

## 01. Home on the Range

A terrible cold settled over the city in his seventeenth year. It crept into cracks in the sidewalk, into dreary rooms through rotting window frames, into lungs and joints and bones. By early November Trenton's breath steamed when he was woken for school by the tinny rattle of the jury-rigged speakers he had built for his aging palmtop. He had built up layers of saran wrap over the windows, stolen from the kitchen and sealed against the window frame with his mother's hairdryer, but nothing could slow the onslaught of this vicious new season. He lay under the heavy mass of blankets and listened to the incongruously cheery early breakfast DJ before steeling himself to crawl out into the cold. By December he was wearing an old hat to bed and pissing in a plastic four-pint milk jug rather than reach the bathroom. His mother had taken to sleeping in the lounge, the only room in the house where his father allowed the heating on. Brendan Mallory spent five days out of seven in the heated cab of a Translight rig on the road between Washington and New York while they risked penalty fines for breaking civic power rationing. His mother had suggested that Trenton join her. She said they could separate a section of the room with an old sheet to give him a little privacy, but he had sullenly refused: He preferred the cold and dark and solitude of his bedroom. He read electronics textbooks and DJ magazines by candlelight, guts twisted up like old washing every time the beep of the card lock heralded his dad's return.

Brendan didn't sleep much. He took pills and drank bitter coffee to stave off fatigue on the road then came home wired and brittle, sedating himself with booze to quash his night fears. Trenton would wait in sullen silence for the inevitable crying jag or burst of violent temper that followed the drinking; hating the eager stupid smile his mother wore for her husband. She was just looking for a little tenderness from the big man, but all Trenton saw back then was mawkish capitulation to his bullying and betrayal of his trust. Mother's should protect their young, a law written into the soul of children. Maria had fuzzy memories of Brendan before the war back when

he might have been an approximation of a half-decent human being, memories Trenton didn't share. Sometimes he felt the heat of Brendan's displaced anger, other nights it might be poor devoted Maria. No matter how well intentioned Brendan's return home might be, (maybe all smiles and a take-out surprise, maybe with blustered hints at seasonal bonuses or a promotion), something would crack and it would all turn sour in an instant, generally when a drop of booze was added to Brendan's unstable mix. Eventually the belt marks, the heavy slaps that landed without warning and the humiliating tirades built up like a callous around the part of a child's love held in trust for fathers. One quiet night, starved of oxygen, that part began to die.

Since then he would lie fully clothed beneath his mound of blankets, listening to his dad's whiskey fuelled snoring and twitching nightmares across the hall, waiting until the Old Man was comatose to sneak out through the island of warmth to the front door, feeling his mother's imploring black eyes follow him across the apartment and out into the city. Despite the bruises and choking sobs, Maria's gentle heart still laboured on and wanted her son to love his father the way she did.

Nothing Brendan said or did could touch or hurt Trenton anymore. The bruises appeared and sank, the blood washed away down the sink. It was just pain, like stubbing a cold toe; arbitrary. Brendan was like a TV someone had left on in the background, moving light and stuttering sound, ignorable. Trenton walked away from each encounter with greater clarity while Brendan diminished a little. By the time he was sixteen, Trenton was buying clothes and second-hand electronics with money made through moving drugs and cigarettes at school. He was an invaluable, if minor, part of the learning establishment's street economy, and no amount of Catholic guilt or furious bluster from his absentee father was going to change it.

Brendan had been a combatant in what historians had started to call the Third World War. Come the armistice he was corralled by the crumbling PRC along with the rest of his military and finally repatriated to American soil after three years of watching seasons turn inside UN holding facilities. He had returned home amongst the ranks of thousands of other servicemen and women that trickled across the Atlantic and Pacific following Black Summer. Some of those

survivors had been ruined physically, some chemically, some genetically, but most mentally, and there was no parade awaiting them.

The Mallory's were pretty unique in their neighbourhood: They were all three still alive. Four homes out of five had lost at least someone to the War or the Myxovirus that followed the ceasefire. Trenton remembered watching National Guards, twitching spastically like malfunctioning robots from nerve trauma, heaving bodies into pits filled with ruined furniture, ragged clothes and old tyres, anything that would burn. He remembered the thump of napalm igniting. He remembered the oily palls of reeking black smoke rising over the silent city. He remembered looking out from behind the razor wire of the relocation camp fence, standing in the food line with Maria, her long black hair bound in a tight braid. He remembered the prefabricated barracks for the women with children, the creaking bunks and the eerie night sounds of the camp. He remembered the unresolved scuttling across the hut floor as he lay awake listening to the breath of dozens of sleeping human beings rushing like surf, though he had never seen the sea.

He was six years old when his dad finally came home to claim them. A big man in old Marine Corps fatigues and a hand-me-down parka with the sleeves rolled up, sandy brown hair grown long and unkempt, his bare arms a twisted mass of ropey muscle and scars, some random like root growth, others deliberate, the result of surgery before and after the battlefield. Trenton had squirmed behind his mother until she finally shuffled him around in front of her and prodded him towards the impassive giant.

‘¡Mire Trenton, él es su padre! ¡Vea, él se viene a casa! ¿Por qué usted no dice hola?’

‘¡Él no tiene gusto de mí!’ he had grizzled.

Maria laughed, nervous and embarrassed. ‘¡No sea tonto, querido! Él es su padre y él le ama. Vaya sacudarrir su mano como un hombre,’ she said, eyes flitting between her son and her husband.

Trenton stepped into the shadow of his father and offered a thin brown hand to be taken. The Mallory's, pale blue eyes a perfect mirror of each other in shape and shade, assessed one another in silence.

'Does the boy not speak English?' rumbled Brendan, peering balefully down at the cowering child and then at his wife with blank hostility.

'Opinión hola en inglés, querido,' said Maria eagerly.

'Hello father,' whispered Trenton.

Brendan squinted and stared at the malnourished child, finally taking his hand and shaking it. 'I suppose that's a start,' he murmured tersely.

One of the camp doctors, a twitchy young black woman that Trenton had developed a secret crush on, had processed their paperwork, given them a last inoculation booster and gratefully handed them over to Brendan who took them both across the city by horse drawn omnibus. The Almish had returned from the far fields and now walked the streets in Puritan black, scattering their disapproval wide on the wings of hooded glances while rescuing the city from starvation.

That first summer together was hot. He played in the courtyard with other skinny children, their heads shaven to prevent the spread of lice. He helped the adults move broken concrete and nourish the grey soil beneath for growing of food. His Dad shuffled off every morning in the company of other tired men to labour in the city, returning with food and water rations that they shared with other broken families in the amber light of the fading sun. When it grew chilly they would head to the community centre to access the Net, looking up e-mail and national news bulletins before watching a movie on the centre's big LCD display.

Trenton was twelve when Brendan found a job at Translight through a program for ex-servicemen run by the government. Things had become tense in their home with the onset of puberty: The animal competition between males for space had begun. Trenton was orbiting his family at a distance, retreating into extended sullen silences punctuated with guttural Spanish just to piss his dad off. Children had begun to drift away into irregular state schooling as food came in from the countryside and hydroponic farms again. The youngest kids, the ones growing up with the freedom of the plots and fields and vacant blocks of the half-empty city hid their faces from the sun and colonised the eaves of buildings along the Potomac, fleeing the violence in their ragged homes and the sudden dull imposition of order on their urban idyll. They became wild

things, shaven apes, the last unreported casualties of the war, while the older children reluctantly slipped their necks back in the leash. There weren't enough pupils to keep all the schools open so they dragged them together from nearby districts, the privileged touching shoulders with the impoverished; one nation, under God.

Trent, already behind by a year, had been suspended from school again. He bought his way back in through the kitchens, bribing the amenable porters from the PJ's with cigarettes. He slipped past the hired security hall monitors like a ninja to steal books and software and charge his palmtop before exiting the way he came laden with a growing stash of pilfered knowledge, all to earn the right to get close to the Urban Hunt Club.

The UHC were all glamour and extravagance, peacocks and divas of the club scene backed up by solid technical know-how and musical acumen. They had a live streaming radio show run from the school which earned them big kudos. They attended clubs and parties with adults, drank their hooch, took their chemicals and slept with them. They enjoyed a local minor celebrity status, insisted on being known by their DJ names, and wore their hair long and coloured in defiance of the grim tradition for head shaving that had become ingrained into urban culture following the war. Most kids loved them, some kids hated them, but no one could ignore them.

Trenton Mallory was a satellite of the UHC. He moved in their shadow supplying them with cigarettes, pills and vodka to fertilize their singular brand of teenage hedonism. He began to grow out his sandy brown hair, hiding the sprouting mop under a beanie hat to maintain his street credibility with his clients in the PJ's. He was their candyman, watching, facilitating. In the slate grey city, it's spine still bent by all the shock and all the suffering, these kids lifted up their heads to stare at the horizon, and he wanted to be part of it.

He studied all winter and into spring. He researched the technology and code they employed. He downloaded the original cuts of the tunes they mixed and toyed with them using pirated DJ software, creating cut-ups of his own, beat-matching and bootlegging in a humble pastiche of his teenage role models. Eventually, he approached them with his first clumsy mix.

It was September. They sat with their entourage on the warm concrete steps at the edge of the brown running track outside school, sipping vodka and cranberry juice from a plastic carton. The field inside the oval was sprouting a healthy crop of corn. He had lingered at the fringe, his palmtop stashed in a chunky surplus load-bearing vest and his beanie pulled down tight despite the heat. They respectfully listened as he told them that he had something that he'd appreciate their opinion on. The hangers-on sniggered tipsily as he withdrew his computer and offered over the headphones. They watched the gel beads swing like a hypnotist's watch while Trenton shrank in embarrassment. Seconds stretched like old gum.

'May I?' the boy named Camargue had asked, and reached for the palmtop, sweeping iridescent electric blue braids out of his aesthetic black face. 'This is your work, yes? May I see the track listing?'

Trenton had called up the playlist with clumsy fingers. Camargue scrolled down, nodding and frowning. 'Your source material is all legitimate,' he had said in his quiet intellectual way, 'but it's also pretty *tame* Trenton.'

Trenton's eyes hardened, his face drew tight over his bones as the iceberg in his guts sucked the heat and light from his skin. He reached out for his palmtop wishing murder on the idiot kids that grinned at Camargue's silky criticism.

'*But*,' the DJ said, lavender eyes narrowing as he snatched the computer out of reach, 'I'm going to guess you chose cuts that you could *handle*, right?' The crowd quieted and turned their attention on Camargue as he waved the palmtop at Trenton. 'I think you're a smart cookie, Trent. Kids are thinking we'll be impressed by any ugly splash of shit they give us if it's got the right label names or producers attached. But simplicity,' he said, nodding to his audience, 'that's the key. I think you know that you're shit and you want to get better, so this is your study.'

'So, let's hear it,' said a skinny boy with flaming red topknot and a wispy goatee. He scratched his narrow chest under his oversized football shirt, turning to Trent. 'Do you stand by your work, dude?' he asked laconically.

'Yes,' said Trent.

'Then we'd better pressure test it,' said redhead. 'I'm Traumahound.'

'Yeah, I know,' said Trenton with as much cool as he could summon, 'we've met, plenty of times. I deal to you.'

'Ah yeah, sure,' said Traumahound blankly, 'I never forget a face.'

He left the track and went across town with the UHC at the invitation of Camargue, riding on the back of an omnibus drawn by a tired team of horses. They talked tunes and tech, ignoring the handful of forgettable glitter kids that had tagged along. Camargue lived with his sister Annabelle and her boyfriend Christian in a plush sprawling loft downtown from which he ran a video production company for music television stations. The apartment seemed to have a migrating population that stabilised at around thirty at any one time, with Annabelle and Christian holding court at the centre. Trenton was introduced to everybody but rapidly lost track of their colourful names and was reduced to smiling and nodding at new faces.

The apartment had been where his first opus had been aired, slipped into the mix at around 2130hrs on Thursday night. Christian was hosting a party for his employees celebrating the conclusion of a three-month project providing new station breaks for a major cable company. Trent sat at the breakfast bar surrounded by the glittering avant-garde that he had only ever seen on TV soaps and fidgeting nervously as he recognised the first tune of his set slip in and the tempo go up. The crowd didn't twitch. He sighed, sure that he'd just created half an hour of wallpaper, but by the time his mix segued into a slick UHC cut-up the place was ready to get hot. People he'd never met before were dancing to his shit.

'Not bad,' said Camargue, offering him a beaker of orange juice as the party turned narcotic about them. 'Not exactly headlining stuff but not completely without merit either. Why don't you get another mix together then come see us with it, we'll tidy it up together. If it's any good we'll slip it in the show early on. What do you say?'

'I say yes!' he laughed. 'Listen, dude, do you want some MDMA or vodka? I've got some wraps and a flask in my vest. No charge.'

'Pour some of that vodka in my juice, dude. I'll raincheck on the drugs until a little later; it's far too early in the evening for chemicals.' Camargue smiled broadly and slapped him on the shoulder. 'But thanks.'

'So,' a lisping girl-voice said, 'this is your dealer-turned-protégé. People are taking about his mix, saying that he's a disciple in your kwoon, sifu.' Trenton looked up. A chalk-pale girl with sleek fuchsia hair and a blue racing leather over a white lace camisole peered down at him, smiling delicately from behind large round purple glasses. 'Hi,' she said, offering him her bone white hand, the wrist cluttered with bracelets, beads and charms, 'I'm Rebecca Ogilvie'.

'Trenton Mallory,' he said nervously.

'Charmed,' she said, tilting her head. His eyes flicked over her face. She had a slight harelip.

'Is his homage that obvious?' said Camargue, laughing. 'This, my friend,' he said to Trent, 'is the legendary DJ Ogre, and you are in the company of luminaries tonight. Becky,' he said, turning languidly to the girl, 'Travis was looking for you earlier.'

She grimaced. 'I'm not in the mood for Traumahound's bullshit tonight.'

'It's not a very big party, angel,' Camargue replied. 'You'll bang into each other soon enough.'

'Then I'll have to leave. Why don't you come with? We can take my car to Annie Goliath's and stay up all night. The summer's nearly over and I don't want to waste what's left arguing with Travis over why I don't want to sleep with him.' She took off her glasses and polished them on her silk teddy. She flicked a momentary glance to Trenton. Her eyes were pink.

'Why you don't want to sleep with him *anymore* is the question, sweet girl. I'm staying home tonight. Why don't you take Trenton?'

Rebecca gave him an appraising look. 'Do you want to come,' she asked, replacing her glasses.

Trenton looked for approval from Camargue who shrugged and smiled. 'Go ahead,' he said. 'It was my suggestion, wasn't it?'

'Okay then,' said Trenton to Rebecca, 'whenever you're ready.'



'Now,' she said and offered him a slim hand.

'Wait a moment, young disciple,' said Camargue, 'take off that stupid fucking camp-survivor hat and show us your head. We don't hide the fact we're alive.' Trenton reluctantly removed his headgear.

'Hmm,' muttered Rebecca, 'we're going to have to do something with that streaky shit-brown mop of yours. You look like some kind of welfare fucktard from the PJ's. The Ghetto Veteran look is so *old*.' She laughed. Camargue twitched.

'Becky,' cautioned Camargue.

'No,' said Trenton quietly, 'it's okay.'

'What's okay?' she asked.

'Let's just go,' he said with a bitter sugar-frosting of a smile.

'My place first,' she said, taking his hand and pulling him after her into the crowd. 'We need to pick up Lucy, my roomie. She should be awake by now I think. Besides, I can't take you to Annie's without fucking with your hair and giving you a decent t-shirt to wear. Do you work out?'

'Well,' he muttered, 'I do a lot of running.'

He didn't make it back home until the following Monday night, and that was only to pick up some more of his stash from under the floorboards beneath the closet while fielding his mother's urgent questions about his whereabouts. He was bare headed, his father's sandy brown hair now a shocking bleached white with New York-chic dye-black roots and waxed into backward slanting spines. He wore smudged black paint around his eyes. His bare brown arms sprouted the black and red scabs of new tattoos.

He threw his best clothes into his dad's old USMC drawstring bag, kissed his mother with a comedown smile and told her he going to be staying with friends for a few days.

'¿Adónde usted va, hijo?' she had begged, holding his arms tightly. '¿Qué digo a su padre cuando él consigue casero? ¿Qué usted ha hecho a su pelo encantador?'

Trenton had laughed. 'Tell him I'm visiting with friends, ma!' He ran his hands through his new hair, preening. 'I'm sick of looking like a chemotherapy patient and embarrassed that I survived the Three Bad Years! I'll be back by the end of the week.'

'Trenton, you're acting odd. Look at me straight.' She cupped his chin and tried to lift his face to hers. He rolled his head away and slapped at her arm.

'Mom! Cut it out!'

'Trenton!' she said, sharply. 'Just look at me!' Her heavily accented plea shocked him. 'Please darling! What's going on? What do I tell your father? He was home last night and he wanted to know where you were. I had to *lie* for you, son. Why don't you talk to me?'

'Mom! Christ, I'm fine!' He scanned her face. Her lower lip was swollen. 'What did he do to you?' he whispered frostily.

'He was angry!' she blurted, cuffing away a sudden spring of tears. 'He was angry, and he had a right to be! His wife is a liar for her son, and lying is a *sin*, Trenton!'

'Mom, I'm going out. If you've got any sense, you'll pack a bag and go too.'

Maria stared lifelessly at him, the tears freezing on her cheeks as the guttering ember of something deep inside was finally extinguished.

'¿Dónde está mi pequeño hijo? ¿Qué sucedió a mi pequeño muchacho? Satan ha puesto a diablo en su lugar,' she said, and turned away.

Trenton shrugged the bag onto his shoulder and left without a backward glance.

Rebecca took him in. She and Lucy Drowner shared a shabby apartment that they tried to make the most of with cheap paint and imaginative lighting. He slept on the couch under a quilt Rebecca's grandma had made.

Lucy was nineteen. She had bottle-black hair and worked at a 24-hour diner as a short order cook. She would come home from her shift smelling of the kitchen with an armload of use-by food that she would summon Trenton to eat. In return he would supply her with quality grass

and ecstasy for the party and amphetamines for the shift at the griddle afterward. She was starved and wiry, with breasts that looked incongruously large on her narrow frame. Lucy hardly ever touched food, she said that she was sick of the sight of it after work, but Trenton's grass and a little flirty coaxing encouraged her to eat. This pleased Rebecca; it was a feat she herself had never managed.

'You're good for her,' she said one night as they lounged in the narrow galley kitchen while Trenton cut up lines of MDMA for wraps to sell at school. He smiled to himself and deftly decanted powder into cigarette papers.

'No, you really are,' she persisted. 'I've never seen Lucy so, well, *girly*, around a guy before. She digs you, Trenton. Everyone has noticed it, not just me.'

'Here's a present,' he said, sliding a tadpole shaped wrap to her. 'One hundred mikes of very good shit.'

Rebecca slapped his shoulder. 'Don't change the subject!' she said with mock severity.

'Becky,' he said, looking up from his work. 'Can I ask you a very personal question?'

'Um, yeah, sure,' she said reluctantly. 'I can't promise I'll answer though.'

'What colour is your hair, naturally I mean?'

Rebecca smiled ruefully. 'You mean, "are you an albino", right? The answer is yes. I'm an albino, my hair is white and I dye it to match my eyes. I'm a freak because my mom carried gene damage home from Korea.' She looked away, covering her embarrassment by stealing one of his cigarettes and lighting it on the stove.

'You're not a freak,' he whispered. 'In fact, you might just be the most beautiful girl I've ever known.' She looked up, her face rippling with confused emotions.

'Hey tribe!' shouted Lucy as she opened the front door. The smell of fried food followed her in.

'In the kitchen!' yelled Rebecca.

'Dinner in the lounge!' replied Lucy.

'Sounds good!' shouted Trenton. Rebecca hustled past him. He gritted his teeth in embarrassment, missing her hurried backward glance.

He couldn't hang out with his landladies that night. He had an appointment with Camargue at ten and one at eight with Angelo (Annie Goliath's boyfriend's big-brother or something, the relationship wasn't really important) to buy a box of half-bottles of cheap vodka that had been cunningly relabelled 'Stolichnya'. It was Thursday, which meant the kids would be after liquor for Friday night and he had to have the product.

The sun had dipped behind the grubby skyline, turning the city a smouldering orange. The concrete and brick radiated the day's intense heat, as if the Technicolor splashes of graffiti were magma seeping from the city's guts. He turned off the main drag and down a deserted side street, his fingers clattering on a sagging chain link fence that bordered the scrubby wasteland beneath an overpass. Silhouettes of zombified men and women shuffled aimlessly between guttering fires and discarded mattresses. He chuckled to himself, imagining the fence as the bars to the Bum Cage in the city zoo.

He was still laughing at his cruel private joke when the cops grabbed him from behind and put him face first up against the chain link, nightsticks in hand.

'We don't have to be nice, kid,' said a gruff voice, 'so don't give us any shit. You do as we say and you don't get a face full of mace, are we in agreement?' Trenton nodded mutely. Rough hands went methodically through the pockets of his vest, lifting his ragged wallet. He silently thanked providence that he had left his stash of chemicals-for-sale back at the apartment. There was a muted beep as his ID card was scanned.

'Yep, he's one of our runners,' said a second nasal voice. A dark uniform shifted in his peripheral vision. 'It was the hair that gave you away son. If you wanted a disguise you shouldn't have shown your momma your new coiffure.' The cops chuckled.

'Okay boy, we're going to take you to the car, tag you and drive you back to your folks where you will be under curfew under the Juvenile Home Detention Review. You're going to bed without any supper tonight.'

'Officers-' he began, his heart in his throat.

'Shut up, son,' said the gruff cop and jabbed him under the ribs with his nightstick. 'Whatever it is, we don't want to hear it. You're going home and staying there until school starts again.'

Trenton swallowed down bile as he was dragged to the car.

His mother and father greeted the cops at the front door with grave and troubled faces. The family sat on one couch, an unholy triptych in an ugly room smelling of whiskey and cloudy with cigarettes, while the cops took up position opposite looking like overheating Siamese twins, hats on their knees. Brendan had one arm around Maria and the other clamped tight on Trenton's shoulder as the police patronisingly explained the details of his probation.

'Now, the boy can go to the municipal library, the hospital if needed and the city probationary centre so he can socialise under supervision, but only between the hours of nine and four. Any later than that and he gets picked up and dumped in Juvie. Other than that, he stays in this apartment,' the cops looked and sounded bored. Crescents of sweat stained their uniforms and beaded in their hairline. 'That's all she wrote, son. You stay out of trouble and be accounted for and by the time you return to school the curfew'll be over.'

'He'll behave,' said Maria, 'he's a good boy.'

Brendan showed the heat-weary cops to the door and closed it behind them with assurances that Trenton would stay out of trouble. He locked the door and leaned heavily on it, muscles bunching under his sticky faded t-shirt.

'*He's such a good boy,*' he snorted, shaking his head, 'so good that I have to suffer the embarrassment of calling the cops to find him. Where have you been, son?'

Trenton shrugged deeper into his oversize vest. 'Just with friends,' he muttered sulkily.

'Your mother was worried. You haven't been home for days.'

'I've been fine,' Trenton grunted.

'But we didn't know that, did we? Who have you been staying with?'

'*Friends!* Christ, I already told you!'

'Blaspheme again and you get the strap,' said Brendan reflexively.

'At least this time you'll have a fucking reason,' he whispered. Maria cringed.

'What did you say, boy?' snarled Brendan.

'Three *Hail Mary's*,' said Trenton.

'Oh my, you're so clever aren't you?' sneered Brendan nastily, 'He's such a wit, this boy, so worldly. Dragged back here like a stray, pissing his pants in fear, but now he's the Big I Am. You don't think about anyone else, do you?' he growled. 'The whole world revolves around you. How is it that I fathered such a selfish little bastard?'

Maria lit a cigarette with a shaking hand and stared hard at the far wall. Brendan leaned his back to the door and lit one for himself, running his scarred hand over his cropped skull. 'In fact,' he continued, 'it's humiliating. Yes, you embarrass me every time your name is mentioned. The cops ask questions like "have there been problems at home" like it's somehow our fault, that we'd driven you out, then they ask "do you know if he's involved with drugs", and what do I say then, Trenton? Hmm? I finally got the truth out of your mother, so don't even try and lie to me! What the hell do I say when the cops ask me what's wrong with you that you'd treat us this way?'

'Okay dad, how about this?' Trenton spat. 'I'd say: "how could I have driven him from his home, officer? I'm never fucking *there!*" That's pretty close, right dad? Or maybe, "well sir, he tends to be out when I get home because I have a habit of hitting him whenever I drink too much or not enough"? And don't you dare give me any shit about drugs, pop,' he bellowed, 'because you fucking gobble them like candy just like all the other washed out fuck-ups left over from the War!'

'Trenton,' whispered Maria urgently, clutching her son's leg.

'Y'know, I wish you had died or stayed in Europe so that I could have invented a decent man for a dad and mom could have found a decent husband instead of living with a basket-case alcoholic who hits her when I'm not there to catch the fucking punches! You're a fucking *bully*, dad, and the Chinese kicked your ass because you're a *pussy* on top of it, so fuck off!'

There was silence. Thick smoke curled angrily in the still air.

All Brendan's attempts to rebuild himself from ill-fitting memories of the man he used to be crumbled. Trenton had finally killed the tattered vestiges of his father's love for him, and with that last scrap of affection went the protection from his father's violence. He stood before them bare, bereft of humanity, sloughed free of the patchwork hide he had created to conceal his sickness. There was passionless murder in his father's awful blue eyes. In a sudden moment of horrid realisation Trenton knew he had gone too far.

'You little cunt,' said Brendan, in a voice a featureless and frigid as the Mongolian steppe.

Trenton bolted, scrambling to get over the back of the couch to his own room and the fire escape outside the window. Brendan crossed the space between them impossibly fast and wrapped his brown hand in his son's hair. Trenton yelped in shock and pain as he was dragged off the couch, scrabbling desperately at his father's wrist. Maria screamed incoherently, begging Brendan not to do whatever it was he intended. She tugged at his clothes, pleading in English and Spanish as the big man hauled his howling son into the bathroom. He twisted the scrawny boy about so they both faced the murky mirror.

'Look at your fucking self!' hissed Brendan his eyes red with smoke and booze. 'Look! You little *homaighneasach*, look at yourself! Is this what you want to be? I fought and bled so that you could paint your face like a *meatachan* and fill your head with poison instead of fucking work like a man, a real man, should! What the *fuck* did I do wrong?'

'Please Brendan!' wailed Maria. 'Trenton! Haga qué su padre dice siempre, hijo! ¡Por favor!'

'Stop jabbering in fucking Spanish, Maria!' Brendan raged. 'You're part of the reason he's turned out this way! Look at him! *Look!*'

Trenton stared at his father through tears of pain. Brendan's eyes were bright blue pebbles floating in blood. 'I don't ever want to be you,' he whispered.

Brendan's jaw locked. He regarded his son with a cold disregard. He reached behind his back and unsheathed his ceramic Marine Corps issue bayonet, wrenched back

his son's head and began to brutally saw off his hair. Trenton howled. Deep cuts burst in his scalp, scarlet rivers gushing down his face and neck. Brendan dispassionately hacked away, ignoring the pleas and shrieks of his son, tossing clumps of blood-soaked hair into the sink while Maria slumped in the corner, crying hysterically and clawing at her face. Eventually the mutilation was over. Brendan jammed his son's bleeding head under the shower and rinsed his patchy lacerated scalp with tepid water. Pink and scarlet twisted in the water as it spiralled down the plughole. Trenton lay slumped over the edge of the tub, gasping. Maria had cried herself dry and now sat wall-eyed and silent.

Brendan calmly cleaned his bayonet on a face cloth and sheathed it again. He sat on the toilet with his hands locked together, staring hard at the wall opposite. The room burned with the last light of the fading day.

'You live under my roof, boy,' he said, 'so you live by my rules. You will keep your head clean of hair; you will keep your face clean of make-up. If you drink liquor, or, God forbid, you ever touch drugs again, then I will give you up for dead. If you're not at school, in the gym exercising, at church on Sunday or studying for your SAT's then I want to know why. If you don't satisfy me, then it's the same. Am I making myself understood?'

'Yes,' sobbed Trenton.

'Good,' said Brendan mildly. 'That's good.' He stood up and frowned down at his blood-streaked hands. 'I'd better wash up for supper,' he said to Maria. 'You'n the boy can tidy up in here, if you don't mind.'

He left closing the door, leaving his son choking on misery under the dull spatter of the shower.

Maria tended the cuts and shaved off the remaining patches of hair until her son's head was a smooth dome riven by gory canals. She dressed him like a baby, leaving him shivering in shock on his bed with one of her cigarettes hanging from his lip, and then she went to her husband.

He listened to the muted exchange of Brendan's cold baritone and Maria's pleading through the thin wall for hours, watching the last of the summer's fat unhealthy



moons roll into the night sky above the city lights, thinking about the vodka buy he had blown. Angelo would be pissed and curse him. Trenton would have a poor rep and miss out on a tidy profit. Sweat stung his ragged scalp and concealed the salty path of dry tears.

He sat, crossed to the window and slid out onto the fire escape and into the hot night, tossing a barren look behind him at the closed door of his bedroom and tenderly fingered the network of scabs on his head.

If he got his hustle on, he might find Angelo. Either way he was never coming back he promised himself, not ever.

Shock found him on his way back to Rebecca. He rode across the city on a wheezing tramcar pulled by a team of skeletal horses, led in turn by a skeletal man; a procession of the damned creeping toward hell. He lent his bloody scalp on the cool glass of the window, faintly aware of the fireworks of pain each jolt and shudder caused him. He watched numbly as a cop car pulled around the ancient omnibus and accelerated hard into the night, lights glaring and sirens howling even though the road ahead was bare of traffic. He stumbled from the tram at Faluja and 4<sup>th</sup>, begging a light in return for a cigarette from the ghostly teamster, and then shuffled three blocks to her apartment oblivious to the horrified glances of passers-by. It wasn't until the door was opened to him and he collapsed into the arms of the girls that he finally gave in to the tears that had dogged him all the way there. They held him, wrapping their thin arms about his shuddering body as he sobbed piteously, his brown fingers pawing desperately, pulling them closer as if he might hide in between them. He was still choking up misery when Camargue arrived, rushing through the doorway to hold him tight, his aesthetic black face locked in a Kabuki mask of disbelief and fury.

They took turns watching him that first night. Lucy called Annie and Angelo, Camargue called Traumahound. Between them they stood their vigil, their young faces grave as they discussed what was to be done. By dawn the apartment reeked of tobacco, dope and tension. Lucy, yawning cavernously, packed her bag for work and left with a

tender kiss for sleeping Trenton and a fierce hug for the rest of the UHC. 'I'll be back by 1400,' she said. 'Just don't let him go anywhere, okay?'

'Sure,' said Rebecca, nodding jerkily, twitchy from sleep deprivation. 'We'll sit on him. No-one's going to leave him alone today.'

'I'll walk with you as far as the store,' sighed Angelo. 'We'll need some more sterile wipes for his head, and I'm out of gum.'

'I'll come with too,' said Annie, 'I need the air.' She got to her feet shakily and shuffled out after them, closing the door gently.

Rebecca and Camargue moved through to the kitchen and fetched another bottle of Mountain Dew from the refrigerator.

'What do we do with him?' said Camargue finally.

'Nothing today,' replied Rebecca, polishing her glasses on her sleeve. 'We let him sleep. Poor baby, look at what that fucker did to him. Do we know why?'

'Because he's a maniac?' sighed Camargue. 'Honestly, I don't know. Trenton isn't making much sense right now. Has he told you much about his family?'

'Some,' said Rebecca, zipping up her sweater against the dawn chill. 'Not much though. I think he wants to but he's afraid. His throat goes tight and he looks like he's trying to swallow a bullfrog every time I think he's going to open up to me.' She tossed back her pink hair and stared out of the grubby window, her white face painted with dawn's rosy palate. 'I wish he'd just...'

'What?' asked Camargue. He leaned close, trying to see the peculiar eyes hidden beneath the curtain fall of her hair.

'He's so *vulnerable*, Carl, and now he's been hurt like this I'm scared he's never going to recover. I'm scared that we're going to lose him before he ever had a chance to find out who he was.' She turned to lean on the doorframe, watching Trenton sleep under a comforter on the sagging couch, exhausted by his tears. 'Look at him,' she said wistfully.

'He's beautiful, and he just can't see it in himself.'

'Hey girl,' said Camargue softly, placing a long hand on her shoulder. 'I think he'll need a hug when he wakes. Why don't you go lie down with him? You need to sleep too.'

'But what about Lucy?' she asked, eyes brimming with hurt.

'She's not going to be home for a while,' replied Camargue tenderly. 'I'll stay up for the others. We'll move Trenton through to your room and the two of you bunk down. I'll get you up for 1300 at the latest.' His eyes were so full of compassion that Rebecca began to choke up tears. Camargue spread his arms. She stepped in to them. 'Its okay girl,' he said gently, 'you can't help what you feel.'

'But what do I tell Lucy?' sobbed Rebecca. 'You know how she feels about him!'

'Lucy's going to smart for a while,' he said, stroking her pink hair, 'and it's going to take a lot of figuring out, but today is not the day for any of that.'

'Today is not the day,' she repeated, wiping her nose with her sleeve.

Camargue laughed and kissed her fraternally. 'Let's get you to bed,' he said.

Rebecca allowed herself to be led to her room. She drew back the comforters and blankets, stepping out of her skirt and sweater. She slid under the covers, knees drawn up against her chest, cramped with cold and fatigue. Camargue shuffled into her dim room, Trenton cradled in his strong black arms like a sleeping child. His muscles shuddered with effort as he gently laid the boy next to Rebecca and drew the covers over him, smoothing them down with a ragged breath and leaving quietly, closing the door behind him. Rebecca lay awake in the gloom, intensely aware of the warmth and scent of Trenton, racked with guilt at her want for him. She closed her eyes and willed herself to sleep, but his warmth had turned to gravity that pulled her toward his thin back. She turned over, her hand tentatively brushing against him. The light contact drew him up out of sleep. She froze, caught guiltily in the act, feeling his body tense under her fingers. She almost sobbed with relief when he drew her arm around him, both of them sinking into the bed, comforted by the simple proximity of another warm animal. She nestled there against him in the smell of old sheets and incense, her room, now changed forever by the inclusion of this, her boy, her love.

'I love you Trenton,' she whispered.

But Trenton was, once again, in deepest sleep.

## 02. The Human Cannonball

For the first few weeks Trenton hid in Rebecca's apartment and waited anxiously for the cops to come and drag him away, but the knock at the door never came. The heat finally drained from the sun and fall arrived. Rebecca went back to school and DJ'd in clubs Thursday, Friday and Saturday. Trenton gave up on his education and laid low while he healed. He threw his old phone in the river and most of his old clothes in a dumpster. He read paper books. He played Capoeira with Annie Goliath and Parkour with Carl. He revelled in his body for the first time; not just as a receptacle for drugs, but as a magical vessel for his bruised soul. He learned how to be taken care of and how to be loved.

He practiced mixing, developing sets for the UHC under Camargue and Ogre's patient tuition. He started working the clubs and underground parties, DJing warm-up sets then dealing alongside Angelo to keep the money coming in. Becky and Carl teased him about his ramshackle unplanned method of selecting and mixing his set. Laughing, they told him it seemed everything was in jeopardy of falling apart whenever he took to the ones-and-twos, but somehow he managed to bring it all together at the last moment. He smiled and tentatively took a new name for himself: Crisis.

Lucy took the news about Trent and Becky badly. She went through the apartment like a tornado of teenage angst, throwing her stuff haphazardly into tatty holdalls and storming out only to return a few hours later under a cloud of humiliation to collect the important things she had left behind. She ended up moving in with Traumahound who spent the subsequent months agreeing with her about how mean Trent and Becky were until she got bored with it all. They didn't see much of her while she bitched and licked her wounds, but by November both girls had remembered how to be cordial in each other's company and things settled down. The Urban Hunt Club had their first Christmas together at Annabelle and Christian's. It felt like a family holiday should. For a while it was good.

On February 27<sup>th</sup> of Trenton's eighteenth year everything derailed.

He came home around 0600, a wedge of the night's takings in each boot where the padding of the oversized tongue used to be. He slipped into the apartment and out of his heavy coat before he realised the lights in the lounge were on.

'Trent?' called Becky. Her voice was strained and forlorn.

His guts clenched. 'Becky?' he called back quietly. 'Baby, what's the matter?' He shuffled through to the lounge in his socks. Becky sat on one of the threadbare couches in a thick sweater, a sleeping Lucy pillowed on her lap under an old comforter. Traumahound sat by the open window smoking a bowl and talking quietly on the phone. The girls had been crying; black rivulets of mascara painted their pale cheeks.

'What's going on?' asked Trent.

'When did you leave Angelo?' asked Traumahound, his voice hollow.

'About 0500: We were in Mitzy's Diner,' Trent replied. 'We had breakfast then I walked home. What's happened?'

'Has your cell been off?' asked Becky.

'It's on vibrate,' he said, turning to face her. 'I guess I didn't feel it go.' His face creased in a deep frown of concern. 'Look, will someone please tell me what's happening?' Traumahound and Becky couldn't meet each other's gaze. 'Please,' Trenton begged. Dread radiated from his belly.

'It's Camargue,' blurted Becky. Her face convulsed. 'He's been *killed*.' She began to sob piteously. Snot began to follow the groove of her harelip. Lucy murmured and clutched at Becky's sweater. Trent stared into their eyes; Traumahound's green, Becky's pink. There was no lie, no mistake; Camargue was dead. 'How?' he croaked.

'He was knifed,' said Traumahound, his voice cracking. 'It happened outside of Solomon's last night. Some cleanheads came down from the PJ's and killed him right in front of Annabelle, killed in front of his fucking *sister!*' Traumahound's narrow face contorted as the grief finally broke the dam of his self-control.

'Why?' whispered Trenton.

'Because they're *fucking cleanheads!*' howled Traumahound. 'Because they're trash from the PJ's and they don't need a reason; they hate everyone, the worthless fucking parasites!'

Trenton tried to meet Becky's stricken gaze, but she refused. She hid her face beneath her fuschia bangs and cried into her bone white hand while she petted comatose Lucy's crow-black hair. Traumahound was staring out of the window, cuffing at tears and attempting to choke back his misery. When they looked at him they saw the PJ's in his shuttered eyes, the same eyes that were lodged like glossy pebbles in the skulls of the shaven-headed kids who murdered Camargue. They might not blame him, not directly, but they knew what he was and where he came from and right then they hated it.

In Trenton Mallory's world love was finite. He had given Camargue as much as he could spare, had loved him as best he could, but these people had known him since they were little kids and had no concept of the true scarcity of love. They gave it all away heedlessly to each other for safe keeping, and now that one of their tribe had been snatched away all that love was gone from the world forever. Just how was his meagre loss supposed to compare to a vast grief like that? He groped about in his heart for something more to give, but even as he searched its chambers they slammed shut to protect him, and when all those red portals were locked and sealed what was left was utter betrayal. All the gentleness that Becky had coaxed from him sprang back inside like a severed tendon. Unable to bear the implications of what was happening to his world Trenton's soul suffered sudden and catastrophic heat death.

'I'm going out,' he said coolly. Becky looked at him with mute disbelief, and then turned her face to the wall, choked by his seemingly cold indifference.

'Where are you going?' asked the astonished Traumahound. 'Trenton! Where the fuck are you going?'

Trenton ignored him and turned to leave, grabbing his coat from the floor and hooking out his cellphone, wincing at the number of missed calls. Traumahound marched

across the floor and grabbed Trent's shoulder. 'I asked you where you're going,' he hissed in his face. 'You can't just leave, man. Becky needs you right now.'

Trenton regarded Traumahound with lifeless eyes. 'I'm going to make it right,' he said.

'What does that mean?' said Traumahound. His frustration and rage at his friend's death began to leak into his voice. 'What do you think you can do, hmm? Got some kinda PJ gangster revenge fantasy in mind, Trenton?'

Trenton stared into his eyes for a mute second then turned to go. Traumahound yanked him around by his shirt. Trenton took a step back and slammed his hand into Traumahound's shoulder with a strength that clearly surprised both of them. Traumahound stumbled back and fell on his ass. Becky looked up in mute horror.

'I'm going out,' Trent repeated. His cell vibrated. Angelo was calling. 'Hey,' he said, answering.

'You alone?' said Angelo.

He surveyed the tableau of misery in the lounge behind him. 'Yeah,' he said in a barren voice. 'I'm all alone.'

'Meet me at Shimon's,' said Angelo. 'He says he knows the guy who did it.'

The PJ's. Well, if that's what they saw then maybe that's all there was. If that was all there was then he'd make it right in the way he knew how. If he couldn't tell them how much he loved Carl then he'd show them in a way that anyone could understand.

2047hrs, February 27<sup>th</sup>, the frozen grey wasteland of the Projects.

Trenton slouched in the back of a car stolen from a pound by shady associates of Shimon's, a small automatic pistol bought with the night's takings clutched in both gloved hands.

That's the building,' said Angelo. He leaned forward in the passenger seat and stared up through the windshield at the random squares of cold light that signified the tenement's occupation. Most of the sodium-yellow streetlights on the block were out so the



old car nestled comfortably in shadow. 'Are you one-hundred percent sure it was him, man?'

Shimon nodded. 'I already told you, dude,' he said emphatically. 'There were, like, thirty witnesses. One of the doormen knows my cousin Rachel, he told her they've had problems with these fuckers for weeks; they've been trying to take over from the club dealers and things have turned ugly more than once.' He shook his shaggy head. 'I have no doubt, Angelo.'

'Why'd they step to Camargue, man?' he replied, still staring up at the shabby building. 'Why the fuck?'

Shimon looked at him incredulously. 'They're cleanheads, man, and he was Camargue,' said Shimon. 'What more do you need to know?'

Trenton was rapidly growing tired of that explanation. He lit a cigarette, finished the last sip of soda he was holding and then slipped the empty plastic bottle into his pocket.

Angelo nodded and sat back. 'Pull around to the fire escape and wait,' he said. 'As soon as you hear us coming, start the engine.' He took a slow breath, ran his hand through his close cropped black hair and drew his gun. 'You ready?' he said to Trenton. Trenton nodded. 'You sure?' said Angelo.

Trenton looked him in the eye. Whether he would admit it or not, Angelo was asking Trenton if there was a way out. 'Are *you* sure?' Trenton asked, eyes calm, his voice measured.

Angelo knew he was out of luck – Rollercoaster's only travel in one direction after all. He nodded sharply and licked his lips. 'You know it,' he said.

Trenton nodded. 'Then let's do this.' He pulled his green army surplus hat low over his brow, chambered a round and slid the weapon into his coat pocket. Angelo did the same.

They got out of the car and walked briskly past fallow vegetable plots and allotments that sprouted tenacious weeds, picking their way toward the scarred doors of the building lobby. Trenton heard the old car start and putter away around the corner. He

shrugged deeper into his coat and flexed his fingers on the grip of his pistol, nervously flicking the safety catch on and off as he swaggered into the building with a cocky bad-boy confidence he didn't feel.

The lobby was empty. Graffiti stained the walls, the floors, even the dusty plastic plants. Most of the fluorescent lights were out. He and Angelo ignored the out-of-work elevators and made directly for the rear stairwell. The reek of piss greeted them as they slipped through the stiff fire door. Trenton ground out his cigarette butt on the linoleum floor and together they began the six storey climb, hearts pounding. Now he was out of the bitter cold he could feel sweat soaking his brow under the woollen hat. On the third floor landing he caught sign of the tag he was looking for in amongst the ugly Technicolor splash of spraybomb: Tru Crime Cru. He'd never heard of them. They were new to the hood; another ragged bunch of junior felons cobbled together from other fragmented gangs and betrayed alliances. They'd be gone in a year. Less if Trenton had his way.

Being back in the Projects made him uneasy. Maybe a mile away were his parents, sitting in a little bubble of smoke and booze and TV while their prodigal son stalked up a stairwell to do murder, coming to kill a man who perhaps only a year ago he'd have respected, perhaps even tried to emulate. He fiddled with the cell in his pocket. It was switched off, had been since he had left Angelo's. He knew Becky would be trying to reach him. Hope mixed with dread at what awaited him when he saw her next. He deliberately let go of the cell and concentrated on the gun; he could worry about Becky when he'd made things right. He'd show her, she'd understand. This had to be done, and when it was over then his heart would unlock and it'd be okay.

They exited the stairwell on floor six and padded out into a deserted corridor lit with fluorescents that gave their skin an unhealthy greenish hue. Angelo checked the number of the apartment directly in front of them and pointed left. Trenton nodded.

They stalked down the corridor, their soles squeaking on the cracked linoleum. The hallway hummed with the muted sounds of collective human occupation going on behind the apartment doors. They reached number 47B. Cheap laminate door, no buzzer, fish eye

lens that someone had conveniently graffitied over. The television was on loud. Trenton could hear the distinctive crackle of canned laughter. He reached into his pockets and withdrew the gun and empty soda bottle, sliding the neck of the latter over the barrel of the former and flicking off the safety. He looked across at Angelo. He was sweating and flexing his fingers on the grip of his gun. 'How do we do this?' he whispered.

Trenton shrugged. He knocked on the door. Moments passed with no change to the racket of the television. Trenton knocked again, this time harder. Angelo looked about nervously as if expecting the other doors in the hallway to burst open. Voices sounded inside the apartment. Trenton took a deep breath.

'Who is it?' said a muffled female voice.

'Is Fontaine there?' yelled Trenton through the door.

The door opened a crack on a chain. A teenage girl with a PJ's look about her thin frame stared at Trenton with stoned vagueness. She took in the surplus vest and hat and the wary look on his bony face and seemed satisfied. 'It's one of your dogs,' she yelled behind her.

As she looked away Trenton slammed his shoulder into the door. It leapt in its frame with a resounding boom but the chain didn't give. Angelo threw his weight against it and they crashed through, stumbling into the shocked girl and knocking her to the ground. In the hallway stood a scrawny shaven-headed boy in baggy surplus, a carton of juice in his hand and an expression of dismayed shock on his face. Trenton kicked his way past Angelo and the pinned girl and raised his weapon, encumbered as it was by the improvised silencer. The boy's eyes widened as he finally fathomed what was happening. The girl began to keen in fear. Angelo struggled up and slammed the front door shut then grabbed her by the hair and held his pistol to her cheek.

Trenton advanced on the terrified Fontaine and kicked him hard in the balls. The boy dropped. The carton of juice splashed over the wall. Trent grabbed him by the collar and hurled him back into the lounge where two more practically identical youths in tatty

surplus sat frozen on cheap furniture. An oversized TV blared out a dull sit-com. Pizza boxes littered the carpet. The cramped room smelled of grass and old takeout.

One of the boys made to snatch something from his fatigue pants but Angelo transferred the barrel of his gun to his eye socket and pushed. The boy whimpered and withdrew a cheap lock-knife, which at Angelo's prompting he carefully tossed away.

Trenton stared down at Fontaine. A dark stain spread across the boy's shapeless olive-drab pants. He levelled his gun at the cleanhead's very young face and sighted along it. 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry,' Fontaine spluttered. 'Please, I'm sorry.'

'What are you sorry for, Fontaine?' said Trenton. He reached for the cold part of him, the lightless part, and cocked the hammer. 'Hmm? Why don't you tell me?'

'Do it!' hissed Angelo. 'He fucking killed Camargue! *Do it!*'

'Please,' wailed Fontaine, he pawed at Trenton's leg. 'Whatever it is, I didn' do it, man, please! If it's the money we owe Momma Foxx then we got it, I promise, and gear too, *please!*'

Trenton's finger tightened on the trigger. He stared into the imploring eyes of Fontaine and saw nothing but animal terror. He looked at the malnourished papery skin of the face; pink and creased with sobbing, running with snot, grey teeth, shaven skull. He looked at the thin arms and piss stain spreading below him on the old russet carpet. He saw himself, crying on his bed, blood flowing from savage cuts on his scalp left there by his maniac father's knife.

'Do it, man!' hissed Angelo. 'Bullet him!'

'We din do nothin' to you, man,' said the trembling youth under Angelo's gun. 'You fuck with us and Momma will *claim* you.' Angelo responded by smashing the butt into the boy's brow. Blood burst across his face as the edge of the magazine dug in. The gun came down a second time and caught the boy on the crown. He slumped, whimpering. Seconds dragged. Fontaine cringed at the sound of his friend's head being beaten in by Angelo and looked up imploringly at Trenton, past the ridiculous silencer, past the death mask he wore, into his father's blue eyes.

In that sudden moment of human connectedness both boys knew without doubt that neither was a killer.

Trenton gently lowered the hammer on his pistol. 'It wasn't him,' he said wearily. 'Shimon got it wrong.'

'What the fuck?' snarled Angelo, hyped up on the power of dishing out a little righteous violence. 'These cleanhead bastards did it! This one had a knife, man!'

'He didn't do it, dude,' said Trenton, still staring down at Fontaine. 'We gotta go, and now.'

The sudden crushing realization that their ill-considered actions they had made things even worse flooded him. Suddenly he desperately wanted to see Becky, to hold her, to tell her he was stupid and that he was sorry and that it would be okay. Fontaine gazed up at him with a desperate hope kindled in his tiny brown eyes. Trent took apart his pistol and silencer and slipped them back in his coat. The boy with the bleeding head whimpered. The girl sobbed. Fontaine panted in fear. The final cleanhead watched the drama unfold in unblinking shock from his threadbare throne.

'We're all done here,' said Trenton. 'We gotta go, and now.'

'They did it!' shouted Angelo, his fear fuelling his fury.

'Dude, we got it *wrong*,' insisted Trent, 'and we can't be standing here arguing about it! Let's go!'

'Fuck that,' snarled Angelo. He barged Trent out of the way, pointed his pistol at Fontaine's skinny chest and pulled the trigger three times. The gun cracked deafeningly. Fontaine jerked as the bullets ripped him open. The room filled with acrid smoke. The girl started screaming and bolted for the door, careering into the doorframe and knocking herself to ground in panic. Angelo swung round and fired at her, putting two shots into the flimsy wall before sending a slug through her neck. As he turned back to finish off the catatonic boy in the corner of the lounge the youth he had pistol-whipped bounded over the dying girl and sprinted for the front door. Angelo panicked and fired wildly about the room, punching splintered holes in cheap furniture and ploughing furrows in sheetrock.

'Angelo!' screamed Trenton from the floor. 'Angelo!'

Angelo stood in shock. He lifted his smoking gun and peered at it in confusion. Trenton bounded up, nearly tripping over dead Fontaine, and grabbed his friend. He dragged him to the grimy window that looked out onto the fire escape and put his boot through it. 'Climb down!' he snapped at Angelo and snatched the pistol from him. Six floors below Shimon's junker waited. The reek from its alcohol-burning engine drifted up on the cold breeze. Angelo clambered out into the night, his gloved hands and knees crunching on broken glass. Trent levelled the half-empty weapon at the remaining cleanhead. 'Don't you dare fucking move,' he snarled, and then eased himself backward out of the broken window.

They stumbled down the slippery iron stairs. Dogs barked in the distance. Trent could hear shouting. Shimon opened the driver's door and looked up at them.

'Get back in the fucking car!' shrieked Trent, pushing Angelo in front of him. Shimon ducked his head back in. Trent and Angelo jumped the last twelve feet to the cracked concrete below, landing amongst weeds and old garbage with a knee juddering crunch. Trent stumbled, righted himself and pushed Angelo onto the back seat of the car before leaping in after him. 'Drive!' he yelled.

Shimon threw the car into gear and accelerated away. 'Is it done?' he yelled over his shoulder.'

'Just get us out of here,' said Trent. 'Get us into the city.'

'Where, man?' asked Shimon.

'Anywhere downtown,' replied Trenton. 'Find us someplace to dump the GTA and lay low.'

Something was profoundly wrong and he needed to think.

2251hrs, February 27<sup>th</sup>. Downtown. The backroom of Murphy's Bar.

Trenton sat on a crate of bottled beer under a dusty strip light and warmed his hands on a chipped mug of bitter coffee while trying to restrain his growing panic. 'Tell me how you found out again,' he said to Shimon.

'I already told you, man,' said Shimon. He paced nervously. 'Rachel said that Junebug, the doorman, saw it all. He told Jessie who told her, and then Briar told me.'

'So Rachel never heard it straight from this guy?'

'No,' whined Shimon, 'but, shit, she already knows him dude. He ain't a stranger.'

'And who the fuck is Briar?'

'Hey man,' snapped Shimon, 'why are you sweating me over this?'

'Listen,' said Trent. 'Angelo just killed two people with a gun you bought for him with my money from your nameless buddies, the same buddies who arranged the GTA that you were driving that we used for the getaway. Those kids back in the apartment? They had fuck all to do with Carl's death. I know we all wanted them to be guilty but they weren't. Now we have two 187's who didn't have it coming and we're in the frame, so Shimon, for crying out fucking loud, tell it to me straight: Who set this up for us?'

Shimon ceased his pacing and slumped into a crouch with his back against a rack of snack boxes. 'Jessie told Briar that if we needed the tools to get square with the cleanheads then he knew the people who could set us up. Briar told me that Junebug had seen it all go down and was trying to get word to me through Rachel that people had our back if we were looking for justice.'

Trenton shook his head. 'So, it didn't all come from Junebug via Rachel, it came from Jessie to Briar to you.' He snorted in disgust. 'Having our back is very different to giving us a car and a target and putting a gun in our hand, Shi,' he said. 'Was it Jessie who sold them to you? Was he all sad and mad at what happened to Camargue and just wanted to see those little bastards get theirs, hmm? Did he just conveniently hear on the wire that it was three of Momma Foxx's boys, and just happen to let this Briar know?'

'Crisis, dude; Junebug said it was *cleanheads*,' pleaded Shimon.

'Yeah,' said Trent, 'but he didn't tell Rachel which ones, did he? Jessie told you that.'

'Dude,' said Shimon, 'I thought-'

'No you didn't,' interrupted Trenton. 'None of us did. Fuck!'

'What do we do now?' asked Angelo. He sat on the bare concrete floor hugging his knees.

'Who's this Jessie?' asked Trent. 'Do I know him?'

'Sure,' said Shimon bleakly. 'Calls himself Creole, he's tight with Solomon.'

'Creole?' said Angelo. 'The club dealer at Solomon's? He's a fucking shark and a major league blow-head. You trusted him?'

'I heard it all from Briar!' pleaded Shimon. 'She wouldn't lie to me, man!'

Trenton carefully placed the mug on some nearby racking and stood up. 'Well that very much depends on what she gets told, Shi,' he said. 'We just hit Jessie's rivals, and they were interns moving product for Momma Foxx. Do you get what I'm saying? Do you have any idea how much *shit* we are in?'

'Dude, I didn't know!' spluttered Shimon. He stood and spread his arms imploringly, his face etched with horror.

'Well, I'll let you explain that to Momma Fox when she discovers we've been bulleting her junior mules,' snapped Trenton. 'I've no doubt she'll be all *cool* about it when you tell her you *just didn't know*.' His faced turned crimson as raw fury finally boiled out of his chest. 'You fucking IDIOT!' he raged, his thin frame shuddering with restrained violence. Shimon went white and stepped back against the stacked food. 'And *you*,' he bellowed, turning on Angelo, 'I told you *no*, I told you they had nothing to do with it, and now we're going to be on a fucking death list because of *you*! I'm going to die for *you*, you fucking *retard*!' He stepped in and kicked Angelo in the ribs as hard as he could. Angelo crumpled with an agonized bark and stared up at him with numb confusion in his black eyes.



Trenton clawed at his scalp in impotent rage. All he wanted was to be hidden away in Becky's arms. He wanted to hear her gentle voice tell him it was all going to be okay. He cuffed at a sudden spring of tears. 'Where does Jessie hang?' he said. Shimon stared at him in fear. 'Where does he hang out?' he demanded.

'He'll be at Solomon's until late,' said Shimon. 'He heads off about 0400hrs.'

'Where?'

'I don't know, dude,' stammered Shimon. 'What are you going to do?'

'Can you drive?' snapped Trenton at Angelo. 'Can I trust you not to fuck up?'

Angelo looked up and nodded miserably. Trent turned back to Shimon. 'We'll be taking your car,' he said. 'Don't even think about saying no.'

0417hrs, February 28<sup>th</sup>; a late night parking lot half a block from Solomon's nightclub.

Trenton sat in the passenger seat of Shimon's car, Angelo behind the wheel, Shimon in the back. They smoked a reefer in silence and watched the thin weeknight crowd stumble around drunkenly in the cold out front of the converted warehouse. A young girl in impossibly precarious heels and scant clothing clattered out into the street to flag down an omnibus. She waved a thin arm cluttered with too much cheap jewellery and painted with fluorescing Sanskrit characters until the teamster drew his weary horses to a halt and allowed the cackling mob onboard.

Trenton watched them with mute distaste. He turned to Angelo. 'Are you sure you'll recognize him?' he asked.

Angelo nodded. 'I know him, man.'

'Are you *sure*, Angelo?' insisted Trenton sceptically.

Angelo nodded. 'That's him,' he said.

Trenton looked across the road. A lanky white man with corn-rowed hair and a precise little beard was talking at the door staff and gesticulating expansively. He reached into his military greatcoat and pulled out a pack of smokes that he offered around. The

doormen refused and did their very best to retain their polite disinterest as the skinny goon made his animate goodbyes. With an expansive wave he began to strut down the sidewalk, arms swinging, the skirts of his long coat billowing. He turned a corner and was out of sight.

'Drive,' said Trenton, 'and don't lose him.'

Angelo started the car and pulled out of the lot, turning left then right to follow Jessie onto a long straight road of parked cars, shuttered stores and deserted lots divided by rusting chain link fencing and the shadows left by the circles of yellow streetlight. He paused to light a cigarette and started fishing around in his pockets.

'Pull up next to him,' said Trenton. He slid the neck of the plastic bottle over the barrel of his gun once again.

'What are you going to do?' hissed Shimon.

'Do as I say,' replied Trenton. He handed Angelo's gun back to him and gritted his teeth. *Please* he begged himself, *please don't fuck this up. Be a man.*

Angelo slowed and pulled up as Jessie lifted his car tag from his inside pocket. He looked up and saw Trent's face through the glass. His expressions smoothly rotated through wary, hostile, briefly puzzled, and then in a moment of sudden realization, weary concern. Trent lowered the window. 'Hey Jessie,' he said.

The dealer leaned down. 'Hey there,' he said. 'Crisis, right? Hey, you got Shi-man with you in there?'

Trenton nodded. 'We wanted to come see you, man,' he said. 'To thank you in person for giving us the tools we needed to get a certain job done.'

Jessie shook his head. 'Man,' he said gravely, 'when I heard what happened to Camargue on my watch I was busted up.'

'Yeah, I get that,' said Trenton. 'That's why you came through for us.'

'It's all done then?' said Jessie. Trenton caught a hint of eagerness colouring his Oscar-winning sincerity.

'Not quite, Jessie,' Trent said, 'one got away.'

He pushed the door open and bounded out. Jessie took two panicked steps back and reached inside his coat. Before he could withdraw his hand and whatever it contained Trenton's pistol was at his throat and driving him back into deep shadow. Their boots crunched on broken concrete as they vanished into the darkness, breath steaming in the frigid night air.

Trenton pushed Jessie back against a crumbling wall and held him there with the gun, his eyes rolling like a terrified horse. 'You thought you were so smart,' he hissed. 'You thought we'd take out the competition for you because we wanted payback for Carl so bad that we wouldn't think, and man, you were *right*. We didn't think, not until two people had already died.'

'I don't know what you're talking about, man,' said Jessie tremulously.

Trenton reached up and slapped the man hard across the face. 'I ain't dying for you, bitch,' he snarled. 'Your corpse is going to Momma Foxx as an apology.'

The whites of Jessie's eyes seemed to fluoresce as tears welled in them. 'Oh Christ, please,' he begged, 'please, I didn't do anything to you. What the fuck, man? What the fuck?' Trenton ground the improvised silencer into his temple. 'Please, I don't know what you're talking about, please!' He screwed his eyes shut, whimpering.

The ground seemed to drop away beneath them. All Trent wanted was to be safe in Becky's arms. He wished he had never taken a step from the apartment, wished he had held her until she cried herself to sleep, wished he'd been brave enough to love her the way she deserved. They could change their names and run, head south-west to New Mexico, start again in Santa Fe, maybe settle in Chimayo where his Mom's folks came from. She could drive. They could take Shimon's car and leave today, leave all this madness behind, shed their old lives like snakeskin. The cost was his innocence, a small price for what he would gain. All he had to do was apply a little leverage.

Trenton began to squeeze the trigger.

From the street came the howl of a siren. A magnesium white searchlight burst to life throwing long shadows of cheap cars and chainlink across the lot. 'You two in the

Chevy,' boomed an amplified voice. 'Stay exactly where you are and put your hands against the glass where we can see them.'

Trenton froze. Jessie breathed a silent prayer of thanks. A battered cop car cruised to a halt, the riot screen lowered over the front windshield. The roof mounted searchlight played over Shimon's car silhouetting the two occupants. 'Do as they say,' whispered Trenton. He saw Shi slap his hands against the glass and turn his head to shout at Angelo.

'You behind the wheel,' boomed the cop, 'you got three second to put your hands up or I swear this'll be a real short conversation. One... Two...'

'No,' begged Trenton, '*don't.*'

Angelo jerked up his arm from his lap. Shimon made a grab for it, lunging over the seats to wrestle it down. Angelo's little pistol cracked twice. One bullet punched through the door to flatten against the armoured hull of the cop cruiser, the second starred the window but couldn't penetrate the toughened glass. For a second there was nothing but the smoke and echo of Angelo's gun, and then Shimon's car lurched forward with a squeal of tyres. The searchlight tracked it for a few yards as it slalomed crazily across the road before the cops stepped out of their cabin and opened fire with their auto-shotguns, shattering the rear windshield and chewing the bodywork to shreds with a terrifying fusillade. The car abruptly slewed sideways across the empty street and into a shuttered storefront. The cops kept firing, stitching huge holes along the wings and disintegrating glass. Jessie and Trenton froze in the shadows, paralysed by the roar and flash of the terrible guns. The cops didn't stop until their magazines were empty.

'Dumb,' said one of the cops a little too loudly.

'Real dumb,' said her partner. He played the searchlight over the smoking wreck. 'But what do you expect from cleanheads?'

'You reckon they're our perps?'

'The car matches the description used in the getaway,' yawned the woman. 'Call in the meatwagon and let's get these assholes logged with forensics. I'm off shift in less than an hour.'

'Why'd anybody care about cleanhead-on-cleanhead killings anyhow?' muttered the man. 'Seems like a waste of police resources to me. It's just evolution in action.'

'Hearts and minds, Stainton,' said the woman. 'The city wants them to think we care. Besides, we don't want their kind leaving the PJ's do we? This should discourage them.'

Trenton stared at the horrific mess that was the remains of Shimon's car. There was no way either of his friends could have survived. His guts clenched with the horror of it.

It was at that moment Jessie bolted.

The dealer slammed into him, grabbed his pistol by the barrel and sprinted out of the shadows with it held like a ridiculous cudgel. Trenton lurched to his feet, looked about him, bounded up onto an overflowing dumpster and made a grab for the guttering of a low roof as Jessie made it to the sidewalk. Trenton hauled himself up and rolled onto the flat roof, panting in terror.

'Contact!' yelled the female cop.

'Wait!' screamed Jessie, but his pleas were drowned by the sudden sharp barks of the cop's sidearm.

Trent closed his eyes and bit down on the scream that was waiting in his throat. He wanted to live so badly.

'There's number three,' said the male cop. 'Good job, quick-draw. It's the god-damned Wild West out here tonight.'

'Dumbass,' said the female, 'he wasn't even holding the gun the right way up.'

Trenton began to crawl across the freezing concrete on his belly. There was a black iron ladder set into the old brickwork that would take him up onto another level. Once he reached that he could make his way across the flat rooftops of warehouses and fabrication plants and out of the industrial district. The cops said they had their three. Maybe they'd get lazy; maybe they wouldn't bother identifying the bodies for a while. Radio's crackled. In the distance the Doppler wail of sirens heralded the imminent arrival of

back-up. Trenton scuttled up the ladder and sprinted across the moonlit roofscape, heedless of the drop.

Live, that's all he wanted, to live and find his way home to Rebecca Ogilvy.

February 28<sup>th</sup>, 0628hrs, Fallujah and 4<sup>th</sup>.

Trenton disembarked the omnibus, shouldering nervously through the crowd of dejected passengers attempting to board its crowded decks. He glanced up. Dawn was displaying its beautiful ember-bright palette of ambers and bird shell blues above the crowded city skyline. He drew his olive drab hat low over his brow, suddenly and intensely conscious of his cleanhead uniform of surplus parka and fatigues. He jogged across the street, turning the corner onto 4<sup>th</sup>.

His rubbery muscles ached intolerably from his exertions, from sleep deprivation, his rooftop flight and the dregs of adrenaline that continued to push him along the sidewalk. Home, so close to home, home to his Becky, his reason to keep placing one foot before another. He'd tell her to pack her things quick, to not ask questions. He still had most of his roll left, more than enough to buy them a forgotten old auto from a repo yard and a full tank. Once they were across the state line he'd explain everything.

Trenton was a smart boy, old beyond his eighteen years. He was a wise boy raised a cleanhead in the PJ's. He had an ingrained instinct for street corner trouble about to go down, an urban sixth-sense, city-zen, but he was blunted that morning, driven half-crazy by grief and desperation, exhausted beyond his ability to cope and distracted by the ache in his chest at the thought of Becky; which is why he never saw the cops.

The post-war DCPD was ramshackle, undermanned and paramilitary; more an army of occupation than a service, but it had eyes everywhere. Cameras monitored the whole city; sophisticated recognition software pirated from the secret services logged your biometrics, recorded the way you moved, captured a catalogue of your unconscious gestures. As soon as you'd been tagged as suspicious then all you had to do was appear on camera once and twitch your nose and your location was known to every uniform in the

city. A lone boy running across the roofs and away from the scene of a shooting qualified admirably as such. The city justice node assigned to monitor the neighbourhood picked out his distinctive gait at the omnibus stop and followed him with unseen eyes until he walked into the patrol grid of a couple of beat cops. The computer gave them his description and tagged him on their army surplus smart visors with a blue halo.

He was less than a block from home when they hit him. He passed by the racks of produce on the sidewalk outside the Korean bodega, past the shuttered baby clothes store, past the train of shambling bums displaying the tell-tale twitches of nerve trauma, and then paused to hunt for his building tag under a bald frost-rimed tree. Suddenly an arm wrapped around his neck and levered him off the ground. He grabbed at it and kicked out, but he was weak and fast running out of breath. The second cop moved in from the side to grab his legs but received a desperate kick to the chin for his troubles. He staggered back, checked his lip for blood, and then came in hard, punching Trenton in the chest and driving the last of the wind out of him.

'We'll add resisting arrest and assaulting a police officer to the list, shall we, son?' he growled, and punched again. Trenton wriggled desperately and the blow glanced. The cop hissed his frustration and drew his baton.

Trenton tried to reach behind his head and claw at the face of the cop choking him, but as he ran out of air he ran out of fight. His vision boiled at the edges as he was slammed gracelessly into the sidewalk and had his arms jerked behind his back to be cuffed. Distantly he heard the drone of his very limited rights being recited to him as his face was pressed into the concrete. He began to sob.

One hundred yards away and two storeys up was Rebecca Ogilvy, asleep on a threadbare couch under an old comforter stained with Lucy's make-up, still in the same sweater, still waiting for her only love to come home.

### 03. Inheritance

Trenton sat down carefully on his bed, his heart thudding in his chest like a dull kick drum and his breath ragged in his throat. Blood dripped steadily from his broken nose to soak the collar of his t-shirt. His left eye was rapidly swelling shut. His ribs grated as he shifted his ass backwards. Beside him lay two familiar objects, family heirlooms; an old bayonet, its long grey blade now sticky with blood, and a scratched USMC Zippo lighter. He dragged his pack of Lucky Strikes from his pocket with a trembling hand, tipped one into his mouth and lit it with the faithful Zippo before returning his attention to the view outside his dirty window, the unchanging black scrawl of rooftops, aerials and cables, and above them a rolling grey sky like an old blanket. The same sky had hung over the slouching tenements he had run in as a boy, shabby hallways where he first learned to smoke, where the embers of stolen cigarettes glowed in the dark like the eyes of the wild dogs that stalked the canyons of the dump and pawed the shallow graves beneath the overpasses. The places he had huddled in the dark with other wary, pinched children, heat bleeding from their shaven heads, thinking the bitter fumes from his mother's cigarettes would keep them warm.

The reek of cigarettes had always been with him, impregnated in his flesh since birth. He had identified it as his own scent, a smell inherited from his mother. Now, sitting in his old bedroom, the stink of it on him was nauseating. He stood and threw open the window to admit a gust of damp air, absently cuffing at blood on his chin. The rain sodden city outside seemed gripped with a preternatural stillness, the street sounds muted and indistinct. He placed his hands on the ledge and pushed himself up so that he could crawl painfully out onto the wet iron fire-escape. Warm raindrops burst on him as he surveyed the bleak mesas of the PJ's stretching away toward the distant haze of the city proper. He pitched his cigarette into the alleyway below, wiped away at the mess of blood, snot and tears that competed with each other for space on his bruised face and clambered back inside to police up his meagre inheritance; a knife, a lighter, an old rosary, an old USMC duffle bag and his dad's old racing leather the colour of old tobacco stains that now fitted his man's shoulders.



Thus equipped, Trenton Behan Mallory fled the scene of his crime.

Trenton Behan Mallory of no fixed abode was tried without representation by magisterial tribunal on March 2<sup>nd</sup>. It was discovered that as well as the charges of accessory to murder (two counts), resisting arrest and assault (police officer) he was also in long standing violation of his home probation agreement. While he was now an adult the magistrates felt it appropriate to take this, his poor school record, his juvenile convictions and previous cautions into account, and sentenced him to a nice round fifteen years imprisonment in the new State Correctional Facility with no opportunity for parole. Within three days of his arrest on 4<sup>th</sup> Street he vanished without a trace into the system. No-one, including Trent, expected him to come out again.

His life became grey walls, grey uniforms, fear of violence, fear of rape, fear of the guards. No-one tried to find him. No-one knew he was there. He was a lost soul bound to Purgatory with all the other damned. He lay awake at night, sleepless with misery, listening to the night sounds of a hundred caged human beings and torturing himself with his memories of life on the outside.

The months rolled by and he gave up on hope. The grim realisation that his whole world was the Pen became liberating. He avoided the cleanheads and hung with the Latinos. He traded between blocks. He befriended the smugglers. He bartered luxuries from the outside earned for good behaviour and studied with the grifters in return for favours or smokes. He became an indispensable part of the grey market. Six months into his stay he made a Perspex shiv in the machine shop and slipped it between another inmate's ribs when the fool tried to muscle in on his clientele. He didn't even sweat when he did it again, this second time to earn props and supply rights from the *pivote central* and his entourage of wall-eyed thugs who ran the block. On Christmas Eve word got out that two of Momma Foxx's cleanhead goons planned to roll him up off the yard, but by the time they were ready to make their move Trenton had a crew ready to stick something for him. The fracas was over before the warning shot was fired by the tower guard. Only one would-be assassin made it out of the prison infirmary and he never made it back

to his cell. The guards sweated Trent for it, even threw him in the Hole for a few weeks thinking he'd break. He didn't. He looked inside himself and found a stone-bound heart devoid of fear.

He was out of solitary and back on the mainline in time for his first year anniversary, armoured in the knowledge of just how cold he could be. He got his first gang set; a rosary and crucifix curled around his left forearm below the tribal stuff Becky had got him. He sweated at the weight pile and began to fill out. Trenton Mallory, the survivor, learned how to be a Lifer.

Sixteen months after he was locked down his world changed once again.

Rumours had been circulating for weeks; word was that things outside in the world weren't right, that certain states had left the Senate and were talking sedition, that civil war was coming. Confirmation came in a public address by the Prison Governor. All prisoners were to be given a choice: They could see out the rest of their time in jail, or they could sign up for the same duration as an indentured soldier in the US Army doing their patriotic duty. The short-timers stayed put in their cells. They knew that if they volunteered they'd be going to their death for nothing. The Lifers, they calculated the risk and decided that any danger out in the world was better than staying in the Pen just as the War Department predicted. Almost every hardened criminal signed up rather than rot behind the wire, including the boy from the PJ's they called Crisis.

He went for a medical in the prison hospital, his application for the infantry was forwarded and he was sent back to his cell to wait. A crack appeared in the stone egg in his chest, a tiny fissure: Hope.

Strength to some, that hope became a weakness in Trenton that the predators on his wing could sense. He became slack in his dealings. Newcomers challenged him daily. He had to fight toe-to-toe when once his rep protected him from threat. All of the authority he had gained for himself began to slip. When he came out of solitary again the block had gone cold toward him. With his allies and his reputation gone the corridors were once again places to fear. Rather than risk attack by the *cholos* he once hung with he waited in his cell, dreading the cold stares in the mess hall or the yard, fearing for his dignity and his ass in

the shower block, and silently begging for the Army to summon him to war. Worst of all was the return of Becky's ghost. As long as he thought that he was doomed to an invisible death within the penitentiary walls he had rid himself of her, but the thought he might soon be free left him agonizing over how close he had come to being with her, and how he might be allowed that moment again if he could just survive long enough.

The block began to slowly empty as applications for service were processed. The guards began to get complacent as cells grew vacant, and without their constant malevolent vigilance old grudges regularly exploded into violence. Trenton was cut across the ribs in a mess room brawl when he was jumped by a shiv-wielding cleanhead in the queue. He spent three days in the infirmary and then got two weeks in the Hole for fighting. He did press-ups on his knuckles in the dark and thought about the perfect moment when he'd see Becky again.

Sixteen days after he got out of solitary he was summoned to the Block Commandant's office where he was curtly informed that his mother had died of her injuries following a robbery outside the woman's shelter she was lodging in some six weeks ago. The commandant displayed zero empathy as he tersely apologized to Trent for not informing him sooner, but as he had no next of kin listed and the woman was DOA at hospital it was down to DNA testing, and that took time to process. Trenton received some disinterested platitudes as comfort and was marched back to his cell.

That night he stared at the springs of the empty bunk above and imagined what his mom had endured to finally drive her out of her home. What ultimate act of selfish cruelty by his bastard of a father had finally driven her out, only to become the victim of some little shit looking to extract revenge for the misery that was his life? It was Brendan who had done this. It was his heartlessness. It was his sheer fucking *evil*. He had practically handed the knife to the cunt who had done the cutting. Trenton traced the thick welts of scar tissue beneath his hair and discovered that aside from fear, guilt and hope he had extended his emotional range to *rage*. Brendan was going to pay. All he needed was one day, one day

and he'd make it all right, he'd tidy up his life, and when he'd settled accounts with his father and found his Becky then he was gone forever.

His hate got him through the six weeks wait until he was finally called up. He was taken out into the empty yard with thirty other prisoners and stood to attention in the hot afternoon sunlight while grim looking army officers barked out the conditions of his service. He shuffled impatiently as they droned on, eyeing the lengthening shadows cast by the guard tower. An hour after the lecture had begun he was holding up his right hand and swearing all sorts of promises to the Government of the United States that he absolutely no intention of keeping. Military Policemen sealed a black polymer tracking cuff around his ankle, gave him his personal effects and told him to report to Camp Chaney for basic training within thirty-six hours or he'd be back in the Pen with an extra five years added to his sentence plus a month in Solitary for screwing them around. The leave of absence was a gift from Uncle Sam, and the MP encouraged him to use that gift to make his peace with the world. Trenton shuffled out of the main gate in the tatty surplus he'd been captured in, the weighty parka over his arm, his sandy hair hanging long around his bony face, and went looking for a ride into Leesburg.

It took him until six the following morning to get back to DC. He stumbled off the rickety bus and into the bright morning sunshine, blinking sleep from his eyes and wrinkling his nose at the fried food stench of the old Greyhound's bio-diesel engine. Dogged by sudden agoraphobia he hustled off to find breakfast and a place to re-orientate while he waited for the stores in the mall to open.

After pancakes, bacon and three cups of sweet coffee he bought a change of tee-shirt, pants and underwear from American Apparel, and then found a pay shower in the Greyhound station bathroom where he washed in privacy for the first time in months. Clean, he shaved at his sparse beard with a one-use disposable razor and cleaned his teeth with anti-bacterial gum. His limited toilet completed he scraped back his wet hair and stared at himself in the warped mirror, searching the contours of his face for the man he'd

become while he was locked away. He had gentle Maria's narrow chin, her sharp straight nose, her dark colouring but for the hair. He had the same brow as her, the same high cheekbones, but set into that angular Spanish-Indian face were the eyes of an impostor; an arctic blue grown all the colder from to staring at the walls of a cell for a year and a half. They alone told him all he needed to know about his true nature.

While in prison all the things he had done made absolute sense, were necessary at the level of survival. They were the acts of a man obeying the rules of a closed ecosystem he never anticipated leaving. To survive he had made the Pen his whole world. Now, standing in this tidy tiled bathroom that smelled of floral disinfectant and the soap he had used on his hair, listening to sickly piped muzak from speakers set into the ceiling, those acts of callous violence utterly and irreparably disconnected him from the life he had once led. Somewhere in this city was a girl he had loved, who he had cherished, who had saved him, and the last thing he ever did in his life before the Pen was abandon her when she needed him most. Somewhere in this city was a girl who wondered why he never came home to her, and now, even though he was free, he knew in his guts that he never would. The boy in the reflection was a stranger to the world.

The rage uncoiled in his gut at how cruel, how *unfair* his life had been. His mother was dead, snatched away just like Carl, just like Angelo and Shimon, just like the life he had loved and his every chance at happiness, but this time someone was going to pay. This time Trenton Mallory knew who the real culprit was, the author of all his pain right from the beginning, and he was going to see justice done before he quit this town.

He threw his old clothes in the trash, stuffed his money and ID in his jeans and went out into the hot day, looking for an omnibus to take him into the suburbs.

Brendan Mallory lumbered up the stairs of his block and shouldered through the huddle of skinny shaven-headed kids congregating on the landing to smoke. They shuffled out of his path grudgingly, tracking him with cold malevolent stares as he shoved open the

graffiti stained door to the hallway. He was old, they hissed, and his time would come soon, but like jackals they would wait until he fell before they unsheathed their knives to feed.

Brendan shambled down the hall, his worn combat boots clumping heavily on the rucked linoleum. His broad shoulders sagged under a faded USMC shirt that stuck in patches to his sweaty back. He paused to lean against the wall, his breath catching in his throat, and watched dust motes hover in the hot sunlight while he recovered from his climb. It was the humidity, he told himself, and the weight of the groceries he lugged. Most of it was glass after all. Glass was heavy, and he was no longer a young man. It took him several minutes of conscious effort before he could continue to his apartment door and fish out the entry tag from around his bull neck. Balancing his bag of groceries awkwardly on his hip he picked the bubblegum from the card reader and slipped his tag in. The door clicked open. With a sigh he leaned on it and stepped into the familiar musty living room.

He dumped the groceries on the couch and sat down creakily beside them, reaching into his breast pocket for his lighter and smokes. He lit up and reached into the paper bag with trembling fingers to select one of the bottles of cheap bourbon, cracking it open and alternating swigs from the neck with drags on his rough cigarette. Thunder broke above. Rain began to pound the windows.

Brendan's soul had shrunk daily since Trenton had left, and what remained shrivelled away to nothing when Maria abandoned him. Everything he had struggled to hold on to had crumbled in his hands. Every day he counted out the remaining coins of his life and found himself coming up short again. Now all he wanted was for the curtain to descend on his days and the sorry sham of it to be forgotten. He leaned back and stared bitterly across the room, at the pale squares above the television where the family portraits once hung and down the hall to where his son's bedroom used to be. The window to the fire escape was open. A warm breeze ruffled the threadbare drapes.

The window had been closed when he had left for the market.

Brendan ground out his cigarette and carefully fastened the bottle of booze. He struggled creakily to his feet and reached behind his back to grip the hilt of his bayonet. Old

he may be, old and sad and tired, but at his core he was still plenty belligerent, and while he hated his life the only person with a right to end it was God. He drew the old ceramic knife and began edging across the room, his aural augmentations competing with his tinnitus as he searched for some indication of an intruder in his home.

Trenton sprang from his hiding place in the kitchen with a snarl of undiluted hate and kicked his father in the knee. Brendan hissed in pain and stumbled, his worn joint collapsing. Trenton aimed another kick, this time for his ribs, but Brendan smashed his knife hilt down on his son's shin. Trenton howled in pain and stumbled back. Brendan turned and lunged with his blade, narrowly missing his son's thigh. The old man lurched to his feet as Trenton's shiv appeared in his hand.

They stared at each other, knees bent, blades poised. Brendan was bigger, heavier, and well trained as well as well practiced, but Trenton was young, hardened by prison and driven by cold fury.

'I wondered if it would come to this,' rumbled Brendan. 'I wondered if you'd find the balls. Seems you did.'

'You fucking bastard!' snarled Trenton past bared teeth. 'Why do you get to live on when everyone else suffers?'

'A question I've asked myself,' replied Brendan as he shifted the weight off of his swelling knee, 'but the answer is with god. You'll get the chance to ask him yourself real soon unless you put that blade down, son.'

Trenton sprang forward, slashing for his father's knife hand. Brendan pulled it back out of reach and jabbed it forward for Trenton's eyes, turning it at the last moment to drive down toward his belly. Trenton jerked back and tried to stab over the top of Brendan's outstretched arm, but the old man had his off-hand up to guard and caught his son's knife arm on his own. Trenton kicked forward with a quickness that clearly surprised Brendan, the toe of his heavy combat boot thudding into his father's barrel chest. Brendan stumbled back, gasping for air. Trent pressed forward, slashing for his father's neck but over-extending in his eagerness. Brendan rocked out of the way of the swinging blade and

struck his son on the nose with his heavy palm. Cartilage cracked. Blood gushed. Trenton shuffled back, tears blinding him.

The two men paused, their momentum lost. Brendan's knife hand quivered as he fought for breath. 'Seems you ain't the little pansy you used to be,' he panted. 'Maybe I got something right after all; just maybe I finally made you into a man.'

'You made me into *you*, you old motherfucker,' Trenton mumbled. Blood soaked the collar of his tee-shirt.

'Mind your language, boy,' wheezed Brendan, 'your poor Momma's in heaven.'

'*And who put her there?*' raged Trenton. He reversed his knife point and sprang forward. The two men's limbs clashed and tangled as they wrestled, bit, cut and kicked at each other. Brendan butted Trenton, catching his eye, and slashed open his shoulder while he reeled from the blow. Trent snarled and brought his knee up into Brendan's yielding ribs then stamped on his ankle. The leg buckled. He dropped to the floor, dragging his son down with him. Trent pulled in his elbow and jammed it into Brendan's solar plexus as they both struck the floor. Brendan flailed helplessly, struggling to breathe, but Trenton was relentless. He jammed his knife point into the soft wooden doorframe to the kitchen, balled up his fists tight, and started punching his father in the face again and again, repeatedly batting aside the old man's arms to pick a clean shot at some un-bloodied part until he finally stopped struggling.

Panting, Trenton leaned back, blood dripping from his hands. His father was still. Blood bubbled past his mashed lips. One bloodshot eye turned to regard him coldly.

'That all you got?' sneered Brendan.

Trenton howled in humiliated rage and scrambled over his father's prone body to snatch up his fallen bayonet and brandish it in front of his face. '*Shut up!*' he screeched.

'When will you *shut up?*'

'You're a disappointment, boy,' wheezed Brendan.

'Shut up or I'll shut you up!'

'I know it, you know it, and your poor momma knew it. You're a whipped dog, boy.'



'I hate you,' sobbed Trenton.

'So what?' said Brendan. His father's blue eye held nothing but utter contempt for his son.

Trenton's face contorted with grief and humiliation. 'Why didn't you love me?' he sobbed. 'What's fucking wrong with you?'

'What was there to love?' said Brendan. He closed his eye. 'Do what you're going to do, boy. You're dead to me, so I may as well be dead to you.'

Something primal in Trenton disconnected. He stood shakily and leaned against the wall. Pain began to blossom in his battered body. He stumbled over his supine father and shuffled toward his parent's bedroom. 'Boy?' whispered Brendan. 'Boy? I'm talking to you, boy!'

Trenton kicked his way through piles of his father's mouldering clothes to his mother's dresser and turned out her jewellery box, picking through the scattering of cheap rings and turquoise necklaces to find her delicate ivory rosary. His gut clenched with grief as he placed it around his bloodstained neck. Next he turned and threw open the closet, tossing out his father's coats onto the bed until he found one he liked, an old tan racing leather with cracked cream piping. He threw it on. The fit was excellent.

'Boy?'

Trenton ignored his father and went into the bathroom to tend his blooming injuries. Most were cosmetic, but for the nose and the cut to the shoulder. He found some disinfectant and surgical tape and gingerly treated them, then stepped back over his father once again to raid his abandoned supply of booze and cigarettes on the couch. He took up a fresh bottle of bourbon and squatted next to his father, fishing out the rosary and swinging it above his face.

'That's not yours,' wheezed Brendan. 'Put it back.'

'She should have been buried with this,' said Trenton. 'You had no right to keep it, though I knew you would.' He shook his head. 'I'm going to see it home for her, dad, back

home to Stallion Gate.' Brendan watched the little cross swing with his one good eye. A lone tear pushed its way through the coagulating blood on his face.

'I'll be in my bedroom, dad,' Trenton said.

Brendan stared up at his son. His lips parted, but all that escaped was a wet croak. Trenton looked down at the dying man lying bloody on his cheap carpet, and wondered where his anger had hidden itself. The withered old man tried to speak, spluttering nonsensical syllables through from his ruined mouth, but he had nothing of interest left to say to his son. Trenton went to sit on his old bed and catalogue his inheritance until the squall outside had spent itself.

Two hours later, after the rain had finally stopped, he stepped over the corpse of the man who used to be his father and went down into the world a fugitive.

#### 04. Pictures of You

He said he was going home, across the desert to Stallion Gate.

She lays out the faded pictures on her bed with her long pale hands. They are of landscapes and sunsets. Candid shots of a boy and a girl, their faces set in natural introspection. Some are posed, the boy and girl clutching each other and smiling artlessly for the camera eye. She put them in order years ago, she observes it still in this rented room: Lines of five, carefully spaced, starting with the Diner.

She pulls open the hotel bathrobe and runs her hands across her taut white belly, tracing the lines where the scars used to be. She closes her eyes and draws the shape of the vanished cuts on her hairless arms. Marie's body is pristine, her soul is haggard. Kirlian photography would show a patchwork spirit held together with crude stitches.

She rises from the rumpled bed with its cargo of memories and moves to the window. Outside it is dark. Snow has fallen on Paris. The city glitters icily like the wedding gown of a fairy tale princess. She wraps her arms about herself, watching lumbering dirigibles alight at Fountainbleau airpark through the messy fall of her unkempt black hair.

She visited Paris just before the war, a History of Art trip to the cultural capital of the European Union for a gaggle of privileged American schoolgirls more interested in ponies and shoes, cigarettes and vodka than Monet or El Greco. She had been given a free afternoon with her brother Luke and his buddy Mark who both served at the Embassy. They looked like a recruiting poster; perched on cast iron chairs, sipping coffee on a sunlit café terrace by the Seine, their gleaming sidearms in glossy holsters. She remembers the girlish awe and immature arousal of watching the roll of young muscle under blue Marine Corps dress shirts the same colour as the summer sky above. She remembers the lazy arrogance and bravado and the searchlight smiles. Looking back now Mark was only three years older than her, but in his uniform with his swagger and poise he was a full-grown hero of The United States to Marie.

Mark took her to the cinema that night. Mrs Collins, her teacher, had seen action in the Gulf as Air Force support staff and had a son of similar age to Mark in the Army. He promised to have her back at the hotel before midnight, and Collins capitulated.

That night there was a short and sordid fuck in a park. Mark pressured her into sex, and she out of fear and guilt allowed him to take her virginity in a clumsy and humiliating fumble that he no doubt hid from Luke but bragged about to his platoon mates when they shipped out for Crete. He was the first, but certainly not the last, of her sad teenage sexual mistakes. Scant weeks later Mark was dead on the steppes of Mongolia and the world burned.

She dismisses the unwelcome memory, returns to the bed and picks up the first photograph, holding it up to the uneven city light that shines amber through the window.

She remembers pulling up with the sun sinking lazy-obese under the Texan plain. The light of that dying sun was thick; the sky it hung in was used up and smudged with dust. Even the fat black flies that battered themselves to death on the dusty truck stop windows were tired of the day. They lumbered stupid and decrepit along peeling windowsills, spilling out filth from ruptured carapaces. She stepped from her car, strode across the parking lot and mounted the sun-bleached steps of the diner. The long shadow she cast seemed to linger sluggishly behind her as if reluctant to follow. The whole world was suspended in that thickening evening heat like insects trapped in pine resin; drowned, black and still, but not yet become amber.

She had sat slumped against the cracked red leatherette of a lumpy padded couch and watched that big sun paint the desert, her chin resting in her hands. The aged light that slashed in between the half closed blinds painted her white skin a murky orange and sizzled in her long black curls like embers amongst coals. The bland, soggy-faced waitress mechanically refilled her stained coffee cup and bustled on her way to the next silent patron before Marie could thank her. She returned her attention to the sunset.

The prefabricated walls of the roadside diner shuddered from tarred roof to cinderblock foundations as an enormous silver road train passed, its gigantic serpentine bulk blotting out the sun. The monstrous thing was painted with a film of ochre dust that obscured its chipped

company logos and softened its blazing running lights. Flinching, Marie picked up her juddering coffee cup and cradled it in her hands before it emptied across the flimsy table. It took a long, painful minute for the whine and the roar and the rattling and the hiss of huge tyres to pass. The customers all sat in cowed silence like cavemen hiding from thunder until the waitress coaxed tinny country music from the battered jukebox on the wall by the breakfast bar.

She relaxed and opened her palmtop, logging on through a proxy server and dialling up her favourite Australian alt-rock station, Century Indie, to drown out the screechy jukebox. She reluctantly checked her mail. There were half a dozen e-cards in her inbox along with the usual twice-daily pleas from her parents to get in touch. It was the firm line from her father and sugary fluff from her mother, the promise that there would be no recriminations if she just came home to Lafayette.

Marie grimaces at the memory of her gentle parents, the hard muscles of her gut clench.

She sees herself sigh as she deletes the e-cards from old schoolmates and fraternity sisters, on-line contacts, gaming clans, family friends and distant cousins, pausing with a sudden blood rush of longing over her parent's card that simply read: *Kitten, happy birthday. We both love you and miss you. Come home soon, M & D.*

The card tells her that the sender has requested an acknowledgement of receipt. It politely asks her if she wishes to send an automatic response.

The guilt chewed hard on her heart those first few weeks alone on the road. She remembers the desperate uncertainty she felt at her choices each time she encountered little things that reminded her of her old life. While she drove all time and matter seemed suspended, she was self-contained, brave and open to possibility, but when she brushed against the world to buy gas, find a safe place to sleep, to eat, then all the fears that had tracked her across the wilderness found her once again and gnawed at her relentlessly.

Her hovering stylus pauses over 'yes' a second before her bitterness reasserts control and deletes the untitled message. Blackmail, that's all it was; a cheap shot.

It was August 8<sup>th</sup>: Her twentieth birthday.

She sees girl-Marie shakily convince herself that her family didn't even notice she was gone until she didn't show for her Wednesday piano recital, no doubt embarrassing them in front of their society friends. Far away, in the hotel room, woman-Marie grimaces: The ugly expression sits on her delicate face like old sump oil on virgin melt water. It's the same expression she wore that Texas evening, disgusted with her own guilt.

Marie Dubois de Lyon was striking. The selective breeding of rich colonial families and the inherited lissom poise of French aristocracy had resulted in sharp, elegant, Gallic features. She was indeed beautiful, but her thoroughbred carriage was spoiled by the inherited arrogance that complete social seclusion and vast privilege gave her. That arrogance was proving to be a sugar pedestal now she was out in the real world.

Eight days before she drew up at the old truck stop she had abandoned the emerald lawns, elegant Colonial facades and hissing sprinklers of her gated community and cashed her substantial allowance in town. She traded in the hydrogen fuelled Oldsmobile Wildsman that her parents gave her for her sixteenth, bought a battered V6 alcohol burner coupe from a lot across the tracks and abandoned the artificial groomed suburbs of Lafayette for the open road, setting out at midnight with a gym bag full of expensive underwear, cosmetics and shoes to discover America for herself before it vanished into history.

The America she found was TV repeats in shabby motels, cheap coffee, old paperbacks in threadbare chairs, clumsy come-ons from desperate local boys, slatted blinds and miles and miles of scrubby broken two-lane blacktop heading nowhere. Her underwear was dirty, her shoes impractical and her make-up untouched. She was dirty and her skin smelled bitter, and none of it mattered.

Marie had avoided the hollow cities that punctuated the highways: They were full of eyes, invisible eyes bought and paid for by the power and influence of her family. She aimlessly burned fuel driving through the lush and the barren, passing under the shadows of trees and bare rock. She drifted along the branching roads like a foreign body in the veins and arteries of America. There were times when she was so isolated that she couldn't even connect to the Net. When she hit a black spot she would pull over, listening to the song of the cooling

engine, savouring the disconnection and wondering what the world was like before it contracted invisibly and trapped them all.

By night she sat in sodium-lit parking lots outside of truck stops that seemed to be perpetually closing, watching bats massacre the moths that danced around the orange bulbs. She listened to the radio news, feeling trapped on the wrong side of a TV screen: A solitary spirit, tied to the Earth and wandering alone.

In that other America, the one she had left behind when she slipped the clutch and pulled away, everything was coming apart. Nothing had been right since the Three Bad Years had come and gone; the whole world had been gutted, and now the survivors stumbled through the spilled entrails in denial. She listened to Vice-President Bates promising that only in unity did America have a future, while guerrilla radio stations hidden away in trailer parks and basements drowned him out with their one word song over and over again: Dissolution.

Government oratory talked of rebuilding, of new frontiers and re-imagined societies, but all she had seen on the crumbling road was empty towns with avenues like dried up creeks and endless memorials to the dead like milestones. Marie had become convinced that the world was already a stripped and bloated corpse; Humanity was just taking a while to accept it. She smiled nihilistically into her bitter coffee.

The darkness that swallowed her family had started as a blue evening shadow, just a hint of the night to follow. Woman-Marie can see the darkness had been nurtured in their home since long before her birth, but the girl who sat at that truck-stop table and hid away from the truth always began her story at the same point: The day Luke came home from China.

In her Parisian hotel room Marie cringes and bats feebly at the memory of her horror, betrayal and pain. She rages at the impotence of her parents and the indifference of her sisters. To escape, she fixes her attention on girl-Marie alone in the diner.

She closes her eyes and remembers the dull chime above the truck stop door ring out as he opened and closed it gently. She flicked her gaze up reflexively, taking out her headphones as if expecting to greet a friend.

And there he stood, blinking in the forge-light of the fading sun.

He was in his late teens, a boy on the cusp of manhood. His straight brown hair was bleached into sandy streaks by the sun. It hung around a long, lean face that was freckled and tanned with a bare wisp of stubble on his cheeks and chin. The blue eyes that shone from beneath his smooth, youthful brow were sardonic and arrogant. Marie could see yellow and purple bruising turning old, hidden by the fall of his hair. His nose had been broken and reset with clumsy hands. From rangy shoulders hung a battered racing leather the colour of old tobacco stains. He lowered a half empty olive green drawstring bag he was carrying and fished his cigarettes from a jacket pocket. Prize in hand, he withdrew a scuffed and dented USMC alcohol lighter from his faded jeans and lit up, tossing back his mane of hair to avoid the flame.

'Hey! Son!' the waitress had yelled thickly, 'this is a public place! It's against the law to smoke in here!'

He had looked at her belligerently, drawing in a lungful. 'Who the hell's gonna fucking care?' he sneered. 'The cops are busy putting up roadblocks at the fucking border; do you think they give a shit if I smoke? Shall we call 911 and *ask* them? Will anybody even *answer*?' The boy stared his insolent challenge around the diner like a gunfighter itching to draw. Marie had dropped her eyes to the table and silently hoped he would notice her. She could feel heat growing in her belly when he spoke.

'Okay, jeez. Mind your language son, that's all I ask,' the waitress mumbled. She bustled behind the counter to serve him with her eyes fixed downward. The battle was done.

'Alright,' said the boy with a victorious smile, 'let's see about ordering.'

He hopped onto a stool at the bar, carefully placing his half-empty bag on the seat next to him, and leafed idly through the cheap laminated menu, flicking ash from his pungent cigarette onto the floor beside him. Marie watched his hunched back as he thumbed the brittle pages. He seemed to burn at a higher temperature than the room around him. There was nothing hidden inside the boy, his emotions drifted off his skin like coloured steam. He was raw and unguarded and wore his blunt honesty like a coat of arms.

Marie stared in wonder as if he was the first living soul she had ever seen.



'What do you think I should have?' he had said over his shoulder. The waitress looked up from the counter, her eyes lit nervously. Marie blinked, looking around at the other patrons who stared ashen faced and marble eyed at their food. The diner seemed frozen in time and bleached of colour. He twisted in his seat and looked at her over his shoulder through a tangle of hair. 'Well?' he said, 'What would you have from this catalogue of delights, miss?'

She blinked stupidly and stared at him. Her mouth was suddenly dry and her blood stoked with adrenaline. 'Ah,' Marie croaked, 'coffee?'

The boy smiled crookedly and turned back to the waitress. 'Coffee, please,' he said. 'What else?' he called over his shoulder, still holding the menu.

'Um, pancakes?' she said.

'Um, *payun-cakes*,' he said, laughing, gently mocking her accent. She flushed, bristling. 'Yeah, that's a good idea,' he said softly to the waitress, 'pancakes please. Two plates, one for the young lady: And bacon for me. You do want pancakes, right?'

There had been something so self-deprecating, so bruised and contradictory and uncertain about the boy in that moment that despite her uncertainty and his brittle bravado she felt a need to be part of his world for a little while.

'Yeah, sure,' she said, closing her palmtop.

'Why don't you come sit with me?' he said, carefully placing his pack onto the floor. She collected her dusty bag and leaned against the counter, anxious and excited. He was counting out tatty dollar bills from a third-hand snakeskin wallet. He favoured her with a bruised lopsided grin. 'Not much is it?' he said, indicating the money. 'I don't reckon it'll get me very far.' He poured sugar in his coffee and turned to face her, collecting his shabby currency together in a neat pile.

'I wonder what it was like when we didn't measure distance in dollars,' he continued, smiling wryly as if sharing a private joke with an old accomplice.

Marie shook her head, her curls dancing. 'I don't get it,' she said.

'How much is a bus ride across town?' he asked. 'Say, three bucks. Three bucks is the measurement of the journey, right? You don't think of the miles, that don't matter because

you're safe on the bus, you think of the *cost*. How far is The FER, or Fiji, or Cuba: Well, it depends on how deep your pockets are, right?' He ground out the smouldering cigarette butt on the Formica of the counter and sipped his coffee. 'If you got shallow pockets, then Europa is a long way, maybe even too far to ever go. If you got deep pockets, then Europa isn't any further than the drugstore.'

Woman-Marie laughs across the years at puzzled girl-Marie, shaking her head: She had never taken a bus ride in her life. 'Where are you going that costs so much to get to?' she had asked him, trying to match his teenage beatnik worldliness with some of her own.

He chuckled dryly. 'Only to New Mexico, a little place called Stallion Gate. It's on the map as Trinity.'

'That isn't far,' she said.

'It is when you haven't got any money.' He smirked mirthlessly. 'Besides, apart from boot leather I rely on the kindness of my fellow travellers to get around: I can't even drive.' The food arrived. He counted out notes for the bill and a tip for the waitress with his free hand. 'I'm just following the Coyote,' he said, 'and the old trickster has led me here. He must have had his reasons, the devil.' He smiled at her, knowingly. It was like a touch. 'Eat your supper,' he said, 'I buy it at great cost. My ship runs aground here in the Texas Panhandle.'

Marie shuffled up onto the stool next to him and began to pick at her food with a dull fork. She recalls silence for a while as the boy carelessly shovelled food into his face. Woman-Marie is still in awe of his artless, unselfconscious beauty. She watches with fascination at the unschooled unity he has between his mind, body and huge emotions. Eventually the pace of his eating slowed and he took more care as the pile on his plate dwindled. Marie could feel something silky and primal squirming in her guts. She wanted him to touch her.

'Why New Mexico?' she asked spontaneously, anxious to end the silence.

'It's where my Mom comes from,' he said cagily. 'It's where I was born. I hear rumours they're siding with the Texans and going it alone, and I figure I'll lend a hand. Like Davy Crocket.' He shrugged as if talk of insurrection was nothing significant. His gaze kept flicking reflexively to her plate.

'How are you going to get there now?' she asked, toying with her food.

'Are you going to eat that!' he snapped at her venomously. His voice struck her from her reverie like a slap. She jumped, jittery and afraid. At the end of the breakfast bar the waitress dropped the saucers she was collecting on the counter.

'I'm sorry,' she stammered, unsure of what she was guilty of.

'For fuck's sake,' he hissed, 'if you weren't hungry then you shouldn't have said yes.' He dug out another crumpled cigarette, shaking the dwindling contents of the pack forlornly. He lit the smoke and placed the Zippo on the counter, spinning it idly, his anger forgotten or masked by self-control. 'Ultimately it doesn't matter, I suppose,' he said bleakly. 'Nothing does. This is the End of the World. All these people,' he nodded derisively at the patrons, 'are going to end with it. They don't want to let go of the old world, they can't. All we have to do to inherit the Earth from the meek is outlast them.' He stared hard into space, eyes narrowing.

'So if nothing matters,' she said, regaining some of her poise, 'why worry if I eat the food or not?'

'Because I'm hungry and I could have eaten it,' he said.

'You still can,' she said and pushed the plate toward him defiantly.

'It doesn't matter. One plate of pancakes won't keep me alive across the desert any more than the six bucks they cost will get me there. What gets me pissed is that they were a gift and you didn't value them. You're no better off than me, sitting here in a shitty little truck stop in Nowhere State, trying to outrun your own sad story and waiting for the curtain to fall on the last sunset. You and I are flotsam, and if we're going to live past today we can't afford to turn away kindnesses. Or food.' His loneliness leaked from his eyes like steam.

She smiled at him shyly, meeting his eyes. 'Thank you for my supper,' she said. She deliberately pulled the plate toward her and began to eat. The boy watched every forkful disappear behind her lips with a heartbroken smile, smoke dribbling from his lungs and drifting on the last dregs of evening light. She finished and self-consciously dabbed at the corners of her mouth with a paper napkin.

'Now we truly are equal,' he said quietly, gesturing at their empty plates. 'Neither of us have anything'. Their eyes locked, communicating a silent primitive need.

'What's your name?' he asked.

'Marie,' she said, her breath catching in her throat.

'Hello Marie,' said the boy quietly, his voice quivering. 'My name is Trenton. It's nice to meet you. Do you have a car?'

Marie nodded. The last vestiges of her old life shrivelled like paper in the fire of her need to be wanted by this boy. Trenton put away the battered Marine Corps Zippo. 'Yes I do,' she said, 'it's out front. I'm about to head South, Trenton, and I'm wondering; would you like to ride a while with me?'

'South is my direction, Marie,' he said, touching the back of her hand with a brown finger, 'South to Stallion Gate. And I'd love to spend a little time with you.'

'That was easy,' she said. They smiled.

Is that how it happened? Have the years and the sadness patched those moments together? Tidying them so that she had one pure and unstained place in her heart, just for him to live in? She no longer possesses the rough cut of that memory, only the candied freeze-frame that has lit her darkness for these cold decades.

Marie clutches the photograph to her chest, wrapping the blue silk of the robe over it to bind it tightly against her heart. True or not, that is how it *should* have been. She places a hand against the cold glass of the window and leans heavily. She is crying. Her body shudders with misery that escapes in choking sobs from her frigid guts. She is tired of aching.

Out in the dark, in the black spaces that simple people do not inhabit her enemies' scheme and manoeuvre: They are moving their pieces on the board with such serpentine cunning that she must maintain total focus or be swallowed like a dainty. She is one against many, holding on to the last whispers of the boy she has loved for thirty years.

Marie kisses the photograph of the dead boy like a prayer across the sad years, trying with her own warm breath to give life to that faded smile and those pale eyes so that, once again, she might feel the wonder of being loved.

## 05. Cities in Dust.

The midday sun glowered like a bloody coal embedded in roiling clouds of reeking oily smoke.

The inferno heat of the burning city core fed a filthy blizzard of ash that fell on gutted suburbs, softening the collapsed ruins of blasted brick and needles of blackened glass that lay like scattered pebbles tipped from a child's bucket. It shrouded the shattered houses in a soft obscuring film, lay thick on the bald limbs of carbonised trees, drifted in the wheel arches of abandoned cars and in the shadow of lost toys. It obscured the bullet holes and transformed the abandoned dead into hummocks of uniform, featureless grey. The city's eulogy was in the thrum of helicopter rotors, her mourners the ash-painted invaders that now stalked the ruins seeking out unlucky survivors. Boots crunched on rubble, IR ponchos crackled in the warm breeze from the burnings, rifles thumped in time against armoured chests like a drum commanding slaves to row. Apart from the muted sounds of the advancing platoon the residential suburb was as desolate and silent as downtown Pompeii.

'Well golly!' exclaimed Major Jack Elgin, pausing in the centre of the broad street to properly appreciate the apocalyptic scope of Santa Fe's annihilation. 'Hey boys, doesn't it feel like Christmas?' He turned, drawing back the hood on his poncho and tossing back his armoured cowl. Dust slipped from his shoulders and collected on his ammunition pouches. 'Snow!' he laughed and held out a gauntleted hand, palm up. 'I never thought I'd see snow in June! And look,' he pointed toward the firestorm, 'there's a Yule log burning on the fire.'

'Just don't stick your tongue out, sir,' muttered Sergeant Hennessy. The veteran shifted uncomfortably.

Elgin frowned, the play vanishing from his eyes. 'Enjoy the joke, sergeant,' he growled quietly. 'Every man in this company had best be obeying NBC discipline and taking his shots. I'm fully aware this sky's still full of the shit we seeded it with, and I don't intend to lose anyone to friendly fire. Speaking of which, hey! Doctor Rathbone! How d'you like what your good works have done for the war effort?'

A slight man in an oversized bright yellow environment suit shuffled forward flanked by two hulking soldiers. He turned about on the spot, raising a cloud of fine dust, and swept his gaze across the murdered town. There was a station wagon abandoned at an intersection, its smudged bumper sticker read "Don't mess with Texas". Its contents, a mound of hastily collected refugee trash and a corpse, were being inspected by two bored soldiers. The passenger of the car leaned his death stiffened face against the cracked door window as if dozing while waiting for the lights to change. The driver lay prone in the dust two paces from her open door, torso carved in, track marks of cannon fire stitched into the asphalt around her. Her gore stiffened dress flapped stiffly in the charnel wind. A pistol was in her outstretched hand. One of the soldiers kneeled down and prised it from her rigid fingers, smiling sheepishly at the disapproving Hennessy from behind his filter plate. 'Souvenir, Sarge,' he said, checking the safety pocketing the gun. 'It's for my son.'

'Let him have it, sergeant,' said Elgin over their private channel.

The civilian in the yellow suit stooped to pick up a tiny child's tricycle, brushing at the ash to reveal a pink plastic saddle with peeling flower stickers decorating it. He turned to face the southern skyline and saw the flames lick at the charred belly of the sky. 'My God!' he choked. 'Oh my good God!'

'Yeah,' said Elgin nastily, flipping down his cowl and purging his filter plate with a sharp exhale, 'this ain't exactly the field of honour, is it Doctor? And the owner of said tiny velocipede you now clutch weren't no combatant, was she?' Elgin turned to regard the atrocity of flame in the middle distance, his suit filters giving him stark and unforgiving clarity. 'No,' he said grimly. 'This ain't Thermopylae, or Agincourt, or Gettysburg or Carentan. My boy's haven't needed to chamber a round, let alone fire one. Any rebel that stood their ground has died for their city. You, your pals in the lab, those heroes at ten-thousand feet who filled the sky with poison and fire, and the occasional helicopter gunship looking for target practice won the day for us.' Elgin shook his head and loomed over Oliver Rathbone. 'You made us redundant, Doctor. You won the day single-handed. How do you feel?'

'My god, the fires,' whispered Rathbone. His eyes were wide and glassy with revulsion and shock.

'There wasn't anyone to put them out, Doctor,' said Elgin. 'The whole population was incapacitated by your Lab's excellent work. We ordered air strikes on strategic sites, sure we did, but most of the fires got started by locals in kitchens, in stores, in factories. They would've stood there and burned to death without knowing what was happening.'

'Oh god,' sobbed Rathbone, dropping the tricycle, his shoulders heaving in his suit. He bowed his head and lifted his gloved hand to the faceplate of his respirator. 'This isn't what was supposed to happen. This isn't what they told us they were going to do! It would rain and then...'

'Yep, I know,' interrupted Elgin wearily. 'We would walk in and take the city from the doped-up populace, and by the time they came down from the drugs you dosed them with they'd be in a camp being processed. I know the plan. I was at the same briefing.'

'What happened?' sobbed Rathbone.

'President Bates decided he wanted an example made,' said Elgin, 'and by Christ it was going to be Santa Fe.' He prodded Rathbone in the chest. 'No-one's going to dare fuck with the Union now, are they, Doc? Because if you do then we'll *destroy your whole city!* I bet Baton Rouge is sure glad it surrendered now.' Elgin lazily kicked the tricycle, shattering the saddle. 'This neighbourhood was abandoned before it all started anyhow. The rebels started moving civilians out of town as soon as they spotted our first attempts at electronic warfare. They had some fine technicians on their side, without doubt. Held us up for thirty-nine hours straight before we shut them down, and by then the evacuation was well on the way.' He turned his face away from the burnings. 'This ain't gonna serve our cause none,' he muttered hollowly, shaking his head. 'What was the god damned point to this?' He straightened his back and hefted his weapon, reassured by the familiar solidity and weight. 'Sergeant Hennessy,' he snapped. 'Get them all moving.'

'*Company!*' barked the Sergeant over the communications net. 'We've still got work to do! This sector needs sewing up by nightfall and observation teams in place. Doctor,' he said, shouldering his rifle, 'you had best get a ride back behind the lines, I'm sure you'll be missed by your buddies in the lab.'



Rathbone deliberately peeled off the cowl of his environment suit and turned his young face skyward. Falling ash turned to grey mud on his cheeks where it met his tears. 'No-one was supposed to die,' he said. 'That was the *point!*'

'Go on,' said Elgin gently. 'Back to the CP with you Doctor, you've seen enough.'

'That was the *point!*'

'Just go, Doctor. Corporal Nyugen, escort Doctor Rathbone to the CP make sure he takes his shots when he gets back.'

Elgin watched Rathbone stumble away into the artificial twilight, wondering if the men working on the Manhattan Project were shocked to find out what had happened to Hiroshima.

Trenton and Marie had found a home in Santa Fe, the first home either of them had ever truly known. For two years their souls floated like silk on the breeze. Now Trenton Mallory's soul was the same colour as the desolate highway.

He sat rocking on a rickety chair in the kitchen of a sun-bleached wooden ruin, wrapped in a sheepskin coat against the cold highland winds and counting the faded flowers on the peeling wallpaper. He licked his cracked lips and tasted blood. 'You got any water left?' he croaked.

'Just a swallow,' replied his companion blearily. The man huddled in a sheltered corner under a threadbare blanket, knees drawn up to his chest, his rifle abandoned on the kitchen floor. 'You want a sip?'

'Naw,' replied Trenton. 'You keep it.' He stood and walked unsteadily to the cracked sink, leaning on the dusty porcelain and staring through the glassless window frame to where the desolate scrubland met the empty grey sky. He shouldered his own weapon and walked toward the door.

'Where are you going?' asked his companion nervously.

'The car,' said Trenton. 'We need water. I need my bedroll. Marie's going to need another IV.'

'Are we planning to stay here?'

'Yep, until tomorrow morning,' said Trenton. He tugged his quilted hunting cap on tighter and rubbed his haunted bloodshot eyes with grimy fingers. 'I've been driving for nineteen hours, Gabriel, and I'm out of amphetamines. I've got two Valium in my medical kit. I'm going to swallow them and I'm going to sleep, and that's it.'

Gabriel sat up, the blanket slipping from his shoulders. 'That's nearly a whole day, Trent. I'll drive. Give me two hours rest and I'll drive. We should keep moving.'

Trenton sneered. 'Through the night?' he snorted. 'Did you pay any attention in basic training, Gabe? If the Union is watching for refugees on the highway then don't you think headlamps and a big fucking V8 heat signature is going to give us away?'

Gabriel stood, his long brown hands held together as if in prayer. 'I could use the night vision rig. We picked a quiet highway, away from the Translight routes. They're not likely to monitor it, right? Besides, we've got a few hours before nightfall.'

'Jeez.' Trenton shook his head in disbelief. 'What the fuck did they teach you in Doctor School?'

'How to doctor,' snapped Gabriel. 'Not how to be a successful fugitive.'

'We don't own the satellite footprint anymore,' Trenton sighed, his shoulders sagging. 'This is the only decent cover we've seen all day, and I'm not going to waste it. The Yankees can keep an eye out for all of us from heaven. All the survivors, all the refugees, they've got no place to go. The Union'll watch the convoys drive up and down for hundreds of miles looking for a place that'll take them in, wait 'til they run out of food and gas then round them up. They'll all be behind wire by the end of the week.' He shuddered. 'They're still better off than the ones we left behind.'

'All those people,' said Gabriel bleakly. 'Just standing there, watching the sky grow dark, waiting for the soldiers, waiting for the bombs. We couldn't do a thing.'

'They were finished when the rain came. We're all just lucky Command got word out to evacuate before they got levelled by the air strike.'

'Whole towns driven out by the rains, no GPS, no supplies, nowhere to go, lost in the desert.'

'Yeah, well,' muttered Trenton, 'no more lost than us. Just be glad it wasn't you that caught a dose. And before you consider delivering another guilt-driven soapbox oratory let me remind you that you're the one who approached me with the plan to save our ass at the cost of everyone else. I get you to the border; you get Marie and me into Free California. That's our deal.'

Gabriel watched Trenton stagger to the car in mute resignation. He settled back down under his worn blanket, struggling to stay warm. Trenton returned with his pack and a half-full plastic container of water. He tugged off his boots and fumbled with his bedroll, laying it out on the cracked linoleum next to Marie. The young woman was cocooned in a military surplus sleeping bag, the hood up and tight around her face. Spittle had dried on her chin. Her eyelids shuddered as if she were in the grip of a nightmare. Trenton crouched over her and tenderly cleaned away the flecks of drool with a baby wipe.

'Why did you sign up, Trent?'

'What?' Trenton stared suspiciously at Gabriel, dragging his fingers through his matted ponytail.

'Why did you join the cause? You're no idealist. You said your Mom came from New Mexico but there's not a shred of sentiment in you. Why?'

'Untrue, Doc,' said Trenton with a humourless smile. 'I'm brimming with sentiment. Bleeding Heart Mallory, that's me. What does it matter anyhow?'

'It matters,' replied Gabriel. 'Indulge me. Consider it part of the deal.'

'The deal,' Trenton sneered, 'did not include us swapping tales and becoming army buddies.' He shook out his sleeping bag and struggled inside it, curling on his side, one hand resting on his rifle. He sighed. 'I was on the run from the cops,' he said. 'It's true my Mom's from New Mexico though. I guess she's the reason I'm here.'

'Patriotism?' asked the Doctor.

'No,' Trenton said bluntly. He shook two pills from a ziplock and dry-swallowed them. 'I don't want to talk about it, Gabriel. If you want to be useful then why don't you give Marie her IV?'

Gabriel Mendoza listened to Trenton Mallory's breathing soften as he swiftly fell asleep. The doctor stood and stepped lightly over the sleeping bags to stand before the empty window, the blanket wrapped around his shoulder like a threadbare cloak. He stared out at the featureless sky and the relentless crushing blandness of shifting scrub. Just a few days, perhaps a week, and he'd be safe in California. All he had to do was get across the border and a new life wrapped in the paternal corporate arms of Genoa Laboratories awaited him. Phoenix, Mallory had said, then San Diego, taking the back roads. They'd need to get fuel the hard way, from other travellers, probably at gunpoint. He turned and gazed at the sleeping pair and wondered if he could trust Mallory not to knife him if it came down to it. Possibly not, he thought, but that very same rapaciousness was keeping them alive out in the wilderness. And frankly, who was he to judge? Mendoza had never pulled the trigger himself, but no shortage of people had suffered because of his work. He shrugged. There was little point agonising over his past actions. They had been necessary and expedient at the time, and there would no doubt be more distasteful choices ahead, but if he allowed the domesticated morality of others shape his destiny then he was going to find himself another pathetic vagabond waiting to be thrown back into serfhood, waiting to die unfulfilled. There were no *what if's* in the world of Gabriel Mendoza, there was only *what is*. Mallory was a little wolverine, but he lived in a small world like all of his closed minded urban poor kin. Mendoza was confident that the boy would get him to California, and after that he didn't give a shit what happened to the brat. He had a glorious future awaiting him in the West, but very much doubted that Mr Mallory or Miss Dubois could say the same.

He considered adding a little something special to the girl's IV and allowing her a quiet death while Mallory slumbered, but knowing the boy as he did Mendoza was quite clear that he would be most un-cooperative if he woke to find her deceased. It was the rather unfounded hope that she would recover that kept Mallory going, kept him driving, kept him finding a way to get Gabriel Mendoza across that border and to that glorious future that his genius deserved.

Mendoza unpacked his own sleeping bag and draped it about his shoulders over the blanket. He shuffled to the doorway and watched dust spiral in the parched air outside. Old telegraph poles marked the nearby highway like desiccated wooden exclamation marks. He shook his head morosely. This place, this nation, was dead. The US Government had kindly provided him with the resources he needed for his initial work, the poor damned souls of the Lone Star Union had kindly tested it for him, and now Genoa would allow him to continue it: In California; The Promised Land. He returned to the kitchen and inserted Marie's new IV, mechanically cleaning the sphincter he had installed in her arm with neat alcohol before slipping the needle in, wondering where she travelled.

## 06. The Painted Desert

'Tell me about the house,' said Trenton, his head pillowed comfortably in Marie's lap.

Marie smiled indulgently and stroked loose locks of sun-streaked hair from his deeply tanned brow. 'Again?' she asked playfully. 'Don't you ever get bored of hearing about it?' Her girlish voice was thick and slurred. She was dehydrated again.

Trent took his father's Zippo from the frayed pocket of his shirt and stared at their warped reflection in the uneven steel. 'You know I don't,' he said quietly. 'Please, tell me.'

'We need water,' she said. 'It's your turn today. Sam went yesterday.'

'I know,' Trent replied. 'I'll go before it gets too hot, just as soon as you tell me about the house.'

'Okay baby,' she said, 'If it'll make you happy.' She bit her lip thoughtfully. 'Well,' she began, 'the house I grew up in was in a place called... Lafayette. It was big, big and white. There were big pillars out front. It was real old, hundreds of years. It was surrounded by trees, big trees, and there was a lawn that stretched away in big steps...'

'How many steps?' Trenton asked. He shrugged out of his jacket. The morning sun was beating on the aluminium roof of the ancient yellow school bus they made their bed in. Sand hissed against the filthy windows. He sighed. The wind always seemed to pick up when it was his turn to go to see the Well Boys. Trenton turned his head and peered out at the white horizon. A dust storm was rolling in. At least it would diminish the fierce heat for a while, maybe until he could get back under cover.

'Umm... Seven?' said Marie. 'No! Eight! Eight long steps down to the lake!'

'Tell me about the lake,' he said.

'But I can't remember,' Marie whined.

'Just try, baby,' replied Trent. 'It don't matter if you can't, but try for me.'

She had been awake for six weeks, but still hadn't recovered from whatever dose had been carried by the rains that hit Santa Fe. She could walk, but only short distances and not without aid. Her motor skills had deteriorated so much that when she was tired Trenton had to

feed her, which embarrassed them both and made Marie cry. She was easily confused, which would leave her frantic and almost always heralded a seizure. She would start to shudder uncontrollably, spitting out a stream of guttural nonsense for a few painful moments before she would come to and sob piteously, beating at herself in frustration until Trenton could pin her flailing arms and hold her until she was still. Gabriel promised he could help her, but he had a shopping list of drugs and equipment that no-one, not even a hustler like Trenton, could find out on the Borders. Between them they did all they could to insulate her from the harshness of their life in the Twentynine Palms Camp, but there was little they could do to rehabilitate her. Every day they would sit with her, ask her questions and encourage her to perform simple coordination exercises attempting to get her to reconnect with herself, but it seemed hopeless: Something inside Marie was irreparably broken.

The three of them had joined a small refugee convoy on the outskirts of Prescott, slipping invisibly into the bedraggled column of ochre-painted vehicles drifting along the deserted highways toward the Free Californian border. When the small towns that huddled against the shoulder of those roads began turning away their dollars some 'fugees resorted to brigandage to feed and fuel themselves, abandoning the convoy to attack lone travellers or vulnerable communities and leaving behind a stain of violence that marked out the innocent as well as the guilty. The column abandoned them and turned its eyes westward, always westward, away from the shadow of war and the cruelty of desperate men.

The train of the dispossessed grew as they headed toward the San Bernadino Mountains. Renegade National Guard units and local militia groups harassed them. Lives were lost in the resulting gunfights and midnight lynchings by gangs of scared or vengeful citizens prowling the perimeter of the camp for unwary stragglers. Trenton traded his unwieldy battlefield rifle for a .38 revolver and a box of bullets and slept in the car with Marie, huddling next to her comatose body on the backseat and listening warily to the muted conversation from around the scattered campfires where Gabriel, demonstrating an avuncular charm, would hold court and entertain the huddled travellers with some snatches of jazz trumpet, an instrument that he had somehow managed to rescue from the destruction of Santa Fe. The doctor might

be comfortable ambling between camps of strangers, thought Trenton, but as far as he was concerned there was no honour among thieves and he wasn't taking any risks, not when they were so close to liberty.

The column came to its final stop on the eastern edge of Twentynine Palms, already across the official state line. The Free Californian Guard crowded the highway with trucks and armour, its tan uniformed soldiery watching the refugees from beneath the brims of their smart helmets and flexing gloved fingers on the hot furniture of very modern looking firearms. The vehicles were separated out, parked up, the occupants disarmed and then prepared for processing by army clerks where their biometrics were taken and checked against their documentation. Trenton, Gabriel and Marie waited in line behind razor wire for two days before they had their chance at crossing the border. A guardsman tapped on the window of their car at midnight and shone his flashlight around the interior. Trenton snapped awake and rolled down the window, blinking the sleep from his gritty eyes.

'Three?' grunted the weary soldier.

'Uh, yeah,' said Trenton.

'What's the matter with the girl?' he asked, frowning at Marie.

'She got sick,' replied Trenton. 'The Union put something in the water. She's been asleep since.'

The guardsman peered at her nodded. 'She's not the first. You'd better bring her papers with you along with your own,' he said, 'and make sure it's everything you've got.'

Trenton and Gabriel stepped out into the cold night. LED spotlights blazed from APC turrets and prefabricated towers, illuminating pinched and terrified faces too tired to hope. They were escorted into line by the guardsman and told to wait along with the human cargo of three other vehicles. Trenton recognized one of the families; the Tyson's from Baton Rouge, the bunch in the old school bus. They had been the first to welcome them into the caravan at Prescott. The dad, Sam, was a college lecturer and had been a conscientious objector to The War. The mom, Ellen, was a pretty high-school prom queen type with an unflinchingly maternal disposition. They had two kids with them, one girl of about sixteen, Lacey, pretty in an All-



American apple-pie kind of way, and a boy of about thirteen, his young face wary and guarded behind loose locks of girlish honey coloured hair. Their eldest boy had been caught alone in town trying to buy food, had been beaten senseless by the local pool-hall thugs, tied by a length of cable to the back of a pick-up and dragged the six miles back to the column's camping place on the edge of Lake Havasu City. There wasn't much left to recognize by the time they cut him loose, nothing but a silver belt buckle that he had been given by his Pa for winning a scholarship to MIT that fall. After the murder Sam and Ellen began to shrink, hiding in their bus with their daughter, but their youngest boy, Chadwick, seemed fascinated by Trenton and silently accompanied him on his errands and scouting missions whenever he was permitted, watching him constantly and trying to emulate his PJ swagger.

'You two!' yelled a Guard officer. He beckoned them over. Gabriel and Trenton shuffled past the huddled Tyson Family. Trenton looked away as Chadwick tried to make eye contact with him. 'Booth three,' grunted the Guardsman. He rubbed his tired eyes before referring to his clipboard. 'Have all your paperwork to hand. If you wear contact lenses or have had any corrective or transplant surgeries to any part of your eye then have all your documentation relating to it available for the case clerk.'

'Why?' whispered Trenton.

'Don't worry,' replied Gabriel.

They made their way to a canvas booth with a hastily stencilled '3' on the side, lit from above by the glare of spotlights. Inside was a trestle table laden with carefully ordered stacks of paperwork and a military laptop computer. A harassed looking army clerk looked up from the glowing screen and peered at them. There were no chairs.

'Passports, social security details and any medical records, please,' she said.

'I have my Federal ID,' said Gabriel smoothly. He presented her with his card. She took it and slipped it into the appropriate port in her computer.

'You?' she growled at Trenton.

'I don't have anything,' he said. 'I come from Santa Fe; we didn't have a chance to pick stuff up on the way out.'

The clerk peered at him suspiciously. 'You don't have a south-west accent, sir,' she said.

'I was at college in DC,' he replied. My folks moved to Santa Fe when I was sixteen. They're still there.' The soldier shifted uncomfortably. 'I've got my girlfriend's stuff here,' said Trenton. He offered Marie's bouquet of ID cards.

'Corporal,' interjected Gabriel, 'you can see by my documents that I've been both a serving soldier and an employee of the federal government. I'm a medical doctor and a fully qualified neurochemist; I have the independent means to support us all while my companions search for work. We will not be a burden on the state of California.'

The clerk peered up at him. 'There's no such place as "the State of California" now, sir,' she said frostily. 'You're on the border of Free California. Stand still while I take your retina scan.' She stood and withdrew a small camera from her fatigue jacket.

'Is that really necessary?' asked Gabriel. 'Surely my ID speaks for me?'

'It needs verification, sir,' replied the clerk. 'And we don't have anything for your young friend.' She pointed her camera at their faces, took a photograph and then returned her attention to the computer. 'You've got a little ocular degeneration there, Doctor Mendoza,' she said. 'You should have that looked at. I'll have the young lady's cards now, please.' Trenton handed them over. They were inserted into the computer. 'Why isn't Miss Dubois de Lyon present with you?'

'She caught a dose in Santa Fe,' mumbled Trenton sullenly. 'She's in the car.'

The clerk nodded. 'Miss Dubois de Lyon's documents check out, she has, by our records, a substantial trust fund held offshore for her and no criminal record; this adds up to a very good case for admittance. Unfortunately she'd need to walk over the border on her own, because, Mister Mallory, it seems that you have quite a colourful past; no mention of college, prison yes, a wanted sheet yes, no education, but no shortage of colour. Unfortunately, I'm afraid it's not the kind of colour California needs at this time. You're not permitted entry. You may remain in Twentynine Palms and reapply, but my advice is that you head south fast before the Union catches up with you and hangs you.'

Trenton felt very sick.

'So, the outcome of my application is?' blurted Gabriel.

'We'll let you know doctor,' replied the clerk coolly. 'Please return to your vehicle.'

Gabriel's face hardened. 'Let me know?' he hissed. 'And how long will the vetting process take, young lady?'

'We'll let you know,' repeated the clerk.

'This is a travesty!' barked Gabriel. 'The skills I'm offering California are unique! Have you actually *looked* at my documentation?'

'Yes doctor, I have,' said the guardswoman, 'and we're choosing not to admit you across our borders at this time, pending review. The Federal Government has seized your accounts and put you on a wanted list for treason, so frankly we need to see if you're the kind of man we *want* loose in our fair *nation*.' She looked Gabriel straight in the eye. 'If you don't like our decision may I recommend Mexico? If you want to give them a try then just turn left and keep going until you reach the border, you could get your young friend here to drive. They might take you both, but there's no guarantee; they're very sensitive regarding immigration control these days, I think they're kinda enjoying the reversal of fortunes. If begging to the Federales doesn't sound like much fun then you are welcome to remain in Twentynine Palms pending your allocated appeal, which will be in...' she checked her computer '...March.'

'That's nine months!' yelled Gabriel. 'This is outrageous!'

'Guard!' barked the clerk. 'See these gentlemen back to their vehicle. Allocate them to Zone C if they intend to stay.'

'Way to go, Gabriel,' muttered Trenton darkly as he shuffled outside the booth. 'So much for all your bullshit: The only one who can get a permit is Marie, and she's a permanent resident of Comaville.'

'Well, you also failed to mention your outstanding criminal record,' sneered Gabriel. 'That has hampered our cause somewhat. What did you do? Rob old ladies? Sell drugs to minors?'

Trenton turned on Gabriel and grabbed him by his coat lapels. 'This is your fuck-up, Gabe,' he hissed. 'Don't try and shift the blame to me. You knew what you were getting into when you hooked up with us, so shut the fuck up, work your smartass college boy magic, and get me and my girl into California!'

'Hey! Cut that out!' yelled a beefy guardsman. He marched over and dragged them apart. 'Get your asses back to your vehicle or you'll go in the stockade!'

'Do as you promised!' said Trenton, jabbing a finger at Gabriel.

'I'll get us in,' said the doctor. He straightened his coat, turned imperiously on his heel, and marched back to the car.

They weren't alone in the hinterland: The Tyson's weren't welcome in California either. Sam's politics made him undesirable to a nation on a war footing; they didn't need liberal English Lit tutors any more than they needed patricidal AWOL ex-cons. The two families settled in their vehicles behind the wire in Zone C of the Twentynine Palms Processing and Relocation centre and tried to make the best of it. When Marie came round it was met with celebration, as if the first grandchild had arrived to their peculiar clan. She was bewildered by it all, and they soon discovered she would remain so indefinitely.

Gabriel was excited by Marie's awakening. He spent the following days attempting to encourage her into speech, but when it became clear she had been badly damaged by whatever chemical had been ravaging her brain he withdrew into a taciturn sulk, only showing interest when someone coaxed a little more personality out of her. Trenton didn't have time to deal with him and his counterproductive moodiness; he had water to collect, shelters to maintain and rations to distribute from the back of the Tyson family's peculiar adult scaled pedal tricycle, a monstrous tubular steel beast covered in dusty Mardi Gras beads and little solar-powered blinking lights that had been in the family for generations. Every day involved a ride out to Zone F on the creaking beast to see the Well Boys and collect their water ration. Ellen and Lacey never did the run. It was collectively agreed by all the families left behind from the column that the girls should stay to their own Zone where they were well known. Instead

Sam, the reluctant Gabriel, and Trenton each took their turn riding the hard-packed dust tracks through the growing shanty town, always accompanied by young Chadwick trotting silently alongside. Some days Trenton would leave early and follow the circular perimeter to the western gate, a simple checkpoint manned by Guards next to the jeep pool. He would sit on the cracked vinyl saddle of the trike and stare at the dusty road beyond the wire and guns, watching as Guardsmen dragged in 'fugees that had tried to cross the border under cover of darkness. He silently studied the positioning of the towers and searchlights, wondering if he would make it if he was alone.

'There were boats!' exclaimed Marie. 'I had a red row boat when I was little!'

'Well done, baby,' said Trenton. He smiled up at her. 'See, you can remember. What else?'

Marie frowned. She shook her head. 'I miss my folks,' she said. 'I want to go home. I want to see the house.' Her gaze took on a curious intensity. She stared at Trenton. 'I want to go home,' she with a very adult focus. 'Trenton, we should go home, you and me, now.'

'We're going to California, honey,' said Trenton. 'Don't you remember? That's why we're here. When you're well enough we're going to cross the border.'

The door to the bus banged open. Chadwick clambered in over woven mats and abandoned boots and hastily closed it again. 'The wind's bad today,' he said, pulling his goggles up and wiping his mouth on his stained tee-shirt. He sat waiting expectantly, staring at them. His left eye was bruised and swollen.

'Hey Chad,' said Marie, her voice becoming slurred and childish again. 'I remembered boats today! How're you?'

'Pretty good,' replied Chad with a shrug. 'Are we going to get water, T? If you're busy or have things you need to do then I could take the trike on my own. I'd be quick.'

Trenton shook his head and grinned. 'Your dad would break his vow of pacifism and strangle me if I let you go on your own,' he said, tugging his boots on. 'Let me get my scarf and goggles and then we'll head off.'

'Okay,' replied Chad with a nonchalant shrug. 'Cool about the boats.' Marie grinned happily.

'Let's go,' said Trenton. 'Keep the door closed, honey. Don't let the dust in.'

Trenton and Chad stepped out into the billowing clouds, bandannas tied around their faces and held in place by their goggles. 'So, Chad,' Trent said, crouching down by the big rear wheel of the bus. 'Do you wanna tell me why we've been light on water the last two days and you're nursing a black eye?'

Chad shuffled uncomfortably. 'Dad lost our ration card.'

Trent tried to see the boy's eyes through his goggles. 'Did he really?' asked Trenton. 'Chad? Did he really?'

'No!' Chad blurted angrily. 'They took it from him! They said that they'd hurt us if he didn't hand it over!'

'Is that how you got that eye?' asked Trenton.

They pushed him and called him a bitch, and *he just let them!* I tried to stop them but there were too many they were just too big. My dad is a *pussy!*

Trenton Stood. 'Hey!' he said. 'Don't speak about your old man that way. It takes a lot more guts than you think to not fight back when that's all you wanna do. He did what he thought he had to so's to protect you.'

'You wouldn't have backed down,' said the boy sullenly.

*True*, thought Trent. 'We'll go get those cards back. I'll bet I know who took them. But you,' he pointed at Chad, 'stay back and don't get involved. Understand?'

Trent walked around to the car, checked that no-one was watching, and slid his hand into the wheel arch to withdraw an oiled rag containing his hidden .38. He checked the cylinder, slid the gun into the back of his jeans and then rejoined Chad. 'Shall we?' he said.

Trent mounted the tricycle and pushed off. Chad ran alongside for a while then jumped up onto the wide shelf over the rear axle. Trent pushed on through the impenetrable wall of windblown talcum powder, lumbering up to a junction in the curved track and turning left. He could see the tower of the Guard checkpoint ahead and made for it. The soldiers, antlike in

their image intensifying goggles and respirators, were bored and bedraggled by the relentless wind. They scanned the identity barcodes stained on the inside of Trent and Chad's wrists and let them move on. A half hour of slow pedalling found them in Zone F near Guard Central, a circular prefabricated military fortification which the rest of the camp radiated out from. Trenton turned right and into the Well Boy's street.

The Guard had handed over the water distribution job to the most pious and organized neighbourhood who put their hand up. Now 'resource centralization' meant that the outer Zones had to walk or bicycle in and collect their daily rations by hand. Trenton hated the occupants of Well Street to a man; they had taken over the water so that they could hold everyone else to ransom, not through any sense of civic responsibility. Up until now it had been a pain in the ass to lug gallons of aqua back on the trike, but now the Well Boys were getting greedy, stealing ration cards and hurting people, and that had to stop. Trent knew that if anyone bothered complaining to their local Guard liaison officer then they would be reminded that if the camp infrastructure didn't adequately represent their requirements then they could leave and hit the road any time. They would also be reminded that if they did they would forfeit their place in the reapplication process and any commendations they had earned from the Guard while at Twentynine Palms: Their best hope was to stay put and follow the process and all would work out, even if they started dying of thirst. But Trenton didn't have hope, he had Marie, and when she was well enough and could answer the Guard's questions then they would stroll into LA and pick up her trust fund, and fuck that untrustworthy shit Gabriel Mendoza. In the meantime he wanted his god-damned water.

Trenton and Chad stopped thirty feet back from Father Geronimo's gate. The fake priest, their nominated distributor, had his own little alley made from abandoned cars and tarpaulins which he manned with goons in Catholic black. Other than a small late morning crowd looking for their ration from his truck and his guards on the gate the alley was quiet: Everyone else was smart and hiding from the dust. The wind picked up. There was a brief shout of annoyance as a tarpaulin came loose and flapped over the camp like an abandoned flag.

Trent turned to Chad. 'If things turn ugly then hang back and keep an eye out, okay?' he said. He made sure he could reach the gun. The Well Boys were in for a big fucking surprise today.

'T?' said Chad nervously.

'It's gonna be okay, little soldier,' said Trent. 'Just do like I ask. The Well Boys are gonna give us what they owe us.'

'It wasn't the Well Boys who took dad's card,'

Trenton frowned. 'Who the fuck was it then?' he asked urgently.

'Well hello again, little guy,' said a gruff muffled voice. Trent turned in the saddle. A heavysset goon with a face wrapped in scarves peered down at him, his meaty hands resting in the pouch of his greasy dungarees. 'This must be your older brother. It's real kind of you to introduce him to us.'

Trent scanned around. Two men and a woman, all wrapped up against the wind, stood in a loose semicircle behind him. The woman stepped forward, reached out and took the handlebars of the trike in a gloved hand.

'What brings you to our neighbourhood, slim?' she asked.

'Here for our water,' said Trenton. 'From Zone C.'

'Show me your ration card,' said the woman. She wore a black jumpsuit with the sleeves hacked off at the shoulder. Trenton fished the cards from his jeans and held them up. She lifted her goggles to study them, leaning in and blinking against the dust. 'Yep,' she said. 'Zone C all right. I think we'll be having that card right now, it's that or you and your little brother are going to hurting all the way home and we'll *still* have your cards.'

'Nah,' said Trent. 'Fuck you.' He twisted his hand that held the cards and thrust the thumb brutally into her right eye. She staggered back, howling and clutching her face. Trent leaped from the trike saddle as the two goons came at him, fists balled.

'You better back the fuck up,' snarled the first bully. He pulled down his bandanna to show a tanned face nicked by scars.



'I came for my water,' said Trenton. 'And I want the cards you stole from the boy.' He reached his right hand behind his back to draw his pistol, but too slow: The first bruiser had already lined him up and sent a haymaker toward his chin. Trent sprang back out of reach of the punch and hooped the guy in the balls as hard as he could. The goon bent double with a grunt. Trent kicked him under the chin. Blood burst from the thug's mouth as teeth shattered.

'Trent!' yelled Chad. The second bruiser cannoned a huge punch into Trenton's jaw, spinning him and knocking him reeling. He regained his wits just in time to be grabbed by the throat.

'You're gonna regret that,' snarled the thug, and squeezed.

Trent coughed and beat at the arm, the gun forgotten, but the goon was just too strong. Suddenly, Chad was at his back. There was a hiss, a sudden flash and the bruiser's grip was broken. He stumbled back, clutching at his thick wrist. Blood pumped from between his fingers. Chad stood holding Trenton's bayonet in his trembling hand. 'I watched where you stashed it,' he said.

'It's all yours from now on,' said Trenton, choking.

The thug bellowed and lunged for Chad with his good arm. The boy whipped sideways, rammed the sharp blade up through his attacker's biceps and pulled it out before he had time to finish making his grab. Scarlet blood erupted from the wound. The goon groaned and dropped to his knees, unable to use his ruined right hand to staunch the wound in his left arm.

'You don't ever get to hit me gain,' hissed Chad. The thug turned his head and growled at him. The boy took a step back, lined up and sent a crisp kick into his tormentor's face, shattering the nose.

'That was like fucking lightning, man,' said Trenton, awed.

'I've been practicing,' replied the Chad cockily.

A shout went up from Father Geronimo's gate guards. 'Go!' shouted Trenton. Chad sheathed the big knife and sprinted off between two trucks. Trenton made for a gap between some army surplus tents. He could hear further shouting from across the Zone, followed by the sound of engines starting. He burst out onto a narrow track and started running under the

awnings of tents, the wind whipping his long hair into his face. He heard further shouts and the bark of orders behind him. He paused to peer back through the flying dust to see a Californian Guard APC lumber along the cross street to his. He cursed his luck; it was only a brawl, it hardly justified an armoured car. He had plenty of explaining to do to Sam and Gabriel already without bringing an armoured division down on Zone C looking for him.

Then he heard the distant rattle of gunfire near the perimeter, followed by the thrum of rotors. Rockets erupted skyward from Guard Central.

'Fugees started pouring out of their tents and milling about in the street, yelling out questions to their neighbours. Trenton turned and sprinted for his Zone. A dull thud sounded in the distance and a plume of black smoke erupted above the camp's eastern perimeter. Panic spread like a Californian brush fire. People started stripping canvas from their vehicles and crying out for missing family members. More explosions sounded. A helicopter came in fast and low over the camp and launched a terrible salvo of missiles at Guard Central. The flimsy fortification vanished in a sun-bright inferno. Trenton watched the chopper turn aside from the blast and saw the stars-and-bars emblazoned on its tail.

The Union had come.

Californian Guardsmen started shouldering anti-aircraft rocket launchers and running toward the perimeter. Trenton ploughed through the hysterical crowds and collapsing encampments, making his way home through the chaos: Marie, he had to reach Marie. He sprinted panting through the deserted checkpoint to Zone C and crashed into Sam, knocking him to the ground. 'Where's Chad?' he bellowed. The sound of gunfire was closer. 'Where's my son?'

'We got split up!' said Trent.

Sam struggled to his feet, his shaggy brown hair dancing in the hot wind. 'Chadwick!' he bellowed. 'Chad!'

'Sam!' yelled Trent. 'Where's Marie? Is she safe?'

Sam turned to face him, his bright blue eyes fierce. 'I trusted my boy with you!' he screamed. 'What have you done with him?'

There was a sudden screech of tearing metal and the sand-smeared silhouette of the distant checkpoint tower crumpled. There was a sound like the beating of a giant muted drum. The two men turned to stare in horrified astonishment as a vaguely anthropoid shape smashed its way through the remains of the checkpoint, its huge hooves thundering as they met with compacted dust of the road. A monstrous suit of bulky armour, twice the height of a man, painted in desert camouflage and bristling with a plethora of weapons, surveyed the ramshackle street. It rotated clumsily at the waist and lowered its guns as it took in the scattering of unarmed civilians watching its arrival.

'You have been liberated by the United States Army,' it boomed from speakers set into its torso. 'Remain in your homes and prepare for-'

The powered armour pilot never had the chance to conclude his hearts-and-minds monologue. A light anti-tank rocket slammed into his shoulder plate from between two cars to his left, rocking the suit. Trenton and Sam cringed and then ran along with the crowd as the armour turned and opened fire with four of its machine guns, strafing the area the rocket was launched from, chewing vehicles and tents to shreds with hundreds of rounds of ammunition.

'I have to find Chad!' yelled Sam.

Trenton wrestled him behind a truck and pinned him. 'You can't!' he said. 'He's going to be coming to find you, so you gotta stay with the bus! Stay with the bus, man!'

'I need to find my boy!'

'Where's Ellen and Lacey?' yelled Trenton. 'What about your wife?'

'I sent them with Gabriel! They're running for the mountains!'

'Then we need to follow them!'

'No!' barked Sam. He struggled desperately with Trenton. 'I won't lose my son again! You don't understand; you've never lost anything! If you had you wouldn't try and stop me!'

Trenton let his desperate grip on Sam's arms slip. Sam crawled away and turned to look at Trent: Tears of desperation drew tracks in the white dust on his face. 'Go on, man,' said Trent wearily. 'Do what you must.'

Sam struggled to his feet and lumbered away toward the metal behemoth. Trenton crawled under the rear wheel arch of the truck and watched him run into the dust storm, calling out his son's name. Trenton rose to a crouch and ran in the opposite direction to the roaring gunfire, narrowly avoiding a car that sped out of the storm. In the distance he could see the old school bus. The canvas had been hastily stripped from it. He ran across the street, tripping over an abandoned bag, and wrenched open the door. 'Marie!' he croaked. 'Marie!'

The bus was empty.

An explosion rocked the ground. The powered armour suit was stamping its way clumsily through the blackened wrecks of cars it had been disintegrating with cannon fire. Another rocket hit it. Trenton leaped out of the bus and ran into the street. Their car was missing, its canvas cover flapping down the empty street like a wounded bird. Marie was gone.

*Home* she had said. *Let's go home.* She had gone. She had left him. The cost was finally higher than the payoff.

Trenton turned in a slow circle, suddenly as desolate as the hellish scene surrounding him. The whole camp was burning. Pillars of oily smoke drifted with the roiling clouds of tan dust. The throbbing of rotor blades competed with the constant crackle of small arms and the growl of powerful engines. He walked calmly back to the bus, threw open the door and started the engine. The bus rumbled into life. He checked the fuel gauge and kissed his mother's rosary; there was enough to get him across the mountains and into Free Cali, presuming he got out of the camp alive. He put the big vehicle into gear and gritted his teeth. A small shape flung itself into the cab with him. Trenton started and snatched out his gun.

Chad stared up at him. 'Where's my Dad?' he asked. 'Where's Mom?'

Trenton shook his head. 'I saw your pa. He was running, running toward the fighting...'

Chad stared at him in horror. 'We can't go!' he said. 'We've got to find them!'

'Look, dude,' said Trenton, attempting to keep his voice even. 'Your ma and sister made it out with Gabriel. I waited for you and your pa, but, Chad, little dude, *he didn't make it.* I saw it. They killed him.' Even as he told the lie it choked him.

'Where's Marie?' asked Chad.

'I don't know, Chad,' said Trent, his voice cracking. 'She's gone, man. She's gone on without us.'

Chad's face crumbled. He began to sob piteously. Trenton grabbed him by the shoulder and pushed him into the bus. He threw the vehicle into gear and powered away, following the main circular track toward the western perimeter. There was almost no visibility and he had to constantly swerve fleeing refugees and burning vehicles as he slalomed along the pitted dirt roads. Bullets punched out the glass of the windows. A fleeing man attempted to jump on board through the open door but fell away and behind. To his left Trenton saw armed men kicking their way through the ruins of people's homes, rifles raised. He couldn't tell if they were Union or Guard, and honestly didn't care. Suddenly a rocket screeched across the front of the bus and exploded to the right, destroying a stationary truck. Terrified, Trenton threw the bus into a sharp left and floored it, aiming for the now-deserted western perimeter checkpoint onto the mountain road. He swerved a burning jeep, burst through the flimsy barricades with a screech of protesting tyres and accelerated away westward to freedom, while behind him the town of Twentynine Palms fell to the Army of the United States of America.

Chad picked his way down the length of the bus toward the rear. Trent swung the bus across the road, overtaking vehicles struggling out of town. He clipped one heavily laden truck, knocking it onto the central reservation. People were fleeing on foot alongside the road, waving at him, imploring him to stop, but he just stared ahead at the mountains swelling in the distance.

'Did we make it?' asked Chad.

'We made it, little soldier,' said Trenton grimly, 'just you and me.'

Chad stumbled back to the cab and draped Trenton's leather jacket around his shoulders, then found the revolver and cradled it in his young hands like a talisman against fear.

## 07. Rain Dogs

Burning hair and seared pork, that's what he could smell over the acidic reek of wet garbage. He tried to lift a hand to inspect the cauterized welt on his scalp, but his left arm wouldn't do more than twitch. He cursed desperately and then lay still amongst the rotting refuse and twist tie 2-ply that cluttered the alley, listening to the percussive sizzle of fat raindrops on wet concrete.

He dragged himself painfully through the drift of filth and found a wall, jammed his empty revolver in his jeans and hauled himself upright inch by inch with his good hand. The leather of his jacket disintegrated across the shoulder where the laser had splashed him. A laser, for crying out loud! What kind of geek carries a fucking laser? He was lucky it was raining so hard and the stupid bastard had expended most of the capacitor trying to cook his car or he might have been missing more than skin and hair right now.

Trenton Behan Mallory turned his bruised face skyward, peering up through the glistening aluminium of the fire escape at the sodium yellow sky above and listening hard for his pursuers. Feet thumped on concrete in the distance as they hunted for him through the hinterland of rusting chainlink and abandoned cars that ringed the industrial park like a squalid crown. He turned clumsily to watch their approach, a pack of jackals in sportswear clutching guns, picking their way cautiously now that they had located their quarry again. A pistol cracked and the wall nearby exploded. Trenton lurched upright and tried to run but the stinking garbage entangled him and he fell to his knees, hissing in pain. He dragged the revolver from his pants, reversed it like a club and struggled to his feet.

'Okay, you fuckers,' he croaked, 'who's first?'

His pursuers chuckled nastily. One slid his nylon hood from his bald head and swaggered forward, pistol dangling loosely in his right hand. 'Time for you to go to sleep, *Mistah C*,' he sneered. 'Junior Severe sends you a little present courtesy of Mister Forty-Five.'

'Could we get this over with, please?' said David Tse prissily, blinking rainwater out of his eyes. 'Give me that!' he grabbed the laser from a bedraggled gangbanger. 'How the hell does this

thing work?' he muttered, and squeezed the trigger. There was a gout of steam as the beam cut through both the rain and the ear of the thug menacing Trenton Mallory. The ganger screeched in pain and dropped to his knees, clutching at the cauterized knob of flesh cooking on the side of his head. Trenton lurched forward, kicked the goon in the face and scooped up the fallen pistol.

'Come on!' He bellowed. 'Come on!'

'You dead, motherfucker!' snarled one of the pack. He strode forward, his pistol cracking. Trenton returned fire. Muzzle flashes and smoke filled the alley. Goons dived for cover. The last of Trenton's bullet's found its mark, punching into the advancing ganger's guts and dropping him mewling to the ground. He turned the pistol on Tse and snatched at the trigger, but instead of the satisfying retort of a gunshot there was a dry click.

'Shit,' he muttered. 'Unfair.' He dropped the gun. 'What the fuck do you want?' he choked. 'What ever it is I can give it to you. This doesn't have to be nasty.'

Tse smiled. 'That is indeed true, Mister Mallory, though not perhaps how you would first imagine.' He lifted the laser and pulled the trigger again. The beam splashed across Trenton's eyes and he fell screaming and thrashing to the ground.

Shit,' muttered the chemist. 'That won't please Gabriel.' He pulled out his compact chrome cell to text his boss about the unfortunate development. There was no time to find a compatible donor, they'd just have to transplant his eyes over and disguise the fact. The little pistol they had selected for Gabriel's suicide just wouldn't do. Something a little more indiscriminate would work: A shotgun perhaps? They tended towards leaving a mess.

'Can someone please shut him up?' he said, looking up from his cell. 'Oh, never mind. Get stripping him.' Tse took a small revolver from his rain slicked jacket and plodded over to the still thrashing Trenton. He leaned over him. 'No hard feelings, Trent,' he said, 'it's just business. Gabriel wants to borrow your life for a while, and there's not enough room for two in there.'

Trenton curled up in the wet and the muck and reached inside his jacket with trembling fingers. 'What have you got there?' Tse asked, kneeling beside him and prising open his hand to find a scratched and dented USMC lighter. He chuckled. 'Oh, you won't need that,' he said and

pocketed it. 'Strip him out of that jacket,' he said to the parade of goons. 'We'll need it. Those boots too. Take anything that's intrinsically him and bag it.'

They descended on Trenton, dragging at his clothes like hyenas tearing at a carcass, leaving him ragged and naked, burned and blinded. He mewled and gripped the tiny ivory rosary about his neck. 'That too,' said Tse.

One of his hired guns shook his head. 'Can't deny him that, man,' he said. 'Homie's gotta have his Jesus at the end.'

'Fine, fine,' said Tse testily. 'Get out of the way.' He knelt over Trenton's exposed back and unpacked a hypodermic. 'Time to go to sleep, buddy,' he said, checking the charge. 'If it's any consolation you don't really die today, you *transform*. Got any last words for posterity?'

'*Becky*,' whispered Trenton.

'Okay,' said Tse, shrugging, 'a kinda disappointing epitaph for such a loquacious guy, but hey; it's your tombstone. I'll see you later kid.'

The needle rammed home, and Trenton's pain was gone forever in a single determinate sting of pain.