

Brick

the treatment/novella type thing

by

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1.

The shallow stream ran past San Clemente High School and into a narrow ravine, trickling at last into a large, gaping drainage tunnel carved into the side of the freeway. It was nearly six thirty in the morning. An icy mist clung close to the ground, and the sky was wet gray slate. I sat hunched over beside the tunnel, my arms dangling like empty sleeves, my eyes set stupidly on the rolling water. I had been there ten minutes, not moving, and I didn't feel the cold.

Bobbing face down in the shallow water was a girl about my age, 18. Fairly pretty, very dead. My eyes had somehow settled on her thin arm, with its gaudy plastic bracelets, pale blue fingernails and short blonde hairs standing on end, all softly batting against her body like a docked boat.

My eyes were cold as my brain lumpishly tried to turn over, but I couldn't look away from the arm. I saw it in my head as it must have looked two days ago, very much alive, slipping a folded note through the slats in my locker.



TWO DAYS PREVIOUS

I opened my locker and the note fell to my feet. It was folded over sloppily into a triangle. I gently flattened it out, revealing scrawled pencil. "TWELVE THIRTY PICO + ALEXANDER". The locker cage emptied out around me and the first bell rang as I turned the note over in my dry fingers. Then I got my books and went to first period.

Lunch break found me on the corner of Pico and Alexander, about a block and a half north of the school. A wide empty street lined with shaggy trees. A payphone jutted incongruously from the cracked sidewalk, and I was less than startled when at 12:42 it began to ring.

I picked it up, and held the receiver to my ear in silence for a moment. A very small, thin voice said "Brendan?"

"Emily?"

"Yeah." Her voice was pinched with what could only be called meekness. "How's things?"

I answered slowly, deliberately. "Status quo."

"Yeah?"

"Uh huh."

"That's good." Her voice thinned out to a whisper, then a high, strained breath. She was crying.

"What's going on, Em?"

Strange noises were all I got back while she tried to stop crying and talk. She broke it with a cough. "It's good to see you, Brendan." That was an honest slip, and my eyes scanned the surrounding area for another phone she might be at. She was crying again. "It's been some time."

"About a month."

"Yeah. I didn't even know your locker. I had to ask Brain." Noises.

"Em, why don't we meet somewhere?"

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"I screwed up real bad. I really screwed up."

"Screwed up how?"

She was blubbering then, fast and incoherent, broken by half sobs and what I had thought was meekness but now seemed like fear. "I did what she said with the brick, I didn't know it was bad, but the pin's on it now for poor Frisco and they're playing it all on me-"

"Slow down now, what?"

"You gotta help me Brendan I think tug - Oh!" That last word was a sharp breath, and the line clicked dead just as a jet black Mustang glided by. I dropped the receiver and stepped out of the booth, spinning. There, another payphone up the hill -- empty. The black Mustang was a ways down the street. A man's hand dangled out the driver's window, and dropped a cigarette butt. It turned the corner and was gone.

I found the still warm cigarette stub. I didn't know from brands, but it was printed with a pale blue arrow near the top of the filter. In the distance the fifth period bell rang.



The Brain was a short kid with rusty yellow hair which reddened near his ears and glasses the size of Volkswagen headlights. I caught him in the hallway just before sixth period.

"What's the rumps?"

"You gave Emily my locker number?"

"Yeah, a few days ago. Was I wrong?"

"What?"

"To give it?"

"No."

"It's been so long, I don't know you two's stats."

"You seen her since?"

"No."

"How'd she ask for it?"

He shrugged. "She asked."

"She seem alright?"

"To me, yeah. You seen her?"

I chewed my lip. "No."

"I thought maybe she wanted to patch things up. You should try and see her."

"I'd like to. Keep your specs on, find me if she shows."

"Sure."

Sixth period broke and the masses were filing into school buses when I stepped into the school theater, also its cafeteria, a huge chunk of brown building. Inside the cavernous space was dark, illuminated only by the lit stage at its far end where the theater clan was rehearsing (a cynic might say 'raping') Into the Woods. There were no chairs. Drama geeks were scattered here and there in front of the stage.

I crept up behind a thin blonde girl with high cheekbones. She held a freshman boy's head in her lap, petting it like a dog.

When she turned and saw me her face was shadowed in darkness, but her words came carved in the shape of a mocking smile. "Hello, Brendan."

"Kara." I slung off my backpack and sat behind her on the floor.

"Come to see the show?" She kissed the freshman's forehead softly, purring.

"No, I didn't." I nudged the boy with my toe. "Lapdog, blow." The boy sat up, dewy eyed, and looked at Kara like a spooked puppy.

"Stay down." She pushed his head back in place, and chided in a sing-song "Don't be mean."

"I'm all friendly." To the dog: "Watch your head, kid, that thing bites."

He got up quicker, eyes hot, but looked at Kara. "Stay." Her fingers wove into his hair and put him down again. She nuzzled his ear with her nose.

"I need words."

"I'm listening."

"About Emily Kostish."

She stopped nuzzling a little too quickly, and whispered to the dog "Get me my purse from the dressing room." He got up and went. "Hurry!" she sang, and the sap broke into a trot. When she looked back at me she was smiling.

"Still picking your teeth with freshmen?"

"You were a freshman once." She slid her finger up my arm.

"Way once, sister." I growled, brushing her finger away. "You know the crowds. Who's Emily been eating with?"

"No one. Awol. I figured maybe she'd crawled back to you. You two were really in a pod there awhile, huh? Awhile back, I guess..."

"Who's the last crowd you saw her with?"

"Let's think... she was with you, but then I guess she ran out... that's harsh... then she was trying to get in with the big crowd, Laura and the Ivy bound cheerleading elite. You know Laura Dannon?"

"By sight."

"That didn't work. So she skipped around, trying to push in here and there, moving down the food chain, picking up bad habits. Last I saw her she was with Dode."

"Dode?"

"Dode, the carrows rat. Hit hard at the proverbial bottom. You really loved her, huh? Ouch, huh. She leaving you for that, ending up with Dode, taking them breaks over you. Must really hurt." Her sharp little teeth gleamed.

I tossed her a bored glance like I was tossing a bone and left. Her lapdog was back, panting "I couldn't find your purse."

She watched me go. "My what?"

Carrows family restaurant was a block off campus. It backed up against the weedy, overgrown edge of the ravine, a perfect little nest for a pack of rats. Five or six emaciated stoners slumped against the rear wall. Their black beady eyes followed me in sync. I picked the nearest one.

"Dode?"

"Nah, bra." Nothing else. The others stared back at me blankly. Alright, I moved to the next one.

"Dode?"

He shook his head hard. "Uh uh."

My methodical investigation was broken by a lanky kid with stringy hair two stoners down. "You looking for Dode?" I answered by walking up to him, nearly toe to toe. His head pushed down, he stammered "I aint seen him."

"Mug like that, I'd dodge mirrors too. Look up." His head jerked up, bringing his eyes with it. They were soft, thin and red. "Been binging, Dode? Hard days?"

A rat hissed "Scram, flatfoot. We're Jerr's friends here."

"Shut up," I barked back, "or you'll get what Jerr got." One of them spat. I turned to Dode. "You ate with Emily Kostish. Where's she eat now?"

"Damned if I know."

I grabbed his shirt. "Damned if you don't."

A bigger rat stood up. "Back off."

I didn't let go. "Throw one at me if you want, hash head. I've got all five senses and I slept last night, that puts me six up on the lot of you."

The big rat didn't sit down, but he didn't throw one either. "Just easy-"

I shoved Dode into the wall, anything but easy, and cocked my head at the big rat. He put his hands in his pockets, muttering something. Back to Dode. "Where's Emily eating?"

"I don't know where she's at, man, I aint seen her, I don't know who said I's seeing her but I aint, you got fed a bad dope there, you aughta be jackin up whoever fed you dat steada jackin poor Dode here-"

I dropped him. He scampered back against the wall, nodding at his fellow rats. "And I aint saying nothin more, bra, dat's dat."

The big rat sat down. "Nothing more here, bra. Now scram back to your cop friends."

I shrugged, already walking off. "I know when I'm beat."

Not thirty seconds after I was out of sight Dode took off like a rabbit, walking feverishly away from the school. I tailed him on foot past the freeway drain tunnel and into the dense weave of suburban streets between campus and the beach. When he stopped in front of a curbed Accord I had the high ground, shielded in a clump of bush fifty feet off.

Emily got out of the car and they embraced. They had quick words, with Dode doing most of the talking, Emily nodding along. Dode gave her a slip of paper, and she tucked it in her address book and pocketed it in her jacket. Then they embraced again, and Dode walked back towards campus. I stumbled through the hedges towards Emily, but she drove off fast.

I tailed Dode back to school. He went straight back to campus and disappeared into the big brown clump of theater. I stood outside for a moment, working my lip between my teeth. Dusk was already thick. I turned and walked home slowly, chewing all the way.





The next morning was crisp. Dode showed for his start-up hit behind Carrows then hoofed towards school, nervous, watching his back for me. I took the blood out of his face by popping out of Carrows as he passed and strolling casually beside him, two coffees in hand.

He shook his head and whined "Shat man, lay off my heels."

"Easy, Dode. I'm in a make-friends kind of mood." I held out the coffee.

He scowled. "Dangle."

"C'mon. It'll put a dab of white in your eyes."

He scowled again, but took it. "You weren't all luvy yesterday."

I shrugged it off. "My ratting Jerr was known, so you had to stonewall me to save face. My only play was to rattle you, see if I could scare you into making a careless play."

He barked laughter. "I held my ground, though, huh? So what's plan B, get all buddy?" He wheezed with amusement. "We gonna go for beers, me and you? Shoot the chick shat? Maybe a bike ride, would ya like that?" More wheezing. "Thanks for the mud, shamus. Dangle."

He tried to walk past me. In one motion I took his coffee cup and kicked his legs out from under him. When he was comfortably splayed flat on the sidewalk I handed him the cup back. "Tell Emily I want to see her. Tell her if she still wants my help or not that's her business, but I want to hear it straight from her."

"I don't know no Emily, where she's at-"

"Yeah, just tell her. She knows where I eat lunch." And I left him lying with his coffee.

I eat lunch in the back of the school on a small concrete wall beside a cement drain. It was isolated and dead quiet. I ate fast, my eyes up. I had finished my food and was reading a library copy of Lord of the Flies when a speck showed in the distance, down the paved utility road which bordered the campus.

The speck walked towards me slowly, then stumbled. I ran towards it, and got there in time to catch Emily and hold her on her feet. Immediately she put her arms around my neck and held on tight. I picked her up and carried her into the shade, and we sat for a moment in silence.

She looked bad. Too much makeup, not enough sleep. She sniffled, catching her breath, then spoke to her shoes. "I'm sorry about yesterday."

"Sorry about what?"

"Getting you worried, on the phone. I must have sounded pretty crazy."

"You sounded scared. You were asking for help, that's not crazy."

"No." She whet her lips and tapped her shoes together lightly. "It was dumb, I got paranoid over a really stupid thing, I was high, I went crazy for a little bit, but now you have to forget about it. I'm totally okay."

"You look it." She turned her weak eyes on me and I folded instantly. "Sorry."

"Brendan, I know you're mad at all these people, cause you think I went away from you and went to them. But you've got to start seeing it as my decision, stop being angry because where I want to be at's different from where you wanna be at."

My face didn't stop being angry just then. "Who fed you that line, Em?"

She looked back at her shoes. "And stop picking on Dode. He's a good guy."

"The Carrows rat?"

"He's a good friend."

"So what am I?"

"Yeah, what are you?" Her anger was choked and strained. "Eating back here, not liking anybody, how are you judging anyone? I loved you alot but I couldn't stand it, I had to get with people. I couldn't heckle life with you, I had to see what was what." There was a moment. She tapped her clogs. One had a hole worn through it. She stopped, and her face contorted, squeezing, as if every muscle in it was working to push tears out of her eyes. "I'm sorry Brendan" she choked, and buried her face in my shoulder, sobbing.

My throat was lumped up, and I had a tough time saying anything. "You were the only one I gave a damn about here. I've gone to hell since you left Em, I can't feel- I don't know. You were the good part of my life, now I can't remember what it was like. I'm not saying this right."

Muffled in my shoulder she sobbed "I love you."

"Yeah." I said.

She pulled back. Her face was a mess, but I'm sure mine wasn't porcelain either. She sniffed. "I've got to go. I'm going to come back tomorrow."

Her hand touched my neck. I tried to keep my voice straight. "You're coming back?"

"Yeah." She took my glasses off, then she kissed me and tried to walk away, but I caught her hand. I put my glasses back on.

"I can't let you leave without knowing what's going on. The brick and the pin."

She made a protesting noise with her nose, still runny from crying. "I told you,"

"You told me it was nothing and I know it's not that."

"It's not, but it's okay. I took something I wasn't supposed to, but it's alright. I gave it back, and I'm clearing it all up. Tomorrow it'll be all over. I'll be here." She tried to walk away again. I didn't let go of her hand. "Brendan, if you love me you've got to trust me. Let me go till tomorrow. Okay?"

"Okay." I pulled her back into a quick embrace, slipping her address book out of her jacket pocket. I watched her walk away quickly, then she turned the corner and was gone.



Through fifth period, English, I dissected the address book. Meaningless names and numbers, mostly. The slip of paper Dode had given her was the corner of a loose-leaf sheet. Blocky letters at the top read "11:30", and beneath that was a symbol:



In the background the teacher droned about the pig head's mouth in Lord of the Flies. There was nothing else in the address book.

The Brain tapped the corner of paper thoughtfully. "Hm."

We were sitting in the shade of the band building in front of school. Students criss crossed the wide lawn before us, lining up to wait for the busses. Brain's forehead wrinkled above his specs. He asked deliberately "Do you know anything else about this?"

I shook my head. "I told you everything."

"You aint got much. Why'd you let Dode fly when he came back to the theater?"

I shrugged dismissively. "It's their turf, I couldn't hear them without being seen, and that would only biff their play. Best to know it's there, let it ride and see what comes of it." Bored. I touched the paper. "But anyway."

"Hm. Well, if this is what I think it is, it didn't come straight from Dode. Not unless Dode's playing out of his league." He rubbed the paper. "I can only give you my best guess."

"Brain, I'm spent, I'd hock a lung for your foggiest notion. Let's have it."

"When the upper crust does shady deeds they do them in different spots around town. I know under the pier's one, down by the bike trails in the state park's another. There's alot of them. The pitch is they've got little symbols for each one, and that's how they tell each other the place, so word won't get around. So this might be that."

"But Dode wouldn't know it?"

"This is upper crust. Dode's pie pan grease."

"What other places do you know?"

"I've heard every secluded place in the burgh. It could be anywhere. Or this could be something completely different."

I studied the symbol. "Call anything up?"

"How many places in town start with 'A'? Or if it's a shape, or just a random symbol. I could make intelligent guesses till timber marries tu, but doesn't really matter - she probably went there last night. She said she cleared whatever it was up, right?"

"Why would she still have the paper?"

He shrugged. "Anyway, even if you figured it out, what good could you do? She's smart, she knows the play and she's gunning to square things. She'll tell you the tale tomorrow."

I looked up at the busses pulling into the parking lot. Gathered around a convertible Rabbit was a small cluster. Among them was a strongly built jock with a shock of blonde hair, and a lithe girl with long brown hair, sitting on the hood. I nodded slightly towards them.

"Laura Dannon there on the Rabbit?"

Brain twisted his head. "Yeah. Brad Bramish there with her. Cream on the upper crust."

Brad grinned too wide a grin. I said softly "He's a sap."

"Ever met him?"

"No."

Brain shrugged. "I won't argue. That's my bus." He handed the paper back to me. "Catch me up when you lick this thing, or when Emily gives you the story. I'm curious."

"Yeah." He trotted off. In the distance Brad and Laura laughed, and he kissed her. Her hair blew in the wind.



They were doing the Rapunzel scene in the theater. I nudged one of the Drama geeks with my toe. "Kara."

"She's out sick."

"All today?"

"No, I saw her fifth."

A "Shhhh!" came from the surrounding darkness, and I left.

The back of Carrows was empty. I didn't like that. I spent about ten minutes checking the cigarette stubs on the ground - no blue arrows. I walked home slower than yesterday.

That night I sat at my computer, tapping away at Tetris and starrng off into space. My mom's voice said "Good night" and the light turned off in the hall.

At ten thirty I was in bed. The slip of paper was propped up on my nightstand. I starred at it, my brain turning this way and that. The symbol grew larger, burning my eyes, and for a moment I was falling away into darkness. I heard rushing water, saw vague shadows, water over concrete, then I was under the water, screaming. I plunged upward and before I could catch my breath a woman with no face kissed me, her long hair plunging around me then pulling away. The last strands had just gone when I woke with a jerk.

My hair was wet with sweat, my breathing ragged. I caught my breath. The paper on my nightstand took my gaze and smoothed my breathing. I put my glasses on, dazed, and took a pencil from the floor. With smooth strokes I shaded the symbol so it looked like this:



I put the pencil down. The clock said 3:46. I laid back uneasily on my pillow. Everything was calm and silent. The worry didn't leave my eyes as I removed my glasses and clicked off the light.

The morning was cold. I left my house in the gray shade of an overcast pre-dawn. When I came near the ravine I slowed. The gentle sound of water didn't soothe me. I slowly, robotically picked my way through the overgrown weeds, down a path, and to the mouth of the drainage tunnel.

I stopped breathing and squatted on the embankment. My arms hung limp. My eyes were sluggish and strained, with too much going on behind them. My lungs emptied all at once, choppily. Emily lay face down in the water. Some dark red foam clung to the sand around her. She was bluish white. I looked at her arm.

For about ten minutes you might have counted two corpses in the ravine. I didn't move a muscle. My eyes were the first thing to shift, breaking off from the body and drifting stupidly into space. I followed them, walking mechanically up the embankment towards school.

After I was gone a lanky figure crawled from the bushes and out of sight. I wouldn't find this out for a while, and when I did it would spare me no grief.

I don't remember walking to school, but when I got there the campus was cold and nearly empty. I drifted across the barren lawns and into the library. The light inside was warm, sheltering the few souls peppered here and there at wood-colored tables. The Brain was there. He looked up, almost startled. "Hey, Brendan."

I fell into a chair.

Brain looked me over. "You're up early."

"I couldn't sleep."

He nodded, lifting his book. "Find Emily?"

I breathed out softly.

Brain went back to watching me closely. "You alright?"

"Yeah. What, are you here for zero?"

"Nah, I gotta take the early bus, cause the others don't run by my street."

"Bad break."

"Eh. Time to read's nice."

A stretch of silence passed between us while I methodically removed my glasses and cleaned them on my shirt. When I put them back on my mindset was sharper. I straightened up. My eyes fixed on his. "Brain, I want to find out who put Emily in the spot she's in."

"You're going to ask her at lunch, right?"

I shrugged, "Even if she shows, which I'm thinking she won't, she's not in a position to give me the whole story."

"Physical danger?"

"Yeah."

"Hm. Cops couldn't do anything until after she got hurt."

I shifted. "Bulls would gum the works for me anyway. They'd stomp their clodhoppers around, flash their dusty standards at the wide-eyes and probably find some yegg to pin,

probably even the right one. But they'd trample the real tracks and scare the real players back into their holes, and I want the whole story with this. No cops, at least for a bit."

"There's nothing to call them for yet." His face made that a question.

I looked hard at him. "You okay to op for me on this?"

"You're not giving me the straight."

"No, and you won't get much else till the whole thing's shut."

"You don't exactly butter a guy up, do you?"

"I need you on this, but that's the way it's got to be."

He thought for half a second. "Yeah, alright. What's first?"

"I don't know. What was Em's locker number?"

"239."

"Your mom have a cell?"

"In her car."

"Borrow it for a few days, get me the number." I stood. "Wait for my word, and cover for me first period. I'm going to be a little late."

I walked back across the soccer field, slowly, my eyes on my feet. Halfway across I stopped and stuck my eyes on the wet grass as my brain spun slowly behind my suddenly lumpish, stupid face. I looked up. The wind whistled. I pushed my glasses up the bridge of my nose and went on walking.

When I got to the ravine I waited on the edge for a few minutes, making sure it was deserted. Then I went down to the water. Quickly, without delicacy, I lifted Emily's body and pulled her back into the drainage tunnel. About fifty feet back I laid her against the wall. It was pitch black. I jumped when I saw two beady eyes peering at me in the darkness. A gull in her nest. I left without looking back at the body.



2.

Twenty minutes later locker 239 was busted open and I was sitting behind the Math building flipping through a stack of notebooks and loose papers. There were two photographs which had been taped to the inside of the locker door. One was of me and Emily hugging. The other was taken at a party. It was Emily and Kara leaning together, beers in hand, smiling. Another girl was to Emily's side, her arm around her neck, but the picture cut her off at the elbow.

The rest of the papers were just class notes, with the exception of a bright yellow card. A pair of eyes peering over a sequined mask was photocopied onto it, with "Party Wednesday Don't Miss It" at the top and "Call Laura for Details" at the bottom. "Halloween in January!" was printed on the back of the card, and a phone number was scribbled beneath it.

I met Brain in a hallway at lunch. He slipped me a piece of paper. "There's the cell number."

"Keep it on vibrate."

He patted his jacket pocket. "Yeah."

"Better stop meeting me in the open too. I'm going to start getting visible, and I need you on the underneath. I'll call."

"What's first?"

I ignored that. "I'm going to throw a few words at you, tell me if they catch. Brick."

"No."

"Or bad brick."

"No."

"Tug."

"Tug... that might be a drink."

"Drink?"

"Vodka and milk or something, or maybe not."

"Poor Frisco."

"Frisco. Frisco Farr was a sophomore last year, I think. Real trash, maybe hit a class a week. Didn't know him then, and haven't seen him around."

"Pin."

"Pin... the Pin?"

"The pin, yeah."



"The pin's kind of a local spook story. You know the Kingpin?"

"I've heard it."

"Same thing. Supposed to be old, like 26, lives in town."

"Jake runner, right?"

"Big time... maybe. Ask any dope rat where their junk sprang they'll say they scraped it from that who scored it from this who bought it off so, and after four or five connections the list'll always end with the Pin. But I'll becha you got every rat in town together and said 'show your hands' if any of them've actually seen the Pin, you'd get a crowd of full pockets."

"You think the Pin's just a tale to take whatever heat?"

Brain shrugged. "But what's first?"

"I'm gonna start kicking down doors and asking for a show of hands."

The first door I kicked led to the backstage of the theater. It was dark, a dress rehearsal was on. I pushed through forest scenery and past beady eyes of drama geeks sitting in shadows as a cracked rendition of "Into the Woods" came from the other side of the backdrop. I eventually made it to another door, and out into sunlight.

Kara was leaning on a railing by the loading dock in back of the theater, smoking a cigarette. Billowy evergreen bushes flanked her, and she didn't see me until I put my weight on the rail beside her. She was annoyed. "Hey Brendan. Here for the show?"

"No."

"Would you go then, honey, cause I've got this headache."

"Kara, I'm going to start shaking things up. Give me the story now and you might miss the bite."

"The story about what?"

"Alright." I turned and started walking away.

"The story about what?"

"I don't want to play games if you've got a headache. Get me if you want to spill it, but I can't guarantee safe passage after tonight." I was at the door.

"I don't know what-"

"Tell the Pin I'll be at the party tonight, and I need words." When I was covered by the darkness in the theater I turned to see her expression just before the door shut. It wouldn't have gotten her a quick loan at the bank.

I swung around behind the Brain as he came out of fifth period. "Tail Kara when you get out of sixth. She's got rehearsal till eight but she'll blow early. She goes home, drop her, else wait for my call." When he turned to ask details I was gone.

I walked home quickly, not slowing as I passed the drain tunnel. In my room I flipped over the party invitation and dialed the number. An older woman said "Hello?"

I hesitated. "Hello, ma'm, this is Tom, I'm a friend from school. Could I speak to..." I just barely trailed off, and she bit.

"Oh, hi, Tom. No, Kara hasn't got home from rehearsal. Can I-"

I hung up, and tapped the number with a pencil. "Hm." I took a telephone directory from beneath my desk, and a moment later was ringing another number. This time a young woman's voice answered. "Hello?"

"Is this Laura?"

"Yes it is."

I turned the invite over in my hands. "I'm calling for details."

"For what?"

"Details about the party."

"Who is this?"

"I don't think we've met."

"Well, then I don't think you're invited to my party. It's a rather exclusive gathering."

"I can imagine." She started to speak but I cut her off. "In future conversations I can suggest several excellent spreadsheet programs and daily organizers to aide your tracking of these rather exclusive invites, or perhaps a private CPA whose services may be rather pricey but a small penny to pay for assurance that your hobnob hole's gene pool isn't inseminated by lesser stock and diluted to a watery paste," she tried again but I kept going "rather like the near beer in those thirty dollar kegs they're loading into your kitchen."

"I'm hanging up-"

"But this is all academic at present moment, for, discretion of your invite sending aside, I have procured a certain someone's invitation, and would like details."

There was a beat of silence at the other end. "You think you're cute, whoever you are."

"Wait'll you get a load of my felt fedora and spats."

"Who are you? Or I'll hang up."

"You don't know me- I'll save you some time."

"I know everyone and I've got all the time in the world."

"Nonsense, your beer is getting cold. Ask whose invitation I've got."

Lightly, "What you said."

"Thought you'd never ask. Emily Kostish."

A longer beat of silence. "Oh yeah? You a friend?"

"Yeah, a real close friend. Confidant might be an exclusive word for it."

"Emily knows where the party's at."

"Emily's not coming, she doesn't know I'm coming, and I'm having doubts myself if you keep toying with me."

"Hold on a minute. Is Emily there?"

"I'm hanging up."

A shorter longer beat of silence. "15 Bush street, up in Stockton Cove. Buzz 42 at the gate. Nine o'clock. But who -"

I hung up.

At 8:30 I paused Tetris, showered and changed clothes.

At 9:30 I ditched my bike at the Stockton Cove gate, used the call box as a handhold to hop the fence and hoofed it up to a very nice two story house labeled "15". Shiny cars lined the curb. I paused behind one of them, took a short breath, then strode up to the front door and came in as if I didn't mind who saw me come in.

The living room was small and clean, with a two story ceiling and a railed staircase at one end. Fifteen or twenty clean people, some in costumes, were milling about in small cliques. I

pulled a couple of odd stares, but no one stopped me, so I went to the keg in the corner and drew half a cup as a prop. A thin guy leaning on the keg nodded and said too nicely "Hey Brendan."

"Tom."

"Who you here with?"

"That guy leaning on the banister."

He looked. "What guy?"

"Give me a second." I left him, planted myself against the banister and pretended to nurse my beer while I scoped the room. Brad Bramish, the jock with Laura in the parking lot, sat slouched on the couch. The crowd was dense around him. He held a cup and spoke much too loudly to a guy at his elbow.

"If coach wants to play me I'll play, but I can't put my best game in if I've got to worry about whether I'm going to be in there. Halftime last game, coach is pissed I ran it on a pass play, out on the field he says to me 'you gotta think about the team and you gotta' you know and 'if you run that ball again you're out', and I said to him you gotta let me play! I'm out there, let me play, and he's saying 'no you're out' and I kept saying 'Let me play! Let me play! Let me play!', just right in his face-

The guy laughed and nodded vigorously. "He was!"

"Just 'Let me play! Let me play! Let me play!' 'No you gotta' 'No, let me play! Let me play! Let me play!'"

Brad hunched forward and kept yelling that until his face swelled purple. Tom stepped in front of him, blocking my line of sight. I ran my eyes around the rest of the room, and caught Laura leaning against a divan. She wore a red silk kimono. Her sharp eyes were studying mine. I wagged my eyebrows back at her, and she looked away. I looked back towards Brad and cut off his 'Let me play!' by shouting "Tom!"

Brad fell silent. Most of the room followed suit. Tom turned around. I smiled good naturedly. "Move aside a step, will you? I'm trying to follow Brad's story, and it's difficult when I can't see his face."

I had the whole room looking at me now. Tom mumbled a "Sure" and stepped aside. Brad was starring at me stupidly. I flashed a dopey grin and winked, tipping my glass. He stumbled on with his story - "He doesn't give me a play to make, what can I do, you know?" then fell silent. The guy at his elbow started babbling.

I looked at Brad. He was looking at me. I pointedly looked from him to Laura. She was looking at me too, her eyes slightly amused. I cocked an eyebrow. The slightest hint of a smile took a corner of her mouth, and she wagged her eyebrows once at me. I glanced back at Brad. He was looking at Laura now, not amused at all. I looked back at Laura, Laura looked over at Brad, Brad looked back at me, and I looked back at Brad. The guy at his elbow chattered on.

Brad called at me. "Hey. What are you doing here?"

"Drinking."

"Uh huh." He glared at me.

"Alright, you got me. I'm a scout for the Gophers."

"Oh yeah." Not amused.

"Of all things, yeah. Been watching your game for a month, but that story just now clenched it. You've got heart, kid. How soon can you move to Minneapolis?"

A few snickers, but not from anywhere near Brad. Those around him looked on with interest. His voice was flat with anger. "Yeah?"

"Cold winters, but they've got a great public transit system."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Oh yeah?"

I leaned back. "There's a thesaurus on the shelf behind you. 'Yeah's under 'Y'. Go ahead, I'll wait."

"Who invited you?"

I felt Laura's eyes on the side of my face, but I kept my stare steady on Brad. "I kind of invited myself."



"I think you better leave then."

"No, I'm having too good of a time."

"Just the same."

I smiled slightly, and very deliberately crossed my legs. Brad's face got very tense. He glanced around at his group. They were looking back at him, all interested but none too angry. "Maybe you want to go outside."

"With you?"

Brad said 'who else' by lifting his arms.

"Sure." I said it as if he'd asked me to the movies. I got up and walked out, he followed me and the rest of the house started trailing after us.

I walked out into the middle of the front lawn and turned to face Brad. I took off my jacket while he hung back, mumbling "You know what's good for you you'll just beat it. Beating a small frye won't win me anything, and it's not going to do you any good-" Laura's face appeared in the front window and I cut Brad off by putting my fist in his face. He grunted but didn't lose ground. I threw my short stocky frame into his larger one and began tenderizing his midsection with jabs. He swung his arm around and tagged me in the ribs, then smacked the palm of his hand into my face, shoving me back onto the wet grass.

He came at me with his big fists clenched. I started to get up, then thought better of it, tucked my legs in and kicked him full force with both feet in the shins. He tumbled, and I came up fast, connecting hard with the point of his chin. He got his balance, and before I could throw another he threw one himself, then another, both into my stomach. I kicked his shin where I had kicked it before. Brad roared and hit me very hard in the face. I reeled back, then threw my weight forward, putting it all into a solid hook straight in his nose. There was the sickening sound of egg shells being crushed, and Brad fell straight back like a board.

He stayed down, holding his face. I staggered back, breathing hard, and looked up at the small crowd. Some stared at me, others at Brad, but nobody seemed about to do anything. I ran a sleeve over my face and walked unsteadily back into the house, pushing past the last few people coming out. "Hey, is there a fight?" one of them asked. I said "Yeah." and stumbled inside.

The living room was deserted except for Laura, sitting on the couch by the window. I walked through the room and out the other end without looking at her.

I fumbled down a dark hallway and poked around in several directions until I came into a dim den and found what I was looking for, a small wet bar. Clumsily I put ice in a glass and cracked the ice by pouring liquor on it. Someone entered the room behind me as I raised the glass to my lips. Laura's voice came from the darkness. "Whiskey?"

I paused, the glass touching my mouth. "Jameson." I downed half of it.

"I like a man who knows what he's drinking."

I licked my lips. "That's a pretty sick thing to be attracted to."

"You put Brad through the gears, didn't you?" She leaned against a leather chair. I turned to face her.

"It'll be awhile before he can see over his nose."

"Any reason why?"

"No." We sat in silence. She studied my face. Hers was lit with the soft broken light of the bar, such that her features seemed liquid.

"You need ice?" she asked. I gently shook my glass so the cubes clinked. "For your face." she added. I took another sip, silent. She stood up, said "Quit your yappin and fix me one." and strolled out a sliding glass door. I grinned and turned back to the bar, cutting mine to the top with water and filling another to the top with straight whiskey.



I joined her on the patio with two drinks in hand, gave her one, and stood beside her facing the view. San Clemente's twinkling suburban lights stretched out in the valley beneath us. Laura sipped her drink. "I'll never get through all this."

"Uh huh."

She sipped more. "So why are you here tonight?"

"I don't know. Emily gave me her invite, and the theme seemed enticing. Dressing up in January and all."

"You haven't seen Emily in a month."

"Really? Well gee, you've got me pegged, I better come clean. I'm here to see the Pin."

She smirked. "Really? Well gol, you're obviously on the in, I better get nervous and spill the whole evil plot."

"Pull yourself together. Sip your drink slowly." She did. "I saw Emily yesterday. And again this morning."

"Really? How is she?"

"She's safe."

"What has she told you?"

"I think I'll just let you guess at that for awhile."

"Yikes, I'm getting all nervous again. Listen, you're scratching the wrong door. I didn't know Emily well enough to know any details of what she was in, I just got wind of the downfall, and I didn't get any details of that, except that it was bad. So now that we're showing some cards..."

"If you haven't got a finger in Em's troubles, why'd her name get me into your rather exclusive party?"

"Cause I don't know, but it sounded like you did, and a girl's got a right to be curious. Now I'm not so sure."

"Well I'll put your mind to rest. I don't know a damn thing, but I want to, and I'm going to. Em's not talking, and she doesn't know the whole story anyway. There's my hand. You can spill what you know about the bad guys to me or what you know about me to the bad guys, your call."

"Which would you prefer?"

"I'll make out either way."

She studied me, her face serious, then asked almost to herself "What's your play in this?" I went to take another drink. A voice called Laura's name from the glass door. It was another girl. Laura flashed me a look then went to her. They had quick, quiet words and the girl left. Laura came back to me and said hurriedly "Will you wait here for me?"

"Sure."

"You'll stay right here and wait - I'll be five minutes."

"Yes."

The moment she was gone I ran around the side of the house, stopping at the corner to peek around front. Brad was gone, and a few stragglers were talking on the lawn. Laura came out the front door and swiftly cut over the grass to the sidewalk, going on down the street. I rolled over the small brick wall and into the neighbor's lawn. Hunched behind a hedge I could see a black mustang idling half a block away. A lean kid with a close shaven head stood beside it, arms crossed. Laura trotted up to him. I risked pushing past the hedge and down the sidewalk, using the cars as cover.

The kid wore baggy jeans and big black engineer boots. I couldn't see the details of his face. He seemed angry, while Laura spoke quickly, trying to appease him. He grunted something and, looking unsatisfied at best, got back in his car and peeled off.

I watched Laura look after the car, then turn and look up at the house. She walked towards it slowly. When she was gone I stood and walked back towards the gate and my bike, leaving Laura to find an empty patio with two half full drinks framing the twinkling suburban lights.

The next morning was brisk. I slumped against the campus payphone, licking my bruised lip. I wore dark glasses. Brain was talking through the phone. "You didn't call."

"Sorry. Kara went home though, didn't she?"

"Yeah, but she stopped at a payphone and made two calls that she didn't want on her phone bill."

"Get the numbers?"

"No. Sorry."

"S'alright. What period is it?"

"Third. You at home?"

"No, but I just got here. Are me and Brad front page news?"

"All around town. You really do that?"

"Yeah."

"Want to tell me why?" The slightest perceivable pause. "Never mind."

"Any other news?"

"Some. Laura Dannon came to me looking for you."

A very perceivable pause, but when I spoke it was as if I expected this. "She did, huh?"

"Second period, nearly shook me upside down. Can't say I didn't enjoy it, but why'd she come to me?"

"She's tapping Kara, and Kara knows you know me."

"Yeah, well. She's some piece of work. If I had known where you were I might have told her."

"That's the spirit. Look, you know a kid around the burgh, lanky, short shaved head, big boots, turns a black mustang?"

"I told you before I don't know the car. Those types are a nickel a pound, but nobody I know that you don't."

"Well, keep your specs on for any others - I need to find that kid."

"Okay."

I hung up the receiver and turned from it sluggishly. A lanky kid with a short shaved head and big boots punched me in the face. I hit the pavement, and my glasses clattered off. He was over me in a split second, kicking me in the thighs and stomach and beating my face and body with short, heavy blows. I saw now that he had a shiny scar shaped like a long, thin V running down the right side of his face. During the brief thrashing he grunted, but didn't speak. When he finished he walked off with several other blurry figures, and I heard a car peel out and roar off.

I didn't move for awhile. The class bell rang hazily high above my head, and blurry legs began criss crossing around me, each one smearing the world a bit more until it was so out of focus I couldn't see a thing, and then I was asleep.



The first thing my eyes focused on when I woke was a split section of a human lung. I muttered "damn" under my breath.

The school nurse waddled into the small, cramped room as I leaned up on one elbow. The cot creaked beneath my weight. "Well there you are, Brendan. Glad to see you've joined the land of the living, though not half as glad as you probably are I'd wager." She spoke as if she was performing a line reading, badly. "How does that noggin feel, or can you feel it at all, and if you can I'm sorry you can, but surely not half as sorry are you probably are in feeling it am I right?"

"I'm fine."

"You should be in time, but you're going to need rest. Now I've called your mom to pick you up, and I'm sure you're wary of spending the rest of the afternoon sitting on your keister watching the television set but I'm afraid that's the way it's going to have to be!" She grinned wide and mechanically.

"Could I have some aspirin?"

"Yes, I can see how you'd like some, and you're fully justified in asking for it. I'll just go and get it for you then. Back in a sec." She went. I slid painfully off the cot and picked the telephone receiver off the wall. I dialed.

"Mom? Hey, don't worry about picking me up. I'm fine, this guy tried to hit me, and he just bruised my cheek. I'll tell you about it tonight, but I've got a ride home. Yeah, it's alright. After fourth period. Okay. Bye."

I was back on the cot when the nurse came in with my pills. I took them, then slid down off the cot and said "I'll go wait out by the gym for mom."

"Not so fast buster brown though I'm sure you'd like to and I can't blame you for it. Gary Trueman would like a word with you in his office."

I sat in the tiny office in a small chair across from a man in his early thirties behind a wood colored desk and name plate, "Gary Trueman, Assistant Vice Principal".

"You didn't know this boy?"

"Never seen him."

"And he just hit you?"

"Like I said, he asked for my lunch money first." Trueman trained a good natured dubious eye on me. "Good thing I brown bagged it."

"Alright, tough break. I'm going to stop asking you about this now, I just want to talk to you." I didn't react. "You've helped us out before."

"No." I cut him off. "I gave you Jerr to see him eaten, not to see you fed."

"Fine, and very well put."

"Accelerated English, Mrs. Kasprzyk."

"Tough teacher?"

"Tough but fair."

"Right, good, keep at it. Anyway then, we know you're clean, and you've, despite your motives, you've been an asset to us. I think you're a good kid."

"Ditto."

"Thanks. So when I let this slide, it's going to be under that pretense, a pretense which is not infallible, which can only be tested so many times before you go from an asset to a pain in the keister. We clear?"

I pushed my glasses up the bridge of my nose. "There's probably going to be a few more incidents."

He was interested. "Oh yeah?"

"Enough to pop your pretense, so let's redefine it now. I'm getting close to another dealer. A bigger one. I don't know who yet, but when I deliver him it'll make the big city rags for you, easy. I don't know how much sliding you might have to let me do, but it might get pretty hot."

"The Veep won't go for anything I can't reasonably hide from him."

"If I get caught like that it's curtains anyway - I couldn't have brass cutting me favors in public. I'm just saying now so you don't come kicking in my homeroom door once trouble starts."

Trueman bit a thumbnail. "Okay. I won't figure you in for anything you aren't caught at. I'll ride it a little while, as long as it doesn't get too rough. But I'm laying the rules right here - anything comes up with your fingerprints on it, I can't help you. Also, if I get to the end of this and it gets hot and you don't deliver, I'll have to pin the row of split lips on somebody and I'll have you. There better be some meat at the end of this like you say, or at least a fall guy, or you're it."

"Fair enough." I stood to leave. "Oh say, you know anything about a Junior, Frisco Farr?"

"The name's not familiar. I could look it up."

"If you would. A class schedule would be great, but don't go poking at him. And I've got one more favor to ask."

Gary Trueman threw me out of the administration building by the elbow, shouting "Get the hell off my campus, punk!" after me. I recovered with a scowl, glanced around, and limped off.

I spent the next twenty minutes casually walking through the school, passing every open classroom door. Eventually I passed the right one, and when I was less than fifty feet past it Laura came shuffling out after me. I glared back at her.

"You're quite a pill." she muttered at me.

"Uh huh." I agreed.

"Want to tell me why you took a powder last night?"

"I didn't think you'd miss the gent who split your beau's beak."

"You left to see if you had me hooked, so here I am. Pin a 'sap' sign on me I'll wear it thin, but stand still and talk."

I stood still. She looked up and down the hall, then brought her face close to mine and spoke quickly. "I'm on the in, top level of the tower and I know everyone, but I don't know all what goes on. I knew Em when she tried to get with me and Brad, and I liked her. She had brains. But she wasn't us and it didn't work, so she split, but she took some souvenirs, some dirty habits she wasn't strong enough to control and a connection to the Pin to keep em going. With me?"

"So far."

"So a few months go by and the next I hear the Pin's got a bleeding tooth over some situation with some certain junk which Em was partial to, and the downfall's coming on Em's head."

"You think Em scraped the junk off the Pin?"

"I don't know, but whether she scraped or copped or just ran her tab round the world and into her own back, it must have been grand for the steam the Pin put out."

"Why didn't you just ask the Pin when you saw him last night?"

She grinned. "You're going off half smart, or just fishing? I'll bite anyway. That was the Pin's muscle, Tugger. You learned why this morning."

I sucked a bruised lip. "Tugger, huh?"

"He's nuts, and they say his dad's got a gun."

"I like him. He's the first player in this mess who hasn't talked my ear off."

"I'll clam up whenever you like." She tried a half smug look.

I grinned, "Fine." and walked away.

"Hold it." I kept walking. "I don't get you. I'm where you wanna know about and you're giving me the cold heel!"

"I'll get where I'm going just fine."

"I want to help you."

"Go away." I walked on a few steps. There was silence behind me. I stopped and turned wearily. She looked genuinely hurt. "Look, I can't trust you. You ought to be smart enough to know that. I didn't shake the party up to get your attention, and I'm not heeling you to hook you. Your connections could help me, but the bad baggage they bring could make it zero sum gain or even hurt me, so I'm better off coming at it clean."

"I wouldn't have to lead you in by the hand -"

"I can't trust you. Brad was a sap, you weren't, you were with him and so you were playing him, so you're a player. With you behind me I'd have to tie one eye up watching both your hands, and I can't spare it."

"You're not Brad."

"No, I'm not." I turned and walked away, and she didn't follow me.

On the way home I checked behind Carrows. Empty. About halfway home my luck picked up. A black mustang was parked near the street in a Ralphs parking lot.

I walked around it slowly. It looked as if it had just been waxed. I cupped my hands against the windshield and peered inside. Clean and empty. I pulled the door handle, which was locked. Something was coming towards me across the lot. I froze, head cocked slightly, my hand still on the handle. It was Tugger, chugging towards me as if he had something on his mind. I let the handle go and casually leaned back on the door, carefully removing my glasses and slipping them in my pocket.

Tug hit me like a train and threw me across the pavement. He turned back towards the car and took out his keys. I got up and came back towards him, my face stiff. He popped me once squarely in the mouth, and I fell to my knees. While he unlocked the door I stood up woozily. Grunting, he spun around and grabbed my jacket, pushing me back while he slapped me hard in the face, back and forth, three times. When he let go I dropped like a stone, catching myself on my hands and knees. I heard the car door slam as I blindly stumbled up and towards it. My hands touched the car and Tug came into focus, his face a blend of annoyed wonderment. The engine roared to life and the car peeled away from me. I nearly fell over again, but with a few staggering sidesteps managed to stay upright.

The mustang drove about a hundred yards out into the parking lot, spun around and stopped, facing me. Its motor purred deeply. I began to limp towards it doggedly, my head up and eyes fixed.

A crackling roar and short squeal of tires spat the mustang forward. It came straight at me, rumbling like a tank. I stopped walking and stood very still, my eyes steady. The gap between us closed in no time at all. The car must have been going fifty when it reached me. It sped past me not six inches to my left, brushing the edge of my jacket. Brakes squealed behind

me. I turned and loped towards the mustang, idling about fifty feet away. When I got to the window Tug starred at me blankly. I swallowed with difficulty. "I want to see the Pin."

Tug nodded slightly. "Yeah, I guess you do."

The trunk of Tug's mustang was pitch black. I tumbled back and forth as the car took corners like candy. I found a jack rod, and with a fair amount of jostling was able to snap the trunk lock. I held the trunk open about three inches, just enough to see which street signs flashed by. Music began to play from the car's cab -- "Sweet Baby James" by James Taylor.

We stopped behind a tan Cadillac at a house which had an elaborate wooden mail box carved as an eagle's head. This was all I saw before I closed the trunk and let Tug come around and pull me out. He pressed his palm over my eyes and dragged me indoors and down steep stairs, dropping me at the bottom.

I was in a very dim, narrow hallway with cheap imitation wood paneling on the walls. Tug walked on ahead and into another room. All I could see inside was Tug's shadow on the blistered plastic wall leaning over and speaking to another man's shadow. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness I also became aware of shapes around me, a number of boys, most dressed like Tugger, watching me from dim doorways.

Tug stuck his head out of the door and said "Alright." Arms grabbed me from the darkness, and I was pulled into the room at the end of the hall.

It was a mess. Clothes were strewn about, empty bottles were grouped in tufts here and there, bits of paper, notes, letters and books balanced in precarious piles. The overall impression though was not of jumbled chaos, but of a nest, comfortably woven and very worn in. A lopsided bed flanked one wall, and a small desk faced another. A slim figure with thin, wispy hair sat with his elbow propped on the desk, writing under a green bookkeeper's lamp. I was shoved into the center of the room. Tug and his clones slumped onto the bed and against the walls. I stood, my shoulders lopsided, facing the thin man's back. At length he sighed, put down his pen and swiveled his chair to face me.

He was mid to late twenties. His features were sallow, his eyes tired. He wore clothes which were so richly black it was difficult to make out specific items -- he was just one inky black mass from the neck down and eyebrows up. We watched each other for a few moments. I cleared my throat with a cough. "You the Pin?"

"Yeah." Another moment of silence. His eyes did not break from mine. "So now I'm very, very curious what you're going to say next."

"Maybe I'll just sit and bleed at you."

The Pin shifted in his seat, bored. "Helled if you're gonna go breaking my best clients' noses and expect me to play sandbag. Anyway you've been sniffing me out before then, sniffing for me like a vampire bat for a horse with a nick on its ear he can suck on. They do that." I blinked. "So now you got Tugger to bring you here, which he never does, and you got me listening, so I'm curious what you've got to say that better be really, really good."

"Call Ms. Dannon in from the hall first; she oughta hear this."

The Pin seemed amused. "No dice, soldier. Would have been a neat trick, though."

I shrugged, then spoke slowly. "I was going to make up some bit of information or set up some phony deal, anything so you'd let me walk. Then I was going to go to the vice principal and spill him the street address of the biggest dope port in San Clemente."

The Pin's eyes shot to Tugger, who didn't exactly jump in his seat. "He knows zippo."

I kept my eyes on the Pin. "1250 Vista Blanca, the ink blotter at the desk in the den in the basement of the house with the tacky mailbox." The world turned on its side as Tug pushed my head into the carpet. He held me by the back of my neck, spluttering "You gonna do what now?!"

The Pin walked towards us. I saw dimly that one of his shoes was twice the size of the other. He was saying "No good, soldier." The cronies around the room began to cackle with laughter. Tug's face was a mask of rage. He was choking me. My eyes swelled. "Alright, let up." the Pin said, but Tug didn't, and everything began to grow softer. Just as sound and sight began to blend together a new voice pierced the din.

"Tug, stop." It was a woman. Tug's face broke a moment, then clenched up again. He took his hand from my throat. I let my head loll to the side and saw Laura Dannon standing in the dark doorway. Then I saw Tug's knuckles, but just for a moment. The Pin's liquid black body seemed to spill out all around me, and for the second time that day I went to sleep in spite of myself.

I woke in a dark room. I was on the floor. On a mattress. On a mattress, on the floor in a dark room. I touched my head gently, but not gently enough. Tugger was sitting about five feet away, watching me like a hungry dog. I looked back at him through thick, glazed eyes.

"Where are my glasses?" I'm sure my voice wasn't very steady. Tug didn't seem to mind. He grinned slightly. "Hell with ya then. Which wall's the door in?" Still amused, he pointed. I rose painfully and shuffled in that direction, my hand groping for a doorknob. Tug shot up and shoved me down onto the mattress. He folded his arms, standing over me like some guardian statue. I winked at him, stood and lurched towards the door again. He took my shirt in his fist and drove me back into the wall, but froze when a door latch clicked. I was dropped back onto the mattress, and when I looked up Tug was sitting just as he had been before.

The sounds of a door being opened and closed came from the darkness. Tug kept his eyes on me. I heard footsteps, but still could not see the room's new occupant. Suddenly Tug vanished into thin air -- the room's blackness just seemed to swallow him. The next voice I heard was thin and whispery. "Sorry about this kid, but what the hell with that what you said before." It was the Pin. His disembodied face appeared a few feet above where Tug had been. "Where you were at, with all of us and the Tug a fist away, you've got to use your nut. Allay the situation. So yeah, you're not scared of me, I got it, but I'm also thinking you're a little nuts now, so you've got that trade off with your standing. But nuts isn't all bad, so maybe it was a good play. I don't know." He was standing in front of Tug. His black clothes and black hat blended perfectly with the dark room, so that his face seemed to bob about in space.

I stifled a cough.

"So," he continued, "Laura talked me down. Let's get you back with the living."



I chewed the cornflakes slowly. I sat in the kitchen on the first floor of the Pin's house, or rather the Pin's mother's house. She was a soft old lady in a pastel cotton dress, currently bent over the fridge mumbling "I thought we had orange juice, Brendan, I'm terribly sorry. How about Tang, or that's more like soda isn't it, or not soda but it hasn't got any juice in it, it can't be very, what's the word, very fortifying."

"Water's fine, ma'm, thanks."

"Now just a moment, we have apple juice here, if you'd like that, or milk, though you've got that in your cornflakes, I don't know if drinking it as well might be too much."

"Apple juice sounds terrific."

"It's country style."

"That's perfect."

She shut the fridge. Tug and Pin sat behind her, looking comfortably bored. She waddled over to the cabinets murmuring "I'll even give it to you in a country glass, how'd that be?"

The kitchen was just like the old lady, warm and soft. The Pin's appearance in this setting was striking; he resembled a sharp black hole against the soft, yellowing decor. He was eating oatmeal cookies with delicate, small bites. The old lady set a glass hand painted with a wilderness scene in front of me, then said "Boys?"

"I'm fine, Mrs. M." said Tugger.

"Thanks, mom." said the Pin and kissed her on the cheek.

She shuffled out of the room, muttering "Okay, well I'm going to go, um, do something in the other room now..." and left the three of us staring at each other.

"So how's bout we take another snap at hearing your tale?" said the Pin.

"I don't know. It starts out the same as before, and this floor ain't carpeted."

"We're cooled off."

"Yeah well, your muscle seemed plenty cool putting his fist in my head. I want him out."

The two shifted. The Pin grinned thinly. "Looky, soldier-"

"The ape blows or I clam."

Tug stood violently. "So clam! What've you got I can't beat out of you back in the basement?"

The Pin and I were perfectly still, watching each other. He spoke. "Give us a few minutes, Tug." Tug turned to him, but the Pin kept his eyes with mine. "I'll call you if whatever." Neither of us saw Tug's reaction, but he slammed the basement door hard when he left. The Pin went back to gnawing his cookie. "So?"

I put down my spoon. "About a year ago I bulled a Carrows rat named Jerr Madison. Know him?"

"Knew him till you bulled him."

"Yeah, well. He bit my ankle, I kicked. No regrets, except it got the VPs thinking they had me on a rope. When I made it clear I wasn't playing their hound dog, well they didn't like it. They keep calling me in, badgering me."

"Gee that's tough."

"I don't like being told whose side I'm on. So now they think I'm on your trail, I know their movements and I'm feeding them yours."

"I gotcha."

"You haven't got me yet."

"What, you wanna talk price?"

"Considering the benefits my services could yield, I don't think that's unreasonable."

"And what are your services exactly, just so I can be specific on the invoice?"

I shrugged. "Whatever serves your interests."

He stood. "Fair enough. I'll have my boys check your tale, and seeing how it stretches we'll either rub or hire you. You'll know which in a day or two." I stood but didn't follow as he opened the basement door and began descending the steep stairs. "We're done." he called.

The moment his dark form was lost in the basement's murk Laura came up out of it. She took my hand. "I'll drive you home."

Her sporty little convertible zig zagged the tangled beachside streets.

"Just drop me at school." She pulled a hard corner. "How long was I out?" I asked.

"Half an hour. It took all of it for me to cool the Pin down."

"Thanks." I said it flatly, but not without sincerity. We drove on in silence.

She stopped the car in the school parking lot and I hopped out. I studied her face for a moment. The engine idled softly. She smiled. "You trust me now?"

"Less than when I didn't trust you before. If you can tell me your angle in this, maybe I can."

"Come here." I leaned on the side of the car. Our faces were close. She spoke softly. "I don't have an angle. I usually do. I don't now, when I'm laying my neck farther than ever, I don't have a play. I don't know why. I want to help you. I see you trying to figure things out to help Emily get out of trouble, and I don't know anyone who would do that for me." She turned her face away from me, in that delicate state just before a woman starts to cry.

I straightened up, my face grave. "Now you are dangerous."

Throwing the car in gear, she peeled out and left me standing alone in the fading evening light.

I pushed past the forest scenery and into the womans' dressing room. It was hazy and cramped. Everything blended into the color of flesh. No walls were visible; it was all billowy piles of costumes and stacks of props. Kara sat at the mirror. I slumped into a chair.

"Brendan Brendan Brendan!" she sang, putting on eyeliner.

"Where's Dode flopped?"

She made a distasteful, silly face.

"I know you two are cozed up, so you'll tell me or you won't."

"Oooh, getting feisty." She giggled. "Last time we talked you were giving me a last chance."

"It worked. You went to Laura, didn't you? Told her my tale."

"All part of your plan?"

"Turned out to be."

"I feel so cheap and used."

"Gol, I must seem a real cad. Sometimes I just hate myself."

She grinned dreamily. "Whatever happened to us, Brendan?"

"Where's Dode flopped?"

She turned around to face me. "We were a pair and a half for a few months, weren't we? Sometimes I miss having someone I can talk to. You every miss having someone?" She was looking at me intently. "I guess you must."

My face was a mask. "I need to hear Dode's tale about Emily. It's important."

She played with her dress strap.

I stood, coughing. "Laura's working with me now, and I'll have the Pin and Tug in my corner soon. The sooner I get the truth from Dode or the truth about Dode from you, the safer you'll both be." Silence. "No? Pass it on to Dode, anyway. Maybe he'll have the sense to get out from under you before he gets hurt." I moved towards the door.

"You didn't, did you?" She wasn't looking at me, but was grinning slyly.

I left.

"So what happens now?" Brain asked over the phone.

"Now we wait for the Pin's answer. Unless there's something I missed, it'll be yes. Then I get under his skin and see what's what." I sat at my desk in my bedroom. It was late evening. "You stick to Kara, keep your specs peeled for Dode and stay away from Laura."

He was quiet a moment. "I think she's with us, Brendan."

"I'll let you know when she is." My voice was a bit sharper than it should have been.

"Okay."

I replaced the receiver and went to bed.



The next morning I opened my locker and a note fell out. It was folded into a star. I smoothed it out. "TWELVE THIRTY PICO + ALEXANDER". I stood frozen looking at it while the locker cage emptied around me. I pulled the other note from my pocket and compared them. Different handwriting. The class bell rang. The locker cage was deserted except for me, and silent except for heavy footfalls which drew my attention from the notes. It wasn't deserted after all. A big kid with a lumpish face walked towards me. He wore a black trench coat over his bulbous shoulders, and his black hair came down over his eyes like a sheepdog's.

"You the Pin's?" I asked. He didn't answer, but kept coming towards me. "So what's his answer?" He kept coming. My body tensed, and I tightened my hand into a fist.

When he was five feet away I heard a metallic click, and a long slender switchblade gleamed in his right paw. My fist and body slackened and I jumped backwards as he swiped the knife at my torso. Before he had wound up for another slash I was running.

The wind rushed in my ears as I ran across the campus square. The lug was close behind me. I dodged over a bench, through a hedge and into the covered hallways on the west side of campus. Our footfalls clapped on the cement, mine quick and sharp, his heavy and thick. I flew around corners, skidded and doubled back, losing sight of him. I stopped, heart pounding, with hallways to either side of me. His footfalls echoed from wherever they were coming from such that they seemed to be on either side. Making a choice, I dashed down the left hallway. Wrong choice. The lug loomed over me, his knife hand flashing. My jacket's shoulder tore open, and the white filling inside turned red. I stumbled back blindly, got my footing and got out of reach just as the knife swung back again.

He chased me down a long straight hallway, footsteps clattering wildly. I huffed and puffed and sprinted the last half of it, getting about forty feet of a lead on him before rounding the corner.

I ran about ten paces down the hall then slid into a sitting position. The lug's footfalls were coming down the long hallway. I kicked my shoes off. His steps quickened and got very loud, very near. I was up, running towards the corner I had just come around, towards the lug, but I was running silently now. He was not. His clanging steps crashed like cymbals in my ears as we both came around the same corner in opposite directions at full speed. I slid like a baseball player, driving my legs into his. They tangled, and the lug pitched forward with frightening momentum. He hit the hall's metal handrail with his arms and head, a hollow gong reverberated and he fell like a puppet with its strings cut.

After I had caught my breath I put my shoes on and quickly searched him. A wallet with about a couple twenties and his student ID, three hash pipes, ten or fifteen joints, a baggie of weed, and a large brownie in another baggie. I left it all on him and staggered off.

"Burns," I breathed heavily into the payphone, "Chuck Burns. Big lug with hair like a sheepdog."

"I know him," the Brain was saying "I just can't pin him to any crowd. He's definitely not muscle for anyone. He taps the Carrows crowd but doesn't hang with them. If you've got a guess I could check it out-

"The Pin. If he's with the Pin everything's kablooie and I gotta blow the burgh."

"I'll check it out."

A tan Cadillac was floating across the school parking lot towards me.

"Never mind. If I don't call you back by three I'm 86'd, call the bulls." I hung up and began walking at a normal pace along the sidewalk.

The Cady slid up beside me, and I stopped walking. The door swung open and a voice from the darkness within said "Get in." With no perceivable hesitation, I did.

I sat in the back seat beside the Pin. The windows were tinted and the car was very dark. The seats were pink vinyl. We began to drive.

The Pin was silent, not looking at me. I followed suit. Finally I said "So?"

"So." he repeated. "Tangles." A stocky kid in the front seat turned around to look me in the eye. My body tensed up but my eyes remained calm. The kid reached into his jacket. I didn't flinch. For a moment he stayed like that, hand in his pocket, eyes set thickly on mine. My face was placid.

He pulled out a slip of paper, a check, and handed it to me. "That's what you'll get every week for your services." said the Pin. "Less of course there's a specific job involved, in where you get sliced in with my crew." Tangles turned back around. I put the check in my pocket. "Square?" the Pin asked.

"Yeah."

We drove on in silence. "First off I gotta lay something out. You're coming into a certain situation, and I'm bringing you in sort of because of it." He breathed. "I didn't tell Tugger to hit you for the Brad Bramish thing. Laura and I, I decided I oughta hear what you were gunning for before I made an enemy. Tug just did it, though. He was hot, and he just hit you. He's been doing that."

"Yeah?"

"He's got my best interests, I know, he's loyal, he just gets hot."

"Muscle you can't control's no good at that."

"You're working for me, not Tug, that's all."

"Alright."

Silence. He held his hat in his hands, fingering the rim. "We're doing a thing down at the Hole tonight. Know it?"

"South of T Street, yeah."

"It's sort of a welcome you in thing. Eight o'clock."

The car stopped. I climbed out onto the exact spot of sidewalk they had picked me up on. I checked my watch.

At 12:32 the phone on the corner of Pico and Alexander rang. I put the receiver to my ear.

"I know what you did." The voice was warbly and very low. "I saw what you did." It was being filtered by something.

"So?"

"Anyone I tell, it would ruin you some way. And I'm going to tell someone."

"Are you making an offer?"

"Maybe. Or maybe I'll just do you in."

"Hire another hash head to blade me?"

"Don't need no blades, shamus. I just gotta squawk."

"What do you want?"

"Just to see you sweat." Click.

I replaced the receiver and stood still for a moment. Then I put a coin in and dialed another number. The Brain answered. "Brendan?"

"Yeah."

"You alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. So keep digging on the Burns lug, and hunt around for Dode too. He set up whatever Emily walked into, it's getting more and more urgent we talk."

"Alright. Trueman was looking for you."

"Trueman and the VP?"

"No, just Trueman. Third period, he came around."

"Asked for me?"

"No, but looked."

"That's not good. Alright, keep me posted."

I hung up and went into a bad coughing fit. Soft rain began to patter against the phone booth.



By eight that night the rain had thinned into a marine mist. I trotted down a narrow sandy path and out onto the beach. A bonfire blazed a few hundred yards away. Stuffing my hands in my pockets I trudged towards it, but was only halfway there when I came upon two boys. One was rattling off a story full steam, shadowboxing for emphasis. It was Tugger.

"...takes me for a schmoe that I'm gonna back off, so I take the first guy with a belt below the belt, which, since I'm outnumbered, so the second and third guys pin me but I flip one over onto the other one, peg this one into the ground with his buddy, then I just kick hell for leather and I figure one left, the gig's duck soup, but no this guy whips around and what's he got a pole with a thing on the end you put paint rollers on, but there aint a paint roller, so it's just this metal thing he whips and I just you know fall back and kick his legs out then rub him up, but I get walking away and whoa, it's raining or what, no it's blood, I got sliced on the face. Here. So that's what that is. No big deal."

"Shuck, man." said the other in admiration, shaking his head.

Tug lit a joint. The warm glow gleamed off the triangular scar on his face. He saw me. "Hey. Up there." He stalked off down the beach, wagging a thumb towards the bonfire.

"Shat, man. Shat-toe! That's some tough pike there." The faceless boy wagged his head harder.

"Yeah." I agreed. This delighted and agitated the boy to no end.

"Things says his dad's got a gun."

"Yeah, and a belt." I trudged towards off towards the fire.

The bonfire was built up quite high, the flames licking four and five feet into the air. A boom box blared thrash music which sounded like sheet metal being stamped. Tugger and several boys dressed like him spazzed to the music and took turns jumping through the fire.

The Pin sat with a distant look trained on the fire. He muttered something to a boy beside him.

I sat on the other side of the fire, picking my teeth with a toothpick. The boy appeared over my shoulder and spoke close to my ear. "You get enough chicken?"

"Yeah."

"Was it good, you get enough to drink?"

"Yeah." The boy gave a big thumbs-up sign to the Pin, who nodded.

"He wants words." The boy said, and disappeared.

"So I'm going to start you on the dope circles, cleaning up the Turkish dues, pulling in the strags." I sat in the cold sand. The Pin sat in front of me, facing the breakers.

"Small fries." I said.

"Yeah, well. Just to see how you handle. Anyway there isn't much else doing. I'm tailing out this big deal, but that's almost done."

" Oh yeah? What was it?"

"Big time. Biggest I ever done, and there was a snag in it, but it's almost done now."

"What was it?"

"It's over." A loud wave broke, creating a thick white line on the black ocean.

"Almost, you said."

"It's over enough. You're gonna make me curious, being so curious."

"If I'm playing out of your basket I've got to know the lay."

"Yeah, well the lay is it happened before you did, so you know bunk." He said that definitively. Silence. "You don't want to know." His voice was softer. "Knowing's really... complex. There's too much stuff sometimes, too many angles. Sometimes you wanna, just, really, you know, just go, be gone. And like you can see the stuff piling on, catching up, and it's just a slow train coming when it'll hit you, and whatever. Life, man. This world, it's all just nothing."

I turned my head. Tugger was coming down the train tracks which ran the length of the beach.

The Pin didn't notice him. "You read Tolkien?" He asked.

"What?"

"Tolkien, the Hobbit books?"

"Yeah."

"His descriptions of things are really good."

"Oh yeah?"

"He makes you want to be there."

The waves crashed. Behind us, with no warning at all, a train shot by. Tug stood with his hands jammed in his pockets, flashing lights and gleaming metal streaking and squealing behind him.

I was awoken at five thirty the next morning by a ringing telephone beside my bed. I put it to my ear.

"Don't go to class." It was the Brain.

"What?"

"Fifth period Trueman *and* the VP come in asking for you."

"Agh."

"Loudly. Did they call your mom?"

"Probably. I got home late."

"Get out of there too, then. Meet me behind the library. I've got some stuff."

The morning was gray and cold. The Brain and I sat side by side against a long brick wall. He handed me a photocopy of a news clipping. "SAN CLEMENTE YOUTH HOSPITALIZED"

"Frisco Farr was found on a sidewalk outside Pinkerton's Deli three weeks ago. He was in a coma, his stomach contained a sausage sandwich, a horse dose of Heroin and traces of Choloric Tricemate, a poisonous chemical found in laundry detergent. Frisco's still under and nobody's talking, so nothing's come of it."

"OD?"

"No, the chem the junk must have been cut with put him down."

"Huh. Bad junk. Bad brick... could that form of Heroin be called 'Brick'?"

"No -- it was a concentrated powder, its street handle's 'whip' or 'rock' or 'brock'." He fished in his pockets. "Here. From Laura."

He pushed a note into my hands. "I gotta get voicemail." I muttered, opening it. It read "Meet me at the southeast corner of the school at 9:30." I crumpled it into a ball. "No. Tell her I'll be at the Pin's at one. Any luck with the lug?"

"Not a one. He could have been working for anyone."

"Keep looking. Was that what Trueman and the VP came to tag me for?"

"No." He set a local newspaper in front of me. The headline read "SAN CLEMENTE GIRL MISSING". Emily's picture was below it. There was an uncomfortable silence between us.

"This isn't good."

The Brain just looked at me. Maybe he was angry or disgusted, I couldn't tell. I didn't look back at him. I took his cell phone and dialed a number. "Mr. Trueman, please."

I stood, fanning the three notes in my hand. The handwriting for each of them was distinct.

"This is Trueman." said the phone.

"What the hell are you doing asking for me in class?"

"What the hell are you doing out of class?"

"What?"

"The VP and I needed to ask you a few questions about Emily Kostich, who you might have heard is missing. It's a very serious thing. The police are involved. The VP and I knew

you two were close, so the VP and I came to ask you questions, but you were truant. If you don't have a valid excuse-

I hung up.

"What?" asked the Brain.

"I've been cut loose. I'm not safe here. We shouldn't have met in the open. Alright, lay low, but ask on the underneath for Dode. That's all that matters now, find Dode, but do it on the underneath, get it?"

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. Just find Dode."

The bird of prey mailbox eyed me suspiciously as I rapped on the Pin's front door. Nothing. With a little pressure the flimsy screen door swung open.

The kitchen was empty. My feet did various things to the warped, sticky linoleum, making too much noise. I gently opened a narrow door (which nonetheless creaked horribly) and descended the steep, narrow stairs into the dark basement.

Fumbling, I found a switch and made light in the hallway. Everything was deathly still and quiet. Barely breathing, I went into the Pin's den. Empty. Slowly first, then with greater confidence I rifled through the Pin's desk. I found papers and trinkets, all meaningless. I felt beneath the desk -- there was space between its underside and the bottom of its top drawer. I pulled the drawer out and stuck my hand into the space. When I pulled it out it held a stack of hundred dollar bills about two inches thick. I reached in again. Another. Another. And another. I thumbed the bills. Pure C notes, all the way down.

I froze. Something had creaked in the hallway. Silently I put the stacks of bills back and replaced the drawer, my eyes on the doorway. I crept towards it on the balls of my feet.

The hallway was empty. I went towards the stairs, then stopped for a moment, listening. Silence. Biting my lip, I turned and crept into the darkened door at the other end of the hall.

It was dark except for sunlit curtains on a tiny window high on one wall. I pulled the curtains aside, and a shaft of sunlight hit the bare concrete floor, spilling just enough light to reveal a figure standing a few feet in front of me. I jumped back, and he jumped back in turn. It was a framed mirror, leaning against the wall with other broken furniture and junk. The vast majority of the room was still dark. I walked the heavy mirror away from the wall and into the shaft of light, reflecting it around the room like a flashlight. More junk, a mattress, bean bag chairs, more junk, and then a strangely bare corner with a single white lump in it.

Propping the mirror against something I went and kneeled at the white thing. It was a brick of white powder, about five by ten inches. There was white chalky residue around it -- there were others there before. I stood, looking down at it.

Behind me, my image in the mirror moved. Except I hadn't moved. It was someone else, in the room, behind me. I spun on my heel and caught a hand in the throat. Tugger threw me back into a beanbag chair. I topped over backwards, righting myself just in time to get pinned against the wall. Tug pulled a small handgun from somewhere and pressed it against my cheek. The shafts of light criss crossed behind his bald head. "What with the poking, genius?! Maybe you're poking for your bull friends!"

"Don't be a sap. I can't even face up at school, the VP's so hot for me."

"Yeah well. Maybe you're looking to make good."

"I'm looking to find this big game the Pin's played, not to gum it, but just so when its tail jams in my back I'll know who to bill for the embalming."

"You oughta ask him what you wanna know."

"I did. He didn't tell me." Tug loosened his grip slightly. I still gasped the words like a dry fish. "When a gee I'm paid to side with won't give me the straight that makes me nervous. Makes me angry."

Tug drew back a bit. "Yeah, well. That's understandable."

Tug set orange juice in a country glass in front of me. We were in the kitchen. He paced. I sat, sipping.

"There was ten of them. I don't know where he picked them, he didn't tell me."

"Huh." I said sympathetically, stifling a cough.

"So we got ten kils of brock, there aint enough marks in the whole burgh to eat that. So he unloads eight of em up north, Anaheim, Newport, even up to LA. I don't know who."

"Didn't tell you."

"Yeah. So that's the last brick in there. We gotta break it into doses, sell em off round the high, maybe some by Shorecliffs."

"What about the ninth brick?"

"Ah yeah. There were problems with that."

"Yeah?"

"It, uh..." He stopped. His face was dull. The scar on his face reddened slightly. He was thinking harder than he was used to. Then he pulled his head up as if coming out of a trance and spoke quickly. "It disappeared. Someone skimmed it. We started raising hell with all the likely suspects, and whatayaknow, it came back. But it came back bad. One of ours took a dose off the top, and it laid him out."

"Frisco."

"Yeah, poor Frisco. You heard about that."

"Sad loss."

"So they say. I say a sap on his back's just a flat sap."

"So what was the downfall?"

He shrugged. "Nothing, yet. We've got our eyes out for whatever, we'll track down the rat. Just takes time."

"I heard something fell with Emily Kostich."

"Emily who?"

"Kostich."

"Don't know her."

"Huh." A quiet pause.

"Has the Pin talked about her?"

"Not to me."

"Yeah, he might know something. Ask him. Tell me what he says, cause if you heard something, you know, I wanna check."

"Sure."

The screen door swung open, and the Pin walked in. If he was surprised he didn't show it. "Pow wowing?"

"Just shooting the shat." I said.

"Yeah, just shooting it."

"Good." said the Pin. He walked to the table, his big foot clunking on the linoleum. He looked me over. "You alright, soldier?" I moved a hand dismissively, sniffing. "So, Tug, I got a call. Someone who says they know something about Emily."

"Emily?"

"Emily Kostich. Where she's at now. Says we'd want to know. Wants to meet."

"Yeah?" Tug was uncomfortable.

"So we'll meet him. Four o'clock. Brendan, you know Emily, didn't you?"

Tugger looked at me. "A while back." I said.

"You've heard she's missing?"

"Yeah, I heard that."

"So maybe you want to come along too."

"What has Emily got to do with you?"

He looked me in the eye. Then he looked at Tugger. "Show, maybe we'll all find out." He gave a slip of paper to Tugger. "Four o'clock."

Tug glanced at the slip, then slid it across the table to me.



A horn honked outside. I looked up from the paper and said in a dry voice "That's my ride."

"Four o'clock." the Pin called after me as I left.

I fell into Laura's car. "A payphone, anywhere." I said roughly.

"What-"

I threw the car into drive, and we jerked forward.

"The mobile customer you have called is away from the phone-"

I hung up violently. Laura's car idled on the curb. I walked towards it shakily, but was only halfway there when a coughing fit hit me. I hacked and spluttered, dropping to my knees on the sidewalk. I felt Laura's arms around me, except it wasn't Laura, it was Emily. I flipped over backwards into darkness, Emily kissing my mouth. She pulled away and I felt dampness on my cheek. I shot up violently.

I was in the back seat of Laura's car. The top was up. She held my head in her lap, dabbing my face with a wet napkin.

"What time is it?" I barked, but my voice was warbly.

"Lie down, Brendan-"

"What time-"

"You've got a fever, you've got to go to the hospital or"

"What time is it?"

"Three forty. You've got to rest, you're feverish."

I broke away from her grasp and threw myself out of the car. We were in the school parking lot. I lost my balance and fell to my knees, coughing. Laura came out beside me, yelling "Get in the car, I'm taking you home."

"Shut up!" I yelled at her till she did. My head was spinning. "Okay, you've got to, what you've got to do is drive around to the Carrows lot. I'll be up on the, the blacktop, the basketball field. So you've got to go by you or me to get down there. If you see anyone but the Pin or Tugger or their crew go down into the ravine, honk four times, long short long short. But don't be seen."

"Get back in the car."

"Do it! Will you do it? This is where you help me, this is it. I need you to do this." I was holding her shoulders. She nodded.

"Alright."

The wind blew cold and bitter over the pebbly black pavement. I stood crookedly in the center of the basketball field, a flat plane of asphalt about the size of a football field with a dozen or so basketball courts faintly outlined on its surface. The baskets stood at straight attention, lined up down the field's length like pavilions.

The black field was barren. I waited. My legs were weak. Then, a speck. Coming towards me, across the field. I slumped towards it. Closer. Still a dark dot. Closer. Then my face snapped into recognition, and I stopped walking. The figure stopped about twenty feet away.

I shook my head. "What are you doing, Dode?"

He grinned. He held a newspaper in his hand. "You gonna stop me?"

"What do you think you're doing, Dode?"

"I saw you. I saw what you did."

"What'd you see?"

"I saw you."

"What'd you see me?"

"You were with her, dead, and you took the body."

"Yeah, I did. That's all you saw? What about before?"

"Before what?"

"Did you see who killed her before I got there?"

His face was ashen. "You killed her."

"I found the body, Dode."

"You, I thought you didn't, but we figured out, I got the news on ya, cause you hid the body, why wouldn't-"

"Who's 'we'?"

"Shut up! You're always talking, always this and that smartso, you're gonna shut up now!"

"I didn't kill her, Dode."

"You're not gonna talk this!"

"Dode, I know you're thinking of Em, I know you tried to help her-"

"Shut up! You're gonna shut your" sight and sound faded for a moment like a radio under a tunnel, then came back "put it over real nice-"

"-so I'm telling you now you're in over your head, you don't want to put your hand in this..."

"Shut it!" He shook the paper at me. "She's dead, you-"

"Why was she scared, Dode? She came to me, who was she scared of? I think I know why, I just gotta know who!"

He threw the paper. He was wide eyed. "You're trying to confuse me."

"Dode."

The papers began to blow in the wind. "I'm gonna bury you, smart guy." He walked stiffly towards the ravine. I put a hand on his shoulder, but shrank back in a coughing spasm. He grabbed my wrist and hit me in the face. I hit the pavement.

Emily flew in front of me like an angel, glowing. Then she got dimmer, her wings spluttering out, and she became her picture in the newspaper article. I crumpled it off of my face.

The black field was empty. I was lying in a fetal position, newspaper clinging to my chest and feet.

My head felt like a balloon of warm blood. I was just barely able to get to my feet. My legs ached. My sight was blurry. My chest burned. I began to walk as fast as I could. I coughed and spluttered. The wind blew against me, and the black field seemed impossibly long. I kept limping forward, towards the ravine.



I slid down the embankment and landed on my feet on the streambed.

Four or five flunkies dressed like Tugger were scattered about. Tugger was there, leaning against a rock. The Pin stood with his hands in his pockets. Dode was on my right, his eyes darting back and forth. Everyone was looking at me.

The longest silence passed. I cleared my throat. "What've I missed?"

More silence. Tug was looking at Dode. The Pin was looking at his big foot, scraping the rock he stood on with its sole.

"Dode here," said the Pin, "says Emily Kostich is dead."

Nobody reacted to that, so I tried not to. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. He says he knows who did it. He says he knows where the body's at." Silence. "And he says he wants more money than I think the information's worth."

"That so, Dode?" I asked, trying to keep my voice steady. I looked at the Pin. "So walk. What's the info have to do with you anyways?"

"Plenty." said Dode.

"Plenty, he says." said the Pin.

"What, does he want cash up front? He's a pot skulled reef worm with more hop in his head than blood. Why pay for dirt you can't believe?"

"You'll believe this." said Dode.

"Shut up. Why're we getting our shoes wet for this horse feathers?"

"You'll believe it," said Dode, "cause its someone close to you. Real close."

"If you pay this clown outta the coffer you pay me I quit."

"Real close." said Dode.

The Pin's jaw was set tight. Tugger held a stick in his hand, snapping bits off the end of it. His hands were tensed up.

"I'm leaving. Let him milk ya if you want to." I stepped away.

"Stay." said the Pin. Then to Dode: "It's still too much."

"No it's not. You won't complain when you hear it."

Tugger's face was an angry mask. He twisted the stick in his hands. His scar was the color of liver.

"So maybe you should." I murmured, my eyes on Tug.

"It's too much." said the Pin.

"It's not," said Dode, raving now, confident, gesturing wildly, "cause it's real important to you, cause the person who killed her's real close, and cause he's got a lot to lose, and he knows if I don't bury him by spilling to you I spill to the bulls and bury him for real, and he's really really scared-"

Tug sprung like a cat. He struck Dode twice in the face, grabbed his hair and drove his nose down into his knee.

"Tug it's alright!" I yelled, stumbling towards them, but Tug had Dode on the ground, kicking him in the stomach and chest.

"Tug, stop." said the Pin in a commanding voice.

He did. Dode raised his head. I saw the gun before anyone else, saw it coming out of Tug's jacket. I yelled something and tried to run forward, but my foot slipped and I fell into the shallow water.

Tug leveled the gun at Dode's head and fired one shot. The back of Dode's skull came off. The rapport reverberated through the black tunnel behind them, and birds flew out. Dode remained hunched upright a moment, then fell limp into the water.

Silence for a moment. The Pin's face was frozen in a stupid, lifeless expression. Tugger turned to him, gun in hand.

"Tug..." said the Pin thickly.

Tugger raised the gun and fired at the Pin. Dirt kicked up beside him, and he scrambled back. I crawled towards Tug, yelling for him to stop. He fired twice more, both misses, and the Pin was away, up over the hill.

Tug lowered the gun. Sirens were sounding in the distance. Every muscle, every inch of my body failed me. With a vague sense of finality I collapsed into the shallows and knew no more.



3.

I woke without visions or dreams or much fanfare at all. I just popped into the waking world in a dark room with a ceiling fan. A Tug clone beside my bed sat up. "He's up!" he called.

Cups and bottles littered the bedside table, the only other furniture in the room. "What time?" I asked groggily.

"Five, well, it's tomorrow, though. You been asleep the last day."

"Are we in jail?" I was still slurred.

Tug walked in. "Hey man." I didn't reply. I rubbed my temples. "We got real worried. Laura, she kept giving you water, saying we gotta take you to a whatever, hospital, but I couldn't, you know."

"What's the stats?" I grumbled.

"Everyone's just laying low. You're here with us, at my folks place. They're gone. The bulls got Dode fore the tide took his body."

"Tide?" I asked.

"Yeah, strong tide, would've taken the body, like out to sea. It can do that. But the fuzz got there first."

I nodded.

"So everyone's assuming it's war, but no one's said it yet. Everyone's lying low."

"War?"

"Yeah. You're with us."

"The hell I am." I swung my legs over the bed. Tug starred me down. "Alright," I said "I'm with you."

He turned to leave. "So just lie low. Sleep some more. Laura, she said you should sleep."

He was gone. I smiled at the clone he left behind. He smiled back. I stepped into my shoes and hobbled out of the room.

The living room had about ten more Tug clones, all cleaning guns. I nodded to them. "Hey." They nodded back, not paying much attention to me as I went out the front door.

I leaned against the payphone for support. The San Clemente streets were dark and deserted.

"Brendan?" the phone said.

"Yeah."

"Are you - what, man, have you heard about Dode-"

"I was there."

"You-"

"Where were you yesterday? I called."

"Kasprzyk took my phone, turned it off. I just now got it back."

"Alright, listen-"

"Are you okay?"

"I'm good, just listen. Okay, first, is my name in the papers with the story?"

"No."

"Alright. Is it just Dode in the papers?"

"Yeah. What do you mean?"

"Listen, I'm going to be calling you tonight, probably late. Sleep with your phone on.

Could you get a car if you needed to?"

"If it's late enough I could take my mom's-"

"You might have to. I'll call."

"Alright."

I kicked open the dressing room door. Kara was on her throne in front of the mirror. A boy sat on the floor by her side. She gasped.

"Brendan. Did you hear about Dode?"

"You scheming little tramp!" The boy realized he should be angry, and stood. "You set that poor kid up, you hid him, you got info from Laura and held Dode like a card till you could play him. For money!" I threw a chair.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You'd bury me at the same time, but it was mostly for the money. Dode thought I did it, he like Em, that was enough for him, but he stuck to the money cause you had your claws in him, cause he couldn't come away from the deal without it and make you happy. You fed him to the wolves, angel."

Her face was placid. "Sit down, you're a mess. Russ, go get my shoes from the wardrobe locker, would you sweetie?" He went, trying to look mean at me. When we were alone we watched each other like caged rats. She stood, capping her lipstick. "Yeah I did, yeah I did, yeah I did." She raised her eyebrows at me. "Who are you going to tell? You could have had me once, and then I'd have played on your side, but you were mean. So now I'm playing against you. I haven't got Dode - terrible loss - but I've still got a card up my sleeve. I've got you."

"You haven't got-"

"I still know what Dode was selling, or have you forgotten? But I'd play it smart. A

quick call from a payphone to copland and you're through." She came very close to me. Her robe fell open slightly. "Five thousand. Cash. I know you can get it from the Pin, but even if you can't I want it by first period tomorrow, or I play my hand and bury you." She walked to the costume rack, flipped through the dresses and let her robe fall. "Now get out.

In two steps I was behind her. I grabbed her shoulder. She spun around and squealed, eyes wide.

Out in the backstage area drama geeks were reading and talking in groups. They all stopped when the door to the dressing room burst open and Kara was thrown out, stark naked. "What are you doing!" She screamed. She stumbled back and grabbed some scenery, holding to it her chest.

"Showing your ace." I pushed past her and quickly walked out the stage door.



The mailbox seemed to splay its talons with extra menace as I walked up the Pin's darkened lawn. A voice from the screen door said "Far enough."

I stopped, facing the dark house.

"Everyone's paying social calls." said the whispery voice. The Pin.

"Laura here?" I guessed.

Silence. "So?"

"So what are the stats?"

"The stats are war, soon as the press heat dies. And if you're with him, you're with him."

"Tug got hot. He panicked."

"Tug's been after my operation from the get go."

"No. He's been anxious cause he thought if you found out he killed Emily you'd turn him over."

"He was right."

"Yeah, well."

"I told him to get the straight, no roughing, I wasn't even there."

"Alright. So he's a hot head. So you don't want him on your side, at least let's have a pow wow fore we start digging trenches. Maybe we can all walk away amiable enemies. What would it take?"

"I don't know. We'd have to square everything between us. He owes me some money."

"Alright, but we can talk."

"Yeah, alright."

"Four o'clock."

"Tomorrow?"

"Tonight. Let's clear it all before it boils up again."

"Alright. Four tonight. You'll be here?"

"Yeah." I turned away.

"Wait!" called Laura's voice. She came out of the house with her purse. "I'll drive you back."

The streetlights flashed by. Laura's car purred, cutting through the twisty streets. I pressed my finger to my lips, silent.

"What's going to happen?" asked Laura. I coughed, but didn't answer. "Do you feel better?" I just stared at the flashing lights.

"I don't know." My voice was weak.

I stumbled into Tugger's living room, and was greeted by Tug's hands on my throat, lifting me against the wall.

"For a smart guy you aint too smart. I said lay low."

Laura came up behind him. "Tug." He dropped me. She knelt beside me, feeling my forehead.

"She was at the Pin's." I told Tug.

He nodded. "Yeah, she's our go between."

"Uh huh. So here's the sit. You and the Pin are going to pow wow, four o'clock tonight, his place. Take all the muscle you want, you won't need it. He wants to talk straight, and you're going to work with him for whatever he needs, cause you don't want war."

"Hell I don't."

"The Pin's sitting on the brick profits, remember? You'd be postal to hit him now. Make peace and wait for your chance."

Laura turned to Tug with anxious eyes. "He's right, Tug. Smooth it out."

"Besides," I said between two coughs, "he's got you on the Dode thing. War'll mean you vs. him and every bull in the burgh."

Tugger turned away. "Yeah, well we'll talk."

Laura looked at me. "You're going?"

"Yeah."

She nodded. I stood and stumbled into the bedroom.

I lay on my back, cleaning my glasses on my shirt. Sweat stood on my forehead, and I shivered slightly. The ceiling fan above me spun dizzily, and now the room was spinning and it was holding still, and then it was spinning again. I clamped my eyes shut. A door creaked. I opened them.

Laura was across the room, her back to the door.

"Go away." I croaked.

She looked at me softly, then floated towards me. Her hair fell around my face and neck. I shrunk back from her. She put her pale hand on my forehead. I started to say 'go away' again, but my lips just barely formed the 'g'.

"What?" she murmured. "Were you going to say something? I thought you were." Her fingers slid down my temples, over my cheek. She pulled my glasses off. "Something really biting? Really smart? Telling me you don't need me?" I tried to speak, but couldn't. My throat was all lumped up. Her damn hands were all over my face. "You don't need me, you don't trust me, need anyone, were you going to say that?"

I broke. I started shaking in sobs, straining. It felt like my throat was trying to choke its way into my mouth. I shivered and cried like a baby. Laura stroked my face with her slender hands, murmured softly. The fan spun above us.



An hour later we were in that same position. I stared at the ceiling blankly. She rested her head against my shoulder, smoking a cigarette.

"Don't go tonight."

I blinked. "I've got to make sure it plays out smooth."

"It'll play however it plays without you there."

"I've got to make sure."

"Why?"

"Cause if there's war, I'm in it too."

"Well let's just, I mean why not just run away. Go somewhere. I've got a car." I gave her a wry look. "I've got an aunt in New Orleans, she wouldn't care." I grinned. "Yeah, it's a stupid thing, but think about it, why not? What, school? C'mon. Family?"

"Alright, stop." Her smoke drifted into the fan.

"I wasn't serious, but we could go for awhile. Just till everything clears."

I watched her smoke curling upwards in silence. She stubbed it out in an ash tray on the table and curled up against my chest. My eyes followed the smoke. Everything was silent except for the fan. I stretched an arm across to the table, and with a nonchalant laziness spun the ash tray around with my finger.

Through one lens of my glasses which lay on the table I could see the cigarette magnified. Smoke still curled from its knarled head, just above the filter with a pale blue arrow.

Laura's arm stretched over my chest. I looked down at it, then up at the fan, spinning.

At three fifteen I stepped into my shoes and crept out the bedroom door, leaving Laura asleep on the bed.

The living room was a swarm of silent activity. About fifteen Tug clones were all either polishing weapons or tucking them into their clothes. There were a few guns. I went to Tug.

"Tell your boys no knuckle business."

"They're just ready."

"Your folks left a car here?"

"Yeah."

"Take it and Laura's." I tossed him the keys. "I'll go first in yours."

"The hell-"

"I'll take the scenic route to draw off any tailers. They'll think it's you, they might even radio back that you're alone. Get it?"

"Mr. Smarts." He tossed me his keys.

"Alright. I started for the door. "Got a cigarette?"

"No. I don't smoke."

"You smoked on the beach."

"I don't smoke cigarettes."

I was at the door. "Give me fifteen minutes, then go."

I crossed the lawn, slid into Tug's black mustang and guttered off into the night.

San Clemente's suburban lights twinkled beneath me. I was at a payphone up on Beacon Hill, overlooking the valley. Tug's mustang was on the curb. It took several rings before the Brain picked up and said "Yeah."

"Alright, I warned you. Can you get the car?"

"Yeah."

"Go to 2014 Clancy, off Pico west of La Grange. Park outside and wait. Laura's inside. She hasn't got a car, but if she blows on foot or gets a pick, tail her. Alright?" Silence.

"Alright?"

"Okay."

"I'll call you when it gets light." Silence. "Thanks, Brain."

He hung up.

I parked in the Pin's driveway, limped up to the front door and knocked. A punk let me in and led me into the kitchen. More punks were gathered around the table, looking angry. The Pin's mom was pouring them milk. One of the punks glanced at me, then pointed down.

I went down the steep stairs into the basement. The hallway had a few more punks and Tug clones glaring at each other, and eyes gleamed from the darkened doorways. I stepped into the Pin's den.

The Pin sat at his desk, legs straight, his big foot crossed over his normal one. Tugger was in a chair in the center of the room. Two punks flanked the Pin, two Tug clones flanked Tug. I sauntered between them and leaned against a wall.

"Talk." I said.

The Pin spoke evenly. "I want full assurance that any heat from Emily and Dode is gonna be on just you. I don't even want my name pulled in the shindig. Second, you owe me six Cs, no rush, but I want your shake that it'll come home in not too much time."

Tug's eyes were intense. His scar reddened. "That's square." I said. Tug looked at me. "You did them after all. Lay low it'll blow over. Stick on this, one of you'll dish it to bury the other and you'll both get the rap. As to the six, did you borrow it?"

"Yeah."

"Then you owe it. Shouldn't need a shake on that."

Tug looked at the Pin. "Alright to both." he said.

"Good." I muttered. "Let's seal it up and blow for keeps."

"Third thing." said the Pin. "The last brick."

Tug and I looked at him. "It's yours." I said.

"That aint the point. I'm gonna start selling it. How do I know it aint bad?"

"Why would it be?" I asked.

"Why was the last one? Cause someone got greedy. Tug here's had the means to swipe half and cut it bad for a long time. Now we're splits my loss of trust's retroactive."

"Did you, Tug?" I asked plainly.

"No."

"Alright, so let's shake and blow."

"Not good enough." the Pin snapped.

Tug shot to his feet, kicking his chair away.

"What would be good enough?" I asked, tensed but not shifting my position.

"I wanna see him dose it. Just to prove it. Then we're square."

"Hell for that!" said Tug, looming closer to the Pin. "I didn't touch your junk, that's it."

"I wanna see it."

"To hell!"

"Your not wanting to dose it's telling me something right here."

"Yeah, it better be! It's telling that I'm out from your thumb, that I aint playing lapdog to no gothed up cripple no more!"

The four muscle punks tensed up. The Pin uncrossed his legs. I stepped forward.

"I'll dose it." I said.

They both looked at me. "What?" the Pin narrowed his eyes.

"If it'll shut you two apes up I'll take the dose, and if I don't die we're all right as rain, and if I do die you two have your war, so long as you keep it off my grave. Deal?"

Silence. The Pin said "Fine with me. I just wanna see it's straight. Tangles, get the brick."

"Johnny, go with him." I said. The punk and the Tug clone left.

Tug just looked at me. Then he tossed his hands up and turned away.

We all waited for Tangles to get back with the brick.

The sound of something breaking came from the other side of the wall. Everyone's head perked up. More breaking, then scuffling, then shouts. The commotion grew louder. The remaining Tug clone and punk looked at their bosses, then ran out the door. Tug started to follow them but I held him back with a raised arm.

The noise was tremendous now, a full brawl. The thin ceiling shuddered and groaned above us with footfalls and bodies hitting the ground.

Then, from not too far away, a gunshot.

The Pin was out of his chair, stepping towards the door. "No!" I said, slamming it shut.

We waited for a few tense seconds. The ruckus did not abate. Another shot sounded.

The door flew open and Tangles fell through, collapsing on the rug. He held his chest, which was red.

The Pin bent over him. Tangles was gasping, saying "The brick, it's gone. The brick's gone." Then he stopped.

The Pin stood, his eyes blazing at Tug. "Make peace, huh? Talk it out? Get your boys in my den soes you could snag it under my nose?"

"Alright." said Tug. His scar was fiery red.

I got between them. "No, that's not-"

"Was it bad, Tug? Snag it so I don't know, or sell it off to flat the war odds?"

"Pin, think about it-" I shouted.

"Alright, I did all that!" Screamed Tug, blew by me like a train and slammed the Pin into the ground with his fist. He punctuated his words with blows. "I cut the brick, I stole the money, I faked a peace, I snagged your junk, I did it all!" He pulled the gun out of his jacket at pushed it into the Pin's face.

I shouted something and threw myself on Tug's arm, wrenching it sideways. The gun clunked onto the carpet. The Pin flipped Tug over and for a moment I was between them, hit and torn, kicking and grunting to free my arms. We rolled over the gun and Tug had it again. I grabbed his wrist. It fired up into the ceiling, and plaster sprayed.

I screamed and began thrashing wildly, kicking and squirming out from under the two raging animals. My jacket was pinned between them. In a flurry of insane movement I shed my bloodied jacket and popped out of the fight like a cork.

The Pin was on top. He had pinned Tug's gun hand to the ground, and was straining to keep it there.

I leapt to my feet, wound up and kicked Tug in the wrist with all my strength. There was a horrible crunching sound, and Tug roared. I took the gun from his limp hand.

"Do him!" the Pin shouted at me, still struggling to keep Tug down. I backed off a few steps. "Do him now!"

With a burst of strength Tug flipped the Pin over sideways and began beating his face mercilessly. I stumbled backwards, out into the hallway.

The mob's fighting was still audible, but it must have been in the rooms and upstairs. The hallway was empty.

My eyes were glued on the doorway to the Pin's den. I could hear them going at it. Wild shadows splayed across the plastic wood walls. The Pin was shouting "Brendan!" over and over.

From another darkened doorway came a flash of light, and the wall beside me splintered. I spun on my heel and fired three shots into the darkness, which became still. I turned the gun back on the Pin's doorway.

Suddenly the shadows reeled, glass broke, and with a brief spray of sparks the Pin's room went dark. They had broken the lamp.

The now darkened doorway loomed before me, and inky black hole. Horrible sounds came from it, blows, breaking bone, screams. The Pin screamed my name over and over, calling for my help. Pleading. I stepped back.

Time seemed to stick for a moment. Everything slowed down.

I dropped the gun. It hit the carpet with a dull thud.

I kicked it down the hall and into the Pin's doorway, and in the same motion spun around and ran.



I ran down the hall, into the room in which I had found the brick. I stumbled, running, kicking through dark shapes, fighting forms, running and stumbling and clawing through the darkness like a man possessed.

I came out of the window and out onto the front lawn before I slipped on the wet grass and hit the ground hard.

In that moment of stillness two sharp gunshots came from the house.

I stood slowly. Everything seemed very still. Crickets chirped. The house was dark. Neighbors' lights were coming on.

Shoving my hands in my pockets I stumbled back onto the sidewalk. I noticed a light from Tug's mustang. The trunk had drifted halfway open.

Inside, tangled in black plastic, was a lifeless arm wearing gaudy plastic bracelets and pale blue fingernail polish.

I shut the trunk firmly and walked off into the night. Moments later the police cars arrived, lighting the dark streets bright as day with their flashing lights.

The morning was cold and clammy. I slumped against the payphone in front of school.

"Hey. Where are you?"

"Library. Where are you?"

"Did she blow last night?"

"No. Stayed there till six thirty, then walked to school."

"You didn't give her a ride, did you?"

"No."

"But she came straight to school from Tug's?"

"Yeah."

"She there now?"

"Yeah. Not with me, but here."

"Alright. Tell her I wanna meet up on the basketball field in half an hour, then go home and get some sleep."

"Alright."

I hung up.

For the next twenty minutes I sat against the side of the gym, writing on a sheet of loose-leaf. Then I circled around behind the admin building and slipped the paper under the back door.



The wind blew cold and hard over the blacktop field. I stood crookedly, hands in my pockets. I was cold without my jacket.

A speck on the horizon turned into Laura, coming towards me. I took jagged breaths, waiting.

She came right up and put her arms around me. A warm embrace. I put my hands on her shoulders and tentatively pulled back.

"Did you see it all? With Tug and the Pin?" she asked softly.

"No. I took your advice and didn't go."

"No?"

"What happened?"

She was looking at me strangely. "The papers say six dead, three around the house, one girl in the trunk of Tug's car, and the Pin and Tug."

"Yeah?" My face was frozen in an ambiguous frown.

"Tug went down by the bulls. Tried to shoot his way out when they got there. They tied him to Dode, too. Same gun. And the girl."

"Huh."

"Well good thing you weren't there."

"Yeah." The wind blew between us.

"You think the girl was Emily?"

"Probably."

She embraced me again, and didn't let go. "You loved her."

"Yeah I did." My eyes were far away.

"You did all this cause you loved her. And now it's finished." The wind whistled. She said "I love you."

"No." I breathed. She pulled back so she could see my face.

"What?"

"No, it's not finished." My face was a mask. "Tug pulled the trigger on Em and he got the fall, but the bulls coulda found that out without me." She pulled back more. "I set out to know who put her in the spot, who put her in front of the gun. That was you, angel."

She was drifting back further. "What are you talking about?"

"It was you. What, you want the whole tale? You want me to tell it to you?"

"Tell it to me." She looked bewildered.

"From the top then. You had your fingers in Brad Bramish for appearances and to keep him buying from the Pin, who you were hooked with. Emily came to you and Brad, you saw her for what she was, an insecure little girl trying to get in. She goes on the backburner. Meanwhile maybe you're getting bored, maybe just greedy, so when the Pin scores big with the

bricks you take your shot. You hook one, take half, and cut it back to size, but you cut it bad. Maybe accidentally, maybe to down the Pin's operation, doesn't matter. You put it back, but poor Frisco doses off it and lands in a coma." My voice was getting stronger. "So now the Pin's fuming, maybe he's jealous of Brad, so he comes to Brad's crowd looking for blood, or at least a scape. You know trouble. There's going to be a war over this. And there's Emily. She trusts you. She wants in. It's duck soup."

"No." she murmured.

"You frame her for the bad brick, then you cut her loose. You turn on your heel and bite her in the throat. Last week on the payphone, Pico and Alexander, she saw something she was scared of. Tug's car driving by? She wouldn't know Tug's car. Tug driving? No, Tug doesn't smoke. It was the Pin driving, but she wouldn't know the Pin either, not face to face. No, she was across the street, angel. She saw the passenger side. She saw you. She saw you and ran like she saw some devil."

Her face was very still, quivering. "Brendan, why are you-"

"And she took the hit. Dode hid her away, but the Pin was on to her, tracked her down, told her to meet him, that they would make good. Gave her a time, and a place. And sent Tug. Just to get the straight. But maybe you had talked Tug up, or maybe he just blew a fuse, but he hit her. She took the hit for you. You let her take it."

She started to sob, her voice hysterical. "Stop it!"

"That's the tale."

"Stop it!"

"You're going to tell me it's not?"

"It's not!"

"Look at me."

She crumpled against me, her eyes stuck straight into mine. "You know me. I've only helped you. How can you - It isn't true!" She sobbed through a tensed, straight face.

I held her stare, but my eyes were still distant. "I hope it isn't. I want you to have been on my side all along, not just trying to get me under your thumb like Brad and the Pin and Tug."

"No-"

"But I think you knew that meeting was going to blow up. I think that was your final play." A gull shrieked in the distance. "But I hope I'm wrong. I hope everything I wrote in the note I dropped at Gary Trueman's office this morning is wrong. About your and Brad's involvement in the Pin's runnings. I hope you didn't steal the brick last night. In your purse."

"I didn't." she breathed.

"That's good. That means you didn't let me walk into a slaughterhouse. You didn't lead Tug and the Pin and their crews to the slaughter. And when Trueman reads the note, takes my cue and searches your locker, he won't find a damn thing."

I saw it in her eyes. Between us, we both saw the locker being pried open, and from its dark insides a chalky white brick of powder falling out, spinning through the air, and shattering on the locker cage floor.

Then there was only silence between us. She looked as if she had been punched in the face. "Brendan..." she murmured, "don't..."

"It's done." I said gently.

Her face did strange things. Subtle contortions. "I loved you."

I looked away. "Yeah, I think you did."

She looked me in the eye again, but I kept starring off into space. She just barely breathed "Why?"

"You know why."

She was still for a beat, watching my eyes. I didn't look at her. Then slowly, steadily, she straightened up. Her figure took back some dignity. She stepped towards me deliberately. Closer. Right up against me. She brought her head to mine, put her lips to my ear, breathed warm breath, and said two words. The first was "Mother", the second was low, guttural and lost to the whistling wind.

She turned and walked briskly away.

I watched her go across the dark, barren field of asphalt.

I heard metal jangle. The Brain was hopping the chain link fence near the edge of the field. He came alongside me. I kept watching Laura. "You get your straight?" I asked.

"Yeah. Sorry, I just knew you'd never spill it all to me."

"S'alright."

"Yeah well. Chuck Burns came to. The knife guy. Spilled it all to the bulls, guess Brad Bramish hired him. On his own, just a grudge thing."

I nodded slightly. "Fits. You did good, Brain. Go sleep."

"Yeah, you too." He started to go, but didn't. "What'd she whisper to you?"

"She called me a dirty word."

He chuckled. "Alright, you don't have to tell me." He left.

I stood there awhile, watching Laura until she got to the other side of the field and walked off behind the twisted chain linked fence. A bird flew overhead.

I stood a bit longer. After awhile the first period bell rang, and I walked back towards campus.

