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Stonefingers

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Stonefingers

By

Chris Prince

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Professional Writing in the Department

Of English

In the College of Humanities and Social Sciences of Kennesaw State University

Kennesaw, Georgia

May, 2010

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

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

Chris Prince

Has been approved by the committee
for the capstone requirement for

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

At the (month and year) graduation

April, 2010

Capstone committee:

Greg Johnson

Member

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Member

Stonefingers

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An Introduction

When searching for content, every writer has been encouraged at some point, for better or worse, to “*Write what you know.*” Of course, it’s a bit dismissive and misleading, and often results in relatively weak fictional versions of reality, but this was the original nudge that, after almost a decade, led to this novel.

In its original conception, it was a story about being locked up from within. The idea of an artist with considerable talent but without the capabilities to express that talent seemed familiar enough to me as an undergraduate in Florida State University’s Creative Writing program. An unpublished short story, “*Equinox*,” focused on a young jazz saxophone player who, after some emotional travesties yet unnamed, could not play more than a few notes on his horn without suffering severe pain similar to arthritis in his hands. Though it was not as well received in workshops as some of my other earlier works, it was that story that stuck with me as I continued through young adulthood, still never putting myself to the grind and producing the work that I felt capable of doing. When I enrolled in the MAPW program at KSU, a full eight years after my graduation from FSU, still unpublished and determined to finally begin and see a project through, it was the story of that locked-up artist that seemed more than appropriate.

During those years I spent away from writing, I became a High School English teacher and accumulated a handful of adventures and experiences for inspiration. Naturally, *what I knew* came back to influence me as I started the early developments and changes for the novel. No longer was the character a jazz musician, but a former Rock'n'Roll guitar prodigy. No longer was the story set around a college town and a sleepy bar, but a rough and tumble public school in south Atlanta. Expanding on the theme of creative power and productivity, and the forces that can hinder it, my characters became teachers in a school that expected very few results. Perhaps the best decision that I made through the earlier stages, and one that I would have to almost struggle to maintain and return to, was distancing the musician so that he would not be the central character of the narrative. I instead modeled the first chapters drafted after the opening of *The Great Gatsby*, making a much more timid and common character narrate in a limited first-person point of view.

Through my first KSU workshop with Tony Grooms, I found an acceptance for this character and the distance that was created with the mysterious musician. By undertaking Professor Grooms' Intensive Writing Project, I was able to produce nearly one hundred pages in a semester, the most prolific semester of my life up to that point. Focusing on his life both in and out of his day job, the narrator, George, was becoming tangible, sympathetic, and somewhat intriguing, but I was stuck in a bit of a redundant cycle of cloaking the musician, Eddie, in too much mystery. The next developments in my writing process for the MAPW proved to both open doors to new ideas and convolute the narrative of the story something fierce.

Getting to a point in the novel that would finally reveal Eddie's past, through Dr. Greg Johnson's Advanced Fiction Workshop, I decided to experiment with the point of view and give the narration to his character. It felt good to get out of the original voice of the story and

experiment with the flair and style of an arguably more interesting character. Again, the response of my classmates in workshops was very positive. I had tapped into a voice that was both original and close enough to the heart to feel honest and real. It was so much fun to play around with this new voice that I wanted to keep it in. I concluded that the best thing for me to keep moving on this story was to keep both voices, perhaps even add a few more, and take a turn into a multiple-narrative novel.

This became the basis for a Directed Study with Professor Grooms on Multi-Linear Narrative in Long Fiction. I added scenes from Eddie's past, including some bizarre mystic characters and California excursions. I tried to take the reader to exotic places, still exploring the concept of finding that outlet for creativity that can elude even the best of us. I developed the love interests within minor characters, incorporating our search for love with that of purpose. Some of these characters also received an occasional voice as the narrative now resembled more of an *As I Lay Dying*, than a *Gatsby*. While the experimentation did me well as an artist and familiarized me as the writer with the nature of my characters, as I have said, it did not do well for the overall effect of the story.

In Professor Grooms' Novel Workshop, I came to face this reality head on. Again, all of the feedback I had received through workshops in the MAPW program had been extremely positive. The response to my now-collected, multiple-narrative first fifty pages was a wake-up call. In creating a Multi-Linear Narrative, I wanted to capture the complexities of life and explore the interconnectivity of all things. Though I feel on a rough level this was accomplished, it simply did not make for a strong story. Like some of my characters, I had to bring things back to the beginning to make them work again. The responses from those in my workshop and the suggestions from my professors helped me sharpen the narrative by identifying which characters

were the most significant and which story lines the most pertinent; thus my goal for my Capstone Project was clear. I needed to take the two-hundred-page spectacle of a first draft and fine tune it into a direct and simplified one hundred pages of clear narrative from the novel's original narrator, George.

Dr. Johnson and Professor Grooms helped me through this arduous process of revisions by reminding me that this is the way that it is done. Anyone's first draft will be a mess simply because of its nature as a first draft. Composing a novel is both a process of exploring all the routes that characters and plot can take, venturing down each path as far as it can take you, and then going back to the start and finding the best road to get you and your reader where the story really exists.

Looking over these pages of my revised draft, which I submit here, I can see the strength that this process lends to any work. I have learned that it is essential for any author to fully understand his characters, where they come from, and everything that has shaped them, but ultimately, a driving story is what is essential for a reader to engage with those characters. By limiting the back story of most characters to poignant hints, and by focusing on the interaction of the characters through a controlled narration and not over-doing exposition, I have created the beginnings of a novel that does not leave its readers wondering where they are going and how it is all supposed to fit together, but instead brings them into the lives of recognizable characters and entertaining situations with a strong sense of theme and identity.

In retrospect, this long process of experimentation with complex narrative structures and plot development, finally resulting in a strict revision into a more refined and driven story, has been more than fitting for my first attempt at writing a novel. Now that I have found the right

voice for this story, I am excited and fully motivated to see it through. Perhaps as my skills and understanding of the process continue to grow, I can revisit the concept of more complex storytelling. I have no doubts that, whether or not such methods make future final revisions, that I will continue to explore the different voices and experiences of my characters. Now that I am better prepared to reflect on my work and find the true story living within such ramblings, I feel comfortable knowing that no matter how far I follow a character down a path, I'll be able to get back to the main road and see the trip through to the destination.

This is a story of finding how any person must find a way to unlock whatever abilities lie within. It is a story of how once unlocked, those abilities, outstanding or not, can be stripped from us in the most cruel ways. It is about the strange places where we can meet others with potential, and how we can help each other along the way. Now that I have accomplished a strong start on what I set out to achieve, it is what I know.

“The road is always long, and though it often seems that the path is straight, everything comes back around to take a hand in your fate.” Eddie Parley

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Prologue

A young man stepped softly into a dark room, closing the door quietly behind him. He leaned against the furniture for both guidance and support. He flipped the light switch and winced from the sudden illumination. Keeping his gaze away from the framed concert posters, magazine clippings, and photographs adorning each wall, he swayed in place for a moment. He strode over to an acoustic guitar in the corner, picked it up gingerly, and examined it closely before sitting on a chair near the wall. The guitar's dark finished soundboard reflected the light from the windows; encircling the sound hole was a ribbon inlay of translucent pearl. The young man set the body in his lap and ran his right hand up the fret board, adorned with the same glistening pearl as the body. The strings were not fresh, but did not require much tuning. He turned it in his hands and looked at his reflection in the back of the body. He smiled at himself and set the guitar into position.

The riff started off slow and low, keeping a steady blues beat on the heavy strings. After a few measures, the young man's picking hand started tapping out a separate back beat on the body of the guitar in between notes. Two more measures and his left hand shot quickly down the neck to pick a few high note accents, and then it was back to the original beat. Now staying low on the fret board, still keeping the pattern, the fingers on his left hand walked up and down the strings. His right hand hovered, cupped over the strings, picking with precision and fluid dexterity. One more slide higher on the neck, and he hovered over a note that held with perfect

pitch for a full measure. He breathed deeply and raised his head towards the ceiling, his eyes closed. Walking back down the fret board, as he made his way back to the original riff, something happened.

The fingers on his left hand, flying and bending with ease only seconds before, stiffened, each at a different angle. The guitarist grunted and breathed heavy. With a whimper, he stared at the hand locked over the strings. His eyes squinted, and his face flushed in a grimace. The hand shook violently and struck some of the strings, releasing a fumbling, muffled screech of off notes. His face now contorted, tears streaming his cheeks; he let out a scream of frustration and pain.

He stood, holding the neck of the guitar with both hands, and swung it against the wall. As three glass frames shattered, the guitar split in a twang and crack of wire and wood. With another swing, the body lay in pieces on the floor. He held the twisted remains of the neck in his hand, lowered them to his side, and let it fall to the ground amongst the rest of the wreck.

For a time, he simply stood there letting his breathing slow while staring at what used to be the guitar he made himself, his favorite of those he still possessed. He raised his hands and looked at them, detached. Now able to flex, stretch, and roll each finger with ease, he lowered them back to his sides, shuffled his foot into the rubbish, and flipped over a larger piece of wood from the sound board. When it turned, he saw his reflection in the cracked, dark finish. He smiled again, let out a short grunt of a laugh, which turned into a throaty chuckle and then finished in a long sigh. He shook his head slowly, turned and walked out of the room, slapping the top of the door frame with both hands as he passed through.

Chapter One

Moments before George Stillgrow woke on a gray, frigid February morning, he twisted in his sheets, mumbling and grunting, breaking into a light sweat despite the temperature outside. He turned over quickly, pulling his arm out from the sheets and feebly holding it out in front of him, as if reaching for someone, before allowing it to fall lifelessly back to his side. His face contorted and he breathed heavier. “Wait!” he shouted. “Not now! Come back!” His eyes opened in a daze. He continued to breathe deeply as he put his hand up to his forehead and stared around the room.

He looked down at the old alarm clock on his bedside table. It clicked to one minute before seven, the scheduled time for the alarm to go off. He took a long drink from a dirty glass of water next to the clock and fell onto his back again. Putting a pale, thin, long arm over his forehead, he stared up at the ceiling of his room, still putting pieces together and distinguishing between reality and dream. The alarm sounded out with its metallic insistence, but he didn’t stop it immediately. Instead, he continued to stare at the ceiling, blinking and moving his lips, piecing his visions together. After a full minute of the alarm pushing its ancient voice to its limits, George’s gaze slowly came down to the numbers on the clock.

His hand slammed down on the top of the box, switching it to radio mode and unleashing a brief howl and hiss of terrible static. Finally sitting up, he was able to get two hands on the clock and silence it. From the edge of the bed, he surveyed his room. Littered with old shirts and papers, even in the dim light of the dawn, his room lingered with the staleness of procrastination.

Looking out of his second story window, he saw the gray fog of a cold morning waiting to envelop him. He thought of the day ahead of him, the promise of monotony it entailed, the chance of miserable chaos it could turn to, and reluctantly got to his feet. "Shit."

The hardwood floors were cold in the winter. Air seeped up through the base of the old house and draft was always present. He made his way down the hall, stubbing a toe on the corner of a door hinge and cursing under his breath. The water pipes moaned in protest as he turned on the hot water in the moldy shower. He yawned, stretched, scratched himself and shivered as he waited in vain for the first signs of steam to emerge.

In his closet were five of the same button down shirts, two pairs of pants, and two old sports jackets that were handed down to him from his father. He never wore anything but these items to work. Nothing that would cause attention by either being too different, or looking too good, or worse, looking terrible, would help him in any way. It was best to stay out of the range of humiliation and keep things simple. Sure, he had other clothes, some he really enjoyed wearing, some that even he thought made him look cool, but weekdays were not the time for trying anything that claimed style. He put together a distinctly unflattering, yet unassuming combination of clothes, checked himself in the mirror, and made his way downstairs.

Still sleepy, he lumbered down the stained, rickety hardwoods that creaked slightly with each step. The hand rail, loosed at the bottom, leaned with him as he attempted to maintain his balance. As he made his way through the living room, still dark in the early hours, he heard the steady, repetitive thump emanating from the stereo speakers. George's roommate Nate's turntables were still on, a record spinning incessantly while the needle attempted again and again to reach beyond the center of the spool. Nate lay passed out on the couch, slightly snoring with

one of his hands in his pants. At twenty-two, Nate was five years younger than George, and the two had never reached a connection beyond a mutual acquaintance Bobby, George's oldest friend and the owner of the house.

George stepped over a large metallic camera case, a crate of records, and a few boom stands for microphones, and reached to cut the power on the console. When he did, and silence fell into the room once again, Nate stirred, smacked his lips, and moved his hand out of his pants to wipe his face. He never fully woke to notice George.

George made his way into the kitchen and turned on the light, then a hand-me-down coffee maker. The kitchen, like the rest of the house, seemed neglected and cluttered, dishes piled in the sink, and open cereal boxes, perhaps months old, were strewn over the counters. As George filled the coffee maker with water, and fished through the sink for a decently clean mug, Bobby Stenslin came bursting around the corner; both of the young men startled each other.

"Jesus, Stillgrow!" said Bobby. He stretched towards the ceiling, pushing his hairy stomach from under his shirt. His round face turned red from the effort. He grumbled a few more incoherent curses to himself and moved past George to fill a glass of water from the faucet. His faithful rescued mutt, Argus, slipped behind George and found his place at Bobby's side. Bobby's hand immediately came down to his side to scratch the patchy grey fur of the dog's head. George stared down at the dog with contempt, the same contempt that the dog had constantly displayed ever since Bobby brought him in off of the road three years before. Argus caught the gaze, lifted his lip slightly to reveal a fang, and gave a muffled three grunts of disapproval. Bobby chugged down a glass of water, filled up the glass again, and took another big gulp.

For a moment, George wanted Bobby to ask him about the day ahead. He wanted someone to acknowledge what he had in store for him that day. He wanted some kind of acknowledgement for the thankless job that theoretically should have made others proudly congratulate him for such selfless sacrifice. Bobby lowered his glass and grunted, water leaking from the sides of his mouth. He nodded, smiled and excused himself past George and back to his room, Argus trailing close behind.

George breathed into his hands waiting for the car to warm up. The morning frost took over his windshield, and he watched the wet rings of clarity grow like clear rising suns. He was just about to shift the car into drive when there was a bang on his window. Bobby leaned over, shivering in a t-shirt, still not fully focusing on George. "Tonight," he said quickly, "you still on?" George shrugged silently. Bobby nodded with annoyance, "shooting a scene by the spot! Burning down a village! Then, to the Nickel for a show!" George nodded unenthusiastically, and Bobby grinned widely. "You're on!" he said, smacking a hand on the roof of the sedan and turning to quickly run in side. George watched Argus follow him in, then pulled away from the house.

The neighborhood, a collection of run down antiques and cheap vinyl-sided newer homes, was quiet as usual this early in the morning. Many of the lots featured rusted car parts and mangy dogs in the front yard. Abandoned mills, from a much more vibrant time, lined the streets, their empty parking lots showed weeds growing through cracking asphalt. As he turned onto the Connector in a daze, he cut the sound off and slipped into the steady stream of south-bound traffic. Observing the long trail of headlights flowing north into town, he felt a small bit of pity for those stuck in their daily grinds. It was one of his few moments of pride that he had each morning as he made his way towards the Crawfax County Alternative High School.

Passing under the traffic of planes flying into the International Airport, thinking of endless possibilities of destinations and plans those above him possessed, George took a long look at the exposed, sagging beams of the old Ford plant in the midst of demolition. They reminded him of veins hanging from a disembodied arm. The winding stretch of highway, lined with the dense forest of trees that blankets the south, led him further away from the metropolis and into the southern suburbs.

Compared to the wonder-bread 'burbs he had known as a youth, or the cultural charms offered by any renovated part of town near the city, Crawfax was always a depressing sight. Even his neighborhood, with its sense of antiquity that lent it charm, seemed as though it had an excuse for poverty. Crawfax, on the other hand, was a relatively new community, and still poor. Ever since that tiny Korean man announced that the '96 Olympic Games were going to the city of Atlanta, the muscle of gentrification used the hand of the economy to push lower income families further south, out of the way of the oncoming tourists. What was once a county of corn-fed country kids developed into a new 'urban' environment with new, crooked politicians and poorly laid plans.

George exited the highway and sighed at the familiar sights of Crawfax. The streets were lined with cheap strip malls, fast food joints, used car dealerships, and Asian massage parlors. Practically every day, there was a different old man limping his way down the median of the Parkway. That day's nomad looked especially distraught due to the cold, gray beginning. None of the strip malls, nor any of the free standing buildings, held independent businesses. Each restaurant, each grocery store, each insurance company, each home improvement warehouse, was the exact same corporate replica that could be found anywhere.

Pulling off of the main drag, he passed through an old neighborhood lined with bare-branched trees and into the parking lot of the school. The sight of the building caused him to sigh to himself. A drab, one story complex of brick and beige that once served as an elementary school, the Crawfax County Alternative High School looked almost innocent from the outside. Only a closer look at the dying shrubbery and the vaguely painted over gang tags could really bring someone to grasp what went on inside during a typical day. George gave one last silent prayer for a better than typical day before getting out his car.

After he stepped out into the brisk morning and collected his things, George became aware of another person standing in the parking lot. He expected another teacher, but turned and saw a tall, wiry, long-haired guy in a faded black tee shirt, leather jacket, silver aviator sunglasses, and tight jeans surrounding brown leather boots. At first look, the guy could have been someone there to fix the air conditioning or a young parent checking in on a delinquent child. The stranger stretched up to the sky and pumped a fist into the air, then turned and realized that he was being watched. He pulled up a hand, shot a six-shooter finger in George's direction, and headed towards the front door. George couldn't help but realize that there was something familiar about him.

George pulled his belongings up to his side and made his way towards the door, trying to place where he had seen this stranger before. The parking lot was barely filled yet; most teachers at the school showed up just before classes started, and there was still a good fifteen minutes before the busses arrived. He wondered silently who would be brave enough to make it in, or who would be the next to drop out.

The stranger was at the front desk when George entered the office. “Top of the morning to y’all,” he said with a grin. The ladies shared a quick glance at each other

“And morning to you,” said the receptionist with the decorative glasses. “And you must be Mr. . .”

“Parley. Eddie Parley, ma’am,” the stranger said with a tip of his glasses. “I’m the new guy to push the bad feelings away.” He winked and pushed his glasses back onto his face. Again, there was an exchange of looks between the women behind the counter. A key was passed to him with a printed out version of the rules and bell schedule. George fumbled with his belongings and shivered as he tried to sign in.

“You’ll be in room one-thirteen, just outside of this room and to the right.” She was holding in a laugh as she handed them over. The women behind her tittered and whispered to each other. Eddie took the papers, banged an enthusiastic fist on the counter and turned to walk out the door. As he did, he bumped directly into George, who mumbled an apology. Eddie walked off without noticing. The women behind the counter all broke into a communal giggle.

As George picked up his stuff, he thought that the laughter in the room was directed at him. “Good morning, Toylanda,” he offered to the receptionist. She composed herself and moved up to shuffle papers on the counter.

“Good morning, Mr. Stilgrow,” she said brightly.

“That one ain’t gonna make it to lunch time,” said one of the women behind her. The other one laughed out loud and shook her head while pulling worksheets from the copier.

“You know that’s right!” Toylanda said. She held in a laugh and nodded at George, throwing her eyes to the wall behind him, ensuring him that they were not discussing him. George grinned stupidly and turned to walk out the door, looking to his right as he left, trying to get another glimpse of the stranger.

George walked into his classroom: bare white walls scattered with pinned gang tags and partially aligned desks. He took a seat behind the teacher’s desk and flipped through the day’s lessons. A routine of history worksheets focusing on the events leading to the Great Depression sat stapled in a pile on the corner of the desk. He flipped through the top copy, curious if he could answer any of the questions on the crossword section. He spotted the long horizontal slot for the Stock Market Crash and placed the packet on top of the rest. Opening the desk drawer, he rummaged through a pile of papers, dry erase markers, and scantron answer sheets. Pushing aside a pack of post it notes, he found a folded piece of notebook paper. He opened it and recognized the handwriting of Ted Guzman, the previous full-time history teacher at the school.

“Attempt to manage these kids and you’re dead! They’ve been through shit you’ve never imagined before. They’ve been busted, and they survived. The results of any misbehavior are now perceived as inconsequential, weak bullshit that they can brush off on their way to failure and dependency. FUCK ‘EM!”

He folded the note up and placed it in his jacket pocket. He wished, in vain, for a moment that he would never end up like Guzman. The man had obviously hit his wall and bailed. He had focused too much on the reformation of these kids. George could understand, even relate, but he refused to let this bitter, purpose-driven side of things invade his conscience. He wandered into the hall and looked towards Eddie Parley’s room.

Down the hall, Eddie Parley was taking in the surroundings of his latest endeavor. His classroom, being that of the Behavior Management Counselor in the Crawfax County Alternative High School, was small and intimate. Featuring fewer desks than the other rooms and a table that served as his teacher's desk, the room was just what he had expected. The disheveled bookcase contained several torn dictionaries and thesauri, a copy of a ragged, old English Literature book, a dozen fresh copies of *Can't Stop You: A Teen's Guide to Self Control*, and a worn water color that was done by a fourth grader in 1987. Parley wrote his name on the white board with a dry marker, sat back in the big chair behind the table, and propped his boots up. He looked to his left, out of the open doorway, and caught the gaze of George Stilgrow standing outside his door.

The two men looked at each other for a moment before either moved or recognized the other. Ed took in George's stance and outfit; he nodded. George was wondering how good Toylanda's odds were in the reception pool, and gave a second to wonder what their wager on him was up to. Down the hall, Kayla Vaughn stood in her doorway. The Language Arts teacher, and one of the three teachers that had held fast to a position since the beginning of the school year, Kayla held her head high and proud. She was pretty, but not beautiful, and despite her shorter stature, she maintained an air of congenial royalty amongst the students and teachers alike. "Morning, Mr. Stilgrow," she said, drawing George's attention away from the new curiosity.

George blushed, as he always did, with her mention of his name. He put his hands in his pockets, dropped his head, and took a few slow steps in her direction, wondering what to say. "G'morning, Kay," he said and gave her a shy smile. "Another day in paradise, huh?" He inwardly cursed himself immediately for his cliché, but she giggled, raised her eyebrows and agreed out of generosity and recognition of effort.

“What’s this about some new dude here today?” she asked in a hush, walking closer to George, who quickly looked over his shoulder at Parley’s open door. “Toylanda and the others are trippin on something with this guy. Could hardly talk when I checked in, they was laughing so hard.” George put a finger to his mouth and pointed over his shoulder towards Parley’s open door. For a brief moment, he relished the conspired gossip with Kayla. They hadn’t held many conversations of substance since he started working at the school. Kayla’s eyes grew wide as she put a hand over her mouth and laughed a girlish squeak. She walked up to George and put a hand on his chest before leaning over his shoulder to get a peek. George looked down at her plump, light brown hand on his shirt and smiled. Suddenly, Kayla gasped.

George turned to see Parley leaning tall against the wall, one leg bent with a foot resting flat against the bricks. He held a thumb in one of his pockets and shot another six-shooter finger at George and Kayla. “Morning, miss,” he said with a smile. “I’m the new dude.” Kayla took her hand off George, gave an astonished grunt to herself and pulled together her usual, professionally composed state. She walked directly toward Parley with hand outstretched.

“Kayla Vaughn, English,” she said. “Pleasure, Mr.?”

“Parley. Edward Parley,” he said, taking her hand lightly in his and smiling directly into her eyes. “I’m watching the time bombs. They brought me in to help diffuse ‘em, or at least keep them from going boom.”

“Time bombs?” said Kayla.

“Behavior management kids,” he replied, never taking his eyes away. “I hear you folks have a handful around here.”

“Sure, but,” Kayla laughed and looked back at George, “I don’t think you’ll be lasting very long referring to them as such. The higher ups are big on keeping things friendly around here. These kids have been through some shit, you know.” Her quickness apparently impressed him. He laughed and shuffled his feet, still holding onto her hand.

“Point taken, little lady,” he said, and looked down the hall. The first of the kids started to appear. He looked back down at Kayla and smiled. “I’ll be sure to use my nice voice when around them higher ups.” He let go of her hand and looked towards George, who had been standing captivated by the scene. “You kick some ass out there today, stretch.”

“Huh?” was all that George could say.

“This is George,” Kayla started and paused. “Mr. Stilgrow, Mr. Parley. Mr. Stilgrow is our current Social Studies instructor.”

“Sure, we practically met outside,” said Parley, beaming at George and extending a wide swung hand shake. He put a firm grip on George’s hand and grinned. Again, George felt a pang of recognition that he couldn’t place. “Pleasure to meet you, Mr. Social Studies. Like I said, kick some ass.” The noise from down the hall was growing louder as more students passed through the metal detectors and the middle school students separated from the high school students. One kid was already yelling at a security guard over a lighter that was found in his pocket. Some of the middle school runts were dodging teachers, trying to get into the high school hall. It was a typical entrance procession.

“Well, damn, here they come. I’m getting back to my room before some shit starts. We better get to work,” Kayla said. “Good luck to the both of y’all.” She walked off towards her room. George stood next to Parley for a moment and looked down the hall. He tried to think of

something to say to the guy that would spark his memory. Eddie stared forward towards the kids, the only adult in the building smiling with excitement.

A voice came from behind them, “Gentlemen, let’s have a positive and effective day of instruction.” It was Dr. Rowland, the elderly principal of the school. He had passed his retirement age half a decade ago, but came back to work after a few investments had gone sour. He dressed like a cross between a pimp and a Baptist minister and always seemed detached from any situation despite his authoritative position. He strode past them both quickly, barking orders at students through a megaphone.

“Let’s go, young people! Move along to your first-period classrooms at this time!” He stopped and turned around, addressing George and Eddie. “Mr. Stilgrow, is this a visitor of yours? Should I remind you of our policies regarding personal visitations?” George and Ed looked at each other. George started to speak, but Ed beat him to it.

“Edward Parley, Dr. Rowland,” he said, extending a hand. “We met last week. You hired me for the Behavior Specialist Counselor. I’m starting today, sir.” Rowland took a step back and looked quickly at George, who looked down at his feet.

“Yes sir,” said Rowland. “Of course, Mr. Parley, I do recall our conversation. Welcome, welcome. Did you get situated in your classroom yet? Ms. Watson in the office should have secured everything for you.” Ed nodded graciously.

“You bet, sir,” he said. “I’m all ready to go. We’re going to have a productive and positive first day with these kids.” Rowland appreciated the effort, but couldn’t resist laughing a little to himself. He looked back up at the approaching students and turned to go. He looked back over his shoulder as he was walking.

“Positive and productive!” he said, raising a hand. He then turned and brought up his megaphone. “That’s right, please move forward into your first-period classrooms, ladies and gentlemen. Let’s have a positive, productive day today.” George turned to go to his room and heard Eddie laugh to himself.

“He took to that one, huh George?” George turned, smiled and shrugged. Ed laughed again. “You’re a man of many words, huh, George?” George shrugged again. “Well said. Go get ‘em, buddy.” Parley walked into his room, hitting the top of the door frame with both hands on his way in.

George made it back to his door and faced the oncoming crowd of stoned and disillusioned youth coming down the hall. A crowd of them headed straight for the two snack machines located across the hall from the main office. A mass of kids in black down-jackets hovered and shoved for position to buy the choice treats, or swipe someone else’s meal before it was claimed. It was a ritual that many of them followed daily, fighting for the first version of breakfast they could get all day. One of them started slapping a bass beat on the side of the machine, and others started with a chant of: “Hey. Hey. Hey. Hey,” as they bounced on top of each other. Someone towards the back of the pile started belting out a chant about Honey Buns.

“I. Got. That. Honey Bun! Honey Bun! Honey Bun!” The others picked up on it quickly and it continued through several repetitions, each gaining laughter and enthusiasm. Levon Turner, a tall nineteen year-old sophomore and alpha of the school, started in with a variation over the chorus of his peers.

“Not no Snickers Bar. Not no Hot Cheetos. Not no Fresh Fruit Snacks. But a Honey Bun! Honey Bun! Honey Bun!” This brought a collective wail of celebration from the group,

which ended quickly when a freshman's Honey Bun was swatted out of his hands and several students hustled for it. Dr. Rowland came booming into the crowd with his megaphone.

“To first-period students! Make your way to class! Mr. Turner! Make your way to first period! We don't want to have to suspend you today!” Levon held out his hands and shrugged innocently, then laughed with two of his friends and continued the chant in a low voice. Rowland was being approached by the freshman, who was popped in the back of the knee by one of Levon's boys and called a snitch. Rowland ignored the other boy and politely asked the freshman to move on to class. The small boy hung his head and cursed, and walked to George Stilgrow's classroom defeated.

Chapter Two

George offered an apologetic glance to the pouting freshman and asked if he was alright, not expecting a response and not getting one. The kid plopped into a seat at a desk in the front corner, covered his head with his hood, and buried his face in his arms on the desk. George nodded to himself and closed the door. Most of the students were still standing. Two boys began to slap box each other, fists raised like old boxers, taunting while bobbing and weaving.

“I'm gonna get ya nigga!” Levon, the bigger of the two, said maneuvering for an open shot.

“Fuck that, you ain't getting shit!” said the other student, a new arrival vying for acceptance amongst the alphas. In the short time George had been there, he had seen several kids go through these motions.

Levon popped the new kid on the top of the head and several students “OH!’ed” with delight. Levon laughed and put his hands up. The new kid, with a hint of rage in his face, nodded and smiled. George walked slowly towards the students and diverted their attention away from each other.

“Okay, guys,” he said in a low tone, his hands out to his sides to show he was not physically threatening anyone. “Let’s just have a seat please.” A few of the bystanders complied. Levon sat, but did not acknowledge George.

“Yes sir, Mr. Stilgrow,” the new kid said in a corny white-guy voice. “We’ll sure take a seat, buddy!” He sat animatedly stiff, bringing laughs from the others. George turned and walked to the desk, hearing mumbles about “that lame ass cracka,” behind him. He sighed and picked up the stack of worksheets left for him. He passed out a set to every kid; some were knocked to the ground immediately.

“Today,” George began to read from the instructions left for him, “you are to work in your reading groups to complete the essay. You can take turns reading the article on the front, complete the crossword of important terms, and then discuss and answer the questions on the back using complete sentences.” He put the paper down and looked up. “And don’t write on any of these, we have to keep enough copies for the entire day. So, use your own paper.” Nobody moved for any paper nor picked up the worksheets. “Any questions?” George said dryly and looked around. No one replied. “Good. Turn in your work when class is over.” He went back around his desk and picked up a copy of the assignment to look it over.

It had the reading level of a sixth-grade assignment, George decided after glancing at the large text and key words highlighted in bold, underlined. How could they give a fuck about some

poor ass people that have been long gone? All they've known is a great depression. The cycle was making him depressed; so he put down the essay, scooted up to the computer, and logged onto a free game site that a kid had shown him last week.

Forty-five minutes later, George was on his fourth game of word twist, and the students were scattered around the room in three small clumps of desks. One group of Hispanic kids, all Crazy Latins, were huddled around a cell phone, listening to music. Levon and a few of the other G.D.'s were playing spades. The three girls in class were standing near the corner bookshelf, each with a phone out and fingers rapidly texting. The freshman still hadn't lifted his head. George noticed the time and stood up.

"Alright, you guys, let's pass in those worksheets," he said. He picked up a few from the ground, pulled one out from under the freshman's hood, and received a few from each circle. No one turned in a paper with answers, but a few of the crosswords had been filled in and then covered in large tags of five- and six-point stars scattered with numbers and letters with little or no meaning to George. He stacked the papers together, putting the marked ones on the bottom of the pile. Perhaps he wouldn't have to use those again. It mattered little if he did though, and he knew it.

"Yo, Mr. Stillgrow, I can go to the bathroom?" A student stood up and pulled his coat on, walking towards the door. George moved in front of him.

"No," said George. The kid stepped back and stood erect with his hands out. "We're out of here in three minutes," George added, not moving, but avoiding direct eye-contact. Levon started beating his desk for a bass line and several kids started chanting and bringing back the honey bun song. The student turned and faced them, throwing up his hands and stacking signs.

“Six Poppin, Five Droppin!” he said with a smile. The Crazy Latin guys laughed and started throwing their own signs. This was a daily ritual, George knew by now, and nothing seriously threatening was being implied. It was just what they did when they had nothing else to talk about. George moved over to the door, to keep anyone from leaving early. He prayed for the next few minutes to hurry up and pass. As he looked out of the classroom door window, he wondered what was going on down the hall in Eddie Parley’s room. By the time the bell sounded, all the students in the class were standing and ready to blow past George as he opened the door. Stilgrow let the crowd by, and stepped out into the halls.

Most of the students coming out of the Behavior Management Counseling room blended right in with the others, not showing any mind about what they had just sat through. George did notice a few expressions that were beyond apathy, not quite astonishment, but something he rarely saw on any student’s face: curiosity.

Kayla Vaughn came across the hall and stood next to George, apparently just as curious as George had been. “Any sign of a dead body yet?” she said with a smile to George. George laughed with a shrug, looked quickly down at Kayla, and then back ahead at Eddie’s door. Ed emerged in the doorway, as cool as he had been an hour before. He leaned against the doorway and crossed his legs. George noticed he was eating the last bites of a honey bun and tried to remember watching him buy one. Ed took the last bite and crumpled up the wrapper, then walked down the hall and placed the plastic in the rarely used trashcan. He looked up at Kayla and George and raised a wave.

“They givin you any trouble yet, Mr. Parley?” Kayla said with a smile. Ed chuckled and shook his head, his long, greasy hair swaying.

“A bunch of pussy cats!” he said loudly, over the heads of several students nearby that just shot him looks. George heard a young girl ask a friend who Ed was.

“Well,” Kayla said pleasantly with a slight laugh, “you just let me and Mr. Stilgrow know if you need something.” She looked back up at George and gave a look of disbelief. “What do you think, George? Is this guy bullet proof or just plain ass crazy?” She brushed a hand on his shoulder as she turned to go back to her classroom.

“He’s something,” George said, again feeling a pang of recognition. Who the hell was this guy?

The late bell rang and a few kids were still lingering in the halls. From around the corner, Dr. Rowland and Officer Camero strode down the hall, shouting orders to clear the halls. “Four more to go,” Rowland said to George as he passed. “Keep ‘em goin. Quality instruction. Positive and Productive!” The doors closed, and the second period began

Throughout the next two periods, things went on as usual. George passed out the worksheets, sat at his desk, and calmly intervened to stop a few petty arguments. A few times, he overheard conversations from kids that had sat through one of Parley’s classes. Each intrigued him. “This dude spit some fucked up game on good and evil, right and wrong shit. He cut on students and said crazy ass shit real quick-like. One kid threw a Honey Bun at him, and dude just caught the shit without even turning around. Got some motherfucking ninja moves and shit, right?” After hearing a few, George realized that each of the stories had a common element, an underlying tone of awe and respect. Still, he dismissed all things concerning the new teacher as hyped up anxiety over a change in routine.

Twenty minutes into third period, George was sitting at his desk, leaning close to his computer in concentration, trying to solve a word puzzle in a game. The kids were scattered in small groups around the room, and most of the worksheets were scattered on the floor. It looked as though the routine had begun to reestablish itself. Then, the noises started coming from down the hall.

There was a thud and a loud collective holler that shook the walls of George's classroom. He stood up immediately to block the doorway, as most of his students were already trying to get out in order to catch the action. George made it just in time and set his body between the excited kids and the door. When he had pushed them back enough, he opened his door slightly and peered down the hall. Kayla Vaughn was across the hall doing the same. They looked at each other and shrugged in confusion. George looked down the hall and saw a flurry of arms through Parley's door window. For a moment, he felt pity for the new guy and guessed that this was the expected moment that would send Parley running for the parking lot.

Officer Camero and Dr. Rowland came running frantically down the hall, barking calls for help through their radios. Camero searched for his keys. George struggled to keep his students inside the class. Then, Parley's door flew open, and out poured Levon Turner with Eddie Parley wrapping him up from behind. Camero was knocked over by the swinging door and rolled onto the ground. In a flash, Levon was face down on the linoleum tiles, with Parley kneeling on his back. Ed had Levon's wrist pulled up from behind, and kept him immobile on the floor. With his free hand, Ed pressed down on Levon's side with seemingly little force. Levon couldn't budge, though he struggled, from the hold. Parley looked around him with a calm expression. He glanced over his shoulder, through his now tangled hair and, to George's

amazement, winked and smiled. Levon whimpered, cursed, and finally pleaded for mercy through tears.

George saw that the students from that room were no longer cheering or chanting, but silent. Eventually, even the students he was holding back stopped pushing at the door for a glimpse and simply just stood there, looking down at the fallen king of the small school of misfits. Camero got to his feet and approached them. Ed pulled back his hands immediately, releasing Levon.

“Alright, now,” Ed said calmly yet firmly, rising with his arms still out to his side, “just a little misunderstanding here.” He looked at Dr. Rowland, hardly even breathing heavily. “Sorry about the disturbance, sir. I’ll just get my kids back into class and continue with our lesson for the period. I’ll come down after this one and fill you in on the details. I see that I have planning then.” It was as if he had scripted the moment himself.

Rowland couldn’t say anything but stammered, “Alright, then.” Levon wiped his tears away as Camero lifted him up and pulled him towards the office.

“Now, officer,” said Ed when he saw Camero going for the cuffs, “there’s no need for those, I’m sure Mr. Turner will be happy to comply civilly.” Camero shot a confused look towards him and then looked at Levon, who just nodded slightly and sniffled. Ed turned back to his classroom. “Okay, kids, let’s get back to our lessons shall we?” They complied without complaint. It was as if he had turned the world upside down. George looked on from down the hall in awe. Rowland turned and spoke down the halls he tried to speak a few words and remembered his megaphone. He fumbled as he pulled it up to his mouth.

“Alright people, let’s get back into our classrooms and continue learning please! Let’s keep positive and productive!” He took another look at the now completely collected Parley. He nodded and walked quickly off to his office. Parley watched Rowland walk away then turned, spotted George staring from down the hall, shot him another six-shooter pointer finger, and walked calmly into class, slapping the top of the doorframe as he entered.

George stood for a moment before turning back into his classroom and closing the door behind him. The kids went back to their positions and began throwing around theories on this new guy and the unheard of display of teacher dominance they had all just witnessed. Parley was some undercover cop that was here to shake down the juvenile criminals, like on that T.V. show. He was some soldier gone crazy after fighting in the war. How else could he know that kung fu shit that just brought Levon down? He was a racist clan member, there to kill them all. He was an enigma that they couldn’t figure out, but one that served as a definite threat. They were terrified.

“If that motherfucker lay his hand on me,” said one kid, standing over the others, “I’ll break his ass! Fuck that shit!”

George stayed quiet, just as perplexed, facing questions of his own. Who the hell was this guy? What happened in that room before they came barreling out the door? How could he possibly be playing it all that cool? Above all, he couldn’t shake the feeling that he had seen Eddie Parley before, yet he couldn’t place where or when.

When the bell rang for lunch, George filed out of the class with the kids. He met Kayla Vaughn in the hallway, her brown eyes wide with excitement.

“Holy shit!” she said in a close whisper. “What the hell was that? I mean, I’m not all for tangling with the students, but damn! I’ve wanted to see Levon go down like that for a while now.” She giggled at her mischievous admission. George smiled back and looked down the hall for a sign of Parley. Kayla put her hands around George’s arm and pulled up next to him. It was a more intimate touch than George expected, and his blood rushed with embarrassment. “Want to go talk to him?” she asked as they headed towards the teacher’s lounge.

“Sure,” replied George, a little quieter than he would have liked. He stiffened his arm a little. Kayla, suddenly realizing her hold on his arm, slowly released her grip and cleared her throat. They passed by Officer Camero, who was at Parley’s door with some paperwork. Parley was standing in front of the officer in all manner of casual politeness. George was half expecting Camero to pull out the cuffs and escort Parley off the premises. Instead, Camero suddenly let out a big belly laugh, something that neither George nor Kayla had heard from him

“I got you, man,” he said to Parley. “Some of these kids can’t stop sometimes. That was some hold that you threw on him. I’ve studied some myself, you know. That was ju-jitsu, right?”

“That’s right, officer,” said Parley. “Just did what I had to. Just make sure you don’t press any charges on the kid, okay? No need.” George and Kayla couldn’t stop to hear the rest of the conversation, but could hear as they walked away Eddie continuing his defense of Levon’s actions and the consequent ‘misunderstanding.’

In the lounge, George warmed up his microwave pasta and searched for a plastic fork on the disheveled counter top. Kayla pulled a sandwich out of the small refrigerator and peeled off the wrapping. Both of them tried to think of something to say to the other, but each remained silent, sharing awkward glances. Then, Eddie Parley opened the door and sauntered in, taking a

seat at the head of the wooden conference table and polishing a red apple.

“There’s nothing to this job,” he said casually. “Wouldn’t you agree, Ms. English?”

Kayla giggled and sat down at the other end of the table. “Certainly seem to have your way with them, Mr. Behavior Management.” She took a bite of her sandwich and smiled through chewing. “And it’s Ms. Vaughn, or Kayla, Mr. Parley.” George pulled the pasta from the microwave, took a seat at the middle of the table and un-wrapped his plastic fork.

“Of course, Kayla,” smiled Ed. “Pardon me for being so rude.” He took a big chunk out of the apple and beamed through open mouth chews.

“So, Ed,” Kayla began with a long and curious draw, “you want to fill us in on that fiasco you just caused . . . or ended.”

“Caused and ended, indeed,” said Parley. “Well, my newly met darling, I can’t rightfully kiss and tell on the whole ordeal. But if you must know the skinny of it: I was going through my introduction on the examination of anger, hostility, and conflict; Mr. Turner inadvertently provided the class with an example of such; when I verbally turned the tables on him, he decided to make an escape with sufficient flair; and I opted not to allow passage for the said exodus.” He took another bite of the apple and beamed.

“Is that standard training and procedure that you received for your special position?” said Kayla, a bit on the offensive as the righteous teacher. “You think beating down these kids is the best way to get them to channel their hostilities?”

Ed laughed and took another bite of his apple. “Not exactly procedures set forth in my training as a counselor, nor are they the most subtle methods. However, I will stand by my

actions, as they are mine, and try and assure you that I had no intentions of pulling a beat down on anybody. I simply just controlled the situation.” He kicked his feet up onto the table and nodded towards George. “So, what do you think, Mr. Social Studies?”

“George,” said Kayla before George could speak. George looked up slowly from his lunch.

“Right. Stilgrow, right?” said Ed. George nodded. “What’s your take, George? Do you find my actions inappropriate?” He twirled a hand in the air.

“Guess not,” said George, and he glanced at Kayla, then immediately back down at the table. Parley pulled his feet down and put his elbows on the table, leaning towards George.

“You guess not, huh?” He slapped the table with his free hand and took another bite of the apple. “Well, once again, I can tell you’re a man of few words, but I appreciate your support nonetheless.” George nodded at him. Parley leaned back once more. They all sat in silence for a moment. Kayla finished her sandwich and crumpled up the wrapper. She stood up and walked behind George, placing a hand on his shoulder as she passed. Ed stood up and bowed in an exaggerated move of cordial politeness. Kayla laughed and shook her head.

“Don’t go killing any of them on your first day, Mr. Parley.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” he replied while taking his seat again. “I’m gonna need to keep them around if we’re to lead any of them down the path of righteous peace and prosperity.” Kayla shut the door behind her. George stood to throw away the remnants of his food. Parley took another loud bite off the apple. “So, what’s your story?” he asked in a friendly tone.

“My story?” George had not expected the subject of conversation to change to him. He wished for a moment that Kayla had not left the room.

“Your story, George,” he said. “What’s a strapping young suburbanite like you doing in a place like this? Saving the world one kid at a time?” George shrugged and shuffled his feet nervously. “Relax, it’s not an interview, man. Just curious. You don’t strike me as one of the permanent patsies they got around here.”

George took it as a compliment and tried to relax a little, trying to mirror Parley’s cool. “Yeah, it’s okay. I’m just working as a long term. They usually are pretty desperate for teachers here, and I got partially certified a few months ago. Just scraping together some cash.” Ed nodded in thought.

“You ever get sick of the shit from the kids?” said Ed leaning fully back in the chair. He finished the last bite of apple and tossed the core ten feet and into the garbage can in the opposite corner. “Seems like it could be a drag if taken with the wrong perspective on things.”

“It’s alright,” said George, again shuffling his feet. “They don’t expect much from us here. So, if you can get through a day, you’ve basically done all you can.”

“Al-right,” said Ed in two stressed syllables. He leaned up again and placed his elbows on the table. “Be good and have mercy on those that suffer,” he said in a low, deep whisper. “Try not to patch things up. Nothing will cure this world.” Again, George felt a strong sense of recognition. However, he had as much difficulty placing it as he did fully understanding what the hell Parley was getting at.

“Nice to meet you,” George said walking towards the door.

“Hey,” said Parley brightly, standing up now, “where you from, my friend? You seem a bit familiar.” Shocked by the turn of tables and eager for another hint, George no longer went to leave.

“I grew up on the north end of the city,” he began. “I live closer to town now, off University Avenue.”

“Off University?” repeated Ed, “Yeah, I know it!” His eyes lit up and he moved in a bit closer and squinted. “You know where to score any green, my friend, George?”

George took a step back and a wave of the kids’ paranoia struck through him. He was no dealer, nor did he hold a record of any sort. He did know that he could answer Parley affirmatively and immediately shook the impulse to do so. He had a routine settled here, and until now, he had successfully kept his private and quasi-professional lives separated. Aside from brief chats with Kayla, he had avoided any substantial conversations at this place. This surprise conversation, which he was certain was inappropriate, had shaken him to the verge of panic. He tried to collect himself and play it square.

“I’m afraid not, Mr. Parley,” he said with a straight face.

“Of course,” Parley grinned again and backed off a step, “but you do know what I’m getting at though.” George said nothing. Ed reached for the door and opened it, motioning for George to go ahead on out. “Enjoy the rest of the day, Stilgrow. Be at peace and nothing will harm you.” He followed George out of the room and into the hall. George stayed ahead and did not look back. Ed began to whistle a melody. George couldn’t quite place the tune. He turned to ask about it when Dr. Rowland came out of the front office door.

“Mr. Parley,” he said briskly, “may I see you sir?”

“Most certainly, Dr. Rowland,” said Parley. George looked at Dr. Rowland to get a clue as to whether or not Parley would be canned. Rowland smiled broadly as Parley reached him. He placed a hand on Ed’s shoulder and nodded his grey head. He then noticed George looking on and waved high and proud.

“Alright there, Mr. Stilgrow,” he beamed. “Let’s continue providing excellent instruction for our young people.” George nodded as the two men disappeared into the office. When he got back to the classroom, George sat at the desk, propped his feet up and stared out the window. His head was killing him.

The remainder of the day went by in a blur, settling back into routine. By the final class, there was hardly a word about Levon, his tears, or the crazy-ass cracker that took him down. Before the ring of the final bell, as it was with every day, George already had his bag packed and on his desk. A young girl with way too many jail tattoos was flirting with a group of hormone-enthralled kids and loving every bit of the attention. They were all under the age of seventeen, and at least two of them had children already. That thought always scared the shit out of George. The girl was bragging about her twenty-year-old boyfriend and her phone rang. George didn’t have the energy left to stop her from answering it in class. Enough battles had been picked and fought already.

“What the fuck do you want, Nigga?” she said loudly. “Come pick me up in fifteen minutes, I’m almost done here.” One of the boys around her reached out and pulled at a belt loop of her jeans. She turned around, smiled and gave his hand a light slap. “Stop,” she said in two drawn out, playful syllables. “Aw, that,” she said back into the phone, “just some dumb nigga

playin around. Come get me in fifteen minutes.” She paused listening to the voice on the other end. George was transfixed on what kind of asshole would date a kid her age, and what kind of sap would want to put up with the shit that this little bitch could serve out. “What the fuck are you talking about, mother fucker?” she said, starting to wave her hand in the air. “Fuck you, nigga! Get your ass over here right now. I ain’t riding no fucking bus!” George felt a sudden wave of thanks to the fact that he was single.

The bell finally rang, the students were sent on their way to homes that George didn’t even want to imagine. Considering how his own residence was a palace in comparison to some of the run-down project halls that these kids stayed in, and how his classroom would look after just six hours of them being there, he knew that wherever they went, it was the last place that he would want to find himself.

He left in a hurry. If he timed things right, he could always get out before the busses hit the roads and slowed everything down. He hated getting behind them when the students were riding. Just the sight of those kids off that campus and in the world worried him. It took away the illusion that the outside world didn’t contain such young, stupid anger. In the parking lot, Kayla called out to George.

“Have a good night, Stilgrow!” she said, waving brightly. Her resilience and energy always impressed him. He waved back politely and climbed into his car. He pulled out of the parking lot just as the bus doors were closing on the kids.

George pulled onto the highway and made his way north, back past the airport and through the industrial parks of the south end. He picked up the phone to call Bobby Stenslin. Bobby would get a kick out of the day, the fight, everything. The city’s traffic was just picking

up. Brake lights lit the stretch of road that curved through valleys and bare trees towards downtown, the towers of glass and steel that seemed to pop up out of the woods themselves. Bobby had just answered when a white monster of an old SUV swerved and cut George off from the left lane. George dropped the phone and cursed.

The monster pulled into the next lane right and slowed down. Eddie Parley was driving, a cigarette hanging from his finger. He hadn't seen that it was George that he just cut off. He cut in front of another car and then jumped three lanes to the right to just make the off ramp to the old Lakewood exit. By the time George picked the phone off the floor, Bobby had hung up.

Chapter Three

George pulled up to the house as the winter sun bid its way over the horizon. Parking in front of the old Victorian house, he shut the sedan off and gathered his things. He could see his breath as he stepped out of the car. Looking down the street at some neighborhood kids playing ball in the street, he took a sigh of relief knowing that his week was over, and he would not have to face students for two days. As he opened the door, Argus charged into the den with his typical three curse salute at George's presence. George ignored the dog and moved towards the old leather couch to relax. He found a half smoked joint amidst the clutter on the table and lit it. Sinking back into the couch, lifting his feet up and lying horizontally, he quickly drifted towards sleep, hoping to relive dreams of the ocean and a woman's touch.

Just as he could hear the faint sounds of waves crashing in the distance, a pillow hit him in the face. "Rise and shine, professor of the delinquent!" Bobby yelled with enthusiasm. George winced and pulled himself upright, stretching with exhaustion. Bobby moved quickly throughout the room, noisily organizing camera boxes and video tapes, rigging a microphone stand, and duct

taping a light to a long broom handle. “Sun is setting, we’ve got a killer show to catch in four hours and a scene to shoot once it gets dark. No rest for the wicked, my boy!”

Bobby, for the last five years, had worked his way up the ladder in the local video productions scene. He worked mostly on commercials for corporate chains and music videos for big names that came to Atlanta to shoot for cheap. The majority of the videos were of chart topping rap artists that, according to him, were shamelessly selling out to the masses. He loathed the corporate structure and deluded visions of these jobs, often criticized the lack of creative originality, and considered it his personal mission to master the craft of filmmaking in order to throw the whole scene for a loop.

As an exercise in productivity and study, Bobby had been shooting remakes of his favorite classic film scenes with bare materials and equipment, assured that it would help him create an independent masterpiece that would raise him to a position of recognition and clout. Most of the equipment Bobby possessed had been lifted from various shoots while he worked as a production assistant. He had learned early on that bigger productions, with ridiculous amounts of money backing them, usually didn’t notice if a boom mic, a few digital tapes, or a light or two went missing. The props and costumes for his shoots, more often than not, came from rummaging through old dumpsters around the city, particularly in the abandoned industrial parks surrounding the neighborhood.

A pile of broomsticks had once served as katan swords for a black-and-white remake of scenes from *Seven Samurai*. A remote control car and a painted over model of a Christmas town were put together for a remake of the chase scene in *The French Connection*, with a long row of worn two-by-fours serving as the above ground subway lines. A collection of realistic water

guns, an old pack of fireworks, and three kids from the neighborhood were all brought together to recreate the standoff at the end of *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly*. Each of the scenes, though cheap imitations, were clearly handled with love and devotion. George, though he often expressed a reluctance to participate, admired these projects and Bobby's passion for making something from practically nothing. It was certainly more effort than George had ever put towards anything in his life, yet it was still a struggle for Bobby to get George's enthusiastic cooperation.

"Get the fuck up, Georgie!" Bobby said with verve. "We're gonna finally put that stash of fake trees Nate lifted from that office building to use." He went into the kitchen and came out with a large bowl, the fumes hit George and made his eyes water.

"What the fuck is in there?" asked George as he sat up. "Smells like gasoline."

"A bit," said Bobby, stirring the contents of the bowl with a plastic spoon. "Mostly lighter fluid and Vaseline. Gonna spread this little batch of goodness all over those trees, call in the air attack and light the fires Bobby Duval style! *Apocalypse Now* will be the next chapter to the remake library. We're upping the ante on our special effects and pyrotechnics!" He giggled at the thought of plastic green leaves burning with a blue, slow glow. Nate walked out of his room, still in the same sweats he was wearing on the couch that morning. Just as before, he was adjusting his crotch as he walked across the room towards the kitchen.

"Yo, G Man!" said Nate. "What's up with them kids at the school today? Any of them spit some sick flows on ya?" Nate was under the impression that because he had listened to Hip Hop most of his life, he was not only an expert on the subject, but fully capable of performing verbal masterpieces. It was something that, despite how much the subject came up, he never took

the initiative to prove to anyone. “When you gonna let me come down there and show them a little something? Man, I gots the vocab!” He slid past Bobby and into the kitchen, returning a moment later with a bowl of cereal that he munched loudly.

“Nate,” Bobby said in the recognizable tone of the director, “when you’re done stuffing your face with crunch, cue up the tapes and add a few strips of red filters to the lights. I want this blaze to be jumpin!” Nate nodded in understanding. Since the two had crossed paths both on shoots and a few shows, they had become partners in all things adolescent and creative. Being a few years younger, Nate seemed to accept his role as the lackey and trusted Bobby’s judgment when it came to putting a vision together. Though he didn’t desire to increase his own role in the madness, George couldn’t help but feel a pang of jealousy watching his old friend find a Beavis to his Butthead.

George looked up at the blank television screen. He wished for a moment that Nate had remembered to pay the cable bill, so that some form of mindless entertainment could take him away from the rude awakening. He stood and stretched, wincing again at the flammable smell in the room. “Damn that shit stinks, Bob. So, when is this going down? I was looking forward to laying low tonight.” Bobby threw his head back and laughed.

“What’s the matter, George? You forget the grand master plan already?” George gave an uncertain shrug. “Damn it, man!” Bobby howled. “Charlie’s getting hit at about twenty-one hundred hours.” He stopped stirring the bowl and held it up like a trophy. “After which, the victorious warriors will convene at the Nickel to get our faces rocked off by Arcadia!” An avid fan of the music scene, Bobby made it an effort to go and see live shows as often as possible, seeing an average of three a week.

“Shit,” said George, trying to muster up energy to get out of the extravagant evening of loud music and cocktails. He had hardly chosen the right words for his case when Bobby interrupted him, holding a jelly covered spoon in the air.

“Shit nothing, Stillgrowth,” Bobby said, flinging a little jelly to the floor and wiping it into the hardwood floor with his shoes. “I’ve got us on the guest list. Got a lady-friend working the bar tonight, and she won’t charge us a dime for our drinks. Arcadia is just kicking off a short tour for a new album of New Orleans’ style funktastic, and we’ll be fresh off of yet another successful shoot. There is no fucking way you can dip out on this. Besides, it’s a Friday night! You can’t start packing it in on a Friday before you’re thirty! You start pulling that shit off now and you can go ahead and plan on one hell of a dull ass life.”

He took a breath and was about to continue. George rose up a hand to stop him and nodded slowly in compliance. It was the same pattern of the last twenty years of their friendship. Bobby had used a similar relentless persistence when convincing George to smoke his first cigarette, take his first shot of liquor, take his first bong, drop his first hit of acid, and sneak his father’s car out of the garage to drive to Athens for a show one night their sophomore year in high school. George never held serious regrets about anything Bobby convinced him to do, but his trepidations with adventures always called for strategic persuasion.

Three hours later, George entered the living room after a nap. Nate was standing behind his turntables, one side of his headphones pulled to his ear. Bobby danced around the room in erratic leaps, raising his fist at each kick of the beat. They spotted George and simultaneously erupted in a hurrah cheer. Despite his trepidations, George couldn’t help but smile and begin

nodding his head along with them. He allowed a rush of quiet excitement run through his spine and felt a familiar gratitude for the wild men that he called friends.

Bobby turned and brought up a half smoked joint and passed it to George. Taking a pull, he recalled his earlier encounter with Parley and the way the stranger had approached him about the subject of weed so bluntly. Along with the slight embarrassment at his earlier unease came the succinct ring of familiarity towards Parley and the frustration at being unable to place the source. He passed back the joint, signaled for Nate to turn down the volume, and told his friends of the day's events. He described the stranger, the strange conversation during lunch, and the tangle between the new guy and the infamous Levon Turner. Though all the details were there, George neglected to mention the stranger's name, dismissing it as a distracter from the story's excitement. Bobby and Nate each heard the tale with their mouths open in awed, gaping smiles.

“No fucking way!” exclaimed Nate with his head still nodding to a beat.

“Sounds stellar!” said Bobby. “Fuckin’ no-holds-barred high! Think they’ll press charges on this guy? Will he end up gunned down in the parking lot next week, what?”

“That’s the crazy shit,” said George. “It was the craziest thing I’ve seen go down at that place, and there were absolutely no consequences. I can’t get it all wrapped up in my head. Some of the kids are terrified of the dude. They think he’s a narc or something.”

“Oh, shit!” said Nate, “It’s just like on that show where they put undercover agents in schools. Yo, George! Keep your mouth shut around that dude, bro. You’ll get nailed.”

“For what, Nate?” George said with a sarcastic grin, taking the joint once more from Bobby.

“Alright, fuck this!” said Bobby with a clap of his hands. “Game time! The sun is set, the spot is primed, and we’ve got a Vietcong village to light up!” He strode to the pile of equipment that he had stacked in the corner of the room, loaded a pull wagon for Nate to carry, and filled George’s arms with poles and lights. The three went for the door, Argus following closely at Bobby’s heels.

Just around the corner from the house stood the remains of an old factory that used to make air conditioners in the 1960’s. The free-standing cement walls, now scattered with tags and graffiti, provided a shelter from the roads and a decent backdrop for Bobby’s short films. He complimented it all once again as they arrived at the two rows of three-foot-high plastic trees he and Nate had set up earlier in the center of a cement block that was once an assembly line floor. The trees were set in dirt to give the full illusion of a forest floor. A freight train blew its horn in the distance. Skittish as he always was for these shoots, George turned his head quickly at the sound.

Bobby took the black sheet from the wagon and draped it over the wall to cover the graffiti. Some of the trees, which looked more like shrubs than giant mangroves, had lost limbs. Bobby scattered the fallen branches in the dirt around the base of each plant. Some of the branches he used to connect the tops of trees to create the illusion of a fuller canopy. He breathed heavily and laughed occasionally. Argus lay down a good fifteen feet away. The dog knew when Bobby was preoccupied and, George suspected he didn’t like the smell of the flammable Vaseline.

“Just about there,” Bobby said as he placed the last of the branches on the make-shift canopy. “Wait a minute!” he jumped, “Nate! Go grab a bunch of those weeds. We need moss for

our jungle. Get as much of it as you can. I want a good solid flame at the base of the shot.” Nate nodded and grunted and was off picking weeds like they were wildflowers. George couldn’t stop looking over his shoulders. There were a number of possible scenarios occurring in his mind, each of them ended badly.

“George!” Bobby was getting bossy now. It was the final stage of his work mentality. George knew he would be like this for the rest of the shoot. “Stay with me, now! I need you to start up my camera and the light. They need to warm up for a second.” George fumbled with buttons and switches. He knew what he was doing, but couldn’t concentrate. Bobby stood up and snatched the light from his hand. “Here you go!” He didn’t skip a beat. George admired this tenacity and focus. Nate came back with a field of weeds for the grasslands. It was spread out along the trees as Nate began humming *The Flight of the Valkyries*.

“Duh duh duh Dah Dah! Duh duh duh Dah Dah! Dah Dah Dah Duh Duh! Duh dah duh DAHH!!” Bobby pick up the chant and began checking the shot. He had George stand behind him and light the trees with the spotlight.

“Just like a full moon on a Ho Chi Minh Night!” said Bobby in his best Duval. He scanned the model tree line in a long, swooping shot. “Like the view from the chopper, eh, George? Nate! Get the goop ready! I’m about to call in the coordinates.”

They laughed like maniacs, even George raised a chuckle, as Bobby made several passing sweeps of the dry imitation jungle with is camera. George stayed a few feet behind him, trying to stay out of the way. Nate, the amateur pyro-technician spread the volatile jelly on the trunks and branches of the trees, keeping an even spread as the director requested. The *Valkyries* chant rose once again to a crescendo. Bobby even added a few “Kill da Wabbits” for kicks before giving Nate the nod. “Fire in the hole.” George looked away, bracing for the explosion.

It was at least a minute and ten lighter flicks later that George looked to see what was taking Nate so long. He was on all fours, his head buried deep in fake flammable foliage, trying to light the base of one of the trees with a lighter. “The jelly isn’t sparking,” he said with disappointment. Bobby couldn’t take the anti-climactic results. His eyes moved wildly and he paced back and forth quickly.

“Alright. Alright. Alright.” He repeated as he reeled through his options. “We’ll just have to add more boom boom. Do we have any gasoline handy, George?”

“Thank God, no!” George shrieked. “Look, let’s just forget it, Bob.”

“Oh, no!” Never say die, soldier!” The camera was shaking in his hand. “Nate, go back to the house, get the hose, and siphon some gas out of my car.”

“Shit!” Nate said, turned and began running back to the house diligently. Argus lifted his head and glanced from the running Nate to Bobby.

“Look,” George pleaded, “don’t get overboard on this, Bobby. You’re going to burn down the whole fucking city.”

“Nothing that hasn’t been done before, George,” he smiled. “Read your history. Besides, this is going to look great!” George gave up. It was dark and he was shaking from fear of a thousand threats. Nate came running back, carrying a small gas can and wiping his mouth with his hand.

“Shit!” he said and spit on the ground. “You guys have any gum or anything?”

“Just sprinkle a little around the base and on the leaves,” Bobby said. He gave George a nod as if this were his safety plan. “Let’s be responsible about this.” Nate obliged and within a few minutes, the *Flight of the Valkyries* chant was building again.

“Fire in the hole!” ordered Bobby.

The flames shot up at least fifteen feet in a burst of blinding combustion. George turned my head quickly. He caught a glimpse of Nate shaking a flaming hand towards the trees and feared that he would burst entirely. Putting out the flames on his arm, Nate was howling and jumping around in a circle as their little Vietcong jungle felt the wrath of Hell upon it. Bobby, mouth agape in a carnal glare, was thrilled. He danced along the line of trees, filming panning shots as if he were in a helicopter flying low and imitating the quick “blub-blub-blub-blub” of helicopter blades. “Beautiful!” he marveled under his breath.

George admitted to himself that Bobby was right. Seeing the thin line of plastic trees engulfed in sticky flames, the jelly adding a blue-green tint, incited wonder within him. The plastic trunks popped and hissed before they cracked and melted down to the ground. It was mindless destruction under the guise of creativity at first, but at that moment, it became more. George saw the beauty that Bobby must have conceived when he discovered the discarded forest in a dumpster weeks before. “Beautiful,” George said, mesmerized by the flames.

After fifteen minutes of the assault, the flames were still dancing. Bobby was still filming. “This is going to look better than the real deal,” he bragged, “Coppola can kiss my ass!” George was getting exhausted. The hypnotic dance of the flames had worn off on him and he quickly glanced over each shoulder towards the darkness, thinking of the derelicts that often slept there. His arms trembled, and he was about to plead with Bobby to put out the flame and get moving. Nate’s interest was obviously waning as well, as he frequently spit into the grass to get rid of the taste of gasoline. George was just about to begin his case for retreat when an empty bottle flew in out of the darkness and crashed amongst the burning trees.

“What the fuck?!” shouted Bobby. Another bottle came crashing down against the rocks, brown shards of glass pelted their legs. “Oh shit!” shouted Bob, “Charlie’s ambushed us! Retreat!”

George looked into the shadows and saw a figure in a thick coat go through a throwing motion. “Incoming!” He shouted and ducked down. The bottle came down against one of the still burning trees and knocked it over on its side. Nate and Bobby were already sprinting through the Spot towards home. George stopped at the fence and turned to peer through the darkness to catch a glimpse of the assailant. The figure was getting closer to the flames, and began dancing like a tribesman, jumping and waving his arms. In time with his beat, he was yelling something towards them. His voice was coarse and deep. George had trouble making it out. He repeated something over. On the third time, George thought he could make out what the stranger was saying. “Get it together, George!” George tripped on the fence, knocked his knee and smashed the light bulb against the pavement. He jumped up and limped as he ran home.

George stumbled through the door and collapsed on the floor, winded and scared and confused. “What the fuck was that?” Argus hovered over him and gave three vicious curses.

Bobby was already laid out on his couch, holding a fresh beer against his forehead and panting for breath. “Neighborhood watch,” he said. “I bet we were breaking fire-protocol.” He pulled his pipe out and lit a fresh one. Nate came out of the kitchen with a beer in hand.

“Holy shit!” he yelled with enthusiasm. “That was fucking great! That crazy ass bum came out of nowhere!” Bobby snapped his fingers and Argus left his position hovering over George and lay down by the couch, just within arm’s reach of his master’s hand.

“Actually,” he said, “we were interloping on his territory, Nathaniel.” He took a swig of beer and savored the taste. “It was his land; we entered guns blazing, ready to take him out. But he got the jump on us.”

George got up off the ground and took a seat on the couch. Nate passed him a beer. “Bob, give the fucking general routine a rest.” he said. “Let’s not do that again, huh?”

“Bite your tongue, George!” shouted Bobby. “That there was quality visceral experience at its best. We committed arson and were assaulted by a liquor-bottle-throwing homeless person. You can’t beat that shit!” He laughed out loud at the thought and stopped short, “Did you break my fucking light?”

“Yeah,” said George with no trace of apology. “I tripped.” Bobby stared at him and started to rise up, preparing for an over-glorified proclamation of guilt. George raised a hand slowly and continued to look forward. “You stole it, Bob. You told me yourself.” That was all that was needed. Bobby smiled and sat back. The two friends each took a swig of beer and sighed, taking in the absurdity of their latest adventure. Bobby broke the spell when he jumped to his feet.

“Stage one of this Friday evening is complete! Get up, shower that stink of flame and victory off of yourselves, and meet back in this room in twenty minutes.” He shuffled his feet a little as he spoke the rest. “We’ve got to put on our dancing shoes and get to the Nickel!”

The Nickel is among the few spots in the city to catch an intimate performance by some of the most eclectic and honest music around. An old playhouse that was bought out by an adjoining bar, the Nickel’s stage has been graced by many a great musician, known and ambiguous alike. Like most places worth going to in town, Bobby had friends there. Arcadia brought crowds wherever they went. A traveling band from New Orleans, they made a mark

amongst the dancing crowds with a raucous vibe supported by a sure-as-a-pulse rhythm section. Hippies and sawyers, break-beat runaways, and party-favor-slinging bandits alike waited in a line wrapping around the sidewalk when George, Nate, and Bobby pulled up. Nate grew excited in the front seat, rolled his window down and howled at the crowd as they passed. Half of the crowd, already dancing in their place, responded in a joyous hurrah.

Bobby pulled into an alley, squeezed his car past a dumpster, and parked in a lone space behind a tree. “Fuck paying five bucks, we’ve got the V.I.P.!” He said that each time he parked in one of his hidden spots. Nate laughed as if on cue. They walked in through the back door and through the kitchen of the bar, which George only did when with Bobby.

There were two immediate rounds of free tequila, and George got a handshake and a grin from several of Nate and Bobby’s acquaintances. He attempted conversation with a few of them that he recognized fairly. “Who’s your quiet friend,” he heard a cocktail waitress asking Nate. George had met her before. After an awkward lapse in conversation, Bobby looked at his watch and pronounced with authority, “Showtime! Upstairs!”

The Nickel’s main stage room was a short flight of narrow stairs up from the bar. The walls are plastered with various flyers for upcoming acts. Bobby perused the wall with wide eyes. He said the names of the acts to himself, trying to ignite any notion of recognition in a show that he will most likely be attending.

“Killer! The Westends are coming next month,” he said to himself. “They have that keyboard player from Broken Wire now. That guy can tear a room up!” He moved on across the board as they inched up the stairs. He reminded George of a stockbroker watching the big board

on Wall Street, looking past the leaflets, the erroneous band names, and the tripped out designs, past the myriad of dates, times and venues, cover charges and age limits to hear it all.

“Going to be a good one, huh?” George asked.

Bobby snapped out of the crowd in his mind. “Damn right, George. You’ve heard the guy I’m talking about. He’s from that Broken Wire band that split five years ago. This guy Chuck Bunch hasn’t toured with anybody for years now, and The Westends picked him up. I hear it’s some kind of hip-hop influenced funk-infusion thing.”

“Sweet,” George said. He didn’t get this entire genre crossing.

Inside the showroom, the floor was packed with anticipated youth. Along the outskirts, the veterans of the scene and artsy black-clad types sat in the elevated seats. The bars on the side walls were slammed with those trying to get as much of an escape going as possible before the ship left shore. George found his way towards the back and took in the scene. The sound of three hundred voices speaking at once made his head swim a bit and he swayed with the currents of syllables, fluid and alternately pitched. Then he noticed her.

Through the crowd of passing faces and drinks, smiles and smokes, and first noticed her sparkling, laughing eyes. Her black hair was cut short, showing the arching lines of her neck. She wore a long, light dress, which wrapped around her neck, exposing her shoulders and back. A drink in hand, she and a friend were having an animated conversation that sent hands gesturing wildly. She swayed to the beats of the house music that was barely audible over the crowd. Her friend began to dance with her and she was twirled in a circle and dipped like a ballroom-gypsy. As she threw her head back, she looked at George through inverted glance. Then, the view was

blocked by a group of guys in polo shirts and jeans. George instinctively took a step towards her, with no notion of anything but getting another glimpse.

“Stilgrow!” Bobby came from the bar with two drinks in his hand and passed one to George. “Watch out, man. Damn! They’re pouring them stiff tonight.” He took a swig and grimaced while nodding a big eyed approval. The bourbon glowed on its way down. The lights went down and the show began. A roar erupted from the crowd as it condensed towards the stage. The six members of Arcadia came on with modest gestures and salutes to the people that listen and kept their hopes alive. They wasted no time and went into a bass beat driven march that was carried by the crescendo riffs of the horns. A melody was played on an organ that was simple and wove through a snapping bass lick. The collective-conscience that Bobby spoke of was forming before George’s eyes and ears. He moved with the crowd and searched for her.

Something sparked in him that he had long forgotten. A blind courage that was fueled by alcohol and the fruitless encounters riled within him. He felt the rhythm of the room and proceeded forward, unsure of what he would do when she appeared, but certain that he must find her. He weaved through the sea of bodies, under the raised arms of those in mid celebration. She was near the stage on the left. He slipped past a couple that were grinding together with the music, and spilled some of his drink on the shirt of a kid with dread locks. When George stood within three feet of her, he stopped and just watched her move.

Her hips swayed in time, and her arms moved in a serpentine gesture that never ended. It was an exotic movement, with a driving force that screamed with energy and yet stayed contained within a centered calm. George felt his feet shuffling to the rhythm. His shoulders bounced with the hits of the snare and he closed his eyes and tried to tune into that wave that she

was on. She noticed. When he looked down upon her, she was smiling back at him, still in motion. He smiled and tried to focus on the sounds. Fragments of panic came into his mind and sent alarms of panic blaring, trying to force a retreat. He closed his eyes again to regain the sensation of her. It worked.

For the next thirty minutes, they moved around each other. Not once did they touch, for that would have sent a storm through George's spine, but they never lost connection. More smiles were exchanged; the occasional high-pitched howl of celebration arose from her upturned head, and the eyes spoke the rest.

Her expression showed interest, a flirtation with sincerity that George knew he could not be imagining. When the set ended, she curtsied and laughed. Throughout the applause of the crowd, he continued to stare at the side of her face in the spotlight.

"I'm George," he said, startling himself despite being nearly inaudible. She turned to him.

"Well," she said with a sly grin, "are we at the moment of introduction, George? It's about time." She extended her hand. As he grasped her fingertips, a surge of life shot up through him and made him dizzy. Then she was pulled away by her friend, off into the crowd before he could speak. He started the pursuit once more, and looked over the crowd to see where she was going. Her companion pulled her towards the bathrooms. He stood there for a moment, at a loss for words or movement.

He spotted Nate by the bar in conversation with two young girls. Nate saw George and motioned him over to hand him another drink. "Alright, George!" he screamed. "I saw you out there, hound dog! Tearing it up, man!"

George surveyed the room and saw Bobby in the corner by the stage with one of the crew for Arcadia. Bobby turned around and waved as he was let past the backstage curtain. Nate saw it too. “Lucky bastard! He always gets back there.”

George suddenly felt exhausted as the drinks floated in his head. He went towards the back of the room and found a seat next to a group of stoned and quiet hippies smoking cigarettes. He took a pull off his drink and wondered about her. Then, she found him.

“Is this seat taken?” she asked with a glowing grin. He didn’t know what to say, so he smiled. She looked into his eyes and tilted her head slightly. George shuffled in his seat uneasily. She leaned forward. “Let’s say that you were given a chance to do something incredible, anything at all, what would it be?”

“Excuse me?”

“Anything at all,” she said intently, making a serious face with a twist of a smirk. “What would it be?”

“Who are you?” he asked, baffled. “I’m George.”

“Time’s almost up here, George. Tick –tick- tick.” She giggled.

“How? What?” he searched for something clever to say. “I really don’t think I know. What would you do?”

“Well,” she said and shrugged, “that is besides the point, George. And I asked you first, so you’re going to have to come up with some answers before this goes any further.”

He stared at her in grateful disbelief. She had arrived. “How would I go about doing that?”

“Well,” she looked up as if in thought, “you better start with finding some better questions. That’s usually where the answers are hidden.” She smiled widely. Her blossoming eyes entranced him with promise. The lights went down. Intermission was over.

“Would you like to dance?” George asked beneath the yells of the crowd.

“That’s an excellent question!” She stood and walked towards the stage. Again, he was in tow, weaving through a mass of undulating bodies as Arcadia appeased the late night dance crowd by finding a trance groove heavy on the ambiance of long notes over a jackrabbit high hat and rolling bass beat. She slipped ahead of him when a spinner bumped him and moved on. He kept his eyes on the bare skin of her neck. Nothing could have averted his course.

George didn’t see where he came from, or notice him before. He appeared out of nowhere and wrapped an arm around her waist. She looked up at him, shocked at first. A growl rumbled within George like he had not felt in his life. Then her face turned soft, and she let him kiss her. She even kissed back. As she wrapped her arms around his neck, she looked at George over his shoulder. She apologized with her eyes and the blossoms faded. George sank back onto his heels and felt a flush of blood come to his face. He turned quickly and headed for the back of the room, sinking away from the communal conscience into a well of self pity and humility. The music had left him.

He took down the rest of his drink and spotted Nate still at the bar. “Let’s go,” he said when reached him.

“What? Second set, George! You can’t be tired yet, huh ,old man?”

“Come on, Nate,” he repeated. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Can’t go without the driver,” he said with a shrug, “and Bob’s still backstage. Here, have another drink and enjoy yourself.” George pulled a stool out from under the bar and took a seat, not worrying about blocking the way of thirsty patrons. He scowled towards the drink and got to work convincing himself that he did not just experience a heartbreak. Another pull. Arcadia moved through a transition into a slow number featuring a languid saxophone. The lights went to blues and violets and accompanied his mood. He felt grateful and a bit back in tune.

He scanned the photos along the wall behind the bar. Unlike the wall on the way up, which promised what was to come, this was an homage to that which had already been. Images from decades ago; feature performers on their rise to the top or their trip back down, all gracing the stage that George refused to face. He looked at the faces of the musicians captured in the moment.

An old blues man clenched his face and hovered over a microphone in one above the scotch selections. George looked deep into the wrinkles of his dark face, the light reflecting lines of sweat on his brow. The expression, the simple image of that expression, sang to George. He knew that old man had felt it too.

“What would I do?” he said to himself, feeling a bit drunk. “Anything at all.”

He looked at another photograph. Underneath the frame, there was a sticker that he recognized from bumpers and back windows from his college days. *Broken Wire*. He had seen them play once, maybe a year or so before they split. He remembered Bobby raving about how tragic it was when they stopped playing. George looked at the image of the five musicians and something drew him to the lead guitarist. His head was bent down, but there was something in

his stance, the outline of his face, that George felt that he knew. The drinks made it hard to adjust to the changing lights; George leaned in to get a better look. He was just about to ask the waitress to hand him the frame when he felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned expecting Bobby, and those eyes hit him again.

“Sorry, George,” she said and slipped a matchbook in his hand. She leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. “You let me know when you figure out those questions.” And with that she was gone. He didn’t follow this time.

He waited a moment before looking at the matchbook. It was from a bar on the East end of town. Written inside were a number and her name, Merry Lee.

Chapter 5

At the Crawfax Alternative School, Monday morning, George faced the day with a bit less regret. Though he hadn’t called the number on the matchbook, nor could understand what exactly made him feel good about his encounter with Merry Lee two nights before, he was well aware of a new confidence brewing inside of him. He even gave consideration to teaching something that day. He showed up fifteen minutes earlier than usual so he could go over the lessons for the day. When Kayla Vaughn arrived in her classroom across the hall, he paid her a visit. He asked her about her weekend, and surprising even himself, he made her laugh a few times with some witty remarks about city life. When Eddie Parley sauntered down the halls, George shot him a six shooter finger and spoke with confidence, realizing only seconds afterwards that he was only presenting an imitation of Parley.

Each period, George spent the entire class on his feet, moving around the room and encouraging the kids to try the assignment. He brought extra pencils to prevent any excuses. He made connections between the Great Depression and the current economic state, trying to get the kids to imagine what it would have been like having to wander from location to location simply trying to find work. The kids noticed the change in effort and made cracks about the white boy there to save them from the slums. He was the butt of a few more jokes than usual because of his interactions, but none of them fazed him. By the end of the day, almost half of the students had turned in mostly completed worksheets. He felt a sense of slight accomplishment when the final bell rang.

Not much was mentioned throughout the day of Eddie Parley's tangle with Levon. All ears were open during the third period, but all was calm. Levon himself didn't rile anyone up with proclamations of revenge or any over-exaggerated displays of alpha dominance. For the first time since George could remember since he began at the school, it felt like the school served its purpose of providing some sort of educational experience. Things would have been perfect for George, had there not been a last-minute mandatory meeting of staff to listen to a Crawford County representative give a lecture on Standards Based Instruction.

These meetings bored the hell out of George, and most of the staff grumbled about the total inconsequential nature of these ideas and methods at their school. It was also the third time in three months that they had sat through a similar lecture from a county representative. With failing performance being a district-wide problem, each lecture seemed to be a fleeting plea from the higher-ups to work miracles. The lectures encouraged using, "the language of the standards to emphasize learning goals and implement quality instruction in every classroom." All of the teachers there sat quietly, each with an expression of doubt and frustration.

George sat next to Kayla Vaughn, occasionally glancing her way and smiling as she rolled her big brown eyes and shook her head. Halfway through a slide presentation showing the declining statistics of the school, matched with the declining statistics of the county and state, George felt a hand tap his shoulder. Eddie Parley leaned in between their shoulders and whispered. “Damn, they seem to have it all figured out, huh? Why doesn’t this lady come on in tomorrow and run every classroom in the building so that our little ones will experience what real teaching is like.”

Kayla half chuckled and whispered, “This bitch couldn’t do half of the job I do in my room, Parley. Why don’t you run up there and knock her out for us so we can get out of here.” George had to put his hand over his mouth to keep his laugh quiet. Ed put a full hand on each of their shoulders and shook them. The representative paused for a moment, realizing that not all of her pupils were listening. She raised a hand until all was quiet. George had seen all of them do this in these meetings and imagined each time them standing for hours in front of his classroom with a hand raised, only increasing the volume of the students with every passing moment.

Eddie leaned back up. “Who’s up for a drink after this one? We need to discuss further some of these fantastic techniques that Dr. Tight-britches up there is laying down.” George nodded immediately. He hadn’t ever thought about seeing any of these people off of the campus before, but the thought seemed right. Kayla leaned back and cringed a bit, apparently trying to fight the temptation. George suddenly had to see her away from there.

“Come on, Kayla,” he whispered, “we could all use a little time together.” Her expression moved to surprise at George’s forward tone. George nodded, “it’ll be good.” He smiled, and she returned it and nodded quickly, moving her eyes back to the front of the room towards the slide

presentation. George saw her happily shaking her head slightly in disbelief. He felt like holding her hand, or kissing her cheek. Eddie lightly kicked George's chair.

"It's on then!" he said in a triumphant whisper.

After the presentation, the three made plans on the way to the parking lot. It was decided that the East Village was a central location and the bar was agreed upon. When they got to Ed's white Bronco, they all stopped short. A large, black, six-pointed star was painted on the hood, smaller, identical ones were on each of the doors. "GD's poppin," trailed off of the driver side. George had often laughed at the coincidence of the Gangsta Disciple symbol being identical to the Star of David. Especially amusing, in some cosmic way, was the fact that none of the kids that tagged this everywhere even realized the connection, nor knew anything at all about the Jewish faith nor could name a single Jewish person. Never before had the connection been so blatantly disregarded as when he looked upon the three-foot-wide star on the white background of the truck's hood.

Kayla gasped and held Parley's arm, apparently thinking that this would upset him. It did not. He started to laugh, low and steady, not looking away from the truck. The laugh grew louder and more hysterical as he slowly approached the car and dropped his things to the ground. "How did they know that I was part Jewish?" he said and broke out in hysterics. George and Kayla shared a glance and shrugged, unable to keep from laughing themselves. Kayla tried to assure Ed that everything would come right off and even suggested they go talk to Officer Camero and Dr. Rowland. Ed, then gaining his breath again, brushed off the idea. "We've got plans, let's hit the road." With that, they were on their way.

George parked across the street from the bar. The Village on the East side was beginning to see its fill of happy hour tattooed patronage and after work hipsters. The grey cloud coverage made the late afternoon feel like an early night, despite the days beginning to get longer.

“Hey, you,” Kayla said, walking up from the alley. “Nice spot you found there.” She bundled up in her coat.

George tried to think of something to say, but hit a blank and cursed himself for trying too hard. “Ed here yet?” he asked after a minute of silence.

“Here he comes,” she said, nodding in the direction of the music store on the corner. Ed’s Bronco was pulling into a side lot, the giant black stars blatant even in the dying light of day. A guy on the corner pointed and laughed at the sight, and Ed leaned out of the window, slapped the star on his side and pointed back at the man. He parked and walked past the store’s window display of instruments and slowed his step to look. His familiarity was lingering still and this sparked something in George, like a hint of what was just outside of the mind’s reach. He slowed to almost a stop and then gave a short wave to the inside of the store, looked away quickly and picked up his pace to a long stride run. When he crossed the street, he looked up and saw Kayla and George, then threw two fists in the air and howled. Kayla laughed and shook her head. “That mother fucker is crazy!” she said.

The bar was typical of the village. A local hangout for the free and weird, a haven for the narcissistic nihilists that challenged suburban conformity yet flocked here for the safety and comfort of numbers. The fake candle-flame bulbs in the chandeliers barely kept a line of visibility in the dark room. Pie trays featuring sixties television show characters, novelty license plates from around the country and an enormous array of punk band stickers and graffiti made

the room feel like an exhibit in irony. Eddie sauntered to a corner booth and took up the whole seat, leaving no other option than for Kayla and George to share the other side.

“Been a while since I’ve been down this way,” Kayla said.

“Finest people in the city!” Parley said with a wave of his hand. “True freedom and just enough angst to provide a dark edged comfort.” George marveled at his ease in any situation.

“Your kind of people, huh?” Kayla said. “You here a lot?”

“Only when the mood strikes,” he said, pulling a cigarette out and lighting it up. He offered one over the table; Kayla refused. George hesitated for a second then gave in. The waitress came up to the table, her dark hair cut short and spiked up into a red tipped mohawk. Her shirt revealed her neck and one of her shoulders, showing the tips of tattooed wings that must have reached down her arms. “A pitcher,” Eddie said without being asked, “local and cold.”

“Gotcha,” she said and turned without any other word. It was like a dance, there was a rhythm that he created with others that seemed to click into place with exactly what should have happened. George was thankful that the ordering was done for him, a decision would have been too much.

“Always drink local,” said Eddie with a puff of smoke to the ceiling. “I’ve been all around, and that’s one thing that I can stand by. No matter what bar you hit in no matter what town, you can’t go wrong with local and cold.”

“You local here, Ed?” Kayla said and surprised the hell out of George when she reached over and helped herself to one of Ed’s cigarettes. He didn’t skip a beat and had his lighter out before the tip hit her lips.

“Round the way,” he said with a grin. “Spent some time round Atlanta growing up. Went to Athens for some of college.” He paused and wandered with his eyes across the trinket covered black wall. He stretched out his hand and gave it a shake over the table. “Bit of a drifter since then,” he smiled at both of us across the table. “Now back here to spread the love.” His eyebrows jumped twice.

The waitress came with a pitcher and three glasses dangling from ringed fingers. “Local and cold.” Her attention to her other tables immediately took her away without further word. George poured Kayla and Ed a beer. George’s nervous thirst was shouting the whole way through his correct manner and subsided with a long pull from his glass.

“To all the people in this world crazy enough to do what we do, and to us few who can survive with our sanity!” We all clinked. “Great to meet you fine people. This should be fun.” Everyone took a long pull. George’s beer was nearly emptied already. Kayla noticed and picked up the pitcher to pour him a refill.

“No, let me get that,” Ed said, reaching for the handle of the pitcher.

“Sit your ass down, Parley,” Kayla said with a chuckle. “No need to overdo the chivalry. You might make a girl feel useless.” Ed sat back, palms out and took a drag of his cigarette as his back hit the booth wall. George watched Kayla pour his glass full. She connected a glance with him, and she smiled. It nearly floored George. His recent streak of female attention seemed too unreal.

It grew darker in the bar, and the happy hour crowd soon became the dinner crowd. As the volume of the masses rose, the three began speaking loudly towards each other, huddling close over the glasses and laughing. They shared the war story gossip of teachers, bringing up some of the kids at the school and finding some humor in the drab and bleak scene of their daily routine. After a few good laughs at both the kids and themselves, the provocative question came up.

“So,” Kayla said to George, “why do you do it?” She leaned in closer to him, placing her hand on his and staring at him wide with enormous hazel eyes. “Why do you submit yourself to being that guy, that white guy amongst a bunch of hood nigga kids, that has the responsibility of making them behave and appreciate something you feel they ain’t never going to understand?”

“Color doesn’t matter, Kayla,” Eddie interrupted, turned completely to the side with his legs outstretched on the booth. Kayla laughed a quick snort through her nose.

“Not to me,” she said, “maybe not to you. But you’re fooling yourself if y’all think you being white don’t matter to these kids.” Ed nodded in silent submissive agreement. The whole topic was making George nervous. “Now,” Kayla said, again focusing on George and leaning in closer to him, “you mind given me an answer, Mr. Stilgrow? Why do you do what you do?”

George swallowed and took a sip from my drink. “Why do you?” he asked. She pulled back and blinked, pulling her gaze away from him. She took one of Ed’s cigarettes from the quickly diminishing pack and lit one.

“Since you’ve always been sweet to me,” she said, “I’ll answer your question and allow you a temporary pass for that little bullshit push-off move.” She waved her fingers in a brushing motion as she said this. Her cigarette was lit and sent a curling line into the hanging light

overhead. “Aside from the need for teacher credit and the hiring value of such a shitty position? Maternal instinct.” Eddie burst out laughing, which caused George to start in. “Fuck you mother fuckers!” she said defensively.

“Sorry Kayla,” Ed said as his smile subsided behind his hand, “you just caught us off guard. I guess I just never saw the cuddly side of you.”

“Nor of them,” George chimed in. “You could just as easily be working with elementary kids in a regular school and get that kick right? What’s for a mother to love with some of these fucking kids?”

“Five older brothers,” She said and took a drag, blowing the smoke into the growing cloud above. “I had five older brothers, not but one of them did a damn thing with his life, let alone get out of high school.” She laughed a little and brushed smoke away from her face. She put out the half unfinished cigarette. “Guess the sad truth is that these little bastards represent something I at least have a shot with. Trying to do what my Momma couldn’t.”

“Damn,” George said. Eddie raised his glass to the center of the table. Kayla laughed and picked hers up. They all clinked together.

“To doin’ what mama couldn’t do,” toasted Ed.

“Mama!” Kayla and George said in unison. They all drank deep.

“So,” Kayla said, “What about you, Parley? Anger Management Counselor! If given a million shots to guess your profession by your swagger and style, that one might pop up somewhere in the mid two- thousand’s. So, especially considering the gargantuan level of anger you’re counseling at this job, why?”

With a cigarette limply held in his mouth, he shot a cloud in the air and stretched his arms in the air. Locking his fingers palms up at the height and pulling them backwards, he leaned forward until his chest pushed against the table. He sat back again and took the cigarette from his lips and grinned. “Well, I’ve had my experiences with facing demons. I know the road and found a map back to the road of sense and humor. Guess I’m just trying to play shepherd to those that have detoured.”

George tried to imagine a pissed off Eddie. Kayla laughed. “So,” she said, “when did the jujitsu, kung fu, smack-down method become the preferred method of anger management? Don’t get me wrong now; I am impressed, and a bit envious, that you were able to put that motherfucker Levon to the ground. I’m just used to the ‘*tell me your problems, write down a journal, let’s role play this out*’ kind of bullshit that nobody ever gets anywhere with. So, where’d you learn that shit?”

A humble countenance that George hadn’t yet seen came to Ed’s face. He shrugged and placed his cigarette in the ashtray. “It was part of my recovery,” he said. “I picked up some training while I was out west. Our emotions and our ability to control them are directly related to our physical selves. You learn enough about the body and how to move it, you can learn to channel the shit flying through and clouding up your head. Knee-bone’s connected to the thigh-bone’s connected to the urge to kick someone’s ass.”

“So,” Kayla said, “like meditation, martial arts and stuff, right?”

“Basically,” Ed said. Kayla laughed and shot an uncertain look across the table. “You seemed surprised, Ms. Vaughn,” he grinned. Kayla shook her head.

“No offense, Parley,” she said. “Just most of the people I’ve seen in to that are into the whole ‘my-body-is-my-temple’ shit. You’ve smoke almost a pack since we’ve got here, and drank about twelve of them beers. Just seems . . . don’t want to say phony, but,” she searched for the word. “Strange.”

“Well,” Ed shrugged and smiled, “you’re absolutely right. But that’s part of what I learned out there.”

“Ain’t you a bundle of surprises!” Kayla said, shaking her head as she tried to wrap her head around this. “Where out west? Cali?”

“Yeah, around there.”

“Mysterious motherfucker,” Kayla said into her glass as she finished the last of her beer.

“Sounds like Jack Daniels’ version of Nirvana, man,” George said. Kayla laughed, almost spit beer out and pawed at his shoulder again.

“Something like that,” Ed said, leaning out of the booth and grabbing the passing waitress by the elbow. “Burbon and rocks, por favor,” she returned his sly grin. Without taking his gaze off her, he asked the table, “you guys in?”

“Sure,” said George. The night was still young and he was enjoying the change of scenery. He figured that whatever was going on with Nate and Bobby at the house, he had seen already. Kayla tilted her head and squealed a squeal of indecision.

“Not me,” she said, pulling her things together. “It’s time I got going. You boys are going to get me out my mind.” Ed nodded at the waitress before releasing her elbow.

“Don’t mean to scare you off with the hard liquor, Kay,” he said.

“Oh, no,” she said, reaching over the table and touching his hand. “You gotta pull a lot more out than liquor to scare me. I just have a bunch of shit to take care of.” George scooted out of the booth, Ed rose to his feet. Kayla stood on her toes and hugged Ed around the neck. She did likewise to George, and tightened the grip for a strong, tingly second. She wiped her eyes and smiled. “I gotta get out of here. You boys stay safe. I’ll see you Monday.”

Ed and George both followed her out with our eyes. Despite a full afternoon of keeping up with the fellas, she kept her sway about her. She practically danced through the building crowd with a grace and rhythm George envied and admired.

“You would be a damn fool,” Ed said, still following Kayla out of the bar, “if you didn’t make a move on her soon.”

The mentioning of George going after anyone caused him to blush and guffaw like some fool. “Come on,” he said. “I don’t know if I could. You know, working with her and all.”

“Fuck that!” Ed said. “That girl is all about some Stilgrow, and you have the duty and obligation to do a damn thing about it. Either that or turn in your cock card at the window on your way out.”

“My cock card?”

“You know what I mean, man. You don’t have a woman, right?”

“Not at the moment,” George picked up his whiskey, thought of Merry Lee, and took a big gulp to get the nerve for the rest of what felt like an interrogation.

“And you find her attractive, right?”

“Yeah,” he said. “She’s great, but . . .”

“Damn, George!” Ed said, taking down a swig of his drink. “Don’t go that route. Like you don’t know what to do with what you got when a fine looking woman wants some of you. You keep on playing this shy, reserved shit and calling it chivalry, you’re going to do nothing but frustrate the hell out of the both of you. Then, the saddest thing in the world happens.”

“What’s that?”

“Opportunity becomes missed chance and resentment.” He raised his glass as if toasting the memory of the fallen opportunity. “Seize the day. Seize the lady. Make her happy. Make you happy.” George raised his glass.

As the empty glasses hit the table, Ed raised his hand again. The waitress appeared seemingly out of nowhere and their next round was on its way. He looked around the bar and found himself picking out all of the potential opportunities in the air that night. A couple at the table next to theirs was leaning in close to each other, wide grins and tilted heads as if waiting for the sign to begin a kiss. A girl at the bar rested her head on the shoulder of the guy next to her. He was carrying on a conversation with the guy next to him, but his hand was resting on her back, his thumb slowly moving in a subtle caress. “Seize the day,” George said under his breath.

“Fuckin A!” Ed said under his. George was surprised that he had been heard over the crowd. The waitress arrived with the drinks. “To all the opportunities yet to be presented. May they never go un-seized.”

The drinks were taking their toll, and George began to let the fantasy of being with Kayla sink in. He wondered how he could get it to that point; how to bridge that gap between flirtation

and action. He considered asking Ed. Ed must have caught signs of the confusion and used it as a chance to strike.

“So, Stilgrow,” he began, “you did a pretty good job of dodging Kayla when she asked you why you do what you do. You mind if I pose the question to you again, now that we are in less company and more alcoholically-lubricated conversation?”

“Shit,” George said.

Ed leaned back and put his hands up. “Hey, man,” he said, “don’t sweat it. You got some shit that you can’t put into phrase, some hidden agenda with this gig, some damn problem with letting others in on your game, it ain’t no thing to me.” He looked as though he was going to continue, like he was hunting for more phrases or possibilities. This time, George put his hand up.

“Whoa,” George said, “enough of this little reverse-psychology bullshit game, man. I’ll talk.” Ed slapped the table and raised his hands in triumphant fists.

“Damn, I would have been a kick ass cop!” He laughed and gestured for George to proceed.

“Why do I work at that fucking school?” George said, really just to get himself going. “People don’t expect much from it. I mean, no matter how they act up, no matter what the kids learn or don’t, no matter what the county tells you they have set for ‘goals’, all that really counts at the end of the day is that I showed up and kept a group inside the classroom for an hour.”

“Wow,” said Ed, “guess you’re right. I mean, I just started and all, but no one’s said shit about what I’m doing in there.” He pulled out another smoke and lit it. “So, that’s all you’re looking for? Somewhere to hide without any questions asked?”

“I’m not hiding,” said George, barely convincing himself. Ed’s expression revealed that he wasn’t budging on the idea. “Alright, maybe it’s true. Not totally in that sense, but you’ve got a little something there,” George relented.

“So,” he blew a cloud to the light, “what from?”

George shrugged, pulled on the whiskey and took a smoke from Ed’s pack. The question tumbled around in his head for a while and he fought the honest answer that kept popping into his head. Finally, he gave up and said it, just to move the conversation forward. “Expectations. I don’t want anyone to expect anything, because I just don’t want to let anyone down. None of my actions matter this way.” He raised his glass to Ed, who clinked with a respectful nod and let the rest of the scene take center stage again.

It was closing in on ten, and the joint was filling in substantially. Tables around them were filled with goatee’s and inked arms, pierced eyebrows and black fingernails. Their whiskey arrived and they each took to the drink and looked about the room. Ed and George sat in silence for a minute, each taking the scene in through the perspective of a growing haze. “Something else,” Ed said.

“Sure is,” George said. “Someone ought to sell tickets.”

“You dream a lot, don’t you Stilgrow?” He was leaning on the table, smiling as if he had witnessed George’s wandering thoughts on a screen. “I mean, you live in your head a good bit, huh?”

George fumbled for the words through a bit of embarrassment. “Yeah,” he said with a shrug. “I guess so.”

“Good for you,” he said. “I do too. Most of these people, most everybody, will say that they use their imaginations. Truth is, most don’t know exactly what that means.” He was beginning to slur a bit and, feeling a bit off in the equilibrium himself, he tried to focus on the rant he sensed coming. “It’s like freedom, right? Everyone says that they’re free. That they would fight for freedom. That it’s the best damn thing in the whole-wide-wonderful world. But, they roll out each day with the same consistencies and conformities that keep them comfortably out of speculation from the predators of the world.”

“Kind of like around here, huh?” George said. “Everyone here is pretty loose on the freedom meter. Most of them wouldn’t get hired for a safe, practical cubicle gig. But, they’re flocking together and playing some kind of role out like it was scripted.”

Ed slapped a hand on the table. “Exactly!” he grinned. “Nothing against them for breaking the molds, huh. Man, you’re a pretty smart fella when you get around to talking.” He waved at the waitress from across the room, held up two fingers and pointed them both down to the table. Somehow, she noticed him above everyone else, smiled wide and gave a thumbs up acknowledgement. “But that’s what I’m talking about, Stilgrow. Like most things, it’s all tied in together. You being the type of fella that lives in his mind and knows his way around his thoughts, you can see those little quirks and contradictions within the world.”

“Plenty of them out there; contradictions, that is.” Ed’s compliments, the booze, and a good three hours of Kayla’s flirtation were giving George a sense of pride that was great and unfamiliar.

Ed laughed and smacked the table again. “Yes, plenty,” he said with a wide smile. The waitress brought the drinks to the table and winked at Ed. He returned the gesture. He looked out around the crowd and dropped the subject. Part of George wanted to push for more. Partially out of fear of having to reveal more about himself, he resisted and remained silent. After a moment of observing the scene, Ed chuckled. “You don’t even push, do you, man? God! That’s refreshing!”

“I didn’t want to . . .” George started apologetically. Ed held up his hand to stop him.

“You want to know something about me, George?” he offered with an air of conspiracy. “Let me lay a tale on you that I think you’ll get a kick out of. That is, if you want to hear it.”

“Got nowhere to be, Ed,” I said, trying to match the coolness he just acquired. “What you got?”

Chapter 6

Ed leaned towards George, placing his elbows on the table and looking out the sides of his eyes to see if anyone were listening. “Now, you’re about to hear something from me that many have tried to get their ears on, a few have speculated over the causes and results of these instances, and each of them has tried to track me down to hear my side of things.” George leaned in, barely remaining casually skeptical. Ed continued, “The only reasons that I have in telling it

all to you are that you seem like you genuinely don't care too much about it, and I've carried some of this shit around for far too long."

"Go on," said George, leaning back in his seat, for the first time feeling like he was doing a favor for Ed. "Share your demons."

Ed laughed to himself and lit another cigarette. "One of the most free I've ever felt was during those first few days of running away from the mess I had created. I was on my way down the Pacific Coast, heading off to find a man that I didn't fully understand, in a car that didn't belong to me, and saying all of the things I should have said to others to myself in the rear-view mirror." He pulled a pen out of his pocket and started writing. "Good lyric," he mumbled, "to myself in the rear-view."

"So what were you running from, Ed?" George asked, watching Ed's hands twirl the pen in quick spins.

"This is how the joke-that became a legend-only to become a demon-was made. I could play any damn guitar placed into my hands by the time I was nine." He put his hands out as if holding a guitar and made a few high pitched imitations of a solo. "Bwaaaayyyowww!" He shook his head and laughed. "A prodigy! Yessir, I played a major pentatonic scale the first time I ever plucked a string. Didn't know it until someone told me."

"So you were a musician?" George asked.

Ed snorted and leaned back, "George, this story will take much longer than necessary if you continue to repeat the obvious." For the first time, George heard the hints of Ed's demons. Ed took a deep breath and regained his calm. He raised his empty glass, and the waitress

appeared to whisk it away for a refill. “It’s difficult for me to talk about this stuff,” he said, barely audible beneath the sounds of the crowded bar. “Please keep up, or I’m not going to get through it. I want someone else to hear this.”

George raised his palms in a motion of apology. He made a quick gesture of his eyes to ask Eddie to continue. He couldn’t say it.

“Thanks,” Ed said. “In college it all came together; it was in Athens, big music town. I first met Dan Thompson as he was playing acoustic on the corner of Broad and Lumpkin. Good-lookin’ guy with a old cherry-burst Washburn strapped on with a couple of shoestrings. He was playing a simple riff with some light accent notes. Quick, familiar and catchy, it had heads turning and bobbing. I was drawn in, hooked with the rest of them for this simple kid with simple sounds. He quit playing and I went to talk to him. He dismissed me and turned to try and sell a demo to some folks. I picked up his box and started playing all these notes I had heard while he played his earlier riff. I brought in some quick picking on the crescendo and kept him from tearing his guitar out of my hands and kicking my ass. My playing ceased when I opened my eyes to the new crowd around us. Dan led the applause.

“Chucky was next to join. Man, I liked that guy before I ever met him. Like I just knew that he existed out there somewhere. He played the keys as mad as he acted. The first time we made noise together, we went through seven different transitions on nothing but a quick look and a knack. And I’m not talking about standard shit here.” He blew out a cloud of smoke and stomped his foot under the table. George jumped in surprise and then laughed, eager for more. “I mean we went from a one-two shuffle, to a samba, to a blues riff, to a mellow-bridge, back into the samba, and then a rocking-heavy finish full of distortion. Sounds like chaos, I know, but I’ll

be damned if it didn't get our fires burning." He looked around the bar and nodded his head to the music coming from the juke-box. George felt that sudden rush of familiarity with Ed and resisted asking the questions leading to the answer. He realized that Ed was close and this wasn't easy for him. Without any cue from George, Ed continued.

"You know, we started small, like anyone else. It didn't take long for others to notice, and then it got bigger. Dan's old roommate, a kid we called Guppy, became our manger. We bought a piece-of-shit passenger van and hit the road." Ed took a long pull off of his newly delivered drink, picked up the pen and stared at it. "When I first saw my name in print, it was fucking surreal." He turned his eyes to George and gave a half-laugh. "And the adjectives these fuckers threw around about my playing, the sound, and this cool presence on stage! I knew it wasn't me. I couldn't recognize him as myself. But I liked him just the same." His grin turned devilish.

"The others got a share of press, but it all eventually came back to me. None of them showed any real signs of being raw about it, and I acted like it wasn't anything to fuss at. The rest of it was way too much fun to get caught up in it yet. By the time most of us dropped out of school for the road, we had two full length studio recordings of everything we had to bleed into a mixing board, and a calendar that took us all over the country." He looked dreamily out over the crowd again. George did the same, imagining that each of them was there for a show that night, and he had the only real ticket. Ed's face turned to his drink, and he stirred it, his countenance going sad.

"I didn't want *all* of it, you know? Fucking journalist and fans, the women, all of the fucking spectators to the show with their own opinions of what we were. They got to us first.

They held me up like a fucking genius. I dare you to try and look a beautiful woman that you just met that you are not the love god that she thinks you are. Dan started showing signs of jealousy. Cutting me off of solos and . . .” He drifted off for a second, shook himself quickly and stood up from the table. “Let’s get the hell out of here. I’ve got a place I want to go to if I’m gonna finish this fucking story tonight.” George, taken aback, agreed. The next thing he knew, George was riding in the front seat of Ed’s Bronco, going north on the highway. Ed didn’t tell him where they were going, but said it would only take a minute to get there. He didn’t play music on the ride, and the drinks caught up to George and he drifted off to the sounds of the wheels on the highway.

When the car stopped, George awoke, still in a daze, but coherent. Ed seemed to have found a new burst of energy. “We’re here,” he said with a laugh and exited the car. George looked up and saw that they were at the end of a dark, heavily-wooded road. He got up and out of the car, stretching and gaining balance. Ed came around the side and gave him a beer from a six-pack. George hadn’t remembered stopping, but the beer was cold. “This way, George,” Ed said, heading down a trail. “You’re gonna like the view.”

At the end of the trail was a cemetery without fences. The tombstones were old, and George couldn’t read any of them in the dark. Once at the top, he stopped short. “Whoa,” was all he could muster. The entire skyline of the city shined below them. They were looking at it from the northwest, and the buildings stretched off into the distance, lit up like torches in the night. George had lived in the town all of his life, yet never knew that this place existed. Ed walked to the top of the ridge and sat on a tombstone, his elbows resting on his knees. George took a seat

on the stump of a tree. They both looked out over the city of millions as Ed simply picked up his tale in the same confessional tone as he held in the bar.

“So, where was I?” Ed said.

“Troubles with Dan,” George said, proud that he had remembered that and thankful that he could keep Ed talking. “He cut you off on stuff. You got all the recognition.”

“Thanks,” Ed said, still looking forward. George heard more gratitude than was necessary for simply reminding him. “Dan,” said Ed, “was always a friend. I forgot that somewhere.” He took a sip of his beer and looked to the east. “The sun will be coming up soon.” George noticed the hue of the horizon slightly lighter. “One thing about Dan,” Ed continued, “was his lyrics about that kind of cosmic shit, like sunrises and sunsets, that somehow escapes being corny and hippy sentimentalities.” He half-way sang, “*It’s not the end of a day, or the loss of light, just a reminder that all we need ain’t always in sight.*” George laughed quietly to himself and a part of him felt what Ed was getting at. Ed snorted and kicked back the rest of a beer.

“So, was it the press?” George asked. “Was that what you were running from?”

“I wish,” said Ed. “Shit, if the story ended there, we wouldn’t have come up here, now would we?” George shrugged. “No, George, it was her. Like in all falls-of-a-great-empire stories, we have us a lady in our tale. Lenore.” Ed stopped after saying the name, as if the wind took it each slow syllable away. “Lovely, longing, lascivious Lenore came into our midst while on tour. She latched onto Dan somewhere in Colorado and stayed with us for the next few stops. None of us thought nothing of it, not even me. That kind of stuff went on. I was happy for Dan, and man, did he get in the groove! They would spend all day together in a hotel room; he would join us

just before showtime; and the kid would play out of his mind! It was a blast to see.” He opened another beer and handed one to George, who had barely touched his first one.

“The heavy price of lust and enlightenment,” Ed began again, “is paid when the ride is over, and never understood during the thrill. I don’t know why I did what I did. It remains a mystery to me to this very day. Don’t you have something like that back in your closet? A choice that was made against all forewarnings and preconceived notions of morality?” George thought for a second, until Ed raised his hand to stop him. “I don’t need to know what it is, just acknowledge that one exists. Please, for my sake.” George nodded, still unsure if he could think of any such drastic action in his life.

Ed continued, “I just couldn’t help but fall for her, man. We were in New York, playing a three night run, and sitting on top of the world. Most of the papers and magazines around the country had at least a review of the latest album. They were still throwing all kinds of praise my way for my live performances, my ‘ingenuity’, ‘virtuosity’, ‘pitch-perfect’, ‘so-good-I-want-to-hump-my-stereo’, sound.” George laughed loudly. Ed joined him and raised a toast. “No kidding, man, a guy actually wrote that he wanted to fuck his speakers when hearing me play. Unbelievable, these fucks are.” They laughed a minute more, Ed making sounds of hysteria that George hadn’t heard. George realizing that he was doing the same. Then, Ed grew somber again.

I couldn’t sleep one night and went down to the bar. She showed up alone. I tried to ignore her, but she came on to me. It was the first time that I had really spoken to her. I didn’t want to cross the lines, you know?” George nodded. “But damn, she could talk a good game. And those eyes? Man, I couldn’t imagine a man looking into those and maintaining a shred of control.” Ed looked out to the city, and then to George. “Of course, you’re probably thinking I’m

full of shit. Most men are when they talk about a woman like I am.” George couldn’t think any such thing, and shook his head slightly to say so. Ed nodded in the unspoken agreement.

“She told me that Dan had kicked her out of the room. I never knew why. It was more than impulse driving me up there though, man, it was . . .” Ed drifted off again.

“Fate,” George said. Ed raised his can of beer in appreciation.

“Fate,” he continued, getting more enthusiastic as he expelled the story from his conscience. “I won’t go into the gritty details of it, but that night was a religious experience for me. Our bodies moved with such anticipation of the other, trading control and encouraging nothing more than the amplification and duration of the moment.” He pulled his beer again. “But the price had yet to be paid.

“She left the room before sunrise, quietly. We didn’t speak of it to anyone. She had apparently given Dan a sufficient story, since he showed no immediate hostility to me. And things went on as usual. Only, something had changed in me.” He looked directly at George. “You know when you do something grand, and it’s so natural that it’s almost like it were someone else doing it, and you were simply just an observer?”

“My whole life’s like that,” said George simply, “all except for the ‘grand’ part.” Ed turned his head to the side in question. George put his hands up, “Not my story time. Keep going.”

Ed nodded, “I’ve got some more figuring out to do with you, Stillgrow.” He rose to his feet and raised his voice to the city. “I was fucking unstoppable those nights in New York! Everything I played came through with so much life that I felt heat in my hands. It was heaven,

and I was somehow providing the soundtrack. The throttle was down, burning rocket fuel, and I flew on in complete awareness of everything around me. The thousands of individual cheers sounded in unison as I tore through riffs with grace and spirit. I could close my eyes and see the eight hands of my bandmates creating rhythm and harmony as they emitted a brilliant array of light and sensation. I played that fucking music with everything I had! When the last note was played, I finally heard and fully appreciated the crowd's response thrown my way. I threw my fists in the air and yelled back, and the place was shaking so hard that the damn chandeliers almost came crashing down!" Ed stood tall, with both fists in the air, panting and smiling.

He turned back to face Ed. "You know what it was?" George shrugged, too enthralled to guess. "It was her. She did that to me. I tell you, I've gone over those nights so many times looking for what made it all shine so brightly, what made it all so fluid and easy. The only answer was her. I had fallen in love with a woman that wasn't mine, and she had given me more power than I could ever imagine."

"So," George said, "it was the beauty that killed the beast." He had remembered Bobby throwing that quote around before.

Ed looked back and laughed a self-deprecating laugh. "This time," he said leaning over George, "your obvious recollection couldn't have been more appropriate."

"How did Dan find out?" George asked, putting the pieces together.

"You know," said Ed, looking again towards the city lights, "I'm not really sure if he ever did."

"So what made you run?"

“Oh,” Ed said, turning to George with a wide grin, “anybody that knows the name of Broken Wire can tell you what happened five years ago in Dallas, New Year’s Eve.” He looked over the tombstones of the old graves, then off to the east, where the horizon was growing lighter. “Let’s get out of here. This tale of the dead shouldn’t be told in the daylight. You live closer to this spot. Let’s go to your place.” He smiled as George stood. “You’ve got an internet connection, right?”

“Yeah,” George replied, “that’s about all we have.”

“Perfect,” Ed said as he turned to the car. “This last part is probably best seen than heard.”

On the drive back, George was now wide awake. He couldn’t remember the last time he had stayed up all through the night. Going through a night like he had, unexpected and intriguing as it was, set a spark off in him that hadn’t been going in quite some time. During this ride, Ed continued to talk. The cathartic exercise of revealing his past in his words seemed to keep him focused on finishing the story.

He told George of the months that followed New York: the rave reviews and exposure, the added tour dates and bigger venues, the secrets kept and the longing for Lenore. A new date to play New Year’s Eve at a small arena in Dallas had been added two months before the day of the show. It was an unprecedented re-scheduling for such a large venue and an up-and-coming band. *Rolling Stone* magazine caught wind of the story and asked to do an interview plus live broadcast of the show via their website. It was the biggest thing that anyone in the band had ever dreamed of.

Lenore had continued to keep her distance from Parley. They hadn't spoken much during those months, and she continued to stay with Dan. He continued playing out of his mind on stage, still fueled with something between love, lust, and frustration. On the night before the New Year's Eve show, she came knocking on his hotel room door.

"She walked right in without me inviting her," Ed said as he turned off the highway on George's exit. "I had no intentions of stopping her. She said that Dan had lost it; whatever it was that he gained from being with her was now gone. She told me that I had to go somewhere when it was all over. She knew a place out west where someone like me could find instruction and become as great as I was meant to be."

"That's where you learned all that mind and body connection stuff?" said George.

"You got it," smiled Ed, "but don't let's get too far ahead of ourselves, George." Ed breathed heavily. "I would have gone and still would go, hell I *am* still going, anywhere to get that girl again." He grew silent and followed George's instructions to the house. "Shit, Stillgrow," he said with a laugh, "this is where you live, man?"

George laughed, looked around at the wreckage of old abandoned buildings, the single standing walls of The Spot, and a few vagrants already walking the streets in the morning light. He shrugged it off with a new confidence. "It's cozier than it looks."

"Damn," Ed said, "I can only imagine." He made the last turn onto George's street. George realized that he hadn't given him any instruction to do so. Before he could say anything about it, Ed continued his story.

“So,” Ed began, “we had one more night together, just as wild, carnal, and spiritual as the one before. That night, I could see a future for the two of us. There was nothing that could really stand in our way. Anything I felt for that woman before became my whole reality that night. I fell for her so damn strong that it still hurts today. It hurts so damn good that I never want to stop hating it.” George pointed out the house and Ed pulled up to the front and parked, not moving to get out yet. “I woke up the next day to Dan beating on my door. I thought for a second that all was about to be revealed. I turned to see what her plan was, but she was gone. The room was empty, and Dan kept on knocking. I got up and opened the door. We both stood there with the same stupid look on our faces. He saw the room was empty and left without asking me a single question. When I went back into the room, I found a note. It told me where to go and whom to find. That’s how I made it out west.”

“So what were you running from?” George asked.

“I’ll show you.” Ed said. He opened the car door and stepped out.

George pushed aside some of the empty bottles left out by Nate and Bobby’s apparent long night. He handed a laptop to Ed and went to the kitchen to make coffee. When he returned, Ed placed the computer on the table and moved to the other side of the room. “I can’t watch it. I haven’t been able to get through the whole thing more than once or twice in all the years it’s been up. Just before this, Dan spoke to me back stage; it was the first thing we had said between us since that morning. He shrugged off the fact that she was gone. I can’t say why it got to me like it did. It was like he was belittling not just her, but that feeling that she had given to us. That extra push towards greatness that came from being with her, he disregarded it in only a few

words. Something brewed up inside of me like venom in my veins. Then,” he pointed to the screen, “that happened.”

George looked up at Ed and wondered if he should even watch, wondered if it was right for him to see whatever terrible thing that Ed committed. He had heard about all of this before, knew the story of the crazed musician, but it was a blip in his memory. It was like watching an execution of a man standing right in front of you. Ed nodded towards the screen. George hit the play button.

The video was direct from the feed of the *Rolling Stone* crew. That night, it had been pulled earlier, this version, leaked onto the internet a few weeks after the show, revealed the full debacle that had been seen over a hundred thousand times since then. It started back stage; the roar of thousands of fans could be heard in the background. The band walked past the camera, following the white tape arrows directing them to the stage. The camera followed. George saw a younger Ed, long hair hanging over his face, blank of emotion. The guys turn a corner, and the crowd erupts in celebration. The shot cuts to another view, this one from the stands, capturing the massive audience and the stage. Another shot cut to the crowd, all smiles and cheers.

Dan went to the microphone, “Good tidings and Happy New Year!” A close up on his face showed the pure joy and accomplishment he felt. Chuck played a few notes from Auld Lang Sine, causing the crowd’s yells to swell again. Ed stood with his back to the crowd, strapping on his guitar and facing his amplifier. George saw his hands trembling at his sides.

The drummer counted it off, and the band went into their one-time hit, “*Everything Comes Back Around.*” The wide shot of the crowd and stage captured a massive collective of celebration. Through it all, it was hard to notice Ed missing his first note. A close up of him

facing his amp showed him looming over his guitar. His hands were trembling more violently now. He tried to strum a note again, but a harsh, cruel vibration came out instead.

Now, Ed was catching the attention of the rest of the band. A shot of the whole stage showed Dan striding quickly over to him, leaning in, and apparently yelling something. Ed stumbled backwards; his hands now seemed locked up like claws; his face contorted in struggle with his once fluid and lucid hands. He tried to hit the note again, and the hideous sound contradicted every sound that the others were playing. Ed was now near the center of the stage, and Dan leaned in on him, apparently screaming again. Ed raised his curled hands and stared at them like they belonged to another man. The rest of the band stopped playing one by one. Dan yelled again with a fury as he watched all he had worked for going down. The crowd was now catching on to something going wrong. The sound coming from them now was confused and dark. Once more, Dan yelled at Parley, who only stared back at him with rage and pain.

Ed swung his guitar off of his shoulder and swung it around by the strap. He flung it into his amplifier and released a visceral yell over the static hiss and high-pitched electric wail from the speakers. Screams and cheers mixed with awkward applause and jeers as the crowd tried to figure out what was happening to their night of joy. Dan moved in closer, grabbed his shoulders, cursed and questioned him. The cameras on stage caught a second where Ed looked back into Dan's eyes just as his hands moved from claws to fists. The first swing was lightning-fast. Dan hit the ground and Ed jumped on top, continuing to throw punch after punch. The others in the band got to him first, pulling back his arms and lifting him off of the bleeding Dan. Security guards in yellow shirts grabbed him around the waist, but Ed was far from done.

He wrestled free of their grip and pushed Chuck to the ground. He strode to the lights at the edge of the stage and put a boot through two of them. He ran behind the drum kit and knocked them all aside. He tore at the backdrop curtain and ripped half of it down. He continued to evade the yellow shirts of security and the others chasing him around the stage. He kicked a hole in one of the monitors and pushed an amplifier over. The falling amp fell into a light stand, which toppled over. As that hit the ground in a spark, the house lights came on. Ed, suddenly seeing the real damage he had done, dropped to his knees at the center of the stage. Looking out over the madness he had caused.

Fights had broken out throughout the arena. The same people that had come together for a night of rejoicing, dancing, and romancing, had contorted into a gruesome mob. Cameras on the floor caught shots of punches being thrown. Young girls were cowering in corners as hard core followers of the band were attacking the trend followers. People were running for the exits, screaming in fits. The cops moved in on the crowd. Some filled the air with pepper spray trying to break up small mobs of brawlers. One more shot of the stage revealed Ed taking it all in. His expression was not joy or pain, remorse or hate, but wonder and acceptance. He was tackled by three yellow shirts, and the video stopped.

George took a deep breath and stared at the screen before looking up. Ed was leaning in the doorway, looking out towards the lit horizon. George tried to find the words to say. He turned off the computer and leaned back in his couch. “Wow,” was all he could say. “That was you, huh? Yeah, I do remember hearing about it.”

“It certainly got around,” Ed said evenly. “It was ten o’clock the next morning when Guppy came to bail me out. They had to keep me in a special holding cell since half the guys

they locked up that night were there on my account. I was told all about my newfound infamy. Clips of that video, plus hundreds of stuff taken by those in the crowd, were already surfacing. The reps from the label, the arena and booking agents, the city of Dallas, and fucking *Rolling Stone* all wanted a piece of me. Dan never wanted to see me again, and Chucky wanted to kick me in the balls.” Ed gave a soft laugh.

“That’s when you ran,” said George, finally okay with repeating the obvious.

“You got it,” said Ed. “I ditched Gup in the airport, bussed my way to California, made a call to my folks before throwing out my cell phone, and hit the road to Mexico, following the path she suggested. I guess I half expected to find her there waiting for me, but . . .” He straightened himself and stretched. “That’s a story for another time.” They sat in silence for a moment.

Ed turned suddenly to George, “so, my new friend, now you know the truth behind the madman. Only a taste of lust and a dash of enlightenment caused the rock god to crumble before the masses. Follow your bliss, but keep a tight leash on the bastard, or else you’ll get dragged face down into the dirt. But as my current state can attest to, this is not as tragic a tale as it would seem. The road is always long, and though it often seems the path is straight, everything comes back around to take a hand in your fate.”

George smiled and nodded. He looked out of the window at the rising new day. He felt a sense of possibility now that had not been there before. He considered what fate had brought him that he had not acted on.

The door to Bobby's room swung open, and Bobby came out with wild hair, a t-shirt and sweat pants on. He spotted George on the couch and raised a fist. His dog, Argus, followed close behind. "Hey, Georgie! You missed a good one last night!" Bobby said as he walked directly into the kitchen. Argus, just about to raise his voice at George, noticed Ed and walked up to him and sat at his feet. Ed scratched the dog's head. George had only seen Argus act that way with Bobby.

"Where the fuck were you?" Bobby continued from the other room. "I must have called like six times. The footage from the forest bombing is looking sick!" George noticed Ed laughing a bit. "Did I hear you talking to someone?" Bobby asked as he emerged from the other room. George looked at Ed and noticed a discomfort at the presence of someone else. Bobby came back out with a glass of water and leaned on the door. For the first time, he noticed the tall, lanky man standing in the front doorway. Bobby's head turned to the side in a moment of recognition.

George stood and started the introduction, "Bobby, this is that new guy I'm teaching with, Ed . . ."

Bobby laughed aloud, "Eddie Parley!?!!" he said, throwing his head back. "No fucking way, man!"

Ed forced a smile and looked to George. "Good to meet you, Bobby," he said quickly. "It's about time I start heading out, George," he said over Bobby's shoulder. "See you at work Monday." He turned quickly and walked back to his car.

Bobby stood in the doorway, his mouth open. He looked at George, "How the fuck did you meet Eddie Parley? That guy has been a ghost for fucking five years. He's fucking working

with you now? What the fuck is up with that?” He looked back out at Ed’s car pulling away, three big, black six pointed stars adorning the hood and doors. “What, is he a fucking rabbi or something, now?” George, utterly exhausted, stood to go to bed. He promised Bobby that he would talk about it later.

Chapter 7

George leaned back in his teacher’s chair and propped his feet up on the desk. The last of the students had left the building, and he had made it through yet another week of teaching. He reflected on the differences that had become increasingly obvious since Eddie Parley’s arrival. The students and other teachers had settled into a new routine, most without really showing any awareness of it. Things had become more calm and organized at the Crawfax County Alternative High School, and it seemed that only a few people really understood why.

George thought often about Ed’s past. He went back and watched the video several times that week, looking for hints of his new friend in the diabolical madman tearing up a stage. He thought about having that as a curse that follows you around. At first, he was thankful that there was no such thing that could follow him around. However, that slowly turned into self-pity when he realized that he had no baggage, because he had never gone anywhere nor done anything. He made a promise to himself to make some impact on this world and change things for the better. Starting with the students was too much of a challenge, so he decided he would help Parley wrestle with the demons of the past.

Earlier that day at lunch, George had lunch with Ed and Kayla in the break room. The three of them had spent every lunch together since the night at the bar. George revealed Ed’s past to Kayla secretly and sent her the video, but neither of them spoke of it to Ed, who seemed

perfectly content with the arrangement. When Kayla had left them alone towards the end of the lunch period, George had taken a bold step. He invited Parley to go with him that Saturday to see a show: Chucky Bunch's new band at the Nickel. From the story that Ed shared, Chuck was the one former band member that he could possibly want to reunite with, and George saw the opportunity to help his new friend bury the past. Prepared for a massive battle of rejection, George had been surprised by a very casual and calm acceptance of the invitation.

Sitting at his desk in the empty classroom, his feet propped up on the desk, George basked in a moment of self-congratulations. He had made it through yet another week of the most "positive and productive" education possible considering the circumstances. He may have taken the first steps towards reuniting rock stars. With a shot of courage, he reached for his phone and pulled up the number he had memorized in the past two weeks: Merry Lee. He had called her once, three days before. She had not answered, and he had left a brief message that still haunted him for its idiocy. He held his thumb over the send button for what could have been the twentieth time and told himself that this would be the day he called and spoke to the woman that wouldn't get out of his head. A knock at his open door snapped him out of his focus, and he closed the phone. Ed walked in without being asked and took a seat on George's desk.

"Another one down, heh George?" Ed picked up one of the worksheets the kids were supposed to work on that day. This one had actually been attempted by a girl in third period. Half of the writing was legible. "Well, she gave it a try, huh?"

"Yeah," George said. "Say, what were you guys up to in your room today? It sounded like a monastery. There wasn't a peep."

"Meditation," Ed replied without looking away from the paper.

“You had them meditating?” George asked in disbelief. “How the hell did you pull that off?”

“I made a bet with them,” Ed said, grinning and looking down at George. “They didn’t think I could hold a handstand on my desk for a minute. I proved I could; they asked how. So, I told them that meditation was the first step. They seemed to dig the idea.”

“Another west coast trick?” George asked, packing his things to leave.

“You got it, amigo,” replied Ed. “Well, good afternoon to you, Ms. Vaughn.”

George turned and saw Kayla walk in. Ed stood up from his seat on the desk, and Kayla sauntered over to the spot and took it for herself. She smiled widely, full of energy after a long day. “Hey boys,” she said in a playful tone. “Parley, I heard you were doing some circus shit over there this afternoon.” George looked down and noticed that the top of her panties were showing as she sat with her back to him. Her dark skin accentuated the light blue lace. He caught himself staring as Ed explained to her his day’s wager with the kids. “And you, Mr. Stilgrew?” she said with a slow draw, snapping his attention towards her eyes. He blushed severely as he nodded, and she pulled her shirt down to cover herself. He noticed that she didn’t lose her smile though.

Ed clapped his hands. “Alright, lady and gent,” he said with a slight bow, “I’ll be bidding you both a fond adieu. Stillgrew, I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“You got it,” George said. “You sure you want to go?” he asked as Ed walked through the door and slapped the top of the frame with both hands.

“Of course I do,” he replied from the hall. “You two keep things clean in there. This is a place of serious education.” His steps faded down the hall. George and Kayla looked at each other, blushed and smiled again for no particular reason.

“So,” Kayla said in almost two syllables, “you’re going out on the town with Parley tomorrow, huh?”

“Yeah,” George replied then leaned in closer as if in conspiracy. “We’re going to see a show by his old keyboard player. I don’t think they’ve seen each other since, well that night.”

Kayla’s hazel eyes went wide, “No shit!?” She leaned back a bit, and her tone grew motherly again. “You’re getting him back into all of that? You really think it’s a good idea?”

“I think so,” George said, “it seems like he really connected with this guy before. Maybe it’ll do him good to see him again.”

“Unless that old shit comes back to bite them both in the ass,” Kayla said. She laughed a little bit and continued, “I think that’s a fine thing you’re trying to do for him, George.” George nodded and smiled. Kayla stood up from the desk and turned to face him. “George,” she began, “I know your plans for tomorrow are set, but,” she looked him in the eyes, “you got anything going on tonight?”

George, caught by surprise, stumbled over his words, “well, I, uh, nothing planned, Kayla. You want to do something later?” He instantly felt how corny he sounded.

Kayla grinned, “Yeah. I think I do want to do something with you later.” She picked up a worksheet from his desk and wrote her address and number on it. “Are you alright with coming

to pick a girl up around eight?” She handed him the paper. He took it, trying to act cool. She kept her smile, but never seemed too eager. Her eyes had admiration within them, mixed with a bit of humor at his expense.

George held the paper up and smiled, “I’d love to.”

She laughed again and said, “I can’t believe that I just asked you out! I wasn’t even planning on it. I mean, I thought about it before, but I . . . I just didn’t expect it to be today. Sometimes you just got to make the move, huh George?”

“I’m glad you did,” George smiled.

“You think I’m crazy?” she asked as she backed out of the room.

“Not at all,” George said softly, “See you at eight, Kayla.”

“See you then, George.”

When George got back to the house, Bobby was in his room, boxes and bags of equipment were layered across the living room. George tripped over a metal case and knocked a folded tripod from its position leaning against the wall. Argus charged in the room and threw a vicious three curses his way. “Shut the fuck up!” yelled Bobby from the next room. “What the fuck did you do, Argie?” He came in the room with a duffle bag full of clanging metal over his left shoulder. Upon sight of George, he dropped the bag to the ground and tilted his head as if studying something.

“What?” George said, moving past him, into the room and flopping down on the couch. Bobby watched him the whole way and kept this look on his face. A grin started to spread up his cheeks.

“Who is she, Stilshits?” he asked and moved around the side of the old green leather sofa.

“What the fuck are you talking about, Bob?” George said, closing his eyes and smiling wide.

“You slick son of a bitch!” Bobby said quickly. “I haven’t seen you grinning like that since damn Gina Sloan took you home from that Halloween party four years ago. Shit, don’t tell me that girl from the Nickel called you back.”

“No, Bob,” George felt a sudden pang of embarrassment for his only effort towards the mysterious Merry Lee, and then reassured himself with the thought of Kayla’s smile. “That lady I teach with, Ms. Vaughn. Kayla. She pretty much asked me out and I’m picking her up in a few hours.”

“Hell yeah, Georgie boy!” Bobby said and punched him in the shoulder for congratulations. “She’s that sister that you mentioned. Pretty face, decent body, nothing to go ape-shit over, but solid all around?”

“Those are your words, not mine,” George said, sitting up and rubbing his eyes. “But, yeah, they’ll do.” Bobby stood up and clapped his hands.

“Fuck yeah, my man. Tap it!” He stepped over the table and began picking up the fallen equipment. “This fucking bullshit sausage commercial outside of Jackson, Mississippi is driving me crazy!”

“That’s where you’re taking all this?” George asked, looking over the couch.

“Yeah,” Bobby leaned over and stacked three yellow and metal cases. “Got stuck on running equipment in the cube truck. Nate’s on his way here with it now.” He leaned the tripod back against the wall and steadied it, holding his hand an inch away for a moment. Swiveling in his Chuck Taylor’s, he turned and strutted back to the green leather sofa, pulled a pipe out of the side table and took a hit. “George gonna get some pussaay,” he sang softly as he exhaled. George tittered nervously at the thought. Argus came back in the room, lay at Bobby’s feet and directed three grunts under his breath at George.

“So,” Bobby began, “when the fuck are you going to bring Eddie-fucking-Parley over again?” George had mostly avoided the subject all week, except to ask Bobby to fill in some details from the fans’ perspective. “I still can’t fucking believe that you just ended up working with that dude. Nobody’s heard from him in like, four years.” His eyes grew wide at a thought, “Have you heard him play yet? I mean live? Dude! That would be the shit! That guy is a legend, bro.”

George shook his head, “Actually, no. I haven’t even thought about it, but he hasn’t even mentioned playing aside from the old days. I’m not even sure if he does anymore.” George remembered the hands that turned to claws and the sound of a violent off-note followed by a scream.

Bobby kept working while he talked, “Man, you should get that guy to play. He was just unreal when they were at the top, before, well, you know.”

“Yeah,” George said. “I think that he and I are going to the Nickel tomorrow to check out

his old keyboardist's band." Bobby dropped a box, stumbled over another, and flung himself back on the couch next to George.

"You mean," he said with astonishment, "Parley is going to be at the show tomorrow? There's a possibility of a Bunch/Parley reunion right down the fucking street tomorrow fucking night?" Bobby started reaching for his phone. "I've got people to call. This could be huge!"

George reached out and stopped him. "Bobby, don't!" It was the most authoritatively direct tone that George had ever used with Bobby, and it stopped them both short for a second. "Don't do it, man. Parley is fragile. If he got up there and the whole fucking scene was expecting something great from him, he would freak out. Plus," he added and put Bobby's phone on the table himself, "if something like that did happen, it would be my fault for bringing him there."

Bobby nodded in agreement, then laughed a little. "Damn, Stillgrow," he said getting up and continuing to work, "never thought that I'd see you all big balling with dates and low-key, high-profile nights out on the town. I feel like my little boy is all grown up," he said with a grin. Underneath it, George could hear a suggestion of jealousy that only a long-time friend can hear.

"You guys are welcome to come to the show, if you can make it back in time," George said to settle the tension.

Bobby looked up and winked. "Man," he said while lifting and stacking boxes at twice the speed as before, "If I have to skip a whole night's sleep and kick every damn one of these people in the ass after every shot to get this shit wrapped by tomorrow night, you can bet I will." The rumbling engine of a cube truck sounded from the street.

“About fucking time,” said Bobby as he stood. The engine stopped and Bobby opened the front door. “It’ll be damn near midnight when we pull into sausage-land, bitch! Get in here and help me load this fucking gear!”

“Piss off!” yelled Nate from the yard. “Damn traffic on the Connector was fucked! The repaving project can eat my ass!” He came into the house, sweating through his backwards cap. His shirt had pit stains. “Bad news, Bob. No AC in the cube. Looks like we’re rolling down the windows for this ride.”

“Whatever, we’ll be in the cool of night,” Bobby said with a newfound rush, “Now, get your ass in here and grab these camera cases. Got a surprise for you.” Nate looked up, curious. “If we can knock this gig out in less than twenty-four hours, you and I will be joining George and his new-found buddy, Eddie Parley, at the Nickel tomorrow.”

“Damn,” said Nate, “Isn’t Bunch playing . . .”

“You got it, shit head,” Bobby said smiling. “Now, get moving!”

George stood up and got a drink from the kitchen. Bobby went out the front door sideways with cases in his hands and under his arms, the duffle bag strap wrapped around his head. Nate brushed passed him and saw George standing there. “Yo, G-shot! You want to give us a hand with this shit?” George put the glass down on the counter and bent over to pick up a case. Bobby came back for his second load.

“What are you doing, Stills?” Bobby said, pulling the case from George’s hands. “You got a fucking date to get ready for, don’t you?”

“Oh shit!” Nate hollered. “George is getting some tonight?” George gave Bobby a double look of disappointment for making this public.

“Yeah,” Bobby answered for him. “Picking up a sweet sister-teacher that’s gone hot for him.” He sang a few opening notes from the Van Halen tune about teachers, and George laughed despite himself.

He walked back through the living room. Argus shuffled back on his four feet and grumbled three at him. “Have a blast, boys. Bring back some sausage.” he yelled out of the open door before closing it.

“About all the good that’s going to come out of this,” said Bobby through a grunt as he turned a long case to the side to get it through the door. “Damn impotent directors on these impotent commercials. Nothing genuine ever comes out of this. Show me a fucking slaughter house! Get a close-up on the grinders! Give me something with some substance and I’ll crave the hell out of some meat!” George chuckled at Bobby’s fire and went to the stereo. He found Bobby’s old copy of Broken Wire’s first album and played *Everything Comes Back Around* for the fifth time that week. The sounds of a younger Parley’s guitar melody gave him some peace, and a bit of encouragement, as his friends drove off and he went to prepare for his date with Kayla.

When George got out of the shower, it was seven thirty. He had just a few minutes before he had to hit the door, and he couldn’t stop pacing around the living room. He didn’t want to leave yet and be early, yet he couldn’t think of anything else to do. His nerves were working him into the past, bringing those old, embarrassing failures with women to mind. He shook off the old and looked at himself in the mirror, and felt foolish enough to practice a few greeting to

himself. He thought of Kayla's beautiful eyes and warm smile. The thought of her calmed him from the anxiety of going on a date for the first time in years.

His phone rang, and as he fumbled to get it open, he didn't even look at the number. It must have been Kaya telling him she was ready.

"Hello, George," said a sweet, sultry voice. "I'm sorry that it took me so long to call back."

George saw his face in the mirror drop into shock. "Merry Lee," he whispered.

"I'm ready to see you," her voice sang, "please come and join me at my place."

"But," he began to explain his unavailability.

"There was something there between us," she interrupted, "the other night. I haven't been able to shake the feeling of it. It's something that I haven't felt in quite some time." There was a long pause as George stood frozen in the hallway, trying to ignore the thoughts that echoed hers. "Was I alone on that, George?"

George swallowed and cleared his throat. "No!" he almost shouted. "No, no. I know what you mean. But listen, I don't think that I can . . ."

"Come over to my place tonight," she kept a cool tone that brought back the music that played when they had met. Visions of her dancing body sent a shiver through him. "We can explore this a bit more, and if that feeling that we share is any hint towards what could be, this could be the best night of your life. Of our lives."

George pulled the phone from his ear and placed it to his chest. Argus swayed into the room and looked up at him. The dog stayed silent and stoic, staring at him as if waiting for his reply. George lifted the phone.

“George,” Merry Lee said with anticipation.

“How do I get there?”

Chapter 8

She lived in a loft along the east part of the city, in an old factory building where mattresses used to be made. The directions were easy enough and George spent most of the ride convincing himself that this was the right choice; that she was the one he should be going to. He picked up his phone to call Kayla several times along the way, but never dialed the number. When he pulled up to Merry Lee’s building and parked, he intentionally left the phone in his car. Kayla would call, angry and hurt. He couldn’t face it. Fighting off confusion and practical reason, he made his way to the door, deciding to follow some urge that he couldn’t explain, seduced by mystery and promises of something erotic and magical.

Her door was cracked open. A soft and soulful melody came from inside; a jazz piano tune that seemed familiar though he couldn’t place it. He took a deep breath and placed his hand on the door, building up the courage to push it open. “Come on in, George,” Merry Lee called from inside. He didn’t know how she knew he was there. The single-room loft was spacious and covered with strange and beautiful trinkets, paintings, and small sculptures. All the lights were shaded with color, and several candles throughout the room threw shadows against the exposed

brick walls. Merry Lee stood from a couch that faced a large window on the opposite wall from the entrance. She wore a light dress of blended earth tones that clung to her figure as if it were held by some magnetic force. A small, round pendant of jade hung loosely around her brown shoulders and rested on her chest. She looked at George over her shoulder, those feline eyes glowing beneath her short, jet black hair. A strand hung along her cheek and curled up to itself next to her right eye. “Wonderful of you to come,” she said as she moved closer, bringing George a glass. He trembled slightly and took an awkward step forward.

“I couldn’t resist,” he said through a sigh. Trying his best to maintain a suave and confident façade, he accepted the glass of wine. A charm of red glass beads and a golden ring dangled from the stem of the glass. The wine was dry and rich. The early dark of a winter night blackened the tall windows. “Your place is,” George searched for a clever word, and his gaze fell into her eyes, “fascinating.” She laughed out loud and put her fingers to her mouth.

“Thanks, George,” she said and took his hand, leading him past her kitchen and towards the large, billowy sofa. “I guess I’ve tried my best to make it so. Most of these things I’ve picked up along travels.” George look around at the myriad of bizarre and beautiful things. A large painting hung above her mantle. Two figures, each a shade of blue, faceless and flowing, rose from what could have been a fire, entwined before a dark red sky. Single shelves lined three of the walls. Each was draped with a different tapestry of fine linen, with varying patterns hypnotic and ancient. Several pictures, each in a unique frame, showed younger versions of her in places that must have been far away. Some included others that George assumed were family. Among the small sculptures were dozens of necklaces and bracelets of gold, silver, and bronze. George picked a necklace up off of a small statue of what must have been a Buddha. Nine leaves made of bronze, linked with small gold rings, with an opal stone at the center.

“A gift,” she said, standing next to him, placing a hand on my back and holding up the opal stone with her other. “A man I knew in Peru made it for me. He descended from an ancient line of Mayan craftsmen. He made this for my birthday.”

“Which birthday?” George asked, hoping to learn anything about this woman.

“One of the good ones,” she smiled, took the necklace from his hand and placed it gently back on the Buddha. She walked back around George, her fingers trailing across his shoulder. Then, she sat on the couch, placing her feet on the cushion next to her, and sipped from her glass. A chain of blue glass beads dangled from the stem. Suddenly, George needed something to make sense of all this. It was too good to be so easy.

“Where are you from?” he asked, mesmerized and still standing. “Here I am, drinking wine and I think being set up for seduction and I don’t know a thing about you.”

“Well,” she said, sitting up and tilting her head, “that’s the most direct thing you’ve said to me yet. There may be hope for you yet, George.” She set her glass down on the table in front of her and patted the seat cushion next to her. “Sit down and I’ll tell you. Then it’ll be your turn.” George moved towards her, taking a long sip of wine, and sat forming a deliberate distance between them. She poured another glass for them both. Then, opening a small, engraved box on the table, she pulled out a joint, struck a match and lit it.

“I’m what some would refer to as . . .” she trailed off her gaze and sent a graceful hand gesturing in small circles towards the window, “a transient being.” Her eyes came back to mine and she laughed and took a hit off the perfectly rolled, petite joint. “I was born out west, in California. When I was a kid, my dad moved us around a good bit.” She passed the joint to George, and he held it uninterested, simply waiting for more about her. “He was a bit of a hippie,

you know. I don't even really remember living in a house until I was like, nine or something like that." She gestured towards George's hand. "You gonna hit that or what?"

He mumbled a bit of an apology and took a couple of short, nervous tokes. She watched him with devout interest and smiled brilliantly. "Sounds pretty cool," George said, immediately cursing himself for sounding like a total jackass. She brushed the back of her hand against his face, moving it down his arm to his hand, gently taking the joint out of his fingers. She leaned back in the couch, breaking contact between their bodies for the first time in minutes.

"Sounds, sure," she said staring out of the window. "And I guess I would learn to appreciate such wanderings, but," she lifted her hand to her forehead, joint burning slowly away. Again, George sat in silent anticipation and awe. "You know, I remember seeing these beautiful places for the first time. Like Yosemite Falls, or the coast off Big Sur, and just kind of brushing it off. My old man would make these long speeches about nature and beauty, the grace of Mother Earth and the confines of material existence. I just couldn't," she drank a deep sip of her wine and remembered the joint. She tapped the long ash into a colored glass tray on the table. She offered George more. He couldn't refuse and squeezed the end with his fingers, which felt clumsy and thick.

"I remember seeing these families during the summer, at the parks and campgrounds. These were, like, normal people, and it totally fascinated me. I was told that I was living the dream of any kid, but I couldn't help but feel that I was missing something, too." She stretched out her legs and placed her feet on the table, kicking off her shoes with her toes. She leaned her back against the other end of the couch and moved her feet to George's knees. "The grass is always greener, right."

“So they say,” George said, and stared at her for a second. The burning of the roach on his fingers brought him out of the trance. She laughed a little and nibbled on the end of her finger, smiling an angel’s grin with a devilish intent.

“You’re one of them, aren’t you?” she asked.

“One of whom?”

“The normal people,” she said. “I can tell. Pure suburbanite with family outings and Christmas lights on the bushes out front, that’s you.”

George shook his head slightly, “I wouldn’t say totally Brady Bunch, but . . .”

“I bet you grew up in the same house until you were out of high school.”

George laughed nervously. “For a few years afterward, too, actually.” She took down the rest of her wine in a full gulp and laughed, kicking her feet in the air.

“I knew it!” she said with delight. She rose to her feet and went back towards the kitchen. George finished up his glass quickly. “I bet you think your childhood was shitty too, huh?” she said while rummaging around for another bottle of wine.

“Had its moments,” George replied, standing. When he got to his feet, he didn’t know what to do with himself. Instead of standing there, waiting for the right thing to say, he asked where her bathroom was. She pointed with a graceful, swan’s reach toward the bedroom, and he excused himself.

The bathroom had its share of trinkets, gems, stones and paintings as well. Clean and cluttered at once, it smelled wonderful and exotic, like George imagine rose petals in India would smell. He splashed water on his face and looked into the mirror, trying to see this

attractive and cool person that she must have thought he was. Music came from the other side of the door. A slow, bluesy soul song that he had never heard before, yet felt he should have known. “This is going to happen,” George said to himself in the mirror. He summoned up every bit of courage in his body and convinced himself that he would go out there, sweep her off her feet, take her into her bed, and give her the best performance of his life. When he opened the door, she was standing next to her bed, naked down to the chain around her ankle and the rings around her toes.

George stood motionless, mouth agape, as he watched her sway softly to the music. Her hands went to her hips, fingers outstretched, and she brought them slowly up her body, around her breasts, across her chest and up into her short, jet-black hair. Keeping her arms up and her hands behind her head, she smiled and narrowed her eyes. “Come over here, George,” she said. He had never heard his name sound so sweet in all of his days. He remembered to breathe and shut his mouth, blinking for the first time in ages. Standing there in the bathroom, he shut the door.

Every bit of his body and mind was in battle with itself. He felt every muscle lock into place and scream to move forward. He cursed himself for not being, at that very moment, wrapped up in a sensuous, blissful euphoria. Yet he inwardly begged his muscles not to move, nor his hand release the knob of the door. He imagined that on the other end of that door, she was gathering her clothes, cursing him for his cowardice and ready to slap him in the face as soon as he walked out. It was absolute agony. George moved to the sink again, running the water and taking in a sip, trying to fight off the urge to throw up out of sheer panic. Then the door opened, and the light went out.

George breathed heavily. It was all that he could hear. He tried to look towards her silhouette, backlit by the soft red lights from the candles burning in the bedroom. He turned and opted for the dark wall opposite him. Trying to muster some kind of apology, he mumbled at his feet. He couldn't get himself to say anything. He felt her hand in his. Her other hand came across his chest and pulled him towards her. She kissed the back of his neck and breathed sweetly to his ear. His breath slowed, and he swallowed hard. Her lips touched his skin again, just below his ear, and she pulled him closer to her. He felt her breasts against his back. She pulled his hand in hers back towards her, until his fingers were touching the soft curve of her waist. He felt the tiny hairs of her skin and breathed deeply. She pulled herself around him, so the light from the next room landed on her face over his shoulder. She put her arms around his neck, leaving his hands on her waist. He moved his fingertips up to the small of her back and breathed again. She leaned close, and he felt her breath on his lips. "Stay with me, George," she said. The panic left him in a final breath. He took the first step back towards the bed.

Just before George woke the next morning, he revisited the sounds of the sea and the feeling of sand beneath his feet. He was not sinking, and the voice of a woman spoke in his ear. He did not feel panic or surprise, excitement or joy, simply contentment. He opened his eyes to the morning light coming in through the large windows of Merry Lee's loft. An autumn red-and-orange tapestry filtered the light in the room. He did not lift his head immediately, but stared into the light and smiled. He reached for her, but he was alone in the bed. Slowly, he turned over and looked across the open space to see her on the wooden floor of her living room. Positioned on only her hands, she had her legs raised directly out to her side parallel to the floor. Her head was arched up so that her chin pointed to the ceiling. Her eyes were closed in serenity.

The image seemed impossible and gloriously feminine. She was a living sculpture celebrating all that was alive, limber, gentle, and strong. George propped himself up on his elbows and gazed at her with awe. He didn't want to make a sound to disturb her, though it seemed by the look on her face that it would be impossible to distract her. His gaze followed her legs towards her body, taking note of every svelte muscle under her olive skin. The shadow her body cast spread behind her like sundial. Suddenly, she lowered her head, inhaled deeply, then pulled her legs into her body. Still, only her palms touched the ground. She straightened her legs behind her, then drew her knees to her chest and lowered herself onto the ground. Extending her arms forward, she released her breath as every muscle on her back relaxed in unison.

“My god,” George whispered.

Merry Lee, turned her head to the side and looked at George over her shoulder. “Good morning, George.” She smiled and giggled a little laugh, “Thank you again for a wonderful evening.”

George couldn't find any other words besides, “thank you.” She rose to her feet and put on a robe.

“You should get up, now, George,” she said as she walked towards her kitchen, “I've made some tea.” George rose to his feet, realizing he was still naked made him grin. He dressed quickly, eager to talk with her more. He became aware of a great confidence within him and a desire to live that he could not remember ever having before. Even the jagged memory of the wrong that he had done Kayla did not affect him. He thought, without knowing how or why, that everything would be worked out between them.

Putting his shoes on as he walked, he looked around again at the small wonders surrounding her place. In the light of the sun, certain objects reflected the light in different colors and angles. George wondered if it was possible for her to plan the perfection of purpose that every single thing in the room appeared to serve. She was pouring the tea, humming to herself. He looked again at the array of framed pictures on the wall. They were from a myriad of locations. There were snow capped mountains, rocky creeks in the woods, canyons at sunset, shores with indigo colored water, and fields of sunflowers. She appeared in a few, at varied ages, but still recognizable, still beautiful, lean and elegant. One was of her as a teenager, her hair long and blowing in the wind. She was with a man that George guessed was her father. He looked Spanish and had a full black beard salted with grey. They stood on a cliff before a sea. She was looking up at him with admiration; he was looking at the camera with a wild yet wise smile.

There was another picture, leaning in a corner on a bookshelf. George picked it up. She was a woman in this one, fully grown, with a slightly younger face. Her hair was long, way past her shoulders, dangling down her back. She was dancing, caught in a pose of fluid grace. She was in a dark room, with colored lights behind her. There were others in the background, some caught in their own motions, some leaning casually back against the walls. George saw two young men, each staring at the woman before them with wonder. He realized suddenly that man closest to her, staring in trepid admiration, was a younger Eddie Parley.

After the initial recognition, it took George a few minutes of disbelief and confusion to piece the connection together and come to the conclusion that he tried a thousand times in a moment to deny. He had found Lenore, or perhaps she had found him. She came up to him and saw him looking at the picture. "That was taken in at a club in New York," she said casually. "It was a wonderful night." She handed him a mug of tea. "It's assalam tea. You'll like it." She took

a sip of her own and looked up into his eyes. The beauty of that look distracted him for a moment, then he focused his determination to quell the notion he had.

He pointed at Parley in the photo, “These guys look familiar, who are they?” he asked.

She looked towards the picture and smiled with a hint of sadness. “Old friends of mine. They were in a band. You probably remember them, Broken Wire. That one is Dan, and,” she sighed as her fingertip reached Parley’s face. “That one is Eddie.” She looked at the picture for a second and turned her face up to George. “They were good friends.” Despite her efforts to hide it, George saw a pain within her and knew that this was the woman that took down empires. His Merry Lee was Eddie Parley’s Lenore.

“I’ve got to go,” said George, trying not to show any panic. He had to figure out what to do next. There was no way he could start a relationship with this woman, if there was ever a chance to begin with. What would Ed say if George told him where she could be found? Would he tell him about what happened the night before? Without taking a sip of tea, he thanked her for the night, apologized, and left in a hurry.