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Cody

For taking the first book out of the trash.

Heather

For reading the second book.

Tony

For teaching me how to accept the dark.

Adventure Factory
Presents

The Bartender:

Darkness on the Edge of Town

By Axel Matfin

Chapter 01

See, I'm a professional. I do a job. 'Lotta people make it out to be more than it is. Like somehow it's more glamorous than anything else that anyone does for a living. But I'll tell you something. Every job? Is just another job. And every single time it's more or less the exact same. I get in, I do the work, I get paid and I leave. 'Course it's never that simple, is it? There's always something going on that you don't see. Regardless of your pay-grade, if you've got any sense of perception? If you focus your attention long enough? You'll see it all. Inside muddled moments and conversations. Where everyone knocks back a few. That's when the truth comes out. Eventually, everyone will know the truth, but few are about to testify to it. Just politics, they'll say. When politics start taking over the job, that's when it's time to leave. Because that's how a professional works. For the job, on their own terms. In spite of what the people in charge think is right. I choose my work real careful and I don't like surprises.

Some days the job feels like it's going to kill you. After twelve hours on your feet, you're left with a brain that you can't shut off. A programmed repetition of the body and mind, based on hundreds of scenarios, is what keeps you alive. Fielding over two thousand

social interactions a night, every single one of them a different calculation of the human condition. And if you're like most of us? You might just be half drunk. Nature of the game. In this world, and make no mistake it is another world, we deal with some real salty people. Sure, they're just like everyone else. Yet doing what I do, you will know them. You will see them and you will be able to distill much more from their words than they will ever understand. You know who they're fucking, when they're fucking, what they drink. Married? Divorced? Do they have kids? Where do they work? Who do they know? Most of them are professionals in their own right when it comes to drinking. Some of them are kindergarteners, rookies, and will eat right out of your hand. Others require a master's touch to unlock their secrets. That's just part of what I do. Once you know someone, you will see their lies and, more importantly, their truths. You will learn secrets about people that they didn't even know they had. A web of connections that goes beyond your own comprehension will start to emerge.

You meet a new person and it can break down the walls of ambiguity that may have surrounded an entire social group. In this biz your sphere grows exponentially, and as it does you will start to see the other players. You'd be stupid to think that some of them aren't just as smart as you. Just as cunning. Just as aware. If you're playing the game, a social chess match, you will come up against some real slimy fucks. You will be confused a few times. Eventually these guys will get the better of you. Which way is right. Which way is wrong. You won't be able to tell. It's not a gang war, 'least not technically. Sometimes it's rough if you sign up for a long haul with the wrong crew. It's just a job you say to yourself. Man's gotta eat.

The next thing you know, you're swallowin' your values like a handful of pills and watching TV all day just to forget your hangover and hide from the rest of the world. You forget what it is, what the job really is. It's a lotta those mind games and clusterfucks,

that's for sure, but that's just the juice. The job? The job is boring days and long nights. Sunday, Monday off. Forgetting to feel hung over. Being amazed that you smoked two full packs of cigarettes in an evening. Eating all meals standing up. Taking people's shit. Not taking people's shit. Making the serious money. Flirting with girls. Throwin' guys out by their ear. Living in the center of a scene. Sure, that's why people think this job has some glitz to it.

There aren't many prerequisites for this job. Sure, you better be able to talk. Forget about bartending courses, there's nothin' in those you can't learn from a book and a month long bender. Don't half ass it if you're gonna do it. You're either in or out. Lot of people think that they're just going to walk in and do it, and if you're a hot piece of ass your odds are pretty good. A lot of people think they can do what I do, but they can't. However you get there, the one thing it takes to be the Bartender?

Keep your cool. You keep your cool, you never get rattled. You never get rattled, you can think straight. If you can think straight, you're on top of shit. You're on top of shit? You don't have shit to worry about.

Today I don't have much to worry about other than a wicked hangover and, somewhere out there, a pissed off girlfriend. The guts of my week have been filled with five ten-hour shifts that were themselves filled with whiskey shots, an environmental hazard. After work Sampson, my bartending partner, and I made the usual rounds to the joints where we get free drinks and know enough staff and regulars so's we can stay late if we like. Sooner or later the bartender can't take it anymore. He or She is tired and a smart bartender will know when to draw the line. Getting greedy never did anyone any good. Sampson and I hadn't quibbled about drinkin' this week, though now I'm wishing that Mary Lou had drawn that line a few ounces earlier. My heartbeat bucks away at the inside of my eardrums. My clenched jaw aches from a night of shitty sleep and dehydration. I lift a lukewarm cup of diner

coffee to my face and pace myself through a couple of sips that I follow with a few guzzles of water. I can feel the liquid entering my stomach and slowly diffusing back into my bloodstream, re-inflating all those cells that have been wrung dry by the hard hand of hooch. I've never been much of a puker. My hangovers have always claimed my brain, rather than my guts. Today is no exception and though breakfast and coffee have helped, they can only do so much. I push a plate of cold scaly egg yolks away from me and check my watch. Two thirty in the PM; it's Monday. My Saturday.

I light up a smoke and thumb through the bills in my wallet. Four hundred bones. Even after pissing away a ton on booze, cigarettes, and meals, I still have a fairly decent wad. It's that time of year. Things are starting to pick up again. No more sexy summer sun, and even the clean slate feeling of fall is gone. People are finished with their outdoor vacations. Back to the bars and nightclubs for all those without the creativity to think of anything better to do with their nights. This is when we settle in. The cloud cover envelopes the City and bombards us with apocalyptic rain and darkness.

I pay for my breakfast without even looking at the bill. I've had the bacon and eggs with a cup of joe here at the SunRise Café so many times that I already know the cost. Now I'm out on the street, pulling my collar up and cupping a hand around my cigarette as a faint rain begins to patter down on these hard bargain streets. I'm going to my workplace, my bar. Along the way I pass a few people I know and tilt away to try and keep a low profile. In my line of work, eventually, people start recognizing you. They want to talk. Sometimes it's just a mild pain in the ass. Other times people try to move in on your real life. I don't need that. Most of the time they just want to stop and chew the fat. Like they're sitting at the bar and I'm at work. The difference being, when I'm at work I'm paid to have baloney conversations; on the street it ends

up being pro-bono. The good ones, the real people, you stop and offer them a butt and a few minutes of your time. On the other hand, crusty old drunks with ill informed opinions and nightmare women? That's when you just turn your head or check your watch as you pass them by.

I work in a pub called Tony's. Tony's is on the East end of the city, not quite a bad part of town, but for the West Siders it's considered slumming. It's a no bullshit kind of place. You come in, you can get booze and food. Its two floors are filled with all kinds of people, many who could be classified as unmitigated disasters. It's not a glamorous job but it pays the bills and plays by the book. To work here you'd better know what you're doing and have at least a half set of nuts if you expect to make any money. It's not for first time nineteen year old honeys who think that a simple smile and a tit shake is going to get them the big dollars. Play it like that and you're just going to be repeatedly sexually harassed. No, at Tony's the servers and bartenders take care of their own bullshit. In the event of trouble, which is different from bullshit, we back each other up. If there's a concern or a problem, the de-facto ideology is that the customer is more than likely, if not always, an asshole. You pay your bill, tip accordingly and at least pretend like you're keeping your nose clean, and we've got no problem at all. That being said, we can only do so much for a job that doesn't do more than pay the bills. Involvement in fights and otherwise dangerous situations falls at our discretion. My life isn't worth getting into a fight with some jacked up asshole that believes he's entitled to walk out on his bill; that's what our security is for. I fist bump Rico, a member of the security team, as I step inside the building.

She's an old Cadillac, this bar. I think that's part of the reason I actually like it here. You don't find too many old steam engines like this. Filled with beaten down leather chairs that have been re-upholstered time after time and the kind of carpet that after a few years is just torn up. You can smoke inside and the place

smells of spirits crossed over, while being haunted by draft beer coagulating in the floorboards. Sounds strange, but it's the kind of place I grew up in. This is the kind of place that taught me how to be a man, back when I first moved to the big smoke. But that was an age ago. I wave and say hello to the downstairs bartender, Bob, and go upstairs where Sampson is leaning over the bar top reading the day's paper. He doesn't see me, but he already knows I'm here.

I've known Sampson since I moved to the City. We've seen and done enough in the world of bars to know that we are lucky with what we have. Although his taste for whiskey borders on debilitating, he is one of the most dependable people I know. We've worked together at various jobs in the past, but have settled into our current locale, where we can do the job blindfolded.

"Mornin' Pal," he says, snapping his fingers and pointing over his shoulder without looking at me.

I snort and sidle up next to him, taking a seat of my own at the bar. He finishes reading an article about some development company downtown, before turning to face me.

"Bit of a ride last night, huh?" He blinks his eyes twice and then mimes rubbing them.

"Nn," I respond, lighting a smoke and refusing to give my hangover credence.

"Well, we were lookin' for drinks and Mary Lou was lookin' to set us up." He lights up a flume of his own.

"Yeah, did she ever. Pretty tired today. I feel like I'm getting old or somethin'."

"Well, she was putting shots of vodka in our beers too."

"No shit? Crazy girl giving us the velvet hammers? Christ, no wonder I feel like road kill today." I'm glad to at least have an excuse for the drill in my brain.

Sampson just shrugs. Favouritism at an establishment could be defined by how drunk you were at the end of the night, along

with the reduced price of your bill. It was usually just best to not acknowledge it. That way it was easier to forget about it if, for some reason, all of your perks disappeared one day. Days like today, favouritism feels more like penance for being able to drink so hard.

“What was the over-under on that bet you made with Ed? How’d the game pan out?” I ask Sampson, who has a strong penchant for betting on sports.

“Cleared the conditions, cleaned up with a cool three hundred bones.”

“Good, he was an asshole to make that bet in the first place,” I respond.

“Bout what I figured,” replies Sampson, standing up and moving away from the bar and into the back hallway. I follow him. He’s pouring a cup of coffee before adding his customary three creams and five sugars. “Mmm! Someone dropped something off for you.”

“Me? It’s not even my birthday.”

“Yeah I know, just a second.”

He goes down the hallway to the staff change room. I turn around and am greeted by Vickie, as she steps into the back hall. I startle her.

“Oh jeez! Tom! Hi!”

“Hiya Vickie, how’s tricks?”

The little spitfire of a waitress looks up at me and places her hands on her hips.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothin’, just a figure of speech is all. How’s your week goin’?”

“Good! I got a discount on a new gym membership, and my agent says that JJ, y’know I was telling you about him, anyway Darren says that JJ really liked my screen test so I’ve got a callback tomorrow.”

Vickie is an actress, and a pretty darn good one by all accounts.

In this business you meet all types with pretty faces and square jaws. The kind of people that got talked up on account of their looks when they were younger. These people get to figurin' that they're not good for more than playin' professional make believe. Lotta them end up as career waitresses or bartenders, which is a lot like being an actor, 'cept we don't get many red carpet entries. Vickie, though, she's the good kind. The kind that treat it as a job where you work for your success, instead of a fame hungry get rich quick scheme built on your looks. She's the kind of actor you actually hope makes it.

Sampson comes back down the hallway, carrying a parcel under his arm while he attempts to sip his coffee without spilling any.

"Yeah, when I got to work today it was just sittin' on the bar. Bob signed for it." He hands me a rectangular box wrapped in brown paper and tied up with string. I tuck the weighty package under my arm for the time being.

"Sampson, there's some guys out there," says Vickie, motioning towards the public area of the bar with her hand, "They're kinda..." She makes a repulsed face that I've seen before.

"Oh yeah?" Sampson rolls his eyes and we make our way back out into the bar.

Five crusty looking guys have gathered around the pool table and are attempting to get the coin mechanism on the table to work. Weathered men, probably construction workers. They're done up in button down shirts and leather jackets of varying lengths. Hair slicked back or spiked up with cheap drugstore hair gel. They've dressed themselves up to what they'd consider a premium, but gnarled faces, twisted hands and corn kernels for teeth give them away. A group of roughnecks that want to act like playboys. One of them, the tallest of the group, is holding a pool cue and he starts snapping his fingers at Vickie.

"Just ignore 'em darlin'. I'll take care of it," says Sampson, after

Vickie gives him a look that tugs on the guy's heartstrings. Vickie goes back into the hallway and Sampson circles around behind the bar, while the finger snapping guy rolls his head to the side and lets out a huff of air before he crosses the room towards the bar.

"Hey! Hey what's the pool table cost?"

"Two bits per play."

"Two? Fuck that's fuckin' ridiculous."

"Sure is," nods Sampson, who then turns to one of the televisions on the wall behind him.

"Hey! Hello?" The guy starts waving and calling at Sampson, who chooses to ignore him for a few more seconds.

The guy is standing right next to me. His haircut is short, but that doesn't stop it from being greasy, and his entire body tilts to the left side, including the sagging skin of his face. He must think he's cleaned up but lord does he reek like some sort of musk. What's that old expression about polishing a turd? A thick smell of body odour is cutting through what must be a half-quart of Avon's best aftershave. It makes my nose twitch.

"Yeah? What can I do for ya mate?"

"Can we, like? Get some beers? Get some service man?"

"Sure. What do you want?"

"What's on special?"

"House lager and pale ale"

"Bud Lite? You got Bud Lite?"

"Not on draught, bottle only."

The guy's face crumples a little. Idiots like this pride themselves on being tough guys: real men who can drink for a month straight, slay wild animals with their bare hands and bed a million virgins. Yet when it comes to their drinking habits they like to keep the calories, and flavor, low.

"That house special? What's that?"

"It's a lager."

“What about Budweiser? You got Budweiser?”

“Look man, the house lager is about as close as we’ve got to Budweiser or Bud Lite on draught.” Sampson is starting to lose his patience with this schmuck, who isn’t even listening.

“Huh? Uh, ok...pitcher of the house lager then. Gimme some change for the pool table too.”

Sampson takes the guy’s money and hands over the change. Not a nickel gets dropped in the tip jar. The guy shuffles over to the other side of the room, where his cronies have already racked up a game. They pour the beer and then start taking shifts to the washroom, flicking at their nostrils and swallowing hard as they exit the john.

“Real group of winners there, huh?” I say to Sampson, who hasn’t taken his eyes off’ve them.

“Yeah, no shit. What’s in yer package?” Sampson and I have been caught up in dissecting the nature of the losers who now occupy our bar, and my package had gone forgotten for the time being.

I sit across the bar from Sampson and start to pull at the strings and peel away the brown paper of the package. Underneath is a shoebox. I pop the lid off and inside, resting on a bed of crumpled up newspaper, there is a handgun, an envelope and two boxes of ammunition. The gun is a Smith & Wesson .38 special. Silver mid-length barrel with a black rubber grip. My guts twist themselves inside out and manage a fisherman’s knot. I sit stunned for a second and then reach into the box for the envelope. Tearing it open, I retrieve a piece of stationary from the Hotel Manke with scribbles from a blue ballpoint pen:

Mr. Wolfe

This is an un-registered, un-marked gun. For all intents and purposes, it is untraceable. Use at your discretion, and watch your back.

I put the lid back on the box and then pass Sampson the letter.

He's watching the scumbags and it takes him a moment to pick up and read the note. When he finishes it, he picks up two shot glasses and pours us both an ounce of Jameson's Irish whiskey. I shake my head and let out a deep breath, raising my glass to his before downing its contents. My brain is a formula one race-course at the moment as I attempt to unearth any reason for me to be sent a package such as this. While my past might be dotted with colourful moments, my adventures have since come to a close. I look up from the box to see Sampson stroking his bearded chin.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" he asks. I nod, and follow him into the back again. He asks Vickie to watch the guys on the floor for him, and leads me into the manager's office. He closes the door behind us.

"What the fuck is this about, Tom?"

"Sampson, wish I could tell you, but to be honest I don't have a goddamn clue."

"Can I see it?" He motions to the box and I nod, opening the lid. He reaches out but I draw the box away from him.

"Don't touch it. Just don't. Even if it is unmarked, there's no reason for anyone but me to be handling this thing. Even then, I'm not sure if I want to touch it."

"Fair nuff. What, uh, what are you gonna do about this?" he asks.

I take a long minute to think this over. I could just walk away. Pretend it never happened. Pretend I never got no stinkin' package. I could carry the gun and start looking over my shoulder every thirty seconds, and descend into a thick paranoia. I could skip town, not ever think about this city again, and just get the hell out of dodge. But, I like it here. Might be a dreary portrait of what hell frozen over looks like, but this is my town. I'll be goddamned if anyone is going to make me look over my shoulder for the rest of my life, much less turn tail and run.

"You don't know where it came from?" I ask Sampson.

“Nope, it was here when I got here. But, wait...it came by a courier; I think we’ve got the slip somewhere, just gimme a second.” He raises his finger in the air and then starts digging through the in and out boxes that sit next to him on the desk. He pulls out a slip of paper and hands it over to me.

It’s a slip from Progressor Couriers, signed off with the incomprehensible signature of the courier. It displays the address that the package came from. 2000 George Street, downtown. The Hotel Manke. The slip doesn’t give any further information, aside from a tracking number. This is more than enough of a clue to start with.

“Well, whatcha gonna do now?” asks Sampson, kicking his feet up on the desk.

I examine the note again. The stationary is from the Hotel Manke, the same location the package was sent from. I pick the gun up out of the box and turn to Sampson.

“I’m going to find out who sent me this gun. I’m going to find out why they sent it to me. I’m going to make them sorry that they ever decided to tangle me up in whatever bullshit this,” I point at the gun, “is.”

“Pheeeeewwww... sounds like you’re going to be needing another drink, cowboy.” Sampson lets out a whistling breath, with his head tilted, and half chortles the last of his words.

“Giddyup,” I snort, and roll my eyes as we exit the office.

“Hey! Hey! Watch what you,” Vickie’s voice is more than audible down the hallway. She’s shouting, and Sampson and I run out onto the floor.

One of the deadbeats is leering over her, not touching her but standing close in her personal bubble. Vic and the man are both next to the bar as Sampson and I step back into the room.

“Problem here?” asks Sampson, a fire in his eyes.

“Uh, nawh...no problem,” says the man, straightening himself and wiping at his nose, looking from Sampson to myself.

“Good.”

“Christ he stinks like,” starts Vickie under her breath, but the man tweaks and cuts her off.

“Stinks like what?! Huh? Bitch, whattya-”

“She was gonna say that you stink like hard work...weren't you Vic?” I cut him off, take a step forward and look to Vickie, using my eyes to tell her to go with the flow.

“Yeah, yeah Tom...hard work.”

“Why don't you get back to your game, eh?” I say to the man, pointing back at the pool table. He attempts to stare me down, leaning into me. I blink and raise an eyebrow. I'm not going to play his game. I make my own rules. He sneers at me, but catches some of the heat from the inferno in Sampson's glare and turns back to his cronies. They've been paying attention to the disturbance from the get go, watching their man give Vickie a hard time and getting a good laugh from it. It's what jacked up dip-shits do.

“What the fuck was that about Vic?” I ask.

“He was asking for my number, and then he wanted more beer. I told him he'd have to wait for you to get back, Sampson, and he just wouldn't leave me alone.”

“Well I'm gonna throw them out right now, so don't worry about it,” says Sampson, making a motion as if he's rolling up his sleeves. I hold up my hand to stop him.

“Allow me, I've gotta take off anyway. Besides, you're too fired up on righteousness to handle this calmly. They'll just get pissed off at you before you've got a chance to calm them down. I'll deal with them on my way out.”

Sampson is known by his closest associates to, on occasion, be so full of moral convictions that they impair his ability to communicate.

“You sure?” asks Sampson, after frowning at me.

“Yeah, I'm going to go down to the Hotel Manke, see if I can't sort this out,” I point to the box sitting on the bar.

“What’s going on Tom?” asks Vickie.

“Nothin’ Vic, don’t you worry ‘bout it.”

I open the box again and deposit the gun into my breast pocket and the ammo into a side pocket of my jacket. I take the courier’s receipt and tuck it into my wallet. Then I straighten myself out and turn to Sampson.

“If you don’t hear from me...well...send someone to look for me I guess. I’ll try and be in touch, but...well, once I know more you’ll know more. Feel me?” Sampson clenches his jaw. I nod at him and turn back to the guys at the pool table.

Chapter 02

Two of them are playing pool, while the remaining three sit at a pair of high tops by the windows. The man who reeks of after-shave is hunched over the table lining up a shot. He freezes and angles his head up at me, the cue still lined up with his shot.

“You work here?” he says in a voice that sounds like a lazy screen door banging into place. I nod. “Well then, how’s about y’be a good boy and go get us another pitcher of beer, me and the fellas are gettin’ thirsty.”

He’s looking for trouble. He already knows that we don’t like him. He already knows he’s been stepping on our toes. He just doesn’t know how far he can push it; he’s curious as to just how far he can take this shit disturber act. The drip down the back of his throat nudges him along. His buddies laugh and congratulate him with pointed fingers when he calls me *boy*.

“Fraid not,” I say, shaking my head.

“What?” the man says, taking a step away from the pool table, inflating his chest as he moves towards me.

There are a million different reasons why a bartender might cut someone off, and there’re only a few ways to do it. An amateur will ignore people: leave them alone or pretend to not hear

an order, hoping that the person will take a hint. That just pisses people off. Or, you can placate people with a drink at a time, hoping to avoid an unnecessary scene. Some bartenders say *no*, and then cave after a person starts to make a fuss. You do that and they own you. There's really only one way to do it right. You tell them straight up, and you stick to your guns.

"Sorry man. You're done. Until you can come back and apologize to the waitress over there, and maybe bring some manners with you? You're done drinking here. So I suggest you finish your game, put your jackets on, and be on your way."

The thing about telling guys straight up is that it can be a bit of a shock to the system. Sure, the average person realizes that they'll look like an asshole if they try and push it any farther. But fellas like this? Riding high on drugs and booze, they think they're entitled to any damn thing they want, and when you start tellin' them otherwise they're bound to disagree with you. Sometimes they start pleadin', tellin' you they'll be good, just give them another drink. A lot of guys, guys like these, think they can push you into doing somethin' you've already said no to. At that point you just stand your ground.

"What? I was jest kiddin'? What'd that little bitch-"

"See now, I know you're a little confused and that's all right. It doesn't really matter what happened, or what you think happened, 'cause right now there's only one way that this is going to go down. You're going to finish your game of pool, or not, I don't really care, and you're going to leave. That's it. End of story. No more beers. No shots for the road. Don't bother apologizin' right now; you take some time to think about a real nice way to say sorry. Then you come back, and maybe we can make this right. But right now? You are leaving." I hold eye contact the entire time I'm speaking. Right at the end, for the briefest of seconds, his pupils dilate. I see the corners of his mouth begin to curl into a snarl, and I know what's coming next.

I don't want to hit anyone. I will give a man every opportunity to walk away from a confrontation, like a rational adult, but the second he puts me in a position where it's me or him? I don't care what I have to do. I'm not going to lose. If I'm put in a position where I have to hit someone? I will hit them very hard in all the places your old man told you to never hit anyone. I treat every fight like a bar fight, and in a bar fight there are no rules. In a bar fight, you keep your head on a swivel and be ready for anything.

He's telegraphed his movements so far in advance that I've got time to tie my shoe before I deal with him. A pendulum right hook goes sailing a foot in front of my face. I avoid it with a single step backwards. He spins himself sideways with the momentum of the punch and I grab his arm out of the air with my left. I pull him towards the pool table, pinning his arm down on the edge of it. In the same motion I snatch the eight ball up from the side of the table. My yanking of his arm has put him off balance and he falls forward, while I raise the pitch-black polymer sphere and slam it down just above his wrist joint. I hear at least one bone snap and he falls over, emitting a brief scream. The other man who is playing pool starts to move around towards me with his cue raised in his hands like a bat. Turning, I whip the eight ball at his face and watch as he falls backwards, a gush of blood spurting from his lips and nose. I lean on the pool table and look at the remaining three men, who sit dumbfounded.

"Next time? Keep your dogs on a leash. Now clean this mess up and get the fuck out of here," I growl.

I turn to look back at Sampson, give him a wave, then step over the man with the broken wrist. He's writhing on the ground, the smell of cheap cologne wafting up at me. I make my way downstairs and out the door.

Onward to action and adventure unknown.

Chapter 03

“Hi there, I’m with Progressor Couriers.

There was no one to accept this package at the specified destination, and it’s our policy to return the package to where it was sent from,” I say, smiling, to the hotel receptionist: a cute ‘lil blond with wire rimmed bifocals.

“Oh, all right then, lets see here... oh yes, thank you,” she says, taking the receipt slip from my hand.

She goes to work punching a few lines into her computer. I wait.

“Ok then, I’ve logged it in our book, you can be on your way!” A healthy dose of pep rally in her voice.

“Oh, I’m sorry lady, I’ve gotta take the package up myself. The company insists that I eye witness all transactions,” I say with a shrug and a disarming slouch.

“Sorry! But here at the Hotel Manke we pride ourselves on privacy and security. We stake our reputation on our ability to provide our guests with total anonymity. Only authorized personnel and guests are allowed beyond the lobby.” She says this with only a twinge of doubt in her voice.

What a smile: the kind I don’t bother pressing my luck on any

further. I ask her to sign a note for my boss, just to sell the bit. Then I wheel around a corner, lean up on a stone pillar, light a smoke and wait. The rain outside begins to pick up in speed and intensity.

‘Course it made sense. I knew that the Manke was a tough nut to crack. I’ve been inside a few times, back in the old days when I was privy to such extravagance on a regular basis. Locked down tighter than a nun’s arsehole, the Manke is where the local elite stayed when they needed a place to fuck someone in private for a while. Politicians have their campaign suites, and movie stars are a regular fixture. To others the hotel is a permanent home, the kind of stronghold that allows local businessmen to take up residence, with no questions asked. I’m not welcome, that much I know. I haven’t been inside the place in a couple of years, but long ago I severed any of the ties that I did have. Still, the extra weight inside my jacket, along with a rather heavy concern for my health, keeps me here.

I don’t have to wait long for a plan of action to formulate in my brain. The receptionist calls over a bellboy and hands him the parcel, along with the slip I’ve brought along. I work in a lot of loud environments. Because of this I’ve learned how to read lips to a certain degree. Numbers, at very least, are easy to pick out. Nine-Oh-Six. *Now we’re talking.* I crush my butt out and push forward off the pillar towards the hotel bar and restaurant.

Though daunting in size, all hotels have the same basic structure. You’ve got the lobby, and the outward appearances that are available to the public. Front desk, pay-phones, a few seats, some plants: what you see is what you get. Beyond this are the rooms, conference and banquet halls, and utility areas. There’ll be a maintenance access somewhere that will, more often than not, lead to stairwells. One security guard per three floors is standard. A constant elevator attendant mans both the civilian stairwell and elevator. This main elevator and stairwell are not points of entry

that I will be able to use. I'll need another way. I move further into the belly of the beast.

Most hotel restaurants are busy. Staff can turn over fast, so going this way I'm betting that no one will recognize me. Just another new guy. As long as I keep moving I doubt anyone will question me much. One thing I don't have to chance is that it's going to be a maelstrom in there. It's four thirty. The kitchen is about to get hit with their first dinner rush, and all kinds of hell will be breaking loose. I'm going in there. Because for the lucky guests of the Hotel Manke there is room service, and that means a room service elevator.

I knock open the kitchen doors and get my head down, doing my best to look like I know exactly where I'm going. It's just as I thought: busy. Cooks and porters occupy the available space, doing their best to finish all their prep before the bills start coming in. I get turned around only once and walk into a group of potato peelers, who stare at me for a split second while I spin on my heel and cut between two oncoming dishwashers, their arms loaded with buss bins full of dishes. The service elevator, thank god, doesn't require a key. After waiting for a pair of cooks to finish unloading several sacks of dried fruit, flour and sugar from the old Otis, I duck out from behind the crates of vegetables I've hidden behind, and punch the button for the ninth floor.

The elevator is fast for an old one and I'm upstairs in no time. I slide open the metal cage doors and take a quick peek around the lavish hallways for any security. It's clean, so I'm out and on my way to nine-oh-six without hesitation. When I reach the door, it's ajar. I debate pulling the gun out of my pocket but decide that it's probably better kept where no one, including me, can get hurt.

Suite 906 is triple the size of my apartment. The front entrance is hardwood that holds a side table that has a pair of keys and a familiar looking pad of hotel stationary on it. After a few meters the ground changes from hardwood into thick white shag carpet.

I don't bother taking my shoes off and move silently down the cream coloured hallway. It leads to a fork that shifts into either an expansive dining and living area or down a longer hallway that appears to become a bedroom. The living area is complete with a bar, sink and a large amount of counter space. The dining room and coffee tables are made of glass. On top of them are several bowls overflowing with oranges, apples and what look like Mexican grown strawberries. The TV in the living area is on and playing a standard celebrity gossip rag, on mute. A Billie Holliday record spins in the corner by the TV. I take a step into the living area, where the furniture is made of inky black leather which contrasts with the white of the carpet in a checkered effect. The view is phenomenal. I'm at the corner of the building, in one of the four towers that make up the keep of Hotel Manke. The City centre is three blocks away, but from here I feel like I could spit into it, providing the wind is with me.

"The employee dress code around here is getting a little lax," comes a woman's voice from behind me.

I turn around to see a tall woman with olive skin and deep black hair leaning against the wall between the dining and living area. She's dressed only in a white button down shirt that stops four inches below her hips, while the buttons descend into a ravine of cleavage. It leaves little to the imagination. She's not startled by my presence: her casual posture against the wall and the smirk on her face tell me so. Her face is familiar and it takes a few seconds for me to register just who she is.

Ersula Esposito, former television celebrity. She'd been circling the drain for the past couple of years, her star continuing to fall. She made a break onto the small screen almost ten years ago as the lavish sexpot on a locally produced cop drama, then she moved on to a short-lived talk show before reinventing her character for the role of a tough as nails inner city lawyer. All of her characters were what you'd call fast women, and it was a standard

part of her appeal. I guess it's no surprise that she's stirring up my blood right now. I tell myself to keep it at a simmer, rather than risk letting it boil over. In the past few years she's been relegated to gossip columns and sidelined on the red carpets, but she's still an insider in all the ways that it really matters. Her being in Hotel Manke is sign enough that, while her fame might be dwindling, the contents of her bank account aren't.

"Hi. I'm, uh, looking for someone," I grunt and stand up straight, attempting to appear official.

"Oh, well in that case, don't bother explaining any further. Keep traipsing around my suite making a mess of my carpets with your street shoes." Her tone is annoyed, but her eyes are sultry.

"Oh! Shit, sorry I was just," I normally don't stumble like this, "I was just...I'm looking for someone. I'm sorry for the interruption but, well, do you have a moment to talk, Ms. Esposito?" I pull it together, and she angles her head with interest as I use her name.

"Well I suppose. Would you give me a moment while I dress quickly? Feel free to make yourself a drink, Detective?" She gestures towards the bar and then raises an eyebrow at me.

"I'm not a cop. I mean, I'm Mr. Wolfe. You can call me Mr. Wolfe."

"All right, Mr. Wolfe. Say, you look familiar."

"I get that a lot."

"Hmm. Well, you can't think of a time when we've met before?"

"No, I think I would have remembered that."

She smiles.

"I suppose anything is possible, but you fix yourself a drink and I'll be right back." She winks at me, and turns to leave the room. The tail of the shirt flits about, revealing the outline of a pair of scant black panties.

I let out a large exhale after she's left the room and move over to the bar. I pour myself a couple of fingers of J&B scotch before lighting up a cigarette. She's awful calm for a lady just surprised

by an unannounced visitor in her room. As I raise my drink to my face, I catch sight of something in the garbage can. It's the package. The bellboy must have brought it up here before I'd even gotten through the kitchen. I look out on the view until she returns to the room. When she does she's still wearing the revealing button down, but it's tucked into a pair of tan high waisted slacks.

"So, Mr. Wolfe, what can I do for you?" she asks, crossing the room, pinning her hair back and pouring herself a Stoli on the rocks.

"I was sent a package today. I tracked it to this suite and snuck up into your room. The package had some, well, concerning information inside."

"I thought you weren't a cop?"

"I'm not. I'm just a bartender." I take a drink. "Look, long story short, I need to know why I might have received a package from your hotel room."

"I can't say that I know what you're talking about Mr. Wolfe. I just woke up, and have been in bed since early this morning. I haven't sent any packages of late, and for the most part am not in the habit of sending parcels anywhere, much less to wherever it is that you've come from." There's an air of disdain for me in her voice, along with a nostril flare. I take it as the challenge I need.

"Right. So Ms. Esposito, do you live with anyone else? Anyone else that might have sent me a package? I see that you're wearing a man's shirt right now. Given your public displays of high fashion, I'm sure that you're not tromping around a Mr. Big and Tall for retail therapy."

"Hah. Well, I see you've caught me there. Yes I do entertain a gentleman in my, for lack of a better word, home. But who he is, and what his business is with anyone, isn't your concern. I've never been one to mix profession with pleasure." She moves her hands when she talks, and the ice cubes in her glass clink.

"Right," I snort. "Well is he here? I might like to have a couple

of words with him as well, as long as I'm here."

"I'm afraid you've just missed him. He left right before you arrived. There was someone at the door and then he said he had to leave. I was still in bed."

"Of course. So when you're not engaged in pleasure, Ms. Esposito, just what is your profession?"

I've regained my composure. I'm not someone who gets star struck, but when you're blindsided by a gorgeous woman stripped down to her skivvies, famous or no, it's hard not to be thrown for a loop.

"Please, call me Ersula." She crosses the room where I'm standing; her entire body moves like a well oiled machine. I fold my arms and lean against the wall, still smoking my cigarette.

"Ok, Ersula, what are you up to these days? Haven't seen much of you on the tube lately."

"Oh, that old game? Pssshhh. The entertainment industry isn't what the kids are calling sustainable." She leans into me, pressing her breasts into my side, as she reaches around to open the blinds and then the window.

"What's that supposed to mean? The guys in charge think you're past your prime or something?"

"Or something." Her face is serious for a moment. "Mr. Wolfe, you seem incredibly resourceful for someone who is just...a bartender?"

After opening the window she's wrapped herself around my waist and is now looking up at me with a pair of deep hazel eyes. I'm pretty sure she's just on the other side of young but, unless you were thinking about it, you'd never know. She's smarter than she lets on. This hidden intelligence, coupled with a twenty-one year old's willingness to wield her sexuality like a weapon, makes her dangerous. I pause, and then cut her a grin before I finish my whiskey. It is now apparent that I'm not the only one looking for answers.

“Thanks for the drink.”

“Don’t mention it.”

I take a step away from Ersula, and the window.

“Do you have to be leaving so soon Mr. Wolfe?” She takes up the space that I was occupying the second I’ve shifted out of it and pouts her lips. Curtseying in those pants and leaning forward, the shadow of her hair falling over the seam of her unbuttoned shirt. I tongue at the gums of my right incisor, and then half snort a laugh.

“Yeah. Yeah I do.”

I move towards the door and she follows me. Before she rounds the corner in the hallway, I slip the pad of hotel stationary from the side table into my jacket pocket. She catches up to me and leans, seductive as ever, against the wall in the hallway.

“Where did you say you were coming from Mr. Wolfe?” She fishes an ice cube out of her vodka and begins to suck on it.

“I didn’t. See you around Ersula.”

“I’m counting on it Mr. Wolfe.”

I shake my head and am out the door.

Chapter 04

“So she says that she doesn’t know a thing about the package. Then she starts coming on to me in a really obvious subtle way.”

“Ersula Esposito? Was coming on to you? I haven’t seen her on TV in years.”

I’m back at Tony’s talking with Sampson.

“She doesn’t look a day over thirty. Maybe even a little younger. But it’s not really her that I’m interested in. She was strange, still really hot too, but she said she didn’t know anything about the package.”

“And you believe her?”

“I don’t. But, it doesn’t matter if I do or not because she wasn’t budging either way. The fact that the package did come from that room means something, though. Her boyfriend, or lover, he was just there. The bell boy brings that package back, and then her lover boy trashes the package and is out the door?”

“You think he’s looking for you now?” Sampson pours us both a shot of whiskey.

“Can’t say for sure. None of it makes much sense, but I did get something out of the hotel.”

“What’s that?”

I produce the tablet of hotel stationary from my pocket and lay it flat on the bar top. I get Sampson to pass me a pencil from behind the bar and brush the graphite stick across the surface. A rubbing. Letters start to appear: a latent record. It's a list of addresses.

188 East Harris

151 Cargo

131 Rain

320 Carnivale

I pull the note from the package out of my pocket and press it flat next to the rubbing. I'm no expert, but from the look of things the handwriting on both pieces of paper is the same. I ask Sampson if I can use the computer in the manager's office for a few minutes.

Flipping up a webpage, I key the addresses into a map website. I know that these streets are in the same general area of The City and once the thumbtacks land in the map, the dots start to connect. Four locations, all within a fifteen block radius of each other. All of them located in what politicians call a *rehabilitating* neighbourhood. The breed of red light district found in legend.

The Downtown Eastside. Few residents of the city spend a lot of time down there, but they all have their preconceptions about it. The kind of place with grimy back alleys, where you might catch some junkie knifing his own grandmother for bus fare. Or at least that's the general public's perception of it. In reality it's where all the transients and broken souls have come together in a danse macabre of drugs, sex, and death by erosion. Over the course of the past three decades the area has descended into a no man's land of sorts. Low-income housing, run by slumlords, keeps people in residence, and the accessibility of narcotics contains their movements. Too many people, carrying the weight of too

many bad decisions and hard twists of fate. All cloistered under the same leaky roof. In this underworld the economy runs based on the needs of survival and addiction, rather than the ruling law of the almighty buck. These people live outside the law. The very nature of their existence contradicts everything that fits inside the white picket cultural norm.

The police, for the most part, leave it as it is. There are no easy ways to profit off of a black market economy. Certain cops get their cut but they're paid off just enough to look the other way, not enough to make them enforcers. Dead bodies start showing up though? That's a different matter. Of course it depends on who's bodies they are. People don't give a shit about a crack head found dead in a dumpster with his eyes rolled back and his skull caved in. Some nice young white couple gets mugged walking through the wrong side of town, though? These people will have all kinds of hellfire crawling up their ass while they try to sell stolen cigarettes, or barter a TV for a sandwich. But as long as average citizens aren't turning up dead, the world continues to turn as normal. The people of the street know it, too. As long as they keep to themselves, their fragile habitat will continue to run deep.

The drugs don't come from inside the city. They might come through the ports or slide in from the airport, but once they're in the city they go right back out again. They go to the international gangs that run amok in the suburbs, where fifty cents gives you a buck and the houses are cheap. That's where the money and the supply of the street level junk comes from, and anyone paying attention knows it. Due to a long-standing pissing contest between municipal police and the suburban cowboys, no functional coalition has been formed to stop the current of drugs. Not that any department has the money to spare for a bunch of pariahs. Besides, drug money keeps the economy full of liquid cash. That's the uneasy, unspoken truth about the Downtown Eastside. It's the only available way to run the most fucked up of situations.

This status quo, however, is changing.

I thank Sampson and am back out into the rain. My phone buzzes in my pocket and I pull it out. Kit, my girlfriend, is calling me, and I thumb the ignore button. The rain churns circles in a small tidal pool that's surrounded my car, and drains into a lone gutter. I light a smoke and climb in, shaking off the thick rainwater and firing up the engine. The Rolling Stones accompany me to the downtown Eastside, along with the afternoon traffic which is highlighted with busted taillights and foggy windows. I park in an empty car park three blocks away from the first address on the list. Car door locked, I flip my collar up and make my way to the first location. On the way I take in some of the signs of the neighbourhood's rehabilitation.

Chapter 05

The Westwick's building has always held a lot of relevance in the history of the Downtown Eastside. Westwick's was a department store with a lineage dating back to The City's founding. The train yards and docks were less than a mile away, which allowed for the easy movement of goods to meet the demand of a young city's shopping centre. Over sixty odd years the building morphed into a diseased version of its former self, falling to disrepair. The company moved on. The iconic red brick hamlet became the start of a low-income housing initiative made by The City. It was the epicentre from which the evolution of the Downtown Eastside began. The back alleys of the red beast might as well have been Jerusalem for the damned, but to the city planners and businessmen it was less than holy. Three years ago the whole thing was demolished, cutting open a swath of inner city sky. Yet icons only die for so long and Westwick's, it had been announced, was coming back. A group of developers had bought the land and are now pumping currency into what they call community restoration, and what I call gentrification. Nice housing for nice people. It would have come sooner or later, but as I walk through these side streets I notice just how much fresh paint they've put up.

The central building itself towers over the remnants of the golden age. Westwick's red brick is back, but it's not the classic stone masonry. Rebar reinforced concrete slabs, with a thick coat of a weather resistant red paint. Tall, composite carbon and fibreglass doors surround intricate metal work that creeps up the building like vines. None of the buildings are fully open to the public yet, but there are signs in the windows advertising the coming affordable housing. I come to my first address.

188 East Harris. The physical address isn't directly on the street, but rather at an alcove that tilts towards tall glass doors and an empty atrium. Inside is smooth polished concrete with sharp angles and rigid features. There's an information totem just before the entry to the atrium.

Westwick's.

Your chance at a piece, of mind.

A community of living, designed around a downtown campus, cultural centre, authentic neighbourhood, and nightlife.

Below this there's a list of the corporations that own the thing, but they've set it up to look like they're community oriented sponsors. I turn back to the atrium and try and get a good look inside. There's nothing but a broad skylight illuminating the gutless building. All I can make out are eight or nine compartmentalized spaces and a bank of elevators. I check the address off on my list and write down the names of the companies that own the development. *PanCentral, Hardy & Sons, Robusto Media, and Fractal Futures.* I keep moving.

To get to 151 Cargo Street I've got to move east another block and cut north two streets. I know that this is going to take me deeper into the neighbourhood, and along with that comes encounters with the people who inhabit it. I haven't made more than three steps around the corner when the lingering smell of

piss and bag baked garbage hits me in the face. It gets bad down here in the summer. The people don't notice me. They have no reason to, unless there's something that they think that they can gain from me. Battered baseball caps and black toothless grins whirl by. The can boys dragging their clattering black bags. Their bowlegged movements line up with the stiff shouldered walk of men who have been standing for eighteen hours straight, and haven't had a good meal in days. A woman on the corner is selling cigarettes out of a plastic shopping bag, her face and her poncho sagging to the right as she yells at anyone who passes her by. The rain doesn't stop these people. Their addiction and mental illness don't, so why should the weather? It's a hard land that can't bring about a real harvest, and it takes these hard people to till the shit of it every day just to try and grind out a living. Down a back alley I see two young men, hunched over a Chinese take out container, rifling coagulated sweet and sour pork into their mouths. Somewhere across the alleys a siren churns out a wail through the clashing of rainwater on the street. I shake off a chill and keep going.

151 Cargo is a blank faced building front with little more than a couple sets of double doors. It's part of the construction as well, but there's nothing that marks it as part of the Westwick's development except for its colouring. I search around a little bit, but only find a PanCentral sign near the end of the block. The building is large, at least a half block wide and deep. The side street that cuts up the block looks cleaner than most. It has large dumpsters filled with construction debris. The folks that live down here might own this place in theory, but none hasten to take up residence somewhere that's filled with hard nosed construction workers. I cut down this side street towards the next address on my list.

131 Rain Street's building, although connected to the rest of the complex, is unlike the commercial fronts of the addresses prior. This building is made of actual brownstones held together with

thick intermediaries of concrete. Six floors of window banks look out on the street, along with a very showy terrace of trees and shrubbery up top. Plexiglas double doors stand between support pillars that break up the front of the building. In the windows are large posters, which block a view of the insides. *Infotorium* is the largest word visible from the street and I move in for a closer look.

Infotorium

Once a thriving part of the Downtown Eastside, this historic site offered a theatrical interpretation of our great city's origin. Now, in partnership with the new Westwick's District, it will be re-opened and re-imagined as a community integrated venue, featuring live music, art exhibits, a media lab, and lounge. We invite you to become part of the community.

Coming soon.

I snort. Yeah, a tasteful homage to The City's origins. I'll bet. *So they're turning it into a venue?* Venues mean big money in this city. Anywhere that you can cram two hundred twenty-something's and feed them booze is like a license to print your own money. But with six floors, this is something else other than just a venue. In the lower right hand corner of the poster, along with the typical list of corporate sponsors, there's another company logo. In scrawled handwriting is the title *The O'Donnell Group*.

Chapter 06

Sean O'Donnell is a modern legend of the food and beverage industry. The story goes that he started just the same as the rest of us, a punk kid with a silver tongue and a taste for hustle. After working his way through the various facets of the business (managing, serving, bartending, even cooking) he finally attained the connections and capital to open his own business. With his smarts in the industry, and his connections with money, his company flourished. Before long he was fully incorporated, taking over spaces whether they were open or not. The O'Donnell Group is the largest, toughest gang of bastards that could be imagined to exist in the cutthroat world of food and drinks. The rumour is that somewhere along the line O'Donnell was presented with that chance to have it all. The opportunity that slides across the plates of a certain number of up and coming restaurateurs: integration with organized crime.

It's simple. A restaurant or bar has large amounts of liquid cash in it at any point in time. Laundering money is as simple as exchanging dirty money through the business's floats (separate accounts or house managed tips) for the clean money that comes from the bank. This is nearly untraceable without a serious

co-ordinated investigation. The dirty money divides into various amounts and hits circulation almost immediately. Even cutting dirty money with the business's clean supply is effective in a pinch. Money laundering is the least risk, most lucrative form of business exploitation, to say nothing of the distribution of drugs.

The story goes that O'Donnell grew tired of smiling and taking other people's shit. He had the nuts to make a move and now he was going to run the show. Not long after being accepted into the fraternity, a few of his over aggressive peers, who had rattled his cage, ended up blue rare with a steak knife through their hearts. By all accounts these days, he's the Kingpin of cuisine and nightlife in The City, though there's never been any true proof of his criminal nature. Either way it doesn't matter. He's become untouchable, insulated by his corporate identity.

Yet what this poster is proposing doesn't sound like O'Donnell's MO. His are the places with the cheap drinks, small menu and the standardized jailbait fare that passes for a cocktail waitress these days. With that alone O'Donnell already has a stranglehold over the downtown core. This new place has the avant-garde air of cutting edge culture addicts. DJs and light shows smothered in the sugary progressive language used by the affluent and amateurs. I wouldn't put it past O'Donnell to try and capitalize on a different kind of party, but it's more unexpected to see him trying to move in on the oxygen bar scene. I try for a better look through the doors but those posters have sealed it off from passers by. I have a pretty good idea what's going to be in there, and I conjure up a imagining of the guts of the building.

First floor is bound to have a coat check, security station, and bathrooms. Considering the depth of the building, there could be a dance floor with a stage near the back. The upper level is open and will be good for a separate floor of service. Private booths. Table service. Two bars, upstairs and down. Hallways that lead to booze storage, coolers, and private rooms that the average patron

would never get a good look at. Two security cameras per bar, one at every exit, along with more in the back room corridors and on the dance floor. This new building would have to be built for sound containment, ensuring that the residents of the high-rise weren't disturbed by the orgy of electronic sound within. Décor is irrelevant and bound to change as the seasons do, but lighting will be carefully planned, leaving as few completely dark corners as possible.

A car rolls by, launching a large puddle of rainwater at me, but I sidestep the wave as it crashes down onto the street. I check my list for the last address. 320 Carnivale. Three blocks east.

I tromp over to a building unlike the others I've visited. It's an old warehouse left over from the real industry days. This near to the water puts it about as close as any private property can get to the ports. Tall metal building front, with a pair of sliding doors big enough to fit a semi truck through. The doors are chained with thick iron links and two padlocks apiece. The structure stands up, but looks like it'd rather sit down. Buildings like this are where you can store any number of secrets, and right now it is a mystery to me. Chain link fence, with razor wire rimming the top, cuts off the alleys that lead to the back door. Despite my re-awakened sense of adventure, I'm not about to climb over a barrier like that in the rain. There are no markings on the building front other than the address. There is something wrong about this place, a desolate ziggurat on the outskirts of the shining new development.

"Wouldn't hang 'round here if I was you." A voice bubbling with spit comes from behind, and I turn to see a woman. She's a weathered old witch, shrouded in a garbage bag poncho and a drooping oilskin hat that covers most of her face, leaving only a knobby chin jutting out the bottom. Stray blond hairs look like tightly knit wires and poke out the sides of the hat. Her back has been twisted by time, and she carries a walking stick that appears to be a large piece of wooden doweling. She doesn't startle me, but

the thunder and lightening do.

“What do you mean?” I ask, digging out my smokes and offering her one.

“Over here.” She shakes her head to the cigarette and beckons for me to follow her to the overhang of a building across the street. I follow her underneath the temporary shelter, and then she eyes up the cigarette. I hand her one and we talk.

“Why shouldn’t I hang around here?”

“You never know when them boys are going to come around.” She doesn’t have a light, so I offer her a book of matches from my jacket pocket. I let her keep them after getting a good look at the scars and recesses in her fingers, stained with the grime of the streets.

“What boys? What do you mean?”

“Couldn’t rightly tell you. But they come around all hours, y’never know when they’re going to be here. Last week Harold was out front, out front when we left him..he shouldn’ta been out front. Dorry said he didn’t come home that night and he han’t come home since.” Her voice is a stutter step that sounds more like she’s talking to herself than me.

“What’d these boys look like? Did they come in a car? A truck?” The thunder and lighting flick on again for an instant and I lean up against the building, pulling my coat tighter around my shoulders.

“They all looked like they had money. Weren’t much reasons I could see for them to be down here, down in the dark. But they been comin’ round for a few months now...don’t remember when it started. But they started comin’ around an fer a while they had two big boys at the doors all tha time, then we stopped being here and they stopped being here. S’rotten cold out mister, wouldn’t have any spare change would you?” Her tuberculosis voice finds its pity pitch, and two haunted eyes poke out at me from under the hat.

“Yeah, I do, but we’ll get to that in a minute. Tell me more

about the boys," I say, flicking my butt into the street and watching those spooky eyes follow the pea-sized ember.

"They're all big boys. Some taller than you. They all had new clothes on, and came in a big car. It was black and had black windows."

"How many of them?"

"Always, always at least three. Sometimes they have five or six, and sometimes they come in another car...the other car looks the same? Sometimes they drive big trucks right on inna the building." I don't bother asking her about the model of car, figuring that she worries more where her next fix is coming from than the difference between a Buick and a Bentley.

"Storm's coming," she says, and the wind starts to pick up. Lightning rakes the sky in front of me while the thunder drops like a trip hammer, sending vibrations through the street that claw at the bottom of my shoes.

"You never got a good look at them? You wouldn't be able to identify any of them?"

"Are you a cop? I shouldn't be talking to no police."

"I'm not a cop."

"Then lissen mister, you got any change or what? That's all I know." She's getting impatient.

The thunder and lightning's clearing out the streets as everyone searches for the best cover from the incoming squall. I dig in my pocket for the change and hand her over all I've got. She pours it into a leather pouch hanging from a chain necklace. A car pulls up in front of us, its tires cutting through the street water, which has almost reached the height of the curb. It's a black Chrysler 300 with matte black rims and tinted windows. It stops just in front of the warehouse. Headlights split a swath of white through the wall of water around us, illuminating our position against the building. The old crone cowers from the light for a moment and then ducks back into the shadows, scampering away down the street

and into a side alley. I continue to stand in the beam, and lean back against the wall to light another cigarette. Wind reaches around my face after sneaking down the outside of the building. After a few moments, the predatory vehicle purrs once more and carries on along the street. They had stopped, though, and that old lady hadn't run away for nothing, so I feel secure in assuming that the large sedan had been the car in question. They didn't get out, but they stopped and took a good look at me when they could. *Hmph.* Time to start walking back up the street and find me the closest dive bar, with the cheapest whiskey and maybe a reasonable excuse for a burger.

I've only taken a couple steps when the headlights of another car lurking in the night put me on full display. I can't get a good look at the car but the sloped front and a decal tell me it's a Ford sedan. My eyes adjust to the glare and the vehicle's ram cage tells me who's behind the wheel. It drives across the street and then parks with its lights shining on me. I don't move, and watch the interior of the vehicle brighten up, revealing a computer console and a locked up twelve gauge. It's an unmarked police car.

The officer inside opens up his door and steps out into the street; a large silhouette shrouded in rainwater. He moves closer, the details of his appearance coming into focus. He's about six foot two and built like someone too small for professional football, too big for any office job. The backlighting catches up with him and the face of a middle aged black man starts to appear. Broad features and heavy eyes framed by a mass of dreadlocks that push out in a ponytail. He's wearing a cheap black suit that swings loose in the legs and clings to his chest. On top of this there's a fraying overcoat that reaches almost all the way down to a pair of steel toed shit kickers. His left shoulder hangs. *College ball get ya? Maybe a real cannon of a service revolver weighing you down.* Once he's close enough I catch his eye and once more lean against the building.

"What time is it Mr. Wolfe?" he says in a voice that sounds like

a rock tumbler.

“Time for someone to be leaving,” I say, like Groucho Marx, looking down at my watch.

“Right. Nice night out though, huh? Pretty good for wandering around the Eastside, huh?” He leans against the lone street-light on the corner, not bothered by the rain.

“Hey, Officer, no better. Despair and addiction are never as good as they are on a soggy evening. Just too bad you had to turn the brights on,” I say in mock disappointment.

“Cute. But no, really? It’s Monday night, and from what I hear? Guys in your line of work, that would be class act bartenders, they usually have the night off. I figure, being a detective, that’s me,” He flashes his badge and bitch of a magnum. “I just wondered what you might be doing down in this armpit of the city. If you’re looking for cheap drinks you came to the right place. Just make sure you get all your shots in clean glasses, and your beer in a bottle.”

He’s calm, which puts me off a little bit. I can’t tell how long he’s been following me, much less how he knows who I am. My mind flicks to the gun inside my jacket pocket and a flash of panic bolts across my mind. Not good getting stopped by a cop, but it wouldn’t be getting any better if he decided to give me a once over and found an unmarked handgun on my person. I try to relax.

“Thanks for the tip, Officer. By the way, what’s a fine vanguard of the law, plainclothes no less, doing trolling around here? I’d think you boys had better things to do than keep tabs on me?”

“Well, I was keeping an eye on that warehouse and who should I see come along but yourself. Seems you’ve got an eye for inspection. Find anything I should know about?” He’s damn sincere for a cop in the employ of this city.

“Just tracking down a few leads. Gotta keep your eye on all the future hot spots. Y’know, class act bartender and all.”

He laughs and shakes his head at me. “Wolfe, if you don’t have an idea of what’s going on down here? Well, I’d say, just leave

it alone and walk away. From what I hear you're all done with adventure and trouble making anyway."

"Yeah that's what I thought too," I mutter. "By the way, just how the hell do you know who I am?"

"Tom Wolfe, mercenary bartender and professional shit disturber. Your file says that you're the kind of man who gets things done."

"Oh yeah? What else does it say?" I take a long drag on my smoke.

"It says that you've been implicated in over a dozen instances of underground activity and that you associate with known criminals."

"I've met my fair share of people, and I've seen things that most people don't. No crime in that."

"How about speeding tickets and citations for reckless driving comin' out the wazoo, buddy?"

"Never been a fan of traffic."

"Double digit bar brawls and several nights in the drunk tank."

"I don't start fights. I finish them. What are you getting at here Officer?"

"Oh I'm getting there, to the big gold star on your record. Tom Wolfe, prime suspect in a murder case dating seven years back. You were never convicted, and the case was never solved."

I clench my jaw for a moment and then respond.

"Where's the part where it says I've always been cooperative, even helpful, to members of this city's law enforcement personnel?"

I've given a good number of statements over the years. Working in bars, you gain a healthy respect for the boys in blue because some nights, when things get out of control, you need them to bail you out. I know that my record is detailed with sordid happenings, but I didn't think anyone still talked about those days. Even if they did, I'm surprised that one cop can pick me out of the

shadows on a night like this.

“Oh, I’ve got that too. But all your good faith goes out the window with me, Wolfe. To me, you’re just another two bit hood.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere, Officer,” I reply, and start to turn away from the man.

“Wolfe!” He shouts my name as another thunderclap hits me. I turn around. “It’s Detective. Detective David.”

“Have fun with my record, Detective David. I’m sure it’s a good read,” I say with a backhanded wave before turning down the street, away from the prying lights of his car.

Cops in this town are like a back alley craps game. Crooked as all hell, and unless you’ve loaded the dice you never know what you’re gonna get. Fact is, most of them are bought off in some way or another. If you shell out a couple grand here and there, there’s no telling what someone might forget. Keep the rackets covered up and the numbers running and you’ll be paid handsomely, that’s above and beyond the call of duty. That’s not to say that the guys don’t uphold the law. They aren’t getting that lousy gold watch and pension for nothing. If some bodies turn up with a few extra holes, or if there’s an easy small time coke deal to bust, the boys in blue are right on top of it. There hasn’t been an internal investigation within departments in years, although if there had been the poor sonova bitch never would have made it out alive.

I’ve always had a tricky relationship with the police. Didn’t trust them much farther than I could throw them, but as a bartender you’ve gotta walk a certain talk. Some asshole starts causing some shit in your bar and won’t leave, sure you can toss his ass out. But that won’t stop him from lobbing a cinderblock through your front window five minutes later. ‘Course you never want to give the police too much of your information. Never know just how crooked they might be, and whether or not the information you just shared is going to cost you a whole lot more than your time. No, when it comes to the police I’ve learned to keep my

mouth shut, my guard up, and my manners on hand.

Chapter 07

Barlight. Just enough light to cast shadows at different angles into the oddest places. Shrouds of cigarette smoke wrap the room in an ethereal quality, leaving it as in a dream. In proper barlight, y'could be sitting next to your own mother and she'd never know the difference between you and the next palooka. 'Course I'd never expect to run into my mother under any sort of barlight, much less the random bright spots and pot holes in this dump. My anonymity is insecure, unless I want to take up real estate on the shady outskirts of the room. There sure as hell is cheap whiskey and right now that's all I care about.

"Make it a double, neat," I signal to the bartender, an old time slinger, hiding in the days of his youth. Still wearing a vest and a tie just like in the good old days. When the young women smiling at him still had all their teeth, and some good natured conversation was all it took to get paid. Before the darkness came to this side of town.

"Sure thing boss!" His voice has the jaunty gentility of a man who's lived in a different time. In *his* mind he's still where a man of his position garners respect from his clients based on the tone in his voice and the authenticity of his words.

I'm inside The Barracuda, a shit hole just on the edge of the Downtown Eastside. Windows frosted with grime and filled with old neon beer signs. Battered tables, with basin sized ashtrays hanging from their sides, are scattered across the room. Ratty booths encircle the joint. It smells like the inside of an old pizza oven, the ceiling thick with the resin of legions of fallen cigarettes. The storm seems to have brought itself inside; the air is dense with humidity and halitosis. Soggy carpet squishes under my feet with every step. Old timers slump into seats that have held their weight so long that they've each got their own permanent ass groove. Young guys, with the poor luck of not being bright enough to realize the bleakness they're living in, are making calls from a scarred up old pay phone. They're calling pregnant wives and disgruntled girlfriends. I'm eavesdropping on them as they try to concoct a story about how they have to work late. Then they huddle around the pool table, trying to hustle a few bucks for another pitcher of warm draught. There's a few sad looking prostitutes, past their expiry date, in the corner drinking rye and cranberry and waiting until one of the johns at the table gets drunk enough to go in the back alley and spit in his hand. There's a couple pieces of muscle sitting around, but they don't look like anything I need to worry about.

When you're down here in the puddles and gutters, everyone's a little scary. 'Cause you just don't know. For all I know those two meaty looking guys in the corner are a coupla queers, but it's more likely that they're a pair of low level enforcers. Either way we've got no beef with each other, and they're here to do a job. Places like The Barracuda don't stay afloat with cheap drinks alone. The rent from the tenants above clearly isn't being put into any sort of renovations. Chances are the back room of this place is just as ripe with contraband as a prison inmate's colon. Woe be the group of frat boys that stumble in here looking for a fresh place to get pissed up and hassle the natives. They're likely to end up in the

alley, with a broken collarbone and a missing wallet. Out of sight, out of mind, though. Once you've seen it, you've seen enough of it. Besides, I'm just here for a drink.

After paying the bartender for my whiskey, I try and find a dark spot to drink it and get my head together.

O'Donnell. Westwick's. Infotarium. Detective David. 320 Carnivale, and that big black sedan. I'm no closer to having any concrete answers than I was when I first found this damn gun. There's something in that warehouse, something that's spicy enough it's got a detective hanging out in the rain running surveillance. What do they have in common? What is the link? What's the angle?

I've taken a seat in the back corner of the room. The only light near me is the slight incandescence of the jukebox, which is spitting out a Thoroughgood version of *One Bourbon, One Scotch and One Beer*. A trail of smoke curls around my hand and the whiskey is sweet in my mouth. It's already been a long day and I'm on the verge of calling it quits. Only so much sleuthing that a guy can do. Out front a very familiar looking black sedan pulls up to the curb. Its lights are on, and I'd guess it's still running. Two men step out of the car, their broad frames shadows through the tinted view of the window.

They come inside and go straight to the bartender. They're big guys.

The man taking lead fills out a large black Oakland Raiders sweater and track pants. He's walking with most of his weight on his right side, his left knee moving like a stuck hinge. He's wearing soft looking sneakers, and when he stands he raises his left foot ever so slightly. *Weakness*. His partner is just as top heavy, though he's not as tall, and is wearing a pull over rain jacket. I can't hear them but from the hand gestures it looks like they're trying to describe me. *Tall. Leather jacket. No hat*. The bartender, to his credit, doesn't straight up give me away but after a few minutes of grinding discussion from the two men his eyes flicker in my

direction. Of course, I'm already halfway to the side exit. Good thing, too, because the second that poor old man's instincts betray me the pair of them are flipping tables and steamrolling across the room. I make like a bat outta hell and bolt down the back corridor towards an emergency exit.

The back door clatters open into the still pounding rain. The alleyway is blocked off on one side by a bank of dumpsters and a chain link fence that reaches up about nine feet. The other side leads out to the street and that shark of a car. I take a quick step to the side of the door and a second later the two men come charging out after me. They look everywhere but behind them. I take a quick hop and a step. Splashing footsteps might have given me away were it not for another well timed chorus of thunder and lightning. The larger of the two men has turned to face me as I'm on my third step towards him. Disoriented by the thunder, he never has a chance. I slam a chopping heel kick sideways into his left knee. The sound of the tendons snapping alone could have dropped a bigger man. In the same motion as the kick I've put my weight behind a right hook that hits him square on the jaw, dumping him sideways on his ass. His body goes limp and he falls like a bag of bones. His partner takes a few steps back and readies himself for a fight, drawing a stiletto blade out of his pocket and flashing it open. I don't bother going for my heater. The few seconds that my hands would be occupied in my pocket would give the guy more than ample opportunity to perforate me. We're shuffling around the alley, and I try and put the crumpled body of his buddy between us so that he can't make a straight lunge at me. It doesn't stop him. He leaps over the downed man and I take a hop back. His arm is outstretched with the knife but I stab forward faster than he can, grabbing his knife arm at the wrist with my left hand and spinning on my right heel, like some bizarre tango maneuver, so that his front is to my back. In the same movement, I slam my right elbow into his throat. He chokes, dropping the

knife. I let go of him. His hands jerk to his throat and I briefly wonder if I've collapsed his trachea. I shift behind him and yank his pullover jacket over his head before giving him a swift kick in the ass. He falls face first into a large puddle, wriggling inside the impromptu straight jacket. I'm getting my bearings when the headlights of the Chrysler rip down the alley, gutting the shadows like a butcher splitting open a carcass. Two more men are getting out of the car, but I'm not about to stick around.

I turn and run for the dumpsters, first climbing, and then launching myself over the top of, the chain link fence. On the other side the thin metal cuts into my fingers and I fall from the momentum of my jump. I land stilted and then tip on my side, my head close to ricocheting off the street. I'm back on my feet in seconds. My legs are taxed from the high fall, but I'm moving as fast as I can. The headlights of the car are blocked by the dumpsters; only a few slivers of illumination slice at my heels.

Once I'm out of the alley, I charge for the biggest crowd of destitutes that I can find. Ducking and turning through them, I find an empty bus stop bench and sit down. I pull my jacket up over my head, doing my best to look forlorn. A minute later the Chrysler comes snarling up the street, garbage spitting out from its tires. Junkies scatter out of the way as twin tidal waves of rain water erupt from beneath the car. The vehicle halts for a moment, and the windows roll down. The people of the street drift back and forth in front of me, making it hard to be sure of anything that I'm seeing. It's silent for a moment, then a bolt of lightning crashes down near by. The flash illuminates the world for an instant. In that instant I think I recognize a face in the sedan. A face from a long time ago. It's gone just as quick as it came, and I'm forced to shake it off. This is followed by the guttural bellow of thunder, then the car windows roll up and they're gone.

I get to my feet and find that my pack of smokes is drenched, much like the rest of me. I start the gloomy walk back to my car.

Who were those guys? They weren't basic trained muscle. Guys that size, more like a strike team. They were unprepared, though. No way I should have been able to take them that easy. No, this was rushed. These guys wanted me. I don't know why yet, but one thing is for sure: from here on in, I'm back in a world of intrigue whether I want to be or not.

Chapter 08

“**Y**ou can go fuck yourself,” Kit’s abrupt sentence falls from her apartment’s intercom. I roll my eyes and jam the button down again.

“Look, I know that...ok so I haven’t...I haven’t been in touch much this week, but...but I’ve been busy, and some things came up, ok? Just let me up and we can talk about it...I can explain everything.” There’s a long pause before the audio box crackles back to life.

“Right. What is there to explain, Tom? I’ve been trying to get a hold of you for three days. No text message. No calls. Just jack shit. What? You and your buddies out for a weeklong tear on the town again? I know that it’s your world of glamour and the excitement of the nightlife and all, Tom, but this is getting ridiculous.” She’s not having it, going so far as to shame me with mischaracterization.

“Look, Kit, I’m sorry. I was going to call you this morning but something came up, really. It’s not...and it’s not what you think. Just let me upstairs so I can explain myself, and then you can throw me out on my ass, all right?” There’s a stillness tinted with ambient noise from her end of the line. She buzzes me in.

Kit and I have been together just about a year and a half. I met her while she was out one night with a bunch of her friends slumming it over in my neck of the woods, at Tony's. She's a real piece of work. Sandy blond in a black cocktail dress, with legs that went on for miles and some of the good old fashioned va-va-voom. She's got these sparkling green eyes that had me breaking one of my rules. *You never pick someone up at work.* 'Course you can modify that, telling yourself that it's more of a guideline than a rule. The thing being that whether she's a pretty girl, or some Edna who's just lookin' for a roll in the hay? You pick her up while you're working? She'll always be able to find you. Whether you want her to or not.

At the time I'd just finished work, and was settling in on the other side of the bar with a cold one when she caught my eye. I'd thought she was in for more than she bargained for that night, hanging around Tony's with roughnecks and dirtbags from all walks of life. These kinda guys think that a couple of shots of Jose Cuervo and a handful of low caliber compliments will make them look like straight shooters. Kit's the type of girl that'll entertain that type of talk, but only for so long. The night we first met I watched her break a jarhead goomba's pinky with her bare hand while he was trying to get fresh. I liked that. When she came over to the bar for another round, I asked her what her poison was. Already a little on the drunk side, she asked me in jest if a tall drink of water like myself was available. We settled into a half hour of dueling banter, and the rest of the night became a patchwork quilt of liquor and sex. The next morning I woke up to demands for breakfast. The rest is history. She's better off than me in all terms of class. She also has a real job, as a senior editor at *The Coast*, an inner city newspaper. She covers the political beat. We're not above taking each other for granted from time to time, and we know it. So despite my excuses, she's well within her rights to be steamed at me.

“What the fuck, Tom?!”

As I open the door, her cannonade nearly knocks me off my feet. I don't bother saying anything, instead I'm peeling off my jacket, popping off my shoes, and taking my sweater to be wrung out in the tub.

“Oh! Ok? That's how you're going to play this? The last time I saw you was five days ago? When I left your place to go to work? Barely a drunk phone call in there at all? Look, I know you're bored these days, but what the fuck? So where's this explanation?”

I'm drying my hair off in her squeaky clean bathroom. She continues, since I'm not speaking.

“I don't know? I'm not sure if I'm supposed to think you're cheating on me, or if you've just been trying to up the ante on how many nights of the week you'll get shit-faced?”

She's right about me raising the stakes on the boozing, and there is a twinge of pain at her accusations towards the drinking habits. I'm out of the bathroom. I grab my jacket, and bring it to her kitchenette table, sitting down to peel off my socks and roll up my pants.

“What do you think you're doing? Hey! What makes you think that you're staying, asshole?”

I lay my socks out next to another base heater, and raise my hand to stop her from speaking.

“Ok. You are absolutely right Kit. I have been out getting shit-faced, being a pretty irresponsible dick. I'm not going to try and argue that. I fucked up and I am sorry, and I know there are no good excuses. I was going to call you today, but something happened. A big fat one just dropped square in my lap, and it required some...investigation?”

She looks like she wants to interrupt me, but crosses her arms and bites her lip.

“Ok, what I'm about to do next is going to probably freak you out...so don't lose it on me...I mean you're going to be surprised,

so knowing that, take this in stride.” She always makes me stumble over my words.

I reach into my jacket, pinch the handgun’s butt between my thumb and forefinger, and put it down on the kitchen table carefully. I look at her face, which starts out surprised, then moves to enraged and, finally, skeptical.

“So I show up to work and Sampson tells me that there’s this package for me. Inside there’s this gun, two boxes of ammo and a note that tells me that it’s an unmarked gun, and that I should watch my back.” Her look of disbelief doesn’t fade. “No, really!” I smile.

“You’re taking me out for dinner. Right now. Get your socks back on.” Her tone is brassy, but I feel like I can exhale for the first time in hours.

Chapter 09

We're at The Nighthawk, a diner just down the street from Kit's apartment. Open late. Always serving food, and if you know 'em? Liquor laws don't mean shit. I've been telling Kit the story and filling in the blanks. Trying to make sense of it all. I'm so caught up in thought that my cheeseburger and fries now look like death warmed over, while Kit has already snarfed down an order of quiche and a caesar salad.

"So then I went to the Downtown Eastside and started digging around."

"This is after you talked to that woman in the hotel room?" she interjects. I can tell she didn't much like the part of the story where I was talking to a scantily clad celebrity sex pot.

"Yes. So I followed the addresses that I got from the notepad in the hotel room. Three of them were part of the Westwick's development. Westwick's is owned by four different corporate entities, but PanCentral's logo is slapped onto the buildings a bit more liberally. The O'Donnell Group is partnering with the development to open some new nightlife place. Like they're trying to create an electronic music scene, from the look of the posters."

"Well that's not really a surprise. PanCentral's been on the

move for the past two years. Lots of international capital has gone into that one. And from the looks of things, The O'Donnell Group won't be happy until they have the whole party culture of the city under their thumb. That's neither here nor there though, so what if The O'Donnell Group is involved in a new urban development? That doesn't really say much. Although, why would those addresses be written down in Ersula's room? Are you sure you're not just chasing random information?"

She flexes her brain at me after clearing her throat with a gulp of the kind of red wine that comes out of a box. For a little over a year she's been digging into developments in the Downtown Eastside.

"Well that's what I was thinking, until I got to the last address on the list. It's this big old warehouse that doesn't have a single discernible logo on it at all. It has a chain link fence around the outside; a chain link fence with razor wire at the top of it. There's something in that building that people aren't supposed to see," I say with a shake of my head. "So not long after I get there, this big mean looking sedan shows up and the locals scatter like roaches under a floodlight. The car stares at me for a few seconds and then drives off. Then a fucking cop shows, or he was there the whole time, I'm not sure, and questions me? He knows my name and what I do, but not why I'm there. I don't know if he's crooked and running surveillance, or if he's a legit guy staking the place out. I don't know! So at this point I go into a bar," Kit rolls her eyes, "Right, yeah, whatever! You'd need a drink too! So I'm in this bar and that same sedan pulls up and two Cro-Magnon looking motherfuckers get out. I bail out the back door, 'cause it sure looks like they're lookin' for me. I get away down the back alley, and they drive around the streets for a few minutes while I hide in a crowd of subterranean mole men!" I don't bother telling her about the fisticuffs.

"Subterranean mole men? Christ Tom, they're people too."

"I know, I know, ok? But, what the fuck me? What the fuck my day!" I'm as loud as I get pre-emergency, but it's still plenty loud. Especially for an empty diner at one thirty in the morning. She shushes me and I lean back and cross my arms, after taking a large guzzle of beer. There is a long silence, then she speaks.

"Don't think this means that you're off the hook. You still owe me more than a dry piece of quiche and some sandy red wine." The corner of her mouth is raised in a half smile.

Something about this woman. She's always got me on the ropes. Not a lot of people see me at a point of losing my cool or rationality. I've stared down nine-foot gorillas, and taken hits from bigger. This dame, though? This dame sure does know how to knock me for a sucker punch, time and again.

I'm looking everywhere but at Kit, and then I see it. The lone waitress has the TV on and is watching the local celebrity gossip rag. Ersula is on TV. I recognize that rich olive skin and inky black hair immediately. I vault out of my seat and scramble across the room to the countertop, leaning over to get a better look at the TV. "Hey, can you turn this up? Yeah, the TV, can you turn it up?" I say to the waitress, who looks surprised but increases the volume.

"Ersula Esposito was out this week in marvellous fashion and with even better arm candy. The actress has been seen keeping up appearances with her current squeeze and local playboy, businessman Sean O'Donnell, owner and CEO of The O'Donnell Group. They strutted their equally impressive assets across the town, making their way from nightspot to nightspot. I don't think they had to waste much time in lineups, though."

The TV flashes through a series of clips documenting Ersula's appearances with O'Donnell. He is a big guy with the build of a rugby player, the face of a boxer and the smile of a movie star. *Well*

that seals it. I doubt it's just a coincidence that he and Ersula happen to be dating. Explains the addresses on the notepad at the very least. But what does any of this have to do with me? A small weight is lifted off my mind, and is replaced by a heavier one. I hope that it makes more sense tomorrow. I wilt in my seat, waiting for the day to be over, staring at my burger.

"Tom?" I snap my head up to meet Kit's eyes, "Finish your beer, and lets go home." I shoot her the smirk of a man who does not want to admit how tired he is, and she returns it with a look of understanding, if not acceptance.

"Check please."

Chapter 10

Ten hours later and I'm back at The Nighthawk. The place is still empty, except for two Mexican guys sitting a few booths down from me eating short stacks, and a barrel chested trucker at the countertop with a coffee and a clubhouse. Armed with my own coffee and breakfast, I feel warm and dry for the first time in twenty-four hours.

"Whatta ya mean you can't tell me what it's about?"

"Look, it's probably just for the best if you don't know anything about it. I'm not trying to screw you here or anything, Barry, but I do need your help."

"No, see Tom, I know you're not trying to screw me. In fact I think of you as one of the last guys to screw me. That bein' said, though? You wanna go sniffin' around? Trying to find Sean O'Donnell? By talking to people I know? Puts my asshole in a bit of a vulnerable situation if you get my drift." Barry rolls up the sleeves of his dark blue button down and tosses his white silk tie over his shoulder.

I'm having breakfast with Barry Jacobs. Barry and I go back a few years. We've pulled off some private gigs together and have run interference for each other, but we've never been more than

highly personal professional acquaintances. He's an up and comer who showed up in the city a few years back after livin' out east. The kind of educated young man who for some reason turned his collected higher learnings loose on the food and beverage industry. A large man with an appetite for life and a gregarious nature, he's usually down for a warm meal and practically always thirsting for a brew. He put a spell on people all over town, swooping in on jobs and milkin' them til the tits on the cash cow went dry. He's continued to gain better jobs through the connections that he's built along the way. Good natured and friendly was what you normally got from him, but once his bullshit gauge got pushed into the red he wasn't above taking someone's head off.

Barry, unlike me, has somehow maintained professional relationships with all of his previous employers and co-workers. That's why we're meeting. He's on the up and up with the bar scene in a way that I simply can't be anymore, and I need his knowledge of the bridges that lead to O'Donnell. I burnt mine a long time ago, and even the ones that remain I don't want to cross again. Kit had left for work, chiding me for sleeping in and telling me that she would call that afternoon. I'd woken up several hours later and called Barry up to see if we could do brunch.

"What kind of douche bag do you think I am, Barry? I'm not just going to walk around town flashing a badge with your face on it. I just need to know how I can get a conversation with this prick. I don't even know that much about him, other than the fact that he's the big time and he didn't get there by just waiting tables and talkin' about wine. He has more saloons and nightclubs than you and I'll ever work at, much less own." I pause and take a sip of my coffee and a bite of my corned beef hash while Barry stares at me, chin raised and arms crossed. "I mean, you don't have to help me. But I'd appreciate it." I tilt my head to the side and shrug at him.

"You know you're going to owe me after this one, right? I mean more than you already do. I'm not talking a couple of shots, you're

going to have to set me up one of these nights.” He’s got a big smile on his face. Trading sponsorship of a fella’s evening is just one of the many ways that favors get passed around in our world.

“I got breakfast, how’s that?” I say, snorting, and drag a smoke outta my jacket.

“You’re a real hard case Tom. How in the hell you get like this anyway? Someone kill your cat?” He’s scraping the last of his breakfast onto his fork and shaking his head.

“Just a few real bad days over the course of time, Barry. Don’t worry yourself with it. I could use those names though.”

“Ok, but you already know the one that I’ve got for you. The name Kimberly Mac ring a bell?” I roll my eyes at him, “You’ve got more friends than you think you do Tom. Just because you’ve left some jobs in a blaze of glory rather than a puff a smoke, don’t think that you’re all alone out there.”

“I play my cards close to my chest for a reason Barry. There might be plenty of people out there willing to be my friend, but that doesn’t mean I’m about to share my company with them. Some of us don’t have the luxury of having that many friends.”

“Like I said Tom, a real hard case”

“So just Kim? That’s it?”

“Look man, I don’t really have much else for you. Just because I’ve managed to get glossier business cards don’t mean that I’m really that much better connected than you. You know it’s all just a wash in this business anyway. You could know half the town, and I know you do, but that doesn’t mean that they want anything to do with you.” He sighs and his face sags.

“Jesus Barry, you in trouble or something? You piss off the wrong people?”

“Nah, just the right people at the wrong time.”

“You out of a job right now or something?”

“No I’m still at The Butcher’s Block, for now. But I’ve signed a deal with these guys that are putting in a new fine dining fusion

joint down by the Westwick's development? They're called Fractal Futures? Loosely associated with that Infotorium place down there? O'Donnell's involved, but I think he's just an investor. Anyway, they've got me quarterbacking the bar setup at Infotorium this weekend too. That's just a contracted job for the opening, though. They're really testy about a lot of stuff. The owner of the company wouldn't talk to me, but he was there for the meeting. I dealt with his number one guy the whole time. The owner just sat there across the desk from me, and then I signed the contract for the gig and he was gone. Young guy, too... well for a deal that size. No idea where the money's coming from for this whole venture, but y'know? Don't ask, don't tell type of stuff."

"Sounds like business as usual around these parts. Few places open, and stay that way, that don't have some money in the wash."

"Yeah, that's what I think too. Don't worry 'bout it though. It'll blow over in the next little bit. But that sorta overshadows any help I could be to ya. See? My new employers wouldn't exactly like it if Tom Wolfe, notorious shit disturber, showed up and started asking around about O'Donnell." At the word *notorious* I smirk. "But, seriously, Kim should at least be able to help get you started. She's still down at The Ol' 55. You remember how to get there, right?" he asks, all too aware of my history with the place.

"Well, thanks Barry. I appreciate any help I can get."

"Wish I could do more, buddy." He looks over the top of his coffee cup, eyeballs wondering about my untold situation. He licks his lips and then asks me a question that I'm surprised I don't get more often. "Tom? Why did you get out of the game? The big league I mean. Don't tell me that Tony's is even in the ballpark. I mean, you were in the thick of it. Hell if you'da wanted your own place? I'm pretty damn sure you coulda found the money, the crew, fuck even a location wouldn't have been hard for you. So why not?"

"Just got tired. That's all, Barry. Sex, drugs, rock 'n roll. Man

can only do so much. Might not be the most glamorous life at Tony's, but it pays the bills. Truth be told, I really just want to be with my girlfriend on a beach somewhere for a long goddamn time. Fuck, I guess when I figure out what I'm better at than being a bartender, maybe I'll give that a whirl. But it's all fake, Barry. As great as it all is? There's days when a man just needs a bit more substance, y'know? The adventures can't last forever."

He shakes his head, lets out a deep breath, and then motions for the check. "Right Tom. Tired. You got this, right? I gotta go meet Gary down the street."

"Yeah Barry, s'all good. You need anything, with this new deal, let me know huh? And say hi to Gary for me."

Gary being his younger brother.

"No problem Tom. You take care of yourself. And lighten up for fuck's sake." He's up from the table and shakes my hand before pulling on a large black pea coat and exiting.

Barry's a good guy. Good enough that I don't need him ending up in the fix that is my life right now. *Nah, the less people that know about this one, the better.*

I haven't seen Kimberly in a while. Walking into her bar and immediately digging for information doesn't seem like the best way to re-start a friendship. Still, I'm not left with a lot of options.

Chapter 11

The train rattles beneath my feet. I'm headed downtown, wondering when this tin can will blow off the rails taking all us regular folks to hell, express style. It's not nasty outside, so I left my car at home. Not nasty yet at least.

* * *

After breakfast I'd stopped into my apartment. A one bedroom bachelor's suite. I found it just as I'd left it: cluttered in a way that some people associate with eccentricity, though I am aware that it's just laziness. Precariously stacked books and a stone age laptop computer rest on the coffee table.

A seldom used TV on the far wall of the room sits collecting dust; next to it is a small patio used mostly for smoking. It's on the third floor of a building that's in what used to be an industrial sector.

Above are heavy metal beams that criss-cross through the room at structurally relevant angles. Below my feet is scarred hardwood. My rent isn't cheap, but cheap rent in The City is just as much of a fairy tale as anything by the Brother's Grimm. It doesn't matter, though. Over the years I've learned that as long as you have a roof over your head and food in your guts, little

else matters. My rent is paid six months in advance, an advantage afforded to me through years of high income, low free time jobs. The belongings required for me to exist could be reduced into two duffle bags and a backpack. Owning nice things has never been part of my agenda. The majority of my spending money is put into good food, libations and savings for vacations that I never go on.

I live a spartan existence, aside from the comforting amenities of home.

I stripped down and had a hot shower, coupled with a shave and a much needed tooth brushing. Then I split open my closet and assembled apparel and equipment fitting of what was going to be, I felt, another very long day.

In restaurants and bars, no matter what position you work, there's a finite amount of set up to be done every day. In the kitchen they call this *mise en place*, for a bartender it's called being set up. Being set up is something that a lot of rookies just can't understand. It goes beyond just making sure that you're locked and loaded with enough cold bottles in your fridge. I don't care who you are and how much mixology you know, your first shift at any job will be spent trying to figure out where everything is. Bottle opener, wine crank, muddler, martini shaker & strainer, caesar fixings, bitters, spoons, extra straws, bar knife, extra change, extra glasses, notepads, telephone, fire extinguisher, bus bins, ice machines, napkins, rags and so on. Sure a bottle's a bottle, but when you've got a lineup of twelve people and you spend nine minutes looking for the mint, for this asshole's mojito? You're gonna get stressed and end up behind. I keep a small inventory of items on my person while I'm at work. The mechanical programming of where everything is engrained in my brain so hard that I'll reach for things at home, and be surprised that they're not there. Back left pocket is notepad, gum and three books of matches. Back right pocket is my wallet and bottle opener. Front right pocket is my lighter, a pocket knife, five dollars in change,

and two pens clipped to the lip. Front left pocket is my cell phone and keys.

I laid out some fresh clothes: an undershirt, blue button down and a dark blue military style sweater. Slim fitting black jeans that offer me enough range of movement to easily run. My black leather jacket is traditional biker style, and I've had it so long that the heavy creases in the material move with my body like custom designed chain mail. Inside the jacket there's a hidden zippered pocket just below the left shoulder. I use it for sneaking joints and flasks into concerts, but this time I deposit the handgun in it. My pants pockets get the same treatment as when I'm at work. In my jacket pockets I store smokes, a spare notepad, and a roll of quarters wrapped in duct tape. Leather water repellent boots with a basic tread and innocuous design for my feet, along with wool socks to keep the wet and cold out. I rolled up a battered black baseball cap and shoved it into one of my pockets in case it really started to piss down again.

Then I was out the door on my way to see Sampson. I'd called him before going to bed with Kit the night before, but today thought it best to check in, in person.

"Thought you mighta drowned out there last night bud," he said, catching sight of me coming upstairs.

"Nah. Just got severely waterlogged. How was last night?"

He shrugged and methodically added a fourth creamer to his coffee, before stirring the mug exactly six times counterclockwise and waiting for the beverage to stop swirling before taking a sip.

"It was whatever. Not too much going on, I think that the rain kept a lot of people inside. Not that that should bother them if they've lived here for very long." He'd come around from the inside of the bar and sat down in front of it. I had sidled up and leaned against the wood.

"So...if I were to take some time off you'd be all right? This storm's supposed to keep up all week." I said, gesturing in the air

with an index finger.

“Well bud, I’m always ok with you taking time off but ‘course that begs the question of what happened last night?”

I explained everything that had happened the night before and his typically suede demeanour got ruffled quick.

“What the fuck does that mean? Who the fuck tries to corner a guy in an alley? That shit ain’t civilized.”

“I know, and that’s why I need the time off. I’ve gotta start digging for some sort of answers before I end up in a hole. I can’t really do that if I’ve gotta be here tomorrow at seven. Catch my drift?”

“Completely. Ok, well, I’ll talk to Terrence. Don’t worry, he’ll be cool with it. It’s not like they ever really need both of us around here at the same time anyway.”

Restaurant dictum: you either have too much staff, or not enough.

“Thanks Sampson, I appreciate it. Oh, and if I don’t give you a call, check in in about six hours or so? You should probably send someone to come lookin’ for me...I mean seeing as how you’re gonna be stuck here for the rest of the week.” He nodded and I continued, “You ever talk to this Detective David guy? Big black guy with dreads?” I went back ‘round behind the bar and poured us both a shot of Jameson’s and slapped a ten spot down.

“No, doesn’t ring a bell. Oh yeah, speaking of people looking for you. The Catface Chef came in last night, seeing if you were kickin’ around.” We knocked the thick doubles glasses together and gulped the ounce of whiskey down.

“He’s back in town?”

“Yeah, just got back in last night. Haven’t heard much from him since he left then, huh?”

“No, not really. Is he, *back* back? Or is he just here for a bit?”

“Sounds like he’s back for good. Apparently he got scre-ewed on things up the coast.”

“Fuck. Does he have a phone or anything?”

“No, not yet. But I expect you know where you can find him.” There was a smirk on his face as he sipped his coffee and closed his newspaper. The page’s headline caught my eye.

Downtown Eastside Celebration

This Saturday the recently renovated Infotorium will open it’s doors to the public as well as the city’s elite. Sean O’Donnell’s new electronic nightspot, in the heart of the Westwick’s rehabilitation project, kicks off its grand opening with guest DJs.....

“Huh? Catface is going to be down at *Infotorium*?” It took me a second to realize that we weren’t on the same page. “Oh you mean Catface’ll be at The Ol’ 55? I’m heading down there anyway.”

“The Ol’ 55? What for?”

“Kim. She’s the only lead I’ve got right now. Talked with Barry Jacobs this morning, you know Barry, right?” He nodded. “And he said that she was probably the best one to set me in O’Donnell’s direction.”

“You’re going to try and talk to him? From the sounds of things, he’s out to kill you,” said Sampson, sitting up straight and looking confused.

“That’s what I thought at first, but it doesn’t add up. Why would he send me a gun, and dispatch a goon squad to take care of me at the same time? Unless his guys didn’t know who I was when I was snooping around, or maybe those aren’t even his guys? If I can get a sit down with him, at least I’ll know what he wants... if he wants anything.”

“Christ, bud, sure is a good thing you’ve got a week off now, huh?”

“You’re tellin’ me. All right, I’ve gotta get going. Catch you on the flipside, and, uh, thanks again.”

“No problem. Watch your back eh?”

“Will do. Oh, what day of the week is it?” I asked, already half-way back to the stairs.

“You have been on a hellbender, huh? It’s Tuesday.”

* * *

The train banks into a turn, the rails producing a screech that offends my senses almost as much as the dank smell permeating the car. The trains were designed as a commuter resource for suburbanites, the stops being at central hubs across the city. They aren’t always dependable but they sure beat taking the busses, which feel more like turds on wheels, oozing through the intestinal tract of the city. The face of The City’s skyline peeks out at me through gaps in the fog. The shrouded perimeter is a relative gateway to a chapel perilous. The can comes to a fast stop that knocks a couple people onto their butts, and the doors pop open. I’m on my way to The Ol’ 55.

Chapter 12

The Ol' 55 is one of those places where we all just happened to be for a time. By *we*, I mean the counsel I kept and who kept me. It was a younger and more raucous time. We were accredited professionals when it came to the charms of booze and loud music, and we searched for the most effective way to pair the two. The Ol' 55 was what we found. It was a cave place. A man's place. Which isn't to say that it wasn't filled to the gills with tough as nails rock and roll chicks who have become a rarity in these hard times of character. We'd stay late into the night, and often. Dice rolled on tables and money changed hands at a coin toss. At some point or another the best, and worst, of us had been staff. The fickle nature of the ownership made it a difficult joint to work at. We stayed, though. For a long time too, because there just wasn't anything else like it. The best house party you've ever been to, six nights a week, with a fully loaded bar and nine taps. The live music didn't stop; the doors just got locked, security curtains were raised and the volume of the music lowered only a notch. A broke-down palace full of sinners, winners, and frightened beginners.

But because of the chaos of its nature, The Ol' 55 eventually started to crumble. Sure, the business remained, but people

moved on. Sobered up. Moved away. A new liquor inspector took over the neighbourhood, and no amount of *contributions* from the owner could keep the place open past its designated hours. People stopped coming and the party that remained was one of those sad ones, where the only people left are the ones that didn't have the common sense to leave. Stuck in the same conversations about how it was back in the day, too drunk to see that tomorrow was just going to be the same thing. I stopped going with any regularity almost a year ago, and have made a poor effort to stay in touch with the staff and regulars. I ended up slipping out the back door of these people's lives, into the shadows. Which is why I'm not looking forward to seeing Kim.

Kim Mac, a spitfire valkyrie in the form of a little rock and roll lady. Jet black hair, tattooed sleeves and stretched ears. She is, and always has been, the heart and soul of The Ol' 55. We'd only known each other by bartenders' reputations, but had become fast friends and contemporaries. She's an ass kicker and ball buster of the highest order, but sweet as honey in steamed milk once you become one of her friends. She demonstrates the subtle art of keeping people in line, while at the same time bringing them back for more. She's the boss in her bar and everyone knows it. Woe be the stuck up little bitch that's too demanding, or some schmuck who thinks that her enchanting smile isn't hiding any fangs. Guys line up around the block just to get a five minute conversation, and whatever beer is on special. Yet, there just aren't too many guys that can match up to the sheer magnetic bedlam brought on by the Catfaced Chef.

People like Catface are why other people think Chefs and cooks are crazy. Unconventionally gifted in the lore of food and not afraid to tell you when you were being a fuck-tard. He's worked enough kitchen jobs to earn the culinary Captaincy without having gone to school, and he wears this distinction like a purple heart. His rough demeanour, not to mention voice, started

as a sandy abrasion and could go one of two ways. Either he liked you and you became his friend, or you made the mistake of saying the wrong thing and would forever be on his shit list. Hands and wrists scarred from the dangers of convection ovens and atom splitting knives make him no stranger to pain. I've never seen him back down from a fight. A five foot ten high voltage sign with mutton chops, and the grin that was his namesake. Seldom rattled and always on the offensive. We've become one of the few people that each other considered a friend. He's the type of guy you want having your back when you're cramped up against the wall with few ways out other than a bout of fisticuffs. God knows we've been down that alley more than a couple times. Spectacular brawls. The hypnotic zang in his eyes is enough to let people know that he is not to be fucked with. A good heart though, even if it is buried beneath a leather exterior and cradled by smoke painted lungs.

The only person who saw that heart on a regular basis was Kim. They'd been inseparable for a long time. I'm not sure what split them apart, but at the end of the ride he'd signed up to work some new joint that was opening up the coast and had disappeared. That was three months ago, though, and I've seen neither hide nor scruffy hair of him since he left. But, according to Sampson, he's back now.

The Ol' 55 isn't far from the train station. At one point I knew all the fastest routes there from any location in the city. I miss that party; those truly were the good old days. There's a familiar feeling in my steps as I round the corner of the bronzed building front, flicking my smoke butt and opening the door. At three in the afternoon the place is just 'bout empty, which isn't surprising. Kim is here, though. Tuesday, her day shift. Hunched over the bar with her brow furrowed, she obliterates another crossword, her method of choice for combating boredom. She doesn't look up until the door coughs behind me. When she does, she squints as if she doesn't know who I am.

“Hello? Oh hi, sorry, you look like someone I used to know. His name’s Tom Wolfe. Real great guy for the most part, until one day he just up and disappeared, never to be heard from again.” Her mock friendliness doesn’t surprise me.

“Y’know, you remind me of someone I used to know too. She was a real cool chick, too bad she didn’t know when to get off a sinking boat...started going down with the rats.” I take it to her, and there’s a brief moment, as we standoff with our eyes, before we both break into a smile and start laughing.

“Go fuck yourself, Wolfe. What’s your poison?” She gets up from the stool that she’s been sitting on and moves behind the bar.

A gleaming wall of backlit booze is arranged behind her, reflecting off the refinished bar-top before her.

“Just a shot of JD, lady,” I respond, and pull up a chair that slides over dark new hardwood laminate. The place sure has changed in the wink of time that I’ve been gone.

The rock and roll party shack, with shoddy light fixtures and a bar with names carved into it, is no more. Instead I’m in a bar that looks as if it’s trying to compete with the homogenized corporate copycats. The type of phallic place where people without discerning opinions about their food or drink spend their money and time. The bar itself was once just a hunk of wood, beaten to death by pint glasses and the heavy salt shaker drumming that some patrons find the nerve to perform. Now it’s a gloss sealed slice of lumber that looks similar to the stuff on the floor. The epic bottle display on the wall behind the bar is just as organized as ever. Everything in the correct place, and despite outward appearances I can tell that behind the bar very little has changed. *I could probably jump back there and pump out just as many drinks as I ever did without breaking a sweat. Everything’s exactly where it used to be, if I know Kim.* The circular high top tables that had lined the walls are gone, replaced by garish looking rectangles. The music playing over the house PA has changed, too. In the past it was a

consistent blend of aggressive rock and roll and the type of dream weaving icons that made solo drunks bearable. Now it was some sort of generic elevator music.

“What’s with the tunes?” I ask, raising my shot glass and bobbing it on the bar, before draining half its contents and licking my chops without a hint of whiskey grimace.

“Ugh, you’re telling me. It’s this new policy, at least during the day. Calvin wants me to tone it down so that we can get some sort of lunch crowd. But I’m like, what the fuck? Lunch crowd? This is a goddamn bar. There’s no reason to be open before three.”

She’s right. There were few people that you could convince to hang out in a dark barroom in the middle of the day, and those that you could? You probably didn’t want them there in the first place.

“So look, I was just in the neighbourhood, and thought that I might...”

“Whatever bullshit you’re thinking of shovelling for me? Forget it Tom. Look, I know that things aren’t what they used to be around here, and I’d be the first one to tell you that. I’m not about to leave it, though. You know how hard it is to find and keep a decent job in this city? No one wants a real bar anymore, and most of them can’t tell the difference anyway. So, I’m stuck here. I’ve got a few things on the side that I’m trying to make happen, but until then? I got bills to pay, and this still does the job. So save whatever pity story you’ve got about popping in to see old friends. You’re in every neighbourhood plenty enough, so save it.”

It isn’t easy finding a job that you can stick to anymore. The idea of tips really calls to the people that think they are good looking enough to be a face person. What is more important is people skills. Flood the job market with people who think being a server or a bartender is an easy way to make some cash and, suddenly, your skills become irrelevant when compared to a hot piece of ass with a good set on her. Sure it sounds sexist, but it’s

part of the reality, which is a sexist one. That's what businesses like O'Donnell's do. They lock down a job market and then marginalize normal people with their hiring standards and dress code. They strip you of some fundamental aspects of controlling your life. These jobs rot people's souls. For girls like Kim, getting a good job means more than making good money. Even still, she's doing what everyone who isn't a lifer is doing. Getting a few hustles going. Hustle long enough, you might get lucky. You might just make it out.

I finish the whiskey and motion for her to pour two more.

"In that case, I'm here 'cause I need some help. It's probably best if you don't know all the particulars, but..."

"Excuse me?"

"All the particulars? Look, I just need a bit of information, if you've got it. If not, it's not a big deal. But do you really want to know more about a situation that I think you should stay out of?" I clench my jaw and look down into the whiskey. "Trust my judgment on this." She stares at me with severe annoyance. "Kim, I'm not joking, this isn't some fuck around. I wouldn't ask like this, if I didn't think it the best option."

"Tom...I like you. We've been friends a long time. I'll help you out if I can but...just...remember that I am your friend. Not just another bartender."

I've seen a lot of jobs and met a lot of people in my day. The bar scene being what it is - a hotbed of fresh handshakes and introductory monologues, protracted by free shots - I've never been someone who holds a large council of people. My immediate staff of friends consists of those that I trust and am closest to geographically. The others are forgotten, or beyond my price range of free time. The people that stick around in a man's life, even after he leaves a job with them, are the ones that he can count on. The guys, or in this case girls, that have been in the shit with you. They've looked you square in the eye while you both wonder

whether or not you're ever gonna get out alive. Kim and I have seen our fair share of apocalyptic evenings. Where the orders don't stop and you find yourself drunk off your ass. Working twelve hours straight where you don't eat more than a couple of cans of cola and a half sandwich. Brothers and sisters in arms. Some of them will stick with you for life. Me though? I usually got caught up in the next adventure, always moving on. I've always had plenty of colleagues, never many friends.

"Kim, I appreciate that. Cheers to that, in fact." We do the shots. "But I still need to know if you know anything, and I still can't tell you what's going on."

She eyes me up and down. "Is this about a girl?"

I laugh. "No Kim. When you ever heard me to go diggin' 'round about a girl?" She puts her hands on her hips and tilts her head at me. I brush past this. "I need you to tell me about The O'Donnell Group if you can, more specifically what you know about Sean O'Donnell."

She lets out a long arching whistle after I say O'Donnell's name.

"What in the hell do you want to know about him for?" I give her a look, asking to be spared. "Right, your secret." She rolls her eyes. "O'Donnell, huh? Well, he's dragging more and more of the industry under his thumb every year..."

I interrupt her and wave her along with my hand. "Yeah right... Tell me something I don't know."

"Hey! Watch your manners!" She points at me. "He's always out and about, from what I see and hear. He rarely stops in at any of his own joints. He's usually out for dinner, but he only ever comes in here for drinks, and even then only when he can get the back room, or the bar if it's almost full."

"You know anything about the broad he's seeing?"

"She's that actress, right? No, nothing more than what the trash mags are saying. She's out a lot too, apparently. Not always

with him. I've seen her at a few of the DJ nights when Gordon, you remember Gordon?"

I shake my head. "Oh, well it's when he spins vinyl to open up for the headliners and stuff? She's up around that sorta scene a lot."

"I think I'm going to need a beer," I say, pointing at my preferred tap of pale ale. "She seems to be getting a little old to be slammin' pills and raving all night, don't you think?"

"Hey, you know just as well as I do that people that were once young and sexy drag it out as long as they can. She's not that old. You and I have met a lot worse."

"Guess you're right. Any word on this Infotorium place?"

"Well, just as much as most people. It's being pretty highly anticipated, though. Tickets to the opening night are going for a few hundred a piece, maybe more now. Word has it the organizers are bringing in all the top guys off tour to play. The visual show is supposed to be sick, too."

"What does that mean? All the top DJs?"

"All the top DJs. Dipppa? Boingabammo? Scare The Children? DinoRapist? Have you been living under a rock Tom?"

"Are these musicians?"

"No they're DJs"

"So they don't play instruments?"

"Look, you asked." She shrugs and gives me an annoyed look, dropping my beer onto a coaster in front of me.

"So you don't know if O'Donnell hangs around that place much, though? If he's personally involved in the development at all? *Not just Infotorium?* I mean it probably takes a lotta clout to bring in all these DJs, right?" I take a good glug of my beer.

"Clout or money? Couldn't really tell you. Sorry, like I said I don't know much about O'Donnell...he's not the most social of clients, if you get my drift." The way she says the word client sticks with me. Pros view customers as some sort of professional

affiliate, even though we're just here to take their money and get them shit-faced.

"Do you know where he goes the most? I'm looking for an excuse to bump into the guy so I can talk to him." She looks like she's going to ask me why I need to talk to him, but I slant my face and tilt my eyes to suggest that she not bother. "Anyway. Thanks. I don't know much more than I did before, but-" She cuts me off.

"This kid. This kid bartender that's always comin' round here these days. He works down by the marina? Fuck, what's his name... he listens to a lot of metal and Skynyrd? I feel like you'd know him? What's his name?" She's looking at the ceiling and jumping up and down, her memory bank of individuals refusing access. I already know who she's talking about.

Lucco Campolli is one of the few protégés that I've had over the years. Every now and then, just for the hell of it, I'd take a job somewhere a little bit more serene than the downtown clubs. For me it was like a working vacation, setting up shop in a high end place full of wine snobbery and amazing food. Clientele of the likes that lived in half-million condos, had six dogs and were either rich enough to be really fat, or rich enough to be in really good shape. Lucco was just some punk kid who'd gotten hired because his Mom was a friend of the General Manager. Smart assed, impulsive and lacking any degree of focus. Over the two years, off and on, that I worked with him, I did my best to expose the craftsmanship of bartending to him. It had mixed results. He cared little about the subtle details, or even the rush that comes with a properly executed cluster-fuck. He wasn't in it for the credentials and connections to the social elite, much like me. It was, to him, a very reasonable way to obtain pussy that he wouldn't have otherwise had a crack at. Now, at twenty two, he was a sharp eyed little horndog who had no problem taking a running jump into the sack with women who were, let's say, more experienced.

"The best thing about women over forty? They don't yell, they

don't tell, and they're grateful as hell!" I'd heard him recite on more than one occasion.

He was not what you'd call a class act, but all in all he had been my student, and I would stand beside him at the well again in a heartbeat.

"Lucco?" I offer.

"Yeah that's it. Average height? Longer brown hair? Looks like he's in pretty good shape? Looks like he'd be a skateboarder, but he doesn't skateboard?"

"Did he try and pick you up?"

"You bet he did. Oh boy, and he was layin' it on thick."

"Yeah, same guy. But what about him?"

"Well he's always runnin' his mouth about the celebs that go into that place he works. You used to work there too, didn't you?"

"It was always just a seasonal thing, but yeah, I used to work at Cornucopia with him."

"Right, so last week he was in here shootin' off about how O'Donnell is always coming in for dinner and sittin' at his bar. Really cocky about it, too. Says O'Donnell leaves damn good tips. Also said that he'd had VIP status at a couple of O'Donnell clubs."

"The VIP stuff doesn't matter one way or the other. But, do you think he was really talkin' with O'Donnell?"

"Don't see any reason why he'd lie about that one. It's not like O'Donnell wouldn't go in for dinner there. That's a nice place."

"It's not that nice of a place," comes the steel wool voice of the Catface Chef.

Kim and I turn to him standing in the door, arms crossed and that broad cheshire cat grin glowing at us through the barlight.

"What the fuck is going on, Tits?!" he shouts one of the crass titles that he uses when speaking to a group, as he moves across the room.

"What's going on Catface? Nice to see you!"

I get up from my seat and cross the room, giving him a

handshake and a slap on the shoulder. Kim just leans on the bar, her face now a murky storm cloud.

“Tommy! That sonuvabitch up the coast? He tried to fuck me! You know what you do when someone tries to fuck you?” He’s already got a little booze on his breath, and the crazy in his eye is just starting to turn hypnotic spirals. “You fuck him first. I was only innit for a couple grand anyway, and-”

I hold my hand up to stop him from saying anymore. I’ll get the full story later and I’m not about to let him derail my day’s chores. I motion towards Kim with my eyes, and he seems to remember why he’s come in to begin with. They make eye contact, and I can see that they’ve got some talkin’ to do. I gift the Chef with my hardly touched beer, and pay my bill.

“Sorry I gotta split, there, Catface. I’d love to stay and catch up, but I’ve got some pretty pressing matters to attend to. But I’ll see you in a couple days, yah?” I put my left hand on his shoulder and reach out with my right for him to shake again.

“You know it. Tommy, you’re a good guy...a real good guy.” The whiskey on his breath is more apparent from the angle we’re now speaking at.

“Thanks, I appreciate that Chef.”

I use the title of *Chef* a lot. Most people wouldn’t understand this. Chef is big dick. Chef is the be all and end all of whatever restaurant they happen to be working for. The buck stops with them because if there’s no food, there’s no work. Period. When you have to talk to the Chef your information better be relevant and any questions brief. I’ve had plenty of friends who were cooks, but amongst those? There are only a few *Chefs*, in my book. It’s not an easy position to obtain, and once you’re there most of your efforts are put into making sure that you stay there, or at the very least don’t screw it up too badly. To us, though? It’s a sign of respect. Among the fraternity of cooks that I’ve found myself within, we call each other Chef. Not because any one of us knows

how to cook any better than the other. That's an endless debate. No, it's out of respect. When a man has your respect, he's Chef. Sometimes, someone that isn't a chef can take a real hard dislikin' to being called that, but sooner or later everyone comes 'round. A secret ranking that steals the word away from those assholes on TV and puts it squarely back in the hands of the men and women who build empires.

I look over at Kim, and thank her with a wave of my hand. While Catface is still facing me, she gives me a look of slight exasperation. She doesn't really want to have the conversation they're about to have. Least not while the Chef's half in the bag. Hopefully she'll be able to get the Cat out of the bag a little before they really get into it. In any event, it's none of my goddamn business, and I have other matters to attend to.

Chapter 13

Cornucopia is at the Heart Harbor Marina, an inner city dock where yachts are parked. The restaurant's patio looks out on the boats, and in the summertime it's a real purty sight to behold. The lights across the water reveal the alternative to the downtown city skyline: banks of residences and storefronts, the centrepiece of this view being the glowing art deco clock of city hall.

Cornucopia's location is one of the reasons it is a revered dining locale. Another is a seasonal French menu dripping with clarified butter, and a wine list so big that over seventy five thousand dollars are tied up in cellar stock alone. Celebrities seem to flock to the place, due to the anonymity they receive and the professionalism of the staff. The summertime slam of tourism and people looking for a sexy patio to sit on always treated the business, and the employees, well. Wintertime is another story. The storms descend, and the quay morphs from a gentle harbour into a frothing mouth of the ocean. The lucrative patio is all but forgotten. The lull of autumn is unbearable, and had been a reason for me never sticking around past the occasional Indian summer. Big dinner parties are held in the main room, which seats over two hundred people. Workplace functions and the steady weekend

brunch keep money rolling until the holidays, when everything kicks back into gear and the staff once more is run off its collective feet. Right now it was going to be dead. The kind of eight hour shifts that feel like an eternity. When customers do come in, employees pray that they want more than a cheese platter and one glass of wine.

I round the corner and peer through the great bay windows to see, as predicted, an empty restaurant. I am greeted by the eyes of a cute little thing of a hostess who has no idea who I am. I wait while she finishes a phone call, and then ask if I can be seated at the bar. She pulls a couple menus, and I follow her to the large granite square that makes up the bar top here. Behind the bar there's an espresso machine, four full wine coolers, a poorly organized and difficult to access liquor display, two ice wells and an oyster cart. Oysters became the bane of my existence for a while. A wine heavy bar that prides itself on proper etiquette can be hard enough to tend, but when you've got oysters too, well, you don't have a snowflakes chance in hell at being prompt. The rest of the setup behind this particular rig is straightforward. Glass washer, rail with house boozes, and three different sinks. As a sign of high quality the standard issue pop gun has been set on standby, replaced by individual cans of soda which is now the in vogue method for serving highballs. That granite countertop bar had fucked me on more than one occasion. Put down a butterfly (our name for fragile glassware) too hard and you have a real shit mess to clean up in the middle of service, and god forbid any of that glass got in the well.

Lucco isn't behind the bar, but I can hear him talking in the back. Hanging out by the kitchen pass, detailing the events of the night prior with the kind of glorious bravado that can only come from a self assured young man.

"Then she drags me out to the parking lot and blows me in her Miata. Top down. Middle of winter. It wasn't raining at that point,

but I think if it was she still would have done it.”

I get up from the bar and walk around to where I can see him leaning against the stainless steel of the pass, while a cook rolls his eyes. Stories of this nature are always on tap with Lucco, and it isn't uncommon to hear him tell the same story more than once within the same half hour time span.

“Hey! Who do I gotta fuck to get an americano around here?” I call, and his head swivels around to me.

“Hey, buddy! How ya doin'?” His face splits into a surprised grin as he steps over and shakes my hand. I sit down again while he muscles me up a coffee.

“Bout as good as can be expected. Whatcha saying there, Lucco? Still gettin' into trouble?”

“Hell yes! So last week me and Paulie went to this death metal show out in the 'burbs, and we get real lit up on Wiser's and root-beer,” I roll my eyes. “And we start getting into it with some of these fuckin' townies 'cause I was talking to this one guy's sister. So anyway, things cool down and I meet this other chick that's not really that hot, but I was drunk so I didn't really care. So we end up doing it while the headlining act is going up. I slammed her like a double bass drum, man.”

“Lucco, man, this is getting old real fast,” I say, as he lowers a cup and saucer in front of me.

“Hold on! So after that, I'm doing up my pants and that chick from earlier? That guy's sister? She just shows up and then the three of us end up doing a bunch of blow and fucking like animals, and I miss out on the whole show!”

Over the years I've heard enough stories like this that I'm neither impressed nor appalled by it. I just raise an eyebrow and look over my coffee at him. He's still smiling, waiting for me to give him some sort of recognition, but I'm not going to. Any shock and awe that I might have felt disappeared with the rest of my propriety years ago.

“What’s wrong man?” he asks me, fearing reproach.

“Nothin’, just a bit hungry, that’s all. I’ll uh, I’ll get a spaghetti.”

He goes to punch the order, leaving me with my coffee and my thoughts. *Don’t say much. Kid’s got a big mouth.*

“So, how’s things ‘round here? Looks like you’re stuck in the middle of the winter lull?”

“Yeah, it sucks. Me and Paulie just keep screwing around, same as ever, all weekend long.”

“Startin’ to get old?”

Long ago I alluded to him that eventually all the young pussy and drinks in the world weren’t enough to sate a man’s thirst. Wouldn’t matter how great it was. It either eventually goes away, or just stops being fun.

“Yeah, I’m lookin’ into some other jobs too. Y’know, this place is just kinda...stuffy sometimes.”

“Heard that, kid.” He lays out a napkin and cutlery, along with a glass of water. “Where you thinkin’ on lookin’ for jobs?”

“I don’t know. I mean, I’ve got this mostly...like fine dining experience, but I’d really like to be in a bar. Y’know? Where the action is.”

“You mean bar? Or nightclub? There’s a resoundin’ difference between the two.”

“Whichever. I mean I know a guy who might be able to help me out with jumping straight into doing one of the downtown club gigs. That’d be pretty good, huh? You used to do that didn’tcha, Tom?” Strip away all the cocksucker stories and that sweet kid is still under there.

“You think you’re ready for the Rockstar bar?” I look at him as if over the rim of a pair of imaginary glasses.

“Fuck yeah! I mean, I think so?”

“I’m not saying you’re not. In fact I think you probably are, but here’s the thing. Whether you can do it skill wise is usually not that big of a question. That just determines how much money you

can make. Fast is fast and eventually, you work somewhere long enough? You'll get fast, and you'll make more money. No, what I mean is that those fuckers?" I point at the wall, in the direction of the downtown club scene. "Will chew you up and spit you the fuck out if you're not careful. Think about it this way, what do you do when you work all night, and it's a busy night, and you make a good slice of cheddar? At least a bill and a half? What do you do that night, after you get off work?"

"I probably go party. Sometimes all night," he muses.

"Right. But you don't go out and party every night because, hey, you're not always makin' great money. But the thing is, with those places? They're so busy all the time that you *are* making money every night. Good money. But you're off work so late, seriously, like 3:30 at the earliest. You won't really have a lotta other options other than to sit at work and get pissed, or go to a co-worker's place and do the same. Or, if you feel that's a bit of a drunkard talking, then I'll put it this way: you will be so tense and stressed out that you'll *want* to drink." I'm painting a picture for him, using the classical medium of properly presented opinion.

"Yeah, but," he tries, but I hold my hand up.

"And Lucco? Trust me. Guys like you and me? It's no good for us. I'm not sayin' that you shouldn't go check it out, hell go check it out. You'll be neck deep in so much cooze and money that you'll have to bring a fuckin' snorkel to work. That or eat and drink your way out." He laughs at the engineered sentence of vulgarity. "I'm just sayin', you gotta know what you're getting' into." He stops and thinks about this for a second, and then snaps around to check on my food.

The front door opens and a large man, on the upside of two hundred pounds and the other side of fifty five years old, comes marching in. A face that in youth was probably considered very handsome, but has since been gnarled by time and, from the looks of his nose, bruised by booze. He's Allan Sunderland. A long time

regular of the Cornucopia. Rich old guy. Used to be an investment banker but got sick of it. Divorced. Hot young girlfriend with a real expensive pair of assets. A fat James Bond. Conversation with him could often drift to needlessly obscene anecdotes because he was bored. That or he wanted to be reminded of the piss and vinegar cocktail nights of his youth. That was just the marquee though. He was naturally suave when he wanted to be. Charming with women, and all business when he meant business. He sees me.

“Hey! Tommy! What’s this guy doing here? I thought you kicked him out!” he says to the confused hostess. “What’s going on, dude?” He offers a hand, along with the phrase meant to indulge youth.

“Not much, Allan. Just stopping in for a bite to eat. How’s yourself?”

“Oh, you know. Business as usual. Eatin’ a lot of Kathleen’s pussy. Want to see some pictures?” He slides into a seat at the bar and pulls his phone out of his pocket, eager to display his favourite toy.

Lucco returns with my lunch and grinds some fresh pepper on top without asking me.

“Uh, maybe after I eat, Allan?”

“Suit yourself. These pictures usually make my mouth water.” I’ve been attempting to play the gentleman, and I give him a knowing look. He knows I’m right there with him, and he lets out a laugh and slaps me on the back. “Lucco, what the hell’s goin’ on, man? Oh yeah, and can I start it off with a coffee?”

“Sure thing, Allan! I’m doing pretty good. No cream, and honey for the coffee, right?” He strolls over to the espresso machine, looking over his shoulder.

“You got it, Bud. You got any good stories?” Allan loves Lucco’s stories. Taking them as another opportunity to drink from the fountain of youth, even if the effects are only temporary. Lucco

indulges him.

I spend the next fifteen minutes eating my lunch and casually saying hello to other ex-coworkers who pop their heads out from the kitchen or pause from their duties at the tables. *This place was a class act to work for.* Aside from the typical fucking around that always takes place when working as a front of house employee, here it's about doing it right. High quality everything: even down to the paper towel in the bathroom, which cost ten cents a sheet. Being able to work for a place like this is no cakewalk, though. Compared to serving in a slack ass pub setting, this is microsurgery. The complex etiquette needs to come off as casual and is actually a big part of the job. This was where I honed the art form of service. It's really more of a science that comes off as an art. A formula practiced and perfected over time. Actions and reactions. The right tools for the right job. A rehearsed and nuanced decadence. Locking and loading the correct cutlery for a twenty seat party. Cruising at top speed with five fresh plates through a mass of bodies can make you feel like you're doing the death star trench run. The nightmarish drink orders you get serving a table at brunch. *There's five of you and you all want a coffee, an orange juice, a mimosa and a water? You see how fuckin' big this tray is?* But of course that's why I never stayed too long. You get burnt out in a whole different way workin' in a joint like this. You start to care about the job just a little too much and it's not a matter of choice. It's a matter of survival. You live it, breathe it, and dream it. It brands your brain so deep that it can take months to remove the obsessive-compulsive nature that goes along with the desire for perfection.

"So I slammed them like a double bass drum!" Lucco finishes the story for what is likely the fifth time that day. Allan loves it and he's holding onto his belly, laughing for dear life.

"Woo! Dynamite, Lucco! Really!" He wipes a couple of fake tears from his eyes, and then starts to tuck into a panini grilled

chicken sandwich.

Lucco's got his back turned to me when I ask him the question. "So who's your connect?" He turns around and looks startled. I remain deadpan.

"What?"

"Well you said you knew someone, get you a club job maybe... just wondering who it is?"

"You're leaving, Lucco?" says Allan with a look of surprise.

"No! No, I'm not, I just-" He's flustered now. The mention of someone leaving a joint is like blood in the water. Servers start smelling shifts, and managers get suspicious as to why someone might leave their current job. All it amounts to is just a bunch of high school gossip.

"He's just... just a guy. A friend of mine, guy's a regular here."

"Oh! That's cool man." I make it sound like someone who's just walked in on another in the shower. He takes the bait. He feels like he's shutting me out and decides to let me in.

"Well, no, I mean... it's not like that. I just don't know if I should be talkin' about it too much, y'know?" He looks left and right as if the walls have ears, and then leans down on the bar. "It's just, he's a big shot, y'know?"

"Hey man, it's your deal. Your connect. Your business." I wipe my mouth with the serviette from my lap and then raise my hands, depositing the soiled linen in the pasta bowl. He takes the dish away from me and moves it to the back without saying anything. I sip my coffee and wait for him to return.

When he does, his features are in conflict, but after a few seconds of pretending to clean the countertops he comes back over and glances at Allan for a second before speaking in a hushed voice over the bar. "It's Sean O'Donnell. Y'know like The O'Donnell Group?"

"Pfffffft! Is that all?" I blow air in his face and lean back, getting louder. Lucco looks even more worried for a second, but lightens

up as the tone of my voice changes octaves. “O’Donnell? Good snag, buddy! That would be some pretty good work.”

“Well, I mean... We’ve only talked about it, but...yeah...no I, yeah, I guess it’s pretty cool, huh?” His pride starts to sneak back in.

“What’s he like? Like what’s his bag?”

“He’s pretty cool. Usually has a babe with him. Sometimes he’s with that Ersula chick? You know, the actress? She’s a real piece of ass too.”

“Shit. What’s he eat when he’s here?”

“Usually the steak frites. He’s a no bullshit type. I mean he’s all business at first, but then he starts to relax and get chatty after a few drinks. Really nice. He likes talking about baseball and boxing, but I don’t really know anything about baseball.” Lucco’s posture is casual now, as he polishes large wine glasses meant specifically for syrah.

“He likes poker too,” chimes in Allan.

“Yeah?” I shift my whole attention onto him.

“Yeah, he was sittin’ here last week telling me about how he made twenty grand at a private tournament over the course of the weekend.”

“He’s apparently got this invite only poker game, for high rollers and stuff,” jumps in Lucco, eager to make sure he doesn’t lose out on his chance to interact.

“Shit, that sounds like some pretty underground stuff right there, huh?” My tone is impressed and I nod my head.

“I think Natasha’s boyfriend goes to it.

Seems like he’s got a lotta cash to throw around.” Natasha is a server at Cornucopia who’s high on the busy quotient, low on brains.

“He’s a little peckerwood” snorts Allan.

“Who, O’Donnell?” I tilt my head and raise an eyebrow.

“No, not O’Donnell, Natasha’s boyfriend.”

“What do you mean, Allan? Guy’s a peckerwood?”

Allan lets out a deep breath and puts his sandwich down before leaning closer so only Lucco and I can hear him.

“See, well, she’s not at work this week. Said she came down sick, right? Or at least that’s what Damon was telling me.” Damon, a senior server known for a haughty attitude and need to gossip. “But then I see her walkin’ down the street that same afternoon. She looks fine as usual, ‘cept she’s got these big old sunglasses on and a hood pulled up. She’s walking that cute little Pomeranian of hers, and sits down on a bench, so I sit down to say hello. She pulls her hood off but won’t look at me, but I could see she’s got this swollen lip. She didn’t want to talk about it, so I left, but c’mon.” He flips his hands palms up and shrugs.

“What, like he’s...?” I mime throwing a punch.

“I’ve done some stuff I’m not proud of in my day boys. Cheatin’ on my old lady. Never done too good by my kids. But I’ll be god-damned if I ever hit a woman.” He shakes his head.

“What’s her boyfriend look like again? I feel like I met him a year or so back, but I don’t really recall?” I ponder.

“Well a year or so ago she had a different guy. This guy’s pretty new, I think? Like last four months or something? You seen her with a guy since then?” I shake my head. “Huh, well, he’s not like a huge guy or nuthin’. I mean he definitely works out, but he’s not very tall. Sorta messy brown hair. Lip ring? Usually wearing one of those black jackets with a hood on it? Both his sleeves are tattooed?” Lucco obliges me.

“So what’s his damage then? I mean what’s with the...smackin’ her around?” I just say it.

“Well, it’s like Lucco was sayin’, and mind you this is just my theory. He plays in poker games, right? He loses and goes home to smack her around, ‘cause he doesn’t feel like his dick’s very big anymore.” Allan’s tone is highlighted with the type of disdain that I’d only ever heard him use while he was at the deep end of a few

magnums of wine.

“What’s he do the rest of the time? I mean it’s not like you can really be a professional gambler, can you? Not unless you can build and keep a serious bankroll.”

“He’s in the entertainment industry somehow. I know he’s been working as a promoter for a lot of the electro pop that’s coming out. Natasha was talking about how he was maybe going to get a gig at that new place that’s opening up by Westwick’s, the info something?”

“Good money in electro pop promoting, huh?” asks Allan.

Yeah. That or he’s pushing something through here, there and everywhere. Temperamental, compulsive gambler. Sounds like a snowstorm in a nostril.

“I don’t really know. A lot of people seem to do it, though. Promoting, I mean,” says Lucco, with a quick shrug that almost makes him lose control of a chardonnay glass.

“What’s this guy’s name again? I feel like I’ve met him at some point. I can picture a face but there’s no name to it.” I rest my chin on my hand on the bar and appear quizzical.

“Sid. Sid something or other? I don’t know his last name,” responds Lucco.

I nod, and then let the conversation fall away to check my phone. There is a text message from Kim:

He and I have shit to talk about. But I don’t want to talk about it at work. Could you come take him off my hands for a bit?

Sure I could help Kim out. Give me a chance to hang out with the Catface Chef, plus if I go through with what I’m planning? It won’t hurt to have some backup.

“Where’s Sid usually hang out?” I straight up ask for this one.

“Tom whatya doin’?” asks Allan, his concern muffled by a bite of chicken sandwich.

“Nothin’ Allan. Where’s he hang out Lucco?”

“Well, he’s normally at...fuck, uh,” I’m boring into his eyes, my mouth motionless. “The Brownstone! Yeah, The Brownstone. It’s a little boho place down on Center Street. He promotes an open spin night down there on Tuesdays...Natasha was talkin’ about it.” I ease up on him and lean back to pull out my wallet. I know the place he’s talking about.

“I’ll take the bill please, Lucco.” He nods and moves over to the computer terminal.

“Tommy, are you sure you know what you’re doing? Sure this is a good idea? I mean I know he’s a skid mark, but Christ you don’t have to be a hero on this one...least not on your own.” His voice is that of a father who’s seen bad go to worse real quick.

“Allan, I appreciate your concern. But I’m always on my own and I’m no hero.” I get up and look at the bill.

I tip him big and shake both men’s hands before winking at the hostess and making my way out into the early evening.

Chapter 14

The Catface Chef and I are having drinks, while I get him to eat some dinner. Swingin' by The 'Ol 55, I'd provided a conversation about what time Kim would be off work and if the Chef in question wanted to catch up until then. He'd had no good reason not to, and now we're in a generic bar just on the other side of Center Street. He's chewing through a tough steak sandwich, so I'm doing the talking.

"So, yeah, Tony's does the trick. Been spending a lotta time bored and that usually leads to bored and drunk. Kit puts up with it, but it's only gonna take so long before she's real choked. I don't know. I've got everything I want. But I'm so bored I start getting' drunk. The bored alcoholic, what a sad story that one is. I've got enough money, but not enough to do something risky. Really, all I want is to be living on a beach somewhere, just sippin' margaritas and reading. Stop the daily grind for a bit, y'know?"

He swallows hard on the last chunk of gristle and garlic bread, and then points at me with his cutlery while he speaks.

"Shit, I'm with you there. This whole fuckin' load of bullshit?" He motions over his shoulder with his steak knife. "So I get there, up the coast, and he doesn't have anything built in the place. We've

got all this kitchen equipment but nothing is built for it. You think it's a good idea to leave a deep fryer out in the pouring rain? I had to buy a tarp for it, but it'd already been outside for a week. I'm a Chef, I'm not a carpenter. Fine, I have to deal with some unexpected turns of events, but then this dipshit puts on a hard hat and a tool belt for the first time in his life and starts directing the construction site like he's Bob Fuckin' Vila. Pay me to run your kitchen and what do you have me doing? Building bathrooms. I built bathrooms..."

"So, what? You stuck through till...what? Why'd you leave?" I crack a peanut shell and drop the husk on the floor.

"He didn't pay me."

"Excuse me?"

"He didn't pay me. Well, he paid me, but only like a quarter of what I'm owed. So we had ourselves a little sit down and I explained it to him real simple. Either I get paid or I leave. He tries to get all reassuring, tellin' me that it'll get taken care of. Two days later? Well? I'm not there anymore, am I? I'm back, motherfucker."

"Shit, that sounds like it was a rough ride, dude. Got many plans now? Or things just coasting along?"

"Don't really have enough bank to sit on my arse for very long. Something will come up. Always does. Someone always needs a Chef."

I tilt my head and take a swig from my bottle of beer. I'm pondering whether or not to tell Catface just what I'm up to. *Sure I can tell him the whole story, but then he'd be in it. He doesn't need that shit. Got enough to tend to. I'm about to pound on some guy that beat up his girlfriend, that's more than a good enough excuse. Takes some stones to do that though, 'specially in a public place. He'll appreciate the thought. You're gonna owe him in the end. But that debt is worth the backup.*

"So, Chef? There's something I gotta do tonight and it's not going to be a nice thing." I keep my tone flat. His face picks up. "There's this guy? Sid? He's been smackin' his girlfriend, Natasha,

around, right? What I want to do is go and teach him a little lesson? Feel me?" Catface nods. "What I need you to do is run interference. Anyone steps to me while I'm putting the screws in this cunt? I need you to hit them so hard that they'll feel it in the past. Get the drift?" He snorts and nods. "Now there's more to it than just that. This guy, from the feelin' I get, is connected. I think he's pushin' some powders, pills, maybe some other shit. So no names. I don't use yours, you don't use mine. We're not going there for the drugs, but I think you should be aware that there is more risk here than there'd normally be if we just...well...showed and put a beatin' on some guy."

"I'm in." Unflinching.

I look over at him, raise my brows and clench my jaw before speaking. "Be sure you mean that."

"Shit, man. You say you need some backup? I'm backup. I've never known you to be the hero type, though. This guy musta really put a hurt to her, huh?"

"Just another guy. Just a guy that I've got an excuse to teach a lesson to. And Chef? I'm no hero. Check please."

Chapter 15

The Brownstone is a den of underground cool, a pale reflection of Tin Pan Alley. Within are the kind of smouldering congregations of people caught between the eccentric creativity of the sixties and seventies, and the modern harangue of hopelessness. The building itself is ancient brick, tapped into the lower corner of a marvellous slum tenement. I'm not sure what saved it from being swallowed alive by the Downtown Eastside, which begins only a few blocks away. Speculation is that the sepia shaded Never Never Land sucked in a lot of disposable income. Despite its image presenting the contrary, nothing really happens here. People come and sit around, get drunk and wait out their evenings. Young people meet, drink, hang out and then go fuck. That's what some bars are about. Stylish hedonism. The stereo's volume doesn't get loud, and you'd never be surprised to hear the Velvet Underground or Bob Dylan playing on repeat. People here drink the good shit though. Had to give them that. Nary a shitty domestic beer to be found unless it is a staple of low quality, which is somehow ironic. Tonight the music is the best of sad synth-pop from the eighties. It sounds like some sadist is beating a keyboard to death. Most of the people in the room are stoned in some way: coke, weed, even

MDMA. In here, sometimes you'll be overloaded with contact highs and won't be able to tell who's on what. Many are borderline pussies. Too unsure of themselves, that's why they're here: for the booze and drugs to help them cut through their insecurities. Who knows what friends Sid has hanging around. I'll stay on my toes, but I don't anticipate any problems.

We pass the coat check girl, decline her offer to hold onto our jackets, and then we're slipping through the crowd, making our way into the belly of the beast. I motion with my hand for Catface to meet me at the bar. We break off on our own respective courses through the crowd. Circumnavigating a full room of people who fail to pay attention to their surroundings. I put my hand on a shoulder for a second, and the instant a person turns they've given me enough space to slip past them. Sofas filled with post adolescent arrested development cases circle the back wall by the bar.

It's a clutter bar. Signed celebrity head-shots tacked to the wall. Christmas lights. An old CD deck that might just be there for nostalgia, I'm not sure. Stuffed animals, big bastards from the fairgrounds, are tied up around the ceiling. The bar isn't sure if it's a tiki lounge or a dive. Eight taps and an ice well that isn't much more than a couple of buckets and a scoop. There's a soda gun, though. A staff member shuttles back and forth into a small room where there's likely a glass washer. A curtain covers the entry to the small room, and out of it billows the chemical gasses that all industry standard washers exude. Old He-Man action figures line the back counter, around four rows of bottles that sit beside a half melted cash register. The bar's not very busy. I'm greeted by a guy in a white t-shirt and black suspenders, eager to grab me a drink. I order two of the stouts and a couple of shots of Jameson. Y'drink a stout a lot slower than a lager, and considering the situation, I need to keep it together. I peek over my shoulder and see that Catface has caught up with me.

"Here. You see anyone that looked like it mighta been him?" I

ask as I hand him his beer.

“What? Fuck no. I was just trying to get over here. These pricks just stand in your fucking way. I didn’t bother casing the joint or nothin’. Thanks.” He takes the beer and downs a large gulp. It’s a pretty brackish stout and he makes a face that tells me he’s gonna think twice before guzzlin’ that pint.

“It’s ok. Look, lets just chill for a second. I gotta get my bearings on this place. Then I’ll come up with some sort of plan, dig?”

“Whiskey?” He looks down at the two shots I’ve got waiting on the bar.

“Boom goes the dynamite,” I monotone and haul it back.

I run numbers on the room. There are approximately five sections.

A trio of sofas by the bar. Hang a right by the hallway, up a small set of stairs, and there’s a pool table and dart board. Behind this there’s another embankment of sofas and chairs. Keep heading around the room and there is a countertop railing with bar stools that overlooks the hallway to the entrance. The people at the sofas by the bar are starting to curl into the cushions and it seems rare that they’re thirsty, although they slowly proceed in and out of the joint. Bunch of slack jawed stoners. The pool table has a flock of guys showing off their plumage. They’re probably nice enough dudes, here for a few pints and maybe a chance at some pussy. The back wall seating is the royal throne of bohemia. Large floppy hats and frumpy dresses on the girls. Snazzy moustaches and second hand suits on the guys. They seem involved in each other. The railing has two different sets of people at it, and one loner. The two pairs look like young couples meeting for the first time at an anxiety heavy location that will make both of them feel uncomfortable. The loner looks a lot like a guy who’d be named Sid.

He’s sitting against the railing, the pool table behind him. The light from above the billiards match sparkles off his lip ring.

Longer brown hair and the lip ring, just as Lucco said. He's staring into a beer. *Shit*. People huddle around the pool table, standing in my line of sight.

I know what I'm going to have to do here. I'm damn glad that I have an excuse to get away with it, too. It's been a long time since I put the heavy on someone. Christ knows that it's not a nice thing to do, steppin' up and putting a beating on someone. Truth be told, if I didn't need to know what this guy knows so bad? I wouldn't be here. Natasha's an idiot for stickin' with such a loser anyway. Normally I'd stay out of it, but tonight's her lucky night. 'Cause I got a reason to be here. A reason to talk to this guy: so I can find out what he knows. More important, I've got an excuse to beat it out of him, rather than just waiting polite like. The gun in my jacket stresses against the pocket liner, a reminder of how little patience I have.

"Ok, here it is. He's sitting on that railing up there by the pool table. You take point on the right side of him, at the corner of the table. Make sure no one sneaks up on me from that side 'cause I'm gonna be turned talking to him. Cool?" I break it down for Catface while I raise my glass.

"Fuck yeah. Hold on, I got us another whiskey." He coughs.

We make our way to our respective positions. Catface and a full shot glass of whiskey are where I placed him. I'm right next to Sid. More people are starting to get caught up in what must be some intense match up, and the pool table is getting crowded.

"Hey man, how you doin? Salut!" I exclaim to Sid, with affection and an air of inebriation.

"Hey. Uh good, yeah, cheers man." He's annoyed but still clinks his glass against mine.

"That's awesome, dude! Hey man, you're Sid, right?" I'm excited to recognize him.

"Huh? Uh yeah, I'm Sid. Do I know you man?"

"I don't know, do you? Have we met before?"

He looks me up and down. “No man. Uh, no, I don’t think so?”

I drop the chucklehead voice and it’s now business. “Fantastic. Look Sid, I’m here to ask you a few questions and I’d really appreciate it if you’d just answer them, ok?”

“What? What the fuck are you talk-” The shift from my tone of drunken camaraderie catches him off guard.

“Sid, just pay attention, ok? I don’t really want to have to repeat myself. You play in a poker game, right? Like, a high stakes game with some big money guys, yeah? Don’t bother telling me you don’t. I already know you do. I want you to tell me where this game is and how I get into it.” I breeze through the information and then smile at him.

His face is tight with confusion. “What?”

“C’mon Sid...I think I was pretty clear. Just tell me about the poker game and we’re all good to go,” I shrug.

He sneers at me, “Go fuck yourself man,” and then moves like he’s going to get up.

I grab a big handful of hair from the back of his head and slam him forward onto the rail. The impact of flesh is audible, his forehead bounces, his beer glass rattles, and I pull him back up. I let go of his hair but keep my hands on his shoulders.

“Whoa Sid, careful there! You almost slipped out of your seat. All that concentration I guess. Thinking really hard? Trying to remember where that poker game is? Well, take your time but don’t waste mine, eh?”

He’s dazed and squinting hard. I bet he’s seeing white spots. He gets his mouth going, though. “Eat shit.”

He starts to struggle with me. I slam him again. This time it’s his face that goes into the countertop and I can feel the vibrations through his skull as his nose busts like an overripe tomato. When I pull him up again blood starts to run down his face, all over his shirt.

“Ouch! Shit! Sid, you better be a little bit more careful.

Probably lay off the lager, eh? Besides, you've got a poker game to attend! Where might it be? I don't know. I'm just looking for a friendly game with some good players. Don't see why you're being such a douche bag about this?" I'm trying really hard to reason with the guy.

People have now taken notice that I'm manhandling Sid. They're unsure of what to do. Normal people usually are when they're confronted with violence. For the most part, they're waiting to see how much worse it's gonna get. There are always a few guys that have the nuts to stand up right away. Unfortunately for them, Catface is already standing, ready to pounce.

One guy in the pool table camp calls out. "Hey! What the hell are-

As the man is talking, Catface downs the contents of his shot glass and spins it in his hand so that the rim is facing out and the inch thick glass is firm in his palm. He strikes the poor guy in the side of the face with the heavy little devil. It busts open the skin just above the man's left eye and stuns him. He's lucky he doesn't get sliced open worse. Catface boot kicks him in the solar plexus. The guy falls backwards onto a couch full of people. His eyes are shocked awake, and he's bleeding from his face. He can't breathe very well from that boot to the gut. Catface throws the shot glass against the wall, and then relaxes on the table behind him. He points around our crowd, settling his finger divisively on Sid.

"Mind you all keep your fuck holes shut, and everyone else but this woman-beating piece of shit gets to walk out of here with all their goddamn teeth." His frightening voice cuts through the air like a hot knife through butter, sizzling. Sid starts to panic.

"Somebody help me! Get this fucking lunatic offa me! For chrissakes hel-"

I'm starting to lose my patience. I slam his head again. The force of impact creates a circular spatter of blood, some of which ends up on my hand. This time, I press my elbow onto the back of

his head and lean on it. I kick his bar stool out from under him, and his body swings forward, while his legs scramble to take some of the pressure off his throat. I lean in close while he sputters and snorts for air.

“Sid? Just tell me what I want to know, and you can breathe again. It’s not that hard. You might never get to play in the high stakes game again, but really from the sounds of things with you and Natasha? That’s probably a good thing. The chips you win don’t put inches on your dick, capiche?”

To his credit he attempts to free himself for a few more seconds, before his need to breath overrides the lock on his information vault.

“It’s at 1722 Livingston! It’s a warehouse. You’ve gotta hit buzzer 34 and the...shlshshsh.” His voice starts to choke out through a gurgle of spit. I grab the back of his pants with the hand opposite the one holding his head, and give him a little more room to breathe. “Itsh... itsh... the password itsh *big pimpin’*”

“What’s the buy in?”

“Five grand.”

“Ah, Sid that’s marvelous. Just ah? One more thing? When is it?” I’m a real sweet guy.

“Tonight...at midnight.”

“Oh really? Shit, ok. Sorry, one last thing there Sid? I mean it this time, last thing. Stay the fuck away from Natasha. That? Or you learn some fucking manners. I hear about you pulling any more temper tantrum bullshit? I’m gonna find you and beat you like I’m your goddamn father.”

He grunts out something. I don’t really care. I let his head and ass go at the same time. His chin catches on the edge of the countertop, his teeth smashing together and his entire body buckling backwards. He folds into the prone position like he’s origami. I turn and make a circular motion with my hand towards Catface. He pounds his beer and we’re on our way towards door. The

crowd parts for us this time. I stop at the bar, pick up a rag and stare down the bartender while I wipe the blood off my hands. Then we're down the hallway and out the door.

Chapter 16

1722 Livingstone is an old warehouse in what used to be the steel industry sector of The City. It has since been converted into faceless storage units and bland office space. A few machine shops and shipping outlets still remain, but for the most part this is a graveyard. The buildings here weren't meant for residency and, with the economy in decline, manufacturing has ceased. These places aren't good for much more than filling with crap or, as is the case tonight, hosting underground functions. The rain has started again, and I'm surprised that I'm in a good mood. Adventure can do that.

The situation isn't perfect, but it's as close as I'm going to get. It's not like I can wait around for another audience with O'Donnell, but two hours wasn't a lot of time to pull together five grand in cash. One phone call made it happen, though.

* * *

"You need how much money?" squawked Sampson over the phone.

"Five large. Look, I've got a grand at home. The rest of it's tied up in the bank right now, and I don't know any ATM that's gonna let me draw four bills at this time of the night. You know I'm good

for it." I blew at a curl of smoke that was drifting towards my eye, then I checked my watch, quarter after ten.

"I know you're good for it. But what the fuck you need five large for at this time of night, Tom?"

"Poker. A poker game against O'Donnell."

"You want five large to go play poker against Sean O'Donnell? Five grand? You sure you want to take a chance on that much money?" He had my back, but he didn't know the score.

"Look, Sampson, O'Donnell is the only guy that can give me any answers right now. And it's not like I can just walk into his office tomorrow morning, drop a gun on his desk, and ask him if he knows anything about it. I don't even know if he has an office. I doubt he's sitting through presentations and board meetings all day long. But, that being said, I'm not gonna have a lotta chances to get within five feet of the guy, much less sit across a table from him. What? I'm gonna stumble into him at a bar? Even in the event of that very unlikely situation, he's gonna have no reason to listen to me. So I figure I go in there, steal a little bit of money from him on the table, then once I have his attention? Then we can chew the fat."

"That, or you're gonna end up five grand lighter. Or he's gonna shoot you in the face and I'll be out five thousand dollars. Don't get me wrong dude, I'm not saying you're going to lose. I'm just not sure the risk is worth it."

"Well that makes two of us. Look, can you have the cash ready in an hour? I'll swing by your place an-" He cut me off.

"I'll meet you there."

"What?"

"I'll meet you there, what's the address?" I hear him working with crumpled paper.

"Sampson, I don't know man. I sent Catface Chef away 'cause I think I'm going to have to do this alone. I'm not sure how they'll feel if two guys show up?"

“Well I’m not sure how I feel about letting you walk into a potentially dangerous setting with five thousand of my dollars. They smash your pretty little face in and I don’t get shit back. I mean I’d miss you too, but that’s a bit of skrilla to be lending out on good faith in a shitty scenario, you hear me? Besides, I’m not the Catface Chef...am I?”

Sampson’s nature made him more of a natural backup for the task at hand. His comprehensive ability to process was greater than Catface’s, and he was much less of a liability. “No. You’re not Catface. Ok, meet me at 1722 Livingston in an hour.”

“What are you doing right now?”

“I just got outta The Brownstone and sent Catface on his way. Called you, and now I’m ‘bout to sneak into The Coast and see if Kit’s still at work.”

“It’s ten thirty at night.”

“She’s working late. Deadline for the weekend edition or something. Apparently they’re trying to dig the Mayor’s office for more information on the homeless issue.”

“Whatever. Ok, well it’s 1722 Livingstone?”

“Yeah.”

“All right, see you there.”

The Coast newspaper is as close as the print media in this town gets to what people used to call journalism. Every other daily paper is just derivative political semantics and headline fodder. The material gets batted around until the stories die of exposure. The Coast doesn’t have an easy time of it. Their investors are pulling out like a back alley john with a flashlight on him. News outlets are favouring the digital format that newspapers keep drifting towards. The kind of reporting that involves slogging through websites and data streams en masse, rather than pounding pavement and talking to people. Kit works long hours and is paid only about half of what she’s worth. She loves it, though. I can see it when she barks orders in the bullpen, and in the intensity

with which she consumes information. I'd reached the twelfth floor of the art deco tower, elevators chiming and releasing me into her world.

Aside from a half dozen staffers at their keyboards and the moan of AM radio, the grey newsroom was empty. Kit's office is at the back of the room. Blinds were pulled down but I saw movement flickering behind the shades. As I crossed the room I nodded at two old timers, hanging on by their fingernails to the notion of objective reporting, and four green looking kids who were probably feeling pretty confused about their career choice. I went into Kit's office. She was on the phone.

"Dale? I'm not sure you're hearing me right. Look, I know that we've been climbing up your ass for the better part of a year. And yes, I know that you've issued statements that cover the entirety of operations in the Downtown Eastside as your office sees it. But I know that you know that I know how the spin works. Look... no, listen to me....I'm not even asking for you to directly answer my questions. This is all off the record anyway...yeah? Well unlike that toad Sandusky, to me? Off the record means off the record. Just give me something Dale. Look, re-election is coming up and while he's been pretty slick about how he's run things, there's been plenty that he's been...what? No, I think you're missing the point Dale." She looked up at me and rolled her eyes. "There's been more than enough shady business that we've had the manners to not even ask about. So if you could just help me out by at least sending me in the right direction here, I'd..." She was wheeling and dealing through the casino of politics and inner city business that monopolizes most of her awareness. She was giving it to the guy on the other end of that phone, but the truth is? If she had something? If she had even one concrete lead to go on? She wouldn't be on the phone. She'd be fact checking and getting ready to crack skulls. But she didn't have a lead, and that's why she was on the phone with this prick.

Her face faded and then tightened. She hung up the phone by dropping the receiver, and held her breath with a pained scowl. She knew I was there but didn't look up from her desk; instead she leaned over farther and rubbed her temples.

"Hey Lady?" I said to try and get her attention. I moved around behind her desk. "Rough day?"

"FUCK! Cockshit! That dickless little shit over at the mayor's office, Dale Hecht! He's steam rolling through me on all this shit with the Downtown Eastside. I feel like we're the only ones who're not buying what they're selling, and 'cause of that our opinions don't mean shit. Deny. Avoid. Spin. General perception is that it's all cleaner and nicer, and that Westwick's is a boon to the whole city, but what the fuck, Tom? What are they doing with all those fucking people? Twenty thousand people lived down there just over a year ago, and now it's down to around fourteen thousand. Where did those people go? There's no official documentation! These people aren't even showing up to pick up their government cheques! They live on those cheques! They're off the grid and now they're gone. The city maintains that it was the new developments and cleaning the drugs off the streets that did it. People going back to family, or starting fresh. But you and I know that's bullshit. It's not just drugs and it never has been. Mental illness and social dysfunction are the paramount causes and concerns, but these cocksuckers just keep blaming it on the drugs and ride through on some garbage about sanctity of the family model going to shit." I started to give her a shoulder massage.

"I know. They built all that affordable housing, but it's on the other side of the suburbs. So what comes next? A pilgrimage of the homeless? Those homes aren't even finished yet and a quarter of the population down there is gone," she exclaimed, throwing my arms off of her before crossing her arms and kicking her feet up on her desk.

"Hey Lady, don't stress too much about it. I don't need to see

the headline *Local Editor's Head Explodes* tomorrow. You'll find something on those pricks." I tried to dust some of the grit off my voice.

She let out a deep sigh, before continuing to vent.

"I know. Erch! Those sons of bitches just hold their ground and won't answer to shit. Most people don't even care, either. They're all so fucking happy about a brand new place to spend their money. Sorry, sorry...how was your day? Everything ok with your...case?" She tilted her head back to look at me, and I leaned over and gave her a kiss.

"Case? Oh. Phhhewww," I exhaled, "It's an interesting one. Found out where I'm going though. Tracked down the leads, so hopefully I'll be meeting with O'Donnell in a couple hours."

"At this time of night?" She glared at the clock on her desk.

"Look, maybe for normal people with normal jobs this time of night is getting late, but not for me. That's just the way it is in the industry. O'Donnell's in the industry, even though he's not really *in* it anymore. So it makes sense that these are the hours he keeps."

"Oh, ok. Well, where are you meeting him?"

"At a poker game. Sampson's meeting me there in an hour." I let it out like it was a mention of someone's birthday.

"Why is Sampson meeting you?" She'd already caught the scent of my bullshit.

"Oh, he's dropping off some cash for me."

"How much cash Tom?"

"Five tchow-cough."

"Sorry, how much?"

"Five large."

"Five hundred?" she asked.

"Uh, yeah?"

She reaches back and punches me.

"You lying dick! I know five large means five thousand!"

"Sorry! I didn't want you to worry about me. Sounds like

you're pretty busy here."

She didn't say anything, but spun around in her chair. Her face went from disbelieving to exasperated. "Seriously Tom? I thought you were done with all this shit?"

I shrugged and widened my eyes. "You think I'm doing this for shits and giggles? What am I supposed to do? I'm still lugging around a gun and the fear that someone's gonna plug me in the back. This is the only real lead."

"Five grand?"

"It's not like I'm about to lose it! Christ, you and Sampson have no faith in my card skills." I crossed my arms.

"Tom, it's not that. It's just a lot of money to be holding walking into what may well be the most dangerous place you could be. You don't even know if it was O'Donnell that sent you the gun." She was scowling, adding up all the facts.

"Well Sampson is coming, so I'll have some sort of backup. But if it smells like shit I'm not about to go sticking my face in it. I've just gotta get close enough for a whiff." She twisted her face at the mention of shit-whiffing, but stood up and wrapped her arms around my waist.

"Ok, but if anything starts to get hairy let me know. I'll go stay at my sister's." She said with a wink.

"I'll meet you in Mexico."

"I told you not until after the election. I've gotta be in the city for at least the election."

"Or after I get bumped off." We've been promising each other a vacation for a while, but with my irregular work life and her inability to miss a moment of inner city happenings it always fails to work out.

"Well if that happens, it'll just be me and the cabana boys." She grinned and gave me another kiss. Then she looked down at my hand, which still had a tinge of red on the back of it. "Tom? Whose blood is this?"

* * *

A dark blue ford Taurus flashes its lights at me, and I turn away from the warehouse. Sampson is sitting in the driver's seat of his car with the window down. Outside the door there's a small pile of cigarette butts. He hasn't been here that long; he just smokes like a smelter. He looks up at me from the driver's seat and turns down the radio, which is playing *Werewolves of London*, by Warren Zevon.

"Y'think they've got a bar in there?" he asks, and drops his last smoke butt onto the ground, where it fizzles in the street water.

"Fucked if I know."

"Well, I brought two flasks just in case," he says, handing me a stainless steel hip flask.

"Oh really? What you packin' here?" I ask.

"Gin." I make a face. "Look, I know you're not going to play a full poker game entirely sober."

"Yeah, and I'm not about to drink warm straight gin all night," I shoot back, holding the flask between my thumb and forefinger.

"That's not for drinking. It's for wearing." I raise an eyebrow.

"Look, we smell like whiskey a lot, eh?"

"Well, that and cigarettes, but I'd like to think I'm a little bit more reserved about my whiskey than you are."

"Bite me. Look, just splash somma that gin on your neck and face like its cologne and you're good to go. Ham it up a little bit, play the drunk, and maybe they won't tear into you so bad. Gin's got a distinctive reek to it."

"Look Sampson, as brilliant as that plan is, I'd rather not stink like gin for the rest of the night. Also, I don't give a shit if they try and tear into me. I don't need to ham it up. I need to play my cards right, and keep my cool." He shrugs and takes the flask away from me.

"Don't think I'm sharing this whiskey with you," he says, pointing to his flask and taking a large swig.

I check my watch. "Ok, it's time we got this show on the road."

"Do you want to put the gun in my car?" He's unbuckling and opening his door.

"Nah. Even if they do search us, they're not about to find it on me." I pat the inconspicuous lump at my left shoulder.

"Your funeral. Oh, here." He pulls a fat wad of one hundred dollar bills out of his pocket and hands it to me. "There's six there. So if you get in rough shape you can try and dig out. Or if you've really got him by the nuts, maybe you can do some serious damage."

"Fantastic. I don't know what I'd do without you Sampson." I punch him on the shoulder and we head towards the door.

"What you want me to do should shit go south?"

I stop and reach into my jacket, pull out the roll of quarters, and toss it to him. "You still remember how to punch a guy in the face as hard as you can, right?"

"You're a real master of strategy, Tom," he says, looking down at the tube of change.

Chapter 17

You've gotta be able to read them like a cheap paperback. Most of the time it's too loud to hear someone talk. The ability to read lips and discern the intricacies of facial features is a must. The way someone fumbles for money. The sharp flick of a lady's eyes as she catches you smiling at her. Do they order the good shit or are they beyond caring? Perceiving levels of intoxication, along with the temperament, of men who've been sauced since before they left the office. What they're wearing and how they wear it. How often does someone go to the bathroom, and who are they associating with along the way? Are they there for a good time or a long time? What does a person's haircut say about them? Their posture? What they smoke? Do they have the rough hands of a working man, or the delicate fingers of a stiff who sits at a keyboard all day? Are they with women, or are they there *for women*. Do they look away when you're stickin' your eyeballs into theirs. What denomination was this guy's money in the first place? A pocket full of hundreds means something. Are they talkers, and if so, when do they talk? When do they shut up? Who are their friends and who are their enemies? Can you draw this guy in for a couple of shots, or is this he on a tight budget? Does he know what

he's doing with those six shots of Wild Turkey, or is he just here for amateur night? You've got a forty five second window to suss this stuff out when a person approaches the bar. If you know what to look for, that's more than enough time. That's my advantage. Knowing everything there is to know about a man, ten seconds after he opens his mouth.

It will be Texas Hold 'Em. Nobody plays five card stud anymore. Too many variations. Too many variables. Not enough good poker players. In Hold 'Em, each player is dealt two cards face down. A round of betting ensues and then three cards are dealt face up on the table, this is called *the flop*. These are communal cards. Another round of betting. Then *the turn*, which is another card played face up. Another round of betting before *the river*, the last card to be dealt. One more round of betting and then anyone that's still in it shows what they've got. To *check* is choosing not to bet and passing the action to the player to your left. *Raise* whatever you want if the action is yours. If you're betting after someone who has already bet you must raise the stakes higher than them. You have to meet someone's raise to continue playing, otherwise your only choice is to *fold*. Fold. Lay down. Get out. Put your cards in the middle because, whether it's too rich for your blood or you simply don't have what it takes to bring the pot in, it's the smartest play you can make. Those are the moves of the game. How they're used is unique to each player.

I used to play fast and loose, which is part of the impatience of youth. You get what you think is going to be a decent hand and you start shovelling your chip stack into the middle like it's a pile of manure, when really it's just blood in the water. The guys I learned to play with were cutthroat, and not above asking about your mother to get a rise out of ya. They'd take me for everything I had and then let me buy back in five times over. I don't look at it as wasted money so much as lessons learned. You don't win poker games by over or under estimating guys. Everyone at the table

deserves at least a modicum of your respect. That fresh faced little dipshit who's pushing on every hand can be just as lethal as the gnarled old gun slinger who doesn't say a goddamn word except for when he bets. Anyone can take you down, but most of the time it's pride that will do that for you. Some guys run the percentages in their heads, knowing the exact odds on whatever they've got, plus what's on the table. I've never played like that. Like the man said, I've made my life out of reading people's faces.

The best players are running numbers at the same time as they're trying to pick up every piece of information that a player might project. These nuggets of information are *tells*. A poker game can be over in under a half hour if people are throwing down serious bets on every other hand. A poker game played with skill can take well over six hours. In my time there have been more than a few occasions where I've found myself walking home just as the sun was coming up. Sometimes I was flush, and others I didn't have a pot to piss in. Over the years I've learned how to push a man just where you need him to go and let him think it was his idea. A trap is only as effective as the bait. Sometimes you need to make a trap look obvious 'cause you don't want to spring it in the first place. You want him out. What cards you have don't matter so much as what people think you have. Lotta people get all hard for pocket aces, though I've never seen a hand that could sink someone quicker.

You blow your load when you wind up with a doozy like that. You start betting the farm, and then the cow's milk turns sour. Big hands don't always lose to other big hands. Big hands lose to a three deuce that some numb-nuts was stupid enough to ride to the river, where he picked up his full house. This poker game isn't going to be filled with numb-nuts though. No, this poker game is likely to be a table full of serious gamblers. That's ok. Professional gamblers can get complacent and play like they've got nothing to lose. Just another night and another pot of money. 'Course there's

always those that are in it purely to win. For me, there's more than just five grand at stake. Despite knowing when to hold them, and when to fold them, walking away just isn't going to be an option.

After we're buzzed in, Sampson and I are led upstairs by a man child who looks like Dolf Lundgren and Kurt Cobain had a baby. I wasn't aware that there was such a thing as a grunge thug, but there he is walking us up a spiral staircase that leads into an abandoned steel fabrication warehouse. Three fold out tables and five ice chests are set up as a makeshift bar. Two young guys stand behind the tables waiting for orders. Five men congregate by the bar drinking beers from fine metal steins and chatting amongst themselves. The room's darkness is offset by a pair of overhead spotlights. They dangle above a luxurious poker table, made from dense deciduous, with a green felt top. The men turn to see Sampson and I walking across the room, led by the doorman.

"Davey, who the fuck are these jabronies?" calls out a tall middle aged fat man wearing a three piece pinstripe suit. His hair is combed in a perfect side part, the kind that you can only achieve using pomade. He's smoking a cigarette that he leaves dangling from his mouth, and drinking what looks to be a whiskey on the rocks. His round face jiggles slightly when he talks, but I doubt that many people ever make fun of him for his weight.

"They got the money Mr. Soda, they knew the password too," says Davey, our escort.

The fat man, Mr. Soda, doesn't say anything more as we cross the room, getting right next to the bar. I turn to one of the young bartenders and order myself a double Johnny Walker Green, two rocks. Mr. Soda removes the cigarette from his mouth gingerly with a thumb and forefinger. He proceeds to eye me up and down before finishing off his booze, which I confirm is scotch from the smell on his breath. He sets the glass on one of the bar tables.

"So? Pardon me, but just who the fuck are you?" His voice is soft and smooth.

I'm picking up my drink and act half surprised that anyone is talking to me. "Me? Let's just say that, for tonight, I'm Sid. Sid won't be joining us and he figured that you fellas were looking for a good game, so he sent me down your way." I take a sip of the scotch and then cross my arms in front of my chest.

"Really? That's surprising, 'cause I'm pretty sure we told that coked up mess to avoid this game until he can pay back what he owes. 'Cause unless you're willing to pay the vig on the five grand he borrowed off me? I'm inclined to tell you that any acquaintance of Sid's is more entitled to a broken arm than he is a seat at our table." He's still calm as ever but I can practically hear the tendons tighten in his right hand which, for the moment, hangs by his side.

I take a slug of scotch, swallow hard and look over my shoulder at Sampson for a split second. He shrugs.

There are four other men standing behind Mr. Soda. For the most part they're all relaxed, waiting to see if Mr. Soda here is going to give me an impromptu tracheotomy. Sampson is right behind me, not making a move until I do. I lower my hand to my side and wave him off.

"Soda Pop, you fat fuck, lay off the guy for a minute." The voice is sharp and young and slanted to the side. I already know who's talking. "S'far as I'm concerned you're right. That rat fuck Sid owes you a lotta cheese. But like I told you, sell it off to those guinea shylocks down 'bout Twelfth and Sable and you're free and clear of it. Let someone else deal with that headache. This guy here, though? He's got money in his pocket, don't ya?"

He steps out from the curtain of shadows behind the other men.

He's puffing on a cigar. His dirty blond hair is cropped tight against a large skull. He has the eyes and nose of a man that used to do a lot of fighting. A hard jaw line descends into a meaty neck encased in a black tracksuit. He's big in all the ways that you don't want to mess with. I look into his eyes as he makes his way fully

into the light. They're friendly, which is what tells me that this is the most dangerous man in the room. Sean O'Donnell.

"Yeah. I've got the money," I reply pulling the cash out of my jacket, looking at O'Donnell but waving it in Mr. Soda's face.

"Well, that's all we really care about, isn't it Mr. Soda?" O'Donnell sidles up behind the fat man. He clamps his jaw down on his cigar with a smile, patting the big man on the side of his face with the back of his hand.

Mr. Soda snorts and then turns around to the bar, deciding that I'm not worth his time. O'Donnell makes a face, mocking Mr. Soda, and then directs his attention at me.

"Hi there! I'm Sean, welcome to the game. Glad to see that you found the place all right. We've got refreshments over here as you can see." He gestures to the bar and then to the drink in my hand. "And we're going to start the game in about ten minutes, but let me introduce you to the rest of our players." He has the genial nature of a man brought up in the service industry knowing how to lull his guests into a false sense of security. I let him think he's succeeding.

"We've got Mr. Townsend." He gestures to a waspy man, with no discernible muscle mass. The skin on his head looks like it's stretched too tight and a vein bulges across the right side of his brow. He has sunken eyes and translucent skin that brightens only around a pair of beakish lips. It's the face of a man who spends a lot of time in the dark. He doesn't slouch, but he's not standing straight; most of his weight is slumped on his back. I shake a handful of spider legs which rattle while in my grasp. He's wearing a white turtleneck that endeavours to give him more bulk. He greets me in a nasal voice that is near whisper volume. If he's got killer instincts he's not showing them right now.

"Jay." A short white guy with a floppy haircut, a pudgy body and a bulbous nose. His head appears too big for his torso. He's wearing a brown blazer and an un-tucked white button down. He

leans forward and grabs my hand, jamming it up and down three times. Then he asks me how I'm doin' without looking me in the eye. He's not going to give me any information. He's playing for keeps already. After greeting me he turns his entire body towards the bar and removes himself from the scene.

"Xang Li." The thick arm of a large asian man reaches out at me. It's covered in a dark pressed suit jacket that is accented with fat cream coloured cuffs which hang out past the jacket. I catch a glimpse of tattoos curling 'round his wrists when I take hold of his mitt. His face is emotionless, but his eyes shift up and down my body. He stands up very straight. His broad shoulders eclipse Mr. Townsend. His fingers grip my hand tight enough that I have time to make eye contact with him for a prolonged three seconds. He doesn't say anything, instead nodding and then dropping back.

"Last and, eh, well, maybe least, Mr. Lopresco." Clean cut. Head like a boulder with one large crack of a scar running across his chin. His hands look like they'd like to put a person's head through drywall rather than shake. The sleeves of a hooded sweater are pushed up, revealing a pair of veiny forearms. The right arm has a tattoo of the globe with an anchor sticking through it and an eagle on top. This guy's a marine or ex marine. On the left arm there's a small list of places he's been. I venture a guess that he's no longer in the armed forces and is either hired muscle, or has taken up residence with The City's finest. Either way? Not to be fucked with. His voice is nice enough though, with the crisp attention to diction that the few could be proud of.

"But then of course there's you there, Bud, you seem to have us at a disadvantage," says O'Donnell, gesturing towards me with his cigar. It leaves a tracer of smoke in the shape of a question mark.

I snort and reach into my jacket for my cigarettes. "That's usually the way I like to keep things." I fire him a wink while my hand turns into a pistol and my mouth makes a clicking noise.

"Ho! We got a mystery man here! A regular Sam Spade!"

O'Donnell lets out a hoot and then looks over his shoulder at Mr. Soda, who is now sitting at the poker table. "You hear that Soda Pop? Real shadow man over here."

"Stupefying Sean. How 'bout we play some cards?"

"Seriously though, pal? What's your name? Can't expect to walk into The City's most illustrious gentleman's club without at least some sort of title. Who would we send the body to?" he says with rogue gusto. I'm having a hard time not liking him. Criminal or no, charm is charm.

"You can call me Mr. Fox if y'want," I say, and thumb over at Sampson, "That's Mr. Simpson."

"Well fellas, we're about to get this chuck wagon rollin'. Got everything you need? Don't worry if y'don't, we stop to piss every forty five to an hour and if you need a drink these guys will take real good care of ya." O'Donnell half bows like a butler before he moves over to the poker table.

Sampson grabs a fold out chair and sets it up a good few meters away from the poker table. "I'd rather not watch. So if you need anything that isn't a couple of thousand dollars, just let me know."

"Smart ass."

I sit down at the table and each man arranges himself for the game. Mr. Soda doesn't take his jacket off. His chubby fingers are nimble and they pop the button on his jacket while he sits. Xang Li takes his off and then proceeds to fold the thick cuffs of his shirt overtop of each other, stopping flat at the elbow. Little Jay stretches out, mucks with his chair, and hunches over the table with his seat pushed back. Lopresco is a bump on a log, and just as expressionless. Townsend's lips tremble as he lights a cigarette. He catches me looking at him and I smile while I light my own smoke. O'Donnell is beaming. This man of plunder needs the thrill of the hunt, his own successes now trivial to him. He's a predator. He plays the games he thinks he can win but none of them are a challenge anymore. To him this might as well be a canned hunt.

A crusty blob of an old dealer sits down, tucking his gut underneath the table, and flexes his fingers into a deck of cards. “Gentlemen, the game is Texas Hold ‘Em, minimum five thousand dollar buy in, and you all know the rules so no fuckin’ around. To start, blinds are twenty five and fifty. They’ll be going up every half hour. Let’s play poker.”

Chapter 18

“So at this point they’ve got like a couple mil in the pot and the camera starts cutting to people’s faces all around the table. All serious like, y’know? Like this is it! Everything’s through, we’re already at the river, this is the big showdown hand. The cards sitting on the table are the eight, six, four and ace of spades, along with the ace of hearts. One by one all of the players start to go all in on this fuckin’ set of cards. The first two guys are just like, wham! All in. The bad guy ponders it for a second and then he’s in. The stakes are goin’ up the whole time, too. So then it’s on Bond, and yeah, of course, he’s all in; everyone’s all in at this point. Cards come up like this: where the Asian dude has got a flush, black guy’s cards spit him a full house, and then the bad guy’s turn comes. He hits on a higher full house, what’s that? Fuck, how did that dealer say it in the movie? Something silly soundin’ like, ‘Highah full house. Sixes full of aces’...Pfft who talks like that? Anyway, then Bond turns it and what do you know? Bang! Bond has a straight flush with a five and a seven!”

Little Jay has become more excitable now that the game’s started. An hour and a half in and the guy won’t shut up. From going on and on about pointless music debates, like the Beatles

vs. The Rolling Stones, to recounting half the script for *The Big Lebowski*. It's not visibly on *my* nerves, but I can tell it's starting to grind at the other guys.

"Bond's odds were something stupid like twelve percent. No way he shoulda stuck with that hand bu—"

"Hey, Skippy, want to lay off the chatter over there?" Mr. Soda breaks the onslaught. "Maybe you find talking about poker, while you're playing poker, to be a real stimulin' exercise in duality, but me? It just gets on my nerves." Mr. Soda had started smoking a cigar at the beginning of the game, though now it's closer to a nub. He finishes talking and then crams the remainder of the stogie back into his mouth, clamping down on the spit drenched stump of tobacco.

It has been slow going for the most part. Too early in the game for anyone to flex their nuts. I stole two hands right off the bat. Nothing big. I made enough to keep from getting raked over the coals for a while. I haven't played much since. The deck just keeps spitting me garbage and I'm laying it all down. When you're green, you start thinking that you're about to hit the jackpot every other hand. Jumping in with a sloppy looking two king offset and daydreaming about ruling the world. There's been some fleeting action. Every now and then someone sparks up a little bidding war that takes straight to the river with low bets and smooth calls. There's only been three hands that have gone all the way, any significant bet buying the pot. None of them are showing much skin tonight, but they sure are flirtin'.

Lopresco doesn't seem to like Xang much, taking every opportunity to try and slice him on the financial side. Xang is a slab of rock. There haven't been more than two instances where I've seen him move for more than his cards. He is still working on his first drink. Mr. Soda started to have some sort of strange affection for me after I took down those two hands. He kept on trying to get me talkin', but all I had for him were smiles and modesty. This led

O'Donnell to start making fun of Mr. Soda, asking him if he complimented all the young guys like that. Townsend is trying to keep up, but that poor sonovabitch wilts every time I look at him. Jay has seen this as well and has started to lay into him. Calling him a pussy and attempting to dare him into hands. Townsend hasn't bit though. His nervous twitch is an anti-tell in itself, keeping you unsure of his play. We are all still sitting even in terms of chip stack, but if anyone has more coin than another it is Mr. Soda.

The next round of cards circles the players. Rather than looking at my cards, I keep an unfocused gaze floating around table. *C'mon you fucks. Give me a crack. Something I can use.* Then I see the game changer. Townsend's hand stops shaking. It happens only for an instant and only when his cards aim up at him. Those spider legs stop shivering for a second and a half. Then, unaware that I've seen this, his face resumes activity in the play and the hand trembles again. It's slight, and maybe it means nothing. But I think it's enough. I check and find myself sitting with Queen and Jack of hearts. The action is going around the table from man to man.

Starting left of the big blind, which at this point is four hundred, is Townsend, followed by O'Donnell then Lopresco, Mr. Soda, Me, Xang, and Jay. O'Donnell is out. Lopresco too. Mr. Soda casually digs through his chips and smooth calls. I'm in. Xang is right behind me. Jay makes a pitiful scene with his cards and shoves them into the middle like a nine year old that isn't getting what he wants. Townsend rattles his knuckles on the table with a check. The cards come up. Queen of spades, jack of diamonds, and the two of hearts. Right now I'm sitting with two pair and a half decent shot at a flush that I won't be counting on.

Townsend doesn't respond in any way. Mr. Soda checks it down with a lazy gesture. I raise it up eight hundred. Xang pushes his hand into the middle. Townsend calls my raise, dropping in eight hundred. Soda folds and the turn comes. I'm not looking at the cards again, this time pretending to fiddle with a cigarette and

my lighter while I keep a sharp eye focused on Townsend's hand. It stops its flickering for another instant, the way a hummingbird's wings look in slow motion. The board has a brand new ace of hearts on it. *An ace, or aces?* I raise it by eight hundred again and Townsend takes his time deciding whether or not to call. He does and we're back with the river. It gives us the six of hearts. It gives me that long-shot flush.

I squirt out a calculated twitch from my left eyelid. I've been using it all game when I've got a garbage hand to lay down and I know that at the very least O'Donnell and Jay are aware of it. I check. O'Donnell pushes out a long slow whistle. The only sound even he can get away with making right now. *Not in the hand, pal? Good, stay the fuck out of the hand.* Townsend creates a fat stack of chips out front of him and makes another right beside it. Four grand. It's nearly all he's got. The pot total is seventy two hundred bones, and that's before my call. That's a spicy meatball. I can take the heat and I call him, looking towards O'Donnell and giving him an induced eye twitch that lasts only a moment and then becomes useless to me forever. Townsend turns over the pocket aces he'd been repping and then, as my lips crack with a half smile, he starts to shake even harder. He nearly falls off his chair when my flush comes to his attention.

"Fuckin' river rat," says Jay, as I lean over to pull my chips in. I squint at him through the veil of cigarette smoke that's cruising across my eye.

"S'cuse me? What was it, Jimmy?" I say.

"...It's Jay...fuckin' Jay, man, and you're a fuckin' river rat that fuckin' drags him out to the river like that, just waitin' to hit, huh?" He's trying to engage me in a stupid pissing contest that could only result in him knowing how I thought the hand through.

"L-leave it," murmurs Townsend.

"Fuck that, Townie! What a rat fink way to win a poker hand!" He's stabbing his finger at me while I ignore him. I can

hear Sampson turn in his chair, his ears pricking up at the raised volume.

“Hey! You watch your goddamn mouth with who you’re calling a fucking rat you little shit heel!” bellows Mr. Soda, throwing his cigar butt at Jay. It bounces off his face, leaving a big ‘ol greasy mark of tobacco juice on his chin.

Jay doesn’t like this and seems to be on the verge of a temper tantrum when O’Donnell interrupts.

“Ohkay! Calm it down. You can be some agro pricks sometimes, huh? Time for a break anyway. Soda Pop why don’t you grab a drink, and Jay? Stay the fuck out of the washroom, you hear me?” He’s pointing at Jay and flicking at his nose.

The dealer remaining to watch our chips, the table splits up and we all take the time to re-compose ourselves. Slumping over a poker table for two hours will dishevel your appearance in ways that you can’t realize until later. Your clothes creep around you at uncomfortable angles, and the blood sitting in your veins becomes stagnant. Your circulation slows down, blood doesn’t get to the brain as fast, and you start to lose your edge. I take a quick run to the john; once inside I overhear Xang talking on the phone in Cantonese, and Jay’s voice down the hall.

“No! No! Really Sean, I’m just taking a piss!” Jay enters the bathroom and stands at a urinal next to me.

“Remember, you shake it more than twice? Counts as playin’ with it,” I say to him as he unzips.

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Heh.”

Xang exits a bathroom stall without flushing, washes his hands, and leaves in a matter of seconds.

“You’re not gonna river me, man.”

“Eh?” I say, hearing him full well, but choosing to let him talk a little more. I notice that he still hasn’t started pissing. Just standing there with his cock out trying not to look at me.

"I know this game, man. I know these guys. And now? I've got you figured out too."

He's just being a little prick. Trying to get under my skin and make me lose my cool. There's a few of these douche bags at every casino table. They try and rile you up, make you feel insecure. Bitch about every single fucking hand. Distract you from the game.

"Jay?" I turn my face and look directly at him and zip up my fly. "I don't know how much your time is worth? I don't know how you spend your time?" I step back from the urinal and walk towards the sink.

"Pfffffft!" He squirts the air through his lips.

"See? My time though? It's valuable." I rinse my hands and am drying them, noticing that he's only just started to take a leak.

"I spend it wisely. Right now you're in the charity of my time, see?" I look him up and down. Still pissing. "I'm sharing my valuable time with you, so how's 'bout you try not to *piss* it away." On the word *piss* I reach out with a leg and give him a gentle nudge forward.

He tips towards the wall and his body wavers. Nothing that's serious to his stance, but he pisses all over his hands and, from my imaginin', the front of his pants too. I walk back out into the main room and stroll over to Sampson.

Chapter 19

“What’s it look like in there man?” he asks. He’s had the bartenders set him up a small makeshift side table using a cooler. It holds a half full ashtray, a bottle of bourbon and a copy of “The Thin Man” by Dashiell Hammett.

“What’s this?” I point at his side table.

“Well, I’m not watching the game, so...I’m reading a book and smoking cigarettes.”

“Some back up you are.”

“You’re doing fine,” he says casually, with a wave of his hand.

“Well, yeah, I am right now. Things might take a turn somewhere though, so...” I pick up the bottle of whiskey. “Stay frosty, huh?” I shake the bottle and then take a swig.

He just raises an eyebrow and offers me a cigarette. I take it and light up, stretching out my back and arms. I’m starting to get tired, and I ask the guys behind the bar if there’s a chance they might have a cup of coffee. They don’t, but they’ve got one of those toxic waste dump energy drinks. I take it. O’Donnell approaches me with a smile and I pretend I don’t see him.

“So Mr. Fox? How’s the game going?”

I turn to him with a smile, rolling my eyes.

“Well apparently I’m a river rat, but whatya gonna do, huh?”

“Sorry for Jay. He’s a friend of a friend who’s someone’s little brother and has a real knack for acting like his shit doesn’t stink.”

I wave this off. “A man doesn’t come to a poker game and expect it to be devoid of reprobates.”

“No. A man most certainly doesn’t.” His smile drops for the first time and I catch his glance shift over to Jay who’s just exiting the washroom, piss all over the front of his pants. O’Donnel lets out a sigh. “But in the past, they were a higher quality of reprobate.”

“Nice place you’ve got here,” I say, changing the subject and hoping to get a better read on him. His demeanour is disarming, if a bit daunting because of his size. If I didn’t know better I’d want to be his friend. Yet a man like Sean O’Donnell doesn’t go from being a bar star weekend warrior to an inner city mogul without getting his hands dirty. You can’t see it, but it’s a stain that won’t wash off.

“Thanks, we picked it up real cheap. The previous owners were talking about cutting heroin here. I told them that it’s hardly the place for that. Stupid pricks, they think that if they can get the product closer to the consumer they’re gonna make more money. If you make it harder for people to get the product? They’ll pay more. Simple shit.” He signals to the bartender for another drink and the young guy obliges. I watch O’Donnell stuff a twenty in the tip jar. More than generous for one drink.

“I don’t really know too much about that stuff.” I play it stupid.

“Oh Christ, you want to steer clear of it. Never met a guy on junk that I liked. I’m not a hypocrite, though. I mean, back in the heydays it was all sex, drugs, and rock and roll, but now...y’know I’m a businessman now. Gotta try and keep your nose clean when you’re dirty in a bunch of other places. Not saying that I’m above having a night of excess every now and then, but hey, I’m not twenty five anymore.”

“What was the turning point for you? The work become the

party and the party become work?"

"It wasn't really like that. I got put in a couple positions where it was either be sober, or lose a lot of money. Once you've got a lot of money you can afford to be drunk some of the time. A lot of people fuck that one right up. Because if you want to keep that money? You've still gotta stay sober. Man's gotta evolve, you know what I'm saying?"

"Sure do."

"Mr. Fox, if you'll pardon me, I'm going to sit down. We're going to be starting again. Got everything you need?" I nod and smile, "Good, well nice chatting. See you inside the ring." He turns and shoots me another smile, along with a wink, before turning with footsteps that are very light for a man of his stature. He's a fighter, so he moves like a dancer.

It starts all over again, though now the going's not so slow. Mr. Soda leans into the next hand like a right hook. Townsend's chips are all but gone and his imminent removal from the game will open up the odds and make things more interesting. The other players will want him gone sooner rather than later. This puts him in the difficult position of having to pick his battles. He's only got enough chips to see a couple more flops. If he finds a hand he likes, he's going to have to stick to it. Probably go all in pre-flop, even if just to scare the other's off and maybe steal a pot. He's out after the flop on this hand, though. It plays halfway, but Soda takes it down with a few daunting bets. He probably just had a high pair. He wants to scare us. Jay has curbed his attitude, yet he keeps fidgeting in his seat. He looks at me, chomping at the bit. Waiting for a chance to spit some more venom my way. Fuck him.

"What smells like piss?" I ask out loud. Xang and Townsend look at Jay. He fumes; I smirk while the other guys berate him for pissing on his pants.

"Shit Jay. Y'know shaking it more than twice counts as playin' with it? And it makes an awful mess," says O'Donnell. We all laugh,

though perhaps mine is a bit heartier than the rest.

We duke it out a few more hands. Townsend is holding on by the skin of his teeth. The hand coming up is where he makes it or breaks it. This is where guys are going to be puffing up their chests and going for the kill. Hands like this one can be dangerous. There might not be much money in the pot, but a man's pride can be the real prize to some.

I'm out right away, even with pocket kings. I don't need the grief. As predicted, Townsend is all in right away. It only takes Xang, Jay and Lopresco a grand to call, and up comes the flop. It's the two of spades, eight of diamonds and the king of hearts. *Damn, shoulda stuck.* Action starts with Xang, who checks it. Jay loads on another grand and Lopresco smooth calls him. Xang calls too and the turn comes up. Eight of spades. Xang's face holds like a mountain, while Jay makes a *scrтч* noise with his tongue and teeth. Lopresco checks his hand again. Townsend continues to shake while he stares at the side pot, the maximum stake he stands to win. This time Xang raises it by two grand and all of a sudden we've got a real saucy pot. Jay calls, while humming *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, and Lopresco re-raises Xang by a grand. They all call. The pot's somewhere around nineteen thousand dollars. Someone is walking away from this a very rich man, and the winner of a bullshitting contest. River comes out with the jack of diamonds. Then the faux faux comes. Action is on Xang but Jay dumps the remains of his chip stack into the middle. This is a no-no. It's not his turn to act and as such, whatever he does can affect how Xang might play the hand.

"What the fuck is that?" Mr. Soda bellows.

"Oh shit! Shit! Sorry! Sorry!" Jay waves his arms around the table, raising his palms to all the players in the hand.

"Oh bullshit! You wanna do shit like that go find yourself a weekend game in the 'burbs, Jay. You know that's a crock."

"Serious! Guys, that was an accident. I-"

Rather than deal with fifteen minutes of bullshit, and Jay's tedious explanation, Xang shoves his chip stack into the middle. There's no need to re-deal this one, Jay is just fucking with them. *Or is he?* Lopresco doesn't seem to comprehend what's going on, and in that I find the rank amateur at the table. He's all in too, with trip two's, I'd wager. Xang has been too tight all along to get strung out to dry without weighing his chances; I'd venture a guess that he's got something half decent. Jay, on the other hand, has been the wildcard all night. If he was trying to buy a pot with that calculated act of over aggression, then he's about to be up shit creek real quick. They turn them up.

Townsend has an admirable jack queen. Not a bad hand to go all in on pre-flop. Lopresco has the trip twos that I'd guessed he did. Xang turns over a king jack, for two pair. *Shit. I had a real shot in this one.* Xang is mumbling to himself in Cantonese. I presume it's swear words. Jay turns over pocket jacks, for the trip jacks, and rubs his hands together before dragging the pile of money over to his corner of the hexagon.

"Heh hah!" he shrilly exclaims. "Whooo....real runner there boys? What can I say? I guess...heh! Sorry Townie! Sometimes you just sneak it in at the end!" He's elated with himself and gives Townsend a couple punches in the arm, while the poor guy just buries his head in his hands.

O'Donnell leans forward and cocks his head at me, after first giving Mr. Soda a brief wave of his hand. Xang already has his jacket on and is halfway to the door. Strange guy. Lopresco looks like he's not sure what happened, studying the board to try and find where the hand that beat him is. O'Donnell changes his glance from me to the dealer and then points at Jay with a half-hearted gesture and a sigh.

"Cash him out, Lou."

Jay is still giggling with delight as he stacks his chips. "Wha?" He turns to look at O'Donnell and the dealer.

“Jay, I like winning. You know I like winning, you’ve seen me do it lots. Now, there’s nothing wrong with a man smilin’ when he wins and there’s nothing wrong with a man being pissed off when he loses. But I like to think I run a gentleman’s game here, Jay, and your behaviour...not just tonight, but over the past couple weeks? Is starting to smack real heavy of asshole, y’know what I’m saying?”

“Sean, you’re right. You’re right, but I...”

“Lou, cash him out,” repeats O’Donnell.

Lou reaches across the table for Jay’s chips, but Jay drags them out of his reach like he’s that nine year old all over again.

“What?! No! What, you guys all think I’m an asshole? No, really? You think I’m an asshole. Fuck you guys! I won this money fair and square. What? You want me to leave? Is that what you want? No way. I’ve got just as much right to play at this table as any one of you!” Jay doesn’t stop talking here, but I’m not going to be bothered to listen to much more and turn to look at Mr. Soda.

He’s restrained right now, but there’s an unbridled amount of dislike for Jay brimming at the surface of the man. He asks me for a cigarette and I oblige him.

“Right, Sean! Right! Oh I’m such a disagreeable guy that you won’t have me at your poker game any more! Fine! Fine...FUCK YOU!” He gives O’Donnell the business end of his right middle finger, leaning over the table and yelling right in his face.

O’Donnell lets out that familiar regretful breath. Jay’s finger is still hanging in front of him, and in a casual motion O’Donnell grabs it and bends it backwards at the first knuckle. First it breaks, then O’Donnell twists it and we can hear the bone pop out at the joint. Jay starts screaming and his legs give out on him so he falls flat across the table.

“What is it, Jay? Why the fuck are you here? You don’t need to be here to hustle some dollars. That’s what the half rent casinos and back room games are for. We’re here to play, ‘cause we’re guys

that like to play with money. Y'know? There's only one thing I can't stand more than a poor loser, and that's a poor winner. You win some, you lose some, that's the way it goes, am I right fellas?"

O'Donnell turns to look at Soda and I, while Davey the door-man escorts a bewildered Lopresco to the door. Sampson is looking over at all the commotion, though it appears his interest is only casual. Mr. Soda and I nod at O'Donnell.

"See, Jay, if I thought you actually needed this money? Like that you maybe had to pay your girlfriend's rent? 'Cause you had to do that before, right? After you blew it all on an impulse tourney down at the Castle Jack? Then I might let this circumstance fly a little bit...but, as things are now, not so much. As it happens I know that you're already pretty flush, though more of your money is in your nose than your wallet. No, it looks like you're just here to be a fucking asshole. So here's what we're going to do: you're going to cash out, and Townsend here, who's been such a good sport all night, is going to take half your stack."

"What the fuck, Sean! That's bullshit! You can't do that! That's my money-" O'Donnell raises his hand like an eagle claw and clenches his jaw tight. Jay shuts up.

"Lou, could you get up for a second?" O'Donnell says to the dealer, who's done splitting up the money.

"What are you...? Hey!"

O'Donnell picks up Jay's body with one arm. He tosses him up onto his feet and I can see the stretching of O'Donnell's physique through his track jacket. Jay hangs, wobbling, in front of O'Donnell, his face confused and half frightened.

"Look Jay, I'm going to let you *walk* out of here. Be happy about that. In the future, if you even want to, you might be able to come back but that's not going to happen for a long while. I'm a man of the people, though, and that's why your shitty attitude's only going to cost you half your stack. I'm not an unfair man. Besides, you're going to need the money for the dental work," finishes

O'Donnell, silky smooth.

"Dental work?" Jay queries.

O'Donnell unloads a right hook that turns Jay's face into an explosion of what looks like chicklets, but isn't. The teeth scatter across the middle of the poker table, flecking blood onto the felt as they tumble like dice. Jay's jaw hangs like a busted kitchen cupboard. O'Donnell calls out to the bartenders to bring him a rag. They do, and he shoves it into Jay's mouth, which is all but gushing out blood. O'Donnell pushes up on Jay's jaw and there's a faint sound of busted bone grinding against busted bone.

O'Donnell whistles, "Davey! Yeah, could you take Jay outside and get him a cab to the hospital? That'd be great."

Jay's whimpering is muffled.

"Oh calm down. Thought you liked milkshakes? Eh? Sorry, bad joke, but that's about all you're gonna be eating for a month, so you better get used to the idea. C'mon, on your feet. Finish this out like a man, even if you couldn't start it like one. That's a fella."

O'Donnell pats Jay on his cheek and stuffs the wad of cash inside his jacket. Davey hauls Jay to his feet and drags him across the room to the exit. Jay sobs through a mouthful of blood and bar rag.

Despite the sudden act of violence, the whole room is steady. My hands aren't shaking, but the stakes have gone up, and I'm not talking about the poker game.

Mr. Soda finishes his cigarette and then turns to me with a toothy grin. "Abused patience turns to fury," he says, to which I raise my eyebrows and nod.

Across the table, Townsend is trying to decline the offer of ten thousand dollars that O'Donnell is pushing his way. He's not trying very hard. At the end of it O'Donnell just reaches over, shoves the wad of bills into Townsend's jacket, and then pulls out his chair so he has to stand up.

"Mr. Townsend, you go home and take care of that sick wife

of yours. Lord knows she's waited long enough for the operation. Take care of yourself, too, you look like shit," says the smiling O'Donnell.

The room is in disarray. We've lost four players in a matter of fifteen minutes. There isn't more than twenty thousand dollars in play right now, but it's still more money than any of us walked in here with. O'Donnell requests a small moment for all of us to compose ourselves, though he doesn't look like he needs it. Mr. Soda doesn't get up. I turn to look at Sampson and let out a huge breath. My poker face slides off for the first time in two hours. We don't take much of a break. That's good though. It's time to cut the shit. Before the next hand gets dealt, I rummage in my jacket for a moment, opening a zipper and shifting the jacket to the now empty chair to my immediate left.

In the absence of the other gamblers, the odds open up and we'll tighten our games. O'Donnell starts folding everything, while Mr. Soda and I duke it out for a couple grand that keeps changing hands every few deals. O'Donnell's staying out. His play has been consistently inconsistent for the entire game. He hasn't stuck to one strategy for longer than two hands, but now he's locking it down like Fort Knox. Mr. Soda is trying to gain some ground, getting his licks in where he can. He's currently the short stack, but we're all pretty even.

Poker is a game of calculations and patience. This far in, where you're only one man away from being heads up, you can start to get a little cocky playing everything up front street. Can't play obvious. No, you've got to sneak around the back, break some necks and slit some throats before anyone even notices you're there. The tension builds. Eventually, something is going to happen. Probably won't be a poor decision. Just luck of the draw.

On the latest hand I come up with a queen of hearts and the three of diamonds. It's nothing special, but as long as I've already paid to see the flop I'll stay in this. The other two call the minimum

and all of a sudden things get really interesting. Up come the queen of spades, queen of clubs and the three of hearts. In poker, this is called *the nuts*. Because now I've got them both square by the nuts. I flopped my full house and right now, despite the fact that I'm no mathematician, I'm liking the looks of this equation. I check it down. I need these guys to hang out for this hand. O'Donnell checks it down too, but Mr. Soda decides to up the action a bit, betting a grand and a half. I take him for a little walk through my expressions before I pay into the hand. O'Donnell smooth calls. Turn comes up as a ten of spades. I bet it up by another grand and a half. This time O'Donnell re-raises me by four thousand, practically all in. Mr. Soda's face makes an involuntary jiggle, and I can tell he's teetering on the edge of an all in. O'Donnell has to see this too. Soda knows he's only got two choices. He makes the ballsy decision and pushes the remainder of his chip stack, just over four thousand, into the pot.

Life affords you a certain amount of luck. You take the hands you're dealt and you decide what to do with them. I haven't been feeling all that lucky for the past couple days. There'll be times when despite the luck that life might be doling out, you've got to take just a little bit more. Sometimes that means gaining it by chance. Other times it means changing the game.

"I'll see your all in," I say, while rummaging in my jacket, "And I'll raise you."

The handgun sounds like it's sliding across ice as it careens through a few stacks of plastic coinage. It comes to a stop dead centre on the table. I can sense a depth charge of aggression going off in the pit of Mr. Soda's stomach but I lock my eyes onto O'Donnell, who signals the big man away with a shake of his head. O'Donnell remains motionless, but his face splits into that classy smile as he turns to the dealer.

"Lou. Take a walk."

Chapter 20

At times a man's reputation is all he's got. In the industry, it's all you'll ever have. You earn a reputation as a fuck up, then that's what you are. You burn enough people, or screw up enough? Don't expect to find jobs doing much more than dishwashing. I don't care how nice of a guy you are or who you know. See, whether or not I like to admit it, I've got a reputation. I've been doing this for too long to not have one. Aside from a few freshman stumbles, poor reactionary decisions that resulted in full on cluster-fucks, I've always played it pretty straight. Done my best to do a good job by my employers. Doesn't mean I was good at keepin' my trap shut, especially if I thought that somethin' needed to be said. What a man says, or doesn't say, can affect his reputation almost as much as what he does. Almost.

"Well, Mr. Wolfe? I'd say that's the riskiest re-raise I've ever seen."

O'Donnell is half laughing as he says this. He's right, either I'm out of the frying pan and into the fire, or I'm already cooked. More important, he knows who I really am.

"See, I appreciate you wanting to keep your identity anonymous Mr. Wolfe, but in this town you can't hide who you are from

me. Sure, you may have been in your heyday just as I was getting out of the circus, but don't think that means I don't know who you are. You're a hired gun, and I can respect that, but you don't become a mercenary without the other gunslingers knowing that you've entered the field of battle. 'Cause that's what it is, Tom. I can call you Tom, right? It's a battlefield, and you know it."

He reaches into the middle of the table and picks up the gun. He cracks open the cylinder and snorts with surprise when he realizes that it's loaded. He snaps the cylinder back into place with the gestures of a man who has handled firearms before. Then he cocks the hammer and leans across the table, casually aiming the weapon sideways at my face, which is still in poker mode.

"So do you want to tell me why you, a guy that for all accounts and histories isn't known to be an idiot, walks into *my* poker game, with a loaded gun?"

He doesn't know. Does he? Is he just yanking my chain? Did I come this far for nothing? Keep it together. Keep it cool.

"Cause really, the only reasons that someone marches up to a guy like me with a loaded gun, are, A, he wants to shoot him in the face? Or, B, he's looking for a job. Now Tom, I appreciate the gusto, and suffice to say I don't think you're here to do any harm to Mr. Soda or myself." He un-cocks the hammer and lays the gun back on the table. I let out the breath that was caught down at the bottom of my chest.

"You have any idea who this is?" O'Donnell says to Mr. Soda, who shakes his head. "This, my dear friend, is Tom Wolfe. Shit disturber extraordinaire. I heard this story about you this one time, you know a Kenny Rickles?"

"I know a lot of people," I snort.

"Doesn't really matter. Anyway this one time Kenny Rickles says he's out working coverage on this kidnapping job. Hired goon stuff, nothing personal, right? So he's there and they're doing the drop. Was some spoiled Wop princess, snagged her

on her way out of class one day. Turns out she's the daughter of Freddy No Limes. So Freddy No Limes, he's outta the game, done with all that Omerta shit. He's settled, got a nice house, nice family, done with it and all the blessings of the family. Rickles finds this out and he's thinking the kidnapping is a little off base, but a man's gotta eat and pay rent somehow so he doesn't complain about the job. The drop is supposed to happen at this construction site, cash for the girl. But just as the car is pulling up and Freddy No Limes is getting out with a briefcase full of cash, one of the backhoes in this construction site fires up. Out of nowhere. Next thing Kenny knows this backhoe is flipping his crew's cars like they were shot glasses. Two big SUVs and a Lincoln turned over in a matter of seconds. Then this big rig reverses and the driver is using the bucket to shield the cab from the hail of gunfire that's raining down on him. No shit Soda, true story. Three guys end up going to the back alley emergency for ricochet wounds, Kenny Rickles being one of them. Once the girl was out of the back of the Lincoln and on her way home with Daddy, what guys were left saw the backhoe obliterating those cars. Was it just for fun, Tom?"

I look up at him. His smile has gotten wider and he's flipping a poker chip in the air. I shrug and half grin back at him.

"When a friend says he needs your help, you see what you can do."

"I meant crushing the cars."

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

"But see, you're no criminal, and in fact if what I've heard through the grapevine is true, then you're not the type that goes looking for trouble anymore. So if you are retired from our underworld, just what the hell are you doing here?" He finishes with an exasperated tone that might have come from a Jr. High principal.

I'm high octane right now, but keep the grip on my mind at ten and two. While the cards aren't part of it anymore, I'm still playing. I raise a cigarette to my mouth and light it.

My hands as smooth as ice cold vodka.

“See, Sean? Can I call you Sean?” I talk, he smirks. “I was really hoping that *you* could tell me what I’m doing here. Putting five grand down on a poker game with a loaded revolver in my jacket? I was wondering that myself. Wondering why just over a day ago I received a package with a handgun in it, along with a note telling me to watch my back. Why the note’s stationary led me to the Downtown Eastside? To three locations.” I hold up three fingers and take my smoke out of my mouth, blowing a sharp jet upwards. “Three locations that you’re either a part of developing, or are some sort of figure head behind, y’know - the Westwick’s developments? It’s a thin lead, sure, but it’s the only one I’ve got. So, really, I don’t know. I was hoping you might have some answers for me? You wanna talk? Lets talk. But tell Mr. Soda to put that knife away. It’d be a real shame if I had to stab him in the throat with it.”

O’Donnell smirks a little and chuckles. Mr. Soda turns and glares at me, dropping a switchblade on the ground, while I continue to smoke. O’Donnell ponders for a moment.

“Christ, you sure are some kind of hard case, man,” he says and rings over a bartender, offering all of us a round. It’s a good time for a whiskey and I indulge.

“Look, Tom, I don’t really know what to tell you. I can’t think of any reason that I’d have sent you a gun. This is the first time we’ve met, isn’t it? I meet a lot of people in a day and I-”

I know what he’s talking about, waving him along with my hand.

“Anyway, I think it’s fair to say that you’re aware of the type of business that I partake in,” he gestures at our surroundings and points at the blood on the poker table, “So don’t get me wrong. There’s a distinct possibility that I might have something to do with you and that gun. If I do, I’m, not aware of it. Pal, I got no beef with you. You played the game, you kept your cool. You’re not the

type to be an idiot and give out information what's private, right?"

I squash the corners of my mouth and raise an eyebrow. *Please, I'm not an eighteen year old busboy. Who would I tell?*

"Right, so it sounds like someone is either setting you up, or they're setting me up. You got any enemies?"

"Nemesis or two, sure. But that's not me anymore. Besides, if someone wanted me dealt with they'd just deal with me. Why set me up to walk right into you? Why would someone send me a gun that led to you?"

"Well, suffice to say there are certain people that want me dead, but..."

"Hey, Sean? Maybe someone set the kid up to grease you?" suggests Mr. Soda with a shrug.

"Well then why would I give him the gun? He's right, Soda Pop. If the gun looks like it came from me, then..."

Ersula. That's what you guys are missing. She lied to me. It wasn't her boyfriend, you, that sent me that gun. It was her. So what's she playing at? How does she benefit from this?

"Wait a minute...do you own a warehouse at...no! You sent some goons in a Chrysler after me yesterday! While I was on the Downtown Eastside!" I point across the table.

"What in the hell are you talking about?!" He raises his voice, not liking the accusatory tone I've used.

"You own a warehouse at 320 Carnivale?"

"Uh?" O'Donnell isn't sure and turns to look at Mr. Soda, who is thinking.

"Nope. That's in the Downtown Eastside, in what they're uh, whatta they callin' it? A rehabilitating neighbourhood? Nah, s'close to the Westwick's stuff but, nope, not yours. Your other locations down there ar-"

"Soda Pop, shut up eh?"

"Look, yesterday I was down at 320 Carnivale. It was the only building on the street that didn't look like it was part of any

development. I'm hanging around and these dick-bags flash their headlights on me and then take off. Half hour later I'm having a drink in a bar up the street and the same car pulls up, two guys bail out and come looking for me. Had to get nasty with them in the alley, and I only got away 'cause of the rain. Not my idea of a casual evening out."

"Yeah, the storms are pretty gross...after tonight the forecast is predicting record breaking downpours for the rest of the week. Something about the lunar cycle," pipes up Mr. Soda, and I think that the big man is finally drunk.

"That's great news," I monotone.

"Wolfie, I wish there was something I could do to help you out. But right now, the less my shit stinks the better, you know what I'm sayin'? I'm sorry but, I'm telling you, I didn't send you a gun. I got no beef with you and unfortunately, no answers for you either. But that being said...that gun? It led you straight to me, so, thing is, if you kept me in the loop on this? I'd really appreciate it. Let's say, on retainer?"

I'm flabbergasted. One of the biggest criminal, and industry, figures in the City is soliciting my help. Havin' a favor in your back pocket from a big dog like this never hurt anyone and I'm going to be tracking this down to the bone anyway. 'Course, this could just be part of a bigger play and he's using me in some other way that I don't even realize. I want to believe him, though. You don't live in the penthouse of the Hotel Manke without being halfway accountable. Ersula. It all comes back to Ersula. The patchwork of possibilities in my brain start to draw a little tighter. Ersula sent me the gun. There's no one else that would have had that much access to O'Donnell's hotel room. But what's her play? She set me up to kill her boyfriend?

"Mr. Wolfe?" O'Donnell says, snapping me out of the five uninterrupted seconds of thought.

"Yeah? Yeah...Sean, yeah I think I can do that for you. But I might need a little help here and there."

"I think that goes without saying," burbles Mr. Soda.

"Yeah? Well I'm sayin' it." I spit some indignance at Soda and then stand up from the table and count my demands off on my fingers. "I need to have some way to reach you. I need access to all your buildings in the Westwick's development, and I'm going to need a lawyer just in case this shit goes south. I'm going to come and see you tomorrow; I want to meet with you personally. We can all get a better idea of where to go after we've sobered up and had some sleep."

O'Donnell shrugs and then says, "Fair enough."

Still standing, I turn to check on Sampson. He's passed out in his chair. I laugh to myself. *Some backup.* I turn back to the table to see both O'Donnell and Mr. Soda standing up. O'Donnell hands me a scrap of paper.

"Here's the address of my office, and Mr. Soda's number. After tomorrow, you need to get ahold of me? You go through him. If he doesn't pick up right away, don't call him back. He will call you back."

I nod and the two men make like they're about to walk away from the table, but I rap my knuckles on the hardwood encircling the felt.

"Hey! Hey! I don't know about you guys, but I'm not about to walk away from my five grand."

They both look at the table like it's an afterthought.

"It's ok. Guys, don't sit down. Mr. Soda, your pair of tens isn't going to be enough and Sean? I'm not sure who you think you're bluffing out of a three player hand this early in the morning? So don't bother turning up those rag cards you got." I look them both in the eye while I turn their cards over in my mind, once more reading their faces. I'm right on both counts. Soda looks annoyed while O'Donnell is pleased.

"Say fellas, you ever been beat by a gay waiter?"

They both look confused while I cut them a grin and turn over

my cards. The queen and the three. Soda doesn't get it. O'Donnell's face has split into a smile.

"Queen with a tray, the gay waiter," he laughs, "Incredible Mr. Wolfe, you don't disappoint. Funny I didn't think you'd be very tall."

"Yeah, well. Just remember, I'm a professional. I do this job. It's over. I'm out. End of story."

"Absolutely. Just a shame that someone as resourceful as yourself can't be bought by a guy like me. Good help is so hard to find. I mean really, inside forty eight hours you manage to claw your way to the final three in my private poker game? Real man sized cojones on you there, Wolfe. Gotta admire that."

I'm not immune to ass kissing, but I do take it with a grain of salt. O'Donnell's handing me the stack of cash, and the gun.

"I have a feeling you might need that."

"I sure hope not."

"Yeah, well, watch your back for the police too, huh."

"Police?"

"C'mon, don't tell me you've suddenly gone dumb shit on me. Hello? There was one here tonight?"

I frown.

"Still got some stuff to learn, Mr. Wolfe. That Chinaman here tonight? Yeah, he's a cop."

I stop and think about it before nodding.

"Don't worry about him much, I'm going to grease his ass tomorrow. But keep your eyes open, huh?" At the mention of greasing the Chinaman, O'Donnell seems gleeful.

I stuff the gun and money into my jacket and nod at the men, before turning to wake up Sampson.

"Did you win?" Sampson asks through a throat clogged with cigarette muck.

"The Game's not over yet."

Chapter 21

“So now what?”

“I’m not really sure.”

“So it’s not him?”

“He didn’t send me that gun. Who knows, though? I could be wrong, he might be playing me yet, but I don’t think so.”

“So, that’s what I mean when I say, so now what?”

We’ve left the building and are making our way towards Sampson’s car. He’s rubbing the sleep out of his eyes and having another nip out of his flask.

“Now, I meet with him tomorrow and hopefully he can point me in the right direction. Doesn’t matter what direction he points me in, though. I know where I’m gonna have to go.”

“Where’s that?”

“Wherever this Ersula broad’s at. She’s the missing link. She’s the one that fed me the big ‘ol red herring about O’Donnell, so she’s who I’m going to have to...I don’t know? Follow. She’s not going to give up anything to me, and I don’t think I could trust her even if she did. That’s for sure. So I guess I’ll just have to find her and follow her.”

“Why didn’t you just tell O’Donnell his girlfriend is runnin’

games on him?”

“Cause then she might show up dead from an *accidental* overdose or something. Whatever she knows, she’s hiding it from O’Donnell, and probably with good reason. She’s liable to tell him anything if she feels threatened, and it might not be the truth. So, I follow her and find out what the truth really is, and if she is screwing’ him over? Maybe then I can let O’Donnell know what’s going on. But even then? What she knows is more important than O’Donnell getting what he wants. The information that’s at stake here is the only leverage I’ve got. Christ, for all I know they’re both playin’ me.” I let out a huge sigh and rub my balled fists into my eyes. When I open them again the red and blue lights of a police car are flashing in my face.

“Oh for chrissakes.”

Headlights shine in our eyes, and out of the driver’s side of the car a familiar bulky silhouette approaches me.

“Mr. Wolfe!” exclaims Detective David with open arms.

“Detective,” I nod, and scratch my chin.

“What brings you out to this fine end of town, at this time in the morning? If I didn’t know any better I’d think you were living on the street these days.”

“Oh y’know, just scoutin’...real estate. Some real good buildings over these parts and-” I stop talking as another silhouette approaches through the glare of the headlights. The man steps forward and as my eyes continue to adjust to the light, his features become clear. It’s Xang Li. I let out a long whistle.

“Right. Real estate, Mr. Wolfe. I hear you. Xang and I were just talkin’ the same thing. Great minds think alike, eh?” His voice rumbles on the edge of laughter.

“So what’s your stake in this? What’s your play?” I ask, squinting at him, my subtlety depleted.

“I don’t know, what’s yours?”

“Maybe I’m just a guy who wanted a little action.”

“Maybe you’re about to be wanted for collusion with suspects in an ongoing investigation?”

“Yeah? Maybe fuck you and the slant you rode in on,” I say, pointing at Xang and using the racial slur to throw him off.

You don’t know me is what I’m thinking.

Detective David takes a long slow pause, reaching into his jacket for a stick of gum. He peels the aluminum wrapper off and then places the piece of gum near the back of his mouth.

“You’re playing a dangerous game here, Mr. Wolfe. I don’t want to see you get hurt. But more than that? I don’t want you fucking up my investigation. So, do like I say, and back the fuck off.” He takes a few steps towards me, but keeps his hands in his pockets.

“I wasn’t aware that the police in this city knew the word investigation, much less how to operate one. Thought you guys were more about investigating your bank accounts for unexpected annual income? Shit, you motherfuckers do what you want, when you want, and you back it all up with a badge. But I guess I can’t blame you.”

“Tom...?” Sampson is behind me and I can feel the hairs on his neck start to pick up.

“If City Hall gave me a leash that long? I might be letting every other hillbilly meth professor pay my kids tuition too. Shit, and if they felt like picking up the tab for me getting my pole waxed by some chick who’s on the other side of a bad semester? Guess I’d let them do that too. Investigation? Fuck you, you can’t even spell the word.” I get what I’m asking for.

Detective David only has to take one step forward and I don’t even make an attempt to stop him. One of his ham sized fists thumps right into my gut and I drop on my ass like a sack of soup bones. There’s a fire in his eyes as he looks over me. The burn tells me he wants to give me some more, but he doesn’t.

“Or maybe I’m wrong,” I cough out. “I have been before.”

Detective David takes a few steps back, stares at me for a second then shakes his head and waves me off. He speaks again before he gets in the car.

“Stay the fuck out of my investigation Wolfe!”

Once he’s in the car I holler at him, “You stay the fuck out of MY investigation!” But the vehicle has already turned around and driven away.

Sampson walks over and hauls me up onto my feet.

“What the fuck was that all about?”

“Pardon my French, it was just a test. Had to push some buttons.”

“Test for what?”

“Well, I needed to know if he was a crooked cop. If he was a crooked cop? I’m pretty sure that he would have, if not killed us? At least tossed us in the drunk tank for a night.”

“Killed us?”

“But he’s not crooked...so, that means that Xang Li was under-cover in that poker game, and that means...the Detective could be somebody I could trust?”

“Killed us?”

“Sampson, I don’t have the energy to get hung up on minor details right now.”

“Killed us?”

“I know. It’s been a hard day’s night for me, too. Fuck it. I’ll figure it all out tomorrow. Let’s go home.”

We climb into the car. Sampson blasts the heat, the dry warmth crawling up my legs, into my guts and finally onto my busted transmission of a brain. The remaining thoughts circling around are the primary ones. The ones for which I still have no truths. Only possibilities. Why am I involved in whatever this is? Why did Ersula lie to me? Just what is going on? What is happening down there, on the Downtown Eastside? Down in the darkness on the edge of town?

About the Author

Axel Matfin is from *100 Mile House, British Columbia*. In 2006 he moved in search of Action and Adventure. He currently resides in East Vancouver manufacturing stories of wonder and excitement.

The Bartender: Darkness on the Edge of Town is his first novel.

Tom Wolfe returns in

The Bartender:

Appetite for Destruction

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