

Frantic. Coming undone at the seams. I was sweating, driving like a maniac though I hadn't drunk a drop. Too angry to calm down, too worried to think straight. But I had to. I needed answers and I needed them now. And worse, I had to get them on my own. I had no partners anymore, no one to help me, no one to watch my back. My aching, sweating, crippled-up back.

Who killed Goldwynn:

Was Goldwynn a member of the fancy pocket-watch club?

Did they have him murdered?

Was that his watch in the woods?

Why did the Agency let us live for so long and why did they want us on their side now?

That last one was the big one. We were too close to something, I could feel it. They couldn't let us continue the investigation without putting us on a leash. Probably because we'd stumbled on their contractors, information we weren't supposed to have. But we were also proving to be useful too. The solution was to strong-arm us into joining. And that told me what Pies had completely disregarded. There was something that they needed to know that they hadn't found yet. That they believed we might be able to find.

I was thinking in 100 directions at once. Driving with all eyes in the mirrors, watching for tails. I was chewing up my cigarette, grasping for anything, making bizarre connections in my head to anything I could remember, every hunch, every gut feeling, every buzz in the back of my head. I was trying to put my priorities in order - should I go back to knocking down that goddamned wall? Should I be going out and having a talk with DeWolfe - try to get a gander in his pockets? Should I be going over the files again - digging through our notes? Should I be trying to find out whether or not Lisa was facedown in a ditch somewhere? Should I just say fuck it and go drive right through the side of Pies' restaurant and kill him?

I was driving without a direction, pulling in and out of parking lots, looping endlessly through traffic circles, stoplight after stoplight after stoplight. When Andy would drift into my thoughts I'd feel anger rising up in me like bile, and I would do my best to push that down inside of me so I could focus again. It was hard to think and I was so goddamned sore I was nauseous. Those sons of bitches should be here, helping me. Instead the burden of the whole fucking case was on my shoulders like some freakish hump.

My father always used to say all things come in threes, good and bad news, pain and fortune alike. We'd gotten a flat tire once, driving through the country. He said that was our first jinx, told me to watch for the other two coming our way. Sure enough, putting on the spare the sky opened up and started pouring down on us.

'That's two' he'd said to me.

And then, with the piss-poor visibility caused by the rain, he narrowly avoided collision with a truck full of sows.

I was a believer.

I didn't believe in hexes or none of that, but I came to see that things always just worked out that way: in three. When I was wrangling with a puzzle for too long, it always came true. Either three big breaks came my way all at once, or three big walls sprung up and

called Monarch Mark I - sold at a whopping \$2000 a pop. I made them pull all files on sales to private clients for all gasmasks of that make and model. The Monarch Mark I was labelled as patent-pending, still part of R&D, not being advertised or sold to anyone. The poor clerks tried to tell me this again and again but I insisted they keep looking. Pull records of sales to any Van Erdel or Baul, obscure sales to research facilities or universities.

I ordered a small lunch from the cafeteria while they searched since I hadn't eaten at Pies after all. I came back to the archives with my fries and shake, began to bark more orders at the ladies. I didn't even feel bad doing it. This might be my last day on earth. Why be a gentleman about anything? Three clerks had turned to six and they were all over the place, climbing big ladders and searching through enormous cabinets. One portly lady who I hadn't seen before came up to me and let me know she was taking care of the situation at Gold's personal request. She had an operator's head-set on, plugged into a big radio she carried around on her hip with a strap. She saluted me like I was in charge and handed me what I needed, told me her name was Rhonda. In my hands I had the compiled documents on the Monarch I.

A total of 200 were made - ever, and only one shipment had ever gone out, a solid order of 45 Monarch I's. The reason they had trouble finding it was because it wasn't sold, there was no record of sale. The company had given them away. Each one came with a special handset and 20 cylinders of 'SEMINUS 6'. It all sounded like some kind of bizarre joke to me, but this case was getting weirder by the second and I had no choice other than to accept it. She stood near me and asked if there was anything else I needed.

"Gold told me whatever you requested is to be my number one priority," Rhonda said.

Later, I finished reading the document and had a cigarette on the roof. I'd never been on the roof of a skyscraper before so I figured I would try it. I was allowed to do whatever I wanted! The elevator man said I shouldn't go up there but I told him to go suck a lemon. But he was right. The wind was so strong that I could hardly light up, and it was so strong I couldn't go anywhere near the edge.

A name. I finally had one. The shipment of masks had gone to something called MASTER GROUP - an address in Monte Rio, California. I would wager all my pennies that this was the Black Watch club. I lost a few pages up there but they weren't too important. I watched them get swept straight off the building, so fast that they didn't have time to fall down, they just flew straight back. I watched them go and wondered how long it would take for them to land and become meaningless litter. I wondered how long it would take me to do the same thing from this height.

My clerks then went to work finding out what the hell a Master Group was. I ordered a single lamb chop and a box of doughnuts and coffees for the girls. I told them I appreciated all their work, and that they deserved a break. A real doll named Nora sat with me while I ate, but the others kept working. They made phone calls, went into the archives and accounts, through the investor's portfolios. I assumed it would be a company or a foundation, something with a ton of stock in Goldwynn's company. But I was wrong. Another half-hour went by before Rhonda came over and gave me the results. She awkwardly explained in detail that it appeared to be a Gentleman's Club of some sort. She found them in the company's Press Releases first, an article about the founding of Goldwynn's charity, The Family Wellness Project. It

series of pies. And then imagine a man with just as many fingers in every one of those pies. That's who Dewolfe is, sweetie'"

She laughed and so did some other clerks but I didn't.

Rhonda didn't either, but that's because we were still all tangled up and joined at the hip - and because she had heard the bulk of Gold's tirade.

It was probably a good thing I didn't go try to see DeWolfe. If Baul was just the mad scientist of the Rich Man's Club and we almost got killed from going near his house, I would imagine waving hello to DeWolfe from across a football field would get my arms and legs sawed off in no time flat. I wished I had gone to speak with him instead of Hoobler, but if that had been the case, that would mean that Hoob would've worked over the scene of the crime or interviewed the Castle crew, which were all bad ideas. It was stupid to mull over things like that, but I just wished I had spoken with him. I might've figured this out sooner.

But what had I even figured out? We already knew the Pinks worked for wealthy fellas, now we just knew *who* those fellas were. Bunch of sex-perverts who run the whole fucking show -- the men behind the curtain. So now I had some names to try to come up with some motives for. Names of people I couldn't go near without coming face to face with the Templar Division, the cops, or even the Lord God himself.

The girls had done their job. They were still digging for more on Master Group, but I wasn't expecting much more to come of it. And I wasn't going to order them to start calling newsrags and tattlers to shake out any stories of bad-blood between Goldwynn and every one of the names on my clipping. Even if I wanted to, they were accountants and secretaries, not cut out for this kind of work. They wrote memos and looked for tax loopholes - none of them were cut out for any of this. I thought of Lisa, with her nose for research. Her ability to see the strings on a puppet and what hands were dancing them around. My gut clenched when I thought about her, and then it sunk even further when I thought about Andy. Hoob had probably already told him.

I wanted to stay with them, hide up in the files while they worked, make them laugh, become friends with them. Go home with them and let them all adopt me. They seemed so happy, something I hadn't genuinely felt is so goddamned long. Then again, they were probably just enjoying a break from their usual grind, away from their bosses. I reminded myself they were probably just as fucked up as I was underneath. Well, not quite as bad. I was a wreck, physically and mentally, at my wits edge and supertime was still on its way. The biggest piece of this had come down the pipe with the gasmask development and now I had a name. The rest I would have to do on my own.

I bid farewell to Jude and Nora and Rhonda and Big Joanie, Jess, Tracey and Trisha. Before I left I thumbed through my money clip, trying to figure out what would be enough for everyone. I ended up just splitting the whole thing into seven piles and leaving with empty pockets. I realized I usually spend all my money in instances exactly as this. Trying to make amends for using people. I had more in the trunk, in the glove compartment, in the back of the toilet in the office, extra under bunker floorboards that only I knew about. I would have to go bail some out.

I got into the driver's seat. I had a cigarette and looked up at the skyscraper. I reached around behind and grabbed the grey rubbery thing, pulled it over my face.

see ol' G.B. with a black pocket watch? Apparently it fires out a small device with a spring. You ever see that?"

"Mr. Brown!" he tried to hold his ground but I pushed against him, forcing him back.

"You spent a lot of time with him. The most - that's what Andy Bobby said. That's what you told him! Did you ever see these things - or see them used on anybody?"

His heels backed into the first carpeted step and he fell over backwards. But I kept coming, leaning over him and grabbing up the front of his shirt like he was some perp and I was the police.

"Because that kind of information will help us find out who killed G.B., you know. It'll give us all the answers we need and then Gloria can get her man. And do him in," I added.

Alabaster's face was wrenched up with fear. He really was a lover, not a fighter. He looked absolutely terrified.

He knew about Master Group. He knew what they really did, which I didn't. But he didn't know I didn't. And he seemed horrified with the insinuation that he had anything to do with it, which meant he did.

But then I made like I had grabbed his shirt to catch him. I picked him back up in one stiff movement like a doll. Wiped off his jacket and straightened him out. Picked imaginary lint off his lapel.

"Let me know if anything comes to you," I added with a smile.

I went up the stairs. I took them two by two but my back hated me for it.

"W-where will you be?" he called up after me.

"Either in the murder room or the secret room behind the murder room!" I shouted over my shoulder so that everyone could hear me.

The wall was futile. Maybe tomorrow (if there was a tomorrow) I would tackle it. But there was no use injuring myself further on some fucking long shot. Instead I whipped myself up a black coffee in the maid's break-room kitchenette and went back to the scene of the crime. It had been a few since I'd been in here. My last breakthrough had been finding Erdel's book, but that nagging feeling was still with me. I hadn't found what I needed to find, not yet.

I did my usual walkabout, just looking, listening. Imagining how it happened, why it happened. Imagining Goldwynn's shrunken little corpse with its collection of stab wounds. Some assailant bending over, stuffing a goddamned bullet in his head. And then..

And then what? The same question again. The same one I couldn't answer. I had to think of it in another way.

Let's say they had some way of locking the door from the outside to make it seem like it was locked from the inside. It's not impossible - I mean, it was a deadbolt, so it's fucking hard to imagine, but let's say they did. Could they have slipped away through the house unnoticed? Made it past the guards and through the gardens and over the fence and into the night unnoticed? Sure.

But I wasn't buying it. I thought back to when we took the case. What did Gloria say the Pinks told her?

"You're our prime suspect," I said to nobody.

What if Gloria had done it, and had no memory of it? Hypnosis, a dope-stupor, maybe? Sounds like they had the means to do it. She's the one who found the body. Maybe the door wasn't locked at all. I know the little dork butler knocked it down, supposedly, but maybe he didn't. Maybe he was covering for her. That was his job. It's possible that she could have done it and not even known she had. Then she hired us to

pick up the pieces. Master Group gets G.B.'s own wife to kill him, then launches a phony investigation, case closed.

But that was insane. Totally unrealistic and had too many holes in it. If she was proving to be a problem, they would just kill her. And it was too complicated. Nonsensical. If only we had been on the case first instead of those rats. We could've had this thing open and closed, had our fucking money in a week. Cruise right off the highway and roll onto easy street.

When I remembered that there was no 'us' anymore, part of me stopped working. I sat down and tried to take a sip of coffee but it was too hot.

I left the room to use the telephone. I called the office and the bunker, but got no response. At least they were smart enough to lay low. Reluctantly I dialled the last number.

"Thank you for calling the Hot Rod, Pies Fischer on the line!"

"It's Brown."

"Fuck you."

He hung up.

That didn't feel very good but I suppose I deserved it.

Back in the room, I tried to drink my coffee again but it was still too hot. I sat at his desk, put my head in my hands and tried to stay awake. Tried to think. Tried not to worry about them. I looked at my watch. 6:21. I imagined the Captain might appear out of thin air any moment, or maybe just step out from the shadowy chimney where he'd been hiding all along.

I think if I weren't thinking about the Captain, I wouldn't have paid any attention to the sound. The soft hiss of fabric. Like running your hand across the leather on a new car. I turned my head and saw my suitcase moving across the floor, being pushed aside by the opening door. A black glove with a long-barrelled a pistol sneaking into the room. My executioner.

This was it.

I shot out of the chair, knocking the coffee over, throwing my whole body against the door. I pinned the hand at the wrist and I heard a hiss of pain on the other side and immediately began wrestling with the pistol.

"I guess Six Thirty came early!" I shouted.

I was terrified, exhilarated.

Cranked the index finger back hard, a nice wet snap and a scream, wrenched the gun from the broken claw, and in a moment of pure hatred, shoved it into the base of the palm, just below the wrist, and fired.

There was a silencer screwed into it, so all I heard was the dry snap of bone and the impact of the bullet into the door frame. Straight through him, I guess.

Now there was a sweet scream on the other side and I still had three fingers and a thumb to play with.

"You like that, you *piece of shit!*?" I stepped further back, leaning forward, putting more weight on the door.

"STOP!" the voice screamed.

I wrenched the broken index finger around, breaking it in a different direction and there was a scream that echoed through the whole castle.

"Come at me like a fucking sneak, willya!?"

"NO STOP NO ---"

"Come after me --- threaten my FAMILY?"

He began to yank his hand back, the red stuff coming out of his wrist, but I wasn't letting him go. I shoved the gun in my pants and twisted the hand at the wrist, wrenching it up like a leaky faucet, even turned my whole body to do it. Another wet snap and an unbelievable scream.

But that's when I realized it was familiar. And that none of the Pinks we fought could feel pain at all so far as we knew.

I threw open the door.

I had Phinneas Alabaster by the hand. He was sobbing and covering his face, all swollen up and red from screaming.

"YOU!?" I shouted, gripping the hand harder than ever.

"NO!" he pleaded.

I led him down the hallway by the hand and the hair, knocking his head into walls along the way. It felt good to be in a fight I could win (if you called this a fight at all). When he tried to struggle I would squeeze his ruined hand and yank back on what was left of his balding mane.

This was a big development.

"Y-y-you shot me..." he sobbed.

"And now I'm gonna fuckin' kill you," I whispered into his ear.

He let out a watery scream like a woman. If he was thinking he'd know I couldn't kill him. Not now, when I could get some information from him.

That didn't keep me from hurting him. I smashed his head a few more times until I got to the kitchenette. It felt good.

Some grim idea had come to me and I threw him on the ground and took out the pistol. It was the same kind he'd given to us, the Browning model.

"You can't," he shook his head at me, clutching his hand. You could only see a little blood on the cuff, but I could tell he was gushing just by his face.

"I can't what - kill you?" I laughed.

"The fff..." he hissed, then took a deep breath, "the guards!"

I went over to the counter, took the pot of coffee off the stove and grabbed a mug out of the cupboard. I poured in the black water and crouched down in front of him.

"Maybe they heard you scream. Maybe not. They didn't hear the gunshot since you were so clever with this thing--"

I pointed it at him and he screamed NO! again.

"Why were you comin' for me with this little doozy anyway?" I asked.

His chest heaved up and down and his eyes were wild.

"You touch me, you're dead. Gloria will have you--"

His words turned into another scream as I splashed him with the scalding coffee. I didn't aim anywhere in particular, just flicked my wrist.

Then I punched him in the face. Then in the gut. Then in the face again. And again. He didn't even struggle, just screamed and wept. It was like hurting a child. I took him by the hair again and smashed his skull on the linoleum, put his bleeding nose to the floor. I got right in his face.

"Right now, Alabaster, I got bigger problems than what Gold can cook up. So yeah, maybe I'm not supposed to hurt the butler," I pressed his skull into the floor, "but I don't think you're supposed to be pointing this at me."

I put it against his temple, hard. He let out another cry.

"So let me tell you, I'm getting to the bottom of this whether or not Gold's paying me."

He settled down a little, tiny whimpers.

"You had know something don't you?"

"NO!" he hissed.

"You didn't do it. You just know something. Maybe you helped it along. Didn't you?"

"NO!"

"Yes you fucking did!" I pressed in hard.

"M-MmmMm..."

"I'll do it, Phinneas! I'll fucking do it!"

His flabby face convulsed and he made more strange vibrating noises. Pink spittle. I wish the coffee pot was closer so I could pour the rest of it into his ear or something.

"Tell me what you know."

He let out a howl, coughing out wet strings on the tiles.

"Start with Master Group," I barked.

"You don't..." he trailed off, weeping.

"I don't what!?" I smeared his loose skin on the floor.

"You don't talk about them... don't understand who they are..." he hissed, snot flying out his nose.

"What don't I understand? Tell me!"

I manhandled him for a while, but he didn't say anything. He just started to cry. I got up and he curled up, covered his face. Blood coming out the hole in the back of his hand.

I stood up and leaned against the counter. My back was bothering me.

"They know who did it," I sighed, "that's not what this is about. So if you had something to do with it, they know. They know and they don't care."

"I...diiidn't..." he sobbed.

"Then WHY were you trying to kill me!?" I spat down at him.

He twitched nervously and covered his head again.

"WHY!?" I stomped on his hand and he went off like a siren.

This time I did splash him with the coffee pot, but he was already screaming so it didn't make much of a difference. I added some water to the pot and drank the stuff right out of the jug. It had cooled quite a bit!

I raised my foot again and he scrambled into the corner.

"No..." he pleaded.

"You just tried to shoot me. What the fuck did you expect? Kisses?"

"SUh - Suhhstopp-" he pleaded, "STOP! STOP! I - I'll tell you..."

And he did.

I had to endure ten minutes of half-blubbering talk, like a child woken up from a bad dream, but it was worth it. I was too exhausted to beat on him any more so I got a broom from behind the door. I'd spear him with it from time to time, when I wanted more answers, or when I just plain found him disgusting. Jabbing it into his soft belly, he'd gurgle and take the track I'd want him on.

The Master Group, he informed me, were in fact Sex Perverts. They had raunchy parties with girls and boys flown in from all over the world. He explained that the house would be emptied of staff from time to time, and would be flooded with other deviants. They would fuck everywhere, in every single room, fuck anyone, fuck anything. I had an

for a long time but no one came in. An hour went by and there wasn't so much as a peep on the other side of the door. This was the same as when Hoob and I were taken in to the little safehouse. Stalling tactics, darkness and intimidation.

"C'mon!" I shouted.

"C'mon let's get this over with!" I kicked the table.

Not one moment later, the door opened and the Captain came in. He had a coat slung over his arm and an umbrella under that. In the other hand he clutched a thin little briefcase. He was in another dark suit with a sky-blue shirt and a white tie. He pulled out a chair and sat down.

"I didn't keep you waiting, did I?" he smiled.

"No sir." I shook my head.

"Nobody let you out of those manacles yet?"

"No sir."

He smiled and slid a keyring across the table. I had to turn around to grab them, and it took a few moments to line them up in the keyhole.

"Nobody likes having to wait around, Christopher. I'm sorry if you were made to wait and wait," he said.

"I get it, okay?"

"Were you planning on letting me wait all night for your call?" he put his coat on the back of his chair, ran his hand over his huge bald skull.

"I knew you'd find me."

"That's still very rude, Christopher. I don't abide by that kind of behaviour."

I rolled my eyes.

"Oh - well now, that's even ruder," he shook his head.

"Can we get this over with?" I sighed.

"Do you have an answer?" he inquired.

"The answer's no. I'm not interested in being your fucking stooge."

"Hey, c'mon now," he looked genuinely hurt, "there's no need for talk like that. What did I just say?"

I took in a deep breath. I wanted to run over there and start something. Get this over. Make him have to put me down here, just like I had to do at Baul's.

"I'm sorry Clarence."

"That's alright. You haven't exactly had an easy time here..." he shook his head regretfully, "Thank you for saying that, though. I mean it."

"No problem," I said. I wanted to go to sleep.

"You want anything to drink? A coffee or water? Wine? I hear the chief keeps a nice Chianti in his desk..."

"That's okay. I'd prefer to sort this out right now..."

"Sure. I can understand that. Things to do, right?"

"Of course."

He opened his briefcase and took out some papers, laying them in neat piles in front of me. They were tidy and clearly labelled with small slips of paper that said Option 1, Option 2...

I had four options.

"So, here's what I can offer you," he shrugged, "I'm sorry there isn't more here."

He got up and closed his briefcase. Motioned for the door.

"I'll give you some time to think about this, okay, Christopher? Are you sure you don't want anything?"

"No sir. Thank you."

I sounded like I was in the goddamned army again.

Option #1 was a form signing my life as well as John and Andy's over to the Templar Agency. It was the deal I had already turned down, but I guess it was still (literally) on the table. I had to check some boxes and sign it.

Option #2 was more or less the same form, but it had ANDREW ROBERTS typed in the fields at the top. I guess they were willing to settle for just him. The line where I would sign for that one had TRANSFER OF OWNERSHIP written under it. Like I was trading him to another baseball team. Like he was my property.

Option #3 was a document detailing several acts of grave-robbing, where young dead women were taken up from the ground, taken home by someone, only to reappear on the city's beaches a few days later. With bucketloads of spermies in them. There was eyewitness testimony from my landlord, from the Deli next door, and from the Laundromat identifying me as the prime suspect, all of them having seen me drag several women into the office who didn't quite seem alive. There was a photograph of me driving down the road with a woman in the passenger seat who looked either dead or drunk.

Option #4 was a form where I could confess to fucking several dead women.

I almost laughed out loud. Almost. The worst part was that they probably really did dig up some poor girls and have a go at them to whip up some evidence. And my neighbours probably got a hell of a lot of dough just to write down my name on some piece of paper and pointing a finger or two.

I wondered if Andy and John had received a visit or if they were in holding somewhere. In the same building, even. I doubted it. The Captain liked me for some reason, seemed like he only dealt with us through me. They probably did an assessment and decided I was the one most likely to listen to reason or broker a deal. Probably had a team of science-men examine my brain x-rays and stool samples and figure I was the one to go with.

Fifteen minutes later the door swung open and the Captain came in with a big glass of wine, swishing it around.

"I couldn't resist," he smiled.

I smiled back, but I didn't want to.

I had to wonder what he thought of me. He obviously must know that I don't like him, the man in charge of my downfall. But that's probably what he always was in charge of, he was used to it. I imagined that's why he was so friendly; he just wanted some polite conversation.

"So, I decided."

"You did? That's great," he took a sip, sat down and folded his hands.

"Well - before I give you my answer. I thought I would ask... is there another option - a fifth one?"

"I'm open to any offer, Christopher."

"Option #2 - where you get Andy. Could we switch it for me? Just me. The other two go free, go underground, disappear?"

But he was shaking his head almost immediately.

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AUDREY

was

all I could think about.

I couldn't help it. It wasn't like I hadn't been laid since she left me five years and x months ago. It wasn't that I was feeling guilty. I just kept thinking about her. Maybe because we were in the tub. I told Gina it would be a neat idea to get in together, like it was something I just came up with. But Aud and I used to take baths together every Sunday, like children, scrubbing eachother's bodies clean with the brush.

Maybe it was because I was looking at her body. I hadn't realized it until now, but every time I've been with a woman since Aud, it's been in the dark. I hadn't been with a woman in the daytime since Aud - and I could see it all. All the ways Gina was different. And you can't help but compare something like that. Wide hips - wider than her shoulders. Maybe as wide as mine. Full, big legs like a cartoon woman, a narrow pudgy waist and breasts that pointed, dark nipples and pale skin. And those enormous eyes, dirty blonde mop on top of it all. She was a looker, don't get me wrong, but just not Audrey.

Or maybe I was thinking about her because I was thinking about those dead girls - the real or made up ones -- that I would have to account for. For some reason I would think of Aud, or those smiling clerks back at the skyscraper - I don't know why - but I kept picturing them as the ones being dug up, defiled. And it made me sad. Angry. It was a crazy thought - made not a lick of sense but I kept coming back to it.

But the bath went from being about snuggling up together to being about what had happened to my body. I still had a lot of bruises on my neck and body, my eyes a little dark, a small cut in my eyebrow. My hands were a mess, and I had some big scrapes up my back that I honestly hadn't even noticed. The last few days had been rough on me.

She used an icy cloth on my bruises, standing over me in her bathrobe. Then she got some ointment from the cupboard and started rubbing it into all my little cuts and wounds. She had filled up the tub for me, lukewarm water to take the swelling down. I told her hot would work too, but she disagreed with me. Actually, lukewarm water wouldn't do shit, it had to either be cold or hot, but I wasn't going to bring up the fact that my wife was a nurse. Instead, I just got into the water. It was like soup left in the open. But either way, it did feel good to get cleaned up, to be taken care of.

I had called Audrey before I found Gina. Just to remind myself that I should be doing this in the first place. Nobody picked up, so I called Andy. I wanted to talk to them for two entirely different reason, but when no one answered, it felt the same. There was nothing at the bunker, nothing at the office. It was late. They were probably out buying bazookas and mounting a machine gun turret ontop of John's car for their campaign against the Templars. But I really hoped I

could've reached them. I wasn't even mad anymore. I had secured a few more days of freedom, but I still needed their help. I still needed them.

I went to Gerber's specifically to find her, and I did. There was some sort of story coming out of my mouth about why I had to turn her down. I don't even remember what it was, I was so fucked up on lack of sleep and dread and pain. Something about coaching a little league team or something even more absurd. I know it had to do with taking care of small children. She said she was off in about ten minutes if I could wait. If I wanted to go on a date. We both knew we weren't going to do that, but it was a nice lie to tell ourselves. Try to act like we're something more than two horny, lonely animals.

I fell asleep at the bar waiting, but she took me home anyway. She put me to bed and snuggled up to me, a complete stranger. Smelly, bloody, ugly. And I was out like a light for almost twelve hours straight.

It was the kind of care I needed. Simple, just someone to make you feel human, remind you that you aren't totally horrible. Someone to tuck you in and make you feel loved, even if she didn't love me.

And in the morning I woke up to her ontop of me. I was already inside of her, like we'd already been going at it in our sleep. I didn't have time to think about rubbers or my pecker rotting off, I just groaned and pulled her mouth to mine, grabbed some handfurls. Despite having a blue-black scrotum, I got along just fine, and she seemed like she did too (except it felt like nothing came out when I had my big finale - nothing but searing pain). She was so small. Big eyes but small hands, small feet, and she was short, though she had one whopper of a rear end. And she knew how to use it. She seemed indifferent that I screamed I was finished. She wasn't. Just kept going, hunkered down and wrapped me up.

She made me eggs and I slept again, then we got in the tub together. She did all the talking. I didn't mention one thing about myself, about the case, my job, who I was. Apparently she already got my name from when we last talked, I told her I was kinda like a cop--- and she didn't really ask anything more than that. The rest of it was about how her boss was mean to her, how long she had to work, how often she was made to do double shifts. And then she talked a lot about her sister, who is sick and in the hospital, which apparently, my tips helped pay for. I felt a little betrayed that maybe the money was the reason I was here. But I put it out of my mind, focused on her mouth again.

She was nervous, spoke like she was waiting for me to shout at her, waiting to say the wrong thing. So instead of trying to figure out what she *should* say, she said everything. She told me about what she dreams about, how we didn't have to worry about a baby because she was on the pill, what foods she was allergic to, what celebrities she's met or wanted to meet. Reminded me of Byrd, the radio newsgirl, except less uppity. I put my head between her floating tits and listened, watching the suds gather around her bush. I loved her.

Or I wanted keep her anyway. Protect her, carry her over my shoulder, take her away. Marry her in Las Vegas. Ready to give her my name when I didn't even know hers. And I wanted her to protect me. To tell me everything is alright, to make me feel strong, make me feel brave. Give me something to fight for. Maybe I didn't love her, but I loved something about her, and I wanted to keep whatever that was. If Andy could see me, if he were standing in the doorway to the bathroom,

he'd shake his head at me. The guy frowns on these kinds of shenanigans with ladies like I do to him and John smoking reefer. When I'd come in late with a pretty thing on my arm, he'd ask the next day how long I'd known her. Like you have to love a woman to *make* love to her. If you could even call it that. Gina and I fucked, we didn't make love, but she was so tender to me about everything else, so tender that I would call *that* making love.

Aud was coming into my head again when I heard a noise. A strange echo coming in through the open door. *crik crik*.

"You hear that?" I asked.

"Hear what?"

Then there was the shattering of glass from the other room, bits tinkling onto the floor. I shoved her head down and dove out of the tub, sliding across the tiles on my bare ass. I got my pistol from my pants and scrambled into the little kitchenette, my wet skin picking up all the dirt and dust from the floor.

"What on EARTH?" she screamed, but I didn't say anything back.

The window facing the street was broken, jagged glass fingers left in the pane.

"Christopher?" she called.

But then someone else called my name. A man's voice from below.

Stupid. Stupid.

I wasn't thinking. Bringing another person into my life like this. I'd signed her death warrant more than likely. Not that I wasn't going to fight it. I'd fight it like a fucking lion.

I hid in the drapes and tried to peer down the street. And that's when my life went crazy. When I went crazy.

A big chunk of pavement shattered the upper pane, clattering onto the floor. Gina screamed.

John was on the sidewalk, his hands clutching his hair like a crazy person.

"John?" I leaned out.

"Chris!" he cried.

He pulled the skin down on his face with both hands like he was made of rubber. He was crying.

"What?!" I threw up the pane.

"They got Andy," he wiped his big face, "they fucking got him—"

My chest seized up.

"He's in the hospital. They say he's fuckin' dyin!" Hoob screamed, clutching his hair with his fists.

I dressed myself soaking wet. And I didn't just forget my socks and underwear, I forgot to say anything to Gina. Forgot isn't the right word anyway. I ran down to John with the gun in my hand like it was part of me.

A couple beer at the Hot Rod had turned into twelve and the two of them wanted to hit the streets. Hoobler didn't want to wreck his convertible, so he had Andy drive it downtown. He was slightly more sober, level-headed enough to navigate the streets. On the way, John

"You need me," he said, though I hadn't even told him what I was doing, "they'll be after you too."

"And you," I said, but he just shook his head. That didn't matter to him. He'd been living his life like he was ready to die since he was a little boy, and this didn't make one lick of a difference.

Down the hall to the stairs, the lights flickered, strange shapes coming off the wall. Like some hulk might be around the corner, or lying in wait.

"Give Pies your gun. I can't talk to that piece of shit right now, but you tell him I said he's in charge of Andy. If anything happens..." I didn't need to finish. John was nodding.

"Tell him to shoot dead anyone who isn't in a white smock and a paper hat," I poked his chest. This was partially Pies' fault anyway.

And Hoob gave another quick nod, like he was in a policeman again and I was the Chief. Like he was ready to finally listen to me for once. It was too bad that all it took was for Andy to get damn near killed for it to happen.

"What's the plan, boss?" he asked.

His eyes were still watery and there was a sway in his voice. He'd never called me any such thing before. When Andy called me boss, it was kind of a joke. But John sounded serious, like it was a title.

I couldn't really verbalize everything all at once.

"The plan's a desperate fucking longshot if there ever was one," I said, straightening my back.

I didn't have anything better to say than that, so I just left it. I didn't even have a way of finishing the rest of the sentence so it would sound rational when I said it out loud. I just lurched forward to get started and John followed.

"We're solving the case, *tonight*."

He would need to get a hold of all that dynamite after all, it seemed.

CVHAPTEREIGHTEEN;
O C T O PUS

his tongue. He wasn't with us or anything. He just happened to be walking by at the time.

I was sweating bad.

A lot of it was worry for Andy, getting snipped and gouged and drained back at the hospital. With nobody looking over him but Pies, my wife, and that lowlife trashman. Or at least that's what I was chalking all the sweat up to. I wasn't made for this kind of thing, and it was like I said. A damned, desperate longshot.

In some weeds and dirt. In behind the fence surrounding the Pinkerton Headquarters, in dark clothes, all painted up with shoe polish. Hoob had even more on, since he didn't have any black clothes, so he ended up smearing eight cans of the shit all over some old suit, the idiot. I couldn't see him though. He was somewhere in the parking lot, doing his part. In charge of the distraction.

Me? I'm in charge of getting inside. Yeah. Suck on that for a bit.

I was in the dirt mounds behind the fence, my eyes pinned to the roof, watching those men in raincoats, long rifles in hand. Did I mention it was raining? I couldn't see shit. I imagined they could though. The Captain, or whoever ran the show likely didn't put any blind men up there. I wasn't expecting to be able to sneak past eyes like that, but then I didn't have to, if everything went right.

I had a floor mat next to me, yanked out from the car, ready to go once Hoob did his part. I'd have to get over the fence and across the yard unnoticed. Through a big fucking spotlight, no less.

John had really decked us out at least. His connections got us silencers and a special tool-set, a couple bulletproof vests like the brinks boys wear. I felt like I was back in the war, wearing my full kit, waiting in some shithole for the bombs to start dropping. Waiting to lose my nerve all over again.

Except, of course, there was no army - just me and Hoob. Two guys who usually did nothing more than take pictures of cheating husbands. Two guys with a list of injuries as long as your arm. Two guys who fight with their fists and poolcues, not rifles and grenades. Two guys and no one else, no cavalry, no reinforcements, no second chances. Either I got in that building, or I died trying.

And I was fully prepared to do so -- at least I'd be dying for a good reason. At least it would be for Andy, not Gold, not money or stubbornness or some godawful Hoobler screwup. I'd be dying for my best friend, probably the only person who would ever even consider doing the same thing for me.

The plan was to get over the fence. From there I could hide behind some kind of generator box that was planted in the back, then try to get to the building from there without getting shot or noticed. And after that, because the front door was out of the question, I would have to climb up a fucking metal pipe running up the side of the wall. It connected to some kind of smaller metal box, two storeys up. From there, I could see the window I would have to get into. Did I mention it was fucking raining? Christ almighty.

I was still sweating.

This was taking too long. Had too much time to think about it. When we split up, Hoob said it would be five minutes, I had to be ready. But I'd been through enough Mississippi's to know it was at least ten. He was supposed to have made a spectacle of all their

It was a hard climb, the brackets bolted to the bricks flexing as I wormed up them, the pipe bending outwards when I was too far from one. Andy could've been up here in a flash. Andy could live on this pipe, raise a family on it if he wanted to, the fucking monkey. Then came a rush of dread, stronger than anything I've ever felt. I almost let go of the damn pipe. Andy. Goddamned Andy. Why did it have to be him?

One step after another, slow and steady, my hands slipping on the dirty piping, back aching, ribs singing.

Wrenching myself up, I passed by a window with metal bars. That worried me. If I had to get through that, I was shit out of luck. You don't really get through iron bars without some kind of saw, and you definitely don't do it from two stories up on a mechanized box while it's raining.

But then as I went by, I saw that it was what was inside that was even more worrisome. Bunks. Maybe a dozen or more, lined up like it was summer camp or something. And snuggled up was a boy on each bed, mean-looking agents, the same ones we'd been running afoul of, except in pyjamas, all tucked in. It was so absurd I thought I had to be imagining it. But here they were. What the fuck was this place? Did they sleep here like it was a fire-station --- or was this their home? Were they like a band of orphans bought up by the agency? I could see now that when I talked to the Captain, I had been right. These people were fucking owned.

But then he said I was too, and said it in a way like he meant it. What did that mean?

All this thinking didn't stop the grease-fire lit up in me, though. Part of me felt like aiming my pistol through the bars and firing a couple shots into their heads, or getting some dynamite from Hoob to toss inside.

I kept going, ignoring the sputtering rage in me, saving it for later. It was hard to convince myself that my scuffles up the wall and the pipe wrenching weren't ungodly loud, but I had to remember that they were really high up, and it was raining. They can't hear over the rain. They can't.

Six feet from the metal box, a bolt gave way. Suddenly my hands were almost a foot off the wall. And it was loud this time. Really loud. The pipe buckled out, the bracket snapped off the wall. I couldn't have been louder if I had John's saxophone. I looked up and heard voices, some faint movement, though the rifles were still in place. I made a hard grab for the next pipe above the next bracket. This one was secure. My back and ribs were bellowing, and I felt one of my fingernails split as I hauled myself up the rest of the way.

I took a moment to see if the box would hold me. Wet and slippery, rickety. But it held.

In this line of work there isn't anything that you aren't going to end up doing. Wearing a disguise, spying, impersonation, fist-fights, shoot-outs, injury after injury, it was all part of it. I'd scaled enough buildings and broke into enough houses that this wasn't anything new. But I'd never had to sneak into a fortress before, sneaking in ready to kill on sight? A place filled with men - who knows how many - men who want me dead?

There was a time I thought I was prepared for anything. Audrey asked me once - years ago, when I came home all swollen up from a fight - what if I take a job I can't handle? I had been on a job that got us

mixed up with gangsters - Italians, and she was scared. She asked what I would do if I was in over my head and didn't realize it in time?

I told her I'd do the best I could.

And if that's not good enough? She had asked.

I didn't have an answer for that. I just smiled some cocky smile for her. But she didn't smile back.

And I was starting to see why. This was a situation where 'my best' meant diddly-squat. 'My Best' was climbing up a pipe and jiggling around with a grated window like a bum, ready to slip and break my neck. No idea what's inside, no idea what I'm doing. My best friend on death's door, myself knocking on it too - nothing going for me but my gut instinct and some shoe polish on my face.

The window led to a small office, some cramped bureaucrat's desk. Bookshelves on every wall, books piled on the floor and desk, but tidy and carefully arranged. A coat rack with a Christmas scarf on it. If the window had bars, I would've had to climb down, get shot to pieces trying the front door. But thankfully it didn't. There was iron grating instead, screwed in from the inside and rusting. I took the nine inch prybar out of my sling and went to work, took the corner off and ripped the screw right out of the sill, did it one more time and wrenched the whole thing to one side. After that I had a standard sliding window lock and a foil alarm, which I'd been doing since before I even used a razor.

Wiggling in, I sped up, some part of me screaming that my legs were going to get shot off. But I remained calm, half-in, half-out. Underneath the window was a big rug, flush against the wall. A weird enough place for a rug - and too damn close to the window for my liking. They were either in the center of the room, under a desk or near the door. Never a window. I figured it was something Andy had told me about. Pressure mats. It was dark, so it took a long time to see, but eventually I realized there was a wire running from underneath the mat, painted the same colour as the baseboard. Gut instinct counted for something, I guess. I had to crawl up on the windowsill like a fucking cat and leap over the thing, landing on the linoleum with a thump.

So now there was a shred of doormat on the fence, an outwards-bent section of piping, a beat-open grate and some boynots downstairs waking up to me breaking in. But my luck had held so far despite all this, so I wasn't going to push it. I stayed in place and looked around for a long time until I saw only one more alarm, wired onto the doorframe. Magnetic contact that I'd have to jimmy, as simple as unscrewing the mount from the door and letting it stay stuck to the frame. I was about to get started on that when I saw the biggest theft deterrent yet. A photograph on the desk. The Captain holding up a trophy bass. The fish didn't actually look all that big, but I knew his actual relative size, so I could see it was really something. Their eyes were both piercing.

Was this his office? I tried to imagine him at the little desk, in the little chair, clutching a pen like a toothpick. It was hard to even imagine him getting into the doorway, let alone holing up in here. When I got done with the alarm and finally opened the door, I saw the words Management and Lawrence printed on the outside of the door in bold letters. I'm lucky he's out.

I pulled on a pair of gloves, screwed in my silencer and checked the safety. Three deep breaths to get ready for this.

A huge thunderclap sounded outside. Then another. Then the whole building shook and I almost fell over. I didn't even have time to shit my pants. Then there were so many thunderclaps in a row that the hallway window blew out and I saw fire climbing into the night sky.

His plan had been to rig up a crude row of dynamite, string some rags from the gastanks to really cause of storm. Why it went off now instead of earlier seemed strange. But then again, Hoob's 'expertise' with dynamite came down to reading a little paper manual that came with the crate on the way here. And anyway you never know what an octopus is gonna do. And Hoob hadn't been making any in a long time.

The lights flickered a few times and a loud ringing sounded, but they all cut out after a few moments. There was shouting above and below me. Downstairs was where the sleepover was, so I headed upstairs. There was another explosion, a huge bang that sounded like it was right behind me and the foundation shook again. It was so loud I almost didn't notice the old man rushing down the stairs, puffing in and out through his push-broom moustache. He paused, gripping the railing.

"What's this?" he narrowed his eyebrows at me.

I shot him in the head.

I dragged his body up the stairs and let him drop right in the entrance. I crouched and dropped a grey-haired fellow with a fire extinguisher in his hand. A moment later I was spotted by another old man running from room to room, pushing a cart full of manilla envelopes and blue sacks. The silencer made it sound like I shot watermelon seeds for rounds. I put his corpse with the other two, but then decided against it. It was a lot of work, but I dragged them both into a bathroom near the stairwell, hid them in the shitter. Tried not to look at their faces.

This floor had high ceilings to accommodate stacks of file folders and documents, huge catalogue machines and audio recorders. There were rows of desks with headphones and switchboxes, bundles and bundles of wires and antennae. This was where they dug, I guess. Where I would have to do my digging too, it seemed.

What sounded like a dozen footsteps sounded above me and I hid behind one of the stacks. Someone threw open the door and shouted 'EVACUATION PROTOCOL', I guess for the old men to hear. But they didn't look around, their boots sounded all the way down until the next floor. I guess the protocol for evacuation was every rat for themselves. I waited for more noise, but none came. I went to work.

With my flashlight I went through the stacks, a mess of folders labelled by clients. I wracked my brain trying to think of where to start. The only thing I could do was go through in order of the names I knew. But I would start at M. Master Group. I ran through, throwing paper everywhere, digging past the Ks and Ls and Ms.

There were dozens labelled MASTER GROUP, all outlining massive projects, subverting other companies, using murder and sabotage - photo after photo of grisly acts of violence and torture, full documentation of it. Unabashed admission of countless crimes and horrors, like they were making a shopping list. Beheading, disembowling, arson, midnight home invasions. No big deal. My immediate urge was that this could be used against them - I should be shoving this in the mailbox by the bucketload, let the whole country in on what's going on. But I had to

would you save? It would be the active cases first, the ones paying out. The old man was probably moving them to a vault or maybe a dumb waiter to get them out.

Ours was the fifth from the bottom in the second sack. Not 'M' for Mastergroup, but 'D' for DeWolfe. Thick with photos, records, dates, answers. Sweet gooddamned answers.

And even though the goddamn place was falling down around me and I could hardly breathe, I read it, right there. Ran away from the fire and smoke swirling up the stairwell with the thing in my hand like it was a prize I'd won. I opened a window and read the whole fucking thing front to back. There were a lot of pages, but a lot of it was formal paperwork and photographs. The mystery came together finally, all the holes filled, all my questions answered by snapshots and point-forms, pencil diagrams and carbon copies, testimonies and interviews, a whole who's-who of these rich assholes. It all made sense - even us and our whole role in it. At first I felt powerful, like I finally had them by the balls, finally had a weapon against them. But as I read, breathing harsh breaths through my tie, I found myself getting angry. Sickly angry. Little curses came out of my mouth one by one until I was red in the face and shouting over the roar of fire.

By the time I finished, I was totally enraged. Soot was raining on me like big snowflakes and the entire doorway was ablaze. Rage subsided, however, when I realized how likely my death had just become. I had my answers, I just had to get them out of here in one piece. I put the file in one of the bags and shoved it down my pants, then wrapped myself up on another fireproof bag. I'd never ran through a fire before. Even as kids, we were always smart enough never to get *inside* of them. It was a short set of stairs, maybe two sets of ten down to where I'd come from. Even still, I felt my pantlegs and the hair on my body catch, my shoes scalded right through, throat and lungs and skin burning hot as I ran through the crazy whirlabout.

And then, when I finally landed, choking and beating at the flames on my legs, a fucking gun went off. Three quick slugs, though none of them touched me. Someone was shooting at me in this fucking mess! I dove into one of the side offices, trying not to cough, not to give myself away. But it was so dark and cloudy I couldn't see anything anyway, my eyes burning out of my fucking head. I tried listening for a while and thought I could hear two of them. A moat of fire was roaring overhead across the ceiling. It was even worse down here than upstairs. I fired blindly into the sounds, unloaded a whole clip in a wide spray, reloaded and listened. But it was too loud, I couldn't hear anything anymore.

Something must've gone wrong. Making a mess of the parking lot shouldn't have produced something this spectacular. Even if by some fluke the blitz had affected the building, this had been too fast. It must've been electrical, a fusebox failure or a blown gas main. Some freak thing, because I'd never seen anything like this before. I wasn't breathing air anymore, and I was so close to the floor I was practically kissing the hardwood. Even the furniture in this room was catching, some few feet away from me, flames crawling down from the ceiling.

I made a mad crawl down the hallway to the room I'd climbed in through, but turned back - the worst of the blaze was coming from that very place. It suddenly occurred to me that the pipe I had been

climbing smelled slightly of fuel. Was that the source of this mess? I was hesitating too long.

Got up and ran through the flames, my pants going up again, burning the fuck out of one of my legs, the bag protecting my head and upper body. Jumped through another curtain of smoke like a fucking circus animal and came out the other side, tripping over some grizzled Pinkerton, shot dead and burning alive. I tumbled through a set of double doors and rolled down the stairs like a bowling ball. Something snapped in my lower back and I screamed at the top of my lungs as I tumbled downwards. I scrambled and jittered my way through more flames and smoke until I came to the next floor.

I hadn't realized I was on the brink of passing out until I got there, took a deep breath of dusty, but fresh air. There was smoke here, but only along the ceiling. As my eyes adjusted I realized the place had been fucking wrecked. A whole wall was buckled and there was debris everywhere, cement bits and drywall, twisted up cots and rebar. Like a bomb had gone off. As I rounded a corner I realized one had.

The sounds I'd heard were explained and laid bare before me. The boys I'd spied weren't sleeping anymore. Or if they were, at the very least they weren't going to wake up anytime soon. I'm not exactly sure at what point John had gone from a hardboiled thug to a mass murderer. I remember when he'd crippled those two guys with the bed. I'd said he better not kill them - you don't want one of these deaths on your head. Now we had a dozen, maybe more thanks to this little cookout. We were all going to pay for this. Hell, when I thought about it, the old fellas I'd aced had probably been even more valuable than these guys. I'd imagine soldiers were a little more forgivable than researchers or whatever they were.

The window with the bars that I'd peeked through, hell, most of the wall - was gone - a jet of flame shooting up from the massive hole in the brickwork. It was coming from the pipe, a twisted branch shooting burning fuel like a hose. It was almost too hot to go near, but I thought I could drop from the blast hole down to the ground from here. Maybe ten feet down?

I didn't so much jump as fall. And ten was more like twelve and my ankles took it all, crazy pain shooting up my legs, a wild scream in the night, echoing up my back and the whole of me erupted in pain. I was exhausted, out of breath, tears in my eyes,

But I was alive. I'd made it out alive. Crawling through the dirt and dripping fuel, having a nice little coughing fit, I felt incredible. My heart raced and the skin on my legs burned but I felt great.

I was laughing, didn't care who might find me, looking up at the roaring flames, a true sight to behold. The entire side of the building above the box I'd stood on was alight, burning white hot, thick awful smoke rising into the night like a black arm grabbing at the sky. Cinders rained down and sparks flew and I realized if I had taken two minutes longer on that fucking pipe, I would've been cooked alive. But that just made me laugh harder. Why not? I had lived through it when I hadn't expected so much as to get in the window. Plus I had their goddamned file. And I was guessing it was their only copy, too. As a final bonus, we had somehow managed to burn down their fucking house. Talk about a stroke of luck. I hobbled around to the front, unsure of where to go, what to do, but still laughing.

But the car was there, parked in front, surrounded by bodies, Hoob squinting up at the burning building, clutching the shotgun.

CHAPTER NINETENE’;

**THE CASE OF THE
STOLEN JEWELS**

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suspicious. It was a long go and I could feel my legs and ankles get worse and worse, but I made myself keep going. Stopped twice to rest, but kept up the pace.

Little by little the cliffs receded and the beach got bigger, lit by nothing except the dull moon and the city lights. Sand and grime turned to rock and grime, turned to dirt. Little bits of grass and scrub left us and we took some unused traintracks into the underbelly of the city. I was starting to realize that maybe something was really wrong with my back now. It had gone on too long. Not just soreness, but pain, searing pain when I took a step. And my feet now too, along with everything else. Cold air on my burnt skin. Things didn't seem hurt so much as broken or ruined. It seemed almost silly to want to get a doctor at this point. I was too far-gone. Hoob too. I might as well just go toe-to-toe with the Captain and finish myself off.

My mind was focused on the file, the real reasons why we almost died all those times. The real reason I have the police looking for me. The real reason Andy might be dying or even dead right now. The real reasons our lives were practically over and ruined. And I was getting angry again. Angry enough that I might make a big mistake. Something really stupid. And that's what they would be expecting too, so I had to think around it.

We came to a slew of tramps and hobos, a shantytown of tents and burnt-out automobiles under the overpass to the bridge. Someone had lit up a fire in an old drum and some rancid smell was coming out of it like cooked garbage. There were maybe two dozen men in and around this area, drifting and quaking, sleeping and drinking.

"Can we stop?" Hoob asked. He was out of breath and so was I.

We were far enough from where we ditched the car that I thought we could, having walked for almost an hour. Anyone who looked down here wouldn't be able to tell us apart from these people. In our state, we blended right in.

Right away an old fella told us he didn't want any trouble, probably because John had a shotgun with him, but we told him we didn't want any either. A few of them were sitting on an old concrete slab like it was a log around the campfire, while the rest slept in piles of rags and filthy blankets. Only a few of them turned to face us. I was so tired I just plopped down on the dirt by the barrel, while Hoob joined the men on the slab.

He shook their hands and said a few hellos, but he wasn't exactly his usual self. No back-slapping, no grins or boisterous noise, just haunted, distracted eyes. The kind of look Andy usually had on. John was worried. If not about his friend, then about the men he'd killed. I don't imagine him to be the kind to fret about his mortal soul, but I do know that violence takes its toll. He said one time that it builds up on you, like trash on your doorstep. Trash that nobody takes away. I swear John could've been a poet in another lifetime.

A bottle was being passed around and John took a big haul from its neck, his face unchanging. It came my way but I turned it down.

"You got somefin' in that bag?" the man at the fire asked, taking a slug from a paper bag.

"Yeah."

"Is it dope?"

"No, it ain't dope," I said.

"You got some money?"

I shook my head *no*, but John took a few bills from his coat and gave it to the man. He didn't seem to mind flashing cash so liberally around these people, probably because he also had a shotgun in his lap as if it were an umbrella. The man took the money and stormed off, his legs stiff and strange. A junkie.

"So what's in the bag, pal?" a fella on the slab asked. His hair was divided into crazy tufts like a clown.

"A story," I said. They laughed.

Then Hoob's head shot around and he stared at me.

"Did you get something?" he asked.

"What thing?" a toothless old man squeaked, like it was any of his business.

I ignored him and held it up.

"The whole fucking thing," I said.

John had just assumed it had all been a failure. He had no idea that I'd struck gold. He was shaking his head like he couldn't believe it, blood congealing in his moustache.

"What's in it?"

"You won't believe what's in here," I said.

"Whas' iz name?" the clown asked.

"What?" I frowned. These people were starting to bother me.

"The fuckin' story, man!" someone screamed from the sea of blankets. A man with a big beard, having some kind of fit, crying and punching the ground.

"What's the fucking story *called*?" he screamed, yanking on the end of his beard.

"The Dead Millionaire," Hoob said, and the bums cheered. They liked the title, I guess. Or maybe they were all just cooked and would laugh at anything.

"That's what we used to call it. Now it's called *The Stolen Jewels*," I said.

"STOP SWITCHING NAMES!" the bearded man covered his head with his jacket.

It went something like this:

Rich pricks. A whole gang of them. So rich for so long that they're almost another race. Inbred and still inbreeding with family lines that go back centuries. Men with sheet-white skin, sagging old ghouls who called themselves gentlemen, kings of politics, captains of industry. So rich they deal in commodities, metals, not paper - increments spoken of in the millions. The rich pricks are the men behind the curtain. The men who own the curtain, the room, and the building it's in.

Girls. Little girls and teenage girls and grown women. Bought and sold like sows at the Sunday market. Another form of currency, hush hush and behind closed-doors, traded by the old monsters like baseball cards. The report is careful to call them 'working girls', as if they were whores or something.

Whores, despite what the preacherman will tell you, make an honest living. Whores get paid. Whores make choices. Maybe hard ones, maybe choices that don't have a lot of different options, but they still make them. If you aren't getting paid, if you aren't choosing to do it, you aren't a whore. You're a slave. Goldwynn, Baul, DeWolfe,

Burns, Chandler IV, all those pieces of shit in the newspaper clipping - they all had slaves. One or more.

Nobody ever liked being a slave. Doesn't matter what your punishment is for trying to run away, what they hold up as an example and say: this could be you. If they have a chance to split, they'll take it, no matter what. The so called *Group of Masters*, the men who have everything and anything -- they took it upon themselves to solve this problem. Find out what makes a human submit. How to make a woman love being owned. Quite a task, really.

Enter Van Erdel. A handsome young grad student making it big in the world of neurology, psychology. Dubbed 'The Master of the Mind', Erdel was brilliant, unscrupulous, and the perfect pick for the gang of old cocksuckers. The sonovabitch takes their money, joins their club, makes their goals his own and wins the Big Prize for Science Pricks while doing it. The file outlines the process of manipulating the slave to make them 100% agreeable, along with an explanation from the late Syndmar Van Erdel:

While education as it exists for the masses seeks to encourage submission to the state and its authority, its primary goal is to create autonomous labourers in the workplace. The education of human 'properties' must differ in that independence cannot be promoted in any way, shape, or form, no matter how small. Through various means, the 'will' or 'personality' is suppressed or even erased completely in favour of an individual completely dependant on their handler. This creates a 'mature childhood', where the property has moved beyond rebellion into complete submission. After training, a property is nothing more than a series of reactions that only take place as a result of commandment. Properties that begin chemical and psycho-sexual treatment at an earlier age excel in their submissive schooling, less likely to form any undesirable character traits, or indeed any traits at all which may hinder their performance.

'Less likely to form undesirable traits' does not mean that they won't. One of G.B.'s girls (his eighth, apparently) must've been outside of that special 'less likely' group. Because she stabbed the sweet bejesus out of the old fucker, shoved an unfired bullet in his head and castrated him (something ultimately omitted from the report Gold received). Templar Analysts believed she had such a 'disordered mental state' that she believed she could make it look like a suicide after the fact. A five page interview with Baul had him repeatedly stumped as to how she could have even known how to make it look like a murder, as sloppy as it was. She had been a 'property' since birth and was supposedly a top student. In the transcript, he repeatedly called it a fascinating development, though he was mournful that it was G.B. who 'took one for the team'.

The instructions given to the Templar Agency by DeWolfe were to make sure Gold was *not* informed about the young girl, *not* to be harmed,

Our hero, Dorothy, after doing the deed, nabbed his watch, unlocked the stone barrier, crawled back through her chimney to the hidden room and got the fuck out of town through the peep-hole pervert hallway.

And here was our case. The Pinks were in charge of finding the little lady, and so far, they'd been shit out of luck. The report stated that by the time they were called in, she was long gone, and searches of the castle and surrounding area turned up nothing. Finding her was important, because the rich pricks needed to find out if this was the work of their enemies, or just some horrible fuck-up. They needed her so they could give her the hot pokers until she spat up a name or anything. And if she did or didn't, from there they would saw open her noggin and see what went wrong. Why she was such an awful slave, and how to keep it from happening again. Find out how her spirit grew back.

But, incredibly, this was secondary to their real mission. The real job that DeWolfe had tasked them with. A two-million dollar piece of jewellery that the girl had taken with her was what had to be found. The #1 priority. The report said the jewels were important for various 'rituals'. I didn't know what that means - and if the fellas on the typewriter did, they sure as hell didn't mention it.

"Means it's a fuckin' ruby pecker to shove up their rumps!" the toothless man whined, and they all erupted in wild laughter.

He might've had a point. I was reminded of the ivory dildoes I pulled from Baul's safe. But I'd seen a photograph of the thing, a wide necklace with dangling gems and gold pieces, like some ancient god might wear in a storybook. The center jewel was as big as a flapjack, a diamond with square facets mounted into a gold backing, the neck riddled with rubies, emeralds, sapphires and topaz. It was ugly as hell, looked like a goddamned stoplight, so big even a guy as big as Hoob couldn't wear it comfortably. But it was worth a goddamned fortune.

The file outlined why we were a problem and why we needed to be put on a leash:

Reason One was because we were learning who the black watches were. A group that definitely did not need the public interfering with their fun. Hell, most of these guys were politicians and high-level businessmen. Their whole livelihoods depended on them seeming like mom and pop, barbecue and milkshake types. Not demented perverts and murderers.

Reason Two was because of Gold, and the fact that she wasn't to know the truth, out of some twisted sense of duty that DeWolfe had to her late husband. But she was about five eureka's away from finding out about poor Dorothy thanks to us and our snooping.

Reason Three was because we might actually come across the pancake diamond - and they'd concluded there was a high chance we would - and if we did, there's not a chance that we wouldn't sell the goddamn thing for pennies because we're a bunch of deadbeats, thus furthering the difficulty of getting a hold of their necklace.

Reason Four was because we were proving to be resilient, effective and 'ultimately problematic' detectives who might be able to solve their case for them, just like I thought. If we would be given the 'proper clearance', we might be able to located their jewels, the girl, or both. There was also a notice that we would have to undergo heavy training afterwards, because we were noted as being 'too unpredictable' and 'violent'.

And that was it. Our goddamned lives hanging in the balance because of some goddamned piece of rock and metal. Because some old fucks were all out of ideas for weekend fun except for raping kids. Andy was on his deathbed, hardly breathing because of it. If I made a wrong move, my wife and anyone I know would be chopped up for lunchmeat and mailed to me. Lisa was dead because of it. That little boy was dead because of it. I was being investigated for crimes that not only did I not commit, but were totally fabricated to begin with because of it. Beaten and stabbed and shot at and blown up and threatened and wounded and terrified and manipulated because of it. Because of a necklace. A fucking NECKLACE. Because some old men think that their lives are the only ones worth anything, and everyone else's is just a turd on their shoe.

When the story was over, we all just sat around in silence. They seemed like they were waiting for a punchline. An ending. Something I did not have.

I looked at John.

"Jesus fuck," he shook his head.

Then he stood up, his gun falling to the ground, the hobos jumping away from it like it might go off. He was shaking, his fists clenched.

We all watched him.

His face wrenched up and he made a noise that I can't even describe. Part steam-whistle, part gurgle. He went into a fury, stomping off into the distance, having a fit like the other crazies would. But there was nothing to hit, nobody to hurt who even remotely deserved anything. Me, maybe. All he could do was kick at the dirt, awkwardly stomping and jumping like a child, trying to burn off his rage, roaring and hissing. Screams I knew were for Andy.

The tramps seemed terrified by the whole thing, a few of them even ran away like he was a bad omen or something. The rest were fascinated by the story, horrified by John. They probably didn't even think it was true until they saw his reaction. Except for the screaming man with the beard (he was clapping his hands) they all seemed unable to look away, their faces painted up with horror and excitement. Me, I just watched him, silent. Content to let him do it. Someone had to. If not him, then it would be me. And I worried that if I did it, things might get even messier.

I heard him groan, picking up some heavy thing, throwing it into the distance. It seemed like maybe a big piece of concrete; impressive to have lifted over his head, impressive to have hurled so far, especially with his crazy neck. But the sound it made was so empty, a clattering echo, so weak it was almost pointless. He made a few more harsh movements and let out some more bellows.

A moment later, some junkie went over to him like they were old friends. Nearly a minute later, I saw he had his arm around him, somehow calming him down, patting his back. John had his head on the

Hoob was making noises like someone was sucking him off, but it was just the dope. He was on his back, all puffed up and pathetic, crying and moaning.

I didn't leave. I didn't hit him. I didn't do a damned thing. I just went and put my arm around him. Waited.

CH20: t r e a t m e n t

I don't really wanna talk about this part. I don't really like this part.

They did it in such a way that we didn't even know it happened. The last thing I remember was climbing into an unused culvert to pass out, an armful of borrowed rags for a bed, a bottle of dark rhum. I was drunk and tired, but not so far gone that you could drag me into the street, work me over and not wake me up. Not so far gone I could be carried away like a kitten on a platter.

But that's exactly what happened.

Instead of waking up to the sun and dew, the pigeons and the morning traffic I woke to white stone walls and a grimy stone floor, cold air and nausea. Tipped on my side, leg and wrist manacles, a bandanna around my mouth. What woke me up were the shackles. I tried to move and I screamed, both of my ankles swollen and pulpy from the fall. I was next to an iron grate, a horrible stench rising out of it. Shit and piss, something worse, too. I was cold, my bare ass exposed. Wearing a backless gown - the kind you get at the hospital. Everything felt wrong. Panic dumped into my veins and I tried to remember getting here, being taken, whatever. But nothing was coming. This was it. The moments I had been waiting for were here. They were minutes away.

It was impressive enough that they found us with the path we took, where we decided to hole up. But taking us back here without waking us up? That was just overkill. Another reminder that they were in charge. We could be dead without warning, wouldn't even see it coming. Granted, we were drunk and on drugs in a public place, which made it easier, but I'd never considered it possible that I could be carried away without knowing it. It was like a fairytale, some ghoul carting off a child at bedtime in a sack.

I felt a bit dopey, like I'd been given a dose of something strong. It made sense, I couldn't see any other way they could've gotten me here. And with all their connections to mind-men like Baul and Erdel, they probably had wild concoctions and serums and potions up the fucking wazoo. At first I thought it was my imagination, but there was a definite throb in my neck. A chilling enough thought. A couple dark men leaning over me. Instead of gutting me or blowing my brains out, they stick me with a needle in the fucking jugular. Jesus.

I didn't know where Hoob was, if he'd been killed or was in the same boat I was. I hoped to Christ he'd gotten away or gotten killed. I never thought I'd be in a position where I'd wished any of my friends dead - where staying alive was worse than dying. And at this point, I didn't even know the half of it.

I think they let me rest before the show got on the road. After struggling away from the stink-drain, I fell asleep for a bit. But only for a bit.

Music woke me up, big band music, a whole swinging orchestra, someone piping it down into the room. Loud, so loud it was deafening. But even louder than the music was a man's voice. I heard it say very clearly:

"AND THUS WE BEGIN TREATMENT."

And it started.

They turned it up so loud my ears rang. Louder and louder and louder still, my eardrums quivering in my head. I managed to bring my hands around and cover my ears, but it didn't make any difference. Before long I was screaming, pleading. I couldn't help it. But

There were two orderlies in the room. They came towards me, grabbed me by the arms. Pain shot through me but he stopped them. They were enormous men, but they looked like teenagers compared to Lawrence. He pushed a finger into one of their chests and grabbed one of their arms. He looked like he was crushing. He told them that they were supposed to unlock me first, help me walk out, not drag me out still cuffed. The man said that I'd attacked him but Lawrence squeezed his arm so hard that the man's face went white.

He unlocked me himself and helped me up. I couldn't walk, and he had to take all the weight of me, but it felt halfway dignified that I wasn't completely being dragged. On the way I noticed my toes were purple from standing on them, my ankles bigger than I'd even thought possible. I was allowed to sit on a chair in another room. This room was bigger, not white but red brick, and there was a big bear rug on the floor for me to put my feet on, a big table in the middle of it. The room was warm, and I immediately felt relief once I went inside. Sure enough, there was a big pitcher of water with ice, a tray with cheese and crackers.

"I guess it isn't toast," the Captain said, sitting me down.

He went around to the other side and poured us each a glass of water, popped a few crackers into his mouth too.

"Hoob," I croaked.

"Oh, don't worry. He's here too. But don't worry about that -- you must be starving," he said.

I ate almost the whole platter. It made me feel sick, but not as sick as the hunger had. Then I drank the full glass in one go. Asked for another.

"You don't want to drink too much," he said.

I leaned over and tried to pick up the jug but I was too weak. I flopped back in my seat and covered my face.

"Here," he said in a soft voice, leaning over.

It took all of my energy but I simultaneously stood up and smashed my glass into the side of his head. He caught my wrist in time, but the thing still shattered on his temple, gashed his head open. And I got him good, too. His eyebrow looked like it was halfway coming off. His face went wild and he crushed my arm where the cuffs had been.

I screamed, his grip on my arm tremendous. He dragged me across the table to his side like a ragdoll, the pitcher of water toppling and busting on the floor. His other hand grabbed my face, squeezing my cheeks inwards. My jawbone felt like it might bust and I found myself screaming again. He brought his enormous face to mine and locked eyes with me. Eyes like an animal. He was overcome with rage, boiling red. No one had pulled anything like that on him before, I could tell.

"That was a mistake," he said.

I mumbled *I gotcha*, but I don't think he understood it. Instead I gave him a nice smile and made a kissy face at him. He threw me against the wall, furious. My head made a sound on the brick like a shovel on concrete.

"Did you not see that coming?" I laughed, my voice horrible, a squeaking teenager, "Are you getting slow or are you just fucking sweet on me?"

He didn't say anything. Straightened his tie and composed himself. For that split second, I had him. He looked like he was going to crush my head. I don't imagine I would have the strength to bring it out in him again, but if I could, that might be my ticket out of here.

He wiped the blood off his forehead, but it kept coming down his face. Incredibly, he wiped it on his beautiful suit, unphased.

"You're gonna like this part," he said, with a smile. Called for the orderlies.

When I was put back in the room, there was a wooden stock for my head and hands like at a medieval fair. And a ring of fellas with masks like you'd make at school - paper plates and a string. Eyeholes only. I ain't gonna tell you what they did, either. Five men would come in, one after another after another. Like there was a train of them waiting outside the door.

And again, I won't tell you what they were doing, but they were doing it. And it hurt, worse than you'd ever imagine it would. And you think the first is the worst but the next one is even worse and it just gets worse and worse and doesn't ever get better. You'd give your life just to live through what happened three men back. There was blood. And laughter. Lots of both, with some screams to even it out. I won't tell you what they were saying to me, but I'm sure you can guess the kind of stuff. I roared at the top of my lungs every curse you could imagine, trying to get them angry. Get them to hurt me, kill me. Anything. But they laughed. They always laughed.

It took a long time for me to pass out, but I did. My ankles and back were in agony, starting to spasm. Finally I just lost consciousness. And when I woke up, I was on the ground, arms behind my back, cuffed again, the men still there, still doing what they were doing. They couldn't let me pass out in the stocks or I'd choke. So my break was getting to lie on my belly like a piglet. Screaming like a piglet. Torn apart like a piglet.

You lose count. I did. Eventually they had to put me back in to stock because I started to smash my head against the floor. I got three good ones in and saw some stars. I couldn't stand though, and eventually I would lose strength and start to choke, so they would have to hold me up. I came back to it and I was on the floor again so I got one more good smash against the concrete and blacked out again.

I don't know how long it was. I didn't know how long anything was. When I woke up, I was in a bed, covered up in blankets. I had an IV drip in my arm, my wrists were bandaged, and I could feel some kind of bandage on my forehead too. Incredibly, I didn't feel any pain. Just a gentle throb in my stomach, severe drowsiness. I was saved. Someone got me out of there. I tried to move and realized I was strapped down. And then the dread sunk in.

There were icebags on my ankles - one of them slid off the bed onto the floor.

I glanced left and saw the Captain, sitting with his hand over his mouth, on a little chair by the bed. There was a bandage on him, too.

"Howdy," he said. He pointed to my forehead, then his.

"I'm like you," he smiled.

I tried to tell him to fuck himself but my mouth was like taffy.

"You can't talk right now," he shook his head.

I tried to turn my head away from him, but I couldn't. I just looked away instead, but he was still talking. I think I was on morphine. I tried yanking my arm away from the drip, but it didn't work. Nothing worked. The whole of me was like taffy.

The Captain smiled, clapped me on the cheek.

"I've got stuff to do. Just wanted to check in on you, though. You're doing great," he smiled.

He started to leave, but then turned around, a finger in the air, like he'd had an epiphany. He took an envelope out of his jacket, fiddled with it for a moment. Put it on my chest, on the throw blanket.

"We got these off your buddy. Thought you might want to know," he smiled.

I didn't look down for a long time. I didn't want to see what was there. But finally I did.

It was a white envelope, opened, and sticking out of it were two pieces of paper, carefully arranged. Tickets. Plane tickets. They were from almost a month ago.

It didn't take me long to realize the suit John had been wearing was the same one he'd had on all those weeks ago when we thought he was cheating us. It didn't take long to realize what that meant. I kept my eyes on it. Didn't look up at the Captain, didn't move. I just let myself burn inside, didn't give him the satisfaction.

It was a long time before I looked up, and when I did, he was gone.

Then the next level of treatment started. My eyes were taped open and a little breakfast in bed table was put in front of me. They showed me photographs of John. And what he looked like now. What they'd done to his face and body. I looked away. They brought in pieces of his hair, like from a love letter. Except they were wet. Eventually they just started to bring in pieces of him. Skin. A few fingernails. A toe. I wouldn't look at them, but I could see them in my peripheral anyway, which was worse. I'd always imagine something worse. Everything was something horrible, his chopped-up dinger or part of his face, his scalp. But I wouldn't look at it. Eventually I told myself that they were props, like from a movie. Eventually I was picturing the things in the corner of my eyes as fruit and vegetables, cantaloupe and tomato pieces, the guts of a pumpkin. But I would always end up looking. One time I looked up and saw a nose, and I decided I would never look up again. It didn't matter though, eventually I would, and next time I saw that they had brought in his hand.

When I screamed, it just sounded like air coming out of a pipe.

A long time after that, I was back in the round room. This time I was in pyjamas, and I even had a pillow under my rump, still cuffed, though the bandages on my wrist helped a lot. But they began the sound treatment almost right away, the lights, the temperature. I can't really explain what it was like at that point. I can't explain what kind of pain I was feeling. I can't really talk about any of it in a way that makes sense.

Finally I left my body, flew right out of it like a ghost. I went through the ceilings and each floor of the place, right on up to the sky, over the city and flew away. I flew over the bridge and the lake, went up into the hills and circled back over the house that used to be mine and Aud's. I flew to the office and watched people do their laundry next door, eat sandwiches at the deli. I watched the postman go down the street, whistling a tune. Two pretty girls skipping at their hopscotch. It was quite nice.

Then there were screams overhead. Gunfire and screams coming down through the speakers. I came back to myself and this time it really was too much. It was pitched black again but the screams were so real - and

I had my moment or two. I knew we had to leave. But I needed to get back to normal. Get un-crazy. I kept thinking I would open my eyes and I would be back in the room. I would close them and open them back up. Open and close, open and close. And I was still here.

There were photographs over each porcelin pisser. Girls and boys. Fat ones and skinny ones, whole piles of people, fucking every which way. I thought I was imagining it, but it was as real as anything. There was even a photograph of the Captain, naked except for a fig leaf, flexing his enormous physique. Blowsucks and wank-offs and arse-fucks. A whole room of men going at eachother, their moustaches in eachother's privates, roosters going up rumps, three on three, five on one. Triplets, all flexing their muscles, and smiling girlies taking it hard. I thought I was going to throw up, but I looked anyway. It was real. I was okay. I was saved.

When my time was up, when they grabbed me and carried me out of there, I was trying to stumble towards one of the photographs to pull it off the wall to take home with me. I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

I was put into a big delivery truck like a mailman drove, surrounded by the soldiers, Andy, and Hoob. He had all of his bodyparts. He was beaten, bloodied. But had his nose, had his fingers and hands.

We looked at eachother but neither of us could talk.

When I looked at Andy, he had a look I'd seen before. On Gold's face. His jaw was clenched shut and his nostrils were flaring. He kept swallowing hard and shaking his head a little bit. He wouldn't look at us. Or couldn't, maybe.

Andy grabbed me again by the collar this time. He got in my face and pointed a finger to my eye like he might gouge it out of my skull.

"Maybe so, Chris. Maybe that's all true. But what are we gonna do about it? We can split up and fuck off and never see each other again after this --- but we're in the situation *NOW*. It ain't changing. We need to deal with it, goddamnit!"

"Do you even know the score, Andy?" I laughed.

"John filled me in."

"Well, he's the wrong person to ask," I shoved him away from me, hard.

He smacked into the table and the light almost went out again. He looked like he was going to strike me.

"You don't even know one fucking thing about this case," I said.

John, incredibly, was still sitting, wiping his face with a kerchief.

"He is on dope," I said, "look at him."

"What do we do, Chris... please. That's what I'm asking..." Andy's face went soft, his eyebrows raised, "what do we do..."

"That's what *I'm* saying, Andy. We don't do anything. We could've before, but that time, when I needed you most, has come and gone. And now there's even more blood thanks to you. Now there's no way out. Do you get it now?"

John moaned. His eyes were fluttering opened and closed. Andy went to him.

"I'm getting out of here, Andy."

Andy didn't say anything. He sniffled.

"Fuck - Andy..."

"*WHAT?*" he snapped, shot around, tears in his eyes.

I felt my stomach sink and I blew a deep breath out.

"Look..." I grabbed his arm, "I'm sorry, okay? Come with me. Just come with me."

He looked at me. There was a pause and for a moment I thought he was going to lean my way. But then he wiped his eyes, shook his head. Steadied himself.

I could see his hands flexing and tightening. He was getting ready to hit me. But he didn't. He just stood up and said *no*, like he was too good to do it. I wanted him to.

John's eyes were rolling in his head. Andy leaned over over, looking him over more closely.

"He got Lisa killed," John said, "I wasn't gonna tell you Andy but he did."

My whole chest hitched like I'd been shot.

Andy didn't move, his back rising and falling. The water was coming into the basement even faster now, and his pants were getting wet. I stood there but Andy didn't turn around.

Finally he coughed and cleared his throat.

"Just get out of here, Chris. Go fuck yourself."

I got out of there as fast as I could, collecting my clothes and gun in the dark, tripping over trash and refuse. My heart was pounding in my chest and I felt faint like I had lost a lot of blood, a cold sweat on my back. Finally I banged out the screen door and trampled off into the fields.

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THE NMO VIES

RAIN

came down for days. The lady

on the radio said it was a record rainfall and the storm drains were full, the gutters overflowing, cars were going off the road left and right. I had trouble staying on the road too, the truck's tires were bald and useless.

There were a few bucks in the dash, but it was barely enough for a full tank of gas. And it was all I had. All our money had been on me when they took me in for 'treatment', spare wads in the office, the bunker, even at Gold's, but they were all lost to me. I couldn't even dig out what pittance I had in the bank account, they'd find me for sure. And I knew a dozen ways to make money, had more than enough people I could shake down, but it didn't matter. I couldn't go back to the city. Even staying on the highway was dangerous right now, because they probably had a description of the truck. All I could do was sweat and drive, try to keep it together, try to stay on the road. But long after the morning came and I was out of money, running out of gas, I knew it was hopeless. I was starving, cold and overcome with pain. In order to keep going I'd have to start sticking my gun in people's faces, which would only bring more heat my way. I sold a couple crates of soup for gas and drove for as long as I could. I didn't know how much last. It had been three days.

Once I started to drift off, I parked at a truck stop and slept the rest of the day. Later, I went out into the pouring rain and opened up a can with a knife. I drank the tomato paste but couldn't keep it down. I burped it up all over the bed. I tried again with Chicken Noodle and that one stayed with me, so I had another. They were so salty I nearly vomited again. The sun was nowhere to be seen, just a dull grey throb behind the rain clouds. It didn't seem like the day would get any better. I turned the truck around.

I drove back to the Castle. The sun rose and set one and a half times and I had to stop for another sleep on the side of the road. Soup bought more gas.

I went there because I was done for. Because it didn't matter anymore. Because I couldn't take it and because I needed to see Gold before the end of this. Before it all came crashing down.

I wanted to call Audrey to say goodbye, but I couldn't even do that. I couldn't do anything that wasn't in this goddamned corner I'd pinned myself into.

On the way back I saw a car I didn't like at the gas station, so I passed it by completely, drove until I was sputtering and lurching up the road, the tank bone-dry. My first big mistake. Now I had to hitch, which left me even more in the open. A black car sped by me not two minutes later and the whole of me clenched up, stiff as a board. Bad

CHAPTER 23

CHRISTMAS

ABOUT

Bill Kurt Burton grew up in Halibacta, USA. He is a dedicated farmer, fisherman, rifle-enthusiast and an award-winning Javelina Boar hunter and trapper. *The Case of the Stolen Jewels* was written by Billiam Kurt while on a tropical cruise he took after surviving a horsing accident. Billiam was voted #1 Fictionalist by his peers at Onataupa Community College in 1998. He hopes to return and complete his studies there one day. Bill's other works, *A Battle for Bortwock* and *The GROANS* are currently out of print. He is currently developing a board game about wine-tasting.



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