

Introduction

In the spring of the year 2001, I went with my father to a town called Parga in northern Greece. Our visit there was part of a holiday package deal sponsored by the Manassis tour group. The motor coach we were riding in stopped in piles of little towns along the mountain roads; in each one we got out for an hour or so to buy trinkets, drink coffee, smoke cigarettes and kibitz with the locals.

Pop and I ambled around the streets of Parga that afternoon and found a tavern to have lunch in. The owner and his pals were incredibly friendly and accommodating people. After a luscious repast of roast lamb with feta cheese and tomatoes, the proprietor brought out a bottle of something to help quench our after-meal thirst. The beverage he presented us with was called chiporo. Unknown to me at the time, chiporo is the northern Greek equivalent of high-octane American moonshine. Within an hour of my introduction to the local refreshment, walking became difficult. By nightfall, I'd lost all ability to speak.

These incurred difficulties did not stop us from buying three liters of the practically pure ethyl alcohol from the restaurant owner. He charged us next to nothing for the unbelievably powerful liquor, and implored us to come back soon. Tears were shed by all at our exodus, and oaths were made for our certain return. That evening, dad and I took a taxi back to our hotel with the containers of the precious, reality impairing libation under our coats. We were on top of the world. We had enough chiporo to burn an oil well with.

Upon my return to Athens, I began work on the novel "Raw Power." As the characters in the story began drinking more and more moonshine during their actions, so, in turn, did the author. To my knowledge, I never wrote a line of the text while hammered on the stuff. However, I had to take numerous breaks from writing because of the residual effects of the unbelievably powerful drink. Within a few weeks of sustained imbibing, my ability to type on the computer keyboard became truncated and telegraphic. If I was thinking of writing the sentence, "he went to the closet to get his machete," it would come out something like, "he went machete." Bad news.

My worm-eaten, Swiss cheese like brain was suffering the aftereffect of mountain shine in the most heinous fashion. So, for the sake of a comprehensible read, I had to cut myself off from the chiporo. It was something of a feat, because the characters in the book all drink white corn from early afternoon until late at night, rarely feeling any deleterious results. I was jealous of my characters. They could party all they wanted. I had to drink plain water for weeks, and then occasionally treat myself to a beer after a productive day of writing. Oh boy oh boy.

So, this introduction is to let you know that genuine research has been done in the preparation of this novel. The Internet was also a great source of information for the book. The Remington Firearms web page, along with the John Deere and Nuclear Regulatory Commission sites likewise were founts of practical knowledge. As near as I can tell, the technical specifications for all firearms, radiation toxicity, pharmaceuticals and power tools are accurate, except in one case. The John Deere 3235 fairway mower's top speed is eleven miles per hour, not twenty. For reasons of making a chase-scene in the text more believable, I changed the numbers to make their fine tractors more gazelle-like.

Thank you for picking up this book. With any luck you'll have a few shakes, laughs and wiggly moments with it. OK, we're through with the obligatory stuff. *Now* it's time to party-

Perri Pagonis
September 23, 2001

One

Youngblood, Virginia is a seven traffic-light town located between Fauquier and Clarke Counties in the north-western part of the Old Dominion State. It's near Winchester, but not too near that city famous for its delicious apples and repeating firearms. Ed Youngblood purchased the first commercial property in the town in 1923. He built a gas station on a former elementary school lot and the rest of the municipality grew up around his soda pop buckets and diesel fuel pumps.

The burgh now boasts a lingerie shop, a bar called the Clean n' Jerk Saloon, and several dry goods and sundry stores. Youngblood, by the way, yields the least state revenue of any town in Virginia, and falls on the corporate line between the two larger county jurisdictions. Police don't flock to Youngblood when there's any kind of trouble brewing there. The diminutive community isn't a heavy hitter in their estimation. The law enforcement officials essentially leave that area to its own affairs.

Which is a good thing.

Because there's piles of money in Youngblood that the law enforcement agencies *and* the Virginia Revenue Commission don't know about. It's just not what you'd call "high visibility income." It falls into the always tricky category the tax people call, "winnings and gratuities."

On the weekends, in the spring through fall months, the small town's population quadruples in size. Parking becomes nightmarish. The Clean n' Jerk even has a make-shift helicopter port off of the premises. Why do so many moneyed, pie-eyed gamblers flock to the town Ed Youngblood founded with his diesel garage?

Because Youngblood, Virginia is the pit-bull fight capital of the world.

Don't misunderstand the situation here. You can see dog fights almost anywhere there's mean people and mean mutts. But in this Virginia town, the dog fight has become something of an art form. The locals breed their animals to be psychopathic engines of destruction in combat. Dogs in that small locality of the globe don't just clash in the pit, they practically detonate with furor. The weekend contests aren't just battles, they're rabidly fought holy wars.

A dog with a winning track record can be worth thirty to forty thousand dollars in final stud sales, and on particularly good weekends, up to a quarter million dollars in wagering can exchange hands at the Clean n' Jerk. People in Youngblood like money. They're not stupid. They just don't like taxes, or things like taxes.

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Boo Smalls has three dogs he's trained for the fights. He also has an "unregistered" distillery on his property off of John Mosby Highway. He sold two winning dogs for stud last year to the tune of twenty thousand dollars each, and made another 20K off of distributing his unbonded distillments. Boo Smalls is into the fight scene big time.

Nitro is Boo's #1 prize dog. Nitro is a pit bull with seven kills to his record. He won five of his fights by biting through the breast plate of the opponent, and tearing out sections of its respiratory apparatus. Nitro's face looks a lot like the exterior hide of a baseball. Boo has had to inject his zygomatic area with sodium penethol and patch him up a few times after an evening's fight. If Nitro can win three more contests, his sale price will go up to fifty thousand dollars.

Nails and Jet are Boo's second and third dogs, and are still in training. Boo's fight-dog preparation methods are local legend, and a closely guarded secret. No one is allowed on his acreage when he's got the canines doing their preparations.

He does the standard procedure with the electric treadmill; the merciless engine that creates the need for them to run well past their endurance. That exercise alone would turn the single-minded beasts into efficient killing-machines. But that's only the start of their program. The famous dog handler also does a specialized form of "slap-training" with thick, leather armlets to work them into hysterical, viper-like deliriums.

Boo also does isotonic strength reps on one specific muscle group of the animal, depending on its anatomy: Nitro has a neck like a football, so he manually develops that area with a rope harness and tourniquets. Nails has

incredible power in his front legs, so he binds them tight, files its claws into points, and drills the dog until it tears through its lashings. Jet has the rear legs of Rhino, so he repeats the binding procedures and exercises on that animal's hind limbs.

So soon, the other two dogs will be ready to join Nitro in pit-combat, and each will have unbelievable strength in one area. Which means, that besides being trained to erupt in competition, the animals will have one section of their anatomy that could literally shred any and all competitors. But Boo has one special trick the locals couldn't even dream about.

One that concerns electricity.

The downstairs area of Boo's cabin is enclosed in steel bars with thick oven grates spread over the clay floor. After the training with the tread mill, tourniquets, and armllets he muzzles the three dogs and puts them into their pen. Then he connects a Sears Die Hard car battery to the oven grates, which are bound together with conductive piano wire. When he touches the points of the jump-cable to the metal bars, the dogs are zapped with unregulated juice and bounce off the walls like cannonballs. The animals attack each other in a frenzy of survival, but cannot harm themselves because of the secure muzzles. After 30 minutes of random jolts the dogs are given protein supplements, whole milk, and rib-eye steaks. Then he leaves them alone to recover for a day. Boo Smalls is one hell of a dog trainer.

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Liz Fury owns The Clean n' Jerk Saloon. The bar sits on her private property and becomes a "members only" club on Friday and Saturday nights when the fights take place. She also owns the Cleopatra Bikini Shop in Youngblood. Liz Fury is local commerce personified. She was a finalist in the Muscle and Fitness magazine body sculpting competition two years ago. She endorsed liquid protein supplements in iron-freak periodicals before she opened her club. The locals refer to her as "Cleopatra Fury." Sonny, her boyfriend, is the local enforcer and bouncer of the place during the nights. His services are especially required when it reverts to its private status on the weekends.

Sonny has a fight-dog in training named Roscoe. It's his first dog and he's determined to make good in the circuit. Liz has warned him repeatedly not to get into the dog-fight angle of commerce. It's a loser's game in the end, and only the most bloodless, unfeeling monsters make the real money off the pooches. Liz tells him to stick to strong-arm jobs, booze, and some occasional pharmaceutical action. Everyone will be better off. But Sonny doesn't listen to her. Sonny's lived in this town all his life. Having a dog on the circuit is a matter of honor. It's a matter of personal pride. Don't forget, Youngblood is the dog fight capital of the *world*.

*

Lester Ganz owns the only grocery store within the town's corporate limits. He sells an eclectic assortment of the world's cheapest and most expensive

food and wine items. Sunday through Thursday he peddles boxes of Cheerios, bags of flour, chicken wings, and Coca-Cola to the locals. On the weekends he changes to imported Champagne, smoked salmon, Swiss chocolates, etc. The local retailer lives for the arrival of the patrons of the Friday and Saturday night games. They are, without question, there to stock-up on the high-ticket items and saturate their pampered bodies with the good stuff; they throw money about like mentally-challenged royalty. He believes their behavior to be somewhat coarse, but glorious nonetheless.

Les Ganz, the meek shop owner, also has a sexual aberration that needs mentioning. The proprietor of the small market enjoys a very particular form of foot-worship, which will be illustrated in detail shortly. When Liz Fury first came to Youngblood, she turned fantasy-act tricks at her apartment for quick cash before she opened the bar and became a “legitimate” businesswoman. Lester arrived at her dwelling promptly at seven p.m. every Friday night dressed like a plantation owner in a crisp white suit and Panama hat. The muscle-girl orally kneaded his cherished feet until they were practically raw, and only interrupted her work to read excerpts of selected William Faulkner novels aloud to him. That was Lester’s ultimate fancy. In his dreams, he was a great southern novelist. He requested that she refer to him as, “Colonel Faulkner,” during their inexplicable sessions.

Liz Fury has not paid for a single item in his grocery store for two years, and is a frequent patron. Their Friday rendezvous still takes place like clockwork every week at Lester’s cabin. As stated earlier, Liz Fury is local commerce personified.

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Boo Smalls was sampling his own unbonded product last month while preparing a 40 gallon batch for the summer gamblers. He completely miscalculated the yeast to grain mixture in still #1. Much to his chagrin, after completion, his product tasted like a combination of all-purpose ammonia and Sears house paint. He attempted to add some “kick” to his less than acceptable white lightning by supplementing it with small amounts of strychnine. When Boo taste-tested his new creation in still #1 he passed out for two days. Boo doesn’t like to lose money on a batch, and will have to find some way to break even on costs. He siphoned twenty gallons of the leprous distillment into large plastic jerry cans, moved them into the utility closet in the front room of his cabin, and left the remainder of the volcanic mixture outside in the vat.

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To give you an example of the weekend activity in Youngblood, here’s a snapshot from a July night’s action at the Clean n’ Jerk. This particular occasion marks Nitro’s eighth consecutive weekly appearance in Liz Fury’s battle pit.

Sonny the bouncer is escorting a former Miss Virginia pageant winner and her celebrity companion to the folding chair area near the edge of the combat area. They’ve got mason jars full of corn liquor in their hands and big money is practically falling out of their designer jeans. The bar is jammed with chattering,

swollen career gamblers, fight-dog owners, beautiful people and ugly ones, too. But they've all got the same pumped-up, hungry looks on their faces. They're ready for the blood games.

Around midnight the horde moves out to the pit. The fight-dog owners have already been out there for some time. The area directly around the cavity is for the owners, big money gamblers and VIPs. It's the only space with seating. The rest of the mob stands behind them or on piled-up dairy crates. The particularly attractive women in the group are always asked by the local boys if they'd like to sit on their shoulders to watch the vicious contests. They almost always accept the offer.

Everyone is getting smashed on bourbon or corn liquor and becoming horny and wild waiting for the event. Liz Fury's bookies from the Clean n' Jerk work the crowd with the odds favoring the various dogs. The house percentage for making a secure bet is 10%. Side bets are completely up to the gamblers.

By 1 a.m. the crowd is tribal and swelling. The dogs have been viewed by all the bettors, the money is in the hands of the bookies, and the place is ready to blow-up with anticipation. Let the show begin.

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Boo Smalls is with caged Nitro at one end of the burrow. Another local man named Hank Cross is with his pit bull, Baby-doll, across from them. Nitro is heavily favored in this contest. This is Baby-doll's second career fight after his victory last week. But Baby-doll is not to be underestimated. He tore the wind pipe out his opponent's jugular area without a shudder in the previous match.

Sonny the bouncer asks the former Miss Virginia if she'd like to commence the evening's games by firing his shotgun into the air. She'd like nothing more. The beauty queen is a bit wobbly from all the white corn she's consumed, but grabs the carbine, turns to the crowd, and holds the rifle high over her head like an altar goddess.

The throng goes wild with bloodlust.

She looks at Boo and Hank. Both of them give her the thumbs-up sign. They're ready to burst from anticipation. The statuesque beauty holds the Remington 1100 autoloader to her shoulder, aims it at the sky, and lets two shots blast into the night. The kick-back knocks her into her chair, and she loses a shoe in the combat pit.

Nitro and Baby-doll are loosed from their cages and charge towards each other like enraged rhinos. They sprint into the center of the pit like runaway freight trains. The two combatants ram into each other with their skulls, and the report is not unlike an automobile collision. The crowd at the Clean n' Jerk howl in ecstasy.

Baby-doll bites into Nitro's front right paw and savagely tries to disengage it from its owner. Nitro goes for what is left of Baby-doll's remaining left ear, chews off a ragged chunk, and spits it out. Then he bites down hard into his

adversary's back. Baby-doll releases his grip on Nitro's paw, and squeals in perfect, clean pain.

Sonny is watching the proceedings like a devotee. He knows he can glean some training techniques for his pit-bull, Roscoe, from watching the famous dog of Boo Smalls. Liz Fury is watching the side bet money exchange hands. The house profit for making bet, after pay off, will be eighty-seven hundred dollars for this one fight.

Nitro bites into Baby-doll's jaw bone and cracks it like a celery stalk. The jaw tears loose, and flaps helplessly around the face of the animal. Blood pumps from the lacerations, and he's blinded by the clotting manifest. Baby-doll tries to attack his aggressor, but can see nothing. He makes snarling stabs into the area in front of him, but finds no opponent. Nitro comes up behind the helpless rival, masticates his neck, and body slams his adversary into lifeless pulp.

As a coda to his victory, Nitro goes to the area of the pit where the former Miss Virginia's shoe had fallen. He picks it up in his bloody jaws, and absent-mindedly shreds it. The shapely knock-out looks down into the hole and says, "holy shit!"

Boo Smalls gets his magnesium alloy canine retractable leash and guides Nitro back to his travel cage. The bettors are off to find the bookies, and the second round of fights are getting ready to start in a few minutes. Hank Cross wraps the carcass of Baby-doll in a towel, and throws it into a dumpster next to the bar.

*

It had been an incredible night for Boo Smalls. Not only had Nitro finished off his opponent with minimal injuries, but his dogs Nails and Jet had easily won their first battles at the Clean n' Jerk. Boo was on his way to becoming a rich, famous and powerful man by Youngblood, Virginia standards. Conversely, it had not been such a great evening for Liz Fury. She had bet against Nails and Jet in their matches, despite Sonny's remonstrations, and only made the 10% book fee off of their matches. Add to this dilemma that now many of the fight-dog owners were becoming unwilling to put their dogs up against Boo Smalls' animals because they were almost certain to be destroyed. Boo's canines were becoming completely unbeatable on the circuit.

Liz was a business-woman of the first water, and knew that if these one-sided victories continued, the games would eventually start to lose their valued bettors. There was always some other local hell hole ready to bleed the Clean n' Jerk's fight-dog action, and she was not going to let that happen without a serious scramble.

Liz also knew how to keep her hands clean, and was not above using any and all methods to keep her financial interests going without personal incrimination. She was thinking she'd have to use someone to help her with this particular bad-odds predicament, and she knew just who to ask for support.

*

Wanda Jackson is Liz Fury's employee at the Cleopatra Bikini Shop. Liz had given her a job there because she was broke, destitute, and had no other skills

except wearing Speedos and operating cash registers. However, she had been a calendar girl for the Snap-on Tool company after she'd finished high school, so she filled out her duties as swimsuit and lingerie model perfectly. The Cleopatra Bikini Shop's annual catalogue showed Liz and Wanda in that year's model thong, flexing biceps and looking sultry. They sold piles of sexy boudoir stuff to the frustrated house wives of Clarke and Fauquier Counties as well. The place was doing all right financially.

On Monday, after the weekend fights, Liz paid a visit to her employee at the store. The owner always kissed Wanda on the cheek when she came into the boutique and greeted her with, "Honey, you *do* have a nice lookin' pair of tits on today." To which Wanda invariably chuckled. They chatted about store income, and the summer blow-out sale that was coming soon. Wanda said she'd like to do a bikini show with some of the local young Lolitas at Winchester Lake, to help get rid of the current year inventory. Liz said she'd think about it. A definite maybe for now. Liz had other things on her mind besides making the skinny young boys at the lake blast their jam.

After some more girl talk, Liz produced a flask of boutique white corn from her hand bag. She encouraged Wanda to take a drink and relax. The store wasn't busy at all, and they were having a grand time just gassing and carrying-on. Wanda was hesitant at first. She didn't like to get laced until the evening. But eventually she got a couple of paper cups from the back of the store and had a cordial with her boss. They downed a couple of shots and continued their varied conversations. While they talked, Liz was adamant that they have a bit more of the delicious liquid dynamite. The two hadn't been out in ages, and the owner of the store was enjoying herself to no end catching up with her old pal. By early afternoon Wanda was completely smashed; burned toast by any degree of measurement.

Liz Fury's conversation changed in tone dramatically by two o'clock. Instead of remembering the nice old times, and gossiping about boyfriends, Liz was telling Wanda how fucked she would be if she hadn't rescued her. She informed her trashed employee that she'd be on the street, dead, or living in some slum with a hateful slacker without her assistance and job money. Soon Wanda was close to tears, and telling Liz she was right. She'd been out of luck when she met her, and owed her everything she had in the world.

Liz Fury moved in for the emotional kill.

"What were you doing for a living before I met you?," Liz snapped at the wasted clerk.

"I was on the street," Wanda sniffed, "I did some tricks, nude pictures, the Snap-on tool thing. That was a bad trip in the end. Those photographers wanted me to do some bizarre shit with a bunch of socket wrenches. A bit of kinky porn and stuff. You know all that, Liz. Why are you asking me?"

“Am I the best thing that’s ever happened to you?” Liz purred.

“Absolutely,” Wanda answered, her voice trembling with emotion. “I’d probably be in a car trunk in the auto graveyard if I hadn’t met you. I love you, Liz Fury. You saved me.”

“I love you, too,” Liz cooed with hormonal feeling, “I’m glad we understand each other’s true heart. But I need you to do a piece of work for me. Something that’s not exactly in the job description at Cleopatra Bikinis. Can I count on you to help me? This is something that I really need. It’s important. Something only *you* can do.”

“Anything, Liz,” she rejoined. “You *are* my best friend.”

Liz told Wanda about the potential situation which could effect business at the Clean n’ Jerk on the weekends. Wanda listened attentively and choked down some more unbonded corn. Liz informed her that if the bar started to lose money, the bikini store would probably have to close shortly after. She said the income from the club supports the Cleopatra on off months, which was a complete lie. The mail order business kept everything above water, and she needed the bikini shop to launder some of the profits from the weekend games. Also, Wanda’s small salary did very little to damage the store’s receipts.

Wanda was close to a nervous outburst now. She questioned Liz, between restrained sobs, “w-what do you want me to *do*?!”

“Just a little something on Friday,” Liz whispered. “I have a business difficulty with Boo Smalls and his unbeatable dogs. I just want you to dress up *real* pretty on that day, and pay him a visit at his cabin. Maybe take him for a drive into Winchester. You could do the town, and, perhaps, visit the Super 8 Motel. Of course I’d pay you for the day. Maybe throw in an extra c-note for your trouble.”

“Boo Smalls?” Wanda questioned, “that scarecrow? You just told me he might hurt your business, didn’t you? You want me to bang Boo Smalls for a hundred bucks?” Wanda hesitated, knitted her plucked eyebrows, and then added, “that’s a lot of money.”

“We’re old friends,” Liz rejoined, “I don’t want you to think I’m just using you because I’m your boss at the shop. This is *big* business. It’s for the club. It’s for the Cleopatra. I need you to distract Boo for a couple of hours on Friday afternoon before the dog-fights. Can I count on you, honey?”

“You’re *sure* this is gonna work?” Wanda questioned apprehensively.

“Could anybody say no to your set of pretty peaches, baby?,” Liz cackled.

*

On Thursday morning, Liz Fury paid a visit to Lester Ganz’s grocery store. She was decked out in muscle-hugging spandex, a black leather bomber jacket, and mirror shades. Liz Fury looked *fine* this morning. She swept into the store and informed her friend that she had business out of town on Friday so their weekly “literary” appointment had to be moved up to this afternoon.

Lester pondered this.

He’d grown accustomed to his Friday podiatry session, and hadn’t mentally prepared in an adequate way for such a hasty re-scheduling. He whined some, hemmed and hawed, and was about to tell Liz to forget the whole thing until next week. At that moment, Liz pulled out a copy of William Faulkner’s *Light in August* novel from her jacket. She began a compelling reading of the great writer’s interminably long, prosaic sentences. She was dramatically describing the desolate American south of the Post-Reconstruction era, and throwing in a genuine sounding tone of lament to her voice.

Lester actively salivated.

He told her they’d meet at his cabin at 1 o’clock this afternoon and not to be late. Liz picked up a Hustler magazine from the rack, plus a pack of Bazooka Joe Bubble gum from the front counter. She stuffed both items into the lining of her jacket. Then she abandoned Lester, who was drooling like an imbecile into his coffee cup. She didn’t say goodbye when she left the store.

*

Sonny was doing the booze inventory at the Clean n’ Jerk when Liz Fury entered the club. They always did the inventory on Thursday morning to get the liquor orders delivered by Friday afternoon. Liz told Sonny she needed his help to run a smear-job on Lester Ganz.

“You like blackmail,” Liz asked Sonny, “don’t you, toots?”

“I *love* blackmail,” he rejoined. “I like guns and bourbon, too.”

“You can play with your guns later,” Liz rejoined, “now just get your camera ready for action, and be sure it has some *film* in it this time.”

“OK Liz Fury,” Sonny responded.

On the drive out to Lester’s cabin Liz Fury was chewing her Bazooka Joe bubble gum and thumbing through the pages of Hustler. Sonny was driving, and trying to view the centerfold of the famous magazine at the same time. He almost ran the car off the road a few times in his zeal to look at that month’s sultry

femme-fatale. Liz told him he was bonehead of a vehicle operator. Sonny said, “nuts to you, doll-face,” as he continued to stare at the pin-up girl in the shiny periodical.

“You always have a skin mag and gum when you go for your appointment at Lester’s,” Sonny observed, “why is that?”

“Because Lester looks like a ferret and his feet taste like wet laundry,” she rejoined. “The mags get me worked up, and the gum makes his toes taste fruity.”

“Why do you still do this bizarre oral-shit?,” he asked, “suckin’ peoples toes and all? It’s nasty. It’s not like you need the money. Why don’t you just run the bar?”

“I always like to have a few people dependent on me for some kind of sick commodity,” Liz Fury rejoined, “You never know when you’re going to need someone to do a piece of dirty work for you that you’d rather not do yourself.”

“You’re a smart cookie in spandex clothing,” Sonny answered.

*

They arrived at Lester’s cabin at the appointed hour. Liz stuffed her mouth with another piece of gum, and rifled through the pages of the libidinous journal. She’s doing her last minute preparations to become the hoof-stimulating seductress from the faded glory of the Confederacy. She instructed Sonny to go to the cabin window and take all twenty-four photographs on the film roll when she began her act, no matter how much all the action looked the same. She insisted that he try and get some photos of Lester’s face and profile during his ecstatic reveries. Liz also told him to be sure and wait until her hair was covering her face before he started to document the festivities.

Sonny prepped his point and shoot Instamatic, and positioned himself by the window of Lester’s place. Liz Fury spat out her gum, threw the magazine down, and cat-walked up the stairs to the front door.

Liz knocked politely on the door a few times with no response. She knocked with more enthusiasm and soon Lester appeared. He was dazzling in his spotless, off-white seersucker suit, immaculate wide-brimmed straw hat, and swagger stick.

“Good afternoon, my date palm,” Lester drawled like southern aristocracy. How nice of you to *come*.”

“Why hello Colonel Faulkner,” Liz Fury answered, “may I come in your big ol’ house and tell you some stories today?”

“Indeed,” Lester intoned, “indeed, my rose, tell me of your travels and tales of woe in our lost Eden of the commonwealth.”

“Why I’d be pleased to, *suh*,” Liz Fury answered, and sashayed inside Lester’s home.

Soon Liz had Lester Ganz, AKA “Colonel” Faulkner, in his favorite arm chair and was delicately massaging and cleaning his lower carpal bones with warm, sudsy water. Lester had removed his wide brimmed hat, and had his neck bent over the back of the chair, post-strangulation position. He had his eyes closed, and was blissing-out like a puppy getting its stomach scratched.

Shortly after the foot-kneading, Liz took her copy of *Light in August* from her pocket and read aloud several paragraphs concerning the family difficulties of itinerant farm workers from the cotton and tobacco growing regions of the deep south.

Lester nearly swooned.

Liz placed a mouth mat in her palate, and began her oral exercises on each individual phalange. Then she took approximately half of his left size 9 into her lingual cavity. Lester cried out, “sic semper tyrannis!” in ecstasy. She fingered her hair over her face, and gave Sonny the high-sign to start shooting pictures. Sonny dropped the camera in excitement, but rallied nicely and got the machine working pronto. Soon he had 24 photos of Lester having his foot-extremities tongue-scrubbed by an unnamed model.

Within a few minutes the famed American writer was physically and emotionally spent. His eyes remained shut, but a beatific smile was pasted to his face. A large, wet stain was spreading over the crotch area of his fine woven trousers, and his breathing was heavy, yet contented.

Liz removed the billfold from his jacket pocket, extracted five 20 dollar bills, and replaced the wallet where she’d found it. She got up from the floor, brushed herself off, and exited the log home.

She didn’t say goodbye when leaving the premises.

*

Sonny was waiting for Liz in the car when she exited Lester’s place. He looked excited. He’d never seen Ms. Fury perform on a client before and was mightily impressed.

“Good lord, woman!” Sonny blurted, “that was a mighty fine reading of a boring-ass old book! Nice mouth-work, too, babe! I’m in *awe* of you, sugar.”

“Do you have your gun with you?” Liz rejoined.

“They’ll take my gun from me when they pry it from my stiff, cold fingers, angel-tits,” Sonny answered her, “you know that.”

“Then let’s get to the 1-Hour Photo shop at Gunpowder Mall and get these things developed,” she snapped.

“You got discount coupons?,” Sonny playfully inquired.

“Just drive, baby,” she responded.

*

Sonny and Liz Fury pulled into Gunpowder Mall’s parking lot, and situated the car in the back by the service doors. Liz told Sonny to give her his carbine and she stuffed it in the front of her metallic blue spandex pants. The bulge was considerable. They marched into the store, and told the bewildered clerk they were in something of a hurry to get their pictures developed. The employee said they should fill out a request form and come back in about thirty minutes. He didn’t have a lot of orders to prepare ahead of theirs.

Liz unzipped her leather jacket, exposing the handle of Sonny’s .45, and said they were hoping for some VIP service. Then she took one of the twenty dollar bills she’d removed from Lester’s wallet, and stuffed it in the mouth of the hourly-wage worker.

The hireling took Liz’s film roll and sprinted to the developing machine.

Liz looked at Sonny and remarked, “I don’t need coupons here, wise-ass.”

In ten minutes Liz and Sonny had the photos in their hands. They informed the clerk, in no uncertain terms, that he had *never* seen these pictures or either one of the 1-Hour Photo customers who used their services today. The employee wildly consented to their request.

A few minutes later they were back on the highway heading toward Youngblood. Sonny beamed with pride for having such a kick-ass girlfriend. Then he demurely asked Liz Fury if he could have his gun back.

When they arrived at the Clean n’ Jerk, Liz put the photos in the combination safe. She poured a glass of white corn for herself and thought about putting together tomorrow’s scheme for the eradication of the Boo Smalls dilemma.

*

On Friday morning Liz and Sonny were up early putting the final touches on their stratagem. When the Cleopatra opened at 11 a.m. Liz would get Wanda prepped and ready to get Boo out of his cabin at 1 o’clock. Sonny would go to Lester Ganz’s grocery store with the compromising photos and threaten public exposure if he didn’t do him a small favor in return for the negatives.

*

When Wanda came in the store that morning, she was ready to face any kind of unusual request her boss could have for her. She'd do anything to help Liz Fury, her personal savior. Even if it meant giving Boo Smalls a slice of her own sweet custard pie at the Super 8 Motel.

Liz met her girl in the store and did the obligatory kiss and "nice tits" cliché. Then they went through the store's inventory of bathing suits, lingerie, and spandex wear until they came up with the perfect seductress ensemble for her. If Boo Smalls wouldn't leave his home for a babe with this outfit on, then he'd probably gone queer for his own dogs.

Wanda was packed into a fuchsia stretch-mini skirt and black lace bra. Then they accessorized her with a zebra-print head band and several thin, metal studded leather belts. Wanda threw a blue jean jacket over her shoulder, and donned black stiletto-pumps to complete the look. She was red hot and ravishing. Liz Fury told her she was beautiful enough to be a model in Hustler magazine. Wanda anxiously chuckled, per usual.

The plan was to have Liz leave her outside Boo's cabin at 12:30. Boo was always working with, or training his dogs before the Friday night battles. Wanda would knock on his door and tell him she'd wanted to introduce herself to him for some time. She's an enthusiast of the blood fights and wanted to meet "The" Boo Smalls for herself. She'd inform him that she's interested in getting a pit-bull of her own, and wanted some tips on what to look for when buying one.

Then she'd suggest they go to Winchester to see a fictitious someone who was selling a dog. When no one was there to speak to them, Wanda would pour on the estrogen, and direct the unsuspecting mark to the Super 8 Motel for a roaring good time.

*

At noon Liz took off with gorgeous Wanda towards Boo Smalls's property, and Sonny drove to Lester Ganz's grocery store to implement his extortion game; which was the real reason why Wanda was needed to get Boo out of his house. The reason for wanting him away from there was simple. Sonny was going to make Lester Ganz kill Boo's precious fight-dogs.

Two

Boo Smalls was in the cellar of his cabin working with Nitro that Friday morning. He'd created a new isotonic strength exercise to work the dogs' neck and leg muscles. He'd taken the winch off of his Ford F-10 pick-up and brought it down into the training area. Then he connected a dog muzzle to the end of the crank's lashing, and mounted the entire mechanism on cinder blocks.

The famous trainer would then fasten the muzzle on one of the dogs, release a generous amount of the cable, and turn the winch on to begin pulling the animal toward the machine. Boo would then connect the car battery to the oven grates on the floor and let the animal get a dose of the hot current.

The beast would careen around its training cage, insanely pulling against the lanyard which was dragging it closer to another agonizing jolt. Boo would turn off the mechanism after a few minutes, give the dog some slack on the cable, and repeat the process again and again. Soon the dog reacted to the slightest pulling motion with lethal, deadly power and lightning speed. The attack-mindset was becoming more and more automatic and instinctual in the animals. Which was exactly the way Boo wanted their disposition to be in the pit.

*

Boo was about to place the muzzle on Nails, having finished with Jet's shock work-out, when he heard someone tapping on his front door. This was an unprecedented event. He'd placed "No Trespassing," "Private Property" and "Beware of Security Dogs" signs all around his property. In the several years he'd been in the dog-fight circuit, he'd never received a single visitor at his home who wasn't personally invited over. He grabbed his Remington 7400 .30-06 from the rifle rack and bolted up the basement stairs to the door.

Boo set the firing pin on his carbine and roared from behind the doorway, "Who the *HELL* is out there!? Can't you read a goddam sign? Get out of here before I shoot you right through this wall. This is *my* property, and I can blow your illiterate skull off right now and claim *self-defense!*"

A lovable feminine voice answered Boo's thunderous warnings.

"Um, Mr. Smalls, it's Wanda Jackson. I work at the bikini and lingerie store in Youngblood. Could I please talk to you for a few minutes. I'm alone and unarmed. I'm not kidding you."

Boo was taken completely off-guard by the ladylike response to his earsplitting threats.

He slammed open the peephole and got a eyeful of Wanda's pouting lips, perfect face, teased-up hair and zebra-head band. She lowered her sunglasses down the bridge of her aquiline nose, and glanced over the top of their frame at him. He swallowed hard, and shook his head. Then he repeated his swallowing and head shaking exercise, and slowly opened the door.

Boo stood in the doorway of his home completely agog at Wanda's goddess body and Frederick's of Hollywood ensemble. He cocked his head to the side for a moment and then returned it to the standard horizontal position. Wanda extended her hand to him and pleasantly intoned, "I'm so pleased to finally meet you Mr. Smalls. I think you're an *incredible* dog trainer. If I could have five minutes of your valuable time to chat, I'd really appreciate it."

Boo continued to stare at Wanda's flawless anatomy. He shook her hand and finally wheezed out an arthritic response to her greeting.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph the father," he blurted to the perky beauty.

*

Lester Ganz was doing inventory at his store before calling the wholesale markets in Front Royal for his weekly orders. His requests were always a schizophrenic pastiche of bargain basement generic edibles and cordon bleu luxury foods. His suppliers referred to him as “the gooch” for purchasing so many high-ticket items every week.

“Colonel” Faulkner was in a good mood today. He’d had a fine time of it last night with the always satisfying Liz Fury. He could still feel a slight tingle in his lower metacarpals from her expert dental skills. He was humming along with a Johnny Cash tune playing on the radio when Sonny walked into his store with a sheaf of photographs in his hands.

Sonny closed the door of the grocery shop, and turned the window sign over to the “Sorry, we’re closed” side. He walked over to where Lester was making his list, clicked off the radio, and tossed the loose photos onto his work area. “G’mornin’ Les,” Sonny said to him, “how are your bunions treating you these days?”

Lester Ganz stared at the disorganized pile of pictures in front of him. He picked one up. Then another. A wave of sick realization washed over him as he began to flip through the entire pile of sordid extortionist material. He tried to remain composed and lit a cigarette. The two men said nothing for a minute, but Sonny’s evil smirk, and calm, watchful eyes spoke volumes between the two men. Lester’s breathing became heavy and strained; it sounded almost like the lingual intonations an asthmatic alley cat would make. Sonny finally began to speak and broke the tension in the store.

“Les,” he patronizingly said, “the situation is not as bad as you think it might be. Really, it isn’t. These pretty pictures don’t have to get out to the 90% loyal Baptist population of Youngblood and surrounding areas. Listen, my friend, I just found out something that I bet you already knew. Did you realize that this area of Virginia has the highest per capita rate of Ku Klux Klan members than any other part of the country? Can you *comprehend* that fact, buddy? Do you know what those ol’ boys do to skinny foot-freaks who touch the food they buy to feed their pure-blooded, degenerate-hating xenophobic families?”

Lester began to uncontrollably twitch in small, spasmodic episodes. His upper lip started to quiver, and immediately afterwards he began emanating an odd chirping tone. It was not unlike the first, distant sounds one hears when approaching pet stores in the walkways of suburban shopping malls.

“Did you ever see those films on the TV, Les,” Sonny continued, “where the Klansmen burn big crosses and scare people shitless with their ghost sheets, guns, nooses, et cetera. Well all that’s just smoke. Video bytes for the media folks. That’s all Hollywood bullstuff. When they really hate someone, they just show up at your home like ordinary guys in a plain van. They jimmy the front door, come up to your room, and whisk you off someplace quiet. Usually to a place where there’s lots of dirt, like a big landfill area. They dig you a nice, deep

hole, and truss you up like a Thanksgiving turkey. Then they take a tire iron and break your kneecaps for tainting their community with sick, personal weirdness. It's hard to walk around after they do that, Les; almost impossible. You're then escorted to the bottom of the hole and the dirt is replaced to it's original position. It's an environmental consideration. One should do their best to be good to the Earth."

Lester Ganz was terrified to the point of painful intestinal fluctuations. His breath came out sounding like mechanical coughs. He finally choked out, "h-how-did-you-get-these? How? Why, w-hy me?"

"Does it really matter, Colonel?," Sonny calmly replied. "The situation we have here is clear. I've got these pictures, and the rules of our game are very simple. If you want them handed over to you, along with the negatives, you do everything I say. If you don't do whatever I suggest, these ditties will be posted everywhere in our fair town by tomorrow afternoon. Do you understand me, buddy?"

Lester groaned concurrence that he understood Sonny's position all too well.

"What is it you want, Sonny?" Lester croaked at him, "money? My store?" Don't you and Liz make enough dough at that wild-ass bar of yours outside of town?

Sonny slapped Lester across the chops, told him to shut his obscene hole, and listen to what he'd arranged for his foot-adoring, blackmail captive to do.

The bouncer of the Clean n' Jerk Saloon took Lester's store keys and locked the door. He told Les that the job he had planned for him is very easy, and would only take an hour or so of his time. They were going to pay a visit to Boo Smalls's cabin and see how his pack of dogs was doing today. They were going to prepare some exceptional snacks for the prize-winning trio, and deliver the goods to the animals themselves. That's the end of it. A cinchy task. No hassle at all.

Sonny took two packets of latex gloves from the Household area of the store and gave a pair to Lester. They both put the protective coverings over their hands. He took a grocery cart from the store and walked the owner through his own shop picking out items they'd need to make their delivery to the Smalls residence. Sonny selected the following goods for his assignment: rib-eye steaks, a small box of 1" carpentry nails, rat poison, steak knives, and a fifth of Jack Daniel's "Gentleman Jack" black label bourbon. He then took the fire ax from behind Lester's front counter and put it in the basket with his goods.

Liz Fury's big boyfriend then sat Lester down at the counter and pulled up a plastic chair next to his unwilling accomplice. Sonny reached in his pocket and removed a Japanese mail-order stiletto. The eye of the enamel tiger on the handle

was the knife's release button. The slim blade whizzed open and clicked into the locked position. He sliced open the plastic collar around the bourbon bottle's neck, removed the cap, and took a long draught of the smoky distillment. He handed the container to his shaky companion.

"Have a drink, Lester," Sonny urged. "We got some work to do before we hit the road. It'll take the edge off your problems. You have my word on it."

Lester took an equally long quaff from the decanter and awaited instruction from his massive escort.

Sonny told Lester to watch how he prepared "steak tartar" for pit bulls, and to emulate his work after the instruction was complete. The Clean n' Jerk's strong-arm told his audience that it's very important, when planning to shred an animal's intestines from the inside, to insert the carpentry nails horizontally into the savory cuts of meat. If they chew down on a vertical nail in the first few bites and cut their mouths, they'll leave the steak alone.

The cunning bouncer was learning more about fighting animals everyday, and knew that these dogs would devour any offered red meat like starved mountain lions. They'd suck down the protein before they even realized they've done it. Sonny was sure of this because his own dog, Roscoe, who would be ready to fight tonight, practically inhaled the stewing beef he bought for him each day.

Sonny and his ward laced the viands with carpentry nails. The strong-arm then took one of the steak knives and made vertical incisions into the fillets. He placed pellets of the rat poison throughout the cut of meat, and urged Lester to do the same with the ones he was working on. Les asked him why this was necessary if the nails were as deadly as Sonny intimated.

"A built-in back-up system, my man," he snickered, "always have a contingency plan going for you when putting together any kind of tactical operation. It's the law of the jungle, you know."

Lester took another long swallow of the famous Lynchburg, Tennessee libation, and held his head in his hands.

Soon the two of them had several chops full of enough lethal material to kill any kind of mammal on the face of the earth. They placed the deadly victuals in a brown paper bag, and Sonny escorted Lester to the front of the grocery store. They exited, locked-up the place of business, and walked to the sedan.

On the ride out to Boo Smalls's cabin, Lester Ganz started pleading with Sonny to let him out of the car and forget this nightmare situation he'd created. The store owner had absolutely nothing against Boo Smalls. He only knew of him from what he heard people say in town, and he'd only met the man once or twice in his life. He kept talking at a frantic pace, asking his captor again and again why

was he needed at all. If he hated Mr. Smalls's dogs so much, why not just shoot the damn things?

The bouncer casually responded that if Lester had nothing against Boo Smalls, he should have no problem performing this small transgression against him. No personal consideration would be involved. As to why he doesn't just shoot the valuable dogs, it's because bullets can be traced to their weapons, and Sonny has an individual motive in this scenario, being an up-and-coming fight-dog trainer himself. The strong-arm then answered his captive's question about using him in this situation. Sonny replied, "I like to keep my hands clean, Les. You know how it is. I'm a respectable businessman, and public opinion is everything these days."

They drove the rest of the way to Boo's cabin without saying a word. The radio was the only sound, playing an array of mournful Patsy Cline songs for the two highway travelers. Lester Ganz was knocking back shot after shot of Jack Daniel's, as Sonny wheeled the machine up the rural route, humming softly to the tunes of the queen of country music.

*

Boo Smalls did something he'd never done since becoming a serious fight-dog trainer in Youngblood. He allowed a perfect stranger to come into his cabin. The animal handler placed his rifle in the corner of the room, and Wanda glided past him, brushing her hip against his as she passed. She positioned herself on the threadbare divan, crossed her tanned legs, and smiled at her bewildered host.

He moved back across the room, sat across from her on a plastic lawn chair, and fidgeted like a teenager. Wanda asked if he wouldn't like to move a bit closer, so they can talk without having to shout a great distance to hear one another. Boo ran his fingers through his hair; he got up from his seat, walked over to stand in front of her, and nervously asked the young siren, "w-would you like a drink?"

"I'd love one," Wanda responded.

Boo got one of his jars of "private" corn from over the TV stand and two Dixie brand paper cups from the closet. Wanda started talking about wanting to get a pit bull to help guard her apartment. She said her neighborhood was starting to get a bad element around it, and there's no better protection than the locals knowing you've got an attack-dog in the house to keep the dirt-bags away.

Boo told Wanda, "that's a pithy statement, Miss."

He went on to tell her that no one has *ever* bothered him at his residence here in Youngblood. Her impromptu visit today marked his first "unsolicited appointment." Boo boasted to her that most people driving on the highway actually speed up a bit when they get near his property to get past it as quick as possible. He handed her the high-potency drink and Wanda said they should make a toast. They raised their disposable cups and touched the two rims together.

“To home security,” said Boo.

After twenty minutes of praising her host’s winning dogs to the skies, Wanda asked Boo if he might want to take her for a ride to see some people in Winchester who had some Pits for sale. She knew it was sudden and he probably had things to do, but she didn’t know when she’d get a chance to visit him again. She said she never sees him in town, and only goes to the Clean n’ Jerk when she’s got some extra gambling money with her. She slid over closer to Boo on the divan, looked at him in the eye, and put her hand on his knee. “Please, Mr. Smalls. I’m afraid to be where I live now. Nobody can pick a good animal out of the lot as well as you. I can’t tell you how much it would mean to me.” Wanda leaned over and kissed Boo on the cheek.

Boo Smalls’s mind was about to rupture with anxiety.

His thoughts were hot fireballs of torment. Could this beautiful woman really be telling him the truth? She wanted him to pick out a dangerous animal to protect her place of residence? Didn’t she have a big boyfriend with a shotgun who could do the same thing, with permanent damage inflicted on the unlucky perpetrators? The indecision was working him over. He’d never, ever left the dogs alone on a Friday afternoon before the fights.

However, they were as ready as they were going to get. The three of them were prepped for any and all competitors the locals could throw at them. Of this he was sure.

And Wanda seems so nice.

And she’s *so* good-looking.

And a little drunk.

The man’s head was filled with doubt about what to do. Wanda was standing up from the sofa and staring at him with positive anticipation. Boo reminisced for a moment, and couldn’t remember the last time he’d been out with a woman. He’d practically written off any future prospects of seriously dating anybody. Especially someone who looked as flawless as Wanda Jackson. Could taking an hour or so off with this perfect creature damage anything? Could it really?

Before he knew the words were out of his mouth, Boo Smalls told his guest he thought there’d be no harm in leaving his place for a short while to check out some new talent in Winchester. Perhaps he might even find an animal that interested him for cultivating into a future champ. Wanda beamed at him, grabbed his hands, and pecked him on the lips. Boo kissed her back, and felt a mild current of sexual electricity run through him that he hadn’t felt in some time.

He informed his pretty escort that he had to secure the dogs in their training area downstairs. Then he'd bring his pick-up around the front of the house. They each took a final shot of white corn; then Boo got his rifle from the corner of the room, and went down the steps into the basement.

Boo was walking on nothing but atmosphere as he descended the stairs to his cellar. He felt light-headed and 10 years younger than he had an hour before his caller arrived. Even his three dogs, who were shredding ancient strips of Firestone radial tires with their teeth when he returned to them, looked at him differently as he entered their training area. Nitro cocked his head in confusion, as if a stranger had just appeared in his sight.

The trainer removed all the muzzles from the animals and put a halt to the exercises with the Ford F-10's winch for the rest of the day. He refilled their water supply, gave them each their vitamin B-12 and protein shots, and allowed them to walk untethered in their individual sections of the training area. He replaced his rifle on the mounted gun rack, and examined his teeth for deposits of food using the blade of a hunting knife for a mirror. Then he returned upstairs, and left his cabin through the back door.

Wanda was getting a case of the jitters waiting for Boo to bring his truck around the front. She wondered if she'd been convincing enough to make him believe her unusual home-defense story. Her head was buzzing with the white corn she'd consumed; and she was trying to keep from looking like a conspicuous, cheap con-artist while standing outside his home.

Then Boo pulled his F-10 up to where she was standing. He was smiling like a plowboy ready for his first high school dance. Wanda's anxieties subsided when she took a look at her escort's facial expressions. He was acting giddy, and openly admiring her world class physical assets. She'd seen that look of complete worship and gratitude on her tricks' faces many times in the past. It was definitely a good sign. Wanda Jackson knew she had her mark by the end of his proverbial short n' curlies.

"Where to, little lady?" Boo gleefully inquired.

"Cork Street in Winchester, near Shenandoah University. It's just off Interstate 81," Wanda answered him, and put her hand on Boo's arm for emphasis of her thanks for his help.

"Shenandoah University?" Boo questioned. Isn't that where all the stuck-up country girls go to pretend they're Liz Taylor? They go there for a while and then end up marrying some God-fearin' farm boy wearin' a straw hat and denim bib-overalls. That's what I heard from the local highborn-types anyway."

"Bib-overalls and some big ol' boots too, honey!" Wanda cackled.

They tore out of his dirt driveway, got onto the gravel road, and headed toward the interstate highway. Boo clicked on the radio and they listened to Dolly Parton sing about the evil means of a farmland temptress named "Jolene."

*

Boo Smalls's cabin did not remain empty for very long after he and Wanda left for their fraudulent appointment near the college. Sonny and Lester pulled up to the perimeter of his property moments after he'd departed with Liz Fury's employee. The strong-arm got out of his car and scanned the area with his Wal-mart binoculars, searching the front yard for signs of Boo's truck. He then walked over to the space around the entry gate and noticed the fresh, wet tire tracks from the F-10. Boo was definitely not at home. Wanda had pulled off her end of the arrangement. Things were working out fine. Sonny shook his head in amazement at her success in removing Boo from the premises. "Spandex is one seductive garment material," Lester's captor murmured to himself.

He returned to his car, collected Lester, the fire ax from the grocery store, and his package of deadly goods needed for the job. Sonny and Lester hiked to the far side of Boo's fenced-in property, climbed in, and began walking towards his cabin.

After a few minutes of the trek, Lester inquired why Sonny would want to walk around outside with a long-handled, heavy cutting implement in his hands.

"To look like I belong in the woods, I suppose," Sonny rejoined. Then he added, "do you remember what I told you about back-up plans, Lester? Well this here instrument is just in case I need to brain one of those monsters if they get loose, get out of the house, or start a fuss with me. They're awesome when they are worked-up. I know, believe me. It's a shame, though, that those fine dogs have to return to the soil so young. I've never seen Pits that could tear a hole in the competition like Boo's animals. That's a fact. But hell, they're going to cause money trouble at the Clean n' Jerk soon enough if they're not done away with. It's just a business consideration and that's all it is. Also, Lester, I might have to kill you with this particular long-handled ax if you start getting squirrely."

At hearing this statement, Lester Ganz released a high-pitched nasal wheeze, which then transformed into an ultrasonic flute-note.

"Just kidding, Lester," Sonny blandly assured him.

The two of them made their way to the edge of the woods in front of Boo's back yard. Sonny sat Lester down on the trunk of a fallen tree. The muscleman placed himself next to his aide and recounted the grim predicament the lank grocery store owner was in.

"Les," Sonny said, "this is where we part company for the day. I believe you are familiar with your options in this situation, but let me recount them for you. If those dogs arrive at the Clean n' Jerk tonight, I'm going to have those

photos of you and your girlfriend spread around town like confetti. If that happens, you'll lose your good name, your grocery store, and more than likely receive a visit from undercover members of the KKK sheet-patrol."

Lester Ganz became mentally unglued at hearing this pronouncement, and started gibbering some kind of pre-lingual word salad at his burly oppressor. Sonny grabbed a handful of his assistant's face, and brutally twisted it back and forth like a loose doorknob. Then he gave Les a final crack across the bridgework, and a trickle of blood began to flow down his lip and into his mouth.

Sonny continued his monologue. "My friend," he went on, "you're an intelligent man. You know when something has to be done to protect your own interests. Whether it's the right or wrong thing to do in the larger sense is purely academic speculation. I *know* you can find a way to break into that cabin. It doesn't look like much of an entry challenge. I'm sure Boo keeps his dogs locked-up in the cellar area. Go downstairs, give them their last meal, and get the hell out of there as fast as you can. I'm going to be watching you with my field glasses from the woods. I'll know when you go in, and I'll know when you leave. If you do everything right, and take care of business like I told you to, everything will be jolly. You go back to your business, I go back to the bar, and everyone's a happy camper. If things go to shit, or you get cold feet, you'll have to move to Thailand by tomorrow morning to beat the heat. Do you understand me, buddy?"

Lester breathed heavily, almost like a death rattle, and creaked a response to the blackmailer that he knew what he had to do. Sonny handed him the package with the lethal wares. He stood Lester up, brushed him off, and told him when he's finished with his duties to walk back to the rural route crossroads and take the Greyhound bus back into Youngblood. Lester's captor told him he'd pay a visit to his place of business tomorrow, and they could chat about current events in their picturesque little town. Sonny clapped his man on the shoulder, chirped a cheerful "toodle-oooh, chum," and walked back into the woods to stake out a good surveillance position.

The store owner sat back down on the tree trunk in terrified silence clutching his bag. He could not bring himself to believe he was in such a twisted, insane predicament. He tried to clear his head. He tried to think logically. And finally, he *could* make himself understand that he was in a desperate situation. He was at the complete mercy of a cheap gangster in a lawless southern town. Lester pondered over several scenarios of escape, and at last came to the conclusion that the only way out of his dilemma was to do what Sonny wanted of him. He would deal with whatever consequences came down the pike after he'd finished here.

He began trying to justify his potential criminal-actions to himself. Would the world really miss three vicious attack-dogs capable of killing and maiming innocent people? Were the new gambling places making their town a better place to live, or merely bringing in fast money and scumbags to satisfy their own greed? When Les thought about it that way, it really wasn't such a bad thing he was being

asked to do. Dangerous, yes. Foolhardy for sure. But it really wasn't what one would term a "sinful" act, now was it? Les braced himself for action. He stared hard at Boo Smalls's cabin for a long moment, and then headed toward the back door of the private residence.

Lester took the determined paces of an outlaw gunslinger walking down the main street of a frontier town. He had the venomous package in his left hand, and bent down to pick up a good-sized stone with this right one on his way toward the place. The scenario going through his mind was simple: break a back door window pane, reach inside and turn the door handle, and go in through the rear of the house. Immediately after gaining entry, get downstairs, serve lunch to man's best friends, and be out of there in a few moments.

When he arrived at the cabin's rear entrance, Lester Ganz, Youngblood's timorous grocery store owner, began to tremble with clean terror. His teeth chattered like a handful of bones. He shut his eyes, barely able to command his hands into action.

Finally, he raised the stone over his head. He was ready to hurl the heavy flint at the miniature plate glass pane and begin his killing task. The small man brought his arm forward with all his effort and speed.

Then he froze. Completely. Lester stared in disbelief. The door to Boo Smalls's cabin was ajar. It wasn't even completely shut.

Boo had been in such a hurry to get to his truck and pick-up Wanda that he hadn't clicked the door catch to automatically lock it. He'd only pushed it back with his hand and never checked to see if it closed completely. It never even shut. The Smalls's residence was wide open for any curious visitor to enter.

Lester gently pushed the door with his brown paper bag and it swung open easily. He stood there unable to believe his tremendous good fortune.

"Somebody up there likes me, I guess," Lester Ganz panted under his breath.

He tossed the stone he carried in his other hand off to the side, entered the house, and partly closed the door behind him. Lester was careful not to lock it. He saw the entrance to the cellar, and made a swift motion to get to the stairs and down to the training area. When he reached the entrance to the basement, the pit-bulls began their low, explosive barking. Lester stopped cold in his tracks; as if he'd been nailed down on the spot with a rivet gun. He took a deep breath, steeled himself, and looked down into the semi-darkness to view his intended victims.

*

Wanda and Boo parked the F-10 on Triangle Drive, and walked the rest of the way into south Winchester. Liz Fury's retail assistant had given her driver a slip of paper with the dummy address on it, and they were looking at house numbers as they walked down Cork Street. She'd hooked her arm through Boo's

as they ambled along the road. They looked for all the world like newlyweds going to buy a cuddly puppy for their new country home.

After some searching, they found the proper house number they were looking for. The couple stood outside the contemporary-looking building without saying a word to each other. Then they looked again at the paper with the address printed on it. The pair continued walking for a minute, and stopped an abundant, friendly-looking man casually making his way down the opposite side of the street. Wanda asked him whether the residential numbers ended here, or picked up again somewhere further along. He informed her this was the only Cork Street in all of Winchester and it definitely terminated here.

Boo and Wanda returned to their original address and stared up at the newly opened, two-story Colonel Sander's Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant. Winchester brats were playing around on the plastic slides and seesaws outside of the place; hefty moms wearing polyester stretch pants and Brooks and Dunn T-shirts were noshing on extra-crispy buffalo wings and drinking Orange Crush sodas. A man wearing a full-length chicken costume gave them a coupon that would save them one dollar on any entree, or two dollars on a family picnic-pack of their delicious products.

Boo Smalls turned to face his beautiful companion.

"I believe we have the wrong address," he opined to Wanda.

She stared in saccharine disbelief at the busy fast food restaurant. "I don't believe it," she pitifully sighed. The leggy girl attempted to look stunned, and continued her spiel. "I'm *so* sorry Mr. Smalls. My friend Charlene said these people were reliable pit-bull breeders. I can't imagine why they'd give her a bad address. I feel awfully stupid, and I've wasted your time. I, I..." Wanda began to get puffy with tears. She'd had several shots of white corn earlier in the day, and was a fairly good actress when it came to mimicking distress. She'd learned how to pout and sob her way out of difficult situations in the past before she became a full-time employee at the Cleopatra Bikini Shop.

Boo Smalls put his arm over her silky shoulder and tried to comfort the unsettled woman. He said consoling, calming things to her in an attempt to allay her frustration and embarrassment. "You can't imagine how humiliated I feel Mr. Smalls," Wanda sniffed. "This is simply *terrible*." Boo continued to assuage her feelings, becoming more than a little aroused at touching her neck, hands and face. Wanda moved close into his arms, and let him hold her tight.

Although Boo was fairly certain this unusual situation was no accident, he was past the point of caring. Boo Smalls isn't stupid. He kept his cash winnings in safe deposit boxes and never carried more than fifty dollars with him when he left the house. He had no credit cards, bank accounts, expensive jewelry or valuables. If Wanda was working some kind of confidence scheme, it was fine with him. He had nothing in the world but his cabin, fight-dogs, and distillery. And nobody in Youngblood was stupid enough to try anything funny with them.

He was glad as hell to be so close to this young Venus. Whether her affection for him was real or not didn't matter in the least.

Wanda collected herself as best she could. They moved over to a street bench and she went through several Kleenex tissues wiping away tears and attempting to re-apply make-up which had smeared during her emotional difficulties. After a while she had returned to her unblemished, cosmetically perfect appearance.

After a long moment, she reached up and held Boo's face in both hands. She pulled the man's mouth to hers, and gave him a deep, cinematic kiss. Boo returned the erotic heat in kind to his partner, and slowly slipped his hands under her jean jacket, and up over her firm, heavy breasts.

When they finally broke their embrace Wanda said to him,

"Um, I don't know how to say this in delicate terms, so I'm just going to say it. Would you want to get a room in town for the afternoon, Mr. Smalls? Do you...do you want to make love to me? I mean right now."

Boo's heart raced and the irises of his eyes crackled with sensual electricity. He rejoined to his date, "yes Miss Jackson, I'd like very much to get a place with you today. I honestly feel like a new man since I've met you. Do you know someplace around here where we can go?"

"Follow me, baby," she rejoined.

She grabbed his hand and they headed toward the Super 8 Motel, just off the commercial district on John Mosby Highway.

Three

Nitro, Jet and Nails began snarling low, homicidal sounds of derision when they sensed a stranger in their dwelling. The trio started ricocheting off the bars of their training area, which was built to keep them apart from each other, and separate from the rest of the cellar. Lester Ganz was at the top of the basement stairs, experiencing a fear he thought only existed when one was having a direct conference with the Prince of Darkness himself. The moans the dogs created in their den reminded him of the wails one hears in the Chronic Wards of state mental facilities.

The thin, nervous man went on his knees, and craned his neck to get a look at the downstairs area without having to take any unnecessary steps into the poorly lit space. From his tightly focused yet difficult vantage point, he could see that the animals were securely caged.

When he made eye-contact with the fighting-beasts, their howling mathematically increased in volume. They began gnawing at the bars of their cages, and snapping at each other with torment from being unable to intercept their mutual intruder. Lester stayed in place for a minute, making extra sure the animals were unable to escape their confinements. Then he walked down the wooden stairs, determined to make this deadly occasion the shortest house visit of his life.

Sonny had observed Lester's entry into the house with utter disbelief. Boo Smalls, his personal icon of the Youngblood fight-dog circuit, actually had the nerve to leave his house door *open* while he's away? This unheard of lack of security only made the young hood more reverential towards the famous trainer. The youthful felon closed his eyes and shook his head in amazement. This is the thought that went through his mind: "Boo Smalls's animals and reputation are so rough, so completely iron-clad, he doesn't even need to secure his private residence when away from it! Good God! That man's got the balls of a freakin' *lion!*" Mr. Smalls's incredible display of complete bad-assed assurance humbled the young man. That was the sketch going through Sonny's mind when Lester Ganz simply opened the back door and walked inside the cabin.

Sonny shook his head in wonder a second time, and mumbled to himself, "Jesus Lord, I wouldn't want to be Lester Ganz right now for all the black label bourbon in Lynchburg."

Lester walked quickly and quietly down the stairs while the trio of hosts howled with red heat. When he reached the floor of the basement he stopped for a quick minute to look around the room. He stared at all of Boo's medieval-like training tools and it made him shudder with disbelief: leather armlets, thick ropes, various muzzles and chain harnesses where hung about the dirty walls. He saw Boo's .30-06 on the gun rack, and 10" hunter's knife planted tip-first into the pine workbench.

His eyes moved over to the Ford F-10's winch, which was mounted on cinder blocks, and connected by insulated cable to a muzzle which was designed to cover the head of the animal being pulled by it. Finally his gaze drifted to the Sears Die Hard car battery. His eye followed the car jumper cable from the wet cell unit, and along the floor of the training area to the several oven grates lining the bottom of the dog cages.

Lester Ganz *nearly* fainted from witnessing the decor of his surroundings. The roar of the animals, dark atmosphere, booze, and comprehension of the terrible predicament he was in all came crashing down on his consciousness like a baby grand piano. He slowly reeled on his feet, nearly collapsed, and finally placed a hand on Boo's workbench to steady himself. After a long moment he knew it was time to get his heavy-handed task started, and then get out while he still had his wits about him.

He took a final look at the training devices, ground his teeth together, and reached into the paper bag with the poisoned meat. He fingered the cutlets and

could feel the carpentry nails laced into the succulent chops. Lester picked one from the bag and approached the cage nearest him.

“Boo Smalls is a regular Josef Mengele,” Lester repeated to himself. “He’s a vicious and sick man. I’m doing these dogs a favor by killing them all now. I’m saving them months, maybe years of misery in the long run.” This was the mantra he said again and again to himself as he got closer to the animal cages.

The dogs were all at the front of their pens, barking so intently and systematically it sounded like an industrial machine running. The store owner held a steak out at arm’s length in front of the cage where Jet was kept. The dog examined the cut of meat, and cocked its head. It barked without conviction a few more times, and sniffed the air, snorting in great puffs. Then the young fight-dog stopped barking entirely. Nails and Nitro, startled by the silence of their mate, subsided in their howling as well. Soon all three animals were staring at the glistening red fillet dangling from the stranger’s hands.

There was silence in the cellar of Boo Smalls’s cabin.

Lester realized this was his moment to strike. He closed his eyes, paused for one second, and began tossing a few strips of the lethal rations into the first two cages in front of him. Nails and Jet greedily gobbled them up as they flopped into their confinements, oblivious to the mortal passengers each cutlet contained. The intruder in the basement was so disoriented and nervous from his task that he almost doled out all the viands to the first two dogs. He felt in his bag and had only two chops left. They would be the last supper for Nitro. Then he’d get out of the house as fast as his legs would carry him.

The dogs were making low rumbling and chewing sounds as they quickly went from one steak to the next, snuffing them up with lightning speed. Lester walked in front of Nitro’s cage and tossed the first cutlet inside to him. The champion dog caught the victual in the air and swallowed it whole, without it ever touching the ground.

Lester stared at the small, savage animal in some kind of admiration. Then he reached in his bag, removed the final steak, and tossed it toward the cage. The beef-chop hit the bars of the dog pen, and fell down directly in front of it. The store owner clumsily moved forward to pick-up the piece from the floor.

*

At the Super 8 Motel, Wanda paid for a double room with the hundred dollar bill Liz Fury had given her for necessary expenses that day. She would receive another one from the Clean n’ Jerk’s petty cash box when she’d finished her end of the business arrangement with Boo Smalls.

Wanda got a 10% discount on the room because she’s a member of the American Automobile Association and had her membership card in her handbag. The Super 8 always gives a discount to AAA members. The Cleopatra Bikini Shop employee remembered this information from past times when she’d been a guest at the establishment. Wanda Jackson knows a good deal when she sees one. She isn’t stupid.

After paying for the room, the couple went across the street to the Sheetz convenience store. Wanda bought a bottle of André Champagne, a six-pack of Budweiser beer, Utz barbecue potato chips, Planter's roasted peanuts, Trojan brand latex condoms (ribbed for her pleasure), and travel sized containers of Motrin ibuprofen pain reliever and Scope mouth wash. Now she's ready to operate for the afternoon on John Mosby Highway. The glamorous girl took her date by the arm while they were heading back to the motel and whispered to him, "Boo, honey, you're day hasn't even *begun* yet."

They swept up the stairs of the motor-hotel and up to the door of their pool-view room on the second floor. Boo was unusually anxious, and his hands were trembling while he fidgeted with the key. His escort assisted him with the procedure, and soon they were inside their love nest, ready for the early evening festivities.

Wanda took the champagne and condoms from the paper bag, and threw the remainder of the goods on the room's second bed. Boo then emerged from the bathroom after a gratifying session of draining the snake. The perky girl had already taken her jean jacket off, and was about to remove the zebra print band from her teased-up hair.

She playfully tossed the bottle of sparkling wine and box of raincoats to her counterpart, and he caught them with a not ungraceful flourish.

The pretty enchantress pointed toward the decanter's cork and told him, "take *that* off." Then she nodded to the Trojans, "and put one of *those* on." Then she breezed past him into the bathroom and closed the door.

At that moment, Boo Smalls was the happiest man alive within the corporate limits of Winchester, Virginia.

Wanda came out of the bathroom and whooped in genuine relief, "Oh, *baby*," she said, "I had to pee like one of those great big Russian race horses. I swear I needed to go so bad I could taste it! I bet I lost a kilogram of body weight there in the sandbox." She cracked herself up with the trendy use of a metric system unit. After a moment she regained her composure and slid into Boo's arms. She unfastened her bra and let it drop to the floor, then pushed her spandex mini-skirt down over her firm hips, and off completely.

Boo Smalls, bootlegger and pit-bull trainer, was making-out with a stark naked supermodel in a cheap motel. The feeling was glorious. It was the first time he could remember being in a rented room with a woman he wasn't paying to be nice to him. He was beginning, just maybe starting to believe, that there's a God in heaven after all. He opened his mouth wide and took Wanda in the deepest french kiss of his life. His date was working with his zipper and shirt buttons, unfastening them all and discarding his clothes as quickly as she could.

She moved him over to the bed and laid him down flat on the mattress. Then the beautiful temptress straddled him and began fondling his stem with her

strong hands. After a moment, she slid down to his mid-section and slowly took his full length in her mouth. Boo Smalls cried out in clean ecstasy. The pleasure his body generated was indescribable. His inner mind became a wash of multicolor, pyrotechnic explosions. Wanda took the champagne from the bedside table, fiercely shook the bottle, and sprayed a wave of bubbles and froth across her perfect, fragrant breasts. She ground Boo's face into her cleavage, and let him gluttonously lick the heady beverage from her nipples and skin.

*

Lester Ganz was reaching down in front of Nitro's cage to pick up the poorly thrown steak. Then he thought better of it, and retracted his hand. Although he was $\frac{3}{4}$ in the bag from Gentleman Jack bourbon, he knew he didn't want to take even the smallest chance of becoming engaged with Boo Smalls's famous pit bulls. To be even this close to them, and safely protected by metal bars, was enough exposure for a lifetime. He began looking for something to help him push the last chop between the thick tines of the cage. A broom or mop handle would be perfect. He began searching inside the cellar for some kind of long, unbreakable tool for his last task of the afternoon.

Then he heard the most abhorrent sound of his career: the moan of an animal slowly having its viscera shredded into spaghetti by carpentry nails. Lester Ganz, unable to stop himself, turned to watch the death throes of the expiring beast.

Jet lay on his side, eyes shut, and bleeding from mouth and rear. The dog's breathing was at moments heavy, then quick and erratic. Crimson bubbles expanded and contracted from its mouth. Then Jet shuddered to his feet, and violently coughed out a clot of black fluid. Mixed in with the manifest were lacerated bits of its insides, run through with the sharp fasteners from the tainted steaks.

Lester Ganz retched, and brought up a mouthful of bile and top shelf bourbon.

Then he spewed the entire contents of his stomach. The sound was volcanic; like the engine of a giant fighter-plane immediately roaring into life.

The deadly ration was beginning to have the same effects on Nails, the second dog. His cries started slowly, then increased, and soon he was prone on his side, gasping in pain. Lester knew he had to get out of the place immediately. Things were starting to get very ugly down in the cellar, and he didn't want to stick around for any more of this grisly business in Boo Smalls's cabin.

He looked over at Nitro. The dog was in the far corner of his pen, away from the front bars. He'd only eaten one of the tainted chops, and Lester wanted to get rid of all of the damned things and bolt the premises. The sick, frightened store owner wanted out of the hellish residence at once. Les abandoned his search for a broom and put his hand down in front of the pen's heavy prongs to flick the remaining cutlet into the cell.

Nitro flew on to the man's hand as if fired from a grenade launcher. Lester screamed bitter shrieks as the champion pit bull's jaws clamped onto him. The dog's teeth broke the carpal bones in his wrist like dried pretzel sticks. Les tried to kick the steak into the cage and succeeded. But now it was a moot point. He looked for something to try and beat the animal away with, but everything was out of reach. Even the car battery cable was too far away. He could do nothing except try to pull his hand away from the enraged fight-dog on the other side of the steel bars. The same dog who had bitten completely through the thick bones and breast plates of several other trained attack-dogs on the fight circuit.

The man's wrist was pulverized. The pain and panic behind his eyes was an electrical storm. However, the dog's grip seemed to be weakening. The poison and sharp objects from the one steak he'd consumed were starting to do their job on the nervous system. Nitro was starting to reel, and his eyes had rolled back into his head; the iron-like mandibles were losing their grip. Then Nitro shuddered violently, and lost all control of its back legs. But, incredibly, the jaws still held! The dog was in a grand mal seizure, going in and out of consciousness, and its jaws would not release Lester's mangled hand.

Les let one long, sharp cry escape his mouth, and pulled his injured arm away from the dog with strength he didn't know he could summon. Nitro pulled back on the member with equal determination. He managed to free his fist from the animal's mouth, but Nitro had one final burst of adrenaline left in his system. He swung back, clamped on to Lester's index finger, and cleanly tore it from the remainder of the digits. Then the animal hacked out several mouthfuls of bilious fluids, and dropped down flat in its pen.

*

Wanda placed a latex Trojan on Boo Smalls's rigid handle, slid his member inside her, and assumed full control of their glorious union. She still straddled him like a cowgirl, and moved her body over his in slow, skillful increments. Her pectoral and abdominal muscles were slick with sweat, and they involuntarily flexed themselves along with her torso's snakelike movements.

Boo was savoring every second of the congress with his pretty friend. He didn't want to consummate before he'd milked every sensory register of pleasure from this impromptu rendezvous. However, that was asking a lot of the man. Wanda Jackson's physique was created and trained to give unbearable pleasure to men. It didn't have a shut-off switch. Soon Boo was at the brink of release, and unable to slow down or cool off the waves of inexpressible gratification.

Wanda switched from the slow, grinding motions she'd incorporated earlier to a fluttering, teasing movement on his white-hot instrument. After a few moments of the delicious torment, she went into the full-bore, heavy push-ups.

Boo could withstand her blistering friction no longer, and discharged with such force that his respiratory apparatus momentarily hitched. He hacked ragged coughs for a long moment after his reproductive system's delightful liberation of its seed.

After the successful completion of their coupling, Wanda made sure Boo was all right, and nursed him back to health with Budweiser beer and the salted

snack foods they'd purchased from the convenience store. They watched stupid talk shows on their motel room's color TV for a while, talked about different breeds of attack-dogs, and took a long, hot shower together for the remainder of the afternoon.

*

Sonny had been watching Boo's cabin with his field glasses for way too long. He was sure that Lester had somehow screwed up the works, or was just standing inside of the place, too terrified to move or make any kind of decision as to what to do. He considered going in there himself to rattle his cage with the fire ax, but then decided against it. He reminded himself of why he brought Lester along in the first place: no personal physical evidence, no motive. The anxious bouncer would just have to play this one out for a while. Keep cool. Maybe have a jolt of bourbon from the flask. It always took the edge off an itchy predicament. Gentleman Jack Daniel's is an Olympic class product when it comes to smoothing out the rough parts of the day.

The back door nearly exploded off of Boo Smalls's cabin.

Lester Ganz violently stumbled out of the house in a state of utter madness. He was running zigzag through the back yard and had a dish towel wrapped around his hand. The thick material was crimson with fresh blood, and dripping with every step he took. He was pale from hemoglobin loss, and unable to think, blinded by perfect fear and inconceivable pain in his arm.

He spun around, looked in all directions like a lost child, and finally began hollering into the surrounding woods, "So-nny! G-get me the *hell* out of here!"

Sonny put his binoculars down, and spat the bourbon from his mouth in contempt and unbridled rage. "Jesus Lord!" the young thug shouted, "how on earth could he have fucked things up *this* bad?" He began marching through the brush, intent on getting Lester as far away from the area as possible, and considered giving his witless assistant a competency lesson in the bargain.

Les was flapping his arm around like a broken wing, blubbing, "oh, God, God it hurts, help, someone please *help* me!" Sonny came crashing out of the woods like a bulldozer, fire ax in one hand, and replacing the whisky flask in his hip pocket with the other.

He grabbed the thin man by his lapels and snarled, "you ignorant cocksucker!" His breath was like locomotive steam and ethyl alcohol.

"Did you finish the job Les?" Sonny roared, "are they history?!"

"Blood... everywhere, all dead," he simpered. "Jesus. It... was... awful."

Lester removed the towel from his hand and showed Sonny the spot where his index finger formerly had been. The strong-arm stared in disbelief at the

mangled wrist and vacant spot where Lester's digit had previously been located. Lester repeated his whiny plea. "Sonny, *do* something. It's *killing* me. I think I'm going to pass out!"

Liz Fury's henchman collected himself in a flash, and pulled the flask from his pocket. He held Lester's arm in a death-grip and poured the expensive whisky on to his lacerated hand.

Lester Ganz screamed like an hysterical woman.

Sonny removed the red bandanna from his pocket, curled it into a rat tail, and tied it tight just under Les's tattered, now useless wrist. The injured man was openly crying, and his legs were straining to support him. When Sonny tightened the tourniquet, his accomplice heaved some opaque, yolky substance from his mouth. He did this because there was nothing left in his gut to reproduce. Then the Clean n' Jerk's bouncer grabbed his charge by the gruff of his neck, and pulled him along as quickly as they could go to his sedan parked on the fringe of Boo Smalls's property.

*

At the Super 8 Motel Wanda and Boo were bathing in the sea-green shower stall, and playing with the various pressure settings of the Sunbeam shower-massage attachment. The steam was rising in the bathroom and Wanda insisted that Mr. Smalls give her a thorough cleaning of the perineum with the machine set on "heavy pulse."

Her grateful partner was only too happy to comply, and vanquished every unwanted particle of material from her exquisite lower regions with the stimulating instrument. Boo Smalls's date for the day swore several times during their session that she would purchase one of these fine household items upon their return to town.

Then, to cap off the day properly and fairly, Wanda took Boo's personal instrument in her hands, and used the agitating pulse in her fingers, wrist, and forearm to bring her companion's plumbing to red-line pressure, and, inevitably, a satisfying emancipation from it.

*

Lester Ganz was beginning to lose consciousness as Sonny dragged him through the woods to the rural route. The store owner's legs were rubbery and his vision had a red tint in the periphery. His escort moved him through the thicket with almost no resistance. They finally made it to their sedan, which was parked on the shoulder of the road. The strong-arm propped his charge against the rear of the machine. Then he opened his trunk and got several large plastic garbage bags and an oil drop cloth from the car's rear compartment.

The bouncer ripped open the passenger door, and placed the drop cloth on the seats of his ride. Then he tore off a mylar bag from the roll, and placed it over Les's wounded forearm. He tore another sack from the roll and used it as a tourniquet to secure the one covering the bloody appendage. Sonny whipped Les around to face him before they took off.

“Don’t you *dare* bleed on my clean car seats you maggot,” the hefty thug warned his passenger.

Les whimpered a weak consent, and they tore off in the automobile towards Fauquier Community Hospital.

Sonny’s rider was in a state of shock and becoming frantic with the unbelievable situation. He would become highly agitated and then, immediately afterwards, start to lose his equilibrium. Lester’s driver bellowed at him to calm down. The more he moved around and went to pieces, the more blood he’d invariably lose. He handed Les the remainder of his flask and ordered him to drink it, which he did easily.

Lester Ganz, never having been adept at keeping his cool while under pressure, became completely unraveled. He began screeching like a monkey at his incensed driver, “Sonny, I can’t *stand* this pain much longer!”

To which Sonny replied, “don’t worry Lester; the way I see it, after the people at the clinic are through with you, you won’t even *have* that hand to give you any trouble in the future.”

Lester Ganz’s eyes nearly leapt from their sockets at the realization of a potential amputation occurring at the hospital. He gazed at the hoodlum in exquisite horror for a long second, and then passed out cold in the front seat of the sedan.

*

Boo Smalls and Wanda walked arm in arm out of the Super 8 Motel and leisurely made their way back to Cork Street. They looked in store windows and talked about different breeds of attack-dogs, their relative prices, and availability on the market. Finally they made it back to Triangle Drive. Boo opened the door of the F-10 for his lady friend and they drove back to the Interstate 81 on-ramp. Boo Smalls was enjoying his afternoon immensely, despite its unusual nature. They cranked open the windows of the pick-up, turned the radio on, and casually cruised back into Youngblood.

They laughed and talked about their outlandish adventures during their day trip. Then Boo pulled up in front of the Cleopatra Bikini Shop, and promised to come by some time when he knew of some local Pits for sale. Wanda had become quiet the last few minutes of the ride. Boo imagined she was just anxious at the prospect of dealing with her intense boss, Liz Fury, for the rest of the day.

Boo Smalls leaned over to offer Wanda a final, heavy kiss, but she turned her head and only gave him her cheek. Boo was puzzled, but not too surprised by this reaction. He thought she was just some sexy, nut-job kid out for a wild afternoon, and he’d been lucky enough to glean the rewards of her adventurous spirit. She jumped out of the truck’s cab and waved an unenthusiastic goodbye.

Boo Smalls was not disappointed by her lukewarm departure. He'd had a *fine* piece of corn-fed, country-girl pie for his lunch break, and it hadn't cost him a dime. It had been a very good day.

The famous dog handler was ready to get home anyway. It was time to get the Pits prepped for fight night at the Clean n' Jerk. Then, at that moment, a paternal-like vision of Nitro came into his head. He began thinking affectionately of his beautiful, investment-portfolio dog. Two more kills and that angry pooch would be worth a cool 50K on the breeding circuit. It seemed unbelievable. Why more people weren't in this lucrative, almost no overhead business, was a complete mystery to him. And Boo Smalls, a man with almost no social conscious or ability for moral regret, thanked God for their absence from the scene.

*

Wanda walked into the Cleopatra Bikini Shop and saw Liz Fury sitting behind the cash register. Liz was smiling, which was always a good thing. When Liz wasn't happy, nobody was happy. Her boss looked up at her and announced, "Honey, you and that fine set of tits you're wearin' look like you could *use* a drink." Liz walked up to her girl, and kissed her gently on the mouth. To a casual viewer, the shop owner's action would have looked like a religious confirmation. Then she stuffed a one hundred dollar bill into her hired hand's black lace bra.

Liz stared at Wanda with a wolf-like, playful look.

"Everything worked out?" Liz cautiously asked her. "You got him out of his place like we planned? You did all that I requested of you?"

"I did *everything* you asked me to do boss," Wanda rejoined. She looked tired and seemed relieved that her duties for the day were through. Also, she was thankful that she was getting on the good side of her sexy friend's temperament.

Liz Fury clapped her hands and laughed out loud. It was a rough, man's laugh that came from her throat. Sharp and resonant, like the voice of a football quarterback calling out an audible-play at the line of scrimmage.

"You did me a favor today, baby," Liz told Wanda. "Liz Fury remembers people who do good things for her."

"Could I have that drink now, Liz?" Wanda responded. "Banging Boo Smalls was kind of like humping a giant-sized reptile. The guy's creepy. He's...like...scaly. I took the longest shower of my life after we finished business at the hotel, and I could have taken a longer one. I felt like I had to. I don't know, he's just...scary I guess is the word. Just please don't ask me to do that again any time soon, OK Liz?"

Liz Fury poured Wanda a paper cup full of corn from the flask in her purse. She brought it to her frazzled employee, and joined her in a toast. Liz told

her she was sure the Clean n' Jerk and Cleopatra Shop would be financially stable for some time now. With Boo's dogs on permanent vacation, business would stay booming on the weekends, and the money she needed to run her interests would be coming in on a dependable schedule.

Wanda sipped her drink and Liz watched her for a few moments. Then the bar owner came around to her side of the counter and began massaging her shoulders. Wanda relaxed, closed her eyes, and let her manager work her strong hands over her arms, back and neck. They were both breathing hard and enjoying the delicious feeling of skin on skin, muscle on muscle.

Then Liz Fury whipped Wanda around in her chair and gave her a hard, long kiss on the mouth; her quick tongue probing every region of her employee's oral palate. Wanda was dazed by the unexpected show of affection, and found the experience quite enjoyable after her uncomfortable afternoon session with Boo Smalls.

After they finished their embrace, they began talking about Sonny. Liz hadn't heard from him this afternoon concerning his end of the action, but she was confident he'd get the job done. Her bouncer was, for the most part, competent, although he acted a bit too childish for her taste. They polished off their shot of corn and poured another round from Liz Fury's personal flask.

*

Sonny squealed the car off of the rural route and headed up the industrial road which would get him to Fauquier Community Hospital. The turn off the lane threw Lester against the door of the sedan, and woke him from his blackout. A flash of pain went through him and he began wailing like an infant in the car. Sonny ignored him until they pulled up across the street from the Emergency Room. The strong-arm grabbed his accomplice by the collar and began telling him his instructions in no uncertain terms.

“Can you *walk!?*,” the bouncer roared.

“I. I. think so,” Lester answered. “Everything looks funny, like it's painted red.”

“Jesus Christ,” Sonny rejoined. He was afraid Les would pass-out again, but needed to get this information into the stunned man's head. If he could do that, and get him inside the clinic, he was home free.

“This is what's going to happen Lester,” he continued, “so listen *very* carefully. I'm going to take your wallet and keys. I'll put them back in your store this evening. Now listen to me Les, you don't know how it occurred, but tell the nice people in the ER you got attacked by a stray dog. You've got no ID, and your name is Joe Brown. Remember that, chum. You're *Joe Brown* for the rest of the day. I'm going to put five hundred dollars in your pocket, buddy. That'll get you in the place and secure some kind of treatment. Tonight, Les, that means in a few hours, you leave the building. You don't check out; you exit the hospital through a window, back door or fire escape. I don't care how you do it-you just do it.

Tomorrow morning I want to see a sign in the front of your business that says ‘Have a great summer! See you in September.’ Listen to me, because this is the real shit coming up. You don’t get anywhere near this town for the next couple of months. If I see you, or find out you’ve returned, those nasty, nasty photos of ‘Colonel Faulkner’ go on display everywhere. Do you understand me, friend?”

Sonny removed his Harley-Davidson billfold from his jeans and plucked five one hundred dollar bills from the bundle. He stuffed them in the front pocket of the injured man’s cotton twill trousers and patted the spot where he’d placed them so Les would be sure to know where the money was.

Sometimes persons who are experiencing deep shock can have moments of incredible comprehension and clarity during their overwhelming episodes. Lester Ganz was about to have one of these explicit events. The store owner became lucid for a second, and confirmed that he understood exactly what had to happen. He thanked Sonny for their afternoon excursion, and briskly exited the car. Lester Ganz walked like a monarch half way across the street towards the hospital. Then, like a man who’d just been shot by a powerful rifle, he collapsed in a glorious heap on the road. He was nearly crushed on the spot by a woman driving a Ford Aerostar mini-van.

The lady in the family wagon stared aghast at him, uncertain if she’d grazed him, or if her vehicle had something to do with his injury. She ran into the Emergency Room to alert the medics. In half a minute, two yeti-sized orderlies came sprinting out of the infirmary. After placing him on the collapsing gurney, they strapped him in, and wheeled Lester into their trauma center.

Sonny’s flask was empty and he needed a drink bad. Soon, however, he’d get all corn and Jack he could handle at his place of employment, the Clean n’ Jerk Saloon. He looked at the canvass sheet covering his car seats and it was badly bloodstained, but nothing had gotten on the ride’s all-weather, factory-installed, tuck-and-roll material.

“He didn’t bleed on my seats,” he snorted, “at least I’ll give him that, the little *pussy*. Sonny roared off in his sedan to dispose of the drop cloth and get ready for the dog-fights tonight. It was a special night. His dog, Roscoe, was making his grand premier in the battle-pit. He was a shoe-in to win with Boo Smalls’s unbeatable dogs out of the way. “Hello, big money,” he purred to himself while wheeling away from the hospital zone.

*

Boo Smalls wheeled the F-10 off of Interstate 81, and down the rural route to his cabin in Youngblood. “Home, sweet home,” the dog trainer mused to himself as he drove his machine up the dirt path. He babied his truck into the driveway, and around to the back where he kept it parked.

It had been a splendid cruise into town today, and Boo had listened to the country music radio station on the way home. He was humming to Willie Nelson’s classic “Whisky River,” and tapped out the song’s time signatures with

his thumbs on the steering wheel. Then his gaze rose from the yard to the back door of his cabin.

It was wide open and askew on its hinges.

Boo Smalls's eyelid twitched, and his thoughts started to race. "Just take it easy, champ," he said to himself. But the anxiety was rising in his inner voice. "Nobody in the state is crazy enough to break into *this* cabin," he reminded himself. "We'll just have ourselves a look-see in the old casa and get to the bottom of this small enigma." Boo casually climbed out of his pick-up and headed towards the aslant back door of his residence.

As Boo got closer to his place, he began to notice the droplets of dried blood in the dust. When he reached the door jamb, he saw the smears and sticky blots had gradually increased in size. They led a dirty trail down to the training area. But something else was bothering him. Something was terribly wrong and he couldn't put his finger on it. Then the formidable realization struck him like a cupful of battery acid.

The dogs weren't barking upon his arrival into the cabin.

Usually the trio yapped like wild harpies when they scented anything in their territory. Now Boo Smalls was standing in his own home, at the top of the stairs leading down into the training area, and he was scared to be there.

His mind started flashing different possible crime scenarios: ones that could have occurred while he was out, or could be occurring even now as he stood there. Each one that came to him was more graphic and fantastic than the last. He began to shiver from the base of his spine, and the raw, electric sensation of dread crawled up his back like a fever and reached his brain pan. It exploded there like an M-80 in a soda pop can.

Finally a cold, steady awareness came to him. His entire financial investment, year's work, and livelihood was located down in that cellar, and he was going to find out what the hell was going on.

He walked quietly and carefully to his ancient divan. Under the ticking he kept his police issue, .38 caliber Glock semiautomatic pistol and bag of cartridge clips. Boo Smalls isn't stupid. He knows that having a back up firearm is important, and just because he doesn't use the handgun on a regular basis doesn't mean it falls into disrepair from idleness. He cleans and oils his Remington semi-auto .30-06 and Glock .38 every month. He fires a few rounds from his pistol every couple of weeks at the vermin, snakes, coons, opossum, skunks, etc., that find their way to his distillery's shed to drink the purified water or eat the valuable grain. Boo's handgun is ready to rock and roll any time, and the famous trainer is ready to blow the head off any meddling shit-bag who's messing with his life's work and investment.

And, if they've got the brass balls to trespass on his property, well it'd be just his pleasure to line them up like Barbie dolls and spray their pretty gray

matter from here to Kingdom Come. Yes, indeed, he thought, that would be a fine thing for him to do to them.

Boo, now pumped with testosterone and his own adrenaline, slipped the ammunition cartridge into the handle of his gun and headed back towards the basement steps.

“Don’t sell no wuf-ticket, boy,” Boo said to himself as he approached the stairs. The cunning man knew one thing about dangerous situations: the element of surprise is the biggest asset you can have if you’ve got to take someone out of the picture permanently. “Don’t sell no wuf-ticket, keep cool, keep *quiet*,” he kept repeating to himself as he slipped down the first couple of steps like a phantom. “Go real slow, don’t scream your brains out or try to scare them like in those bullshit Hollywood-gangster flicks. If you see anything that doesn’t have four legs on it, keep a steady hand, and gut-shoot them if possible. Then you can ask your uninvited guest all the questions you want with no argument from them what-so-ever. However, If you can’t get them just below the navel, then aim for the face. Nothing works on an aggressive trespasser quite like a brain-shot. Absolutely, positively, nothing.”

The dimly lit cellar was eerily quiet. Boo kept his gun held tight in front of him, and continued down the first few stairs. Then he stopped. Cold. The sick-sour odor of gastric juices and entrails entered his nostrils like stale cigarette smoke. Sweat began to appear on his brow, and the feeling that things were worse than he could possibly imagine came crashing into his mind. Still, he held the pistol steady, but was unable to fathom why his animals were not raising holy hell at the scent of someone in their area.

Then he saw it. Splattered on the floor like an obscene Rorschach test: the morning contents of Lester Ganz’s stomach, plus a hefty sample of his personal blood type mixed in for good measure.

His eye followed the bloodstain trail to the front of Nitro’s pen. He couldn’t see his dogs at all in their confines. Not one of them had come up to the front bars. This was unheard of. “Someone’s stolen my fuckin’ animals,” he said in a frenzied mindset. God have mercy on the rookie pissants who did this to me.” Incredibly, he retained his composure, and kept himself from reacting like a dumb cowboy. Boo resumed his ghost-like movements through the cellar, and advanced towards the animal pens. Then he halted.

For one split second, Boo Smalls’s vision went totally, white-out blind.

When his eyesight returned, he gazed in fascination at the three corpses before him. Each of his prize animals was dead, and they had died horribly, as testified by the clots of thick, intestinal fluids surrounding each of them.

He blinked, took a deep breath, and spun around like a spring-loaded toy.

Boo Smalls sprayed the downstairs of his cabin with .38 caliber slugs, flashing the gun back and forth, aiming for corners, or anyplace a person could wait in ambush for their mark.

He roared in inhuman tones, “Eat lead, you shit-ass scum-bags! Die like friggin’ *cock-a-roaches!*”

He unloaded the Glock’s entire clip in a few seconds. Slugs blazed around the room like hot popcorn kernels. The report of the heavy pistol in the cellar was like the sound of exploding cannon shells. The thick smell of potassium nitrate from the spent cartridges mixed together with the odors of the basement like a perfect garnish. Calcium dust fell from the ceiling like a fine confectioner’s sugar, and lightly coated the floor.

And then, silence.

Boo still held the pistol in front of him, but was no longer pulling the trigger. He knew for certain he was alone now. Of this he was sure. His wild gaze held firm, and his hair was matted to his forehead with perspiration. He slowly looked around the room, and his eyes set on the three dog pens and their deceased occupants. He wasn’t sick, and he wasn’t melancholy. That would come later. But now he just wanted to sit down and do nothing. He wanted to remain absolutely still for maybe ten years or so. That sounded about right to him. Boo Smalls sat down on the workbench in his basement, and didn’t move an inch until Saturday morning.

Four

A few days before the grisly elimination of Boo Smalls’s dogs, he’d received a visit from the notorious pair of local characters known to the citizenry of Youngblood as the Rayhall brothers.

Buzz Rayhall, age 9, and his brother Kenny, 7, loved to climb the fence around the Smalls’s property and hang-out on his land during the day. It was only about a mile away from their family’s lot at the J.E.B. Stuart trailer park, on the far side of Interstate 81’s shoulder. Buzz had discovered Boo’s twin distillery system about a year ago while on a scavenging expedition, and when he first cautiously approached the gleaming steel containers, he believed the large cauldrons to be crude space ships.

The two brothers would take off from home during the summer months and walk down the berm of the highway, off to do whatever adventure they had planned that day. Boo’s acreage was an especially good place to spend afternoons because of the abundance of wildlife located there. Invariably there was an

opossum, squirrel, fox, rat or something with four legs in the woods to chase around and throw rocks at.

One time in the early spring, Kenny had espied a black squirrel sitting on its haunches on a tree stump, munching on an acorn. He quickly brought the animal's presence to the attention of Buzz. They watched it for a minute in complete silence. The pair of boys marveled at the creature's almost human facial expressions. The manual deftness the animal displayed handling its meal was astonishing. Then Kenny rose from their observation point, removed a smooth stone from his pocket, and whipped it side-arm style at the unsuspecting quadruped. Almost as if radar guided, the stone nailed the tiny beast in the chest, knocking it several feet into the air. The ambushed creature died instantly. Buzz bought Kenny an extra-large, cherry flavored Slurpee at the Sheetz convenience store that afternoon for his unbelievable marksmanship.

Lately, the two boys had been finding all kinds of good things to goof around with on Interstate 81's shoulder. The Virginia Department of Transportation, or V-DOT in local parlance, had been widening the highway to accommodate more traffic that feeds into Interstate 66. That's the highway that leads to Washington D.C. and other northern towns.

Buzz and Kenny had seen newsclips of the nation's capital on the television before. They almost always showed some kind of political demonstrations by various groups wanting more money, recognition, power, or something on that order. Nobody seemed to be content about anything in that city. The television reporters in D.C. were all whiny things, too. Everything they said sounded like, "*wanh-wanh-wanh*." Why anyone would want to drive into Washington for any reason was a complete mystery to the two brothers.

But the stuff the V-DOT construction crews left by the side of the road each day was remarkable: short lengths of rope, different colored electrical wires, steel stakes that looked like medieval weapons, muddy work gloves, etc. Sometimes they really lucked-out and found half-empty spray cans of fluorescent paint. The paint was used to mark off areas where electrical connections, or gas and water pipes would go when the tarmac was put down.

The paint cans were the really coveted items. They'd take them to their favorite hiding place on Boo Smalls's land and graffiti things like, "Korn," "tits" and "pussy" on the surrounding tree trunks or big rocks on the ground. Their personal clearing was claimed and marked off for all possible intruders to see. It was definitely the territory of Buzz and Kenny Rayhall.

One day they'd checked out the always departing construction sites and found nothing of any interest to take. They'd even walked past Boo's property on the shoulder of the road, and after some time, sat down on some abandoned cement joiners. After a few minutes of mindless activity, such as watching cars whiz by them or flinging shale at sodium-arc highway lights, Buzz thought he saw something lumbering up the embankment. And indeed he did see something moving on the grassy incline.

A large raccoon was trundling up the hill to its den. The older brother alerted his junior to the intruder and soon a fusillade of rocks and gravel were

being hurled at the startled animal. The two boys screeched and galloped after the portly coon, whipping jagged stones and anything they could find at the quickly escaping beast.

However, the boys were too late for any animal torment on this particular occasion. The coon climbed way down in its hole, and was completely out of their grasp. A tirade of profanities and promises of torture were barked at the creature secure in its lair. Then, disgraced by their defeat, the Rayhall boys walked back up Interstate 81 towards Boo's property and the J.E.B. Stuart trailer park. While returning to their clearing, Buzz saw something else on the highway shoulder, and liked what he saw.

The orange fluorescent paint cans were half buried in silt, and laying side by side in a small culvert. But they seemed different from the ones they'd found before. They looked like they'd been there for some time. Buzz would never have noticed the two cylinders if the sunlight hadn't reflected off of them at just the proper angle. The boys unearthed the two units and immediately forgot about their humiliation with the raccoon; they were in scavenger heaven now.

Kenny tried to pop the top off of the can, but could get not get it to comply. The same dilemma presented itself with the container Buzz was working on. They figured they'd get it to their private territory on Boo Smalls's land, and use a stone or something to open the reluctant vessels. For now, they simply dropped the two canisters on the ground and kicked them along the side of the road.

*

Unfortunately for the Rayhall boys, Boo Smalls, and the town of Youngblood, Buzz and Kenny's reading skills were not well developed. Sure they knew words like "crap," and "screw," but the standardized school tests they took a few weeks ago put both boys' reading ability at the primer level. If the pair of them could have deciphered the warning on the cans, they probably would have taken them to the Youngblood municipality office, or to the firehouse in town. This was the warning embossed on the small, radioactive waste containers.

Biohazard Warning
Pohick River Nuclear Facility
Low Level Radioactive Waste Container
Phosphorus 32 (P-32)
Transport date: 5-20-01
Final Destination: Red Falls, Nevada
Primary Nuclear Waste Repository

It wasn't a lot of rad waste the boys had come across. But that's the problem with nuclear material. When you get rid of it, you've got to get rid of *all* of it. The various transport drum sizes: 55, 30, 10, 5, and 1 gallon containers are what most people are used to seeing. But lots of times, the runoff spillage is much smaller than what is transported in the larger containers. But still, you need to get rid of every bit of it.

The two errant 10 ounce cans had been placed on top of the transport truck by a technician when doing a holding area inventory. They'd been marked off as shipped material, and then forgotten as the day progressed. When the conveying vehicle hit a series of pot holes on the highway that the V-DOT crews hadn't filled-in, the cans fell from the top of the truck and into the culvert. To the Rayhall boys' credit, the lead-lined waste containers they'd discovered did look a lot like spray paint cans. But looks, as most people discover sometime in life, can be quite a deceiving thing.

The boys kicked their hazardous material containers down the road and reached the fenced-in area in front of Boo Smalls's land. They each threw a canister over the fence, and then climbed in after them. Within moments they were in their clearing, working on the cans with heavy stones, and trying in vain to crack them open. After some desperate attempts at breaking their seals by hurling the canisters at the giant white rocks near the clearing, defeat finally settled into the minds of Buzz and Kenny. They weren't going to be able to embellish their clearing with day-glow paint today.

Resignedly, they continued to kick the containers around and found themselves within eye-shot of Boo Smalls's two-unit, stainless steel barrel distillery. Then they both saw something that made them forget the previous chagrin with the fat raccoon, and their inability to open the paint cans. They espied a filthy opossum moving about by the door of the shed, next to the stills. He had pulled a small bag of grain outside into the open, and was contentedly chewing the sack's ingredients.

Instinctively, they began running at full clip towards the animal. Kenny told Buzz, between breaths, to keep *real* quiet. Don't whoop it up and scare it away before they could get close enough to brain it with these useless-ass cans they'd picked up on the street today. They closed in on the animal, gaining speed like tiger sharks on their intended prey.

Kenny, the younger brother, could not contain his thrill of the hunt and let go a war-cry whoop as they got within rock-throwing range of the beast. He threw his canister at the now fleeing mammal. The can struck still#2 which was empty. The sound of flying metal crashing onto hollow steel was like the sound of an enormous gong being struck. The opossum fled like a shot upon hearing the report of the impact, and the Rayhall brothers stopped running. They stood agog at the incredible sound they'd created by banging the side of the steel cask with the canister.

Buzz followed suit, and rifled his can at the still. Another metallic tidal wave of sound filled the air. They picked up their projectiles and hit both stills many times. The sound was like enormous, demented wind chimes swinging in a hurricane. The boys were thrilled beyond words. Still #1 contained an amount of the bad hooch that Boo had botched a while before; about 20 gallons worth remained inside. When the canisters hit that keg, a deeper tone was produced than the higher cymbal crash sound which emanated from its mate.

Then the gunshots started.

Boo Smalls was on the horizon with his .38 Glock aimed in the general area of the Rayhall brothers. The report of the powerful pistol was like death itself. The boys froze in crystallized terror, and Kenny's almost full bladder released its contents. Buzz, the older brother, took the canisters and quickly threw one up the ex-current siphon of each vat. One made a rattling sound as it hit the steel floor. The other splashed into the leftover corn on the bottom.

Then more shots were heard, and their fear vanished; it had transformed into the involuntary flight instinct of self-preservation. Buzz and Kenny tore off from the area with a velocity they thought they'd only seen on the Road runner or Speedy Gonzalez cartoons. They were completely unaware of their feet moving. It was an absolutely reptile brain escape from their new found clamorous pastime.

Boo Smalls, intentionally missing the burr-head crew-cuts of the Rayhall brothers by miles, chuckled to himself. He re-set the weapon's safety switch and pocketed the Glock in his jean jacket.

*

Friday night at the Clean n' Jerk Saloon

Liz Fury's strong-arm and bed warmer, Sonny, is a happy man. No one had heard from Boo Smalls all day, and he hadn't shown up with the few other dog-trainers at their appointed hour. He didn't answer his home telephone, and no uninvited person dared visit his property after dark. News of his absence spread through the crowd like an electric current. Cell phones started clicking, and other dog trainers were notified that Boo and his seemingly unbeatable dogs were nowhere to be found. Within the hour several local handlers showed up with their Pits, ready to do battle on a more even playing field than the week before.

Liz Fury's bookies were mingling with the crowd at the bar, giving their odds and taking early bets on the night's contests. The fight dogs were next to the burrow, caged, and ready to be viewed by anyone who wanted a piece of the wagering action. As news continued to spread about Boo's no-show status, the Clean n' Jerk became more and more animated with people. Soon it was practically bursting with customers, bettors, local usurers and VIPs with gambling streaks.

Sonny was in the bar's office with Liz and Wanda. The former Muscle and Fitness magazine model was pouring complimentary shots of Jack Daniel's for her employees, and beaming with the satisfaction of a job well done. She estimated at least 25-30K in betting fees this night, and all because of the timely elimination of a few bad dogs. Life, according to Liz Fury, was a good thing if you knew how to grab and manipulate it by the soft parts.

Liz and Sonny mutually agreed that Lester Ganz's accident today was not much to be worried about on the retaliation scale. Sonny had driven past his grocery store after he dropped him off at the Emergency Room. He'd deposited his wallet on the store's counter and left the front door key under the welcome mat, as promised. When he drove by in the evening to come to the fights, the

“Gone fishin’” sign was in place. The door to the shop was bolted, and the lights were off. Their man was definitely on a lengthy vacation by now.

“You sure he’s gonna lose that flipper?,” Liz questioned her bouncer.

“Honey,” he responded, “the last time I saw that hand of his it looked like the Thursday lasagna special at the Denny’s family restaurant. It was a real road kill, darlin’.”

Liz Fury drained her shot glass, poured another one, and responded, “well, there go the piano lessons I guess.”

The bar owner assured her pals she wouldn’t miss her weekly c-note sessions with Colonel Faulkner. He’d been used to good measure when his time had come to provide assistance for a troublesome situation. Wanda chuckled, sipped her booze, and crossed her perfect legs upon hearing this information. Sonny knocked back his shot of bourbon and barked, “God, I *love* Youngblood, Virginia!”

Liz Fury told her employees they might want to carry a sidearm with them for the next few days. Boo Smalls might come back here asking questions and looking for trouble. Wanda balked at this idea. She said she’d probably end up killing herself with the evil thing. But Liz was adamant, and told her that blowing away some dickhead in self-defense was the easiest thing in the world to do. And completely legal to boot. She’d probably end up liking it.

Liz repeated the situation’s obvious information, mostly for Wanda’s sake: Boo couldn’t go to the police. What would he tell them? That competing racketeers poisoned his vicious, illegal animals? That he’d made the betting odds at the dog fights in town undesirable for international gamblers? Boo Smalls was on his own as far as payback went. She told Wanda if she saw him on the premises to alert her or Sonny instantly. Between the three of them, Boo would back off from their superior firepower if he got a wild hair up his ass. She also told Wanda there was a variety of firearms under the front bar of the Clean n’ Jerk. All she had to do was pick one out, and ask her for the quick and dirty, 1-minute ballistics course.

*

It was time for the blood games to begin at the Clean n’ Jerk. Roscoe, Sonny’s pristine fight dog, was matched against Big Pete, a solid black Pit with one kill on his resume. Liz Fury’s bookies had put the odds at 3 to 1 in favor of the more experienced dog. The bettors flocked at the chance to triple their money against Sonny’s animal. When the bookies had come back to the bar with the wages and marks, the Clean n’ Jerk Saloon, for its 10% secured book fee, would make ten-thousand four hundred dollars off this one contest.

To commence the first fight of the evening, Liz insisted that Wanda take a flat .38 from her collection, and send a few rounds into the sky to kick things off. The two stunning beauties walked up to the edge of the pit, and got the thumbs-up

sign from both trainers. The crowd was standing up, cheering like it was the Army-Navy football game, and waiting for Wanda Jackson to blast some lead into the night with her new toy. Liz showed her how to release the safety, and set the firing pin. Now it was up to her girl to ventilate the sky with slugs from her shiny semiautomatic weapon.

The roar from the mob was deafening. The two dogs were in their cages chewing at the bars for release. Liz Fury had her hands on Wanda's hips, and was whispering encouragement into her ear. The Cleopatra Bikini Shop employee raised the pistol with both hands at a 45 degree angle, and unloaded the 7-shot clip at the fingernail moon without a shudder.

The release of the hot rounds was a new, delicious experience for her. It was pure sensory register excitement; it was pure *sex*.

Wanda Jackson realized something about herself at that pivotal moment. She learned that she liked the power and kick of the carbine running through her rock solid arms. She enjoyed the smell of the potassium nitrate and the thunder from the muzzle. Wanda Jackson discovered that she *adored* the experience of firing high-velocity semiautos into the night very much. More than anyone could imagine.

The slaving animals were released from their tethers. Roscoe and Big Pete crashed into each other like hot meteorites in the center of the pit. The force and angle of the collision caused Roscoe to do a complete somersault over his adversary and end up behind him. Sonny's dog then bit into his opponent's lower flank like a Great White shark. It pulled a mouthful of pink thigh meat cleanly from the bone. The sound was like a parched newspaper being torn.

Big Pete shrieked like a steam whistle, and lost control of his masticated leg. Roscoe danced around the wounded beast trying to find the ideal angle to latch on and finish him off. However, Big Pete jerked and flopped his way around to keep eye to eye with the rival. He constantly kept in front of his aggressor no matter how difficult it was to move. If Roscoe was going to complete their vicious game now, he'd have to do it face to face.

Sonny's dog went in low, as if going for a limb, and then came up like lightning. His sharp incisors bisected Big Pete's snout and nose leather. Blood spurted from his face like pressurized water from a garden hose. Roscoe's upper canine teeth caught directly under the wounded animal's eye-socket, and he murderously twisted it in his jaws. The flesh peeled away like the loose skin of a peach, revealing a mass of steaming tissue.

Big Pete lost control of both legs after the last attack. Only his front paws and lower jaw were operational. Roscoe dragged his opponent around the perimeter of the pit by the upper throat. He slowed down occasionally to clamp his jaws further into the flesh of the wounded animal.

Roscoe dropped the badly injured beast in the far side of the pit and looked at him. He considered his enemy's position like a seasoned executioner. Big Pete tried to crawl towards him, but had lost an eye, and all control of his body

movements. Its flagging brain was telling the unresponding flesh to continue the attack, but all the creature could do was undulate like a jellyfish.

Sonny's dog came up behind the expiring beast, clamped onto its neck, and bit into the spinal cord. It appeared to the crowd that the black Pit was jolted by a wet cell shock. Then it went lifeless; the strings cut from the puppet. Roscoe lifted the dead animal's body in the air with his mouth and flung it into the center of the burrow.

The Clean n' Jerk crowd went wild with satisfaction.

Sonny ran to Liz Fury with a beatific smile pasted to his face. Liz was sitting with Wanda. Her hand was in her employee's lap, almost as a territorial marker. Liz kissed Sonny hard on the mouth, but told him this wasn't the time to be a chump. They had to be quick, and make sure the side-bets they'd made were paying off. There's no secure-betting if you're not wagering with the house bookies. Sonny tore off from them to do as instructed.

The 3 to 1 bookies stared in mock disbelief at Big Pete's mangled remains.

Their bluff had worked perfectly.

It had been a sure thing that Roscoe would win the match. The bookmaker who slipped the barbiturate amobarbital into Big Pete's water dish directly preceding the event made sure of that. The bettors were lining up in front of the odds-makers to get their payoffs. It was just like Liz Fury and company had planned. Give them a little something for nothing at the beginning of the game; get the rubes worked-up. Then make it all back in the next couple of fixed fights with the *cooperating* dog trainers, plus quite a bit more, for the rest of the evening. The club owner bought a round of white corn for all the lucky gamblers present on this hot summer night.

Liz Fury was on top of the world.

*

Saturday morning

Boo Smalls had been sitting on his work bench in the cellar for the better part of a day, staring at the bloating carcasses of his beloved fight-dogs. He'd gone through the complete psychological cycle of grief several times. Impotence became rage, then sorrow, then acceptance, and round and round it went. Boo, in his mind's eye, was coming up with a recompense plan to justify this recent event which had taken place in his home. It was ragged and disorganized now, but a plan was in the making. The one thing he was sure of was that Miss Wanda Jackson had something to do with this gory situation.

He'd fallen for her pretty come-on in a matter of minutes like some kind of dumb, horny teenager. It's incredible, he thought, what a little loneliness can do to a thinking man's reasoning skills. But here he was: he'd taken the tempting bait and paid the price for it. He believed Wanda herself was too obtuse to plan something like this on her own; but her boss, Liz Fury, was another issue entirely.

He'd have to pay a visit to the Clean n' Jerk today, and see how things had gone without his participation last night. He couldn't be 100% sure the whole thing was their doing, but he'd practically bet his Ford F-10 on it. A man like Boo Smalls knows plenty of people in town who'd like to cut his balls and kill off his nice investment. A man like Hank Cross, or Vic Norwood, or any of the other bribe-taking trainers who'd lost a bundle on his superior animals. Yes, Boo believed he'd pay a visit to Liz Fury's place of business today, and it wouldn't be a bad idea to bring the Glock along, too. Just as a precaution against any pending unpleasantness.

But now it was time to clean-up the carnage, and get ready to start life over from scratch. Whoever did this nasty business to him knew the police couldn't get involved. Youngblood is a place that is either above or below the laws of the Commonwealth, depending on how you choose to view it. It was just some sort of big revenge plan or business consideration. A mano y mano thing.

Then a pang of grief went through him like a cold saber blade.

Boo Smalls openly wept. A flood of emotion and shock thoroughly overwhelmed him. He unlatched the doors of all the dog pens and held their prone, lifeless bodies like a parent in deep trauma. He knew he had to get them out of his cellar, or he'd go insane with grief and perfect wrath. And he absolutely could not bury them now. He couldn't bring himself to do that yet. It was still too soon; just too sudden an event. But something else had to be considered as well.

They were starting to decompose.

The bodies had spent almost 24 hours in a hot, humid cabin cellar. The inevitable ways of the flesh were beginning to work on the tissue of the three champion fight dogs, and they were starting to stink. Bad.

Boo stood in his basement, surrounded by the decaying flesh of his animals and had no idea what to do. It was like the perfect innocence of childhood. He stood bewildered and feeling utterly empty. The word "empty" rattled around in his mind for a moment. The word became almost comical to him. He began repeating it over and over, chuckling to himself at the ridiculous sounding thing. "Empty. Emp-tee. Em-p-tee." Boo Smalls turned, walked up the stairs of his training room, and got a jar of his private white corn from over the TV stand. He took a long draught from the container, and stared out his front window for a moment.

“White lightning,” he whispered to himself. “I’ve got half a still full of fucked-up corn liquor in still #1, and the other vat is ‘empty.’” This thought amused Boo to no end. He snorted laughter and slapped his knee with a fit of child-like giggling. Boo Smalls began a soliloquy to himself and the non-existent, yet appreciative audience in the cabin.

“My dogs have been poisoned by some hell-bent cowboys, and their bodies are rotting in the cellar. And, I’ve got about 20 gallons of alcohol that would make a billy goat puke in my still outside. Well Maybe, I could put those carcasses in my private distillery unit, the one I lovingly refer to as ‘old number one,’ and hold on to those lovely cadavers for a while. That corn would keep anything from going bad for a thousand years. Like one of them Egyptian mummies. And then, when I find out who did this bit of nonsense to me, I could maybe make a present of my former investment-animals to them. Perhaps I could find out where THEIR place of residence is located. Possibly they’d enjoy having some perfectly preserved pit bulls with their eviscerated guts full of live dynamite thrown through the windows of their home! There could be a lot of property damage involved on the receiving end of such a situation, but I’m positive it would be an adequate reciprocation for yesterday’s house call. Yes indeed, I do believe that would be a fair and proper exchange.

Boo took another long swallow from his private jar, replaced it over the TV stand, and walked back downstairs to his cellar. He got the large canvass bag he used to carry the dogs’ harnesses and armlets when they went to events, and carefully placed the three corpses inside it. It was much heavier than he expected, and the feeling of the extra weight made him practically ill with depression.

He slung the bag over his thin, wiry shoulders and headed out the door towards his shed and distillery units.

The day was becoming overcast. Boo Smalls looked into the horizon like a religious devotee while carrying his grim parcel to the place they’d be preserved until further use was required. The sack seemed to become heavier with every step, and Boo put the cloth down once to catch his breath before continuing on. Soon he reached his shed and the steel casks. A couple of raccoons were munching on the contents of a small sack of opened grain; the bag looked weather beaten and the corn was pale and soggy, like it had been exposed to the elements for some time. He tossed a rock in their direction and they scattered from it like it was a live grenade.

Boo raised the lid of still #1, and sank the entire bag and its contents in the nearly 20 gallons of unpotable corn liquor. He never saw the radioactive waste garnish on the bottom of the metal barrel, which had been delivered courtesy of Buzz and Kenny Rayhall.

Boo closed the hinged covering and stared towards the West Virginia mountains. He had an unusually clear-headed feeling. As if things would

somehow, miraculously improve in short order after his night of shock and astonishment. Now it was time to think about paying Liz Fury a visit, and see how the lovely Wanda is doing today. He began walking back to his cabin and stopped for a moment. Boo Smalls looked over his shoulder at the mountains once again. More dark clouds were heading toward Youngblood. A storm was on its way to their town. There was no doubt about it.

*

Sonny and Liz Fury were counting stacks of money in the bar's office that overcast morning. They had cleared, after side-bets, trainer payoffs, and bookie garnishes, thirty-three thousand, nine hundred dollars last night. Liz had talked to several of the local dilettante and greenhorn fight-dog trainers last evening. She now had a reserve of "kamikaze puppies" lined-up for action, and ready to take a fall to adjust the betting odds whenever she needed.

She had the whole economic pyramid of pit bull action in her hands; like a black widow spider in the center of her web feeling for any vibration within the filaments. It was her show entirely now, from soup to nuts. Liz Fury was *the* power-broker of black market commerce in Youngblood, and the rock-hard beauty enjoyed her position to no end.

Sonny received his ten percent cut from her each weekend evening for muscle and security services. He'd also earned seventeen hundred dollars in side bets off of Roscoe's fixed victory last night. It had been a world class night for the bouncer of the Clean n' Jerk. They entered the unbelievable cash figures in the bar ledger and placed the receipts and account book in the combination safe.

The strong-arm was feeling amorous after a night of easy money and victory in the pit. He lifted Liz up on to the office desk and slipped her leather skirt up over her toned haunches. He was slowly unzipped by his boss, and they were joined at their hot crossroads in moments. Liz bit into his shoulder during his locomotive-like thrusts, and nearly passed out from ecstasy at the taste of his red blood in her mouth. Within seconds after their uncoupling, Wanda Jackson walked into the office.

"Wanda, baby," Liz panted out to her, "I was just thinking of you, sugar." Sonny adjusted his trousers, and walked carefully to the desk chair to sit down. Liz crossed her legs, and stayed seated on top of the wooden bureau. She motioned for her girl to come over to her. Liz put her hands over Wanda's shoulders and brushed her lips over hers. Then she produced a 100 dollar bill from the pocket of her skirt, and place it down the front of her gorgeous employee's tight jeans.

"We had a *very* good night," Liz crooned to her sexy pal. "Listen kitten," she continued, "I want you to start working at the bar on the weekends. All those crazy, rich people who come here either drink Budweiser, Jack Daniel's bourbon, or Liz Fury's local white corn. There's nothing you have to figure out in the mixology department. Nobody orders strawberry daiquiris or any of that candy-ass Yankee shit. And they *tip!* Good Lord, girl, they'll be callin' you Wanda Armani after a few weeks of those gratuities. You've earned it, sweets. What do you say?"

“I could always use some extra cash, Liz,” she rejoined. “Thanks, I’d love it. But I want to talk to you about the Cleopatra. I’ve got a great advertising idea, and it fits right in with your offer to have me help tend bar on the weekends. Do you want to hear it?”

“Tell me anything, doll,” Liz answered, “I’m one happy girl this morning.”

“Well,” Wanda started, “when I lived in D.C., there was this bar called The Crazy Horse in Georgetown. They did wet T-shirt contests, bikini shows and sexy stuff like that in the summertime. They used the bar for a runway and the chicks used to catwalk up and down it like streetwalkers. I used to make enough money there in July and August to last me until November. The guys always like to show off for their dates, and they’ll buy anything the girl even looks at to impress them. The vendors who cruise the bars selling roses and silver jewelry make a mint. I was thinking we could take the leftover summer inventory and have a swimsuit show *on the bar* next Friday. I guarantee every horny rich-boy in that place will purchase something for his half-drunk date that night. I’ve talked to my girlfriends who go swimming at Winchester Lake, and they all said they’d do it in a minute, if, maybe, they could keep a suit or two after the show. Does that sound like something we could do, Liz? Does it?”

Liz pondered her pretty employee’s proposal.

The Cleopatra Bikini Shop’s inventory was backing up. They were selling plenty more merry widows and bustiers for the fall now instead of thongs and Catalinas. It’s the middle of July, and definitely time to do the clearance sale. Also, in realistic terms, the inventory was practically worthless. The mark up on swim wear is like the mark up on movie popcorn. If you don’t make at least 2000% cost return on investment, you’re an inept bonehead. On top of all that, she only kept the damn place going, despite its decent sales, to clean up the overflow cash from the Clean n’ Jerk’s weekend action. What the hell did she care if Wanda and her pals wanted to prance around on the bar wearing next to nothing, trying to sell some over-priced strips of colorful material to a bunch of well-off twits with too much dough?

Liz decided to have some fun with the situation, and thought she’d pull a Tom Sawyer trick on her cute friend. Just for a minute. Just for fun. She looked pensively into the air, and shook her head sadly at her employee. Wanda’s lip trembled.

“Well, baby,” Liz ominously began, “it’s like this...”

“Oh no!” Wanda creaked, “you don’t like the idea? Oh, *please*, Liz. Come on. I don’t know where to put all the old inventory anymore. There’s no

room anywhere. The place looks like a thrift shop. C'mon, Liz. Let me do this. I can sell these things, I *swear!*

"I'm just not sure it's a good *thing* for the bar," Liz went on, "public image is a very important these days," she said, enjoying her playful torment of the distressed employee more than she liked to admit.

Wanda was losing her enthusiasm, and becoming maudlin. She knew from experience that when Liz Fury didn't want something to happen, it usually didn't. She turned to leave the office.

"OK, Liz," she said dejectedly, "you know what's best. Thanks anyway. See you tonight."

The store owner let her get within inches of the office door.

"You're *sure* this promotion is going to work?," Liz questioned, "I don't want any bush league, half-assed bikini show in my bar! These babes better look right, too. No Front Royal scags will be permitted to catwalk on my tables. I've got zero tolerance on that point. If I see a scag in the bunch, you've got trouble. Are we clear on that, babe?"

Wanda turned to face her boss with a look of pious gratefulness. She was glowing. Absolutely radiant. She raced over to where Liz was sitting on top of the desk and held both her hands. "Oh, *thank you*, Liz," she pealed, "I promise, I'll only ask the girls from the lake who the make guys stammer and drool. They'll be the only ones participating. Honest. Oh, this is so great! How can I thank you?"

"Why don't you give your nice boss a kiss," Liz purred.

Wanda and Liz Fury exchanged a long, tasty lip-lock. Sonny the strong-arm, who had been adjusting his manhood in his trousers when Wanda Jackson entered the office, discovered the sizable bulge in his pants had returned, and with accrued interest. He watched the two enjoy each other's company until they eventually separated from one another.

Then the young bouncer crowed out to his boss, "Liz Fury, baby you are one *live wire! Absolute DYNAMITE!*"

*

Boo Smalls drove his Ford F-10 pick-up truck through town towards the Clean n' Jerk Saloon. He'd decided that it would be pointless to stop at the Cleopatra Bikini Shop. To be sure, he'd like to beat some kind of information out of Wanda Jackson before he talked to Liz and Sonny, but he knew in his heart she wasn't in on the decision-making end of things. She was a trophy-girl; a potted

plant; parsley on the side of the plate. There's no sense in messing up such a pretty face. Unless it becomes absolutely necessary.

The Glock .38 lay on the car seat next to him. He'd placed a new clip in the handle before taking off from home. He had another 7-shot clip in his pants pocket. He wasn't sure why he brought the extra rounds with him; in the larger sense, he thought it was better to have them and not need them, than need them and not have them.

This is the scenario of encounter that played in his mind: he'd go to the bar and tell his friend Liz the bad fate that had come to his prize animals and see how she reacts. He'd only need a minute to know for sure if she was responsible for the slaughter of Nitro, Jet and Nails. Her response to the news would tell him everything he needed to know. Then he clicked on the radio on the dashboard console and listened to George Jones sing a lament about being hopelessly stranded in some remote southern town.

He swung the truck into the saloon's front delivery area. As he stepped out of his ride he noticed Liz and Sonny's sedans were also parked in the lot. He pocketed his gun, took a deep breath, and went up to the front door of the club. Boo was sure it would be locked and he'd have to knock for an hour or so to get some kind of response from the occupants. But that was OK. Sometimes it's good to create a little tension in a situation. It kept people looking over their shoulders. And being able to sustain a feeling of anxiety in others was a quality Boo Smalls was glad to say he possessed.

He stood in front of the door trying to convince himself that he wouldn't simply pull the gun from his jacket and blow them both into pieces. The thoughts of his slain animals kept flashing through his mind: moments of rage would subside into sudden heartache. He had to keep reminding himself that he only wants information now. Revenge against a guilty party, he was sure, would come later. For the time being, he should be a calm country boy with some bad news to share about his life's investment. Then when the time comes for retribution, cripple the scum-bags who did him dirt, and shortly afterwards, obliterate them from existence.

Boo reflexively turned the doorknob of the place with one hand as he was bringing his other one down to knock on the front glass. Then the unbelievable happened; the door opened with no resistance at all. It was completely unlocked. Liz Fury's bar was vulnerable to any and all comers who wanted to get inside the place. It was open because Wanda Jackson had unintentionally left it that way. She had used her new key that Liz had given her last night to come in this morning and hadn't pulled it closed. Officially, the Clean n' Jerk wouldn't be operating for several more hours.

He stepped in quietly and looked around, letting his eyes adjust to the dim setting. The bar wasn't completely dark; a few shafts of light were coming from underneath the door of the office, which was slightly ajar. He heard the voices of Liz, Sonny, and Wanda coming from the inner sanctum. The wiry dog-trainer placed his hand in his pocket, and wrapped his fingers around the handle of his Glock .38 semiautomatic.

Boo Smalls stepped up to the door of Liz Fury's private office, and went inside.

Five

The three cadavers floated peacefully in the almost 20 gallons of pure ethyl alcohol in still #1. Their time of pain and torment had finally been put to an end, and the preserving fluid was slowly saturating their body tissues. Occasionally a gas bubble would arise from the mouth or nose of one of the animals, breaking the perfect silence. Then quiet resumed its illimitable domain.

The small canister of radioactive waste was also perfectly motionless and sat eerily silent on the bottom of the steel cask. Despite the best efforts of the Rayhall brothers, the seal had not been breached, and its contents lay safeguarded. The inside of still #1, with its poisoned canine victims and lead-sealed menace, was as soundless as the great void of outer space. It seemed, almost, as if it were waiting for some great event to rouse it from its slumbers, and bring it to full bore conflagration.

*

Lester Ganz stared dreamily at the heavily bandaged stump that was formerly his right hand. The attendants in the Fauquier Hospital Emergency Room had agreed that the appendage practically fell off of its own accord during the surgery procedure. When he'd arrived at the hospital, he hadn't been processed by the Admittance Desk, or entered into the ER's computer system. Because of the severity of his wound, the store owner had been wheeled instantly into the Procedure Room.

Les never even needed to tell anybody at the facility that his name was Joe Brown, because no one had asked him for any identification. He'd been taken into the recovery area after the operation and stayed there in an anesthetic daze for a few hours. Miraculously, he'd remembered Sonny's instructions from the early afternoon to the letter. "Fear is a man's best friend," he used to say to himself, and fear had probably helped him recall his instructions in verbatim fashion.

He had slipped out of the trauma center that evening, as instructed by the gruff strong-arm. He'd bribed one of the orderlies in the dispensary with the 500 dollars he had to give him a quantity of morphine, antibiotics, and a ride to his store. The night shift attendant complied to the request without blinking.

The two of them exited the hospital grounds in the employee's Ford Ranger pick-up, and went directly to Lester's shop. With his left hand, Les worked the combination safe in the back room of his business. He took out several thousand dollars in cash and the legal paperwork to his commercial property. Then, with great difficulty, he changed out of his hospital shirt and street pants and into the extra clothing he kept in the utility closet. He found his wallet where Sonny had left it, and then asked his driver to take him to the

Winchester Greyhound Bus terminal. That would be the end of his chauffeur services for the night. The compliant youth replied, “no problem, boss-man.”

Now Lester Ganz sat like a Haitian zombie in an air-conditioned scenicruiser. He was whimsically watching the traffic zip by on his way to Atlantic City, New Jersey. Despite his diminished physical and mental condition, a plan was beginning to congeal in his head. He thought he might use this unexpected free time for an unplanned vacation: a time to recuperate, pop morphine pills, play the one armed bandits, and possibly find himself a good, cheap, hit-man for hire in the process.

*

Liz, Sonny and Wanda were sitting around the office desk when Boo Smalls slipped into their quarters to join them. None of the three occupants noticed his entry. Wanda was drawing on a legal-sized pad and showing her two companions how the bikini-babe show would be put together next Friday. Liz and the bouncer listened to her enthusiastic descriptions like parents indulging a young, enthusiastic step-daughter.

Then Sonny’s gaze met Boo’s calm, attentive eyes.

Scores of potential reactions flashed through the strong-arm’s mind at fractal speed. His hand started for his pocketed gun, but then stopped. He subconsciously understood that Boo Smalls had the drop on them. He halted his movements, and placed his arms on the table. It was time to be nonchalant. Boo Smalls didn’t know anything for *sure* about their exploits yesterday. For now, he could only reckon they were the perpetrators. It was time to play straight-face poker with the locally acknowledged guru of the dog-fight circuit.

“Good mornin’ everyone,” Boo Smalls said cautiously.

Wanda and Liz’s heads snapped up like spring loaded mannequins. They’d been caught off guard. Completely. In the office of the Clean n’ Jerk. All their eyes locked on Boo’s jacket, where the bulge from the Glock semiauto was unmistakable.

Wanda spoke first.

“Hel.. hello Mr. Smalls. Thanks for the great time yesterday. Did...did you find a dog I might be interested in?” She was ready to give him the come-on treatment and got up slowly, approaching him like a Piccadilly coquette.

“I put that *particular* project on hold, girl,” he flatly intoned. “I’m here to talk to your pretty boss.” With flat eyes he stared Wanda back down into her chair.

The three of them were well armed, but couldn't make a move on their captor. Wanda had her flat .38 in the pocket of her jean jacket. Liz was carrying Sonny's .45 in the waistband of her leather mini, and the bouncer had his Derringer in the top pocket of his vest. However, they were covered. They couldn't draw on him without a distraction.

The trio stared at their guest with white fear and animosity for a tense moment. Their breathing became quick and erratic, and their eyes shifted nervously back and forth.

Their collective silence spoke volumes about their guilt, and that was when Boo Smalls knew for sure they'd been the ones who'd snuffed his prized animals.

Boo began talking to the bar owner like an elementary school teacher admonishing a negligent student.

"Liz Fury," Boo said, "your fine-looking employee paid a visit to my cabin yesterday. She told me she's looking for a Pit to keep the boogie-men out of her apartment. We went on a wild ride in the afternoon to look at some dogs a friend had informed her about, but all we found was the new KFC on Cork Street. After that little snafu, she was *real* nice to me, and compensated me in beer and hormones for my unused canine appraisal services at the Super 8 Motel."

"You're on private property, Boo," Liz snapped, "I could have you arrested."

"Aren't you even going to ask where I was last night, honey?," Boo rejoined. "Didn't you miss me on our standard Friday evening date?"

Liz Fury was getting more than a little pissed-off at the man's temerity and screeched at him, "I don't give a damn where the hel...."

Boo Smalls fired a round from his semiautomatic directly over the head of the body builder. The report was volcanic. A section of wood paneling behind her office desk splintered into strips and fell to the floor. His gaze did not falter one iota. He stood there calmly eyeballing all three of them.

Liz, Sonny and Wanda instinctively whipped their heads down in terror, flat on to the surface of the office desk. When they lifted them back up, the look on their shocked faces was murderous. Feral. Animalistic. The trio could drop him in a second if they could reach down into their pockets. But Boo still had the group covered, and any kind of cowboy move now would be a fatal mistake.

"Please don't interrupt my train of thought again, Ms. Fury," Boo warned her.

He continued, “folks, I don’t want to bore you with a lot of details you’re probably already familiar with, but somebody came onto *my* private property yesterday and butchered the guts from *my* dogs. Someone killed off *my* investment. And considering the extreme coincidence of Miss Hot Pants’s affection yesterday, and me being unwilling to sell my dogs out to your shit-ass bookies, makes you, Liz Fury, my prime suspect in this investigation.”

“I didn’t kill your dogs, asshole,” Liz snarled, “but I’m not too upset that they’re history, either. You could be making easy cash, Boo. So what if you set a dog up from time to time to bite the dust. It’s all just a numbers game, babe. And it’s all *good* money. Dog fights are dog fights. Dickless rich people come to see some blood spill that they’re too afraid spill themselves. What is this thing you’ve got with “pride” in your animal and “honor” in the games? There is no pride in dog fighting. Youngblood is just a hick town with a reputation. You might take the fame and notoriety seriously. I sure as hell don’t. I juggle imaginary numbers, people bet real money, and one foul-ass canine takes a dirt nap. But YOU had to fuck-up my racket with those goddam unbeatable monsters and almost scared off my big-time gamblers. And for what? I ask you, for what?”

Sonny the bouncer, trainer of the fight-dog Roscoe, could not believe what his ears were picking up. “No *pride* in the fights?,” could he have heard her correctly? Liz wasn’t from these parts; she didn’t understand the deal. She was a good businesswoman, and a fine piece of tail in the bargain, but it was becoming obvious she didn’t get the overriding mentality of the thing they’ve got here. Namely, that the dog-fight circuit was *the life* for career bad-asses in Youngblood.

Sonny had lived in this town all his years. The dog trainers, although feared, were revered by the locals. If you could breed and train the toughest animal in the pits and earn a real wage at it, then you were making a living like anyone else, and people left you alone. Then he shook his head to clear the irritating thought from his mind, and returned all attention to his captor.

Boo Smalls calmly answered the muscle girl’s inquiry. “For what you ask? For money, Liz. Dinaro, scratch, capital, anything you want to call it, that’s what for. Just like you and your financial interests in the Clean n’ Jerk. Now I’ve got a question for *you*. Do you believe Youngblood is the only place on earth where this type of blood-sport takes place? Well it isn’t. I’m a *real* trainer, girl, so listen to what I’m saying. I take bad animals and make them cash winners. After they’ve won x-amount of fights they become very *valuable* in the stud market. You wouldn’t know about that side of it, babe. You just run the show in your own little world at the bar and think that’s the end of things. I’ve sold dogs to multimillionaires in Mexico, New Zealand, Italy, and places in the Far East I can’t even remember. Have you ever really *looked* at the crowd in your club on the weekends? They just appear to be rich-snots and hicks to you. But many of those drunken businessmen represent interests you can’t imagine. Nitro, my best dog, would have been worth approximately 50K in the next two weeks. My other

dogs, by the end of the summer, might have been worth that much, too. The boys you get to drug their animals and get chewed-up by the competition are just sick cowboys looking for quick bucks. How much do you pay them to dose their dogs? Five hundred dollars, maybe a thousand? You screwed me over Liz Fury, you have no idea how deep this shit goes.”

“I repeat to you Mr. Smalls,” she cautiously said, “I regret that there’s been an accident with your dogs, but *nobody* here is responsible for it. And spare me the economics lesson. If you get some animals trained and ready to fight by my rules, bring them back to the bar and we’ll both start making money again. Right now, what can I do?”

Boo raised the .38 from his pocket and leveled it at Liz Fury’s head. “I’ve never killed a woman before,” Boo mused, “but any day is a good day to be born, and any day is a good day to die so...”

A monstrous thunderclap sounded outside the Clean n’ Jerk, rattling the windows and making the overhead lights flutter.

Boo jerked his head in the direction of the sound. Like lightning, Liz, Sonny and Wanda pulled their carbines from their places of concealment and had the sights pinpointed between the eyes of Boo Smalls. Boo returned his gaze to the muscle-woman and continued with his almost beatific composure. His Glock .38 was still trained at the skull of Liz Fury.

The standoff was complete. One shot from any party guaranteed a complimentary slug in return.

Boo’s mind was racing. This was definitely not how he’d expected things to turn out. He’d surmised their guilt, and should have backed out after telling them about his misfortune. He stood still in the office, and met all three of their gazes, one by one. “There’s always time for revenge a bit later,” he murmured to himself. That thought kept whirling in his head as he maintained his face-off with the ominous trio.

Also, he was sure none of Liz Fury’s people wanted to deal with a murder conviction resulting from this difficult predicament, and neither did he. When he’d pulled the gun on her, it was an attempt to make her confess to the slaughtering of his dogs, not to dispatch her permanently. Now he’s got to back out as best he can, and start to work on his long range plan of recompense. Because, as he kept reminding himself, “there’s always time for revenge a bit later.”

The sounds of the electrical storm which had finally made it to town were the only sounds in the room. Muffled thunderclaps filled their ears.

“You’ve got me Liz,” Boo said. “I can’t deal with the three amigos like this. Nobody wants to go down with a murder sheet here. At least I sure as hell don’t; I don’t even like to think about taking a lengthy vacation at the old crossbar hotel. Actually, it gives me the creeps just to think about it. So correct me now if I’m wrong. If I get some dogs ready for war in the pit sometime soon, and decide to play ball with your bookies, I’m going to be a welcome trainer at the Clean n’ Jerk? Is that what you’re telling me?”

“That’s what I’m telling you, Boo,” she said, a cruel smile curled up on her lips like the edge of a knife.

“And you didn’t kill my animals?” He plainly asked.

“I swear to God, nobody here had anything to do with it,” she replied.

“So we’re still business partners, in a manner of speaking. Is that right?” Boo questioned.

“Absolutely,” she rejoined.

“That’s good,” Boo responded, “it’s good to know who you can trust in this business.”

Boo backed towards the door, lowered his weapon, and stepped out of Liz Fury’s private office.

*

The electrical storm was going full-throttle when Boo sprinted to his F-10 and fishtailed out of the Clean n’ Jerk’s loading zone. The wiper blades barely pushed enough water from the windscreen to see the road, and the lightning pitchforked all around the town of Youngblood. He fingered the hole in his jacket where the bullet went through, and wished he’d brought his flask of corn with him.

Liz Fury, Sonny and Wanda were knocking back shots of Jack Daniel’s in the office, and trying to calm down from the events of the last few minutes. The consensus among the three of them is that Boo Smalls is certain of their guilt, but is in almost no position to act on it, yet. The strained détente upon his exiting seemed like an interim response to their liability in the situation; almost as if he were leaving a poisonous calling card with them at the Clean n’ Jerk.

“He’ll be back,” Liz snarled, “but he can’t really touch us in the larger sense. Everything on our side of the incrimination equation is circumstantial. If he’s smart he’ll come to his senses and play ball with us. If not, he can screw his own fight-dogs into next week. I really don’t care which option he chooses.” She swallowed a long shot of Jack, and poured another for herself.

“What he said about ‘pride in the fights,’” Sonny uttered, “that’s true, honey. Youngblood doesn’t have much else in the way of recognition going for it.

When I was a teenager, going to the contests was better than the 4th of July parade. My daddy took me every weekend in the summer. Now the local kids just have that pro-wrestling bullshit, NASCAR, and whatever else the media business-people come up with to keep them distracted. The fights are the real deal, Liz; the fights are *family* in this town. I wouldn't want to drug Roscoe for a few fast bucks; I'll be up-front with you on that particular issue. The stud-sales are the real game. Boo's telling you the truth about that."

Liz looked impatiently at her employee. Then she said, "honey, stay put with your boss Liz Fury and let me do the thinking for the next couple of years. If everything keeps going the way it has been, you'll be able to *buy* this piece-of-shit burgh for your very own. You can re-name it Sonnyville or Bad Dog City or anything that strikes your fancy. Then you can grind it up, feed it to Roscoe, and put what's left of it on your geraniums if you want to."

Wanda Jackson downed another shot of Jack Daniel's, and looked apprehensively at her boss. Liz Fury caught her troubled look and smiled. "Don't worry baby," she cooed, "Mama Liz isn't going to let anything happen to you. And I've got a feeling in a few weeks you're going to have more money from tips falling out of your g-string than you'll know what to do with. I promise you kitten, you're going to be fine. Liz Fury remembers people who do favors for her."

Wanda got up, tottered slightly, and walked over to the office radio to turn it on. The disc jockey said the tropical storm was now directly over Youngblood and would stay in the area for the next few hours. Then the Tanya Tucker song, "It's a little too late to do the right thing now." spilled out of the machine's small speaker. The three of them listened to the sassy tune filling the room and the thunderclaps booming outside. They finished off the bottle of Jack Daniel's in short order, and their conversation came to a dead standstill.

*

The tempest was not only positioned over Youngblood, but the center of the electrical activity was directly over Boo Smalls's property. Strong winds drove the sheets of rain into horizontal waves. Thunder sounded like a thousand shotgun blasts, and tines of lightning flashed every second in neon parabolas. The various forms of wildlife on his property had all found cover in the woods, and the tin door of his shed by the stills was wildly flapping by a single hasp.

Boo Smalls had pulled the F-10 over to the shoulder of the road to wait the storm out. He had a cigarette in his mouth, and was wondering how his fortune could turn out much worse: his fight-dog investment had been shot to hell by a bitch-goddess club owner who wants control over every facet of the local betting action, and he'd been grievously taken in by Liz Fury's sexy confederate, Wanda Jackson. Although his afternoon with her had been extremely satisfying, he couldn't believe he'd been so easily suckered into leaving his animals unprotected. And finally, his last 40 gallon batch of white corn had turned to shit

because he'd been too blitzed to get the ingredient quantities correct for its production. Boo could not fathom how his luck could deteriorate any further.

A fireball of lightning exploded out of the sky and blasted the shed by his stills. The aluminum siding and plywood detonated with the impact, and flew into the air in fiery jets. The tin door of the erupting shack flew into the sky like a rocket. A second mammoth fireball spewed from the black clouds and pierced the twisting metal in the wind; it disintegrated the flying object into powder within a second. The massive lightning bolt curved in mid-air after its collision with the airborne portal and impacted directly onto the top of still #1 with the force of a pre-atomic weapon.

The elemental electricity scissored through the metal cask like rice paper, blasting shards of steel skyward. The charge touched off the highly flammable ethyl alcohol in its base and the vat blew-up in an epic eruption. Cascades of flame from the remains of the forged container lapped at the side of still #2, and the wind whipped the fire about in frenzied currents.

After several moments the rain began to douse the flames, and in half an hour nothing was left of the supply shed or still #1 except scattered debris. Still #2 had survived the storm, the only damage being flash burns across its side.

Soon after the storm had begun to move north, Boo steered his F-10 back onto the road, and headed for his cabin. The anxious man knew only one thing about his activities for this Saturday evening. He was going to start on the white corn when he walked in the door, and would stop when his body could withstand no more of its effect.

*

The morning rain had kept a lot of bettors off the road, and away from the bar that Saturday night. A severe cloudburst right at the time of the contest is the only thing that can postpone a dog-fight in the town of Youngblood. Although the squall had moved out of the area by late afternoon, the back roads were covered with downed power lines, and fallen tree limbs were everywhere. The Clean n' Jerk opened for business at its usual time, but around midnight it was only half full of its usual habitués.

Liz Fury wasn't too concerned by the lack of attendees in her place of business. She'd been around long enough to know that once in a while you have to yield to the whims of Mother Nature. The gamblers who did make their weekly pilgrimage to her bar were treated to three expertly crafted, tailor made dog-fights, designed to order by Liz Fury and her famous bookies.

The fighting pit had become a veritable swamp; during the fights it was difficult to recognize the individual dogs tumbling around in the brown murk. But once again Roscoe had taken down and eliminated his adversary. Although Sonny knew Roscoe was winning his matches by the most unethical means imaginable, it didn't diminish the thrill he received watching his dog destroy its opponents. He was beaming. He had personal visions of becoming Youngblood's next trainer extraordinaire. Perhaps, he fantasized, even to join Boo Smalls in the pantheon of recognized bad-animal handlers.

Wanda Jackson was packed into a Union Jack motif string bikini while tending bar at the Clean n' Jerk that night. She was telling all the unusually attentive people there that the sexy-blowout show next Friday was going to be the event of the summer at the saloon. She'd lined up several "local models" and they'd be displaying the *maillots* and high-stepping it up on the table tops next weekend. She told the boys to bring their lady friends to the fights and get great prices on the Cleopatra's remaining summer inventory.

When Wanda had finished her duties as bartender that night, she'd received six hundred forty dollars in tips, and had been handed no fewer than seventy one business cards.

Liz Fury cleared, after payoffs, seventeen thousand, two-hundred dollars that night.

*

Lester Ganz had passed-out from morphine ingestion on the Greyhound bus on the way to Atlantic City. He had to be revived by the driver when they'd arrived at the terminal. The injured store owner walked in a daze down the dilapidated streets until he happened across The Friendly Arms Motel on Virginia Avenue. The peg-board lettering on its faded marquee read: Have your next affair here!

He was tired, disoriented, and the pain throbbed in his hand no matter how many pills he took. He went inside, signed his name as Joe Brown in the guest book, and took a room overlooking a hamburger stand that also sold New Jersey State lottery tickets and discount phone cards. Lester lay down on his animal print bed covers and slept for two days straight.

On his third day in the Garden State, Lester spent all morning and most of the afternoon trying to shave, wash and dress himself. It was nearly impossible to do things exclusively with his left arm. After fixing himself as best he could, he wobbled downstairs, head still buzzing with pain-killers, and inquired at the desk in which direction is the famous boardwalk. The pale, disinterested teenager behind the counter was reading an X-Men comic book and wearing a Bon Jovi T-shirt. He answered Lester's question not raising his eyes from the graphic novel. "Go left, young man, go left!" he warbled to the hotel's guest.

Lester Ganz exited the motel and turned left, as instructed. He found the boardwalk and began ambling down towards the amusement park on the steel pier. It was terribly muggy outside at this time of afternoon, and he wanted to get away from the noise and heat of the tourist strip. He absentmindedly tramped into Caesar's casino.

The immediate blast of cold air on his face from the house fans was delicious. He deliberately walked over to a banquette and sat down hard, almost collapsing onto it. He watched the incredibly beautiful waitresses in their theme-toga miniskirts and laurel head bands zip back and forth across the betting floor like angels at an enormous fraternity party. An unoccupied cocktail waitress spotted Lester resting on one of the guest sofas and approached him.

He was feeling a bit more together than he had outside, but the pain-killer was still tweaking his system. The store owner was *slowly* approaching the self-coined, psychological state of well-being that he liked to call, “consensus reality.” He’d created this term because the literary theme of subjective versus objective reality is a pivotal subject in the novels of William Faulkner, so it is, in the opinion of Lester Ganz, nothing to be trifled with.

The bleached-blonde, toga-wearing knock-out stood in front of Lester and examined him like a lab specimen. The man’s head was bent down towards the floor, but he began to raise it slowly. His gaze started at her laced slave-girl sandals and continued up her creamy legs to the top of her roman costume. Then he looked at her name tag. On it was printed the name “Kim” in classical script.

A slow wave of morphine curled up through Lester’s spine, and he couldn’t be *completely* sure of where he was, but still had a good idea of his bearings. He thought he’d try and confirm his current geographic position, using the lowest statistical possibility as a first guess.

“Um, ex..excuse me Miss,” he said to her. Am...am I possibly in the fabled place that classical scholars like to term ‘Heaven’ in their academic texts?”

“Yeah,” Kim replied.

A streak of goose flesh rose on Lester’s right arm, and he thought, for a split second, he could feel the sensation moving into the area where his hand was formerly located. He found this feeling to be quite disconcerting.

“C-could you please repeat that, Miss,” he stammered.

“Oh, you’re in Heaven all right,” Kim snorted, “Heaven, New Jersey, USA. Home of ‘old blue eyes’ himself. My name’s Kim. Caesar welcomes you, citizen. Would you like a drink, mister?”

“That would be wonderful,” Lester replied, greatly relieved to know he was still among the living, and was in the town he remembered taking the bus to.

“You gotta buy some chips first,” Kim rejoined, “then I can get you all the booze you want.”

“I have to purchase some chips?” Lester repeated.

“Yeah,” Kim answered.

Lester slowly removed a hundred dollar bill from his wallet and handed it to her.

“Could you get them for me, Kim? I kind of like sitting here in the cool air just now. Then maybe you can help me play some of the one-armed bandits. It’s about all I can handle today.”

Kim went away and returned with a double shot of rail bourbon and Lester’s gambling chips. She had purchased 20 of the 5 dollar slot machine tokens. Kim did this service for Lester because she wanted a 5 dollar gratuity. That’s why she got the half-sawbuck increments from the house bank.

She sat next to Lester and asked him about his terrible injury; she seemed genuinely sorry that he didn’t feel so great. Lester sipped his drink and told her to please just keep the gambling tokens she’d bought for him. He was having a fine time just sitting down, zoning on morphine, and watching the proceedings in the Caesar’s casino.

Kim became apprehensive for a quick moment.

“OK, mister,” she said, “thanks for the great tip, but don’t think this is gonna get you the ‘round- the-world cruise’ with me or anything like that. My boyfriend’s in the syndicate in this town, and he doesn’t like it when people think I’m up for grabs in this toga-wearin’ joint.”

Lester instantly sat up ramrod-straight, as if he’d been inadvertently shocked with an electric cattle prod. He looked at his pretty hostess for a long second, cleared his throat and asked her, “You’re boyfriend is a, how shall we say it? *A racketeer?*”

“Yeah,” she answered while snapping her sugarless gum.

“Kim,” he said, “is there a place around here we can speak in private?”

*

Sunday morning after the dog-fights, Youngblood, Virginia

Boo Smalls’s head felt like it had been removed from his shoulders and fired from a civil war era cannon. Last evening he’d started hitting the corn, as promised, upon entry into his cabin. The storm had still been going when he’d reached his home, but with only a fraction of its intensity from when he was at Liz Fury’s place. He’d sprinted inside his dwelling from the F-10, but was nonetheless drenched by the residual rain from the tropical depression. He then changed into jeans and a work shirt, stuffed the Glock in the front of his pants, and finished most of a large mason jar of his vintage product before it claimed him for the remainder of the evening.

Now it was late morning and the sun was shining into his front room. He stretched his limbs, and the oxygen starved muscles of his body screeched in protest. He nearly vomited from the strain of the minimal exercise. His gorge

went back down slowly and he walked like an injured man to the front door of his cabin to examine the day.

It was a picture perfect, day-after-the-storm. The air was clean and the sky was hard blue and cloudless. It was a good time to start your life over again, he mused. He thought maybe he'd start working on a new batch of corn in still #2, or make some phone calls to his breeder friends to see if any especially promising young canine talent might be available and for sale. Yes, Boo thought, it was a good hour to try and get some semblance of normalcy back in the old system.

Then he noticed the wisps of black smoke in the middle distance.

Boo Smalls looked at the tendrils of thick fume rise from the area around his stills. He was positive that was where the dark, smudgy vapors were coming from. The famous dog handler then walked away from his house and into the back yard of his dwelling in a near trance-like state. A feeling of absolute dread had seized him. He placed the Glock on a tree stump, steadied himself, spread his feet, and then released the holdings of his stomach onto the topsoil.

Shortly after his unexpected digestive elimination, Boo felt more like he was able to investigate the unusual situation by his stills. He picked up his semiautomatic pistol and checked the firing pin and safeties before proceeding. Everything was in fine working order. Now it was time to see what kind of skullduggery was happening on the other side of his property.

Boo Smalls tramped through the thicket of woods and got to the clearing where his stills were located. He slowed down to a deliberate gait, and then stopped cold.

His supply shed and still #1 looked like they'd been detonated with TNT and then strafed with anti-aircraft fire.

The hutch was in thousands of kindling sized pieces. The bags of grain and containers of purified water were shredded into strips of confetti. The charred cereal looked like it was scattered for a quarter of a mile around the site. He scrutinized the tattered remains of still #1. The bulk of the unit had miraculously stayed fixed to its base. However, the hinged top had been completely destroyed, and the sides had been mangled into teeth-like points all around its scorched perimeter. It looked like some hideous metallurgic flower. Strings of black smoke lazily curled out of its incinerated substructure.

Boo Smalls took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and for the first time as an adult prayed for some higher being to justify the grievous actions taken against him in life, and especially within the last few days. He remained calm for several moments anticipating a reply, but received no explanation, metaphysical or otherwise.

After his unanswered wait, his reasoning abilities started to splinter like dry match sticks. And thus began the piecemeal mental unraveling of Youngblood's premier dog handler.

He'd never considered suicide as a viable option for ending his own life before today, but somehow the idea of it didn't seem so alien to him now. And he had his Glock stuffed in the front of his pants. It would take about two seconds to end this unbelievable personal dilemma with complete certainty of the outcome. One fifty-cent cartridge fired discreetly through the temporal lobes would do the trick. Then, the big sleep: no more looking over the shoulder, no more of life's evil bs, no more anxious loneliness.

All at once, his vacillating faculties seemed to come rushing back to him. Iron clad common sense and logic regained their controlling positions in his mind. Or so he thought, because there's a problem with losing your mental stronghold on reality: all your routine actions seem to be hunky dory, until the horrifying consequences of them come crashing back to you.

The recollection of his oath to regulate Liz Fury and her cowboy flunkies filled him with a sense of shame for having considered the final solution because of this minor setback. A sense of relief hit him like a wave of ice water. He whooped like a like a horny caballero at remembering his pledge of retribution and gleefully fired several rounds from the Glock into the air over his head.

This strange ballistic ceremony he was performing indicated the strings of civilized thought unraveling in his head. Boo Smalls was on the precipice of going into that dark, gray subconscious zone where the ideas of right and wrong become meaningless schoolbook terms. The unfortunate bootlegger, standing by his wasted shack and seared corn still, was transforming into his own black angel of vengeance.

He wistfully thought to himself that if the strange protein-freak woman known as Liz Fury wants to drive him out of Youngblood, or financially ruin his interests, it would be his pleasure to respond in kind to her invitation to lock horns. Yes indeed, he thought, that would be a fine thing for him to do.

Boo whistled an atonal, happy tune to himself. He walked back to his cabin and got his extra shovel, fire ax, rake and a five gallon can of gasoline. He returned to the site where his supply shack and first distillery unit used to be. Then he spent the remainder of the afternoon cutting down the base of still #1. He shoveled and raked the remains of his shed into one large pile.

He was feeling sort of itchy and funny by turns. Like some ineffable something was crawling on his skin. Boo figured it was just more anguish and shock toying with his already compromised nervous system. The famous trainer believed he'd start to feel a whole lot better once he started putting a few molotov cocktails together to deliver through the window of the Clean n' Jerk tonight. He thought that might be an outstanding activity to keep him occupied on a Sunday evening. It certainly beat watching "Murder, She Wrote" on the television at home.

He'd collected all the debris from the shed and still into one good sized pile. He doused it with gasoline and set it aflame with an Ohio Blue Tip match, which he cinematically scratched into life with the edge of his hard, dirty thumbnail.

Boo watched the final grim remains of building material burn down to nothing. In his mind, it was a clean finish to the job Liz Fury and her shitbag associates started with him. Now he felt he was thinking clearly for the first time in many days. He knew what he had to do, and it was easy; a child could do it. How hard could it be to fill a few bottles with gasoline, place a burning rag on the top, and deliver them through the glass windows of her bar? The Clean n' Jerk's owner had screwed-over the wrong truck drivin' country boy, and now it's time to play brass knuckles with her, guerrilla-warfare style.

Boo heard something scrabbling around in the woods near where he was standing. He figured it was an opossum or coon and didn't pay much attention to it. Critters were everywhere on his land. As long as they stayed out of his cabin he didn't care too much how they amused themselves on his property.

Then he heard the low growling.

He looked into the brush on the edge of the woods and saw the tall grass vibrating. Then, like a shot, he heard the chase of a terrified animal escaping from a predator. The ground-level pursuit could be followed by watching the plants tumble down from the zigzagging flight of the targeted beast. Then, a single sharp cry was heard, and more low, guttural champing was audible. The growling sound was muted, as if the teeth of the raider were buried in the soft hide of the prey, and tearing mouthfuls of flesh from its body.

The dog handler silently drew the Glock semiauto from the front of his pants. He'd spent the first clip he brought with him performing his war dance of psychic liberation a short while ago. Now he released the empty clip from the handle, and clicked his reserve one in, slapping it into place with the heel of his hand like they do on police TV programs. He leveled the gun at where the carnivorous chewing sounds were coming from and waited to see what would appear.

After a short while, the masticating sounds ceased. The tall grass began quivering again. The victorious animal was definitely moving out into the clearing. It was easy to trace its path in the greenery. Boo trained his weapon at the point where it looked like the beast would emerge. The new, clear-thinking man was enjoying this situation to no end. After all the incredible bad fortune he'd experienced lately, he supposed it might be mentally healthy for him to ventilate some rabid animal and release some personal tension. A bit of spur-of-the-moment, off-season hunting never bothered Boo Smalls in the slightest of ways. He went on one knee, braced his firing hand, and peered down the muzzle of his carbine. The beast appeared in the clearing.

It was Nitro.

And it wasn't Nitro. The four-legged creature standing before him was something out of a mental defective's deep nightmare: the filthy dog on Charon's barge carrying souls across the river Styx into Hades; a hastily sketched lesser demon found in a William Blake notebook. It was something the dark, subconscious mind coughed up and spat out in a green fever. And the monster was looking at Boo Smalls with a glimmer of recognition.

The beast was pink-skinned; its remaining fur was clumped into patches, and it was covered with what looked like black powder burns over most of its body. The dog's open mouth was clotted with fresh blood from its kill moments before. The beast breathed quickly, and pawed at the ground incessantly, as if looking for some misplaced ancient bone. But the feature that made Boo shudder to his quick was this one: the creature had *no* pupils in its eyes. The usually white sclera tissue was a solid crimson sheet from eyelid to eyelid. The animal regarded Boo with interest, and growled intermittently to itself; almost as if it were searching its memory for references and clues as to its current location.

Boo Smalls, upon witnessing the resurrected animal, was certain that his heart had stopped beating for a several seconds. He was also sure that if he hadn't pounded his chest with his free hand at the precise moment he did, it would not have re-started again of its own accord.

A long moment passed between Boo Smalls and, what appeared to be, his re-animated fight dog, Nitro. The dog handler's brain frantically reached for any kind of explanation that could justify this situation. This strange beast wasn't some stray creature from off the highway or his land. It was *his* dog and he knew it. He could account for that by the facial stitches that were visible on the brute. He'd patched Nitro up a couple of weeks ago after a close fight, and the marks from the thread and incisions were still crisscrossed along its snout and cheeks.

Nitro, or what Boo believed to be his dog Nitro, directed its gaze away from its owner. It pawed the ground a few more times, and then slowly began walking towards the woods, in the direction of the cabin. When it reached the edge of the clearing it slowed, and then stopped completely. The small, inhuman-looking beast turned back around to stare at its master. Through its glowing, red eyes, it seemed to be beckoning him to follow.

Boo Smalls had considered himself a rational man for most of his life. However, on this summer morning, he'd lost the ability to summon any higher reasoning faculties with any degree of success; they had become too much of a burden to him. He stared at the face of the grotesque living thing for a brief moment, and then began to follow it into the woods. The extraordinary animal turned when he saw his companion coming, and continued into the thicket and towards the house.

Then Boo and his dog Nitro disappeared from sight into the brush.

*

Lester Ganz sat in his room at the Friendly Arms Motel on Virginia Avenue. It was time to change the bandage on his arm. He was getting good at

doing it, but always felt queasy when looking at the fleshy, oozing stump. He'd attended a civil war re-enactment battle last year at the Sully Plantation and had seen how surgeons attended to infantry soldiers with shattered limbs on the battlefield. The amputation procedure the doctors perform on people today is almost identical to the one used during the great conflict. Only now the anesthetic drugs are better and they use power tools instead of hand saws on their patients.

In Lester's case, the carpal bones in his right wrist had been gnashed into splinters. The attending doctors in the Emergency Room cut the skin in a complete circle around the useless hand and peeled the surrounding skin down several inches. They severed through the remaining tendrils and bone fragments which attached his palm to the rest of his forearm, and discarded the withered appendage. Then the surgeon rolled the skin back up over the stump and cleanly tied it off.

Lester didn't like to look at his wrist anymore. Optically, it reminded him a large, uncircumcised male member. He always changed the bandage quickly, and tried to avoid as much visual contact with the limb as possible while cleaning and dressing it.

Kim the cocktail waitress at Caesar's casino gave him a quantity of Talwin, a pain reliever less potent than morphine, which she had left over from a bout of kidney stones last year. Les thanked her endlessly for the pharmaceutical gift, and abandoned his more powerful analgesic in favor of the proffered new medicine. So now, for the most part, Lester was successfully returning to his beloved "consensus reality," and general comprehension of life in Atlantic City, New Jersey.

Before leaving Caesar's on that day, he'd arranged a meeting with Kim and her boyfriend Carmine Angelini for a dinner date this evening. They were going to rendezvous at The Friendly Arms, and then go to the Trump Taj Mahal casino for the all-you-can-eat Sultan's Feast in the Star of India dining room. It was Kim's favorite restaurant in all of Atlantic City.

Before Lester left the casino, Kim made certain that he knew Carmine didn't go by his *real* name when talking to strangers at any time. The appellation he used for his daily movements around town was the much simpler moniker, Chuck Jones.

"Don't call him Carmine, Mr. Ganz," she reiterated. He doesn't like it at all when people know his family's title. He gets mad, starts acting funny, and drives like a maniac."

"I wouldn't call him by his proper name for all the jumbo shrimp at the Sultan's Feast," he told her that day before exiting her gambling establishment, and quickly downed a Talwin.

Now Lester waited for his dinner guests in the small motel room. He clicked on the cable television channel and watched fragments of an Asian pornographic film entitled, "Curling-iron Girls." The one-handed man had always

been fond of oriental women, and he found this low-budget Hong Kong quickie to be a rather stimulating entertainment.

The knock at the door finally arrived. It was Kim and Chuck Jones, casually late by ten minutes. The hellos were short and courteous to a fault. The beautiful hostess was decked out in a black pants suit and silver high heels. She looked like a very expensive personal secretary. Chuck Jones, however, was not what Lester had anticipated. He'd expected to see a man in his twenties, muscular, cocky, and a little too flashy for his own good. Mr. Jones was the antithesis of what Lester had imagined an Atlantic City racketeer to look like. The man was in his early forties. His dark hair was thinning and gray at the temples. He was slightly overweight in the gut, and wore a Sears polo shirt, cotton-twill pants, and oxblood loafers.

He shook Lester's left hand and the grip was like cold steel. At that moment, the humble store owner knew he'd come across the right man for his eradication assignment. Now, Les wondered, how does one bring up the subject of eliminating a small-time Virginia thug to a middle-aged man who's sitting in a cheap motel room in New Jersey. He pondered this question for a moment.

Chuck Jones and his date were sitting on the divan. Kim had turned the channel from Asian pornography to MTV. They watched skinny teenagers in designer shorts and headbands drive snowmobiles around somewhere in Colorado. The video clip they were watching turned out to be a protracted infomercial for a Canadian pharmaceutical company's new line of organic multivitamins.

After a minute, the lack of conversation was becoming embarrassing for everyone. Chuck Jones finally broke the quiet spell in the room.

"My lady friend here has told me a little about you, sir," he said to Les. Not too much, but I think I have an idea of why we're going out on the town tonight. When did your *accident* take place, Mr. Ganz?" Chuck nodded to Lester's right arm.

"Last week," the nervous man rejoined. "I didn't think I could handle the morphine they gave me at the hospital back home much longer. I was always about to faint or be sick when taking it. However, the pain was still terrible when I got into town. Kim was nice enough to give me some leftover medicine she had in her purse, and now I can move about without falling over or passing out."

"She's a sweet girl," he rejoined, unblinking. Chuck Jones leaned over and addressed Lester in a mannerly, businesslike tone. "Mr. Ganz, if someone out of negligence hurt a member of your family, would you take them to court for a monetary recompense? How about a deliberate malicious act against one of them? Would you call the police?"

"I w-would indeed, on both counts," Lester apprehensively replied.

“I believe you Mr. Ganz,” Chuck calmly responded, “now to be honest, you strike me as a responsible individual who wouldn’t dream of going above the law to justify a personal grievance. Therefore I’m forced to believe that someone has done you a tremendous injustice, and you’re not in a position to rectify the situation through normal channels, would that be correct, sir?”

“S-something on that order, yes, Mr. Jones. A certain party in my hometown of Youngblood, Virginia has physically injured me in a terrible way, as you can see. Also, they have in their possession some, umm, *compromising* photos of me with a local woman there,” the small, bookish man creaked. Now it was Chuck Jones’s turn to be still and consider the situation. After a short moment he resumed speaking.

“Mr. Ganz,” he continued, “as coincidental as this sounds, I have a bit of business to attend to in your neck of the woods in Virginia. I’m going to look in on some old family members I’ve recently re-discovered after many years. I’ll be leaving next Thursday to visit them. If, by the end of the evening, I were to stumble across a large manila envelope containing five thousand dollars in ten dollar increments with non-sequential serial numbers, an address where your offending party could be located, and an exact physical description of the perpetrator, I can personally guarantee a quick and quiet resolution to your personal injury.”

Lester Ganz sat gaping in fascination at the intuitive problem-solving skills of Carmine Angelini. The man known simply as ‘Chuck Jones’ on the streets of Atlantic City.

“I just have one more question for you Mr. Ganz,” he blithely said to him.

“What’s that?” Lester twittered.

“Are you hungry?” he queried. “I could eat a starched tablecloth right about now. The Sultan’s Feast awaits us.” He turned to Kim and chucked her gently under the chin. “You hungry, pumpkin?” He playfully asked her.

“Yeah,” Kim cooed to him.

The three of them exited Lester’s Room at the Friendly Arms Motel and walked down the brightly lit boardwalk to Donald Trump’s casino with its world class fare and entertainments.

*

Boo Smalls followed his reborn pit-bull through the woods with an uncanny feeling of fear and desire. He stayed twenty to thirty feet behind the animal, and kept his Glock trained on its head while they moved through the brush. The fear was easy enough to understand. He believed he’d just lost most

of his yearly investment to vandals, and now was presented with the glowing, resurrected body of his former prize fight-dog. It was enough to make anyone's twig snap. The desire was simple enough to explain as well; and the desire in this case was to discover something important: namely, what on earth did this beast want from him? It was surely leading him somewhere. It craned its head back several times during the trek to be certain Boo was still in tow.

After a few moments of moving through the brush, an unusual sense of easiness settled over Boo Smalls. Almost as if he'd made peace with the world, had his earthly affairs settled, and was sublimely ready for oblivion. He watched Nitro as he passed through the edge of the clearing and into the area which was his unofficial back yard. The unseemly beast once again checked to be sure that his owner was behind him. Then he headed directly towards the cabin's rear entrance. The dog trainer looked ahead past the creature towards his home.

The re-animated corpses of Jet and Nails sat quietly by the door, awaiting the return of their companion. Their red eyes were glowing like diodes.

Boo Smalls could not go on. He stood cemented to his spot, staring in raw perplexity at the scene as Nitro joined his mates by the door. His prized animal sat next to the other two, and became motionless and silent. The three of them stared at their owner with a look of expectation in their illuminated crimson orbs.

He went on. The area was so quiet an electric hum began sounding in Boo's ears. His skin was beginning to bother him with the itching again. He'd be sure to put some cortisone on it when he got inside his place.

If he got in.

If all of this insanity is really happening in the first place. He wasn't sure if he'd broken through the plane of reality into some kind of mysterious personal fantasy, or what was actually going on. It was a feeling he'd never experienced before.

The man began to think about various situational possibilities: maybe he'd been knocked unconscious in a car accident after the storm, or been shot by Sonny at the Clean n' Jerk this afternoon. Maybe he was in an Emergency Room somewhere and this was just his over-shocked system playing havoc with what remained of his functional gray matter.

Then he heard the dogs' weird howling begin, and he knew it wasn't a dream.

Their moans weren't the intonations any flesh and blood creature could conjure. Their throaty rumblings sounded as if they were coming from a great distance, like muffled thunderclaps from miles away. But there was an odd metallic trebly-resonance to them as well; as if their voice boxes were lined with iron filings. The sheer volume of their other-worldly cries was terrifying. A

deadly texture of sound, shifting between dull roars to the fin-shrieks that a falling bomb produces.

The trio began scratching and clawing at the cabin's back door. Their strength was incredible. Chips of wood went flying with every flick of their paws. Boo came out of his woolgathering session in a flash. Even though the situation had reached the level of incredulity, his survival instincts, or what was left of them, whipped into action. He drew the .38 semiauto from his belt in a hot second, and let three rounds blast into the sky.

The beasts froze. Then, slowly, they turned towards him and resumed their pleading looks for entry into the cabin. He approached them carefully, one determined step at a time. They continued to gaze at him, with what seemed to be positive anticipation. He got within ten feet of the door and stopped.

It was a threshold moment for Boo Smalls. His entire life and training had boiled down to this unreal, metaphysical confrontation on his property. A literal meeting of life and death outside of his back door. Boo realized the animals could destroy him in moments if they so desired, but he chose to take his chance with fate and continue advancing towards them.

He walked into his test of fire like a Zen master. The dog handler stuffed the still warm gun in his trousers, and headed toward the door completely unprotected. If this was how it was meant for him to check out of this life, by being mangled by his own miraculously re-born fighting-dogs, so be it.

He walked to within a few feet of the animals and their low, metallic rumbling began, but with nowhere near the frenzied volume of the first salvo. Their groans came in precise increments, like an automated factory machine doing rote work. He braced himself, walked between the chorusers, and opened the door to his home. The door swung open with difficulty because of the jarring Lester Ganz had given it during his wild escape several days ago.

The animals stared at him with what looked like a melancholy appreciation. Then the three of them walked quietly into the cabin, and went downstairs to their training area.

Boo Smalls began to experience a new sense of complete freedom; a great feeling of emancipation from any bonds of societal constraint. The concepts of right and wrong were passing from out of his mind and into the infinite void like runaway daydreams. No filtering ego remained to sit in judgment of the desiring id and the policing super-ego. It was a delicious feeling, usually reserved for the criminally insane.

He slipped inside his home, took a jar of corn from over the TV stand, and got several rib-eye steaks from the refrigerator. Then he followed the trio of hell hounds into the cellar. Boo calmly closed the basement door behind him as he escorted them into their dank domain.

*

Sonny was training his fight-dog Roscoe in the empty lot behind his and Liz Fury's apartment. He had several discarded Fauquier County phone books in a pile and was holding them with a protected hand while the dog shredded the volumes into ticker tape with its powerful jaws.

The strong-arm was the happiest man in Youngblood, Virginia. His champ seemed to be unbeatable, regardless of what Liz and the bookies were pumping into the blood of the competition. His gut feelings told him this particular cur was a future gold mine, and would pull down the serious money in a few months when the private interest stud-sale representatives came to town. Little did the young hoodlum realize that his cherished animal was going to be viciously killed that Friday, and that he himself only had another few weeks to live.

*

Wanda Jackson met with the several swimsuit babes she'd lined up for the modeling job at the Clean n' Jerk on the weekend. They were hanging out at Winchester Lake, driving the local teenage boys into blue-balled deliriums. The sexy quartet were all wearing sheer tube-tops, fluorescent-colored thongs, and stiletto heels. The girls were kicking back on their day off from work, and drinking white corn and lite beer from plastic champagne glasses.

Trish, Janelle, and Tammy all worked at the Cannonade Country Club in Winchester. They performed a variety of functions at their place of employment: lifeguard, bartender, weight trainer, physical therapist, etc. They also did escort services as a bonus for selected members.

Liz Fury's employee told the girls about the astronomical tips she'd received at the Clean n' Jerk last Friday. She also informed her pals that there were great numbers of single guys with money falling out of their spotless Levi's blue jeans at the bar who looked like they'd enjoy the company of a lingerie model for the evening.

Wanda was ebullient. She excitedly told her pals that she'd been to one of the sundry stores in town earlier in the day. They'd had a blow-out sale on huge Confederate Flags and rebel infantry hats. She'd bought a whole box full of their stuff for ten dollars. She'd received the OK from Liz Fury to decorate the bar with the colorful civil war gear for the weekend. Wanda's pals told her they'd *love* a chance to dance at the club on Army of the Confederacy theme night. They'd wear their cowboy boots and hip holsters along with the infantry caps as a bonus to complete the outfit. "What businessman with a snoot full of white corn could say no to buying a half-price string bikini off of a gun-slingin' dixie chick?" they giddily asked themselves.

Then the girls conferenced for a while. They thought maybe some of those horny, cash-carrying boys might like some *serious* companionship that evening. If Wanda could make six bills in one night passing out bourbon and beer, why not up the ante a notch, and make some real money taking the fellows back to the haystack for some personal attention? They agreed to play the situation by ear on Friday. If a financial opportunity knocked while they were dancing at the bar, they'd deal with that circumstance when they came to it.

Wanda couldn't wait to get started with the bar decorations. The weekend was only a couple of days away, and she knew her civil war skin-show would be the hit of the summer at the Clean n' Jerk.

*

The situation in Boo Smalls's basement looked like something out of a surrealistic prison movie. The pink, blistered trio of canines were calmly sitting by the bars of the training area, awaiting admittance to their individual cells. Boo quietly padded down the stairs, placed the bag of steaks and corn liquor on his workbench, and regarded his charges.

Soon the three of them began calmly pawing at the bars. Even with this easy motion of their front limbs, paint and steel filings jumped from the tines at each swipe. Then the growling started, but only for a moment.

Boo walked between the members of the group and unlocked all three doors. The wards walked into their confines deliberately, and immediately began pawing at the oven grates on the clay floor covering their individual spaces.

Before the re-awakening of the three strange beasts, the mere sight of Boo holding the jumper cable wires in his hands could send them into a state of panicked madness. Now they were in their pens and aggressively pawing the delivery system of their once dreaded hot-juice treatment.

The dog handler watched the beasts with continued clean amazement. The scalded, eyeless creatures held him in a state of dumb fascination. Boo went to his work bench to collect the rib-eye steaks, then returned to his animals. In an odd replay of the scene with Lester Ganz's gory murder of the three dogs, Boo Smalls held the choice cut of meat out in one hand for Nitro to inspect. The former prize pit-bull looked at the ration, and came to the front of his cage to examine it. The dog gently took the cutlet from his master's hands and dropped it to the ground. It regarded the chop like something new and unknown. Finally Nitro pulled the meat into the corner of its pen and left it there untouched.

The three animals were beginning to fidget in their pens and continued the almost uncontrollable exercise of scratching the electric iron slats. Boo, for the life of him, could not understand their interest with the once dreaded grates.

Their scraping of the bars was becoming manic. Metal flecks and static sparks were jumping from the spots where their claws ground against the element. They resumed the low, throaty growling, and the passion of their monomaniacal work was becoming increasingly alarming to witness. The intensity level was escalating rapidly in the pens, and the scraping and moaning of the confined beasts was becoming terrifying; in a matter of moments it was almost unbearable to watch.

Boo Smalls was getting scared of what might happen if they got wild and started clawing at the bars of their pens. He couldn't even be sure if his Glock .38 or .30-06 rifle could stop them; it would slow them down, definitely. But would that be enough firepower to bring them down if they somehow escaped their cages? He didn't know.

Boo, subconsciously or of his own mind, understood what he had to do to cease the spectacle in the training area. He had to turn on the juice, and hope it would do something to stop these ungodly creatures from tearing themselves to shreds. Jet's paws were becoming meaty clubs from the machine-like drubbing of the slats. Nails and Nitro's pads were almost as bad from the incessant smiting of the lattice on the clay floor.

The dog handler walked over to the Die Hard car battery and connected his end of the car jumper cable to the negative terminal. The fury in the cages was starting to peak. Clay chips, metal fragments, and clouds of dust swirled in the air. The dogs' ominous other-worldly snarls and clawing action made the scene look like a genuine battlefield of perdition. Boo could watch the red-hot insanity in the pen no longer.

He connected the positive terminal to the car battery.

The cries of pain and ecstasy were explosive.

And then there was serenity in the basement of Boo Smalls' cabin.

The famous dog handler watched in mute amazement as the animals lay down across the quietly humming bars, soaking up the unregulated current from the huge wet cell unit. He slowly walked over to the bars of their pens and saw each of the beasts slowly panting, with their tongues lolling out on one side of their mouths.

Boo went back to the Die Hard to be sure the connections were taught. Everything seemed to be working in apple pie order. The dogs *should* be screeching their lungs out and flying off the walls like buckshot. But they weren't doing that. And what was worse than the howling, what was inconceivable to the mind of the viewer, was plainly evident in the training pen. It looked like the trio had a sense of genuine *relief* on their swollen, indescribable faces as they stretched out on the hot, live wire.

Boo was certain there was some difficulty with the connections to the battery, because the animals simply couldn't sit there and soak up the direct current. That particular scenario, he was certain, was an impossibility. He took a penny nail from his workbench and tossed it through the bars of the pen and onto the kitchen grate in Nitro's pen. When it made contact with the element, the fastener jumped from the slats like a ricocheting bullet, sending a wake of sparks in its path until it bounded clear of the space. The quiet animal paid no attention to the object darting around inside its cage.

Now, incredibly, he was certain that the battery and connections were working. Boo also thought he smelled some of their rubbery flesh beginning to char from the electric searing, but the animals stayed where they were without a hint of protest.

Then a perfect moment of comprehension came to Boo Smalls, the man who'd lost practically everything he owned on earth during the last few days. The same man who was hell bent on taking down Liz Fury's gang of hoods like a rabid animal.

Lightning.

It was the lightning from the storm that brought them back to life.

He recalled how the top of still #1 was blown to pieces and the edge of the vat was badly charred and chewed up, as if a bomb from an airplane had struck the container. If Liz Fury's people had tried to detonate his distillery, they'd have placed the charge at the outside bottom of the cask to make the blast point destroy the vat and detonate the contents at the same time.

But some other thoughts were working in Boo's mind as well. He believed it wasn't just the Frankenstein trick that revived them. There was something else to the equation to be considered. He was sure of it. And it came to him in a flash.

The bad batch of corn liquor.

He'd placed amounts of strychnine in the unpotable pure ethyl alcohol. Then he'd preserved the dogs bodies in the fluid. An inconceivable chemical reaction must have taken place when the lightning touched off the white corn. A extraordinary, chemo-electric act had brought his dogs back to life during the violent thunderstorm on his property.

At that moment, Boo understood the life-giving miracle that had come to Youngblood.

He trembled and held his arms tightly together. Now he was sure this seeming divine intervention was a sign that his meager plans of destruction towards Liz Fury were made in haste. In his crumbling mind, he abandoned the idea of burning down the Clean n' Jerk with his crude molotovs.

Somehow a much more grandiose destruction was being planned for her in the cosmic realm. The dogs had been reborn and delivered to him for a reason. And the reason was obvious: some greater power wanted Boo to take the dogs to the fights this weekend and let *them* be the avenging angels of his personal misfortune.

Boo Smalls laughed like a religious zealot and clapped his hands. The report they made was like a gunshot.

Of course he did not realize that the radiation poison in his body was slowly creeping into his central nervous system and brain cells. His skin was beginning to blotch, and his thought processes were becoming erratic and confused. None of that mattered in the larger sense however, because Boo Smalls was now convinced of the retribution role the animals would play this weekend in Youngblood. They were his agents of revenge towards Liz Fury. Pure and simple. And it was his duty to care for them until they were to be unleashed on the profane woman in a few days. If they wanted to be supercharged with wet-cell current all day, he'd go to the Sears hardware store and get them all the Die Hard

batteries they could handle. Yes, he thought to himself, that would be a fine thing for him to do for them.

*

Thursday afternoon at the Clean n' Jerk Saloon

Wanda Jackson and Sonny were hanging up rebel flags and posters of Robert E. Lee, J.E.B. Stuart, and Jefferson Davis around the walls of the club. They also tacked up plastic swords and reprints of confederate currency behind the bar. Wanda had brought several boxes of swimsuits and lingerie from the Cleopatra for Trish, Janelle, and Tammy to model tomorrow night at the big function. Things were looking good for an incredible night of sales and easy money at the bar.

Sonny was feeling particularly fine that day. He'd had a glorious exchange of body fluids with his boss earlier in the morning and was at ease with the world. Also Roscoe, his dog, was slated by the house bookies to win against whatever challenger comes up against him tomorrow night. The line of thought among the odds-makers was that they'd make Roscoe a sure thing for the next couple of weeks, and then have him take the fall. Sonny, by then, would have a stud-buyer waiting for a dog, and would deliver his champ before his number came up to lose the fight. If his animal could win another three contests, his sale price would go up to twenty-five thousand dollars.

The bouncer walked over to the house stereo system and placed his Albert Collins' "Don't lose your cool," compact disc into the player. Soon the club was filled with the guitarist's famous high-end Telecaster licks and Sonny and Wanda started boogying around the bar to the ferocious jam, "Meltdown."

Wanda opened a jar of Liz Fury's white corn and the two toasted their handiwork with the decorations. They were dancing around the place and finishing with the final touches of the civil war motif when Boo Smalls walked into the club.

This time Sonny and Wanda weren't caught off-guard by the dog handler.

The blonde beauty flashed her flat .38 from out of her black spandex running shorts in half a heartbeat. She had the carbine locked in both hands and aimed squarely between Boo Smalls' eyes before the man even realized it. Sonny was equally quick with his .45 semiautomatic which he had tucked away in his jean jacket. The two of them had their boy completely covered. He couldn't make a move to defend himself even if he'd wanted to.

Boo Smalls was unarmed.

He was wearing a thin white T-shirt and seersucker cotton pants. A bulge from a gun would have been the easiest thing in the world to detect. He was smoking a cigarette and admiring the new antebellum decor of the place. He

smiled at the two armed employees and waved off the need for them to keep his head in the cross hairs of their powerful weapons.

“Don’t you people ever take a break from the Clint Eastwood stuff?” Boo questioned the two workers.

“What do you want Boo?” Sonny gruffly asked him. “Last time you were here things could have got a little messy; and as far as I know, nobody likes to clean up big messes. We’re just two hired hands keeping the peace here in the bar and don’t want a lick of trouble from you; think of us as like a couple of stoned, smiley-faced hippies from the 60s. Peace and love is our game, ain’t that right sweet cheeks?” he said to Wanda

She quickly picked up on Sonny’s off-handed, flower-power conversation motif and rejoined, “peace in our time, peace with honor, baby,” in a terse, satiric manner with her voice imitating that of former U.S. President Richard Nixon, “that’s what its all about here in Liz Fury’s saloon. Ain’t *that* right Boo Smalls?”

He casually regarded the two hirelings for a second and smirked like a spoiled child.

“Save me the ‘Tricky Dick’ one-liners, *please*,” Boo Smalls dreamily replied. “Yes, peace is a wonderful thing; it’s absolutely great. Peace of mind, like I’m feeling right now, is about the finest thing a man can achieve. I’ve come to tell you I’m ready to play ball with Liz and her bookies. Whatever she wants me to do with my animals is fine: tranquilize them, dope em’ up anyway she sees fit, it doesn’t matter. Fate has blessed me with three new perfect creatures of commerce, and I’m here to tell you I’m in for whatever action the Clean n’ Jerk has to offer me. Can you tell her that for me? I’ll be here Friday and she can see my new crop of winners, or losers, or whatever she believes is the right thing to call them. Lord be praised.”

Sonny looked at Wanda in astonishment. They both lowered their weapons and stared intently at Boo Smalls. They were sharing the identical thought: could this be the same crafty dog handler who had almost taken them out of the game permanently only a few days ago? He looked different, like he had a bad excema on his skin. His eyes didn’t focus so well either, and every few seconds they’d wander, and lose contact with whatever he was staring at. The man looked like he was becoming mentally unglued.

“Are you OK, Boo?” Wanda asked, “you don’t look so great. “Do you have a case of poison ivy or something like that? Your skin looks kind of, well, burned-up.”

“I have never felt better in my life, Miss Jackson,” Boo replied. “Please pass along my information to Liz and tell her I’ll be here at the regular time tomorrow when the trainers arrive to put the dogs on view for the bettors. We’re all going to make a lot of money this weekend. I can sense it. I’m never wrong about my winning feelings either, Wanda. You can bet on a big payoff this Friday. I’ll see you then. Goodbye you two.”

Boo Smalls exited the Clean n’ Jerk, got into his F-10, and cruised out of the loading area of the bar. Sonny and Liz stared at each other in complete bewilderment. Albert Collins was playing a cat scratch blues lick and singing about losing his mind over a girl in his hometown. Sonny finally spoke to her after the long pause.

“You had *sex* with that man?” he questioned. “You better get checked out at the Fauquier Clinic soon, honey. I mean like, today.”

“Don’t remind me of that little tryst,” she rejoined. “Everything was safe, I made *sure* of that, but Jesus, he’s looking bad this afternoon. Like he’s started melting or something. I think he might be losing it in ways we common folk don’t understand. Anyway I’ll pass on his information to Liz. She’ll be glad to know she’s broken his will and got him to see things her way. I like to bring her good news, she kisses me like a marine sergeant and puts money in my bra.”

“Just keep the office door open while you do the good messenger service,” Sonny replied. “There’s nothing sexier in the world than seeing a sweet country thing like you french-kiss the boss-lady.”

“Except getting paid for watching it,” Wanda rejoined.

Sonny loudly cackled at her genuinely astute remark and said, “I believe I stand corrected.”

They both knocked back a shot of white corn. Then Wanda went into the office to tell Liz Fury the bizarre tale of Boo Smalls’s consent to play by the odds-makers rules in the upcoming dog fights. Sonny did the usual Thursday liquor inventory and made the obligatory calls to the wholesalers to stock up on the “bonded” booze for the weekend. He ordered many extra cases of Budweiser and Jack Daniel’s for the approaching fights. He had a strange hunch that Boo was right about the blood-matches coming up. They were somehow going to be more spectacular than ever. Something no one on the circuit could even hope to imagine.

After he’d called the liquor vendors, he took his sedan into Winchester to buy several gallons of white corn from Liz Fury’s private distillery source. The cruise on Interstate 81 was relaxing and the day was shaping up nicely for Sonny. The strong-arm mused his situation. He truly believed that tomorrow night would

be the start of something big in his life. He could feel it. It would be just like his personal icon Boo Smalls had predicted. This weekend would be the kick-off into big money and fast times. He couldn't wait for it to begin.

Seven

Thursday night, Atlantic City, New Jersey

Lester Ganz ate his meal at the Trump Taj Mahal with a certain heavy-handed reserve. In direct contrast to their host, Kim and Chuck Jones were cheerful and animated during dinner. The pair went back to the all-you-can-eat bar several times and fed each other jumbo shrimp with their fingers like newlyweds. After the feast, the trio went to several casinos on the boardwalk: Showboat, Bally's, Trump Castle, and Merv Griffin's Resorts to name only a few. Lester would buy a thousand dollars in chips and later return the gambling tokens to the casino bank and ask for as many ten dollar bills as they could spare. He told the tellers he was going to the gentlemen's clubs on the strip after a while, and the only way he could control his spending urges was to tip the dancers in the small, sawbuck increments. The house bank personnel were uniformly unmoved by the information offered to them from the owlish man.

After a few hours of casino hopping, Lester had his money ready to hand over to the savvy racketeer. The three of them walked back to Virginia Avenue together. Across the street from the Friendly Arms Motel was a small, ramshackle liquor store called The Snake Eyes. A coiled cobra set to strike its cornered prey was painted on the sign outside the storefront. The poisonous reptile's eyes were depicted as a pair of red gambling dice, with one white dot in the center of each square as the pupil.

Chuck Jones walked into the store, said a few words to the clerk, and walked out with a bottle of Herradura Tequila and a bag of ice. Before Lester and his guests could get to the door of their motel, the clerk of the store came running up to them in a state of profound anxiety. The young man apologized to the group for his personal oversight, and wondered if Mr. Jones might like a few complimentary bags of chips, candy bars, magazines, bottles of California champagne or cartons of cigarettes courtesy of his store.

Chuck Jones playfully slapped the man on his back and told him everything was fine. He thanked the youth for his concern and said not to give a second thought to the matter. The clerk told Mr. Jones to please have a good evening and that his lady friend Kim looks more beautiful every time he sees her. He then sprinted back to the store covering his head with his hands.

"Nice kid," Chuck said to Kim.

“He’s real polite,” she replied.

“He knows the angel of death when he sees him, and wants to stay on his good side,” Lester thought to himself, and popped another Talwin into his mouth.

The three of them walked into the motel. They got the door keys from the smarmy kid wearing the Bon Jovi T-shirt, and went up to Lester’s room to work on the details of their collective project.

Kim the waitress and Chuck Jones entered the room and placed the tequila on the small table in front of the davenport. He pulled up a chair for Lester, and his girlfriend got three water glasses from out of the bathroom. She found an ice bucket in the closet and placed several handfuls of the clear cubes inside it. Then she placed a few of the frozen pieces in each of their glasses and poured doubles for everyone. It appeared that the evening’s activities were far from over.

Mr. Jones pulled an immaculate Mont Blanc fountain pen from his trouser pocket. He looked around the room and saw a few pieces of Friendly Arms Motel stationary by the bed stand. He stood up, collected the paper and returned to the sofa, sitting close to Kim. Then he raised his glass to toast his two companions.

“And justice for all,” the inscrutable racketeer proclaimed.

“You got it, babe,” Kim rejoined.

“Sic semper tyrannis,” Lester wearily bleated.

The loving couple downed their shots and poured another round for themselves. Lester apologized to his guests for just sipping his drink. He’d taken a strong pain killer and he’d learned that if one mixed that dose with high-octane alcohol, a blackout for days might occur. Lester’s company was not in the least offended by his self-denial, and told him they had no problems whatsoever with his avoidance of the liquor.

Mr. Jones inquired if Lester was an American Civil War buff. This question got the store owner’s attention instantly. Chuck Jones informed his new acquaintance that he’s something of a history bookworm, and has read extensively about General Stonewall Jackson’s stunning string of military campaign victories during the great conflict. When he’d heard Lester repeating John Wilkes Booth’s infamous Ford Theater epithet, he was almost certain he’d found someone he could talk to in detail about his wide range of readings on the subject.

Lester informed his hit-man acquaintance that he was more of a fiction reader than military history enthusiast, but had a great interest in southern literature, especially the works of William Faulkner. He told his guests that the place where he needs his bit of business attended to is directly off John Mosby Highway in Youngblood, Virginia. Everyone in that part of the state can talk at

length about the Gray Ghost's Partisan Irregulars and their sabotaging activities of northern interests during the war, himself included.

For the first time that night, Chuck Jones smiled directly at Lester Ganz. The urbane mobster had just finished reading Mosby's biography, *Rebel*, and had been fascinated by the man's life story. In an unusual way, the two completely divergent men were starting to bond a friendship based on the subject of a famous southern saboteur.

They chattered about the legendary man's fearless sorties behind enemy lines for a while, and afterwards, his diplomatic position as ambassador to China during his senior years. Neither of the men mentioned the embarrassing fact that the famous insurrectionist died because he was kicked in the head by a horse.

When it seemed they would never get down to business, Kim reminded the two of them that there was a serious matter to be discussed here, and that they could gas about dead army guys later on if they absolutely had to. Chuck Jones gave Kim a peck on the lips and told her, as usual, she was right about the situation.

After an hour of *detailed* conversation about Sonny, Liz Fury, the Clean n' Jerk Saloon and other minutia about Youngblood, Chuck Jones felt completely confident that he could take care of Lester's problem without much of a fuss. He told Lester he would handle the situation next Friday, when he was going to visit some newly re-discovered family in that area.

Lester handed him the envelope stuffed with old ten dollar bills and thanked him for coming to his aid when he could not do for himself. Then the small man began to feel self-conscious and slightly sick to his stomach about the transaction he'd just completed with Chuck and Kim. He stood up, wobbled slightly, and ran to the bathroom where he almost tossed his cookies, but couldn't bring himself to do it completely. He looked at the bandaged stub that was formerly his right hand, and that visual image brought him back to "consensus reality" in a flash.

Lester believed in his heart that he was doing something reprehensible with this assassination scheme, but he also believed that Sonny was an evil dirt-bag that the world wouldn't miss for one second after he's gone. He thought about the mortal consequences of his actions, and it scared him. Then he stared at his damaged limb again, and decided to go through with the deal. If Lester had to pay the price of eternal damnation for his deserved revenge, he'd deal with that particular difficulty when his number came up.

He returned to his guests after he'd straightened himself up and thrown some water on his face. Kim turned on her nurturing instincts and stroked his head, telling him he'd be fine in a while. Chuck Jones told him it was only natural to have a bout of butterflies when one decides to take substantive, proactive measures in their life.

He informed Les that it was a certainty he was doing the right thing. Sonny, from how Lester had described him, was a scumbag cowboy who rips people off and shoots from the hip whenever he gets riled up. Guys like that are bad for business he told his host. The world is better off without them.

The local couple prepared to leave Lester's room at the motel. They all said their mannerly, uneasy good-byes to each other. Chuck told his client that this would be the last time he'd see him. He'd enjoyed their talk about southern civil war icons, and was sorry they couldn't continue the discussion at a later date. He informed Les that in an emergency, if any contact *had* to be made, to do it through Kim at Caesar's casino; anything short of a major earthquake or a premature interment of their mark was not considered an emergency. Lester replied that if he did have to speak to her he'd use the name Joseph Brown in all his communications.

The history buff mobster shook Lester's left hand, and told him by next Friday night, he'd never have to worry about being bothered by one particular Youngblood, Virginia roadhouse doorman ever again. Lester thanked him in a thin, trembling voice.

Kim hugged Lester and the pair of Atlantic City demimonde characters exited his room and went down to the lobby of The Friendly Arms Motel.

"What a sad guy," Kim said with empathy to her man. "I really feel sorry for him. He looks like hell with his arm chewed up and taking pain killers all the time. It's too bad you're going to have to go back there and ventilate him tonight."

"I know honey," he rejoined, "I was starting to like him, too. He knows a lot about the history of the south although he doesn't admit it. And he seems to be a genuinely interesting fellow despite his difficulties. The deep southern aristocrats are actually descended from the remnants of the Roman Empire, you know."

"Yeah?" Kim replied.

"I never lie," Chuck responded. He paused for a moment and then said, "let's go get a drink at The Panther Club. I'm feeling kind of edgy tonight. Something isn't right. I don't feel like myself at all."

"You're the boss, honey," Kim said, "I know what you mean about feeling funny. I don't feel like my usual charming self, either. I think I could use a fresh margarita, too."

Kim the cocktail waitress and Chuck Jones got in his plain sedan and cruised up Atlantic Avenue to their favorite strip of bars and entered The Panther Club through the VIP entrance.

*

Friday morning, Youngblood, Virginia

Boo Smalls was sitting in his cabin and sick to his stomach. His brain felt like hammered oatmeal and he was having dizzy spells. He got up from the divan where he'd spent the night and went into the bathroom to urinate. In the mirror over the sink he noticed that his face was puffy and the skin under his eyes was beginning to peel. Small blisters were forming on his forehead and cheeks, and he felt a burning sensation in his groin while he eliminated his excess water.

After he'd finished examining himself, he went down into the basement to look in on his three charges. He'd disconnected the Die Hard battery after about forty minutes of the indescribable activity with it yesterday. The dogs had stayed prone on the grates all night after the current had been ceased from its source.

They appeared to be in some kind of a semiconscious condition. It was difficult to tell if they were sleeping or awake. They breathed normally, and their eyelids remained open, but their lack of irises in their crimson eyes made them look heavily sedated or comatose.

The water dispensing bottles in their pens were full, and they'd all ignored the steaks Boo had thrown into their pens last evening while they were soaking up the wattage. The trio seemed dead to the world.

After a few minutes they sensed that another person was in the room with them. Their paws began twitching and their bodies shook with nervous movement. As if they had telepathic abilities between them, the pit bulls groggily got to their feet and began pacing the confines of their cages. Boo closely watched the triumvirate as they appeared to re-acquaint themselves with their environment. They slowly walked in circles around their areas, and regarded everything intently. They still ignored the provided food and water.

Then the three of them moved to the front of their cages and watched Boo Smalls' every move. The bizarre, otherworldly staring match appeared to be complete; all involved parties were examining each other like new students on the first day of school. The trainer moved towards the car battery, and quickly connected both terminals for an instant, then retracted the clamps. A fast shudder went through the bodies of the beasts, however it generated nothing from them like the ecstatic cries from yesterday when they'd been ready to tear the cabin to pieces for an extra electric charge.

Now, after overuse from the day before, the Die Hard was low on current. Boo had worked it for forty minutes yesterday, and had been using it in their fight training for some time. The animals looked at their master with blind expectation, and when he re-connected the terminals, the dogs resumed their prone positions on the oven grates like automatons.

Then Boo heard a booming noise, followed by the sounds of something madly running around upstairs in his cabin. His mind flashed panic, then rage, and lastly it registered a deep calm within itself. The furious emotional cycle of his disintegrating mind took only a few seconds. He lifted his .30-06 from the gun rack and confidently walked upstairs to dispatch whoever or whatever it was that had made the fatal mistake of bothering him at his home this morning.

The huge, terrified raccoon was scabbling about in the front room, trying to find a way out of the cabin. It had fallen into the place through the chimney,

and Boo had inadvertently left the flue open. The beast had thumped down the chute like a bag of prison laundry, and crashed into the logs and kindling in the hearth. When the creature saw Boo approaching from downstairs, it hissed like an enraged mountain cat, and positioned its body in a corner to defend itself.

Boo raised his carbine to sanction the raspy critter permanently. Then, an idea passed through his mind as he saw the coon staring intently at him and taking an aggressive, confrontational position. He returned to the basement and retrieved one of the travel cages he uses to take his dogs to the fight events. Also, he picked up his large chemical fire extinguisher and returned upstairs to the front room.

The coon was still where he had left it, and the beast was regarding him with a look of extreme malice. Boo unfastened the lock on the sliding door of the travel cage, clicked it open, and tossed it in the direction of the animal. The clanging and rattling sounds the cage made when it struck the ground alarmed the collared wild thing and it began charging towards Boo, teeth bared.

Boo blasted the varmint with a huge cloud of oxygen-disbursing chemicals from the extinguisher and the beast fled from the noxious fog. The bewildered raccoon coughed and gagged mouthfuls of the flame eliminating materials. Boo chased the creature around the room directing the shots from the canister to get it moving towards the travel cage. After a few moments of pursuit, the animal willingly ran into the trap to avoid another direct shot from the nozzle. Boo slammed the crate's door shut and locked it tight.

The trainer felt tired and more sick than ever from his pursuit of the unfortunate guest. He collected a jar of corn from over the TV stand, sat on his divan, and looked at his penned quarry through the slats in the vessel. The dog handler took a long draught of his private stock liquor and replaced the jar where he'd found it. Then Boo Smalls grabbed the handle of the raccoon's container in one hand, his high powered rifle in the other, and slowly went back downstairs to the training area.

His dogs were still laying on the metal tines absorbing what little juice was left in the Die Hard. Boo placed the caged raccoon in the corner of the room and went to the front of the dogs' pens to look them over. Per usual, they seemed content to stretch out on the electrified metal. The soft hum of the juice being sent to the element could be heard in the training room. The faint smell of burning hair and flesh could be detected down there as well.

Boo went to the battery and disconnected the cables. The animals shuddered again, as when he first connected the apparatus this morning. The trio moved lazily about on the slats, not showing much interest in what was going on about them. He returned to the travel pen with the raccoon, and brought it to the front bars of Nitro's cell.

He placed the front section of the coon's cage to face the entrance into Nitro's cubicle. Boo quickly opened the door to the dog's area and placed the front grate of the travel crate against it. He slid the bars of the small carrier up and banged the back of it with his foot. The raccoon scampered out of its confine

and into Nitro's training pen. Then the man slammed the door to the fight dog's pen shut and waited to see what would happen.

*

Lester Ganz sat on his single bed at the Friendly Arms Motel. His feelings of shame and spinelessness were grating on his mind in a relentless way. The meek store owner, despite his medicated condition, was able to think clearly after the initial rush of his pain-killers had worn off. His self-loathing for not being able to stand up to Sonny the bouncer's macho bullshit back home was beginning to overpower his senses. He felt small, ineffective and cowardly for running away from his business and the trouble in his town.

Les was also certain he'd just thrown five thousand dollars down the porcelain convenience when he handed the envelope with the money to Chuck Jones a short while ago. He was sure the duo were having a serious laugh and a bottle of champagne somewhere celebrating the success of their confidence job concerning his troubles in Virginia. The thought of them passing out large tips, and spending his cash made him tremble with ire, and then, slowly, he'd sublimate into self-pity and remorse.

The sense of regret he was feeling was becoming unbearable. He was starting to review his current predicament as cinematic flashes in his head. His mind's eye treated him to a montage of humiliations and embarrassments: he viewed himself getting suckered by Liz Fury for his personal, foot-worshipping absurdity; being made a pawn in Sonny's game of blackmail without a struggle; being left on the road like an animal after he'd been attacked by Boo's pit-bull; being strung along like a complete rube by Kim and Chuck Jones, and finally being treated like a meaningless peon by the teenage desk clerk of the motel.

After several repetitions of the grim scenes played through his mind, Lester Ganz came to a slow, but accurate realization: no one is going to help him out of this difficult situation but himself. This is his problem and he's going to have to solve it by his own resolve.

After his moment of insight, a wave of relief flowed over him. He understood that he alone held the keys to his own future and fate. Lester's thoughts began picking up speed, almost tumbling over themselves as he pictured various problem-solving alternatives to his predicament. He could write off the lost money he'd shamefully hoped would solve his problems at home, and start working towards a way to keep Sonny at bay with a dose of his own scheming medicine.

Lester Ganz knew what he had to do. It was risky as hell, but at least he would be trying to control his *own* fate in this grisly, complex matter. He had to somehow get hold of a firearm, break into the Clean n' Jerk, and while Liz had the safe open, retrieve the photos and negatives of their scandalous rendezvous at his cabin. He was sure she kept the blackmailing material in the combination safe at the bar. Liz Fury didn't even hold a safe deposit box at the local bank, because she trusted absolutely no one with the cash but her own sweet self.

With a wave of energy he hadn't felt in days, Lester cleaned up the table with the water glasses and tequila bottle. Then he washed his face, got his few

belongings, and exited the room for the last time. He walked down the stairs, ignored the desk clerk, stiffed his bill at the motel, and began walking up Virginia Avenue towards the Greyhound bus station.

*

At the bar of The Panther Club, Kim and Chuck Jones were on their second round of frozen Margaritas, but not enjoying them with the usual zeal they have for the colorful drinks. The couple knew that they had to make a serious decision about the fate of Lester Ganz soon, because a person new to the killing game could start talking awful fast if they get a case of the cold feet and decide to change their mind about a piece of work.

Their sense of malaise was palpable. Carmine Angelini, AKA Chuck Jones, had done innumerable wicked things to strangers in his life. From arson to strong-arm jobs, from embezzlement of funds to pimping, he'd run the gamut of illegal activity in Atlantic City. However, he'd never met a man who'd contracted an assassination-job from him whom he'd felt any kind of friendship towards.

Chuck Jones was hitting that period of middle age where reflection of ones deeds in life becomes an almost daily routine. And he was feeling a sense of nipping guilt for all the nefarious turns he'd committed on others during his misspent youth.

He'd met Kim several months ago, and the sense of relief in finding a partner who loved and cared for him was enormous. She became a salvation for the aging, lonely mobster. In his heart of hearts, he truly loved the girl. He'd had hundreds of call-girls, one-nighters, and destructive relationships with women in the past, but Kim put an end to his self-doubt and fears about real connection with someone. He felt genuine compassion for his young girlfriend. He wanted to marry her someday, and was even thinking about becoming a father.

Also, the feared racketeer wanted to do one decent thing with his life before he could retire from the good fellas game and become just another Joe Blow on the boardwalk. The Angelini family business was doing incredibly well by syndicate standards, and his younger brothers and associates in the organization were raking-in the black market revenues of the town by storm. They didn't need the mellowing Chuck Jones and his new girl to slow them down.

At the bar, Kim told Chuck she thought Lester wouldn't even talk to himself about the contractual agreement he'd made with them concerning Sonny in Youngblood. The Caesar's casino waitress felt a real pang of concern for Mr. Ganz, the small man who could talk about civil war stuff with her mature boyfriend. He'd actually made him smile and be happy for a while. It was one of the few times since they'd been dating that she'd seen Chuck in a pleasant state of mind around other people.

It was something of a miracle that she'd located the injured man in her casino and had agreed to the appointment for all of them to meet at a later time. Chuck had been animated and loose in the motel room after the two of them had discovered their common interest, and they could have gone on for hours about all that military-battle tra-la-la.

And now, as a standard business practice with an unknown person who pays for a sanction and can identify you to the authorities, you've got to take him out of the picture permanently. That's the golden rule the wise guys live by.

The two of them were somber and fiddling with the straws in their enormous boat drinks. They listened to a few Frank Sinatra songs on the bar's stereo system and tried to make small talk, but it was a strained and uncomfortable situation.

"I really *like* that man, honey," Chuck Jones finally said to Kim. "I swear, I don't know why, but I can't bring myself to finish the job tonight. He's such a Forrest Gump kind of fellow. A real pleasant guy. I'm sure he's never hurt anyone in his life. I absolutely feel like *shit* about this situation."

"I know baby," Kim replied, "he's like a retarded, geeky kid who needs special education or something. He even tried to help me fix the drinks at the motel and had forgotten about his injured arm. He tried to pick up the tequila bottle with his stump. He was so embarrassed. I almost cried I felt so sorry for him."

More depression settled on the scene at The Panther Club. Kim exhaled loudly and clicked her fingernails on the polished wood. Chuck Jones took a book of matches and lit several of them, one by one. He watched the flame burn down to the tip of his finger. Afterwards, the pensive man would drop the spent torches into the circular amber ashtray that had an image of a stalking jungle cat enameled onto it.

And then, Chuck Jones' face illuminated like an electric icon of the Savior. Kim felt his energy rising, and knew something was up.

"Honey," he said, "how many miles do you have on that new, flashy Corvette I, uh, *acquired* for you last month?"

"About a thousand," she said, "why do you want to know, baby?"

"We've been going out for a while now," he rejoined, "and we haven't been on a *real* vacation yet, now have we?" Kim knew what he was getting at, but let him go on, like he was going to *surprise* her with something big.

"Why no," she answered, "we've been stuck in New Jersey for months and it's hot and sticky and I hate it. I'd love to go somewhere for a holiday. Anywhere, really, away from casino. I'm *sick* of wearing a toga to work every day.

"I was reading," Chuck Jones replied in a pedagogical tone, "in the July issue of the American Automobile Association's monthly magazine that this is a

wonderful time to visit the historic battlefields of Virginia: Fredericksburg and Manassas in particular are stocked with Civil War historians who take you through a guided tour of the famous sites. As you well know, my dear, I have a great interest in such grand matters.”

“Oh, I *know*,” Kim rejoined. You told Lester that you’d rediscovered some old family in his part of the state just to make our story sound good, but I never imagined that you really wanted to go there.”

“I could also take my Remington 710 bolt-action field rifle with the infrared night scope with me, in case I get a chance to do a little hunting on the side while we’re out of town. As a matter of coincidence, Youngblood, Virginia is quite near those remarkable heroic places. Maybe half an hour drive at most. It might be curious to see what Mr. Ganz's albatross, the strong-arm, looks like in the flesh. We may even be able to give Lester an early Christmas gift with any good luck. It is entirely possible this Sonny person will have an accident while we’re in town. I’m absolutely sure, as you stated earlier, our client wouldn’t even talk to a butterfly about our business arrangement. We could take a well earned vacation from the local family concerns, soak up a little history on the side, and fulfill our contractual obligations to the man all in one fell swoop. *A fait accompli* if you will. It wouldn’t be a completely by-the-book piece of work, but the personal satisfaction might be well worth the minimal risks. What do you say, pumpkin? Want to go on a road trip south of the Mason-Dixon line?”

Kim beamed at her boyfriend. She flashed her big, pretty teeth and hugged the man with real feeling.

Then Chuck’s dazzling girlfriend chirped, “‘Virginia is for Lovers,’ baby. I read that on a car bumper sticker in Caesar’s casino parking lot. This’ll be great! I can’t wait to go and visit the land of 18th century, big-haired presidents. Hmmm, let’s see.... we’ll eat fried chicken in roadside diners, and then buy some corn, and tomatoes, and get a big ol’ bushel of peaches, too. Oh, yes, we must have peaches! You really are the best, baby. You’re going to help that poor man Mr. Ganz, and I think that’s great. And do you want to know something, hon? *I love you, Chuck Jones.*”

Chuck ordered two more frozen Margaritas and the couple enjoyed them tremendously. They talked about their upcoming trip, and getting the car ready for a big cruise to the southern states.

The middle-aged mobster with the young girlfriend felt a real sense of accomplishment and personal triumph. He’d finally decided to do something like pro bono work for the first time in his life, and it felt good to him. He played with the straw in his drink and Kim lovingly twiddled a strand of his hair in her hand.

“Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus,” the smiling hit-man opined to himself, and took a long, cold sip of his frozen drink.

*

The report of the cage door banging closed got Nitro up from the element, and he wearily began moving about in the cell. Boo Smalls turned the folding chair from his workbench around so he could observe the front grate of the training area. He positioned himself to watch his dog's reaction to the nearby bristly intruder.

The radiation poisoning continued working its way through Boo's system, and the unstable trainer pulled the hunting knife out of the bench's soft pine and absent-mindedly began testing the blade's cutting-edge with his thumb. His attention stayed riveted to the scene in the cage, but the once cunning man was unaware that he'd created a long, thin incision on his finger from the nervous handling of the cutting tool.

The large raccoon surveyed the pen and at last made visual contact with the scalded, unnatural creature who shared its confines. Upon viewing its neighbor, the coon's dirty back flew up into hackles, and it bared its needle-like teeth with ferocity. The incensed animal backed itself into a corner, as it had done upstairs when it confronted Boo Smalls. Only now its hissing took on a new tone of hostility, as if mixed with a rough, unqualified kind of hysteria.

Nitro glanced in the direction of the defensive animal. When the two of them regarded each other eye to eye, the pit bull turned to face its adversary in a fighting stance. The low metallic rumbling began in the ferocious dog's throat. It lowered its head, as if to charge the shrieking creature in the corner of the pen.

Boo Smalls finally noticed the deep cut in his thumb when he heard several drops of blood spattering on his work boots. He banged the knife's tip back into the tabletop and the sound distracted the caged animals for a split second.

The coon was the first to sense the advantageous distraction and charged at Nitro while the dog was still regarding its owner. The cornered beast frantically scuttled towards its target; its eyes ablaze, and mouth maniacally champing as it closed in towards the pit bull.

The unsuspecting dog yelped in surprise as the fierce, sharp teeth of the terrified beast sliced into its licheny flesh. The coon clamped on to the dog's shoulder and tried to tear away a mouthful of its burned skin and pie-bald fur.

The dark basement began to sound like the floor of a dense, deadly jungle as the combatants snapped and swiped at one another. It only took a few seconds for Nitro to regain its composure after the quick animal had surprised it. The dog systematically cornered its prey, and cut off any angle of escape the varmint could hope to gain. Then Nitro charged headfirst into the soft underbelly of the screaming thing.

As the pit bull's jaws bored into the pelt of its victim, the coon shuddered as if hot electric current were being directed through its limbs. Nitro continued to champ into the cornered beast, and its shaking became convulsive by turns. After a moment, the coon's eyes completely lost their luster, like the power had been pulled from the source. It slumped against the wall of the pen, and collapsed in a heap.

Nitro seemed unaware of what had just transpired in the pen. The infernal brute pawed the coon's body, trying to garner some reaction. Then it returned to the electric element on the floor and began clawing the tines; just as it had done earlier when Boo had brought the dogs in from the nearby woods.

Then the caged pit bull began to cough and gag on something deep in its throat. The low snarling that the animal generates when perturbed was returning, but not with anything like its former, terrifying volume. A series of deep coughs and retching sounds ensued, and at last Nitro spat out a mouthful of some clotted, dark substance. The beast scraped at the disgorged manifest and several bits of the intestinal matter tumbled out from between the bars of its pen to the outside of the cage.

Boo Smalls moved towards the bars to examine what had been pushed outside the confines of the cell. At first he thought his eyes were playing tricks on him. He hadn't felt well at all the last few days, and now he thought he was starting to see things also. He stared again at the material before his feet, but did not want to touch the items. He moved them around on the floor with the tip of his work boot. And finally, he was sure that what he was viewing was real.

His animal had spewed a quantity of carpet nails onto the clay floor.

Dozens of them.

The astonished trainer repositioned himself on the folding chair. He had watched the proceedings in the pen with a sense of overwhelming awe. "My God," he thought to himself, "that animal not only ripped the clockworks out of that nasty coon, but he shocked it to death with some kind of electrolyte current from its mouth." Boo, for the second time in as many days, began questioning his increasingly unsteady grip on reality. "What on earth has happened here?," he groaned, "do the powers that be really want me to unleash such, savage vengeful things on Liz Fury and her people?"

He weakly gripped his head between his hands to contemplate the situation. After several moments of introspection, the answer came back with an affirmative response. He *would* take the beasts to the games on Friday, and let them complete the chore they'd been sent to do. After he'd confirmed his course of action he sat stock still on the folding chair. The clean incision on his thumb continued its metronome-like bloodletting onto the basement floor.

Boo Smalls remained in his meditative position for twenty minutes or so, until he was alarmed by the sounds of all three of his animals scratching at the elements in their pens. Their former nervous zeal had returned to them, and they looked like obsessed creatures of the night trying to unearth some succulent morsel from under the floor of the cellar.

The trainer realized from the frenetic activity happening in the cages that he only had a few minutes to get them pacified. Boo was genuinely fearful of what might happen if they didn't get the juice they wanted. He had no idea what would happen to him or the surrounding area if they escaped from their confines.

He pulled his .30-06 rifle next to him. Then he went to the Die Hard to connect it to the grates. He coupled both terminals, hoping for a small bit of current to buy him some time until he could think of something to do.

The battery was dead.

No juice. Not even a spark was left in the wet cell.

The deadly animals were nearing the enraged level of ripping at the elements that they had done yesterday, only now Boo had no power with which to tranquilize them. The clouds of dust were rising from the clay floor, and the moaning sounds that he'd become so accustomed to were beginning to increase in volume. Jet and Nails had abandoned their work on the electricity's delivery system, and had started scraping and biting the bars of their confines. Their solid red eyes glowed like automobile tail lights, and metal flecks popped off of the restraining bars as they gnashed them with their sharp incisors.

In next to no time, things had gone code blue in Boo Smalls' basement.

There was only one thing for him to do.

He'd have to shoot the strange other-worldly things, his personal trio of avenging agents, and deal with Liz Fury on his own after this grim event in his training area was finished.

Boo Smalls went to his rifle, picked it up, and set the firing pin. He shouldered the powerful carbine, and aimed it directly at the skull of his dog Jet, who was madly biting down on the bars of its pen. His index finger caressed the firing mechanism of his gun. He held his breath, and slowly pulled the trigger towards him.

Then Boo had a revelation; a crystal clear vision came to him.

Alternating current.

He had unlimited amounts of electricity in his house. In the walls, in the freaking sockets! "Good Lord," he shouted at the ceiling of the basement, "how could I have been so ignorant? Just because the battery's dead doesn't mean I can't juice em' all night if that's what they want."

He threw his carbine down and ran into the closet where he keeps his various power tools. He removed an orange-colored, fifty foot extension cord from the shelf and raced back to his work bench. He aggressively grabbed the hunting knife out from the top of his work bench. The force of retrieving the blade irritated the cut on his thumb. Blood was quickly dripping down his hand as

he sliced off the female end of the cord and stripped the inside wires of their insulation.

The dogs were going into deliriums of howling and scraping at the bars. Sparks flew from the tines like an acetylene welder were cutting into them. Boo disconnected the cables from the battery, and kicked the Die Hard away from the edge of the element which reached outside the training area. He quickly wrapped the exposed wires from the stripped extension cord around the daisy-chained kitchen grates and ran toward the AC outlet on the other side of the cellar.

Nails and Jet had broken through the first pair of the bars on the outside of their pens and were champing madly at the next few. Their tongues lolled out from between the grate and their teeth snapped like spring-loaded bear traps.

Boo reached the edge of the basement and slammed the male end of the extension cord into the socket. Blood flew from his hand in a geyser.

The screeching in the pens decreased slightly, but not entirely. Nitro had still been scraping at the electric component when the current finally came through. The stunned dog whined a bit from the initial contact, and resumed the semi-conscious state that the electricity produces in the animals. Nails and Jet had left their positions over the grates, and were wildly tearing at the final few bars of their training cell.

Boo saw what was happening and reacted to the situation. He ran over to where his rifle lay, grabbed the gun, and headed towards the animal pens. With the butt of his carbine he began banging the bars of the cages where the dogs were trying to escape. He drove them back a few paces, but not far enough for them to step on the electrified grates.

The beasts roared and their eyes burned like road flares. Nails and Jet started to propel themselves against the bars, trying in vain to reach Boo Smalls. They flew off the tines like steel bolts fired from a rivet gun.

Boo stepped back from the cracking cell bars and machine-like champing of the animals. He shouldered the .30-06 and began shooting rounds directly in front of the two dogs. The beasts only backed up slightly with each shot issued into the pen. Boo continued to unload cartridges from the muzzle of his gun straight before them. The pair continued to incrementally back away, and were only inches from the element behind them.

Finally the rifle was empty. No more rounds were in the auto-load. The smell of smoke and potassium nitrate filled the room. He madly continued pulling the trigger only to hear the empty clicking sound of the firing mechanism. Enraged, sick and bleeding, he threw the gun like a javelin and Nails. The dog's back paw touched the element, and the whine of satisfaction instantly replaced its demonic roars.

Jet was still off the element by a few centimeters or so. Boo ran to the spot where he'd placed his fire extinguisher. He grabbed the container and returned to the front of the pen. He blasted the dog with several salvos of

chemical fog. The creature dodged the hot blasts, its hind legs still only the smallest distance away from the relief it was seeking.

Boo dropped the fire extinguisher and bolted to the spot where he'd cut the extension cord. He grabbed his flashlight and returned to the pen. He shined its beam directly in the beast's eyes, and the creature seemed to be engrossed with the lamp. But this time, instead of throwing it in front of the dog, he reached between the bars and playfully lobbed it over the animal's head into the far corner of the pen. Jet jumped after the trail of light and stepped onto the electrified field. The cry of bliss was unmistakable.

Within moments the three animals returned to their prone positions on the grate; and, incredibly, all was quiet in the basement of Boo Smalls' cabin.

Eight

Friday night at the Clean n' Jerk Saloon

The news of Boo Smalls's disappearance from the dog-fight scene would have been enough good-wagering news to bring more than the usual crowd back to Liz Fury's gambling bar. But the addition of new super-star bartender Wanda Jackson and her steamy swim wear extravaganza brought the local and out-of-town bettors into the place in droves. By eleven o'clock that night the place was bustling with revved-up, excited players. The floor in front of the bar was three deep with customers ordering beer, top-shelf bourbon and white corn before the highly anticipated skin-show and pit-fights.

Wanda and her friends Trish, Janelle and Tammy were selling drinks to the crowd at a hot clip. They were all packed into black spandex hot pants, bright red halter tops and black stiletto heels. The girls whizzed around behind the front seating area peddling drinks to the thirsty horde. Beefy salesmen and international dandies handed their personal business cards to the four beauties every minute. The monetary gratuities were overflowing out of the four huge brandy snifters they had placed on the polished wood of the bar.

Sonny had replaced the usual country music CDs that played on the club's stereo system during regular nights. He'd brought in several of his favorite Texas roadhouse discs for the big hormone event with the pretty barmaids. Instead of hearing the standard fare songs of Travis Tritt, Wynonna Judd, and LeeAnn Rimes, a considerably more aggressive musical menu was the order of the evening.

The flashy, southwestern-rock of Junior Brown, ZZ Top, Stevie Ray Vaughn, Johnny Winter, J.J. Cale and Albert Collins pumped from the house's Bose 901 reflex speakers.

The already tight crowd was getting ready for the girly-show in an hour, and the bookies were starting to mingle among the bettors with their odds-making sheets. Some of the diehard gamblers were starting to head out the pit to inspect the animals before the contests began.

Liz Fury was outside of her club with Sonny. They stood behind the saloon at the edge of the battle-pit. Most of the designated winners and losers for this evening's fights had been arranged, and the owners of the dogs who were scheduled to go down were receiving their doses of barbiturate to inject their canines with. Things were going along smoothly until Sonny and Liz saw something unnerving coming around the side of the saloon towards them.

It was Boo Smalls. He was behind the wheel of his F-10 pick-up, driving slowly up to the clutch of trainers and fighting animals. His face was puffy and blistered, but he seemed to be smiling nonetheless.

In the bed of the truck were his three dogs. They were in their travel carriers and appeared to be sleeping. Remarkably, it had been an easy task to get them into their portable cages. The reason for the ease in moving them was simple: for some time after the current is shut off from the elements, the animals remain in a docile, dazed state. After Boo terminated their AC juice, he got his retractable leash and easily guided the three creatures into their smaller cages. Then he loaded them into his vehicle, and drove to the area behind the saloon, which is where the trainers display their animals for the bettors to see what they're wagering their good money on.

Boo pulled up to where the collection of locals were standing and casually began unloading the travel cages onto the ground. His face and hands appeared to be badly sunburned. His right thumb was thickly bandaged with gauze; dark, dried blood stains were plainly visible against the white antiseptic material. Also, he was wearing extremely dark-lensed sunglasses. No one in town had ever seen him with a pair of shades on before. Liz and Sonny looked at each other in a questioning way, and went to speak to the famous dog handler.

"Before you go into one of your famous tirades," Boo Smalls said to Liz Fury, "I want you to know I'm here to play by your rules, exclusively. These are my new animals, and you can pick and choose what you want to have happen to them. Consider them your sacrificial captives to feed to the local lions of commerce. A bread and circuses offering to the Empress Liz Fury and her combat coliseum, if you will."

Liz stared at his face. The man seemed to be mentally drifting from the situation at hand. He *appeared* to be drunk, but was speaking lucidly. He didn't smell like he was liquored-up either. But his skin was in some kind of terrible condition. When a mild breeze would puff by, small flecks of dried epidermis would float off of his arms like dandelion seeds.

Sonny peered into the slats of the dogs' travel cage and barked, "Jesus Christ! What kind of hellacious things do you have in there, Boo?" He backed away from the cages with a completely flustered look on his reddening face.

"Ah, the Praetorian guard is present and accounted for," Boo absentmindedly chuckled to himself.

Liz Fury peered through the cage vents and jerked her head back in distaste. "My Lord, man," she snapped at the trainer, "what on Earth *are* those creatures?"

"I *told* you my dear," the beatific trainer rejoined, "they are my offering to you, Liz. Now, let's look at the situation we have here. I see you've got five trainers and their *champions* on the premises. That means you need one more dog on the roster for the three gladiatorial contests to take place. They can't fight themselves, you know. As a bargaining token and show of good faith, I'll even have my other two dogs fight each other for the amusement of the citizens."

Sonny, Liz Fury, and the local trainers stood in mute disbelief as Boo Smalls addressed them at the lip of the battle-pit. It was an unprecedented moment in the history of the dog-fights in Youngblood. The legendary trainer appeared to have lost his reasoning faculties during the week of his absence from the contests. His off-handed historical references to the fighting spectacles of the Roman Empire left them slack-jawed with incredulity.

"I *know* what you're thinking," Boo continued, "My two gratis combatants won't go at it with any zeal because they were trained together and familiar with each other. Well, let me tell you something, Liz. If I get *my* dogs worked up enough, they'll go after one of Hannibal's elephants if it's in their territorial range. What do you say, Ms. Fury? I'm asking you for one hundred dollars a piece for the services of my animals. Win or lose, you can't beat the price."

"Nice try, Boo," Liz rejoined, but I've already got Hank Cross's new Pit on schedule to go against Sonny's dog Roscoe tonight. He *should* be here soon." Liz Fury peered into the vents of the travel cages a second time. She shook her head in wonderment. "You should take those poor things you've got in there to Chester Byron, the vet in Clarke County. They look like they've been sautéed or parboiled or something."

"You have no idea how right you are in that regard," Boo smilingly answered, and then began a strange hiccupping kind of laugh in his throat.

"Darlin'," Sonny said to Liz, "I wanted to tell you this news inside the bar, but Hank Cross won't be coming tonight."

“What?!, what do you mean?,” she snapped at him, “why the hell not?”

“I got a call from him about ten minutes before we came out here,” Sonny sheepishly said. “His new dog had a coronary attack about an hour ago. He’d kept it training on the treadmill all day and its ticker blew-up from exhaustion. He knows it’s bad business to crap-out of a fight at the last minute, but he can’t help it Liz. His dog is *dead*.”

“Hank Cross couldn’t keep a fern plant alive in a sports bar,” Boo Smalls said to them. “He’s not a real trainer. He’s a flunky, plebeian, dirt-cowboy like the rest of us!”

Boo was reeling now, and making unusual, Tai-chi like gestures in the air with his hands.

“Now Liz,” he addressed the bar owner, “I imagine my kind offer of using the new animals is looking a bit better to you right now. Why don’t you go tell your bookies the news about the new dog in the third match, plus the bonus fourth contest tonight. Gamblers love to get something for nothing. Then we can go around the back and inject my hulks with whatever it is you want. You give me the hypos, and I’ll hit them up myself with you watching. They’ll be no tricky stuff.”

“It looks like you’ve got me in a time-sensitive situation here, Boo,” Liz answered him. For the second time this week, she was *very* nervous being around this man. She continued, “are you sure the things in those cages will respond to the drugs we pump into them? They don’t even look like *real* dogs. They look more like something you’d find on the bottom of the Shennandoah River.”

“I reiterate to you Liz,” he rejoined, “they are my *offering* to you. I’ll pump the one that goes against Roscoe full of downers, and in the fourth bonus fight you can pick which one you want to drop dead. I’ll do the intravenous deed right in front of you. You can’t lose. This isn’t a swindle, I swear to you.”

“I don’t know Boo,” she responded, “I mean, where did you even *find* these things. I guess, now that I can see them better through the vents, you can tell that they are real Pits, but man something *bad* has gone on with these beasts. Where did you get them from anyway?”

Boo was visibly startled at her question. He tried to stand straight so as to respond to her in a more professional manner; and after a moment, regained most of his composure.

“Actually Ms. Fury,” he replied, “the animals came to me. It’s a long story to be sure. Now, as you can see, the first wave of bettors are starting to arrive to

view the dogs for tonight's matches. Are we going to play ball together this evening or continue the deadlock? For once, it looks like we might need each other's help. For a three hundred dollar investment, you'll make tens of thousands tonight. How can you beat those numbers?"

Liz Fury reached into her skintight leather pants and produced a thick roll of hundred-dollar bills. She peeled off three of them, and stuffed the c-notes in the top pocket of Boo's work shirt. Then she spat a command at Sonny to collect the bookies and to get them out to the pit double-time to work on the new set of odds for each fight.

The famous trainer stepped back to the area where his dogs' travel cages were sitting, and peered through the slats. The three of them were resting comfortably. He tapped the sides of each cage to agitate them a bit and the beasts began to stir. Within a few minutes they were on their feet and looking weakly outside the perforations in their confines.

Boo Smalls, head spinning with radiation poison, realized something at that instant. He understood that his worst nightmares about the fights had finally come true. The world famous blood-sports in his hometown, which had formerly been an endeavor of pride and hard work, had been reduced to the pathetic level of televised, Saturday morning programs. The same kind of meaningless junk the kids watch with each other on the weekends: professional wrestling, roller derby, American Gladiators and all that steroid Hollywood crapola. The time honored dog-fights in Youngblood had been diminished to the ridiculous equivalent of *sports entertainment*.

And he understood something else standing there in the dim light with his three charges. He knew that something apocalyptic was going to happen at The Clean n' Jerk Saloon tonight. Boo surveyed the area around the pit, and mused to himself behind his ultra-dark sunglasses.

"Well, if Liz, 'Cleopatra' Fury is the new Empress of the blood-games in MY town, that would make her bed-warmer boyfriend, Sonny, the 'Mark Anthony' character in this strange tale. And every school child knows what happened to that squirrelly pair when they locked horns with the big kahuna Augustus Caesar now don't they? So now, I do believe it's time for me to start a little conflict of my own in this part of the world. I've got three savage outriders waiting to be dispatched against her corrupt Empire, And the time is right for the Republic to return."

The dogs were beginning to come around, and their low groaning became audible. The animals were making their initial scratches against the sides of the carriers, and small dents were appearing on the edges of the travel compartments.

Boo Smalls raised his right hand up to examine it. The skin was beginning to peel off in short strips. Dark blotches were beginning to grow like leopard spots along his limbs. His thumb throbbed with the long incision he'd inadvertently made with the hunting knife. The three dogs were now banging the

sides of their cages with considerably more force. The trainer reached down to the front grate of Nitro's cage and grasped the release latch.

"Let the games begin," Boo whispered to himself.

*

Lester Ganz entered the Greyhound bus terminal in Atlantic City and purchased a one-way ticket to Winchester, Virginia. He was feeling better now that he'd come up with the idea of taking care of his own difficulties, and not relying on some gangster scheme to solve his problems at home. It still smarmed him something awful to think about blowing five grand on his arrangement with Chuck Jones and Kim, but what could he do about it now? He told himself he'd consider the whole affair an expensive lesson in self-reliance and get on with his own concerns as best he could.

He sat in the lounge area of the terminal and fed the individual pay television in twenty-five cent increments every fifteen minutes. He watched roughly an hour and a half of the movie "Return of the Jedi," but the small man was constantly being solicited by panhandlers and dilapidated prostitutes who wanted to watch the stunning George Lucas production along with him.

At last the announcement was made for the points-south scenicruiser to depart the station. The bus was slated to stop in Philadelphia; Baltimore; Washington, D.C.; Alexandria; Winchester; Richmond and terminate in Raleigh, North Carolina. He purchased a copy of the Stephen King book "The Running Man," a Bic ball point pen, and small block of paper at the station's souvenir shop to amuse himself with on the ride back to his hometown. In Lester's mind, the famous horror author from Bangor wasn't a half-bad story-teller, for a *Yankee* writer; but he came nowhere near the honored position of big Bill Faulkner in the world's literary pantheon.

Les admired the endlessly wordy New England scribe for his balls-to-the-wall, monomaniacal characters who, after being placed in nightmarish situations, used incredible personal resolve and comic book daring to escape their unholy predicaments. Lester also favored the horror writer's talent for being able to make the most common, everyday objects, something to be terrified of. He recalled that after he'd finished reading the novel, "The Tommyknockers," he couldn't bring himself to use the electric carving knife in his home for a few days.

He boarded the shiny motor coach; it was only about half-full of tired, one-weeker tourists. Many of them lifted the armrests between the double-seats to lay down and sleep off their evenings of abandon and debauchery.

During the ride, Lester finished about half of his future-shock novel, but was unable to concentrate on it while the bus headed closer to Youngblood. He took the block of paper and placed it on his lap. He then lifted the pen in his left hand, and tried to come up with some plan of action to put into use when he returned home.

The text of "The Running Man," had actually put a small amount of bravado in the weary store owner. The book's kick-ass protagonist, Ben Richards, had to use disguises, weapons, multiple identifications and personal cunning to

keep from being detected by a television-crazed, ever-watching population who was looking for him everywhere.

Les intrinsically understood that he would have to stay undercover in his house when he returned, and visit his store in the late evenings to get supplies. This much, he could do on his own. He thanked God his private vehicle had an automatic transmission. His days of driving a manual stick-shift were behind him now. He'd decided he'd get a taxi from the bus terminal in Winchester for the ride into Youngblood. Then he'd exit the cab a half-mile or so before he reached his cabin and walk the rest of the way to his place. But the problem of acquiring the necessary firearm perplexed him.

Lester Ganz knew one thing for certain: Liz Fury and her associates didn't mentally grasp anything so well as the muzzle of a carbine in their faces when a demand was being made of them. The small man thought around the problem from as many different viewpoints as he could summon, but couldn't think of a way around not having to use a handgun in his difficult plan. All he wanted was to get inside her bar, retrieve the photos and negatives, and not have anything to do with that strange assortment of people again.

It wasn't going to be an easy task. He'd have to use all of his wiles to get inside her private sanctum at the Clean n' Jerk without being detected, and wait for Liz to open her combination safe. If she happened to be with Sonny when she entered the office, and discovered him waiting in lay for her, that might be the end of the game for all three of them.

But how would he *get* a gun? He couldn't move about in the daylight hours at home. If news of his arrival reached Sonny, he'd spread the dreaded foot-photos around town within an hour after hearing of it. He considered the problem and doodled on his pad, trying to cleanse his mind with automatic writing and meaningless scribbles.

Then he had a tremendous thought. This bus was headed towards *Washington D.C.* now wasn't it? The murder capital of the entire *world*: more homicides per year than in Cairo, Shanghai, Calcutta, Rangoon or any of those fabled places where life is cheap.

The coach stops for thirty minutes in each of the large towns for passengers to use the comfort stations, drink coffee and burn a couple of coffin nails before taking off again. If his guess was correct, the Greyhound bus station in North West D.C., was probably not situated in what one would call a "high-rent" district.

He would get off the ride immediately after their arrival there, and ask the people in the station if there was a pawn shop near the terminal. Lester didn't need any state-of-the-art hand cannon for his upcoming confrontation. But he did need something that would get their attention in a hurry. He wanted the Clean n' Jerk crew to realize he was deadly serious about retrieving the blackmail materials.

They were due to arrive in the nation's capital in about twenty minutes. The small man smiled contentedly to himself. His blueprint plan for action had been made, and it settled securely in his mind. Lester sat back in the plush seat of

the scenicruiser and waited for the coach to pull into their stop in the city. With any luck they'd be arriving in some decaying, economically depressed neighborhood very soon.

*

“Boo, Boo Smalls!, get your ass *over* here,” Liz Fury barked at him. The owner of the famous bar was huddling with the trainers of the fight-dogs before the bettors arrived to view the animals. She had to act fast as the gamblers were approaching the fringe of the pit. Boo re-fastened the latch on Nitro's cage. He picked up the three carrier containers and placed them back in the bed of his truck. Boo then opened the rear panel of the F-10 for the wagers to view his unbelievable beasts, and scrambled like a scarecrow over to where Liz and the cowboy handlers were grouped. The muscular beauty quickly slipped two capped hypos of amobarbital into his palm with the precision of a street-wise crack whore.

The bettors had arrived and were told the news about the rescheduled lineup. Many of them were upset with the information of so many sudden changes. Sonny and the bookies were quickly returning to the pit-area from inside the club. Liz calmed the moneyed crowd down with some insider-talk and references as to which dogs to bet heavily on, which, in the greater sense, was all meaningless banter. The bettors began inspecting the animals and were either fascinated or repulsed with the sight of Nitro, Jet and Nails in their carriers. The bookmakers began creating their new sets of odds with the strange trio of creatures. The very fact that these brutes belonged to the legendary Boo Smalls made them, despite their appearance, even money or favorites in their matches.

Soon the power-cabal of Liz, Sonny, the perplexed bookies and heavy players were gathered by the cavity in the ground. The owners removed the dogs from their cages and held them taught with steel-reinforced, retractable leashes. There was the usual patter about the animals' winning records and general condition. Then several of the bettors wanted to view Boo Smalls's new dogs up-close. They'd heard enough mystery stories about the remarkable beasts, and wanted to see the genuine articles outside of their travel cages.

A handful of people had gathered at the tail gate of Boo's truck and stared at the brutes in their pens. The carriers were beginning to rock on their sides from the internal beating the dogs were administering to their confines. Larger dents were beginning to appear in the metal sides of the units. Strange, inhuman sounds emanated from the inside of the containers.

Then Nitro's claw popped through the wall of the receptacle, and slowly began cutting a gash through the carrier with the deadly precision of an electric can opener.

One of the ladies standing by Boo's truck was the first to see the big problem about to come down behind the club. She was a divorcee in her fifties, wearing a lime-colored Versace pants suit and snakeskin boots. Her peroxide dye-job hair was pulled into a tight bun, and her brilliant red lipstick looked like it

had been applied with a paint roller. She looked in the direction of Boo, who was situated several yards away from her. He was standing with the trainers, but looked bewildered with the situation.

With all the delicacy she could muster while watching the talon slowly tear through the sheet metal like warm taffy she called out, “um... Mr. Smalls... we *may* have a slight problem here.” Then the woman began to walk briskly away from the group, and after a few paces, she broke into a full sprint. Her heavy jewelry made wild, jangling noises as she put all her effort into exiting the area as fast as she could make her feet respond.

*

Stevie Ray Vaughn’s roadhouse classic, “The House is Rockin’” wailed from the Bose 901 speakers suspended from the club’s ceiling. It was midnight and time for Wanda’s labor of love skin-show to start for the pumped-up crowd. The gentlemen seated at the bar cleared off their drinks to give the four ravishing, leggy charmers plenty of room to strut their wares.

Trish, Janelle and Tammy had each given a box of the lingerie and swimsuits to an appointed, adoring patron. Their job was to hand them a new garment after the one they were wearing had been purchased off of them.

The four barmaids bounded onto the bar like the famous Radio City Music Hall Rockettes. Their faithful assistants handed them their confederate infantry hats and leather gun belts. The girls cocked the caps on their heads at rakish angles and whipped the gunbelts around their muscular waists. The driving, high-end guitar music filled the room, and the beauties started to grind and high-step on the planks like Las Vegas showgirls.

They slowly ran their hands over each others’ skin and the intoxicated males in the audience cried out in ecstasy. They pulled one another’s halter tops and spandex biker pants off, to reveal four identical confederate flag print string bikinis on their perfectly defined, goddess bodies.

The music segued from Stevie Ray Vaughn to Johnny Winter’s gangbuster version of “Highway 61 Revisited.” The sounds of his fiery licks swelled through the speaker cones like a hurricane.

Fistfuls of cash were handed to the gorgeous quartet and the swimsuits came off with a snap of their fingers. The crowd swelled towards the stage in a hormonal surge. The girls’ threw their togs to the lucky purchasers, and the assistants handed them the next salvos of bustiers, thongs, biker shorts, and high cut panties.

Trish was naked and still between changes while gyrating on the bar. She was becoming intoxicated with her own heat, energy, and sexual power over the audience. The bombshell turned her rear to the crowd and back-flipped into the mosh pit of her appreciative horde. She crowd-surfed to a table in the corner of the room and danced on the small board to the delight of the couple seated there. More tiny swimsuits and boudoir wear were passed to her, and paper money was sailing around the room like ticker tape.

Janelle and Tammy followed their friend’s lead and dove into the crazed mass of patrons at the Clean n’ Jerk. Soon the four of them were positioned on

tables in the corners of the place, hoofing themselves into a frenzy. Sweat glistened off their sinew and tanned skin. Their long hair and hard bodies were electrifying to watch.

Their assistants couldn't hold the voluminous amounts of cash they'd collected any more, so the crowd passed each of them a champagne bucket filled with the gratuities and cash from the sold merchandise. All four of their containers were overflowing with large bills, business cards, and crude, hastily written love notes.

The quartet crowd-surfed back to the main bar with their overflowing pots of cash held over their heads like Olympic trophies. The music on the stereo shifted from the hailstorm guitar of Buddy Guy to J.J. Cale's slow, smoky tune, "After Midnight." The four femme fatales did a slow bump-and-grind to the seductive rhythms and resumed running their hands over one another with genuine feeling. Sexual pouts and looks of passion outlined their faces.

More money was hurled at the quartet like handfuls of popcorn.

The four of them slowly began re-dressing each other in their red halters and black hot pants. Trish and Janelle brushed their lips over one another's and Wanda and Tammy performed a mock coitus on the bar while the slow, stirring beat of the music overpowered the delirious crowd.

The song slowly wound down and the girls dismounted the bar area. The attendees of the show began to roar their appreciation. The applause, whistles, stomping, and cheers were eardrum damaging. The performers were finally surrounded by their devotees and not permitted to leave the back bar until they agreed to dance to one more song for their audience.

The stereo system kicked into Junior Brown's furious instrumental "Secret Agent Man," and the girls began their final jig of the evening. Things were going fine and the crowd was loving the show until wild gunshots and hysterical, high-pitched screams from outside the club were heard in the bar.

*

The three dogs' otherworldly moans held the throng of gamblers rapt in awe around Boo's Ford F-10. Then the triad of brutes began slashing at the sides of their carriers like Norse berserkers. The containers fell out of the back of the truck and began violently pitching on the ground. Several of the bettors came out of their stupors when they saw the vessels careen out of the flat bed, and began running from the area around the burrow.

Nitro had ripped a crude incision roughly half-way around the container and was now attempting to slip out through the aperture. Portions of the beast's head could be seen jutting through the perforation in the sheet metal. Nails and Jet's cages were tumbling in the dust, and banging against one another. The two dogs were working on the tines of the container doors with their jaws. Flecks of metal filing leapt from the portal's hinges with every champ of their knifelike teeth.

Nitro's head and shoulder area issued from the opening in the carrier's twisted metal. The animal's eyes glowed like a lava flow. It pulled a paw free from the confines and tried to wriggle the remainder of its body out from the receptacle. Jet chewed his way through the remainder of the cage's hinge and exited its restrictions. It stood in the dark, examining the few people who had stayed to witness the strange, birth-like hatching of the beasts.

Nails's cage became still for a short second. Then the animal exploded through the holder's grate like a battering ram and joined its companion in regarding the people around them. Sonny pulled the .45 from his jean jacket and aimed it at the pair of alarming creatures before him.

The men and women who'd remained by the pit now broke into a clean panic. Screams and cries for help filled the air as they raced to get away from the increasingly fantastic spectacle.

Before he could pull the trigger, Roscoe, his fight-dog, slipped from Sonny's grasp and viciously attacked Jet, who was the closest dog to him. Nails and his diabolic companion reversed the assault on the aggressive dog in a split second, tearing sections of flesh from bone as easily as cotton candy from the stick. Roscoe whined high-pitched, agonized notes as the pair of brutes tore the prized animal to bits.

The strong-arm stood in stupefaction as the animals completed their work on his helpless pit bull. Nitro at last freed himself from the container and immediately began charging towards the fleeing gamblers. Sonny fired several rounds at the pair of dogs dragging Roscoe's carcass between them but shot wide each time. The two creatures abandoned their quarry and sped off at an incredible speed to join Nitro in his pursuit of the escaping people.

Boo Smalls stared at the night sky with a look of dreamy satisfaction pasted to his face. The dim, full moon shown down into his eyes. His agents of retribution were off and bringing destruction to those who did him such terrible turns in the past. "Cave canem," the suffering man repeated again and again to himself; the ancient Latin phrase for "beware of the dog." He continued his saint-like murmuring, and concluded his introspective incantation with, "beware of them, indeed."

Sonny and Liz Fury were sprinting towards the Clean n' Jerk in the wake of the animals. Liz turned her head towards Boo as she ran to her club bellowing at him, "your day hasn't even *begun* yet, baby. I'm not even close to being finished with you!" The trainer returned to his truck and retrieved the Glock .38 semiautomatic from under the driver's seat. He stuffed the carbine in the front of his trousers and slowly walked towards the jam-packed roadhouse.

A few of the bettors and bookies had made it back inside the club. There was a confused rush at the door to get within the walls of the saloon. The frantic people roughly pushed one another through the opening to get away from the pursuing beasts. But several of them were too slow to elude the savage bunch.

The murderous triumvirate scrambled between the legs of the pack at the back door of the club and randomly severed mouthfuls of muscle tissue from the

calves and thighs of the horrified gamblers. Cries of wrought-up distress filled the bar as the unfortunate ones dropped to the ground clutching at their lower limbs.

Liz Fury and Sonny saw what was happening at the rear door of the club. They veered around the side of the bloody action at the back entrance, and skirted around the premises to re-enter through the front door.

The crowd inside the Clean n' Jerk had heard the initial cries and gunshots from the battle-pit. Now they were witnessing the wild-dog assault on the unlucky patrons by the back area of the nightclub. Nitro, Jet and Nails attacked anything that moved within their range. Then the three dogs scattered once they got well inside the saloon, and began their terrifying advances on the entire mob in Liz Fury's barroom.

Wanda and her three girls were still standing on the bar in their seductive clothes, unsure of what was happening. Then they all saw Nails come bounding over the top of several fallen patrons and begin attacking some of the seated guests at the front tables. The loud, thrilling music was still pumping from the house stereo system. ZZ Top's epic adrenaline song "Beer Drinkers and Hell Raisers" pounded out of the lush Bose speakers.

Liz Fury fought her way to the front of the bar, pushing her frightened customers to the side like rag dolls. She snapped open the drawer under the cash register and grabbed several semiautomatic pistols: 9mm Walther P-38s and .38 Colt Commanders her weapons of choice.

The muscular beauty tore off her jean jacket to reveal her white tank-top underneath. Her eyes had become diamond-blue points, and her biceps rippled as she leapt onto the bar with the four knock-outs. She dropped the collection of handguns into one of the girl's champagne buckets, and twenty dollar bills puffed into the air like pillow feathers.

She grabbed a carbine from the container, set the firing pin and slammed the piece into Tammy's hands. "Just point and shoot, baby," she told the stunned girl. "Just shoot those damned beasts into the middle of next week." Liz flipped Wanda her favorite flat .38. The stunning employee from the Cleopatra Bikini Shop released the safety, aimed, and spayed the entire clip at Nails, who was masticating the forearm of a Japanese investment banker who'd come to the bar to look at dogs for purchase.

The crowd at the saloon screamed and fell to the floor with the chattering report from the semiauto. Each of the seven shots from the clip moved progressively up the dog's body toward the skull of the animal, and the seventh bisected and atomized its temporal lobes. Nails's head exploded in a chrysanthemum of flame. Steaming tissue splashed onto the face of the struck-mute banker. He closed his eyes and blacked-out, falling face down on top of his ostrich skin valise.

"Way to go, baby!," Liz cried out to Wanda. The bar owner then set the firing pins on the remaining two pistols, and threw them to Trish and Janelle. Now all three of Wanda's go-go playmates were armed with the right stuff to take care of the remaining, psychotic hell-hounds.

Jet was in the far corner of the bar. The beast had fallen on several of the patrons who'd taken cover on the floor from Wanda's salvo of shots. The dog was capering from one person to the next, slashing at them and champing into whatever its teeth would happen to connect with.

Liz Fury placed her two index fingers in her mouth and blew out a shrill, ear-piercing whistle. Jet raised its head up from the collection of prone bodies on the ground and stared in the direction of the high pitched noise. "Let him have it, ladies!" she screeched.

The trio of heavily-armed bikini showgirls fired their carbines in tandem at the mark. The dog's body flew against the far wall of the saloon. Sparks flew from each perforation the slugs made as they pierced the torso of the beast. Round after round penetrated the physique of the animal. Its red eyes gradually grew dimmer as each bullet tore through its breastplate. At last the beast dropped into the corner and remained there, motionless; then the light from its optic nerve clicked off entirely.

Boo Smalls entered the bar to witness the pandemonium his glorious animals were creating there. He saw the carcasses of his two dogs on the floor, and then directed his gaze toward Nitro. His prize dog had abandoned his pursuit of the bar patrons, and was madly trying to chew through the electric cable which connected the Clean n' Jerk's house alarm system to the AC power source.

The crowd inside the saloon heard the cease-fire of the carbines, and the screaming had stopped from those whom the beasts had assaulted. Within seconds the customers were on their feet and stampeding towards the front and back doors of the establishment, attempting to exit the nightmarish situation.

Sonny was behind Liz at the bar. He pulled the .45 from his jacket and aimed it directly at Nitro. The bouncer fired a hot round at the deadly animal, but only grazed its head. The slug whizzed into the housing of the alarm system and detonated it. A eruption of rainbow colored sparks flew from the cavity in the wall where the unit had been. Wires stuck out of the cavity in a gnarled array. Nitro greedily lapped at the sparks and electric discharges coming from the circuits.

The customers grew hysterical upon hearing more shots fired and pushed with even greater zeal to exit the bar. Sonny leveled his .45 at the dog and used his left hand as a brace to level the shot. This time he wouldn't miss his target. His quarry was lined-up dead-center in the pistol's sights. His finger deliberately caressed the firing lever.

Boo Smalls saw the young thug about to dispatch his animal. The famous trainer's failing mind somehow managed to operate at lightning speed during this fantastic event at the bar. He yanked the Glock .38 from his trousers and fired four rounds directly over the head of the strong-arm. Each round shattered a five gallon glass container of 190 proof white corn. The report from the gun was deafening. The remaining people in the bar rushed to the doors or broke through windows to escape the insanity. A woman tripped over the electric cable leading to the house stereo system, and the heavy guitar music cut off in mid power-chord.

It sounded as if the massive speakers had tried to swallow the final notes of the disconnected song.

Liz Fury dived onto the bar when the shots were fired. Sonny, determined to destroy Nitro, only flinched when the containers of alcohol shattered and spilled their contents on the bar floor. The booze was spreading out in currents over the planking of the saloon, and had created a shallow puddle of liquid which spread approximately half way to the front door from the bar.

Boo Smalls, Sonny and Liz Fury were now the only inhabitants of the Clean n' Jerk Saloon. The injured people in the crowd had managed to escape along with the rest of the patrons; Trish, Janelle, and Tammy had all bolted with their buckets of cash. Now, the three principle players of the world famous Youngblood dog-fights were alone, and ready to finish the dirty business at hand.

Sonny had now completely regained his composure after the containers over his head had been blasted, and leveled his .45 at Nitro.

Boo Smalls casually scratched an Ohio Blue Tip match into life with his dirty fingernail.

Liz and Sonny both turned their heads toward Boo when they heard the ignition of the flame. Nitro's owner held the small, burning stick above the pool of grain alcohol on the floor.

"Let the dog go, Sonny," Boo warned him. "I take it this establishment isn't insured against massive fire damage or acts of God."

Nine

Lester Ganz's scenicruiser pulled into the small Greyhound station located at the intersection of 9th and F Streets in North West Washington, D.C. Les went to the Men's room at the terminal before starting his quick-and-dirty quest for a handgun. In the stall, while relieving himself, he read these various graffiti written on the tiles: André of North East; Darnetta as Peanut; Park Hill 'bamas; TJ eats white cock/ 555-9353 any time; The R Street Killas, and Little Man Tate was here.

He quickly exited the bathroom and went to the information and ticketing window to ask the agent about the location of a pawn shop. In the booth, the abundant mulatto woman's eyes glazed over when she saw Lester approaching her. He looked like he had a problem with his travel itinerary, and she *hated* dealing with people who had scheduling problems.

Lester asked the woman if she would happen to know the location of a nearby pawn store. He told her he only had about twenty minutes before his bus left the terminal, and wanted to sell a few items for cash before it took off. The lady looked at him with extreme suspicion.

“Did my *supervisor* send you here?” She snapped at Lester.

“W-what did you say?” He rejoined.

“I *know* you heard me,” she irately returned. “I said did my supervisor send you to check up on me? On my six-month job performance review it was mentioned that I had a minor difficulty with deportment and *courtesy*. I do not *have* a problem with courtesy! Don’t you say that I *do* have one, either.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Lester answered her.

“You damn right,” she shot back.

The woman adjusted herself in her seat. “Now, what did you want to know?” she asked Lester.

“A pawn shop,” Lester quietly responded, “is there one nearby?”

“Solomon’s Buy and Pawn,” turn right out of the front doors. Half a block down 9th Street.”

“Thank you so much,” Les replied.

“And don’t you *dare* forget I was courteous to you,” she grumbled at him.

Lester stepped away from the information booth and headed towards the front doors of the station. He was about to exit when he heard the ticketing agent loudly calling out to him, as if she’d forgotten to tell him an important piece of information.

“Sir!” she roared.

Lester trembled in anticipation of what she might say. He turned back to meet the gaze of the ticket/information agent.

“Yes?” he said.

The volatile female had indeed forgotten to tell him something. She’d recalled, upon Les’s departure from her post, the proper way of completing a conversation with a patron as *demand*ed by her boss during her job performance evaluation. She was implementing it now because she still wasn’t convinced that Lester was merely an inquisitive patron, and not some quality-control scumbag hired by the bus line to check-up on her minimal etiquette and protocol skills.

“Thank you for choosing Greyhound bus lines for your travel needs!” She barked at him.

Lester bolted towards the doors, and exited out onto the street. He turned right as instructed and passed through rows of decaying houses; gay nightclubs; novelty and wig shops; and all-night liquor stores with sheets of machine-gun proof glass set between the clerks and patrons. He continued up the street and located Solomon’s Buy and Pawn.

He looked in the window and saw a variety of goods for sale: gold and silver jewelry; cameras; electric guitars; snakeskin boots; complete sets of Snap-on socket wrenches; stereo systems and computers. No firearms were displayed in the front of the store, and no one appeared to be inside.

Lester pressed his nose to the glass. He tried to open the door but it was locked. Then a thin man came into view from the back of the shop. The fellow inside buzzed the security lock and Lester stepped into his place of business.

The owner clicked on the overhead lights and Lester approached him. The wraith-like individual looked like the Samuel L. Jackson character “Jules Winnfield” from the Quentin Tarantino movie “Pulp Fiction.”

Les continued to look around the perimeter of the store, unsure exactly how to bring up the subject of purchasing a firearm. He only had about ten minutes left before his bus was going to leave. The small man from Youngblood didn’t relish the thought of staying in the 9th Street terminal another few hours until the next points-south scenicruiser arrived to take him on the eighty mile journey back home. Lester broke the awkward silence in the store, and began a conversation with the owner.

“You don’t look like a Solomon,” Lester smilingly said to him.

“People call me TJ,” he replied, and extended his left arm to greet Lester. The two men shook hands and smiled cautiously at one another. “How can I help you tonight, sir?” the pawn store owner asked.

Lester paused, and then said, “I don’t see that you have any firearms for sale in your store Mr. TJ, do you carry any?”

TJ smiled and his gold tooth twinkled from the beam of the fluorescent overhead lights. “Oh, no, no sir. No firearms here. Bad for business. Gets a rough crowd in the store; lotta young hoods and their kind. I do just fine with what you see in the display cabinets. I keep a shotgun behind the counter for when things get out of hand, but I’ve only had to use it a couple of times. ‘Weapons are ominous tools, and should only be used as a final option,’ Sun Tzu said that in the book *Art of War*. I got a big spear gun in the back if you wanna see it, though.”

“You don’t carry *any* guns?” Lester questioned him, “I thought all pawn shops carried them.”

“D’you ever see that movie called “The Terminator,” the one that had that big-ass, Arnold Schwarzenegger-man in it?”

“Yes, I did,” Lester rejoined.

“*That’s* why I don’t carry any guns in my store,” he said. “The man who sold Arnold all those big automatics got burned pretty bad in his *own* place of business. That’s not going to happen to me. Not to old TJ. That’s for certain. Could I help you with something else, though? Maybe some nice boots? What size do you wear?”

Lester’s heart sunk in his chest. He’d been counting on getting a decent weapon here and not having to move about outside so much once he got back home. This place seemed like the perfect spot to pick one up, but now he’d have to figure something else out.

“Oh, that’s all right Mr. TJ,” Lester wheezed. Thank you for your time.” He began walking towards the door of the shop, but then turned around when the owner spoke to him.

“I don’t mean to get personal, sir,” TJ said to him, “but to be honest, you don’t look like the type to be buying a firearm. You seem more like the kind of person looking for a real good graphic calculator. Does it have something to do with what happened to your hand?” He looked at Les and continued, “It looks like it’s time to change that bandage on your arm, too. It appears to be a bit, you know.. crusty.”

“That has something to do with it,” Lester bleated, “I need it to protect my store in Virginia. I’ve got some problems with local thugs, and the police aren’t much help in my town.”

“I heard *that!*” TJ sympathetically responded. TJ looked at Lester intently, almost like he were trying to see through him. After a few seconds he said, “wait here a minute please. I might have something you’d be interested in.” The store owner disappeared into the back room and returned with a large paper bag. “I found this in the trash can yesterday.” He looked at Les and continued, “sometimes the gang members around here need to get rid of their guns in a hurry if they get cornered by patrol officers. They dump ‘em anywhere they can and then beat feet back home to their mammas. This ain’t the first one I found in my alley either.”

TJ reached into the oil-stained brown bag and produced a 9mm, semiautomatic, gas operated Heckler and Koch model P7M8. One of the most powerful production handguns in the world.

Lester stared in awe at the enormous weapon. TJ released the ammo clip from the handle, pocketed it, and handed the carbine to his customer. The man from Youngblood almost dropped the pistol from its sheer weight. He examined it for a brief moment, put the machine back down on the counter, and thanked TJ for showing him the deadly instrument.

“If anything’s gonna protect you and your store,” TJ said to him, “that baby’ll do it. You could kill a pack of rabid polar bears with that mutha. Listen, why don’t you sit down for one minute. Some neighborhood boy brought in a bunch of army surplus medical kits the other day and I bought ‘em for a dollar each. I can’t stand looking at your dirty bandage anymore. I’ll get you a nice drink of sake and we can change that soiled thing. I used to work in the infirmary when I was in the Navy. It’ll only take a minute. You’ll feel better with a clean dressing on it.”

Lester was stunned by TJ’s kindness. He sat down on an empty beer keg and the pawn store owner brought him a ceramic vessel with a shot of the rice wine in it. Then the thin, black man cleaned and dressed his wound with hydrogen peroxide, antiseptic pads and gauze in what seemed like 30 seconds. TJ poured himself a shot of the rice wine and pulled up a café chair to sit next to his new companion. Les sipped his drink carefully. TJ downed his delicate Asian beverage in one throw and poured another for himself.

The two men chatted about the various difficulties of their respective businesses for a moment. Then Lester informed TJ that he really had to get going. His Greyhound coach was leaving in a few minutes and he didn’t know if he could stand waiting for another bus in the tiny terminal with the strange woman in the information counter.

TJ grinned and his metal tooth was radiant in the light. “That’s Trineeta,” he said laughingly, “she’s kinda nervous sometimes. That woman’s on some funny diet she heard about on the Oprah Winfrey show. Now she only eats peaches and rice, or something on that order. You don’t even wanna be around her when she’s hungry. No sir, you don’t.”

Lester thanked the amiable man for all his good turns while he’d been in his company, and said he’d enjoyed spending some time with him. He got up to leave and was heading towards the door of the pawn store. TJ walked with him up to the entrance, talking the entire time.

“The D.C. Police Department has some kinda thing going now where they buy unregistered handguns back for a hundred dollars each from anybody who brings one into the station. Can you believe that shit? Now every kid on ninth street buys junk guns for twenty dollars, takes them to the precinct, and makes

five times their investment in only a few minutes. It's amazing to consider what kind of math-challenged intellects are making the big decisions for the city. I was actually going to take that monster I showed you in to their headquarters on 14th Street tomorrow and pick-up a quick c-note."

TJ paused, looked straight at Lester, and said, "I'd sell *you* that gun for a hundred bucks. I think you need it more than the North West precinct does."

Lester Ganz could not believe his ears. He turned to stare directly at TJ. A look of wild gratitude filled the features of his face. "Really, Mr. TJ," he answered. I couldn't tell you what it would mean to me. To be straight with you, I'm kind of afraid to move around in my town right now. It would help my peace of mind so much to know I could protect myself in an emergency."

"Where're you from anyway?" TJ asked him.

"Youngblood, Virginia. It's near Winchester," Lester answered.

"That's where those crazy-ass dog-fights take place on the weekends, isn't that right?" He asked.

"Like you wouldn't believe," Les rejoined.

TJ returned to the rear of the store. He pulled out an ancient, rusty strongbox from a shelf under the display counter. He played with string of keys on his belt loop and found the one that fit the container. He balled up a few pages of the Washington Post's sports section which he'd been reading, and used them as packing material for the carbine. He placed the handgun inside the case, and then rummaged around in his pocket for the ammunition clip. TJ then tossed the rounds in the box, shut the lid with a click, and locked the unit with the key. He then returned the lock-opener to his pocket.

Lester had followed him to the back of his shop and watched his proceedings. He reached in his trousers, placed his wallet on the counter, and pulled out a one hundred dollar bill with his fingers. He was almost tapped out of the money he'd brought with him to Atlantic City. He only had a few hundred bucks left in his pocket. TJ slid the box over to Lester's side of the counter and said, "that'll be one hundred and ten dollars, sir. I got to charge you ten dollars for the strongbox."

TJ's new companion repeated his performance with the billfold and retrieved a sawbuck. He handed the pawn store owner the money and put the box under his right arm.

"What about the key to the box," Lester asked, "I'll need it to open the container when I get home."

“The key stays with me, friend,” TJ rejoined, “you can bust that box open with a hammer when you get to wherever you’re going. It’ll take you a while, but like I told you earlier, I’m not gonna have no Terminator-man take me out with a gun I sold him in my own store. You look like a nice enough guy, and I believe someone has done you a terrible injustice. But Jeffrey Dahmer was a normal lookin’ man, too. Ted Bundy was also, for that matter. You get on home and work on that box for a few hours and you’ll have all the protection you’ll ever need. I guarantee you that. Yes sir, I do.”

The new gun owner thanked TJ endlessly for his help and compassion. He said he really had to run because the bus was practically ready to pull out of the station, and caffeine-crazed, commercial drivers are notorious for leaving passengers stranded in strange places.

Lester sprinted to the door, and was ready to have TJ buzz the security lock to let him exit. He waited, hand resting on the door knob. The pawn store owner looked at Les for a second and then said, “I want you to remember something before using that weapon, sir, ‘to win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting, *that* is the acme of skill. Thus, what is of extreme importance is to attack the enemy’s *strategy*.’ That’s more wisdom from my man Sun Tzu. If you’re going to go against an opponent in your town, you’ve got remember to use your head in a situation before you use that enormous gun. I get the feeling this is the first time you’ve had to rely strictly on your personal resolve to settle a serious score. Please keep in mind that you don’t attack a strong, dug-in adversary. Rather, you defeat a demoralized, tired group, who is weary of fighting and has no real leadership. This is the last time we’ll see each other friend, so please take my words to heart, and God-speed in resolving your conflict. Good night.” TJ hit the electric button on the counter and the locking-mechanism droned, letting Lester know he could exit the shop.

The man from Youngblood stared in disbelief at the remarkably astute information given him by the store-owner. Then he recalled his previous conversation with Trineeta at the information booth, and galloped out of the store in an effort not to stay with her in the Greyhound waiting room for the remainder of the evening. He turned left on 9th Street and bolted towards the bus terminal.

The grocery store owner dashed back towards the station. He passed the decaying landmarks he’d seen previously, but was now starting to run out of breath as he closed in on the station. He was only 50 yards or so away from the points-south scenicruiser and the last few people were boarding the coach. His chest and sides were aching and he had to keep adjusting the strongbox under his arm as he charged towards the vehicle.

He was only twenty yards away from the motor coach as the last person in line stepped up to the door to take their seat. The transport’s motor was running and the conductor was ready to pull out. Lester was too winded to even cry out for the bus operator to wait for him to arrive.

The driver of the coach looked at the sprinting man with indifferent eyes. He’d seen the little man giving his friend Trineeta a hard time in the depot when

they'd first arrived, and didn't care if the arrogant bastard got stranded in Chocolate City for the night or not. It'd serve him right for treating a hardworking woman like her with such disrespect.

The final person in line cleared the last step into the bus and the driver pressed the pneumatic lever for the doors to close. After they were shut, he had no legal obligation to open them until they reached the next terminal. Lester was only a few yards from the transit vehicle and pouring on what little strength he had left to reach the slowly shutting doors. He was only five feet from the closing portals. The running man lost his footing for a split second, but managed to hurl the strongbox containing the 9mm handgun at the closing aperture.

The bus doors closed directly on the strongbox, and suspended the rusty package in mid-air.

Lester nearly collapsed onto the bus portal. He stared up at the driver, and then pointed to his merchandise which was suspended between the two Plexiglas gates. The bus operator released the pneumatic lever, and the doors opened, releasing the parcel. The small man boarded the coach and gave the driver the murderous look of a psychopath. He was glad the container he held had to be bashed open, because he was afraid he might like to use the weapon on his chauffeur for the evening. Lester, after gaining his breath, wheezed out at him, "W-why didn't y-you wait for me?" The store owner was livid, which was a feeling he was unused to experiencing.

"I have a schedule to keep, sir," the driver laconically responded. Lester could have torn the driver's shirt off with his one good hand, but then remembered TJ's sage advice in the store. This wasn't the time for a physical confrontation. Les tempered his anger and glared directly at the driver. "I'll attack his strategy of being blasé about the matter," Les said to himself, "he believes I don't want to cause a scene here, and he's right. So, I'll simply stare him down like a mongoose; try a little Sigmund Freud subject-object mindfuck treatment on him, and if he wants to make something of it, then he'll be the aggressor in this scene. If he starts to get worked-up, I'll have plenty of witnesses that will testify that he was verbally abusive to a passenger, and have him in a compromised position with his employers." Les knew this was a cheeky, third grade attempt at generating psychological unrest in the mind of the snooty driver, but he didn't give a damn. It actually felt kind of satisfying to him.

Lester put his package down in a nearby seat, stood in front of the conductor, and set his eyes on him. His gaze bored through the smug man like microwave beams. After a long moment, the operator became anxious and fidgety; like an amphetamine-imbibing, Anthony Perkins might have reacted. He cleared his throat, and said he needed to take off if they were going to get to Alexandria at the appointed time. Les continued eyeballing the bus operator like a rabid skunk and sat down in the seat directly behind him. Then the conductor

glanced back at Lester and contemptuously snorted, “Thank you for choosing Greyhound bus lines for your travel needs.”

*

The flame from the match burned closer to Boo Smalls’s fingers as the tense Mexican standoff continued in the Clean n’ Jerk Saloon. The trainer held the fire directly above the pool of almost pure alcohol, while Sonny kept his carbine trained on Nitro. The aberrant creature was still chewing the exposed electrical wires in the wall near the back door. Liz Fury stared back and forth between the two obsessed men in the wreckage of her bar.

“My fingers are getting hot, Sonny,” Boo cautioned him, “put that gun down or start looking for a new watering hole.” Liz Fury’s eyes darted between the two figures at lightning speed. The flame was almost in contact with Boo’s fingers. The muscular beauty grabbed Sonny’s arm and pulled it up with a savage jerk. “We can repair the bar the way it is now, Sonny!,” she thundered at him. “If he drops that match, we’re history. Let it go for now. We’ve got too much to lose here with all this high-end, testosterone-bullshit.” He fought her manacle-like grip for a second, but then calmed down, realizing his boss was right. Also, the bouncer knew that all he had to do was get that animal outside of the club, and he could blast it to pieces in a minute.

Sonny lowered his weapon. He and Liz Fury stared intently at Boo. The shaky trainer retracted the flame from over the puddle. He neatly blew the plume of fire out, and placed the spent match in the ashtray on the one table that was still standing upright. “Good call, Liz Fury,” Boo muttered to the muscular woman, “you’re a smart lady.”

Boo aimed his Glock .38 in the direction of Nitro and fired a round at the animal. The bullet struck at the dog’s feet distracting it from the electric wires in the wall. The strange beast tore out of the saloon with unimaginable speed, and began heading towards the battle-pit.

After he fired the last shot, Boo Smalls nearly collapsed from nervous exhaustion. The man was spent, both emotionally and physically, from the horrific events of the last few days. An incredible wave of fatigue fogged his mind, body and senses.

The dog trainer walked past Liz and Sonny in an oracular, trance-like state. Behind the bar area he retrieved a cardboard box from the floor. On the sides of the container were printed the words “Jack Daniel’s Charcoal Filtered Bourbon. Lynchburg, Tennessee.” The ailing man then walked over to where the prone frames of Jet and Nails lay. He gently picked them up and placed them in the carton. Sonny sensed his mental distraction, and sprinted out of the door while he was retrieving the bodies of his dogs.

Boo awkwardly pulled his gun from his pants to fire at the escaping bouncer. Liz Fury came up behind him in a flash, and clamped her hand onto his wrist with unbelievable strength. The trainer cried out in suffering as the blonde body builder pulled his arm up with one hand, and removed the pistol from his fingers with the other. Boo fell to his knees and began a strange, wracking cough that slowly mutated into tears. Liz watched him for a moment, perplexed. Then

she dragged him through the room by the collar of his work shirt, pulling the man out of the saloon through the back doors.

She hauled him about twenty feet away from the bar and deposited him on the ground. Then Liz returned inside the club, retrieved his box with the remains of his animals in it, and placed it next to him. "Game's over, Boo," she icily said to him. "I guess you could say we're even. It'll take me a while to fix the damage your pack of dingoes did to the Clean n' Jerk." The tough girl paused, looked at him strangely, and then continued, "*Maybe* I'll get the bettors to come back here soon, if I'm real lucky. Sometimes an event like this adds a certain kind of folklorish appeal to a place that simple-minded people like to indulge themselves in. Anyway, *you* certainly got a good lick in on me for messing with the mutts at your cabin. That can't be denied. So, listen to me honey, and listen good. Don't you come back around this saloon again, ever, or I'll kill you dead with your own damn handgun. That's a promise, lover. Sonny's about to dispatch that other *thing* you brought with you tonight and I don't blame him. There's enough evil beasts out there in the great outdoors as it is. The world will be better off without the ones you showed up with tonight. Now I'd suggest you take your parcel over to your truck, collect the other body that will be ready for you shortly, and get the hell out of here before I change my mind about blowing your head off right here." She gazed at him intently a second time. "And go to see a doctor, man," she continued, "You look like you're falling apart."

Liz Fury turned her back on him and returned to the bar to start the clean-up efforts. She stuffed his Glock .38 semiautomatic in the front of her leather pants and slammed the back door of the club behind her.

Boo shook his head back and forth to regain his bearings. He stood wearily up on his feet, collected his grim package with the remains of his champions, and headed towards his F-10 pick-up truck.

Then he heard the shots coming from the area around the battle-pit, and he began to run towards the sound of the reports.

*

Kim and Chuck Jones had spent the night in the Sheraton Hotel on Columbia Pike in Arlington, Virginia. Kim was a member of the American Automobile Association, and the hotel chain gave a 10 % discount on room rentals to Triple-A members. Kim knows a good deal when she sees one, and knows that a dollar saved is a dollar earned. She's not stupid. They'd taken her Corvette from New Jersey, and driven south down the Atlantic seaboard for the last couple of days. They were leisurely making their way towards the famous Old Dominion battlefields of the Civil War.

Today was the third day of their impromptu vacation, and they were only about seventy miles from Winchester. They would definitely get there by the late afternoon. Chuck was anxious to get on Route 50 West, which is the famous road that becomes John Mosby Highway after the corporate limits of Fairfax County. He imagined the Gray Ghost and his Raiders going on their disruptive campaigns

into enemy encampments, and destroying their materiel and military stores. The thought brought a dreamy, wry smile to the mobster's lips.

He'd brought his Remington 710 centerfire rifle along with him, for fulfilling his end of the contractual agreement with Lester Ganz, but his mind was elsewhere this morning. He'd enjoyed the ride down the coast in the new Corvette immensely. Kim had put the rag top down and the weather had been perfect for the road trip. He'd brought several of his Nat King Cole CDs with him for the lengthy cruise.

The silky voice of the debonair crooner filled him with appreciation for his pretty girlfriend as he watched Kim wheel her machine down the highway. She'd turn and give him her big, showgirl smile from time to time while he attempted to sing snatches of the classic songs together with Nat.

Now they were sitting in the breakfast room at the Sheraton, AAA map spread out before them, making their itinerary for the remainder of the trip. Chuck thought they should find a hotel room near Youngblood, use it as a centralized point, and then plan their day excursions around the area from there.

Kim was in complete agreement with her aging boyfriend. She hadn't put many miles on the car since he'd given it to her, and the exhilaration from driving it on the highway was incredible. She'd motor her man Chuck Jones around anywhere he wanted to go in that beautiful ride. It made no difference to her where they went, as long as she could tool her luscious machine down the Interstate freeway.

They looked in the Triple-A guidebook for hotel accommodations in the southern states. The amount of approved lodgings dwindled considerably after the corporate limits of Prince William and Fauquier counties. They checked out the listings for places in Winchester: Days Inn, Travelodge, Holiday Inn Express, The Super 8, and one oddly named establishment called The Gore Motel. However, none of them had all the amenities Chuck and Kim had become accustomed to in New Jersey, so they were not a real consideration.

They flipped through a few more pages and saw an ad for a hotel called The Battletown Inn and Gray Ghost Tavern. Chuck Jones's eyes widened in delight as he read at the advertisement. It was the only guest house in Winchester that looked good to them. It had air-conditioning, dry-cleaning service, a four-star restaurant, complete bar, and something called "in-room coffee," which made it the only logical choice for the traveling couple. The ad also stated that the accommodation was near several local points of interest: Dinosaur Land, Patsy Cline's home, and the Stonewall Jackson Museum. And, of course, the inn offered a 10% discount on rooms to members of the American Automobile Association.

"I think we have a winner," Kim chirped to Chuck Jones. She started singing the Queen of Country Music's signature tune, "Crazy" and nuzzled close to her hit-man boyfriend. "I believe you're correct *ma'am*," Chuck responded in his best southern drawl, which sounded somewhat strained coming through his impenetrable New Jersey accent.

After breakfast they settled their room account with the front desk. Kim and the receptionist started a conversation that slowly became a protracted discussion. Chuck made a polite apology to leave them for a moment, and went outside the building to wait for his girl. Kim finally emerged from the lobby and went to the parking area. She revved-up her bright red machine, and pulled up to the front of the hotel. The vacationing couple were now well-fed, well-rested, and ready to head into the land of NASCAR racing, Civil War history, and illegal dog-fights.

They placed their few bags in the sports car's trunk and Chuck clicked the lid shut. Kim got in the ride and pressed the button on the instrument cluster to put down the car's convertible top. The gears purred as the soft canvass canopy folded accordion-style into a neat pile on the rear of the vehicle.

Chuck jumped into the seat next to his sweetheart and shut the passenger's door. Kim clicked on the car radio and Shania Twain's "Man, I feel like a woman," began to play from the surround-sound speaker system. The two lovers smiled between themselves and settled into their seats. Then Kim punched the gas pedal, and the pair of New Jersey tourists took off in the direction of Route 50 West.

*

Lester Ganz sat in the basement of his cabin, attempting to pry open the strong box containing the 9mm Heckler and Koch handgun he'd purchased from Solomon's Buy and Pawn in Washington, D.C. The process of breaking into the container was not going well. For approximately an hour he'd used a crow bar and various hammers to try and breach the seal of the carton. He'd put lots of impressive looking scratches and dents into the unit, but was unable to break the lock open. The strongbox was tougher than it appeared to be. The metal of the container was rusty, and could be bent with great effort by the crowbar, but the lock was absolutely unyielding. He decided to take a break from his physical actions and use his intellect in the situation, as TJ had instructed him to do.

His arrival back into Youngblood had been a completely uneventful episode. The motor coach had pulled into the Winchester station around 3:00 A.M. There had been one taxi available outside the depot when he'd exited the terminal. He didn't know the man who was driving the cab, and the store owner had avoided eye-contact with the driver during the ride back into town. Les had instructed the taxi operator to let him out at the crossroads near his home, and he walked the remainder of the way to his dwelling by moonlight. When he reached his place, he went directly to bed and stayed there for almost an entire day.

After he awoke from his long sleep, he went to his cellar and ate canned foods and bottled water, which he always had a cache of in his basement. Lester was grateful he'd purchased an electric can opener last Thanksgiving when they were having an inventory blow-out sale at Wal-mart. His days of operating a manual one were ka-put.

He took a dose of Talwin, but was reaching a point where he didn't need to use them so often. The pain was starting to subside in his arm, and he was beginning to feel better about himself, despite his wound and dangerous

predicament concerning Sonny and Liz. Now he sat downstairs in his cabin, trying to figure out how he'd open the reluctant container.

His eyes scanned the contents of his basement. He considered using his hatchet on the vessel, or continuing his pursuits with the crowbar and hammer. However, both of those options would take hours of noisy work. Then his eyes settled on the door of his closet where he kept his power tools, lawn mower and...high pressure roof nail gun.

Lester had bought the Daewoo riveting machine and Bostitch 300 pounds per square inch air compressor from the Ace hardware store when he was repairing the structural supports under the basement stairs of his cabin. He had purchased new 2x4s to replace the old beams with, and wanted to save himself the grief of pounding nails into the structure for hours on that afternoon.

On his first attempt at using the new tool, he had connected the electric compressor to the fastening machine with the air hoses, and set the machine at its lowest setting to test the unit. He was amazed at the ease in which the gun drove the nails directly into the beam, just up to the fastener's head. His fix-it project under the stairs of his home had been almost too easy with the new appliance. He'd finished his amateur carpentry job faster than expected that day, and wanted to check out the full capability of his new gadget. Lester started to experiment with the pressure settings of his new power tools.

With the compressor set at the half-way pressure setting, he could send a 1.75 inch nail directly through two 2x4s. When Lester tested the unit at its highest setting, the nail blew through two of the boards and splintered them into pieces. The projectile then blazed through the room, cleanly zipped through the fiberboard paneling of the basement, and buried itself into the sheet rock. That afternoon had been the last time Lester had experimented with his new nail gun. Until now.

The grocery store owner walked over to the closet, opened the door, and brought down the package containing the high pressure fastener. It was still in its original packaging. He'd only used it the one time, and it looked immaculately clean and unblemished wedged in the styrofoam molding. Then he lifted the Bostitch air compressor out of the storage unit, and moved it over to his work bench with a grunt.

He took the nail gun and strongbox over to his work table. Lester had two large clamps attached to its opposing corners. The small man was getting used to working exclusively with his left hand, and quickly unfastened the binding units. He moved them to the center of his table and secured the strongbox to the platform with them.

Lester opened the box with the nail gun and stared at the ominous tool for a moment. Then he connected the air hose to the compressor, plugged the unit into the AC outlet, and clicked in a new coil of 1.75 inch nails. He was ready to begin his second attempt at opening the tough container. But before he started acting on his project, he considered TJ's sage advice about the acme of skill. He needed an objective plan before he ran off half-cocked into his efforts.

He began thinking about precautionary measures. He got his plexiglas safety goggles from the closet and placed them securely over his eyes. Now he needed a blueprint of attack. Les ran his fingers down the front of the container, and along the side of the lock. He guessed that if the compressor was positioned at the 300 psi highest pressure setting, a fastener might leave a small perforation in the metal at the point of contact. That would be all he needed to begin cracking it open. He would continue to create small incisions around the lock with the nail gun, and then finish the entry-job with the crowbar. Now all he had to do was test the cutting strength of the projectile nails against the tensile strength of the metal case.

Lester took the nail gun in hand, set the machine at its highest pressure release point, and approached the strongbox. He placed the barrel of the pistol against the edge of the container flush against the lock. "All I need is one little hole in the wall," he said to himself. "Please, just give me one clean breakthrough in the casing, and then I'll know I can have this bastard open in an hour or so. I imagine my insightful friend TJ would approve of this well thought-out, offensive strategy. I believe he'd give me his blessing on this tool-intensive venture. But now, it's time to see if this bird will fly or not."

Lester closed his eyes and pulled the trigger of the nail gun.

The metal around the impenetrable lock exploded into jagged shrapnel.

The report the carbine made was like a large drill bit being fired against a church bell. The nail that discharged from the magazine flew straight up in a ninety degree angle after its contact with the casing. It penetrated the ceiling of the basement, the floor of the top room, and imbedded itself in the roof of the cabin.

Lester flew back from the terrible noise and dropped the gun. It skittered across the floor of the basement and came to a stop against the far wall. The startled man tripped over his own feet and fell flat on the ground in a heap.

The strongbox on the work table broke free of the clamps securing it when the blast occurred. It rocketed against the wall, sprung open, and then ricocheted back onto the work surface.

Lester opened his eyes to see what had happened, but it was difficult to focus for a moment. He shook his head trying to adjust his vision but was still unable to see clearly. Then he understood why he couldn't see properly.

A twisted shard of steel had penetrated the Plexiglas lens of his safety goggles. The point of the shrapnel was positioned only a few millimeters away from his cornea. It reflected the dim light from the basement in distorted patterns.

Les slowly removed the protective eyewear and examined the fragment wedged through the plastic. Then he walked over to the work table.

The strongbox lay open before him like a birthday present. The front section of it was shredded to pieces. Bits of newspaper surrounded the battered container like snowflakes. The gunmetal bluing of the Heckler and Koch P7M8 gleamed in the dull light like the skin of a great snake.

Lester Ganz picked up the powerful weapon in his left hand and held it up to the pale light in the cellar. He turned it this way and that, admiring the contours and design of the engineering masterpiece.

He put the gun on the table, retrieved the clip from the box, and placed the rounds in the handle with his left hand, using his right arm as a brace.

Then he picked up the weapon again, and gave a brief thought to his personal nemesis Sonny, the bouncer at the Clean n' Jerk Saloon. His memory jumped back to the moment when the smug strong-arm first threw the sheaf of photos onto his desk at the store, and chuckled at Lester's compromised position in his blackmail scheme. Then the stunned-but-smiling man regained his awareness, returned to his precious consensus reality, and said to himself, "laugh while you can monkey-boy, and look out all you country people."

Ten

Nitro had bolted from the club and headed towards the fight-pit. The dog's eyes were glowing like roman candles, and the scent of fresh prey was filling its nostrils. The animal almost flew towards the area where Boo had parked his Ford F-10. The carcass of Roscoe, Sonny's fight-dog, lay in the middle of the trench where Nails and Jet had left it after their easy disposition of the defenseless beast.

Everyone who had been around the burrow had fled when the three wild dogs broke out of their carriers. The trainers had escaped in their trucks, and the rest of the bettors and bookies had either gotten off of Liz's property or had tried to get back into the club. However, in the mad rush to escape from the area, one of the dogs who'd been scheduled to fight that evening had been abandoned by its owner. Art Dench had ripped out of Liz Fury's property like a Texas flood when the unbelievable proceedings had started with Boo Smalls's animals. He'd inadvertently forgotten his caged pit-bull, Screwball, at the gaming site.

The incarcerated animal was gnashing at the bars of its container. Nitro sensed the confined dog's anguish as it approached its territory and poured on the speed to attack the imprisoned creature.

Nitro flashed towards the furious Screwball, but as he approached its cage, got a whiff of the vital fluids from Roscoe's tattered remains. The otherworldly beast became crazed with the sanguinous perfume, altered the course of its pursuit, and jumped into the pit to investigate the delicious, sensual aroma of fresh blood.

Sonny was in hot pursuit of Boo Smalls's grotesque beast. His .45 was in his hand and he was sprinting like a track star after the malignant canine. Screwball was in its crate, barking like an enraged debutante at the dog who'd neglected it in favor of another quarry.

The bouncer of the Clean n' Jerk reached the lip of the pit, and stared down into the chasm. He was breathing hard, sweating, and observing the hideous demonstration taking place below him in the ditch.

Nitro held the lifeless animal by the gruff of the neck. The vibrant, electrical glow from its eyes was pulsing like a squad car light. The wild beast then commenced a series of crashing body slams on the cadaver until it grew tired of its challengeless exercises. It flicked the corpse away with a twist of its enormous neck, and then looked in the direction of Sonny, who was now jumping down into the trench along with Roscoe's savage adversary.

Sonny clicked a fresh 7-shot clip into the handle of his .45 and aimed it at the deranged brute. Nitro sensed the additional quarry in the pit; it set his gaze on the new target and began hurtling towards the man. Screwball, the original target of Nitro, was in its holding pen and howling at the proceedings taking place below it like a rutting tiger.

The strong-arm of the club set the firing pin on his carbine. He went down on one knee, and lined-up the charging animal in the sight on the barrel. If he missed his target now, as he had already done several times this evening, it would be wretched, if not fatal news for the young hood. The charging animal closed in on Sonny. Its eyes blazed like afterburners on a rocketship as it roared towards its confrontation with Liz Fury's boyfriend.

Nitro was twenty feet away from Sonny and approaching at break-neck speed. The heavily-armed thug aimed his carbine at the breast plate of the beast, held his breath, and fired a round at his rapidly advancing target.

The shot shattered the rib-cage of the dog, missing its heart by centimeters. Nitro jerked slightly from the bullet's impact, but continued its monomaniacal charge at its adversary. The dog was now fifteen feet from where Sonny crouched.

The local gangster fired four scorching rounds in succession at the oncoming monster. Flecks of skin and bone sprayed out from the animal's body as the projectiles passed through its anatomy. The dog flinched with each contact the slugs made with its figure, but continued its intense stampede towards the man. Nitro was now a mere ten feet from Sonny and still determined to reach and destroy him.

The bouncer went down on both knees and faced the oncoming beast at eye level. The two opponents locked visuals for the final few seconds of their blood contest. Sonny raised the .45, aimed for the heart of the beast, and fired.

Nitro's chest shuddered as the hot lead passed through its ventricles. Its back legs gave out entirely with the last wound. But the brute, through sheer will power and momentum, continued to advance towards its mark. The dog was only a few feet from Sonny, and began using its front paws to pull itself forward. After a few seconds, its upper body shook violently, and the animal collapsed. The wild thing lay dying only a few inches in front of Roscoe's owner.

Sonny still had the pistol trained on Nitro, and was about to dispatch the dog with a final shot when he heard the death-rattle in the animal's lungs. He lowered the carbine to examine the mortally wounded beast. The light in Nitro's

eyes was diminishing rapidly. The former brilliant red beacons now looked like fading flashlight filaments before the battery is completely drained. The dog raised its head with unbelievable difficulty to stare for a final second at its conqueror.

Sonny, for the first time since the unreal proceedings of the evening began, started to relax. He pointed his .45 directly at Nitro's head and said in a film noire, melodramatic voice, "this one is for Roscoe, you little freak." His finger touched the trigger of his gun, about to release the terminal round.

The luster in Nitro's eyes flickered back to life for a split second. Then the animal completed its final action on earth; it snapped its neck straight up, and spat a clot of bright red blood, laced with carpet nails, into the face of the gangster.

The strong-arm flew back from the slick manifest as it coated his features. The shot from the .45 went wide of its mark and plowed a deep rut into the ground. However, it made no difference with the situation in the battle-pit. Nitro lay flat and lifeless on the ground. The dog had been run through with .45 caliber ammunition and would present no more menace to the people of Youngblood, ever.

The Clean n' Jerk's security man sat on the ground, removed the red bandanna from his pocket, and began carefully wiping the viscous mess off of his brow and cheeks. He'd never in his life experienced the sense of humiliation, loss and astonishment that he was now feeling. The young thug was at the nadir of his self-worth; the sense of devastation was complete. Sonny, the feared bouncer of Liz Fury's famous saloon, hung his head and reflected on how small and meaningless his actions are in the grand scheme of things. He never even heard Boo Smalls climb down the side of the ditch and quietly walk up behind him.

Screwball, the dog in the carrier at the edge of the ditch, continued its frenzied yapping as the young hood contemplated his meager participation in the events of the cosmos. The dog went through a series of shrieks, snarls, and machine-like whelps as it slashed at the bars of its cage, trying to escape its confines. The strong-arm grew weary of the animal's unyielding cacophony, and fired a round in the direction of the beast.

The slug whizzed through the upper corner of its carrying vessel, and made a sound like a small gong being struck as it blasted through the thin metal. The formerly fearsome dog made puny, whining sounds as it wedged itself into the corner of its carrier. It cowered there, fearful of further retribution from the man in the pit.

Sonny's personal icon of the dog fights, Boo Smalls, came up silently behind his protégé. The relationship between the two men had always been a tense one. Both of the lifelong residents of Youngblood had always been cautious of one other. This situation they found themselves in now was no different. It was a moment where almost anything could happen. The older man put his hand on Sonny's shoulder. The young bouncer didn't move when he sensed the physical contact.

“Liz Fury doesn’t understand men like us, now does she?” Boo calmly asked him.

Sonny waited a few seconds before answering him, unsure of what this conversation might lead to.

“No sir, Boo,” he answered, “I don’t believe she does. She comes from out of town. Southern California, I believe. Liz never gives me details about her past. She doesn’t understand the tradition of the thing we’ve got here. There’s no sense of *pride* in the games she puts on at the club. The money’s nice. Oh, it’s very nice, but it’s not the same anymore. Not like it was. Now it’s like some shit-ass high school football game, with a bunch of pencil-neck bookies running most of the show.”

Boo waited a second before he continued the conversation. He retracted his hand from Sonny’s shoulder and walked over to where the carcass of Nitro lay. He knelt down, picked up the limp body of his former champ, and looked Sonny directly in the eyes. The stains of the animal’s blood began spreading on his blue denim work shirt. Immediately after retrieving the remains of his animal, the tone of their discussion dramatically changed.

“You and Liz shouldn’t have broken into my home, boy,” Boo snarled.

“Those *things* shouldn’t have killed Roscoe!” Sonny angrily shot back, and leveled his .45 at the famous dog trainer. The bouncer’s hands were shaking, and the streaks of Nitro’s blood on his face made him look like some kind of bizarre ghoul sitting in the dirt.

“Go ahead and shoot me, Sonny” Boo calmly told him, “you’ll be doing me a favor. You’ve had plenty of opportunities this week to blow me into Kingdom Come and you’ve found a way to avoid it every time. You can’t bring yourself to do it because deep inside, you realize we’re practically the same person. It’s like looking into the mirror when you cast your eyes on me, isn’t it my little man? We’re the only ones around this burgh who remember the triumphant days of the fight-pit. Most of the trainers in town these days are from away, you know that as well as I do. They don’t come here because of what Youngblood used to be; they’re here for the instant payoff. They’re the worst kind of fast-money, coyote-cowboys imaginable, and Liz Fury is their quick-fix queen. We’re just about all that’s left of the A-team, champ. The last of an elite group who remembers the way things used to be.”

Boo continued staring at Sonny sitting on the ground. He smirked and said to the anxious gunman. “And by the way, boy, your clip is empty. You fired the last round at that loud-ass mongrel in the cage.”

Sonny was becoming angered by Boo's condescending tone of voice. He didn't like to be talked down to, and Boo was making him feel more useless and scandalized by the second. Also, he couldn't remember if he'd fired six or seven shots from his .45 during the final, deadly confrontation with Nitro.

"Don't call me 'boy,' sick man," the strong-arm snapped at him.

Boo looked at him with his increasingly beatific smile and said "you are a greedy punk turning your back on the heritage. With a lot of work you might become something of a real man, someday. But now you are young, dumb, piece of muscle being whipped around this place by a savvy, world-class bitch who knows how to turn a profit. Make no mistake about it, *boy*, you are Liz Fury's personal dupe and you *know* it."

Sonny shuddered at Boo's last penetrating pronouncement. He locked his gaze into his hero's shades, and violently pulled the trigger of the .45. An empty, metallic click was the only report.

Boo Smalls didn't so much as flinch when the gun's hammer fell and nothing issued from the pistol. Sonny twitched his head like a startled animal, and gawked in astonishment at his unflappable rival. The murky sodium-arc bulbs from outside the Clean n' Jerk provided the only illumination down in the ditch. The gloomy indirect light made the two men look like weary, dark specters in the burrow. Boo continued to stare at Sonny behind the jet black lenses of his sunglasses.

After a strained moment, the bouncer slipped the empty carbine into his jean jacket. He hung his head, closed his eyes, and attempted to blot out the events of the evening from his memory.

Youngblood's premier dog-trainer brushed past Sonny and walked towards the edge of the ditch. He placed Nitro's body up on the edge of the pit, and then climbed out himself. He placed the dog's carcass in the Jack Daniel's carton along with the inert forms of Jet and Nails, and began slowly walking towards his F-10 pick-up truck.

At once, a wave of nausea and dizziness came over Boo as he placed the box in the flat bed of his vehicle. His vision spun in circles, and his feet felt like they were ankle deep in thick mud. He held on to the side of his truck for balance. Then he fell on his knees and released the contents of his abdomen.

The radiation poisoning was running freely in his system now; but the sickness passed as quickly as it had come. He got up from the ground, removed his dark glasses, and threw them onto the passenger's seat. The moments of clear-headed thinking that had saved him in the battle-pit with Sonny disappeared also. He was now becoming more disoriented and prone to delusions with each passing moment. Also, he was mentally and physically spent. He needed to go home and sleep.

Boo got in his truck and turned the ignition key. The motor coughed several times, but then fired-up. He headed around the edge of the pit towards the rear entrance of the Clean n' Jerk. He passed by the side of the club, exited Liz Fury's property, and drove onto the empty rural route towards his cabin.

The trainer's mental faculties were fading from the toxins in his body. His physical deterioration from the nuclear material was becoming more evident each day: the skin peeled from his frame, and more dark blotches continued to appear on his limbs. However, in spite of all the terrible difficulties which had happened to the uncompromising man in the last bit of time, a seed crystal of a plan was beginning to take shape in his mind. A scheme that concerned the skills of Chester Byron, the local veterinarian in Clarke County.

It also included a need to harness *large* amounts of electricity.

*

Several of the overhead lights in the Clean n' Jerk had blown-out when Sonny shot the security system's electrical housing box. Liz Fury was working in the semi-darkness, mopping up gallons of white corn from the floor of the bar. That was the first priority of the clean-up. The muscular beauty shuddered when she considered how close she'd come to losing everything when Boo Smalls held the burning match directly over the pools of alcohol on the planking. She could pick-up the broken glass and smashed tables and chairs on the far side of the bar in a short while. Right now she had to get this high-test rocket fuel off of the ground.

Wanda Jackson cautiously entered the club through the front door. She was still wearing the red halter and biker shorts from the lingerie show. Her three pals, Trish, Janelle and Tammy had exited the place immediately after they'd dispatched Boo's dog, Jet, with Liz Fury's auxiliary carbines. They'd sped off in their rides to count their loot and be done with the Clean n' Jerk until another cash crop opportunity arrived. Wanda had returned with the receipts for the swim wear and lingerie they'd gotten rid of. The four girls had sold approximately seven-hundred and fifty dollars worth of inventory in the forty-five minutes that they were displaying the merchandise.

Liz Fury's pretty employee looked about at the wreckage in the bar. She walked around straightening tables and re-setting chairs. Most of the furniture had been damaged, but some of it looked like it could be repaired without too much trouble. They'd have to buy several new cases of whisky and beer glasses along with the big carpentry repair job that lay ahead of them. Several of the windows had been smashed, but that could be fixed in a day or so. The electrical wiring would be the big problem. Electricians can always find something wrong with a circuitry system and, in their own smarmy technical lingo, start charging you for specific things only they understand the use of. But, considering everything, the situation could have been a lot worse.

Wanda walked up to Liz and put her arms around her distracted boss. Liz Fury appeared to be on the verge of tears. The owner of the bar discontinued her

swabbing duties and returned the intimate gesture to her employee. The two of them stood there, clinging to one another for a moment.

The Clean n' Jerk employee broke their embrace, and stared into the face of her manager. A single tear *was* rolling down the saloon owner's cheek. Wanda reached into the front of her spandex biker shorts and produced the roll of cash from the bikini show. She stuffed the money into the pocket of her boss's leather pants, and wiped the teardrop off of Liz's face with her finger. Wanda brushed her lips over her boss's mouth and said, "everything will be fine, baby. We can put this place back together in a week. You'll see. We'll have this joint full of moneyed country-boys in no time." After the shocking events of the evening the two beauties badly needed each others' comfort and security. Liz looked deep into Wanda's eyes. After only a few moments together, both of the powerful women were consumed with an absolute sensual heat.

The two buffed females shared a long, burning kiss in the scattered debris of the Clean n' Jerk Saloon.

Liz Fury broke their protracted lip-lock and held on to Wanda with unquestionable feeling. The famous body-builder recovered her composure after a second, and took her girl by the hand. Liz picked-up an overturned table and set two undamaged chairs in front of it. She walked behind the bar and produced an unopened bottle of Jack Daniel's black label bourbon and two shot glasses. She set the material down on the table, pulled her seat next to Wanda's, and twisted the plastic cap off the container with a vicious *snap!*

The saloon owner poured two shots up to the rim and handed one to Wanda. The pair of stunning babes downed their shots, and poured two more. After the second fast-round of hard liquor, Liz Fury was ready to have a serious talk with her girl.

"Do you know what Sonny's doing right now?" Liz Fury asked in a disgusted tone to her employee.

"No, Liz, I don't know," she responded, "I have a feeling you're going to tell me, though."

"Well, honey," Liz went on, "a few minutes ago, if my guess is correct, he took care of the infestation problem we had earlier with Boo Smalls's animals. From what I could hear, he used a lot of ammo in the process of eliminating one larger-than-life pit-bull. We won't have to worry about those abominations, or that wiry man, bothering us again. Ever. Those beasts killed his dog Roscoe out in the pit earlier tonight; *that* pissed him off. Now listen, toots, here's the picture as I see it. I'm in here, cleaning up the remains of the bar that provides his income. I'm *supposed* to be his woman, although he's nothing more than a good bang in the sack in my honest estimation. And what is he doing now when he should be here with me? Is he trying to make me feel better about this

predicament? Is he consoling me? Hell, is he even picking up some goddam furniture or trying to put this place back together? I'll tell you what he's doing. He's out there crying about losing his shit-ass dog! A lousy freakin' fight-dog for Christ's sake!"

Wanda Jackson held the hand of her employer. "Men don't know a damn thing about how women feel sometimes, baby," she told her boss. "Believe me, I know. But I'm here for you, Liz. Don't worry about him right now. He'll come around when he feels better. You watch and see if he doesn't."

"Listen, sweetie," her boss rejoined, "do you remember when I told you that Liz Fury remembers the people that do favors for her? Well tonight, you've been my angel. You took that one dog out of the game with that .38 I gave you better than Annie Oakley could have done. Then you bring me my cash from those worthless swim suits we sell at the Cleopatra. And finally you're here to help me get over this friggin' mess that has screwed me sideways for at least the next good while."

Liz Fury reached over to Wanda, held her perfect face in her hands, and kissed her forehead.

Liz poured two more shots of Jack Daniel's for them, and continued her diatribe to the good-looking bartender, "I have a strange feeling Sonny and I are about to hit the final snag in our relationship. He's a good strong-arm. He's got the mind for it, but he's young, and tends to get flustered when shit hits the fan. This isn't the first time he's come close to fucking up the works. That easy job I gave him to do with Lester Ganz turned into a nightmare. He's a country boy who wants to be a player with his pit-bulls. I'll need him for the next bit of time to get the bar back together and for protection. But in a while, it's going to be time to say sayonara to my bouncer."

Liz Fury gently stroked the contours of Wanda's flawless face and looked intimately into her eyes. The dim lights from the remaining lamps in the club made the dazzling couple look like ravishing phantasms.

"I've been in Youngblood for a couple of years now," Liz continued, "and I've had a pretty good run of the show in my time here. This thing that happened tonight might be some kind of sign to start thinking about pulling up stakes. You've been a fantastic friend to me, Wanda. You work at the Cleopatra whenever I tell you to, and you sure as hell make a first-rate bartender on the weekends. I'm going to try and squeeze what I can out of this club for the next bit of time and try and make a go of it. It won't be too easy getting the bettors back, but I'll do what I can. Either way, Sonny's going to be out of the picture soon enough."

Liz Fury stood up from the table. She took Wanda's hand and pulled her up to where she was standing. The two knock-outs held each other in the pale light of the neon beer signs. They exchanged a long, dreamy look into each others baby-blues. Then Liz whispered into Wanda's ear, "do you want to be with me, baby? Do you think you can you share your life with me? Share my bed, always?"

Wanda was silent for a few seconds, considering her boss's proposal. Then she gently touched lips with her new mate. The two continued gazing into each others' eyes for a long moment. Then the beginnings of a smile began to form on the Clean n' Jerk bartender's mouth. She arched her plucked eyebrows at Liz and said softly, "I guess we'll be *the* pair of bad bitches in this town, or anywhere else we decide to set-up shop, now won't we, lover."

"You bet your lacy underalls we will, sweet-pants," Liz Fury cooed to her girl.

*

Lester Ganz was in his cabin rummaging through bookshelves, boxes of old college papers, and folders in the closet looking for his copy of the famous warfare text of Sun Tzu. He'd taken a World Literature survey as an elective in community college many years ago, and one of the recommended titles for that class was *Art of War*. Lester had never examined the book, opting to read Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* instead of the ancient Chinese general's ideas on combat. A colleague had told Lester that the legendary Russian writer's books were similar in tone and style to his revered William Faulkner, the all-time Dixie-lit champion.

He quickly bought the bulky psychological novel from the bookstore, but barely completed his reading of the tome during the course of the semester. After finishing the byzantine story of Porfiry, Raskalnikov, and the hysterical widows, Les came to a serious conclusion about world literature: nineteenth century Russian novels, although meticulously written and profound, are flat-out boring; and Fyodor Dostoyevsky was no Bill Faulkner.

In a strange twist of fate, Lester recalled purchasing a used copy of Sun Tzu's book several years ago at the Clarke County Library's annual book sale. He'd gone late in the day to the fund-raising affair, and the members of the ladies auxiliary club were throwing handfuls of donated and used texts into cardboard boxes. They were selling the overflowing containers of literature for fifty cents each. The store owner purchased one of the parcels out of pity for the sales staff and took it home.

Lester recalled seeing *Art of War* mixed in with the piles of Harlequin romances, Mack Bolan adventures, Southern Living recipe books, and Tom Clancy novels. He also recalled seeing Richard Nixon's, *1999: Victory Without War*, one of the many *detailed* screeds from the jowly former President of the United States among the piles of paperbacks.

Now he was combing through his cabin, looking for the long forgotten translation of the Asian military text. He was hoping that the respected age-old title could bring him new wisdom with his upcoming confrontation with Liz Fury and her crew.

Les had closed the window shades to his home, so he could move about in the daytime without notice. At nights, he had to remain in the basement so no inside lights from his cabin would be detected from the streets.

The small man checked everywhere to locate the text, without luck. He went downstairs and began an inch by inch inspection of his residence. He looked in the bathroom, and then went into the small room where the hot water heater was located. The box of books was exactly where he'd left it many years ago. The dust was half an inch thick on the top layer of titles. Sun Tzu and Richard Nixon's documents lay on top of one another, next to a faded Avon romance novel by the name of *Passion's Destiny!*

Lester blew the top layer of dirt from the books and retrieved both titles from the top of the pile. The store owner thought that possibly, if Sun Tzu's strategic advice was insufficient for his needs, the words of a man who formerly had a globally entrenched, nuclear arsenal at his fingertips might be of some use.

He took the two volumes in his hand and closed the door of the utility room. Then he went upstairs and turned off the light in the basement.

Lester Ganz began to cogitate as he placed the re-discovered books on his writing desk. The proceedings of the last two weeks had been as staggering and remarkable a time as Les had ever experienced. His terrible injury and adventures up and down the Atlantic coast had begun to change the formerly timorous man in several outstanding ways.

First, he would never have considered injuring or even killing a man in anger before this event. The thought of physical confrontation had always terrified him until a few days ago. To his own surprise, Les had almost attacked the Greyhound bus driver at the station in Washington for his insolence.

Also, the thought of purchasing a weapon, a large caliber handgun in this instance, had also been completely alien to him. Now he was considering the real possibility of having to use such an ominous instrument if he could not retrieve the photos and negatives of his taboo weekly appointment with Liz Fury from the combination safe of the Clean n' Jerk.

And finally, because of the real life-and-death situations and no-nonsense predicaments he'd been in as of late, he'd completely forgotten about his personal indulgence with the foot-worshipping activities. The aberrant nonsense concerning the oral stimulation of his arches seemed ridiculous to him now. Lester began to realize that the problem with his life, previous to the last couple of weeks, was clean boredom.

"Anyone with half a mind can run a grocery store," he thought to himself. *"I've become so apathetic with my predictable life, that I embraced some hoe-headed, sexual dementia to make me feel alive again. Good God, no wonder Sonny and Liz thought they could string me along any way they pleased. I'd*

become a complete patsy, and taken for granted as an indolent, unremarkable cream puff. I've got to change their line of thinking on that particular matter, and I've got to change it soon. I can't continue to be a locked-up prisoner in my own home. This is some kind of outrage!"

Lester began to feel undeniable rage welling up inside of him. He was tempted to take the pistol from the table and drive to the bar at that moment to confront the pair of local hoods. As he headed for his writing desk to collect his gun, he recalled TJ's advice about strategy and *tried* to calm down.

He decided that what was required in this situation is a composed, level-headed design for his evidence retrieval operation at Liz Fury's bar. "This isn't the time to fly off the handle," he repeated to himself, "Not when you've come this far in your plan." Les was gradually regaining his poise, but still anxious about his current situation. He needed to burn off some energy so he wouldn't start to get neurotic and tense before he could think rationally about the matter.

He decided to try some physical exercise to take his mind off his difficulties. The excited man got on his knees, and awkwardly attempted to perform a one-handed push-up. A few years ago, Les had seen the eerie actor Jack Palance on the Academy Awards program doing the difficult physical stunt, and thought it was a laugh-riot. Now the exercise was not nearly as entertaining to him. He believed if he could do one complete round of the activity it would be a good start to relieve the nervousness. Maybe try some sit-ups later in the day. Anything to take the edge off of the cabin-fever.

Lester spread his legs, centered his left hand under him, and pushed himself up with his arm approximately half-way to a locked-joint position. He held his body tense for a few seconds, using every bit of his upper body strength to maintain his elevated location, but collapsed back on the floor.

Flustered, but determined to improve his performance, Les spread his feet out under him again, and visualized himself completing the demanding exercise. He cleared his mind of the previous failure, and reset his hand underneath him.

With strength he did not know he possessed he pushed until his joints cracked, and reached the locked-arm position. He held himself rigid for a second to savor the victory, and let himself crash on the carpet. "One and a half one-handed push-ups," he creaked to himself, "not bad for a first try. Tomorrow, I'll do two and a half of those agonizing events. And later this afternoon, some sit-ups. That fitness-guru woman Jane Fonda would definitely approve of that activity. I'll need every advantage I can get in this upcoming situation with those evil lizards at the bar, and if that means getting physically as well as mentally prepared, then that's simply what I'll have to do."

He got up from the floor, brushed himself off and sat down at his desk. The 9mm Heckler and Koch sat next to the volumes of Sun Tzu and Richard Nixon. Lester took a sip of tea from his mug and then lightly set the beverage down. He carefully extracted the ammunition clip from the handle of the gun with his left hand, using his right arm as a brace. The increasingly conscious man was

beginning to feel quite comfortable handling the powerful firearm. He was getting used to holding the weapon in his left hand.

He picked up the gun and held it horizontally in front of him, visually soaking up every detail of its composition. Then Les shut his eyes and reverentially began repeating the ancient Latin phrase, “in hoc signo vinces,” over and over to himself. After a few moments of vocalizing this mantra, he switched to the English translation of the famous epithet and continued whispering it to no one but the spiders in the walls of his cabin. “With this sign you shall conquer,” he contentedly purred to the disinterested arachnids. The transcending man also consciously dedicated his fortifying vespers to the spirits of Sun Tzu, Richard Nixon, and of course, the great American writer, William Faulkner .

After completing several minutes of this mind-clearing incantation exercise, Lester placed the gun back down on the table. Then he picked up the book *Art of War* and began to read the introduction to the text.

*

Kim and Chuck Jones wheeled the Corvette into the parking lot of the Battlefield Inn and Gray Ghost Tavern. It had been a glorious cruise down John Mosby Highway. At the road side produce stands Kim had purchased these items: pints of fresh blueberries, bags of homegrown tomatoes and peaches, and several carafes of sweet preserves, oblivious as to what kind of fruit was stored in the jars.

They’d abandoned the Nat King Cole CDs in favor of the local country music stations as soon as the radio could clearly pick them up. Now George Strait, Patty Loveless, Alan Jackson and Trisha Yearwood graced the surround-sound stereo system of the beautiful Detroit street machine.

Their hotel was set beautifully against the rolling Virginia countryside. The couple exited their ride and admired the surrounding mountains and lush green forest. Chuck popped open the trunk of the roadster and removed their bags. He left the long leather case containing his Remington 710 in the car’s storage compartment. He’d brought this rifle with him especially because of its iron-clad accuracy and gray synthetic composite stock. The color of the carbine’s epoxy resin body was an exact match of the charcoal-hued material found in the uniforms of the Army of the Confederacy. He knew he was being sentimental about his choice of firearms for this occasion, but the man couldn’t help himself.

Kim collected her bags of country produce and the two of them entered their place of residence for the next few days. After signing in and hanging up their clothes in the room’s spacious closets, the two of them went down to the Gray Ghost Tavern for a cordial and to coordinate the plans for their stay in Winchester.

The drinking establishment was stocked with seemingly every bonded product on earth, and the white-haired barman who served them was the most pleasant gentleman either of the two New Jersey natives had ever met. The couple both ordered their all-time favorite libation- a frozen Margarita made with double-shots of Herradura tequila.

Chuck got up from their table and began to look appreciatively at the photos and etchings of General Mosby and his Raiders fastened to the wall. There were also several framed antique maps on the room's panels detailing the saboteur's dangerous expeditions into the Army of the Potomac's guarded territories. Chuck Jones was thrilled.

The remarkable bartender had their orders ready in moments, with a complimentary tray of Macadamia nuts on the side. The mellowing racketeer had a brief thought that he might like to spend his retirement years in the Old Dominion if everyone here was as nice to him as this man had been.

Kim and Chuck spread out the Triple-A map on their table and started to look for battlefields to visit. There was no disappointment in the amount available to see. Soon it was decided that they'd do the famous rounds of Fredericksburg and Manassas. Then they'd do the Stonewall Jackson Museum and old town Winchester on their last day, which would be Friday. It was Tuesday night, so they had time to see the sights at their leisure.

After the second round of Margaritas, Kim told Chuck that she really enjoyed the thought of doing all the history-trail stuff with him. She knew he was having a ball just being near all the Civil War things, and it was fun watching him get excited about something for a change. But, if possible, she really wanted to see the place called Dinosaur Land if they got a chance.

While they'd been in Arlington, the receptionist from the Sheraton Hotel had seen the two of them in the dining room looking at the Winchester guide book, and told them they *had* to visit the famous dinosaur park. She told Kim that it was only a four dollar entry fee, and you could take photos of your friends and family with a sixty foot high synthetic Brontosaurus. If that were not enough to get her excited, the park had scads of other scale model lizards, plus a plastic Triceratops, saber tooth tiger, and the funkiest looking petroleum-product caveman and cavewoman on the planet.

Kim beamed at the news of the 60 foot Brontosaurus while the woman chatted on about the time she'd been there with a student group from Wakefield High School on a class trip. Chuck Jones's girlfriend was becoming more wiggly by the moment to see the funky spot as the woman talked on about their educational day visiting the beasts of the Mesozoic era and Pleistocene epoch.

Kim the waitress had become ecstatic with the hospitality specialist's description of the theme park. She couldn't wait to visit Dinosaur Land.

Back at Gray Ghost Tavern, Chuck Jones was having a good laugh about his attractive girl's coy manner of asking him to go to the schlockey tourist trap with the big plastic reptiles. Of course he knew she'd want visit the colorful, zany place. They're both from Atlantic City, New Jersey. If the Garden State's famous boardwalk with its mimetic structures of donut and hot-dog shaped pop-stands didn't cultivate a taste for trash-culture, nothing would.

Kim looked at her boyfriend with smarmy, mock-malice as he hooted it up at her demure request to see the huge epoxy beasts. "Of course, we'll go there

honey,” he said to her, wiping a tear of laughter from his eyes, “we’ll take the Instamatic camera and I’ll take your photo with every monster in the park. That’s a promise, kiddo.”

Chuck was personally unable not to stare in appreciation at Kim’s rapturous face when she smiled her big smile for him. The man’s resistance went down to nothing as she pressed herself against him and kissed his cheek. The giddy pair were going to see historic southern monuments *and* jumbo-sized plastic animals for the next few days. They’d also have a chance to decide the earthly fate of Liz Fury’s strong-man, Sonny, on their last night in town.

Eleven

Boo Smalls wheeled his F-10 pick-up truck down the rural route towards his property. His vision spun like the internal mechanism of a kaleidoscope as the events of the last few days flitted through his memory. His rational, lucid thoughts broke down into strange fantasies and terrifying visions as he tried to keep his Ford truck steady on the road. The one thing the man was sure of, whether he was hallucinating or not, was that he could go to sleep for at least a week once he returned to his dwelling. But he didn’t have a week, let alone a day to act on his current deliberation. He had mere hours to set his new, congealing plan into action.

It was late now; practically three o’clock in the morning. He needed to get at least a couple of hours shut-eye before visiting his old veterinarian friend Chester Byron in Clarke County; the man lovingly known to the people in his town as Chet the vet.

Also, Boo needed to get a few important articles from his cabin before setting out on the penultimate project of his career in Youngblood: namely, his Remington 7400 .30-06, and as many rounds of ammunition as he could carry. Also, he’d need several gallons of the bad corn in his utility closet, and his galvanized steel trash can from the back of the house. It would be dawn in a few hours. Shortly after daybreak, people would be on the streets going to the shopping centers on Saturday morning. It would be best if he could operate under cover of night, but time was not on his side in this particular scenario.

He continued tooling down the road towards his home with bizarre images popping up before his eyes. In a cloudy background, Nitro’s stitched face would blend into Sonny’s deadly gaze leering down the barrel of a gun. Then he’d see his tool shed and stills burning in the morning light. This image would morph into a sheet of multi-colored flames coming from the mattress of the bed at the Super 8 Motel. The same bed he and Wanda Jackson had performed their intense sexual exercises on only a short time ago.

He clicked on the radio to try and focus on something concrete while the eerie picture show imprinted itself on his forebrain. Garth Brooks’s fabled drinking song, “I’ve Got Friends in Low Places” crackled out of the speakers mounted in the door panels. The ironic content of the country singer’s tune started to make Boo laugh while he drove down the poorly lit road. Soon he was

cackling with incredulous guffaws as he navigated his truck down the long path, and finally, back onto his own land.

The trainer followed the worn path up to his cabin and went around the side of the structure to park his truck by the back door facing the woods. He exited the vehicle, leaving the parcel containing the cadavers in the bed of the truck.

Boo Smalls produced the house keys from his pocket and opened the door to his home. He began walking towards the staircase leading down into the training area when the first wafting aromas of spoiled meat met his nostrils. The man stood still on the stairs, trying to discern how this unpleasant scent could be possible in his house. Boo took in a large whiff of the air, and then walked into the dark basement, unconcerned of what might be emanating the repellent fragrance from down there.

The dog-handler turned on the small light and saw the remains of the raccoon that Nitro had shredded slouched in the corner of the training area. Its flesh had begun to return to the component level, and the process had ripened up the atmosphere in the cellar considerably.

Boo went to the gun rack on the wall and retrieved his Remington 7400 semiauto. Then he returned upstairs and placed the .30-06 gun on the divan. He went to the closet and retrieved a large, mylar leaf bag and plastic snow shovel from the various items stored in there. Then he retraced his steps to the basement, opened the gates to his former kennel area, and flipped the body of the varmint into the polymer bag with the spade.

The bag with the coon's remains was feather light compared to the box he'd been carrying earlier with his former champs in it. Boo brought the sack upstairs with him and opened the back door to his cabin. He went to the perimeter of his yard before it met the edge of the woods, and tossed the bag into the brush, secure in the feeling that all of Mother Nature's lower creatures would take care of its return back to the soil in short order.

As he was returning to his place from the thicket, a wave of fatigue swept over him that almost knocked the man to the ground. Boo walked into his cabin by sheer will power, and settled on the sofa next to the Remington rifle. His mind wandered in and out of semi-consciousness. He was seconds away from falling into a deep slumber when he jerked awake, remembering something he had hidden away behind the jars of white corn over the TV stand.

One Saturday in May he'd had an exceptionally good night of winnings from the dog fights at the Clean n' Jerk. The hometown people at the club were congratulating him on his astounding wins, and he'd been in exceptionally good spirits. Through the information grapevine at the bar, his reputation as a legendary trainer had been picked-up on by one of the young girls who'd come to see the blood-games from Front Royal.

Becky Chambers, a corn-fed, *very* horny local darling, had found the wiry man and pit-fight games *exhilarating* in the fullest sense of the word. When she discovered that Boo was the top-man at the thrilling event, she moved on him in a

flash. By the end of the night they were both in his bed at the cabin, doing whatever erotic exercises came to their minds.

Unbeknownst to the Youngblood dog-handler, Boo's companion for the evening had a secret preoccupation that had been fascinating her for the past several months. Becky, over the course of the springtime, had become a rabid devotee of the famous country music singer Bobbie Gentry. The sultry country siren from the 60s and 70s had become a sexual icon in her mind. The young girl had purchased her old album covers from thrift shops, photos from collectors, and any likenesses of the smoldering vocalist she could find. Afterwards, she had taken her myriad of color pictures and black and white images, and festooned her room at home with them.

The obsessed woman whom Boo had picked-up at the roadhouse had exactly one desire in life. She wanted to have her stomach look as smooth and muscularly defined as her worshipped minstrel. Bobbie Gentry's signature look of the 1960s was a composite of form-fitting hip-hugger jeans; deep chestnut, beauty pageant tresses; and a man's work shirt, tied in the middle, exposing a perfectly contoured, tanned stomach.

Becky was doing sit-ups and dieting to achieve the total-field look of her idol. But she also had something in her purse to assist her in the weight-loss department. Namely, a small glass phial filled to the rim with high-grade crystal methamphetamine.

The night she'd gone home with Boo, she kept dashing into the bathroom of his cabin for a quick jolt of the white powder from her one-hitter coke-bullet. Then she'd emerge from the loo like a gun shot. Her eyes would be like pinpoints, and the electrified girl would be ready to continue their orgy for as long as her body would stay in one piece. His date was ready to combust with pleasure from the high-octane speed.

Boo Smalls had known something was up with her when his companion kept disappearing into the hopper every quarter hour or so. But, in the larger sense, he didn't really care what she was medicating herself with in there. When she was with him, she did whatever he wanted her to do, and that was fine the famous man.

The stimulants she'd consumed made it possible for Becky to drink incredible amounts of white corn while she was partying with him that evening. The trainer had told her that she might want to slow down with the alcohol. He advised the girl that his homemade blend of hooch had a nasty kick that could sneak up on you, as well as have a powerful first impact.

Becky was oblivious to his warnings and downed shot after shot of the unbonded distillment. Then, every twenty minutes or so, she'd supplement the corn with her personal pharmaceuticals and craft her head to complete perfection. For the time being, the adrenaline and dopamine her body was producing from the crank overpowered the effects of the more slowly released acetylcholine from the booze. But that biological standoff only lasted for a few hours.

In the early morning, after their night of erotic festivities, the girl from Front Royal was scorched to the point of near epileptic fits. She would begin

crying hot tears from the intensity of the crashing headache she was experiencing, and then become insolent and wild when she couldn't locate her one-hitter phial.

Later in the morning, Boo drove the completely wired girl back to her home. She talked endlessly about a time-sharing vacation plan that she and two other girlfriends were going to purchase at a beach house in Virginia Beach, Virginia. She was gibbering like a mandrill, and plainly ecstatic about going to the Atlantic coast and staying at the seashore in August.

They didn't exchange phone numbers or have much to say to one another when he dropped her off. It didn't matter too much to Boo Smalls. He'd had a first-rate, rocks-off time of it last night with the loquacious Miss Becky Chambers; the clandestine zealot of former country music super-star, Bobbie Gentry, and was glad to see her leave.

Upon returning home that morning, Boo located the phial with the crystal speed wedged between the wall and the tank of the toilet bowl in the bathroom of his cabin. Becky must have knocked it down there in her hurry to return to the proceedings, and then given up hope of finding it once the amphetamine-horrors and shakes started tormenting her in the morning.

He popped the phial out of the crevice with his pocket knife and examined the strange container. Inside the tube was a tiny crucible on a hinge which could collect a small amount of the powder when inverted. Then the filled cavity is turned upright, and the entire delivery unit is placed in a nostril to be respirationally ingested. The coke-bullet is similar in design and application to a Vicks vapor-action inhaler, only it's more expensive, and usually filled with top-of-the-line, warp-drive pharmaceuticals.

Boo was feeling adventurous after his night of sexual exploits, and decided to sample a small amount of his babbling date's unintentional gift. After he'd located the speed, the curious man inverted the phial, turned the loaded chamber up, and snorted a blast of crystal into his mucosa. Soon after ingestion, he was *wide* awake and doing fix-it jobs around the cabin he'd been putting off for months.

Later that morning he put the phial in the back row of his jars of corn over the TV stand and lost any personal interest in it. He thought that *maybe* he might be able to lure some of the younger girls from the weekend fights over to his place if he told them he had something nice for their heads waiting for them there. But after some failed seduction attempts, he'd given up that notion.

But now, sitting in his cabin after the brutal night at the Clean n' Jerk Saloon, Boo Smalls was certain he could use as much methamphetamine as he could get his hands on.

The excited trainer got up from the couch and quickly walked over to the shelf with the jars of corn. He hastily shifted the containers about looking for the concealed phial. In his agitation to get the drug, he nearly dropped a bottle of his product on the floor. His mind flashed to the situation earlier in the night with the

standoff between Liz, Sonny, and himself over the lake of pooled moonshine on the floor of the roadhouse. He trembled at the memory.

Boo collected himself as best he could, and began taking the bottles down one at a time. At last he saw the coveted coke-bullet in the far corner of the deep shelf. He controlled himself with steel discipline, and slowly reached between the remaining mason jars to retrieve the crystal meth. His hand closed on the small container, and he delicately pulled it to him.

He held the glass between his fingers and shook it to see how much of its contents remained. The vessel was three-quarters full of the brain-rattling product, and remarkably, it hadn't clumped from the savage Virginia summer humidity. Boo prepped the chamber of the one-hitter and raised it to his nose.

The Youngblood dog handler closed his eyes and strongly inhaled the high-grade accellerant. It felt like tiny ice-picks jabbing into his forebrain from the base of his septum. He prepared another hit and duplicated the procedure in his other nostril. Carbon blue fireworks went off in his head as the speed began circulating in his system. He was beginning, just beginning to feel less fatigued than he did a few moments ago.

The increasingly wakeful man fixed another few hits of the wondrous drug for himself, and within a quarter of an hour, was ready to blaze out of the house and put his final resurrection plan into action.

He dashed to the closet and put on a clean T-shirt. His denim work shirt was covered with blood, dirt, and machine oil from where his Glock .38 would have been if Liz Fury hadn't so elegantly removed it from him. But he didn't have time to think of her right now.

While he was in the storage spot, he collected the remaining three boxes of ammunition for the Remington .30-06, and a five gallon container of the tainted corn liquor. He pocketed the rounds in his jean jacket, and the coke-phial in the front of his Levi's. He placed the large plastic vessel of alcohol by the front door.

The carbine was in his hand and he'd almost made it outside when a wild idea struck him. With his free hand, he grabbed a fresh jar of his boutique white corn from over the TV stand and then exited his cabin.

He blew out of his residence, placed the rifle and white lightning in his ride, and then returned to the house to get the voluminous synthetic jug. After retrieving the heavy item, he exited his place and locked the door. Boo Smalls threw the jerry can of bad corn *and* the large, stainless steel trash can that was next to his cabin into the bed of the F-10.

The energized dog-trainer got into the cab of his ride and turned the ignition. The battery screeched and coughed in resistance. It was time to get a new Die Hard for sure, but he couldn't waste time pondering about that purchase this moment. The engine finally roared into life. He threw the truck into gear and headed off towards Clarke County for an unannounced, early morning rendezvous with his old pal Chet the Vet.

*

The moon and stars provided the only light on the rural route as Boo maneuvered his truck towards the residential district of Clarke County. The

amphetamines in his system made the thoughts jump and flutter through his mind. His teeth chattered and felt like chalk as he rubbed his tongue over their enamel coating. The man took the cap off of his mason jar of white lightning and slowly sipped its contents, trying to take the edge off of the methamphetamine. Then he replaced the top of the liquor jar and jammed it into the huge inner pocket of his Levi's jean jacket.

Boo settled in the driver's seat of the truck, and then felt something unusual jabbing him from his jacket pocket. It was definitely something other than a box of the ammunition he'd stuffed in there before. His hand burrowed about in the denim material, and finally he produced the two capped hypodermic needles Liz had given him earlier in the night to drug his own animals. The ½ cc syringes were filled with amobarbital, and had been meant to sedate his dogs before they went into combat in the pit.

The man snorted vicious laughter as he recalled the havoc his trio of canines had caused in her bar during their last stand at the Clean n' Jerk. Liz Fury and Sonny were lucky to have the place still standing after his animals' siege of her saloon. He stared at the two hypos for a moment, shook his head in amusement, and then pocketed them back in his jacket. Then Boo pulled off of the dark country street and began heading north on John Mosby Highway.

*

Chester Byron's veterinary clinic was located in the basement of his private house in town. He was in his early 50s, a widower, and had lived alone for the past several years. He'd met Boo Smalls, and many of the other trainers, when he'd occasionally go to the Clean n' Jerk to wager on the local pits. He was a good citizen, an outstanding animal doctor, and volunteered at the elementary school to assist with their reading development programs. He liked to deer hunt in the fall months, and had personally restored a classic 1964½ Ford Mustang convertible to near mint condition over the last two years.

But Chester Byron *liked* to gamble, and would occasionally bet large amounts of cash on the fights through the trainers and Liz Fury's bookies.

At times, the waiting room of his clinic would become filled with a precarious, mottled mixture of animals. Hairdo-wives and small children with their purring house cat or trilling guinea pig could be found sitting next to a chained and muzzled, ferocious bulldog or bleeding Pit waiting for medical attention.

Finally, Chet had to enforce a strict separate-hours policy for his regular clients and his gaming-investment patients. The time-specific relationship worked well for him. Between knowing the trainers personally, and being friendly with the bookies, he'd had unusually good luck with his wagers at Liz Fury's bar. Now he was about to receive a visit from a member of his gambling-habit clique that would be unlike any other he would experience.

Boo Smalls turned his truck onto Chet's street. He shut-off the headlights and killed the motor of his ride to coast down the road. The F-10 was silent as a

shark as it coasted to a resting point opposite the house. The trainer looked around the streets to see if anyone had witnessed his arrival. The town road was as still and quiet as a tomb.

The highly-medicated man reached in his pocket and retrieved a box of rounds from his jacket. He released the drop-out, four-round magazine in his carbine and loaded it. Then Boo refitted the clip in the machine and cautiously exited the vehicle.

The poisoned bootlegger circled behind the flat bed of his ride and retrieved the box with the cadavers. He placed the Remington on top of the parcel and walked up to the front door of Chester Byron's home. To Boo's good fortune, the thick cardboard of the Jack Daniel's box was wax-treated and waterproof. The inside of the container was becoming thick with the residual vital-juices of the three champions.

He placed the carton down, picked-up his rifle in his right hand, and sounded the doorbell. The white gauze bandaging around his injured thumb was beginning to unravel, and resembled a miniature flag of surrender as it flapped in the early morning breeze.

There was no answer at the door of the Byron residence during the first few attempts to wake him. Finally, Boo kept the buzzer depressed for several minutes, until he heard a series of thudding footsteps approaching the front door from inside. The unannounced guest steadied himself, waiting for the portal to fly open. However, what emanated from within the dwelling was the heated voice of his friend, demanding to know who would bother him at this god-forsaken hour of the morning.

"It's Boo Smalls," the bootlegger quickly responded to Chet's interrogation, "it's something of an emergency I'm afraid."

"Boo...Boo Smalls?" the man behind the wall rejoined. "Jesus Christ, buddy, why didn't you say it was you? The way you leaned on that door bell, I thought it was some demented boogie-man come to get me." Chester Byron unlocked the dead-bolt, released the security chain, and flung the door open wide.

The barrel of the Remington was positioned only a few inches away from Chet's face as he stood in the doorway to greet his companion.

"Good morning, doc," Boo said to him, "in an ironic way, you may have been correct about your visiting boogie-man prediction. It's funny you'd say a thing like that to me this morning. I believe it's something of a prophetic statement, my friend. I really do."

Chet the vet nervously examined Boo Smalls from head to toe while the desperate man held him at gunpoint: the man's hand had been lacerated and was poorly bandaged. The arms of his jacket had been rolled up, and the skin on his forearms was the color of tomato juice. Flecks of epidermis were coming off his

limbs like peeling paint chips. It also appeared that he'd lost some hair around his forehead, and prune-colored sores were beginning to form on his neck. The man looked like a killer clown who'd recently been fired from a circus cannon.

His gaze went to the cardboard box containing the remains of Boo's fight-dog champions. The veterinarian's eyes widened in astonishment, and then horror, as he viewed the contents of the package Boo Smalls had brought along on his early morning social call. He returned his attention to the trainer and carefully asked him, "What's happened to you? What's going on here? Why do you have a box full of shot-to-pieces pit-bulls, or whatever the hell they are, with you?"

Boo stared at his companion for a brief moment, smiled, and was about to answer him when he felt something funny happening in his mouth. He ran his tongue over his front teeth, probed his gums, and spat out one of his incisors onto Chester's front lawn. The famed dog trainer then returned his interest to the doctor.

"I really don't have time to go into the details of the situation," Boo responded, "but as you can see, Dr. Byron, I have a problem that requires your medical expertise. You're presence is required in the operating room, sir, and it's required right *now*."

"Boo, you're not well," his friend rejoined. "You look like you've been burned, and those hematoma on your skin appear to be breaking open. Also, what could I possibly do to help your animals? Those beasts, I'm sorry to say, are history. By the looks of them, they've been dead for hours. What in the world are they, anyway? They're not regular Pits. They look more like nasty, miniature warthogs or something. Tell me now, did some kind of big-time craziness go down at the Clean n' Jerk tonight?"

Boo Smalls fixed his diminishing eyesight on his friend Chet Byron, still aiming the Remington directly at his companion's skull. "We're chums, Chester," Boo told him, "but this situation goes beyond our friendship. You're going to put these creatures back together anyway you can, and I'm going to watch you do it. You don't have to understand the whys and what-fors. We're going into your surgery room for the rest of the morning. I hope you got plenty of rest before I arrived. If not, I've got something in my pocket that could jump-start the remains of Caligula Caesar if it were necessary for my plan. Now pick-up that container, and lead me down to the clinic. This isn't a game, Chet. It's the real deal."

Boo's acquaintance looked in clean bewilderment at the ragged man wielding the powerful carbine in his face. Dr. Byron wisely thought this was not the best time to argue with his friend. Perhaps he'd try reasoning with him once he got him downstairs. The animal doctor was just now beginning to become fully conscious, having been pulled out of a deep sleep by the dog handler's arrival.

Boo Smalls, however, was *wide* awake, eyeballs practically vibrating in their sockets, and was staring him down like Chief Sitting Bull. The small town veterinarian looked at him with concern, and spoke to his captor. “Anything you want, Boo. I’ll try and help you anyway I can, but I’m telling you up front those animals have seen their last days. Those boys are certifiably *dead*.”

Boo smirked at his hostage and replied, “it wouldn’t be for the first time, my good man. Not for the first time at all.”

The doctor picked up the heavy parcel and walked into his living room. Boo followed his gambling buddy into the residence and the two of them slowly went down the stairs and into his clinic.

*

Some of the fluorescent lights in the office had popped during the severe electrical storm from a while ago. The waiting room of the animal clinic was dimly lit. Chet usually opened the gutter windows during business hours for extra sunlight. But now the couches, coat racks, lamps, chairs and tables cast unusual shadows against the walls of the office.

Chet continued walking into the operating room and clicked on the overheads in that section of his clinic. The brilliant luminance from the bulbs momentarily hurt Boo’s eyes as he continued walking behind his friend into the bright light being emanated from the surgery room.

The doctor set the grisly container on the stainless steel examination table. Then he stretched a pair of latex gloves over his hands, slowly removed the three misshapen corpses from its insides, and placed them on the polished metal board.

The country vet was simultaneously fascinated and repulsed by the otherworldly creatures. They had been riddled with large caliber firearms during the course of the evening at the pit-fights. They constituted a complete grab-bag of miscellaneous body parts. But their grotesque physiques were unbelievable to view. In all his years of practice, he’d never seen such remarkable, strange vertebrates. He lifted an eyelid of one of the animals to look at its iris and pupil. A dull, maroon sphere comprised the entire eyeball of the dog. Chet pulled his hand back in non-comprehending fear. Then he turned around to look at Boo Smalls, who was standing several feet away, and had the gun still trained on his friend.

“Not a pretty sight, is it doctor?” Boo questioned his hostage.

“Boo, please, you can put the gun down,” he said, “and come over here, I want you to tell me what you want done. You’ve got to see what’s left of your animals and decide what’s going to happen here. I’m afraid there’s not a lot of material left to work with. I’m not trying to be funny or dick you around, but you’ve got to tell me what you want me to do. You’ve basically handed me a bucket of Colonel Sanders chicken pieces with no instructions attached. And, unfortunately, most of their internal organs and skeletal frames have been run

through with gunfire. So come over, take a look, and tell me how on earth you want to approach this situation.”

“I think I’ll hold on to the Remington a while longer, thanks,” Boo said to his companion. He retrieved the coke-bullet from his pants pocket and the bulging liquor jar from his jacket and placed them on a counter between the small Panasonic radio and box of Kleenex facial tissues.

Boo inverted the phial, prepped himself a blast of crank, and snorted the crystal with gusto. Then he popped the cap off of the corn and took a draught of its contents. The internally burning man let a thunderclap of laughter from out of his lungs. The sensation of the mingling intoxicants in his system was wonderful. He hadn’t felt this energized in time immemorial.

Boo motioned with the barrel of the rifle for Chet to help himself to the mind-blowing stimulants and depressants available to him on the medical tabletop. Chet was hesitant, but thought it would be in his best interest to humor the dangerous man at all costs. The nervous vet went to the counter and sipped some of the powerful white corn.

Chester’s cheeks convexed and he began sputtering as the electrifying beverage scalded his mouth and throat. Boo smiled at his friend and encouraged him to take another mouthful of the corn. Chet did as instructed, and this time the alcohol went down easily, with a sweet after-burn slowly working its way down his chest and into his stomach.

Boo beckoned him to try a hit of the crystal meth in the coke-bullet. The gunman was smiling broadly now, but kept the rifle leveled on the doctor. He implied to the reluctant surgeon that the morning was still young, and they had many things to accomplish before their impromptu gathering would be concluded.

Chet was familiar with the mechanics of the glass bullet’s delivery system. Many of his colleagues in veterinary school, during the crunch time of final exams, had used the dangerous amphetamine to get through their nerve-racking tests and heavily scrutinized lab experiments.

Chet took the phial, prepared an increment of the crystal, and placed it to his nostril. He inhaled deeply and the heady powder flashed into his membranes. His nasal passages burned as the acrid substance moved into his nasal passages and began to drip down his throat. The vet prepped another salvo of the meth for himself, and snorted a shot of the drug down the other nostril. He did this for two reasons: because he enjoyed it, and because it would undoubtedly make Boo Smalls feel a sense of trust and connection with him. Boo needed to be placated at all costs this early dawn hour.

The vet shook his head after ingesting the powder to regain his bearings, and then looked at Boo. The two men exchanged glances for a few seconds and finally Chet said to him, “are you ready to come over to the examination table and tell me what to do, or are we going to party and talk about old times?”

A look of mutual sympathy crossed between the two of them as they nervously eyeballed one another. Boo stepped over to the steel board and viewed the blasted remains of his three champions. A overwhelming sense of

helplessness and ineffectiveness swarmed over him. He stared down into the tangle of limbs and shook his head with anguish.

Boo Smalls, his body raved with poison, speed, liquor and rage realized that the doctor had been right in his earlier bleak pronouncement. These dogs were history. His unbelievable, ill-conceived idea to try a second resurrection through a massive electric infusion was complete madness.

He looked at his trio of animals stretched out on the slab with unknowable despair. He could recognize their individual bodies by the packed-muscle in the areas he'd worked with the isotonic exercises in the training area. Nitro's sinewy neck was still bulging out over its bullet-pierced chest. Nails's front legs were still rock solid despite the seven direct hits from Wanda's .38, and Jet's hind-quarters remained hard like steel girders.

Boo looked over at Chet after his examination of the bodies. No words were spoken between the two men. Chet was beginning to think that the reality of the situation was beginning to dawn on Boo. Also, the anxious vet was beginning to feel the deleterious effects of the corn and crystal he'd taken a few moments before. He gave his friend the best 'concerned smile' he could muster, and moved forward in an attempt to console the dog trainer.

The trainer's loaded rifle, however, remained set on the doctor. Boo wasn't ready to call it a night yet. Chet moved back to the other side of the examination board and awaited instruction. The gunman walked over to the medical counter, lifted the jar of corn with his free hand, and quaffed another mouthful of the powerful liquid. Boo was beginning to think that he could drink forever at this point. He didn't even feel the analgesic effects of the white corn in his system as he stood looking at Chester and his animals.

He reached over to turn on the Panasonic radio on the medical counter. As he touched the power button, he nearly swooned in a blackout. His legs turned to jelly, and he had to grip the counter with his free hand to steady himself. Chet moved towards him, but then thought it better to let him pass-out on his own. This was a dangerous time for Boo's hostage and he knew it; a time where anything could happen if he didn't watch out for himself.

The events of the day swam before Boo's eyes like a dream sequence in a B-movie. He recalled Liz dragging him out of the saloon by his collar, Sonny's botched assassination attempt in the battle-pit, and the screaming crowd at the Clean n' Jerk as his dogs wrought havoc in the degenerate place.

Then his long-term memory began to play folly with him. His mind flashed back to the pithy Classical epithets and historical references he'd subconsciously tossed about to the bookies and trainers this evening; the same epigrammatic quotes he'd learned in night school practically twenty years ago. Boo had been a reluctant pupil for most of his time in the Youngblood educational system, but had taken a shine to the ancient history class taught during his summer make-up courses. Especially the tutorials concerning the Roman military campaigns throughout Europe and Africa.

The collection of archaic phrases he'd tucked away in a corner of his mind and almost forgotten had resurfaced from the penetrating sickness and shocks to

his system. The famed statements had begun to uncontrollably flood his thoughts. Passages such as “The die is cast,” “on to Actium,” and “the senate and the people of Rome,” burned into his vision like a photographic double-exposure over the recollected events at the club this evening.

And then Boo Smalls had the revelation of a lifetime.

The age-old phrases and bad memories of the day were dancing before his eyes, and blurring into a cluster of mind-numbing lights and images. Then, the swirling mass of disparate information began to congeal in his field of vision. Text and pictures combined and recombined until one single phrase stood out plainly in his sight. Standing out before a veil of moiré effect shadows and benday dots stood the one unforgettable Latin epithet. The most plain, taken-for-granted three words in classical studies.

E pluribus unum stood out before his blood-shot, straining corneas. Each alphabetical character in the sentence was like a twenty-foot tall Las Vegas neon sign, complete with three-way, multi-color chaser lights. It was a glorious thing to behold. Freddy Mercury and Liberace would have approved his vision’s absolute fabulousness.

And at that moment, Boo Smalls knew exactly what he would have Chet do with the animals on the slab. It was perfectly clear what kind of compromise had to be made. Out of many entities, he would create a single great One.

From Chet’s vantage point, the gunman appeared to be in a semi-conscious state of reverie. The vet called out to Boo and the dog trainer seemed to hear his name being sounded, but was unable to respond. After the doctor called his moniker for the third time, Boo Smalls snapped into clean consciousness, and looked at his company with a sense of urgency.

Chester stared back at Boo, but didn’t like the maniacal gleam in his eye which had replaced the earlier sense of devastation. The psychically renewed dog-trainer walked to the corner of the lab and set-up a folding chair for himself and one for his captive. He motioned with the rifle for the Doc to sit down next to him. The nervous vet did as non-verbally instructed by the barrel of the Remington and awaited new direction.

Boo reached in the top pocket of his Levi’s jacket and produced a hard pack of Marlboro cigarettes. He didn’t smoke much as a rule, one or two a day at most, but the man thought this was as good a time as any to begin burning a few more than usual. The trainer produced his famous package of Ohio Blue Tip matches, and one-handedly scratched one into life with his fingernail. He lit the fine tobacco product, inhaled deeply, and put the spent flambeau on the medical counter.

Chester was in near paroxysms of nervousness, waiting to find out what was going to happen in his clinic. Boo put his gun across his knee and leaned over to talk to his bewildered acquaintance. For the first time that morning, Chet the vet began to feel as if things might settle down soon. His head was still

blazing from the white lightning and crystal meth, but an intuition that things might miraculously solve themselves settled over him. Also, he was glad as hell Boo didn't have the gun pointed at him anymore.

The two men began a dialogue sitting under the bright lights of the operating room.

“When you were in vet school, buddy,” Boo asked his friend, “what kind of grades did you get in your surgery classes? I’m especially interested in knowing if you ever got a little crazy with those cadavers they make you buy from the biological warehouses. I’ve heard it said that medical school kids can have a real snarky sense of humor in the lab sometimes. I mean, for example, oh, I don’t know... doing things like cutting off the head of a dead chihuahua and putting it in the pocket of some disagreeable person’s raincoat. Things of that nature. Did you ever get squirrely like that, Dr. Byron? Even one time?”

Chet stared at his mate and then began laughing in spite of the incredible situation he found himself in. He regained his composure after a moment of suppressed chuckles and answered Boo’s question.

“My grades in vet school were fine back in the day. The Anatomy classes were a real cinch. But listen, since you bring it up, I’ve got to tell you something funny. One time back in the 70s, it was a Halloween afternoon, my lab partner and I became a little crazy. We got into the preserved specimens used for dissection training, and created a hybrid critter that we later called a rat-dog. Some of the medical labs that we ordered samples from used to sell individually-wrapped, embalmed rats. One of those companies used to grow those beasts to the size of woodchucks.”

Chet paused for a moment from his monologue, and asked Boo if he could maybe have a cigarette. Boo threw him the pack and the matches, and waited for him to continue. Chester’s captor looked like his mind was drifting again. The vet lit one of the Marlboro’s, smiled contentedly, and then continued his tale.

“So now comes the hysterical part, Boo. You won’t believe this. My lab teacher used to get a few cadavers for dissection classes from the local dog pound. I guess the current, politically correct term is ‘animal welfare league,’ but who gives a shit about that? Our instructor was a pal of the manager there, and he’d get some stiffs for us right after they’d been gassed. He’d bring them into class for us to practice our incision and stitching skills. Early that morning my partner and I discovered a snow-white, miniature poodle in the specimen tank. Well, we decapitated the poofy-thing and attached its head to the body of one of those woodchuck-sized, preserved rats. After we’d sewn the two anomalous pieces together, we put it on the table facing the front doors of the lab. It was the first thing people saw when they came in the room that day. You’ve got to remember

that it was Halloween, so we took a long loop of the dog's intestine and spelled out a greeting in front of the strange creature. Do you know what we spelled out in chitterlings on the table?

"Nope," the dog trainer responded.

"BOO!" Chet the vet, rejoined, "just like your name, buddy. Ain't that some riotous shit?" The Clarke County vet gleefully slapped his knee with laughter; the speed and corn were doing wonders on the doctor at this point.

Boo Smalls and Chet whooped it up at the physician's funny joke. Chet was in tears of merriment for a long moment. When he opened his eyes to dry his face, the Remington was pointed back at him, and Boo wasn't smiling anymore.

"I'm glad to hear you've got a sense of humor about things my friend," Boo told him. "I'm glad to know you're a surgeon who doesn't mind going slightly against the whims of Mother Nature to create something new for the world. Because tonight we've got a lot of surgery to perform. I'm going to be your guide, and we're going to make something nobody in these parts, or maybe anywhere, has ever seen before."

Chet looked at Boo with growing fear and concern. "W-what do you mean by that?" he asked the dog handler, who was becoming increasingly more disquieting to be around every moment.

Boo stood up from the chair. His cigarette was down to the nub and he held the butt in the corner of his mouth. The man spread his arms wide and said to his friend, "Chester, we're about to make the return of Lazarus from the grave look like a cheap card trick. We're about to make for ourselves a genuine canine Frankenstein!" And with this pronouncement, Boo Smalls threw his head back and squealed high-end, treble-clef laughter at the ceiling of the animal clinic.

Twelve

It was 3:00 in the morning, and Lester Ganz was going for an undercover visit to his grocery store. He stealthed out of the back door of his cabin and around to the front like a cat burglar. The thoughtful man was wearing a pair of moccasins for treading in silence, and his darkest-colored clothing to avoid any visual detection. He climbed into the seat of his Ford Escort and quietly pulled the door shut. The car hadn't been driven in about two weeks, and he prayed to any celestial entity who would listen that the Die Hard battery wasn't out of juice.

He settled himself in the seat, depressed the fuel pedal several times, and leaned over the steering column to turn the ignition key with his left hand. The car's starting mechanism sounded like it had been punched in its solar plexus as it

loudly gasped, wheezed, and tried to turn over. Lester pumped the gas with his right foot like a jazz drummer. The car's engine choked and sputtered like a go-cart motor. Lester looked like a crazed teenager behind the wheel as he kept working the pedal, and twisting the key in the column.

The engine sounded like it was fading into oblivion. It came to a near stop, making an odd droning sound as it almost expired. Then the car roared into life like a rocket ship. Lester startled at the noise, but then relaxed, knowing he'd be cruising out of his driveway in half a minute. He reclined in the seat, dropped the shifter into Drive, and slowly worked the car onto the street.

The store owner maneuvered his vehicle to the shop in total darkness, and never turned his headlights on for the trip to his place of business. He hadn't passed any other cars on the rural route during his cloaked movement, and he'd seen nobody on the sidewalks as he took the back streets through Youngblood to get to his establishment.

When Lester reached the market, he parked the Escort in the back alley and entered through the delivery entrance. It was obvious to anyone who looked in the front window that he hadn't been in the store for some time. The delivered mail had piled up on the floor in a heap, and the place smelled unusually musty. However, he was *glad* as hell to be out of his house, even for an hour or so. It felt fantastic to get out of its neurosis-producing confines.

The owner collected the bills and advertisements from the ground, and placed them in a plastic sack behind the front counter. Then he produced a flashlight from underneath the cash drawer to see his way around the insides of the market. He'd be sure to bring the battery operated light with him when he returned home this morning.

Lester had become accustomed to walking in the darkness of his house over the last several nights. However, the man took no chances with turning on the upstairs lights and being discovered at home. The flashlight would make it easier to locate items in his cabin while tramping around in it during the late evening.

He took a small shopping cart from the rack, and placed the flashlight in the front of the basket. The unit now looked like a miniature coal mining car with a headlight in front. The careful man pushed the barrow down the aisles of his store, collecting supplies for his home *and* the items he would need for his confrontation with Liz and Sonny this coming Friday. He'd made the final decision to act on that day, and now he commenced the big preparation for the event.

Les had been physically and mentally working-out for the last few days at his place while planning for the dangerous sortie. He'd been reading Sun Tzu and working on his sit-ups and incredibly difficult push-up exercises. He could now do five of the evil one-handed wonders in a row, and had reached a high-mark of 25 stomach-crunching repetitions.

He'd also started running in place for thirty minutes each day. Lester was not overweight in the slightest degree, but found that the exercises helped him think more clearly than when he'd been completely sedentary. While he ran in his

spot, his intellect would become unburdened from most of the meaningless junk stored in the reactive mind. The man found it was easier to make decisions and act on them after he'd oxygenated his anxious brain cells with a purifying workout.

From the years of rote, pencil pushing routine in his market, his gray matter had become lame and weary from lack of new stimulation. Now, over the last two weeks, his thoughts were becoming increasingly more defined, and he could focus on subjects in detail.

"A sound mind, a sound body, and a 9mm Heckler and Koch P7M8 will hopefully get me out of this cataclysmic mess," he said to himself as he collected various wares from the shelves. Les went to the canned-goods section and stocked up on Del Monte leafy greens, Heinz baked beans, and every container of Bumble Bee solid white tuna on the mantel. "I can't eat the chunk light stuff," he mumbled aloud, "it tastes like 'Little Friskies' cat food. Maybe worse."

He wheeled the cart to the front of the store and picked out several bottles of lime flavored Perrier water, and a bottle of Veuve Clicquot Le Grande Dame champagne for himself. He still had many of the high-priced items in his store from his orders of a few weeks ago. The shop had been closed the last two weekends, and he hadn't sold all of the expensive merchandise. Lester believed that if he lived to see the start of next week, a bottle of Veuve Clicquot would be a fine way to toast the beginning of the rest of his life.

The increasingly confident man moved to the personal grooming area and looked at the myriad boxes of L'oreal hair dyes. He ogled the pretty package-photos of Milla Jovovich, Jennifer Lopez and Andie MacDowell as he fingered through the various shades looking for platinum blonde. After a moment's hunt his eyes detected the desired hair color. He looked at the picture on the carton, and knew this was the item he was looking for.

The photographic-image on the hair-coloring packet was of Heather Locklear. The beautiful starlet of the blockbuster television shows, Dynasty, Dallas, Melrose Place and Spin City.

Her flawless face and blonde, sun-filled hair graced the package of the L'oreal hair dye. She looked like an angel visiting an outlet shopping mall. Lester picked up the box and examined her dazzling eyes and perky smile. "Nice teeth," the man mused, and tossed the box onto the pile of canned tuna in the grocery cart.

His final stop was the seasonal section of the store. Les scooted the basket along and parked the pushcart at the display of T-shirts and baseball caps. For his plan to have a chance of coming-off on Friday, he'd have to look as much like one of the local boys as possible. He took an extra-large sized, official NASCAR product, Dale Earnhardt T-shirt from the rack. Nobody would notice the bulge from the Heckler and Koch in the rear of his jeans with a shirt that voluminous hanging over it. And without a doubt, no one would give him a second look if he

walked into the Clean n' Jerk with the champion stock car racer's face embossed on his cotton/polyester blend top.

Dale Earnhardt was an icon on the order of Patsy Cline, John Mosby and Richard Petty in Youngblood. His image was so ingrained in the peoples' subconscious that his likeness didn't even gain a reaction anymore; not even when they stared directly at the depiction of the famous man's bushy mustache and chiseled features.

He proceeded to the spinner-rack of sunglasses and picked out a pair of cheap mirror-shades that covered a good portion of his face. Lots of people wear dark glasses to Liz Fury's club for the weekend fights. They do this primarily because the customers behind them *don't* want to be noticed for various personal and professional reasons. The shades were definitely going to be part Lester's costume for that evening.

At last the man found himself in front of the shelf of baseball caps. He looked at several of the pieces of headwear, but didn't find himself attracted to any of them. He needed the perfect, Youngblood Virginia look to get into the bar with minimal attention paid to him. He pawed through a few more of them and then saw what he believed was the ideal article.

The adjustable cap was dark blue and had a criss-crossed string-mesh back for ventilation purposes. Lester played with the strap on the back of the cap with the thumb and forefinger of his left hand. The dexterous man altered the band to where he believed it would be a proper fit. He tried it on and his calculations had been perfect. He then took off the head-gear, admired it from several angles, and decided that this was the one he would wear for his upcoming historic night. On the front of the cap, in large upper case letters, were stitched the words SHIT HAPPENS.

Lester finished the late-night plundering of his own store and prepared to leave the premises. He stuffed his essential merchandise in several plastic bags, and then placed them by the back door. After returning the grocery cart to the rack, he collected the bag of mail from behind the counter. The cautious store owner checked the supply list in his pocket to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything, and went to the back door to begin loading his car with the goods.

Lester quickly and quietly filled the Escort with the sacks, and got ready to leave the back alley.

The compact car made odd respiratory sounds as he turned the ignition key, but started-up after a second try without difficulty. He dropped the transmission into the Drive position and started to move slowly out of the back delivery area. For the second time that evening, he intentionally left the headlights off as he navigated through the silent residential streets to get back to the rural route.

He'd been out of his house for an hour and a half, but it only seemed like a few minutes had passed when he turned the Ford back into his cabin's driveway. Lester examined the gravel path in front of him, repositioned the small car in the exact position it had been in before he exited his home, and cut off the engine. Then he placed his head on the steering wheel and let out a sigh of relief, satisfied

that no one had seen him in town or on the streets. Now he had to get his gear inside and things would be fine until Friday night.

The alert man grabbed several of the bags and moved like a wolf through the dark and to the back door of his cabin. In under a minute he had the remainder of his things from the backseat of his car moved to the inside his home.

Lester shut the door of his place after he'd brought the last salvo of his store's inventory inside. He sat on the ground with his back against the wall, listening to the plastic bags make crinkling sounds as they settled themselves on the floor. Les turned on the flashlight he'd brought with him and directed the beam around the room. Everything was the same as when he'd left the place. He didn't know why there would be any change, but the events of the last fortnight had made him wary of practically everything.

He picked through the bags on the floor, found a bottle of lime flavored Perrier water, and screwed it open with his thumb and forefinger. He sipped the delicate beverage and ruminated about his situation.

The supply-gathering session had been a success. Les was sure of it. Now he had enough decent food and supplies to keep him going for a while. He even had a nice, bubbly reward planned for himself if things worked-out in his favor.

During the last few days, he'd continued his reading of the Stephen King book "The Running Man," when he became weary of Sun Tzu's succinct work on warfare. The protagonist of the future shock novel, Ben Richards, was becoming his personal icon of salvation for the approaching showdown with Liz Fury and Sonny. The hunted man in the paranoid story was the embodiment of the tactical theories set forth in *Art of War*.

The rabidly pursued protagonist only used weapons when necessary. He kept violence to a minimum and employed disguises, ruses, and distractions in his efforts to avoid detection. Whenever he was forced into a confrontation, he tried to separate the enemy from any assistance. Sun Tzu was adamant about keeping one's adversary disconnected from support, confused, and away from their leadership.

Lester playfully smiled to himself at the thought of being the hero in a tricked-out action novel full of beautiful femme-fatales and Hollywood-style special effects; then he tried to shake some of his "consensus reality" back into his head. He placed the flashlight on the counter, and stocked the perishable food, bottled water and champagne in the refrigerator. Afterwards, he placed the canned goods in their respective cupboards, and the clothing articles in the utility closet.

Returning to the kitchen, he saw the box of L'oreal hair dye sitting on the floor amongst the empty plastic sacks. He picked up the package and took it with him to his bedroom. It was very early in the morning and he was going to get some sleep before he started his total make-over plans. He placed the container with Heather Locklear's heavenly face next to his prescription bottle of Talwin that Kim the waitress had given him. As he looked at the medicine sitting there, he realized something; the pain in his right wrist was gone. He'd forgotten to take the anesthetic pills in the morning, and hadn't thought about them until now.

He smiled again at the fact that something had actually gone right for the first time in a long while. Incredibly, his arm didn't give him the awful discomfort as it had earlier. Les stretched out on the mattress and turned the flashlight out. It was only a couple of days until Friday, and soon he'd personally find out if blondes really do have more fun than the rest of the peroxide-challenged population of north-western Virginia.

*

Liz Fury and Wanda Jackson were repairing the broken furniture and spackling bullet holes in the walls of the Clean n' Jerk on Wednesday morning. They'd been nailing together the tables and chairs that could be fixed, and discarding the stuff that was beyond redemption.

A handful of people had driven up to the bar on Saturday night after the apocalyptic events of the night before, but left as quickly as they arrived. Liz had placed a "Temporarily Closed" sign out on the front door, but she almost needn't have bothered. Word of mouth had spread the unbelievable news about the wild dog attack around town faster than an MX missile.

That Monday morning, after the hellacious weekend, the lawyers began calling the bar on behalf of their harmed clients. Several of the people who'd been wounded by Nitro, Jet and Nails on Friday evening were filing liability suits against the club for personal injury and criminal negligence.

Liz knew that possibly, *a few* of the claims would make good in court. Fortunately for her, most of the patrons of the Clean n' Jerk realize that they're not dealing with a completely above-board establishment when they enter, and try to keep personal involvement with the bar to a minimum. But she also understood that when the private attorneys start making calls, things inevitably default to a serious hassle. It would probably cost her a good chunk of change to get out of the situation.

She'd called her own lawyer in Washington, D.C., a rugged fellow by the name of Robert DeNiro. The juris doctor had the same name as the famous Hollywood actor, and the same tempestuous manner as well. After his client had informed him of her dilemma, he'd contacted the plaintiffs personally, attempting to dissuade them from legal action. When he explained the situation with the club, the private property laws, and "members only" status which applied to all patrons during specific hours of operation, many of the offended parties backed down from their suits. Still, several of them were adamant for compensation.

Liz Fury's counselor obtained writs of postponement from the State Attorney General's office in Richmond which would move back any legal action against the club for one year. His tactical delay was absolutely fine with Liz Fury. In light of current events, she expected to stay in Youngblood no more than a few weeks at most. Liz knew when it was either time to move on, or put the wagons in a circle. It was *almost* time to hit the road in her estimation of things.

So now, the club owner and Wanda were working side by side in the bar, trying to put the place back together for one last stab at attracting the gambling money before the games moved on to some other roadhouse, as they inevitably would do.

The two sinewy beauties were wearing black tank tops and high, acid-wash cut-off jeans as they hammered the chairs and tables back into some semblance of their former construction. Liz would spackle some blast-point perforations in the paneling with compound or nail a cover over a particularly large gash in the wood. Then she'd return to assist Wanda with the reconstruction of the furniture.

Sonny had been practically no help at the bar since the demise of his dog Roscoe last Friday. He'd been in a profound funk, and had spent most of his time calling on other handlers in hopes of locating a new animal to begin training.

Liz was boiling-over with anger about his lack of concern for her and the bar. However, he was an integral part of her plans for the remainder of the week, so she stayed as pleasant to him as possible under the circumstances. Even now, as Liz and Wanda were attempting to rebuild the Clean n' Jerk, he was out in his sedan sizing-up fight-dogs and talking with trainers.

The only thing Sonny was good for now, in Liz Fury's estimation, was spreading the word among gamblers and handlers that the contests *would* be back on Friday. The bouncer told anyone who would listen to him that the dog-fights are scheduled to return on the weekend: with or without a full roster of animals, with or without Boo Smalls. He encouraged his listeners to bring their extra cash to the bar on the weekend to maybe double, or even triple their money.

Liz Fury and Wanda had been together most of the time since the unbelievable events of the weekend. The two new lovers had grown closer than ever in light of the unaccountable events that had taken place at their business. They'd used Liz's office as their make-shift boudoir, and had made sizzling love to each other on the desktop, sitting in the boss's padded chair, and in the powder room adjacent to the manager's private sanctum.

Then, at the end of the day, Liz would go home with Sonny. She'd attempt to be level-headed and considerate with him because of her continued need of his services. But soon she'd end up being as petulant and non-communicative with him as he was being with her. She was literally outraged at his lack of interest in repairing the club, and couldn't believe his juvenile pre-occupation with these stupid animals. Liz knew when to pull the plug on a relationship, and she was sure that after the upcoming weekend, Sonny's days as her man were through.

The two bombshells took a break from their carpentry sessions and sat at the bar for a breather. Liz went behind the counter and poured them both a shot of Jack Daniel's, and popped open two cans of Budweiser beer. She returned to the front and pulled up a stool next to her girl. The owner of the Clean n' Jerk began a conversation with Wanda, stroking her baby's strong forearms as she spoke with her.

"This weekend is make-or-break time for the bar," Liz ruefully told her companion, "I guess you pretty much know that, don't you Wanda?"

“I imagine that’s right, Liz,” she nervously answered. “So tell me, please, what are we gonna do if the place goes belly-up?” Wanda looked at Liz with real concern. It was a question she’d wanted to ask her for the last couple of days.

Liz looked at Wanda for a brief second like a protective, female mountain lion, and then answered her apprehensive question. “Well you and I are going to be *fine*,” Liz purred. “Your sweet mamma Liz has been putting some greenbacks away for a rainy day, so there’s no problem in the immediate cash-flow department. The bar, the Cleopatra, and the mail-order biz I can leave in the capable hands of Robert DeNiro. We have a client-attorney arrangement where large amounts of paper currency can be transacted with a certain amount of professional discretion.

Liz became pensive for a quick moment, and then continued her spiel, “You know, honey, I’ve always wanted to visit Key West. Now that’s a place where you can have yourself a time, girl! Does that sound like a road trip *you* might be interested in? I’m asking you this question seriously. Does the idea of packing your bag and blowing this pop-stand town seem agreeable to one Miss Wanda Jackson? Would you maybe like to visit the Florida Keys with the legendary local bad-ass Liz Fury in a couple of weeks? Possibly stay for a while down there? Or do you feel a sense of undying loyalty and connection to Youngblood, Virginia?”

Wanda smiled at Liz like a nervous, teen-age girl sitting in an ice cream parlor. She touched her boss’s face and started to say something, but then stopped herself.

“What, baby,” Liz asked her, “what’s the problem? Tell me.”

“W-well,” Wanda stammered, “what about Sonny? Aren’t’ you still, at least technically, his woman, even though things aren’t so hot between you two right now?”

Liz Fury let a small explosion of laughter erupt from her throat. She collected herself and continued talking to her pretty friend. “Listen cookie, I *told* you, Sonny is going to be sent packing before the beginning of next week. It’s a lock. An absolute guarantee. I must admit that when things were good between us, he was fun to have around. But, in the larger sense of the matter, he’s just a hot-headed punk. A punk with some potential, mind you. But I don’t have the patience or the time to find out if he’s going to turn into someone I can depend on, or if he’s just gonna dick-around and play cowboy-games with his hick friends for the rest of his life.”

Liz looked deep into the eyes of her distressed employee, and pulled Wanda close to her. Her mate responded in kind. The smell of liquor was hot on

their breath. It was becoming a sensual moment for the pair of bodybuilders, and they both started to burn with carnal feeling.

Liz Fury kissed Wanda's eyelids and moved her mouth down to meet her lover's lips. "Don't you worry about that man anymore," Liz told her, "in almost no time we're going to be on the beach in Florida driving the cabana boys wild and looking for a place to start a new saloon. I think maybe we could call it 'Liz Fury's Hurricane Room.' You like that name, girlie?"

Wanda beamed affection toward her authoritative mate. She enveloped the muscular beauty in her arms and whispered, "I *adore* that name, baby, and do you know something else, girlfriend? I'd really love to have the boss of the Hurricane Room crawl all over me right about now."

The two of them got up from their bar stools, and raced each other to the door of the private powder room adjacent to the manager's office.

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Kim and Chuck Jones had finished their historic tours of Fredericksburg and the Manassas Battlefield Park earlier than expected. The weather had turned hot and sticky, almost to the level of Atlantic City standards. Carmine Angelini, AKA Chuck Jones, had greatly enjoyed his visits to the famed fighting grounds. He'd purchased several bags of souvenirs and literature from the gift shops at both of the celebrated sites. Kim, his beautiful companion, was enjoying herself as well, but was beginning to give him subtle reminders as to why they'd come down south in the first place. It almost seemed that Carmine had forgotten his business arrangement with Lester Ganz concerning Sonny the bouncer, and was getting carried away with their mini-vacation.

When she brought up the subject of visiting the Clean n' Jerk Saloon, Chuck would agree with her that they needed to reconnoit the area, but then found ways to eventually avoid the task.

In Kim's estimation, the mellowing hit-man hadn't been acting like himself lately. For the last few days, her boyfriend seemed more like a caring hospital volunteer than an organized-crime assassin. She wasn't complaining about the personality shift. The transformation from a brooding, troubled gangster to an ebullient bon vivant was an extremely welcome change. The comely cocktail waitress was beginning to suspect that her beau was getting tired of the crime game in New Jersey, and was looking for ways to permanently close that chapter of his life.

It was still early afternoon and the two of them were cruising back towards Winchester on Route 66 West. Kim clicked on the radio and Johnny Paycheck's cheeky classic "Take this job and shove it," spilled out of the speaker cones. The two of them exchanged wry smiles as the singer addressed his employer in indecorous tones, and indignantly vacated his position.

Chuck Jones started a conversation with Kim about their itinerary for the next day and a half. He informed his girl that it was of utmost importance that they visit The Stonewall Jackson Museum and Old Town Winchester on Friday,

which was their last day in town. But now it was Thursday, and they had the whole rest of the afternoon to do what they pleased. He gave her his personal guarantee that they'd visit the Clean n' Jerk tonight to check out Sonny before they went back to the Battlefield Inn.

"So," he playfully asked his driver, "What should we do for the rest of the day?" Chuck was being impishly sadistic with her. He was going to make her beg and squirm to see the condominium-sized plastic reptiles at Dinosaur Land. The man couldn't help himself. He was feeling great.

Kim smirked at her fellow and gave him a frisky look of haughty rivalry. She decided to torment him right back with a dose of his own smarmy medicine. "Oh, I don't know," she responded, maybe we could stop at that place we saw yesterday, what was it called? Apple Blossom Mall, that's it. I could buy some of those oh-so-trendy Kathie Lee Gifford signature model polyester pant suits. As far as I can estimate by the looks of people we pass on the street, Rayon is still the fabric of choice in this town. Then, maybe, I can talk to a few of the local boys tuning up their GTOs outside the Sheetz Gas n' Go. That's what I'd like to do now. I bet the ladies in the dress shops can talk for hours about handsome Regis Philbin and that darn, irrepressible Kathie Lee. Doesn't that sound like fun to you, hun?" Kim kittenishly leered at him, and awaited his response.

"Kim, my dear" her beau rejoined, "I think the entertainment option you described is a bit one-sided to be honest with you. I was rather hoping we could stop by that industrial park-sized Wal-Mart off of John Mosby Highway, which, as I recall was near the Apple-something mall you just mentioned. I was looking forward to picking up a new electric sander and table saw there. As you know, I like to read all the technical manuals and warnings that come with the units, and I'm sure their hardware section is enormous. They must carry at least twenty brands of both those items. It could take the remainder of the afternoon. I'm sorry sweetheart, but I like to be thorough when I'm researching a potential power-tool acquisition." The New Jersey swain had mischievously stalemated his plucky girl, and was ready for her to start begging to see the synthetic brontosaurus. He was not disappointed.

"Chuck!" She mewled, you *promised* to take me to see the big lizards! Why are you torturing me like this? I've seen more serious history in the past couple of days than I can take. I want to have some *fun*. Please. We're already on the right road heading in that direction. We can be there in thirty minutes. I looked at the Triple-A map this morning."

Kim's boyfriend broke into a huge, toothy smile. "We can go to the Flintstones-style amusement park on one condition," he told her, "and this prerequisite is something I insist upon." He looked completely sincere as he watched her wheeling the sports car up the freeway.

"What's that, hot-shot?" She asked him.

“I want you to start calling me Carmine again. I’m *sick* of being Chuck Jones. It’s the most ordinary, featureless name I’ve ever heard in my life. I’ve been Chuck Jones for more years than I can remember, and I’ve absolutely had it with that cheap-ass, vanilla-flavored, under cover moniker.”

Kim looked at her passenger in raw astonishment. Then, slowly, her bewilderment turned into happiness, and finally to understanding as he continued staring at her in his strong, enthusiastic manner. Her boyfriend, Carmine Angelini, was tired of the racketeering game, and was about to start making plans to get out of it for good.

She leaned over the floor mounted shifter in the Corvette and kissed her man gently. He kissed her back with real emotion. Then Kim got a pixie-like smile on her face and playfully said to him, “so, it’s like a ‘take this job and shove it’ type situation, hunh, boss?”

“You got it, babe,” he heartily replied to her, “on to Dinosaur Land my pretty girl, the terrible lizards await us.”

“Anything you say, *Mister* Angelini,” the delighted girl said to her man. Then Kim punched the gas pedal of their gorgeous Corvette, and the car took off like a missile in the direction of the prehistoric-monster theme park.

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When the happy couple finally exited the gates of the kitsch-sensation, they were both batty from their exploits of the afternoon. Kim had brought along her Instamatic camera and they’d taken pictures of each other standing next to woolly mammoths, riding a stegosaurus, and challenging a triceratops to a fist fight by the hot lava pools. They’d bought T-shirts, a stuffed-toy Tyrannosaurus, popcorn and cotton candy from the gift shop. Then they gave a gratuity of twenty dollars to the bewildered employee there for no reason whatsoever.

They walked back to the parking area arm in arm and placed the bags of souvenirs in their vehicle’s trunk. The storage compartment of the flashy ride was getting full of the purchases from their getaway. Carmine looked at the Remington 710 perched back there among the civil war books, jars of strawberry preserve and a polyfiber-filled, stone-age animal. He shook his head in awe of the incredible contrast of the collected items and shut the trunk of the machine.

Carmine Angelini, formerly known as Chuck Jones, knew what task lay before him now, and was beginning to put his game-face on. Kim noticed the change in her boyfriend instantly, and understood it was time to start thinking about their contracted business arrangement.

The thoughtful man pulled his girlfriend close to him and told her that this was where the fun stops for the day, and the nitty-gritty begins. Kim said she understood perfectly and was ready to hit the road to go check out the predicament at the Clean n’ Jerk.

He continued to hold his girl and she embraced him back with affection. They stood together for a moment and then Carmine whispered to her, “I’m

beginning to get the feeling that this might be my last *professional* job, honey. I don't know yet if I'm going to execute the terms of our arrangement with Mister Ganz *verbatim*, but I owe it to the man to at least check it out. One way or the other, I'm getting out of the wise-guy business soon."

Carmine continued holding Kim. He closed his eyes and ran his hands along the small of her back and shoulders. He liked the way she felt. He liked to feel her responding to him.

"I kind of like it down here," he went on. "People are friendly, and they give you more food than you can eat at the restaurants. I'm thinking I might like to look at buying some land in the Old Dominion in a year or so. Does that sound like something you could go for, toots? I know you're less than enthusiastic about working at Caesar's and I don't blame you. However, you do look fine in that short toga they make you wear, I must say."

Kim gave her boyfriend a playful but strong pinch on the derriere at his last remark. The mobster chuckled to himself, and continued his discursion.

"But really, pumpkin, do you think you could possibly move down to the land of presidents with Carmine Angelini. It's a big state with lots of parcels for sale near the North Carolina border. We'd be landed gentry in that part of the world, that's for certain. It's just an idea for now, mind you, but I'd like to know what you think about it."

Kim looked up at Carmine with clear, soulful eyes. She pulled his head down to hers and kissed him firmly. Then she held his face in her two hands and sincerely told him, "I'm your girl, Carmine. You are my heart. I go where you go and that's the whole story; it's a done deal. If you want to move to Guam and pick bananas I'll go with you, no problem. You *are* my life, and I love you."

Carmine Angelini tenderly kissed her cheek. Then he moved over to the driver's side of the Corvette to hold the door for her to enter. She slid behind the wheel and put the key in the ignition. The man from Atlantic City then walked around the front of the ride, opened the passenger door, and slipped in beside her. He looked at his girl and said to her, "all right then, so we know what's going on in the big picture of things, but now let's go check-out Mr. Bad Guy at this shit-kicker dog-fight bar."

He was in combat form now. The smile was gone, and the hawkish features that had attracted Kim to him at the casino were plainly standing out on his face. Carmine Angelini was ready to get dirty if the need presented itself.

Kim put the car into gear, exited the park, and headed back towards Route 81 in the direction of Youngblood. This time, they didn't turn on the radio as they headed towards the Clean n' Jerk Saloon.

At the corporate limits of the town, Kim and Carmine had to ask a man on the street for directions to Liz Fury's drinking establishment. All of the local population are used to getting questions from out-of-towners about the bar; especially from well-dressed people in expensive cars. They can recite to them the navigational stops and turns to make by rote memory. Kim thanked the man for his help and tooled her ride towards their destination. After a few moments, they were parked outside of the place, and looking at the front door of the famous roadhouse.

It was early evening and there was still some sunlight left in the sky. The "Temporarily Closed" sign in the window had been taken down only hours before their arrival. It was Thursday night, and the few locals who go to the bar to drink corn, play poker, and watch the World Wrestling Federation's "Thursday Night Dynamite" program were already in their regular positions at the bar and tables.

Liz Fury and Wanda had completed their makeshift repairs of the furniture and walls in the early afternoon. The electrician they'd called to fix the alarm system that Sonny had shot to pieces never showed up.

The glazier had come to replace the broken windows in the morning. On the Clean n' Jerk's house phone, he'd made several calls to supply warehouses to find the right sized pre-cut glass panels, and had them securely fit in the walls by two o'clock. Liz paid the man in cash from her pocket, didn't want a receipt, and told him to forget he'd been at the club that day. When the tradesman agreed to all of her requests she peeled off an extra one hundred dollar bill and slipped it into his top pocket. "Buy yourself a steak," she said to the surprised man, "you look hungry to me."

Now Kim and Carmine were sitting in the car, about to enter the club. The mobster told his girl to just be natural and nice to everyone that talks to them. He reiterated that the only thing for certain is that they're used to people from out of town stopping by, so a couple of Jersey-types coming into their space wouldn't be much of a distraction to the patrons. They looked at each other for confidence, got out of the car, and walked up to the door of the bar ready to collect some information on their contracted target.

Sonny had shown up at the Clean n' Jerk approximately an hour before Carmine and Kim had pulled into the parking area. He'd been cruising around the different counties looking for a new-talent Pit to start training. Also the strong-arm had spread the word that the fights would be on again, one way or the other, tomorrow evening. He'd had several shots of corn with each of the handlers he'd seen that day, and now he was buzzed enough to be mean to people he didn't like without being completely drunk.

Liz and Wanda had stocked the bar that afternoon with new containers of corn, Jack Daniel's and Budweiser. They'd been working practically non-stop at putting the place back together since last Friday, and they were exhausted. When Sonny came into the place, his boss told him he'd have to take care of the bar for the early evening while she and Wanda crashed in the office for a few hours to get some sleep.

The young hood griped about having to serve drinks while he was still looking for a new Pit to train. He wanted to make some calls in the office to a few breeders in West Virginia. Liz began to heat-up like a grease fire at his selfish whining. She started to grab him by his T-shirt, intent on ripping it to shreds, but controlled her actions. Then she collected herself, and asked him in her most demure manner if he could please do this for her as a favor. The bouncer balked a bit more about the inconvenience, but finally agreed to her wishes.

Then Liz Fury and Wanda Jackson retired to the confines of the manager's office. Liz stretched out on top of her desk with a rolled-up gym bag under her head. Wanda pulled up two office chairs. She ensconced her perfect haunches on one and rested her creamy pins on the other. They were both completely enervated from carpentry chores, bourbon consumption, and an afternoon of hard-edged love-making. The two of them fell into a deep, dreamless sleep shortly after they closed their eyes.

Kim and Carmine entered the bar and looked around the inside of the place. A group of portly, unshaved men wearing Lee jeans and baseball caps were sitting on the newly rebuilt chairs playing seven-card stud poker. They all had shot glasses in front of them, and a mason jar full of corn sat on the center of the table.

A few buzzcut, high school kids were sitting at the bar, drinking beer straight from the can. They were watching The Brahma Bull, AKA 'The Rock' make light work of his enormous enemy 'Big Show' on the WWF wrestling match being broadcast on the TV. On the house stereo, Dwight Yoakum's twangy version of "Little Sister," spilled out of the ceiling mounted Bose 901s.

The couple from Atlantic City got the once-over look from all the customers, but then they returned to their card games and television programs. The pair of tourists started walking towards the bar and then immediately hesitated. Carmine and Kim both instantly recognized the man serving drinks to the teenagers. Their client, Lester Ganz, had spared no detail in his description of his nemesis, Sonny. Now they were standing only a few feet from their mark, and were about to confront the person they'd been hired to kill.

Sonny sat behind the bar, arms resting on the polished wood. His longish, dirty-blond hair hung over the collar of his jean jacket. His face and eyes were puffy from alcohol, and he was mumbling to himself as Kim and Carmine took their seats next to the high school kids. He looked at the two new faces sitting in front of him with mild contempt. Carmine returned the rough, icy glare to the coarse barman.

Kim smiled at the strong-arm and politely asked him if they had any Herradura tequila in the house. If so, they'd both like a frozen Margarita with double shots of that delicious bonded product.

Sonny looked at Kim with utter incomprehension. His eyes had become piggishly small from the corn he'd consumed. The pretty girl who was addressing him at the bar talked funny; like she was from New York City or one of those other shit-bag Yankee towns. She was asking him about some kind of booze he'd never heard of. The young tough was tired from his day of kennel-cruising and

drinking. Also, he had a headache that felt like it would soon remove his sinuses from the rest of his body. He continued to stare at her, trying to figure out what she was talking about. Finally he yawned, and responded to her question.

“What?” He asked his customer.

“Tequila,” she responded. We’d like some Margaritas. Do you have *any* kind of tequila here?

Carmine was doing a visual study of the boorish fellow while Kim kept him talking. This was definitely their mark. The gunman from Atlantic City could now see why Lester wanted him out of the picture. Their bar keeper was a complete cave man; an uncouth, repulsive creature. The hair bristled on the back of the hit-man’s neck as he continued to regard their host.

Then the New Jersey racketeer’s gaze settled on something oh-so familiar on Sonny’s side of the bar. His eyes widened as he recognized the shape of the item under the cleaning rag. He collected himself instantly, made a mental note of the article, and continued his casual observations of the place. Kim the waitress continued her difficult conversation with their bartender.

“Got no tequila,” he snorted. We got bourbon, white corn and beer. If I were you miss, I’d go with the beer. You don’t look like the type to go for corn. Whatever your boyfriend wants is his own affair.”

“What do you mean by ‘white corn,’ sir?” Kim questioned the irritable man, “I’ve never heard of it. Is that some kind of mixed drink or something?”

Sonny snorted again, and asked her, “Honey, where *are* you from anyway?”

Kim was about to answer him when Carmine broke into their dialogue. “I’m sorry my girl has so many questions, sir,” he chimed in, “she’s got an inquiring mind. Listen, just set us up with two doubles of Jack Daniel’s, no ice, and a Budweiser back. That should do us just fine.” Carmine Angelini pulled a twenty dollar bill from his pocket, and held it out over the bar for Sonny to take. When the bouncer reached for it, the racketeer released the paper money from his fingers a second too soon, and it fluttered to the floor on Sonny’s side of the bar. The disgruntled bartender bent down to pick up the currency.

Carmine Angelini, quick as a cat, reached over the polished wood, retrieved the Glock .38 semiautomatic pistol which was under a cleaning rag, and returned to his sitting position before the bouncer could stand straight again. Kim’s eyes nearly popped from their sockets as he retrieved the handgun and passed it to her under the counter with snake-like speed. She took the pistol from him and placed it in her handbag in half a tick.

The New Jersey native apologized for his clumsiness, and told Sonny to keep the change from their order. When their drinks came, Carmine told their man that they're in town to see the dog fights. Carmine started telling him about the unbelievable cock-fights he'd attended in New Mexico while on some business there a few years ago. Their barman perked-up at the change of subject in their conversation.

The aging gangster went on for a few moments, making up nonsense about the razor-stirruped rooster fights in the southwestern states that he'd never seen. Then he asked Sonny if he'd be in attendance for the pit-fights tomorrow. Their host confirmed that he'd be there, and opening the bar, because that's when the club made all its money. He told them that the trainers usually show up around 10:00 PM and the fights start around midnight.

Sonny became maudlin for a moment and told Carmine about losing his own animal last week. However, the bar keep kept looking directly at Kim while talking to him. Ever since last week, Liz Fury had cut the young man off from any kind of erotic activity at the apartment. He was getting more than a little worked-up looking at the pretty girl from New Jersey sitting in front of him.

The Clean n' Jerk's security man couldn't believe Liz Fury's insensitivity to his situation concerning the loss of his dog, Roscoe. That animal had been his investment and life for several months. It was inconceivable that *she* was pissed off at *him* for not helping to repair the bar after his fine beast had been so badly torn-up.

The strong-arm opined that Liz should take some of that money she's got in the combination safe and buy herself a little life *perspective*. Sonny was beginning to believe more and more in Boo Smalls's prophetic words, "Liz Fury doesn't understand men like us, now does she?" He believed his boss was a smart woman, but had no fealty for the game's tradition in her. Loyalty, pride and honor were abstract concepts to the strictly fast-money mentality of her fight-dog club. He kept telling himself, "she's not from Youngblood. She doesn't understand the code we've got here. She doesn't understand *the life*."

At the bar, Liz Fury's counterman continued staring hard at Kim. The situation was becoming a bit uncomfortable for her. He invited himself to have a round of bourbon with the couple and started a monologue about his personal achievements and future goals with his pit-bulls. After a few moments of indulging his conversation, the two Atlantic City customers finished their drinks. The pair told their host that they'd enjoyed their time at the club, but had to be moving on.

Sonny wasn't finished talking however. He continued his self-appreciative speech and began to stroke Kim's hand as he rambled-on about his future superstar status on the blood-game scene.

Carmine was burning with a desire to step behind the bar and kick the ignorant man's teeth out, but was somehow able to control himself. He knew he'd be out of the place in a few minutes, and it's better not to start something that could get out of hand. His mind flashed to the days of his youth, and he was astounded at his present self-control in the situation. Many times in his younger

years he'd broken peoples' ribs and jaws for displaying half of the insolence Sonny was showing his girl now. "Just keep cool, and get out of here" is what he thought to himself. "I've got all the information I need about this dirt-bag. Now it's a judgment call as to what to do with him."

The couple finally got up to leave, but Sonny grabbed Kim's arm with force to restrain her. The frightened girl looked at Carmine and her man stared hard at their half-drunk barman. The two hoods locked eyes like champion fight-dogs in the battle-pit.

Sonny was unused to having men stare back at him when he was angry. Usually people fled when he gave them his iron-eyed look. Now this old man was not only staring him down, but staring him down like a poisonous snake. He didn't know why, but the young thug believed it would be a good idea to let go of the girl and maybe let things slide this time.

The barman released his grip on Kim's arm and the tense spell between the two men was broken. Carmine reached in his pocket, never lifting his gaze from Sonny, and tossed a twenty dollar bill on the bar. "Thanks, for the hospitality, friend," the mobster gently told him. "We'll see you tomorrow night at the games. Maybe we'll all make a little bit of money off the local animals. That would be a nice thing, now wouldn't it? Now you have a good night, pal." Then he humorously added, "and don't let those snoozing poker players over there give you a hard time."

Kim and Carmine headed towards the door of the Clean n' Jerk. The pretty cocktail waitress clung to his arm as they made their way out. Suddenly, Sonny got a dose of his cohes back in his system and icily called out to the exiting couple, "you have a nice night too, pops, and be sure to bring your *grand daughter* back here tomorrow night for the festivities. I'm not quite finished gettin' to know her yet. I believe she's started to like us country boys."

The mobster froze in place. Kim held his arm tight and told him not to start anything now. The aging fellow turned to give the barman his worst cyanide glare. Sonny met his gaze with his own insolent leer. The racketeer held his look for a moment; then shook his head, and waved goodnight to the bouncer of the Clean n' Jerk.

When the couple got outside the bar, they walked to the car in silence. They slipped into the ride and slowly wheeled out of the parking lot. After a few minutes of driving time, Kim told Carmine how incredibly together and calm he'd been in the hot situation. Her man smiled and said nothing for another few moments. Kim finally broke the silence in the car a second time and said, "Honey, I do believe you gave that young man 'the good-bye look' when we were exiting the bar, would I be correct in assuming that?"

Carmine Angelini was silent for a few more seconds and then said, "yes, pumpkin, you'd be right in your learned estimation of the young man's fate. No doubt about it. Tomorrow will be our last night in town. And, it will definitely be Sonny's last night in Youngblood as well."

The two of them cruised in silence up to the Interstate 81 highway exchange and headed towards the Battlefield Inn to call it an evening. Tomorrow promised to be full-schedule day for both of them.

Thirteen

The area around Chester Byron's stainless steel examination table looked like the floor of an abattoir. The veterinarian and Boo Smalls had cannibalized the three canine corpses, and had created one nightmarish-looking thing that resembled a roughly patched-together razorback hog.

The last several hours in the clinic had constituted one of the strangest times of Chet the vet's life. Boo and he had finished half the jar of white corn during the course of the morning, and had treated themselves to several more administrations of the methamphetamine while attending to their ghoulish labors.

Boo Smalls had held his friend at gunpoint, observing the surgery and making suggestions as to the anatomical recomposition of the new beast. After many attempts to convince his captor that he couldn't simply rebuild an animal from spare parts, Chet gave up trying to persuade him, and started piecing undamaged bones and connective tissue together with surgery pins. He accelerated the process by using his Black and Decker 1500 hand drill to quickly insert the fasteners into the joints.

At first, he was doing his best cosmetic taxidermy work possible, trying to appease the unstable gunman by looking busy. But after an hour or so of work, Chet began to look at his exercises as a strange, reconstructive challenge, and became engrossed in the procedure. After a few hours of the operation he was working on anatomical minutia of the corpse.

In the estimation of Chester Byron, the outcome of the surgery didn't make much difference in the greater sense of things. The situation in his clinic had become so bizarre that he himself was getting swept-up in the unreality of it all. Also, the doctor was half-in-the-bag from corn and wired from the brain-hammering speed. However, as long as he kept working and looked busy, Boo was happy. In the back of his mind he figured the best thing to do was play the situation out as calmly as possible; wait until his abductor either passed-out, died from his unusual ailment, or exited the premises on his own volition.

There had been several knocks at the door during the morning. Saturday was always a busy day at Chet's office. Also, the phone had sounded several times during the course of their grim business on the exam table. After a few unanswered calls, Boo took the phone off of the hook. He turned on the Panasonic radio which was located on the medical supply shelf. The two of them listened to FM country music classics while Dr. Byron pieced together the protein-based rag doll.

When Patsy Cline's immortal tune "Crazy" came over the airwaves, Chet began an uncontrollable laughter that lasted for a couple of moments. Boo Smalls also saw the gallows humor in the choice of songs being played on the portable

tuner. The gunman began a high-pitched laugh that sounded like a racking, wheezing gasp; it soon devolved into heavy coughing. He spat a clot of blood into the sink, and another tooth flew out with it and rattled in the basin.

At noon, Chester told the gunman he could do no more. He'd sewn the last sections of the quiltwork monster together, and was calling it quits. Boo was dubious about the doctor's words, but intrinsically understood that this was all the work he was going to get out of him.

"I've got to tell you buddy," Chet said to him, "I don't know what on earth you want this strange specimen for, but I've used everything that was salvageable from the three beasts you brought in here to put this one together. I must tell you though, that a few things are well...missing from the complete animal. Like a reproductive system for one, an endocrine system for the other."

Boo stared at him like a demented hitch hiker for a short moment and then barked out, "I don't care if the damn thing doesn't have an *endocrine* system or not! You think if it did have one of those oh-so precious things, that everything would be jolly? Jesus Christ man, beggars can't be choosers in these higher issues. You say you did all you could with the material I brought you? Well, that's good enough for me. Now let me get out of here and let you clean-up this bloody place. Lord it's starting to smell like the Chicago stockyards in here. I need to breathe some clean air."

Chet the vet carefully wrapped the newly rebuilt entity in a towel and placed it in a green plastic lawn bag. Then he began wiping vital juices and unusable biological parts off of the steel table.

Boo walked to the medical counter, clicked off the radio, and pocketed his cigarettes, matches and the phial of methamphetamine. He picked up the bag with the corpse and began walking out of the clinic. He turned to speak to Dr. Byron before exiting his residence.

"You did a good job for me this morning, buddy," Boo solemnly said to him. I don't believe I'm going to see you again, so thank you for your help. A lesser man would have tried to knock me out or call the police. You helped me like a friend even though I had to point this gun at your head to insure your cooperation. I'd suggest you don't tell anyone about our business here today. Also, I wouldn't go to the Clean n' Jerk for a while if I were you. I've got a feeling that place is on its last legs. 'Sic transit gloria mundi' the old Romans used to say. 'Thus goes the glory of the world' I believe is the rough translation. Goodbye Chester Byron, and thank you. I mean that sincerely."

Boo Smalls tramped up the stairs of the clinic, walked across the front room, and exited the home of his friend. Chet the vet collapsed in the chair next to the medical shelf. He took a long draught from the jar of corn that Boo had left behind. He stared around the room at the blood stains, dirty rags, canine body parts, medical equipment and hand-operated power-tools decorating the operating

room of his animal hospital. Then the wired doctor began an eerie laugh that sounded like the sorrowful wailings one sometimes hears outside the Animal Welfare League during a full moon.

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Boo Smalls walked quickly to his F-10 pick-up, threw his rifle in the front seat, and placed the body of the animal on the floor of the passenger cabin. A kid on a bicycle was driving by when he exited the house, and stopped when he saw Boo loading his truck with the unusual goods. The delirious, poisoned man snarled at the child, revealing a Jack-o'-lantern smile of missing teeth. The youngster emitted a flute note of terror from its lungs and ran from the spot, leaving the bicycle unattended.

The dog handler jumped in the cab, started the engine, and pulled out onto the street heading in the direction of the Pohick Nuclear Power Plant.

*

Boo passed many oncoming cars on the rural route heading towards the power station. He'd been correct in his earlier assumption that the streets would be filling up with folks heading for the stores. But soon, as he approached the area near the main building of the facility, the traffic practically disappeared.

As is the case with most places that generate large amounts of nuclear energy, the area directly around them isn't considered greatly desirable real estate. The Pohick power plant was no exception. As Boo continued towards the site, he found that he was completely alone on the long service road. The place was operating with a skeleton crew on the weekend, and they'd all checked in to work hours ago. There wasn't a single person or car in sight, anywhere. It seemed to Boo that he'd been transported into an abandoned landscape.

The Pohick Nuclear facility is, at its center, a pressurized water reactor. In-house electric current activates an internal condenser, and the control rods in the reactor vessel heats a steam generator which pumps the turbines. The turbines crank the power generator and then the raw current is sent through the power lines to breaker stations. Capacitors placed along the cable supports break-down the unregulated current into usable wattage increments.

Therefore, the closer one gets to the plant's output source of electricity, the more powerful the juice. Boo was now a mile or so from the plant and gazed at the enormous iron struts that hold the heavy power lines above the road. Huge ceramic insulators stuck out from the supports like high-voltage fronds on an electric palm tree.

As he cautiously approached the outside barrier of the facility, Boo noticed that the security booth was unattended and the gates of the wire fence were swung open. He slowed down, looked around, and still saw no one.

Although his mind and vision were nearing shut-down status from poisoning and pharmaceutical overdose, he strategically decided to get further away from the plant to begin his work. There was no reason to draw attention to himself if he could avoid it. A quarter-mile distance or so from the main power generator should be sufficient for his needs.

Boo Smalls turned his truck around and drove for a moment back down the service road of the power plant. He remained the only motorist on the street. It was a queer feeling; being completely isolated with so much space around him.

The area around the energy-producing structure was well-maintained and pleasant. Both sides of the access route had been planted with tall Cyprus trees. There were no buildings or houses visible from the road. Only the image of the nuclear plant loomed in the middle distance. He pulled the truck off the macadam, onto the soft grass, and next to one of the monstrous steel cable-supports. Then he exited the vehicle.

The man from Youngblood and his pick-up were dwarfed by the immensity and height of the steel support structure. Boo could hear the humming of unregulated current sizzling through the rope-like, insulated wires high above him. Also, he could see that the scaffolding's mounted hand grips leading to the top of the structure started at about ten feet off of the ground.

The dog handler climbed into the bed of the F-10, and then onto its roof. The first rung of the grips came up to his knee when standing on top of the truck. He'd easily be able to climb up the service column of the support girder. It was an ideal place to orchestrate the second resurrection of his champion.

He jumped to the ground from the roof of the vehicle, fell down, and began his wheezing laugh again. The disoriented man stood up and felt waves of incredible fatigue wrack his body. Then, mere seconds afterwards, bursts of adrenaline would shoot through his system like a hail storm.

Boo Smalls had become a walking nightmare. His peripheral vision was closing to where he could only see directly in front of him. He told himself that he had no more time to waste admiring the scenery around the power plant, and commenced his raving attempt to create life from non-life.

His mind flashed to the scene outside his distillery when he'd first discovered that Nitro had been revived from the netherworld. He had been completely humbled by the almighty event, and was overwhelmed by the awesome, revivifying power of the cosmos' natural elements. The errant lightning bolt from the electrical storm had touched off the liquor in the steel cask, and had created, seemingly, a completely new living-thing.

The trembling man's gray matter became strafed with disconnected notions. He felt in his tainted marrow that this type of creation-event must have been how life began in the ages of time immemorial. Electric current, with its indescribable power to animate *and* to destroy, had somehow touched-off and energized the earth's primordial soup into something that was indeed *alive*. A high-voltage jump-start from lifeless, inert clay to the physical planes of genetic existence.

So now Boo Smalls, a crippled fight-dog handler and bootlegger from an infamous southern town, was about to attempt a dramatic recreation of the geologic world's miraculous kick-off into being. He went to the bed of his truck and removed the plastic container and steel trash can. He brought the two items to the side of the F-10 and took the shrouded carcass from the floor of the cab. The

weak man gently placed the body in the container and then opened the plastic five gallon canister containing the bad corn liquor.

Boo anointed the body with the white lightning, and then poured the canister's entire contents into the metal drum. The carcass of the animal bobbed lazily in the powerful fluid. He looked at the fascinating life-form in the container with something like amazement in his eyes. Then he dragged the steel can with the corpse and white corn to the side of the support column, and looked around to see if he was being observed.

He was still completely alone. Nothing was in sight for miles except the perfectly manicured grass along the side of the service road, metal cable supports, and tall thin trees. The ravaged fellow went into the cab of his truck, and produced his Remington 7400 semiautomatic rifle.

Boo had filled the four-round clip yesterday evening before visiting Chester Byron. He retracted a box of cartridges from his jean jacket, placed them on the hood of the vehicle, and repositioned himself over to the side of the F-10. He gazed up at the first line of electric cables suspended fifty feet above his head. He picked out the one he would aim for and went down on both knees. Boo used the bumper of the Ford to brace his elbow and shouldered the powerful hunting rifle. Then he aimed down the barrel and through the sight to the point where the cable reached the insulator.

A moderate breeze started to blow, and as it tossed his hair about, small tangles of it fell from his head onto the grass. Boo shook the fallen locks from his collar, and re-aimed the carbine at his mark. Then he held his breath, and pulled the trigger.

The clay cone exploded into husks, and sharp pieces of the encasing material rained onto the ground. The cable underneath it had been grazed, and white sparks flew from the connection like fire from a roman candle. The scratchy noise being emitted from the clipped wires sounded like bedsheets being torn to pieces.

Boo fired the remaining three shots in the clip at the same point. Each round penetrated more of the thick, braided wire. The high cable began to sag and swung from side to side.

The gunman re-loaded the drop-out clip and readied himself for the second fusillade. Boo shouldered the Remington and aimed for the loosened connection. He fired the four rounds in rapid succession. Each bullet pierced the insulated cable and ricocheted off the steel support with a shrill, high-end whine.

An electric blaze had started on top of the support structure. Boo turned the box of cartridges over and was frantically grabbing for rounds to place in the clip. Before he could completely re-load, he heard a sound like an enormous, rusted gate being swung open on dry hinges. He looked up, and saw that the cable had disengaged itself from the support, and was falling towards the ground.

With speed he did not know he could generate, Boo dove under his truck as the cable came crashing down only a few feet away from him. The exposed end of the wire was spitting high-voltage fireballs, and slinking along the grass like an agitated black snake.

The man from Youngblood knew that someone from the plant would be coming out soon to investigate the gunfire. Boo slid out from under the truck and began to move towards the white-hot end of the cable. The dancing filament writhed on the cut grass, leaving a trail of scorched chlorophyll. He visually followed its movements for a second, and then stepped on the cable with his work boot. It momentarily stopped the erratic twisting of the electrical conductor. Now his foot was mere inches from the live end of the exposed wire.

The wary man slowly reached down to the spitting circuit, and grabbed its insulation wrapped section. He held the heavy cable at arms length and began walking quickly back towards the Ford F-10. The line spat and crackled as he moved towards his truck. Boo stepped up on the front wheel of the vehicle, onto the hood, and finally stood on the roof of his ride with the blazing wire held high over his head.

He climbed a few of the rungs of the support column and stared down at the roof of his machine and the open mouth of the steel drum containing the stitched-together remains of his animals. The tragic mortal with ionized radiation in his blood had, ironically, come back to the place of the deadly by-product's origin to take part in the radically unorthodox, life-renewing ceremony he was orchestrating.

Youngblood's premier dog handler clung to the scaffolding of the tower with one hand and held the loudly popping, terribly heavy electrical line in the other. He was oblivious to the shooting sparks that burned his wrist. The wind began blowing his remaining hair about, and his mind flashed back to the scene in Liz Fury's bar where his animals had been shot down. His thoughts continued to ricochet back and forth from recalled fragments of his personal loss to multi-colored, kaleidoscopic imagery.

The ideas spun in his head like blistering electrons around the nucleus of an atom, and the desperate man rocked unsteadily on the rungs of the column. Then, like an enraged Jupiter on the mountain top, he shouted into the Saturday afternoon wind, 'Live again!' and hurled the flaming end of the electric line towards the mouth of the steel drum. The burning cable hit the mouth of the steel trash can dead center.

An eruption of pure white heat detonated the vessel into innumerable razor-like fragments. The report was like cannon fire.

Boo was blown off of the support girder and into the air. A fragment of the can sliced into his leg. He landed on the ground with a smack, and rolled over several times before coming to a stop.

The delirious man shook his head several times to try and clear it. He was hurting bad and his mind flashed like a kinescope. He groaned into the wind, "my work here is finished now, and I need to see the living fruits of my labor. My fantastic charges were renewed by the first conflagration, surely the remaining One withstood the flames of Its own second-coming." Boo pulled himself to his feet and shambled unsteadily over to the smoking remains of the trash can.

The shredded anatomy of his former champion lay in burning pieces on the ground. There had been no miraculous resurrection or divine genesis. No life from non-life activity had manifested itself through an infusion of electric power. There had only been a strange, pyrotechnic exercise of a fallen man's vanity on the power plant's access road that day.

Boo began to hear wailing police sirens in the distance. His earlier mania and rock-like determination for action were fading, but he still knew when it was time to get out of a situation in a hurry. He took a final, disgusted look at the incinerated remains of his brute and the crackling power line. Then he threw his rifle in the truck and started it with a fast flick of his wrist. This time the engine started immediately. He cranked the steering wheel hard about, tore out from the grassy embankment, and flew onto the access road heading away from the plant.

The bootlegger wildly pumped the gas pedal of his machine and poured on the speed heading toward the exit. The sirens sounded much closer now as he got closer to the street. The wild man was closing in on 100 miles per hour and still accelerating as he approached the intersection of the service road and the rural route. He jammed-on the brakes, slowed down to seventy, and violently pulled the driving wheel full-left. The F-10 turned-up on two wheels and nearly cartwheeled over itself. Then, wondrously, it flashed onto the street, and merged into the flow of cars heading towards the shopping centers. Thirty seconds afterwards, several police cruisers ripped past him from the opposite direction and blazed onto the service road of the Pohick Nuclear Power Plant.

The exhausted man began to feel terribly ill while driving behind the wheel in the slow traffic. He was sick in his mind and body from the self-defeating, Quixotic exercises of the last few days. Now, as he tried to keep his car from veering off of the macadam, he at last conceded that he was in the throes of some terrible derangement, along with being contaminated by a sickness he could not imagine. In one of his final flashes of lucid thinking, Boo Smalls turned his truck onto John Mosby Highway and headed towards Fauquier Community Hospital.

In twenty minutes he was parking his truck on the side street of the clinic. He still knew enough to hide his rifle under the seat of the F-10 and not to park in a high-visibility area. The shattered individual removed his jacket and threw it in the cab of his ride. Then he locked his truck, calmly walked into the Emergency Room, and collapsed on the floor.

*

Friday morning

Lester Ganz awoke this day with a sense of destiny playing about in his mind. His arms and legs smarted slightly from the physical exercises he'd been doing, and his eyes were sore from reading the inspiring books of Richard Nixon, Stephen King, William Faulkner and Sun Tzu. In the realistic sense of his captive situation, Les was getting ready for war.

He knew what he had to do to for a successful photo-retrieval operation, and he was *determined* to make it work. His plan was simplicity itself. He would

be the first customer to walk into the doors of the saloon at six o'clock when either Sonny or Liz unlocked the door. Nobody, not even the local habitués, arrive for at least half an hour after the Clean n' Jerk is ready to receive them.

From what he remembered about the establishment's operations, one of them would be tending bar the first hour or so until the regulars started showing up. With any luck, Liz would be the one to open. Lester was counting on her arriving first because she was the only one who knew the combination to the vault. He'd introduce her to the 9mm Heckler and Koch, have her lock the front door, and make her give him the photos and negatives from the combination safe. Then he'd get out of there, and have nothing to do with the place again. No more Friday afternoon foot-games, no more deviant weirdness.

If Sonny was opening the tavern, he'd get the same introduction to the powerful firearm. Then he'd have him lock the front, and hold him in the office until Liz showed up. He hoped that situation wouldn't present itself, but he was powerless to control that possible chain of events. It would be a chance he'd have to take, because, as Les was quickly learning, almost everything in the greater plans of mice and men is pretty much uncontrollable.

If the couple showed up together, Lester would have Liz gag and handcuff him to the brass footrail connected under the bar. Les had won the nickel-plated cuffs at the Virginia State Trooper's annual raffle a few years ago. It had been the third prize in the raffle drawing, falling behind dinner for two at the TGI Friday's at Gunpowder Mall, and a pair of front-row tickets to see singer Michael Bolton in concert.

"Divide and conquer. Keep the troops away from leadership and support," Lester repeated to himself. The store owner hoped to God that General Sun Tsu knew what he was talking about when he was busy writing down his grand ideas for posterity.

But now the store owner had another issue to attend to. He needed to make himself look like any other provincial stiff that walked into the Clean n' Jerk. If anyone saw him on the street or greeted him, even for the short time it would take to walk from his car to the entrance of the Saloon, it could potentially foul up the works.

The man reached over to his nightstand and retrieved the package of L'oreal hair dye. He stared at Heather Locklear's impeccable physiognomy for a moment and began reading the pamphlet of instructions for usage.

Inside the box was a bottle of peroxide, a clear plastic shower cap, and bottle of rinse. The directions indicated that if you wanted to have hair with the color and vitality of Ms. Locklear, you should apply the peroxide to your scalp, put the baggie over the tresses, and let it remain for twenty-five minutes.

Lester had light brown, mouse-colored hair. He'd always been proper in his appearance, and had his short follicles trimmed every two weeks at the Haircuttery in Apple Blossom Mall. His perky stylist at the franchise salon, an ectomorphic girl named Vernice, had playfully mentioned to him that he should do something wild with his locks sometime; maybe get a body-wave perm or a dye job.

Lester looked at the package's instructions again. They directed him to keep the peroxide preparation on his head for roughly half an hour. Les went to the bathroom and began his task at changing his everyday appearance from light-brunette grocery store owner to blonde ploughboy. After he applied the coloring formula to his head, he kept in on for three hours.

When he finished with the rinse and dried his scalp, Lester Ganz had the lightest shade of blonde hair ever seen in Youngblood; his locks were as yellow as a Post-it memo. It was the exact same hue favored by many of the World Wrestling Federation athletes, especially the extraordinary "Hollywood" Hulk Hogan.

He admired his handiwork in the mirror and went to the closet to begin working on part two of his deceptive image; his sartorial shift from mild mannered retailer to countrified good ol' boy.

After a few moments, his look was completed, and Lester approved of his new Bubba-fied composition. The Dale Earnhardt T-shirt was a massive expanse of material over his blue jeans. The mirror shades covered a third of his face, and the SHIT HAPPENS baseball cap looked wonderful with his lemonade-colored fringe sticking out from underneath it. He reminded himself to get a toothpick or wooden match to place in the corner of his mouth before he exited the house. It would be the perfect, final garnish to his redneck disguise.

Lester Ganz went to his writing desk, and picked up the Heckler and Koch. He'd been studying it like a devotee the last several days, and knew its mechanical workings inside out. He carefully lifted his shirt, and placed the gun snugly between his belt and the small of his back.

Then he took the police issue hand cuffs and draped them over the top of his belt next to the firearm. Lester then got his cotton twill jacket from the closet and put it on. It was a necessary garment, even though the weather was fiercely hot. He had to conceal his right wrist in its pocket, or there wouldn't be a surprise element on any level, no matter how many funny outfits he puts on.

The new southern-everyman then went to the kitchen to prepare, what he was afraid to think might be, the last breakfast of his life. He was determined to make it an unusually fattening one.

*

Friday afternoon, 2:00 PM

Carmine Angelini and Kim checked-out of the Battlefield Inn and began packing the trunk of the Corvette for the long-haul back to Atlantic City. The management had sent a bottle of champagne to their room at noon to wish them a good drive back up north.

The couple had made acquaintances with many of the staff during their short stay, and promised to come back for a longer visit when they get an opportunity. Carmine had given the white-haired barman at the Gray Ghost Tavern a fifty dollar tip on the way out of the hotel, and the bar keep gave him one of the General John Mosby daguerreotype reproductions off the wall of the club as a keepsake.

The couple was ready to hit the road to go to Old Town Winchester and the Stonewall Jackson Museum, but Carmine's mind was elsewhere. Ever since he'd locked horns with Sonny the night before, his thoughts had been on the upcoming hit scheduled for this evening.

Kim had talked with some of the Latino maids at the Battlefield Inn, and had discovered that the Clean n' Jerk opens at six o'clock on Fridays. The chambermaids told Kim to be careful when she went to the dog fights, because there had been some trouble at the bar the week before; something about a wild dog attack. The pretty waitress from New Jersey assured the concerned girls that she would be fine, and informed them that Carmine was a good companion to be with if things got wiggly someplace. She thought to herself after their conversation, "if the people at that bar think they had trouble last week, then they haven't seen jack-shit yet, my little chiquitas. That is for *damn* sure."

The two tourists paid in cash for their stay at the hotel and didn't want a printed receipt for tax, payroll, personal accounting or any other purposes. There was no argument issued by the front desk attendant when Carmine handed the man a crisp fifty dollar bill peeled from a wad the size of a pocket-edition Koran.

The entire front-room staff of the Battlefield Inn came out to the driveway to wave goodbye to Kim and Carmine as they finished wedging all their souvenirs and baggage into the Corvette's trunk. Then the couple shook hands with and hugged the employees, got into the shiny ride, and put the convertible top down. Kim put the machine in gear, and the pair cruised off towards Strasburg to visit Stonewall Jackson's museum.

The car was pulling away from the waving group, and Kim was still smiling back at them when Carmine took her handbag and retrieved the Glock .38 semiauto that he'd taken from the Clean n' Jerk Saloon the night before. It was the same gun Liz Fury had taken off of Boo Smalls the previous week, after the wild massacre at her roadhouse.

He popped the clip out of the handle and examined it; two rounds remained. The troubled man replaced the ammo back in the weapon, opened the glove box of the car, and placed the gun inside. Kim sensed her boyfriend's inner discontent and started to assuage his feelings.

"Don't let the douche bag at that shit-hole roadhouse work your nerves, baby," she said to him. "After tonight's appointment, people won't hear any more lip from his mongrel-ass until the tag end of the second coming, if then."

"I know, I know" he mumbled back to his gorgeous driver. "I'm just getting tired of the whole sitch. When I was a kid, I used to whack someone who was ripping-off the family and then go straight to lunch. It didn't bother me in the slightest. Now the entire thing seems foul to me. I mean, who am I to decide who lives or dies in this world? I'm just an ordinary guy like anyone else; no better, no worse. I'm not getting cold feet about the hit, baby, don't worry about that. I'm just getting...*old*."

Kim the waitress ran her hand up and down her man's arm as she tooled the hot machine towards town. "Don't even say things like that, Carmine," she sweetly intoned to him. "You're in the prime of life, and I think you are the sexiest man I've ever known."

She paused for a split second, looked at him, and then continued, "You know, if you asked me to marry you right now, I'd say yes in a heartbeat, so don't give me that b-s about being a relic. I mean what I'm saying too, baby. Lots of girls at Caesar's think you're a hot ticket. So listen to me now, we'll take care of that *annoying* fellow at the bar tonight, head back to Jersey for a while, and then start looking in the real estate journals for some land down here to build a place on. It's got to have a lake close to it, though. And some fruit trees. After that we can play Scarlett-O and Rhett for the rest of our days and I'll be a happy camper." Kim looked coyly at her man after her suggestive digression.

Carmine was stunned by Kim's mention of marriage. He'd been thinking about asking her to be his wife for weeks. The brooding man's face turned into a nervous smile. He faced his companion and said, "So, you think you'd like to get married after we finish our piece of work this evening, hunh, pumpkin? Well, you know we've got to drive back to Jersey tonight, and the Garden State parishes don't do weddings on Sundays. They're booked solid doing their sermons for the flock and all that rigmarole. Also, the civil ceremony can't take place until Monday because all the public offices are closed on the weekend."

Carmine was about to continue his playfully taunting speech when Kim grabbed him by the back of his neck and pulled him to her mouth with all her upper body strength. She pressed her lips against his and ran her tongue along this inside of his cheek. As they continued their passionate kiss, she depressed the accelerator of the Corvette and the car roared down the highway like a comet. The two of them persevered in their passionate embrace while the sports car climbed to over 80 miles per hour. The cloth top of the car was down, and the air currents swooshed around them in noisy blasts.

Kim broke their embrace and shouted into the wind, "the churches are *never* closed in Las Vegas, baby! We can take the American Airlines flight from Laguardia on Sunday. They leave every day at noon. I checked their schedule before we left New Jersey!"

The aging mobster looked at his girl in perfect awe, and then yelled back at her into the deafening wind, "hey pumpkin, wanna get married by an ordained Elvis Presely look-alike on Sunday?"

To which Kim bellowed back, "*Oh, yes!* Make me a peanut butter and banana sandwich, baby. I'm a hunka-hunka burnin' love!"

"Viva Las Vegas!" Carmine hollered into the hurricane sweeping around his head.

Then she punched the gas of the torpedo-like vehicle and the machine laid a patch on the road as the car flew at 110 miles per hour towards their destination in Strasburg.

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After their hypersonic ride into town, and confirmation of the high-speed marriage proposal, Kim and Carmine slowed down the pace of the afternoon considerably, and visited the Stonewall Jackson Museum. Kim was wondering how the day could possibly improve: Carmine was about to perform his last hit, they were getting married on Sunday, and soon they'd never have to deal with New Jersey family insanity ever again.

The thought of being Mrs. Angelini was flitting about in her mind. Then the couple got to the foundation's designated parking area, and exited the car. The pair of tourists went to the ticket window to pay the entrance fee and Kim stopped cold. She looked at the posted admission rates and whooped. The entry prices were three dollars for adults, and two dollars for American Automobile Association members and children under twelve.

Kim jumped in front of Carmine to pay for their tickets. She showed the employee her AAA card and the young man in the booth extended the discount to the lovely lady's escort as well. Carmine courteously thanked the clerk for extending him the reduced rate. Kim the waitress was ecstatic. She loved her Triple-A membership card.

Inside the small museum were genuine Antebellum period costumes, antique firearms, maps, photographs, and lots of other ephemera from the Civil War era. Carmine bought several more books about the great general's military campaigns and tipped the boy who'd given him the entry discount twenty dollars for being a nice guy.

"Thank you sir," the flabbergasted youth croaked at him.

"Forget about it," Carmine nonchalantly rejoined.

The museum had only a few patrons in it that day. The kid at the entry booth asked Carmine if maybe his lady-friend might like to try on some of the reproduction costumes they have on hand for theatrical reenactments. The local historical society stages a 'heritage day' every year and keeps the wardrobe in the museum. Kim accepted the invitation to dress-up like the southern temptress Vivian Leigh before the young man had finished his question.

Soon she was decked-out like a hybrid of a Victoria's Secret lingerie model and Little Bo Peep in a hoop skirt and crinolines. The sales clerk brought out a reproduction Army of the Confederacy infantry cap and ammo belt for Carmine to wear. The knock-out southern belle from New Jersey retrieved the instamatic camera from her purse and the clerk took photographs of the couple in their festive garments.

After the photo shoot, a few minutes of chit-chat, and Kim's quick change back into 21st century designer jeans, the couple said they had to be leaving. They'd enjoyed their afternoon stop there in Strasburg to no end. And, as with most of the places they'd visited on their working-vacation, they promised to return again soon. Their day was running along perfectly, and as the pair of tourists merrily exited the museum, Carmine Angelini was mentally planning the details of the final sanction of his career.

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Kim and her man took off in the Corvette for old town Winchester; the last stop on the tour of their brief holiday. They cruised up Interstate 81 North to get to the city and then parked on one of the side streets near the promenade. The main street of the tourist district was maintained in a late 19th century motif. It was stocked with antique stores, upscale curio shops and trendy bistros.

The couple chose a spot to eat, and had an immaculately prepared lunch served outside on the steel wrought café tables. After the salad course had been completed, Kim and Carmine discussed the details of tonight's assassination over club sandwiches and calamari.

Kim relayed the information to her *beau* about the club opening at six o'clock tonight. Carmine told his girl that she should drop him off at five PM on the street outside the Clean n' Jerk. He'd stake out the place from across the road in the thicket of woods. At first, his idea had been to pick Sonny off from a distance with his Remington 710 bolt-action, but that had been before the youth's unfortunate choice of words the other evening when the couple had been visiting his establishment. Now the man was sure he wanted to be up close to his mark when he finished the job. The reasons were simple: Carmine enjoyed the poetic quality of killing the repulsive kid with the same gun he'd lifted from him, and also, he wanted to see the fellow squirm a bit before offing him.

The plan was cinchy: when he observed Sonny entering the bar that evening, he'd enter the club immediately afterwards. Then he'd escort his acquaintance into the back room, office, bathroom or out to the rear entrance of his place of employment. They'd discuss the young man's lack of etiquette for a few moments, and then he'd receive the big send-off. Afterwards, when Carmine exited the bar, Kim would drive up to retrieve him and they'd start heading back to New Jersey. Then the newly-engaged twosome would make their plane reservations for swinging Las Vegas.

"I think I'll use the man's own piece to do this job, honey," Carmine said to Kim as he dipped the fried squid into the cocktail sauce, "There are only two rounds in the clip, but that'll be plenty. One shot in the ear from a .38 could take down Evander Holyfield, the other slug is just for insurance. A garnish you might call it." He sighed, looked into the sunlight, and said to his girl, "I'm glad as hell this is the last one, baby. I've been thinking about nothing else but this bit of business for the last day and I don't need the pressure anymore. Now let's get the check and hit some of those sweet-smelling, girlified boutiques. I want to buy you some spoon rests and sconces or whatever it is that great Virginia ladies appoint

their dream homes with. Who knows? Maybe this time next year we'll be having iced tea on the portico and looking out over the back 40 acres. I want you to have all the necessary equipment to pull it off in style."

Kim looked at Carmine with concern. She didn't like the idea of him going up against the cagey bouncer with only two rounds in the gun, no matter how powerful the ballistic-thing is. "please be careful when you go inside the bar tonight baby," she pleaded. That character is big and mean, and I don't want anything happening to you."

"Pumpkin," he said, "I've never used more than two rounds in my life on a job. That grungy mutt will be disposed of with speed and precision after I reintroduce myself to him. Don't you fret about my safety. It'll be over and done with before one of those absolutely identical country music songs we hear on the radio is completed. I'm Carmine Angelini, and you have my word on it." He smiled at his girl and she smiled back with tenderness. "Do you feel a bit better now, babe," he inquired. "Nothing bad will happen to me. It's as routine as taking out the trash. Now let's hit the stores, it's almost time to get on the road for the Clean n' Jerk."

Kim leaned over the lunch table and kissed him on the forehead. "OK," she said to him, you know the score when it comes to your work. That's for certain. Just be careful. And yes, let's get some little home ditties while we're here for the new place. Napkin rings or something. But whatever we get, its got to be small. The trunk of the ride is ready to bust from all the stuff we've bought."

The couple paid for their lunch, left an extraordinary tip for the waiter, and went shopping in old town. They leisurely cruised the stores and Kim bought scented sachets, a knitted tea cozy, two marble-handled letter openers, and a set of hand-painted ceramic drink coasters.

They paid for the merchandise, chatted with the various sales-ladies about colorful historical personages, and walked back to the car. Carmine wedged the gear into the Corvette's trunk and removed his set of powerful, pocket-sized binoculars. Then the couple climbed into the perfect, red machine. He reached into the glove box and slipped the Glock .38 between his belt and the small of his back. Afterwards he placed the binoculars into his front pocket. Kim looked at him in apprehension, and he winked back at her with complete self-assurance. Then the pretty girl from Atlantic City fired up the vehicle, and the two of them headed in the direction of Liz Fury's famous bar.

Fourteen

Friday afternoon, 4:30 PM, Fauquier Community Hospital

Boo Smalls had spent the week in an isolated section of the clinic's Intensive Care Unit. The physicians and staff had never treated a case of extreme radiation poisoning before, and had to call in specialists from the Department of Energy in Washington D.C. to examine him. However, there was little that could be done to help the afflicted man.

The lab technicians administered numerous biopsies, and it was estimated that Boo had been exposed to a 600-800 Rotogen dose of the radioactive waste product P-32 for several days. At a 100 Rotogen exposure, radiation sickness occurs, at a sustained 400 or above count, the prognosis for recovery is practically nil.

The ICU doctors had given him a massive blood transfusion and pain killers. But there was little else the DOE or anyone else could do for the suffering individual; his entire system was shot-through with the ionizing radiation.

The federal and local personnel tried to get information from Boo concerning the location of the radiation leak. However, while speaking to his handlers, the patient would go through periods of clear thinking which then would turn into strange rants and dementia.

The Federal personnel took Boo's wallet and personal belongings after they'd been summoned to the hospital. They dispatched a radiation detection mobile unit to his cabin, and inspected the grounds of his property. The search crews' Geiger counters went off the meter in short order as they approached his distillery, and they soon discovered the second canister of Phosphorus-32 at the bottom of still #2.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency was called into action after the discovery, and Boo Smalls' property was quarantined. No news of the contained radiation leak was ever broadcast in the area.

*

Now Boo was alone in his detached room in the ICU, and was ready to begin his unannounced departure from the infirmary. His first stop would be the hospital laundry facility to steal a pair of cover-all jeans that the landscaping crews wear. Then he'd go to his truck on the sidestreet, get the spare ignition key from under the rocker panel, and head back to Liz Fury's bar to finish the arson job he'd come so close to completing last week. This would be his third attempt at the big payback, and he would not miss his opportunity this time.

He'd had a chance to send molotovs through the tavern's window two weeks ago, and could have ignited the corn liquor on the floor last week which would have sent the place sky-high. Tonight would be his final time stepping up to the pyrotechnic plate, and he was determined not to blow his chance to set the place ablaze. *If* he could make it there.

Getting himself to the Clean n' Jerk was a real consideration. Boo wasn't sure if he could make it out of the driveway of the building, let alone do all the demanding actions he had planned. The man was exhausted and physically falling apart. His head hurt all the time, and his limbs felt as though firewater was

running through them. He'd lost most of his hair and several more teeth had dislodged themselves from his gums during the course of the week.

The shrapnel in his leg had been removed, the incision on his right thumb had been stitched, and the burns on his wrists from the electric wires had been treated. Those were, he believed, the only positive things that had happened to him since his arrival at the infirmary. The most horrific part of his ordeal had been when he'd overheard the doctors talking about his untreatable, terminal prognosis.

At first, Boo had been terrified by the mention of his shortly expected demise. Then, as the days passed, his fear slowly turned into anger and then cool, personal resolve. And the reason he'd been able to keep his mind in some kind of working order was the constant thought of his retribution on Liz Fury. His focus and conviction to destroy the Clean n' Jerk Saloon had become something on the order of monomania.

Now it was four thirty on a Friday afternoon, and the night shift crew would be coming on duty in a few minutes. If he were lucky, the morning ward attendant would be in the back room collecting her belongings before checking out. Luck was something he believed he'd run out of sometime ago, but was still hoping to catch a few small breaks for the last bit of time he had *above* ground.

He opened his door slowly, peered through the aperture, and saw no one at the attendant's station. Boo's heart throbbed heavily in his chest as he saw an escape opportunity before him. He mentally steeled himself and took a deep breath; then slipped out of the room and down the stairs, headed for the clinic's laundry room.

The determined man passed no one on the steps as he moved with all his remaining speed down to the basement. When he reached the bottom floor he entered the long, narrow hall and passed several doors with ominous warnings printed on the panels: Danger-Radiation Ward; High Voltage Area; and Biohazard Storage Vault. Boo wheezed his asthmatic laugh as he passed them all and said to himself, "that's all peanuts, my dear. Absolute kid stuff," and made his way down the passageway to the boiler room and laundry.

After opening the door to the washing room, Boo stared in astonishment at the uniform rows of industrial-sized washers and dryers. He was alone in the huge chamber, and ran his hand along the side of one of the larger cleaning machines. It was approximately the size of a Volkswagen micro-bus, and had roughly the same shape as the famous hippie-approved vehicle.

Then he saw the shelves of uniforms against the far wall of the room and moved over to it. The landscaping cover-alls were folded neatly on the bottom shelf, next to innumerable sheets, pillow cases, white lab coats and hospital gowns. Boo ripped off the ridiculous apron-like garment they had him wear in the Isolation Ward and slipped into the dark blue, one-piece suit. It felt good to be in real clothes again; even a blue jump-suit was favorable to hospital pajamas.

He saw an unopened bottle of lime-flavored Perrier water on one of the empty shelves and took it down. He was terribly thirsty, and thought it's owner wouldn't miss it too much; primarily because it had been carelessly disregarded at

the uniform rack. Boo opened it, took a long draught of the sparkling beverage, and placed the bottle in the huge front tool-pocket of the cover-alls.

The escaping man was beginning to feel a wave of sickness spreading over him. He tried to fight it off, and succeeded. His legs were beginning to feel heavy again. Boo realized he had no time to tarry and quickly left the laundry room wearing the landscaping gear and no shoes.

He went up the stairs to the first floor and found the tradesman's entrance at the rear of the building. Again, there was no one there to stop him from exiting. Boo imagined that hospital employees are a lot like any other group of office workers on a Friday afternoon; they're glad as hell to get away from their cubicles, and ready to start getting drunk on the weekend.

The exhausted patient exited the hospital from the back door, and walked into the sunshine for the first time in a week. The warm rays felt wonderful on his face; almost like a holy confirmation. He quickly moved over to the side street where he'd parked the F-10 seven days ago and located it.

The neighborhood birds had been unkind to his truck over the course of its stay, and had claimed it with scores of their well-aimed, multicolored droppings. It didn't matter in the least to him. Boo had never been happier to see his beloved pick-up. He reached under the rocker panel for the magnetic key case, and removed it. The key fit into the door with an authoritative *snap*, and he jumped inside the cab and shut the door.

The heat inside the passenger space of the vehicle was phenomenal. Thermal currents rose from off of the dashboard. The steering wheel was too hot to touch. Boo removed the bottled water from his pocket and splashed it on the driving wheel. The liquid hissed and bubbled as it struck the hand grip. The man from Youngblood slipped the key into the ignition, madly pumped the gas, and turned the starter switch.

Nothing happened. No electrical activity issued from the battery. Not even a click.

The car had been sitting in the blazing sun all week. The Die Hard battery had been scheduled for replacing several months ago, and Boo hadn't gotten around to it. Now it was completely dead, and wouldn't start again without a jump. All the pleading in the world would not make the wet-cell unit turn the engine over.

Boo Smalls let out a cry of clean anguish as he realized no amount of pumping the accelerator would make any difference. He held his head in his hands and tried to think clearly as another wave of dizziness took hold of him. He slowly rolled down the window of the truck and tried to breathe normally. It did little good.

Waves of nervous exhaustion began passing through him like salvos of lazy electric current. He was drifting in and out of semi-consciousness again. Then, before blacking-out completely, the dog trainer looked over at his jean jacket which was draped over the passenger's seat. The two hypodermic needles

full of amobarbital that Liz Fury had given him last week were sticking out of its pocket.

And then Boo remembered the phial of methamphetamine that was also in his jacket, and grabbed for his garment with determination.

The enervation of his system was overpowering. Boo felt like he could actually fall sound asleep with his eyes peeled wide open. Also, his peripheral vision was still diminishing. It was difficult to see things clearly unless he looked directly at them. However, he quickly went through the contents of his garment, and retrieved the coke-bullet with the crystal.

The crank in the phial had clumped into a gelatinous nugget. The savage heat and humidity in the truck had turned the flaky powder into something that resembled a clot of children's school paste. It was impossible to snort it from the container. Boo's mind seemed to blink-out for a moment. He saw things as though through a television screen with a broken horizontal control. Then he looked at the hypos that had fallen onto the floor, and had a glorious idea.

The inspired man picked up a syringe, took the cap from the needle, and depressed the plunger of the unit, releasing the amobarbital onto the floor of the truck's cab. Then he removed the plunger from the shaft, and opened the cap of the coke-bullet. The congealed speed plopped out of the glass and Boo held it between his fingers. It had the consistency of a fresh jellybean.

He almost dropped the pellet as another titanic wave of grogginess came over him. Then he placed the little ball in the tube of the syringe, and filled the hypo almost to the top with the lime-flavored Perrier water. Boo replaced the plunger and shook the mixture with manic conviction. The nearly half-gram of high quality amphetamine instantly dissolved in the water.

Boo Smalls unzipped his jump suit, removed his arm from the long sleeve of the garment, and stabbed the gleaming hypodermic needle into his vein.

He could taste the high-octane speed as he depressed the plunger.

His mouth filled with the flavor of electric vanilla-cream as he felt the full half-gram of crank start to work its way into his blood. He retracted the syringe and threw it out the window of the truck. Half a moment later he was nearly exploding with adrenaline energy.

Hope springs eternal in Man, and Boo tried again to start the engine of the F-10. The only sound in the cab was his hard breathing as he fruitlessly turned the ignition key. The incensed dog-trainer slammed the steering column and began, in his cracking voice, to swear aloud. Then his eye hit upon something across the street, and Boo Smalls saw a solution to his dilemma.

The landscaping crew's equipment shed was located behind the hospital. The door to the small structure was open, and Boo saw a pair of John Deere 3235 fairway riding lawn mowers, some 5-gallon plastic gas cans, and various power-

tools spread about its insides. He grabbed his package of Marlboro's, matches, and a box of rifle cartridges and put them in the mammoth pocket of his overalls. Then he reached under the seat and retrieved his Remington 7400 .30-06.

The newly energized man exited his truck and ran like a wild chimpanzee across the street, over the hospital's back lawn, and entered the utility shed. His eyes hit upon the lawn vehicles' ignition keys which were hung on a nail by the door. He took both sets in his hand and began shaking the gas cans to see if they were full. After he'd discarded several empty containers, Boo located one that was teeming with high-test petrol.

Boo picked up the brimming can and took it over to the first tractor. He placed it on the floor board to the right of the vehicle's gas pedal. Then he mounted the power-mower and jammed one of the keys into the ignition switch. The machine roared into life with the first turn of his wrist and Boo shrieked in ecstasy. He placed the Remington over his knees, and put the ride in gear.

Then, just like the legendary George Jones leaving the house on a liquor run after Tammy Wynette had taken the keys to his automobiles, Boo Smalls punched the pedal of the riding mower and headed up the street in the direction of Route 81 and the Clean n' Jerk Saloon.

*

Friday afternoon, 4:45 PM Youngblood, Virginia

Carmine Angelini and Kim were parked in the Corvette roughly a quarter mile from Liz Fury's bar. The mobster was going over the simple plans of his final professional assignment with his comely girl. He told her to move the car up closer to the saloon in about ten minutes; a couple of New Jersey city blocks distance should do it, and then wait to see when he would enter the club.

He'd be watching the tavern from the thicket of woods across the road from it, and entering the roadhouse immediately after Sonny comes in to set up the bar for the evening. His heavy-handed work there should only take a few minutes. Then when he exits, Kim should drive-up to the front of the place pronto to get him. After that, it's martini time, and off to John Mosby Highway heading north to Atlantic City.

Carmine told Kim not to get absent minded during her stakeout. This was no time start watching the clouds go by or daydreaming about dust ruffles for her new four-poster bed. When he came out of the saloon, he expected immediate curb service.

Kim the cocktail waitress told him again to please be careful while in the place, and she'd be there in a hot second to pick him up after he walked out of the tavern. Then the couple looked at each other and gently kissed. Carmine felt around his back making sure the Glock .38 was secure there. Then he exited the car, closed the door, and turned to face his girlfriend.

"Just keep your eyes peeled for the next little bit of time," he told her. "Then we can start thinking about the King of Rock n' Roll giving us the vows in his rhinestone jumpsuit. With any luck he might do some of his later-period

karate-moves for us if it's a slow day at the chapel." Kim nodded in agreement and was soothed by his calm, self-confident words. Then Carmine Angelini blew a kiss to his girl and began walking up the road towards the Clean n' Jerk Saloon.

In a few minutes he was situated in the woods, across the road from the bar. He'd found an empty, discarded bucket of drywall mud and used it for a make-shift seat. The mobster positioned himself on the stool, took out his miniature binoculars and began to wait for Sonny the bouncer to show up for his final day at work.

*

Friday Afternoon, 4:50 PM, Youngblood, Virginia

A couple of hundred yards away from the Clean n' Jerk Saloon, Lester Ganz sat in his Ford Escort hoping against hope that Liz Fury would be opening the bar at six o'clock tonight. He'd left his house early because the claustrophobia, cabin fever, anxiety and adrenaline had become too much for him to contain. Not even the sage words of Sun Tzu or Stephen King, nor the physical exertion of one-handed push-ups, could calm him down. It felt so wonderful to be outside of his home he couldn't believe it.

Lester had come to the bar in the opposite direction as Kim and Carmine. So, with the Clean n' Jerk as a centerpoint, the two cars were approximately one third of a mile apart from each other on the same rural route. He'd parked his car on the shoulder of the road, and used his set of his bird-watching binoculars which he always kept in the Escort's glove box to observe the action outside the bar. Les had a clear view of the famous tavern from his fixed position.

The grocery store owner recounted his retrieval plan to himself as he punched the radio's pre-set buttons and fiddled with the air-conditioner controls to vent his nervousness. He would be the first customer through the doors at six PM. He'd get Liz to open the vault with some help from the Heckler and Koch, get the photographic evidence, and leave in a hell of a hurry. If Sonny got there first, he'd simply have to hold him at gunpoint until his boss showed up. If they came in tandem, get her to use the cuffs on her personal gorilla, and take her alone into the office to collect the goods.

Lester entertained the idea of "accidentally" letting a few rounds of his 9mm go into the young thug's pubic region. Les smiled at the notion, and then let it pass. He didn't need to spend the rest of his life in jail on a homicide conviction. If he was ever going to get Sonny back for making him participate in the incident at Boo Smalls's cabin, he'd take his time and do it right: very quietly and with a lifetime-enduring torment.

Now Lester Ganz sat in his economy car, taking periodic looks at the saloon with his field glasses. He was forced to play the waiting game until his appointment with destiny. Les checked himself in the rear view mirror: his visored cap and vivid-blond hair looked perfect; and his T-shirt and mirror shades made him appear exactly like a Mr. Bubba Anybody. He pressed the radio buttons a few more times and finally settled on the all-news station. The insufferably-pleasant weather announcer informed him about something he was

already well aware of. Namely, that it was going to be one hell of a hot night in Youngblood, Virginia.

*

Friday, 5:15 PM, inside the Clean n' Jerk Saloon

Wanda Jackson and Liz Fury were in the office of the bar making plans to leave Youngblood; either for a short vacation if the bettors came back tonight, or for good if they stayed away.

Liz believed in her heart that the days of big money at the bar were finished. The statuesque body-builder had it in her mind to squeeze whatever cash she could out of the place for the next short period of time; then she'd blow this chicken-coop town forever with her new babe and head for the Florida Keys.

Liz Fury isn't stupid when it comes to issues of survival. She liked being prepared to exit a location in a hurry if things got sticky, and the legal documents the two women had before them would make it easier to bail town pronto if the need should come up.

The pair of femme fatales were finishing some paperwork that they would send by overnight courier to Robert DeNiro in Washington, D.C. The legal documents that Liz was signing put 49% of her interest in the Clean n' Jerk Saloon, the Cleopatra Bikini Shop, and the mail order business in the hands of her solicitor. She would maintain the controlling 51% of the enterprises. She did this maneuver so her lawyer would be able to auction off her properties after receiving a written confirmation by her to do so. However, he wouldn't be able to sell the properties without her request in writing. If she did desire to liquidize her assets, it would require signatures from both Liz and Mr. DeNiro to unload the parcels.

The bar owner did this action because her attorney was an expert at burying illegal property transactions in the names of diverse-interest businesses and ad hoc sub-companies. He'd be sure to bury them extra-deep if his own name was on the bill of release. Also, Robert DeNiro would receive a healthy 20% of all moneys garnered from the sale of her interests as payment for his legal services.

Now Liz and Wanda were preparing the Federal Express package to send to his office. The owner of the Clean n' Jerk Saloon went to her combination safe and dialed the correct predetermined sequence of numbers: 7-30-47; the digital equivalent of body builder Arnold Schwarzenegger's date of birth. Inside the vault was the legal paperwork for the club and mail-order place, the envelope of photos and negatives from Lester's foot-freak afternoon, and a large gym bag containing the money she'd earned from the dog-fights at the club over the past two years.

The shop-worn satchel contained, approximately, one million, three-hundred and seventy-seven thousand dollars. Most of the cash denominations were in old, non-sequentially numbered hundred dollar bills. Red rubber bands were wrapped around the dirty stacks of paper currency in ten-thousand dollar bundles.

Liz removed the bar's business licenses from the vault, shut the door, and spun the dial. She returned to the desk, and the two of them examined the materials they would mail before putting the documents in the overnight envelope. Everything seemed fine, and ready to be sent. Then Liz Fury began shuffling through the papers looking for a particular document, and couldn't locate it. After a few minutes of pawing through the paperwork she knew she didn't have what she needed.

Everything was accounted for except one important item that had to be included in the package: the Virginia Commerce Commission business license for the Cleopatra Bikini Shop.

She knew right where the missing article was, too. It was exactly where she'd left it, and where it legally should be- displayed on the wall of the small lingerie store, behind the cash register. Liz Fury hissed to herself for not remembering to get it earlier.

The saloon owner looked at her watch. It was getting close to five-thirty, and that reminded her that Sonny was late to start setting up the bar. The last Federal Express truck left the center at six o'clock. Liz wanted to get the signed legal documents in the hands of Bob DeNiro as quickly as possible, in case there was any trouble brewing for her in the near future.

However, somebody had to set the place up soon. Wanda was a good bartender, but Liz wanted to be on-location in case any new dog-trainers showed-up early. She'd only received confirmation from three of the handlers coming to the fights tonight. She'd never heard of any of the men who had called her, and was afraid that they'd just bring any angry pooch they found off the street to her club in hopes of collecting some quick scratch.

She knew she was in a tight situation. The serious gamblers wouldn't sit still for dogs that weren't trained pit-bulls with at least some kind of fighting-skills. The rich rubes always wanted a good show for their money, and Liz was almost sure she couldn't provide them with it now.

The Herculean beauty caught herself half-wishing that she'd never started to mix it up with Boo Smalls in the first place. It had been bad when she couldn't control his aloof-attitude or unbeatable animals, but losing her place to a bunch of Virginia yahoos with junkyard mutts was infinitely worse.

After a moment, Liz came out of her meditative session and looked at Wanda. Her pretty girl had been watching her for the last minute or so, and had been afraid to startle her from her reverie. The owner of the Clean n' Jerk placed all her legal documents in the overnight envelope and handed it to her companion.

"I need you to make a chop-chop mail run to the Fed Ex Center for me, toots," Liz said to Wanda, "you've got to stop at the Cleopatra first and get the business license off the wall. Put it in this envelope and then post this bad boy over night to Bobby DeNiro in D.C. Can you do that for me? I'll set-up the bar for you because my soon-to-be ex-bouncer and boyfriend is nowhere to be found. Take my sedan and try to get back soon. The local hoe-heads usually don't show-up until around six thirty or seven o'clock, but tonight's not a regular night. I'm

hoping Sonny at least found a couple of more trainers to bring in to the games this evening. That's all he's good for now; talking hyped-up shit to his dog-fight buddies and getting smashed on my white corn."

"Sure Liz," Wanda rejoined, "I'll be happy to mail the stuff for you. When I'm at the Cleopatra, I'll get one of the new thongs and bustiers to wear tonight at the bar. I'll split my tips with you 50-50. I know that always makes you happy. And I think you're right about Sonny, too. He needs to go to the free clinic or A.A. or something. He's turning into some kind of a snarling, freaky character. Actually, he kind of reminds me of Boo Smalls before he got that terrible sickness; you know, all defensive and wiry. Anyway, hon, let me take-off with the papers now. We've got to open real soon."

Liz Fury looked at Wanda with real tenderness. She was beginning to feel that her girl was someone she could really count on during a crunch time. She did little things for her that made her happy. Like the tip-splitting, or staying late to help at the bar when she's officially off the clock. Liz handed her the envelope. Then she pulled a folded wad of bills from her black leather shorts and gave her a fifty dollar bill for the postage.

She put her arm around her pretty lover and walked her to the front of the club. Liz unlocked the front entrance of the Clean n' Jerk and stepped outside with her.

The body builder placed the roll of money back in her pocket and retrieved a set of car keys. As she handed them to her mate, Liz grabbed the wrist of her employee and pulled her close. The two beauties stood together on the front steps, touched lips, and then placed their foreheads against each others. They looked into each other's eyes for a quick minute and then Liz said to her, "come back soon, sweet-pants, I've got a feeling Sonny's going to be all we can handle tonight. Keep thinking about going to Key West, girl. Then we'll finally get a chance to wear all those string bikinis we've been trying to sell."

Wanda Jackson took the keys from Liz, and playfully pinched one of her boss's incredibly firm boobs. Liz prankishly bared her clean, sharp teeth back at her. The owner of the Clean n' Jerk turned from her mate, entered the club, and went to the storage room to get a fresh keg of Budweiser to start getting ready for the evening. Wanda Jackson weakly pushed the door of the saloon closed. However, as had happened once before, it stuck in the frame and the automatic lock didn't catch. Then she jumped into the sedan, fired up the engine, and took off in the direction of Cleopatra Bikinis and the Fed Ex Center. After a moment, a sluggish, hot breeze made its way down the street, and the door of the Clean n' Jerk Saloon quietly swung open.

*

Friday afternoon, 5:25 PM, Youngblood Virginia

Both Carmine Angelini's and Lester Ganz's eyes practically jumped from their sockets when they witnessed Liz and Wanda kissing each other goodbye outside the bar. The pair of men had had their binoculars trained on the door when the two women emerged from the inside of the place. From their surveillance posts, they had watched Wanda push the door ajar, and leave the parking area in Liz Fury's sedan. Then they both observed the portal slowly open again from the hot puff of wind.

The aging mobster had begun to get concerned that his mark wouldn't show up to do his preliminary duties at the bar. But when he saw the two beautiful girls come out from the roadhouse, he started to relax. If Sonny was as horny as he'd been the other night around Kim, it was certain that he'd show up shortly. Then he saw some movement in his far peripheral vision field, and swung his field glasses in that direction.

Lester Ganz's mouth hung open on its hinge. He could not believe this good turn in his fortune: Liz Fury was in the bar, probably alone, and the door to the Clean n' Jerk had miraculously swung open for him to begin his movements. It was practically an invitation to get in there ahead of schedule, retrieve his scandalous photos, and get out of dutch permanently with that motley crew.

The store owner recalled that Sun Tzu had written about the element of surprise, timing, and seizing opportunities in his pithy work, *Art of War*, but he had little to say about dumb luck entering the military equation. "If luck is the residue of design," the anxious man said to himself, "then this is my moment. I have a plan, a gun that could bring down a steroid-crazed rhinoceros, and, hopefully, enough personal resolve to pull this thing off. In the names of John Mosby, General Sun Tzu, and action-hero Ben Richards, it is time to *Carpe the Diem* and finally resolve this situation." The intrepid man put down his binoculars, and checked the firearm and handcuffs stuffed into the back of his jeans. Then he shut off the car's engine, exited his ride, and headed for the wide open door of the saloon.

*

Carmine watched the small blonde man approaching the club through his field glasses. For some uncanny reason, the fellow trotting towards the building seemed familiar to him. Then, when Lester removed his right wrist from the pocket of his jacket to push his sunglasses back up the bridge of his nose, it became clear to the fascinated mobster what was happening. He saw Les's bandaged wrist and knew instantly that this was his client; the same Lester Ganz whom had contracted his services in Atlantic City.

He'd dyed his hair some color not found in nature and had dressed himself up like a NASCAR moron. His thin jacket had bunched-up over his belt. From the recognizable shape of the enormous handgun that was outlined under his T-shirt, it appeared that he was about to try and play "Dirty Harry" with the rock-hard girl at the bar and try to solve his blackmailing problems on his own.

The man from New Jersey felt torn between a belly-laugh and real admiration for his intrepid friend who liked southern books and culture. For the first time in Carmine's career, he was unsure as to how to proceed.

It was obvious that Mr. Ganz had given up any reasonable hope in having Carmine fix the situation for him, and it was right of Les to think so. Anyone who pays a stranger to perform an elaborately-planned execution, in cash, in full, before it is performed, is a desperate imbecile. The small man had been close to becoming a statistic himself after he'd paid the glib mobster for Sonny's contract killing.

Now Lester's hired-gun was sitting comfortably in the woods, being a spectator to the upcoming fireworks. It was fascinating to watch the whole Dixiefied psychodrama start to play out in front of him.

Carmine began to think about Kim sitting in the Corvette up the road. He didn't know exactly what would play out in the bar between Lester and the body-builder woman he'd referred to in their conversations as "Liz Fury." But the gangster knew as soon as he got proactive with the situation, his risk of getting injured or killed increased mathematically.

His mind drifted back to his afternoon with Kim. He recalled her buying all the prissy household-crapola from the stores in Winchester; she'd been ecstatic when she'd purchased all her poofy domestic stuff. His girlfriend wanted a home, and a life, and she wanted it with him. It was a comforting feeling. Then he shook his head to clear it from the pleasant but distracting thought, and brought his attention back to the situation at hand.

Carmine vacillated for a moment, and then decided to watch the outside of the bar for a few more minutes. If Sonny showed-up soon, the situation would indeed change, and he'd have to get into the picture. But for now, just for these next few minutes, he decided to keep watching the act unfold.

The racketeer surveyed the scene as Lester Ganz moved up to the front door of the Clean n' Jerk Saloon. The running man came to a stop, and caught his breath. He stared at the open portal as if it were a sentient, living thing. Then the store owner collected himself, and felt around the back of his jeans to check his firearm. Carmine observed the gentleman with intrigue. His client stood transfixed in the doorway, and appeared to be in a state of silent meditation. Then he replaced his hands in his jacket pockets, straightened his back, and calmly entered the bar.

*

Friday afternoon, 5:30 PM, Route 81 North, Clarke County, Virginia

Boo Smalls rode the power lawn mower down the shoulder of the highway towards Liz Fury's bar. The traffic whizzed by him and many people gaped at the battered man as he headed towards his final appointment with the glamorous tough-girl. His vision was blurring in and out of focus, but he could still manage to keep the tractor steady.

In the immediate distance, he saw a Virginia Department of Transportation pick-up truck slowly moving down the shoulder ahead of him. The operator of the V-DOT pick-up truck's name was Raymond. It was his Friday afternoon assignment to gather the hundreds of fluorescent traffic cones that divide the right exit lane from the area where the construction workers lay underground telephone

and electrical cable. The crews don't work on the weekends except during emergencies, so this was his final chore of the afternoon before going home for a two-day rest. Raymond was driving at a very slow pace, plucking the cones off the road with his left hand, and tossing them back into the bed of the truck.

Boo Smalls's John Deere fairway mower's top speed was twenty miles per hour. But the massive dose of methamphetamine in his system was making him crazy with the slow pace of the tractor. He saw the truck a few hundred yards ahead of him and stomped on the gas pedal to try and overtake the official vehicle.

Raymond looked in the rearview mirror and saw the maniacal man approaching his truck from behind. He slowed his vehicle down to a crawl, thinking that the fellow on the riding mower might be in some kind of trouble. He saw Boo frantically waving and yelling for him to stop. Raymond pulled the ride to the far edge of the shoulder, turned off the engine, and waited.

When Boo got to within twenty yards of the pick-up, Raymond decided it was better to get out of the situation in a hurry. He saw in detail Boo's almost toothless mouth, fringe of hair flying in the wind, and dark spots along his neck and face that made him look like a screeching leopard.

The V-DOT employee turned the key to start the engine, and the truck came to life with a roar. He was about to drop the truck into gear when two blasts from Boo's Remington .30-06 tore through the front and rear windows of the cab. The shatterproof glass exploded into tiny cubes and Raymond froze in terror as Boo Smalls pulled up to the side of his pick-up on the John Deere.

The driver of the tractor pointed the barrel of the carbine in Raymond's face. The poisoned man's eyes were spirals. Raymond believed he was going to be shot. Maybe not killed, but definitely shot. Then Boo's eyes came into focus and met the man's frightened gaze.

"Get out," Boo said to the driver, sounding more like Arnold Schwarzenegger's terminator-man than he could have ever understood. Raymond leapt from the passenger's side of the truck onto the highway's shoulder and began running up the dirt embankment into the woods. Boo abandoned the mower, and collected the gas can from the tractor's floor board. Then he threw his rifle and petrol container into the bed of the pick-up.

The reeling man brushed the thousands of glass fragments from the driver's seat, and got behind the wheel of the rig. He put the shifter into Drive and tore onto the highway, knocking traffic cones everywhere as he headed towards Liz Fury's roadhouse.

*

Sonny the bouncer drove towards the Clean n' Jerk on the rural route. It had been an absolute fuck-stick of a day. He wasn't ready to deal with Liz Fury's torment at the bar, and then have her again deny him a slice of hair pie at the apartment. That scenario, he believed, would be something more than he could endure.

The trainers he'd spoken to today on his public relations junket all basically had the same story to tell him. They weren't interested in Liz Fury's action right now. There wasn't going to be any serious money in town for a few

weeks. Not until word got out to the gamblers of a new place to hold the fights. Boo Smalls's animals had put a real whammy on the famous gambling spot, and people didn't feel safe going there now. The crowds would come back to Youngblood after the heat wore off, but it could take a while. Right now was the time to keep the investment animals healthy, and wait until a new staging-area could be found.

The strong-arm had been hitting the white corn early today. He mused his situation as he wheeled his machine towards the club, and was getting more and more fed-up with the predicament at work and at home. The young hood was ready to get angry at practically anything as he got closer to the bar. The one bright spot in the day had been that he'd found a dog he thought he could start training soon. The six-month old, black and white Pit he'd discovered was an aggressive slab of pure muscle with teeth like a velociraptor. Sonny had put down five hundred dollars on the beast, and would bring the trainer another five hundred tonight after Liz paid him for the week.

But now he needed to get to work. He hoped his boss was going to have a serious change of attitude soon. The strong-arm didn't know how much longer he could take her bitching about the damage to the club, his slacker disposition, and inability to get things done.

Sonny truly hoped that Liz was going to treat him properly this evening; like the man in their relationship and not some here-today, hired navy. He believed that any verbal digs or slick back-talk from her might just break his resolve to try and keep cool. And if that happened, things could get ugly.

Fifteen

Lester Ganz walked into an empty saloon. The place seemed different to him from the few times he'd been there before. The furniture looked like it had been hammered together by hunchbacks. The window moldings and panes were brand new, also. Liz Fury was in the storage room with the hand truck getting a keg to bring to the front bar. He heard her moving items back there, and was psychologically steeling himself for their meeting.

He pulled the 9mm Heckler and Koch from the back of his jeans, walked up to the wooden bar, and took a seat. He noticed a small glass filled with toothpicks on its polished top. He took one of the small skewers and placed it in the corner of his mouth. It was the final garnish to his strange, bucolic outfit. Now he waited like a B-movie detective for his nemesis to walk out into the front room.

Liz wheeled the barrel out of the utility room and stared at the wispy man with electric hair, mirror shades, and a SHIT HAPPENS baseball cap perched on his head. He looked familiar to her, but she couldn't place him exactly. She walked towards him like a distracted panther and said, "we don't open for about thirty minutes, chum. Come back at six o'clock. I've got a ton of shit to do before then, so why don't you be a good ol' boy and scram for a while."

Lester Ganz didn't flinch as he pulled the massive firearm from under the bar and aimed it directly at her head. Liz stared in awe at the hand cannon pointed only a few feet from her face, and then slowly raised her eyes from it to meet her guest's intent gaze.

"Do you like my new hat, Liz?" Lester asked her. "I believe it adds something of an ironic quality to our situation, don't you?"

Upon hearing his voice, Liz Fury understood that it was Lester "Colonel Faulkner" Ganz who'd come to the saloon to pay a social call. She'd been wondering when he'd get up the balls to show himself in town again. The bar owner was also curious to know what had happened to his hand after Sonny had deposited him outside the hospital a couple of weeks ago. Her boyfriend had said the damage to his wrist had been severe, but the cocky bouncer had a knack for exaggerating his stories. She continued looking at him with interest. Besides the funny clothes, he seemed different. More confident. Not the same flighty bird she'd known for the last couple of years.

"Sonny told me you'd had a bad accident at Boo Smalls's house," she evenly said.

Les extended his wrist from his pocket, and showed Liz the bandaged stump, never taking his eyes off of hers or moving the gun. "I could kill you right now for the shit you and that chicken-headed thug of yours put me through. Fortunately for you I'm not the kind of guy who goes around town and randomly shoots women on the street; although if I ever were to start that particular avocation, now would be a good time. I want the photos and negatives from our last rendezvous and then I'll be saying goodbye to you and your ilk forever. I know you keep all your valuables in the safe in the office. That's why I'm here to see you this evening. I want those items from the vault now Liz; so I suggest you get moving." Lester Ganz was not smiling at his captive when he made his demand.

Liz jerked her head away in disgust as she looked at the tattered bandage that covered Lester's lower arm. She felt sick looking at the wound. Then she turned back and squarely faced her former Friday afternoon trick. "Sonny fucked-up our simple plan to get Boo Smalls to cooperate with us, and you had to pay a price that wasn't intended. I wouldn't blame you if you did shoot me now, Lester. If our positions were reversed, I'm not sure if I'd be able to show your sense of restraint. You're a better person than all of us in this sad hick town. Now let's go into the office and get your merchandise. I don't even want those sorry pictures anymore. I'll be leaving Youngblood myself in a short while, so you won't have to worry about any future repercussions. Come on, let's get this thing done with."

Lester couldn't imagine why things were going so smoothly, and wasn't about to question this positive turn of events. With any luck he'd be out of the

saloon in a few moments and on his way home. As the two of them walked around the front bar towards the office, the police handcuffs slipped from his belt and clattered onto the floor. They both looked at the manacles on the ground and Liz chuckled. “You not into feet anymore, Les? From my vantage point it looks like you’ve moved up to the bondage business.”

“I’m not into any of that nonsense anymore,” he said flatly. “I’m a different man now than I was two weeks ago. I’m starting fresh after today. Start a whole new life with a different perspective of things. Maybe I’ll even get myself one of those pretty mail-order brides from Asia that I’ve heard so much about. Who knows? But it all starts with me getting those funny pictures back, so let’s move it.” He stooped to pick up the cuffs and pocketed them. Then the two of them entered the manager’s office of the Clean n’ Jerk Saloon.

Liz Fury worked the dial of the combination safe and swung the door open. She pulled out the envelope of photographs and the canvass bag full of money from its insides. Then she opened a brown paper lunch sack that was on her desk. The saloon owner dropped the photos and negatives into it. Immediately afterwards, she unzipped the gym bag, removed ten of the ten-thousand dollar bundles and placed them in the pouch with the photos.

“Put this under your arm and get out of here, Les,” she said to him. “A hundred-thousand clams won’t buy you a new flipper, but it’ll sure make you a lot more attractive to those Yokohama-mamas in the postal-bride market. You see my man, I’m a different person from when we last met, also. It’s an amazing thing to consider the twists of fate that can go down in one’s life in just a few days. And to answer your question from a minute ago, I do like your hat. “Shit happens,” about sums up every aspect of the human condition as far as I can tell. Now beat-it, blondie. I’ve got a bar to run. At least for the next couple of days I do anyway.”

Lester stood in undiluted amazement as Liz backed away from the desk and motioned for him to slip the bag under his arm. He cautiously moved up to the parcel and picked it up under his right arm in a chicken wing pinch.

At that moment Lester Ganz experienced his personal epiphany. He had achieved, through his own design, 100%, consensus reality, action-hero status. Indeed it was, in the words of former United States President Richard Nixon, a ‘Victory Without War.’ No rounds had been fired from his carbine, and he’d used brainpower and not his ominous weapon to get positive results in a tense situation. His actions had detailed a fine example of General Tzu’s “acme of skill” tenet.

He was 100K richer and now all he had to do was get out of the bar, get back to his car, and head to his cabin. “Luck really is the residue of design,” he said to himself as he began backing out of the place. Liz Fury followed him out of the office and into the front room. “Have a nice life, Colonel,” she told him as she walked behind the bar, “with any luck we won’t see each other again until the big-boom.”

*

Friday afternoon, 5:45 pm, outside the Clean n' Jerk Saloon

Sonny roared up in his sedan and parked at a forty-five degree angle outside the club. He was incensed, late for work, half-in-the-bag from his afternoon white corn sessions, and horny from a week of involuntary abstention from boffing Liz Fury. He charged out of the car, and went into the open door of the bar. At this point, he was *almost* hoping Liz would give him some lip about being cavalier in his timeliness. He was more than a little ready to get pissed-off and rowdy.

From his position in the woods, Carmine Angelini observed the bouncer drive up and storm into the club. He knew he had to get inside the tavern within a minute to cover Lester. The mobster now wasn't sure about being able to dispatch his mark on this day, but understood that he had to get in there fast and diffuse the situation that was undoubtedly starting this second. He admired Les's verve in trying to correct his own predicaments, but Sonny looked drunk and dangerous. The thug would eat the poor store-owner alive if he got his hands on him. Even though his client was armed, Carmine was positive he'd never fired a gun in his life. He got up from his location and walked briskly across the street towards the Clean n' Jerk.

*

Sonny blew into the bar and was immediately greeted by Lester's Heckler and Koch upon entry. He leered at the strange man holding the gun in his left hand, and clutching a paper bag under the other arm. When he noticed the grocery store owner's bandaged wrist, he discerned the identity of the thin blonde fellow, and began to laugh out loud.

"Well, Lester Ganz is back in town!" He bellowed. "Everybody's favorite foot-freak has come back to the nest, and looking like a surfer-boy to boot. Now you *know* its too early for you to be coming back home, buddy. As I recall you weren't supposed to even think about this place until September or so. It's only the end of July for chrissakes. Now you know what happens when people break their promises to Sonny don't you? They get a lot of free advertising in our community from my personal photo archives. Those pictures I took of you and the lovely Ms. Fury will be posted everywhere by this time tomorrow, and you'll be run out of town on a hot rail by the fire-breathing Baptist brigade. It should be something to see."

"There's not going to be any smear job, Sonny," Liz snarled at her smug boyfriend. "This man's been through enough trouble because of our careless bullshit. Step aside and let him go before he accidentally rips a hole in your skull with that 9-mil he's holding."

Sonny couldn't abide the tone of Liz's voice. The sassy roadhouse-queen told him what to do entirely too often for his taste, and it sure as hell wasn't a

woman's place to tell him how to run his affairs. He was getting red hot under the collar, and spat back at her, "don't you dare tell me how to handle myself, peaches! Mr. Ganz and I had a business arrangement, and I'm just citing him for his breach of contract."

Liz Fury whipped out one of her Colt .38s from the arsenal behind the bar and aimed it at Sonny; she roared at the astonished thug, "get the hell out of his way and let him out of here! I told you we're finished with him you dip-shit, now move it!"

The strong-arm's mind splintered in anger. Her insolence was beyond any kind of redemption. Like a flash of lightning he reached into the top pocket of his jean jacket and retracted his Derringer; he had it aimed directly at Liz Fury when Lester fired at him from point blank range.

Sonny's right hand shattered in a Rorschach of blood and tendons. His index and middle fingers disintegrated from the palm. The slug grazed his small pistol and sent it careening across the floor. Lester was blown against the bar by the kick-back of the weapon, but managed to hold onto it and his bag with the photos.

The young hoodlum fell to the ground wailing like a coyote. He clutched his wounded hand against his jacket, and simultaneously tried to bandage it with his T-shirt. Liz Fury put her gun down on the bar, walked up to the fallen man, and turned him over on his back with her boot. Tears of pain were beginning to start from the young heavy's eyes as his lover pinned him down with her heel. The stunning beauty leaned over him, bent down to his ear, and sweetly said, "you're fired, *peaches*."

The downed goon's eyes narrowed into slits of rage. With his left hand he reached with cobra-like speed into his jacket and clicked open his Japanese stiletto. He began his deadly swipe at the disrespectful beauty, but Liz leapt away from him with animal agility. Then there was a second deafening gunshot, and Sonny's left wrist burst open like a rotted tomato. Carmine Angelini stood in the doorway of the bar with a smoking Glock .38 in his hand.

The security-man of the Clean n' Jerk rolled on the floor screaming like a wounded jungle cat. All eyes turned in the direction of the visitor from Atlantic City. Lester Ganz gaped at his acquaintance and could not believe his eyes. Liz Fury stood stock still, understanding there was some connection between Lester and the mysterious tourist in the doorway. The two men smiled at one another for a short second.

"Sic semper tyrannis, Mr. Ganz," Carmine said to his friend who was still pressed against the bar from the first blast he'd fired.

The racketeer walked over to where Sonny lay, and gently moved Liz Fury over a few paces. Then he placed his foot squarely in the middle of the screeching man's chest, and held Boo Smalls's Glock .38 between the fellow's eyes. "It's

your call, Mr. Ganz,” Carmine called out to him. “This man’s life belongs to you. You need to give me the thumbs-up or thumbs-down on this one. It’s all the same to me. I have a feeling he won’t be missed if you want to carry out the terms of our agreement.”

Friday afternoon, 5:47 PM, outside the Clean n’ Jerk Saloon

Boo Smalls parked the V-DOT pick-up on the shoulder of the road about a hundred yards away from Liz Fury’s bar, and jumped out of the cab. His legs buckled slightly from the impact of leaving the truck, but he regained his balance after a moment. He went around to the passenger’s side of the vehicle and retrieved the heavy container of gasoline and his Remington .30-06. Then he began gamboling up the street towards the famous roadhouse.

The door of the bar was open and Boo thought he heard voices coming from inside the front room, but it didn’t matter to him. Once he’d finished his piece of work here, they’d all be coming up to the entrance in a hurry.

He calmly walked around the side of the building and, while ducking under the window sills to avoid detection, began splashing the high-test petrol on the wooden panels of the club. After a few moments, he’d used-up the entire five-gallons of motor fuel, and had doused a semi-circle of the flammable liquid around the back half of the place.

The smell of the gasoline was soothing to Boo Smalls. Almost like an analgesic taking effect to counter the great amount of amphetamine in his system. He remembered his terrible humiliation from the last time he’d been at Liz Fury’s saloon, and the thought of this retribution made him smile. Then he shook his head to clear it of the mental distraction, and his attention came back to the chore at hand.

The failing man removed the package of Ohio Blue Tip matches from his landscaping overalls, took one out of the container, and flicked it into life with his thumb. However, this time the nail detached itself from the surface of his finger as the flambeau blossomed into a plume of flame. He dropped the burning matchstick onto the ground, and a high wall of fire instantly whipped its way around the rear of the road house.

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Friday afternoon, 5:49 PM outside the Clean n’ Jerk Saloon

Wanda Jackson saw the furling black smoke and tongues of flame lapping at the back of the bar as she returned from the Federal Express Center in Liz Fury’s sedan. She floored the gas and swung the ride into the parking lot of the club like Steve McQueen. The beautiful swimsuit model hurtled out of the car and sprinted into the burning club to warn her mate.

She charged into a situation that was unlike anything she’d ever witnessed: Sonny was on the floor and bleeding. A man she’d never seen before had his foot on his chest and a Glock .38 semiauto pointed inches from his head. Liz was

standing a few feet away from the pair of men, with a look of piqued interest on her face; and a skinny, blonde, surf-rat looking guy with a bag under his arm and an enormous gun in the other hand was backed-up against the bar.

There was no time to reason the situation out. She screamed to everyone in the club, “The whole damn place is on *FIRE!* Get your asses out of here! I mean like *now!*” As Wanda finished bellowing her warning to the people, the glass panes from a pair of the new windows imploded into the room. Waves of orange and black flame blew around the shattered apertures.

Lester Ganz began to move for the front door. Liz Fury bolted into her office to retrieve the gym bag with her life’s money from the combination safe. Carmine Angelini didn’t flinch as he pressed the Glock against Sonny’s left eyeball.

After Liz had gathered her money from the safe, she attempted to leave the bar through the office window. She threw a chair through the glass panes to try and get out, but as she strove to exit, the fire swept into her chamber like volcanic lava. The blaze backed her against the front door of her office and lapped at her exposed legs. She managed to find the handle with the back of her hand. Then the club owner opened the door in a flash, exited the localized inferno, and slammed it shut behind her.

Jets of black smoke were starting to fill the front room of the Clean n’ Jerk. Lester Ganz had paused to witness the situation with Carmine and Sonny on the floor, and then continued his way towards the exit.

He was almost to the door, and home free, when Boo Smalls stepped into the doorway of the bar, holding his Remington .30-06 in front of him. Fire was beginning to outline the frame of the portal, and Boo looked like an incandescent grim reaper arriving at the fall harvest.

“I don’t think you’ll be going anywhere this evening, friend” Boo said to Lester as he fired a round at the store owner’s feet. Lester dropped the Heckler and Koch on the ground in astonishment and backed up a few paces. “I don’t think anyone here would want to miss Liz Fury’s swan song party. Why it’s only just beginning.” The poisoned man laughed like a desert animal and the people in the bar all stared at the ghastly entity standing before them. Boo Smalls was screeching with uncategorizeable respiratory sounds, and waving his firearm at the people trapped in the burning building.

The smoke was getting thicker inside the tavern. Liz glanced at Wanda. Neither of them were close to a weapon at this moment. Carmine was still perched over Sonny, who had begun wailing from the incredible pain in his arms. Lester continued to stare in awe at the infernal image of Boo Smalls framed against the growing fire near the front door.

The burning wood frames of the building hissed and popped in the room. No one spoke, but all eyes moved about with fractal speed from one participant to the next. Then Carmine Angelini broke the vocal silence in the place.

“It appears Mr. Ganz can’t come to a conclusion right now, Sonny,” he said to the pale man on the floor. “I imagine that means the decision to blow your head into fruit cocktail or let you live to see another day now rests on my shoulders. Now, as I recall sir, you were quite discourteous to me and my lady friend when we’d come to your club last night. I must admit to you, I tend to look disfavorably towards people who have no understanding of decent behavior. And you being from the Commonwealth of Virginia, the land of American royalty, I’d expected to see a bit more social grace and good cheer from my barkeeper. However, besides last night’s bit of unpleasantness, I’ve had a good time in the Old Dominion for the last few days. And do you know something, Sonny? My girlfriend proposed to me the other afternoon. We’re getting married in Las Vegas on Sunday. I’m pretty excited about it.”

“Congratulations, sir,” Lester nervously shouted out to him as he regained some of his composure.

“Thank you, Mr. Ganz,” Carmine calmly rejoined, and then continued his lecture to the strong-arm. “You see, my man, *that’s* what I mean by being civil and courteous to people. You could learn a thing or two by talking to Les over there. He’s a genuine, pleasant, educated individual, and it’s a pleasure for me to be able to call him my friend. But I digress. What I’m trying to say is, from the various things that have happened to me in the last few weeks, I’ve gained some life perspective, and I’m trying hard to make myself a better man. My problem is, no matter how much I strive to refine myself, I keep running into nasty-ass mutts like you who test my resolve for self-improvement.”

Flames had reached the roof of the building, and smoke was now puffing down from the rafters. Then the door of Liz Fury’s office burst off of its hinges, and blazing-red thermal currents lashed at the frame. Wanda screamed and began to run towards Liz when Boo Smalls let a round go in front of her feet. The pretty girl stopped cold and glared at the dark boogie-man who kept them trapped in the burning place.

“W-who are you?” Sonny whined to his assailant, as Carmine held him down with his foot and fixed him with his gaze like a falcon.

“Just call me the Gray Ghost,” he smirked at the boy, and fired the round from the Glock .38 just wide of the bouncer’s head. Sonny reached for his ears from the thunderous report and rolled around on the ground like a spoiled child having an incredible temper tantrum.

“Oh, baby is it ever getting hot in *here!*” Boo Smalls wailed at the ceiling of the burning structure. Wanda and Liz had begun coughing badly, and Lester was trying to breathe through his mouth. Carmine Angelini stood up from Sonny’s undulating body, and stared at the phantasmal man in the doorway. Boo

pointed his carbine at the mobster, and cautiously shook his head inferring that he should not approach.

“Drop the damn gun, scarecrow!” Kim the waitress bellowed into Boo Smalls’s ear as she jammed the barrel of Carmine’s Remington 710 into the back of the insane man’s neck.

When Kim had seen Boo arrive at the bar, and then viewed the flames start outside the club, she’d retrieved Carmine’s rifle from the Corvette’s trunk and started running towards the place. When she heard Wanda scream and shots fired, she began sprinting.

The startled man dropped his gun as commanded and fell to his knees from disorientation. Sonny scrambled out of the door, bloody hands under his armpits, and began running down the rural route towards town. Lester Ganz retrieved his Heckler and Koch from the ground, and began moving towards Boo Smalls who was on his knees in front of Kim.

Carmine walked over to his girl, kissed her, and kicked Boo hard in the ribs. He looked at the wasted man, shook his head, and took the rifle away from his girl. He instructed her to go retrieve the car double-time, and pull up in front of the place to get him. Kim did as instructed and ran from the club to her ride.

The roof of the Clean n’ Jerk began to sink, and burning sections of it fell to the ground. Liz grabbed Wanda and the two of them bolted for the front door. Carmine grabbed Boo by his lapels and slammed him against the floor of the club. “She killed my dogs,” he kept lisping and blubbering through his gums. “They were my life and she killed them. Just killed them like bugs.”

Liz and Wanda stared at the delusional man on the ground. The body builder held the bag with the money tight to her breast. She looked at Boo and felt something akin to pity for him. She knelt down next to the man and whispered to him, “You win the game, Boo. Hands down. You saved the honor of the dog-fights, and cast out Youngblood’s infidel in grand style. Touché chum. See you in hell.” Then she and Wanda raced to her sedan, fired up the ride, and peeled out of the driveway towards Interstate Highway 81 heading south.

The fire reached the front bar. Liquor bottles exploded and the wooden columns became pillars of brilliant peach-colored flame. Carmine Angelini and Lester Ganz stood over Boo Smalls in the doorway of the burning saloon.

“You’re a man of your word, Mr. Jones,” Lester said to him, “and you sure as hell know how to enter a room. That’s for certain.”

Carmine had almost forgotten that a few weeks ago he’d been known as Chuck Jones of Atlantic City. He shook Lester’s left hand and asked if he could see the handgun that he’d used in his daring attempt to reclaim his blackmail materials. Lester handed him the big pistol.

“A 9mm Heckler and Koch,” Carmine said in admiration. That’s one powerful piece of machinery.

“Keep it,” Lester said to him. “I don’t want it anymore. I’ve got plenty to worry about besides the possibility of killing someone by accident with that thing. I give it to you as a gratuity for services rendered.”

The remainder of the tavern’s windows imploded and the entire roof came down in flames in the center of the bar. Carmine grabbed Boo by the collar of his jumpsuit and dragged him outside the building. Kim the waitress zoomed up in the Corvette and popped open the passenger’s door for her boyfriend to enter.

“I imagine this is the last time we’ll see each other Mr. Ganz,” Carmine said to him. They both looked at each other with interest for a short moment. Then Lester said to him, “Mr. Jones, I’m a member of the Virginia Historical Preservation Society. We have a fund-raising dinner every year around Christmas time in Richmond. Perhaps you’d like to join our fine organization. It’s only a twenty-five dollar annual fee, and you’ll receive a beautiful quarterly magazine as a bonus. The contact information is in the national 800-number phone book. Maybe, if it sounds agreeable to you, we could meet at the state capital next year to discuss the exploits of General Mosby in more detail.”

The middle-aged mobster smiled at his friend and said, “you can count on it Mr. Ganz, and please, call me Carmine. The reason for the name change is something of a long story that I don’t have time to get into right now. We’ll talk all about it in December. That’s a promise.”

The outside frame of the building fell in and the flame reached up into the late afternoon sky. In an ironic twist of fate the melting wires of the stereo fused together and the compact disc machine began playing a warped, atonal, but recognizable version of the Patsy Cline classic “Crazy” as the building collapsed in on itself.

“My gun,” Boo Smalls croaked from under Carmine’s foot. The two men looked at the husk of a man flapping under the heel of the mobster. “My Glock,” he continued. “Liz Fury took it from me before. You must have gotten it from off of the bar. That’s where she puts her extra weapons.” He sounded like a talking sock-puppet. The racketeer stared in disbelief at the strange man’s uncanny knowledge of how he’d come across the weapon. Carmine had believed it to be Sonny’s pistol, which was why he’d brought it with him in the first place.

The New Jersey hit-man picked-up Boo Smalls, popped the empty clip out of the handle, and stuffed the weapon into the pocket of his coveralls. At that moment, the flames touched-off the bullets which were loaded in the hand guns that Liz kept under the bar. Scores of rounds went off in all directions as the building burned down. The grotesquely distorted version of Patsy Cline’s timeless tune continued to moan from the dying speaker system.

At the sound of the gunfire, Lester Ganz and Carmine ran to the open door of the waiting car, and crunched themselves into the Corvette. Les turned to the

stunning girl and said to her, with all the self-control he could summon, “tempus fugit, my dear.” Carmine overheard his polite heed to split the scene with alacrity and told his girlfriend, “you see, pumpkin, the deep southern aristocrats really are descended from the Romans.” Kim floored the gas and the red machine tore out of the driveway, leaving rooster tails of dust in its wake.

Now Boo Smalls was alone, standing outside the conflagration that was once the Clean n’ Jerk Saloon. The man felt absolved of all his life’s committed sins, and bathed in the blood of the lamb. Hot rounds whizzed by his body, but he was certain they could have no damaging effect against him. He began walking towards the V-DOT truck that was parked on the shoulder of the road.

The purged man felt something like religious invigoration in his system, and believed he was getting his second wind of the day. He was ready to continue his acts of retribution on an even higher level. The bootlegger felt obliged to do something more meaningful than the damage he’d reaped upon the tavern of Youngblood’s harlot, Liz Fury.

“Annuit Coeptis” he repeated to himself as he staggered towards his vehicle. “He has favored our beginning,” was the mantra he kept pushing through his mind. Boo Smalls at last reached the truck, managed to open the door, and collapsed into the driver’s seat. He finished the remainder of the Perrier water in the bottle, sat upright, and started the engine of the ride. Then he dropped the pick-up into gear, hit the gas, and began zigzagging in the direction of the Pohick Nuclear Power Plant.

Epilogue

Sonny the bouncer died from alcohol asphyxiation two weeks after the Clean n’ Jerk burned to the ground. His body was found in the apartment he formerly had shared with Liz Fury. He’d spent the fortnight in Fauquier Community Hospital after the cataclysmic event at the bar, and had had a double amputation performed on what had been left of his hands.

The day of his release from the clinic, he’d taken a taxi back to his erstwhile lodging. Then he kicked in the door of the place, opened a gallon bottle of white corn with his teeth, and slowly drank himself to death over the course of the evening. The autopsy stated that he’d consumed nearly half a gallon of pure ethyl alcohol before his respiratory system had shut down.

*

Carmine Angelini and Kim the cocktail waitress were married in Las Vegas, as planned, that Sunday. Kim was glowing in a white mini-skirt, sheer chemise, and white high heels. Carmine wore a charcoal gray Armani suit and Tony Lama boots. The groom tipped the Elvis Presley-clad priest one hundred dollars, and he performed several eye-popping kung-fu routines for the couple after the ceremony. The young bride was thrilled.

After seven months, a miracle occurred, and Mrs. Angelini gave birth to a stunningly beautiful baby girl. The subject of Kim’s miraculous clock-beating of Mother Nature was never brought up by anyone on either side of the family. The

happy couple maintained the christening tradition of the Roman Catholic Church *and* fast-food American culture by naming their precious child, Lisa-Marie.

Approximately one year after their marriage, the Angelinis moved to Abingdon, Virginia near the North Carolina border. Carmine purchased twenty-five acres of lush, green land and built a two-story redwood home. They indeed did become local “landed gentry,” as the retired racketeer had predicted. The new couple was heartily welcomed into the community, entertained often, and became avid supporters of the famous Barter Theater.

Also, the retired mobster joined the Virginia Historical Preservation Society as an Associate Member, and met Lester Ganz once every year in Richmond to discuss American Civil War history and tell stories into the night.

*

On the day of the conflagration at Liz Fury’s bar, Kim and Carmine had deposited Lester by his car on the side of the road, and then beat a hasty retreat out of the area. Les had jumped into his Ford Escort and driven home while police cars and fire engines screamed past him on the way to the blaze.

Upon entering his cabin, he deposited his paper bag with the compromising photos and money on the coffee table. Then he went to his refrigerator and collected the bottle of Veuve Clicquot Le Grande Dame champagne. He carefully removed the foil from the container’s neck, and then one-handedly popped the cork with his thumb.

The ecstatic man sat on the divan, drank the sparkling wine directly from the bottle, and merrily fingered the thick bundles of cash that Liz Fury had given him. While he thumbed through the decks of C-notes, and took large slugs of the delicious beverage from the container, he realized that he couldn’t have given a damn what William Faulkner would have thought of his *nouveau-riche* behavior.

Lester began going to the Clarke County Public Library more often, and started using their free Internet services. He located several mail-order bride sites, and in December married the lovely Miss Cherry Duong, formerly of Beijing, China. The Ganz’s renewed their dowdy grocery store and Lester built an extension onto the building with some of the money his statuesque benefactor had bestowed upon him.

Cherry Ganz opened a boutique nail salon called Dragon Lady Nails in the food store’s annex and pulled in piles of extra income from the Youngblood wives who would come to do their weekly shopping at the market. Cherry also became a part-time, substitute math teacher at the local high school, and was voted to have the ‘best smile’ of the faculty and staff in the senior yearbook.

*

Liz Fury and Wanda Jackson had driven for fourteen hours straight from the Interstate 81 access ramp in Winchester to the Florida border after the holocaust at the Clean n’ Jerk. The two beauties pulled into the first Holiday Inn they came across in the Sunshine State and stayed there for a week. Then they took their time in driving down south to Route A1A, and continued through the chain of bridged islands until they hit Key West.

After spending a few weeks in hotels, the two flawless models found an apartment, and then began looking for business properties. Liz was adamant that they try and run a legitimate racket this time: no more wild dogs, no more corn liquor. They found two commercial parcels situated next to each other, three blocks off of the ocean. After two months of hard work and creative cash dealings, Liz Fury's Hurricane Room and Wanda Jackson's House of Pain made their grand openings.

The cocktail bar and weight-lifting gymnasium had a common door between them. The local body builders would come to do their isotonic and muscular endurance routines at Wanda's place, and then saddle up to the bar for mai-tais, zombies and suffering bastards at the adjacent watering hole.

Liz's attorney, Robert DeNiro, was able to dissolve the land parcel of the Clean n' Jerk, mail order business, and bikini shop. He sold the interests to unnamed buyers for two-hundred and seventy thousand dollars. Fifty-four grand of which went directly into his pocket. He'd also been able to dissuade the last of the plaintiff's from any legal action against his muscular client. By discreet mentionings of his acquaintances in the New York and New Jersey areas with last names like Gotti, Gambino, and Angelini, the injured parties at last decided against pressing charges. Liz Fury simultaneously cursed the ground he walked on, and thanked The Maker for having men like Bob DeNiro in the world.

Liz and Wanda used their respective businesses to launder the cash they brought with them, and bought an island-style home on the beach. Many celebrities visited the trendy new Hurricane Room while visiting Key West: Tony Curtis, Harvey Fierstein, and once, Elton John and his entourage stopped in for several rounds of sea breezes and sex-on-the-beach shooters while on the final leg of a North American tour. Wanda Jackson was thrilled beyond words.

The hard-bodied beauties had their photos taken with all the popular names who would drop-in, and decorated the insides of both the bar and work-out room with them. Liz Fury and Wanda Jackson became, without question, the happiest couple in Key West, Florida.

*

Boo Smalls had driven the V-DOT pick-up truck away from the burning saloon that hot July evening, and had had trouble keeping it on the road. He passed by his cabin, but found that the area had been quarantined by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and had armed guards posted around it. The enraged man stopped at the gas station up the road from his residence. He held the attendant at gunpoint with his empty Glock .38, and forced the youth to fill several five-gallon containers with gasoline. The terrified employee did as instructed, and carefully placed them in the bed of the truck with the blasted-out windows. Then the wired, hallucinating, barefoot man resumed his maniacal drive towards the nuclear facility to attempt his final, doomed arson plan.

Boo Smalls blacked-out behind the steering wheel a few miles from the power plant, and ran the truck into a culvert. Virginia State troopers found the truck in the morning, with no sign of the driver. Boo Smalls has not been seen or heard from since the day of the fire at the Clean n' Jerk Saloon.

*

The author believes it should be mentioned that Pit-bull terriers are not, by nature, aggressive animals. They must be specifically trained to perform attacks on people and each other. The strange autogenesis that occurred on Boo Smalls's property only served to reanimate the inert flesh of the beasts; the violent training that they'd received previous to the miracle had been ingrained into their systems by human design, and was simultaneously revived when their bodies were renewed.

The exact nature of their resurrection remains a mystery. What can be said, with certainty, is that some subtle affinity between the atoms of stainless steel, ethyl alcohol, strychnine, Phosphorus-32 and the raw power from a bolt of lightning brought three dead animals back to life on a summer afternoon in the small town of Youngblood, Virginia. However, all that was learned from their extraordinary rejuvenation is that some living organisms, can indeed, be killed twice.