

The New Jerus Blues Vol. 2

Unfinished Pieces

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Chapter One

Ice Breakers

It's the first night of college. Technically, Orientation.

I'm skipping it though, basically because I'm anti-social, which I feel like is a good medical moniker for being like, "Oops, I got too high."

I'm beneath the hexagonal roof of the gazebo, in the scent of rain, using my Magnum marker to tag up the gazebo where so many others have. Though instead of drawing a caricature of a penis or copying the insignia of some death metal band, I write my tag in elegant and hyper-cursive scrawl—*ASDF*—to let them know—let the world know—that I was here. 2001.

The noise gets louder. Peals of laughter from the freshman lounge.

Imagine me walking in, eyes looking like radioactive strawberries, getting assigned to some hyped-up team of freshmen who just can't wait to dominate the next round of Ice Breakers.

I light up a Newport and decide to wait until it's over. I might be missing important information, but unless Orientation is the only place I can find out my email password, I'm good right here. I'll wait.

I reposition myself by the picnic table, which is in front of the freshman lounge window, next to a small tree, which jingle-jangles raindrops on top of my head, but I kind of like the Zen of it. I hear the sound of a door opening, and then a silhouette exits the front door.

1. Pretty Asian
2. Patting pockets, no lighter
3. Gray baby tee and navy Abercrombie gym shorts
4. Long black hair, messy tie-up

Question: Will you choose to help?

- A. Offer a lighter
- B. Act cool, say nothing
- C. Run

I choose "B."

Not the fastest processor on the market, and usually there's a lot more analysis than action. But it just so happens that I'm the only one in front of the dorm smoking a cigarette, and clearly, I didn't strike rocks together to get the thing lit.

She's also not the shy type, and she really needs a nicotine fix.

"Hi there," she says, walking up to me. She has a slight rasp in her voice—which I like, though obviously this isn't her first pack of smokes. Her voice doesn't waver or wobble; it goes straight toward its intended target.

Her 5'5 frame moves from light of the doorway to a now shared puddle of orange streetlight above the picnic bench. "Do you have a lighter? I think I left mine in my room."

I fully gaze into her face. My system almost breaks down.

I absently dig in my pocket and flick my Bic, as they say. The flame jumps up, all too happy to make her acquaintance. I, on the other hand, maintain a reserved attitude, as though I'm only doing the civil act of sharing butane, nothing more.

Normally, if there were a bunch of other smokers around, she might drift away or make a light comment, say thank you and walk away. Smokers all develop a sort of sensor that tells us whether another smoker needs/wants company or prefers to be left alone.

I guess I'm not giving off any particular signal, because she lingers. She takes a deep pull off her cigarette, and I can see her shapely lips wrapped around her Marlboro Menthol Light. The orange fluorescence describes the rounded edges of her face, her small chin, the curled wisps of smoke as she exhales.

She gives me a look of amusement, and despite the shadow cast over her eyes from the brim of her cap, sparks of iridescence flash at me from big, dark eyes, reflecting raindrops and streetlights.

"Did you just get here?" she asks, taking a puff and exhaling from the side of her mouth, seeming older and slightly wearier with this action than her 18-year-old appearance suggests.

"Nah, I just forgot," I say, words coming out on autopilot. Brain still jammed. Back-up systems deployed.

"You didn't miss much," she says, "except me crushing the Ice Breakers."

"What'd you win?" I ask her, intrigued.

She grins and blows out smoke. "Bragging rights. I think everyone's scared of me now."

I laugh. At least that part of me is working.

She smiles. She's the type to take long, hard pulls. Her cigarette sizzles on every drag.

"You want to know how I won?" she says. "Two Truths and a Tale. You just guess which one is the lie. Want to play?"

"You want me to lie to you?" I ask, words like slurry.

"Every good lie has a little bit of truth in it. Don't make it easy. If I can't guess it, you win."

"What do I win?" I ask.

"Bragging rights?" she suggests.

I put my cigarette out. I pause as I look at her.

"How about a date?"

"I don't go out with strangers," she says with a wry smile. "You should probably ask me my name first."

"Oh, right," I say, bashfully. "What's your name?"

"Play the game," she says, and puts out her cigarette. She takes the lighter out of my hand and lights a second. Chain-smoker.

"Okay," I say, taking a breath.

I think for a minute. *Reveal yourself, but not too much.*

"I'm an art student. I draw graffiti and stuff like that."

"Professional criminal, got it," she jokes, ticking off boxes.

Momentarily flustered, I move on.

"Uh, I was recently arrested for vandalism, but I did it to honor a friend of mine who had passed." I said this much in a sort of defense of the first one. God, I'm bad at this.

"Okay, this is a little easy, but that's two. The third one will obviously be the lie," she says, rolling her eyes, but not in a mean way.

"I'm a great dancer," I finish lamely.

"Bingo!" she cries out. "Too easy. I know a wallflower when I see one. Come on, dude!"

"Okay," I say, somewhat defeated. "You next."

"So, you're an artist, huh?" she says appraisingly. "I can see that."

She points to the paint-splatters on my Converse sneakers.

"I didn't think those were from painting," she says. "I thought you were one of those guys who are really into sneakers. Like limited editions or something?"

"Nah, these are authentic. Work-wear," I say proudly.

"An artist though," she says thoughtfully. "That changes things."

“What do you mean?”

“Okay, you ready?” she says moving on. “Let me show you what a professional liar looks like.”

Her lips are raspberry, slightly harlequin in their shape. Her teeth are white, even in shadow.

“I was born in Hawaii, and I didn’t wear shoes until we moved to Jersey when I was like five years old. I still feel weird when my feet are totally covered.”

I look down at her Birkenstocks, given the invitation. Confirmed. Pretty feet, red-polished nubby toes. Nice arches.

“My favorite food is Mac N’ Cheese, and if we’re talking instant, if it’s not the blue box you can send it back,” she says next. “Even when my parents take us out to restaurants for their anniversaries or whatever, I always look for Mac N’ Cheese on the menu. I eat the fancy stuff too, sometimes.”

“Okay,” I say slowly, “that’s really...specific?”

I figure the last one is going to be a lie. Has to be.

“When I was a little girl, I was almost kidnapped. I’m Pinay, so everyone in my house was my ‘aunty’ even though we weren’t actually family. Anyway, long story short, I was brought back safely, but since then we’ve lived far away from anyone that looks like us. So, I’m super acquainted with the ways of white suburbia.”

“Okay,” I say and laugh nervously. Did she just say she was kidnapped?

“Which one’s the lie?” she asks and puts the cigarette out beneath her sandal.

Her eyes are gorgeous half-moons, daring me to try.

“The first and third sort of tie into each other,” I reason out. “You could’ve been born in Hawaii and had servants there. But I mean, are

you some kind of heiress or something? Sounds like you lived on a pineapple plantation or something.”

She laughs. “Pineapple heiress? No, nothing that extravagant.”

“Anyway, I’m guessing your favorite food isn’t macaroni and cheese?” I say hesitantly. “But I don’t know. That was so *specific*. Unless you’re crazy or a great storyteller, or a genius liar—but who would make up a lie like that?”

“Even one detail can throw it all off,” she says proudly. “But that’s part of the game.”

“So, was I right?”

“Tell him what’s he’s won, Jim!” she says, mimicking the voice of a game-show announcer. She even does the buzzer. “ERRR! Not a date!”

She cracks herself up at my expense. She’s really enjoying herself.

“Sorry,” she says. “Don’t worry, it’s just a stupid game. My name’s Vita.”

Vita sticks out her hand. I shake it. She has long, elegant fingers, plus a firm grip, fully prepared for the adult world of making deals.

“Danny,” I say, trying not to squeeze her hand too hard, or hold on too long. Her touch is both warm and cool. Then it’s gone. My hand sort of tingles.

“Nice to meet you, Danny,” she says. “You live here? I mean, I hope you do. Otherwise, I’m going to regret having had this whole conversation.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“You know, some random guy hanging out in front of the dorm, looking all mysterious, smoking in the shadows. Says he commits crimes for fun and calls it ‘art’? Next thing you know, he’s going to ask if he can draw my portrait or model for him. It’s a bit sketchy. Hey, but you’re an artist! Right? You see what I did there?”

I like her. Not only is she smart, she might be a little nuts.

"I'm on the fourth," I say. "Sort of a jail cell vibe, but I'm trying to fix it up."

"As we all are, Danny. As we all are. Do you think I've been gifted the Ritz?" she jokes.

I flush again. She has me at every turn.

"I'm one floor below you. Come visit some time," she says and winks. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got to go and make myself some Mac N' Cheese. I'm starving."

Vita spins and walks back to the front door. It's only when she holds up her key card to the door and the door unlocks that I realize she's given me a clue. Or has she?

She turns just before going through the doorway and gives me a little wave that I'll think about for the next hundred years.

I light up another cigarette and listen to the sound of the Ice Breakers melting. Soon all the freshmen will come out to the cul-de-sac for air. Hip-hop will come pumping from one of the dorm rooms somewhere, for everyone's benefit, and cliques will form as they all figure out who to befriend, who to hook up with, and so on.

I figure I'm lucky. First girl I met, and I already got her name and know where she's staying. I'll probably see her again, right here, smoking a cigarette. Maybe I'll find out the truth one of these days.

That little wave, that handshake, those eyes.

I can't fall in love with the first girl I see, can I?

Dammit.

I forgot to bring my keycard.

Chapter Two

Blue Nude and the Wave

I'm at the poster sale on College Ave. staring at Dali's dripping egg.

Normally, I'd never be the type of person to put an art poster on my wall or let anyone know how *into* this shit I am, outside my bedroom. I'd rather put up a poster of Biggie Smalls or Wu Tang, and if anyone asks, I'm working on a mixtape.

But other kids are nerding out—like one kid literally has a used copy of Shakespeare in her hands and is quietly reading a scene to her boyfriend who looks equally entranced. I guess it's okay to express ourselves here. This is college, not high school.

Still, I reach out to the Dali and think, “Nah.”

I love Dali, but that's stoner shit. I need to *evolve*.

I leave Surrealism and head into the Dark Ages. That's when I see her again. That girl from the night before:

Ivita Gracia Dela Rosa.

Of course, she's moving quickly through time itself. When it comes to talking to a pretty girl, the universe gives you like two seconds to make a move. It's like a law of physics, like gravity.

Now she's in front of Botticelli's Venus, and pausing in front of Raphael's Madonna.

She's wearing a baby tee from Hollister. Navy blue gym shorts (I'm guessing Abercrombie). Painted toenails peeping out of Birkenstocks. She's one of those girls who are into being comfortable.

I'm rocking baggy blue jeans and my favorite tee, a vintage Bruce Lee.

Vita is now in Picasso territory. Me and Pablo are like besties. I know this motherfucker like the back of my hand. I go in.

"Blue Period," I say once I'm within earshot. "Good choice."

She turns and looks at me, and gets startled, then laughs.

Lord, have mercy... she is so pretty.

"Want to help me?" she asks and cocks her head a little.

One of her long bangs is hanging over her eye like Aaliyah.

I'm Jet Li, flying in the air.

"Yeah, I can help. I'm looking for something, too."

"You know a lot about art?" she asks me.

"Do you know the story behind that painting?" I ask her, ready to show off.

We're standing in front of *La Mort de Casagemas*.

I tell her the story about how Picasso was living in Paris as a starving artist, and how he watched his friend shoot himself in the head, and how this led to Pablo's Blue Period.

"It was a love triangle," I tell her. This gets her interested.

"She must've really been something," Vita says.

"They didn't have anything. They were living on the streets, just trying to make it," I muse. "But inspiration starts there, when you have nothing except love."

Vita gives me a look. "You're really into this stuff, aren't you?"

I shrug. "I told you I'm an artist."

"Hmm," she makes a murmur of appraisal. Good or bad, I can't tell.

Vita leads me into the Impressionists now, and flourishes a poster of ballerinas stretching at a railing and fits it to my neck like we're checking out shirts in a store/

"Let's play a game: You pick something that you think represents me, and I'll pick something that represents you. How do you feel about Monet?"

"That's a Degas," I say.

We split up to search for the perfect picture. I wonder if I should take this seriously or make it all a big joke by selecting Edvard Munch's *Scream*.

I end up going with *The Wave* by Hokusai. Something about it just feels perfect. It's colorful, but light, and as a wall piece, has that vintage feeling that never gets old. You don't get tired of looking at it.

At the same time, that wave is full of drama and power. It's about desire and pain, but it doesn't feel that way.

Plus, it's Asian. She's Asian. I'm Asian. I know I made the right choice when I put it in her hands.

A smile creeps along the edges of her round cheeks.

"Well-done," she says and nods appreciatively.

Back in my room, my blue flannel bedspread appears radically different with Vita standing on it. Her caramel skin is banded with gold stripes as the sun slides its rays across my desk.

“So, how does a painting like this happen exactly?” Vita wonders. “Do you artists just hang around naked women waiting for them to have emotional breakdowns before you whip out the paints?”

I laugh and imagine Picasso lurking in some poor woman’s house with his palette in hand.

“How come you get *The Wave* and I get the depressed chick?” I joke.

“Think of it as a conversation starter,” Vita encourages me.

We go down to the third floor to hang her poster next. I trail behind Vita like some helium balloon she’d won at a fair, smiling dopily as her demeanor changes from visitor to queen.

She’s already one of the most popular girls on her floor, and I watch in awe as she trades a quick one-liner with the third floor R.A., both cracking up like they’ve known each other for years.

Vita introduces me next to various people whose names I won’t remember later, the girls I’ll call “Hey” and the guys I’ll call “Dude.”

“We have an open-door policy,” Vita explains, leading us into her dorm room. “Come on in.”

On Vita’s side are things hanging, dangling, waving, fluttering beside an open window. Her bedspread is silk and indigo, and the air tinged with the scent of raspberry body splash and menthol.

“Lynn and I have...different tastes,” Vita explains with a wave, pausing for comic effect.

Lynn’s side of the room is all razzmatazz and zebra while Vita’s side of the room is all about serenity. Well, keeping calm amidst the chaos anyway. The general clutter doesn’t inspire a feeling of Zen. A tower of biology textbooks and marble notebooks and general riffraff remain

stacked on her chair, causing me to stand awkwardly in the middle of the room while she moves stuff around.

“Believe it or not, I’m still unpacking,” Vita apologizes but I just take in the wall next to her bed, which is the reason we came, supposedly.

Hokusai’s *The Wave* is in my hand, rolled up and rubber banded. I scan the wall for the optimal location and see things that make me uncomfortable. Namely, a bouquet hanging upside down in a very central location.

“Do you want something to drink? We have bottled water and Snapple.”

“Snapple sounds great.”

Vita hands me a bottle of peach tea when we’re interrupted.

“Have you guys been to College Avenue yet? Holy moly! There are so many girls,” a wiry Indian kid bursts in, leaning against the door with his eyes closed. He dramatically holds the pose of a tormented lover.

“Danny, this is Viraj, our unofficial mayor of the third floor.”

“Very nice to meet you, Danny,” Viraj cries, as if happy to be at my service. He folds his hands and starts to speak in a fake Hindu accent. “Welcome to the third floor of Sperry. We hope you enjoy your stay!” Then, breaking the act, he chuckles, “I’m just messing around. I’m Indian, so it’s not racist! Let me guess. You’re Filipino, right? No, Korean! He’s Korean. I know Koreans when I see them.”

“Viraj is studying to be a sociologist but can’t tell Filipinos from Koreans. We all look the same, don’t we Viraj?” Vita jokes.

“This one’s darker than your average Korean,” Viraj notes, observing me like an expert in the field. “Not that there’s anything wrong with having a generous supply of melanin. Right, Vita? You like your guys to be able to stand a sunburn.”

“Why, because my boyfriend’s Black?” Vita shoots back, ready for combat.

Her words catch me like a hook to the chin. Actually, more like a stray bullet twirling me around like a ballerina. A photo I seemed to have missed becomes glaringly obvious. Whatever semblance of a smile I was wearing a moment ago suddenly freezes on my face.

“Oh, you have a boyfriend,” I utter with more of a conclusive air than I meant to.

Vita nods as if nothing is amiss. “His name’s Marc. He’s half-Black and half-Thai. Isn’t it unfair to just say that he’s Black? What about his Southeast Asian heritage, huh?”

“Black is the dominant gene,” Viraj retorts, making them both laugh. “Anyway, I must get going. Danny,” Viraj says. “It was nice to meet you. *Hasta la vista*, Vita. Say that ten times fast.”

Viraj bows like a Shaolin monk, fist to open palm, before taking his leave into the hall.

“He’ll be back in like twenty minutes to steal something,” Vita sighs, rolling her eyes. “Want to see a picture of my boyfriend?” she asks and reaches out to her bookshelf where the frame sits. She holds out the photo for me to glance at and hand back.

There it is: the quintessential couple shot: the two of them posed on top of a mountain, her boyfriend with his lanky arms wrapped around Vita like a bow, their faces shimmering against the glare. He appears to be Tiger Woods’ doppelganger, even down to the golf shirt.

“Looks pretty serious,” I comment distantly as she sticks the photo back into place among the clutter.

“We met at debate camp. Super nerdy, right? We were supposed to go to Johns Hopkins together. Blah, blah, blah. Sorry if I’m boring you with the details.”

“No, it’s very interesting,” I hear myself say as I look out into the fading afternoon, wondering how much time should pass before I leave.

The sun is setting over the cul-de-sac and the shadows are growing violet blue. The peace of the campus and its new inhabitants still hold onto the last bits of the day from the parking lot to the dining hall and beyond, through the woods and paths to Passion Puddle.

Legend has it that if you walk around the pond three times with someone, you’re destined to fall in love.

It’s also where some kid hanged himself.

Chapter Three

9/11

The morning was beautiful. All of the dappled shadows looked ultramarine blue and green permanent spread across George Street and all of the trees were pure viridian. There was that sense of morning peace and stillness that made the dorms look like an Edward Hopper.

Manhattan was thirty miles away, but suddenly this college farmland seemed like the safest place in the world. We stuck together, and none was to be let alone at any moment, even to take a piss. We would accompany each other to the latrines (as we were now calling them) in case enemy soldiers snuck up on the rear.

The Towers had fallen. We thought we would all die that day. Kept looking up at the sky, wondering when the nuke would drop on us next.

“They hate us,” Dom says grimly. “They hate us because we’re free. It’s a religious crusade. They call America the ‘Great Satan’. They think we’re destroying the world. They think we’re the ones making them into slaves.”

“Fuck them,” Sonic says. “Let them burn with their Qurans.”

Chapter Four

Sonic

It's the end of September. The bombs we expected never came. Only anthrax, which only added to our paranoia.

It doesn't help that we're getting high 24/7 now, me and my friends, my posse, my crew from the dorms.

We're in "The Beater", a rust and maroon Buick that runs on fumes and bong-water.

Dom is allowed to have it on campus since he's from Long Island, which is technically out of state.

Dom's behind the wheel, dressed like some mobbed-up tennis pro.

Sonic is in the backseat with me, still trying to get us all to rush a fraternity with him.

It's been going on for days, ever since a sorority girl on College Ave. asked if she could touch his hair. His spikes made him look like an extra in *Dragonball*, especially when he walks around with his shirt off—which is often.

Since becoming Sonic's roommate, I've heard so many locker room slogans I think I'm starting to sweat Gatorade.

“Delta Kappa’s got the hottest girls at their parties. They’ve even got their own chef,” Sonic says. “Hell Week is only seven days, and when it’s all over we’ll become kings!”

I pass the bong back up to the passenger seat where Cheese is.

Cheese is the half-Black kid with grubby glasses and a severe overbite. He looks like a rat, but a cute one you’d see in a kid’s cartoon. He’s weird, but that’s what happens when you grow up the only Black kid in rural New Jersey. His mohawk is dyed fluorescent orange, which makes him look like a tree that’s been marked for logging. He reaches over his shoulder and takes the 10-inch water pipe from my hand.

“I almost rushed up in SUNY,” Dom says as he steers us down Ryder’s Lane, a dark single-lane highway behind campus. “Took a few bumps along the road,” Dom says and taps his nose, indicating some cocaine-fueled fiasco. “Take it from me, fellas. It’s better just to show up on the weekends and drink their beer. After that, say see you later.”

Dom parks the car and the two roommates head inside with as much confidence as an 18 and 19-year-old can muster. Using a fake I.D. to buy booze is like picking up a girl at the bar. With Dom’s Humphrey Bogart smile, the operation won’t go wrong. He isn’t classically handsome by any means, but Dom’s got enough charm to make a tombstone blush.

“I say we take over this whole school,” Sonic tells me privately as we wait in the car. “I’m telling you, Danny. The world is nothing but a heist. Either we take it or let someone else have all the fun.”

“Do you know how many American presidents were in Skull and Bones?” I reply, meaninglessly, kind of. I’m with him, but at the same time, I’m way ahead of him.

Sonic ignores the presidential fact-check and drones on. I press my face against the window, for no reason other than to see what the temperature is like. It’s pleasantly cool.

Five minutes later, Dom and Cheese return. Dom places a bottle of rum in the trunk and slams it shut. Cheese hands us our 40's wrapped in brown paper bags.

"Gentlemen, I'd recommend drinking these as fast as possible. They don't taste that good cold and they're not going to taste any better when they're warm," says Dom, and then it's cheers.

Phase One is complete. We've gotten the booze.

Back on campus, we start Phase Two and light a blunt inside the gazebo. During the day, the gazebo is a popular spot for cigarette smokers. It only took a day or two as a freshman before I graffitied the fuck out of it. At night, it's the perfect spot to smoke.

Tonight, we're keeping our cipher tight for Dom's birthday. It's just the four of us on this blunt. Everyone knows the rules: Puff, puff, pass. To the left-hand side, as the song goes.

I don't know if the weed is blueberry-infused or Afghani in origin, but mixed with malt liquor, my normally quiet demeanor opens, and I'm talking shit instead of just thinking it.

"You know who you look like?" I tell Cheese. "You're like a fat Steve Urkel."

This has Dom and Sonic dying. I feel a fire inside my gut and my tongue is like a B-boy doing The Worm in my mouth.

Time for Phase Three. Shotguns.

This kind isn't a recline to spite those stuck in the backseat like children. It's a way of maximizing the smoke by reversing the blunt, the shotgun blower taking care not to get ash in their mouth or burn their tongue. Soon, we'll all be floating.

Who invents this shit?

Anyway, I did all this in high school, so I'm far from green. Just leave me out of the conversation when things inevitably turn into pissing contests about who has the most notches on their belt. When it comes

to women, I'm not even a white belt. I'm a no belt. I'm not even in the class.

The blunt becomes a roach, and Cheese is the first to tap out.

"I'm gonna lay down for a while," Cheese says, but his nasally voice sounds more like syrup than intonation. We watch his chubby form bumble and stumble across the campus grass, zig-zigging here and there under streetlights back to the dorm.

Dom passes the flask around, and we each take a sip of Bacardi to officiate Phase Four. I shudder violently after swallowing the rum. I preferred the 40 oz., but that's all backwash and foam now. The liquor gets to us quickly. Dom and Sonic start talking nonstop, switching topics like they're switching lanes. I'm just sitting in the cockpit mumbling, "Hell yeah. Hell yeah."

"This is America. This is the Land of the Free!" Dom cries in a full-throated speech.

"AMERICA!" some freshman screams from a window across the quad.

"That's right, baby! United We Stand!" Dom yells, echoing the slogan that can be spotted everywhere that freedom reigns.

"Kill them all!" Sonic screams. "Let them burn with their Qurans!"

"Jesus," I think to myself, not so much because I'm a Christian, but Jesus, Sonic. Come on.

The screaming echoes across the quad as Dom tearfully honors a firefighter who grew up in his town, another victim lost by the tragedy. He chugs the last of the rum, pours the rest out in silence, and then throws up.

"Ugh, that blunt was a mistake," Dom mumbles, bent over and coughing into the grass.

"Don't say that!" Sonic says fiercely, picking Dom up and holding him in his arms.

We help Dom back to his room where Cheese is already snoring his head off, and Sonic eases Dom onto his bed. I do my part and remove Dom's shoes, like some ritual to keep the boogeyman at bay.

Normally, as freshmen, it would be our obligation to draw dicks on his face or something like that, but it's Dom's birthday. We let him rest.

While Sonic rolls him over on his stomach, I peek into Vita's room next door. Her door is ajar and through the door's crack I spot Vita in deep concentration mode with headphones over her ears.

Even from where I'm standing, she looks like she's on an island of order amidst a sea of chaos. Glowing lights dangle in mid-air, photos are lopsidedly hung, clothes pour out of both her and her roommate's closets, yet there she sits quietly, contemplating the next word.

From her moon-shaped eyes reflecting off the iMac, to the way that she's biting her lower lip when she's thinking; from her tied-up black hair to her Filipina complexion, deepened soft caramel by the dim light—I'd never guess in a million years that she'd become the girl who will break my heart, ruin my life, and send me into a depression that will last for years.

But if I could do it again, I'd do it all over in a heartbeat.

Vita notices me in the doorway with a start, removes her headphones, and smiles.

"This is probably un-American of me to say," says Vita, "but killing all of anyone won't make it better."

One knee is propped up to her flattish chest, her face half in shadow. Her roommate's bed is empty. The zebra-striped bedspread is neatly made.

"I apologize for my roommate's outburst," I reply, half-jokingly. "In no way does he represent my views, ethics, or feelings either politically or otherwise."

“Same,” Vita agrees.

“Where’s yours?” I ask, sidling into the room.

“Hmm, I dare not say,” Vita says, rolling her eyes indulgently.

I know this eyeroll to mean that Vita’s busty blonde—slightly horse-faced—roommate is with her new fling somewhere without parental supervision.

“Would you like some water?” Vita offers with amusement, since I keep smacking my lips from cottonmouth.

“Water sounds good,” I say with a playful wince. “I’m feeling a little woozy.”

She hands me a cold bottle of water from her mini fridge as I sit down on the edge of her bed.

“If you’re not too busy, maybe I can get you to use some of that creative energy to give me some ideas for my essay?” Vita says, changing the subject.

“What’s the assignment?” I ask, peering at Vita’s computer screen, which just has the letter “V” typed out in different fonts and sizes.

“Yeah, the last hour of my life has not exactly been productive,” says Vita. “How do you feel about Bookman? Too snobby?”

“You should go Wingdings and get cryptic on your professor.”

“I’m screwed.”

The first time I talked to her, Vita asked me for a lighter, and I basically proposed a modeling session. The second time I talked to her, I tried to salvage my dignity by asking her to go eat at the dining hall and she hit me with the “I already ate”. And now, here I am, in her dorm room, drunk, leaning a little too hard over her desk, probably reeking of pheromones. It’s all I can do to keep a confession of love from busting through my chest like a Japanese paper wall.

"How about we switch places?" Vita suggests. "You take my Expository Writing class, and I'll take whatever class you want. What do you think?"

"Have you ever done charcoal sketches of a naked homeless person?" I ask.

"Ahem," a voice interrupts at the door. "Should I come back?"

Sonic is standing at the door, his bulky frame and prickly crown filling up the doorway.

"Yeah, we're having a little moment here. Do you mind?" Vita teases. Sonic feels offended, or jealous, and starts to leave. "Gosh, I'm just kidding," Vita says. "You're so sensitive!"

Sonic lingers but doesn't come further than the doorway. He leans against the frame and folds his muscular arms.

I look at Vita who gives me a wink. I want to stay, but at this point I know I'd just say something dumb.

"I'd better call it a night," I say. "Help you tomorrow?"

"I'll hold you to that," Vita says. "Good night."

Back in the hallway, I feel Sonic's elbow in my side.

"Would you two just get married already?" Sonic jeers.

"Shut up."

We get back to our room on the 4th floor and throw a towel under the door. The ritual usually starts with several precautionary measures, but the alcohol makes us sloppy, and I forget to open the window.

Sonic packs a green nugget into the glass pipe, hits it once, and then passes it to me. Air-freshener neutralizes the vapor of drugs. Sonic hands me a Gatorade from our mini fridge and I accept the electrolytes with thanks.

I glance around Sonic's side of the room, cluttered with various gallon-sized tubs of protein powder and hair gel. I think about the day we all moved in, about meeting his parents, who seemed very excited

that I was Korean. Sonic was born there, but he looks more like one of those shirtless Iroquois warriors from a Social Studies book. A G.I. baby. Born, and then abandoned.

“Do you like *bulgogi*?” his dad asked me, pumping my arm like a politician. “Our Steven here can’t get enough of it!”

I winced at his pronunciation of *bulgogi*.

Sonic is on his computer now, searching for tunes. He’s been subjecting me to some godawful Tiesto lately, but thankfully he goes for something a little atmospheric tonight. It’s Oakenfold on low volume. Besides our shared love of Mary Jane, we have almost nothing in common.

“You don’t want to join the frat?” Sonic asks out of nowhere.

“Nah, that shit is just a distraction. I need to focus on my art,” I reply.

“And a certain girl on the third floor,” Sonic leers with an obtuse grin. “What I wouldn’t do to hit that. But I guess it’s anyone’s game.”

“The fuck is that supposed to mean?” I react with uncharacteristic harshness. “You think Vita’s a slut?”

“Nah, she’s a good girl,” Sonic says.

“Fuck you.”

Sonic guffaws and then pauses meaningfully. “It’s all good, dawg. You’ll get her. You just got to make a move. If you don’t, someone else will.”

I pause, trying to rein in my thoughts to win this argument. It seems like we disagree, but do we?

“Have you ever been in love?” I ask.

Sonic almost snorts but pauses and lowers the music a little.

“I had a girl in high school. Cheated on me with the quarterback from the rival football squad,” he admits, his face illuminated by blue light. Sonic laughs, self-aware of how high school this sounds.

I want to ask, since his parents are white, if he's more attracted to white girls. Or if he wishes he knew who his real parents were. I don't know if we're there yet.

"What was it like for you in high school?" I ask instead.

"Not gonna lie, dawg. I was mad popular in high school. I was the star receiver. We were the kings of our school. We almost made State."

Listening to Sonic talk about football is sad. Touching, but sad. I know from the way that he hobbles around sometimes and lies flat on the floor to "stretch his back" that his body has been through some shit. His next sentence confirms this.

"I was supposed to play for the Scarlet Knights before my back got fucked up. Messed it up during practice. Can you believe that? During fucking practice, bro!"

It's the first time that I learn how Sonic was hit the wrong way one day after school and was later told by a doctor that he should never play again. Full contact, anyway. Flag football is okay, but bringing this up will only upset him.

The night ends that way, with that melancholia of past pain remembered. It's something roommates eventually share at some point, and I guess we're getting it out of the way early.

Unlike Sonic, I know exactly what I'm in school for. I'm going to become a famous artist. I don't even need school. I'm just trying to get a degree to make my parents happy and put them at ease while I climb the ladder all the way to Sotheby's.

Anyway, it was a moment, and probably the first meaningful one that me and Sonic shared. He'll probably tell this story to strangers at bars all over Jersey until he's an old man. But at the time, it felt like we were sharing something.

I guess you had to be there.

Chapter Five

The Portrait

“**Y**ou’re a really good writer,” murmurs Vita in awe.
“I am?”

“You don’t how badly I was stressing about this,” says Vita, letting out a sigh of relief.

She turns from the desk and flops down on her bed. “And now for the moral dilemma. I can’t hand it in.”

“What, the paper?”

I’m in Vita’s room, helping her with that paper she’d been asking about. Not that exact one, but it’s been an ongoing joke, her running away from college, me pulling her back to the edge with my mythical essay skills. I had to finally show and prove. Not that I was a great writer to begin with, but when you’re in love, you start becoming an expert in anything you choose.

“I don’t know what I was thinking. I shouldn’t have asked you to write my essay. This Expos class is stressing me out. I’m sorry.”

“Vita, I’d write a hundred pages just to be near you.”

“Argh! You and your words. Damn it,” Vita groans and rolls into a tight ball. “Why did you have to do such a good job? I can’t hand it in like this.”

“I can make it crappier for you if you want. Just add some literal pauses of thought such as ‘umm’ and ‘uh,’ and a ‘hmmm’ at the beginning of your final paragraph. What do you think?”

“I think you’re the nicest guy I’ve ever met,” she says to the ceiling.

I pause for a moment, holding those words too close to heart. I shake it off and purposely bang on the keyboard, pretending to ruin the essay.

Vita bolts up. “What are you doing?”

“I’m clearing your conscience,” I say, with a maniacal grin on my face. “All it takes is one click, and I can make this all disappear.”

Vita cries and jumps into my arms laughing while I pretend to take a chainsaw to the essay. “Please, stop!”

We laugh as I grab her arms, not hard, but in a mock struggle, all the while feeling the softness of her biceps which I can almost encircle with my hands, the tenseness as she pushes back, her nails digging into the skin of my forearms. Finally, I push her onto the bed and leap back onto her chair and prepare to do the deed.

“Um, what’re you doing?” Vita asks fearfully.

I press CTRL+A and highlight the entire document. I feel a giddy madness bubbling inside me now.

“It’s not saved, you know,” I say and hold my finger dramatically over the backspace key.

“Put your finger down and step away from the computer,” Vita commands nervously.

I press backspace. Five pages of expository composition disappears instantly.

“NO!”

I'm cracking up now.

"Well, you know what?" Vita roars, leaping off the bed. "I can press CTRL Z! LET ME GO! Danny, if you don't let go of me, I'm going to bite your nose off!"

"Say goodbye cruel world!" I cry. Restraining her flailing arms in a tight one-armed hug, I erase all memory of the forbidden document.

"DON'T!"

We freeze, barely breathing, our hearts racing. We look at each other, wanting to laugh, neither of us making a sound. "I can't believe you just did that," pants Vita softly. "You're so bad!"

Vita's hands are placed on my shoulders like handlebars, her body elevated slightly as she presses her flat stomach against my solar plexus testing my lack of breath. Her lower back is taut, straddling my lap. Everything in my head swirls like Van Gogh.

Only the desktop wallpaper remains. It's a picture of Vita and Marc at her high school graduation.

"Hold on. We've got to change something."

Vita turns and watches me go into her computer settings and search. I click the "Art" folder and find *Iris*es by van Gogh.

"Do you like post-Impressionism?" I ask, even though I'm already changing it.

Vita nods wordlessly and watches me change her wallpaper. She turns from the computer screen and looks at my face. She's still on my lap, pressed against me, but neither one of us can make a move. We stare at each other as if in shock or surprise, unsure of how to proceed from here.

"I want to draw your portrait," I declare firmly. I'm not taking no for an answer.

"Right here?" Vita asks. "Right now?"

I nod solemnly.

"They say you should always start a portrait with the eyes," I say. Then adding, a little lamely, "The eyes are windows to the soul."

She ignores the cheese, and rearranges our chairs. Luckily, I always carry a sketchbook. Presently, I tear a page, taking care to leave the edges clean.

"The amount of space between two pupils is about the size of a third eye," I ramble, like a doctor who's explaining how surgery is done to calm to patient. "Failure to see the future inspires most of life's happiness, living in the moment, not seeing how it will end."

She raises her eyebrow. I shut up and draw.

Ten minutes in—or maybe it's an hour—my pencil is furiously outlining her face. I'm caught in the act of pretending I know what I'm doing, but at the same time, I'm thinking this might be the greatest thing I've ever done.

"Do you believe in moments?" she asks suddenly.

My hand stops moving and I pause in the middle of cross-hatching the fullness of her lips, bringing depth to the flesh without coloring in the emptiness. I look up and see the silvery-black orbs of her eyes staring into mine with a look of puzzlement like she's waiting for me to say something.

"Like the idea that one moment can last forever?" she explains.

Her right eye is a dark circle like a black pond with little white stones being splashed across its surface, her eyelids adorned with a veil of purple shadow, dark in shade; eyelashes which fan and wave.

"Tell me the truth. How many girls have you done this with?" she asks.

"Zero."

"Never?"

"You're my first."

"You lied to me," she says. "You said you'd done it lots of times before."

"I saw the future," I reply.

I look at those lips that know how to speak Tagalog. Vita recently taught me to say *Kamusta*.

Her skin is the sort of golden brown that you can only find on the sand of a Pacific Ocean beach after the waves have just made it wet and dark, and the interlude of the sun and time make it light again.

Finally, it's done.

I sign my name "ASDF" and do the big reveal.

"Did I make it too *sensual*?" I ask, worrying over the session's finished product.

"I was definitely not looking at you like that," Vita insists playfully. "I'm just kidding. I'm going to keep this forever."

Her body slips against mine like a glove. We stand there and hold each other for what seems longer than would be professional to do so.

After the portrait is finished and hung, we lay down on her bed. She asks me about graffiti, and so I tell her, the origins of this thing which I stumbled into, and somehow landed me here at Rutgers despite my otherwise abysmal high school career.

"What's 'ASDF'? What does it stand for?" Vita asks next, moving on.

"It's my tag name. My best friend was QWER—"

"The guy you wrote graffiti with?"

"Yeah, Quincy. You know, he gave me that name."

"And then he passed," she says, touching my hand. She knows about QWER. She knows a lot of things. All part of the game.

"He was the only kid that loved art as much as I did," I say quietly. "He should be alive, making great art."

"You want to know why he died," she concludes softly.

"I mean, yeah," I say. "Like, why do I get to live and why does he die? He was so much better than me."

"One does not have to do with the other."

"I know that."

"But you want to know if someone, *something*, is in control," she says.

We fall quiet for a moment. Then I ask her if she believes in God.

"Of course," Vita says. "Raised Catholic, went to Catholic school my whole life."

"That doesn't mean you have to believe," I say.

"You don't have Filipino parents," she points out.

I chuckle softly.

"Seriously," I say. "Do you?"

Vita looks at me and searches my eyes. "Yes," she says. "I do."

She turns her head and looks at the shadows on the wall. "But it doesn't mean I'm perfect."

"Of course," I say, sitting up a little. "No one says you have to be—"

The lights are dim, and in between our words, the decorative glow of lights on Lynn's side of the room pulses.

"What if you knew the real me, Danny?" asks Vita quietly. "The me I was before?"

"I'm sure I'd like her too," I say.

"Not if you knew she was the type of girl to get into any guy's car," she says, looking down.

My mouth dries up. I imagine Vita then, 15 or 16 or whenever she's talking about. I speak carefully, slowly.

"I have my own car," I say, reaching out cautiously with my words. My hands stay where they are, squeezing a pillow over my torso. "And that was then, this is now."

"What if she stinks up the car?"

"Hey, I got some luggage I have to take also," I say softly. "Some of it might be muddy."

"I've done a lot of things I'm not proud of."

"Me too."

Wetness forms at the edge of her eyes. I let her lean against me. Her shoulders seem to collapse a little.

"My dad has dementia," Vita says quietly.

I pick up the remote and click the TV off. Now it's totally silent.

"What's that?"

Vita explains the days of forgotten names and places, a constant drift into the past, a childlike inability to care for oneself, and finally the vague smile, the blank stare.

"I've never lived away from home before. I feel like I just left him there."

I reach over and grab a box of tissues from her windowsill and put the box in front of her.

"He would want you to go to school and become the best doctor you can be. This was his dream for you."

Vita nods, sniffing and dabbing her eyes with Kleenex. She takes a deep breath and laughs disparagingly.

"Don't worry. This is what I'm here for," I reassure her.

"To emotionally support your downstairs neighbor while she has an emotional breakdown?"

"It was included with my Orientation docs."

Vita leans back and looks at me, smiling sadly.

"Danny, what do you want from me?"

"I just like being with you."

"What if I can't give you what you want?"

"I'm not just here for that."

"Yeah right," Vita says in disbelief. "What if we can't do more than this? Are you going to be okay with that?"

"What do *you* want, Vita?" I ask in response.

"What do I want?" she repeats. "What do I want?"

Vita is biting her lip so much it seems like it'll start bleeding. I touch her lip and make her stop.

We say nothing for a long time. We look outside the window silently as a group of friends make their way up the cul-de-sac drunk, singing off-key. I peer at our reflections in the glass. The catchlight in her eyes. I feel her fingers interlacing with mine. I hold her hand and lock it there.

"What if I tell you the truth, and you don't want to be with me anymore?" she repeats softly.

Our silhouettes shine against the night window, the shadows behind us colored by the flashing of Christmas lights above Lynn's bed.

"I wouldn't change anything," I tell her.

As if on cue, we lay back down on her bed. I'm flat on my back, facing up at the ceiling; Vita is on her side, one leg draped over my lap. It's like we'd been rehearsing for a play we're so in sync. After a while, I feel Vita's hand tipping my chin down to meet her eyes. Her face is tilted upward, her eyes wide and searching.

"Do you want to kiss me?" she asks softly.

I turn my head and stare at the ceiling. For a minute, I don't say anything.

"No," I say at last.

There's a gray dapple of leaves projected by the streetlight below
in the cul-de-sac. The transfer of light to dark indicates the wind's
movement and the tree's rustling against the corners of the ceiling.

Cast in shadow is the portrait I painted. I can almost see her face.

Chapter Six

Gods and Monsters

I'm with Jolene in front of a coffee shop a block away from Mason Gross. "UNITED WE STAND" signs and memorials stand displayed beside witches and skeletons. Anthrax makes its rounds throughout the U.S. Postal Service, but this has had no impact on the prospect of trick-or-treating. Everyone is going to get their chocolate no matter what.

Jolene is my friend from Figure Drawing 101. We spent first semester learning the hard way that drawing nude models isn't sexy. The nudes are desperate to make a buck, or just really into being naked. They don't exercise much.

There's a homeless encampment down by the penny fountain. A glimpse into our future. We're sitting at a sidewalk brunch table with T-square rulers sticking out of our portfolios. We immediately bonded over our shared affinity for anime and hip-hop, and I found out that she used to be part of a graffiti crew in Paterson that's made the pages of *Graf* magazine more than once.

Jolene is a petite Puerto Rican beauty, and in Doc Martins, she only stands 5 foot 3. She wears her curly brown hair in a tight ponytail but usually tries to offset her sex appeal with dorky glasses and a scuffed-up fleece. She's one of those artists destined for greatness. She has the best lines I've ever seen.

"Calling all saints. What you dressing up as?" Jolene asks, spreading cream cheese on a toasted bagel.

"Just another Asian trying not to slip between the cracks," I say and sip my coffee. "I'm wearing a hoodie and hoping for a box of Nerds."

"Boo. You got to dress up. It's Halloween. Don't you love the lights and shit? Everyone's under a spell for one night. You can be whatever you want. Doesn't that get you the least bit excited?"

"Halloween is for hoes," I reply drily.

The brisk temperature has Jolene in a sheepskin jacket and me in a navy peacoat.

"How do girls make marching around half-naked in the cold look so easy?"

"Guess you won't like my outfit. Still not sure if I'm going through with it or not," Jolene thinks aloud with a dab of cream cheese on her lip.

"Let me guess: Police officer? You're Cat Woman! Wait a second, I know. You're going to be dressed as a dominatrix, aren't you?"

"Nah, that's out. I'm doing cosplay. People who know, *know*. Only the real ones know. Not going to be walking around looking like a *hoe*," Jolene says, throwing my words back at me.

"I meant that in the most respectful way possible."

"Sure, you did," she says, rolling her eyes.

"So, what are we talking about here?"

"Booty shorts and boobs. Suspenders. Doc Martins. Still can't get it?"

“Stripper.”

Jolene laughs. “Okay, well it was the easiest costume to put together because I already had everything. It’s a character from a game that you and I both love.”

“Ms. Pacman.”

“Oh, you think you funny,” Jolene snorts. “What about you? You going dressed as Adam?”

“If you insist, we’ll both be naked. Where will you be parading this fantastic cosplay?”

“I met a guy.”

“And?”

“He’s in a frat.”

I splutter into my cappuccino. A pigeon flies over her head, making Jolene scream and duck.

“Rats with wings!” she yells, shaking her fist. Facing me, she makes a guilty expression and admits, “I know. We always make fun of frat boys. He’s different though.”

“Said a thousand girls just like you. Which array of Greek letters is he sewing on his shirts?”

“Delta Kappa,” Jolene says, the look on her face comically apologetic. She bites a baby carrot.

“They’re the ones, huh? My boys are rushing Delta Kappa. The Delta Kappa brothers have a reputation, that’s for sure. I’m going to their mixer tonight.”

“That’s what’s up! I’ll be there, too. Come check me out! You’ll know it when you see it.”

“Alright, cool, cool.”

“You can meet my boyfriend. I think you’ll like him. His name is Flow.”

“Flow?”

“Do you know him?”

“No,” I shake my head and light up a cigarette. “Cool name though.”

“He’s a rapper,” Jolene says, giving me a squiggly smile.

“Rappers get all the girls.”

“Why don’t you bring your girlfriend? The one you always talk about: Vita.”

I let out a groan to Jolene’s amusement. Bus and car traffic flows up and down George Street as Spanish guitar plays lightly from a speaker. Cinnamon is spilled on the black metal table.

“Things have taken on a new dimension. I feel weird about going after her now. The long-distance boyfriend was one thing, but this other thing is like...I don’t think I should mess around with this one. It’s getting too deep.”

“Sheesh, what’d you do now?”

“I just...I feel like I’m going to mess up her life or something.”

“By being there for her and loving her and giving her your heart and soul?”

“I don’t know if I’m what she needs right now.”

“You’re probably right. She deserves a *man*.”

I ignore my friend’s diss and continue making excuses. “Her and her boyfriend have plans to like, save sick kids in third-world countries. I just need to find my own girl. One that likes to dress like a dominatrix. I deserve a good ass-kicking.”

Jolene pats my hand in consolation. “You’d be a good slave.”

The door to the Purple Room opens with a radioactive violet grin and Dom, dressed as a Catholic priest, bids me enter a darkened room with covered windows, neon accents and the distinct aroma of bong water. The far end of the room looks like an alien spaceship with a wall of monitors, stacked and mounted in a precarious balance, connected by snaking ropes of tied cords and wires, plugs stuffing surge-protectors in every socket.

Radioactive lint flowers on the carpet and all surfaces. A Dreamcast, caster of dreams, glares in suffering the ordinary reality. Sonic hands me a controller and we play a round of *Virtua Tennis*.

Cheese is behind the monitors fiddling with his pliers and screwdrivers and getting yelled at for it. The feud between Andre Agassi and Pete Sampras plays out in a tournament that never ends when suddenly the screen goes blank.

“What’re you doing?” Sonic cries out. “I was about to seal my name in the Hall of Fame!”

“Cheese, is this really necessary?” I add.

“Alright, alright! Just wait! Give me a minute. That wasn’t supposed to happen,” Cheese cries, busily unscrewing whatever he screwed in.

“You get that cable yet?” Dom piles on from the back of the room.

“Will you guys just hold on? Give me a minute. Let me fix the problem. As soon as I figure out where this damn wire is supposed to...there. Now your game is back on.”

Our neighborhood hacker emerges from behind a jungle of cables and wires looking, ironically, like a giant piece of cheese. Big cartoon eyes painted with everlasting glee are coupled by an iconic toothy grin. From the top of this animated ensemble, Cheese’s bespectacled face, complete with a neon strip of wooly hair, pops out with a glowing grin. He’s dressed up as SpongeBob SquarePants.

“Another brilliant performance by Pete Sampras!” I cry out in a fake British accent and imitate the digital scenes of celebration I’ve seen a hundred times.

“Boo! I call foul!” Sonic jeers. “Interference from the ball-boy.”

“Ball-boy? How dare you!” Cheese harrumphs in disgust. “Can a ball boy give you this?”

The TV switches from the friendly graphics of the video game to a jarring display of flesh. We don’t even know what we’re looking at until about two seconds later because of the extreme close-up. But there’s familiarity in the high-octane rhythm. We stand up, entranced in the purple dark like cavemen.

“Cheese, in light of this little miracle,” Sonic says, “I’ll let the interference slide.”

Cheese grins and enjoys his moment of glory. “You call that a miracle? All you have to do is make a screenname, enter the mainframe, and find the digital key-code analogous to the server.”

None of us are listening.

“Hold on a sec. There! Now you can hear it!”

Orgasmic moans rise in pitch; a porn star’s cries of “Yes! Yes! Yes!” blast our eardrums.

“That’s too loud.”

“Yeah, that’s a bit much.”

“Whoopsie-daisy,” Cheese chuckles and brings the TV down to normal volume. “See? All it takes is a dummy account and you’ve got free Direct TV. I swear, the people running this company are morons. They deserve to get their shit stolen.”

A busty blonde with water-balloon tits and a face that resembles the bottom of a sandal at the end of summer licks her hand and mounts a big sausage atop a red-checkered table.

“Reverse cowgirl,” Sonic notes with appreciation. “Uh oh, here come two more customers. Can she satisfy three cocks at once?”

“Well, they didn’t come for the garlic knots,” Dom quips. “Alright boys, it’s time. Let’s suit up.”

“I need your flannel, *chico*,” Sonic says to Dom. This is said with a Mexican accent to match his costume for the night. A shirt comes flying across the room and Sonic flares it around and does the buttons all the way up to the collar. A paisley bandana is tied tight around his big head.

“Alright gentlemen, the moment you’ve all been waiting for,” Dom intones like an announcer before a boxing match. “Sonic, you got the pills?”

Sonic takes out a small envelope from his pants pocket. He empties it so that four pills the color of Pepto Bismol roll into his palm. He hands one to each of us like a pharmacist.

“Double-stacked Superman’s. Holy shit, dude. Where’d you get these?” Cheese says with wonder.

“Don’t worry about it,” Sonic says nonchalantly. “Delta Kappa knows how to treat its pledges right.”

“These pills have a 70% content ratio of MDMA,” Cheese informs us, his glasses looking like fogged windowpanes. “Then again, anyone can put a Superman stamp on a pill. All you need is a pill press. You can find one cheap online.”

“O ye of little faith,” Dom says and plucks the pill out of Cheese’s hand. “You don’t want it? Give it to me.”

“Hey!” Cheese cries and makes a grab at his pill as Dom dances away holding it over his open mouth. He flicks it to Sonic who catches it with a splash in his red plastic cup. Sonic downs the cup of jungle juice in one gulp and flashes a fluorescent purple grin with the pill between his teeth, spits it out in his palm and hands it back to Cheese.

“Bombs away,” we all cheers and tip our heads back.

The plan is to roll our asses off and join the parade of ghosts, vampires, monsters, cheerleaders, and sexy nurses. But before I swallow mine, I stop.

What would Vita say if she knew I was taking Ecstasy? I wonder. Would she be cool with it?

I imagine her face. I don’t see her smiling and telling me how cool I am.

My imagination takes me further. I envision myself going up to her room, high out of my mind, telling her that I love her...

“I’m going to pass,” I announce to my stunned cohort after they finish their red cups. “I’m sticking with jungle juice tonight. You guys can have mine.”

“What’s wrong, dawg?” Sonic asks, furrowing his eyebrows in concern. His hand rests on my shoulder, as if worried for my health.

“You alright?” Father Dom adds, cocking an eyebrow.

“I’m not in the mood,” I say. “It’s all yours.”

“Your call, Danny,” Dom and takes back this sacrament.

Dom holds up the offered sacrifice for all to see and asks how they should divide the pieces. Cheese takes out a razorblade from his handy-dandy toolbox and goes to work. They split the fourth pill into thirds, and these pieces go down to fizz rainbows and strobe lights in their stomach acid. Almost all of them anyway.

“I’m not swallowing mine,” Cheese announces, flashing a smile like a Jack-O-Lantern.

“Hand it over,” Sonic demands.

“Nope. Didn’t say I wasn’t going to take it. I just said I wasn’t going to swallow it.”

“Well, what’re you going to do with it then? Crush it up and smoke it? What kind of crackhead are you?” scoffs Sonic with little patience for Cheese’s antics.

“I’m going to stick it up my ass,” Cheese wheezes nasally and gives each of us a shit-eating grin.

Sonic and Dom fall to the floor howling. Furniture is moved and adjusted back into place in the fits of hilarity that follow.

“Dude!” Dom cries laughing. “What the fuck are they teaching you at Gamma?”

“Swallowing it is a waste. You can get 80% improvement on bioavailability if you absorb it through your rectal tissue. The stomach acid just—”

“Dude!” Father Dom scolds. “Language!”

“Did you just say, ‘rectal tissue?’ What the hell is wrong with you, Cheese?”

“You absorb it through your anal cavity,” Cheese tries explaining again.

“AWWW!” we protest in a riot, all of us laughing.

“Cheese, do me a favor, alright? Leave the room. And while you’re at it, stick that pill up your ass.”

“Will do,” Cheese retorts defiantly. “Watch me.”

Cheese reveals teeth like piano keys, a smile you’d rather not see before someone sticks something up their ass, and he makes his exit. The Purple Room is in uproar.

“Yo, what the...” Sonic stammers, shaking his head. “He’s not going to hump me at Delta Kappa, is he? Because that would totally not be cool. SpongeBob starts humping me, I’m knocking him out. I have a reputation to worry about.”

“Does that really work though?” I ask. “Bioavailability or whatever?”

“It works, and those pills are strong,” Dom states matter-of-factly. “He’s going to be rolling his ass off. He’d better not end up in the hospital. He’s going to need a lot of babysitting.”

“And lots of water, “I add, thinking back to news reports I’ve seen about kids dying in the clubs from dehydration.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll take care of him. I just want to see how this turns out. You know how funny this is going to be?” Dom giggles.

Ten minutes later, Cheese returns from the bathroom stalls with a slightly different gait. I can’t put my finger on it, but there’s something different about the way he’s walking. More duck-like.

“Took a while. What’d you do? Have a little fun while you were in there?”

“You washed your hands, right?”

Cheese grins and shows us hands that none of us asked to see.

“One pink superman flying in the rear,” Cheese declares.

“AWWW!”

“Goddammit Cheese!”

“You dirty fuck!”

We shake our heads and file out in costume, laughing with all the black lights still glowing behind us.

On the third floor, Vita is in her room with Lynn. The door is wide-open as usual. Multiple lights blaze at different angles to make as thorough an inspection as high wattage can give.

“Hey,” I call, leaning into their doorway.

“Ho,” Vita hollers back, helping Lynn with her costume in front of the mirror, a Playboy bunny with a pink wig. Vita stands behind Lynn adjusting her accentuated bust.

“Y’all be careful tonight now, hear?” I drawl. “Don’t be eating no candy that isn’t wrapped. It could be laced with something.”

"Where you headed, stranger?" Vita breezes back, turning around to look at me. Her mascara is darker than usual, but she seems in no hurry to dress. I'm curious to see what she's wearing, but I'm afraid that it'll kill me.

"Going with the fellas to a little mixer's all," I say, my fake drawl faltering as I avert my eyes from the reflection of hot lights and cleavage. I look at a box of Cinnamon Toast Crunch on Vita's desk. The chefs look hopped up on sugar, like they're on drugs.

"Still early, isn't it?" Lynn asks me, checking the digital alarm clock on her shelf.

"They got some preshow before the main event. I'm going to finally see all their secrets," I intone in a spooky voice.

"Better hope they don't start whacking each other with paddles," Lynn says. "Might ask you to step in for a smack or two."

"Could be worse than that."

"Where are we going to tonight, Lynn?" Vita asks out loud to her roommate as she locks eyes with me, communicating something without words. A sort of, "Will I see you tonight?"

"Viraj claims there's a party at Alpha," Lynn informs us, making micro-adjustments to her wig.

"Alpha, boo!" I ironically jeer, as if I care about frat rivalry.

"She wants to see her Chippendale," Vita whispers and winks. "Don Giovanni."

Lynn makes no reply, laser-focused on her wig.

"Guess I'd best be on my way," my voice trails. "Did you decide what costume you'll be wearing?"

"What did we decide?" Vita asks Lynn.

"Catholic schoolgirl, wasn't it?"

"Just a little something from back home. Still got it, might as well use it. I'm going to have to hike my skirt up to compete with *these*

puppies though,” Vita teases and pretends to cup Lynn’s breasts. I can’t help but look.

“Be safe out there,” I warn one last time, feeling a little ill at the thought of Vita parading around in the streets with Lynn, the two of them looking sizzling hot.

I tell the girls that I’ll see them later and head down to the first floor. I sprint across the cul-de-sac and up the soccer field to catch up to my boys at the bus stop, following the unmistakable sound of Sonic’s high-pitched laughter from far off.

My crew is standing among the mixed crowd of freshmen both dressed in costume and not, but apparently, we’re the only ones who are this intoxicated at 8PM. If any of the other freshmen want to catch a glimpse of what their midnight is going to look like, take a good look. What *we’ll* look like at midnight will be a completely different story.

“Senorita, suck my chinchilla!” Sonic sings poorly in make-believe Spanish. “Touch my Chiquita banana! Let’s go back to my villa!”

“Dude, you see that little nurse over there?” Dom whispers. “Over there next to Darth Vader. What I wouldn’t give to have her hold my balls and make me cough.”

We laugh.

“Tonight, anything goes,” Dom continues, doing his best Humphrey Bogart. “You bring home a porker tonight, there’s no shame in it. It’s Halloween.”

Dom sanctimoniously blesses us with a sign of the cross and we get on the bus.

In the atmosphere of Halloween night is the noxious fragrance of death, that sweet pungent odor of rotten apples and spiced tea.

I can feel a tingle on my skin, and I didn't even drop E. Soon my whole crew is going to be in La La Land, telling everyone they love them and that they're best friends, grinding their teeth with eyes that look googly, rubbing their arms, their hair, dancing with their entire being beside the speakers.

Angelic traffic passes us as we walk up the crumbling side-street that leads to Delta Kappa, an iron-and-rust frat-mansion decorated with Jack-o-lanterns and spider webs. The house already looks haunted. The decorations only succeed in making it cheerful. A guy called Black Moses greets us at the door dressed like Shaft with his sleeves cut off to reveal pythonic arms.

"What up, Sonic? These your boys? Alright guys, take your asses downstairs. No hanging out in the hallway."

"What's up, Moses?" Sonic salutes and gives him a fist-bump as the bouncer nods and rolls a toothpick in his mouth.

"Hi there!" Cheese chirps at the door. Moses gives SpongeBob a look from behind his shades but says nothing as we make our way inside.

The house has a long hallway of dark wood and Delta Kappa insignia in every imaginable place. It's poorly lit, and the brothers walking around in their various costumes and holding their cups seem more like a blurry mob, or a painting that sat out in the rain with the colors starting to run. We walk past the crumbling fireplace with an American flag hanging above it.

"WHAT'S UP, SONIC?" a guy named Xander screams. He gives us all a fierce bearhug even though he has no idea who the rest of us are. From first glance, I can tell this is the type of guy who does well with sorority bimbos. His handsome face is matched with white teeth,

ice-blue eyes, and frosted tips. For Halloween, he's dressed in doctor's scrubs, covered with fake bloodstains. He's clearly coked up, talking a mile a minute. "Yo, tonight is going to be crazy...bitches...kegs...get it on, baby! You boys are going to have the time of your lives. Do your thing, baby! WOO!"

In the kitchen, fleshy creatine machines mill about drinking beer and eating tacos. The breakfast nook is set up buffet-style and the eating area is filthy, but the brothers here are a tad more focused and genial, running at a slower pace, making time to get their calories in. Halloween or not, they still need protein.

Tonight's fare is all-beef tacos, no lettuce or salsa or cheese. Just shells and hamburger meat.

On Halloween Night, all freshmen are invited to rush and join the ranks of the fraternities. Sonic is known here, and by extension Dom, Cheese, and I are given generous offerings to draw from their keg and join their feast. The brothers call us "boys" and "gents." It's clear that tonight we're not just a bunch of sausages coming to the party without buns.

"Look alive, Chief!" a Viking roars at me and sloshes a beer into my hand. The beer is flat amber piss, but it's better than standing empty-handed and smiling dumbly. Better to hold something. Even better to be drunk.

Dom and Sonic are making small talk with the other freshmen. Sports chat, mostly. Cheese is around and about, exploring the basement looking sweaty, bright-eyed, and full of glee. "Can I get a sip of your beer?" he wheezes at me after he circles back. He seems like a lost puppy, panting and excited. Heatwaves and vibrations radiate from the pores of the yellow sponge. His glasses are fogged.

I hand Cheese my cup and think about how similar a piece of cheese is to a sponge when you draw it, but how they look nothing alike in

real life. "Man, I feel like a million bucks," Cheese rambles happily. "Thanks for giving us that pill earlier. That was nice of you."

"Don't sweat it. And don't sweat on me either," I gripe noncommittally, wondering if I should've taken my pill after all.

"You're a good guy, Danny. I mean that. I think out of all the guys, you seem to have your head on straight. I mean, you're weird, but in a good way. Some of these morons still act like they're in high school. Look at Sonic for Chrissake. Never mind. I take that back. Sonic's kind of a dick, but what can you do?"

I stare at Cheese as he babbles happily. The Ecstasy has him way too open. Against my will, I visualize the pill absorbing up his ass into his bloodstream.

"Anyway, what's up with you and Vita? Dude, she's fucking hot. I'm not into Asian girls, but if I was, well I don't know. You got something special there, buddy. I'm not just saying that because she's good-looking. She's a cool chick. Girls like that are hard to find. You probably want to keep an eye on that. I mean since she's probably wandering around with Lynn tonight."

"Yeah, maybe you're right," I reply, wondering if tonight will be the night that I tell Vita that I love her.

"Eh, what do I know? Tell Vita to get rid of her boyfriend. He's there, and you're here. It's like 2+2. Sorry, I think I'm rolling my ass off. Just forget I said anything. Holy shit, I'm starting to feel it!"

Cheese wipes perspiration from his glasses and stumbles into the subterranean gloom, searching for Patrick Starfish. He has a point.

The music suddenly cuts off. There's a shift in the room. Bodies align themselves on stage shoulder to shoulder. As all the freshmen turn to the stage, they're faced with the spectacle of an army. Fifty brothers stand together, brothers of every race, wearing black T-shirts with the Delta Kappa insignia on their biceps.

The brothers are gym-strong and wear bandanas. They're dressed in motley like a ragtag group of conquerors from another world here to address the lower ranks in the hull of a leaky ship. Xander, the current Delta Kappa president, stands in the center, looking somehow dignified despite his constant sniffing. Presiding as the emcee of the evening's main event, dressed as Eazy-E, Jeri curl and all, is Jolene's new boyfriend, the rapper named Flow. His skills on the microphone make him an obvious in-house choice for emcee.

"YO, YO, YO SHUT THE FUCK UP!"

Everyone shuts up.

Flow stands in front of the giant subwoofers. He looks like a gangster Napoleon in front of the Imperial Forces.

"Alright y'all. This is it. This is the moment you've been waiting for. But before we get into it, we've got to get into some business first. The brothers of Delta Kappa—"

"—DELTA KAP!" all the brothers bark in unison.

"Welcome you to our 2001 Freshman Orientation. If you're here now, and you're still standing, that means you've got some fucking balls. Give yourselves a round of applause, y'all."

There's a round of applause, spiked with whistling and feet stamping on the cement floor.

"Tonight, we're about to show you the good life."

Strains of wild hooting from the crowd.

"But you've got to remember what this is all about. It's more than just girls and partying and having a good time. It's about being with your brothers, it's about being there for each other, having each other's backs. It's about being down for the cause!"

"THAT'S RIGHT!" screams a ginger-bearded lumberjack like he's one Redbull away from an aneurysm.

“If you’re down for Delta Kappa, then you’re making a commitment. It’s an oath, to promise and know that you’re going to be down for every single one of your brothers. Everyone one of my brothers standing here behind me got my back, just like they know I got their back.”

Flow dips and shuffles on stage before the crowd of freshmen, looking at each pledge in his eyes.

“If y’all haven’t heard, last night some punk-ass little coward from Alpha sneak-attacked our brother Fredo with a baseball bat. He’s still in critical condition. So, as we go about our business tonight, as y’all have a good time, just remember our brother. When you sip your drink, make sure you drink one for Fredo. He’s in Robert Wood Johnson Hospital right now.”

Fierce, dark growls rise among the mob. Apparently, Fredo is a brother much loved.

“I know what some of us are thinking. We should go over there and handle our business. Believe me, Delta Kappa always handles its business. But there’s a time and a place. Don’t do anything stupid. That’s not what we’re about. Once you become one of us, you represent us, and your actions represent us. We don’t need vigilante shit. Just know that those cowards are going to get what’s coming to them. We take care of our own!”

Roars of approval and a thirst for blood ripple through the room.

“FUCK ALPHA! FUCK ALPHA!” several impassioned pledges scream, quickly ascending to a full-on chant.

Flow nods and chuckles, enjoying the moment of ruckus.

“Tonight, we got some special guests in the house. Please give it up for... (*what are their names?*)... Give it up for Cherry and Peaches, y’all!”

On Flow's command, some tantric New Age music starts bumping from the giant speakers and a disco ball begins spinning and lighting up the room with lurid colors.

"We're about to get nasty up in here!"

The girls come out, and from the get-go, everything is politically incorrect and tacky. The music is Indian, the strippers are Latina, and they're wearing veils like Arabian belly-dancers. No one seems to care that the baggy dresses they're wearing are meant to suggest burqas since the costumes come flying off in five seconds anyway.

The center stage is small but sturdy, built by hand from repurposed lumber. The DJ flips the record to N.E.R.D's *Lapdance* and it's like an "On" switch for the strippers. The basement is filled with pandemonium as Cherry and Peaches slingshot their bras into the audience.

There's a surge to the wooden platform by all the freshmen present. Big brothers named Sumo Joe and Black Moses are prepared to beat the crap out of any pledge who gets too handsy, or in other words, without the proper respect of proffering a dollar bill.

"GET YOUR DOLLARS OUT! THEY'RE NOT HERE FOR SHOW, BABY! LET'S GO!"

"I'm not feeling anything!" Sonic shouts in my ear. I look and see his bandana now drooping a tad, as if to signal his disappointment. "I think these pills are beat! How do my eyes look?"

I glance at Sonic's pupils to see if they're dilated. All I see are disco balls.

"Multicolored!" I yell back and quickly return my attention to Cherry and Peaches as they go into a lesbian routine, feeling each other's breasts and removing each other's G-strings. I'm fascinated by the way they step out of their underwear. So daintily in their stilettos.

Dollars flutter in the air. Across the body of freshmen pledges, great sums of pizza money are exhausted as Cherry and Peaches wriggle butt-naked in a garish rainbow strobe.

I look hard, blink my eyes once, twice, and suddenly see Cheese still dressed as SpongeBob sandwiched between Cherry and Peaches. The crazy bastard must've rushed the stage!

His tongue is hanging out like an overexcited puppy. His glasses are thick with condensation. His Urkel-like face looks blissful and angelic. He has no idea where he is.

The music changes to some spacey EDM, sending Cheese into a trance. Cherry and Peaches grope him, feeling his porous foam body, searching for a zipper on those square pants. With perfect timing, the disco lights switch to strobe, and in the rapid blinking flashes of high BPMs, Peaches (or Cherry) begins to remove SpongeBob's brown shorts. I instinctively shut my eyes and hear Sonic shrieking hysterically amidst an uproar of whistling and cheers.

"SpongeBob is packing some heat, boy!" Flow announces, still performing as the master of ceremonies. Dom grabs my arm and squeals, "I can't look!"

In the bluish-white flashes between light and darkness, I see the strippers with lifted veils, both on their knees bobbing their heads and working on a semi-erect SpongeBob. Cheese's penis looks like a fat dolphin awaiting rescue.

The air is full of hilarity and horniness. The strippers escort their beloved cartoon hero offstage, presumably to take turns riding him with his costume still on. I feel like a wet-rag beneath a beer-pong table has been wrung out over my innocence. The testosterone level is so thick, a girl standing too close might get pregnant by osmosis.

“One more time, give it up for Cherry and Peaches, y’all!” Flow announces. “If you want to get down tonight, it’s \$50 for head, and \$80 for that ass!”

A buzz of excitement flurries in the air as every freshman pledge considers whether he’ll pay to lose his virginity for eighty bucks.

“You’re going to have to get SpongeBob’s sloppy seconds though!” Flow cracks and walks away from the microphone laughing at his own joke. “Don’t worry. We got condoms and Listerine. And now, let’s get it, baby! Yo DJ, drop that beat!”

As the DJ throws on *Big Pimpin’* by Jay-Z, the three of us converge in a corner to discuss the next move.

“Is Cheese getting double-teamed right now?” Sonic wonders aloud, still unable to believe what we’d just witnessed. The pledges around us rush to get in line. “I’ve got to get me some. Who’s with me?”

I look back at the line getting longer by the bar. I could never...

“They have no idea how long that wait is going to be,” Dom snickers. “Cheese will probably go for hours.”

“Yo, someone come with me,” Sonic presses harder. “I need to get laid.”

“Go ahead and hop in line, pal,” Dom urges with a smug smile. “I don’t want my dick falling off, but you go right ahead.”

“Listerine may kill 99.9% of germs, but that’s only mouth bacteria,” I point out. “Doesn’t count syphilis.”

“It’ll make your mouth minty,” Sonic retorts.

“The Listerine is probably for the ladies,” I argue. “I imagine they’d need to freshen up after kissing so many...dudes.”

“I think these pills are beat,” Sonic grumbles. “I don’t feel a damn thing. Do you guys feel anything?”

"I felt something when the music and all the lights came on," Dom confirms. "Definitely felt something. Just give it time. Depends on your environment. When the party starts, we'll be feeling it. Trust me."

"Usually takes an hour to kick in. It's been two hours already," Sonic complains. "I think Xander beat me on these pills. I should go over there and get our money back."

We look over to Xander who mans the bar, pouring shots down the open mouths of pledges.

"Should we go talk to him?" Sonic asks, his jaw visibly tense.

"I say we just wait," Dom says decisively. "You just need to meet a hottie. It'll happen. Just relax."

"Goddamn Cheese," Sonic mutters enviously and glances back at the line of freshmen waiting for their turn. "Maybe I should've stuck the pill up my ass."

"Nah bro."

We disperse into the crowd, each to his own purpose. As the night spins on its axis, I accept anything handed to me. Shots are being distributed among the pledges like Halloween candy. Rum mixed with death. The third shot almost makes me puke.

In no time, the basement and the whole house are filled with party crashers and invites. Here in the near pitch-black gloom, neon ghouls and nymphs dance in a disco strobe of jack-o-lanterns and faux-candles. I play a round of beer pong with Dom against a sexy referee and a girl dressed in leopard skin. We get knocked out, but Dom proceeds to charm the girls as I ask for directions to the bathroom. I'm told that it's upstairs, like no shit. I'm on my own. I want to be near the bathroom just in case I puke.

Through the sweat and perfume, fragrant silhouettes laugh and stare down at anything that dares to look in their direction. Upstairs

through the creaky gloom, I find the stickiness of the kitchen floor once again, and all table surfaces have been repurposed for beer pong.

Every five minutes, the brothers toast to each other for another great night. I imagine they do this a lot. I notice a few Asian bros among their number and wonder if they feel like one of those stars sewn on the American fabric, an added stripe for an added people, icons in the night sky, we are the world, and all that shit.

What do you bring to the table, little man? Do you know what it takes to get into this club called America?

Do a keg-stand!

An hour later, I'm caught stealing drinks at the bar. A violation most foul. I can't help it. I'm way too drunk and the line never ends. I could just go back to the dorm but somehow that doesn't seem to be an option given the fact that I'm certain Vita will arrive at any moment. All the douchebag bartenders ignore me. Costume or none, I don't exist. The cup snatching occurs as Biggie raps on 112's *Only You*. Beer-bopping through the crowd, and behind me some girl screams, "Stop him!"

Stop who, bitch?

Back upstairs through the cobwebs and bats in the hallway beside the kitchen, I spot Sonic and Dom in what looks to be some kind of parley gone wrong. Xander is standing there, and his dancing sky-blue eyes have gone cold. The blood on his hospital garb is starting to look a little more real. A tall redhead dressed as Jessica Rabbit stands beside him observing coldly with a twisted smile. A few other brothers who I don't know, and Sonic's Big, a huge Dominican meatball named Perez, are diffusing the situation.

"I said get on your knees," Xander threatens Sonic while ignoring the room, "and kiss my ring, you mutt."

Sonic's eyes look like chiseled granite, his square chin is pointed up sharply as if to cut Xander's face. It feels like you could polish stone on Sonic's cheekbones. He has that look like he's about to take Xander's head off, but resists, wanting to play by the rules. Not budging, not bending one knee. Walking away is off the table. A hard slam onto the wooden floor seems more likely.

"Fuck you and your ring!" I cry out, more of a heckler than a participant. This is a poorly calculated interjection.

"Who the fuck is this?" Xander demands to know, his attention diverted along with the rest of the room. All eyes fall on me. Casual partygoers and unaffiliated dudes read the room and flee the scene. "Let's see what's going on in the basement," their eyes seem to say as they vacate the living room.

"You little bastards. You come into our house, drink our booze, enjoy our hospitality, and then tell us to go fuck ourselves? Who do you think you are?" Xander asks in a deadly voice, and the room almost seems still enough to hear a grandfather clock tick. But there's a huge-ass party going on down in the basement and besides, there's no grandfather clock in this dump.

I'm thinking of something clever to say, but Father Dom gets there first with reason. "I think we just need to calm down. My boy's a little drunk right now. We've all had a lot to drink."

"You don't get to have an opinion, *pledge*," Xander sneers. Dom holds up his hands as if declaring his innocence. Looking back at Sonic Xander fires, "I give you pills from my personal stash, and you have the balls to come in here saying my shit is weak? I'm willing to let this slide and chalk it up to you guys being dumb-ass pledges who don't know better, but you've got to make it right. Go on, bitch. Kiss the ring."

“Yo Xander, Sonic’s a good kid,” Perez pipes up, sticking up for his Little. “He just had too much to drink. Sonic, you should apologize and then let’s peace up. Come on, guys.”

“I don’t have to peace up with a pledge. Are you shitting me? Kiss my ring, or you’re out.”

“Sonic, you kiss this motherfucker’s ring, you’ll regret it for the rest of your life,” I warn and then feel hands on me. Someone grabs me up and spins me around and I find myself face to face with an angry gorilla. I mean, literally, the dude is dressed as King Kong.

“Yo, this is the kid who’s been stealing drinks from the bar!” he explodes in my face, his eyes filled with primal rage.

“You serious?”

“Yo, kick this little Asian’s ass, bro!”

I feel myself lifted off the ground by three brothers, two of them at my shoulders and one of them at my legs while Xander, Perez, Jessica Rabbit and my boys watch me get carried off, *clump, clump, clump*, like a dead man through a backdoor in the kitchen and tossed outside.

The backyard is more like a parking lot, with one sad barbecue grill that no one’s bothered to clean since ten summers ago. Seated around the patio table on mismatched lawn furniture are Flow and Jolene and a few other brothers and their girls, holding what looks to be a candlelight vigil.

“Yo, what the hell are you doing?” Flow cries out as King Kong and the others toss me into an overflowing recycling bin. Empty beer cans clatter all over the concrete. I get up on one knee, then prepare an arm block for defense, just in case I get socked in the face.

“Danny!” Jolene cries and jumps up from Flow’s lap wearing a long black wig, tight black shorts with suspenders and a white tank top with her boobs popping out. Her hands go to her mouth just like an anime character. She’s dressed as Tifa from *Final Fantasy VII*.

"Ms. Lockheart," I say with a nod of my head, acknowledging her. I glance at Flow, wondering if I should introduce myself.

"This punk was stealing drinks at the bar," King Kong growls.

"And running his mouth," Jimi Hendrix adds for good measure. The third one just stands there looking like a very intense jester.

"You got the wrong guy. He's good people," Jolene vouches, signaling me to come sit down. I sort of lean toward her instead, not wanting to get knocked out while sitting on a patio chair.

"Your friend isn't welcome here anymore," King Kong rages. "We want him out."

"Is this your boy?" Flow asks, keeping his cool and glancing over at Jolene. He gives me the once-over, still dressed as Eazy-E, not bothering to remove his shades. "Let me talk to him."

King Kong starts to protest, but it's clear that he's outranked.

"He's not allowed back in the house. Xander said so."

"Alright cool, just let me rap with my man real quick and we'll send him home."

"Fine," King Kong grumbles and storms off.

"Better thank your lucky stars when you get home," Hendrix snarls at me, staring me down. The mad jester breathes heavily and gives me the wild eyes as if to let me know I've escaped certain death.

"Yo, tell my boys I'm alright though!" I call after them. The door shuts behind them, muffling the crazy volume thumping from the house. The bass from the basement continues to vibrate the patio. Tapers and a small collection of bathroom candles in their little metal dishes flicker in pools of melted wax. The light dances off the liquid; the flames groove to the beat. There's a portrait of a young guy in his twenties with a crew-cut, blue-green eyes, and a dimpled chin.

"Got a little crazy in there, huh?" Jolene says and winks at me in full cosplay.

“You wasted?” Flow adds bluntly.

“Kind of.”

“You stole drinks?” Flow interrogates.

“The bartenders were ignoring me on purpose. I’m just having one of those nights. I’m kind of waiting for someone, but she never showed up.”

Flow nods as if he understands, but a dreadlocked guy who seems to be dressed as Bob Marley barks, “This is our house. Would you like it if I went into your house and took a crap in your food? Huh, little man? Would you like that?”

“Chill Roger, I got this.”

Roger wants nothing to do with me. He gets up and leaves the patio, along with a few of the brothers following him, until the last of the girlfriends go with them.

“That was dramatic,” Flow snorts and laughs a smoker’s laugh, reigniting a blunt that had been extinguished.

“Where your crew at? Why you all alone?” questions Jolene, cuddling up against her new gangster boyfriend.

“There was some drama with Xander and Sonic,” I mutter, still drunk, watching the flames flicker and dance in the night’s breeze.

“What happened?”

“I’m not sure, but he was telling Sonic to kiss his ring in front of everybody,” I explain, getting more animated. “Then King Kong spotted me and called me out for lifting drinks. I admit it was the wrong thing to do, and I apologize. I didn’t mean any disrespect.”

Flow passes me the blunt. I’m surprised and honored, knowing that this is the peace pipe. I hit the blunt a few times and pass it back with thanks.

“Jolene, you don’t smoke?”

"Not me, I only do Bay Breeze and vodkas. Wait, so what happened? Did Sonic do it?"

"I don't know. I don't really feel like going back in there and asking."

Flow shakes his head in disappointment.

"You know what, I love my brothers but sometimes they let power go to their heads. During Rush, a brother can make a pledge do whatever they want. I mean damn near *anything*! I don't know why they always take it that far. They start tripping and forget everything *they* had to go through. It's like a cycle."

"They're fucking tripping," I nod, mirroring Flow's vernacular.

"That's messed up," Jolene adds. "Couldn't Xander just make Sonic perform extra duties or something?"

"Xander can be kind of a prick," Flow agrees. "Plus, he like to do a little too much..."

Flow makes a face coupled with the gesture of sniffing lines without the sound effects.

"He still don't have to be acting like that," Jolene moans, the picture coming clear.

"Sonic wants to be down with you guys," I plead, turning to Flow. "He'll do anything. But Xander called Sonic a mutt in front of everyone!"

Flow and Jolene exchange glances, simultaneously making the facial expression for "Yikes!"

"Sonic is Perez's Little," Flow ponders, thinking out loud. "I think we can smooth it out."

"What if Sonic quits?" I wonder.

"You need to be asking what happens if he gets *kicked out*," Flow corrects, taking off his shades and looking me in my eyes now, mano y mano. "Nobody *quits* Delta Kap. You might be surprised if your man

kissed that ring, but if he didn't, he just went through a whole world of bullshit for nothing. Ain't no quitting in Delta Kappa."

Jolene looks like she wants to defend me, but since Flow is her new boyfriend, this is unfamiliar territory. She just rubs his knee, but he's plenty calm. He's the reason I'm still sitting here on the property.

"Yo shorty, go get us some beers," Flow says smoothly.

"You want me to wait in line?" Jolene asks, not sarcastically, but obediently, which kind of shocks me.

"Nah, as a matter of fact, I got some drinks in my room. Let me talk with my man over here. I'll be up in a minute."

Jolene gets up and touches me on the shoulder.

"I'll see you in class, Danny. Make sure you get home safe, okay?"

"If you see Vita, can you tell her where I am?" I request, even though the two of them have never met.

She nods sympathetically, still cosplaying as the anime character. Flow waits for her to disappear before lighting up a Newport. He offers me one, after I make the gesture for being fresh out.

"You lose anyone in the Towers?" asks Flow, taking a drag and nodding to the picture of the clean-cut dude with a proud smile, the candles flickering on his face.

"Yeah," I reply softly. "A guy I knew from church. He worked at Tower One."

Flow nods.

"Only the good die young," quotes Flow.

"He was your friend?" I ask, indicating the photograph.

"He was my *brother*," Flow corrects me. "He was my Big when I was a pledge. He died in Tower Two. He's with the angels now."

"I'm sorry," I murmur out of respect and bow my head. Flow makes the sign of the cross and lights another candle for him.

Flow passes me a candle and tells me, "For your dead."

I light the candle and say a brief prayer.

“God bless the dead,” Flow rasps once more, crossing himself. “I miss you, Derek. You were the best.”

A moment passes as Flow grows silent, possibly fighting back tears. I don’t dare check.

“You’re not trying to pledge?” Flow asks me, putting his shades back on.

“Nah, not me.”

“Why not? Something wrong with Delta Kappa?”

“It’s not for everybody,” I say. I can’t tell if this comes off facetious or politically correct.

Flow doesn’t like this answer. “Why isn’t it for *you*?” he presses.

“Some people need to be in a group,” I begin, which must be something he’s heard a million times before, judging by his reaction.

“‘Some people need to be in a group,’” he parrots back to me. “Nigga, *everyone’s* in a group. You think you live alone on this earth? ‘No man is an island unto himself.’ Do you know what that shit means? That means you got a bunch of people around you, responsible for *your* life, keeping *your* ass alive, and you don’t even thank them. You just take it for granted that everyone should just take care of your bum ass, so that you can do whatever you want to.”

“Some people know how to make it on their own,” I attempt to parry feebly. My argument is about as thin as paper and wouldn’t stand up to a breeze, let alone Flow’s furious wind.

“This world is survival baby!” Flow cries loudly, fully charged up. He’s tapping the side of his temple and looking at me like, *Think! Think!* “You’ve never been out there with the wolves, huh? You don’t know anything about that. Otherwise, you wouldn’t be saying dumb shit like, ‘Some people need to be in a group.’ So, in other words, you think you’re special.”

“No, it’s not that,” I protest, but as soon as he says it, I know he has me pegged. “I just want to do my own thing; you know what I’m saying?”

“What about your bros?” Flow asks, calming down a notch. “You don’t have their back?”

“Of course, I do. But I’m saying, we’re not like a *group*. We’re just a bunch of individuals put together in this crazy experiment called ‘college.’”

It’s like watching a car crash in slow motion. In the pinwheel and tumble of my philosophy, I can see two things: One: that for some reason, I desperately want this man’s respect. Two: everything that comes out of my mouth is doing the opposite of achieving that. Flow shakes his head, amused at my naivete.

“I forgot that you’re just a freshman. You don’t know anything. You haven’t been with the wolves. You’re still eating that processed food they’re giving you. You don’t know how to eat raw meat. That’s what wolves eat.”

I stare at him blankly, uncertain how deeply I should go with this wolf metaphor.

“I’m talking about knowledge, motherfucker!” Flow suddenly shouts, as if to answer my question, tapping the side of his head once again. “You’ve got to go through pain to know how to move in this world. That shit isn’t a *possibility*. That shit is a *guarantee*. The only question is, when it goes down, how do you move? Do you have a game plan? Do you have a code of ethics or a structure that’ll guide you through? Or are you just going to do what you *feel* like? Fuck feelings, bro. Feelings change every day. Fuck that shit.”

Flow leans back, and evidently this is his main point. I’m too feely. I’m too wishy-washy. I’m a romantic. I’m useless, in hard times and in times of war.

Flow rises out of his seat. He's done lecturing me. I have no idea whether we've become friends.

"Next time you come through," Flow starts to offer, rethinks his statement, and switches it up. "Yo, I'll see you around, alright? What's your name, player?"

"Danny," I reply.

"Alright then, Danny."

I watch in awe as Flow struts imperiously back to the frat house. The music is still bumping after he's disappeared. I'm left alone in silence, invited by shadows to make my leave, however stunned I might be. Flow is making his way upstairs, spending the rest of his evening with Jolene, the NYC art world's future queen.

I exit through the side gate and pass through circles of party people smoking cigarettes and shrieking with laughter. Somewhere in the bushes, I hear someone throwing up. I head down the street when I hear several voices call my name.

"Yo, Danny!"

"Wait up!"

Dom, Sonic, and Cheese catch up to me, relieved at having found me. I feel a little cheer rise back up in my soul. They arrive as priest, gangster, and SpongeBob, however intoxicated and disheveled. The noise from the neighborhood sounds like the fun part of hell. Cops are encouraging the pedestrian traffic to move on, but more likely, enjoying the show. Costumed freaks let loose the darker energies of the moon.

We inspect each other and see no blood, though on their side there've been some apparent chemical changes. From the cut-out hole pops Cheese's face where his glasses seem to remain on perma-fog, his mouth open, panting like a puppy. Oddly, Dom and Sonic seem to match SpongeBob's expression as well. Those giddy eyes, frozen in

excitement. The sniffing gives them away. A bad situation caused by drugs, resolved by what else, but more drugs?

“What’d they do to you?” Dom wonders with amusement, glad to see me in one piece. I brush myself off just to make sure. I should’ve gotten punched in the face. “You got carried out. You’re a fucking legend, bro.”

“Yo, Danny has got some balls,” Sonic confirms solemnly, holding his fist out in respect. “Mad props, dawg. I know you got my back, for real. I’ll never forget that.”

I give Sonic a fist bump, and then he suddenly pulls me in, hugging me fiercely. I’m crushed by the vice grip of his bulk, but as intense and sweaty as he is, I can feel the love. He squeezes more air out of me and breathes heavily into my ear. He’s almost on the edge of tears. It feels good, kind of.

“That’s what brothers are for,” I affirm as he slowly lets me breathe again. It hits me that I’m echoing Flow. I look at Cheese and ask, “Did they fuck the shit out of you or what?”

“I wish!” Cheese pipes up cheerfully. “My disc was a floppy. Ecstasy will do that. Anyway, we just talked. Those girls were super nice. Peaches has a kid, and Cherry is just stripping to take care of her *abuelo*. That means ‘grandfather’ in Spanish.”

“Alright, so what happened to you?” Dom asks me.

I regale my boys with what had happened outside, about getting tossed into the garbage, and being two seconds away from getting a beatdown. I explain to them how Jolene and Flow put a pause to the soccer game on my ribs.

“What about you guys?” I ask and then pause, searching Sonic’s eyes. “Did you...?”

Dom and Sonic exchange a look and immediately I know.

"I screwed up. I was being a dick to Xander," Sonic sheepishly mumbles, his bandana fully drooping off his sweaty head. "I didn't show the proper respect."

"You did what you had to do," Dom adds hastily as he and Cheese pat Sonic on the shoulder. Sonic nods his head, accepting the defeat like a boxer taking the fall. I stare at them in disbelief, unable to accept the idea that Sonic had gotten down on his knees and kissed that asshole's ring. But then again, there are a lot of things that I don't understand. About being in a group. About strength in numbers. About climbing the ladder. About needing to belong.

"I did what I had to do," Sonic repeats with a nod. "It would've been a mistake to come this far just to quit."

I pretend to agree, but I wonder if this is one of those little purchases on your soul that ends up being nonrefundable. How will Sonic feel a month from now, a year from now, *ten* years from now? Will he brush it off, this memory of submitting to another man, kissing his goddamn ring?

"Xander was mad cool about it afterwards," Sonic notes brightly. "Yo Danny, if you weren't stealing drinks..."

"Bro, the *cocaina* this dude had was pure snow," Dom says in a low voice. I suddenly remember that they're also on Ecstasy. "I think it jumpstarted the pill."

"For real," Sonic concurs in a manner fully satiated, like he's finally busted his nut. "I'm definitely feeling something now."

"Me too," Cheese says. "I'm fucking *rolling*."

"Aw, go shove another pill up your ass," Sonic says and laughs.

"With pleasure!" Cheese agrees.

"So, what's going on now?" I wonder.

"I don't know, but I feel like dancing!" Dom giggles excitedly, jumping up and down and twiddling his fingers.

“You guys down to go to the city?” Sonic suggests. I can already see them there, riding the train, waiting in line, and trying to score more drugs in the bathroom.

“Let’s do it, baby!” Dom whoops, jumping like it’s game time.

All I can think about is Vita. Where is she? Why didn’t she come?

“You guys go ahead. I’m going back to the dorms,” I tell them.

Dom, Sonic, and even Cheese, despite being somewhere on the moon, understand what I need to do.

“Bring it in,” Dom ushers and gathers us in a huddle. He puts his head in the middle, and the rest of us follow. Cheese leans in as far as his SpongeBob costume will allow. Our foreheads are touching as Dom speaks with a basketball coach’s conviction. “You guys are the best crew I’ve ever met in my life. This is what it’s all about right here.”

A gaggle of hoes pass us by and mock our little moment on the sidewalk, but we don’t care.

“You guys are my boys!” Sonic roars into the huddle.

Dom, Cheese, and Sonic head to New Brunswick Station to catch a train going into Penn Station. I go the other way and catch a bus from College Ave. back to campus. The bus smells wretched with puke. I’m surrounded by drunken conversation, and I keep to myself as raucous laughter blends with drunken sobbing. All this whirlwind of emotion mixed with unfulfilled wishes, only to be subdued by late-night pizza deliveries.

As I get off the bus and walk across the soccer field to the dorm, I focus on finding Vita safe in her room, with all the whorish make-up removed. Or kept on, but only for me. Vita will tell me the reason why she didn’t come to Delta Kappa. Scenarios that we’ll laugh about play in my head. Lynn had too much to drink. Viraj saw an ex and had to be consoled. Something.

We'll share stories of our crazy nights and end the evening with ramen. Then it can all be over, this horrible Halloween, this stupid holiday that once meant ghosts and candy, but now exists only to test our resistance against temptation, experimenting with the strength of our purity. When the enchantment is over, we can go back to being little, old us again, and I won't have to wonder if Vita is safe. I won't have to worry that she's out there, trying to dance while some creep moves in with plans to put his hands all over her ass.

When I arrive, I know it's still early according to the standards of a Friday night. There are only the quiet sounds of homebody freshmen who never go out. The muffled dialogue of movies being played on laptops, and the bleeps and blips of video games.

Besides that, it's eerily quiet. The air feels suffocating and still.

The third floor is dead, but Vita's door is open with light spilling out into the hallway. Those silly girls must've left their lights on in a hurry to be out the door.

I approach Vita's door and hear voices. My heart begins beating. I'm afraid of what I'll see.

As I peek into the room, I see someone dressed as a cop, down on one knee. He's holding Vita's hands as she's sobbing and nodding her head.

I immediately back away thinking, Oh God, it's Marc. He's asking Vita to marry him!

I can hardly move. I feel like I've just been hit with a harpoon. I stagger down the hall and pause in front of the restroom. But then it hits me. Was that Vita, or someone else? All I saw was the cop. He was down on one knee, blocking my view of Vita or whoever it was.

A cop's radio breaks the silence. It wasn't a costume. That guy's a real cop.

What the fuck?

I rush back to Vita's room and burst through the doorway. It's not Vita. It's Lynn!

Vita's roommate meets my eyes over the cop's shoulder. I understand now that he's a campus cop by his uniform. He's pudgy and stern and looks at me with stiff authority. He rises off his knee as his mouth opens with commands. I don't even hear him. All I see is Lynn sitting on Vita's bed. Lynn's face is a blotchy mess. Her eyes are smudged in make-up from tears.

"Where's Vita?" I demand to know, as the cop blocks me from further entry.

"Sir, you're going to have to step out of the room," the cop repeats, pressing me back toward the door. He moves forward with his hands raised, pushing me out.

"Lynn, where's Vita?" I repeat as I back up. I'm complying with the cop's commands up to a point. He wants me to leave the room entirely, but I won't do that until I get an answer.

"Sir, I'm telling you one last time. Step out of the room." The cop shoves me into the hallway. This pisses me off. Now I'm ready to be a pain in the ass. I'm not leaving. The cop has me shoved against the wall, but he can see that I'm not going anywhere. He radios for back-up. At the sound of the struggle, Viraj enters the hallway and starts to pull me away. His normally cheerful eyes are full of fear.

"Danny," Viraj chokes, still dressed in his vampire costume, his Dracula make-up and eyeliner smeared around his face. I can't move or speak. Viraj is holding my shoulders as if one of us might fall. "Vita is in the hospital."

"Is this him?" I hear a female officer barking behind me. "Sir, turn around. Open your eyes."

A flashlight beams into my pupils, blinding me. The blinding light flicks back and forth like they're trying to see what's inside my skull. I

try to pull away, but the officer has her hand gripped around my jaws with rubber gloves.

“What happened to Vita?” I ask, forcefully removing her hand from my chin.

“Sit, you’re under arrest,” she says, ignoring me. I try to push her off me, which I admit is a bad decision. She reacts like I just tried to swing on her. “He’s resisting arrest. Hold him down!”

“Where’s Vita-a-a?”

These last syllables falter as the wind flies out of my diaphragm and everything goes black. It only lasts a second. It only took a second, too. I don’t know how the male cop brought me down exactly, but in my mind, it was a judo hip toss. One minute I was on my feet, acting belligerent. A second later, I’m on my stomach with my face against the floor and the wind knocked out of me. My arms yank behind my back. Handcuffs bite my wrists with their teeth.

“You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say or do may be held against you...”

I’ve never felt cuffs before, despite having been arrested for graffiti once. That was more of a ticketing situation. This is completely different. With my arms locked behind my back, I can’t even get up. The cops scoop up all 120 pounds of me and drag me down the hall.

“Danny!” Lynn cries frantically. “Where are you taking him? Let him go!”

By now, the commotion has caused freshmen to come out of their rooms. They’re following behind as the cops hustle me out of the dorm.

“It’s Danny!”

“Where are they taking him?”

Everyone knows who I am on the third floor. I’m the guy who does graffiti. I’ve decorated “Hey’s” room with sketches and drawn

renditions of “Dude’s” grandma or whatever. There’s shouting all around me from students protesting to let me go. But the only thing that seems to be happening is my feet being dragged across the floor.

We’re followed into the cul-de-sac where the squad car is waiting.

“Let him go!” is being shouted in all directions, but the cops are trained to ignore taunts. Up to a point, at least. The male cop shoves me into the backseat and threatens everyone to go back inside, or else.

Viraj is gesticulating in front of the mob, but the last thing I focus on is Lynn’s tearful face looking on as the squad car drives off. What happened to Vita?

The dorm is getting smaller. I’ve never been in the back of a squad car before. The seats are oddly comfortable. It’s very spacious.

Chapter Seven

Pizza, Motherfucker

*H*i, you've reached the Dela Rosa's. I'm sorry we can't take your call right now. Leave us a message and we'll hit you back!

I try Vita a week after she's gone, but no one picks up the phone. I get her machine and come close to uttering something unintelligible into the receiver but end up hanging up instead.

I know that whatever I say on a voice recording will be regretful, so I choose to reach out to her in writing instead. She'll probably check her inbox eventually, even if she does drop out of Rutgers.

Like a haiku poet, I try to compose something brief. I go for three lines, allowing what is said to be just as important as what is not.

The first line should be a question. The second line should be filled with hope. The third line should be a wish or a prayer, or perhaps a light comical observation that sort of sums up the meaning of life with its sparsity of words.

But the three lines turn into multiple paragraphs of meandering thoughts, apologies, condolences, confessions, inspirational quotes, and reports on cafeteria menu changes.

I “Select All” and press “Backspace.”

Let’s start over.

Hey, it’s me. Just thought of you today. Wondering if you’re okay. Wondering if you’re ever coming back lol.

Backspace.

Hey, it’s me. I hope you’re doing better...I wish I knew what to say.

Just thought I’d give this email thing a try and fill you in on what’s been going on since you left.

First, Viraj and Lynn lodged a formal complaint with the police. Hopefully, that gets the wheels rolling and we put those bastards in jail.

We also did some digging on our own. Delta Kappa and Alpha are arch-rivals, so the brothers at Delta Kappa know who all the Alpha guys are. Just before Halloween, one of the Alpha bros was all hopped up on coke and steroids and hit a brother at Delta Kappa named Fredo in the head with a baseball bat. Since then, Delta Kappa has declared an all-out war. There’s been mad drama on Frat Row. There was even an ABC News van parked on College Ave. a couple days ago. The university is shutting down the frats until further notice.

There have also been a few bomb threats here and there—you know, from terrorists. A Sikh guy got beat up at a gas station because some asshole can’t tell the difference between Sikhs and Arabs. Also, some lady thought she got anthrax in an envelope, but it turned out to be baby powder? Like, why anyone would mail baby powder in an envelope is beyond me. So, yeah. Fun times.

It’s been pretty lonely without you. We all miss you. I think about you all the time. I bet the last thing that you want to think about is Rutgers or anything related to college. And maybe that’s the right way to think.

You didn't do anything wrong, and you certainly didn't deserve it. But wherever you are, I just hope that you remember that it's a big world out there. Please don't forget that. Fuck Rutgers. Fuck those guys. Fuck everybody.

If it makes you feel better, just forget about us—but don't forget about me. If you never see me again and move on with your life, I don't blame you. Put it all behind you. Just take time and heal.

But in case you do come back, just know that I'll be in front of our smoking tree waiting for you.

- Danny

I press Ctrl A.

My finger hovers over the button. The cursor stands by, emotionless.

"You have until the end of November to make your own arrangements. The University has decided not to get involved with the criminal aspect of your offense. We're going to let this remain a housing matter. You'll still be enrolled as a Rutgers University student, but you'll need to provide your own housing or commute from home. You will no longer be allowed within the dormitories. Do you understand?"

I'm sentenced a week after Halloween. I take it without any reaction. I'm not sure if they expected an apology, but I'm not in the mood. When I turn to leave the room, the R.A. adds, "I'm sorry about what happened to Vita. We all are. Believe me, she'll get the justice she deserves. I've filed an official complaint, and an investigation will soon be under way."

I leave the office and wait for the bus to take me back to the dorm. I have a few weeks before I get kicked out. I wonder how to tell my parents that I'll soon need to borrow the car.

It's near the end of November. Clouds and the wind hint at fallen powder. Dom, Sonic, and I are on our way to Delta Kappa to take part in a simple act of vengeance. We've waited two weeks to let things cool down, but none of us have forgotten the need to act on behalf of Vita. These aren't exactly *our* plans, but we participate gladly, certain that at the end of this day, we'll feel better, and something will have been achieved. A lesson will have been taught; a girl's honor will have been restored. These and other medieval thoughts swirl in our heads like so many dead leaves.

Cheese remains behind since his asthma makes him a liability. There's a good chance that we'll need to run from the cops, and it's better if he does what he does best and uses his keyboard for revenge. Cheese waits until the big day, just to sync the giant middle finger perfectly, and hacks into the university mainframe. We already have Luke and Chewy's real names, so finding their academic transcripts isn't too hard, at least for Cheese. He turns a lot of digits into zeroes and then sends out class-wide emails from Luke and Chewy's logins with subject headings like, "I'M A RAPIST".

There's amusement and satisfaction in these acts of destruction, but Delta Kappa wants blood. We're not quenched of our thirst either. Sonic and Dom use their connections at Delta Kappa to collaborate on common interests. We put on black clothes and go to College Avenue.

In Delta Kappa's war room, we're introduced to a level of articulate savagery that we ourselves would be unable to muster. Some of our own powwows in the Purple Room produced ideas like running into one of Luke or Chewy's classes and hitting them in the head with a brick. The brothers at Delta Kappa are more interested in teaching all of Alpha a lesson they won't forget. A good old-fashioned melee. In the throes of which, if we can locate our targets, we can do whatever we feel.

Xander and Flow deploy the brothers of Delta Kappa as blunt objects in formation. A blueprint of Alpha headquarters is obtained from who-knows-where, as well as a municipal street map. One of the Delta Kappa boys used a school highlighter to mark entrances and exits. Dom, Sonic, and I are just grunts beside these generals, so we just stand on the side and do as commanded.

In total, the sting, known as Operation Pizza Box, will be executed by eleven brothers, fourteen including us. Seven will enter from the front, and seven from the back. The raid will be led by Sonic's Big, the Dominican tank named Perez. Though he's the largest of our party, he's by no means our only muscle. Every member of this Delta Force knows how to brawl. It's us who seem nervous, something Xander remedies with a few lines of blow. It's my first time, and I guess I can say, I understand the appeal.

Whoosh!

Suddenly I feel thunder and lightning bursting forth from my chest. I swear that I can knock out a giant twice my size. It's like I've been plugged into the Matrix. Like Neo, I whisper to myself, "I know kung-fu."

"We split up into teams. You guys come with me," Perez commands, pointing at Dom, Sonic and me. "Most of these assholes will probably be in the living room, but any weapons they have will be

upstairs in their rooms. Bats, hockey sticks, all that shit. Grab it before they do.”

Perez claps and brings us in for a huddle, looking into our peep-holes with his huge warrior-god eyes. “Remember, if you’ve got to hit them with something, go for body shots. We don’t want to give them anything they can use in court. And don’t nobody use real names. Your name is Black. Your name is Blue. Your name is Gray. Don’t act like a hero. This ain’t a movie.”

Alpha headquarters sits at the top of Frat Row on a hill. It’s a dead end, set far back from the main drag of College Ave. It has a colonial brick facade with white pillars flanking its double-wide door. I’ve never been here before, but it looks exactly like what it is: a notorious house of vice and pleasure.

“Fuck these douchebags,” Perez tells us as we walk over. “Bunch of Hawaiian shirt-wearing assholes.”

“Trust-fund babies,” another Delta Kappa member adds with disdain, trying to hype us up. “They’re mad because even with all of Daddy’s money, they couldn’t get into Ivy League.”

I wonder how he feels about the fact that *none* of us could get into Ivy League, but this thought quickly passes as we approach. It’s remarkable how conspicuous we appear, and how little any of them seems to give a shit. We look exactly like what we are: A bunch of guys who’ve come to fuck shit up. The cocaine helps us all embrace this.

We’re just outside now, about to pull black stockings over our faces to mask our identities. I can tell from the level of lawncare that Alpha has an alumnus that cares about its reputation. Delta Kappa may not even belong to an official charter now that I think about it.

Operation Pizza Box is under way. Perez and a few others squat at the bottom of the front porch steps. The decoy carries a pizza box with his baseball cap low over his eyes. The rest of us are waiting next to

the hedges. Another team waits for the signal to storm in through the back door. The doorbell rings. A minute later, someone answers the door with a lilt that goes upward as if to wonder, "Did someone order a pie?"

The pizzaman shoves his way through the front door as Perez and company quickly charge in behind him. We all follow the war path like motorbikes flanking a Mack truck. More members of our Delta Force storm the house from the rear. Me and my boys are running around like kits as the foxes do their work, chasing down chickens, catching them by their necks.

The Delta Kappa boys, filled with a sense of purpose, do not hesitate to attack anyone inside the house. Thankfully, there are no girls in there, but upon reflection, we really have no idea who's even a member of Alpha. Some of these guys might've just stopped by to hang out and play videogames. There are only five of them in the living room, and they don't stand a chance. The Delta Forces are on them, beating the living shit out of them, while the rest of us flush through the kitchen and adjoining rooms, finding no one, but leaving a trail of destruction anyway.

I don't touch anything. I'm just running about, crazed with adrenaline. When Sonic motions for me to go upstairs with him, I sprint up two steps at a time as if I'm in a Mario game, looking for a fire flower or a glowing star.

Perez is already up there, now armed with a baseball bat, encouraging us to follow his lead as we locate some hockey sticks in a random closet. Upon his orders, we ransack the drawers for drugs. Dom locates a twist-tied baggie of hard white powder we assume to be coke, and shoves it in his pocket. His eyes light up, and we keep searching. It's just a game, I say to myself. It's just a game. But my high is wearing off,

and by now the Alpha boys downstairs are probably on their stomachs with their hands zip-tied behind their backs. These are serious crimes.

But even this thought gets lost as I become cognizant that I'm now in the place where Vita was taken. Down a dark corridor that smells like stale beer. One of these rooms.

Suddenly, an Alpha bro with a shaved head pops out of a room to make a run for it.

"Get him, Blue!" Perez yells at Sonic. Sonic, without any hesitation to obey his Big, gets low and spears the guy from behind. What Sonic doesn't expect is the switchblade that comes flashing side to side as the shaved-headed guy scrambles back onto his feet. Sonic is naturally quick, but on cocaine, he lives up to his name. He jumps back and barely avoids getting his stomach slashed.

"Watch out! Watch out!" I cry, useless on the sidelines, looking for something to throw at the guy.

Sonic feints and then hits the guy's hand with a Bruce Lee kick. The knife is loosened from the Alpha's grip and Dom dives on it.

"Yo, Black!" Dom calls, and does a lateral pass back to me so that the knife is out of reach of our enemy. The blade lands at my feet and I scoop it up, closing the blade.

Perez holds Dom and I back as Sonic and the Alpha with the shaved head struggle for a few seconds on the ground. Perez wants to see what his Little is made of.

Sonic flips the Alpha onto his back as if he's in a varsity wrestling match and puts him in an arm-bar. Perez is proud.

"Let him up!" Perez orders.

"Yo, chill! Chill!" the Alpha cries, slowly rising and holding up his hands. Perez signals two of his bros and they drag the Alpha bro by his collar down the hall. The next thing we know there's the sound of

his body tumbling down the stairs. Fuck, I think to myself. We're all going to jail.

Perez marches us room to room to make sure they're all empty. He and his boys have stuffed their pockets with treasures and are ordering Dom and Sonic to fill their own.

Finally, we come to the room at the end of the hall. The door is locked.

"Somebody's in there," Sonic says.

"Dude, we've got to get out of here," Dom says, his eyes paranoid. I look at the door. "If they're in there..."

Perez ignores our chatter, stomps past us, and kicks the door open with a size 13 Timberland. Inside are two guys, Alpha bros. One of them is a tall blonde kid who may or may not be Chewy. But the short kid with the caterpillar brow is definitely Luke Skywalker, as per Vita's description.

"What's up, bitches?" Perez booms and springs forward, decking the blonde kid with a swinging right. The kid's knees fail him. Perez swings his fist on its return trajectory and backfists Luke on top of the head. Dom, Sonic, and I stand there, idling in front of the door, holding hockey sticks, and watching. Perez would be better off in the police academy, but he's probably an accounting major. He kicks the blonde kid in the face, and as the kid goes down, Perez proceeds to stomp his head.

"For Fredo, motherfucker! Delta Kap, *motherfucker!*"

The blonde kid is seriously hurt. He's either bleeding from his nose or his mouth. I don't know if he's unconscious or just choosing to lie there. Either way, not moving is probably a good idea for him.

"Dude!" the guy with the caterpillar brow yells, still leaned against the wall, holding his head where Perez bopped him. "Are you guys fucking crazy?"

It's ironic how I'm now here, at the threshold of taking my revenge, but my conscience is telling me to leave. Is this just cowardice? What was the point of coming here if not to take care of this guy? He's here now, right in front of me, but I just feel scared, worried, and sick. The Delta Kappa boys *are* fucking crazy. So what if Fredo got clocked in the head? Does that mean that it's okay to just run through here and enact violence on everyone we see?

But "So what" is just an excuse. You've got to do something. You can't just let them attack you. Scorched earth. Two thousand of ours; two million of theirs. I'm not saying it's right. Everything about it is wrong.

But here's another reason: We're fucking wolves. Everyone else is raw meat. Food. Something Flow said, but I forgot his exact words. Something about being there for your brothers.

For Vita. Not because of what he did, but what he would've done if he could've. He would've destroyed her life.

Hey, you know what? Fuck it, he deserves it.

Luke is pleading for us to call an ambulance. I'm looking right through him and taking in the setting behind him. The shitty posters and stained wallpaper. The lights strung up in the room. Is this the room?

I let go of the hockey stick. I flick the knife open.

"Halloween Night?" Sonic growls at Luke, making sure we're on the same page. "You messed with the wrong girl."

I point the tip of the blade at Luke's unibrow, my voice emitting a strangled rage. "You spiked my girl's drink."

"I swear to God, bro. I didn't know she had a boyfriend. I thought she was drunk!"

“Yo, Black,” Dom urges, putting his hand on my shoulder. “You’ve got the green light to do whatever you want to him but give me the knife.”

My hand trembles, and for an instant, I wonder if I really could stab him. Go to jail. Say it was worth it.

I hand the knife to Dom.

“Fuck him up, Black!” Sonic urges me.

I open-palm Luke on the cheek as if to get his adrenaline ready for a duel. A ring, either consciously or unconsciously, forms around us as the other Delta Kappa brothers create a wall.

Luke is on his feet, hands open and pleading. He knows that if he fights back, the wolves will fall upon his body. He has no choice. I guess I don’t either.

I hit Luke with a straight taekwondo punch, my knuckles crunching hard against his nose. He goes down clutching his face. I kick him in the jaw, and he falls backwards.

We take turns stomping on his face. His blood splatters like a Jackson Pollock.

Chapter Eight

Shrooms

We meet in the Purple Room the following Saturday and stand in a circle chewing psilocybin mushrooms. Black lights turn our teeth neon as we masticate the fetid matter. We make yuck faces and listen to each other gag without judgment, getting the job done.

Captain's Log: We've got patterns. I repeat, we've got patterns.

"Next time I say we make brownies," Cheese groans.

"What're you, the Food Channel?" Sonic scoffs and then shudders.

"Dom, how's that peanut butter?"

"It cuts the taste, but it makes it harder to swallow," Dom replies.

"If I start losing it, someone say, 'Peanut butter.' That's my safety word."

"Peanut butter," Cheese chimes.

As if on command, Dom almost empties his guts. Dom quickly recovers and punches his roommate on the arm.

"Asshole! I almost puked up all my shrooms!"

"Peanut butter," Cheese repeats merrily, this time dodging the swinging blow.

Four plastic baggies drift into a waste basket. All the dust, crumbs and spores are being absorbed into our bodies. "Peanut butter" is

the safety word, our silver rope back to reality. In an hour, we've become clinically insane. Whose idea was it to wander the cul-de-sac? We pretend that we're science majors, highly curious about plant life—botany students—but anyone who's been on campus from Day One knows we're high as shit.

Dom, Sonic, and Cheese are on the lawn observing the grass with keen interest, tossing autumn leaves in the air and watching them fall like crinkled airplanes. The Resident Director is probably watching us with binoculars. We need to get away from the dorms, but it's going to take a concerted effort to mobilize. I tap Dom on the shoulder and interrupt him as he inhales the fragrance of a dried leaf.

"Dude, smell this."

"Hey man, I think we're acting kind of weird. Maybe we should not be in front of dorm smelling leaves."

Dom pauses and smiles blissfully like an invalid, pondering my statement. His eyes, no longer sleepy olives, are instead dominated by glassy blackholes.

"Jesus, how long have we been here?" asks Dom without urgency or concern. "Just smell this leaf. Tell me this leaf doesn't smell amazing."

He crinkles the leaf into potpourri, releasing the trapped smells of autumn—a noxious odor of death and apricot, rotten squash, fossilized amber and mildewed marmalade. It's like sex and beauty and the primordial divine order of yesterday in one whiff.

"Who's got a watch?" Dom rambles, trying to mentally organize, and we look back and see Sonic on all fours, mooing like a cow as he pretends to eat the grass. Freshmen gather around him, attracted by his antics. "There is no Time. Fuck Time," Dom decides.

Hoodies under our fall coats, all of us looking like we're about to commit a robbery, we move amoeba-like away from the dorms in hopes of escaping the threat of surveillance. We'll be members of a

forgotten utopia, lost savages, a new cult. The clouds follow us like angels of God.

We barely make it past the bus stop when things take a turn for the worst and Dom whispers with worried eyes that his stomach hurts. We need to go into the dining hall and face its traps before he shits his pants. I can see the disaster that lies ahead: our unity will crumble, each of us scattered inside the belly of the whale. The look on the custodian's face will haunt me as she smokes a Newport by the dumpsters and shakes her head. She will not be calling me "Sugar." Not today.

"I want to look at myself in the mirror," Cheese announces cheerfully, oblivious to my dread. "I want to see how my eyes look."

"They're dilated, now shut the fuck up!" I hiss. "Everyone can hear us. Everyone knows."

Suddenly, I feel my own stomach lurching. It's only a matter of time. We bounce like pinballs into the dining hall, and I abandon my unit. I head straight to the bathroom with sweat breaking out at my temples. Inside a bathroom stall, I yank my pants down and barely get into position before the cosmos empties itself from my bowels. This aborted future, an alternate reality of things that might've been, is left floating in the toilet with a color like coal. There are bits and pieces I recognize as undigested caps and stems.

It starts to hit me. If I wasn't tripping before, I am now. I know so because of a sudden burst of inspiration to create. I take out the Black Magnum I always carry in my pocket and put some ink on the inner door of the bathroom stall: a psychedelic mushroom growing out of a cloud, the cloud growing out of a brain, the brain growing out of a tree, the tree growing out of a human skull—a symbol of life after death.

I want to keep going but I'm out of time. Someone is knocking, knocking on the door.

Is that you, Jesus? Pounding on the bathroom stall?

"I left something in there for you," I inform the bewildered face of an ape before he can knock again. The light in the bathroom is spectral and wavy, as if I'm underwater, tongues of fire on refracted water.

"You drop the kids off at the pool?" a familiar, yet distorted voice says behind me.

I turn and see Dom smiling like a sleepy-eyed turtle, waiting for my reply.

It takes me a few seconds to comprehend his meaning, and when I do I lose control. I laugh so hard that I fall to the tiled floor. Dom is right beside me, both of us holding each other, unable to stand up.

We both come out of the bathroom looking deranged with toilet paper sticking to the bottoms of our sneakers. Sonic and Cheese are wandering the food-line, neither of them carrying trays in their hands, just poking around holding up pieces of fruit and examining them like managers in the produce section of a grocery store.

Impulsively, I pick up a university newspaper, and as soon as I do, its headline shouts at me in soviet gibberish. The ink from the newsprint begins crawling onto my skin. The words become a part of me like a virus. The letters float on my clothes like alphabet soup, the propaganda, the "truth."

Somehow, we reassemble and manage to escape the dining hall. We hop on a bus to get as far away from campus as possible. When it occurs to us that the bus will circuit the same route repeatedly, we hop back off and take a shuttle to Rutgers Gardens. The ride is full of disapproving glances as my friends howl like mental patients.

Finally, we arrive at the botanical gardens. We're safe. Here, no one will judge us for our keen interest in foliage and flowers. I look up at the autumn canopy to see the sunlight poking through the leaves like

stars in the constellations. The dappled light descends into a bamboo grove. The earth rustles with November hues and shades.

As we take a rest by a babbling brook, I figure that this is a good time to call Vita and let her know that I'll be late for dinner. I look at my Nokia and can't figure out the buttons. The numbers on the buttons have little friends. Strange symbols with secret meanings. I want to call my girlfriend, but I don't know how to use my phone.

The afternoon vanishes. Dusk comes and drapes our shoulders with fading light as if we're kings.

"This is what heaven will be like one day," I say to no one. "When we die, we'll walk around like this and be with God. We'll look at things, taste things, and we'll just keep on walking, forever."

We lay down in the glade and stare up at the sky. The dark bluish-green shadows grow longer, and we can see the birds flying in the sky in echoed trails, every feather on their wings exemplified a million times in the pixelated light.

My friends are just figments of my imagination, I realize privately. Ghosts traveling with me for a moment in time, their absence, a reminder of the life I once had. I'll remember these moments from now, and they'll just seem like echoes, lost in time.

Later Cheese wanders back and forth repeating, "Peanut-butter. Peanut-butter," like a broken toy. Dom and Sonic have totally lost it, making faces at themselves in the pond. I'm sitting beneath a gnarly tree, chain-smoking, trying to stay within the edge of shifting frames.

"The trees have spirits," I whisper to myself, "these branches twisted by some unknown wind. She was a beautiful woman, her soul cast under a spell and placed in a frozen prison with weeping limbs. She was a goddess, a maiden, a lover, a prostitute..."

No one's listening, but I pray for the souls of the dead.

Chapter Nine

Virgo

When Vita came back in December, I met her outside the dorm that I'd been strictly forbidden from entering. I'd only been in my new accommodation for a week when I got Vita's email telling me that she'd returned.

I got on the first bus back to campus. I didn't care that it was winter. I would've become a snowman for her.

We met on the bleachers by the soccer field, since I felt weird about brazenly hanging out in front like I used to. The bleachers were cold under the bluish-white soccer lights. The windows looked like marigold rectangles glowing from a distance.

"I called your name when I was in the hospital," Vita confesses. "Not Marc's name, but yours."

Vita's eyes are penetrating dark orbs, flecked with streetlight. "Do you understand what I'm saying to you?" her gaze seems to say.

"I..."

I have no idea what to say.

For all the practice—for all the fantasies and scenarios played out in front of mirrors, in the dark walking beneath the moon, in moments

when I would gaze up at her window—I’ve forgotten how simple it is, the one line that I’ve been given to memorize, but can’t seem to say.

“I thought about not coming back,” says Vita, taking another approach. She takes a deep drag. Exhales. “Do you know why I did?”

“No, why?” I ask.

“That email you sent me,” she says.

I feel suddenly bashful. My cheeks get hot, despite the frigid air.

“I just wanted to make sure you were okay,” I stammer.

“You don’t know how much that meant to me, Danny,” she says and puts her hand on mine.

I look at her hand. It’s strange—how many times I’ve sketched these things, trying to capture their weirdness, their expressiveness, their soft, gnarly beauty. Drawing a perfect hand means embracing all the awkward angles, and every delicate curve.

But it’s a thing that we take for granted every day. It’s simply meant to reach out and grab what we need and say, “It’s mine.” But beyond the expression of desire, of need, of want, it’s an expression of togetherness, of oneness.

Of protection. Of love.

Now, with her hand simply resting on mine in late December night, I know that it belongs there. I flip my hand over and feel her fingers slide into the places where God removed flesh and bone to make room for what was needed to hold anything at all.

“I’m sure other people wrote you,” I mumble, unsure how to say that one line that she needs to hear. It’s so simple, so easy, yet I’ve never thought it to be possible or even true. I don’t want to say it unless it’s true.

How can you know what love really is?

Vita puts her cigarette out. Time’s up.

“No more games, Danny. I want to know.”

Vita turns her body toward me so that we no longer sit side by side but instead face each other. Our knees touch against the cold air.

"Do you love me?" she asks.

I gaze into her eyes, and I see the rest of the tomorrows that might follow from this one moment. I know that no matter how this goes, I want to take that chance, and that whatever happens, there will be no regrets. Just to have that chance, for more days.

Yeah, I think I know.

I nod my head solemnly.

"Can you say it?" she asks, her hands in my hands.

"I love you, Vita," I tell her firmly, looking right into her eyes.

"Tell me again," she whispers, her soft eyes searching back and forth between mine.

"I love you."

She leans forward and we begin to kiss. The lights over the soccer field go out, leaving us to embrace this moment, this feeling of love, lost beneath winter stars and all the surrounding darkness.

We kiss all the way from the front of the dorm, up the stairs, and to the front of her room. It's the middle of the night, and Lynn is gone. The lights are off, except for the soft pulse of the Christmas lights strung around her bed. When I get in her bed this time, it's without clothes. I hide myself beneath the covers. And then she joins me.

"This is my first time," I tell her, not knowing what might happen, trusting her to know better than I.

"I know," Vita says.

She kisses me and then takes her top off.

Chapter Ten

Loft Parties

“Rushing into a painting, it’s like rushing into making love,” Professor Nabokov says in the middle of a lecture. “You go too fast and miss everything that’s important in creating the moment.”

Sophomore year: Same studio where I once drew sketches of nudes. Now, we’re doing full-on pieces, and getting our dreams torn apart in the process.

Art students encircle a gangly old man wearing a moth-eaten sweater that smells like pipe tobacco as he kneels on the floor with his gnarled hands smoothing out the edges of a canvas, pulling it tight and clean.

“Become religious about stretching your canvases. Make this a ritual in your daily lives,” declares Professor Nabokov. “Get on your knees, feel each part of the canvas, the screws, the brackets, the pieces of wood. Get involved with every step of the process. Personally, I always feel like a Roman soldier, building a cross to hang Christ. This is evidence of both my reverence and sanctimony.”

The professor chuckles, then stops after seeing that we don’t get the joke.

“Well, get to it then. You have your wood and your screws. Crucify yourself and your dreams, then hang it for the world to see.”

It’s me and Jolene again, still painting our way towards a degree.

We hang up our pieces and make comments on each other’s work, everybody keeping it nice and cordial. For most of us, the golden rule still applies. We’re all too fragile to admit that we’re no longer the best in the room. This isn’t high school anymore.

“The way you made the subject look so mysterious by blurring her eye—”

“Oh, and the hair—”

“Yeah, the hair is fantastic...So lifelike...”

“The shadows are really well-done...Very dramatic...Full of tragedy, sort of a nod to the Greeks...”

“Yeah, it’s a throwback for sure, but like, in the best of ways...”

Professor Nabokov steps forward, observing every line and every smudge, finding the strokes intended or not, his laser focus being that of a historian, curator, mathematician, and poet laureate, all at the same time. Everything is contextual, literal, and metaphorical. If it works, he’ll praise you for about ten seconds and move on. If it doesn’t, he’ll let you know why in monologues that stretch to the end of class.

You never end up with the thing that’s in your head. All of us know we’re failures in that regard. Bob Ross isn’t here to help us plant happy little trees.

Professor Nabokov limps closer to the wall and we step out of the way. All our talk about strokes and colors, composition, and the use of negative space evaporates like paint thinner. His is the face of judgement.

He often lets us burble happily for a while, finding truth and beauty in our own vanity. And then we’re like insects pinned to the wall.

It's time to have our legs plucked out, our antenna straightened and skewered by pins. Only then will we pay attention to the truth.

It's not his intention to be cruel, only to make us *see*. For all his brutal honesty, some of us walk away as better artists with a more objective point of view. The rest of us spiral into existential crises.

"It was so fucking bad," I tell Vita on the phone. "I don't even want to repeat it. It's too horrific."

"Just tell me."

"He said it was—"

"—trite."

Professor Nabokov stands there, dark glasses and cane. He pauses long and hard staring at my final project.

"The colors seem to evoke memory and emotion. It's visually interesting; the colors are eye-catching, but ultimately, it's trite. It means nothing, concludes nothing. I see no meaning, or even the suggestion of one, other than to seem ironic, which I find somewhat irritating in this context.

"The goal seems to mean to suggest something of love without getting there, perhaps because love in its most superficial aspects has been considered. A 'boy meets girl' kind of love, without anything being lost or broken or paid for. It's a dream of a sufferer who enjoys his pain because he thinks it makes him unique. He enjoys the feeling of light, dazzle, and believes in fairy tales and happy endings. Sort of *Romeo and Juliet*, but without poetry, or originality. It doesn't even have the heart to be cynical.

"Visually, going back to the technical aspects of the painting, it has enough technique to draw you in and focus your attention on the subject, and while the color choices are tasteful, they don't challenge the viewer in any way. It seems like an advertisement, and so in this sense, perhaps it's meant to represent anti-love. But ultimately, even

this subtext escapes me, and that strikes me not so much as immature as it is naïve in intention, which is far more egregious in my opinion.”

“What if our sense of purpose is just a vehicle for transcendence?” I ask Jolene after class. We’re at our coffee shop, next to the State Theater on George Street. “Maybe the search for beauty is worthless,” I complain. “Everything is just meant to fade into oblivion.”

“Forget what Professor Nabokov thinks,” Jolene assures me and reaches across the table to squeeze my arm. “You know you’re dope, so who cares what one professor says?”

Jolene has ditched the dorky glasses this year. With her new make-up and hair, Jolene seems ready for the world in a way that I’m still trying to figure out. When she makes it to the big time, I’ll ask if I can clean her smocks for her.

“So, if you’re not totally jaded then it has no artistic value,” I gripe vehemently. “Well, excuse me Professor Nabokov, but I’m in love!”

Jolene smiles, glad that I’ve gone from freshman puppy to proud ambassador of love.

“Are you done?” she quips.

“Yeah, I’m done,” I say, calming down and sipping my latte.

“I’ve been rewatching *Neon Genesis Evangelion* from start to finish, and it’s driving Felix crazy. This morning though I caught him singing *Fly Me to the Moon* in the shower.”

“Best close-out song ever,” I say supportively. “How does Flow feel about the hair? I’m guessing you were inspired by Rei?”

“Not sure if he loves the color. What do you think?” Jolene asks, shaking her shoulder-length curls, the underside of her dark locks

highlighted with a metallic plum. She's dressed in an army green jacket with sleeves rolled up, baggy jeans, and commando boots for some urban chic. She looks like she's already living in SoHo, or somewhere in New York where people know how to dress like fashionable vagabonds.

"It looks great," I assure her. "I mean, every guy who's ever watched Hentai is definitely a fan."

"Don't ruin it for me. Felix doesn't watch anime. He doesn't even watch cartoons. He's too grown sometimes."

"What happened with his record contract?" I ask, reflecting on Flow. "I picked up one his mixtapes at a bodega the other day. He's the next one up. Seriously, I'm still banging it in the car."

Jolene makes an awkward face, something she is not known to do. "He turned it down. He be on some vigilante shit. I don't know. You see him, you can ask him."

"I heard all the Delta Kappa boys still party at each other's houses. It's kind of like the frat splintered into little factions."

"That's what happens when you try to act all gangster," Jolene says, knowing all. "Ain't them boys supposed to be chasing a degree? What're they doing beating each other up in the street? I mean, over what?"

"I think it started over a girl," I say, repeating rumors from the grapevine. "I mean, it always is, right?"

"That or money," Jolene agrees.

"Anyway, if I see him, I'll tell him that I'm a fan," I say with a laugh. "The guys on the first floor of my house are all ex-Delta Kappa. So, it's kind of like we live in the remains of a frat house."

"Sounds fun," Jolene says sarcastically. She's had enough of the frats, even though she's still romantically tied to an ex-member. I can

see it in her eyes. She wants to get out of Rutgers. "What happened with your boy Sonic?"

"Ah," I say, making an awkward face of my own. "He's taken on a new job."

"Not trying to get back into school?" she asks, sipping her coffee.

"Nah," I say, holding back all that I could say, shouldn't say, about his newfound vocation as a drug dealer's apprentice.

"By the way, Felix was asking about you."

"Me? What about?"

"He just rented out a new studio on Commercial Ave. He wants to know if you'll do some artwork there. You know, designing the walk-in area and the interior and stuff. He wanted me to do something, but my style doesn't really match the vibe. His music is, you know, it's street. I recommended you. You can thank me later. I'll be expecting my cut."

I pop the last of the cinnamon raisin bagel into my mouth and chew thoughtfully. Suddenly, the air is filled with the sense of hope and new beginnings that only September can bring. Just a minute ago, I felt like quitting. Now, I feel a resurgence. God, is this what it's like to be an artist? Downtrodden one minute, filled with elation the next, floating job to job?

Fuck yeah, sign me up!

"Alright, I'll do it. But I must warn you, my self-esteem is still blown to smithereens."

"I have a glue stick that I can lend you," Jolene jokes, pretending to search in her art box.

We laugh as, down the street, a homeless prophet speaks to pigeons.

"Alright, I have one more thing to tell you. I was going to tell you when we sat down, but then after the thing with Professor Nabokov..." Jolene says in a mix of excitement and hesitation.

"Spare my feelings. Tell me the news," I reply and throw the rest of my latte back like a shot of whisky.

"God, I can't contain it anymore!" Jolene cries, on the silly side of giddy. "Are you ready for some big news?"

"Enough preamble. Let's have it," I snap with faux impatience.

"You can't tell anyone."

"Oh jeez," I utter, thinking that she might be pregnant.

"I met someone this summer," Jolene gushes. "You'll never guess who."

"Who?"

"Alexander Viejo!"

"Who?"

"Bro, you don't know him? He's like a *god* right now in New York. You know those Japanese toys and the couture mashups with the cartoons? That's him!"

"I thought that was KAWS."

"Well, it's also Viejo," Jolene says, admitting her star might not be so original. "It's a lot of them. But that's what's hot right now. I met him at a loft party in Brooklyn and he wants me to do a show!"

"What? You're going to loft parties now? What kind of show? Like a fashion show or a show-show?"

"A show-show! At a gallery on Bowery Street. Isn't that crazy?"

"How did this happen?" I wonder with my heart palpitating, possibly from the chai latte and bagel.

"He was like," Jolene starts and pauses, too ecstatic to tell the story properly. "I can't even explain. He's a total freak. That's how geniuses are! At first, he was interested in my hair. Then we started talking about modeling. Then we started talking about art, and I happened to have some slides with me—"

I lean back in my chair, impressed by Jolene's game.

"I showed him some stuff I'd been working on over the summer. Like distorted prints from all the anime I've been watching—I'll show you later—anyway, long story short, he loved it and invited me to be part of his next show!"

"This is like when Basquiat met Warhol! How does this happen?" I wonder.

"I'm only allowed three pieces, but still!" Jolene cries, her eyes on megawattage.

To become a professional artist at the age of 19. To skip college and go straight to the league.

None of us want to be here. We want to be *there*, in New York City, living under the bright lights, doing what we love: Painting and being the voice of a generation. This appeals to our inner narcissists, but it also serves as the ultimate validation of our innate genius and skills. Who the hell wants to spend the next four years tinkering with Photoshop?

"If it was going to happen to anyone, I knew it would be you," I say, not without envy. I lay it on thick. "You're a major talent. You're going to become NYC's newest darling. I know it. The Boricua girl from Paterson with the best lines the world has ever seen."

"Are you okay?" Jolene asks, deflating a little. She can sense the overstatement.

"Yeah, just hire me to write up your introduction," I joke, trying to recover from my jealousy. "I'll use the big words and describe you as 'luminous' and 'avant-garde.'"

"Ugh, come on, Danny. I just ate."

"Sorry."

"You're going to come though, right? It's February 14th. Mark it on your calendar!"

“Whoa, that’s Valentine’s Day,” I say, holding her horses. “I have a girlfriend now. You know that, right?”

“Bring her! You’re supposed to introduce me, yo! You can drop by the show and have a romantic night in the city afterwards.”

“You know what? I think Vita might like that,” I say, imagining a night with Vita in the big city full of roses and snow. It’ll be our first Valentine’s. A date in the big city sounds perfect.

“I can introduce you to some people, so when you come, make sure you bring some slides. You never know who you’ll meet. Graffiti might be the next big thing.”

“Can we drink out of plastic cups?”

“But for real? I need your help. I’m going to show you some stuff, and I need you to be as honest as possible. I only have,” Jolene quickly does some math, “six months to prepare! I trust you to destroy me if necessary. Can you do that?”

“Well, I am a sadistic bastard. Why not?”

Our laughter comes easily now.

We’re going to be famous!

I ignore the sad reality that once Jolene gets picked up, she’ll probably drop out of Rutgers and move to the city, and I’ll be minus a best friend at art school. But then again, who knows? Maybe she’ll invite me to all those loft parties and shit.

Chapter Eleven

Wildwood

Vita lives in a town called Medford Lakes, off Exit 5 on the Turnpike, which will take us about an hour to drive. I'm behind the wheel, confidently speeding the Celica and enjoying the smooth handling of the ride. Vita is on the passenger side, telling me stories about her dad.

"My dad was so gentle. Never raised his voice. He was always so calm, and if he ever got upset, he just closed his eyes and smiled until me and mommy calmed down," Vita says and then laughs affectionately. "God, we must've been a handful sometimes. He loved us so much."

Vita pauses and looks out the window.

"I speak about him in past tense sometimes," she admits quietly. "I wish I didn't do that."

Vita trails off about their days in the garden, on the boat, camping and going for hikes.

I'm listening to stories from her childhood—but I'm also learning a lot about this thing called *dementia*.

It's not like cancer. It doesn't arrive with a bang. It creeps in, quiet as fog.

In the beginning, there was forgetfulness. Nothing huge. Then it got worse.

At first, her dad felt frustrated. This was a man who could recite historical dates or pages from the Merck Manual like a computer.

But once his mind started to slip, so did everything else—his moods, his appetite, his motivation.

Then it took his job.

And worst of all, it took his personality. His charm.

“I still see the old him in moments,” Vita says, backpedaling and clarifying.

What she doesn’t say—what I quietly infer—is that those moments are showing up less and less.

He had had to give up his private practice, which he and his wife ran together. They were both pediatricians, and despite being Filipino—a background that often made people assume they were “the help” rather than the owners—they thrived in the mostly white, suburban community.

There wasn’t a kid Dr. Dela Rosa couldn’t charm into taking a shot with a joke and a smile. Everybody loved him.

They sold the practice, which gave them financial stability, but it also left her dad homebound. Her mother took on a job as an assistant at a former colleague’s clinic—a step down from running her own, but it covered the bills.

They hired a full-time nurse to care for him during the day. He was prescribed mild sedatives to keep his moods in check—but really, it was to make him manageable. He had become unpredictable, sometimes as irritable and stubborn as a child.

There were a few incidents. Once he ran out of the house completely naked. Sometimes he’d insist on going for hikes or long drives—things he could no longer safely do alone. He grew paranoid,

suspicious of the nurse, and eventually, his own wife. The dosage went up.

These days, he mostly listens to AM radio and plays Solitaire on his Dell.

“He’s still sharp in a lot of ways. He’s still a big military buff. He knows everything that’s going on with the war in Afghanistan,” Vita says. Then she gives a small laugh. “He’ll forget our names, forget where we live. But he’ll never forget 9/11.”

The joke isn’t that funny, a rare misfire for Vita. But I get her point.

I think about my own parents and our family’s struggles, which mostly have to do with their lives as immigrants, and the day-to-day life of dry cleaners in a crime-filled neighborhood. I’ve never had to worry about their health though. Even seeing my dad catch a cold bad enough to make him miss work—which has happened exactly once in my entire life—shook me to my core. I can’t imagine what Vita has gone through, watching her father shrink into a world of shadows and the absence of memory.

How much of life is just a memory? What happens to life when those memories fade away?

The appearance of a Wawa gas station tells me we’re in South Jersey. It’s woodsier than North Jersey where I live. Set far back from the streets, a lot of the houses look like old mansions with gates at the end of their driveways, or winding lanes that lead up to circular parking. All in all, Vita’s neighborhood is scenic, idyllic, and looks like the cover of a Weichert Realtors brochure.

Of course, to Vita, this is just home.

“That’s my swing,” Vita points out an old tire swing which hangs lazily from a tree branch stretched over the lake’s water. Three large homes sit at a distance from the road, none of them competing in size necessarily, but coexisting in the comfort and security of knowing

that all the fields and quiet country roads surrounding are theirs. The houses sit spaced out around the lake, which is big enough to skip stones across.

I pull the Celica off the main road and into the cul-de-sac.

Each mailbox makes the same quiet announcement—of wealth, security, and a well-defended privacy that only looks casual. Even the brick ones seem like they could double as expensive homes for squirrels or something.

Up the drive, flowerbeds brim with flowers I recognize and others I don't: hydrangeas floating in soft white clouds, yellow chrysanthemums blooming from bluish green bushes, and purple aster lining the black soil around the ornamental trees.

Vita doesn't point out the *sakura*—her mind is elsewhere—but I'm pretty sure it's the one near the driveway, the one that sprinkles white petals across their yard every spring.

I assume the landscaping company maintains it all now. Everything is trimmed and picture-perfect, but not fake.

As we pull up her driveway and park the car, I'm at a loss for words.

I don't want to say the obvious—because saying it feels like admitting that, by comparison, I'm poor. But her house is huge, a brick Georgian, as I recently learned from some architecture book.

It's the kind of house that, as kids, my older brother James and I would point at from the backseat of our mom's car and say, "That's my house,"—as if claiming it could bring it closer.

Other than this bold, childish declarations of future wealth, I've never driven in a neighborhood like this without some part of me expecting a cop to pull me over and tell me to get lost.

I pull Vita's car up to the driveway up the gentle curve to the front of the door.

As we exit the car, I can hear birds chirping. The neighborhood is quiet and peaceful. I grab her duffel bag and follow, almost like that first day she took me to her room in the dorm—trailing behind without words.

I'm almost expecting Vita to knock on the door, but of course, she's the princess of this castle, so there's no need to announce herself. She opens the door, which is unlocked, and calls out in Tagalog.

"I thought your mom was at work," I say, tightening up, unprepared to meet her mom for the first time. This wasn't a moment that I'd realized I would be nervous about, but now I know.

"Marcia, our nurse," Vita explains. "Take your shoes off. We're Asian."

Marcia is an older woman with a slightly graying bun of hair pulled back tight. She's wearing a pleasantly inquisitive expression, and a pink apron that makes me think she's got something going on in the kitchen that might be worth exploring later—especially since it's almost noon and I'm skipping my usual tray of dining hall slop.

There's a welcoming aroma like lemongrass or turmeric, savory and a little spicy. The house looks and smells like Marcia never skips a chore.

Marcia smiles and nods her head as Vita explains who I am in Tagalog.

"Very handsome," Marcia says to me and giggles with Vita.

Vita and Marcia seem to be almost family, but Marcia shows no sense of entitlement.

I was expecting a medical professional in a white uniform, but she's more of a housekeeper—with an added duty of making sure Dr. Dela Rosa takes his medication on schedule and doesn't wander off on his own.

Vita and Marcia's conversation takes on a different tone, and I become aware that they're discussing "the fall."

"He's okay now," Marcia says in English now, perhaps for my benefit. She has a Filipino accent. "He's resting."

"Thank you, Marcia," Vita says, and Marcia demurely retreats into her duties.

Vita turns to me and smiles. "Welcome to my home. Want to meet my dad?"

As we walk through the corridor, I cause us to pause in front of various framed photographs, taking in snapshots of her life before I meet the man of the house.

The journey starts in Hawaii where she was born. She was a little island girl with pouty lips taking up half of her face. Here she is with her parents at a luau, her mom and dad looking young and regal. Everyone is wearing a flower necklace, the ones they call a *lei*.

As we proceed down the hall, Vita's parents take to wearing dark glasses as Vita expands in size, beauty, and gravity, at the forefront of each photograph, while somehow her parents seem to shrink.

Finally, the most recent photo of Vita at her graduation is hung prominently over a decorative hallway table carved in a Southeast Asian style. Vita is holding her diploma, standing between both Dr. Dela Rosa's.

We've come to the door of his study, where he spends most of his time.

"Should I bow? How do I address him?" I ask nervously.

"You can just shake his hand if he gives it. Don't worry, he's on light sedatives," Vita reassures me.

I follow Vita inside as she slowly pushes open the door as if her father might be asleep.

Compared to the other rooms, this one carries a musty odor—not unpleasant, but lived in, like a space that’s been sitting quietly for too long. The radio plays at full volume, broadcasting upon the war in Afghanistan. The window-blinds cut the sunlight into narrow slats.

Japanese maples line the front of the ground floor study, and in the far corner, I spot Dr. Dela Rosa hunched over an old Dell, playing Solitaire.

He senses our presence and meets Vita’s face with a delighted smile, happy that she’s home. She runs up to him, throwing her arms around him, as I keep a distance to give her time with her father.

He’s patting her back, and she might be crying for the way her back is shaking, but he seems unaware of what we’re doing here, or even the fact that his daughter is supposed to be at university.

Dr. Dela Rosa wears big frame glasses that feel reminiscent of the seventies. He’s wearing a blue robe and crisp white pajamas. His skin is coffee-colored and smooth, his hair graying and combed back. But compared to the robust man who was photographed when Vita was a little girl, he seems to be slowly disappearing into his own skin.

“Daddy, there’s someone I want you to meet,” Vita says, straightening up and stepping back. “This is my boyfriend, Danny. We go to school together.”

“My name is Danny Kim, sir. It’s an honor to meet you,” I almost bark, unprepared for the nerves of this moment.

I step forward and shake her father’s hand.

Dr. Dela Rosa’s grip is squishy, like it’s made of putty. He smiles vaguely, but he doesn’t bother to ask me questions or think of anything to ask.

He nods his head vaguely and smiles, as if he’s about to tell a joke but forgets how it goes.

Vita begins speaking to him in Tagalog to get his version of the events of what happened. She's pointing at his leg, which has a bandage where he must've cut himself on something or other, but despite his limp, he waves her off without any attempts to explain what happened.

Maybe he's stoic, or maybe he doesn't remember what happened. Either way, he deals with her questions by rising in his slippers and turning the radio off.

Vita continues pressing him and gesticulating, in what seems more like the manner of a mother or a wife than a daughter, chastising him for some carelessness which he ignores.

He rummages around on his bookshelf where I notice a large collection of cassette tapes and CDs are arranged beside some old, but impressive looking speakers made of walnut or some expensive kind of wood.

Dr. Dela Rosa finds what he's looking for and turns up the volume at what I think might qualify as the max and starts blasting a song that I recognize as Chopin's *Nocturne No. 9*.

"Ivita played this at her piano recital," he shouts over the music, locking eyes with me for the first time. His eyes dance with delight.

His English is perfect—which surprises me thought I'm not sure why. Maybe because my own parents, who are around his age, still struggle to form grammatically correct sentences, even after more than twenty years in America.

"His dream was for me to be a pianist," Vita explains over the volume. "Typical Filipino father. Just wanted his little girl to be sitting on stage in a big poofy dress."

"My mom used to play this for me as a kid," I shout back, for lack of anything intelligible to say.

The sudden boom of music doesn't faze them—maybe it's a shared love of sound.

Dr. Dela Rosa leans back in his chair, eyes closed, perfectly content. He waves his hands back and forth, lazily conducting an invisible orchestra.

Vita simply gives me a look and indulgently rolls her eyes.

"Ears, Daddy!" she shouts, and then turns the music down by half the volume. Dr. Dela Rosa looks up at her like she's a dear. Vita kisses her dad on the forehead.

"We'll be upstairs," she says.

I suddenly wonder if I'm sleeping here, since it's the weekend.

Would Dr. Dela Rosa even notice or care if I did?

"It was an honor to meet you, sir," I say and attempt to meet his eyes again, but he's smiling quaintly and shaking his head softly with the flow of the piano keys.

"Bye, Donnie!" I hear him say as we exit the room.

We go up the stairs to Vita's room, passing more family portraits and Catholic relics on the way.

On the second floor, we pass several rooms whose purposes I can't even guess—only three people live in this mansion. Four, I remind myself, counting Marcia who has a room downstairs.

Vita's room is now in the master bedroom. Her parents no longer use it. Her mother sleeps in a small bed down the hall, and her dad stays on the first floor to avoid the risk of slipping or falling.

Vita's bedroom is nothing like her dorm room. For one, it has a sunroof and a private bathroom with a jacuzzi.

"Here it is!" she says with false brightness—and then proceeds to let herself have a breakdown. Her cheer peels away, and the real emotions—guilt, sadness, pity—come flooding in.

I sit on the bed with her as she cries, overwhelmed from seeing her father again.

Dr. Dela Rosa is presumably in his office, unaware that we're still in the house. Marcia is going about her normal day but wisely keeps to the first floor.

After what she calls "a good cry"—her words, not mine, though I tear up too—we hold each other on the bed. This leads to kisses. Then hours of slow, passionate, uninterrupted sex.

By mid-afternoon, we're drained—more me than her—and start wondering what to do with the rest of our unearned Friday off.

We decide to go to the shore, for no real reason that I'm aware of except that Vita isn't ready to see her mother, or deal with the potential backlash for the foolishness and "over-emotional" reaction to skip class and come home.

"I think that it's going to be too cold to swim," I point out, not objecting exactly, just tapping the brakes to see if they work. This kind of spontaneity isn't really like Vita.

"We used to go to this place in Wildwood. They have the best lobster," Vita says, lying in my arms, her hand under the sheets, keeping me as docile as a kitten.

"I like lobster," I say dumbly, but I know she's coming up with reasons to get away from the house. It's nearly 4 o'clock. Her mom will be home soon.

"I'm actually starving," I add.

"Me too," Vita agrees. "Let's go."

We drive with the top down, chasing the end of summer. Vita leans against me singing SWV's *Weak* like we're in a karaoke bar.

There's no real way to measure happiness, but maybe it blooms in places where pain fills the empty space.

If my job is to help make some good times happen with some sand and a nice seafood dinner, then I'm all for that.

It's our first trip anywhere together, so we stop by a CVS to buy a disposable Kodak to commemorate our first mini vacation.

I didn't realize how much Vita loves the beach until we're standing on it.

As I watch her twirl in the water, I remember that she was born in Hawaii. The sun creates that magic glow behind her, with droplets of sea spray coming up around her bare legs in denim shorts, and she's in her element.

She tries to teach me the hula, but I can't follow the steps, so I just sit on the sand and watch as she transfixes me, a flock of seagulls, and a few September beachcombers and their dogs—moving like she's drawing the sun, the sea, and the rain together with each fluid gesture.

When she's done, she gets a well-deserved applause.

"I used to come here a lot in high school," she tells me as we walk on the beach and let the flowing waves swirl around our bare toes. "This is where I came when I needed to escape."

"I used to just dream on my street corner," I say, adding my own experience with that desire. "I'd imagine traveling West across America and starting over."

She pauses and looks up at me. I hold my arms around her waist.

"Just listen to the ocean," Vita says. "You don't have to say anything."

We stand there, holding each other, watching—and listening—to the waves tell a story as old as time itself.

As dusk begins to settle over the sea, we drive down to the pier to have dinner at a place called Captain Jack's. It looks like an old fish market—and I guess it was once—but now it's a plastic table-cloth joint that boasts the best lobsters and potatoes in Wildwood.

Captain Jack's has a low-down, salt of the earth kind of vibe, but the crowd—toting bottles of white wine—lets you know that the prices are no joke.

I make a funny noise once we get seated by the water's edge. Those lobsters must be amazing, or else I guess we're paying for the view. It *is* a stunning view with fishing boats, yachts, and sailboats floating on the pink and blue horizon.

"I can pay for it," Vita assures me gently. "They jack up the prices here. But it's good, I promise."

"I guess that's why they called him 'Captain Jack'," I quip, and we laugh.

One day, I'm going to be able to buy you everything you want, I think to myself.

Vita reaches out across the table, right past the ketchup and the salt, and I put my hand in hers and hold it there as we gaze out into the gathering clouds on the horizon.

Our waitress is a young blonde who introduces herself as Dara, who's probably in college too. She chats us up as I sit and let Vita do all the talking. The two charm each other so much I wonder if Dara will let us go on the tip.

We're the youngest couple on the deck by far. Most of the diners are affluent locals, enjoying dinner with family or friends, and with a bottle of wine and a few beers, they'll have a few laughs about the old days—the 60's, 70's, and 80's when they were young.

We're also the only Asians, but whatever.

It's my first time having fried calamari, which Vita insists is a must-have. I've never even heard of this creature called *calamari*, but then I find out that it's just squid.

"You've never had calamari?" Vita asks, shocked.

"I usually get mozzarella sticks," I reply, which makes her crack up for some reason. I smile at her, totally in love.

"Try it with the lemon," she says and squeezes lemon juice over our fried plate. She feeds it to me, and it's amazing.

Calamari? I'm a fan.

Our lobsters come next. The little baskets overflow with the steamed crustacean, making it almost convincing that we're about to get our \$200 worth. The fries are golden brown and seasoned to perfection. The lemon-butter sauce comes in a little plastic cup. We toast with our sodas and get cracking with our tools.

Again, Vita helps me because this is probably the second time I've eaten lobster in my life. I think the first time was in a Chinese restaurant or something.

"You've never been to Red Lobster?" she asks, again stunned at my lack of food experiences.

"Yeah, but who orders lobster at Red Lobster?" I ask, half-joking. The joke is that my family could never splurge on items like lobster, even at Red Lobster. "Haven't you heard of 'Endless Shrimp'?" Vita is cracking up again. "You know Asians love a good deal! I think my mom took some home in her purse."

We crack claws and feed each other the best morsels. The sun is setting over the darkening water, creating refractions that only Monet would be able to re-create.

I take Vita's hand and place the last little fried calamari on her finger. The greasy ring is cold now, and even though it probably feels gross, she tears up a little.

“One day, it’s going to be a real one,” I promise her.

“Really?” she asks, her eyes searching for lies.

“I’m going to be famous one day. When I sell my first painting, I’m buying you a ring, and buying us a house,” I tell her, believing my wildest dreams, here in Wildwood, letting these bold assertions manifest themselves somehow into our universe.

“You can do anything as long as you believe in yourself,” Vita says, confidently. “I believe in you.”

We lean over the table and kiss, ignoring the tables of old couples watching with wistful smiles on their faces, remembering when.

Suddenly, the wind picks up and blows one of our Styrofoam plates across the deck.

I feel a pelt of rain hit us in a sheet like someone just blasted us with a Super Soaker to cool down our horniness.

I look at Vita and see her look of surprise, and then we glance up and see that ominous black clouds have gathered above us, doing more than threatening rain. They’re giving us a five-minute countdown, complete with a sudden gale that starts blowing plates and empty cups off tables all around us.

In moments, the waitstaff spring into action, relocating diners indoors and closing the deck umbrellas before they fly away.

The wind is going nuts now. Dara rushes up to us and apologizes, but we just laugh and tell her we’re fine. She promises to come back with ponchos, but we assure her we’ll be okay.

As the chaos ensues, Vita and I sit in what is now a downpour, complete with huge swirling gusts, and let our hair hang stringy from the rain. We hold each other’s hands, securing our plastic chairs only with the weight of our own bodies as furniture flips over and gets dragged across the pier by the wind.

"I think I'm falling in love with you all over again!" I cry over the roaring wind.

Vita's face has an expression that I can't quite discern. There are no words for it. It's something I've never felt or seen before. Like calamari, it's my first time.

She looks at me and just laughs and smiles, the rain pelting down at us from above.

The black clouds roll over the ocean, darkening the sea. The rays of sunshine that poke through are soft and golden.

When Dara comes back, we ask her to take our picture, despite the downpour. She laughs and obliges, then hands back our Kodak. Then Vita asks one of the grandmas who's just watching us—looking on with a smile of contentment—to take a picture with me, Vita, and Dara.

We're cracking up the whole time like we're the ones who drank the wine.

Finally, before we leave the pier, drenched and shivering, I use our last picture to take a shot of the dark clouds, and those distant points of light over the horizon—not knowing when the rain will end.

We drive up to Vita's house the same night. The ride back is quiet. We're cold and wet. Vita's also privately facing her mom in her mind—who is definitely home—but Vita makes us enter the darkened home through the back door. There's a lot of whispering and tiptoeing which doesn't make me feel that comfortable, but all I really want is a hot bath. Vita takes us through that backdoor to a side staircase that

also leads up to the second floor, almost like it's a separate part of the house. Seriously, how big is this place?

Safely in her room, we make no romantic ritual of taking our clothes off. I stand awkwardly in the bathroom and wait for the water to heat up. Normally, we would be making out and probably already fucking before even getting into the shower. Now, we're just standing with our teeth chattering, looking at each other and speeding up the heat with our minds.

Ah! Finally, the hot shower. We thaw our frozen bodies, and it isn't until we've both gotten under the covers that we're able to let our bodies settle into the warmth of each other's body and the sheets.

Vita remembers the wet heap on the floor and puts on her pajamas. She goes down to the laundry room to throw my soaked clothes in the dryer. When she returns, she takes her pajamas off and rejoins me in bed naked.

"Are you ready to meet my mom tomorrow?" she asks, right before we make love. This isn't exactly a turn on. I just nod my head, kind of scared, but still my dick is hard.

"It'll be okay," she says, and pecks my nose affectionately. "You, she'll love. It's me that I'm worried about."

The next morning, I'm awoken by Vita's minty breath and the smell of bacon from downstairs.

"My mom is waiting to meet you," Vita coos in my ear.

I sit up as if I'd thought it was a dream. I look under the covers at my naked body and stare back in Vita in shock.

"It's okay, she knows you slept over," Vita says.

Vita is already dressed in a light American Eagle zip-up hoody and a fresh pair of denim shorts. Her hair is tied up, and she looks casual, but ready for the day. Or, as I realize later, ready to leave as soon as possible.

“I washed and dried your clothes,” Vita says sweetly, giving me pleasant glimpses of what married life might be like, at least in my fantasies. “Come down when you’re ready.”

She leaves the room and I cautiously get out of bed, butt naked, and hurry into the bathroom. As I do my business, I see a new toothbrush and toothpaste on the counter like it’s a hotel.

I wash up and come out again, paranoid that either Marcia or Dr. Dela Rosa will suddenly burst in. I grab my Bruce Lee t-shirt and jeans off the back of Vita’s desk chair and can’t resist the urge to sniff.

What can I say? They’re Downy fresh.

I creep downstairs, wanting to flee the house, but the smell of bacon has cartoon arms that lure me to the kitchen.

Dr. Dela Rosa is in the massive kitchen, her 5’2 stature dwarfed even further by the huge kitchen islands and stainless-steel appliances in the beige marble kitchen.

When she sees me walking in, shy and nervous as hell, she drops the spatula and comes toward me with a big smile and her arms open like we’re long-lost relatives.

“Danny, welcome to my home. Call me Ana. Vita’s told me so much about you.”

I’m sort of stunned because until this moment I was completely unaware that I’d been discussed at all. Vita never mentioned it. I thought I was still a secret, sort of.

I glance at the wall clock. It’s Saturday morning, just past eight. Marcia is nowhere in sight. It must be her day off.

Dr. Dela Rosa is dressed in what looks like expensive leisure wear. I can see the resemblance between her and Vita: the same eyes, same nose, and same lips. Vita, standing at 5'5, got a little more height from her dad's side, I guess.

I glance over at Vita, who's leaning over the kitchen island with her chin cupped in one hand, watching the show. She looks very amused and isn't trying to help me out at all.

"You have a beautiful home," I say politely. "Vita always talks about you, too."

"About what a terror I am, I bet!" Ana declares and laughs heartily. I like her already.

Ana looks at me with a look of appraisal, processing all kinds of information that I don't even know about. "I can see why she likes you," Ana says after a minute of unabashed analysis. "Ivita can't *stop* talking about you."

"Mommy!"

Tagalog gets exchanged between mother and daughter. Daughter upset, but not really. Mother hooting with delight. I take a seat at the table and watch the conversation go back and forth like a ping-pong match.

I get up to help, but am quickly rebuffed and told to stay seated. Vita and her mom both serve me a big breakfast plate laden with a pepper-and-cheese omelet, hashed-brown, toast and jam, along with the mythical bacon—which is actually a Filipino sausage called *longganisa*.

It's amazing.

I get busy shoveling food into my mouth, mostly because I feel awkward, but also because it's delicious. Dr. Dela Rosa, or Ana as she likes to be called, plays detective with her daughter, not letting her off

the hook on the facts of last night's trip to the shore, and skipping class.

After this is done, Ana sits with a playful expression as she studies us over her teacup, looking back and forth at our eye contact.

"So, how long have you two been doing it?" she asks finally, drawing shocked protests from Vita, igniting an onset of laughter from mom. Vita covers her face and shakes her head as Dr. Dela Rosa cackles warmly.

"We're going back to school," Vita announces after breakfast.

"You shouldn't have been home," Ana says, a little seriously. "Let me worry about your dad. We'll be fine. You do what you need to do. Don't forget why you're there."

This final line tells me what it's like between them: the unvarnished expectation, and the struggle to fulfill it.

But to me, she's perfectly sweet.

"Danny, it was nice to meet you," Ana says warmly. "Come over any time you want."

I can sense that she actually means that, and I thank her warmly for breakfast.

"Vita," Ana says, letting her daughter off with a light, but final warning before we go, "Be good."

And we do. We try to be good. We think we're good. And in any case, we try.

But so seldom does anyone try to get pregnant at 19.

It just happens.

Chapter Twelve

Off Campus

Professor Nabokov once said something to me that I'll never forget:

"You don't end up with what you want. What you get is a series of accidents that complete the chaos."

I knew he was talking about painting, but as everything in my life started to fall apart, those words stuck with me.

I'd gone to Professor Nabokov for advice after he devastated me in front of the class. He had his little lawn chair unfolded, his cane leaning against the seat, and he was sitting there—contemplating—in front of his own wall-sized canvas.

What was he thinking, sitting there in silence, staring at all that avant-garde gibberish splashed across the canvas?

How would he even know if it was done?

Jackson Pollock was once asked how he knew when a painting was finished. He famously replied, "How do you know when you're finished making love?"

I don't know if Pollock was being a smartass, since his all paintings resemble a gargantuan color explosion of jizz on canvas, but I understand what he meant:

You know when you know. And afterwards, there's nothing else to do but walk away.

I've been searching for that same feeling in art, in painting, in my life even. Every time I touch a canvas, I'm filled with the hope that *this one could be the one*.

The one to do what?

That's the part I failed to ask myself.

I just kept reapplying gesso to old canvases, starting over and over again—chasing this dream that I couldn't grasp—to become something that I never was:

Good enough.

We all want simple things. But the older you get, the more you realize that everything you used to want was wrong: Good grades, good times, a good girl—those tiny tags of happiness that elude you, and break in your fingers like charcoal sticks.

All you're left with are the smudges—the stains of what you almost had.

Sonic would have done anything for those assholes. He committed felonies to win their favor, and he was ready to be at their beck and call. He would've run into a shitstorm for his coach and his team, broken body and all.

To Sonic, being part of something meant everything. For me, that 'something' was always more abstract. An idea of self that was based on talent and merit. A future of fame or obscurity: to be Picasso or Van Gogh—either way, to live for love.

We wanted the same thing in the end. We just had no way to capture it or say exactly what it was.

Sonic got kicked out of his house by his parents, who said he was out of control. They were religious types, and they didn't like what they were seeing. His destructive behavior, his anger, his newfound self-medication in the form of beer cans and cheap liquor.

It only took one winter vacation at home before they gave him the boot, and he sort of drifted around New Brunswick throughout Spring and Summer of 2002, talking about how he was going to enroll in Middlesex Community College and get back into Rutgers, a plan that remained unfulfilled.

Sonic also said he was going to join the Marines and go to Afghanistan, but the closest step he made to fulfilling that patriotic duty was shaving his head. All those glorious *Dragonball* spikes went fluttering into a bathroom sink somewhere. When he raised his head to look at himself in the mirror, he went from the goofy, slightly douchey meathead—to looking like a straight-up menace.

I don't want to say too much about that last night of Hell Week since I wasn't there, but I understood what it meant—perhaps more than any of our friends could.

I can imagine the scene, with a little Hollywood mixed in. The pledges all kneeling on the floor in their underwear, soaked in sweat, alcohol, and who knows what other liquids. Torches lit. The brothers of Delta Kappa wearing masks—or something equally ritualistic and terrifying. Giant paddles, marked with graffiti, blood, and battle scars whipping the air in practice swings.

Each pledge is called to the middle to receive lashings, and made to repeat the fraternal code perfectly, with the added weight of extreme fatigue mulling their brains.

Sonic takes his beatings. He barks out the code. But when it's over, he's not welcomed in. No insignia, no brotherhood. Just silence.

Xander's blue eyes say it all as he removes his mask. Xander will remind Sonic one last time where he stands, and who is above who.

"Congratulations, Mutt," Xander says softly as he circles around Sonic, hitting his open palm with his bloodied paddle. He leans in behind Sonic and whispers into his ear, almost tenderly with the hiss of a snake, the humor of a sadistic bastard.

"Drop your pants, Mutt. Let's see what side of the gene pool you're on."

My pencil snaps with the weight of this memory—and it's not even mine.

But it lives in both of us.

In our blood.

In what we inherit.

September 2002. Another school year starts—this time off-campus—and we're free men, able to do whatever the fuck we want.

Vita helps me move into my room on the second floor, a cramped corner box, but at least it's all mine. A place to get my paintings done without any interruptions. Within the first week, I paint the walls top to bottom with color fields that look like Rothko sunsets.

Sonic takes the biggest room, which is meant to be a double, and pays extra rent. He's flush with newfound cash, a fact that I'll explain soon.

Dom and Cheese double up once again, keeping the spirit of the Purple Room alive. They bring those black lights with them, but their

room is smaller now, so it practically burns your eyes to hang out in there. Like the Olympic torch, they refuse to turn those things off. The purple haze reigns now on Louis Street, though I'm not sure if we've discussed how to split the electric bill.

The day we all come back to Rutgers feels like a family reunion. We spend a few days moving our shit in, helping each other out, decorating our shared spaces, passing blunts and brews all the while. We top it all off with a barbecue and bump our music in the concrete backyard, a tiny little patch of grass big enough to let the dog piss on.

Vinnie is our guard dog. He's a half-German Shepherd and half-Pitbull stray that one of the guys from downstairs picked up over the summer. He's got the body of Arnold Schwarzenegger, but he's just a puppy at heart.

The guys on the first floor are all Delta Kappa boys. Former pledges who Sonic once stood in line with to get paddled. They don't say anything about what happened to Sonic, but they're good guys. Or whatever—at least they're not narcs, so they're cool. But it gets very bro-heavy down there. Lots of beer pong, and Eminem's latest album in heavy rotation.

One Sonic is already enough for me to deal with. I try to keep my distance.

During that first month, Sonic, Dom, Cheese, and I make a strong effort to split up chores. We want our shared domicile to reflect our new selves: mature, responsible, and ready to take on the world.

By October, reality starts to settle in, and there's a pile of dishes in the kitchen sink that no one's touched in weeks. We've officially switched to paper-plates. It seems like we only use the microwave to reheat Chinese take-out or cook-up licks of Special K.

Rich Boy Chris, one of the ex-Delta Kappa boys from downstairs, gets these little glass jars filled with liquid cat-tranquilizer. He pours

the clear liquid onto a glass plate and then voila, thirty seconds later the plate comes out crusty white, powder fluffed into little crystals that you can scrape and sniff.

Ketamine right out of the microwave is ten times more potent than when it has a chance to cool. One little bump and we all start shrinking beneath the kitchen table like Alice in Wonderland and disappear into K-holes. Inside the videogame, slam-dunking, me personally hitting the skyhook in NBA LIVE. We're inside the neon lights. We live in waves.

"Bro, think about it," Dom says. "You've got the Covenant. The aliens are called Prophets. They're trying to unleash this Doomsday weapon called Halo. Tell me this isn't a metaphor for the Muslims and their jihad."

"But they made the game years ago, before 9/11," Cheese contends, unconvinced. "How would anyone have known?"

"Dawg, I think they knew. It was all planned," Sonic analyzes. "The Bush family is mad shady. There's a reason why we're over there, and it ain't just about terrorism. That's all I'm saying."

"So, you think the CIA told the programmers to put this story plot in the game?" Cheese snorts.

"Maybe it was just out there in the universe. Everyone feeding on the same information," I hypothesize, stoned out of my mind. "Tuning in to signals we can't see or recognize."

"Dude, I just learned about this shit in Psych 101!" Dom exclaims, getting excited. "That's Carl Jung, right?"

"Yo, hold on a second."

Then—*knock, knock, knock*.

There's a flash of paranoia that's normal in this home full of pot-heads.

“Calm down, you pussies,” Sonic says, peeling himself off the couch. “It’s Ta-Ta’s.”

Plumes of smoke hang in the air. Seated on a long black couch that we found next to a dumpster. Each of us has an X-Box controller in our hands.

A big screen Hitachi illuminates the room, and the air is foggy from bong hits. A vast black and white Tony Montana poster behind us features a scene from *Scarface* and covers half the wall.

The food has arrived. Press Pause.

We pop tabs on tall boys, Arizona Green Tea, to wash down pepperoni pizza, gyros, or kebabs; Italian subs, chicken parmesan, and Chinese to-go boxes. In the kitchen, take-out menus are attached by magnet to a fridge that’s almost always empty.

“Dawg, I should go to the CIA!” Sonic cries, slice in hand, dancing with his shirt off.

“He means the ‘Culinary Institute of America,’” Dom informs us.

“Bullshit,” Cheese snorts. “If he said Central Intelligence Agency, I’d at least half-believe him. They could always use another decoy.”

Jacksons and fifties. Ass and titties. Sirens and Ulysses—all your dreams in transit.

The dripping streetlights and buses at dawn. People in front of televisions being brainwashed. Like Edward Hopper—the loneliness of being together in the same room.

Men behind curtains push buttons on the mechanisms of war. Entertainment is simply shock-value. The awe of hell raining down and lighting up Baghdad. Night-Vision on the eight o’clock news. The Axis of Evil. Terror Alert Orange. Another day as an art student, moseying toward the back of the store.

It's time to reup on art supplies. Slipping long tubes of paint up my sleeves. What masterpiece will this Titanium White, Prussian Blue, and Yellow Ochre create?

If it's any consolation to the staff of the Arts and Crafts section, tell them one day, I'm going to be famous.

My name is Danny Kim. I used to go to school here...

After Vita and I get back from the shore, I lock in and get to work. I'm not just painting—I'm doing things I've never done before. Some artists use transcendental meditation or LSD to break through—for me it comes from the audacity to tell myself that I've already made it. It's like an out-of-body experience—I'm not even trying. I'm just watching myself work.

Until this point, I've been happily messing around, doing little sketches, poems and half-finished pieces that never connect or go anywhere. They've just been ideas. Scribbles. Experiments.

This time, I go full Van Gogh mode and produce with multiple canvases a week. I work feverishly for a month straight, painting anything I see, everything that's around me—portraits of my friends, a still life of a bong, I even sketch a turd that Vinnie left on the floor and render bright little green and yellow scribbles around it to show that it came from nature, and it's beautiful to somebody somewhere in the universe.

I'm smoking a lot of weed—but I'm also thinking a lot. What was Van Gogh without his suffering? Would we care about his sunflowers, his irises, or his lonely little chair—with the myth of who he was?

I throw the finished canvases to the side and keep going.

I stretch and staple canvas like I'm nailing dead parts of myself to the cross. Gesso is slathered on and I'm using brushes, markers, and even spray cans like I don't even give a fuck—I'm abyssally deep in the zone.

Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?

That's what I want to know too, Paul.

What the fuck is Western Civilization? Do I even belong?

What about my ancestors? Do we know their names—or just dynasties and vases in glass cases?

I used to write my tag in bathroom stalls.

Otherwise, I was fucking invisible.

If you're good enough, you get instant fame.

Calligraphy is graffiti. What's the difference?

Give me a place to write my name.

I fling paint, scrape off dried crust, and let the canvas shit all over itself. I'm violent, loving, tender, hateful, angry, soft, and gentle. I poke with pencils and make little swirls. I wield palette knives to scrape, spread, and smear. I draw heavy black outlines like mascara on the eyes of a porn star. Clouds and slashes bleed ink like the ritualistic suicide of heaven.

Time to show Vita. I'm done.

Is it done?

What have I done?

Too late. She's here.

I'm so excited I can barely contain myself.

I don't want to put all the weight of my expectations on her.

I'm just doing something for class. That's what I told her.

She shows up on a Saturday afternoon wearing a baby blue Bebe Sport leisure suit that brings out her ass and curves so nicely, I almost forget my true purpose.

But she seems distracted. *Did I already give it away?*

“Hey there,” I say and lean in to kiss her. “You look beautiful.”

I feel something different about her today. Normally, when I lean in to kiss her, Vita kisses me right back. Sometimes, we just stand at the door making out obscenely before rushing upstairs to my room to make love. I feel hesitation, but I let it go.

“What’s the big surprise?” she asks, her eyes looking wet and kind of nervous.

“Nothing, just been working on this thing,” I tell her casually as we head upstairs to my room.

We open the door and there’s an immediate stench of marijuana that I’ve grown numb to, but not Vita. She makes a face and waves the air in front of her face comically, coughing all the while. The boys grin at her, stoned out of their heads.

“You might want to crack a window in here,” Vita says with her trademark humor, making them laugh bashfully, but of course, none of them attempts to move.

I escort Vita down the hall to my room and open the door fast, like all her family and friends are in there, waiting to shout, “Surprise!”

Right next to my boxspring, front and center in the room, is my latest piece, the one I consider my *pièce de resistance*, a huge canvas that I went kind of crazy on. It *looks* like it’s still dripping wet. It’s powerful and all-encompassing, but I’m secretly worried that it sucks and just looks like the work of a madman.

“Whoa!” Vita exclaims, and stops before entering further, almost as if afraid.

Is this a good reaction or bad?

“What do you think?” I ask hopefully.

“Is this for class?” she asks. “It’s huge.”

“Do you like it?” I ask again, my smile stretching tighter to maintain its hold.

“I mean, it’s really—wow!” Vita says, looking it up and down. It measures three feet wide and four feet high—my biggest canvas yet. I guess I went for size.

“‘Wow’ good?” I ask.

“Is this why I haven’t been allowed to come over?” Vita asks with light humor, cautiously entering the room as I close the door. She walks over to the edge of the bed and sits down gingerly, as if my canvas is a wild beast that I’ve brought home to raise on human souls.

She’s not answering my question, but I know her. Vita never lies. I feel let down. I want her to be standing in front of it, looking at every inch, all the details, the little secret textures and mixtures of paint around the tiny abstract forest and over the rolling clouds of the metaphorical mountains.

“Just tell me—good or bad?” I ask, almost begging for a bone.

She’s looking at me, not the canvas. She doesn’t even mention the smaller pieces that are lined around the room. I’d set the whole thing up to have a gallery effect. Okay, the canvases are all on the floor, but this was the best I could do.

She can’t focus. She’s just trying to appease me.

“I like it,” Vita says, and smiles. She studies my face and adds, “It’s a big statement!”

“I’m trying something new,” I explain. “Something without shapes exactly, but impressions of—” I pause, stammering, feeling perspiration despite the brisk late-November air coming in through the open window. “It’s like, going back to those old Chinese paintings where the landscape is really wide and things on the land are really small, to give a sense of heaven...”

My voice trails off.

I feel so fucking desperate—I hate that she sees it all over my face.

“I like it,” says Vita softly, this time less convincingly. “It’s just a lot.”

“I know,” I say downcast. “Maybe too much.”

Vita bites her lip and looks at the painting a little more. Her eyes drift around the room. I know that she feels like the Rothko on the walls are a little overstated and somewhat—well, disorienting—but I don’t like the way she’s looking around, like she’s never been here before.

“Is everything okay?” I ask, concerned.

Vita smiles weakly. “I just feel...a little nauseous.”

“Oh,” I say, my annoyance dissipating. My brow furrowed. “Do you want some water?”

Vita looks at me. She’s searching my eyes in a way that wants to guess what I feel before I even know myself.

“Danny, I have big news,” she says slowly.

“Me, too,” I say with a deep exhalation, and sit down on the bed. I just want to tell her about Jolene’s art show and my chance to make it big so that she’ll support me. I just need her to tell me what I need to hear—that I can do anything if I put my mind to it, or something equally reassuring—words that I can only believe if Vita tells me.

She looks at me, biting her lower lip nervously. A habit of hers.

I put my finger on her lips. My little way of making her stop.

She opens her mouth a little and pauses.

“Okay, you first,” she says.

Chapter Thirteen

Meet the Parents

Everything was so perfect. I had my own room. I was living with my boys. I had a great girl who loved me. She would sleep over, and I'd wake up next to her and make love to her before we even brushed our teeth.

We would get breakfast sandwiches at Hole-In-The-Wall with iced coffees melting in the streets. Her hand holding my hand. Her legs in cut-offs. Me in basketball shorts. Flip-flops scratching the pavement. Her shadow and my shadow. Growing longer. Gone.

But summer's over, and now my life is over, too.

Okay, that's fucked up. What am I saying?

My life is just beginning!

Our life—and the life of this little one—a product of our love.

A product of...unprotected sex. Lots of it. Tons of it.

Shit.

She was on birth control. I didn't know I had to still use a condom. Condoms are for strangers. Right?

We should sue the company that makes those pills! Defective! Defective!

Okay, breathe.

Mostly, the big news hasn't derailed our lives *yet*. Vita and I are still going to class, and I'm still painting like a maniac as if nothing has changed—though I often find myself absentmindedly painting little blobs that I later recognize as fetuses.

The point is that we're taking the news in stride *most of the time*. I even introduce Vita to my parents. She's two months pregnant, so I figure they should meet my girlfriend once before we tell them she's going to give them a grandchild.

The conversation is awkward with my parents, as usual.

I call home. My mom picks up. "Hello?"

"Hi Mom, it's Danny."

"Danny!" my mom says and then screeches into the background.

"Husband, pick up the phone. It's Danny!"

Someone picks up the other line. It's my dad.

"Hello?" he answers.

"Hi, Dad."

"Hang up the phone!" my dad shouts into the background. He's upstairs. She's downstairs.

"No, wait. I have to talk to both of you."

"What?" my mom screeches back upstairs to my dad.

"I have to—"

"I can't hear anything," my dad says and yells back downstairs.

"Hang up the phone!"

It takes some effort, but finally I manage to explain—in broken Korean—that I have a girlfriend. Would they like to meet her?

This completely catches them off-guard. They ask me if I'm in trouble.

I hate that the answer is "Kind of"—but still automatically process how this news would have been received so differently if it was coming

from my older brother John, who is currently in his last year of Cornell, preparing to go to law school.

Anyway, we set a date.

I take gigantic bong rips after hanging up, to wipe my mind clean of this memory.

We're standing in front of a Chinese restaurant called Emperor Jade off Route 18. I selected it for its regal façade since it looks like a Chinese palace, but upon closer inspection, the place is kind of a dump. At least it's far away enough from Rutgers that my parents won't suggest visiting the crack house where they are currently paying my rent.

"Are you ready to do this?" I ask Vita after we've been seated. "What if we just send pictures later and say, 'Surprise!'"

"That's going to create a lasting impression, don't you think?" Vita replies.

"Did I tell you how amazing you look?" I ask, putting my hand on her knee. I can see the look on my parents' faces when they see me sitting next to this stunning beauty. Vita is the girl next door when she wants to be, but when she turns it up, it's all the way up. Isn't there something called "pregnancy glow"?

If so, she's shimmering. I hate the fact that we still have sex three times a day. I mean, it's good for the relationship. But damn it, we have no self-control.

What if we have twins? What if we get pregnant again right after the first one? What if I can never stop fucking?

Well, I might as well lean into this. Being with Vita *is* the height of my life's shortlist of accomplishments. What accomplishments? I barely existed in high school, and in my brother's shadow, I'm just a blip.

If I was born to do anything on this Earth, clearly it was to reproduce and continue the Kim family line!

Not that it matters what my parents think, but okay, it does. I'm still a Korean guy at heart. There's no eloping in our family history, no straying from the inheritance of kimchi in the DNA. I want this night to go smoothly.

I'm a soju cocktail of fear and pride, a true Korean. But I love Vita, and I have to tell her what to expect so she knows how to duck when the left hooks come swinging. I gently informed her prior to our arrival that she would be judged, mostly on the basis that she's not Korean.

"Meet the Parents' is a dangerous game," I say again, repeating things I've already said out of anxiety. "It almost always goes south."

"Babe, it's going to be okay," Vita says. "I mean, how bad can it be?"

"The first thing my mom is going to ask you is whether you go to church. That'll probably come up before we even order the food."

"I'm Catholic. We call it mass," Vita teases me.

"Let's go over our notes. I think we're Methodists. We were brought to America by missionaries. Money is loaned unofficially, without interest, at church meetings. This is called a '*gye*' and that's how we got to open our dry cleaner. Don't do a Hail Mary, because that will be met with suspicion. But feel free to speak in tongues if the Holy Spirit strikes you."

Vita's listening, watching me with fascination. She finds my nervousness to be cute. She's not rattled at all.

"I think I'll be okay," Vita says lightly, putting her hand on my hand. "Stop worrying."

I'm still amazed that Vita *wanted* to meet my parents. Is she insane?

"Believe it or not, I want to know more about the people who raised you to become the wonderful person that you are," Vita says. "Is that strange?"

"That had nothing to do with them," I reply. "That was all me."

Vita laughs, but I'm kind of serious. Do I even know who my parents are?

Certainly not the way she knows her parents. I mean, I know what *kind of* people my parents are, but she knows her parents intimately: Where they grew up, how they first met, how they fell in love, and so on.

My parents wouldn't speak about their childhoods if there was a bayonet pointed at their chests. It's like pulling teeth to get them to say anything about Korea, even though their hearts are obviously inseparable from that divided peninsula.

There's a lot of hustle and bustle in Emperor Jade. I wish I didn't pick a place that was so noisy. But maybe an inability to hear each other speak is just what the doctor ordered.

Servers with ill-fitting ruby-colored tuxedo jackets zip around with huge platters of mouthwatering food balanced on their shoulders. This chaos will fill in the awkward silences and cancel out any embarrassing questions my mom might ask.

"What do you feel like eating?" I ask distractedly, for the third or fourth time. We've already decided on Course A, but Course B is not without its charms. What I really want is a cigarette, but we've decided to go cold turkey together.

"Gosh, I'm starving," says Vita, looking down at her belly. "I think this little guy likes Chinese food."

"Well, he *is* Asian."

"You think it's a boy?"

"I don't know. Maybe?"

"I'm ready," Vita says, her eyes warm and trusting. "Are you ready?"

She's been asking this a lot lately. Maybe because she needs to keep pulling me down to earth to stay with her, making sure I don't float away.

I'll never abandon her or the baby, if that's what she means. But that's not what she means. She just wants to let me know that she loves me, and I love her. I do. Of course, I do. I'll do anything...

I spot my parents walking in. Vita and I rise from the table.

Uh oh. My mom has her look of consternation set to Level 5. You can always tell by my mother's perm the level of formality of the occasion. It's very tight.

As they approach, Vita gives a little bow.

"Hi!" she says charmingly. "I'm Ivita. It's so nice to finally meet you."

"Yes, hello. Nice to meet you," my dad replies in a Korean accent. He chuckles a little. After thirty years in America, he still thinks it's funny that he can speak English.

"Nice to see you," my mom says and smiles at Vita. Turning to me, her face switches to worry and she asks in Korean, "Have you been well?"

I give a canned response, and we sit down. My dad starts ranting as if Vita isn't even there. She sits with a patient smile waiting for translation.

"My dad is upset about the traffic," I explain to her and play translator for the rest of the night when they aren't talking directly to her.

I field their questions in Korean, mostly about the house I'd moved into with Sonic, Dom, and Cheese. They don't ask about my art classes. They just want to know if I'm at risk of being homeless again. "My living situation is good," I convince them, leaving out the fact that the place smells like weed 24/7.

"What's your...your major?" my dad asks swiveling his attention to Vita finally, addressing her head on. He smiles charmingly, a grin full of gold crowns and uninsured dental work. He snuffles unconsciously as his nose runs constantly from years at the steam press.

“Right now, I’m in premed. I’m hoping to become a doctor.”

My parents make happy noises upon receiving this information. It really changes the mood at the table.

My dad takes this as a cue to launch into his standup act, my high school blunder years serving as comedic material. Soft and awkward throat clearings emit from my mom. She looks uncomfortable as my dad laughs, just plain confounded that he could’ve produced a son with such a lack of academic rigor.

Finally, the food arrives. Chinese dishes gleaming with sauce, sprinkled with sesame seeds, the peppers bright red and green, the bowls of rice as white as steam are placed in front of us.

“Let’s eat,” my dad proclaims, but before his chopsticks reach the beef, my mom stops him.

“We must pray first,” she urges in Korean with a frown on her face, and then to Vita she asks, “Are you Christian?”

“Yes, I am,” Vita responds in a way that seems as if she’s been anticipating this question, a small release of breath.

“Do you go to church?” my mom asks, her eyes searching Vita’s eyes for any hesitation, any flinching from the truth.

“I was raised Catholic,” says Vita. I’m unconsciously gritting my teeth.

“A good thing,” my mom says to me, after a moment, perhaps considering all the other religions it could’ve been. “She’s pretty, smart, and a Christian,” my mom announces, letting us we know that we’ve passed the first of many tests.

“Thank you,” Vita says, genuinely relieved, or maybe it’s just me sucking in my breath this whole time. More like “Thank God.”

We bow our heads in prayer, and Vita automatically crosses herself, but my mom has her eyes closed.

The rest of dinner goes well because my dad does most of the talking, not curious about the details of our relationship exactly, but carrying on with his usual brand of dinner conversation: complaining about the rising cost of insulin for his diabetes, the goings-on at the White House, and the cost of the things in general.

Vita matches my dad's every passing thought with grace, engaging him like a voice in his head to urge forward his views on the economy, healthcare, Bush, the war in Afghanistan, electricity, and plumbing. Somewhere toward the end of the meal, as the last giblets of chicken and the scrawny pieces of broccoli drown in the sauce, the question of how we met each other is asked.

I begin hesitantly, knowing that by mentioning the dorm that I'm guaranteed to set off my dad. He hasn't gotten over my getting kicked out of freshman housing for smoking weed.

"Does she know you do drugs?" he interrogates, not to be a jerk, but there's a level of unveiled scorn that hurts.

The waiter comes over and asks us if we want ice cream or oranges. Vita and I both order ice cream and my parents order oranges.

"Doesn't she know why you got kicked out of student housing?" my dad asks again, the change in mood totally abrupt. My mom's objections are ignored.

"I wasn't on drugs," I rebut in Korean and then in English add, "I had drinks at a party. Is that a good reason to kick me out of the dorm?"

"Husband, don't talk about that here," my mom hisses in Korean, looking embarrassed. "Danny promised he'd quit. He doesn't do it anymore."

"*Kkae-ddok-ghat-eun-mahl-ha-ji-ma!*" my dad almost yells. Don't say words that sound like dogshit. His favorite phrase. "That's what you said last time. Every time, it's someone else's fault. Not your fault."

“What’re we talking about here?” Vita whispers to me from the side of her mouth.

“Me getting booted from the dorms.”

“Oh,” Vita utters and looks worried.

“After you graduate, you can do whatever you want,” my dad continues in Korean. “I don’t care. Maybe one day you’ll become a famous artist, or you can get a job as a designer, I don’t know.”

“Dad, I—”

“But don’t get this nice girl in trouble. She’s going to become a doctor!” he blasts me with his voice rising and pointing a finger at Vita.

“Husband, please. Danny is going to study and do a good job. He’s going to graduate. We just need to keep praying every day.”

“Can’t you just sit still without talking?” my dad snaps, his good cheer sucked out of him like there’s nothing left but the rind.

“Your son is really talented,” Vita interjects expertly, trying to salvage this portion of the night. “Were either of you artists? I was wondering where he may have gotten it from.”

My parents look at Vita like she’s nuts. If either of them ever drew a picture, they left it somewhere in Korea with the shoes they never had.

“You were lucky to get into the university,” my dad continues. “With your grades, you were lucky to graduate high school. But now is your chance. You can get a degree and do anything you want. But without a degree, what can you do? You’ll end up back where you started, pumping gas for the rest of your life.”

“My dad’s first job in America was at a pump station. It’s something he never forgets to remind me,” I tell Vita quietly.

A tense silence wraps around us like tablecloth. The vanilla ice cream is an eggshell-colored ball slipping and sliding around the glass bowl as I chase it with my teaspoon.

After dinner, I fight with my dad to pay for the check. He insists on paying for it and pulls out the huge wad of cash he always brings home after emptying the register. He peels off five moist twenties and mutters about how expensive food is getting. I glance over at Vita looking beautiful in her winter coat, miniskirt, and “hooker” boots as she makes small talk with my mom.

We escort my parents back to my dad’s old Dodge and say goodbye. Before they leave, my mom hands over a grocery bag full of groceries for me and my housemates to eat. I can already see from a glance that there’s a big jar of kimchi.

We get in Vita’s Celica and drive back to my place on Louis Street. Through the window, partially obscured by a “curtain” that someone had rigged poorly, we see some of the ex-Delta Kappa boys playing beer pong on the first floor. Shoes hang from telephone wires in front of the house; the street is speckled with broken glass.

How the hell am I going to pay for rent and everything else we need?

“What if I started selling weed?” I ask Vita point-blankly after I parallel park. Not the most graceful approach, but I leave the car running so that the heater stays hot. I don’t mention the many transactions that have already taken place.

“Are you serious?” Vita utters. She’s searching my eyes to see if I’m joking. I can play it off like I was, but it’s too late.

“We’re going to need to get our own place soon,” I explain. “It’s going to be hard for me to keep going to school and make money at the same time. I mean, I guess we could both drop out temporarily. Or maybe you can have the baby and go back to school, and I can just work and paint on the side.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me. You’re thinking about becoming a drug-dealer?” Vita asks, genuinely perplexed.

“Sonic already has a little racket going on,” I fumble on. “They’re friends mostly. Associates, colleagues, acquaintances, people we know. I don’t have to do anything except answer the door.”

“You guys are going to get caught,” she predicts in a how-can-you-be-so-dumb voice.

“It’s not like that. People come over, they smoke a little, they leave. They do it all the time anyway!”

Vita counts streetlights all the way to Little Mexico before breaking the silence.

“I want to go home. Can you drop me off?” she says.

“Are you mad?”

Vita makes a face and thinks for a moment, trying her best not to treat me like the idiot that I am. She reaches out and strokes my hair, letting me know that she still loves me, even if I am dumb.

“I feel sorry that Sonic flunked out and got kicked out of his house. But that’s his life. You need to think about us now, okay? You’re not on the same path as him.”

“I know. I just want to make sure we have everything. I don’t want to depend on our parents for help.”

“We’ll be fine. If I have to live at my parents’ house and take a break from school, I’m okay with that,” Vita says. “I’m not okay with you going to jail and not being around to see our baby.”

“You’re right,” I admit. “It just seems so easy. All I have to do is—”

“All *we* have to do is be there for each other. We’ll be fine. We’re not the first and we won’t be the last,” Vita says firmly.

“I don’t want you to have give up your dream,” I say.

“It was never my dream, Danny,” Vita says softly, looking into my eyes. “It was my parents’. They’re not going to be happy, but we’ll be fine.”

“I’ll look in the classifieds,” I say, agreeing with her. “There’s always something.”

“And you can still paint,” Vita says. “I don’t want you to give up your dreams either.”

We go in and lay down on my bed, which is just a boxspring on the floor. I talk to Vita’s belly where our little seed is growing day by day.

After we make love, I draw her naked in bed. My pencil slips out of my hand and rolls to a stop beside her boots, lying on their sides, lifeless apart from her legs. I take in the old, stained carpet under the lamplight and feel depressed.

I watch Vita sleep peacefully in the reddish glow of the heat lamp and think about somehow selling my artwork for a million dollars. Nothing is impossible if you put your mind to it, right?

I sit there in the dark and can’t sleep.

Too many things on my mind. Too many things I can’t draw my way out of.

Chapter Fourteen

Hustlers, Inc.

Watching Sonic get money was something the rest of us couldn't ignore.

Within months, he went from a shiftless nomad to our fearless leader. None of us would have said so openly—since on some level, he was still a dumbass for getting kicked out after one semester—but money talks, and whether we wanted to admit it or not, seeing Sonic transform piece by piece—with diamonds in his ears, a gold chain around his neck, two phones, and a Movado on his wrist, made a deep impression.

Piles of cash laid out on the billiard table in our living room became a normal sight—next to a duffel bag full of drugs, with Sonic in the middle, handing us our cut. Our first customers were friends from class or from back home, but soon our reach expanded as word got out about the quality of Sonic's weed—and his ability to maintain a steadfast supply when other dealers ran dry.

Before long, potheads from all over Jersey were getting their stash from Rutgers. We even had friends drive down from schools in Massachusetts and Vermont to offset their local drought. Eventually, all that weed would break down—pounds, to ounces, eighths to grams, and

probably even into nickel bags for high school kids trying to dance with Mary Jane for the very first time.

Not saying we were selling weed to high school kids—not directly anyway. I voted Democrat, you know what I’m saying? Trickle Down Economics, baby.

But with every image of Tony Montana, there’s a part of the movie you don’t see.

I’m not even talking about the come-up—the scrambling, the hustling, the against the odds montage of taking no prisoners. I’m talking about private moments in the dark, when you’re talking to yourself, wondering if you should even be alive.

After Sonic got kicked out, he had plenty of those moments. He floated from couch to couch, crashing with guys he knew from wrestling or football. He didn’t have class. He didn’t have a home. He didn’t even have a job. And he was dumb broke.

He hid his despair whenever we would hang out, but when it came time for us to push off and attend our schedules, he was left alone to wander around, looking for someone else with as much free time as he had. He tried to front like he was “living the life”, but he was basically living the life of a bum.

He tried working at a gym where the owner let him crash and shower. For a while, Sonic posed as a personal trainer, but he couldn’t keep a schedule. He kept missing appointments, so the owner downgraded him to mop duty—and even that didn’t last.

After that, Sonic must’ve had a wakeup call. To start making money to pay his own way. That’s when he ran into an old comrade, an ex-wrestler named Aram, at a bar on Easton Avenue—Old Queens Tavern or The Golden Rail—one of those.

Aram was a dude whose eyes that never exactly connected with whatever you thought he might be looking at. Like Sonic, his eyes were

small and slanted, but that was mostly from drugs. He had the sort of face that made you wonder if he was mentally challenged, but he did get into college somehow, so he must've been literate at least.

He had a shaved head, like Sonic, and he was beefy but not in shape anymore. If you asked him what he did, he would hand you a mixtape and tell you to check out his rhymes.

I personally had three copies of his mixtape, because every time he gave me one, he forgot the other time he'd given me one, and I kept them because it was pointless to correct the mistake—and besides, CD cases make good weed plates.

I never listened to Aram's CD (or should I say "A-Dolla"), which is kind of fucked up, but just from talking to Aram, it was hard to imagine that this slob would have anything coherent to say, let alone a lyrical feast that justified the tape's 37 tracks. He was bad enough in conversation, who the hell wanted to listen to his benzo-ed drawl over a beat?

Aram was a Russian Jew, who would've smelled like vodka and herring if he were in Dostoyevsky novel. In 2002, he smelled like weed and—somehow—fresh laundry. He sniffled constantly from cocaine use and was either on an insomniac binge from the substance, or on lots of Xanax to come down and get some sleep. It was either one or the other, and I don't think I'd ever seen him sober.

I think the fact that Aram was so messy bothered me. If he spoke with any kind of clarity, or was able to focus and make eye contact with you when he spoke, and didn't have Dorito crumbs at the corners of his mouth, and if he was generally in better shape and more put together, I would've found it easier to accept that for some reason, this guy was really good at what he did for a living—which was selling drugs.

Sonic and Aram reconnected around the end of summer and were soon a part of each other's lives, which then made Aram a part of our lives—if only for a couple of months—but it was something to remember, and we didn't appreciate it at all.

By the time Sonic fully came back to us as a comrade and housemate, we'd all spent our summers separately, going through life experiences away from school—presumably maturing and becoming more prepared to make it on our own. Dom spent time down in Florida working at a country club, perfecting the art of schmoozing with ballers and big timers—finance guys who had yachts bought and paid for by various pyramid schemes. Cheese spent the summer in New England where his white mom had some kind of organics store connected to a farm. And I had spent the summer with Vita, long distance, with the keypad of my phone imprinted on the side of my face.

Sonic came back to us with a triangular grin, a nonchalant attitude about the world and its many avenues of *Veni, Vidi, Vici*. Physically, he was even bigger than before from living in the gym—and as we would later find out, steroid cycles. The world, for him, had become part-wrestling match, part-transaction.

He seemed to crawl out from under some boardwalk at Seaside Heights, bearing meditations about strippers who didn't like being called "hoes", the benefits of mixing pink liquor with cocaine, and constant reaffirmations about his own body—not just the obvious bulking, but proud assurances that his erection had enough surface area for two strippers to do separate lines of blow.

"They prefer to be called 'pole jockeys'," Dom pointed out wryly, having dated his own share of dancers.

"Yeah man, why're you disrespecting the hoers?" I added.

"There's no need to demean them," Cheese mumbled.

“Fuck outta here,” Sonic chortled gruffly, trying to save face. But moving forward, he toned it down a little. He had to remember after a summer with Aram, that we weren’t Aram—and a little recalibration was needed.

September brought its new start, with the end of summer vibes in the breeze, and classes to be attended, and bills to be paid, but we still gathered at Cooper Dining Hall on Tuesdays for Soul Food Night, to pack those Styrofoam takeaway boxes with ribs, mashed potatoes, corn, and steamed veggies, to sit in front of the TV stoned and enjoy the sense that we were now the kings of our own castle.

Sonic was also there sometimes, but we lived in different rhythms. He was always home during the day and usually gone at night. His life was now moving in a Circadian rhythm that matched whenever Aram would wake up from being comatose to report for duty to drive Aram around the city to sell drugs. In other words, Sonic had become Aram’s chauffeur.

Sonic drove around New Brunswick in his green Miata—an absurd contraption given Sonic’s expanding girth. Aram, riding shotgun, did his own share of dragging the chassis down to the pavement. The arrangement was that Sonic would drive, and act as Aram’s muscle when necessary. Aram did a lot of coke, and talked a lot of shit, so it *was* necessary. Plus, Aram was forbidden from legally being behind the wheel of a car—for the rest of his life. I’m not sure why, but I can make a few safe bets.

The arrangement worked out nicely between them, and together they made *a lot* of money. Sonic knocked out a few guys who owed Aram or were his would-be competitors. He drove Aram around with a consistency that let Aram expand his business. In return, Aram gave Sonic discounts on weight. *Pounds* of weed. Huge green pillows that seemed to have been born from the tiny trunk of that Miata. It was

truly a strange turn of events. We found ourselves with more weed than we knew what to do with—except, of course, we knew exactly what to do with it. Make Money.

Sonic's target customers were his ex-brothers at Delta Kappa. This was a wise move, because first, there were a lot of them. Second, they all imbibed, one way or another, and/or knew tons of people who did also. Third, it served as a nice little "Fuck you, look at me now. You're buying from me *bitch*."

Sonic never said it out loud. He didn't have to. That was the point. I imagine that to Sonic, that was almost as good, if not better than the cash—the humility that was now being shown when he showed up with product better than anyone else's, at prices that couldn't be beat. As far as the boys at Delta Kappa knew, it was all coming from him. They could only wonder how this scrappy ex-pledge had come to be their supplier. But in the end, it also didn't matter, because in the drug game, it's all about profits.

Sonic had the game on lock. The rest of us just opened it up further, making the hand-to-hand sales of eighths and quarters and sometimes ounces that Sonic didn't want to deal with. Sonic only dealt in quarter pounds and up. That meant he was getting *at least* a G per sale. Where the fuck was all this weed coming from though? Who was Aram connected to and how?

More inquiring minds would've been cautious to have the facts before cooperating. But we were only too happy to have won the lottery.

As for me, I wasn't doing as well as my friends. I was trying to balance my life as an artist, a boyfriend, a soon-to-be-father, and a full-time student. I was preparing to meet Alexander Viejos with a few canvases that I went from absolutely believing in—to now wanting to throw in the trash.

Every now and then I'd get a text on my Nokia, asking if I had anything. I always did, but it wasn't enough to make a dent in my savings. A couple of regulars from my art classes were my main clientele. But they were also the brokest bunch of good-for-nothings I'd ever met. These motherfuckers were always asking me to front them *grams* for crying out loud.

I understood exactly where they were coming from—but still, I was filled with disgust. I now knew what *I* looked like. We were in the same sinking boat—complaining about the price of paint and wondering if it was worth dumpster-diving for canvases.

An eighth here, a quarter there. I averaged about \$100 a week. It was nothing.

Things ramped up after Sonic knocked Aram out. That was around November. I'd just found out that Vita was pregnant, and there was a lot more than just weed moving in and out of the house by then. So much so that we almost forgot about the misadventures of Aram, the fat Russian-Jew who used to pass out on our floor.

But he wouldn't forget us.

I was looking for a way to get plugged in and tap into the magic that had made Sonic a thousand-aire, which wasn't enough to sit on forever, but it was far more than I could make at a part-time job.

"I just need 10 G's," I kept telling myself.

Why I decided on that number I'll never even know.

I'm Asian. I should've done the math.

A few days after Vita and I had dinner with my parents; I went and got myself a job. It was one of those ads you see every week in the classifieds, as if stamped there forever:

Telemarketing.

I got dressed in a suit and showed up early. Once I got there, I realized that I was already making a big mistake.

The job interview was so easy, it was embarrassing. "Do you speak English?" was the first question they asked me.

"Have you ever used a phone before?"

This was number two on their grandiose list of requirements.

I soon came to find out that most of the people in there were ex-cons. They were almost all invariably high when they came to work. They came from Newark, Elizabeth, and Irvington. I knew these guys, and by that, I mean that I was familiar with the way they spoke, the way they dressed. The type that hung around in front of our dry cleaner, bottled water in hand, one knee up, leaned against the graffitied wall of our store, looking as if all they were missing was a newspaper, that's how casual they were in wasting their afternoons.

After the rigorous interview, which included a literacy test to ensure that I would be able to read the teleprompter, I texted Vita and told her the good news. "I got the job!"

I added the exclamation mark there, sort of as a joke, but Vita was proud of me anyway.

I was outside the office smoking a cigarette when one of the other guys I'd been in the waiting room with walked up to me.

I looked up and saw a big Black guy with braids standing over me. He looked down at me with a smile to show he had come in peace.

"Yo, that was some bullshit," he said to me in a baritone voice. He shook his braids and grinned. He looked to be about 6'4, 250 pounds. I agreed.

"You get the job?" he asked, following up earnestly.

I felt nervous, wondering what he wanted.

"Yeah, I got it. Start tomorrow."

"Word," he said and exhaled from his own cigarette. A Kool.

I watched some pigeons pecking the ground a foot away from us and decided to head back to Louis Street.

"Good luck," I said and started to leave.

"Hold up, hold up," the dude said, shifting his weight from foot to foot, looking bashful.

I paused, wondering what this giant wanted from me.

"Y-y-y-ou p-p-play video games?" he asked, with a noticeable stutter. I would later find out his stutter came out whenever he got excited. I doubt anyone made fun of his speech impediment though. His size and general thuggish demeanor ensured that most people pretended he spoke just fine.

I didn't deny that I played video games, but I didn't claim to be good either.

"Oh, by the way, my name is Tre," he said, and held out his hand. We slapped hands in the way of the streets, and his hand made mine feel like a baby's.

Tre looked side to side conspiratorially. "I need s-s-some help," he said quietly.

"What's up?" I asked.

Tre shook his braids again and ducked down a little so no one could overhear our conversation. Then, confidentially he asked, "You ever play *Final Fantasy*?"

It's crazy how fast things can change.

By the end of 2002, our house on Louis Street was like a call center, each of us with our cellphones (or booster phones) chirping with secret codes for materials and weights desired, times to meet, etcetera.

Customers would come over, play video games, and whenever they felt like making the move, ask for the thing they came for—mostly weed. But we had mushrooms on occasion, and Ecstasy on weekends. We had a whole pharmacy of pills, too—Adderall was the most popular, but we had Xanax and Valium, too. We even had regular amounts of cocaine, courtesy of my new connect, the video game freak with the braids named Tre.

"If I can just get this Alexander Viejo guy to cosign me, I just might be able to sell some paintings," I tell my boys late one night, coked up out of my head.

"How much does a painting usually go for?" Dom asks between snuffles, not being funny, just totally ignorant. As I was.

"Shit, I don't know. Maybe if I can get on Sotheby's, like a million?" I guess.

"Wow, this coke is really something," Cheese chirps, brushing his teeth with a powdered finger. "Aram was a fucking scumbag, but you've got to hand it to him. He had the good shit."

"This is the last of it," Sonic frowns. "Consider that connect gone."

"Where can we get more of this stuff?" Cheese asks, itching for more.

"Try this next bag," I say, reaching into my pocket. "This one's mine."

They all start laughing but then stop when I produce a gram of rock. If we were a band, I'd been playing glockenspiel until now. This is the moment I pick up the electric guitar and suddenly show everyone I'm Hendrix.

I pop the plastic baggie open and let the rock clink on the plate-glass mirror, music to a cokehead's ears—an invitation for all.

Cheese begins cutting it up right away, with Dom not far behind him eagerly rolling up a dollar bill. Sonic sits still, eyeing me with appraisal, but with the blow in my system, I'm a statue. I look right back at him. Let's do business, my eyes say. I'm as hungry as you are.

"Coke is coke," Sonic grunts, assuming the coke is mid. He has a glint in his eye, but he knows he knocked his former connect out cold. "The frat boys will still buy it."

I take this as a yes, happy to see that Sonic is wondering where I got it from. I'm not trying to compete with him though; I'm just trying to make a faster buck. I'm tired of being broke. Plus, I've got a kid to feed!

(This is all said in my head in rhymes that don't rhyme, but I'm channeling Biggie Smalls here.)

The boys take turns doing lines. The conversation bubbles up again—coked-out chitter-chatter, and Tre's coke is praised like a little girl at a beauty pageant. They're gushing over the quality, but that could just be the coke talking.

Still, Sonic is our main supplier, and this must be acknowledged through some level of ass-kissing. The conversation turns back to him, which is to his liking.

"It's good to have you back, Sonic," Dom tells the big lug and shakes him like a puppy. Sonic smiles sheepishly, knowing exactly what Dom means. "I was worried you were becoming Aram's little bitch."

We all laugh, thinking back on how Sonic was at Aram's beck and call.

Sonic hawks a spitball of phlegm. "Fuck that, I ain't nobody's bitch."

Sonic starts saying something about some kid named Nick from New York, but no one's even listening. At the mention of Aram, we begin reminiscing over Aram as if he was a friend. He was like an odd character who drifted into our sitcom, and then was written out after a few episodes, and nothing more.

"I'll miss the way we used to step over his body and eat our breakfast as if he wasn't even there," I say nostalgically.

"Remember how he kept using our cupboards and mattresses as his personal hidey-holes?" Dom says with a laugh.

"Do you know how many times I found drugs hidden in my Lucky Charms?" Cheese exclaims.

"So, what happened with you guys?" Dom asks Sonic.

Sonic gets quiet and grins evilly.

"He got too comfortable, dawg," Sonic says, cracking his knuckles. "Started talking to me the wrong way."

"Come on, seriously," Dom insists. "No bullshitting. What happened? You didn't just knock him out for no reason."

Sonic won't say. Maybe it was an Asian joke gone wrong, or some remark about his unknown parentage. Sonic didn't "shine shoes anymore," as the line from *Goodfellas* goes. Maybe it was calculated. I wouldn't put anything past Sonic anymore.

Aram's knock-out was discussed in the neighborhood for about a week, but it solidified Sonic as that dude on Louis that you don't fuck with. And it only got worse from there, either because of the ego or the reputation—but fuck it, call it karma. Bad vibes started creeping in. Mysterious phone calls. Cars parked out front that drove off in a way that didn't feel reassuring.

There was a lot of stuff we didn't really know.

It was already weird enough that the guys who lived next-door thought Aram lived at *our* house, when we thought he lived at theirs.

I knew Aram wasn't a nuisance that would simply vanish. He was sloppy and he was dumb, but he had connections, and people with plugs like that, plus a total lack of any kind of schedule, are bound to pop up again in one way or another. They don't disappear; they wait in motel rooms with savage nomads and come outside when it's time to pay the rent.

"What am I going to do?" I ask Sonic.

Vita is pregnant, I tell him. I need to make money fast. My plan is to get \$10,000 and then get out, just enough to have a pillow. I've seen Sonic make that much in two weeks. I just need a month or two and then get out with my nose clean.

We're driving on the Garden State Parkway in Sonic's Miata.

He takes out an orange plastic vial.

Cancerous streetlights pulse like brain-scans over hushed baseball fields.

I had gotten Sonic to join me on a temp-job, going door to door canvassing houses for vinyl siding. Walking around in the winter air was brutal. Now the season's over. I made about \$600, which isn't bad. But also, ain't shit.

It had paid us both \$10 an hour. Commission if we were able to schedule a visit from one of the salesmen, which we never did.

According to Sonic, no one wants vinyl-siding. Everyone just wants drugs.

"If the FDA approves, then so do I," Sonic says on our way back to Rutgers. "I ain't trying to get busted over a pound of weed."

We cruise towards the exit for New Brunswick, a field of dead grass surrounded by concrete and metal bridges, frozen weeds growing at the foot of metal signs with the impossible U-Turns that only New Jersey has.

"All I have to do is make a phone call to Master Chief," Sonic says, mentioning one of the guys who plays at our X-Box tournaments. "He's got a crooked doctor who writes him fake scripts for OxyContin. I'm just letting you know because you're my boy."

The blunt burns down to a roach.

"You want any more of this?"

I take the roach and manage to milk out a few more puffs. We open the windows and light cigarettes.

"We're becoming part of the cancer," I say sadly.

"Nah dawg. This is the cure," Sonic retorts.

We're stoned, drifting through winter twilight on the Parkway.

"It's almost Christmas," Sonic says out of nowhere.

"Yeah," I murmur. Vita is only going to get more pregnant, not less. It feels like I'm trading my future for cold calls, like selling pieces of my dream to settle a tab.

At least it pays hourly.

I didn't last too long in the telemarketing game. By the end of 2002, I'd had as much as I could take.

I soon find out why it's always in the classifieds. There's always an opening, because unless you want your soul to die right there in the cubicle, mid-sentence in front of the teleprompter, you gotta get the fuck out of there.

I'm auto-dialing and raising money for the Firemen's Freedom Foundation, a charity for 9/11 which I find out later doesn't even exist. The calls roll from one to the next. Some people just wait for you to finish talking out of some sense of decency. They don't know that all I hear is the click—then the next call.

Old folks always have time to listen and talk. On my last day, I get an old man who asks me please not to hang up on him, just because he's so damned lonely. I listen to him talk about his dead wife and his

no-good son who never calls him. He talks for over an hour, and I just listen.

I wonder what ever happened to him. I wonder if he's dead now.

Feel like I should've gone to his funeral, just in case no one else would.

Chapter Fifteen

Everything You Used to Want Was Wrong

The gynecologist's office is still decorated with the remnants of Christmas. There's a plastic tree that they'll probably give another week, before boxing up and transitioning into a Valentine's Day theme.

The atmosphere smells the way all doctors' offices smell—sterile, neutral, slightly menacing.

Scents are no good for babies, Vita and I learn—along with a list of other seemingly normal things which are now off-limits. We're trying to learn them all.

Pictures of expecting couples are hung and framed in the waiting room. Men and women of different ethnic backgrounds, who apparently shop at the same department stores, look far from unprepared or stunned as they gaze down at the expecting mother's bulge, smiling at the baby to be.

All sorts of mom magazines with pregnant models ranging from famous to relatable are fanned out on the coffee table along with medical brochures. These are interspersed with furniture catalogs featuring the latest in stroller technology and plush cribs which carry price tags that literally make my mouth drop.

Vita lays on her back as the doctor spreads gel on her belly and projects Vita's uterus onto a screen. Appearing on the monitor is a disappointingly grainy and low-resolution black-and-white image.

Things are explained in plain English, but all I see is negative space, a quicksilver quality to what's definitively there as tissue and then darkness where our baby is floating like a granule of dust in the cosmos.

"Congratulations!" the doctor (whose name I forget) says with a warm smile. "We have a heartbeat!"

"Oh my God!" Vita exclaims, and to my surprise, is crying.

I look on as the doctor and Vita, both female, share this moment which I know I should also be a part of, but somehow, am not.

A heartbeat. That means it's alive.

That's good.

Of course, that's...that's what we want.

I stand at what feels like the distance of another room and wonder if the baby senses the vastness around it, if it can feel its mother, or even knows that it's alive.

Vita grips my hand tightly as I blank out. We're guided by the doctor through labels and expectations, as well as reassurances that everything is normal, but I can't see or even hear. I only catch the fact that it's five millimeters long.

I maintain a forced air of enthusiasm and care. Vita is relieved that the baby is okay. She's worried about her past as a chronic smoker.

"Do you have a gender preference?" Vita asks as I drive us back to campus. I meet her dark expectant eyes and suddenly think of a right

answer, instead of what I actually want. Do I care? I guess I do. But how would I even know what to choose?

“Girl, I guess,” I say, choosing the child that I think would make Vita happier. “That way she can look like you.”

“Really? I want a boy. I want to dress him up like a little gentleman. I think he’ll be so cute,” Vita says, beaming.

I escort Vita to the front door of the suite where she lives with Lynn and two other girls.

“I love you,” I tell her.

She puts her arms around my neck and kisses me, one hand holding the envelope with the ultrasound images inside.

I try to leave, but she doesn’t want me to. “Come in,” she says. “Why are you always in such a rush? I feel like I barely see you anymore.”

“I’ve got this painting that I’m trying to finish,” I stammer, knowing I should be here for her in this moment. Whatever that means. Sitting around and looking at the blurry dot together. Talking about baby names. Thinking about baby clothes in our minds.

To be honest, I have money to make and drugs to sell. I have drugs to do. I hate myself—I want that to be clear right now. But I’m fiending like a motherfucker. I need to get out of here.

“Oh, right,” Vita says, not hiding her disappointment. “The art show. It’s only a month away, right?”

I know what she’s thinking: Once he gets this out of the way, no more distractions. One more month.

She can wait. She’ll be there.

I haven’t even been painting. And it’s still the most important thing in my life.

Call me an oxymoron. Call me an OxyContin addict.

Vita tells me to text her later.

I go back to the parking lot and get in her Celica, which she has basically given to me since I've been going back and forth from my house to her suite every day. As soon as I get in the car, I take out a little baggie filled with a crushed 40 mg. pill, duck my head under the steering wheel, remove a rolled-up dollar bill from my pocket, and take a hit.

Yes...

If you ever want to know what Oxy feels like—and I don't suggest you think about it much, or even try it to find out the way I did—that's what it feels like in one word:

Yes.

I take my hit and now that I feel calm and satiated, almost call Vita and tell her that I've canceled my plans. I'm available. Let's look at the baby.

But I don't do that.

I just ask her what she's doing as I pull out of the parking lot. It's been fifteen minutes since we parted, and she tells me that she's in bed, looking at our baby—the blip that represents our future. A white dot the size of a pill.

I take the Parkway to Exit 145, and pull onto the exit for Main Street, East Orange, Brick Church Station. January's short daylight already has the avenue lit against sunset. The yellow glow of chicken shacks, the neon windows of liquor stores, and the tropical green from a Haitian market let me know where I am.

I pass by our dry-cleaner next to the vacant lot, but don't stop in to see my parents. I imagine they're in there as usual—my dad working

over the steam press, my mom at the sewing machine. A place they'll never get out of until they're too old to do anything else.

My brother will fulfill the Korean dream and become a big-time lawyer. He'll make enough money to get them out of the store so they can spend the rest of their lives playing golf and bragging to their friends about what a hotshot he is.

And about me, they'll keep silent. They'll make noises in their throats and remind whoever's next that it's their turn to hit the ball.

I stop at a red light in front of their store. The window's lit, but they're somewhere in the back. No one picks up clothes or drops off at this hour, so they're probably just doing their best to get everything out on time. My dad will use his pole to fish out a guy's clothes from the huge racks of plastic-wrapped garments, the Korean AM news station crackling in the background. A sweet, chemical smell of starch. The hum of my mom's sewing machine in the corner—rusty, trusty, and old.

The light turns green, and I tell Tre I'm almost at his house, on Rosemont Street, a few blocks away.

"Swing through, my nigga," Tre's baritone booms and we hang up.

Five minutes later, I get out of the car, parking it in his driveway so Vita's Celica doesn't get jacked. The neighborhood is full of duplexes, with one here and there barely standing as the victim of arson. Fire fraud, or something. Maybe a crackhead burned it down with their pipe. Who knows?

I head into the basement of Tre's mother's house. A quick little hallway past a laundry machine and a makeshift kitchen. I say what's up to Tre's half-brother, Montrel, who is, I think, over 30 years old and cognitively compromised, but cooks up the best chicken I've ever had in my life.

"What's your secret?" I asked him after he offered me a piece.

Montrel grinned at me, his lazy eye conveniently pointed at the can of Accent in his hand.

Tre told me later that Montrel “fucks with Asians,” which was to say that he liked me, maybe because he also liked kung-fu movies. The rest of this logic was not explained, except that Tre added that Montrel doesn’t share his chicken with anybody.

Tre is in his room, which is kind of a barebones square with concrete floors and walls. The only decoration in the room is a poster of *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles II: The Secret of the Ooze* (1991) with the four turtles looking down at a broken canister leaking green goo. The first time I came over to Tre’s house and spotted this odd decoration in what was otherwise a barren bedroom, I laughed out loud and asked Tre what the deal was. I thought there was some hidden meaning that my lack of Blackness or gang affiliation prevented me from understanding.

“You don’t fuck with *The Ooze*, nigga? That movie hard as fuck,” Tre answered with complete sincerity.

That was all there was to it.

In another world, in another body, Tre would’ve been a total nerd. He loved video games more than anything. He had multiple consoles, but PlayStation II was his favorite. He spent most afternoons and evenings on the edge of his bed, game controller in hand, with his friends seated on plastic-crates for chairs.

It took a couple invitations before I finally agreed to drive Tre home after work and hang out. His promise of weed and Hennessy was enough to give me a reason, but I really wanted to see if he was serious about the *Final Fantasy* thing.

He was.

Tre’s friends, gangbangers from the neighborhood, were *Madden* guys mostly. This was 2002, and if Tre’s associates knew that he was

geeking out over an RPG with magical princesses and some weird element called “Materia”, it could have serious consequences.

When I got there, he was almost at the end of the game but stuck on several side quests before the final battle with the story’s arch-nemesis Sephiroth.

I knew the game and its secrets, having obsessed over it myself during high school. I guided Tre through, and over the course of many shared blunts, bottles of Hennessy, the occasional duet over an Al Green song, we got to be friends. I even told him about the situation at 77 Louis Street, and he offered to get me anything I needed—from a stolen Audi to a submachine gun.

“Cuz you my *nigga*,” Tre said with an emphasis meant to show affection.

I went through a laundry list of things he could possibly get, and the only thing he admitted to not being able to get was meth, and the one thing he was *hesitant* to get was heroin. “My uncle a dope fiend to *this day*,” Tre admitted. “Trust me, you don’t want that.”

“How about coke?” I asked, just for fun, since we were spinning the wheels.

“Coke ain’t nothing,” Tre said. “If we talking weight, you gotta wait. But if it’s less than an ounce, I could get that shit for you *right now*.”

The cognac had us both talking reckless, so I didn’t think much of it. But when I asked him again, sober, he just asked me when and where. He didn’t seem to think much of it.

I enter the room and his man Lil C, who I’ve already met several times, is playing *Grand Theft Auto III* in full concentration mode.

“What’s up, C?” I say, giving a quick hand-slap to Tre’s friend, who takes his hand off the controller just long enough to welcome me. Lil C (who’s real name I don’t know and never ask) looks like a mini version

of Snoop Dogg, his long face sort of puppy-like with his braids pulled tight. Like Tre, he's wearing an XXL white tee shirt and dark-blue Chuck Taylor's. Both of them, I find out eventually, belong to a local set of Crips.

"Ay yo, Danny. I just got this shit, my nigga. You se-seen this shit yet?" Tre stutters and hoots excitedly. "Yo! Turn left, nigga! Nigga turn, turn!"

Lil C is navigating the streets and escaping the sirens wailing behind him.

"Yo! I'm trying, son! I need a better car! I can't turn in the motherfucking Astro!"

"Well, who told you to steal that piece of shit ride? Ay yo, Danny! This nigga going on mission, and he takes a motherfucking minivan!"

The two of them are fully engaged in the video games, and it's not that much different from the action of Louis Street, except that Tre has a sawed-off shotgun and pistols tucked under his bed.

We watch as Lil C makes his character jump out of the minivan to finally face the incoming squad of cop cars. He brandishes an automatic rifle.

"SAY HELLO TO MY LITTLE FRIEND!"

Two police cars explode and the cops who come out get riddled with bullets. More havoc ensues until finally his character is plowed over and killed by a squad car which then crashes into another car which then explodes as the scene begins to fade into a control menu.

"That's how you go out my nigga!" Tone shouts and snatches the controller from Lil C. "Now give me this shit, my nigga. Let me show y'all how this shit gets done!"

"Yo Tre, I can't stay long. I got class," I tell him.

Tre nods.

"You giving that shit back to me in a minute. Don't be raising my stars, nigga," Tre tells Lil C and leaves the room.

"Nigga, what you say?" Lil C mumbles to himself puffing on the roach. "Yo Danny, check this out. All weapons, full-armor, and my weekend ride, homie."

A tank materializes in the air and drops to the ground with a little bounce.

Lil C blasts off the cannon at any cops on the street horizon. It won't be long before the Feds come.

"What you've been up to, C?" I ask, just to make conversation so I'm not watching him play in silence. C is an affable character. A smooth card with the ladies, according to Tre. This usually provides plenty of stories each time I meet him.

"The man picked me up over the weekend," Lil C says in his soft-spoken demeanor. "They had me fucked, man. I couldn't wait to get out that bitch."

"What? You were in jail?" I ask, stunned.

Lil C proceeds to explain that he'd gotten picked up for not making his alimony. He was only 21 years old and he had three kids.

Tre returns to the room. In his hand, he has a brown paper sack with exactly one ounce of cocaine inside. It's a rock the size of a baseball that I'll take back to Louis Street and cut up to distribute to my boys. A thousand dollars in my pocket once it's all said and done.

I hand Tre his payment of \$1100. I have no idea what Tre's cut is, but I know he'll probably spend it on more video games.

"Yo, Tre. This guy says he was arrested for not paying alimony."

Tre shakes his head and makes a face. "Shiet, my nigga. Him and every other nigga

I know. That's how they get you. They pick you up, run your file, and see if they can't throw in you in the pen."

“That’s fucked up,” I reply.

Tre and Lil C seem unfazed, a fact of life accepted by them and everyone else they know.

I leave the house with promises to hang out next time, but there won’t be a next time.

Tre will get shot a couple weeks later while trying to protect his girlfriend from a stalker.

I won’t even know about it until months later. He just won’t pick up his phone.

I’m thinking about IKEA and baby cribs when I see ultra-bright headlights following me off my exit. I’m on Route 18, not far from campus. A black Lexus rides on my rear, pushing up behind me for no good reason at all. I switch to the right lane so they can go ahead and pass me. The black Lexus follows, keeping its high-beams steady on my rearview, trying to blind me.

I switch back to the middle lane. The black Lexus switches lanes behind me. I shift down to the speed limit and watch it slow down. It slows down with me, and rides at the same speed so that we’re neck and neck. The cars behind us are beeping furiously.

What the fuck is this guy doing?

I speed up and take off for the exit into the theater district downtown. Shaken, I drive around the metro station taking a few wrong turns to throw off the tail. I feel like I’m losing my mind.

Was that car even real? Am I losing my mind?

It's February 1st. Sonic's birthday. He's throwing a shindig, and I'm supposed to help with party supplies.

I call Tre, but there's no answer. Multiple texts. Nothing.

I even drive up to the front of his house, but I don't have the courage to ring the bell. His mom or stepdad would answer, and I've never been introduced.

I linger in Vita's Celica, but some dudes at the end of the block stare with a hostility that makes it clear I'm either going to drive off now or walk my ass to the bus stop—without Vita's car.

I speed back to Rutgers, worried and confused.

It's eight o'clock, and the pregame is on.

On the first floor, the energy is palpable. Eminem and 50 Cent are going back and forth on *'Till I Collapse*. The kegs have arrived, as has the ice luge for shots of Jägermeister, all set up in the basement. I sniff some more Oxy before I enter the house. Not because I can't do it inside, but it's becoming a growing beast inside me, something I have to do before I basically do *anything*.

I sit in the driveway for a moment and hear voices calling to each other with merriment and laughter. Beer pong happens on any given day of the week, but on nights like these when both floors combine to throw a party, the whole house forms like Voltron to become one giant machine of debauchery. The scent of cologne is omnipresent; the sound of toilets flushing like a chorus in our drinking song.

I've already told Vita that I was going to sleep at her place tonight. I've been M.I.A. according to her. Not good, considering that she's now in her tenth week.

What the fuck am I doing? I need help.

It's Sonic's birthday, I tell her lamely. I'm just going to help him blow out some candles and dip out early.

When did it become so easy for me to lie to her?

On the second floor a half-hearted attempt to clean up the house makes immediate surface space available for setting down drinks. Vinnie, the half German Shepherd and Pitbull mix who belongs to no one, greets me at the door by practically knocking me over. He licks my face and trails after me.

Dom and Cheese are shooting a game of pool in the living room. Rich Boy Chris, one of the Delta Kappa boys from downstairs, is walking around looking like a muscular crab. He's a good-looking kid, very well-bred I guess you could say. I've never described anyone that I've ever known as "well-bred", but for Chris it just fits. Something about his blue-gray eyes and short blonde hair makes him look like a born white-collar criminal, but that's only because I know him. He's been doing cycles of steroids with Sonic recently, and it's been making them both increasingly obtuse and difficult to fit through doors.

I catch the cue ball as it flies off the table and give a make-believe toss before handing it back to Dom. "How's it?" he asks me with a grin.

I know what he wants. "Where's the coke?" but he just waits for me to settle in.

I avoid any direct questions and head straight to my room. My boys are going to be the first ones to find out that there's no coke tonight, or at least not as much as they'd hoped. I still have a few bags leftover from the pick-up a couple weeks ago.

I'll give those to Chris, who I know will be willing to pay \$200 a gram, the crazy fuck. I'll give one to Sonic since it's his birthday. Everyone else is going to be pissed.

I shut the door and break down my last 40 mg. pill under a dollar bill, cut two lines of OxyContin with my Rutgers I.D. card and sniff the powder with the same dollar. Tonight is the last night of getting high, and then it's a new life, I say to myself.

Maybe Tre isn't picking up because he knows that I need to focus.

How would he know that? I'd never even mentioned that Vita was pregnant.

Regardless, I tell myself whatever works in the moment. I'm going to start 2003 clean, I tell myself. Going cold turkey. Going to be the best dad in the world.

I've already fucked up that New Year's Resolution. But there's still Chinese New Year's right around the corner!

These noble thoughts melt into warm goo as I submerge myself into a sea of tranquility.

A beautiful baby to come.

I'm going to be a dad. Young and unprepared maybe, but in love and happy.

How hard can it be?

I'll propose to Vita before the baby is born. I'll make millions of dollars by selling my art.

I'll be the new voice in art and not just being referred to as some "Asian sensation."

I'm going to be so good that my race won't even be an issue.

I'll simply be known as "the next great American artist."

Living the American Dream.

Suddenly, there's a commotion out in the living room. Vinnie is barking an alarm. I open my door and see Sonic standing next to the billiard table with blood on his face and his shirt off despite the subzero temperature outside.

The steroids and blood make him look like some kid's attempt at drawing a Marvel character with a blunt crayon at IHOP.

"I was about to murder those motherfuckers!" Sonic roars and pounds the drywall like lightning beside the dartboard.

There is now a sun for all the other tiny holes in the wall to orbit.

Vinnie yips in concern, jumping up to sniff the blood on Sonic's face.

"Calm down, bro. Tell us what happened," Dom leads with calm, acting as the voice of reason.

All of us gather by the pool table as Vinnie goes back and forth between Sonic, Chris, Dom, Cheese, and me sniffing our hands, licking our fingers, clearly concerned at the scent of violence.

"There were these three guys in La-La's Pizza giving me bad vibes. I could feel them watching me. I told them to quit staring at my cock."

"No way, you said that?" we respond, laughing.

Sonic brightens up and forgets he's still bleeding. His eyes twinkle with the joy of a sadist.

"Then they slapped the pizza box out of my hands."

"Oh shit," we murmur, visualizing the tragedy of a La-La's slice on the grungy floor.

"So, what'd you do?" Chris asks.

"I told them to see me outside and I whooped their asses!" shouts Sonic.

Vinnie barks in approval, his wagging tail knocking over someone's half-finished beer can.

"You sure it wasn't the other way around? You look like you got hit by a truck," Cheese snickers.

"Fuck you. I could've murdered them if the cops didn't show up!"

"Did you know who they were?" Dom interrogates.

"Never seen them before," Sonic grumbles and stomps off to the kitchen to make an ice pack with Vinnie padding along behind him.

"You get any more blow?" Chris asks me, his attention quickly refocusing to more pressing matters.

"I got a few bags," I tell him quietly.

"What do you mean? Didn't you pick up?" Chris asks me, with an arched eyebrow.

I shake my head.

"Something happened. I got three grams left. They're yours if you want them," I say, about to name my price. I quickly change my mind to get what I really want. "But I'm only trading them for Oxy."

"I got you," Chris nods and lights a cigarette as we resume a more casual posture around the billiard table. "My girlfriend is coming over tonight with her friends. I promised I'd have something for them."

"Hey Chrissie, didn't you say her dad was a cop?" Dom asks, just to bust Chris's balls, as opposed to having a sense of real concern.

"New Brunswick police captain," Chris shrugs. "But she lives with her mom in Tom's River. She can't stand her old man. Says he's a fucking asshole."

"Daddy issues," Cheese analyzes. "If you break her heart, you'll get us all arrested."

I take out my black box and unlock it to take out the rest of the coke I have left. I look at the rubber-banded stacks of cash. It feels good to know that this crazy game is coming to an end, but suddenly that money seems very finite. I wonder how long it'll last.

Sonic bursts in a minute later. I should've locked the door.

He points a shiny revolver at my head. For a split second, I see the top of my brain sitting on a pile of money.

"Where the fuck did you get that?" I nervously laugh and shut my black box as he grins like an alligator. "It's not loaded, is it?"

Sonic hands me the piece. I hold the snub-nose revolver aloft, feel the heft, push the hammer up and hand it back to him.

"I'm not keeping it loaded," Sonic explains, as if that makes it perfectly okay. He aims at the wall and pulls the trigger.

The hammer flies with a click. The wheel-chamber spins.

Sonic looks like what he is—a prime contender for the gladiator events which occur just about every weekend on Easton Avenue. Juiceheads will get into street-brawls over literally anything. Winner gets nothing.

“You really think Aram’s going to try to do something?”

“The past is the past, dawg,” Sonic shrugs and taps the firearm in his jeans. “In case he’s trying to make a comeback, I got something for him.”

“So, what, you’re going to put a hole in him?” I ask in shock.

“I’m just going to let him know, I ain’t the one.”

“Jesus,” is all I can say.

“Someone’s out to get me. I didn’t want to say it out loud and get everyone worried,” Sonic confides quietly, nodding his head toward the living room, indicating the rest of our friends, “but that shit in La-La’s was a set-up. Don’t ask me how I know.”

“You sure you’re not getting paranoid?” I ask.

“I’d rather be tried by twelve than carried by six,” Sonic says and with practiced ease, quickdraws the revolver from the waistband of his jeans and squeezes the trigger at the mirror.

He tucks the firearm back under his jersey and leaves the room.

Chris comes in next and closes the door behind him, locking it. He licks an orange 40 mg. pill of Oxycontin and wipes it on a tissue. The orange time-seal smudges off leaving the pill white underneath.

“Damn bro, what’s happening?” I wonder out loud, my mind roaming from one tragedy to the next. “Even Master Chief ran out of pills.”

“I know,” Chris murmurs with eyes that rest on the blue light from my computer, looking at nothing.

“You’re going to have to go to war over these once you’re out there,” I tell Chris as he reaches his hand out for the twist-tied bags of coke. “What a fucking time to be dry.”

I hand the grams to Rich Boy Chris and watch as he opens one up and prepares to mix the coke with the Oxy.

I shouldn’t do anymore, I tell myself. I need to go back to Vita’s ASAP.

But the thought that this is supposed to be my last night of ever getting high makes me reconsider.

One more line won’t hurt. I’ve already done three.

The dollar goes right to my nose.

I lay on the bed and close my eyes and feel myself floating like a leaf in a black stream. I’m in a forest with autumn leaves falling gently from the trees.

The drip is like an army of snails making their passage of exodus across sidewalks on rainy days. Orange snails crawling all over the street, getting crushed underfoot and smashed onto the pavement under the wheels of our Huffy bikes and the heels of our Nikes.

Somewhere in the past I see the rising sun outside the window. I hear someone brushing the snow off their car in the stillness of blueberry dawn, that beautiful blue light that one can only see in winter at first light.

When the whole world is aglow with it, illuminated by this distant light on our cold planet, from a star slowly dying. Brushing the snow off your windshield, the hot coffee, creamy and sugary, still in your stomach, the hot breakfast now gone, the memory of it that keeps you warm.

“How’s the new sound system?” I ask, referring to the work Chris is having done to his new M3. His parents gave him a brand-new BMW

as a present for getting into business school, but even that wasn't enough for Chris. The speakers had to blow your ears out.

"Taking forever," Chris groans. "But once it all gets done, it's going to be sick."

I hear Chris ramble on about installing screens in the back of the head rests, but I'm so high I can barely pay attention.

He uses the word "sick" as an adjective over and over as I nod off with my eyes half-closed saying, "Dope...dope..."

There's a knock on the door. Chris hides the rolled-up dollar in his pocket as I call out from the bed, "Who is it?"

"It's me, Sonic."

"Alright."

I get up and open the door.

"What're you two homos doing here in the dark, eh? I'm not interrupting anything, am I? Cut me a line, Chris."

"We just blew down some Twin Towers," Chris says, but makes no move to cut Sonic a line of anything.

"Hey dawg, respect the Towers."

"Whatever," Chris says and takes a deep pull off his cigarette.

As high as I am, I'm able to easily ignore the tension that otherwise would feel thick enough to spread on a bagel. The two of them have been at it for a while now. I guess because Chris was able to go through the same process of hazing and everything else that Sonic did and managed to stay in school, whereas Sonic, well.

Anyway.

"Yo Danny, let me get the blow. I'm trying to get fucked up tonight."

"Ah shit. Chris took the last of it," I say, remembering it's Sonic's birthday.

“Chris, you can’t just keep that all for yourself. Let me and Dom get one. You keep one, and then your girlfriend and her friends get one. That’s three grams.”

“I’ll cut you a few lines, but I need these for tonight. I already promised my girl a bag for her and her friends.”

“Yo Chrissie. Girls are here. What’s going on?” Dom pops in, his eyes comically peering from side to side.

“Chris is acting like a little bitch.”

Chris bolts up from his chair and meets Sonic chin to chin. They’re about a half-second from throwing down.

“Calm down!” Dom yells as he and I intervene to split them apart. “Let’s just take it easy.”

It’s not so simple pulling either of them away. The two juiced-up lugs are beyond physical control.

“Chrissie, let me and Sonic hold one bag,” Dom tries reasoning. “We’re probably going to be bugging you all night for lines anyway.”

“I already promised Cassie that I’d give her some. If you guys want to split bags with her goofy-ass friends, go ahead.”

“Fuck this!” Sonic barks, his eyes glittering and hard like black diamonds. “I hook you up all day, every day. This is how you repay me.”

“Take it easy,” Dom soothes, massaging Sonic’s shoulders. “Don’t go out there pissed. Let’s not scare off the ladies.”

“Sonic, just chill,” I say, throwing in my half-a-cent. “You can still have a good time without drugs.”

Sonic looks at me like I’m crazy. I’m so high I could probably levitate if I concentrated hard enough.

Dom pushes Sonic out, who leaves without another word, his chains jangling all the way to his room.

"You guys are raging," Dom lectures sternly. "Cut out the steroids, fellas."

With that, he leaves the room shaking his head.

"Fuck Sonic. Thinks he's Tony Montana or something," Chris grumbles, sitting back down with a huff. "If he wants to fight me, I'll beat his ass right now."

There's another knock on the door. It's Cassie with hair like hon-eyed-snow and her friends Dee-Dee and Vanessa with hair like brown Fusilli.

"You guys going to be jerking each other off all night, or what?" Dee-Dee greets us with her Staten Island accent.

"Hey baby," Cassie purrs sweetly.

"Hey babe. We're coming right out. Just give us a minute."

The three girls leave, and we hear Dom in the living room loudly making overtures.

Chris takes the rolled-up dollar and puts it behind his ear, clears his nostrils, and hawks a thick coke-loogy. We do more lines, and do more lines, and then decide it's time to go outside.

We walk into the living room like some bizarre version of *The Bachelor*. The girls have taken off their coats and are sitting on the couch. They're Italian chicks with tight baby-tees that emphasize their Roman hills.

As everyone starts pregaming, I start texting Vita. "Just have to take care of a few things," I type.

It's not even 10PM yet. I'll leave in an hour, I tell myself.

An hour later, I go to puke off the veranda.

The liquid from my guts flows without any pain or feeling.

I can't even feel the air. I look at the night stars. Everything is clear and perfect.

Suddenly there's a crash and the sounds of girls screaming coming from inside. I run into the house and find Chris in the kitchen squared-up against Sonic.

Sonic reaches back and smashes his knuckles into Chris's jawbone, who stumbles backwards and falls, but is right back on his feet for another round.

"Stop it!" the girls are crying.

Most of the male guests, friends and randoms, are cheering it on like *Fight Club*.

The two clashing monsters have become unmanageable and beyond the help of a non-steroid abusing citizenry.

Sonic swings at Chris, misses, and gets hit with a counter right cross which sends him back. Sonic gets low like his old varsity wrestling days and attempts to spear.

"Oh my god! Stop it!"

Chris catches him and pushes back. The two of them slam into the refrigerator. Vinnie comes springing up the backstairs from the first floor and starts barking at the two wrestlers with his claws scrabbling on the tile. The dudes from the first floor come running up next.

"Make them stop!" cries Cassie.

"You guys are crazy!" Dee-Dee screams.

Rich Boy Chris and Sonic go shot for shot in the face. Their heads seem like bloodied cabbage.

"Let them settle it!" Rob from the first-floor orders as the Delta Kappa boys hold the rest of us back. "They have to let the bad blood out."

Chris's eye is red from a straight shot. Sonic's nose is bleeding.

Chris clocks Sonic in the temple, and Sonic's knees give out. He tries to get up but fails.

"That's enough. Chris wins."

“Alright, now peace up guys. It’s over.”

Chris and Sonic slap hands and apologize, laughing it off. They disappear into Sonic’s room, presumably to share the cocaine that they were fighting over.

The rest of the shindig is proper.

No one is arrested and no one dies.

Girls and guys fill all livable space and continue to lose track of their red cups. Beer pong tournaments run all night.

Every room is open and full of heads smoking, passing gravity bong and blunts, everyone in the basement is dancing and getting liquor poured down their throats.

I should tell Vita that I’m on my way, but I just did a few more lines.

Sonic and I freestyle in the room, so high we not only think we can rap, but we’re also already in the talks of making an album.

Girls are dancing on the billiard table. Al Pacino as Tony Montana watches with a smirk of contempt, but a part of me believes that he likes what he sees, even with a bullet in his shoulder and phone calls to make.

Then there comes the hour when incidents involving vomit happen more frequently, and people innately know when it’s time to leave, which is right around now.

The night almost ends smoothly until Sonic starts to harangue Chris for a rematch.

Everyone’s sullen and in their separate corners now.

Dom’s trying to do clean up, God knows why.

I suppose the answer is because he sniffed more coke like the rest of us and can’t sleep, but anyway it’ll take more than a roll of paper towel and a bottle of Windex to clean this shit.

All our guests, those who we invited and the many more who just showed up, are gone.

I was supposed to have left hours ago. I need to preserve the illusion that I'm ready to be a father. I just needed to go out with a bang. I'm going to be a good father.

I look at my phone.

Dammit. Vita.

HELLO??? WHERE ARE YOU???

I look at myself in the mirror. I'm not even sure what I see. The bathroom smells like shit. The toilet is clogged. Those wet *Maxim* magazines could probably use some straightening up, but who knows how many people pissed on them?

The kitchen is almost beyond redemption. There's a mop bucket in the corner with flies zigging around an odor of urine.

As if on cue, Vinnie comes and nuzzles our hands and then pisses like a racehorse.

"We're out of control. I can't do this anymore," Dom says, calling it quits.

He peels off his dishwashing gloves in disgust.

I look at Dom as he's speaking, and for some reason attempt to take the dish-gloves away from him though I have no intention of cleaning.

"I'm not going down with this ship," Dom grimaces. "Tonight just opened my eyes. Those two idiots, fighting in our kitchen over a bag of coke."

"You know it's about more than that. They had bad blood," I say seriously.

"You guys are losing it. It's not fun and games anymore. The coke, the steroids, and now Oxy? What's next? Are you guys going to start spiking your veins? Watch and see what happens if you keep sniffing that shit. All of you!"

Just then, a door opens, and we hear Sonic shout, “Fuck you guys for talking about me behind my back. You pussies. Come and say it to my face!”

The door slams shut. Dom and I look at each other.

“I’m not a snitch,” I murmur hesitantly, “but you shouldn’t piss him off. He has a gun.”

“A gun?” Dom hisses at me in disbelief. “What is he, 50 Cent now? Forget it. I don’t care anymore. I’m done.”

“I think someone’s after him,” I mumble, glancing at Sonic’s closed door.

Dom laughs cynically, shakes his head, and stands up. He runs his hands through his hair and rubs his eyes, looking suddenly very old. He shakes his head.

“It could be Aram coming back for revenge,” I explain, watching Dom walk towards the veranda.

Dom gestures for me to look outside.

We stand on the veranda looking at the street below.

Without a word, we check for undercover cop cars, or vans, or any kind of vehicle that looks suspicious. I squint my eyes and search for a black Lexus, but I don’t see one.

I follow Dom back inside as he slowly exhales cigarette smoke.

He stands at the entertainment unit for a moment and then puts out his cigarette.

The wind stabs you like a knife. I remember that line from a story by William S. Burroughs. *The “Priest” They Called Him*. I think it was about a junky, but I can’t remember it now. I walk through the

late-night gloom up French Street and down the hill on Suydam. The scene transitions from college slum to Mexican barrio. By the time the sun rises, I'll be on campus.

It's freezing, but I don't feel anything. I'm too fucked up. I wonder if she'll even answer the door. I push buttons on my Nokia to let her know that I'm coming.

The freshman campus is blanketed in white as I pass by the soccer field that my dorm window used to overlook. The dorm where we first met stands in the bluish-gray night, illuminated by a reflection of celestial light caused by the snow. The sky has begun to clear up and stars twinkle from behind the clouds. Somewhere in this winter scene is the *sakura*, our smoking tree. I wish we were still here. I'd always wanted to speed things up, to skip this stage and get to that place where we could have the money and the freedom to make our own calls. It only dawns on me that, contrary to what we thought, we didn't beat the system; we were simply living out the consequences of our mistakes.

I knock on the door once, and it opens. She's been up, waiting for me.

"Be quiet," Vita tells me as she lets me in. "Everyone's sleeping."

She's wearing a shimmering silk bathrobe that captures the lunar glow. She softly shuts the door. I take off my snowy shoes and hang my coat. I'm shivering.

"Are you crazy? It's freezing outside," she says, and gives me a look.

"I'm sorry," I start apologizing, but she just holds her finger to her lips and leads me into her room. Red numbers glow 5:34 AM. I grab a chair at her desk and face it towards her.

"What would you say if I took some time off from school?" she says, her voice somewhat distant.

"Well, you kind of have to," I say slowly, unsure what she means.

“No, I mean like tomorrow. This weekend. I’m thinking about going home.”

My blood freezes. *What’s going on?*

“And...not coming back?”

“What’s the point? I’m pregnant. I’m just going to end up flunking anyway. Why should I suffer and try to study when I don’t even care?”

I stand up now and walk toward the window. I check to see who’s out there, who might be listening, an instinct I’ve developed out of paranoia. I feel ashamed and shut the blinds so that we’re wrapped in steely darkness.

“I know I haven’t been the greatest boyfriend. But I’m going to be here for you.”

“Danny, don’t promise me something you can’t deliver,” Vita says flatly, and sits up. Her eyes look right at me, burning with an emotion I’ve never seen before. She’s pissed. “Look inside your heart and be honest. That’s all I ask. If you want to be with us, then be with us. I want to be with you, but only if you want it, too. I don’t want us to hold you back from whatever it is out there that keeps making you check your watch and look out the window. I would hate to be the reason you felt like you didn’t make it, because we were holding you back from doing the work that you needed to be doing.”

“Vita, you’re my muse.”

“I used to be.”

Ouch.

“Vita, there’s so much going on right now. I want to explain. I just can’t right now. But it’ll be fine. I just need a little time. Don’t worry.”

“Talk to me, Danny. This is what couples do. When two people say they love each other, they tell each other the truth. No matter what.”

I can’t say it. I know I should tell her that I didn’t realize it before, but I should probably be in rehab.

"What's happening to us?" asks Vita out loud, rhetorically, as if there's no answer.

I want to say something reassuring and definitive, but I've got nothing. I tell her I'm going to the bathroom and then I stand there for a while, just looking at myself in the mirror, wondering if I should just tell her the truth. My face is a gaunt, guilty image in the mirror. I look like shit under the fluorescent lights.

When I come out of the bathroom, I see Vita sitting up in bed, holding my phone. I stop cold. The screen is lit up.

"Seventeen unread messages," she says, partly as a declaration of fact, partly as an accusation. All of it tinged with a sense of betrayal. "Ten are from someone named Pete, and one from someone named Jolene. Do you want me to read it to you?"

"Can I have my phone back?" I ask hoarsely.

She reads:

"Can you stop by later? I need you to look at something for me.' Oh and look, there's a little heart at the end," Vita adds and flings the cellphone at me.

She doesn't need to curse at me. I already hear it in my head.

You piece of shit.

"Who is she?" she asks as I quietly pick up my Nokia and put it in my pocket.

"Who?" I ask dumbly, stalling for time, my mind racing for a reason.

"Jolene. You know, the girl you got a message from. Is she the one from art class?"

"Yeah."

"And she's the one whose show we're going to see at the gallery?"

"Yeah."

"I don't want to go."

“What?”

“I’m not going. You can go have your fun, sell your art, get famous, whatever.”

“Babe, it’s not like that. She has a boyfriend. He’s a rapper. He’d shoot me if I tried anything.”

“So, you’ve thought about it.”

“No, it was a joke. Look, I know I’ve been busy. I’ve been going through a slump. It’s like the art, the energy, it just isn’t there. And I finally realized that it’s because I’m painting for a motive now, a purpose, which dilutes the purity and messes up the process—”

“Danny, let’s face it. On the list of all the important things you should be caring about right now, where am I? Where is the baby? Are we number one? Clearly not. Number two? Doubt it. Are we even in your Top Five?”

“Why are you talking like this? Who’s putting this in your head?”

“Communication is more than words. You of all people should understand that.”

“I just want to be the best, that’s all. Do you want me to quit? Should I just skip the show? It’s not a big deal. It’s not even my show!”

“No, because then you’ll resent me for making you quit. I want you to go and wow them. I want you to make connections and become the best artist that you can be. I want you to be happy. You have this great vision for your life, Bri. I just don’t know if I’m in it. When you see yourself traveling the world, meeting famous artists, and doing all of the things you’ve always dreamt about, am I there with you?”

“Of course.”

“Do you even see that far ahead?”

“Vita, we’re nineteen years old. What do you want me to say?”

"We can't be kids anymore. We're going to have a baby. A child. Don't you understand that? I need a real man. I need someone who's going to be there for us. Is that too much to ask?"

"I'm here for you. I'm here now."

"No, you're not. I just told you that I'm leaving, and you don't even care."

"I care. I'm going to visit you every weekend!"

"Yeah right. You can barely get yourself here to see me and it's a ten-minute drive from that drug house you live in."

"Do you want to get a place together? Should we move in? I'm sick of that place. Babe, tell me what you want."

"I want you to be happy."

"What is this? Why are you playing all these mind games?"

"You know, there was a time I used to look at you and know exactly what you were thinking or how you were feeling, just by the way you'd be laying down. Now I look at you and I can't even tell if you're in there. You're somewhere else, distant, and wherever it is, it's clear I'm not invited. I have no idea what's going on inside that head of yours. It's all a big secret. And I'm sure there's a reason. There's always a reason."

"You're way off," I deny, shaking my head, but I have the look of someone who's been caught stealing.

"Am I? Who are you anyway, Danny? Hm? You just come in and bust into my life, make me fall in love with you, and then you move on? Is that what I was supposed to expect? I left a very nurturing and safe relationship for you. I'm not blaming you for that, but it's true. You need to hear this. I broke that man's heart. He told me he wanted to kill himself. Do you know what it's like to listen to something like that and know it's your fault?"

“I’m not blaming you. It wouldn’t have worked anyway, and I know that. But he was there for me, and he loved me, and he wanted to be with me, and he still checks in on me to see if I’m okay after everything that happened. He still loves me. But I don’t love him. For some reason, I love you. I love you for the way you look at me, and for the way you make me laugh, for your kindness and warm heart. But now I don’t even know who you are. So just go out and chase your dreams.”

“What do you want from me, Vita? I told you this was how it’s going to be until I get a buzz going. But you’re right, I want to be famous, and maybe it’s just my own ego or vanity that makes me think I even have a shot, but every time I paint something, I feel closer to touching my destiny. Do you know what that is, Vita? It’s *transcendence*. I don’t want my life to mean nothing. I don’t want all of this to just fade away. I want to be remembered. I want to show my parents that their sacrifice wasn’t wasted—”

“You know what I want, Danny? I don’t care if people to remember my name years from now. I just want my daddy to remember who I am, *now*. If I could, I’d invent a cure for dementia so that I could bring back every single day that we’ve lost since then. But that’ll never happen. You see, Danny? This will never happen again either. You and me, in this moment. It seems like nothing now because you’re so sure that there’ll be a tomorrow. But you don’t know when those tomorrows will end. You won’t know until you learn exactly how little control you really have. Time is something you don’t get back.”

Chapter Sixteen

Basquiat

The streets are sealed with black ice like the slick spit of a demon folding up this Valentine's Day's card. I'm in a gallery on Bowery Street watching Alexander Viejo stroke his goatee. I pray that he doesn't notice how shaky my hands are, or the fact that I'm sweating all over the film. It's like all the pores in my palms have opened and someone turned a spigot.

"A lot of graffiti," Alexander notes with a slight rise in his voice that makes me unsure if he's impressed or disappointed with my portfolio.

"Yeah, I started with spray cans before I ever held a brush," I explain. "In this next slide you'll notice a satirical take on North Korean propaganda mixed with the *United We Stand* motif."

Alexander Viejo is wearing leather pants, a Valentine red Versace sweater, looking bored and handsome with his hair pulled back in a ponytail all gleaming.

It's weird meeting a celebrity and terrifying to try to impress one. It's like he stepped out of one of the magazines he's been featured in, like *Interview* and *Vogue*, and ended up in front of me.

I'm wearing an Oxford shirt underneath my best black hoodie, black Timberland boots, and jeans. I don't know what "semi-formal" means.

"I want to show you one more picture. Do you have a second? It's a portrait of my girlfriend. We're going to get married. I haven't proposed yet, but just between you and me," I press on and take out my last slide. "This is something that I drew last year."

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This wins me a few more seconds with Alexander Viejo, because for some reason people always want to see pictures of other people's kids, family members, or significant others.

"She's beautiful," Alexander Viejo says and clicks his tongue after holding the slide up to the lights for a few seconds, but he doesn't mention anything about the technique or color executed in the portrait. I take what I can.

"Thanks," I say, and then wonder if it's weird to thank him in this situation. He's probably talking about her, not the picture.

"I'm trying to get into fashion or design," I fumble forward. "Maybe I'll even feature my work in a gallery one day, like this one."

Where is Jolene when I need her? She's supposed to appear at this exact moment and help me be memorable and charming. And where the fuck is Sonic with the phone call that'll make these cold sweats go away?

I just need Alexander Viejo to give me the nod and introduce me to someone who has the power to take me from being an anonymous art student to the higher echelons of the game.

There's a sick sensation of insect legs crawling all over my clammy flesh as Alexander Viejo, embodying all my last hopes, saunters away.

“It sounds foolish now, but I really thought that if I did graffiti, that as long people saw it, that that would be enough,” I say distantly to an old socialite who happens to be nearby. “I didn’t think about money or fame. I had a little plastic card that had my name and the university’s name on it that I could use to get food in the dining hall. I didn’t have any concerns.”

Everyone is talking, meeting, greeting, and getting to know each other. This is my version of purgatory. I make a run for the bathroom. I feel like I’m going to shit myself. I spot Jolene who waves at me. She’s amid gallery owners, fellow artists, and clients, having her moment. I’m about to splatter my jeans.

I make it to the bathroom stall right on time. There’s no shit because by this time, there’s nothing left to shit. It’s just liquid from my body. Hateful liquid, hating me for all the things I’ve done. It’s been a week since I did my last Oxy, and since then, it’s been a carnival ride into The Inferno.

This is it, I said.

This will be my last one. I just need a little bit to end the chills. Help me recompose myself to make the rest of this night happen. Sonic will call any minute now. He came to Manhattan with me for the show. Not to support my artwork, necessarily, but to meet up with a guy named Nick from New York. One of Aram’s old connects.

“This time it’ll be different,” Sonic told me.

“This time I’m done for real,” I replied.

“Master Chief says he’s working on something, but we can’t sit around and wait, dawg. He’s already going to the Bricks and shooting dope in his vein. I ain’t going out like that, dawg.”

“What if this guy is bullshitting?” I wonder about Nick from New York.

Sonic didn't answer. He said he would call once he made the deal. That was two hours ago. I check my phone. No missed calls from Sonic. No text from either. But there's one from Vita.

Call me.

I pull my pants off and flush the toilet but stay in the bathroom stall. I dial Vita. She hasn't answered my calls or called me since that night. She picks up on the third ring.

"Babe?" she answers.

She called me "Babe." Does this mean we're getting back together?

But her voice sounds weak. Something's wrong.

"Is everything okay?" I ask, the shock curing all feelings of withdrawal.

"Can you come over?" she asks. "I need you. Right now."

"Vita, I'm at the show. What's going on?"

"I just need you to come over," she says. "Please."

"Okay, I'll be right there," I tell her and hang up.

I wash my hands and splash water on my face.

God, I look like shit.

When I exit the bathroom, I bump into Jolene, who is just about to be whisked away by a crowd of people, including Alexander Viejo.

"Danny, I've been looking everywhere for you," Jolene says. "Come! We're all going to grab sushi and sake."

"I can't," I begin to say.

"Danny, let's go," Alexander Viejo says and smiles.

Fuck, he knows my name. What do I do?

He jerks his head in the direction they're all heading. I don't know how to say no.

"I'll be there soon," I say.

I swallow hard and text Vita: *On my way.*

I'll just sit for fifteen minutes and make enough of an impression for him to remember me later. I'll congratulate Jolene on having a great night. I'll make sure that everyone notices that we're good friends. The train leaves from Penn Station every twenty minutes. If I time it right, I can get there right when it arrives.

"In the end, Basquiat let them get in his head," Viejo hisses later at the table. He's so uncomfortably close I can almost feel him licking my ear with a forked tongue. "They loved the Black Pride stuff, all that stuff about kings and Joe Lewis and Charlie Parker. But when he went after the white establishment, they loved him even more. A bunch of sick puppies!"

"Masochists, all of them. There was nothing he could do to them that didn't tickle them pink," Viejo's agent, an anorexic-looking lesbian with a pompadour adds. "But they would always consider him to be a 'Black artist.' He would never be one of them. It drove him to suicide, even if his death was technically an overdose."

Fuck, I gotta get out of here. Vita needs me. Sonic, where are you?

"It's a fallacy to think that only the good die young. We have an obsession with death, youth, and beauty because dying young means you get to be frozen in time," a British Black lady holding a hairless cat remarks. "There's no end to human vanity, that we would sacrifice a long life of love and happiness just to be pretty when we die."

That's right, lady. I just need Viejo to tell me that I'm a genius. Fuck it, tell me I'm pretty. Tell me I have a future. Please don't let this all be for nothing.

Viejo nods, his slicked black hair and pencil-thin mustache like a Disney animated Satan, multiple cups of sake dissolving that cool and aloof artist that he was, revealing eyes of a lunatic. "You are a goddess, my dear," he says gazing unabashedly at Jolene. "What a show you put

on tonight! May you be forever young, drinking with your pinky in the air.”

“You know what’s funny? I only do this at parties,” Jolene says and laughs charmingly. She sounds like someone else.

“Sake gets you a little high when you drink it hot,” says a white guy with a white mustache. “It’s really soothing, like tea. It goes straight for your head and leaves you in the clouds.”

I chug the sake in one long gulp which makes Jolene laugh. This is my contribution to the night.

I order another one and down that one, too. I almost feel better.

The waitress brings the bill and everyone starts to leave. How long was I here for? Way more than fifteen minutes. Jolene is saying farewell, but like the good friend that she is, lingers after the bill is paid by Alexander Viejo and keeps me company before an enchanted pumpkin comes to whisk her away.

We wait outside the sushi restaurant. Like a revolving door, some come out and others go back in. Taxicabs pick up and drop off party-goers on the forlornly lit streets. The traffic lights glow a hazy red, and then a bluish green.

“Have you ever seen Picasso’s *Blue Nude*?” I ask Jolene for no reason.

“Why?” Jolene replies, her eyes somewhere a block away. In less than an hour, she’ll be in a Brooklyn studio enjoying cheese, crackers, and chorizo. For now, she’s stuck with me, because of the time we shared, the laughs we had, the coffee.

“Don’t you think it looks like a vagina?”

“Umm...I’d have to look at it again.”

“Trust me. Her head is the clitoris.”

"Danny, are you okay?" Jolene asks, her warm brown eyes matching mine now. She knows something's up. I've never talked to her about drugs. But being from Paterson, she probably has a good idea.

"You were great tonight. I know you're going to kill out there," I tell her, knowing this is probably goodbye.

"I probably should've told you earlier, but I'm dropping out of school," Jolene says, thinking the same thing that I am, wrapping it up clean.

"Seems like everyone else I know is. At least you're doing it by choice."

Jolene gives a fake laugh and at the same time looks concerned.

"Inspiration is everywhere, Danny. You know, it's out there. It's in the street. It's in the people you meet. Did you get any numbers?"

"Yeah. Some lady gave me her card. She asked if I wanted to be a model."

"That's dope! Aren't you glad you came?"

I think about Vita. "I need to go, Jolene. Thanks for inviting me. Really."

"Danny, wait. Just one piece of advice. I mean, if it's okay. Shit, that sounds wack. I'm not trying to act like I know something..." Jolene stammers with uncharacteristic awkwardness. She just made the old Freudian slip of saying what we both know inside.

"It's alright. Go ahead," I say.

"You know how we love to dump on the mainstream," Jolene says cautiously, "and it's fun to laugh at wack artists? Just don't forget that we all work for somebody at the end of the day, you know? Treat this like a job. I mean, like if you want to work for the dopest company out there, you can do that. For real, I believe in you, Danny. But even if you have the best portfolio in the world, the powers that be will still want to work with someone who...has their shit together. You know?"

“That’s deep, Jolene,” I say somewhat numbly. “One day, you’re going to be rich and famous. My advice to you is to always hold your drink. Don’t ever put it down. Especially when you’ve got your pinky in the air.”

Jolene looks surprised for a second, recovers, and is about to say something back, but a red Benz pulls up to the sidewalk and blows a perfect rendition of *La Cucaracha* from the horn.

“Take care of yourself, Danny,” Jolene says, and gives me one last look. It’s a sad one.

Jolene gets into the passenger side of the Mercedes. Viejo is at the wheel. The red two-seater drives off under a traffic light that almost looks blue in the snow that starts to fall.

She’ll never answer my calls again.

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"You were great tonight. I know you're going to kill out there," I tell her, knowing this is probably goodbye.

"I probably should've told you earlier, but I'm dropping out of school," Jolene says, thinking the same thing that I am, wrapping it up clean.

"Seems like everyone else I know is. At least you're doing it by choice."

Jolene gives a fake laugh and at the same time looks concerned.

"Inspiration is everywhere, Danny. You know, it's out there. It's in the street. It's in the people you meet. Did you get any numbers?"

"Yeah. Some lady gave me her card. She asked if I wanted to be a model."

"That's dope! Aren't you glad you came?"

I think about Vita. "I need to go, Jolene. Thanks for inviting me. Really."

"Danny, wait. Just one piece of advice. I mean, if it's okay. Shit, that sounds wack. I'm not trying to act like I know something..." Jolene stammers with uncharacteristic awkwardness. She just made the old Freudian slip of saying what we both know inside.

"It's alright. Go ahead," I say.

"You know how we love to dump on the mainstream," Jolene says cautiously, "and it's fun to laugh at wack artists? Just don't forget that we all work for somebody at the end of the day, you know? Treat this like a job. I mean, like if you want to work for the dopest company out there, you can do that. For real, I believe in you, Danny. But even if you have the best portfolio in the world, the powers that be will still want to work with someone who...has their shit together. You know?"

"That's deep, Jolene," I say somewhat numbly. "One day, you're going to be rich and famous. My advice to you is to always hold your

drink. Don't ever put it down. Especially when you've got your pinky in the air."

Jolene looks surprised for a second, recovers, and is about to say something back, but a red Benz pulls up to the sidewalk and blows a perfect rendition of *La Cucaracha* from the horn.

"Take care of yourself, Danny," Jolene says, and gives me one last look. It's a sad one.

Jolene gets into the passenger side of the Mercedes. Viejo is at the wheel. The red two-seater drives off under a traffic light that almost looks blue in the snow that starts to fall.

She'll never answer my calls again.

Chapter Seventeen

Cold Turkey

“It’s nice,” I find myself murmuring. “Us being like this. I miss this.”

“It’s nice,” Vita agrees noncommittedly and takes a sip of black coffee. She’s wearing dark-red lipstick, heavy mascara, and a headband with her hair in a ponytail. She tries to smile between drags from her cigarette. There’s a half-eaten stack of pancakes between us, a dissected turkey-sandwich, and a plate of cold cheese-fries with congealed gravy.

Our waitress with the varicose veins all up and down her legs comes up and asks us how we’re doing. “Can I get you guys anything else?”

“Can I get a refill on the coffee?” Vita requests.

“Sure, doll. What about you, hun?”

“I’m okay, thanks,” I answer.

After she leaves, I use my knife to mix the blueberry syrup with the strawberry jam and paint the sunset on my plate. Vita watches and smokes her next cigarette calmly.

“How’s therapy?” I ask.

“Amazing. A long series of breakthroughs. We laugh, we cry, we hold each other and curse our parents and men,” Vita quips, her tone similar to the one I’d always known and loved: a mix of irony, sarcasm,

and sincerity. Her voice is raspier though than it was when we were freshmen. "Bonnie says that it might be a blessing in disguise. We weren't ready. Life goes on."

"So, she knows that you...lost the baby?"

I ask this without meeting Vita's eyes.

"Everything I used to want was wrong," Vita says vaguely and gazes at the lights on the highway. Then meeting my eyes with a coolness emphasized by a puff of smoke she adds, "But hey, I'm still here."

Trucks and cars flash by in little orbs of light passing across her irises.

"I have a drug problem," I confess randomly, deciding now is the time.

Vita's eyeshadow looks like a collection of clouds, for a moment dissipating with rain. I expect scorn and disbelief. Instead, she lets me have this moment of too little, too late.

"That's good, Danny. I'm glad you can finally admit that."

The waitress comes back with our coffee. Steam rises from the cups as we sit in silence, waiting for her to leave.

"That's beautiful," our waitress comments, admiring my syrupy landscape.

"He's an artist," Vita tells her, an echo of pride that she used to exude whenever we met strangers who saw me doodling or sketching her in public.

"I've never seen anyone paint with their leftover food before. But I guess you can find inspiration in anything," our waitress clucks amiably and stands for a moment to watch me scrape out more clouds in the sky. She walks off and we continue to sit, not drinking our coffee.

"How are your parents?" I ask Vita.

"Well, ever since I got back from the hospital, I've suddenly become five years old again. My mom won't let me sleep without her by my

side, so that's been fun. She can't leave me alone for a second. My daddy's the same. Some days he's good, some days not so much. He's been calling me 'Marcia' lately. That's his sister's name."

I try to touch her hand. She dodges and grabs her coffee cup instead.

"Can we talk?"

"What do you mean? Isn't that what we're doing?" Vita smirks.

"Yeah, we are. But I just want to..."

Vita takes a deep breath.

"I want us to start over. I want us to go back to the way we were. Do you think we can do that?"

"Why?"

Her voice is flat enough to butter burnt bread.

"I love you."

Vita rips open several sugar packets and pours them one by one into her coffee, stirring the black liquid slowly.

"I think about you all the time, Danny. But that doesn't mean we have to be together."

"I know that I wasn't there for you," I hear my voice breaking. "I wasn't there for you when you needed me the most...I wasn't in my right mind."

"You don't get to do that," Vita corrects me. "*I* was the one who lost our baby. *I* was the one who had to drop out of school. *You* were the one who said you would be there for me no matter what. *You* were the one who never called, never picked up your phone, never showed up on time, always left for some reason or other. And where were you? Getting stoned with your friends? Working on your art or selling drugs?"

"I messed up. I got caught up, like you said I would. I lost track of us, and I lost track of time."

“Time is something you don’t get back, remember?” Vita responds, lighting her fifth or sixth cigarette. “I don’t want you to feel sorry. I don’t want anything from you.”

“I’ll do whatever it takes,” I stammer.

“Sure,” she says, and then rises to go to the bathroom.

One guy drops his spoon as she passes by. I can still hear it clattering on the table.

Chapter Eighteen

Did Someone Order Pizza?

It's mid-May, but I've stopped going to class since, it doesn't even matter.

I spend most of the semester doing dope and riding the NJ Transit train. Up and down, back and forth, getting off and getting on, wandering the streets of the city. Rahway, Metuchen, Elizabeth, Newark. I check out new tags and note which ones are still there, the ones that are so good that no one dares to erase them. I wanted to be one of those once. That used to be my dream.

Well, it's over. Who cares?

Dom's gone now. No more Dom Mom in the house. He went back to Long Island and called us all junkies before he left. He even cried in front of me, begged me to get help. I was stoned on the heroin we'd gotten from Master Chief. I didn't show much reaction, but I still remember his tears. Dom was a good friend.

Cheese moved out as well. The house is a lot emptier now. The Delta Kappa guys still party downstairs, but on our floor it's like a

ghost town. Just me and Sonic nodding off most of the time when we're at home. Even Vinnie, our half-Pitbull stray, spends more time on the first floor now, finding our inert bodies to be less entertaining than the ones moving around, throwing beer-flavored ping-pong balls for him to chase.

Cheese still comes around to play in our Xbox tournaments on Friday nights, but he spends way less time with us than he used to, now that Dom is gone. Cheese has always been steady: sticking to bong hits and coding, hacking into corporate systems for fun. Plus, he has a girlfriend now. She told him that we were crackheads and warned him to stay away from us, so he does. Except on *Halo* nights. He's the number one player, so she gives him that.

"With Nick from New York, it's a dollar a milligram or go fuck yourself," Sonic tells me.

The temperature feels like subzero despite the fact that the windows are open, and the birds are chirping their spring songs. Sonic even has the heat is on. The heat goes on and off. Off and back on.

"I think Nick is still connected with Aram," surmises Sonic with a surety I don't question.

"Wasn't that obvious from the beginning?" I ask.

"These Russians stick together," Sonic replies, but this means nothing.

"It all makes sense," I say, not caring either way as long as we get the drugs.

Sonic closes his safe. It beeps shut.

"It's going down tonight," Sonic confirms, sitting down at his computer chair. "Kill two birds with one stone. Get the Oxy and stick that gun to his head. If we ever see him or his boys following us again, we're coming after him and blowing his brains out."

The hunger for Oxy leads me to nodding. When you feel like you're dying, everything sounds like a good idea.

Sonic has the money, but doesn't want to pay it out of principle, knowing we're getting jerked around like punks. As for me, all that drug money that I'd saved for the baby's crib has gone straight into my bloodstream.

If I wasn't fiending, maybe I'd feel something besides desperate. I'd spent that morning sifting through garbage, searching for discarded balls of aluminum foil or the unvacuumed carpet with a magnifying glass, putting things up my nose that vaguely resembled drugs.

"Time goes fast," I murmur distantly, remembering the sight of the cherry blossoms floating on the wind.

I think of the *sakura* again. I'd gone back to see it in full bloom, the wind breezing through the petals, the drift of cherry blossoms like spring snow. I went there to repent for the loss of our baby, for all I'd done to Vita, and selfishly, to feel some sense of purification for my sins. I even tried to cry, but there was no liquid I could shed that wouldn't be used to dilute a bag of heroin later.

"Seems like yesterday it was summer, we were barbecuing and making money," Sonic mumbles.

"Yo, you alright man?"

It's Rich Boy Chris from downstairs. Somehow, I'm back in my room. Sonic is gone. I must've nodded off again.

"I'm chilling," I reply, opening my eyes from what had been some kind of nap.

"We're still doing *Halo* tonight, right?" Chris asks.

"Oh shit, was that today?" I say, glancing around for a calendar. No such item exists.

Were we so high that we scheduled the day of the robbery on the same day as our *Halo* tournament?

I should tell Chris that it's off. No video games tonight. We have plans to rob a drug dealer, but the words don't come. I take a minute to analyze Chris, wondering if he can be of any use. He seems like he might know how to tie some Boy Scout knots.

"Vinnie took a piss in the bathroom," I hear a familiar voice say in the hallway. It's Cheese, here for the tournament. "His aim is getting better. He peed on the toilet at least."

"Whose turn is it?" Sonic calls from his room. "I mopped up last time. Someone's got to clean that up."

I stand in the hallway staring at our half-pit bull half-German Shepherd as he walks in like Arnold Schwarzenegger. He sniffs his own piss on the bathroom tile, then trots off to the living room at the sound of an opening door.

"Who's a good boy? You're a good boy!" I hear Cassie cooing to Vinnie as she enters.

"You guys hear anything from Nick?" Chris asks, putting a cigarette out in my ashtray.

"You ever build a campfire?" I ask in reply, working my way up to a proposal. I feel hesitant, wondering if this means we'll have to cut him in.

"Is anyone ordering food?" Sonic asks, coming out of his room.

"Pizza!" Cheese calls out from across the apartment.

"Cassie, you want anything?" Chris hollers to his girlfriend in the living room.

"Pizza!" she hollers back.

Chris orders the food.

Twenty minutes later, there's a knock on the door.

"That was quick," Chris puzzles and walks into the living room to open the door.

I hear Cassie scream.

It happens so fast I don't even make it a foot past my bedroom door.

I see Chris lying face-down on the floor, hands spread out like he's getting frisked by the police.

Next, I'm faced with a black hole.

It takes a second to realize that there's a gun in my face. I'm backed up to where I was just sitting at my desk moments before. I'm instructed to place my head down with a black 9mm. pressed against my temple so hard that it hurts.

No barking from Vinnie, the world's worst guard dog. He's probably gone back to the first floor. The invaders are a mix of white and black guys, masks on their faces, masking tape wrapped around their fingertips.

"Give it up, motherfucker," I hear a voice say. "Where's the stash at?"

"I only have my wallet," I say pitifully. "Everything is gone. I don't have anything."

I hear voices coming from Sonic's room. There's a loud smack and then the sound of cursing.

Later I found out that Sonic took a pistol-whipping across the head, but even then, he didn't give. He had five hundred E-pills, two pounds of weed, and about twenty G's locked up in his safe. Basically everything. If Sonic thought about reaching for his .38, he changed his mind when that Glock smacked him across the skull. Probably a good thing, because unlike his gun, these pistols were loaded.

The leader took Cassie by her long blonde hair and pried her mouth open with the barrel of his 9mm. After that, Sonic gave them the safe and they vanished. All told, they must've been in the house for less than ten minutes.

Chris is the only one who has the wherewithal to take Cassie out of the house to work out some kind of story. We know that she's going

to call the cops. Worse, she's going to tell her father, the police chief of New Brunswick. There's no doubt about it. We're fucked.

By the time Chris gets back to the house to rehearse the flimsy alibi he's worked out with Cassie, Sonic is already on the run. One duffel bag is all it takes. Cheese has vamoosed back to his girlfriend's house, and I'll never see him in the flesh again.

I'm sitting on the couch, the fake leather L-shaped thing too big for the thieves to take, staring with Vinnie at the gaping void left by the TV, the sound system, the things that Sonic's hustle paid for, in the days when we lived like kings.

"Can't believe they took my fucking Xbox," Chris mutters to himself, shaking his head in disbelief.

Chapter Nineteen

Knowledge

It's early June when some Lebanese guy calls me up and starts yelling through the phone. It's our old landlord from Louis Street. He wants us all to go and clear out our stuff, but he can't get in touch with anyone. "I don't have contact with anyone from the house anymore," I tell him. "No one's heard from Dom for months. Cheese moved in with his mom on some farm up in New England. Sonic is still on the run."

I tell my landlord all of this because he knows about everything that happened, knows us all by name, and doesn't give a shit. He'd seen his relatives shot by militiamen. He thinks we're a bunch of pussies.

I tell him I'll go and clean up, figuring I may have the inkling to paint again one day. Paints are expensive, so I have no choice but to come and collect my stuff. My time at art school is over.

I break the house down into pieces and get some help from the Delta Kappa boys from downstairs. We don't say much, just make our way through the upstairs poster by poster, throwing garbage off the veranda and onto the sidewalk as the sun stains the sky a wild strawberry pink, the color of some kind of ending.

A couple of Mexicans pick up our old couch, the one we picked up off the street the year before. The one Vita and I used to make love on when no one was home. They carry it off into the sunset past Joe's Liquors.

I say peace to the Delta Kappa guys and give Vinnie a hug and a kiss, his tail going a million miles an hour. He wants to go to the park, so he jumps into my passenger seat. Just like old times, his wagging tail seems to say. This triggers something inside me, and suddenly all those tears I'd been saving just pour out of my face as I sit in my car, hugging the stray dog.

Before I leave New Brunswick, I stop by Commercial Avenue on the off chance that Flow might be in the studio. As fate has it, he's putting the final touches on his album, so he's pulling an all-nighter anyway and I'm welcome to stay. He's got about an ounce of weed and plenty of snacks with him and invites me to partake. I help myself to a Snapple and some chips, but that's it.

Flow's studio is in a vacant-looking building on Commercial Ave. The gangster Napoleon sits at a soundboard and keyboard, everything looking state-of-the-art, thousands of dollars of beat-making equipment bought with a lot of smoothed-out wrinkled cash.

It's a legit set-up, and Flow is the producer, DJ and emcee. The boys in his crew are a bunch of hype-men, my own opinion, based on the samples he plays for me. Monosyllabic death threats. Cash-machine sound effects and gunshots laced over the beats. But Flow is the lyricist, the talent, the king.

"Took you long enough to come through. I thought you were never going to roll up. You know how to make motherfuckers wait for it, don't you? I got to say though, the wait was worth it, my G."

We're taking a break from mixing. Me the colors, him the beat. The paint is drying on the wall of the studio.

"I had some personal shit to deal with. But yeah, I'm glad you like it," I reply as we stand side by side, looking at the mural I've finished painting on his studio wall.

"I had the vision; you know what I'm saying? Like alright, check it out. I want that *Reasonable Doubt* shit on my wall," Flow tells me, taking me back to that moment of inspiration months ago, when he first asked Jolene to commission me for a mural in his studio. "I wanted Jay-Z's first album cover as a testament to what's happening here. The music that birthed Jay-Z before the world even knew who he was. Who's your favorite rapper, my G?"

"Personally, I'd have to say lyrics over everything. So, in that case, I choose Nas."

"Word," Flow nods all mellow, smoke curling out of his nose like a black dragon. "I'm all about lyrics, too. It don't even matter about all that gangster shit. Everybody's got a story. No offense, but you're from the suburbs, right? What's making you feel that connection with Nas?"

I pause and think, wondering if Nasir Jones has ever thought his music would inspire some Korean kid from North Jersey. Then again, it's not even about race. Reflecting on Nas's beef with Jay-Z feels like the ultimate question: For love, or money?

"I'm going with Nas," I confirm. "He speaks the truth. I don't know what it is, but when we encounter truth, we can't help but pay homage. That shit is universal."

Flow nods appreciatively. "Alright, so what you do want to do?"

"About what?"

"How much do you want? I mean, you got to get paid right? You didn't come through and do this shit for free," Flow says and cuts off the music from his mixing board. I look around and check the mural on the wall, finished and almost dry.

“Have you ever paid for artwork before?” I ask as Flow admires the monochromatic blue mural of Jay-Z, fedora tilted low over his eye, the white scarf matched with his tuxedo.

“Nah, this is the first time. Didn’t think there was a six month wait list, my G.”

“I’ve never been paid for my work,” I admit. “I don’t even know what to charge you.”

“I feel you,” Flow nods and switches topics. “By the way, I don’t know if you heard, but me and Jolene ain’t together no more. Just FYI, know what I’m saying?”

“Oh, shit. Well, I haven’t talked to her in a minute. Anyway, I’m sorry to hear that. You guys were a good couple.”

“She’s in New York now, doing her thing. I was with her when she met that weirdo,” Flow laughs with amused disdain. “Eccentric motherfucker, but you know how industry folks be acting. Mad talented though. I’ve seen his shit. He’s got the streets on lock.”

“I heard you got an offer from one of the labels,” I mention. “What happened with your deal?”

“They offered,” Flow says and shrugs. “I declined. Still trying to get my Bachelor’s, you feel me?”

I nod my head, taking notes from this Jedi.

“Alright man. It’s getting late, or should I say early? Let me break you off with some bread.”

“Nah man. I can’t take it.”

“For real?”

“Yeah man. Just consider it a sign of friendship. You helped me out that one time. Let’s just figure now we’re even.”

Flow takes off his shades and looks at me with notes of appreciation. He nods and puts his shades back on.

“Alright, let’s do it like this. I’m going to hit you with some knowledge, kid. That’s my payment.”

“Knowledge?”

“Knowledge and wisdom, my G. There’s nothing more precious in this world than that. Get in the booth right quick.”

“What, am I being recorded or something?”

“Nah, I’m just going to let you in on some game. I don’t want you sitting in front of me because I’m going to be talking to you like an O.G. homie, and we’re not that far apart. We’ve got to get farther. Get in there, see how it feels.”

“Okay.”

I leave the producer’s room and go into the booth. It’s a dark claustrophobic sound-proof space. Stepping up to the mic, I feel the darkness and silence surrounding me. I close my eyes and feel the world disappear.

Suddenly, I hear Flow’s voice come in through the speaker.

“Yo D, you hear me?”

I hear you.

“Alright, we’re going to do it like this. I’m going to give you some straight up real deal shit, bro. You ready?”

“I’m ready.”

“You know why I didn’t take that deal? They heard me on the demo and they were like, alright, he’s nice. We can use him. But they wanted me to do a group deal, like a band member, you feel me? First off, that shit is corny. Second, I’m not signing unless me and my people all get signed, you feel me?”

“Yo, D. I’m from Camden. You know what that means? Number one homicide rate in the country. It’s just a fact. There’s no way out. We’re a forgotten city. Nobody knows where Camden is, and nobody knows where we’re from. Nobody gives a damn. You know why?”

Because anybody who ever made it out of Camden got the fuck out of Camden.

“You’re into that graffiti shit, right? You know where that shit started? The Bronx, 1970’s. Some of them people didn’t even have running water. But the soul was *in* the people; it was in the music; it was in the parties and the dancing and everything was just *live*, you know what I’m saying? There wasn’t anything negative about it. It was all love. And they sure as hell weren’t doing it for a record deal.

“All the murals those brothers painted weren’t because they were pissed off and just trying to vandalize some public property. Graffiti was their voice. It was the only way they could ever make it out of the hood. If not them in their physical form, then at least on those trains. To show the world their art, so people could know their names. They just wanted the world to know they existed.

“I’m young, but I come from the old school. I don’t give a fuck about a record deal. I’m making music and I’m setting my people free, my brother. You can’t put me in a mansion and make me forget where I come from. Whatever you do in this life, don’t forget where you come from. Don’t forget who you are. And don’t forget the people who loved you, because without them you wouldn’t be here. And without them, you won’t be where you are years from now whether you at the bottom or the top. No matter what, at the end of the day, it’s about who’s going to light the candles for you when you die. Everything else a fade.”

Chapter Twenty

New Jersey Diner

Another year passes, a period I like to call “The Lost Year” where I spend my time as an art school drop-out working at a local diner, doing nights mostly, the after-movie crowd. Occasionally I’ll draw something on the receipt if I see a girl with nice eyes, but the tips still suck. It wouldn’t make a difference anyway because I only think about Vita 24/7, so any attempt at flirtation is strictly transactional. But I’m lucky if even that happens. Most of the time it’s truck drivers and couples sharing a stack of pancakes or cheese-fries and gravy.

Sometimes I imagine what it’d be like if Vita just suddenly came walking into the diner, but then I figure if she did, she’d probably be with some other guy. I guess I try not to think too much while I’m on the job, which is half of the reason why I work the graveyard shift in the first place—to avoid lying in bed, thinking all night.

My face looks the same as it did when I was 18, but I’d say my eyes are different. I look at the world a lot differently than I used to, that’s for sure. I don’t tell myself that I’m going to be famous anymore. The fact that I should be going into my fourth year at art school doesn’t totally escape my thoughts either, but it feels less important as time goes on.

For the most part, I've put my college days behind me, but I do catch flashbacks every now and then. Like one time I thought I saw Sonic at the counter hunched over a cup of coffee, but it wasn't him. The guy ended up being Hispanic or something, with a shaved head, but I thought maybe Sonic would do something like that to change his appearance. It made me wonder if he was still on the run, or whether he was alive or dead.

One thing about the diner is that you learn to listen. Everyone's going through something. It doesn't matter who they are. You don't even know the stories people have inside until you make it your business to be there, a familiar face who has the time to listen as they sip their coffee. It's good for them, and it's good for you too. You start to realize that your voice isn't yours. It's made of a million others.

One of my regulars comes in with his mom, who I think has Alzheimer's or something. They always sit there and don't talk, and you can tell they're together so much they don't really have to talk outside the house. They just eat at the diner to be out. The guy looks like he never got married or even had a girlfriend, but it's always just him and his mom, plus his dog at home. He always gets a burger patty with no bread, to-go for the dog.

Then there's this other guy who comes and sits at the counter on Fridays. An old guy with white hair and a droopy mustache with his back all bent as he leans on the counter with glasses on the tip of his nose. My man named Phil. He orders the same thing every Friday night for dinner: turkey and mashed potatoes, cranberry sauce, sweet corn, and gravy with a biscuit on the side. He doesn't drink anything but water and just talks to me while I wipe glasses with a rag. I tell him I used to be an artist when he sees me drawing on a napkin. He watches, fascinated, and I only stop because his food starts getting cold.

“Why do you say you used to be an artist? You *are* an artist,” he tells me authoritatively.

I don’t know too much about Phil except that he likes world music and reading. I’ve seen him on many occasions bringing in a sweaty dog-eared tome with him even though we usually end up talking the whole time he’s here.

“I can read at home,” he shrugs. “I’d rather talk.”

I don’t tell Phil too much about my life, about my situation, though I do once, in a moment of weakness, confess that I’d proposed to my ex-girlfriend and had gotten rejected. I tell him that she’s with someone else now, that I threw that ring in Passion Puddle. I almost tell him that sometimes I still drive by her place of employment, a Double Tree hotel in New Brunswick, but I don’t want to lose my favorite customer.

“You’re summer,” Phil tells me calmly, with wise affirmation. “In life you go through seasons. When you’re a kid in your mom’s house, you’re spring. Now, as a young man, you’re summer. One day, you’ll meet the right girl, and you’ll have your own kids. Then you’ll be autumn. Me? I’m winter. Note the white hair.”

“Yeah, but summer is supposed to be fun.”

“You’re just going through a slump. You’ll find your way. That passion, that love of art was given to you as a gift. When was the last time you painted?”

“It’s been a while.”

“What’s stopping you?”

“I don’t know what to paint.”

“Yes, you do,” Phil says and starts counting out his tip. “You paint your pain.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Romeo and Juliet

If Romeo and Juliet hadn't died young, they might've grown to hate each other. Maybe Romeo would've cheated, or Juliet would've stopped believing in love. Not every young romance ends tragically—but the happiest ones end early.

I try to paint my pain like Phil said, but nothing good comes out of it. I think about going back to art school, but it's almost like I'm on empty. The inspiration is gone. Maybe you only get one chance in life, and if you blow it, you're done.

I put my pen down. I don't know what I'm doing anymore. I'm alive, but I don't feel that way.

When I proposed to Vita, I was clean. I'd reached the fuzzy orange period of being clean with no relapses and no cravings. I spent every day in the gym building my body back up. I gained weight and ate plenty of chicken breast and salad. I even started juicing, the fruity kind, putting a multitude of strawberry and banana concoctions into

my veins. I read a few psalms in the morning and sat in the lotus position and meditated. I felt ready for anything, even rejection.

It'd been six months since we broke up. I didn't think she'd move on.

I thought getting clean meant I'd get everything back that I lost, but far from it. After all we've been through, it's like Life is telling me, You thought it was over? This is just the beginning, bitch. Now we have to figure out your existential angst. You'll never paint again. Deal with that!

But this is my Blue Period. Everyone has a Blue Period. Picasso's best friend killed himself, that's what got Pablo so depressed. I think it was over a woman, a story of one-sided love, but either way, that was his best friend.

They were living on the streets of Paris, getting drunk, getting high, talking life, talking death, talking love, talking about beauty to beautiful strangers, making love and making art all day. That life of the artist, where having nothing is having everything, with the whole world right at your fingertips.

We spend our lives waiting for love a bus that never comes. You can't sit around and look for it. You have to go through the fire to get to the flame. When you hold it in your hands, you can light yourself up or hold it up for others to see through the darkness. You light the darkness either way.

The female nude's clitoris. Edge and form of black lines, secret folds of the flower. Weeping, the most unguarded he ever saw her, twisting cigarette-ends together for a smoke. Just a relief from reality and the need for wine or candles, bread and no cheese, cold water and no heat, nothing but each other and a shared sense of vision we call hopes and dreams.

Pablo's best friend was in love with her, but while Pablo was flying, his friend was stuck in a wheelchair. Maybe she even loved him. They were both painters, Pablo and his man. I can see Picasso's humongous eyes staring intensely at the angles of her cheekbone and jawline, the hexagons in her eyes, the shadow of café lights on her cheeks. Meanwhile, his best friend was loading up the revolver, and finally put a bullet in his head, right across the dinner table.

Pablo saw him in his dreams; he saw him in his nightmares. He talked to his spirit and lived with his ghost.

His soul was in hell, but they remained good friends until the day he died.

Vita moved in with this guy she met at the Double Tree where she was working after she dropped out of pre-med. He was a valet or something, ten years older than her. I met him once when we were having a cigarette in the parking lot, and she was telling me for maybe the third or fourth time to stop coming to her job, telling me that I had to let her go. This Dominican guy with white pants and douchebag sunglasses rolled up and asked Vita if everything was okay.

I didn't see her for a long time after that. A couple of years. She moved in with the guy at his place in Edison, and I guess I understood her reasons. I was the guy who broke her heart, and he was the new guy—the more mature guy. A guy in his thirties, probably past all the existential angst. And I'm not gay, but even I noticed the bulge in his jeans.

She came by the diner one day and told me all of this, about her moving in with him, as if to make it clear that we would never get back together again. She didn't say anything about the size of his dick. I just assumed it to be true from what I had already seen in my recurring nightmares.

How was I doing, she wanted to know.

How was I supposed to tell her that I'd been working on something every night for the last two years?

How could I tell her that I was painting this picture to show how much I loved her?

I remember it was hot and the rain evaporated like it had never happened. We took another swim and stood on the rocks with waves crashing all around us. I held her and we just stood there watching the sea. Vita was wearing a black bikini and her hair was down. I took one last picture of her on the beach. It was the last picture that I would ever have of her. It would develop faded from the way the sun slanted into the eye of the disposable camera. We didn't have a good camera back then. We must've picked it up along the way, getting ice and drinks at a CVS or something. I had that picture for a long time. I used to hold it and put my fingertips on the photo and touch her face for years after. She was sitting on the sand, looking up at the camera, and I was standing above her. I could see her pretty face; that face that loved and trusted me. I burned all of our other pictures and the letters we used to write to each other. I don't even remember burning them, but I must've because I used to have them all in a shoebox at home, underneath my bed. One day, the shoebox wasn't there anymore. I must've taken it into the backyard one day and then set it on fire. Probably sat there and watched it catch fire, all the pictures quickly melting, the flames licking away everything that reminded me of her into ashes. But then there was that one picture that wasn't in the shoebox, that escaped the ashes, and so that was the picture I held onto and gazed at when I wanted to remember what she looked like, faded and smiling, looking up at me, that day at the beach.

When I finally got to her house, on the night of the Big Show, she was already gone. Her mother had driven her to the hospital. Only her father was home.

I opened the door and entered their house in a panic. I followed the only light that was on. Dr. Dela Rosa sat in his study, and when I entered a look of recognition fluttered across his face.

“Where’s Vita?” I asked, running up to him.

Dr. Dela Rosa smiled and got out of his chair.

He turned and stood at the stereo and pressed play.

It was Chopin’s *Nocturne No. 9*.

As those opening piano notes filled the room, I fell at his knees with the folds of his robe in my hands.

And wept.

The afternoon light from the hospital is both bright and pale. I look out at the trees. The green looks like the way you would describe it to someone who’s never seen light.

“I fell in love with you all over again,” I say numbly, calling back the words from a summer forever ago. Vita is in the hospital bed, recuperating after losing our baby.

“I held onto those words for a long time,” she says faintly, under medication. “I waited and waited for you to come back to me, but you never came.”

“Vita,” I choke, my words fractured, on my knee. “I love you more than anything.”

“I’ll always love you,” whispers Vita. “One day you’ll understand.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Irises

One of my favorite paintings is called *Irises* by Ogata Korin. It's hundreds of years old now, done on an ancient Japanese folding screen that features these indigo-colored irises on their green stalks repeating over and over in a pattern across the panels. It reminds me that despite all the sadness that comes with life, there's beauty that comes with it, in endless repetition.

When 2005 comes around, things are the same. I turn twenty-two, still work at the diner, still live with my parents.

My heart and mind never leave Vita, though I've been on a few dates since then to move on. One girl I used to work with at the diner named Alyssa was kind of into me. We dated for a few weeks, and I thought there might be something there. Then she found out she was pregnant, so she and her ex-boyfriend got back together. I told her that I was happy for her, and she just looked at me with those pretty green eyes like, *Are you serious?*

Sure, why not? At least somebody's happy.

That's when you know you're depressed. You start getting happy for other people.

There's another girl named Rita, but her name is too similar to "Vita," and I just can't handle it.

Let's just say there are a few misfires—all misfires, who am I kidding? It's like a catastrophic log at an airport control tower with nothing to record but crashes. *Hey, I'm trying to fly a new plane over here!* Test-trials ending in shattered legs and broken arms, horrific burns. My limbs sticking straight-out, the cast somehow freezing my right hand into a thumbs-up sign.

Mid-November comes around, and it's our anniversary. I call Vita. To my amazement, she picks up. "I was just thinking about you," she says. It's been so long since I've heard her voice. "I miss you," she says.

I'm speechless but somehow manage to sound composed. I ask her how she's doing, and she tells me she's thinking about leaving Alejandro. It turns out that he's married with a wife and kid in the Dominican Republic. I don't know how he kept it a secret for that long, but the point is that she isn't sure about things.

"I'm planning on moving out. Going back to my parents."

"Do you need some help?"

"I'm okay."

"Can I see you?" I croak finally.

She gives me the address.

It's a small cozy place in that looks like the kind of place we once imagined for ourselves once the baby was born. Vita gives me a hug and leads me straight to the bedroom. I realize later that it's because she doesn't want me to see the memories she's created in this place, with Alejandro instead of me. The bedroom isn't much better, but she's already started removing any history of her being there, so it's ironically neutral.

I look at the bed. The place where all my nightmares took place. Black satin sheets. Silky and smooth. They slept here, fucked here.

What's worse, they held each other at night and told each other they loved each other.

Vita comes over and starts kissing me. This is enough to shake me out of the sobering reality, and I reenact those moments of love, to recreate what we once had, as I kiss her neck and take her clothes off.

We make love with a passion that feels like time travel, but when it's all over, nothing has changed. Vita lays in my arms and I ask her to be my wife. She smiles, kisses my hand, and says, "Let's just be happy now while we can."

She still has that portrait on the wall, the one I'd painted for her in freshman year. I don't know if I should be honored that after everything, she still carries that original memento of my adoration for her, or if I should feel disrespected that she's been fucked so many times in front of the thing that I once innocently drew for her.

"You still have it," I say.

"I told you I was going to bring it with me wherever I go."

Suddenly, the portrait falls off the wall and lands onto the floor facedown. There are no windows open. All the windows are closed. There's no wind. The portrait just falls.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Rutgers

The *sakura* is gone.

When I visit freshman campus the following spring, I'm hoping to see cherry blossoms drifting in the wind. I want to reminisce beside the tree that used to stand next to the picnic table where I first met Vita. Back when the towers fell and we thought we were all going to die, and the days after when we clung to each other out of this sense that there was no tomorrow, so just live for today. We smoked cigarettes by that tree that Vita told me was a cherry tree. The symbol of life's impermanence. She was right about that and everything else. But anyway, the tree is gone. Like it was never there.

Passion Puddle is still there though. The legend is that if a couple walks around its sylvan banks three times, they're going to get married. This secluded pond is near the chapel where I once prayed for Vita after she went to the hospital and had her stomach pumped. The frat guys who roofied her and who we subsequently got revenge on, by

gathering forces from the rival frat, Delta Kappa, and barged into their frat house, fucking them all up.

It's ironic that the same thing would happen to us down the line, except those guys weren't interested in revenge. They only wanted the cash and drugs. Still, as I lay my head on my desk with the 9mm pressed into the back of my head, I thought about it and it made an impression on me.

I proposed to Vita once. Bought her a ring that I could afford. Not worth much, but a symbol of my desperation. Got down on a bended knee at Passion Puddle. I imagine the ring is still there at the murky bottom.

George Street has changed. It looks less like a derelict street. There are high-rise suites for off-campus senior housing and the vagrants have been swept away. The State Theater is still there, the church and the fountain. But everything looks different in a way that I can't place. I don't even know where I am and the feeling leaves me with the sense that there's no point in trying to revisit the past.

Where they are now, I wonder from time to time. One day, in a moment of weakness, I decide to join Facebook.

I lock my bedroom door and hit that search bar and start typing in names. I start off light and look up "Dominick Polenta."

Judging from all the pictures on his profile page, it looks like he went backpacking across Europe after all. He's still there in the south of France somewhere. There's one pic of him standing in a field of sunflowers with his arms spread out to the sapphire sky. The caption reads, "Van Gogh flow." And that's it.

I want to write him a message, but I'm not ready for that yet, so I just press "Like."

I look up Cheese next. I type in "Charles Duke" and sift through a bunch of white people who are obviously not Cheese. When I finally

track him down, I notice that under his trucker's cap that his wooly hair has grown into an afro and he's keeping it all natural. No more dye. He has a mustache now, which makes him seem more content somehow. A lot of pics of him showing off his chickens, which also look plump and healthy. Who knew our friendly neighborhood hacker was just a country boy at heart?

Suddenly, I get a message. There are three messages, conversation-style texts.

I read:

Sonic: Yo, what's up DAWG? You finally got on this shit, huh? How you been?

S: I'm out, bro. We should meet up sometime. You know what I'm saying? I ain't into all that shit anymore though. I heard you got clean, too.

S: You still talk to anyone? Seems like everyone's doing their own shit. But whatever, it's all good.

I take a sip of water and start to type.

D: Hey man, how's it going?

I see he's still online. It only takes him a minute to respond.

S: YOOOOO!!! What's up, DAWG?

D: How are you, man?

S: Good, man. Where you at?

D: Back at my parents. Just working at a diner and shit. What about you?

S: I'm back in school, dawg. I got out of jail like a year ago. I did a semester at Middlesex County College, and now I'm back at Rutgers. Just commuting from home though. Not trying to get back into any shenanigans.

To my surprise, he spells "shenanigans" correctly. Must be all that studying.

D: That's awesome, bro. I'm happy for you.

S: How's life, dawg?

I get into the conversation now. It feels good to reconnect with an old buddy.

D: Forget me, man. How are you? What was jail like?

I can't believe how comfortable I am writing that. In conversation, it's exactly how we would talk. But maybe this is *faux pas* on Facebook. I'm such a newb.

I wait for a while, but he doesn't answer. I sit in front of the screen, worried that I've crossed into uncomfortable territory. I linger on Facebook a little longer and think about looking up Vita. After a half-hour passes, I turn off my computer, thinking I've either pissed off Sonic or just made things awkward.

I go to sleep.

The next morning, I turn on my computer, still bothered by this abrupt end to my interaction with Sonic. I log into Facebook and immediately look at my message box. There's one message.

I open it. Holy shit. It's long.

The Letter from Sonic:

Yo, my bad for suddenly cutting off like that. I just had to pause for a minute, you know what I'm saying? Plus, I was supposed to be studying. But honestly, it's a hard question to answer. What's jail like? It sucks ass! HAHA.

But for real, you just brought me back and I had to take a minute, you know?

Anyway, I'm glad you asked me because it's kind of tied in with this writing assignment I'm supposed to do for class. I won't get into the specifics and bore you or whatever, but if you don't mind being my guinea pig and letting me write this shit down, it'll actually help me a lot. I'm supposed to write about a traumatic experience, and I've been

struggling to get the words. I think I write better when I'm just talking to someone, you know what I'm saying? So anyway, you can just delete this shit or whatever. I'm not trying to waste your time. But if you don't mind helping me with this one, I appreciate it.

My professor says I'm supposed to write down my experiences, kind of like an essay. Shit is hard though. I think they'll give me another ten years if I tell them everything. HAHA. But she says just write down anything. I told her Expos was the reason I failed out of college. She told me all the more reason to work on my writing. I told her I hate writing. She said don't worry, just write it like a letter. I'm like, a letter? To who?

So it's just my luck that you suddenly popped up on Facebook. I saw you on my Recommended Friends list and I said to myself, "Uh-uh. This can't be my dawg, Danny." And there you were. Okay, I'm getting off-track. Did I ever tell you that I think I have ADHD?

Anyway, you probably think prison is like Oz or whatever you see on TV. It's not like that at all. It's one thing to watch people in prison. It's another thing to be in there. The hardest part about prison is being alone with your thoughts, and just feeling....alone.

My dad hired a lawyer, a family friend. They told the judge I was mixed up and what not. I didn't like how they played up how I was adopted, doing that whole thing about me not knowing who I was, searching for my identity and all. I mean, I already told you I wanted to find out more about my Korean heritage, but I don't think that's what made me do all the things that I did. At least, that's not the reason in my mind.

I've been trying to figure out how everything happened. It all went down so fast. One day we were making money. The next thing I knew we were being robbed at gunpoint. And then I stuck up that liquor store. I don't know if I ever thought about the reasons behind everything. Addiction makes you selfish. You only think about yourself, and that's

what makes you hurt everyone around you. So I'm mostly sorry about that. I'm not sorry for the fights I got into or the scraps I won or lost. Everyone knows what it is when they put their fists up. One of you is going to get smacked in the head. There's nothing to be sorry about after that. What you feel sorry for is the people who you hurt that you don't mean to hurt. And those people hurt in ways that you don't see.

When I stuck up the liquor store, I didn't even run. It was this Arab dude, and he wouldn't give up the safe. I told him that I was going to shoot him, and he didn't move. He kept telling me his boss already emptied the safe. I screamed at him and threw a bottle and broke a bunch of shit, but he wouldn't give it up. He told me to give him the gun. He could tell I was out of my head.

I don't know what gave that guy those kind of balls. Maybe he really didn't have the keys. Said he was just an employee and he didn't have access or whatever. He was probably telling the truth. But also, it probably wasn't the first time someone pointed a gun at his face.

I kind of gave up after that. I was so tired of running. I just dropped the gun and fell to the ground. I didn't want to run anymore. Then he did the craziest thing. You know what he did? He came around from the other side of the counter, took the gun and put it away from me, and then he just held me. Dawg, he held me like I was a baby. And I cried in his arms. I was still like that when the cops came. (He didn't call the cops, but someone heard the noise from outside and made the call.) He picked me up and helped me get myself together before they cuffed me. I looked at him and thought about all the bad shit I used to talk about Muslims after 9/11. It wasn't personal, you know what I'm saying? But in that moment I just felt like, "How in the world did I ever say those things about you? I'd never dare do anything like that to your face." And I promised that I wasn't ever going to use those words again.

My lawyer wanted me to talk about my childhood at the hearing. I was supposed to talk about how traumatized I was from being an orphan. How that eventually led to me being strung-out on heroin and sticking up a liquor store with a gun that had no bullets in it. How it was an act of desperation. How I only sold drugs because I got in with the wrong crowd. Hanging with guys who weren't athletes. Guys who had nothing going for them. That's how my lawyer played it. Steve was just confused. Steve is a good kid from a good family. His parents are active in the church. His dad is a football coach. His mom organizes the bake sales, etc.

In the end, the judge let me off light, but the truth is that if I was Black, they would've sent me to County for ten years instead of eighteen months for the attempted armed robbery. Eventually that got dropped to ten months with some time in a halfway house and probation. The drug charges were dropped. Conspiracy and Intent to Distribute or whatever. They didn't have any evidence since those dudes from New York took everything anyway. Or maybe Chris's girlfriend Cassie changed her tune for Chrissie's sake. I feel bad for her though. 18 years old and getting a gun stuck in your mouth. She didn't deserve that. No one does. I don't know how she ever got over it, but her old man left it alone for some reason. Maybe it was just God, or the perks of being Asian. I never felt so glad to have chinky eyes before in my life. HAHA.

My probation officer is this cool lady named Alicia. She's big on telling the truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God. She's always quoting the Bible. She can quote the Bible like a preacher. I recognized some of that stuff from my mom and dad. I don't know if I ever told you this, but my mom and dad are both super-religious. They were missionaries in Korea before they adopted me. That's how we met. They were both great parents. I had a happy childhood. I don't blame them for

anything. That's the truth. So, what is it? Who am I supposed to blame? The System?

Alicia tries not to get too religious on me, but I know she and my parents just want me to find Jesus.

I'm like, "Where he at?"

"First you must repent. That's the only way you're going to change."

I can hear her voice in my head saying it, and to be honest, I'd just lay in bed at night, thinking about it. Like alright, maybe I'll start going to church. I'll even pray. So what? Is this supposed to fix me?

Anyway, to your original question, jail sucks. Was it hard being locked up? Yeah, obviously. Did I get into a lot of fights? Yeah, I did. I won some of them, but not all of them. Everyone's in survival mode. We're all just scared. Some guys even hang themselves.

I had this one night when I realized for the first time that I was afraid. Not afraid of someone, but afraid of life. Afraid of the world. I was afraid of what people thought of me, of how they would treat me if I didn't have something to attach to my name. Like, what am I going to be when I get out? What if I'm just an ex-convict with no money, no car, no status, and I can't even play football anymore? What if I'm just me?

You see what I'm saying? The thing that I'm the most afraid of is myself. I don't want to be me, because I don't know me. I don't know who I am, or where I came from. I just know that I'm not good enough.

But that's the lie.

You asked me once, "What are we? What's our voice? What's our power?"

I don't have those answers, but maybe you do.

I want to say I'm sorry, my brother. As a friend, I should've told you to stay away from the shit I was doing. I didn't have anything going for me, so I was just lost. I didn't even have a girlfriend. You had your art, and you had Vita. You should've never gone down the same road I did. I

just blew money on strippers and whores. What you had was special and real. Nothing can ever change that.

Anyway, enough about that. I just thank God because I'm sober now. I don't even know how long it's been. I used to tally the days, but the number of days don't matter to me so much anymore. I'm never going to break this streak.

I left the halfway house, and I told my probation officer Alicia that the first thing I wanted to do was go to church. She took me to the Tabernacle and now I go with her every Sunday. I'm an usher, which is crazy to think about. People just hand you plates full of money like they're not worried about it. The ones who lift their hands the highest have been down on the ground the lowest. That's some real shit.

By the way, I even got a girl now. It's kind of early to talk about but might as well tell it. Her name's Nikki. She's a girl I met in church. She's going into sports medicine. Super smart girl. I don't know what she sees in me. But she thinks I'm funny. Anyway, it's still early, but like they say, when you know you know. This time I think I do.

When I finish reading his essay, I sit back and exhale, feeling frankly amazed. I think about God, and I think about love. I think about redemption and grace. I have no words to reply or type back. It isn't the kind of message you can respond to right away. Maybe one day, after time passes. Maybe one day when we realize how much of the hustling, the fighting, the striving for money and fame was just our way of finding ourselves, trying to figure out how to be men.

Filled with emotion, I decide that this is it. It's time. It's now or never. Let heartbreak begin again.

I search "Vita."

I press "Enter."

I sift through a few misses, and then there she is. I can't explain this feeling. It's been a year since we've seen each other, and already she feels like someone I barely know.

I click.

I start off with her basic information.

Ivita Gracia Dela Rosa

Student at the University of Hawaii

Works at: V.A. Center PTSD Department in Honolulu

Lives in: Honolulu, Hawaii, United States of America

I blink several times, confused.

Honolulu?

I click on her profile picture. It's her silhouette looking out at a Hawaiian sunset. I can't see her face. The sunset looks like starfruit and guava melting into the sea.

She kept her profile an open book. So like her.

I click on each photo, wondering if she's one of those people who publicize their life to the world, but her gallery is barebones. She gives you enough to know it's her. Four photos—five if you include her profile pic. I stare at them for a long time. Realizing once again how hard it is to let go.

The first one is a pic of her and her mom. They're both sitting with some blue raspberry and lime-green cocktails—little umbrellas in each—laughing like whoever took the pic just said something funny. The restaurant is dark, and the caption lets me know it's some place called *Jack's Waikiki*.

The second pic is a family photo. A bunch of Hawaiians and Filipinos at a luau, big white smiles with a bonfire in the background, everyone wearing flowers in their hair or around their necks. A large family. Five generations in one frame. Vita is the closest one to the fire,

holding a little girl I'm guessing to be a cousin's kid or niece. She looks so beautiful that I bite my lip.

The third pic is a selfie. Vita stands in front of a mirror, pointing to her nametag in a bathroom at the V.A. Center. She's wearing a black blazer and has this look like, *Yeab, that's right*.

It must've been her first day.

Then there's one more. Vita is on the far left, a head shorter than the purple-hearted soldiers back from Afghanistan. A couple of them with prosthetic arms and legs, but they're all smiling. She looks happy. She looks great.

And that's it. Nothing else to see. Nothing else to know. I stare at her face and wonder if she'll accept my friend request.

Working at the V.A.—that's unexpected. Then again, trauma is something that she knows well.

I scroll down her timeline, bracing myself for flirty messages from guys. There aren't any.

Instead, I see a message she posted a while ago, about six months from the last time we saw each other:

Wherever you go, you are with me.

I think about you always. I think about you every day.

You are my heart, my spirit, my love, my backbone.

You are the light in the corners of my eyes, you are there every morning as I wait...

I love you, Daddy. Till we meet again.

I pause. I close my eyes. I feel exhausted.

I check out her Friends List and notice that she and Sonic are connected. I'm not sure how I feel about that—until I remember he's religious now. And dating a girl from church. I relax.

As distracted as I was, I realize that I haven't even seen Sonic's profile picture. I want to know what the new and improved Sonic looks like. I click.

His spiky hair is back—shorter and more tamed. His left pec is freshly inked. It's that pic guys post right after getting a tattoo: swollen from blood, shiny from Vaseline and saranwrap.

The tattoo is a family crest, a shield with some symbols too blurred by the fluorescent glare to make out. But I can tell it's clean linework. The caption reads:

"Got this one to celebrate my dad's sixtieth birthday. I am who I am, and I'm proud to be a McCormick."

I feel a lump in my throat and click back to his profile page. Next to his pic, I see something that makes me smile.

Steve McCormick

Student at Rutgers University.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Graffiti

Always start a portrait with the eyes.

This is the outline. Composition and linework are all that matter at the start. Measure negative space and figure where the eye of the viewer will be, whether it's from a bus window or walking on the street. In this case, it's probably a seated position from a toilet seat.

The pupils are easily done with the tip of the black marker and a deliberate amount of catchlight for effect, almost anime-style but not quite.

Basquiat painted Black kings. Picasso just thought we were all animals who wore masks.

I have different caps for bigger pieces: Thin caps for the outline, fat caps for the blends. The inside of a bathroom stall is really a job for markers, old-school style, the same tools I first held back in junior high when I felt the power and wonder at breaking the law and creating something beautiful at the same time.

A fat black Magnum coupled with a fine Sharpie fresh from the pack like a small blade to use one time only. Her visage looks out from the sides of trains and under bridges. She's at corner stores and bodegas, on street signs and subway grates, always with that strand hanging over her eye—seductive, defiant, unforgettable.

When I paint Vita's face, the hope is that one day, while back in New Jersey riding on the Turnpike or Route 1, that she'll see her face emblazoned on the concrete, brick, or metal grating. Maybe one day Vita will ride the PATH train to Port Authority and see a version of that original portrait I painted of her in the dorm, only bigger and this time on the side of a defunct locomotive, there for all the world to see.

I've been doing this series for about a year now. The first piece in the series happened on that fateful afternoon in her dorm room. Since then, I've taken my act to the train tracks around North Jersey. What started as an act of desperation is now simply an act of love.

This is the last one in the series. Tonight, I've decided to hang it up. I'm going back to school in September, and I won't have time to run around at night like a ninja anymore. I'm going to study for real this time. And besides, I don't want to become some one-trick pony. I've got other things that I want to do. I don't want them to put me in a box so soon.

This one will be simple, rendered in black ink on the grimmer side of a men's restroom. That's how I first saw the end, that moment clutching onto the side of the toilet seat sweating buckets of water, crying and drooling on the porcelain, going through withdrawal, looking up at the ceiling, trying to find God.

I didn't see the face of Jesus, but I saw the drawing: Vita's moon-shaped eyes and arching eyebrows, with lips the color of raspberry wine; her cupid's bow marked by a single star to the right of our earthbound horizon, the heavens and the ocean being her upper

and lower lips. After I got clean, I started painting Vita's portrait in different versions and variations like an Andy Warhol silk screen.

As I finish putting the final touches on her eyes, her lips, I imagine her standing before me one last time. I'm holding that last photograph from the beach in my hand. It's the last part of her that I can hold in my hands and ever touch.. I light it on fire, dropping it so that it sizzles in toilet water. On the back, I can read the words she wrote:

*With endless love,
Vita*

There's a light in every drop as it drips down the windshield; a life that rises through the earth. The green stems that eventually flower kiss the rain falling on their faces, upturned and never looking back at the dirt.

A trail of rainbow-tinted gasoline followed me into the world. One burst from the spray-can and I blasted off, crossing highways and headlights, painting a landscape of New Jersey. From the trainyards of Newark to the city of our fallen towers, I tagged cold hard surfaces with the portrait of a girl I once knew.

One day it was a masterpiece. The next day, it was gone.

Now I'm riding in summer highway mist with my dad, remembering this: New Jersey from above, the panorama of bumper-to-bumper traffic, the contagion of mini-malls, red and green lights tinged with blue halos, the concrete expanse darkened with that last rain.

"*Ya, i-saeki-ya*. This is your big chance," my dad says in Korean. We inch up in the rain, getting closer to the exit for Fort Lee near George Washington Bridge. "You mess this up, there's nothing for you anymore. You'll be stuck at home, wasting your life, working at the gas

station. You know how long I had to pump gas before I got my chance to open my own business? You think it's easy? Anyway, you have a talent, don't waste it. Just use your head and obey the law. Don't make trouble like before."

We're on our way to Fort Lee where there's a showing at the local library spotlighting "Asian-American Artists and Voices," a theme I used to avoid like the plague when the last thing I wanted was to be labeled, not to mention have my work displayed somewhere as humble as a local library. My dad, on the other hand, is certain, as he always is, that this could be my big moment. He insists on driving me there.

"Dad, how come you never became a photographer?" I ask him for the first time.

He snuffles and wipes the windshield. I feel the chill of freon on my arms and hear the static of KBS radio.

"*Ya, i-saeki-ya*, he repeats in Korean, this time more gently. "Do you know how hard you have to work to raise three children? Do you think it's easy? It doesn't matter if you live in America or Korea or any country. Wherever you go, you have to work hard. You can't buy a house and put your kids in college by taking pictures."

"What if you never got married or had kids? You could've traveled the world and lived your dreams," I point out, half-jokingly.

Dad grows quiet for a moment, perhaps thinking of all the places he once dreamt of traveling to, before finding himself married to my mom with three kids. Maybe he could've been snapping photos for magazines and living with his hair flowing in a wind that only breezes through exotic locations, instead of standing over a steam-press in the ghetto, opening and shutting the corrugated metal gates of a dry cleaner covered in graffiti.

"I wasn't a great photographer," Dad replies after a while, quietly, as if reminding himself of all that he has. "The best pictures I ever took

were of you guys when you were growing up. My dream was to buy a house and see my children go to college. I don't have regrets."

"I'm going to make you proud, Appa. I'm going to go back to school. I'm going to work hard."

"*Gu-rae*," he concedes, and sniffles again. "*Yeolsim-I hae-ra*. Work hard."

Sniff.

Decades of working the steam press left him with a perpetually runny nose.

Vincent van Gogh cut his ear off. That's what everyone remembers. He gave it to a prostitute. He told the pimps at the door of the brothel to just let him speak to her for as long as he could hold his hand over a candle's flame. He cut off his ear and gave it to her so she could hear what he had to say.

Most people don't know van Gogh was epileptic, and right before each seizure, he'd see the transcendent and the divine unfold before his eyes. Heaven and hell are often intermingled like colors on a painter's palette. Van Gogh is the only artist I've ever seen who could paint the wind.

There's no shortage of tragic artists in the world. True artists don't reproduce beauty. They're born like accidents, or hiccups, in the evolution of all things. It's their lives in and of themselves that hold real inspiration. In practical matters of the world, they're useless. They die in poverty, often alone, ravaged by psychological disorders or disease. They become drunks or drug addicts, and they fall in love with prostitutes because they can only be married to one thing.

Vincent went early, but Hokusai died as an old man. Like Vincent, his iconic paintings were done at the end of his life. When he was on his deathbed, the only thing he felt regret for was all the paintings he could've still created. "I've only just learned how to paint!" he reportedly said.

In a couple of days I'm going back to school. It's been a quiet summer. Just waiting around. Figuring things out. Getting my mind right. I've been trying to paint during the day. At night, I'm a security guard.

The site I work at is a glue factory. I don't know why a glue factory would need a security guard, but there have been a couple times a truck came by to drop off or pick up. I have no idea. I'm supposed to sign them in, but so far, I've been kind of ducking whenever I see headlights. Mostly I'm just there by myself. It's exactly what you would imagine a glue factory to be like. It's old, it's dirty, and there are big smokestacks where billows of white smoke come out of. There's always a sort of sweet chemical smell lingering in the air. There're also these cats that go roaming about in the pitch-black catching mice which is kind of creepy. My job is to walk around the factory once an hour and punch in with this old-fashioned key-clock thing that I wear like a satchel. They use it to make sure I check in at every station instead of sleeping on the job.

I'm supposed to wear the uniform they gave me, but after a couple days I realize no one is ever going to check up on me, so I've just been walking around in my hoodie and jeans with this key-clock around my neck. Part of the reason I chose this job, besides the money, was so I could just be alone and think. When I'm not doing the rounds and clocking in, I sit in the guard-shack and sketch out my recollections. It gets kind of lonely sometimes. Eight hours of solitude, no one to talk

to. It's great for getting work done, but there are plenty of times I just start talking to myself out of sheer boredom.

It's a solitary existence, alone in the dark with nothing but the occasional rattling of chains to tell you the cats are stalking. I look up at these huge dark vats of boiling glue and wipe the grime off gauges and meters and wonder what will happen if there's ever a meltdown. Sometimes I imagine all this hot glue pouring down in a tidal wave on top of me, leaving my broken pieces sealed back together in its sticky chemical wake, but it never happens. Maybe I don't need it anymore.

Most of the time I walk around the empty parking lot and look up at the stars and think about this bathroom stall graffiti. Funny thing is Vita will never see it. I do it because I love it. I do it because it makes me feel alive. But living is the most important part. Staying alive. To keep going. All the way till the end.

Every day is a chance to redefine yourself—without erasing everything that made you: your time, your culture, your history.

This is the epiphany I have standing under the stars in this empty parking lot. It's so hard to explain. On each *sakura* blossom, there's a falling petal that holds all of existence. Should we not try to hold onto what's beautiful in life regardless of what we lose?

One night I'm doing my rounds at the glue factory, and I hear a sound. It isn't the cats because they don't make that much noise. But it's an old familiar sound. Sort of like a hissing.

I go towards the back of the factory near the barbed-wire fences where there are some abandoned tracks. A popular tagging spot, most of the kids there are decent. Suddenly, I find myself on the other side of the flashlight. Reminds me of the old days. He looks scared. Might've been seventeen or eighteen. I act like a professional.

I look around to the right and then to the left, and motion with my flashlight.

“Make it quick,” I say and walk away.