chrissie.

The old man jerked sideways in the rocking chair. "What's the matter?"

"You drifted off. You were talking about the blues."

"What? Oh, right. Yes. Powerful. Most powerful thing on Earth. Takes us back to our inner lives. The lives of our cells. Genetic memory—that sort of thing."

"You ever play the blues?" asked Milt.

At that, Dexter sat forward and neatened up his clothes. "I was played *by* the blues, young man."

Milt smiled. Maybe they weren't so different after all. "What instrument?"

"I did try my hand at the gui-tar but I didn't have the touch."

"Well, that's one thing I can honestly believe," said Milt with a laugh.

"Laugh if it pleases you, son. In the end, I went well beyond being a picker. I played the players."

"What's that mean?" asked Chrissie.

Dexter was about to answer when Hek stepped out onto the porch and squelched his resolve. She seemed oddly out of place in the light of day.

"Go ahead, Dexter. You can tell them. Perhaps it will help them to understand how important they are to us." Dexter gave her his seat and she took it as if it were expected.

"I've seen how you folks are towards each other. Slavery left a billiard ball of hate in the black man's heart. Some said they forgave the white folks. Others said they forgave their ancestors. But not a one of them ever forgave themselves. In the middle of their hate sat one nasty truth—that every one of you Threes hate yourselves for who you are and where you come from. I thought I could help relieve that burden."

He hung his head and took a deep breath before continuing. "I used the hands of all those musicians to gather up the darkness and siphon it off."

Milt was openly scoffing at the story now. "Hold on a minute. You expect us to believe that?"

Dexter shook his head. "I don't expect nothing. I'm just answering your question. You did ask me a question didn't you?"

Hek stepped in with the authority of a long-sitting, county judge. "He did," she declared and Chrissie realized that Milt's question had been the key to Dexter's confession in the same way that the cemetery grove had been the key to Hek's house.

"Fine, then. Continue," said Milt as he crossed his arms.

"Thank you, your highness," said Dexter without even a shadow of a smile. "Blues singers use their music to pull the darkness out of people's hearts so I figured I could use that very same music to trap it forever."

"Let me guess. The guitars?" Milt sneered.

"Finally, the young man has decided to get on board the train!" said Dexter. "Yes. When an accomplished player resonates with a crowd, be it five people or five hundred thousand, everyone feels better, but their inner pain always returns to them in time. I thought I could stop the cycle. The guitars are vessels that I used to suck up that dark energy—the Aphota—and take it out of circulation."

Dexter looked around and realized that the entire household had come out to listen. Even Nyx was lingering inside one of the open windows.

"Go ahead," said Hek. "Finish the tale and grow from the telling."

"Alright," said Dexter. "I have to admit to y'all that this mess we're in—all of us, including your friend Joseph and now Della and Belinda..." Belinda looked up from the doorway when she heard her name. "...This mess is my doing. I didn't understand what meddling in these things meant. I was a younger man then." He said the last words directly to Hek.

"Yes, you were," she said kindly. "Youth must err."

"Anyway," continued Dexter, "I let those guitars circulate for years. Some worked for decades. My plan was to gather them up and bring them back here, but getting them back wasn't so easy. There has to be balance in the world, you know? I created an imbalance and by doing so allowed Erevos in."

"Erevos is one of you people?" asked Milt. He was having a hard time keeping up, much like the first time he saw those Lord of the Rings movies.

"No," said Hek, coldly. "Erevos isn't anything. He is the absence. His name is not to be spoken within this house."

"Then I guess it's a good thing we're out here on the porch," said Milt with a laugh. He stopped abruptly when he realized that no one else was laughing.

"You're talking about the devil," said Chrissie as she pulled her legs up under her. She'd suddenly gotten a chill in the hot and humid air.

"There's no devil. Not such as the Christian church paints him, anyway," said Dexter.

"Some say I am the Christian devil," said Hek with a half-smile. "The Christians used Pagan images as their symbols of evil to discredit the religions they were competing with."

Dexter added, "Coke versus Pepsi got nothing on the big Christianity versus Pagan fight. But that's beside the point. What I'm trying to tell y'all is that all that dark energy—the Aphota—turned into something else. Got a mind of its own, is what it did. That is Erevos. Once I had all those guitars back together in one place, I realized that I'd made a mistake. Separated by space and time, that energy was manageable. I didn't realize what would happen when it was all under one roof."

Dexter looked to Hek for relief and she granted it by picking up the thread of his story for him. "Unbeknownst to me," she said, "Dexter sought out people of character to give the vessels to in an attempt to undo what he had done."

"Whose idea was it to burn down the pawn shop?" asked Belinda.

"It was my choice," said Hek. "I didn't know what else to do. Burning the vessels is a tried and true method of dispersing energies. In this case, however, those energies were much more powerful than I expected."

"Della saw its face," said Belinda. "It was in the fire. Joseph's face. It came after her and that was when she changed."

"Yes," said Hek. "Erevos used her to steal the remaining Aphota. It will be even stronger now."

Chrissie leaned forward in her chair. "So you're saying you were going to get rid of the ancestral pain or whatever of all of us black folks with a flick of your little guitar wand? What gives you the right? We aren't your playthings! We already went through that shit of..." Jerry tried to shush her and she batted his hand away. "Don't you touch me! I'll speak my mind however I damn well please!"

Hek held her hand up to Jerry. *Let this play out*, the gesture said. Jerry stood down.

Chrissie took a deep breath and sat back, this time focusing on Hek. "I'd say you all owe us an apology for meddling in shit you didn't have any business messing with."

Hek looked Chrissie in the eye and said softly, "You're right. We apologize. I apologize to you, Christine, and to your

people, and to Milt, and to Belinda, and especially to Joseph who now bears the burden of our mistakes. We were wrong to try and touch your world. That's why we're here. We wish to correct our mistakes."

The goth woman's response caught Chrissie off guard and she found herself believing Hek, but Milt remained skeptical. "I don't believe any of this crap," he said. "If you know where Joseph is, just tell me and I'll go and get him, thank you very much."

"The doubter is among us," said Hek and the other Fours smiled. "You are welcome here, doubter. You make us stronger."

"Okay. Good. Then you won't mind telling me where you last saw my friend."

Dexter leaned forward and said, "Oh, we haven't seen Joseph."

"But you said..."

Hek interrupted him. "We've followed Erevos down the river. It's taking lives in a town called Rosedale and it's gathering followers. It's getting very strong. Perhaps even stronger than we are."

"Then let's go," said Milt. "At least tell me where Joseph is so I can help him."

"He wouldn't recognize you, Milton. It's very likely that he'd try to kill you."

Milt seethed. "You're telling me that my best friend is going to attack me?"

"He's not your friend any longer," said Hek calmly.

"Bullshit!" shouted Milt. Hek bristled but remained seated. "You goth weirdoes hit us with some shrooms and tell us this stupid story and we're supposed to believe you just like that?"

Hek took a deep breath and stood before Milt. "I've healed you and you've accepted. I've offered you refuge and you've accepted. I've fed you and you've accepted. I've tried to explain our predicament in the simplest of terms so that you might understand and yet you continue to hurl your hatred toward us. Doubting is healthy. Malevolence in the face of kindness is not."

Milt was unfazed. "Then prove to me that one single word of your bullshit is true."

"You are a pragmatist whose view of the world has been challenged, Milton. You're an insect trapped in a jar. All you can do is hope that the glass will eventually disappear so that you may return to the world you knew before. Unfortunately, sometimes that jar is a killing jar."

"Are you threatening me, lady?" asked Milt.

"Stop it, Milt!" shouted Belinda. "Maybe, for just one minute, you could look beyond the end of your own nose and see that these people are trying to help Joseph and Della!"

"Oh, you think that's what they're all about, do you?" asked Milt.

"Yes, I do! Have you ever seen someone go insane right in front of you in the blink of an eye? Has Della ever tried to kill you?! That's what happened to me last night!"

"Belinda, no offense but they may be manipulating you. Changing your memories."

Belinda was about to respond when Hek held up her right hand. "Either you trust your heart or you do not," she said to no one in particular. "I will not hold anyone here against their will. You're free to leave at any time. I await your decision." She turned and went inside, the other Fours trailing behind her.

"Was it something I said?" asked Milt with a boyish grin.

Chrissie stomped over and slapped his face as hard as she could. Milt didn't flinch. "I'm trying to save us all a lot of trouble," he said. "This is a dead end trip. Surely you can see that." Chrissie didn't respond so he turned to Belinda. "Lindy?"

"Don't you call me that."

Milt knew that staying at Hek's house meant death, not only for Joseph and Della, but for him as well. He could feel it. He looked at Chrissie and Belinda and tried to think of a way to sway them, but all he saw was condemnation in their eyes. There'd be no telling them anything. Once he realized that—really knew it in his heart—he turned heel and walked away without a word. He was halfway to his truck when he heard Chrissie shout his name, but he didn't look back.

"The staties are in the break room, Sheriff," said Deputy Travis.

"How many?" asked Bill.

"Three, I think. Unless there's more of them out in the car."

Bill reached for his wallet and pulled out a twenty. "Why don't you run across the street and get us some of that store-bought coffee? Darkest they got, you hear me?"

"Yes, sir," said Travis, happy to have something to do. He'd been stuck at the station for over 24 hours monitoring dispatch. Doing a good job of it, too, as far as Bill could tell. "You want cream and sugar?"

"Naw, son. These are lawmen. They'll take it black or they won't take it at all."

The young man nodded and bolted out the front door of the station. He almost got hit by June Riley's old Ford pickup as he crossed the street.

Bill shook his head and moseyed into the conference room. As soon as he crossed the threshold, a black man in an expensive suit stood up to greet him. "Hello, Sheriff. I'm Master Sergeant Rhimes. Work out of the Batesville office. Pleased to meet you." Clear. Concise. Efficient. Bill disliked him already. That didn't stop him from shaking the man's hand, though. Had to keep up appearances. The other agents, Billings and Moreno, went through their greetings as well.

The sheriff smiled broadly and said, "I guess now's the time when you tell me why the hell you drove down here at the crack ass of dawn to take me away from my murder investigation."

The big man grinned ear to ear and immediately put on a corn-pone, country accent. "Well, sheeeeit, Sheriff, I reckon we down here to piss in you-all's pond. Least, that's what the Lieutenant Colonel said we ought to do. Ain't that right, boys?" His cohorts agreed vociferously. The Lieutenant Colonel in question was George Reynolds, the current head of the MBI. Bill had learned the hard way that this was not a man with whom to fuck.

"I'm listening," said Bill.

The grin disappeared and Master Sergeant Rhimes sat down. "We understand that you've got yourself a handful down here. There are directly related crimes in other counties so we're here to help whether you need us or not. Do we have an understanding?"

Bill nodded and was about to pontificate on the finer points of jurisdictional authority when Travis entered with the coffee. The MBI agents' eyes lit up like fireworks when the rookie started handing out the cups. Rhimes opened his and asked, "Cream and sugar?"

Travis looked to Bill and the sheriff motioned to the cabinet above the sink. Five minutes later, the room was silent except for slurping sounds. The coffee lightened Bill's mood a bit, so he walked the agents through the facts as he knew them so far. He conveniently left out the part about one of his men shooting an innocent civilian in the face, though.

When he was done, Rhimes looked over the notes Billings had written down for him. He never made notes, himself. He found that it distracted him from paying close attention to the people he was listening to, and he did like to pay attention.

"From what you've told us so far, we have multiple homicides, no motive, no suspects, and a half-processed crime scene with contaminated evidence. That about cover it?" The sheriff slurped his coffee and said nothing. "You see, Sheriff, I know how small town departments work. My great granddaddy was lynched by one back in the day, so let's talk plain. Who do you think did this?"

Bill sat forward and leaned on the table as if he were about to deliver the secret of the ages. "Well, fellas, I reckon that's what you're here to tell me, not the other way around. We believe the killer is alive and that he's made off with one of our officers. You took me away from the search for him just so you could twist my nuts, so you'll forgive me if I'm not inclined to play Hardy Boys with you just yet."

"You called the killer a 'he'. Why is that?" asked Rhimes.

"Not hard to figure considering some of the folks he killed were plenty capable of defending themselves."

"Method of death?" asked Rhimes. Bill just stared at him. "Sheriff, how were the victims killed?"

"Don't know just yet. Looked to be mostly blunt trauma stuff but there was no single method. It was like somebody was

experimenting with all the different ways you could kill folks.” He looked Master Sergeant Rhimes in the eye. “And for your information, smart ass, bodies were stacked chest high in there. We had to ‘contaminate’ the scene in order to ascertain if any of the vics were still alive.”

“Were they?” asked Rhimes.

“No, thank you for asking, they were not. Once we had them all spread out, we ran out of room, so instead of stacking them back up, I had the bodies put on ice. I thought it prudent to give them the respect they deserved. I’m sorry I didn’t call the Lord Emperor of the MBI and let him know I was considering the feelings of my constituents.”

Rhimes digested the sheriff’s words slowly then stood up and tossed his empty coffee cup in the trash. When he didn’t immediately sit back down, the sheriff stood up too. It had the feeling of one of those bar brawls in the old westerns Bill liked so much.

Rhimes was about to suggest that the sheriff could go do something that was physically impossible but he was interrupted by Deputy Travis. “Sheriff,” said the rookie, “Butch says they found something but he won’t tell me what it is over the radio.”

The sheriff nodded. “Excuse me, gents. I’ve got work to do,” he said as he turned and strode right out the front door of the station.

The two junior agents looked to their boss for guidance. He nodded and they headed toward their car. They caught up with the sheriff at the edge of a pecan tree grove just north of the neighborhood where the killings had taken place.

Bill’s undersheriff eyed the newcomers suspiciously as they approached.

“What is it, Sheriff?” asked Rhimes, half-expecting another fight. Instead, the sheriff guided him away from the others.

“Listen here, Rhimes. I know you’re following orders. I can appreciate that. I was married for 28 years.” His attempt at humor fell flat but he didn’t seem to notice. “Normally, I could keep up this whole bitter cop routine for days but I’m afraid we don’t have that long. Fact is, I could use the extra manpower right about now.”

“Sheriff, if you’re fucking with me, so help me God, I’ll...”

"No fucking around, Rhimes. I got me a killer here and he's going to kill again."

"How do you know that?"

"My undersheriff," he pointed Butch out, "is the best tracker I know. He followed the trail of three people this far and he says they're headed north on foot. One of them's my missing deputy."

"How can we help?" It amazed Rhimes how quickly adversaries could become allies. All it took was a common enemy.

"Two of my men are going to set up a checkpoint just north of Gunnison. Butch'll continue to follow the trail. You and me are going to head up to the neighborhood that's next in line on the chopping block." Rhimes nodded and was about to speak when Bill grabbed him by the arm. "This ain't no drill, you understand? What these folks did, I ain't seen nothing like it before. Not here, not in Vietnam. Will your boys be alright if it comes to that? They look a little green."

"They'll be fine," said Rhimes.

"Good. Then they're with Butch and you're with me."

It took less than five minutes for them to reach the next neighborhood. Bill cruised through slowly without any lights or sirens, hoping that he could avoid alarming the residents. Rhimes pulled out his sidearm and checked to make sure he had a round in the chamber.

"Easy there, chief," said Bill. "We don't know the suspects are here yet. I can't have you shooting at registered voters." A grim smile crossed his lips.

"Just making sure I'm ready," said Rhimes as he rested the weapon on his lap.

After their second trip around the neighborhood, Bill stopped the car. There were a few older homes and a bunch of double-wide trailers stretched out in front of him. All-in-all, it was a nice enough neighborhood but something wasn't right. He drove around the block one more time.

"Looks like a lot of these folks are still home," he said. "Strange for a weekday."

Rhimes shrugged. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying it's a strange thing for a weekday," said Bill, this time more insistently.

Rhimes looked at each home as they circled the neighborhood and he realized that the sheriff was right. An inordinate number of the houses had two or three cars parked outside. "No one's outside, either. It's a nice enough day. Where are all the kids?"

Bill nodded and eased back onto the highway. "Hold on," said Rhimes. "Where're you..." He didn't finish his question because Bill pulled off the road and switched off the engine.

"We'll go back in on foot. If the suspects are in one of those houses, best to let them think we've had our look-see and moved on."

Rhimes nodded and said, "You know, you're not as dumb as you look."

Bill let that one roll off his back for the time being. He and Rhimes walked back to the neighborhood in silence, both aware of the danger they could be facing.

Bill stopped and crouched behind some bushes. "Hear that?"

Rhimes shook his head. "Bad ears. Afghanistan."

Bill filed that tidbit away. "Sounds like somebody's moving around in that trailer home." He motioned toward the neatly kept blue and white number on the right. "Let's pay them a visit." He turned off his radio and added, "You got my six?"

"Covering," said Rhimes. He quickly moved to the other side of the trailer's front door in a crouch. Once he was in position, Bill drew his sidearm and held it behind his right leg where it couldn't be seen. No need to alarm these folks unnecessarily. Once he was at the door, he nodded to Rhimes. After getting a nod back, he knocked. No answer. He knocked again. "Sheriff's department," he said just loudly enough for someone on the other side of the door to hear. Rhimes looked at Bill and mimed turning the door knob. Bill thought about it and nodded. Most of the folks around there never locked their doors. The sheriff reached out with his left hand and grasped the door knob. It turned. He held his pistol up next to his face and slowly pushed the door inward. "Sheriff's department," he said. "If anybody's home, it'd be best to come on out. Don't want to shoot anybody today." There was no response and nothing stirred inside the mobile home. "Alright. I'm coming in. If anybody's home, I'm going to need to see your hands." He stepped gingerly into the trailer. It was a modest home but it was

neat and clean. Nothing unusual. He walked through the place, room by room, until he was satisfied that no one was there. He was about to suggest moving on when he noticed a half-eaten bowl of cereal on the kitchen table. It looked like one of those fruity cereals that turned the milk a nauseating lavender color. He felt the side of the bowl. Ice cold.

Once back outside, Bill told Rhimes what he'd seen. "Sounds like your cereal lover left in a hurry," said Rhimes.

"That'd be my guess. The sound I heard might have been them skedaddling out of there."

"Moving on?" asked Rhimes. Bill nodded.

The next place they came to was an older house that was painted light green with dark green trim. Bill knew it well. The Markwoods had built it twenty years back and had lived there up until last year when they'd moved away to be closer to their daughter. They were friends with his wife but he'd lost track of them since the move. The new tenants were a black family that had moved from the other side of town. *What was their name? Wilton? Williams? Something like that,* he thought. Bill thought they seemed nice enough for black folks.

"Better cover the back door," whispered Bill. Unlike the mobile home, the house had a multitude of potential exits. Rhimes nodded and disappeared around back. Bill gave him a few moments to get into position while he eased toward the front door and opened the screen. He knocked, just like at the last place. No response. "Sheriff's department," he said. Nothing. He tried a couple more times before he reached for the doorknob. He'd no sooner grasped it than it began to turn on its own. Without thinking, he backed up and raised his weapon. He lowered it again when he saw that he was aiming at Rhimes.

"Jesus Christ!" shouted Rhimes.

"Announce yourself next time, agent."

"I did. Seems I'm not the only one with a hearing problem."

The sheriff cocked an eye at the MBI agent and stepped inside. The first thing he noticed was the smell. It was like a locker room in there.

"The back door was open so I did a little recon," said Rhimes. "They're back here and they're plenty scared."

Bill followed Rhimes down the hallway to the master bedroom. The door was open but the lights were off and the curtains were drawn. It was almost completely dark in there.

Rhimes spoke from the hallway. "Alright, folks, it's me again. Master Sergeant Rhimes. I'm going to turn on the light. No need to be afraid." He reached inside and flipped the light switch. The overhead light illuminated a room that was completely filled with people. No furniture—just people. There had to be at least thirty of them, all African-Americans and all scared out of their wits. The light made them cover their faces and recoil in terror. Many grabbed onto whoever was closest. It was like a scene from a concentration camp.

The sheriff eased his way inside and all hell broke loose. The people began wailing. They clawed at one another as they pushed toward the window. The curtains were the first to go, allowing sunlight to stream in and blind everyone. The throng pushed on the window causing the plate glass to bow outward, but Bill knew those windows weren't about to budge. Sam Markwood had put them in himself. Double-paned and damned near bullet-proof.

"Back away, Sheriff," shouted Rhimes. "They're reacting to you for some reason. Get out of here before they hurt themselves!"

Bill could see the logic in that so he backed out into the hallway and listened as Rhimes tried to calm the people down. He thought about the faces he'd just seen. They were all familiar to him. Good people who'd lived around there for most of their lives. Most of them knew they had nothing to fear from the likes of Sheriff Bill Woolworth.

Once he had the crowd settled, Rhimes popped back into the hall. "Sorry, Sheriff. I had no idea that was going to..."

"What happened to them?" asked Bill.

"I don't know," said Rhimes. "As you can see, they aren't in the mood for conversation. I've seen animals like that before—cows on their way to slaughter—but never people." His hands were shaking.

"Think you can get them to leave that room? Smells like they've been in there a while."

"I'll try," said Rhimes. "It'd be better if you brought in a forensic psychiatrist."

Bill shook his head. "This look like CSI to you?"

Joseph, Della, and Deputy Ed watched as the two cops parked on the side of the road and made their way back toward the neighborhood they'd just left. Somehow, the voice had known they were coming and it had warned them to get away. Joseph hugged Della's body close. She didn't respond or even blink for that matter, but her voice boomed out loud and clear inside his head.

"We have to get moving before they see us, dear heart." A map appeared in Joseph's mind. It looked just like those maps in the Indiana Jones movies, all brown and weathered with a moving red line that indicated which way to go. The Della Voice was providing him with his own, private GPS system.

Joseph stood up and the others stood with him. They even followed along when he walked over to the police car. "Get in the back," said the voice. Joseph did as he was told. Della followed. Deputy Ed got into the driver's seat and ripped the bottom off the steering column. Five minutes later, they were roaring up highway one toward Gunnison.

The tiny town was the second largest in Bolivar county, meaning that it hardly got any attention from the Bolivar Sheriff's department unless it was an election year. Bill always scheduled a handful of campaign stops there to remind the residents that it would be a terrible idea to vote against him. They were good people who mostly kept to themselves. That tendency usually served them well. On this day, however, it would not.

"There's important work for us here," said the voice. When Joseph looked over, the sound appeared to be coming from Della's blank face. He grasped her cold hands in his greedy fingers.

"I know, love," he said through crusty, sunburned lips. "I'm ready."

"Good. I know I can count on you." The more she spoke, the more the voice became Della's Voice once again. The color returned to Della's cheeks and she stared into his eyes the way she used to.

"Tell me what to do," he said.

“Our new helper will come in handy here. He’ll gather up the good people and keep them out of harm’s way while you deal with the others. They’re evil and they must be punished. You will be my sword. This time, with your eyes wide open. Can you do that?”

Joseph held Della’s hands tight to his chest, nearly toppling her over in the process. “Yes, my love.”

“Good boy,” said the voice. Della’s face slowly twisted into a smile. It took considerable effort but the voice was slowly gaining control of Della’s muscles. The real Della was still inside there, fighting, but that didn’t worry the voice. Not even a little bit. Della couldn’t possibly win. With every kill, the voice grew stronger. Perhaps she’d even pick up a few more helpers in Gunnison and discard the bitch altogether. She grinned at the thought of Joseph’s pain.

Deputy Ed pulled off the road near a group of houses and stumbled out onto the hot blacktop. He moved toward the first house while Joseph and Della waited in the back seat. Joseph knew the drill. They’d just done the same thing in the last neighborhood.

A couple of popping sounds told Joseph that the deputy had had to encourage the home owners to cooperate. A few minutes later, Ed stepped out onto the small, concrete porch and signaled Joseph with a wave.

Joseph got out of the car and looked around. It was such a nice day. It was a shame to mar the peace with violence. The voice heard his thought and chimed in quickly.

“Joseph, dear, we’re here to help these people. You understand that, don’t you?” Della’s mouth moved slightly with each word creating the effect of a YouTube video with a sound sync issue.

Joseph nodded and reached into the back seat for his guitar. “Yes. I’m ready.”

“Good,” said the voice. She was a little bit nervous, fearful that expanding her reach might mean relinquishing some of her control over her favorite plaything.

Joseph wasn’t aware that there was a battle being waged. He just felt himself getting stronger. Questions were occurring to him where before he’d followed along blindly. He didn’t resist the voice—no, nothing so bold as that—but the idea

of resistance did occur to him. That was the work of the Caretaker who was nurturing what was left of Joseph's inner life.

Della's body remained inside the car while Joseph marched up to the house with that old guitar in his hands. The weathered wood was dark now, stained with the dried blood of the voice's victims. He stomped past Deputy Ed and found a small family hiding in the back bedroom—a large, black woman and her two daughters. The little girls had so many colorful barrettes in their hair that their heads looked like fireworks explosions.

"Whatever you folks going to do to us, you let my babies go, you hear?! LET MY BABIES GO!" The woman screamed the words from the depths of her soul.

"Anybody else in here?" asked Joseph. He could smell bacon cooking in the kitchen.

The woman shook her head. "No sir."

"Good, said Joseph as he perused the room. "This is going to be the safe area." He walked back to the porch and nodded to Deputy Ed. No words passed between them but Deputy Ed understood. He walked to the next house and Joseph waved at Della. He watched as she got out of the back of the police cruiser and climbed into the driver's seat. She didn't appear to be looking at the road but she was able to maneuver the vehicle into a hidden spot behind the house. She got out and stood next to Joseph as the voice spoke to him once again.

"Good. Now let Della...let *me* stand watch over this place of safety while you reap our harvest."

Joseph nodded and walked off after Deputy Ed. The map in his head showed him the way. He wondered if Ed had a similar map in his own head and the thought made him jealous. For just a moment, he was consumed with rage, but then the feeling subsided as quickly as it had arisen and he went about his work.

The second house was larger than the others they'd cleansed. Its layout was clearly illustrated in his head. It looked to have three bedrooms, a family room, a living room and a dining room. He'd have to be careful. Vermin would have many places to hide in such a structure. He circled the house and saw that Deputy Ed had blocked the back door with a riding lawn mower. He continued, pausing only when he heard an incoherent yell from inside the place. A part of him—the part that

still wanted to please the voice—was worried that Deputy Ed might be overstepping his bounds. That worry abated when he saw the Deputy standing guard by the front door.

“Good or bad?” asked Joseph. The deputy shook his head and stood aside so Joseph could pass.

The bedraggled rocker soon stood face to face with the Williams family. They were one of the few white families in that neighborhood. Grandpa Williams was nursing on the contents of a small, green, oxygen tank from the comfort of his La-Z-boy recliner. Mrs. Williams huddled behind that massive chair with her twin boys, Chip and Chuck. Mr. Williams stood bare legged behind an ironing board where his pants were currently laid out.

“Now, look here,” said Mr. Williams. “I don’t know what you people want, but just take it and leave.” He saw the way the intruder was eyeing the children so he moved to stand between Joseph and his family. He looked around for something he could use as a weapon and soon realized that a hot iron might just do the trick. He grabbed the steaming appliance and flung it at the intruder as hard as he could. It hit Joseph in the shoulder with a thud and fell to the floor where it instantly began melting the polyester carpeting.

Joseph didn’t even know that the man had thrown it. He was too busy receiving instructions from the voice. He heard the front door click shut and he knew he was on. It was just like some other thing he used to do. What was that? What was it that he used to do on a stage in front of people? He couldn’t remember, but the feeling of being “on” was comforting. He didn’t say a word. He just picked up the hot iron and began swinging it around by its cord. A few minutes later, the Williams’ home became the third killing house.

After the work was done, he felt invigorated. He quickly moved all the furniture out of the main living area and carelessly piled it in the back bedrooms. He knew he wouldn’t need those rooms. The map showed him how many houses contained good people and how many contained evil ones. There weren’t many evil people in this particular neighborhood. The voice wasn’t interested in quantity. Much like a diligent pest control expert, it was only interested in thoroughness. The hardest part was the slow pace. It required patience. The voice would have preferred to stamp out all of the evil at once, but that would have endangered the good people, so that wasn’t an option.

Grandpa Williams was the last body to be added to the stack. Joseph plopped the old man's oxygen tank on top of his bloodied corpse and wiped his hands on his shirt. The family only amounted to a short, four-foot-high pile, but there would soon be more. He retrieved his guitar and held it close while he waited for the next delivery from Deputy Ed.

Chrissie stormed through the house until she found Hek in one of the back bedrooms. She could just make out the woman's elegant form through the open weave of the high-backed wicker chair. "Milt's gone," she said matter-of-factly.

After a long pause, Hek spoke. "Yet you remain here." Hek stood up slowly, but a part of her silhouette remained in the chair. Chrissie looked closer and saw that Nyx had been sitting beside her. Jimi was sleeping in her arms. "I'm sorry if I'm interrupting," said Chrissie, unsure of how to react.

"I would have told you if that were so," said Hek. "We were merely discussing our options. Nyx believes we should strike now, before the Aphota becomes stronger."

"I thought you were going to...I don't know...blow it up or something."

"That's as apt a description as any, I suppose. When something explodes, its component parts are scattered about. That's what we intend to do to the Aphota."

"Aren't you going to kill it?"

Nyx looked Chrissie in the eye, her golden irises glinting in the light. When she spoke, her voice was raspy and distant—not at all like her svelte appearance. "There is no such thing as death. Everything breaks apart and assembles in new ways but nothing ever goes away." She took a deep breath and it rattled in her chest.

"Nyx is correct," said Hek. "If the Aphota is scattered to the winds, things will go back to the way they were before Dexter interfered."

"What happens if you can't stop it?" asked Chrissie.

Hek shot a glance at Nyx and then replied, "We disagree on that point, child."

Chrissie sighed. Communicating with these people was tiresome. "So what do you think we should do?"

Hek let a slight smile settle on her lips. "I want to talk through all the possibilities before we act."

"I might not know a lot about this, but it looks to me like it's time to do something."

"We are doing something. We're discussing it."

"While people out there are getting hurt? Jerry said it was killing people. A lot of people." Chrissie wondered if she might be able to catch up to Milt after all.

"Some would say death is life...and life is death, Christine," said Nyx in her hoarse whisper.

"Our plan was built around Milton," said Hek. "Now that he's departed, we need a new one."

"Fine, then let me help. Or Belinda," said Chrissie.

"We'll consider it."

"But for how long? You act like you don't want to do anything at all. Is that it? Did you make Milt leave on purpose so he could do your dirty work for you?"

Hek remained still. "This thing we wish to do—it's very delicate work. It's spiritual surgery. You don't understand, child."

"Stop calling me child." Chrissie wanted to shout but she didn't want to let these women know how much they were getting to her. "What does it take to get a response from you? Is it just the cuss words that set you people off? Well then, you can go fuck yourselves." And with that, she turned and left.

Nyx laid Jimi on the bed and moved to follow her, but Hek held her back. "She isn't as volatile as Milton. We need what she brings to the table. Her fire—it's something I no longer feel."

Nyx shook her head and her long, black hair drifted around her as if it were weightless. "I do," she whispered. "I feel it every moment of every day. I fight to keep the wolf at bay."

"I know," said Hek tenderly. "This young woman exists inside her feelings. She enjoys them. That makes her very different from you. We need her if we're to succeed against the Aphota."

Chrissie stomped out onto the porch and realized that it was already late afternoon. What had seemed like an hour inside the house was in fact almost seven hours outside. She leaned against one of the posts that held up the porch. What the hell was she waiting for? If time was faster here than in the world she'd come from, that meant that entire days could have passed out there without her even knowing it. Days during which the others could have been hunted and killed by the dark thing the Fours were afraid of. The more she thought about it, the more convinced she was that she should have gone with Milt.

"You can't catch up to him now."

Chrissie turned to find Jerry standing beside her. She glared at him for a moment and then turned back to watch the sun set.

"Fine by me if you don't want to talk, sister. Fine by Hek and the others too. I don't think it's alright by Belinda, though. She needs your help." He sat down in one of the rocking chairs and it creaked under his weight. "See, this was supposed to be about Milt. Weren't to be about you or the others at all, but here you sit. You got to accept it."

"I want to know what we're supposed to do now," said Chrissie. "Right now. This hanging around and thinking about things and talking it over is getting us nowhere."

"You probably won't believe this, but at this point, I figure we're going to do whatever you and Belinda say."

"What the hell am I supposed to do with that? I'm not even sure I believe half of the shit you people are saying."

Jerry stopped rocking and craned his neck around to see if anyone inside had heard her. When he was satisfied that Hek was out of earshot, he began rocking again. "Don't really care what you believe, missy. A thing is or it isn't. You believing in it or not doesn't change that fact. Probably better that you don't believe."

"Jesus! People are getting hurt out there, Jerry!"

"Alright. I reckon you believe that part of it, then. Just answer me one question. What is your first impulse? Right now. Quick. What do you most want to do right this very second?"

Chrissie didn't have to think about it. "Run as far away from here as I can."

"Good. And which way would you go?"

Great, thought Chrissie. *Another fucking game*. She flung her arm toward the highway that went back the way they'd come. "That way, I guess."

"That's the way Milton went too, ain't it?" Jerry had stopped rocking.

"Yeah. So?"

Jerry jumped up and ran inside the house. The screen door slapped shut behind him leaving Chrissie as bewildered as ever. "These people are seriously fucked up," she mumbled to herself. It was time for her to make a decision. She started down the steps but stopped when she heard Hek behind her.

"Finally," said the last person Chrissie wanted to see at that moment.

Chrissie whirled around to face her tormentor. "You people, or whatever you are..." She paused when she saw something akin to excitement on Hek's face. She looked behind the pale woman and saw the other occupants of the house were there on the porch behind her. "What's going on?" asked Chrissie.

Jerry took his place to Hek's right and Dexter to her left. Nyx fell in behind her and Mavis helped Belinda bring up the rear with Jimi in her arms. Hek held out her hands to Chrissie but the younger woman shook her head. "You answer me," she said.

Hek sighed. "You may not believe this, but you are as much a challenge to me as I am to you. I accept that. It's time for me to follow."

"I don't get it," said Chrissie. "You think I know something that I don't know!"

Hek said, "You know where the Aphota is."

"No, I don't," said Chrissie.

"Yes, you do. Your spirit knows. You just don't know how to ask it. Your impulses are pure because, in your heart you only wish to be of service." She turned to indicate Belinda. "You don't know Belinda, correct? And yet, you would help her if she were dying."

"That's just being decent."

"Decent," repeated Hek. She turned and smiled at Jerry. "You were right, Geryon."

"I'm fucking sick of all this mumbo jumbo!" screamed Chrissie. "Now, you let me in on whatever it is you're doing here or I'm seriously leaving you spooky fucks behind!"

Hek cringed with each curse but said nothing about Chrissie's words. For the moment, she was focused on Chrissie's heart. "I want you to lead us to the Aphota. We have a general idea of where it is but we are few in number and we don't understand the world of Threes as well as you do."

"Jesus, lord in heaven, how many times do I have to tell you that I DON'T KNOW WHERE THAT THING IS?!" She enunciated each syllable as she shouted them at Hek.

The ghoulish woman remained unfazed. "Your conscious mind does not know. You need to get past that. We did the same with Belinda and, despite her desire to help, she's lost a great deal of her own fire in the process."

For the first time, Chrissie noticed Belinda's face. It was worn and haggard, devoid of the sparkplug energy she'd previously exhibited. She handed Jimi to Mavis and Chrissie crouched in front of her.

"What did they do to you?"

Belinda shook her head slightly and mumbled, "I did it. I'm not strong enough. Not like you. Not like Della. Please help her. Please." Her eyes were filled with tears.

Chrissie ran over to Hek. "What the fuck did you do to her?!"

"Nothing. We asked if she would help us fill our vessel. It's much like the vessels that Dexter created from his guitars. She agreed and took the lamp into her hands..." Hek paused. Was that guilt on her face? Chrissie wasn't sure. "The Aphota lashed out and used our vessel to harm her. We don't know how, but we dare not use the lamp again." She motioned for Nyx to come forward and the slender goth girl brought over a glass oil lamp that contained a churning storm in its oil font. "Now that the Aphota knows where we are, we must use this vessel to destroy the key to the house." She stared at the place that had been her place of refuge for many thousands of years.

Chrissie looked over at Belinda and asked, "Is it true?" Belinda nodded and Chrissie turned back to Hek. "So you think I can take you to this Aphota thing—to these people it's possessing—just by going where I feel like I ought to go? That sounds pretty weak."

"It is. We know no other path."

"Why me?"

Surprisingly, Nyx answered in her husky drawl. "We sought one person. We thought that person was Milton, but it was never him. It was you. His fire obscured you from our view. We pushed you in ways that were intended to reveal your energies and, like Milton, you refused. We thought we might have been wrong about both of you, but Geryon never gave up." Chrissie looked at Jerry and he flashed her a smile and a thumbs-up. "Show us the way, Christine." For some reason, when Nyx used that name, it didn't anger Chrissie.

The sun had set and darkness had descended upon the little house in the field. Chrissie looked at the others, one by one in the tempestuous light from the lamp. "What about Belinda and Jimi? Are they coming too?"

"Belinda and Mavis will remain here and tend to the child," said Hek. "If we accomplish our task, it is my hope that they will be able to open the path to my house without the key."

Chrissie still didn't understand how a walk through a cemetery could unlock anything, but it didn't matter. For the first time, she felt like these people were giving her the real story. Chrissie turned toward the highway. "Alright, then. Let's get going."

Belinda and Mavis watched as the unlikely group headed toward the cemetery. Once they were inside the circle of trees, a tremendous flash of light and smoke billowed up into the night sky. Mavis knew that was from the destruction of the lamp and the sealing of the doorway between that place of safety and the world of the Threes. Belinda leaned on her shoulder.

"How about we go inside and fix a bottle for Jimi and some supper for us?" asked Mavis. "Might be a long wait."

Rhimes got the families out of the house and parked them under an enormous pecan tree that took up most of the front yard. None of them said a word, especially when the deputies were nearby.

Agent Billings approached Rhimes. "Thirty-two people, all black, and not a one of them will tell us what happened. They act like they're afraid of us."

"Everybody but me," said Rhimes.

Billings thought about it a moment. "Maybe it's because you're the one that found them."

"Could be," said Rhimes. The people who'd been locked inside that house had looked at him like they'd expected him to do something. "Any black deputies in Woolworth's department?"

"I'd have to check. You think the sheriff is..."

"I don't think anything. I just know that what I see before me right now is mighty ugly."

"I didn't mean anything by..."

"I know, Billings," sighed Rhimes. "Me neither. Speculations are on hold and I need it to stay that way. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," said Billings. His family was from the Chicago area. He'd grown up there but he'd heard about the racial atrocities of the past. Some of them still went on. The perps these days just did a better job of covering their tracks.

"For now, let's get these people checked out. Are the paramedics here?" Rhimes looked back toward the highway.

"No, sir. There's not any. There's only one doctor in town and word is he's busy with autopsies."

"Well, the living take precedence over the dead. See to it that the doctor gets some help. Have medics dispatched from Cleveland. In the meantime, I'm going to see about rounding up some transpo. Maybe these folks will open up once we get them away from the crime scene."

Rhimes sent Agent Billings on his way and he walked over to the group of victims. "Ladies and gentlemen," he began, "I want you to know that we're doing everything we can to take care of you. If you need anything, just let me know and you'll have it. First off, we're going to get you fed. I'm sure you must be hungry after your ordeal." No response. Not even a cough.

"I promise you that we will apprehend the person or persons who did this to you, but to do so, I'm going to need your help. Anything that you can remember about them—anything at all—will be helpful. Just let me know when you're ready to talk about it." He felt like he ought to thank them, like at the end of a speech at the Rotary Club. Instead, he just nodded. He was about to go back inside the house when he heard someone whistle loudly out back.

All the deputies looked in that direction and Rhimes held up his hands. "Stay put, deputies" he shouted. Keep an eye on these folks." The group of victims didn't even look up. It was like they no longer took notice of anything. Rhimes drew his sidearm and ran around to the back of the house. No one was visible so he hoofed it over to the triple-wide on the next lot. He reached the front door just as the sheriff was coming out.

"What's going on, Sheriff?"

Bill shook his head. "More of the same. Bodies stacked up just like at the Meyerson place." He walked over and wiped his boots on the grass like a dog who'd just finished doing his business. "There's blood everywhere in there." He whistled again and Butch looked around the corner of the house. Bill waved him over.

"Good thing your deputies are house trained," said Rhimes.

"Funny," said Bill as Butch approached. Bill turned to his undersheriff. "Get Doc Hayes down here, pronto. This scene's fresher than the first one. Maybe there'll be more evidence. And get our boys inside while the scene's still fresh. Let's move!"

"Mind if I take a look?" asked Rhimes as Butch waved more deputies over.

"Be my guest," said Bill. "Hope you're not too attached to those shoes, though."

Rhimes reached in the breast pocket of his jacket and pulled out a pair of tyvek shoe covers. "I came prepared," he said grimly as he reached down and slipped the booties over his Aldens. "Keep your people out here."

"Now, just you wait a goddamned minute."

"Sheriff, do you want to catch these perps?"

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It means, I have suspicions, and those suspicions can either be confirmed or denied by what I find inside. I'm an

investigator, Sheriff. Let me do my job while the scene's still fresh."

"Ah-ight. You got fifteen minutes on your own." He stuck two fingers behind his teeth and whistled again. "Listen up!" he shouted. "I need everybody to prep out here while Agent Rhimes takes a look around. He has fifteen minutes, after which you can go inside." He looked back at Rhimes. "That work for you?"

"Fine, Sheriff, but I'm a Master Sergeant, not an agent." He almost grinned at the old redneck despite his desire to appear stern. He mounted the steps to the mobile home before he let that smile slip out.

The interior of the trailer was dark. The curtains were drawn and all the lights were out. Rhimes slipped on a pair of black latex gloves and flipped the light switch. Nothing. He could see the living room furniture in the light from the doorway, so he crossed the room and slid the curtains to one side. Sunlight flooded in and Rhimes saw that he was standing in a perfectly normal room that just happened to have a set of bloody handprints on one wall. He instinctively looked down and saw that the floor was perfectly clean where he stood.

He turned toward the kitchen. The handprints at the other end of the room intrigued him but he needed to cover the scene methodically. Best to clear the kitchen and dining room before proceeding to the bedrooms. Bit by bit, he explored the west end of the trailer home. He opened the refrigerator and was surprised when its interior light didn't come on. *Of course*, he thought. *No power*. Some things were just so ingrained. You hardly ever saw a dark refrigerator. The interior was still cool, so the suspects couldn't have been gone for very long. He turned back toward the other end of the trailer and found a large figure looming in his path!

"Jesus, Christ, Billings," he said after catching his breath. "Warn me next time, alright?"

"I'm sorry, sir. This place is just..."

"Yeah," said Rhimes as he pushed past the younger man. "It sure is." He moved to examine the handprints. The blood was still red. Fresh. Rhimes held his hand up next to the prints. They were almost the same size.

After a quick check behind him, Rhimes headed down the hallway. He used his flashlight to expose several closed

doors and more blood on the walls. There was a little bit of spatter on the carpet but most of the red stuff was smeared around the doorframes. It looked like a victim had been dragged down the hall. Every potential handhold was decorated with a bloody handprint or scratch mark.

"Don't touch anything," said Rhimes.

"Thanks," said Billings. "This is my first day. Name's Billings."

Rhimes let the comment slide.

They reached the first closed door and Rhimes looked back at the junior agent. Billings was all business again. Good. Rhimes waited for a nod before reaching down to turn the knob. It rotated easily enough. When it clicked free, he pushed the narrow door inward. It opened onto a bathroom that looked like it had just been visited by Mr. Clean. Rhimes was about to move on down the hall when he got a tingle down his back that told him to look closer. The shower curtain was closed and there appeared to be something in the tub behind it. He drew his weapon and clicked the safety off.

"MBI! Come on out!" No response. "I'm going to count to three," said Rhimes in the matter-of-fact style he'd perfected over years of training and practice. "One. Two. Three. Alright, we're coming in." He grabbed the shower curtain with his left hand and pushed his weapon in ahead of him. Even as he did it, he knew better. If there was someone there, the suspect could have grabbed his gun and redirected the muzzle toward a wall or the ceiling. Fortunately, the tub was completely empty except for a bottle of Cookie Monster shampoo.

Billings looked over his shoulder and muttered, "Awesome, Sarge. You've apprehended that fuzzy blue asshole who's been making off with my desserts."

"Ha ha," said Rhimes. "Don't get too relaxed."

"You don't have to worry about that."

They moved back into the hallway and this time Billings took point. He arrived at the second door and looked to Rhimes. Nods. Open. This time they found themselves in a girl's bedroom. Everything was pink and white and there was a collection of Hello Kitty toys displayed on a wicker bookcase. A quick sweep of the bedroom and its closet revealed nothing.

"Batter up," said Billings and Rhimes moved toward the next door. This one had a big sign stuck to it that read, "Keep Out: This Means YOU!" Rhimes wished he could abide that

warning but he had a job to do. He pushed the door inward and the smell hit him hard.

"Jesus!" shouted Rhimes as he backed into the hall. He could feel his breakfast coming up.

"What is it?" Billings covered his face with his shirt sleeve and peeked inside. Yep, definitely a boy's room. There was a bunk bed up against the near wall with disheveled sheets on both beds. Billings moved in, holding his weapon in front of him. When he was satisfied that it was clear, he moved to the closet. He flung open the door and found a mound of human intestines.

"Holy fuck," said Billings as he scrambled back to get away from the nightmare. The walk-in closet smelled like shit and rotten meat. He dry heaved once before Rhimes grabbed him by the shoulders and pulled him back into the hall.

"You listen to me," whispered Rhimes. "You vomit on this crime scene and we will never live it down with the locals. You read me?"

The agent's face was green but Rhimes' voice pulled him back from the ledge. He swallowed hard. "I'm going to go get some water," he said before stumbling back to the kitchen.

Rhimes rummaged through the boys' room one more time to make sure there were no other surprises. Thankfully, there weren't. By the time Billings returned, he was poised at the ready outside the last door.

"Be my guest, Sergeant," said Billings. Both men had their pistols at the ready. They nodded to one another and Rhimes opened the door to reveal...nothing. Darkness. He flicked on his flashlight and nearly shouted when its narrow beam caressed a bizarre work of grisly art. There were at least twelve bodies of various sizes strung up in the center of the room. Several of them were probably the kids who had slept in the bedrooms they'd just explored. All of the bodies had been gutted. The guts that hadn't been stashed in the boys' closet had been used to tie the bodies into a teepee shape in the middle of the room and the victims' stomachs had been stretched over their faces like cauls. The bed had been upended against the far wall to make room for the grotesque sculpture. The carpet made a squishing sound when Billings went to the window to let in some light. As it turned out, the display was no less disturbing in full sunlight.

The two men stood transfixed by what they saw. The smell was much less overpowering than that in the closet. It smelled more like a butcher shop than anything. *If you let your mind go there, you might even find it pleasant on some level,* thought Rhimes. He looked over at Billings. "You alright?"

"Not really. You?"

"Don't know yet. Ask me tomorrow. For the time being, I say we back out and let the local yokels in to collect evidence."

"Fine by me." They were about to clear the threshold when something on the window sill caught Billings' eye. He approached the window gingerly, as if he expected it to leap out and stab him. There was a smear of blood where the window had been opened. Probably where the killer escaped.

"Is that what I think it is?" asked Rhimes.

"Yep," said Billings. "Thumb and index. Clear as day."

Billion Murphy had lived in the same house his entire life. His father had been a sharecropper—one of the few around those parts who wasn't black. He'd taken off one President's Day, so now Billion lived alone with his mom, Ada.

People always asked him about his name, and he was happy to tell the story. He'd been delivered by a local midwife. She was a wonderful caregiver, but she'd never been great at reading and writing. To cover for this deficiency, she'd gotten her granddaughter to fill out the paperwork required by the state. Eventually the girl became tired of being Gram's secretary, so she decided to mess with the names on the forms. You know, for fun. Most of the new names were rhymes of the actual, preferred names, but some of them were outrageous examples of linguistic folk art. Billion's name fell into the latter category.

When Billion's mother realized that her son had been legally named after a number, she was furious, but she settled down when she realized that a twenty-seven dollar fee went along with the name change. Billion ended up being Billion for all of his 15 years.

On this particular day, Billion raked his hands through his dark red hair and peered around the trees at the edge of his yard. He thought he'd heard a scream. He crouched behind a woodpile next to the carport where his mother's 59 Beetle was parked.

The screen door screeched open and a guy with long scraggly hair emerged. Billion had never seen anything like him before. His arms were covered in scratches and in one hand he carried the remnants of an old guitar. Billion thought it was a Les Paul, but he'd never seen one like that before. It looked like it had been dredged up from the bottom of the river.

Billion stayed hidden behind the woodpile and tried to figure out what to do next. If the Beetle was there, his mom was at home. She must've let the man in. Maybe he was a friend of hers. Maybe there wasn't anything to worry about after all. If that was true, then why did his stomach hurt so badly when he looked at the man?

He was wrestling with the idea of going into the house when a woman and a policeman came shambling up the drive. They looked like zombies to Billion. If they were zombies, he

was glad they were the slow, old-school zombies and not the new, super-fast variety.

He took a deep breath and thought hard. *How do you kill zombies?* In most of the movies, you had to shoot them in the head, but on that show, *The Walking Dead*, you could pretty much spear them in the head with anything, no bullets required. Billion chose to believe that the folks who made *The Walking Dead* had done their research, mainly because he didn't know where to find a gun.

He backed away from the house and crept out to a small Tuff-Shed his mother had bought to house their riding mower. There were some long garden stakes in there that would do nicely.

The door opened with a squeak that scared the shit out of Billion. He stood completely still, waiting for the zombie horde to come running toward him, but they never showed. He wiped his brow and slipped inside the shed. It was hot as all get-out in there. He wanted to say it was really *fucking* hot, but his mom had told him that he'd go to Hell if he didn't stop using that language. Up until that day, Hell had been the one thing Billion was scared of. Now he had two fears—Hell and zombies.

The inside of the shed smelled of gasoline and fresh-cut grass. It was hard to make out all the details in the dim light, but Billion thought he saw the metal stakes in the corner. He had to be careful, though. One wrong move and the entire pile of stakes would slide to the floor in a Jenga-like explosion of zombie-luring noise.

Five minutes later, Billion emerged from the shed with a three-foot metal spear in his hands. It felt good. Empowering. He pitied the zombie fool who shuffled his way!

He crossed back to the wood pile and looked at the back door. It was closed and there weren't any sounds except for the birds and the wind in the trees. He swore he'd heard a scream earlier. That was before he'd even seen the zombies so he knew it hadn't been his imagination. After what felt like an eternity, he made up his mind to go inside the house.

The patch of grass between the wood pile and the carport might as well have been the length of a football field. Billion knew that he'd be vulnerable out in the open but there was no other way to the door. He took three deep breaths and skittered across to the Volkswagen. He kneeled behind the car and peeked out to see a smear of blood on the back door. That

one tiny detail stood out in his mind as if he was viewing it through a microscope. It became his whole world. The zombies were real. What if there were a bunch of them in the house? No matter how hard he tried, he wouldn't be able to spear all of them before they bit him. He began to rethink his plan.

After some very hard thinking that involved various projections on how likely it was that his mother had already become a zombie herself, Billion decided to take the Beetle and go for help. A single zombie out in the open was one thing. A house full of zombies that included his zombified mother was something else. He wasn't sure he could spear his mother in the head even if she was trying to eat his brains.

He reached up and opened the vent window so he could pop the lock, then slowly, ever so slowly, he eased the car door open. He didn't have the key, but that was alright. His mother kept an extra one in a small box under the back seat. At that moment, Billion was thankful that his mother was always losing her keys. He stayed low as he eased the front seat forward and climbed into the back seat to look for the box. He pulled the bench seat up and found it, just as he expected. He knew he'd only have one chance. If the car stalled out, the zombies would get him for sure. He climbed into the front seat and inserted the key into the ignition.

The ignition turned over but it made a hell of a racket. He pushed the accelerator while but the engine turned over and chugged and quickly died. Shit! The zombies had to have heard that! Billion grabbed the key and tried again. Nothing.

At that very moment, two very important things happened. First, the three zombies he'd seen earlier emerged from the house. Second, Billion remembered that there was a choke control on the dash that needed to be pulled out to prime the engine. He grabbed for the knob and pulled it all the way out then he fiddled with the key once more. The engine sprang to life and the little car shook.

The cop zombie and the lady zombie stayed where they were while the rock-n-roll zombie moved toward the car. Billion pushed the clutch in so he could put the little car in reverse. He glanced to the side just in time to see the rock and roll zombie swing his nasty guitar at the passenger side window. Glass went everywhere just as Billion felt the clutch pedal go in. He jammed the stick shift into the R position and let the clutch out. The

motor revved and the car jerked backwards just before the engine died. Billion looked down and realized that the parking brake was on.

The rock and roll zombie dove through the window at Billion. Up close, he didn't look like the zombies on TV. He looked more like a homeless guy. Billion dove into the back seat and used the bench he'd removed as a barrier to slow the zombie down. A quick look around reminded him that none of the rear windows opened. No problem. He'd seen guys kick out car windows on that Cops TV show. If he could get the rock and roll zombie into the front seat, he might be able to trap him there and kick out the back glass to get away.

The rock and roll zombie sure did smell bad. If he weren't so afraid of Hell, Billion would have thought he smelled really *fucking* bad. Billion was about to try kicking at the glass when the zombie did a most unexpected thing. It spoke!

"Hey, kid, calm down," said the rock and roll zombie in perfectly articulated English.

"What the fuck?!" shouted Billion, now no longer afraid of Hell. It couldn't be any worse than this! "Zombies can't talk!" He was on the verge of tears. It was one thing to get away from real life zombies. It was another for them to break the zombie rules that had been so well established over forty odd years of pop culture.

"Hey there, man, who said I was a zombie?" asked Joseph. The inflection was odd, but his voice didn't waver.

"You sure as shit LOOK like a zombie, dude!"

Since he'd begun conversing with the voice, Joseph really hadn't considered his appearance, nor did he consider it now. The Della Voice told him what to say to soothe the young man. The Caretaker in Joseph's heart could feel how much the voice needed the boy.

"I just got away from some real zombies," said Joseph. He pointed at Della and Deputy Ed who were lingering by the door. "Those zombies."

Billion was suspicious. The guy might not be a zombie but he sure was weird. Maybe even crazy. That could be even worse.

"How do I know you're not going to feed me to them to save your own skin?" Billion raised his eyebrows. *Well?*

Joseph stared off into space for a moment and then answered. "I'll open the door and lure them inside. Then you can get away. Alright?"

Billion nodded. That sounded good to him, but then he planned to hoof it the hell away from the rock and roll crazy man as fast as he could. He watched as the stranger climbed the steps to the back door, his guitar thumping on each step as he dragged it behind him. Once he was inside, his zombies followed. It was Billion's one and only chance. He flung open the driver's side door and tumbled out onto the gravel drive. His makeshift spear was on the ground beside him so he grabbed it and ran for the road.

Three lunging steps later, he was being pinned to the ground by his best friend's sister. "Marcy? Let me up! There are zombies in my house!" She didn't seem to hear him. She was a good bit stronger than Billion, and she weighed about three times as much as him too.

For a split second, Billion's mother crossed his mind. Where was she? She'd been in the house when he'd left that morning. Those thoughts were interrupted when Joseph and the zombie twins came back outside. A moment later, Billion could feel something inside his head. It was like he was a puppet and someone had their hand up his ass trying to work his mouth. Marcy got off him and he stood up, but someone else had taken control. The images that flashed through his mind were scarier than any movie he'd ever seen. The puppeteer showed him how the zombies had killed all the white people in the neighborhood except for him and Marcy. It even showed him how they'd murdered his mother. The grisly sights, sounds and smells were used to break him inside. He cried like a baby for his mother but nary a tear fell from his eyes. Then, without warning, there was calm. Peace. He felt love descend upon him like a heavy blanket. It slowly and deliberately suffocated him.

Milt stopped at the first intersection he'd seen in an hour. A quick check of his phone told him that there weren't any cell towers in the vicinity. There was nothing but farmland in every direction. There wasn't even a street sign or a highway marker to identify the crossroad.

The Tundra's gas gauge was around the quarter tank mark. He needed to pick the right direction or he'd end up hoofing it with the red can of shame. If only there were someone around to ask. Joseph and Della were still out there and he had to find them before Hek did.

He decided to keep rolling south. As long as he stayed close to the river, he was bound to stumble upon civilization eventually. He put the truck in gear and rolled through the intersection.

Mile after mile passed and the fog of despair began to cloud Milt's thoughts. What if he ran out of gas? What if he got stranded out there? He was at his lowest point when he saw it—a TV antenna poking up over the foliage on the side of the road. He slowed to a crawl and eventually spotted the dirt driveway. Finally. If nothing else, he could get directions or call triple-A for gas.

The overgrown bushes and trees that lined the drive scraped the sides of his truck as he urged her forward. Milt pressed on. When he finally cleared the tunnel of trees and bushes, he saw a bright green house. At first, it looked cheerful, but up close, it was evident that any cheer that had once been present had long since rusted away. The structure was perched atop leaning pillars of mismatched river stones. The windows were covered with dirt and the porch was filled with junk that even a scrap yard would turn down.

Milt turned the truck around in case he needed to get out of there right quick like, but he didn't shut off the engine just yet. He waited. One minute. Two. Four. No one came out to see who he was and what he wanted. What if no one lived there? There was only one way to find out. He stepped out of the cab and into a humid heat that accosted him like a dockside whore. He was sweating profusely by the time he mounted the rickety porch steps.

The front door appeared to be the newest part of the house. It was dark red with a large brass knocker that was

shaped like a lion's head. Milt lifted the knocker and let her rip. The percussive sound echoed inside the house, complementing the buzzing cicadas in the surrounding trees. He waited a few moments, but no one came to the door. A quick glance around the overgrown yard confirmed that no one was coming from that direction either. He knocked again, this time more insistently. Again, no answer.

Milt peered through the windows but between the dirt on the glass and the darkness in the house, he couldn't see a thing. He was walking around the house when he noticed a telephone pole. From it, several wires ran into the attic.

He wandered around to the back of the house. If the windows back there were a little cleaner, he might be able to peek inside. It seemed like a good idea until he realized that the entire back yard was overgrown with a dense thicket of milkweed. If he just plowed through it, he'd end up covered in its rubbery sap. He went back to the porch and found an old lawn mower blade that had been unceremoniously dumped in the tub of an old washing machine. He didn't put too much thought into how it got there. He just made sure he was holding onto a part of the blade that wasn't sharp and he got to swinging. A few minutes later, he was at the back door. Trouble was, the sill was almost four feet off the ground. The steps that had once provided access were now completely rotted away. Not one to give up easily, Milt thrashed more weeds until he discovered a couple of old milk crates with Elsie the cow etched into their sides. He stacked them on top of one another and climbed up.

He pushed on the door and his first effort nearly landed him on his ass. He held onto the door frame until the milk crates stopped wobbling underneath him. *The door's probably swollen inside the frame*, he thought. There was no doorknob, just a hole where one should be. He bent over and peered into the house. On the far wall of the kitchen was an olive green, rotary phone with a long, tangled cord. Bingo.

He hit the door with the base of his fist. It didn't budge and he nearly fell off his perch again. That door wasn't going to move unless he was able to put some muscle into it and that wasn't likely to happen from atop those milk crates. He jumped down and hacked his way around the back of the house to see if there was another way in. The far end of the house was engulfed in a tidal wave of kudzu vines. They'd choked a large

tree to death and were now working on the house. Milt figured the kudzu had the upper hand in that competition. He was about to look elsewhere when he saw something under that cascade of greenery. He chopped the kudzu with his lawn mower blade and crept underneath the canopy.

It felt like a cave under those vines—cool and moist. After the pressing heat of the delta, it was a welcome change. The entire area had once been a patio, complete with an ornate wrought iron dining set. The metal work was almost unrecognizable under the moss that was slowly upholstering it. Milt slid his hand gently along the back of one of the chairs. Like the cicadas, the moss comforted him. He remembered visiting his grandparent's farm when he was just a kid. An old clay pipe and some tree branches had been all he needed to build his own fort. He was getting lost in his own romantic memories of growing up in the south when a harsh voice rang out from within the house.

"What you want, white boy?"

Milt jumped at the unexpected sound and spun around to see...nothing. No one was there. Then he noticed an open doorway that was partially covered with vines. He moved toward it but stopped when he saw the figure looming in the darkness.

"Hello?" he said. "Is somebody there?"

"Damn fool, I done asked you what you want!" It sounded like an old black woman to Milt. Surely an old woman wouldn't hurt him.

"I'm sorry if I'm trespassing, ma'am..."

"If? Oh, you know you trespassing, but it ain't how you think."

"Um...okay. I'm lost and I'm just about out of gas. If you'd be so kind as to point me toward the nearest gas station, I'll be on my way." Milt could barely make out the small figure. It was a shadowy lump without any visible arms or legs. His mind raced with possibilities.

"Ain't no gas here, white boy. That witch didn't teach you nothing, did she?"

"I'm sorry but I don't know any witches." He thought about it and concluded that he'd probably laid a handful of Wiccans in his day, but he didn't think they counted.

"Your name Milton, ain't it, white boy?"

Milt froze in place. "Yes, ma'am. That's right."

"Then you the right one. Now, stop acting a fool and get your ass in here. We got a lot to talk about."

Despite the fact that Milt had just spent the last twenty minutes trying to get into the old house, it suddenly became the last place he wanted to go. The Hansel and Gretel story loomed large in his mind. "Can't we just talk out here?" he asked.

"I told you to stop acting the fool. Now come on in this house 'fore that kudzu get you."

Milton thought the old woman was kidding until he turned to see that the vines had overgrown the mossy patio furniture in the few moments that he'd been talking to her. That lit a fire under him and he ventured slowly into the house.

The back room was so dark that Milt couldn't make out where the walls were. With all the rotten boards and cracks in the structure, it should have been well lit even without electricity. He held his hands out in front of him to try and keep from running into anything.

The voice of the old woman echoed through the empty house. "This place home, I reckon. It ain't much to look at so I'd just as soon you keep your peepers to yourself." Suddenly, the voice was right next to him in the darkness. "My name ought to be known to you, Milton. Shit, that witch didn't help you none at all."

The darkness felt like it was pressing in on him—scrambling his thoughts. He looked back the way he'd come and realized that even the open doorway was no longer visible. "Seriously, grandma, I don't know any damn witches, so you can take your withered foot off of that particular gas pedal right now."

Silence. Had he gone too far? Maybe, but he was tired of the games. He just wanted to get back on the road. He heard what sounded like a large, metal lock. Milt imagined the big, goofy sort of cartoon padlock that you might see in a Scrooge McDuck cartoon. He reached out, desperate to find a solid surface, but the walls of the house had disappeared.

"Oh, you knows a witch, alright," said the old woman. "She done brung you back to life then left you to wander around on your own. She a witch sure as you standing here."

Milt wasn't willing to bet on the validity of either statement. Was the old woman talking about Hek? "Are you one of them? The Fours?" he asked.

The woman laughed until she fell into a coughing fit. "They call themselves that, don't they? 'Fours'! It's funny 'cause they pretending they better folks than you and me, Milton. As if four is the highest number can be reached. Four higher than three, for sure, but it don't mean nobody else can't get no higher. Lower numbers might even be better. Who's to say?"

Between the double-negatives and the old lady's assumptions, it was hard for Milt to follow her logic, but it was obvious that she knew who Hek was. "You one of them or not? Jesus Christ, this is..."

"Curses clog my ears, boy. Make it real hard to listen. Even harder to answer. I 'spect you need some time to cool off. What you say?"

Milt got the sense that his next utterance could have dire implications. For all he knew, he could end up trapped in that emptiness forever. He closed his eyes and sat down where he was without another word. He took several deep breaths and tried to calm himself. He thought about feeling the floor beneath him for clues to his whereabouts but he ultimately rejected the idea in favor of showing the old crow that he didn't give a shit about any of it. In the process, he actually came to realize that his surroundings didn't matter. He was still there, wasn't he? He was alive and kicking and he felt no pain. So what was he afraid of?

Moments passed and Milt felt a cool breeze on his face. He heard the old woman's voice again, only this time it sounded like she was above him. "Open your eyes," she said softly.

Milt did as he was told and saw that he was back outside, in the middle of a neatly manicured lawn. The house and all its junk were gone, replaced by a beautiful garden. He looked up into the round face of the old woman. She was beautiful in her way, dressed in a layered gown of greens and golds. She had an odd hat on her head, and underneath it, long dreads. She was flattered by his attention. "Takes some tending to get 'em this long, you know?"

"Yeah, actually, I do. I tried dreading my hair about five years ago. Bad idea. Ended up cutting them off."

"White boys ought not have 'em noway." She smiled and held a hand out to him. He took it and she helped him to his feet with a surprisingly strong grip.

"What happened to your house?"

"Weren't never no house here. You know that. Got a lot of growing up to do, young man. Did some today. More than a little bit, actually. Real proud of you."

"I don't understand."

"You mean you *won't* understand. You got to put your mind to it." Milt started to say something else but she waved an impatient hand at him. "Hush up for now. I got important business for you to take care of." Her eyes narrowed and she focused her attention on him like a cat sneaking up on a bird. She reached into her gown and pulled out a velvet Crown Royal bag. She handed it to Milt and continued to hold her hand on top of his after he accepted it. Her skin was as soft as tissue paper. "This my toby. I be giving it to you if you be having it. Just know that if you do take it from my hand, you bound to finish the errand I give you."

Milt felt the weight of the bag in his hand. There were things inside but he couldn't make out what they were. Damn, this was one hell of a weird day. "Are you going to tell me what this errand is before I accept?"

The old woman shook her head. "Ain't no faith in that now, is there?"

"Then at least tell me if this errand has anything to do with finding my friends."

"That's fair, I reckon." She eyed him up and down and then leaned in close and whispered, "If you does what I ask, you'll find your way. Can't say no more than that, young man."

Milt nodded and slowly pulled the bag away from the old woman's grasp. Once it was in his sole possession, it felt heavier. Denser. He untied the gold rope that bound the bag shut and the old woman leapt toward him with surprising speed.

"No, no, no! Whatever you do, don't open the bag. Toby be losing his charm if you do that. Keep him closed and keep him close. Understand?"

"Yes, ma'am." Milt tucked the bag into the front right pocket of his jeans and patted it.

"Good thing, putting him so close to your white rooster," said the old woman. Milt thought she was making a crude joke but then he noticed that she wasn't laughing. "Now, you gone get right back in your truck and drive a far piece down this here highway. You gone think you done drove too far. In fact, you gone know it. That's when you'll be where you going. Push

through it, young man. Keep driving, even when you think you gone fall right out. When you reach your limit, you gone be there. Building covered in vines just like the ones you seen here. Get inside that there blanket of life and light a fire. Keep it burning and those you seek will find you. Then we'll be seeing how this all works out."

"Hold on a minute. Are you saying you don't know what happens next?"

"Don't nobody know that, boy."

"Ma'am, please forgive me if I offend you with what I'm about to say. I just... What the hell am I supposed to do with this bag?"

"You ask that without no anger so I figure you'll know soon enough on your own. Some answers is better if you cipher 'em out by yourself. Think on it. You not back in the place you know yet. You just halfway there. The bag and your own balls will be getting you all the way back. Once you there, it's up to you to finish this." She backed away.

Milt nodded but he didn't understand. "You never did tell me your name," he said with a half-smile.

"You right. Now, go on. Git!" She shooed him away like he was a pesky dog begging for table scraps.

He had the feeling the old woman was about to haul ass out of there so he asked one last question before she could get away. "Is Joseph alive?"

"That ain't the right question, boy," she answered with a sparkle in her eyes. "You learn that real good and then you'll know your answer."

"Yeah, but..."

"No more talk. I need to be taking my constitutional. Be seeing you again, though. I be right sure of that."

She turned to walk back toward where the house had been and Milt knew better than to continue to badger her. She'd dismissed him. He hiked across the wild garden and climbed into his truck. When he turned to look back, the old woman was gone.

Chrissie emerged from the little cemetery to find that the time of day had shifted to very early morning. She felt like she'd suddenly set foot on one of those moving sidewalks they had at the airport. The effect was so disconcerting that she fell to her knees.

Jerry ran over to her. "It's mighty hard dropping to Three. We done it enough that we're used to it, but the first time's a real bear. Take deep breaths."

Chrissie looked up at the older man who was once again wearing his police uniform. She smiled and he helped her to her feet. "Y'all are going to have a hard time if your entire plan consists of following me. I'm not going anywhere fast." She hung her head and threw up right out in the open. It embarrassed her at first but then she thought these people ought to be able to handle it. She'd been asked to believe that they were from another dimension. The least they could do was put up with a little vomit. She wiped her mouth and Jerry helped her to her feet. Her head was spinning more slowly now. Maybe the upchucking actually helped.

"The food," said Dexter, as if that explained everything.

"Oh, yeah. You ate before we left, didn't you?" asked Jerry.

Chrissie just glared a 'DUH' at him.

"Your body adjusts to a lot of changes coming over. The food, not so much. We usually don't eat before crossing."

She hit him in the shoulder as hard as she could, which wasn't very hard at all but it made her point for her. "Thanks for warning me, asshole." The swear word made the Fours all look to Hek, but she didn't bat an eyelash. Chrissie figured that since they weren't in her house, she could say whatever she damn well pleased, and she was right. She was about to say so when she heard a car engine backfire. Jerry was nursing his ancient patrol car to life.

"Still starts!" he yelled from the driver's seat. He slid out and leaned over the open door. "You drive stick?" he asked Chrissie.

"I can't drive that thing. I'm not a cop."

"Well, then, we going to have to find..."

"She'll drive," said Hek. She approached Chrissie and spoke to her in hushed tones that the others couldn't hear. "This is why you came to us, Christine. There is no danger to you except that presented by the Aphota."

Chrissie wanted to believe her but she'd made some mighty big leaps to get this far. "Stop pushing so fucking hard, alright?" she whispered.

Hek looked like she'd just been presented with a difficult riddle. "I don't understand."

"Doesn't feel so good, does it?" asked Chrissie. Before Hek could answer, she added, "Just get in the car." She walked toward the police cruiser on legs that were becoming steadier by the moment. "Everybody who's going on the road to nowhere better saddle up!" They all looked at her like she'd just told them to bake a dog hair cake. "Seriously? Saddle up? Never heard that one before? All these years of observing and...just get in the car."

"Are you mad at us, Christine?" asked Jerry with an innocence that almost made Chrissie cry.

"No, Jerry. I'm not mad at you. Just tired and nauseous and a little bit frustrated."

"Don't you worry," said Jerry. He looked her in the eye with those bloodshot orbs of his. "We trust you, girl. You won't do us wrong."

Chrissie almost laughed at his earnestness. It wasn't something she encountered very often and she didn't quite know how to take it. Fact was, she'd have felt more comfortable if he'd given her a hard time or been sarcastic with her. Like Milt. She felt an odd pang of fear as she thought of him. She shook the thought out of her head as she climbed into the police car and slid the wide bench seat all the way forward. The mirrors were next. She carefully adjusted each one manually. The rearview gave her a clear picture of Hek, Nyx and Dexter in the back seat while Jerry settled in next to her up front. How the hell would she ever explain this unlikely group of people to anyone? Maybe she'd tell them she was shuttling performers back and forth between a goth show and a blues festival.

The engine was already warmed up, thanks to Jerry, so Chrissie popped the emergency brake, slid the transmission into first gear, and tore off down the road, screeching through a stop sign in the process.

She smiled at Jerry. "I can handle stick just fine."

"So I see," said Jerry as he struggled to secure his lap belt.

Hek leaned forward and grasped the screen between the front seat and the back. "Is something wrong?" she asked softly.

"No. Why?" asked Chrissie.

"It seems we're moving rather...rapidly."

"Yeah, it's cool, isn't it?" Chrissie smiled. "If we're going somewhere, might as well get there as fast as we can, right?"

Hek nodded stiffly and settled back between the terrified faces of Nyx and Dexter. Chrissie watched them in the mirror as they whispered back and forth but she couldn't make out what they were saying.

The highway was thankfully free of traffic and Chrissie was able to stretch the car's engine to its limit. 65. 70. 75. 80. She rolled down her window and laughed when the backseat was suddenly filled with swirls of long, black hair. Hek and Nyx struggled to rein it in.

"Think you ought to slow it down a bit, Christine," said Jerry. "Don't want to tempt fate here, do we?"

At first, Chrissie was pissed at the old man. She wanted to tear that wide-brimmed hat off his head and beat him with it. Then she settled down and began to see the humor in the situation. She eased her foot off the gas. "You're right. Sorry. I just want to know where we're going, don't you?"

"I'd rather just get there in one piece," said Jerry with a wide grin that exposed the gold crowns on his molars.

Chrissie shook her head and looked out across rural Mississippi. She wasn't sure where they were, but it didn't really matter. Most of Mississippi looked exactly the same. She looked at Hek in the rear view mirror. "So, how am I supposed to know where to go?" she asked.

Hek brushed her flyaway hair aside and sat forward. "Don't think about it. Let the car drive you. Indulge yourself."

The doubletalk was wearing away at Chrissie's good humor. "Seriously? What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means that you should look around you. If you see anything that's of interest to you, go there. Follow your curiosity."

"You sound like a yoga instructor."

"What?" The wind noise from the open window was making it hard to talk but they'd be sweating their balls off if she rolled it back up.

"Nothing," said Chrissie over the road noise. Hek nodded and leaned back again.

Indulge myself? Thought Chrissie. *There's nothing out here to be interested in.* They hadn't seen anything but telephone poles and farm land so far, but she'd only been driving for a few minutes. Chrissie settled in and tried to relax.

The road they were on took them through the tiny town of Duncan and then dead ended into a divided highway to nowhere. Chrissie hung a left and cruised north. The morning dragged on and what had started as a fun adventure, quickly became a chore. No one in the car was talking and there was nothing outside to spark even the tiniest bit of curiosity. On top of that, it was starting to get hot.

The divided highway took them around Clarksdale so they didn't even see it. Chrissie drove on. When offered a major highway just north of Clarksdale, she took it, hoping for a change of pace but it was not to be.

"Does all of Mississippi look like this?!" she yelled at no one in particular.

"It's always been a largely agrarian community," said Jerry.

"Thanks a lot, Mr. Encyclopedia" muttered Chrissie.

"You're quite welcome," said her copilot with genuine pride.

Halfway to Batesville, Chrissie turned down a tiny dirt road that ran off to the right. The tires kicked up giant clouds of dust, making the car look like a bottle rocket skitting along the ground.

Hek leaned forward and asked, "Did something here attract your attention?"

"Yeah," said Chrissie with a sneer. "Being bored out my skull made that tree over there so very attractive that I had to drive over to get a closer look."

"I see. Did you wish to stop and examine this tree more closely?"

"Nah. Now I just want to see if I'm going to wreck this car or gouge out my eyes first. Right now, the odds are fifty-fifty."

“You’re joking. I see. It’s a good way to dispel tension.” With that, she leaned back in her seat and retrieved a pair of sunglasses from a fold in her gown.

Chrissie glared at her in the rear view mirror and aimed the car at the nearest pothole. The vehicle shuddered violently and threatened to slide out of control but Chrissie turned into the skid and regained control. No one said anything, but the passengers in the back seat held on a little tighter.

Joseph was sitting with an old man beside a comforting fire. The guy smiled at him and got up to close the door to the cozy room. When he leaned over to whisper in his ear, Joseph woke up. The image of the Caretaker dissolved like sugar in water. Joseph was in a shed. It was the same shed that Billion had used as a hideout but Joseph had no idea who Billion was. He barely knew his own name.

He tried to stand up and found that his legs hurt so badly that he couldn't. He grabbed hold of the riding mower next to him and slowly pulled himself to his feet. It was then that he noticed his jeans. They were black with filth. He touched his thighs and the pants legs were as stiff as pottery pieces. What the hell was going on? What had happened to him? He remembered Della's voice. Had she been whispering to him? He didn't know. All he could remember was blood.

He took a deep breath and tried putting his weight on his legs again. This time they held firm. They hurt like hell but at least he could use them. He stumbled to the shed door and pushed. It was locked from the outside. There were numerous cracks in the walls so he pressed his face up against one and took a look around. There was an old house with some people milling about in the back yard. Joseph didn't notice that none of them were of color. He was more concerned with breaking out of that shed and getting away undetected. That would be difficult with his legs hurting as bad as they did. Maybe he should rest a while. Wait them out. He was leaning back on the lawn mower when he heard Della's voice, clear as day. He scurried back to the crack in the wall.

"Friends, we're going to be moving on soon," said Della. "Before we do, I want to tell you how proud I am. I love each and every one of you with all of my heart and I know that good things will come to us once we complete our task!" She hoisted a nasty old guitar overhead to accent her words.

Joseph expected cheers or possibly a round of applause. Instead, the people stared straight ahead, transfixed. Was he really seeing these things? He rubbed his eyes and realized that his hands stank to high heaven. They were covered in the same dried mud that had coated his jeans. Maybe it wasn't mud. Somehow, he knew what it was. It was dried blood. He tried in vain to wipe his hands clean. He was

rubbing them in the dirt when a shadow passed over the cracks in the wall and made him flinch. The door flexed inward and Joseph could hear someone putting a key into the lock. The hasp squeaked and the door slowly opened. The bright light outside made it hard to focus on the figure standing there. It looked like a woman. Was it Della?

"Hello, honey." It sounded like Della. Sort of. Joseph didn't answer. He was willing his eyes to adjust faster. He wanted to see her before he made up his mind. "Don't you know me, sweetheart?" she asked.

Honey? Sweetheart? Della wouldn't have used those words unless she'd done something awful. And why wasn't she coming over to him? Her legs were probably in better shape than his were at the moment. Joseph slid to the back corner of the shed and put the large riding mower between them.

"What's wrong, sweetie? Aren't you feeling better?" She held up the ratty guitar. "I had to borrow your instrument." Joseph remembered that guitar. It was important. "You can have it back now. I think you need it more than I do."

She held the guitar out to him. At first, he felt compelled to take it. Wasn't that everyone's impulse on being handed something? But just as he was about to touch it, he caught a whiff of its nasty smell and he backed away. Something was terribly wrong. Something had crawled inside that guitar and died. It sounded crazy but that was what he felt. The woman moved into a beam of light that came through one of the cracks and he saw her clearly for the first time. She looked like Della would if she'd put on zombie makeup for Halloween.

"I'm not going to hurt you," said zombie Della. "I want to help you feel better."

Joseph looked around for a weapon. There wasn't much to choose from in the tiny shed. There were no tools to speak of and the 500 pound mower wasn't going to do him much good. He frantically searched the dark corners of the shack and noticed that several boards had rotted away in the far corner. Maybe he could escape after all.

He spoke to zombie Della. "Please. I don't want you to see me like this. Let me get cleaned up."

The Della Thing smiled and Joseph noticed that she was missing several of her front teeth. He ran his tongue around his own mouth and found that two of his canines were missing as

well. Weird. He considered whether or not his dental insurance would cover something like this. Probably not.

"Is that what's bothering you, sweetheart? Don't be embarrassed. We don't have to worry about things like that." She moved closer, still clutching the guitar in her outstretched hand.

"No!" shouted Joseph. She was about to grab him when he slid across the seat of the riding mower and swung himself toward the corner of the shed. He hit the wall with a thud and one of the boards splintered and fell away. He struggled to force his way through but the hole was too small.

"Baby? Where are you going? Really, you don't look that bad to me."

Joseph ignored her and worked his weary fingers into the cracks between the boards. They'd been nailed on from the outside. If he was going to get free, he'd have to push them off the building's frame. He worked at the loose boards and several of them loosened, but the opening still wasn't large enough to allow him through.

Zombie Della seemed to be a little slow on the uptake, but the reality was quite different. She glared at him as he kicked at the loose boards. "And just where the fuck do you think you're going?" she screeched.

That sealed the deal for Joseph. He knew that she wasn't his Della. Hatred boiled out of her face as she reached for him. If she could have grabbed him at that very moment, he believed she would have killed him with her bare hands. She couldn't reach him, though. The riding mower was between them and her motor skills were almost as rusty as his own. She fell against the mower's steering wheel and howled with anger as the nasty old guitar hit the ground. Zombie Della scrambled for it like her life depended on it.

Joseph didn't think about what he was doing. He grabbed the guitar by its neck and immediately fell back onto the cool dirt floor.

Della smiled and Joseph saw that he'd been mistaken about her. She wasn't missing any teeth. Her skin had regained its lively hue and her eyes sparkled with kindness. It was his Della after all. How could he have ever doubted it?

"Darling," said the Della Thing. "Are you alright?" She walked around the mower and reached down to help him to his feet.

Joseph tried to answer but his lips wouldn't move. That was okay. Somehow, Della knew what he wanted to say and answered his questions as if he'd spoken them out loud. He didn't second guess any of it because he wasn't being allowed to think.

"We need to get back to work, honey bunch." The Della Thing had so much positive energy now. It's projection of Della was getting better and better. Joseph welcomed this new version—Della 2.0.

They emerged from the shed and the brilliant sunlight burned Joseph's eyes. It didn't seem to bother Della, though. Joseph stopped squinting and realized that he liked the burning sensation. As his eyes adjusted, he came closer and closer to staring directly at the sun. The burn was pleasant. He could feel it eating away at him. His eyes were very close to being permanently damaged when he felt a hard slap across his face. He looked over and saw Della's face through the purple and black dots that obscured his vision.

"Stay with me a little while longer, baby." The words were sweet music to Joseph's ears. He nodded as Della turned on a garden hose and splashed his face with lukewarm water. The rubbery smell brought him back to his childhood and summer afternoons spent running through the sprinkler in his front yard. The Della Thing could tell that she was losing her first, best energy source and for just a moment, she panicked. Without Joseph's spiritual battery plugged into the guitar, she was going to fall far short of her goal. She'd spent the last few hours looking for a new battery but she'd found none. She'd made each and every member of her growing cadre of helpers grasp the guitar while she attempted to connect to them. She'd killed the first few by taking what little energy they had left. The next few survived the test, but just barely. She could force her way into their minds and force their wills to bend to her own but she couldn't take from them the one thing she needed most. Only Joseph could provide that. It troubled her to realize it, but it was also comforted her in a way. Why was that? How could this wrecked shell of a white man lend her any comfort whatsoever? It was puzzling and distracting.

The Della Thing led Joseph to the little patio behind the house and climbed onto the redwood picnic table to address her troops. "This is just the beginning, friends," she said. "As we

grow in number, our aspirations also grow. The Earth will soon quake under our feet and what was wrong will be righted once and for all." No response came from the group. Not even a nod in her direction. She cocked her head as if to say, *Oh well. Never expected much from this group of idiots to begin with.* Her speech was more for her than for the zombified white folks, anyway. She dropped her arms down to Joseph and he helped her down to the deck.

The Della Thing said, "Everyone check your pockets. We need to find cars to take us to the next stop." Every one of the people in Billion's backyard scrounged around in their pockets, looking for car keys. When they found some, they ran around trying them in anything that resembled a working automobile. Della sighed. This wasn't efficient but it could be effective. Her helpers were like army ants. With enough of them at her beck and call, she'd be able to swarm anyone, no matter how many she lost along the way. Numbers had won every single battle across the expanse of history and she intended to see that the trend continued today.

"Sheriff, I know your computers here are slow, but they're not that slow." Rhimes was starting to let his exasperation show on his face. He'd spent most of the previous afternoon and evening down at the high school, setting up cots in the gym and hoping that he'd be able to earn the trust of some of the folks they'd rescued. So far, no pertinent data had come from his interviews there. He had to keep reminding himself that that was what they were—interviews. Not conversations with friends or playful banter over the water cooler. They were interviews with one goal—the collection of information that would tell him where to look for the killers.

"How about this?" asked Sheriff Woolworth. "You tell me what those folks down at the school told you last night and I'll let you in on the prints. How's that?"

"Sheriff, I told you—those people aren't capable of processing the things that they saw. They didn't tell me anything."

"That's not what Butch said. He said you were having a good sit-down with some of them."

Rhimes sighed and rubbed his face with both hands. He'd lost whatever patience he'd had for this redneck and, if he wasn't careful, he'd end up clocking the old fool and getting arrested himself. "We don't have time for another pissing contest, Sheriff! You either give me the print data or watch my ass get Reynolds down here in the flesh."

Bill didn't like the sound of that any more than he had 24 hours prior. Was the MBI guy bluffing? No matter. He was just yanking the guy's chain, anyway. "Just get your undies out of your ass crack for a minute, will you?" He turned to one of his rookies and tried to remember the boy's name. "Travis?"

"Yes, sir?"

Bill felt like he'd just won the lottery. "Get me the fingerprint report from Butch."

"Yes, sir," said Travis and he darted off down the hall. What followed was an uncomfortable silence between the two lawmen as they waited for the rookie's return. They looked at everything in the room but each other and both were relieved when Travis returned with a manila folder in hand. He handed it to the sheriff.

"Thank you, Travis," said Bill. He opened the folder and looked the data over one last time before giving it to Rhimes.

Rhimes took it gingerly, trying not to seem too eager, then he tore it open and looked at the results. Joseph Austin Miles. From Memphis. Was he really the killer, and if so, why wasn't the sheriff crawling all over this? "I don't have time to play games, sheriff. Are these the real results?"

"Oh, they're real, alright. Thing is, that information's meaningless without analysis." The old cowboy grinned and sauntered back toward his office where he intended to spend the rest of the day catching up on reports.

"Sheriff?" No response. Rhimes saw Agents Billings and Moreno down the hall by the conference room and he motioned for them to follow him outside. Once they were out in the parking lot, he shared the folder with them.

"Has an APB been posted for this Joseph Miles yet?" asked Billings.

"No. The locals aren't following up on this at all. It's weird."

Moreno finished his coffee and handed the folder back to Rhimes. "This is the whole report?"

"Yeah. Something else is going on. Call Jackson. See what you can learn about Mr. Miles."

Moreno stepped away leaving Billings and Rhimes at the side entrance to the station. They could see that the activity level inside was settling down. The sheriff had called off his dogs.

"Why would he back down?" asked Billings.

"Only one answer," said Rhimes. "FBI."

"You think this thing crosses state lines?"

Rhimes nodded. "If the sheriff thinks we're all going to get booted off the case anyway, why keep messing with us?"

"So what do we do?"

"I want this collar. This is some heinous shit and I didn't come down here to fetch coffee for the feds."

Moreno was still talking on the phone when he jogged back over. "...then send it to the computer there and I'll pick it up. No tracks. Promise." Rhimes slung one of his patented "what the fuck" hand gestures at Moreno and the junior agent held him off with his free hand. "Thanks, Sandy. I owe you one." He ended the call and smiled.

"Well?" asked Rhimes.

"I was on hold with the office so I placed a second call to Memphis PD. I've got an old girlfriend who works there." He grinned.

Rhimes was not amused. The clock was ticking and he needed a lead now. "What did she have to say, other than 'go fuck yourself'?"

"On the contrary. We're going out again next time I'm..."

"The information, Moreno!"

"Right, right. Sorry. Joseph Austin Miles is well known up Memphis way. He disappeared last week. Dumped his car in the river and took off. No body, no nothing. Memphis PD thinks he might have something to do with a couple of murders there too, but they don't have any evidence beyond the circumstantial."

"They have a file on him?"

"Yeah. Sandy's going to send it to my Dropbox. Off the record. We're good as long as I let her know if we get any leads." He paused and looked at Rhimes before dropping the other shoe. "You realize this means the guy crossed state lines?"

"Way ahead of you. I think the feds are already on the way. We need to get moving."

"I can pull the file from my phone if you want."

Rhimes rubbed the stubble on his face. He needed a shower. He could drive home and leave this one behind if he so desired. It was practically out of his hands already. That sort of behavior wasn't in his nature, though. He'd made master sergeant by being tenacious, both with his cases and with his superiors. Why give that up now?

He threw the car keys to Billings. "Take the wheel." He strode around to the passenger side and all three men climbed into the unmarked car.

"Which way?" asked Billings.

"North. Got to be. That's the direction the killings were headed in. They were following the highway so that's the way we're going too."

"The deputies at the checkpoints would have seen them," said Moreno from the back seat.

"Depends." Rhimes turned in his seat. "You got me that file yet?"

Moreno's focus immediately returned to his phone. "One more minute. Maybe two."

Rhimes pinched the bridge of his nose. "Sorry, Moreno. You're right. The odds are against us finding this guy. If he's alone and on foot, there's no limit to the directions he could have gone. Hell, he could be sleeping in a cotton field right now. I just...I think he isn't. I think he's looking for more people to kill and that'll keep him close to the populated areas. That means close to the highway."

Billings said, "That's good enough for me," and he punched the accelerator to the floor.

By the time they reached the southern edge of Gunnison, Moreno had a picture of Joseph on his phone. Rhimes took in the details of the man's face. He looked kind. His face was the sort that attracted homeless people because they knew he'd probably give them his pocket change.

"Boss?" It was Billings. Rhimes looked over at him as the young man slowed the car. A sheriff's car was in the road up ahead. One of Bill's deputies had been told to patrol Gunnison just in case the perps showed up there.

They pulled over and Rhimes showed Joseph's picture to the deputy. After studying the picture for a little too long, the deputy said hadn't seen him. Rhimes knew the guy would call the sheriff and let him know that they'd asked, but he wasn't worried. Sheriff Bill Woolworth had taken himself out of this game.

Rhimes got back in the car and they drove on, more slowly now. There were a handful of houses, most of which were well kept. A few weren't, but that was the way it was in rural areas like this. It wasn't a planned community with rules about how far from the curb your flower beds had to be. The MBI agents were relieved when they saw signs of life. Joseph and his accomplices hadn't struck there yet.

"Where to now?" asked Billings.

Moreno was eyeing a map on his phone. "Like you said, they could be anywhere."

Rhimes motioned for Billings to pull over and they all huddled around the map. "More cow paths than roads in these parts," he said. "Hoofing it would have its advantages."

"If they really are on foot, we'll need air support to find them," said Moreno.

Rhimes frowned. He wasn't likely to get that to happen without a fight. Fuel costs alone would roughly double the price

of the investigation in a matter of hours. He turned to Moreno and Billings. "What would you do?"

"Come again?" asked Billings.

"If you'd just murdered a bunch of people and done God knows what to their bodies, what would you do next?"

"I'd take a fucking nap," said Billings with a laugh.

Rhimes didn't laugh with him. "That's right. You'd be tired. There was a delay of eight to twelve hours between the two sets of killings. That means that Mr. Joseph Austin Miles has had just enough time for the third inning to start. So why haven't we found more bodies?"

"Could be he moved on," offered Moreno.

"Maybe," said Billings. "But the violence changed between the first attack and the second. The first was sloppy. The second was more controlled. The body sculpture alone indicates that the killer was enjoying himself more the second time around."

Rhimes nodded. "Guys that do things like this need to escalate each experience. The fact that he escalated to such a degree less than a day after the first set of killings tells me that he's pushing himself to do more. It's like there's a foreman watching him and evaluating his work, and this guy needs a raise."

"So he's killing again? Right now?" Moreno didn't want to believe it.

"Probably. Just not here. We ought to head back south and..." Rhimes' voice trailed off as he watched a black Toyota pickup truck hang a hard right off the highway ahead. The guy inside was obviously in a big hurry. He'd nearly turned the truck over in his haste to make the turn. "You see that?" he asked.

Billings nodded. "You think he pulled off the road to avoid us?"

"The driver was a white guy with a big head of hair. Down past his shoulders."

The three men looked at the picture of Joseph. They were going to need backup.

After nearly three hours spent bouncing along dirt roads, Chrissie began to feel nauseated again. It was time to get back on the pavement. Unfortunately, she had no idea which way to go. The back roads had been awfully windy and she'd taken almost every turn she'd come across, so her sense of direction was a little scrambled. She eventually stopped trying to sort it out and took the next path that veered toward the west. A few miles later, they were cruising on broken pavement.

"Where are we?" asked Chrissie out loud. She didn't get an answer. She glanced over at Jerry and he simply shrugged. Twenty minutes later, her heart sank into her shoes. Ahead on the left was a very familiar feed and seed and on the right was a little cemetery. They'd taken a round trip to nowhere.

Chrissie pulled over and turned to face the passengers in the back seat.

"Why did you stop?" asked Hek.

"Are you kidding me?" Chrissie had had enough. "We're back where we started. It's like passing 'Go' in Monopoly."

"I don't understand what that means," said Hek calmly.

"Monopoly? Really? You don't have eight-dimensional Monopoly where you're from?"

Hek's blank stare told her all she needed to know.

"We've driven this shit can..."

Jerry cleared his throat. He had obvious affections for the old vehicle.

"Sorry, Jerry," said Chrissie. "I'm just...we're wasting our time!"

"No. We are not," said Hek calmly.

That answer didn't register for Chrissie. She wanted to scream at the woman in the back seat but she restrained herself. Experience had proven Hek to be immune to emotional outbursts. "Then explain it to me," said Chrissie, "or I'm calling it a day."

"We are clearly not where we were when we started this morning." Hek spoke as if she were instructing a child on the finer points of the ABCs.

Chrissie shook her head as if there were rocks in her ears that were keeping her from hearing. "What?"

"Shall I repeat it for you, child?"

Chrissie held up slender fingers and counted off each of her points. "One: we came through that cemetery right there and got into this car right here. Two: we drove off in that direction," she pointed behind Hek. "Three: we drove around aimlessly all day. Four: we are now back at the cemetery, and five: we're parked in almost the exact same spot where we started."

Jerry started to speak but Hek stopped him with a glance. "Is that how you see it, child?" she asked.

That word was making Chrissie bristle. She glared at Hek and said firmly, "Yes and no. Yes, that is how I see it because there really is no other way to see it. And no, I am not a child."

Hek sighed and straightened the folds in her dress before speaking. "This world rotates at over 1000 miles per hour. It moves around the sun at approximately 67,000 miles per hour. The rates at which the sun moves through the Milky Way galaxy and that galaxy through the surrounding cosmos are immeasurable. None of us is ever likely to occupy the exact same point in space twice in our lifetimes, no matter how long they may be. Not only that, but our cellular structures have changed in the time during which we have traveled. We are not the same beings we were this morning. This is not the same spot we left from. Nothing is the same as it was then. Everything is in a state of perpetual change. That's what life is."

The brief lecture made Chrissie's face burn. She was embarrassed to feel so small. She'd never in her life thought about anything beyond her reach. Perhaps it was time she started. "I'm sorry," she said softly. "Maybe I am a child." With that, she got out of the car and strode off toward the cemetery.

Jerry started to go after her but Hek stopped him with a lithe hand on his shoulder. When he looked back at her, she said, "Let her sort it out."

The day was almost over. It wouldn't be long before the trees around the cemetery were casting their long, shadowy fingers across the ground at her feet. She stared at her hands and held back her tears. If she was so smart, why did she make such big mistakes? No one should be depending on her! She shouldn't have even gotten in the truck with Milt that day. Stupid, stupid, stupid! She beat herself up for a while, then slowly came back to the moment. What was she supposed to do next?

"Act," said Hek from behind her. Chrissie spun around to face the slender woman. In the afternoon sunlight, she looked quite fragile. "Your actions define you, as mine do me. Will you help us, Christine? We're closer to our goal than we've ever been before. I can feel the thrumming of the Aphota. It's being nursed to health nearby. Can you not feel it?"

"If you can feel it, then why do you need me?"

Hek stepped closer. "I can't explain it all to your satisfaction. For now, let's just say that we need your..."

"What?"

"It is not my intention to offend you."

"Just say it. I don't have much pride left to hurt."

"Let's just call it naiveté. If the Aphota were a radio station, any Four would be able to tune it in clearly, but the energy of the broadcast would overpower our radios and distort the signal. You, however, would be capable of receiving its signal on a radio that's less sensitive and therefore free of the distortions of particular memories and knowledge. That is why we need you."

Chrissie nodded. She didn't entirely understand but the radio station metaphor helped. "So we keep driving?"

Hek smiled. "Yes, please."

They went back to the car and found Jerry slumped over in his seat, asleep. Without a word, Chrissie started the car and turned south on highway one. She tried to let go of her thoughts, but it wasn't easy. The more she imagined letting go, the more she held on. Such was her nature, but eventually her worries fell away in the cool air of a beautiful evening. She let her desire go and instead focused on the pleasure of the moment. The gentle hum of the engine. The whisper of the tires on the pavement. The hard surface of the steering wheel. The orange light of the setting sun. She sighed deeply and simply let herself be.

There wasn't much along that stretch of highway to distract her. It was mostly farm land on the left and levees on the right. Every now and then they'd pass an old sharecropper's house but Chrissie hardly even noticed.

It was almost dark when they reached Gunnison. Chrissie slowed down to take a look around. Like the rest of rural Mississippi, it was somewhat sparse. A handful of clapboard houses, a few trailer homes, and lots of weeds.

Jerry stirred from his sleep and snorted as he jolted upright. He massaged his temples and asked, "Are we there yet?"

Chrissie answered softly, "Maybe." For the first time since leaving the cemetery, she'd found something that interested her. Ahead on the left stood a brick building that was almost totally engulfed in kudzu. The voracious vine had turned the large single-story structure into a living sculpture.

"What's that?" asked Chrissie as she eased off the gas.

Jerry spoke up. "Had a bad flood here. Remember Katrina?"

Chrissie nodded. "I didn't know the damage came this far north."

"It did if you were close to the river. Places like this were left to rot. Cost too much for folks in these parts to rebuild." He looked around. "This Gunnison?" She nodded and he continued. "That was their school house. Used to be real nice, too."

Chrissie stopped the car just past the dirt road that led up to the ruined building. The motor churned, waiting to be put to work. Chrissie felt the same way. She wanted to help but she wasn't sure if she was trying too hard. Maybe she was.

"Do you want to go in there?" asked Hek.

Chrissie shook her head. "No. It's alright. False alarm."

"But it interests you."

"I've always liked ruins. I called them leftovers when I was a kid. The first place that I saw like that was on Cumberland Island. You know that place?" Hek shook her head. "It's off the coast of Georgia. My aunt lived in Savannah and took us out to the island one summer. The best part was seeing the old houses on the island. The Carnegies had vacation mansions built there. Now they're just ruins and the descendants of their horses run wild on the beach." Chrissie's eyes glazed over as she remembered the deep feelings that the place had stirred in her. "It was scary. And romantic. And sad. Sad to see those places abandoned but cool to see how nature had taken them back."

Hek pointed at the vine-covered building. "Let's take a look."

Chrissie eased the car up the access road. At the top of the hill, a crumbling parking lot lay between them and the

building. It was overgrown with weeds, some of which stood over six feet tall. She plowed through them to get closer to the school.

She leaned forward to look skyward through the windshield. "You see that?" she asked.

The others hung out their windows and looked up too. Jerry was the first to verify what she'd seen. "Smoke," he said. "Looks to be coming out of the building."

Chrissie glanced into the rear view mirror and saw something flash across Hek's face, but the leader of the Fours remained silent. Chrissie pulled around back and stopped the car. Jerry's keys swung from the ignition, clanking against the metal dashboard. None of the car's occupants moved.

"What's wrong?" asked Chrissie.

Jerry chuckled. "We're just waiting." He turned sideways in his seat and rested his hand on Chrissie's shoulder. "See, we been chasing this thing for a long time. And now that we're here, not one of us has a clue as to what to do about it."

"You don't know that," snipped Nyx.

Jerry grinned. "Like hell, I don't. You know it too. If not, you're more ignorant than I thought." He waited for her retort but none came.

"What about the fire?" asked Chrissie.

"We haven't see no fire yet, have we? Just smoke. That, I don't know about. What I do know is that we're all, every last one of us, afraid to get out of this here car." He capped his statement with a smile and reached for the door handle.

"Wait," said Hek. Chrissie thought she'd follow it up with another crazy explanation of what was happening, but she didn't. "I'll go. The rest of you stay here. Just in case."

Jerry nodded and sat back but Nyx grabbed Hek's arm. "That's not how this works."

Hek pulled away and Dexter let her slide across his lap and out the open door. He held onto Nyx as Hek closed the car door and turned to face the building. The school's main entrance was a gaping maw. Two large, green doors leaned against the hole, both rusted through and falling off their hinges. Yellowed safety glass windows on either side of the entrance looked back at her like diseased eyes. She sighed and forced her legs to move forward. Before she got to the doors, she heard something behind her. She turned to find Chrissie standing there.

"You ought to have somebody with you," said Chrissie. "No telling what's in there."

Hek knew she should tell Chrissie to go back to the car. It made sense. Chrissie was extremely valuable to them. But then she considered the fact that Chrissie was the one who had led them there. If the Aphota was to be defeated, it might be Chrissie who would make the difference for them. It would be wiser to trust the young woman's impulses than to tread on them with simple logic. She took Chrissie's hand. "Stay close to me," she said. "If anything happens, I want you to get away from here as quickly as you can. Agreed?"

"Okay," said Chrissie.

The right side door fell aside the second Hek touched it. It hit the ground and the noise echoed through the empty hallways of the building. The pair stepped around the door and into the darkness. Hek rubbed her right thumb and forefinger together in a brisk, back and forth motion and a small point of light appeared between them. She manipulated it with her hand until it shone ahead of them like a flashlight. Chrissie shot her a confused glance but said nothing.

There were doors on both sides of the hall with laminated numbers glued over their frames. Chrissie tried one before Hek could tell her not to. The knob turned but the door wouldn't budge. Hek shined her light ahead. Twenty feet or so down the hall, there were rows of lockers. Some of them hung open, their contents now part of the dried sludge that covered the tile floor.

The uneven surface made Hek extra cautious. She shone her light into every nook and cranny before allowing Chrissie to move ahead with her. The Aphota was extremely clever. The school could be a carefully laid trap.

The hallway widened and opened onto what had once been a common area with a large skylight. The skylight was intact but it was completely covered in muck and kudzu. It reminded Chrissie of the large terrarium that had been in her sixth grade science teacher's room. Something about it had always scared her. All that life sealed up in a plastic ball. It seemed wrong.

Hek pointed to an open door on the far side of the atrium. The sign over the door said LIBRARY. "Approach from the left and stay outside while I enter," Hek whispered. Chrissie

nodded and moved into position. Hek extinguished her light and they could both see a faint, orange glow emanating from the room. It lit the air around them like a lighthouse on a foggy night.

Chrissie looked to see if she could find something she could use as a weapon. Sure enough, there was a three foot section of square metal tubing sticking out of the dried mud. She pried it free and gave it a test swing. Perfect.

Time passed slowly as Chrissie stood guard outside the library. Minutes felt like hours. She leaned around the door jamb to see what was keeping Hek. There was a long desk and a bunch of toppled book carts. She stepped inside the doorway and ran right into Hek! She would have screamed if Hek hadn't grabbed her and held her hand over her mouth.

"I told you to wait," said Hek. Chrissie shook her head and Hek felt like strangling her. Was she dismissing her guide again? Perhaps. She sighed and motioned for Chrissie to stay behind her.

They still couldn't see the source of the glow, but they could smell it. Someone had started their own indoor campfire. The scent would have been pleasant if they'd been sitting in front of a fireplace. In this particular situation, it was downright disturbing.

Several of the shelves had collapsed and water-damaged books were piled everywhere. Once they reached the far side of what had once been called "the stacks" by library personnel, the path became clearer. There was another, smaller atrium in the center of the library much like the larger one outside. This one was enclosed on two sides by curved walls.

Hek held a finger to her lips and stood ever so still. She waited for whoever was on the other side of the wall to give away their position, but all she could hear was the crackle of the fire. Chrissie wasn't quite so patient. Unbeknownst to Hek, she moved toward the other end of the wall. She was almost there when her feet slipped out from under her. She fell to the floor and knocked over one of the few book carts that had been left standing. Books crashed to the ground and the metal cart clattered across the uneven floor. Both women froze in place as the sounds echoed through the hallways and eventually faded to silence.

Hek grabbed Chrissie and dragged her behind one of the bookshelves. Chrissie's heart was racing. She leaned close to Hek and whispered, "Somebody's over there. I saw a figure

move through the light.” She saw fear on Hek’s face for the first time ever, but it didn’t dull her resolve. “I’m going to take another look.”

Hek shook her head. “Death would be a vacation compared to what Erevos will do to you.”

“Good,” said Chrissie. “I haven’t had a vacation in a long time.” She was tired of sneaking around the edges of the main event. Even if it meant having her ass handed to her, she was going to find out what was really going on. She snuck up to the curved wall and slid along its surface to the point where it opened on what had once been a children’s reading area. On the far wall, she could see the shadow of the figure that stood in front of the fire. Was it a man? If so, he wasn’t moving. Chrissie looked around and found a small piece of brick on the floor. She threw it into a pile of broken bookcases on the far side of the library. It clacked against the wooden shelves and disappeared into the rubble.

“Did you see the shadow move?” whispered Hek from behind her.

Chrissie nearly jumped out of her skin. She gave Hek the meanest look she could manage and then shook her head. She pointed at herself and then at the fire. Hek shook her head but Chrissie didn’t see her. She’d already eased her head around the corner. She took a quick look and immediately moved back to Hek. “It’s a man,” was all she said.

Chrissie’s heart was racing. Had the guy seen her? Surely he’d heard the brick. Maybe it was some sort of statue. Or maybe he was just toying with them.

Hek pushed past Chrissie to peek around the corner herself. The young woman’s foolishness was contagious. The man was just a silhouette but she could make out a long coat and a cowboy hat. She sighed and slid back to where Chrissie was waiting. “It is not Erevos,” she said with obvious relief.

“Who is it, then?” asked Chrissie.

“I don’t know. A cowboy, perhaps.”

“What?! Did you say a cowboy? A fucking cowboy?”

Hek frowned. “He’s wearing the traditional accoutrements. I’ve seen pictures.”

Chrissie would have laughed out loud if the situation hadn’t been so dire. She motioned for Hek to wait there.

Holding the piece of steel tubing out in front of her like it was a sword, she moved around the corner and into the light.

“Hey, you,” she shouted with all the fierceness she could muster. “What the hell are you doing in here?”

The man turned toward her and belted out a warm laugh. He sounded friendly enough, but he was still just a silhouette. No telling if he had any weapons on him. “Do you think this is funny?!” shouted Chrissie. The man continued to laugh with gentle delight. “You answer me or I’m going to brain you with this fucking pipe! We’ll see who’s laughing then!”

At the mention of a physical threat, the man backed up beside the fire. It was an involuntary action that allowed the light to expose his face. He was bearded and his long hair had turned a silvery grey, but his smile was unmistakable.

Chrissie dropped her makeshift sword and gasped. “MILT?!”

"Say what, now?" asked Sheriff Woolworth. He couldn't believe his ears.

"One of those MBI agents is on the horn, sir. Says they found the suspect. He's holed up in an old school building in Gunnison."

Bill knew the place. He should—he'd run plenty of vagrants out of there since the flood had gutted it. If the killers had moved north, they could be in Gunnison by now.

"Not a word about this to anyone, son. Understand?"

The rookie nodded. Bill clapped him on the shoulder and darted around the corner to the dispatch desk. He closed the door behind him and settled into a chair before donning the dispatcher's headset.

"Woolworth here. Over." The sheriff expected laughter from his MBI colleagues. The whole thing had to be a joke to make him look like an idiot in front of the FBI.

"Sheriff, we need backup." It was that black son of a bitch. "Highway one, mile marker 133. As many men as you can spare. Over."

Bill took a deep breath and then keyed the transmitter. "Rhimes, describe your situation. Over."

"Sheriff, you know goddamned well what our situation is. We've located the suspect and..." The radio went dead. Probably another ploy to try and reel him in, but he wasn't falling for it. No-sir-ee, Bob.

"This is all very entertaining, Rhimes. I got one for you too. Did you know that abuse of an official law enforcement radio channel brings with it a mandatory six month sentence? Over."

"Sheriff, more suspects have just arrived. They're driving a '62 or '63 Impala black and white. From what I can see, there are at least five of them. Three Caucasians, possibly females, and two African American males. That makes a total of six suspects on the scene. Over."

Bill chuckled. That old boy was doing some mighty fine acting. Of course radio acting had gone out with the Charleston so he probably wouldn't win any awards, but damned if he didn't sound like he was really worried. "Rhimes, don't you have anything better to do than mess with me? I'm not sending any

deputies your way. Do you understand? Not a one. The feds have arrived so give them a call. Over.” There was a long pause. Dead air.

Rhimes conferred with the other two men in the car. “Think we could take the six of them by ourselves?”

Billings shrugged and looked at Moreno. Moreno leaned forward and said, “We’re not equipped for entry. Plain and simple. They could barricade themselves in there and we’d end up with a standoff.”

“We can’t let them leave,” said Billings.

Rhimes knew both men were right. If he couldn’t convince the sheriff to send backup, they’d be on their own. They could wait for troopers to be dispatched from the MBI but those officers were spread pretty thin.

“You still there, Rhimes?” The agents could hear the sheriff smiling over the airwaves.

Rhimes keyed the mic. “Still here. Just trying to figure out where else we could get some assistance. Gunnison got a hunting club? Over.”

“Naw. No hunting club. They got a prolific quilting circle, though. I’m sure you’d be right at home there. Over.”

Rhimes leaned back in his seat. There had to be a way to convince the sheriff. “Bill, I get the feeling you’re just a nigger-hating, white boy. Is that more or less correct? Over.”

Billings nearly fell out of the car. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Let’s see if he takes the bait.”

Seconds turned into minutes. Billings was certain that the sheriff had split, but Rhimes knew better. He keyed his mic again. “I’ll take that as a ‘yes’, Sheriff. You know, it occurs to me that the only folks that have been killed by these suspects were white folks. All my beautiful nigger brothers got off scot-free. That must bug the shit out of you. I suppose I ought to go in and warn the perps that we’re onto them so they can continue their good work, ridding this world of you white vermin. Over.”

“Now you listen to me, you sack of shit. I don’t know what’s going on up there but I’m through with you. Now you tell me what’s really happening and stop trying to rile me up! Over!”

“I’ll bet the FBI sent you at least one African American agent. That’s a triple-A, just like me. Does he talk like a white man? I bet it really chaps your hide when we do that, huh? You

hate it when one of us is smarter than you, don't you, Sheriff? Over."

Sheriff Woolworth was so mad that he felt like putting his fist through the screen in front of him. *By God, I will not let this nigger play me*, he thought.

"I asked you a question, agent Rhimes. Either answer it or clear this channel. Over."

"Only real racists get mad when they're accused, Bill. Only those people who harbor hatred but want to appear all warm and fuzzy on the outside. It didn't escape my notice that you've got an all-white department down there in nigger-town. How'd you pull that off without anybody noticing? Never mind. Don't answer that. It's not important. What is important is the fact that I'm going to file a grievance against your department, your county, and you personally if you DON'T GET ME SOME FUCKING BACKUP, RIGHT FUCKING NOW! OVER AND OUT!"

Rhimes flung the mic into the floorboard of the car and turned off the radio. He took a deep breath and chuckled. "Help's on the way," he said.

"Rhimes? Over." The sheriff waited a moment and tried again. "Rhimes, goddamnit. Answer me. Over." No luck. Rhimes was either sitting there listening or he'd turned his radio off leaving Bill to make his own gravy. He got up and strode out into the hall. The rookie who was supposed to be on dispatch duty had been waiting outside the whole time.

"Everything okay, Sheriff?" he asked nervously.

"Fine. You know where Butch is?"

"Um..Undersheriff Regan?"

"Yes, goddamnit, do I have shit in my mouth?"

The rookie stammered, "Uh, no, sir. Um, I saw him...let's see. I think it was out by the Coke machines. Out back. That's where he was when..."

"Thank you, son. Now, get back to work." Bill stomped off toward the parking lot leaving the rook in a puddle of sweat.

Bill found Butch lounging outside, a cigarette in one hand, a Dr. Pepper in the other. Damned if that boy didn't drink a lot of Dr. Peppers. It was a wonder he didn't smell like that

shit. Bill looked around to make sure no one else was within earshot.

"Listen here, Butch. We got ourselves a situation. Rhimes and his bunch have cornered a group of suspects up at the old schoolhouse in Gunnison. Six in all. I want you to quietly take a couple of cars up there to check it out. No rollers. No sirens. Just slide in all quiet like and see if that nigger's yanking my chain. Think you can do that?"

Butch nodded. "Sure, Sheriff." He scanned the parking lot. "I don't think there're enough deputies on duty now, though. You alright with me calling a few in?"

Bill rubbed the stubble on his chin. "Best to swing by and tell them in person. I don't want the FBI jackasses to get wind of this if it's just a practical joke."

Butch eyed his boss. "Do you think that's what it is, Bill? Best to tell me before we go in there loaded for bear."

"Fuck, Butch, how am I supposed to know? That old boy's been looking me up one side and down the other since he got here. Still, there was something about what he said that rang true. Just check it out, okay?"

Butch felt like saluting but he knew that sort of thing was frowned upon by Bill. Instead, he shook his boss's hand and said, "Consider it taken care of."

The Thing had achieved nearly complete control of Della's body. The illusion of her living, breathing countenance was almost complete. Joseph could hear her voice in his head and see her smiling face before him. Something was still missing, but Joseph couldn't put his finger on it and he didn't care. He finally had his Della back.

"Stay on the road," admonished the Della Thing from the passenger's seat. They'd stolen a blue PT Cruiser from a large woman who they'd found watering her lawn a few miles back. She wouldn't be needing the car again. She was busy cooling her heels in a pile of human carcasses that rested on top of the freezer she'd used to stockpile hamburger meat when it went on sale. Lord, those grandkids of hers liked hamburgers.

Joseph tried to focus on the task at hand. The car was a stick shift and, despite the fact that he'd driven stick for years, he couldn't quite remember how to make his muscles perform the necessary actions. The car jolted ahead in fits and starts at the front of a caravan of five cars. All five were stuffed to the gills with people who had fallen under the spell of the Della Thing.

The Thing made Della's body turn to look at the car behind them. The trouble with becoming more embedded in that shell of flesh was that it was getting harder and harder to see out of it. The Thing was actually becoming Della. It was no longer an it. It was a she. A she named Della who had physical limitations. For example, she could no longer tune into the thoughts and senses of those she controlled. She could maintain her control indefinitely but the feedback loop was closed. She didn't know why. All she knew for sure was that she was still, technically, connected to the guitar—locked in there by that pawn shop fucker named Dexter. Dexter fucker, Dexter fucker, Dexter fucker! She laughed.

While there were disadvantages to her current position, there were advantages too. Choking the life out of a person with hands that could actually feel the throbbing gristle beneath its finger meat was a thrill that she'd never experienced before. She made Della's head look down at Della's hands. She giggled with glee when she saw the dried blood caked on those once gentle appendages. She was experiencing a moment that felt

like salvation when Joseph stopped the car. Her pleasure flipped on itself and, in the blink of an eye, became rage.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing, asshole?!" she shouted. The car windows were rolled up and the AC was off. It was 127 degrees inside the PT Cruiser. Everyone was sweating bullets but it still felt hotter when the Della Thing got angry.

Joseph turned toward Della and looked into her eyes. "You wanted to go to Gunnison," he said. "Well, we're here." He pointed at the sign that proclaimed "WELCOME TO GUNNISON, pop. 245."

The Della Thing could see the hurt in his expression and she reveled in it. She wanted to rub rock salt into that wound and see his grimace turn into cries of pain. She wanted to torture Joseph with Della's body and make his one true love into the executioner of his dreams. She wanted and wanted and wanted but she knew better than to indulge herself at the moment. There was still so much work to do.

"I'm sorry, love," said the Della Thing. "I just thought that maybe you didn't love me any more." Joseph's face fell into his lap and he started to cry. The Thing thought, *This is too easy.*

"NO!" squealed Joseph. "Oh, no, no, no! I could never stop loving you!" He crawled over the center console and fell onto Della's body. He pinned her arms to her sides so she couldn't do much more than pat his upper arms with her bloody fingers.

"There, there. It's alright, dear heart. All is forgiven. Now, do you think you can keep driving or should I get Billion up here to help you?"

Joseph shook his head and wiped his tears on his sleeve. "No, I can do it," he said. A string of snot ran from his nose to his chest but the Della Thing didn't tell him about that. She rather enjoyed how pathetic it made him look.

She patted him on the shoulder as he tried to put the car in gear. The sound was deafening. He was grinding the teeth off of all the gears in the transmission, one by one. He tried again and again, but he only made it worse. Eventually, the engine seized and stalled. The Della Thing had to calm herself. If she hadn't, her rage would have lashed out and destroyed Joseph, the caravan, and at least a third of Mississippi. That wasn't the plan. She had been born with a purpose and she intended to see it through.

Della's body clumsily climbed from the car and walked to the next vehicle in the caravan. It was Billion's mother's Beetle. She knew that Joseph would have no better luck with that one so she walked to the next car—a black, 1978 Lincoln Continental. Surely Joseph could drive that boat.

She opened the driver's side door and pulled fat Marcy from behind the wheel. "Get out," she said as she slung the girl to the pavement. Marcy didn't complain. She got up and watched the Della Thing get into the car. The Thing looked up to see Joseph standing there beside Marcy in the road and she nearly clawed Della's eyes out. Annoyance was a new sensation for her. The longer she was locked inside Della's body, the more Della's body infected her with its own invisible poisons. It was becoming more and more difficult for her to keep the cap on while someone else shook the soda pop.

"You two!" she shouted. "Get your asses in the goddamned car right now!" She slid across the massive bench seat and crammed the old man the locals called Biter against the door. Joseph slid in next to her, followed by Marcy who tried to cram her way back into the driver's seat. "You fucking idiots!" shouted the Della Thing. "Marcy, get in the BACK seat! NOW! Jesus, I'm going to fucking kill all of you!" Della's face was fire engine red and her heart was doing double-time paradiddles in her chest. Joseph leaned over and tried to embrace her and that made her even angrier. "Get off me, you fucknut! Now drive this car where I tell you before I completely lose it!"

The Della Thing heard the car start and she felt the rocking motion of the giant vehicle but she couldn't see or hear anything around her. It was like she was entombed in the basement of that pawn shop again. How long had she been there? Decades? Centuries? She wasn't sure.

Minutes later, she was finally able to open Della's eyes and look around. They were rolling north on highway one at a snail's pace. She looked at the speedometer. None of the markings made any sense to her but the needle was way over at the left side. She realized that she'd blacked out and she wasn't sure how long she'd been gone. That was dangerous. Her army could have disbanded and run off into the woods leaving her alone to fend for herself. If that happened, she wouldn't have the energy to start again. She would die, or at the very least, fade away until she could find a new source of energy. That could

take a very long time in a sparsely populated area like Gunnison, Mississippi.

"Are we still in Gunnison?" she asked Joseph out loud. She spoke with Della's mouth, using Della's vocal cords. She didn't even realize she was doing it.

"Yes," said Joseph. He was obviously afraid. He no longer felt the comforting presence of the Della Voice between his ears. Now she only existed outside him and she was always angry.

The Della Thing looked around and tried to get her bearings. She looked at Joseph and tried to reach out for him with her mind. Nothing. She couldn't read him at all. She'd been stripped of almost all of her senses.

"Stop the car," she said as calmly as she could.

"What?" stammered Joseph. "But you said that you..."

"I SAID STOP THE CAR, ASSHOLE!" screamed the Della Thing, now more Della than Thing. Had she miscalculated? Was she trapped? Her thoughts were racing in a million directions at once. She looked down with Della's eyes and saw the guitar leaning against Biter's leg. She grabbed it and hugged it to Della's chest, then she did something she didn't know she could do. She began to cry.

Joseph leaned over to console her and he drove the black stretch job off the road and right into a ditch. They hadn't been going very fast so no one was hurt, but the Della Thing dug Della's fingernails into the wooden surface of the ruined guitar as if trying to find a way into her own sarcophagus.

"Della?" asked Joseph tentatively. "Honey, are you alright?"

That was the straw that broke the demon's back. Della's arms reached out and grabbed Joseph by the throat. "Don't you fucking patronize me, bitch!" Joseph struggled against Della's impossibly strong grip grabbing at her fingers with what little strength he had left. She meant to kill him and, by God, that was what she was going to do. As she sank her fingers into his fallow flesh, the Della Thing felt a fresh surge of energy. It calmed her, much like a needle full of junk calms a heroin addict. Just before the last bit of life was milked from Joseph's withered frame, she released him and fell back against Biter.

The remnants of Joseph's mind swirled as he collapsed against the driver's side door and gasped for air. Had the love of his life just tried to kill him?

"No, dear heart. No. No," said the Della Voice. It was back inside his head.

"Yes!" said Joseph. "You hurt me! On purpose!" He spat the words at his goddess, desperate to hurt her back. Instead, he just fueled her with his hate.

"Get out of the car," she said. "All of you."

She realized for the first time that the Lincoln was sitting nose down in a ditch, its massive rear end poking up toward the sky. She flung the passenger side door open and Biter fell to the ground with a thud. She climbed out and stood on top of him, dragging the guitar behind her. Was he dead? She probed his mind. No response. Oh well. He wouldn't have done her much good, anyway. She stood on his lifeless body and surveyed her surroundings, then she climbed up to the highway. The other cars were a jumble in the road behind the Lincoln and all of them were still running because she hadn't told her army to turn them off. It was at that moment that she knew what she had to do. She'd come too close to losing herself in the meat locker of Della's body. Now she had a new plan.

"All of you form a circle. Everyone except for Joseph." The bedraggled, white Mississippians shuffled around her until they formed a crude circle. Instinctively, they joined hands, as if they were about to sing Kumbaya. The Della Thing led Joseph to the center of the circle with her. She held the guitar close, like a little girl holds her favorite baby doll, and locked eyes with Joseph as she began to chant.

Joseph was suddenly and inexplicably severed from his link with the Thing. She maintained eye contact with him in an attempt to keep him in check but she'd released him for the moment. For the first time in longer than he could remember, he was completely alone. Sure, the Della Voice had grown distant before, but not like this. This emptiness made his mind feel raw, like an open wound that was being poked with a steak knife. He fell to the ground, weak and broken, as the others continued their chant. He couldn't make out what they were saying or if it was even English, but he couldn't have cared less. For the first time, he realized that Della was gone—truly gone—and that she'd been replaced by a monster.

Milton stumbled out of the school with Chrissie and Hek's supporting him. It really was him. Chrissie was sure of it. At first, she'd thought it was another trick—perhaps a test devised by the Fours—but no, he was who he claimed to be despite the changes in his appearance. His hair was almost completely white, with only a few strands that recalled the dark black mane she remembered. The clothes he was wearing were so worn that they looked like they might fall right off his frail body. How had he changed so drastically in such a short period of time.

"I need to sit down," he said.

Hek nodded and helped him over to Jerry's car. When Nyx saw who Hek and Chrissie had brought out of the abandoned school, she was truly taken aback. Her gasp spoke volumes.

Milt fell into the passenger's seat and Chrissie knelt beside him to caress his bony hands. "Milt?" He stared off into the distance. "Milt, do you remember me?"

He focused on her for a brief second and then his eyes moved on again. "Yes. You. I remember you," he muttered. "You spat on me once. Or was it twice?"

Chrissie turned and looked up at Hek. "What happened to him?"

"He must not have exited through the key," said Hek. When Chrissie continued to look puzzled, she explained. "The cemetery is a buffer between my world and yours. The path through the key makes it possible for us to exist as Threes...for a while, at least."

"Are you saying this is going to happen to you too?"

"Not this," said Hek, "but something. We've never stayed here long enough to find out what. Milton's problem is different."

"Different how?"

"He visited the Gardener." She knelt beside Milt. "Were you at the Gardener's home, Milton?"

Milt laughed. "That's funny. She called you a witch. Witchy woman. Witchy, bitchy women, all of y'all!"

"Did she tell you to come here?"

"But who is..." started Chrissie. Hek silenced her with a gesture, her eyes remaining on Milt.

"Yes, lordie, she did. Said to look for this place. It took a long ass time, but eventually the toby brought me here. Done as I was asked, you see. Just like I was asked and the toby provided."

Chrissie saw that he was clutching something. "What is that, Milt?"

Milton held the conjure bag close to his heart. "Not much life left in old toby anymore. No ma'am, not a lot."

"Has he gone crazy?" whispered Chrissie.

Nyx spoke up from behind her. "He's been touched by the Gardener." She knelt beside Milt and placed her lithe fingers on top of his wrinkled hands. He was still holding the bag against his chest. "Milton, may I touch the mojo? I promise not to damage its spirit...or yours."

Milt looked at her as if he were seeing her for the very first time. For a brief moment, his eyes cleared and he opened his hands for Nyx. His thumbs were locked together in the string that held the bag shut and his fingers extended like the wings of a bird. Nyx moved her hand toward the bag slowly. At first, Chrissie thought she was just being mindful of Milt's fragile state, but then she realized that there was something physically surrounding Milt's hands. The only way Nyx could penetrate it was to move her fingers ever so carefully forward. It was another key. To what, Chrissie had no idea.

Nyx finally reached the bag, her fingers floating above its coarse fabric. She was about to touch it when Milt snapped his hands closed around it and shook his head. "It's not for you," he whispered, looking her in the eye. "It would harm you."

Nyx nodded slowly and pulled her hand back. She'd been waiting her entire life for this moment and now it was passing, never to return. She sat down on the broken pavement and let out a sigh that gave away the depths of her melancholy. She was devastated that she'd never come that close again. Milton was to become the Caretaker and eventually replace the Gardener. Not her. She'd never be more than what she was at that moment.

Chrissie looked up and saw that all the Fours were bowing their heads. Even Hek. She didn't understand who this Gardener was or why she'd done this to Milt. She only knew that there was an energy in the air that reminded Chrissie of those static electricity demonstrations at the science museum.

Milt smiled and looked at her, suddenly lucid. "I'm sorry, Chrissie. You'll have to take it from here. Help Joseph. Help Della."

"What? Why? YOU help them! They're your friends! You're not going anywhere!"

"I've kept the fire burning for a long time," said Milt.

Chrissie moved toward him but Nyx and Hek held her back. "Don't touch him," whispered Nyx. "He's between."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

Hek took Chrissie's hand. "He spans both our worlds. Maybe others too. His vision is broad." If she'd been a lesser being, she might have been envious. Instead, she was in awe.

Milt looked over at Hek and smiled one last time before he placed his palms over his chest and shuddered.

"Is he dying?" asked Chrissie.

"Yes and no," said Hek. "He's leaving us to take the Gardener's place."

"Milt, you don't have to go! Take my hand!" In Chrissie's heart, she felt the need to tell him that she loved him, but that was crazy, wasn't it? He was an old man and she hardly knew him.

Milt bowed his head and wavered slightly, as if he were inside a waterfall, and then he was gone. The electrical charge Chrissie had felt in the air disappeared too. It was like the most beautiful piece of music had been playing and someone had turned it off just before it was finished. Chrissie looked at the empty passenger seat and felt like she was going to go insane with sadness. She fell forward onto the ground and began to weep.

Jerry crouched beside Chrissie and rubbed her shoulders. "It's alright. Really. He's done something extraordinary that'll help us all." Hek cleared her throat behind him. Jerry knew that she had many misgivings about the Gardener, but at the end of the day, he thought most of those were due to how similar the two of them were. Now that Milt was tending the garden in her stead, he wondered if Hek's feelings would change.

Chrissie's sobs brought Jerry back to the matter at hand. She didn't want to be comforted. She wanted to wallow in her sadness and carve holes in her heart with her sobs. Why couldn't Milt have just left her alone that day at the convenience

store? She could be back in Oxford, blissfully ignorant of all of this bullshit.

"Chrissie?" It was Nyx. Chrissie looked up and saw tears streaming down that pale face. "Please understand. This is difficult. I just want to..." When the words didn't come, Nyx did the next best thing. She leaned in and hugged Chrissie and the two of them cried together.

Hek stepped away from the car and motioned for Jerry and Dexter to follow. "We have to tend to the fire," she said softly. "It exists in this timespace fully now. It must remain lit until the Aphota arrives. If it goes out..." She raised her eyebrows.

Jerry nodded. "We can't start it back up. Got it. Where's it at?"

Hek pointed at the school. "Library."

One quick nod and Jerry was on his way. He felt better having something to do, but he knew his task wasn't a simple one. A fire like the one Milt had been minding needed very particular fuel.

Dexter waited for him enter the building before he addressed Hek. "Won't be good to face the Aphota when it's dark."

"That's her plan," said Hek.

"Why you calling it a her all of a sudden?"

"Because, that's what it's become. When the Caretaker's energy was around us, I could feel the Aphota."

"So you saying that it's still on its way?"

"Yes. Now."

"Lord almighty. I don't know about you, but I'm not what you might call tip top."

Hek almost laughed. Dexter had such a charming way with words. "Nor am I the tip top, Dexter. I haven't been since the Threes showed up."

For the first time since he'd known her, Hek appeared weak in Dexter's eyes. He wondered why he hadn't noticed sooner. "You good, though, right? I mean, you going to make it?"

Hek shrugged. "I don't have a choice, do I?"

"Oh there's always a choice. Might not be the one you want to make, but there's always something."

Hek walked over to Nyx and Chrissie. They looked up to see her face framed by the purple sky. "It's going to be dark soon," she said. "I'll need both of you to help prepare."

"Prepare for what?" asked Nyx. Chrissie was glad that, for once, she wasn't the only one who didn't know what was going on.

"The Aphota in on her way. We have to..." She paused when she heard cars coming up the school's driveway. She grabbed Chrissie's arm and pulled her to her feet. "Get inside. Quickly."

Chrissie was still a little swimmy headed but she followed Hek and Nyx into the school. Once there, they peered out through the broken doors. Two police cars stopped and six deputies climbed out. They were all carrying short-barreled shotguns.

"What the hell?" asked Chrissie. Hek put her finger to her lips and pointed toward the library. They were moving in that direction when a loudspeaker crackled to life outside.

"This is undersheriff Regan of the Bolivar County Sheriff's Department. Put down your weapons and come out with your hands where we can see them. You're wanted for questioning. Nothing more. Non-compliance will be dealt with swiftly and severely."

The microphone clicked off and Chrissie whispered to Hek, "Do you mind if I use a few curse words now?"

Rhimes watched as two police cars quietly turned up the driveway that led to the school. "What the fuck are they doing?" he muttered. Surely, they weren't his backup. They didn't even have their sirens on.

Rhimes pulled his car halfway up the drive and then turned it sideways to block the only way in or out. Moreno nodded to his boss as they climbed out and went the rest of the way on foot. When the dust cleared, they could see that the deputies were out of their cars with their guns trained on the back of the school building. They got there just in time to hear Butch's "come out with your hands up" speech.

"Is he serious?" asked Billings.

Rhimes nodded but the nod had a "shut the fuck up" subtext as well. "They think they're going to get the collar," he said.

"Not like that, they won't," said Moreno. "That place had ten or twelve exits before the roof started collapsing. Now it'd take a hundred men to secure it." He looked at the darkening sky. "And that would be in broad daylight."

Rhimes turned back to Moreno and said, "Keep your eyes open and let me know if you see any way we can do this job without getting anybody killed in the process."

"Yes, sir," said Moreno, but he didn't have high hopes. He'd become proficient at close quarters combat during three tours in Afghanistan. He'd seen first-hand what happened when the folks you were chasing had a willingness to die.

Rhimes casually approached Butch, ignoring the other deputies. He even walked across their line of fire as an overt dismissal of their tactics. "Regan, was it?" asked Rhimes. He knew the man's name, but he wouldn't give the undersheriff the satisfaction.

Butch ignored the question altogether. "This is our crime scene," he said, "so I'd appreciate it if you and your men would stand down and clear to one side."

"Oh, yes, sir, Mr. Undersheriff, sir. Just one thing before we clear to one side, though." He leaned in close as if he were sharing a secret. "You're going to end up dead if you keep working the Bonnie and Clyde angle. See, I saw what these folks did in that last neighborhood. I saw it up close, and what I

realized is that these aren't any normal perps. These are the types that they refer to in the textbooks as 'committed'. You read me, Undersheriff? Now, my friend over there was force recon with an expeditionary unit in Afghanistan. Do you know what that means?" Butch reluctantly shook his head. "It means he knows his shit, Undersheriff Regan. It means he knows how to stay alive in situations just like this one. He tells me that we don't have enough men to cover the exterior of this building, and I'm inclined to agree with him." Rhimes stood up straight and smiled. "I hope you'll find this helpful hint useful in your pursuit of justice, Undersheriff Regan. In the meantime, my men will be clearing to one side until the Sheriff of fucknut county agrees to grace us with a larger uniformed presence. Thank you for your time."

Rhimes strolled back to his car as nonchalantly as he could. Once there, he huddled up with his men. "Doesn't look like the cavalry's coming. Billings, get on the horn and see if you can rustle up a handful of staties."

"Yes, sir," said Billings, and he ran back to the car.

Moreno watched the local law and tried to look cool and comfortable while he quietly spoke to Rhimes. "Think they're dumb enough to go in there?"

Rhimes nodded. "They need to apprehend the suspects before it's good and dark." He looked up and down the side of the school building. "Is there a way for us to do this by ourselves?" he asked.

"Out of the question," said Moreno. "Best to let them lie overnight and then flush and track them at daybreak. Crazies like these always leave a trail."

Rhimes was about to ask him for other options when Billings stepped up. "Not much luck. There was a big pileup on 55 a couple of hours ago. Most of the patrols that should have been close to us got diverted down there. Dispatch says they can get a couple of cars rolling this way but only a couple. Should be here in an hour or so."

"Jesus. Then we've got to convince the locals to leave things be until the morning."

"And what if they don't run then?" asked Billings. The others looked at him like he was speaking Greek. "What if they hunker down in there for the fun of killing off the local law? You can't depend on self-preservation from perps like these."

Rhimes smiled. He'd personally chosen these two men for this duty with good reason. Billings had the psych background and Moreno knew the tactics. It was easy to forget how smart they both were when you spent most of your time together waiting in cars and eating Quarter Pounders on the run.

The agents were off their guards and didn't notice that one of the deputies had walked up behind them. "One of you with the MEU in country?" asked the man.

All three men reached for their side arms as they turned but they all tried to make it look like they hadn't. The young man still picked up on it. "Sorry, didn't mean to alarm you fellas." His freckled face turned bright red. Almost as red as his hair.

Moreno held out his open hand and the young man took it. "Moreno. I was MEU. You a Marine?"

"Was," said the man. "Name's Foster, but they call me Red."

"Ain't no such thing as 'was', Marine," said Moreno with a half grin. "How'd you end up with the Hee Haw bunch?"

"They're alright. Just haven't had to deal with nothing like this before. Undersheriff's spooked by what your CO told him."

Rhimes thought to tell the kid he was nobody's CO but he let it slide. Best to let Moreno chat it up with him. Maybe he could keep this bunch from getting killed tonight.

"You see any of what these people did back there?" asked Moreno.

Red shook his head. "Naw. Sheriff had me posted at the station."

"Well, we saw it. Regan saw some of it too. If he's scared, it's because of that."

"Maybe so. Still, your CO here kicked it up a notch. He wanted me to ask you something." Red looked uncomfortable, so Moreno thought he knew what was coming. "He'd like your advice on what we should do here. You know, to apprehend these folks before..." He raised his eyebrows.

Yeah, before you all get your asses handed to you, thought Moreno. "First thing, we need to reconnoiter the perimeter."

"What for?"

"If we can close off some of the exit points, we'll be able to flush the perps out in the direction we choose come daybreak."

We should have more manpower by then so we can take them down safely."

Red shook his head. "That ain't going to happen. Sheriff sent us out here to get this collar and I don't think Regan'll let it go."

Moreno flashed the young man a grim smile. "Then you're fucked," he said, "and my plan just changed to the safe distance variety. You read me?"

"Copy that. Thank you for your candor, sir." And with that, the freckled deputy turned and hiked back to talk to his superior officer.

"Think he heard you, Moreno?" asked Rhimes.

"He did. Problem is, I don't think he'll be able to convince Regan to go along."

Rhimes rubbed his stubbly chin. "Then that's it." He walked around the car to the driver's side.

"Hold on," said Billings. "What's 'it'?"

"There's a hot shower and a piece of apple pie calling my name," said Rhimes. The junior agent continued to stare down his boss, so Rhimes explained. "Look, son. This will go down one of two ways. One, the locals go in shooting and everybody gets killed. Two, the perps go all Butch and Sundance and everybody gets killed. We're better off getting the hell out of the immediate vicinity."

"But the troopers..."

"Two cars. Probably two troopers. That makes five of us and some deputies who don't want to play on the same team." He saw Billings' face fall into his lap. He was a good agent. One day, he'd be great, but for the time being, he was a little too idealistic. "Got to deal with what we have in front of us, Billings, and I intend for the three of us to live to see tomorrow."

"I hear you. I just think they need our help." Now he was pleading. Rhimes hated when he did that.

"The sheriff's boys?"

"No, the suspects. We don't know that the people inside that building had thing one to do with those murders."

Rhimes almost laughed. "I got a pretty damn good idea!"

"But you don't know, do you? How could you? That's why we aren't judges. We get paid to sort things out and that means protecting both sides."

“Jesus, Billings.” It was Moreno. “This isn’t a class at the academy. Rhimes is talking about saving our asses.”

Rhimes took a deep breath and looked Billings in the eye. “Son, I know you. I know your mama. She taught me in the fifth grade, so don’t go getting all high and mighty on me.” He shook his head as if he could banish the demons Billings had brought up with the flick of a brow.

“Then let me go inside. At the very least, I can ascertain whether or not they’re dangerous.”

“Are you out of your goddamned mind?!” shouted Rhimes. “You go in there and YOU’LL be the hostage.”

“Not if they don’t see me.”

Moreno perked up a bit. “You want to scout them out?”

“Something like that.”

Moreno looked at Rhimes. “It might not be such a bad idea. There’s too much ground inside for the suspects to have it all covered. We could surveil them without them knowing.”

“To what end?” Rhimes crossed his arms.

“To see if there’s any point in pursuing this further.” Moreno saw the skepticism on Rhimes face so he continued. “I ever tell you about my time in the Korangal Valley?”

“Uh-uh, but it doesn’t...”

Moreno continued, “We were embedded with 2/3 Echo for 28 days on foot. Day 18 we approached a little shack. One of the Echos said he saw a guy duck inside there. Thought he had an AK47 on him. There was only one exit so we covered it and shouted for whoever was inside to come out. Not a one of us knew Pashto at that point and we sure as hell didn’t know any Korangali. We shouted our warnings in English and got no response. We were about to light the place up with a grenade when I saw something inside. It was bright daylight and the interior of the shack looked pitch black, but I was pretty sure of what I’d seen. The other marines told me not to go in there, but I took it slow and had my rifle at the ready. When I peeked in the doorway, I could see it was a home. There were two bedrolls and some bowls and cooking utensils. Something moved in the corner and I almost fired. Then I saw her. It was a little girl. Looked to be about six. She was huddled there, clutching her nadera doll. You know what that is?” Rhimes shook his head. “Mothers make them for their daughters out of scraps of cloth.

This one had a brown dress. That's what the other men had mistaken for a rifle stock."

"Your point is what? You think there's just some kids in this school building fooling around?"

"My point is, we don't know, sir. Not yet." With that, Moreno stepped back to allow Rhimes to make his decision.

"Jesus Christmas, you guys are a pain in my ass. You know that?"

Billings muttered, "Yes, sir."

"Fine. You want to go in there, be my guest. I'll brief Regan so he doesn't shoot you. But mark my words. Thirty. Minutes. We clear on that? In one half of one hour I'm getting behind the wheel whether you're back here or not."

"Understood," said Billings.

Rhimes walked the men over to the car and popped the sedan's trunk with his key fob. "Then you might as well gear up. And don't forget the vests."

"You're going to do what?" asked Regan.

"My men are entering the building now to run recon on the suspects. I've given them thirty minutes. I expect you to do the same. In that thirty minutes, nobody shoots. No guns. No gas. No flash bangs. Once they're clear of the structure... Well, then you can do whatever idiotic thing you want. Until then, you need to stand down."

"Now you wait just a goddamned minute!" shouted Regan.

Rhimes turned and stood toe to toe with the undersheriff. "And what do you propose I wait for, Regan?" The undersheriff instinctively backed up a foot or two. "All I care about is protecting the innocent people in this community. If that happens to include you, then this is your lucky day. But if you get in my way...if you do any little thing that might, in even a teeny-tiny way, jeopardize my people...well, you might as well be one of the suspects. You read me?"

Regan nodded. He looked at Rhimes just like the villagers had looked at Karloff in those Frankenstein movies. The MBI agent scared him. Maybe even more than the perps holed up inside the school. There weren't many black men like Rhimes left in Bolivar county. They'd either left of their own accord or been sent to prison for getting in the Sheriff's way.

Rhimes walked away and Regan climbed into his car to raise the sheriff on the radio. "Butch, I hope you're winding this thing up," said Bill. "Over."

"Not exactly, Sheriff. There are suspects are holed up in the school building, just like we were told. Saw them go in there myself. Over."

"Jesus, Butch. Then gas them out! I sure as hell hope you didn't radio in to hear me tell you that! Over!"

"We have another problem. I'll be damned if I got a good look at them. That MBI nigger wants us to give his men thirty minutes to recon the place. I think it's a good idea but it might compromise our collar. Over."

There was a long pause. Regan thought something might be wrong with the radio, but then it crackled back to life and the sheriff's voice rang through loud and clear. "You listen to me, you son of a bitch. Our citizens are the ones who got

killed. Good folks are looking to us to protect them from any more savagery. We do this, Butch, and we will be reelected until we decide to retire. You do what you have to do to insure that bust is ours or, so help me God, I'll see to it that you're on permanent prison duty. Over."

Butch knew what Bill was hinting at. He'd send Regan to jail on fake charges. His mind raced with the possibilities. Was he going to have to take Bill out? If he did it quietly and covered it up the right way, maybe he could be the next sheriff. Maybe things would work out after all. He keyed the switch on his mic. "Be very careful, Bill. I'm on the scene, so I'm running it my way. If you want to handle it, you'll have to drag your lazy ass out here. Out." He turned off the radio and sprang to his feet in a huff. He walked over to where the other deputies stood with their weapons trained on the doorway.

"What'd the sheriff say?" asked Red.

"Says I'm to handle it." He looked around and saw that the other deputies were waiting for instructions. "We're going to stand by. If anybody comes through that door, check your targets twice and call out a warning before you take aim. The MBI agents are inside running recon. When they're done, I'll decide how to proceed based on their intel. Understood?" Everyone said they did, but none of them relaxed. They all kept their eyes on the doorway. "Jimmy, you and Lev toss that old cop car and tell me if you find anything suspicious." Jimmy and Lev didn't need to be told twice. Like most cops, they liked it better when they had something tangible to do.

"Red, I want you to stay focused on that door. Report to me if you see movement. But do not aim or fire without my okay. I want to see your safety on. Got it?"

"Yes, sir," said Red.

"Phil and Bobby, I want you to move our cars so the headlights and Q-beams shine on the building. It's getting dark and I want Red to have a clear view."

"Got it, sir," said Phil.

Ten minutes later, the cars were in place and most of the deputies were back to waiting. The sky was almost completely dark by then, so they could see the glow from Milt's fire in the smoke that lingered above the school.

Phil pointed it out to Red. "Maybe they done gone and set fire to the place."

"Could be," said Red as he glanced skyward. He didn't like Simmons distracting him from his assignment.

"Maybe these people are like the ones in Waco. Remember that?"

"I heard about it," said Red. "I was just a kid when it happened."

Simmons looked closer at his fellow deputy. He was awful young. "Yeah, well, anyway," he continued, "Those folks burned their whole compound down around their ears. Crazy as a soup sandwich, if you ask me." Red started to tell him that he hadn't asked, thank you very much, but he held back. Better to just go along. That's what he'd learned working at the Bolivar Sheriff's office.

"Listen, Simmons," started Red.

"Call me Phil, alright?"

"Fine. Phil, do you know how long the MBI guys have been in there?"

Simmons looked at his watch. He had to pull the Velcro blackout strap off the face to read it. When he did so, the other deputies all jumped. "Sorry!" he said with an apologetic wave. Red chuckled to himself. Damn guy thought he was SWAT or something. "About twelve minutes," said Simmons.

Moreno and Billings had made it to the hallway just outside the school's library. Getting in had been much harder than they'd originally thought, and once in, they'd had little choice as to which way to go. Most of the other routes were completely blocked.

"They're in there," whispered Moreno. "They're talking but I can't make out what they're saying."

Billings nodded and motioned Moreno away from the open doorway. He eased himself close then got on his hands and knees and swung his head inside for a split second. Once he was satisfied that no one inside had seen him, he slid over to where Moreno waited.

"Broken bookshelves. Fire at the far end of the room. No visible suspects."

"Okay. I'll slip inside first then you cross to the far side where I can cover you. We'll move up nice and slow."

"Copy that," said Billings. He checked his sidearm. The clip was full and he had one round in the chamber. He had a

long barrel shotgun on his back but it would be next to useless in those cramped quarters. He pulled it out of its holster and slid it under some debris in the hallway.

Moreno slipped around the corner and crouched just inside the doorway. His heart was racing. No one at the MBI had ever asked him why he'd left the Marine Corps. This was why. Sneaking into places where people wanted to kill you had gotten the best of him. He hadn't expected to have to do that again, especially as a detective, but here he was. The civvie surroundings made the whole scene a bit too much like Afghanistan. Still, he had a job to do and he intended to do it. He looked over at Billings and got a thumbs up followed by another familiar hand gesture. Move on up, it said. He nodded and slid around the broken shelf units. One by one, they moved forward. Inch by inch. Moreno checked his watch. They only had a few minutes left before Rhimes sent the rednecks in.

The two agents sidled up to the curved wall that bracketed the reading area and Moreno held up a hand. Hold here. They waited but heard nothing. Had the suspects moved on? Billings made hand gestures indicating he was going to take a quick look. Moreno nodded, but he really wanted to run away. Suddenly, as if by magic, Moreno was back in the shit again. Afghanistan. The hut. The doll. The little girl. He couldn't let Billings kill her, could he?

Moreno jumped around the corner and screamed, "No, don't you do it! Don't you kill her!" The four silhouettes in front of him froze in fear and Billings slipped back between the bookshelves.

"We're not killing nobody, mister," said Dexter. He raised his arms and turned to face the MBI agent.

Moreno's head spun. It was an old black man. Wait. Two old black men. And who else? Women. Two women. Where'd the little girl go? How did these civilians get in here? And they were speaking English!

Jerry dropped his service revolver and kicked it over to Moreno. "We got no other weapons," he said calmly.

Billings immediately emerged on the other side of the fire. "Everyone keep your hands where we can see them. You're wanted for questioning." He looked over at Moreno. The guy looked like he was having trouble remembering his name. "Moreno?" The agent looked at him and a glimmer of recognition crossed his face. "I need you to cuff them," said Billings.

"Okay," said Moreno. "Alright." He took a deep breath.

"What's the matter, man?" asked Billings.

Moreno shook his head as if he was trying to shake the skin off his face. "Nothing. We saved them, didn't we?"

"Um, yeah. We saved them. Now cuff them so we can get the hell out of here."

Moreno reached for his cuffs and moved toward the two goth women. It never occurred to him to ask why they were hanging out in an abandoned school with a couple of old black guys. Ever since Craigslist had appeared, he'd stopped asking those sorts of questions. He was about to take the taller woman's hand when something clicked behind him. He started to turn when he felt the shotgun barrel in the small of his back.

"Hand over the gun." It was Chrissie. "You too, pretty boy," she added, nodding at Billings.

"Alright. Just don't shoot him," said Billings. This situation was going to shit faster than he could have ever imagined.

Jerry picked up his own sidearm and holstered it while Dexter held Billings's weapon like it was a ticking time bomb. He had no intention of using such a thing if he could help it.

"What now?" asked Billings. "You going to skin us and make us into some kind of modern art?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" asked Chrissie.

"He's speaking of the Aphota," said Hek. "She's done terrible things to their people."

Billings looked over at Moreno. It looked like it was going to be up to him to get them out of there alive. "Photos? What photos?" he stalled.

"A-pho-ta," said Chrissie. "It's like this...THING. Whatever. You just sit down and keep on shutting up for now."

"Nyx, can you see outside?" asked Hek.

The slender woman nodded and pressed her fingers to her temples. "It's dark. The police officers are still there." She paused for a moment and then continued, "They're pulling the seats out of Jerry's car."

Jerry cocked his head. "Say what?" He turned to Hek. "How about I go out there and stop them?" Chrissie wondered what that meant but she didn't devote a whole lot of thought to the subject at the moment.

Hek shook her head. "No. The Aphota will take care of the police."

"You mean she'll kill them, don't you?" asked Chrissie.

Hek turned to her and said "Yes," without so much as a blink.

"And you're okay with that?"

"If it helps us, yes, I'm okay with that."

Billings sat up. "Those cops have families and..."

Chrissie pressed the shotgun barrel into Moreno's back and Billings shut up immediately. She knew better than to take her eyes off him again. "Hek, he has a point. Nobody has to die. We can't just..."

Hek interrupted, "Am I responsible for your life, child?"

Chrissie flinched at hearing herself called a child again. "No," she said tersely.

"So, how am I responsible for them? I am not. I have one task to complete. That is the eradication of the Aphota. If I am fortunate enough to complete this task in a timely fashion, I'll gladly leave this place and never return. Nothing more. Nothing less."

"They're people, Hek. Souls."

"And the Aphota may well consume them. If that happens, the destruction of the Aphota will release them again."

"Time," said Nyx, her fingertips still resting on her temples. "Time, time, time."

Hek kept her focus on Chrissie. The girl's understanding was important to her. "Child, I only ask that you trust me. Your judgments are based on incorrect assumptions. You must do as I tell you from this point forward or, indeed, all of us will be destroyed."

"Well, when you put it like that," said Chrissie with a little half-smile. She thought it was funny but no one laughed. She lowered her voice. "I'm trying, Hek. It's just that it's a lot to take in all at once. Milt dying, and this fire, and now these cops. And I still haven't seen this Aphota thing. How will we know when we find it?"

"You'll know. You'll feel her prying at the edges of your thoughts, climbing into your emotions, pushing away your sanity. At that moment, you must not feel pity or guilt or sadness. Even a brief bout of melancholy will make you vulnerable. She will own you outright if you're not careful." She moved close to whisper in Chrissie's ear. "You must know in your heart that I

will protect you. Know it. Accept it as fact and do not stray from the fire."

"What's the fire got to..."

"Finish this," said Nyx without opening her eyes.

"I'm not like you," said Chrissie. "I've never been that certain about anything."

"You have to be." Hek held out her hands, palms up. "Here. Take hold."

"Hekate!" shouted Nyx.

"I know," said Hek.

"What's wrong?" asked Chrissie.

"The Aphota is here."

Joseph woke up and felt something sharp pressing into his face. He rolled over and realized that he was laying in the middle of the highway. The Della Thing was standing nearby, surrounded by the bodies of her former army. He tried to stand but dizziness overtook him and he fell back to the pavement. His head felt like a pressure cooker.

"Della?" he called softly as he looked up at his wife. Her face was a wreck. Joseph didn't know what had happened to her since he'd passed out but it must've been bad. With that blood-soaked guitar in her hands, she looked like some kind of rock and roll crucifix.

Joseph spotted Billion so he crawled over to where the boy lay. "Hey, kid, can you hear me?" Billion remained still and silent. Joseph fumbled around, trying to find a pulse. He slapped the boy's face and it's dull, lifeless eyes fell open. He was dead. Joseph checked the other bodies and found more of the same. He tried to recall what had happened before he'd passed out but all he could remember was the chanting.

"I took them." It was the Della Thing, only now she was different. She was all Della and not Della at all. She looked down at him and smiled. Half of her teeth were broken or missing altogether and her skin was as sallow as a corpse's.

"Where's my Della?" asked Joseph.

"She's here. Her pain is delicious. She wants to talk to you, Jo-Jo! Oh, how sweet! Maybe I should call you that too. Would you like that, Jo-Jo?"

Joseph craned his neck and looked down the highway. Surely someone would come along sooner or later. When they did, he'd convince them to hit her with their car. Or maybe the cops would show up. She'd just killed a bunch of people, hadn't she? Didn't cops usually turn up for shit like that? He hung his head and spoke softly. "Call me whatever you want. I don't care. I just want to talk to my Della."

The Della Thing made a hoarse, sputtery noise. Eventually, Joseph understood that it was laughter. "She won't be speaking to you ever again, Jo-Jo. You're stuck with me. That's okay, isn't it? Hey, I'm a lot more fun!" With that, she leapt on top of him and started grinding her pelvis against his crotch. It was a pathetic imitation of the sexual act intended to upset him.

"Get the fuck off me!" shouted Joseph as he kicked at her. She laughed until he caught the guitar with his heel and sent it skidding across the center line of the highway. He thought she'd go after it like a dog after a cheese steak sandwich, but she didn't. Instead, she stood up and kicked him right in the balls. He was already weak, so this new adventure in pain put him over the threshold of what he could take. His vision blurred and he almost blacked out again.

"If you EVER so much as look at my beautiful vessel again, I'll cleave you in two!" shouted the Della Thing.

Joseph had no response. He was too busy trying to convince himself that the pain he was enduring was only in his mind. By the time he opened his watery eyes, the Della Thing had retrieved the guitar. He had no idea what power the broken six-string held for her, but it was obvious that she needed it. He had to figure out a way to get it away from her permanently.

"Get your ass up," said the Della Thing. She was developing a voice of her own. She no longer sounded like Della at all. She was starting to sound like an old black woman.

With considerable effort, Joseph managed to stand. He raised his head and looked the Della Thing in the eye. "Happy?" He expected some sort of condescending comment but he got none. The Della Thing had gone back into its trance state. Joseph reached out and touched her hand. Her fingers were incredibly cold, like twigs coated in ice. He had the urge to snap them off, but what would that achieve? If he ever got his Della back, she might need them.

He looked at the dead bodies in the road and wondered if those people had been carrying weapons. He searched their pockets one by one, trying hard not to look at their faces. He came away with a half a pack of Juicy Fruit, some keys, and a Bic pen. Not a single one of these people had a pocket knife.

Joseph was considering his options when the Della Thing sprang back to life. A sly, closed-mouth smile crept across her lips. "There is an open crossing," she said, matter-of-factly. "We got to go."

"I can't walk," said Joseph. He wasn't exaggerating.

The Della Thing knelt beside him and he slid away from her. She caught his foot in one craggy hand and sent a bolt of frigid cold up his leg. When he cried out, she bent down and bit his right calf as hard as she could. Her broken incisors

penetrated the muscle, creating a pain the likes of which Joseph had never experienced in his life. It hurt like hell, but it was also warm and soothing and paralyzing. Joseph could no longer move the leg at all. After several minutes of her bizarre pain therapy, the Della Thing sunk her teeth into his other leg. As the pain built there, the tension in his right calf faded away and Joseph found he could move the leg easily. When the Thing finally let go of his left leg, he could move that one as well.

She looked at the night sky. "Get up. We got to reach the crossover before sunrise. I shoulda known not to stay in your fucked up head for so long."

Joseph had no idea what she was talking about, but whatever she wanted, he wanted the opposite. "You sure about that?" he asked. "We had a good thing going."

The Della Thing felt something in her chest. A stirring. Some sort of feeling. She dismissed it at first, but it returned whenever she looked at Joseph. The feeling scared her. It was beyond her experience and beyond her control. She felt like it was using her in some way. It was a rider—a leftover part of the Della that was—and it was dangerous. *No, no, no, no, no!* She screamed inside her head. She wouldn't allow herself to be trapped in that broken body forever! The crossover would solve all of her problems. She'd use it to eradicate the transgressors at the same time that she saved herself. She just had to find it.

None of the Della Thing's thoughts were shared with Joseph. Instead, she'd gone into that trance state again. Joseph backed away slowly and lowered himself into the weeds next to the road. He considered running off into the forest, but he thought she'd probably hear him. He covered himself with dead leaves and waited quietly.

Della awoke inside a small, dark room. She was laying on the hearth of a small fireplace within which burned a smattering of embers. She sat up and shivered, rubbing her arms to warm herself.

"This will help," said the Caretaker as he handed her a bowl. "Best to go on and eat it before it gets cold."

The man had a familiar demeanor if not a familiar face. Della gratefully accepted the stew and wolfed it down. She hadn't realized just how hungry she'd become.

"Good," said the Caretaker. He tended the fire and added a few small sticks to the coals. They immediately burst

into flames that brightened the room considerably. "You can just set the bowl down. I'll tend to it directly."

Della did as she was told and took a deep breath. The stew made her feel much stronger but she still wasn't herself. "May I ask you a question?"

The Caretaker raised his eyebrows with a smile. "Of course," he said as he blew on the coals.

"Where am I?"

"You're home," said the Caretaker, "and I'm here to see that you aren't evicted."

Della smiled at that and the fire in the fireplace blossomed again.

The Della Thing awakened suddenly in the middle of the road. She must have blacked out, but how could that be? She didn't have time to think much about it. She needed Joseph if she was going to have enough power to make the crossover. She ran frantically up and down the highway, shouting "Joseph! Joseph, please help me, honey! It's me! Della! I'm free!"

Joseph heard her, but he didn't dare peek out to see what she was doing. He'd made up his mind to lay perfectly still until she went on about her business. Then he could find some help and possibly keep her from reaching the crossing that she wanted so badly.

"Joseph, you stupid motherfucker!" screamed the Della Thing. She was starting to slur her words. "We have to reach the crossover before sunrise or your precious fucking Della will be dead! How'd you like that, you miserable, white piece of shit?!" She paused, wondering why she could no longer feel his presence. If he'd run off 24 hours ago, she'd have been able to track him by reaching into his mind. Now that their connection was severed, she was finding it difficult to get out of Della's skull. She thought she would have to make her way to the crossover alone and she suddenly felt morbidly sad. Emotions were new to her. She'd done impressions of them in the past, but this was the first time she was truly able to feel them. She felt like her chest was going to collapse when she took the first few, tentative steps away from that place without Joseph. It was with no small effort that she forced Della's broken body to walk away, step by miserable step, dragging that mangled guitar behind her.

When Joseph was sure she'd gone, he emerged from the ditch. Surprisingly, his legs felt like they were both completely healed. He just had to decide what to do next. The Della Thing had gone north, so the obvious choice was to go south, but Joseph was worried. The Thing wasn't just trying to save her own skin. She wanted to kill.

He looked at the bodies on the ground before him and the sight jogged a memory of his own bloody hands doing the Thing's work. He gritted his teeth and tried to ignore the images, but one led to another and another. The memories poured back into his consciousness and he fell to his knees and wept. All those people. All those lives. All that blood on his hands. As tired as he was and as much as his balls ached, Joseph felt that it was his duty to make sure that no one else died. He picked himself up and trundled off after the creature that had once been his wife.

Agent Rhimes sat in his car and considered what had led him to that moment. He didn't think of his past often because the memories were too troubling to live with every day. He realized that he was about to turn fifty. Just a few more years and he'd be retired and living high on the hog. An MBI pension was no fortune, but it'd be enough to get him where he was going. Gulf Shores, Alabama had called to him ever since he'd visited the place on his honeymoon. He and his then wife, God rest her soul, had had such a good time there that he'd always aimed to get back. Maybe buy a little boat and do some fishing. Anything but police work. He'd had a fine career, but he was tired of thinking about the dark side of humanity. He wanted to feel optimistic again.

He sat up behind the wheel and rubbed his eyes. No need to go deeper down that well of thoughts. Better to stay alert. He had two men inside that building and they were counting on him. He needed to stretch his legs. That would help him stay focused. The gravelly surface of the driveway crunched underfoot as he got out of the car. Gloom consumed the treetops and ground level quickly faded to black. He dug a big flashlight out of the trunk and swung its beam along the side of the building. He was wandering down the drive toward the highway when his watch alarm beeped. His men had had their thirty minutes. He turned off the flashlight, but the area around him remained illuminated. "What the hell..." was all he had time to mutter.

The Della Thing was glowing brightly when she latched onto Rhimes' face with her claw-like hands. Once she got a good look at him, her glow subsided. "Stay out my way and you gone be safe," she said, and then she hugged him close with skinny arms that were as strong as angle iron.

Rhimes struggled to get free but he was going to be hugged whether he liked it or not. The question was, what was he going to do when she let go?

"HELP!" shouted Rhimes. "Somebody get this bitch off of me!" He swiveled his wrist and swung the flashlight at the woman.

The Della Thing laughed deep in her throat. "I'm here to help you," she said. "Can't you see that?"

"How're you helping me? By holding me against my will?" asked Rhimes.

"I'm your protector," said the woman as she loosened her grip. He took the opportunity to swing the flashlight at her skull as hard as he could, hoping to take her down. Instead, the light shattered, sending a spray of metal and plastic to the ground. The woman's face twisted into a parody of a frown. She was mocking him. "I forgive you, child," she said. "Now get the fuck out my way."

Rhimes was wondering where his backup was when one of the deputies ran up behind him and shouted, "Get down!" Rhimes assumed that command was meant for him and he dropped to the dirt next to the D-cells that had fallen out of his damaged flashlight.

A single gunshot rang out and the bullet clipped the woman's shoulder. Rhimes thought that would be enough to stop her. It wasn't. She continued to walk toward her attackers like they were paparazzi at a movie premiere. He heard a scraping sound and saw that she was dragging a broken guitar behind her. What the hell? He was trying to figure it all out when she started glowing again.

"Why don't y'all line up across here and let me kill y'all all at once?" She grinned and the deputies backed away. There had been no chapter on glowing women with fucked up teeth in the field training manual.

Regan motioned for Rhimes to get to one side while keeping his rifle trained on the stranger. The MBI agent crawled over to the relative safety of an alcove in the wall of the school building and unsnapped his holster. If Regan wasn't able to put her down, he wasn't sure his pea shooter would be much protection, but it made him feel better.

"You prefer I take you one at a time, boys? That's alright too," said the Della Thing just before Regan opened fire. Rhimes watched as the woman got hit multiple times. Thigh. Torso. Arm. She kept approaching, step by step. As far as he could tell, she wasn't even bleeding.

The deputies took cover behind one of the police cars and Regan grabbed Phil's arm. "Get on the horn and tell the sheriff we need everybody down here," said Regan. "Every-fucking-body. You got it?" Phil nodded and ducked inside the car.

"What do we do, sir?" asked Red.

Butch's mind was spinning. He had no idea how to proceed and, even worse, he was scared shitless. He wiped his brow on his sleeve and said, "I don't know, Red. If bullets don't hurt her..." He let that hang out there a moment to see if someone might refute his assessment of the situation. When no one did, he had nothing else to offer.

"Maybe she's just high," said Lev. "You see her teeth? Looks like it could be meth. I once had to take down an old boy on PCP and he was like the incredible Hulk. She might not be feeling it."

Red shook his head. "I ain't never heard of no drugs that make your skin glow!"

"Well, maybe it ain't something we seen yet. Maybe it's something they been cooking up in Memphis or something. Like that stuff that turned those folks' skin blue. You know what I'm saying?"

"Man, you're reaching," said Red.

"That's right," said Lev. "You got any better ideas?"

Red shook his head. All he knew was that the weird glowing woman was coming for them.

Rhimes watched as the woman shuffled toward the cops, dragging that guitar behind her. He had to do something. There was no love lost between him and the local law, but he couldn't let her massacre them. He thought about the shots Regan had fired. They were classic put-down shots meant to maim, not to kill. Was it possible that she was wearing some sort of body armor? Maybe that was where the glow was coming from. Some kind of high-tech gee-gaw sold to those soldier-of-fortune types. Yeah, that had to be it. He thought about her embrace and he couldn't remember feeling anything but skin and bones under the rags she was wearing, yet she'd seemed to be made of wrought iron. How was that possible unless she was wearing some kind of protective gear?

One thing was certain. Regan hadn't taken a shot at the woman's head. How could he? Redneck idiot or not, he'd at least had *some* police training. No one was ever taught to take a headshot unless it was the only option.

The big question was, could he do it? Could he, Master Sergeant Rhimes of the MBI, shoot an unarmed woman in the back of the head? Glowing or not, she was still a citizen with

rights, and one of those rights was not to have your head blown off just because you threatened some law enforcement officials while you were hopped up on crazy.

Rhimes stood up and checked his weapon. One round was in the chamber. Check. He had a full clip. Check. The safety was off. Check. He held the hunk of steel at arm's length and took a look down its sights. He was forty feet away from the woman now. He needed to get closer if he was going to get a clean shot. The closer the better, but he also needed to be quiet. If she turned around and looked at him, he wasn't sure he could pull the trigger.

He moved closer, careful not to make too much noise. His breathing had become shallow. That was bad. He needed oxygen. Inhale deeply. Slowly. Hold it. He'd exhale into the pull and that was when he'd fire. Textbook. Chances were, the shot would blow her face open from within, scattering those damaged teeth all over the ground in a spray of bone and brains. He could see it in his mind's eye. He envisioned his target as he got closer. Closer. Step by step. The woman was almost on top of the deputies now. Some of them were running into the tangled brush. Rhimes knew that was suicide. It was so dense that there was no way those men could escape. He had to take the shot now because the deputies weren't going to. Why weren't they? Had she mesmerized them somehow? Was that what she'd done to him too? No more. He had to take her out. He blinked the sweat out of his eyes and slowly inhaled.

He was exhaling, his finger tightening on the trigger, when he was suddenly blindsided by someone. His gun flew out of his hand and thumped down in the dirt. His assailant was on top of him, holding him to the ground, hugging him close in much the same way that the woman had, only this one smelled like shit rolled in more shit with a nice dish of shit on the side. When he finally got a look at the man, he immediately recognized him. It was Joseph Miles.

"Get the fuck off me," shouted Rhimes as he tried to push the ragdoll man off.

Joseph was stronger than he looked. When Rhimes stopped fighting him, he put a finger to his lips and whispered, "I'm here to help you."

"That's what she said. I'm not inclined to believe either one of you."

Joseph shrugged and just as he was about to stand up, Rhimes grabbed his weapon and cold-cocked him in the temple. Joseph fell to the ground, unconscious, and Rhimes handcuffed him before climbing to his feet. He raised his weapon and used the corner of the building to steady his shaking hands. Then he stopped and dropped his weapon to his side. The crazy, glowing woman and all the deputies were gone.

Dexter and Jerry emerged from the shelter of the school to face the Aphota. They stood like blues sentinels, blocking the Aphota's path to the fire that Milt had given his life to protect.

The deputies saw the men come out of the building and they raised their weapons. Red was about to take a shot at them when time suddenly slowed to a crawl. The sounds of the crickets in the grass and the opossums in the underbrush faded into a dull cacophony of bass. It was like putting your finger on a record and slowing it down.

Inside, next to the fire, Nyx shivered and fell to the floor. Hek ran over to keep her hair out of the fire.

"What's wrong with her?" asked Chrissie.

"She's slowing the temporal curve so we may contain the Aphota."

Chrissie shook her head. "How about giving that to me in English?"

"She's slowing down the flow of time outside. The Aphota has bound itself to the body of a Three so it's connected to this dimensional plane." She looked down at her friend and added, "Every action has a cost."

Chrissie felt like she should have watched more of those old Carl Sagan shows with her father way back when. "What's that rumbling noise?"

"As time is slowed outside, the sound waves..."

"Okay, I get that part. So what do we do now?"

"We wait for Geryon and Dexter."

Jerry noticed that the police cars were shimmering. Nyx had created a time bubble within a limited area. That left a zone within which time was flexible. It made the leaves on the trees exude multiple layers of colors that pulsed and sparkled. Both Jerry and Dexter understood it, but that didn't make it any less impressive to witness.

Dexter pointed at the guitar that the Della Thing was dragging beside her and shouted, "That ain't yours!"

The Della Thing turned and laughed, seemingly oblivious to the time warp. "Hard to believe you the one what made me."

"You're a side effect," said Dexter. "A mistake. I just wanted to ease the pain you created."

"Well, how's that workin' out for you so far, tar baby?"

Dexter ignored the taunt and yelled, "You give me back my guit-tar!"

"You just a nappy-headed pickaninny, ain't you?"

The light emanating from the Della Thing changed hue as she dove through the time bubble to attack the deputies. They stood there, frozen in time, and failed to react at all. She dragged Lev out of the car and held him up so Dexter and Jerry could see. He remained completely still as she chewed his face off with her broken teeth. He didn't bleed. He didn't even show that he was feeling any pain. Not yet. Time was moving too slowly for him.

Dexter wanted to move closer to protect the deputy, but Jerry held him back. If they moved too far from the building—too far from Nyx's protection—the Aphota would be able to jump out of Della's body and into one of theirs.

The Della Thing slowly consumed the face of the police officer, giggling the whole time. Dexter could see that she was actually swallowing the gruel as she gnawed it off of his shiny, pink skull.

Inside the library, Nyx was in bad shape. He nose was bleeding profusely and she was unconscious. Hek bundled her friend in a blanket and held her tightly to her chest. Chrissie was beside herself with fear but she kept the shotgun trained on the MBI agents.

"We have to help her!" she shouted.

"I am helping her," whispered Hek. "I can't release her until her job has been done."

"Even if it kills her?"

"Yes," said Hek softly. She wouldn't meet Chrissie's gaze. "We have to succeed. If we don't, both our worlds will suffer for it."

Chrissie couldn't believe what she was hearing. For a moment, she let her heartache have its way with her and she looked away from the MBI agents. In that split second, she heard the sound of a footfall. When she looked up she was staring down the barrel of Rhimes' handgun.

"Put the gun down, girl. Do it now," said the agent.

It was enough of a distraction for Billings and Moreno to spring into action. They quickly converged on Chrissie and redirected the muzzle of the shotgun just in time to avoid her

blasting Rhimes in the face. The shot rang out in the enclosed space and everyone's hearing evaporated into a singular ringing sound.

To the Della Thing, the shotgun blast sounded like a long smear of sound. "Y'all's little bitches gone be payin' next. You'll see! Ain't gone be time left for you lest y'all get on the right side of this thing."

Dexter pointed a shaking finger at her. "You're never leaving this place if I can help it."

"You a fucking fool." The Della Thing wiped the gobbets of flesh from her mouth and glowered at the men. "Ain't you done suffered enough, Jim Crow?! Uncle Tom! Stepin Fetchit! Coon motherfucker! How much abuse you gone take before you stand up for yourself? For your people? That's what all of this about, right?!"

Jerry shook his head. "You got it wrong, lady. You can't fix violence with more violence. That doesn't work."

"You as ignant as him!" the Della Thing spat. She suddenly ran headlong at Jerry with incredible speed. Time bubble or not, she was on him in a heartbeat.

Joseph rolled over. His head ached like crazy. He wasn't exactly playing his "A" game, but he knew that the Della Thing was still on the loose and he was the only one who could stop her. As far as he knew, none of the others had any idea what they were dealing with. Maybe he could still get in touch with his Della. Maybe he could push the Thing aside and help his wife reclaim her own body. Even if it meant taking the Thing back inside himself, it would be worth it. He had some practice living with it. Della didn't. He had to set her free before the Thing finished her.

His hands were cuffed behind him so he slid along the side of the school until he could look around the corner. There was a clearing ahead and a couple of cars with their headlights on. There was a body on the ground, but it was hard to see. Could it be Della? Hope and despair collided within him and nearly knocked him to the ground. Without thinking, he ran out into the light.

Dexter pulled the Della Thing off of Jerry, hoping he could get her to attack him instead, but she wouldn't take the

bait. Instead, a man with his hands behind his back appeared inside Nyx's time bubble. He hurled himself into the Della Thing's chest and knocked her to the ground. Once on top of her, he raised his head and looked into her eyes to see for the first time just how much damage the Thing had inflicted on his wife.

"Della! Oh God, Della!" shouted Joseph. "Can you hear me? Jesus, can you hear me?"

Della's right hand balled itself into a fist and slammed into the side of Joseph's head. She struck him again and again, laughing while she watched the pain she inflicted dance across his face. She pushed him onto his back, crushing the bones in his cuffed hands under his own weight.

Joseph screamed but he wasn't ready to give up on his wife yet. "Della! I know you can hear me! You can fight this thing. You have to attack it from the inside."

"That bitch can't hear you, white boy," scoffed the Della Thing.

Joseph ignored her. "Della! Find the Caretaker. Help is there. It's the one place this bitch can't get to. You just have to ope..." Joseph abruptly stopped talking because the Della Thing had broken his jaw. The pain made his eyes feel like they were being pushed out of his skull from the inside. He tried calling Della's name again and was met with an even more forceful blow to the side of his head. It jacked his neck around and sent a fresh wave of pain shooting down his arms. He was losing the fight. He knew it and the Della Thing knew it, so he made the only choice left to him. He pretended to be unconscious. He had to be careful, though. Just closing his eyes made him fall perilously close to sleep. If he passed out now, he probably wouldn't wake up.

The Della Thing kicked him in the stomach and Joseph bore it in silence. He listened as she moved away from him, dragging that broken guitar behind her. He concentrated on his wife's eyes. The Thing had taken over her body but it hadn't been able to steal her eyes. Della's eyes had always been so full of life and optimism. The Della Thing had eyes as empty as a dry riverbed. Strangely, that realization gave Joseph hope.

In the time it took Joseph to think those thoughts, much had happened across the way. Had he zoned out? Maybe. He was so tired. He was about to fade away completely when

someone grabbed his shoulders and shook him. "Guitar," said Joseph through a broken jaw. Each word brought new shards of pain. "Guitar. Kill deh guitar."

"I hear you, young man. I just don't know how just yet. My friend over yonder, he knew, but he ain't doing so good. There's some folks inside that do, too. What say we let them take care of that for us?" A rough hand eased Joseph's sweaty hair to one side. "Be still," said the man, and as he did, something hot and wet struck Joseph's cheek. The man mumbled something about blood, but Joseph couldn't make it out.

"You hurt?" mumbled Joseph.

"You could say..." The man was choking. Joseph strained to open his eyes but before he could, the man fell forward on top of him. Pain shot through Joseph's nervous system like a power chord through a Marshall stack. He screamed but no one was left to hear him.

The Della Thing stood outside the door to the library, blood dripping from her slender fingers. She'd killed Jerry and she thought she'd killed Dexter too. Black or not, they'd been in her way. As soon as the sun came up, she'd begin her real rampage. She'd leave the broken body she now inhabited and take another one. She'd take special pleasure if it turned out to be a Four, but she knew she might have to kill all of them. Oh well. *Que sera sera*. She giggled at that and one of Della's broken teeth scratched her lower lip. The Della Thing liked how it felt.

She walked toward the library but had to stop when the guitar she was dragging got caught on some debris. Somehow those men had broken the neck off of her beautiful instrument. Now it was just hanging together by a couple of strings. She slung those around her neck like a stole, with the guitar body dangling on her right and the neck hanging on her left. The pain generated by the strings cutting into the back of her neck told her that the body she inhabited was still alive, and that it might hang on just long enough for her to reach the fire. The Aphota didn't know what was going to happen when she touched the blaze. All it knew for sure was that the fire was energy. It was life. In the right hands—her hands—it was also a weapon.

"Alright, everybody on your feet," said Rhimes calmly as he regained some of his hearing. "Do it now."

"She's hurt," said Hek softly as she cradled Nyx.

Rhimes kept his weapon trained on the two women on the floor. He knew better than to trust them. They were killers. "Let me see your hands," he said.

Hek held her hands out away from Nyx, but Nyx was incapable of compliance. "I can reach down and hold up her hands for her if that will put you at ease," said Hek. "I'll do it slowly. Just tell me if it's alright for me to do so."

A quick nod was all Rhimes gave the woman. He knew he was being an idiot. The woman on the floor was faking. She had a handgun under that blanket and these would be the last thoughts he'd ever have. His hand tightened around the grip of his sidearm as Hek eased the blanket back. Nothing. Hek

pulled the younger woman's arms free. Rhimes sighed. Her hands were empty.

"Alright, stand up," he said.

"May I not comfort her, Agent Rhimes? Please?"

For a moment, Rhimes lost himself. "Do you know me, lady?"

"Yes," said Hek. She indicated Chrissie. "This one is like you. She can help you to understand that we are not here to harm you. At present, Nyx is giving her very essence to save us all."

Billings spoke up. "Don't listen to her, boss. These people are the killers. You saw what they did!"

Rhimes suddenly puffed up like a prize fighter and pushed the younger man away. "And just who the fuck are you to tell me who I should listen to?" he yelled.

Chrissie looked over at Hek and saw worry on her face.

"I meant no disrespect," said Billings. "I just wanted to remind you that..."

"That I'm a stupid ass nigger that don't know shit about law enforcement? Is that it, you white trash piece of shit?"

"Um...no, sir," stammered Billings. He backed toward the library shelves hoping that he might give Moreno a clear shot if it came to that.

"Um, YES sir, is what I think you meant to say, agent cracker-ass!"

Hek stood up, gently laying Nyx's head on the floor. "Agent Rhimes," she said. He spun around and leveled his pistol at her face. Hek didn't flinch. "Gary. You're feeling the effects of the Aphota. Its power is growing. Soon it will spread this anger to every person of African descent in this hemisphere. This anger will take hold of them and their victims will be legion. All races will be victims of this plague if we can't stop it here. I need your help, though. We all need your help."

Rhimes felt his anger ebbing and flowing as he wrestled with a torrent of conflicting thoughts. Just as the urge to kill became impossible to ignore, it was replaced by overwhelming sadness. What the hell was going on?

The Della Thing watched the drama brewing inside the library. She could see the fire and it made her giddy with vicious joy. Soon she'd steal its energy and channel it through Della to finish her work. Then she'd no longer be bound to that nasty

white flesh. She'd be everywhere and she'd feed on the violence she made the others inflict. When she was done, she'd become their god. It was all going to work exactly as she'd planned.

She was pushing her hatred into Rhimes when she felt something twist inside her gut. She withdrew quickly into Della's crushed mind.

You here? She thought the words to whatever was left of Della. The Aphota had been certain that the woman's mind was gone, but now there was a doubt. *Answer me, Della. You here, bitch?* There was no response, but another twinge of pain shot up from her stomach and permeated her lungs and throat. *What you doing?* thought the Aphota. *Why you want to hurt yourself?*

This time the response was clear. Della's small, weak voice spoke to the Aphota out of the darkness. *I am*, was all it said.

You is what, bitch? You nothing to me! That's for sure! Goddamn trouble is all you is. The Aphota tried desperately to find words that would make Della angry enough to lose focus and fade away entirely. *That fucknut husband of yours is outside. I done killed him, though. Boo fucking hoo! Too bad, ain't it?*

I love you, whispered Della.

"What the fuck?!" shouted the Della Thing out loud in the hallway.

Billings and Moreno turned and aimed their weapons at the hallway outside the library and saw the weird woman with the broken guitar. She didn't seem to be aware of them, though.

"Put your hands up," said Moreno, though he felt silly saying it. The Della Thing remained motionless.

Moreno turned to ask for suggestions and Rhimes fell to the floor. Billings approached him cautiously. "You okay, boss?"

Rhimes nodded as he sat up. "I'm sorry, Billings."

"You remember?"

"Yeah, I do." He looked at Hek and caught her eye.

"It's okay," said Billings. "I know you didn't mean it."

"Oh, but I did," said Rhimes. "Not personally against you, of course, but there's a part of me... It's the kind of thing that only ever shows the top of its head when my guard goes down." He made a point to look Billings in the eye. "I don't want those feelings," he said, "but they're mine. Know what I mean?"

Billings shrugged. "I guess." He hoped that the rational Rhimes had returned for good. If he hadn't, he didn't want to set him off again.

Rhimes smiled. "That's okay. You're better off not knowing."

Billings was trying to figure out whether or not Rhimes was fucking with him when Moreno shouted, "Something's happening to her."

Chrissie and the MBI agents all converged on the doorway. Hek found it amusing that a group of Threes who'd been very close to killing one another a few minutes ago were now on the same side. She moved to place herself between the Aphota and the fire. The heat had settled down but it was still alight. She hoped that it would be enough.

Della's body had begun glowing again. It rose slowly and hovered a few inches off the floor, her feet dangling lifeless below her. That ghastly mouth exhaled an awful stench and she began to laugh. "I'm still here," she said.

Rhimes could feel his hatred building again when something struck him on the back of the head. His body crumpled to the floor as Moreno and Billings turned to face their new assailant—Hek. She hammered Billings with the table leg she'd just struck Rhimes with and the agent fell out beside his boss. Moreno fumbled with his shotgun and immediately took a shot at her. The blast was broad and more than a few of the tiny projectiles struck Hek before she could render the third agent unconscious with her primitive weapon.

Chrissie was speechless. She stared at the lithe woman in disbelief as the Della Thing pushed its way into the library.

Outside, Joseph rolled Dexter's body off so he could breathe. His hands hurt so badly that he considered giving up. But then he thought about Della. If he was going to help her, he'd have to be able to see. His eyelids were swollen but he was eventually able to open narrow slits between them. He forced his damaged body into a kneeling position beside Dexter and leaned over to check him out. At first, he thought the old guy was dead but then he rested his head on Dexter's chest and heard a faint heartbeat. He sat up and recognized the man's face for the first time. "I'll be goddamned," he muttered as he fell back onto his ass. Things were becoming clearer.

He used his elbow to smack Dexter in the side of the head and searing pain shot up his arms. His vision narrowed to tunnels and he had to will himself not to pass out. "Hey! Pawn shop man! Can you hear me?" Dexter remained silent, but the air around them did not. It sounded to Joseph like someone was speeding up a recording. Droning bass frequencies morphed into birdsong as the sky brightened. *Finally*, thought Joseph. It had been the longest night of his life.

A sound like air escaping from a hot air balloon filled the library. Hek ran over to where Nyx lay. "Nyx has lost the time bubble," she said evenly, "and I've lost her."

Nyx was dead and Chrissie could see that Hek was bleeding. What the hell would she do if Hek died and she was left there all alone? She'd die too, of course.

The Della Thing moved closer and Hek pushed Chrissie down behind the fire pit. "Stay there," she said and then she approached the Aphota.

The Della Thing laughed when Hek gagged at her smell. "You think you so high and mighty?" she said.

"No," said Hek. "You simply smell like excrement. It's difficult being this close to you."

The Aphota laughed again through Della's mouth. "You right 'bout that. This bag of bones about done for."

It was Hek's turn to smile. "Do you know who I am?"

For the briefest of moments, the Della Thing went blank. Inside her, Della's small voice was growing again. It had no real power over her but it was goddamned distracting! She was prattling on about love and it was driving the Aphota crazy.

"Shut the fuck up!" shouted the Della Thing to no one in particular. Della's eyes rolled back in her head and she floated back down to the floor.

Hek slapped Della's face as hard as she could. So hard that the remains of Della's teeth tore a jagged hole in her cheek.

The Aphota rose back to the surface of Della's weary face and grinned. "I know you. For sure I do. And I know I'm gone find a way inside of you. When I'm done killing all the white folks here, I'm gone take care of your people. How 'bout that? And you gone help me, bitch!"

At that moment, Hek felt like she was falling off of a tall building. The Aphota pried into her mind, forcing her to lose

control of her body. Hek had assumed that she'd be able to push the Aphota away from Della long enough to get the guitar. Then she'd trap it there and destroy it in the only fire on Earth hot enough to do the job. But now her house of cards was collapsing on itself. Instead of running, the Aphota was pushing its way into her!

"No!" yelled Hek silently from within the Aphota's smothering embrace. "How can you..."

"I'm beyond all your trite-ass shit! I'm a god, and pretty soon, I'm gone be running this here joint!"

The Earth felt like it was swaying back and forth beneath Hek's feet. So much thought had gone into her plan that she had no other options. Nyx had given her life and now the plan was going to seed. How could she have made such a big mistake?

Hek fell to her knees and Chrissie emerged from behind the fire pit. "Hek?!"

The Aphota launched Della's body at Hek and pushed its rancid thoughts into Hek's mind. Hek resisted feverishly but the Aphota was winning. It had almost completely enveloped Hek when something stopped it from within Della's broken shell.

I love you.

"NO! NOT NOW! NOOOOO!" screamed the Della Thing! She clawed at Della's face. "Don't you fucking do this to me you skinny, white cunt!"

At first Chrissie thought the Aphota was yelling at Hek but then she realized that she was fighting with herself! Chrissie took the opportunity to grab Hek and slide her to safety behind the dying fire.

"Hek, can you hear me?"

Tears streamed down Hek's face. She sobbed deeply and nestled her face into Chrissie's shoulder. She wept and said "I'm so sorry" over and over again.

Inside Della, a battle was raging. Della's love against the Aphota's hate. The Aphota knew that Della could never win—love was just a myth—but she could certainly get in its way. The only problem was that Della was stronger than the Aphota ever imagined. She sat in her rocking chair beside the Caretaker and smiled. It was warm there. Comfortable. There was a fire in the fireplace and the Caretaker had given her some soup that had incredible restorative powers. The Caretaker's little black cat snuggled in her lap and purred loudly as she slurped her

soup. Della felt like herself again for the first time since Joseph had disappeared.

"I love you," she said out loud. Over and over. Love was her life blood and she meant to share it with the Aphota. The Aphota was Joseph. It was everyone. It was all who hated and all who loved. Deserving or not, she would love them all.

I love you.

"Della?"

Hek looked up to see Joseph standing in the hallway. He stumbled forward, cradling his damaged hands against his chest. There were a lot of things happening that Hek had never planned for. She'd assumed that the Aphota had jumped to Della because it had used Joseph's body up.

The Della Thing saw Joseph and panicked. "You! No! You! Not her! She dead! Dead, dead, dead!" It sneered at Joseph, knowing he was too frail to put up much of a fight.

"Help your wife," said Hek, locking her eyes on Joseph's. She knew that Della was trapping the Aphota somehow. Holding it inside her body.

"How?!" shouted Joseph.

"You know," said Hek.

"No, I really fucking don't!"

The Della Thing screeched as Joseph moved closer. Hek smiled. It was a good sign when a man moved toward the object of his fear instead of away from it.

"Love her," said Hek softly.

Chrissie yelled, "We have to help him!"

"We are helping," she said.

Joseph had to push hard to get close enough to touch Della. It was like hurricane force winds were pushing away. When he finally was able to touch her, the blue-white energy that was emanating from her skin burned him. He didn't care. He embraced the Della Thing and whispered, "I love you," into an ear that still bore one of the cat earrings that he'd given her. That simple piece of jewelry reminded him of all that she'd ever meant to him. Her rancid odors evaporated and her burning flesh felt soft again. She was his heart and soul and he'd give anything to save her. Even himself. That was when he heard Della's real voice in his head.

I love you too. She sounded happy. How was that even possible?

The Aphota was trapped between Joseph and Della. It flung itself at both of them, trying to find a way out of the cage they'd built out of their love.

Hek and Chrissie watched as the couple swayed back and forth in front of the dying fire. Hek knew that the longer she waited, the better the likelihood of her success, but she couldn't let the fire go out. It was going to be a gamble, and that made her very nervous.

"Christine," she whispered. "Take this." She handed Chrissie an ornate knife she'd drawn from the folds of her dress. "When I tell you to, cut through the strings on that guitar."

"Guitar? What guit..."

Hek pointed at Della. The guitar that's hanging around her neck. "I need you to cut the strings," said Hek.

"What? Why? What's going to happen?"

The energy in the room was growing. They'd have to act soon.

"Just do as I say. When I say 'go', you help me to pull the strings tight and cut them with that dagger."

Chrissie looked at Hek and nodded.

Joseph could no longer see the library or the fire. He was in a hallway, bathed in light that warmed him from within. The walls and the ceiling were formed of what appeared to be a single piece of wood, as if the passage was built from the hollowed-out insides of a massive tree. He ran his hand along the surface as he moved forward. He didn't expend any energy on the task, nor did he feel any pressure to be or do anything. He just moved ahead. Soon, he was face to face with a large wooden door. It had no knob and no locks. There were no windows. There was just the hallway and the door. Its surface shimmered as if it were lit by candlelight.

Something called to him. His hands no longer hurt as he felt around inside his pocket and retrieved an iron skeleton key. It was heavy—much heavier than it should have been given its size. The key must open the door, but where do you put a key when a door has no keyhole?

Joseph felt around the edges of the doorframe and found that there wasn't a single gap. He rested his forehead against the surface of the wood and stared into it. Its darkness obscured many of the surface details, but he could make out one large knot in the surface. It was casually placed in that way that mother nature placed many of her greatest secrets. Joseph touched it and found it to be as solid as the rest of the door, but he had a hunch. He held the key out and pushed it into the knot. It slid right in as if the wooden surface wasn't there at all. He turned the key and there was a soft wood-on-wood sound. When it stopped, Joseph worked up his nerve and pushed on the door. He was as giddy as a child on Christmas eve. He just knew there was something wonderful on the other side.

The door swung inward without a sound, exposing a quaint room that would have been right at home in Snow White or Sleeping Beauty or any of a hundred classic fairy tales. There was a fireplace that contained a comforting little fire. A charred pot hung over the flames and the smell that emanated from it made his mouth water. Joseph saw movement off to his right and he felt fear for the briefest of moments. He relaxed when he saw a small, black cat in the corner. He crouched to call her over and an old man stepped out of the shadows. He had long

grey hair and a beard that looked translucent in the golden light from the fire.

"Hello, Joseph," said the Caretaker. "I've missed you, my friend."

Joseph stared at the man. The light was dim but he was pretty sure he'd never met him before. He didn't want to be rude, though. "Thank you, sir. This is a beautiful home you have here."

"Oh, don't you dare call me sir. And it's not my home. It's yours."

"I seriously doubt that," said Joseph. The Caretaker smiled. His beard made the expression larger than life.

There wasn't much else to say or do, so Joseph looked around the room. He noticed that the door had closed behind him but that didn't worry him. He knew he was safe.

"Would you like to have a seat?" asked the Caretaker.

"I'm fine. Besides, you don't appear to have any..." Joseph was about to comment on the lack of furniture but instead he saw that there were now chairs beside the fireplace where before there'd been none. The cat jumped up onto the seat of one of them and began to groom herself. Joseph decided it would be okay to sit for a few minutes and visit with the friendly old man. After all, he had nothing better to do.

The Caretaker scooped up the cat and placed her on his lap as he sat down. The light from the fire played tricks with the man's features and made him look very familiar to Joseph. He didn't mean to, but Joseph found himself staring at him.

"You don't know me?" asked the Caretaker. "I was with you the whole way here."

For the first time since he'd arrived, Joseph felt uncomfortable. Something about that place made him want to make the old man happy. Denying knowledge of him seemed like it would have the opposite effect. "I'm afraid my memory isn't what it once was," he said.

The Caretaker had a glint in his eye, as if he were playing a particularly satisfying trick on Joseph. He turned away for a moment and when he turned back, his face was much more familiar. "I'm known as the Gardener these days. Your Caretaker is part you and part me. Part others as well, but that's harder to explain." He paused for a moment and then added, "You used to call me Milt."

With that key bit of information, Joseph's mind turned a kaleidoscopic wash of broken glass into a full-fledged, Imax image. "Milt?!" He leapt up to embrace his friend, scaring the cat away in the process. He hauled the old man to his feet and stared into his eyes. Of course it was Milt! He had no idea how his friend had gotten so old but there was no doubt in his mind that what the man said was true. "Jesus, it's been forever!" he said, then he thought about the implications of his statement. "Oh, sorry, man. That wasn't a crack about the white hair or anything."

Milt roared with laughter. He could feel his younger self coming back into focus. "No offense taken, dude. It's great to see you! I thought that might never happen."

"What? Us see each other again?"

Milt nodded. "A lot of shit's gone down."

Flashes of imagery struck Joseph like a fist and he fell back into his chair. His heart ached as he remembered bits and pieces of the last week or so. "Have you seen Della?"

Milt smiled brightly and took his seat again. He said nothing but he nodded as the little cat returned to his lap. Then Joseph saw her. She was the most heartwarming sight he'd ever seen, as if there was a cutout in his heart shaped just like her.

"Hey, sweetie," said Della. She was dressed in a long, black gown. It was plain but elegant. She'd been standing in the shadows the whole time.

Joseph stood and he felt like his soul was going to burst. He was afraid to approach her. What if she wasn't real? He didn't think he could handle that.

"Dell," he said. "I thought..."

"I know."

He struggled to find the words to express his feelings. He shook his head and looked down at the floor. When he raised his head again, she was still there. He kissed her softly, taking in the tastes and smells and textures that made up the woman he loved. Both of them were crying. He embraced her and she hugged him back with all her might.

"I thought I'd lost you," she said. Everything had disappeared except for the two of them. They were the entire world and it was enough.

"I love you, Dell," said Joseph.

"I love you," said Della, and they held each other quietly for a time.

Milt spoke and broke their spell. "I'm sorry to interrupt. Of all the people I've ever known..." He paused, rethinking what he wanted to say. "I used to want what you have. I wanted it so bad I'd have killed for it. Now, I'm just happy to have witnessed it."

Della and Joseph moved back toward the fire and sat down. Strangely enough, there were now three chairs. "Why are we here, Milt?" asked Joseph.

"You're probably starting to remember some things that you'd just as soon forget, but I need you to remember. I pulled you out of that school library. Do you recall?"

Della leaned her head on Joseph's shoulder. "I remember parts of it but I was never entirely there."

"I remember it," said Joseph. His features hardened and he squeezed Della's hand tightly. "That thing was killing Della. It was using her like it had used me."

"That's right," said Milt. "What if I told you that the three of us can destroy it?"

"From here?" asked Joseph. "I don't even know where the hell we are." His calm was dissipating. The thing. He had to get rid of it before it killed Della! He remembered that much.

"Joseph, I know this is going to sound all spacey dipshit coming from me, but we're inside your love. Yours and Della's. It's the one part of Della that the Aphota couldn't reach. Her Caretaker is a part of me and he helped her hole up in here and wait for you. Now that both of you are here, we should be able to force it out of Della's body."

"Where will it go?" asked Della. Joseph shot her a glance that said, *Who gives a shit?* She looked back at him and put her hand on his cheek. "It's no good if all we do is send it into someone else. It'll just start this fight all over again."

"You're right," said Milt. "There's someone on the outside who's working hard to break it apart, but to do so, she needs the Aphota to return to its vessel."

"The guitar," said Joseph.

"Once it's there, I think she'll be able to split the Aphota into tiny pieces again. It's less harmful that way. The way it was meant to be." He sat back, tracing memories that couldn't possibly be his own. "Pain's a funny thing. Most anybody can

take a little at a time. A scratch here, a bruise there. But take it all at once and it's overwhelming."

"What do you need us to do?" asked Della.

"You know how you've been expressing your love for the Aphota?" Della nodded. "That's what made it possible for me to bring Joseph here. If both of you do that together..."

"Love that fucking thing?" said Joseph. "Are you out of your goddamned mind?"

"It won't work if it's not genuine," said Milt. He was no salesman. He had no reason to spin this for his old friends. They had to come to it on their own terms.

"Sweetie, it's not so hard. I actually feel sorry for it. It's like some of those rescue cats I worked with. Remember that grey one? The blue Persian I named Simon?"

Joseph thought back. Cats weren't really his thing. He liked them okay but if the truth were told, he could have lived without them. "Sorry, but I don't remember."

"He was in a cage at the shelter. I had him pulled because of how he looked at me. He was so scared that when I tried to calm him down, he lashed out at me."

"Right, and cut your hand. Now I remember. Hard to forget rabies shots."

"But you didn't blame the cat, did you?"

"I don't know. Maybe. I mean, I get that he was just scared."

"A month later, he was cleaned up and fostered successfully before being adopted into a home with three children. He's still a member of their family today."

"So what's your point?" asked Joseph.

"My point is that fear can make anyone a little crazy. Imagine the fear in that one little cat and then multiply it by millions. That's what that Aphota thing is. The only way to slow it down is to reach out with love."

Joseph shook his head. "I just don't think I can forget the horrible things it made me do, and the things it did to you, Dell."

"You don't have to forget, or even forgive," said Milt. "Just reach out with kindness. It's never felt kindness before. The feeling is so strange that it angers it."

Della looked deep into Joseph's eyes and caressed his hands. Those hands had been damaged by the Aphota but now

they were like new. The damage wasn't real. Maybe none of his experiences were real. Nothing but his love for Della. He looked up at Milt and said, "Alright."

The Della Thing was in a trance. It stood beside the hot coals with Joseph, both of them now glowing from within and producing a rising tide of white noise. It was like they were in the middle of a tornado but there was no wind.

"Christine!" shouted Hek. "Now!"

Chrissie couldn't hear her. She couldn't concentrate. The energy emanating off the Aphota was blocking out everything else.

Hek moved to the other end of the fire pit to wait for Chrissie to cut the guitar strings. She yelled at Chrissie over the deafening roar inside her head. It wasn't physical noise. No sound waves were vibrating the air in that room. In fact, the air felt like it was slowly being sucked away.

"Christine!" she shouted. If she didn't act now, the air in the room would putrefy and she would pass out before she could complete the destruction of the Aphota.

She ran around the fire pit and grabbed Chrissie's arm. She needed the knife. No ordinary blade would be able to cut through those strings. They were a part of the Aphota, just like the rest of the guitar. Hek pulled on Chrissie's fingers but they wouldn't budge. Chrissie began to laugh.

"Let me have the knife, Christine!" shouted Hek. She looked into Chrissie's eyes and saw that they were empty. Somehow the Aphota was manipulating her. It couldn't take complete control of her, but for the moment it was able to keep Hek from getting the knife.

The laughter continued and Hek began to cough. The air was becoming poisonous. The Aphota was going to kill them all and leave its essence in the guitar until it could move into someone else and begin again. Hek couldn't let that happen, but she was out of options.

It was then that Hek realized what she had to do. Like so many good ideas, she didn't know where it came from. She was simply thankful that it had come to her at all. She grabbed Chrissie's hand. If the girl wouldn't let go of the knife, she'd have to become a part of it! Hek swung Chrissie toward Della and scraped the blade across the last three strings. Two of them broke before Chrissie started fighting back. Hek struggled but

she was smaller than the girl and she didn't want to hurt her if she could help it.

Chrissie was in a state much like slumber. She caught glimpses of sights and sounds but she had no way to assemble them into a coherent whole. A knife. Hek. Burning coals. Flickering light. An old guitar.

Hek grabbed Chrissie's wrists and made another attempt at cutting the last string but it was no use. She was exhausted and the Aphota's energy was growing. Chrissie wrestled her hand away from Hek and slammed the knife blade into the floor, then she bent it over and snapped it in two. The Aphota laughed through Chrissie's open mouth. Soon it would have complete control of the young girl.

Hek stood, gasping for air and said, "You win, mighty Aphota. Erevos. Skotos. Take me instead."

Chrissie's mouth moved but only guttural sounds came out. The Aphota wasn't yet able to talk through her. Hek understood anyway.

"I have the power you seek. You'll be able to cross over and the Fours will be at your mercy. That's what you want, isn't it?"

Chrissie moaned again and the Della Thing took a step toward Hek.

"Yes, come and embrace me, great Aphota." said Hek. She opened her arms and moved to embrace the body that had once belonged to Della. She let her hands slide down Della's arms. Down. Down. All the way to the guitar. As soon as she had the guitar's body in one hand and its neck in the other, the Aphota realized what she was up to. Chrissie screamed as Hek shoved her foot into Della's chest, grabbed the guitar parts, and pulled that lone string straight through Della's neck. It only got caught once—on her spinal column—but Hek bore down and wrapped the string tight around her hands to pull with all the leverage she could muster. The roaring sound fell silent as time stopped for everyone but Hek. Then the guitar string broke free, sending Della's head back into Joseph's chest.

Hek scrambled to gather up the pieces of the guitar. The tortured instrument had always been the seat of the Aphota's power. It had been its prison for so long that part of its spirit was permanently trapped there. Hek held on tight and plunged the pieces of the guitar deep into the burning coals. Her hands burned as well, but she didn't care. She would gladly

sacrifice herself if she could finish the job once and for all. Chrissie's screams enveloped Hek's being as the heat burned through her flesh. It was as if the walls themselves were screaming from deep within their timbers. That was the last thing she remembered.

When Hek awakened, she was in the back seat of Jerry's police car with Dexter. Her first thought was of her hands. She looked down to see that they were both unharmed. She spoke to Dexter and when he didn't respond, she shook him. Nothing. She leaned in close and felt his breath on her cheek. She sighed. After what had happened to Nyx, she couldn't bear to lose anyone else. The others weren't gone, exactly, but their paths had diverged, perhaps forever. Hek felt the loss deeply. Perhaps she'd been among the Threes for too long.

She looked up and saw Chrissie talking to someone in front of the car. It was Milton. The two of them spoke like old friends who'd run into one another at the dog park. They hugged and Milt walked off toward the woods. Chrissie wiped her eyes as she opened the back door of the police car. She was digging around in Dexter's pockets, looking for the car keys, when Hek spoke and scared the shit out of her.

"The Gardener?" she asked.

Chrissie took a deep breath and nodded. "He saved your hands. He tried to save Joseph and Della, but..." She left it at that.

"What about the police officers?"

"They're pretty much the same as Dexter. Milt said they'd come around soon enough. The fire's gone out so they should be alright until their friends come looking for them." She stopped short and looked around. "Hard to believe more cops didn't show up."

Hek nodded. She didn't know much about such things but she knew that police usually clustered around events such as these.

"I'm glad you're safe," said Hek.

Another smile. "You too," said Chrissie. "Look we can talk about it later. For now we need to get going. To where, I have no idea."

"Go north," said Hek.

She sounded confident so Chrissie didn't question it. She got into the driver's seat and eased Jerry's car down the driveway. When they got to the highway, she saw what had happened to the other cops.

There had to be hundreds of dead bodies there and dozens of burning cars. It looked like a scene from a war movie. Some of the cars were police cars. Others were harder to identify.

"What the hell happened?" she asked.

"Your police did come. They just got themselves killed. The Aphota was fighting them the whole time she was inside with us. "

"Jesus! How the hell are we going to get through this?"

"We walk."

"What about the car? A shit storm like this is going to attract a lot of attention."

Hek looked at the old vehicle. Jerry had loved that machine for reasons she never understood. She shrugged. "They'll do what they do. They can't hurt us."

That didn't comfort Chrissie, but she knew Hek well enough to know that further questions would render even more oblique answers.

Together, they hoisted Dexter's arms over their shoulders and picked their way past the dead bodies. Most of the officers had been burned alive. Chrissie couldn't tell if they'd been black folks or white folks. Now they were just dead folks. Death was the great equalizer. Race, religion, creed...whatever. None of it mattered when the final chips fell.

Once they got clear of the mess, they found an old station wagon that had run off the road. The driver's side door was hanging open and the keys were still in the ignition. Chrissie knew this because the door chime was dinging away.

They put the back seat down and wrestled Dexter inside, then Chrissie climbed behind the wheel and tried the engine. It started and she backed it onto the road. Once she got it turned around, she punched the pedal to the floorboard and she didn't look back.

The station wagon was parked in front of the feed and seed when Dexter woke up. He climbed out of the back seat and crossed the road to where Hek and Chrissie stood.

"Y'all done figured a way back to the house?" he asked.

"Perhaps," said Hek.

Chrissie remained silent, content to wait and see what happened next. Hek proceeded across the field and the others followed without a word. When they reached the spot where the house should be, Hek turned to Dexter. "Call out to Mavis."

Dexter shook his head. "Hek, I don't think..."

"Call out to her."

In the distance, the sound of sirens was growing. Someone had taken note of the massacre to the south. Had they followed them north?

"Hurry," urged Hek.

Dexter faced the spot where the front steps would be and shouted, "Sweetheart, we need your help. Won't you please let us in?"

The sirens were growing. It wasn't one police car. It sounded like a dozen.

"Again," said Hek. "Louder and from the heart."

"Sweetheart! You can feel me here, can't you? I'm right in front of you! Mavis!"

Chrissie could see the cop cars now. They were turning the corner and heading for the feed and seed.

Hek took Dexter by the shoulders. "Yell for her, Dexter. Not sweetly. Give her a piece of your mind like you would have done in the old days."

Dexter was unsure of this course of action, but he figured he might as well try it. "Woman, you best get your fat ass out here and answer me! You old crow! You gone leave my ass out here to burn today? I don't think so! Now get your hide down here and you open this damn door for us!" "Damn" was the worst curse word Dexter could think of at the moment.

The cops had found the car and they were turning their attention to the strange trio in the middle of the field across the way. Chrissie saw them and put her hand on Hek's shoulder. "We have to..."

Her sentence was interrupted by the sudden appearance of the house in front of them. It hadn't faded in or even blinked in. Somehow, it was just there. The trio bounded up the steps and Dexter hugged his wife.

"Oh no you didn't," she said bitterly.

"Sweetheart, it was just for... Hek told me to say those awful things, isn't that right, Hek?"

Before Hek had a chance to acknowledge his statement, Mavis flung her arms around her man and gave him a big kiss right on the mouth!

"Not out here, alright, sugar?" said a flustered Dexter.

Chrissie wasn't paying attention. She had her eyes on the group of cops that was making its way across the field. Hek came up behind her and put a hand on her shoulder. "Don't worry," she said.

Chrissie looked back at the house just as Belinda came running out onto the porch with Jimi in her arms. "You're back!" she shouted as she hugged everyone. Then she realized how few of their group had returned. "Della?"

Hek shook her head. "Joseph too. Jerry. And Nyx. Dear, Nyx." She sighed. "They've been released from the burden that lies ahead of us."

Belinda's reaction was swift. She hugged Jimi tightly and sobbed deeply. Jimi soon joined in even though he had no idea why. Chrissie held them close until their tears ran out, then they all sat on the porch steps and mourned together. Even Hek, who'd said repeatedly that they had no reason to do so, wept a few tears for her friends. When asked about it, she said she was weeping for her own loss, not theirs.

When the sun hit its zenith, they went inside and prepared a big meal. It was a guilty pleasure, though. The house felt barren without the others there. After they finished eating, they sat at the table together for a long time. They sat and absorbed the fact of it all. It was Belinda who finally broke the spell.

"It's time I was on my way." She glanced over at Jimi who lay sleeping beside her. "I should take him back to Memphis."

"He may stay, if you wish," said Hek. "He will adapt to the change. It's ultimately up to you, though. You're the only one here who might know his parents' wishes."

Belinda began crying again and Chrissie went to her. For some reason she felt tremendous affection for the woman. The feeling was mutual, of course. Chrissie reminded Belinda of Della in a strange way. Her friend. The word echoed inside her head. Never had it held such significance. Should she take Jimi as her own? For Della?

"I don't know how I would ever explain..." she began.

Hek interrupted her. "Choose for yourself. Let me work out the details."

Belinda nodded. "Then I'll raise him for my friend."

"It will be so," said Hek.

Chrissie looked at the people assembled before her and realized just how much she was going to miss them. She wanted to tell them so, but the words didn't come. Instead, she pointed at the front door and said, "I guess need to be getting home too. How long has it been?"

"Long as long and short as breath," said Hek without looking up. "That's what Nyx would have said."

After a moment of silence, Belinda stood up and hefted a bleary-eyed little boy in her arms. "I don't know what that means. Has time been doing something funky?"

Hek smiled. "Not so much. Dexter, would you be so good as to escort Belinda home?"

"It would be my honor," said Dexter solemnly as he got up from the table.

"No goodbyes," said Belinda, and with that, she strode right out the front door, followed closely by Dexter.

"Can someone take me back to Oxford?" asked Chrissie.

"Yes," said Hek. "If that's what you want."

"Well, I can't stay here. This empty field doesn't quite do it for me."

"Would you wish to stay if you could?"

Chrissie gave Hek her best WTF look. "Doesn't matter, right? You said..."

"Do you wish it?"

Chrissie plopped back down in her seat. "Maybe. Hell, I don't fucking know!"

Mavis gasped at the curse words but Hek ignored them. "I find myself in need of an assistant," she said. "I would like you to take the position if it's something you desire."

"You mean take Nyx's place?"

"There is only the one place for each of us."

Chrissie considered what was being offered to her and what she'd be leaving behind. Her life was just beginning. She wasn't done with college yet, let alone marriage and children and her career.

"Hek, I know it would be wonderful."

"But?"

"But I need to find my way to my own life first. I hope you can understand."

Hek smiled. "I was once as you. It's difficult for me to remember that time but I get glimpses of it when I look at you. It's not my wish to remove you from your path."

"I know," said Chrissie. "I wish I could choose both."

"Possibilities abound," said Hek. "I chose to have Dexter remove Belinda's memories of her time here. Do you wish the same?"

"Oh, no. Please, no!"

"Very well. Yours will remain intact. Perhaps you will tell your children about us."

"I'm sure I will," said Chrissie. She wanted to hug Hek again but she was afraid that doing so would make her reconsider her choice. She turned abruptly and walked out the front door with Mavis. Back to her life, small as it might be.

EPILOGUE

The garden behind the house was in full bloom. It looked both wild and cultivated at the same time. The dead kudzu vines had been gathered up and dried to be made into beautiful decorations inside the old house. Small groups of people talked and laughed as a couple of the men picked up acoustic guitars and strummed them to life. As the music soared, an old pickup truck pulled into the driveway. It was a battered Tundra that had seen better days. Toyota didn't make them any more, but its owner had maintained the machine with the diligence of youth.

Jimi parked the truck and remained seated behind the wheel, unsure of how to proceed. He'd just turned 19 and he was trying to figure out if he actually wanted to be there. His mother had died the previous week and a strange woman had given him a letter at the funeral home. It described a way that he could contact his birth mother. He'd known that Belinda wasn't his real mother but he'd avoided asking about the woman who'd borne him. He didn't think he wanted to know. She was long gone, after all, and Belinda had been such a good parent. Looking for the woman that Belinda referred to as "sugar beet" had always seemed like a betrayal. And yet, here he sat.

He'd driven a long way and he'd even stopped at a local cemetery to follow the very strange directions that had been described in the letter. He'd felt silly doing so, but he'd done it. *Might as well see this through*, he thought.

Jimi climbed out of the air-conditioned comfort of the Tundra and was pleasantly surprised to find the outside air to be cool and dry. He wiped his sweaty palms on his jeans and pulled the letter out of his pocket one more time. How many times had he read it? At least a hundred. He was to ask for a man named Milton.

He folded the letter and slid it into his back pocket as he took in the scene in the back yard. These folks were having a party. What if it was all a setup? What if he wasn't wanted there? Well, they could tell him that and he'd be on his way. Simple. He walked toward the back yard.

The first person he came upon was a black man who was laughing hysterically. Tears rolled down his face as he asked Jimi to repeat what he'd just said.

"Is there a guy named Milton here?" asked Jimi for a second time.

The black man's face lit up. "Sure thing, young fella. He's over yonder. Might want to wait for him to finish his song before you approach him, though."

Jimi nodded his thanks to the man and strolled closer to where the two men were playing their guitars. He wasn't much into the whole acoustic vibe but the music lightened his heart anyway. It made him feel better about being there. One of the men kept his head down as he played lead while the other strummed a basic blues chord progression. Somehow the sum of the music was greater than its parts. When the men wrapped up their song, Jimi applauded with the others there in the back yard. His applause was genuine.

He approached the men and asked, "Which one of you is Milton?"

"Milton?" said the scragglier of the two as he stood up. "Who's asking?"

Jimi felt his knees go weak. "Uh, just me, sir. My name's Jimi Myerson." He held out his hand to the guy. Might as well be friendly.

The man took his hand and shook it hard, then he grabbed Jimi by the neck and pulled him in close. "Milton! That's right. I almost forgot." He got lost in a labyrinth of thoughts but then he surfaced again and looked Jimi in the eye. "So you're Jimi. Holy shit. I know somebody who'll want to meet you."

Jimi looked around nervously. The old guy seemed harmless enough, but Jimi still wanted an exit strategy. Milton had turned his back on him as Jimi stammered, "I can't stay long."

When Milton turned back around, he had the other guitar player beside him. The man was practically beaming. "Jimi," said Milton, "I want you to meet Joseph Miles. Your father."

The back yard fell away and Jimi's feelings threatened to overwhelm him. His FATHER? No, Dr. Jim Myerson was his father. Not this scraggly hippie!

Joseph stood still, unwilling to force himself on his son. He could wait. He had time. He thought back to the last time

he'd seen Jimi. That had been in Memphis the night that he'd gone over to Milt's place to watch hockey. It was all so long ago but it remained crystal clear in Joseph's head.

"Jimi, I understand if you don't want to see me. We don't know each other, after all. But I am your father and I loved you so very much until I had to go."

"Go?" asked Jimi. "They told me you were dead!"

"It's a little hard to explain," said Joseph.

"I still don't get it," laughed Milt and Joseph punched him in the shoulder.

"Don't listen to him," said Joseph.

It was all just fun and games for these people but to Jimi it was serious business. He'd been told that his parents had been murdered. That was the story he'd heard his whole life and now his father was standing right in front of him as alive as could be.

"You are NOT my dad and you never were, you fucking loser! My dad's head of surgery at a big hospital, not some asshole that..."

A pair of graceful hands grasped Jimi's shoulders from behind and pushed down on them, willing his tension away. He spun around and stood face to face with a woman who looked like an angel.

"Hello sweet Jimi," said Della. "I sure have missed you." She burst into tears as Jimi embraced her and he soon found himself crying as well. When they'd cried themselves out, he pulled away to get a good look at her. "What are you looking at?" she asked.

Jimi reached into his pocket and pulled out a tattered photograph in a plastic sleeve. "I only ever had one picture of you. I was just trying to absorb how you look in person."

"I know you're mad at us right now," said Della, "but none of this is our fault. It's simply how it had to be. We both died in your world a long time ago, sweetheart."

Jimi's head was spinning. "You what? MY world? No. Mom...I mean, Belinda said that you..."

"She was telling you the truth, Jimi. At least the truth as she knew it." Della paused, waiting. She was used to waiting.

Joseph broke the silence. "We can't be together very long, Jimi. Could we at least have a sit down and talk for a bit? No pressure."

Jimi nodded and the family moved to a vacant table. Milt was watching them when Hek walked up behind him.

"Is he alright?" she asked.

Milt looked back at her and said, "I think so. Time will tell."

AUTHOR'S NOTES

I want to thank you for taking the time to read my work. There are a lot of options out there these days, so I'm happy that you gave me a chance.

If you're from the midsouth, you may already know that all of the places in Caster are real. You can actually visit the circle of trees and the old cemetery across from the feed and seed, and you can make your way to the field where Hek's house appeared. You can even find the kudzu-covered, brick building if you look hard enough. Those places all exist, but none of the characters in Caster do. So if you go to Bolivar county, please don't expect to find a racist sheriff. He doesn't exist. I chose to use real places because the blues is a real thing that found its way to us through those very special spots. I felt it was a disservice not to include the real Rosedale, Mississippi and the surrounding area in this tale. If you live there, I hope you'll forgive the liberties I took for the sake of storytelling.

I doubt it will happen within my lifetime, but I hope humanity will eventually see the day when outward appearances no longer dictate how we approach one another. Places like Stax Records and Muscle Shoals Sound Studio have proven that music can definitely help us cross that great divide if we let it.