

Michael Vick's *Raw Power*: Reborn, Recharged, Reloaded

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Youngblood, the smallest municipality in the Commonwealth of Virginia, is the pit bull fight capital of the world. However, and it is a big however, one should not misunderstand the situation we have in this diminutive, rat-trap sized piece of the world. You can see some serious dog fights almost anywhere there's a population of mean people and equally mean mutts. But in this Virginia town, the dog fight has become something larger than life, something of a slaughterhouse art form. The weekend contests aren't just high visibility battles of hormones and incisors, 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. On particularly good weekends, up to a quarter million dollars in bets can exchange hands at the central staging area of the fighting action, Liz Fury's infamous roadhouse, the Clean n' Jerk Saloon.

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Summer 2006, three weeks before NFL training camp season begins.

Somewhere near Youngblood, Virginia.

"What I really like about you, Dash," Michael Vick jovially spurted out to Dasha Mercury, his number one imported girlfriend, the poisonously-beautiful and deadly-chic Russian supermodel

represented by the Storm agency of London, England, “ I mean what I *really* like about you baby is the fact that you’ll use absolutely anybody and anything to get what you want in this life. ” She looked at him the way a thin city rat might look at a discarded cigarette butt and then playfully licked the six-pack of ebony muscle on his granite stomach.

“And,” Vick mirthfully continued, “it appears that you want pretty much everything there is to have in this life, presented to you by a busload of trembling department store toadies, or at very least, acquired for you at someone else’s expense.”

“Dah, baby, Dah. You know me too good,” she absentmindedly replied, and flicked a wisp of her platinum blonde hair from her face to have a less difficult angle of approach towards his glistening, protein-intensive torso.

Dasha had met Vick at a nationally televised monster truck rally in New Orleans, Louisiana, while working on assignment for the TNT television channel. Dasha, Kate Moss, Milla Jovovich, Lizzy Jagger and Greek super model Vicky Kagia were doing a seasonal photo shoot for the Perfect Victim LTD line of summer maillots and boudoir wear. The high-concept shoot took place with the voluptuous models prancing around in their 3-gram total weight outfits in front of an array of snarling monster trucks, snorting rail dragsters and tricked-out funny cars. The TNT television network broadcast the entire photographic session, live, and billed it as their *Turbo-charged Beauty and the Diesel Beasts* summer spectacular.

When Vick and Dasha were introduced later in the evening at the after-shoot party, the erotic attraction was immediate, the sparks invariably flew, and the two ended up staying together at the Blue Mink hotel on Bourbon Street for the night. They eventually remained there for thirteen consecutive days.

During that time, Vick ate Lobster Thermidor, Argentinean Porter House steaks and chocolate truffles for breakfast every day and washed it down with buckets of Veuve Cliquot La Grande Dame

champagne. Dasha ate figs like a ravenous lower primate, talked on the phone to her agency representatives and leafed through glossy real estate catalogues of mortgage foreclosed villas for sale in Baden, Switzerland.

Their final hotel bill at the Blue Mink totaled seventeen-thousand, three-hundred and sixty dollars, telephone charges included. The exorbitant bill was, however, reasonable to a certain extent. The great cost incurred was the price of silence and professional discretion on the part of the hotel's management. Discretion was needed because ten of those nights were spent in the hotel's privately hired car, moving through the back streets of New Orleans ghettos, seeking out the city's most ferocious pit bull fights to view.

Dasha and Vick cruised in their low-profile hired ride to the grimmest alleys and make-shift basement kennels to watch the blood spill and fur fly from the dogs in the horrific pits. And, just like the noise and the gore and the blood, their love blossomed from there.

The two picturesquely naked, obscenely beautiful people were now laying side by side on Vick's 1970s Swedish-style conversation-pit divan and were watching grainy, video-taped footage of two pit bull terriers ripping each other's faces off of one another's skulls on the mega-sized plasma TV screen. They lay prone, supine and in perfect repose in his sanctum sanctorum bucolic getaway crib just outside the corporate limits of Youngblood, Virginia.

Vick's monomaniacal interests in the fight dog circuit was something akin to an army ant's interest in an open package of refined confectioner's sugar. He was, seemingly, hormonally driven to participate in the sanguinary events, although he knew that if his participation in them were known to the public, his NFL career would be blasted into atoms and swooshed down the toilet in a nanosecond. His appetite for the pit fight was, apparently, insatiable. His ability to control his need for blood sport, nil. Dasha had taken care of his local canine business interests and actions and had acted as a personal,

discreet, charge d'affairs for his financial considerations. A more complete Dracula-Renfield type of relationship would be nearly impossible to locate.

Dasha and Vick were some happy campers sitting there on the retro-style sofa-thing watching the blood-puppy horror-show. A more contented, compatible couple, in the death sport domain of the human condition, would be difficult to locate.

Dasha sprang up off of the couch, walked like a trained trapeze artist to the kitchen, and grabbed a handful of dried figs, which was the only dietary and nutritional sin she allowed herself. She could operate for days on nothing but figs and carried them in her many handbags, bicycle pouch, make-up kits and various pieces of luggage. She thought they were sinful because they had more calories than diet Coke, cigarettes, green apples, carrots and air, which were the things that sustained her the rest of the time when she wasn't noshing her figs. She ate them with absolute relish; the same way ancient, decrepit vampires masticate and savor jungle river leeches and obese intestinal blood worms.

She said "*mmmmm, yom, yom, yom*" to herself as she chewed them. She actually didn't hear Vick's continuing diatribe while she noshed her snack, as she was in ecstasy with the taste sensation she was experiencing in her mouth.

"And as long as I have way too much easy money in the bank," Vick continued in a cooing, trebly, Nat King Cole style warble, "you'd slap your mama's eye-teeth out of her *zy-go-ma-tic* face-zone to stay near this high-revenue ballistic scene, this phantasmal hellish paradise, this Youngblood, Virginia."

Vick cracked himself up with his personal bozo-rap and appeared to be remarkably contented with himself for his pithy statement. He sat up from his place on the sofa, and began playing with a heavy, titanium edged, hunting knife which was situated on top of the TV table.

Vick was then reminded of his very first thoughts on that very first night of pits with Dasha in New Orleans. He remembered that, after all their bad fun was over and they'd seen the best the town had to offer, he had had only one thing to say to himself.

"Boo Smalls' dogs could make creamed chipped beef out of any fight dog I've seen here. He's the only one who understands the real game. He's the man I need to see for a Pit. If there's one man in this world I can relate to, it's Boo Smalls and Boo Smalls alone. For him, it's a matter of honor, pride and esteem, you see. I happen to see a lot of myself in that strangely-driven man, and I like what I see. Pride alone sets him apart from the rest of the shit-bags in the circuit."

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Boo Smalls was sampling a mason jar full of his own boutique, VIP label white corn product while making a quick, 40 gallon batch of the soon-to-be-in town summer gamblers. However, in his intoxicated state, he'd completely miscalculated the yeast to grain mixture in still #1 and screwed-up the whole lot of it, big time. After its completion, his product tasted like a combination of all-purpose ammonia and Sears house paint.

He attempted to add some high octane, brain-scorching "kick" to his less than acceptable white lightning by supplementing it with small amounts of strychnine that he'd lifted off of some of the local, scuzz-ball mutant kids who make homemade scratch acid in their parents' basements. When Boo taste-tested his revised creation he passed out cold for two entire days.

Boo Smalls is Youngblood's pit bull trainer extraordinaire, a living legend in the town and in select areas around the globe and has three dogs he's trained for the fights. He sold two winning dogs for stud-work last year to the tune of twenty thousand dollars each, and made another 20K off of distributing his unbonded alcoholic beverage to the locals.

Nitro is Boo's #1 prize dog and has seven kills to his record. He won five of his fights by biting through the breast plates of his opponents, and tearing out sections of their respiratory apparatus. Nitro's face looks a lot like the exterior hide of a parboiled 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 stud 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 which he conducts in his cabin's basement 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 and also a specialized form of "slap-training" with thick, leather armlets to work them into hysterical, viper-like deliriums which practically guarantee their piranha-like bloodlust in the battle pit.

He also does agonizing and endless 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 taunts and drills the dog until it tears through its lashings. Jet has the rear legs of a small Rhino, so he repeats the binding procedures and exercises that he does with Nails, but on Jet's hind limbs.

But Boo has one special trick the locals couldn't even dream about, and it concerns the use of 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 exercises are completed with the treadmill, tourniquets and armlets, he muzzles the three dogs and puts them into their pens. 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 hellish SOB of a dog trainer.

When Boo finally awoke from his alcohol-induced coma, he knew intrinsically that he would have to find some way to break even on his white corn costs, no matter how trifling they might have seemed. He siphoned twenty gallons into large plastic jerry cans and moved them into the utility closet in the front room of his cabin. He left the remainder in the vat to be shipped outside of town later in the season.

Done with his duties as a liquor purveyor, Boo rounded up his prize pits and headed to the Clean n' Jerk Saloon to further build on his legend as the greatest pit bull trainer in the world.

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The Clean n' Jerk Saloon sits on private property and becomes a "members only" club on Friday and Saturday nights when the fights take place. Liz Fury, the owner of the Clean n' Jerk, also owns the Cleopatra Bikini Shop in town. She 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."

To give you an example of the summer weekend activity in Youngblood, Virginia, 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 is escorting a former Miss Virginia beauty pageant winner and her celebrity companion to the folding chair area near the edge of the combat area. Sonny, the local enforcer and bouncer of the Clean n' Jerk during the nights, is Liz's course and craggy boyfriend and has a fight-dog in training named Roscoe. It's his first fight dog investment and he's determined to make good in the circuit. He's lived in

this town all his life, and, as any long term resident of the town can tell you, having a dog on the fight circuit is a matter of manly honor; it's a matter of personal *pride*.

The bar is jammed with chattering, swollen career gamblers, fight-dog owners, beautiful people and remarkably plain ones, too. But, regardless of their economic and aesthetic station in this life, they've all got the same pumped-up, wild-eyed, hungry looks on their faces. They're ready for the blood games; ready for the primitive, sub-reptile, killing-spree instinct in all of us to completely take over their tiny yet calculating minds.

Around midnight the horde from the Clean n' Jerk move out to the pit. The fight-dog owners have already been out there for some time and are cautiously eyeballing one another for slips or nervous ticks in their overconfident, facial facades. The area directly around the cavity is for the owners, big money gamblers and VIPs. It's the only space with some sort of seating, which means that there are several hilariously dilapidated folding chairs haphazardly placed around its perimeter. 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 young men's gentile offers of an elevated viewing position.

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

By 1:00 a.m. the crowd is throbbing like a clogged artery and ready to the point of paroxysm for the battles to begin. The dogs have been viewed by all the bettors; the money is in the hands of the bookies. The place is practically ready to blow-up with anticipation.

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Boo's standing next to Nitro's cage while another local trainer, a 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 at all underestimated in this match. He tore the wind pipe out his opponent's jugular area without a shudder the previous weekend.

Sonny 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 than to kick off the deadly contests with a 12-gauge, double-pump bang. The beauty queen is a bit wobbly from all the white corn she's consumed, but grabs the gun from Sonny's hands, turns to the crowd, and holds it high over her head like an altar goddess.

The throng around the pit 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. She 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 reeling 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, obsessed rhinos. They sprint into the center of the pit like runaway freight trains. The two dogs ram into each other with their skulls, and the report is not unlike a small automobile collision. The crowd at the Clean n' Jerk howl in pure, infected 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 vertebrae. Baby-doll releases his grip on Nitro's paw, and squeals in unadulterated pain.

Sonny is watching the proceedings like a devotee. He knows he can glean some training techniques for his pit-bull, Roscoe, from watching Nitro in action. Liz is watching the side bet money

exchange hands. The house profit for making secure bet, after pay off, will be roughly 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 out everywhere from the lacerations, and he's blinded by the slick 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 Baby-doll, clamps down with his practically metallic jaws into its neck, and body slams the blinded beast into a 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 into confetti. She looks down into the filthy, sanguinary killing-hole and says aloud, "holy shit!"

Boo gets his magnesium alloy canine retractable leash, clamps it onto Nitro's chain collar, and guides the dog back to his travel cage. The winning bettors are off to find the bookies for payoffs, and the second round of fights are getting ready to start in a few minutes. Hank Cross absentmindedly lights a Marlboro cigarette and wedges it into the corner of his mouth. He then wraps the carcass of Baby-doll in an oil cloth taken from his truck's storage compartment, and throws the whole, bloody mess into a dumpster next to the bar.

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"God damn, that's some over-serious shit!" Michael Vick incredulously barked at Dasha between bites of spicy style Popeye's fried chicken and biscuits. "That's not just a dog, *krashka-moy*, that's some kind of science-machine monster-thing Boo Smalls has got out there. God, I love that man! If I don't get one of those end-of-the-earth little beasts for my own, then I'm gonna crap my own oriental rugs like a sick-in-the-liver Afghan hound and smile in the mirror while I'm doing it. "

He adjusted some color contrast setting on the plasma TV screen on his cabin's far wall and watched the clandestinely televised proceedings with the same intensity as a hyperactive child watching Spider-man cartoons. Dasha made some fine-tune corrections on her Macintosh Air laptop computer and the satellite camera stationed high above Youngblood made some minute focusing adjustments. The picture on the television screen became instantly crystal-diamond clear. A smile with the cutting precision of a new razor blade fresh from the package twisted its way onto her perfectly formed and lip-glossed mouth.

As stated earlier, Vick and Dasha's cabin outside of Youngblood was deceptively ordinary looking. Inside it was stocked with state-of-the-art technology toys and machines including video-phones, holographic image-projecting amplifiers and robotic, motion-activated intruder alert and pacification systems. All of which were imported from private Tokyo-based communication and home security companies.

However, the crème-de-la-crème of their home entertainment system was Dasha's laptop satellite command prototype Macintosh Air computer, which had been jazzed-up big time by an adoring tech-geek fan who lives in Mexico City, but does business often in London, England, for the Storm Modeling Agency.

While Vick and Dasha had been in New Orleans for her monster truck rally shoot, the two had made friends with the on-site technical administrator of Turner Network Television, which is based in Atlanta, Georgia. After many celebratory toasts at the conclusion of the shoot, Vick and Dasha began talking to him about arranging a hack into TNT's satellite system to get a special frequency setting so they can angle one of the multiple-optic lenses to any position in Virginia where they desire to see what is happening on land.

Before the evening was over, Vick handed Dasha a personal check for one-hundred thousand dollars, which was laundered into her private account and then transferred into the technical

administrator's retirement savings account the next day. Before the end of the week, the Macintosh Air computer was delivered to Dasha's private address via Federal Express couriers, with instructions on how to access the satellite's monitoring system and private frequency setting. The two had been watching Boo Smalls and the weekly dog fights for the last two weeks like fanatics.

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It had been an incredibly successful night for Boo. Not only had Nitro finished off his opponent with minimal injuries, but his dogs Nails and Jet had easily won their first battles as well. Conversely, it hadn't been such a great evening for Liz Fury. She had foolishly 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's animals because they were almost certain to be destroyed.

Liz 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 in town ready to bleed the Clean n' Jerk's fight-dog action, and she wasn't going to let that happen without a serious scrap.

She 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'd have to use someone to help her with this particular bad-odds predicament, and she knew just who to summon for support.

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On Monday, after the weekend fights, Liz paid a visit to Wanda Jackson at the Cleopatra Bikini Shop. Having been a nightshift employee at the Interstate highway 81, exit 12 off-ramp, Pizza Hut Express and pin-up girl for the Snap-on Tool company's annual socket-wrench calendar, before becoming Liz's sole employee at the Cleopatra, Wanda was not only adept at working the cash register but also filled out her duties as swimsuit and lingerie model perfectly. Liz always kissed Wanda on the

cheek and greeted her with, “Honey, you *do* have a nice lookin’ pair of tits on today.” To which Wanda invariably chuckled, with the slightest degree of tense apprehension.

The two ladies chatted about store income, and the summer blow-out sale that was coming soon. Wanda said she’d like to do a live bikini show at the Clean n’ Jerk with some of the local young Lolitas from Winchester Lake, to help get rid of the current year inventory. Liz said she’d think about it. A definite maybe for now. She had other things on her mind besides making the skinny young boys from the lake blast their jam.

After a few minutes, 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 like high school girls.

Wanda was hesitant at first. She normally didn’t like to get laced until the evening hours. 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 various conversations. The two of them hadn’t been out in ages, and Liz was enjoying herself to no end catching up with Wanda. By early afternoon Wanda was completely smashed, toaster-caked by any degree of measurement.

Liz’s conversation changed in tone dramatically by two o’clock and, instead of remembering the nice old times and gossiping about boyfriends, she was telling Wanda how massively fucked she would have been if she hadn’t rescued her from a lousy employment situation at Pizza Hut Express. She informed Wanda that she’d be on the street or living in some slum shithole with a hateful slacker without her assistance and better job money. Soon Wanda was on the verge of tears, and telling Liz she was completely correct. She’d been out of luck when she met her, and owed her everything she had in the world.

Liz then moved in for the emotional kill-shot

“What were you doing for a living before I met you?”

“I, I was working at the pizza place, but did some tricks on the street for a skinny Greek pimp named Kostas,” Wanda sniffed, “I did some nude pictures, quick videos and 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 rubber-grip insulated, metric system calibrated socket wrenches. And, you know, a little bit of the quick-and-dirty with Kenny the heating and air-conditioning contractor from Middleburg for extra scratch when he was in town. But you know all that, Liz. Why are you asking me?”

“Cause I wanna know something, important. Tell me, from your heart, am I the best thing that’s ever happened to you?” “Absolutely,” Wanda answered, her voice trembling with queasy emotion. “I’d, I’d, oh God, probably be flat broke, living in a trailer by the auto graveyard and becoming all...all...Dunkin’ Donuts white trash looking if I hadn’t met you when I did. I love you, Liz. You saved me from a really bad sitch.”

“I love you too,” Liz cooed with hard, dominant 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 the Cleopatra Bikini Shop. This is something that I really need. It’s important. Something only *you* can do. Can I count on you to help me?”

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

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

Wanda was close to a nervous outburst now and agitated to the point of having intermittent muscle spasms in her right eyelid and upper cheek area. She shakingly 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 him for a hundred bucks?” Wanda hesitated, knitted her plucked eyebrows, and then added, “wow, are you sure? That’s a lot of money, Liz.”

“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 him for a couple of hours on Friday afternoon before the dog-fights. Can I count on you?”

“You’re *sure* this is gonna work?” Wanda questioned apprehensively, her eyes involuntarily crossing in their sockets from the untold amount of corn liquor she’d consumed.

Liz reared her head back and loudly cackled, “Could anybody say no to your set of pretty peaches?”

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“You know you’re a rich man,” Michael Vick opined to Dasha, “when you have an Austrian wardrobe consultant on your personal payroll but still prefer to piss in the bathroom sink to save water.”

“Buy me a lady Rolex and maybe I could one day laugh at dat one. I will go ha-ha-ha for too many hours,” Dasha flatly replied in her heavy Russian accent.

“Maybe for your birthday,” Vick casually rejoined. “But now, I have a piece of work for you. Something that only a sweet little Russian girl who can’t say no to a dollar, or basically any kind of shiny, retail bullshit can do for me.”

“Vot is dat, Mik-ail?” she playfully responded, her curiosity getting the best of her.

“I need you to contact Boo Smalls,” he said seriously. “The man whose career I’ve been following for years. I need you to get me one of those serious Pits he’s got on the circuit now. As you know, I can’t be seen near that fellow or people might start to talk. I want one of those psychotic little beasts he’s got tearin’ the brains out of the competition and I want it bad. Money simply isn’t an object in this matter. Go get me one of his elite fight dogs of his and I’ll hang Rolexes from your tits and ass and fingers and toes. Capiche?”

“Honey, she enthusiastically replied, “when you talk to me dat way, that’s when I know I love you best. Vot’ll I wear to seduce our crazy dog-man?”

“The less the better, I would imagine” he smirkingly replied.

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On Thursday morning, Liz Fury paid a visit to Lester Ganz’s grocery store.

Lester’s a thin, wispy, eccentric retailer and owns the only grocery store within the town’s corporate limits. He also has a mild sexual aberration that needs to be mentioned here. He enjoys a very particular form of foot-worship exercise performed by Liz Fury. When Liz 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 an antebellum plantation owner in a crisp white suit and Panama hat. Liz 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 as the session progressed. 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 practically indescribable meetings. Liz 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.

Liz was decked out in muscle-hugging spandex, a black leather bomber jacket, and mirror shades. She looked *fine* this morning. She swept into the store and informed Lester 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 schedule adjustment with a noticeable degree of dissatisfaction.

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 one o’clock that 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.

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Sonny was doing the legal booze inventory at the Clean n’ Jerk when Liz 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 chop-chop smear-job on Lester Ganz.

“You like blackmail, don’t you?”

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

“You can play with your guns later,” Liz rejoined, “now just get your digital camera ready for action, and be sure it has some space on the memory stick this time.”

“OK,” Sonny responded.

On their drive out to Lester’s cabin, Liz 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 acidly told him he was a 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 some gum with you 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 incredulously asked, “suckin’ people’s toes and all that pissant bullstuff? It’s just plain nasty if you ask me. It’s not like you need the money anymore. 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,” she 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.”

Sonny pondered this and replied, “Liz, you’re a smart cookie in spandex clothing.”

*

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 for a quick fix of sensual heat. She was

doing her last minute preparations to become the hoof-stimulating seductress from the faded glory of the Confederacy, just as Colonel Faulkner always requested of her. She instructed Sonny to go to the cabin window and take scads of photos when she began her act, no matter how much all the action looked the same. The two megabyte memory stick was nearly empty, so he had hundreds of shots available to use. 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 Sony point-and-shoot digital camera, 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 demurely answered, "may I come in your big ol' house and tell you some stories of profound historical import today?"

"Indeed," Lester intoned, "indeed, 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 delicately answered, and sweetly sashayed her way inside Lester's home.

Soon Liz had Lester Ganz, AKA "Colonel" Faulkner, in his favorite arm chair and was delicately massaging and cleaning his left foot's lower carpal bone area 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 wiggly 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 scores of photos featuring Lester having his foot-extremities tongue-scrubbed by an unnamed model.

Within a few minutes, Lester 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 it 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, almost to the point of being ecstatically unnerved by her presence. He’d never seen her perform on a client before and was mightily impressed by her work.

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

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

“They’ll take my gun from me when they pry it from my cold, dead hands,” Sonny answered her in his mock badass, door-man bouncer voice, “you know that.”

“Then let’s get to the 1-Hour Photo shop at Gunpowder Mall and get these things printed up,” she snapped at him with country roadhouse, boss-lady intensity.

“You got discount coupons?” Sonny playfully inquired.

“Just drive, baby,” she atonally responded.

*

Sonny and Liz 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 printed. The clerk 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 directly into the clerk’s mouth.

He took Liz’s memory stick and sprinted to the house computers and printing machines.

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 two who had used his services today. He wildly consented to their request and nervously asked if they might be interested in a complimentary, battery-operated, electronic, 5”x7” fiber-optic, photo-picture frame. This particular model had little, multi-colored tracer lights built-into its chromium surface. Liz eyeballed the frame,

then she looked at the clerk as if he were some kind of misplaced, defective laboratory animal and snorted a quick, firm “fuck that, chica,” directly to his kisser.

A few minutes later they were back on the highway heading towards Youngblood. Sonny beamed with pride for having such a kick-ass girlfriend by his side. 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 grand scheme for the permanent 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 eleven a.m. Liz would get Wanda prepped and ready to get Boo out of his cabin at one 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 pictures and memory stick.

*

When Wanda came into the store that morning, she was ready to face any kind of non-protocol, unusual request Liz may have for her. At this point, she’d do anything to help Liz Fury, her personal savior from the impersonal streets of Youngblood. Even if it meant giving Boo Smalls a slice of her own sweet custard pie at the Super 8 Motel as part of the bargain.

Liz met Wanda 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, after several attempted seductress-looks were tried on and appraised, was, at last, fitted 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 an acid-wash blue jean jacket over her shoulder, and donned black stiletto-pumps to complete the look. She was as red hot and ravishing as a country courtesan could be and still walk the streets in the daytime. Liz Fury told her she was beautiful enough to be a model in *Hustler* magazine. Wanda anxiously chuckled at Liz's comment, 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 Boo to the Super 8 Motel for a roaring good time.

*

At noon Liz took off with 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

Late in the morning of the next day, Vick and Dasha began piecing a plan of action together for the acquisition of a world-class, pit bull cum laude.

“Women have two weapons,” Vick blithely stated to Dasha as she was incrementally squeezing her slim haunches into a pair of Ray Brown signature leather hot pants and zipping up her custom designed Jimmy Choo hip-boots. “They can summon tears on command, like trained chimps, which seems to get them what they want, at least most of the time, with the normal, Frank Capra-esque bozos of our society. And of course, as you know *very* well my post-Soviet lollipop, they sit directly on top of their other weapon, which is the one I believe to be more effective in the long run, and the one you should incorporate in your dealings with our dear Mr. Smalls. ”

“Pussy rocks, Mik-ail,” she distractedly responded while hopping around the cabin attempting to pull the seat of her hot pants over the curve of her ass.

“That’s pretty much what I’m trying to impart to you, *zey chik moy*,” he thoughtfully rejoined.

They went over their scheme to attract Boo Smalls to sell them one of his impossibly homicidal fighting dogs. It was a simple plan but needed to be carried out carefully. Vick knew, from reconnoited information by his personally hired detectives and field agents who’d been following Smalls for the last several years, that he could smell tricks and traps from a mile away. He only had two weaknesses: money and, of course, larger sums of money. As this is essentially a straight-up business deal, at least as straight-up as illegal pit bull fight transactions can get, it shouldn’t be a major problem in getting him interested in making a sale to them.

His only other mild Achilles’ heel is easily available women. But make no mistake, they come in a very distant second in the hierarchy of his personal world view. Money, in its purest sense, is the quintessence of absolute freedom, while women are simply a cheap reflection of one’s individual vanity.

However, truth be told, they're fun in bed, and are sometimes fun to bite on the ass. Therefore Boo treated himself to an occasional empty-headed, corn-swilling summer nubile who happened to accidentally find herself at the weekly combats at the Clean n' Jerk. As Dasha Mercury is an internationally recognized runway super model, who would have large amounts of cash simply falling out of her impossibly tight leather hot pants, she should have a fairly good shot at gaining and holding his attention for at least a few minutes as she chatted him up for a possible business arrangement.

Dasha at last had her hormone-tweaking ensemble complete and was checking herself out in the wall mirror. She had adorned a hand-sewn, Zandra Rhodes signature issue, Century-Supernova collection, see-through chemise which had been given to her, for personal services rendered, by Paul Stanley, the singer and guitarist for the rock super-group KISS. With this ultra-select garment working in tandem with the Ray Brown leathers and Jimmy Choo boots, she'd be able to, possibly, seduce a badly-decomposed, dead pachyderm to come back to life, let alone gain the attention of an isolated, lonely bootlegger and pit bull trainer.

Her magnetic beauty worked, much to her delight, earlier than she had intended it to do so. As she was teasing-up her hair into provocative angles and pouting picturesquely into the mirror, Vick found himself aroused to the four-alarm stage of carnal desire by her primping and posturing. He moved to where she was standing, lifted her over his head with one hand and carried her to the Swedish 70s-style conversation pit in the front room like a seasoned cocktail waitress carries a tray full of daiquiris to the furthest table of a crowded sports bar.

"Prepare to be consumed whole, *utka-moy*," he quietly informed her. "Consumed like a mama anaconda devours a confused, wandering warthog."

"Dah, baby, dah, eat me like American apple pie vit many tablespoons of rich vipped cream" she squealed in her excited, but never fully abandoned, way-past cool personal style.

Their wildly animated, endlessly varied love-making session lasted, unexpectedly, until the afternoon. After completion, Dasha required another hour of time to re-assemble herself to acceptable perfection and become the phantasmal beauty that she'd been paid to be by the Storm modeling agency of London, England.

Vick opened his ostrich-skin Gucci brand billfold, extracted ten five-hundred dollar bills from its interior, and handed the sum to Dasha. He then informed her that this was just a bit of hello money for Boo Smalls. A token of interest to whet his appetite for a possible business transaction. She tossed the money into her Claude Montana shoulder bag and blew a Bette Davis style air-kiss to Vick. She then blew out of the door to her borrowed, Viper-blue, 2006 model, Blue Mamba edition, Dodge Viper SRT-10 convertible roadster. The luxurious automobile had been loaned to her from an unnamed Washington, DC power-broker with a weakness for eastern European, Balkan, Slavic and Russian female companionship.

She twisted the ignition key and the futuristically chic, muscularly-contoured sports car bellowed into life. She threw it into first gear and tore out of their driveway like in the Batman cartoons in the direction of Boo Smalls's property. She clicked on the car's CD player and Svetlana Loboda's Ukrainian disco chartbuster song "Cherno Belaya Zima" blasted through the retro-fitted Alpine stereo. She threw the car into second and it ate up the road like over-cooked, bargain-brand spaghetti.

The big, naked, showered and shiny Michael Vick lay in supine bliss on his Swedish sofa and began diddling with the keypad of the prototype Macintosh Air laptop. He then clicked on the plasma TV and watched the channels flip until he reached their private frequency, furnished to them by their favorite on-site technical administrator from Turner Network Television's New Orleans affiliate station. His corona-cigar sized index finger skated across the surface of the laptop's synaptic pointing device and he shifted the lens on the satellite to the exact point where he could watch the activity outside of Boo Smalls' cabin.

Vick felt something small and grainy tickle the skin under his taut thighs. He lifted a leg up and noticed the nauga-hide upholstery on the sofa appeared to be mildly peppered with dry fig seeds, which were delivered courtesy of Dasha Mercury's perfectly aerobicised ass. To be sure Dasha's oh-so-photogenic derriere is hygienically scrubbed and powered every day. But fig seeds tend to number in the seven-digit category, like sperm cells and Virginia mosquitoes. Considering the amount of figs she noshes each day like a starving Roman Empire foot soldier, it's a wonder she doesn't leave a trail of them behind her as she struts down international designer runways and the hard boards of on-site stages and photo studios.

Vick mused to himself, *"Man, I really love the serpentine fissures found within the inner sanctum of Dasha Mercury's skinny Russian butt. She's got one of those really teeny-tiny little hyper-retentive assholes with baby-spider sized ridges 'round the proverbial rosie. A sweeter little slice of eastern-block, estrogen-based rump roast I've rarely come across. That girl can do just about anything in this world and get paid for it, except for getting all the fig seeds out from the byzantine ridges of her peach-smooth ass. We all have our crosses to bear in this life, I guess. Dasha's got fig seeds in her crack that all the plastic surgeons in Rio can't extract. That's some Homeric shit for a super model to deal with, man. I truly believe it is. Well, so be it. Sic transit gloria mundi."*

Vick then went to the kitchen and prepared an iced green tea, refreshing summer beverage for himself in a small, Lalique, opaque crystal flower vase, formerly owned by Salvador Dali. He then curled-up on the Swedish sofa-thing, adjusted the controls for a fine-tuned picture on the plasma screen and watched with piqued interest the visual images being broadcast directly to his home from outside of Boo Smalls's cabin.

*

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 dog's neck and leg muscles and was applying the treatment

to him. He'd taken the winch off of his Ford F-10 pick-up truck's front bumper and had brought it down into the training area. Then he'd connected a dog muzzle to the end of the winch's lashing, and had mounted the entire mechanism on a rack of cinder blocks.

He then fastened the muzzle on the dog, released a generous amount of the cable, and turned the winch on to begin pulling Nitro toward the machine. Boo then connected the car battery to the oven grates on the floor and let the animal get a dose of the hot current.

Nitro careened around his training cage, insanely pulling against the lanyard which was dragging him closer to another agonizing jolt. Boo turned off the mechanism after a few minutes, gave the dog some slack on the cable, and repeated 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 his dog Nails, having finished with Nitro'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 that he'd been in the dog-fight circuit, he'd never received a single visitor at his home who wasn't personally invited into his cabin. He grabbed his Remington 7400 .30-06 from the rifle rack and bolted up the basement stairs to the front 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 thin-ass freaking wall. This is *my* property, and I can blow your illiterate skull off right now and claim *self-defense* you cheese-eatin', shit-bag nobody!"

A lovable feminine voice answered Boo's thunderous warnings.

“Um... wow, I wasn’t ready for such a cannonball of a welcome. Mr. Smalls, it’s Wanda Jackson. I work at the bikini and lingerie store in Youngblood. I know your time is valuable, but could I please talk to you for a few minutes. I’m completely alone and unarmed. I’m not kidding you. Please, it’s kind of important.”

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

He slammed open the shutter of the peephole and could not singularly believe what was on the other side of the cabin’s door. He got an eyeful of Wanda’s pouting lips, perfect face, teased-up hair and zebra-head band; he rubbed his eyes in continued disbelief, and stared again through the hole. 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 like a medicated tourist at Wanda’s flawless anatomy. He insensibly shook her hand like a somnambulist and finally wheezed out an arthritic response to her greeting.

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph the father,” he finally blurted to the perky beauty.

Wanda giggled like a tipsy debutante at his salutation and patiently awaited his formal invitation to enter the premises .

*

Lester Ganz was sitting at his desk, doing inventory at his store before calling the wholesale markets in Front Royal for his weekly orders. His requested items 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.

Ganz 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 the Johnny Cash tune *Ring of Fire* which was playing on the radio when Sonny walked into his store with a sheaf of digital 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 batch of photos onto his desk’s work area. “G’mornin’ Les,” Sonny sarcastically 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 and another. A wave of sick realization washed over him as he began to flip through the entire pile of sordid extortionist photos. He tried to remain composed and lit a cigarette to calm his nerves. The two men said nothing for a minute, but Sonny’s evil smirk, and calm, watchful eyes spoke volumes. Lester’s breathing became heavy and strained; it sounded almost like the guttural intonations an asthmatic alley cat would make after enduring a violent rain storm. Sonny finally began to speak and broke the icy 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 myself that I bet you already knew because you’re an intelligent, informed business man and Virginia historian. Did you realize that this area of Virginia has the highest per capita rate of Ku Klux Klan members in the country? I mean the whole U-S-of A. Can you *comprehend* that fact, Les? 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 expertly break your kneecaps with it 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 its original position- like replacing a divot on a golf course. It’s an environmental consideration, you understand. 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, Les?” 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 memory stick, 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?”

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

"What do you want?" 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 to sustain your needs?"

Sonny slapped Lester's face with cold, internal disgust, like a North Korean pimp. He then told him to shut his obscene hole, and listen to what he'd arranged for his foot-adoring, blackmail captive to do.

He took Lester's store keys and locked the door. He then told Lester that the job he had planned for him was 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 unbeatable dogs was doing today. They were going to prepare some exceptional, *very* tasty 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 stretched out the gloves a bit and put them on their hands. Sonny then took a grocery cart from the store and walked Lester 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, several small boxes of 1" carpentry nails, rat poison pellets, a set of steak knives with the logo of the Dallas Cowboys football team emblazoned on their handles, 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.

He then sat Lester down at the counter and pulled up a plastic chair next to him. Sonny reached in his pocket and removed a chromium-alloy plated, Japanese mail-order stiletto. The eye of the enamel tiger on the handle was the knife's release button. He nonchalantly pressed the release and its slim blade whizzed open and clicked into the locked position. He sliced open the plastic collar from around

the bourbon bottle's neck, removed the cap, and took a long draught of whiskey. He handed the container to Lester.

"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 sip from the decanter and awaited instructions.

Sonny told Lester to watch how he prepared "steak tartar" for pit bulls, and to emulate his work after the instruction was complete. He told him that it was 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 chewed down on a vertical nail in the first few bites and cut their mouths, they'd leave the steak alone.

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

Sonny and Les continued to lace the viands with carpentry nails. Sonny, after completing his work on several steaks, took one of the extra Dallas Cowboys official licensed NFL product steak knives and made vertical incisions into the fillets. He placed pellets of the rat poison throughout the cuts of meat, and urged Lester to do the same with the ones he was working on. Lester asked him why this was necessary if the nails were as deadly as Sonny suggested.

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

Lester took another long swallow of the whiskey and held his head in his hands.

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

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. Lester had absolutely nothing against Boo Smalls. He only knew of him from what he'd 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 Sonny again and again why he was needed at all. If he hated Mr. Smalls's dogs so much, why not just shoot the damn things himself?

Sonny 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 and it'd be as simple as throwing out the trash. As to why he didn't just shoot the valuable dogs, it was because bullets could be traced to their weapons, and Sonny has an individual motive in this scenario, being an up-and-coming fight-dog trainer himself. He then answered Lester's question about using him in this situation. "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. Lester Ganz was knocking back shot after shot of Jack Daniel's Gentleman Jack black label bourbon. Sonny wheeled the car up the rural route, humming softly to the tunes of the queen of country music.

*

Boo Smalls did something he'd never done before since he'd been a serious fight-dog trainer in Youngblood. He allowed a perfect stranger to come into his cabin while he was training his animals. He placed his rifle in the corner of the room by the front door, and cautiously asked Wanda to enter the

front room. She glided past him like a nimble Siamese cat, casually 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 could talk without having to shout a great distance to hear one another. Boo anxiously ran his fingers through his lank, greasy hair; he then got up from his seat, walked over to stand in front of her, and nervously asked Wanda, "would you, maybe, um, like a drink? I make corn liquor myself. It's not exactly what the tax office calls 'bonded package goods' if you understand what I'm trying saying to you."

"I'd love one," Wanda responded.

Boo got one of his mason jars of "private" corn from over the TV stand. He then retrieved two Dixie brand, floral pattern, paper cups from the closet for them to drink from, as this was, indeed, a special occasion. Wanda started their conversation by talking about wanting to get a pit bull to help guard her apartment. She said her neighborhood in Winchester was starting to get a bad element around it, and there was 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, with a tone of genuine appreciation in his voice, "that's a pithy statement, Wanda."

He went on to tell her, with something akin to personal pride emanating from his person, that no one had *ever* bothered him at his residence here in Youngblood. Her impromptu visit today marked his first "unsolicited appointment" by a local citizen. Boo *almost* boasted to her that most people driving on the highway actually sped up a bit when they got near his property to get past it as quick as possible. He handed her a floral pattern Dixie brand paper cup full of nearly 200 proof white corn and

Wanda, with a pageant queen smile pasted to her face, said they should make a toast. They both raised their disposable cups and touched the two rims together.

“To home security,” said Boo.

“Death to burglars,” Wanda rejoined.

After twenty minutes or so 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 a very sudden request, and that he probably had things to do, but she didn’t know when she’d get a chance to visit him again. She said she’d never seen him in town, and only went to the Clean n’ Jerk when she had 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 gently kissed Boo on the cheek.

Boo Smalls’s usually methodical mind was ready to rupture with anxiety.

His thoughts were hot fireballs of torment and spinning with possible scenarios. Could this remarkably 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 service, with permanent damage inflicted on the unlucky perpetrators? The indecision as to what he should do was working him over bad. He’d never, ever, left the dogs alone on a Friday afternoon before the fights.

However, they were as ready as they were ever going to get. The three of them were, without question, prepped for any and all competitors the local trainers could throw at them. Of this he was sure.

And Wanda seemed so, well, deliciously girly and nice.

And she’s so goddam good-looking.

And, of course, a little drunk.

His 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 long 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 flawlessly feminine as Wanda Jackson. Could taking an hour or so off with this perfect creature damage anything? Could it really?

Before he could fully comprehend that the words were out of his mouth, Boo Smalls told her he thought there'd be no harm in leaving his place for a short while to check out some new Pit bull talent in Winchester. Perhaps he might even find an animal that interested him for cultivating into a future champ. Wanda beamed at him, grabbed both his hands, and pecked him quickly 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 Wanda 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 retrieved 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 Wanda had arrived. Even his three dogs, who were busy 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.

He 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. Boo then 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 and other

gunk 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 while waiting for Boo to bring his truck around to the front of the cabin. She wondered if her act had 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 an over-conspicuous, cheap con-artist while standing outside his home.

Then Boo pulled his F-10 up to where she was standing. He was smiling widely like a teenage plowboy ready for his first high school dance. Wanda's anxieties subsided when she took a look at Boo's almost goofed-out 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, and it was happening right now.

"So, where to?" Boo gleefully inquired.

"Cork Street in Winchester, near Shenandoah University. It's just off Interstate 81," Wanda answered Boo, and put her hand on his arm to emphasize her appreciation of 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 to say they went to college, 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' shit-kicker boots too, honey!" Wanda loudly 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 had left for their fraudulent appointment near the college. Sonny and Lester pulled up to the perimeter of his property moments after they'd departed. Sonny got out of his car and scanned the area with his Wal-mart brand 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, remarkably, pulled off her end of the arrangement. Things appeared to be working out fine. Sonny shook his head in amazement at her success in removing Boo from the premises. "Spandex is one bitch-ass seductive garment material," he murmured to himself.

He returned to his car, collected Lester, the fire ax from the grocery store, and his package of deadly steaks 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 the fire ax 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're 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 ax if you start getting squirrely."

At hearing this statement, Lester Ganz released a high-pitched nasal wheeze, which then transformed itself 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. He then placed himself next to him and recounted the grim predicament Lester was in.

"Les," Sonny said, "this is where we part company for the day. I believe you're 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. His mind splintered in clean fear and he started gibbering some kind of pre-lingual word salad, like a terminally confined mental defective. Sonny grabbed a handful of his 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. "Lester," 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?"

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

Les 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 was able to make himself understand that he was in a desperate situation. He was at the complete mercy of a cheap, homicidally wacked-out, redneck psychopath 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 the ugly business 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 other animals and innocent people? Were the new dog-fight and gambling places that were popping-up in Youngblood making their town a better place to live, or merely bringing in fast money and economic bottom-feeder scumbags hell bent on satisfying their own voracious greed? When Les thought about it that way, it really wasn't such a bad thing he was being asked to do. It was dangerous, yes, and foolhardy for sure. But it really wasn't what one would term a "sinful act against God or man," now was it? Les braced himself for action. He stared hard at Boo Smalls's cabin for a long moment, and then headed towards its back door.

Lester took the determined paces of an outlaw gunslinger walking down the main street of a rowdy frontier town. He had the package of poisonous chops 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 Boo's pit bulls, and be out of there in a few moments.

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

Finally, he raised the stone over his head. He was ready to hurl it at the miniature plate glass pane and begin his killing task. He 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 at the front door that he hadn't clicked the rear door catch to automatically lock it. He'd only pushed it back with his hand and never checked to see if it had closed completely. It had never even shut. Boo 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," he panted under his breath.

He tossed the stone he carried in his other hand off to the side, entered the house, and partially 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.

*

Michael Vick watched the rear door of Boo Smalls's cabin on the plasma TV screen. The rear door seemed askew on its hinges, the area around it seemed to be trashed, but no current activity was going on in any capacity. If he had tuned in only a few hours before he would have seen an unbelievable, world-beating, blood-bath of a show via his satellite camera, but now all was still and he waited to see what would happen when the deadly-chic Dasha Mercury arrived there in the model year, Blue Mamba Viper. He sipped his green tea from Salvador Dali's small flower vase and quietly mused to himself on his personal situation in the cosmos.

Social order, you see, it's all about social order. I'm paid tens of millions of dollars each year to do what? Throw a fucking football farther than God intended a normal man to do. To be sure, I'm one lucky mudskipper in this life. Not because my arm is strong enough to bust a water buffalo's head into oddly shaped fragments, but because sooo many millions of corn-fed American bozos are willing to watch me run around with ball in my hands for a couple of hours each week. They forget about the few super-money, corporate darlings who really run the show in this life and live like mental ward, in-bred pharaohs at their expense. They forget about all that shit and say "go-go-go Mike" as I gambol around like a directionally-challenged mountain goat and act like it's something terribly important in the universal scheme of things. What can I say? Someone's got to do it or people will start asking questions. Ergo, I simply have to say, God bless the American free enterprise system.

Vick continued to watch the activity-free plasma TV screen at his leisure. He sipped his delicious Asian beverage and thumbed through an Italian-English language tourist phrase book to help pass the time.

*

Wanda and Boo parked the F-10 on Triangle Drive, and walked the rest of the way into south Winchester. Wanda had given Boo 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 his as they ambled along the road. They looked to all the world like a pair of 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. Boo and Wanda 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 that 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 Wanda.

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

She stared in saccharine disbelief at the busy fast food restaurant. "I don't believe it," she pitifully sighed. Wanda 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 her. 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 wasn't stupid. He kept his cash winnings in safe deposit boxes and never carries more than fifty dollars with him when he leaves the house. He has 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, 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 Wanda, 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. In clean agitation, 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 howls and moans the dogs were making in their den reminded him of the primitive wails one hears in the Chronic Wards of state mental facilities.

He bent 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 dogs were securely caged.

When he made eye-contact with them, their howling mathematically increased in volume. They began to actively gnaw at the bars of their cages, and snap at each other with torment from being unable to intercept their mutual intruder. Lester stayed in place for a minute, making extra sure the dogs 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. He could not bring himself to comprehend that Boo Smalls, his personal icon of the Youngblood fight-dog circuit, actually had the nerve to leave his house door *open* while he was away from his property. This unheard of lack of security only made him more reverential towards the famous trainer. He 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 titless God Almighty! That man's got the balls of a ghetto-ass, Uzi-packin' street lion!

Boo's incredible display of complete bad-assed, personal assurance humbled Sonny. That was the sketch going through his mind when Lester Ganz simply opened the back door and walked inside the cabin.

Sonny shook his head again and mumbled to himself, "Jesus Lord, I wouldn't want to be that fuckin' pencil-necked, lightweight, Lester Ganz right now for all the black label bourbon in Lynchburg, Tennessee, *AND* all the 9 millimeter ammo at a Beirut airport."

Lester walked quickly and quietly down the stairs while the trio of dogs howled with blind red heat. When he reached the floor of the basement he stopped for a quick minute to look around the room. He stared at the collection 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 battery, along the floor of the training area to the several oven grates lining the bottom of the dog cages.

Lester Ganz *nearly* fainted from viewing the decor of his surroundings. The roar of the dogs, dark atmosphere, booze, and self-aware comprehension of the terrible predicament he was in all came crashing down on his consciousness like a baby grand piano in a Donald Duck cartoon. 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 containing the poisoned meat. He fingered the cutlets and could feel the carpentry nails laced into them. 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 from 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 cages.

The dogs were all at the front of their pens, barking so intently and systematically it sounded like an industrial machine running. Lester 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 Jet stopped barking entirely. Nails and Nitro, startled by the silence of their mate, subsided in their howling as well. Soon all three dogs were staring at the glistening red fillet dangling from the stranger’s hands.

There was a heavy, toxic 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 meat 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 sharp, thin nails each cutlet contained. Lester was so disoriented and nervous from his task that he almost doled out all the steaks 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. He walked in front of Nitro’s cage and tossed the first

cutlet inside to him. Nitro caught the victual in the air and swallowed it whole, without it ever touching the ground.

Lester stared at Nitro with some kind of strange, uncomprehending admiration. Then he reached in his bag, removed the final steak, and tossed it toward the cage. It 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 of meat from the floor.

*

Michael Vick grew tired of watching the complete inactivity on the plasma screen and moved over to his wall-mounted, Polk Audio stereo component system. He fingered through his selection of CDs and smiled with great satisfaction as he removed his nearly worn-out copy of Motley Crue's epic trash-glam masterpiece, *Dr. Feelgood*. He placed the disc in the CD player's tray and hit the play button. With the precision of an Egyptian spitting-cobra, the machine clicked into action. The kidney-crunching title song rumbled through the precision speakers like industrial-sized boulders crashing down a Carpathian mountainside. Vick smiled in clean bliss and sat back down on the Swedish sofa-thing, letting the punk-metal tsunami wash over him like a boutique-label diesel fuel.

You know, I've got to believe It's all Pam Anderson's fault, that whole big, ugly broo-ha-ha when Crue went to pieces in the 90s, he academically mused to himself. Big-titted beach bitches break-up the best bands every goddam time. Hell, small-titted ones can do the same thing. Look at Val Bertinelli and that wimp-ass Van Halen character. She cut that boy's hair into some Prince Valiant looking-thing, whipped some squeaky-clean L.A. booty on his hind-parts and he didn't know what hit his "classically-trained musician" ass. Aaand, don't even get me started with that grad-school nightmare, the Yoko-beast. Talk about a complete inscrutable assassin with nothing better to do than tear a band up and hide behind her big-ass sunglasses while doing it. I'm sorry but she's got no intrinsic delicacy at all but plays like a lady and it annoys me, Michael Vick, NFL All-star quarterback and celebrity spokesperson for

various retail products and professional services. Please don't even start my ass on that particular rock-wife subject. The Tommy Lee-man finally got his shit back together and made nice-nice with Crue again, but it took too goddam long. I always knew Nikki Sixx was the brains of that band, yes I did, I knew that for a fact. Woo-woo-wwwoooo I can be so cool sometimes!

And indeed Michael Vick put his money where his mouth was and followed-up on his personal admiration and flat-out fandom-fanaticism of the quintessential LA couture-sleaze band, Motley Crue. In 2004, the Atlanta Falcons played the Baltimore Ravens in an exhibition game in the Los Angeles Coliseum for the football-starved fans of NFL-teamless LA. After Atlanta's stunning overtime win, I Vick took a Sunday night drive in a rented, metal-fleck finish, cracked aubergine-frost colored, Plymouth Prowler roadster to the legendary rock and roll nightclub, the Whisky a-go-go. He greased many palms of the security personnel and service staff there with hefty pourboires until he retrieved Nikki Sixx's private cell phone number from a platinum blonde rocker-waitress named Raven McQueen (real name Clementine Stubbs) and proceeded to contact the grime-rock icon, Nikki Sixx himself.

Within an hour of their first telephone conversation, Nikki Sixx himself came roaring up to the Whisky in his restored, 1978 model, Marlboro red, Pontiac Trans Am Firebird. The two struck-up an immediate friendship and concurred, in iron-clad terms, that as far as rock music is concerned, chicks equal trouble. They toasted each other with several rounds of virgin daiquiris, as Nikki had terminated his acquaintance with Pierre Smirnoff and Jack Daniels many years before, and then left in Vick's purple Prowler to check-out the talent at various Sunset Strip gentlemen's clubs. Before the evening was finished, Sixx had traded his Firebird to Vick for a small Sony digital camera which contained compromising photos of supermodels Tyra Banks and Gisele Bundchen at an unnamed UAR Sheik's 40th birthday bash at the Jumeirah Beach hotel in Dubai.

Sixx claimed he never really liked the "Trans Am Firebird" because the name was too long. He swore from then on he would stick to cars that had shorter, more acoustically pleasing names like

Mustangs and Daytonas. Vick had the car delivered to his cabin outside of Youngblood, and it became his personal ride when he was in that part of the country.

*

At the Super 8 Motel, Wanda Jackson 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 was a member of the American Automobile Association and had her membership card in her handbag. The Super 8 always gives a discount to active AAA members who have their club card with them, plus two other forms of personal identification. She 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 when it comes to issues of personal economy, and knows full well that a penny saved is truly a penny earned.

After paying for the room, the couple went across the street to the Sheetz gas station and roadside convenience store. Wanda bought a bottle of André Champagne, a six-pack of 16oz.-can King Cobra malt liquor, a large bag of Utz barbecue-flavored potato chips, several packets of Planter's roasted peanuts, a half-dozen Trojan brand latex condoms (ribbed for her pleasure), and travel sized containers of Motrin ibuprofen pain reliever and Scope mouth wash. With these items in her possession, she was now ready to operate in "full performance mode" for the remainder of the afternoon on John Mosby Highway. She took Boo 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.

She 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. She had already taken her jean jacket off, and was about to remove the zebra print band from her teased-up hair.

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

She pointed toward the cork on the bottle 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 take a slash 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 in her goofed repartee. 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, tanned hips, and off completely.

Boo Smalls was making-out with a stark naked, country-honey supermodel in a cheap, Winchester motor-hotel. The feeling was glorious beyond psychometric capability. It was the first time he could remember being in a rented room with a woman with whom he wasn't paying ridiculously high prices to be nice to him. He was beginning, just maybe starting to believe, that there was a God in Heaven after all. He opened his mouth wide and took Wanda in the deepest French kiss lip-lock of his

life. She was working with the zipper on his Lee jeans and work shirt buttons, unfastening them all and discarding the clothes onto the floor as quickly as she could.

Wanda moved him over to the bed and laid him down flat on the mattress. Then she straddled him like a great, big ape on a banana tree 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 from his slaving gob-hole. The pleasure his body generated was indescribable. His inner mind became a wash of multicolor, pyrotechnic explosions. Wanda took the champagne bottle from the bedside table, fiercely shook it, and sprayed a wave of bubbles and froth across her perfect, fragrant breasts. She then 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 countless slugs of 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-stemmed, unbreakable tool for his last task of the afternoon.

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

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 nails from the tainted steaks.

Lester retched in perfect repulsion, and brought up a mouthful of acrid bile and top shelf bourbon.

Then he spewed the entire contents of his stomach onto the basement floor.

The sound was volcanic, like the engine of a giant fighter-plane immediately roaring into life.

The deadly meat was now beginning to have the same effects on Nails. 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 insane, 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. Lester, sick and frightened, wanted out of the hellish residence at once. He abandoned his search for a broom and put his hand down in front of the pen's heavy prongs to flick the remaining piece of meat into the cell.

Nitro flew on to the man's hand as if fired from a grenade launcher. Lester screamed bitter shrieks as Nitro's jaws clamped onto him and, with his crocodile-like mandibles, broke the carpal bones in his wrist like dried pretzel sticks. Lester tried to kick the final steak into the cage and succeeded. But now it was a moot point. He looked for something to try and beat Nitro away with, but everything in the basement was way 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.

Lester's wrist had been pulverized into crimson chunks and pulp. The pain and panic behind his eyes was an electrical storm. However, Nitro's grip seemed to be weakening. The poison and sharp nails 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 full grand mal seizure, going in and out of consciousness, but its jaws would not release Lester's mangled hand.

Lester let one long, sharp cry escape his mouth, and pulled his injured arm away from Nitro with strength he didn't know he could summon. Nitro pulled back on his wrist with equal determination. At last, Lester managed to free his hand from the animal's mouth, but Nitro had one final burst of adrenaline left in his system. He swung back, fast as a ricocheted bullet, and clamped on to Lester's index finger.

Nitro cleanly tore the finger from the remainder of the digits.

Then the dog hacked out several mouthfuls of bilious fluids, and dropped down flat in its pen.

*

Wanda placed a latex Trojan condom 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 Brazilian-cowgirl ape-thing, 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 nanosecond of the congress with Wanda. 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'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, pelvis-pounding, heavy push-ups.

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

After the successful completion of their coupling, Wanda made sure Boo was all right, and nursed him back to health with several cans of King Cobra malt liquor and mouthfuls of the Barbecue-flavored potato chips that 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 that could eventually be suitable for Wanda's home defense needs, 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 provable motive. He 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 a labor-intensive morning.

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!" he 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 him a competency lesson in the bargain.

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

He grabbed Lester by his shirt lapels and heavily snarled, "you ignorant cocksucker!" His breath was like locomotive steam and ethyl alcohol.

"Did you finish the job Lester?" 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 red carnage and vacant spot where Lester's finger had previously been located. Lester repeated his whiny plea. "Sonny, *do* something. It's *killing* me. I think I'm going to pass out!"

Sonny collected himself in a flash, and pulled the whisky flask from his pocket. He held Lester's arm in a death-grip and poured the expensive bourbon 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 just under Lester's tattered, now useless wrist. Lester was openly crying, and his legs were straining to support his weight. When Sonny tightened the tourniquet to try and stop the blood loss, Lester violently heaved some sort of opaque, yolky substance from his mouth. He did this because there was nothing left in his gut to emit. Sonny grabbed Lester 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' 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 Boo give her a thorough cleaning of the perineum with the massage-machine set onto the "heavy pulse" mode.

He was only too happy to comply, and vanquished every unwanted particle of material from her exquisite lower regions with the stimulating instrument set on any variety of strengths, including light spray, continuous, full spiral, ocean swirl, and, of course, the preferred heavy pulse setting. Wanda swore several times during their stay at the Super 8 motor-hotel that she would purchase one of these fine household bath and home items at the local department store 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 his fleshy plumbing-unit to red-line pressure, and, inevitably, a slam-bang satisfying emancipation from it.

*

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

Sonny 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 Lester'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 Lester around to face him before they took off.

"Don't you *dare* bleed on my clean car seats you little maggot," he loudly warned Lester.

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

Lester Ganz 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. Sonny bellowed at him to calm down as the more he moved around and went to pieces, the more blood he'd invariably lose. He handed Lester the remainder of his flask and ordered him to drink it, which he did easily.

Lester had never been adept at keeping his cool while under pressure and in short order became completely unraveled. He began screeching like an electro-shocked lab-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 eyeballs nearly leapt from their sockets at the realization of a potential amputation of his hand occurring at the hospital. He gazed at Sonny 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 relative availability on the market. Finally they made it back to Triangle Drive. Boo opened the door of the F-10 for her 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 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 to peck. 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 fruit pie for his lunch break, and it hadn't cost him a dime. It had been a very good day.

He 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 Youngblood 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. Liz looked up at her and announced, "Honey, you and that fine set of tits you're wearin' look like you could *use* a drink." She walked up to her girl, and kissed her gently on the mouth. To a casual viewer, her action would have looked like a religious confirmation. Then she stuffed a one hundred dollar bill into Wanda's black lace bra.

Liz stared at her 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 Liz," 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 Liz'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 riding 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 motel, 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 anytime soon, OK Liz?”

Liz Fury poured Wanda a paper cup full of white corn from the flask in her purse. She brought it to Wanda 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 thanks to the small favor that she’d performed for her today. Liz thought to herself that 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 Liz came around to her side of the counter and began massaging her shoulders. Wanda relaxed, closed her eyes, and let her 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 Wanda’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. He 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 hard 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 a toddler in a burning hotel room. Sonny ignored him until they pulled up across the street from the Emergency Room. He grabbed Lester by the shirt collar and began telling him his instructions in no uncertain terms.

“Can you *walk!*?” Sonny roared.

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

“Jesus Christ,” Sonny rejoined. He was afraid Lester 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 Lester, 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. You’re *Joe Brown* for the rest of the day. I’m going to put five hundred dollars in your pocket. That’ll get you in the place and secure some kind of treatment. Tonight, Lester, 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?”

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

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. He became quite lucid for a few seconds, and confirmed that he understood exactly what had to happen. He, for reasons that are still unclear, graciously thanked Sonny for their afternoon excursion and briskly exited the car. Lester Ganz walked with the tight grace of a recently deposed monarch half way across the street towards the hospital. Then, like a man who'd just been shot in the back of the neck by a powerful rifle, he collapsed in a glorious heap on the road. He was nearly crushed on the spot by a middle-aged woman driving a Ford Aerostar mini-van.

The lady in the Aerostar 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 collapsible gurney, they strapped him in, and wheeled Lester tout de suite into their trauma center.

Sonny watched the proceedings with Lester, the van-lady and the manatee-sized orderlies in clean, slack-jawed incredulity. His liquor 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 his 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 toe-freak, skank-pussy rat. Sonny roared off in his sedan to dispose of the blood-soaked 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

cackled to himself while blazing away from the hospital zone like an escaped mental convict in a cheap B-movie.

Shortly after the savage gore-fest came to an end at Boo Smalls's cabin, the deadly-chic Dasha Mercury glided up to the front of his property in the Blue Mamba Viper and turned off the engine. She began applying final touches of La Prairie make-up to her flawless face to make herself impossible to resist to the famous Boo Smalls. She placed her handbag over her shoulder and cat-walked, as only post-Soviet supermodels can, to the front door of his cabin, ignoring all the posted signs which warned any trespasser of certain-and-undesirable consequences.

"Got-dam this is a real shit-hole," she thought to herself, "If I must to do this for Mik-ail to buy for me a super Rolex, and maybe throw in an Audi cabrio for Christmas, then do it I must." She knocked with conviction several times on the front door with no response. She then sashayed her way to the back of the cabin to try her luck there.

Michael Vick was thumbing through the current issue of *Vogue* magazine's Paris edition while Dasha worked her way to the back of Boo Smalls's filthy cabin. Vick came across a scent-page advertisement for Channel's Mademoiselle perfume which featured several way-past-fabulous glossy photos of Dasha as the stunning focal point of the ad. He scratched the surface of the page with his fingernail to active the scent and took a deep breath of the sample.

"French perfumes have always been a bit heavy for my taste," he mused aloud to no one at all. "Not that brassy colognes don't have their place in this complex world of ours, but this particular scent could send a crime scene Bloodhound into some sort of near- apoplexy state I'm sure. Give me my Ferre anyway. Ahh, but don't get me started on such subjects."

As Vick pondered the virtues and liabilities of French and Italian colognes, Dasha moved into view of the satellite camera and her image at last appeared onto the giant plasma screen in the living room. Vick put the fashion magazine down and watched the proceedings like a devotee.

Dasha walked past the blood-streaked, dust trail that led up to the cabin's back door. She peered inside the open door and called out in her thick Russian accent, "allo, is someone here, I'm Dasha, I want a dog. Cash I have." She received no answer and rapped on the open door some more to gain any occupant's attention. Again there was no response.

Her cell phone suddenly rang and it startled her to near shock. She answered it and Vick was on the other end. "Mik-ail, vot the hell you're doing?! I was scared to point of making pip in my too nice leather-shorts. You see me on screen at home?"

"Da," Vick responded. "Krushka-moy, I think you should get out of there. This thing doesn't look so cool to me. It's got a bad feel to it. We'll try another time. Also, Channel perfume is heavy as communist tear-gas if you didn't already know that. Come back home now, I think it's a good idea."

"Nyet, baby, now it starts to get fun. See you after I do business with crazy-dog man. Tomorrow I have Rolex for breakfast." She closed the phone and proceeded into Boo Smalls' cabin. Vick watched the back door like a hawk from the Swedish-style sofa-thing.

Dasha moved into the cabin and up to the top of the basement steps. The first wafts of Lester's bourbon-based blown-groceries and the dogs's decomposing flesh hit her nostrils like a shovel full of broken glass and she nearly wretched from the odor.

"It smells like some-von shit his pants and been fuckin' down there!" she said aloud.

She took a deep breath, held it, and walked down the stairs into the basement. In the dim light she saw the training equipment and dog pens. And then she saw the blood: splashed around the floor like school paint. She reeled on her Jimmy Choo boots, recovered a bit and moved over to the pens where the dogs were kept. The three cadavers were on their sides, with thick pools of blood and vital fluids surrounding their bodies. She could hold her breath no longer, and let loose an ear splitting cry of "awwwwwwww" which increased in volume with every step as she sprinted up the basement stairs and out the back door of the cabin. For the second time in a few hours, the rear door nearly exploded

off of its frame. As she bolted to the Blue Mamba Viper, she grabbed her cell phone from her bag and speed-dialed Vick, who'd watched her blaze from the place just seconds before.

"Mik-ail" she screeched into the phone, "something is wery, wery wrong, I mean fucked-up, I'm coming home. Dead dogs and vomint all over the place. Have the wodka ready when I'm there. Dasha out." She slid across the hood of the car like in the *Dukes of Hazzard* TV series and into the driver's seat of the car. She slammed the key into the ignition, started the engine and tore out of the place towards Vick's cabin outside of Youngblood.

*

Boo Smalls wheeled the F-10 off of Interstate 81, and down the rural route to his cabin in Youngblood. "Home, sweet home," Boo mused to himself as he drove his car 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 was listening to the country music radio station as he had tooled his way home. He was humming to Willie Nelson's classic "Whisky River," and tapping out the song's time signatures with his thumbs on the steering wheel as he backed the car into its usual space and turned off the engine. 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 thick drops and splashes 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 thrown onto his face.

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 wasn't stupid. He knew that having a back up firearm was important, and just because he didn't use the handgun on a regular basis didn't mean it fell into disrepair from idleness. He cleaned and oiled his Remington semi-auto .30-06 and Glock .38 every month. He fired a few rounds from his pistol every couple of weeks at the vermin, snakes, coons, opossum, skunks, etc., that found their way to his distillery's shed to drink the purified water or eat the valuable grain. Boo's handgun was ready to rock and roll any time, and he was

ready to blow the head off any meddling shit-bag on-or-near-his-premises who messed with his life's work and investment.

And, if they had the brass balls to trespass *inside* his private residence, well it'd be just his pleasure to line them up like China dolls in a Vassar dorm room and spray their pretty gray matter from here to Kingdom Come with .38 caliber southern hospitality. 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. He 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 shitless like in those cardboard 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, entrails and the something like French cologne 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 was the morning contents of Lester Ganz's stomach which he'd blown out of his pie-hole a few hours before. Plus there was a hefty sample of his personal blood type mixed in to the rank, intestinal slop 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 frozen-but-frenzied mindset. God have mercy on the country pissants who did this to me." Incredibly, he retained his composure although the mental stress-points were cracking, and he 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 punk-ass scum-bags! Die like friggin' *cock-a-roaches!* I'll eat your goddam livers for my lunch and then you'll know who I really am! Boo Smalls takes no shit from nobody in his own cabin, babies, no he does not! "

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 sanguinary 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 lank 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 his dogs, Boo Smalls had 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 Boo's property and hang-out on his land during the day. It was only about a mile away from their family's parking slot at the J.E.B. Stuart trailer park, on the far side of Interstate 81's shoulder. Buzz had discovered Boo's double-vat, white corn distillery system about a year ago while on a scavenging expedition. When he first cautiously approached the gleaming stainless steel containers, he believed them to be crudely-constructed, abandoned 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 property was an especially good place to spend the afternoons because of the abundance of vermin-like wildlife located there. Invariably there was an opossum, squirrel, fox, rat or something with four legs in the woods to chase around and terrify, or, at very least, throw rocks at.

One time in the early spring, Kenny had espied a fat, black squirrel sitting on its haunches on a tree stump, munching on an acorn. He quickly brought the squirrel's presence to Buzz's attention and they watched it for a minute in complete silence. The pair of boys marveled at the creature's almost human facial expressions as it examined the nut and twiddled it about in its paws. The manual deftness it displayed while handling its meal was astonishing.

Then Kenny rose from their observation point, removed a smooth stone from his pocket, and whipped it hard, side-arm style, at the unsuspecting squirrel. Almost as if radar guided, the stone nailed the squirrel dead in the chest, knocking it several feet into the air. It died instantly, never having had a

clue what had happened. As a token of esteem to his brother, Buzz bought Kenny an extra-large, Cherry-Tsunami flavored Slurpee at the Sheetz convenience store later 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 (V-DOT in local parlance) had been widening the highway to accommodate more traffic that feeds into Interstate 66- the highway that leads to Washington D.C. and other northern towns.

Buzz and Kenny had seen news clips about Washington, D.C. on the local television stations many times before. They almost always showed some kind of political demonstrations by various groups wanting more money, recognition, power, or something on that order- but it was mostly more money they invariably seemed to want. Nobody seemed to be content about anything in that city. The television reporters in D.C. were all exceptionally whiny things, too. Everything they said in their reports 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 and completely worthy of pillage by the Rayhall brothers: short lengths of thick rope, different colored electrical wires, steel stakes that looked like medieval weapons and muddy work gloves were always scattered about the sites. 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 finally put down.

The paint cans were the really coveted items. They'd take them to their favorite hiding place on Boo's land and graffiti things like, "Korn," "Slipknot," "tits" and "pussy" on the surrounding tree trunks or big rocks on the ground. Their personal clearing on his property was claimed and vividly marked off,

usually in a fluorescent orange color, for all possible intruders to see. It was definitely the territory of the Rayhalls.

One day they'd checked out a roadside construction site that was near its completion, but found nothing of any great interest to take. They'd even walked past Boo's property on the shoulder of the road to get there in anticipation of finding some great prize but were disappointed in their search. After a while 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 there.

A large raccoon was trundling up the hill to its den. Buzz alerted Kenny to the raccoon's presence and soon a fusillade of rocks and gravel were being hurled at the startled animal. The two boys screeched and galloped after the retreating raccoon, whipping jagged stones and anything they could find at it.

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

The orange fluorescent spray 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 cans if the sunlight hadn't reflected off of them at just the proper angle. The boys unearthed both of them and immediately forgot about their humiliation with the raccoon; they were in scavenger heaven now.

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

*

Unfortunately for the Rayhall brothers, 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.

Extreme Biohazard Warning

Transport From: Pohick River Nuclear Facility

Pohick, Virginia

Low Level Radioactive Waste Container

Phosphorus 32 (P-32)

Transport date: May 20, 2006

Final Destination: Red Falls, Nevada

Primary Nuclear Waste Repository

It wasn't an awful lot of dirty rad waste the young boys had come across. But that's the problem with spent nuclear material. When you get rid of it, you've got to get rid of *all* of it because it's

some very-highly-intensely powerful shit. 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 last 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 check. 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 Interstate 81 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 brothers' 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 stills. Then they both saw something that made them forget their previous chagrin with the fat raccoon, and their inability to open the assumed 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 opossum

like laser-sighted missiles, incrementally gaining speed like ravenous tiger sharks on their way to intercept the intended prey.

Kenny could not contain his thrill of the hunt and let go a savage war-cry whoop as they got within rock-throwing range of the opossum. Throwing his canister at the now fleeing animal, Kenny struck still#2 which was empty. The sound of the flying metal can crashing into the hollow steel of the vat was like the sound of an enormous Asian temple-gong being struck by a speeding Suzuki racing team motorcycle. The opossum fled like a shot upon hearing the thunderous atonal 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 distillery vat with the canister.

Buzz followed his brother's suit, and rifled his canister sidearm style at the still. Another metallic tidal wave of sound filled the air as the can impacted with the vat. They picked up their cans and hit both stills many times. The sound was like enormous, Quasi-Moto style, demented wind chimes swinging in a hurricane. The boys were thrilled beyond words with the indescribable cacophony they could create merely by hurling spray paint cans against a steel vat.

Still #1 contained an amount of the bad white corn liquor that Boo had botched a while before; about 20 gallons worth of the stuff remained inside the vat. When the canisters hit that still, a deeper, more resonant 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 muzzle-blast report of the Glock was like death itself. The boys froze in crystallized terror, and Kenny's almost full bladder released its lukewarm liquid contents. Buzz took both canisters in his hands and, in clean panic, quickly threw one up the ex-current siphon of each vat. One made a rattling sound as it hit the steel floor while the other splashed into the leftover white corn on the bottom of the second vat.

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 as their sneakers trampled the ground like red-line RPM hotrod pistons. It was an absolutely reptile brain escape from their immediate, life-threatening surroundings.

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.

*

Dasha Mercury came blazing up to the front of Vick's cabin outside of Youngblood in the Blue Mamba Viper. She had calmed down somewhat after getting her mammoth snootfull of rank blood and guts in Boo Smalls's basement, but was still, for the most part, mentally frazzled. She had been gibbering weird bullshit to herself as she flashed down Interstate 81 and turned onto Vick's property.

Dog-fights I like so much, but dog cemetery and vomint, shit, piss, bloodbath and torture basement is too much for Dasha. I am runway model, not lady-Frankenstein. Mik-ail must buy his own damn dogs from Smalls-man. I must call Storm agency. Get me work anywhere, even someplace in Guam or Micronesia outlet mall, I don't really care. I need this devoid-of-chic drama not at all.

She turned hard into the driveway and the Blue Mamba skidded to a stop next to Vick's perfectly restored, vintage Firebird Trans Am. She jumped out of the ride and sprinted, as best she could in Jimmy Choo spike heeled boots, to the front door of the cabin. Before she reached the door, Vick appeared in the doorway with a bottle of ice-cold Crystal vodka in one hand and large punchbowl full of dried figs in the other. The bowl had been stolen from the Pierre hotel in New York City during a fund-raising auction for the renovation of urban playgrounds in economically depressed areas of the city.

Dasha approached Vick, kissed him hard on the mouth and then greedily took the bottle from his hand. She quaffed huge mouthfuls of the stuff like a badly dehydrated feral wanderer might do from a found wineskin. When she'd finished roughly a third of the bottle she burped loudly and her nostrils felt as though blue-hot butane flames were passing them.

"bozhe moy!" she screeched and crossed her eyes in pain as the alcohol vapors passed through her respiratory system. She coughed, spat and sputtered for a few seconds and then took a handful of figs from the stolen crystal punchbowl. She crammed them into her mouth, two-at-a-time, and chewed them like a camel on methamphetamine, spitting out the stems with the precision of a German-made kitchen appliance. "Yom-yom-yom-yom" she mechanically repeated herself as she noshed and gradually became more settled and at peace with herself.

Vick watched her actions in clean amazement. He continued to hold the vodka bottle and punchbowl for Dasha within her easy reach, as if he were a piece of heavy, mahogany, antebellum house furniture in a plantation anteroom. When she appeared to be approaching something like a normal state, he asked her if she might like to come inside and tell him what exactly happened at the cabin.

Dasha explained to Vick, before the full kick of the Crystal kicked in, about the dead pitbulls in the basement. Nobody had been at Smalls's cabin when she was there, and she was sure they were the same dogs they'd been watching on the plasma screen from their satellite camera for the last couple of weeks. Boo Smalls's dogs were all history, there was no doubt about it. But someone had surely been in the house to do the killing only a short time before she'd arrived. The physical evidence was everywhere.

She began hiccupping and lay down prone on the Swedish sofa-thing. Vick went to the closet and brought her a full-length, Siberian fox coat and covered her. She was soon in la-la land dreaming about figs, no-load mutual funds and, for some strange reason, French-vanilla ice cream. The fur coat,

incidentally, had been accidentally left at his cabin last winter by American pop-artist Robert Rauschenberg when Vick bought several of his mixed-media pieces for the cabin's rarely used game room area.

"Well, it seems the game is getting more than a little interesting in Youngblood, Virginia," Vick said aloud. "And, my Spider-man senses are telling me, that things are going to get a lot more bizarre in a short period of time. Ergo, I'm pretty damn sure that it's time I give a call to "the Spazz" for a bit of support in Camp Vick." Michael Vick flipped open his cell phone and scrolled down the list of contacts until he reached the number for his long-time associate Dwayne "Spazz-man" Watts. He hit the call button and within seconds the song "Return of the Spider," from Alice Cooper's little-known cult classic album *Easy Action* filled his ear, which was the music-call wait tone which Dwayne Watts had installed on his cell phone. Vick waited for his friend to pick-up and listened to the spy-drums and atonal guitar noodling with piqued interest. It was good stuff to be sure. He continued listening to the lengthy ringtone and finally decided, in no uncertain terms, "not bad, but it's not the Crue."

*

Friday night at the Clean n' Jerk Saloon.

Sonny was 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 at the bar for the bookies to view. 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 in Youngblood were notified that Boo and his seemingly unbeatable dogs were nowhere to be found. Within the hour several local trainers showed up with their Pits, ready to do battle on a more even playing field than the week before.

The 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. Liz was pouring complimentary shots of Jack Daniel's for them, and beaming with the satisfaction of a job well done. She estimated that at least 25-30K in betting fees would be garnered that night, and all because of the timely elimination of a few uncommonly bad dogs. Life, according to Liz Fury, was a really good thing if you knew how to grab and manipulate it by the soft parts.

Liz and Sonny mutually agreed that Lester Ganz's horrific accident today was not much to be worried about on the serious-retaliation side of the equation. Sonny had driven past his grocery store after he dumped him off at the hospital's 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' for the summer" sign was in place. The door to the shop was bolted, and the lights were off. Their man was definitely somewhere on a lengthy vacation by now.

"You sure he's gonna lose that flipper?" Liz cautiously questioned him.

"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 blithely responded, "well, there go the piano lessons I guess."

Liz assured her pals she wouldn't miss her weekly c-note, podiatric sessions with Lester Ganz. He'd been used for all he was worth when his time had come to provide assistance for a troublesome situation and his name could now be scratched off her list of single-use, disposable people. Wanda nervously chuckled, sipped her powerful booze, and crossed her perfect legs upon hearing this

information. Sonny knocked back his shot of bourbon and barked aloud, “God, I *love* Youngblood, Virginia!”

Liz Fury told Sonny and Wanda they might want to carry a sidearm with them for the next few days. Boo Smalls might come back here to the Clean n’ Jerk asking questions and looking for trouble. He’s not stupid, and will be sure to understand it was a purely economic motive behind the killing of his animals. He’s definitely going to grill anyone and everyone he thinks has something to gain by his demise.

Wanda balked at the idea of carrying a gun in her handbag. She said she’d probably end up killing herself with it as she was unused to carrying anything but condoms, Kleenex, tampons and chewing gum in her pocketbook. But Liz was adamant about Wanda arming herself with a loaded gun, and told her that blowing away some dickhead in the act of self-defense was the easiest thing in the world to do. And it’s completely legal to boot. She’d probably end up liking it.

Liz repeated their 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 fighting-animals? That he’d made the betting odds at the dog fights in town undesirable for international gamblers to partake in? Boo Smalls was completely on his own as far as any kind of payback went. She told Wanda if she saw him on or near 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 to start something. She also told Wanda that 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 finally time for the Friday night fights to begin at the Clean n’ Jerk saloon. 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 to1 in favor of Big Pete. 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 wagers 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 gun collection, and send a few rounds into the sky to kick things off. They walked up to the edge of the pit, and got the thumbs-up sign from both trainers to start the fight. The crowd was standing up, cheering like it was the Army-Navy football game, and waiting for Wanda to blast some lead into the night. Liz showed her how to release the safety, insert the clip, and set the firing pin. Now it was up to Wanda to ventilate the sky with slugs from her pistol.

The roar from the mob around the battle pit was deafening. The two dogs were in their cages, angrily chewing at the bars for release. Liz Fury had her hands firmly placed on Wanda's hips, and was whispering words of encouragement into her ear. Wanda, almost without realizing what she was doing, raised the pistol with both hands at a perfect 45 degree angle, and unloaded the 7-shot clip at the fingernail moon without a shudder.

The release of the hot rounds from the gun was a new, absolutely delicious experience for her. It was pure sensory register excitement that snaked over her temporal lobes like unregulated electric current; it was pure delight; it was like pure, unadulterated, very dirty, *sex*.

Wanda Jackson realized something about herself at that pivotal moment in her life. She learned that she liked the ballistic power and hard kick of the gun's backlash running through her rock solid arms. She enjoyed the smell of the potassium nitrate and the deafening thunder from the muzzle. She discovered that she *adored* the experience of firing a high-velocity semiauto into the heart of the night very much. She liked it more than anyone could imagine.

The slavering animals were instantly released from their tethers. Roscoe and Big Pete charged towards each other at ramming speed, and they crashed, head-to-head 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 Big Pete and end up behind him. Roscoe then bit into the other dog's lower flank like a Great White shark. It pulled a mouthful of pink thigh meat cleanly from the bone; the sound it made was like that of a thin, tabloid newspaper being torn in two.

Big Pete shrieked like a steam whistle, and lost control of his masticated leg. Roscoe danced around Big Pete trying to find the ideal angle to latch on to it and completely finish it off. However, Big Pete jerked and flopped his way around to keep eye to eye with Roscoe. He constantly kept in front of him 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.

He 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 Big Pete'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, salmon-hued 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 visually examined him the way a middle-aged, free-clinic doctor might examine a very young prostitute's nether regions. He considered Big Pete's position like a seasoned executioner atop the gallows in the public square. Big Pete tried to crawl towards him to try and continue the fight. But he had lost an eye, and had nearly no control of his body movements. His flagging brain was telling the unresponding flesh to continue the

attack, but all it could do was flop uselessly around in the dust and undulate like a beached, mammoth jellyfish.

Roscoe came up behind Big Pete, clamped onto its neck, and bit down hard into the spinal cord. It appeared to the crowd that Big Pete was jolted by a wet cell shock. Then it went lifeless; the strings cut from the puppet. Almost as if in self-congratulatory tribute, Roscoe lifted Big Pete's body in the air with his mouth. After a pause of a few seconds to savor the victory, he flung it into the center of the burrow. It thudded and skidded on the ground and finally came to a stop. It lay there like a badly-mangled Sunday pot roast, steaming and oozing multi-colored, pastel fluids from the endless teeth marks covering its body.

The Clean n' Jerk crowd went wild with satisfaction.

Sonny ran to Liz Fury with a beatific smile pasted to his usually inexpressive face. Liz was sitting with Wanda. Her hand was perched in Wanda's lap, almost as a territorial marker of ownership. Liz leaned over and kissed Sonny hard on the mouth, but told him this wasn't the time to be a chump and start playing like a bad-ass. They had to be quick, and make sure the *real* side-bets they'd made for themselves were paying off. There's no secure-betting if you're not wagering with the house bookies and one must protect their interests and be quick when it comes to pay-off time side-bet action. Sonny immediately understood there was serious work to be done before any victory celebrations and tore off from the two of 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 the underdog 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 3-to-1 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 to spend some big money. 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. Liz Fury worked the crowd with hearty congratulations for all the winners and bought a round of white corn for all the lucky gamblers present at the Clean n' Jerk saloon on this hot summer night.

Liz was on top of the world.

*

Dwayne "Spazz-man" Watts was at the Florence Moon pelletteria on the fashionable Via del Corso in Rome, Italy, buying leather jackets for the upcoming fall season when his cell phone began to sound. It started playing its customized ringtone of Mark Morrison's 1990's club-player, FM classic "Return of the Mack." Maria and Andreea, the ultra-hip, Euro-cutie sales babes at the leather goods store, were greatly impressed with Dwayne's taste in vintage cell phone ringtones. They politely repaired from his side to prepare for him a cappuccino café while he spoke to the party on the other end of the line.

"Prego," he spoke into the receiver with his most genteel, faux-gentrified speaking voice.

"I find the work of Dostoyevsky, even at his best, to be over-wordy and occasionally wooden," Vick said to his friend, "while the novels of Iceberg Slim, in my humble opinion, never fail to satisfy the reader."

"You called me from the fucking Virginia boondocks to tell me that?" Spazz-man answered.

"Not just that," Vick rejoined, "Also, the American literary critic and poet Edgar Allan Poe pretty much owed his entire career, what little there was of it while he was alive, to the accolades of Charles Baudelaire, who was the first name European author to greatly laud his work. Poe was a Virginia native, which is a fact that many people don't know."

"Were you not wearing your helmet during the playoffs last year?" Spazz-man questioned.

"Where the hell are you, anyway?" Vick asked him.

“In Rome... Rome, Italy, that is, buying leather. It’s my weakness, you know that.”

“Secretly doing lunch with Rocco Sifreddi again, are we? He’s so... oh, I don’t know...fifteen minutes ago.” Vick playfully taunted him.

“Fuck you, fuck your friends, if you have any,” the Spazz mirthfully rejoined.

“I need you to get your leather-wearin’, Via del Corso ass back in the States pronto. I’m looking to buy a certain breed of animal, I believe you’re familiar with the type I’m speaking of, and I’m trying to contact Boo Smalls for a sale. Dasha went over to his cabin in Youngblood and said there was some very bad, very nasty juju going on there. She came back here completely fried. Somebody wiped-out his investment animals Josef Mengele style. I need you here as soon as you can make it. This is the shit, baby. This is crunch time.”

A hushed silence came between them on the line.

“THE Boo Smalls?” the Spazz questioned, his tone of voice becoming reverential at the mere mention of the famous trainer’s name.

“Oh, yes,” Vick answered, “the man, the legend. As you can imagine, money is not an object here. Get your hind-parts over to Fiumicino Aeroporto. Use my card number and get a first class ticket to Dulles Airport in D.C. and rent a ride to get here. I’m at my place near Youngblood, not Surry County. Don’t go near Surry County, capiche?”

“Gotcha, boss,” he said, “I’ll be there tomorrow if not sooner. Boo Smalls, my God. Someone offed those fine dogs of his. This is not merely a fucked-up sitch, Vick. This is a matter of Church and State, man; this is some really bad pizza. Ciao, babe. See you soon.”

“Hang-on,” Vick quickly interjected, “I need one more thing from you. Stop by the Barberini metro stop and get me a couple of packs of the three-color linguine from the mini-market at the north exit. I’m queer for that shit.”

“Done,” replied the Spazz, and closed the line. Maria and Andreea returned to his side and they all enjoyed their cappuccinos and delicate, lemon-cream filled, tartlettes which had been delivered courtesy of the corner bakery. Later, the girls assisted him in selecting several hand-crafted jackets and full-length coats for the upcoming fall and winter months.

The sales girls at the boutique were beautiful and helpful to a fault, the leather garments he purchased were of the finest quality and fit him like a sheath, but there was a profound melancholia in Dwayne “Spazz-man” Watts’s temperament for the rest of the day. Something was awry in the state of Virginia, he could feel it in his body’s infinitely complex network of connecting fibers and cartilage. His senses were tingling like pheromonal lightning flashes, and he could see upcoming trouble in his mind’s eye. He somehow knew that there was soon to be a showdown in Youngblood and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

*

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 and bereavement several times. Impotence became rage, then sorrow, then acceptance, and round and round it went. Boo, in his subconscious mind, was involuntarily coming up with a recompense plan to justify this recent event which had taken place in his home. It was ragged and disorganized now, floating around in his head on the weakest of brain waves at this point, but a plan was surely in the making.

The one sure thing he was certain of was that 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 in a grim situation: he'd taken the tempting bait from her and paid the price for it in a monumental fashion. He believed Wanda herself was too obtuse to plan something like this on her own; but her boss was another issue entirely.

He decided he'd have to pay a visit to the Clean n' Jerk today, and see how things had gone without his participation in the dog fights 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 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 would be more than a little happy to see his fight-dogs in the pet cemetery. Yes, Boo believed, he'd pay Liz Fury a visit today and it wouldn't be a bad idea to bring the Glock .38 along, too. Just as a precaution against any pending unpleasantness.

But now it was time to clean-up the carnage in his cabin's basement, 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. This pretty mess that happened in his house yesterday was just some sort of big revenge plan or business consideration against him which had been brought to its inevitable climax. It was a mano-y-mano thing and nothing more than that.

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

Boo openly wept. A flood of emotion and shock thoroughly overwhelmed him, and rocked his inner-being to its very core. 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; it had been too sudden an event and he needed time to cope with the fact that they're gone. But something else had to be considered as well.

They were starting to decompose.

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

Boo stood in his basement and had no idea what to do. His bewilderment was like something akin to the perfect innocence of childhood. He stood there motionless, alone and spiritually bankrupt and 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. It became stuck in his head and sounded more asinine and alien to him with each repetition. "Empty. Emp-tee. Em-p-tee" he bleated like an imbecile in a state institution.

He turned, walked up the stairs of his cellar like a sleepwalker, and got a jar of his private white corn from over the TV stand. He took a long draught from the jar, and stared out his front window for a moment.

"White lightning," he whispered to himself. "I've got half a vat 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 in a fit of child-like, yet somehow malevolent and ominous giggling. He 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 pure fucking alcohol that would make a billy goat puke in my still outside. Well Maybe, I could put those carcasses in the vat, 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- keep 'em fresh and smilin' like one of them big-skulled Egyptian mummies. And then, when I find out who did this bit of hellacious 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 and deliver some perfectly preserved pit bulls with their eviscerated guts full of live dynamite 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 vats.

The day was becoming overcast. Boo looked into the horizon like a religious devotee while carrying the cadaver-filled, canvass sack to the place where they'd be preserved until further use was required. The sack seemed to become heavier with every step, and Boo put it down once to catch his breath before continuing on. Soon he reached his shed and the steel vats. A couple of raccoons were munching on the contents of a small sack of opened grain; the bag of grain 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 small radioactive waste canister on the bottom of the metal vat, which had been delivered courtesy of Buzz and Kenny Rayhall.

Boo closed the vat's lid 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 and Wanda Jackson a visit and see how they were doing today. He began walking back to his cabin and stopped for a moment. He

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 a bit of business to several of the local dilettante and greenhorn fight-dog trainers last evening. After her chats with them, she now had a good reserve of "kamikaze puppies" lined-up for easy action, and ready to take a fall to adjust the betting odds at the Clean n' Jerk whenever she needed them.

She now had the whole economic pyramid of pit bull action in Youngblood in her hands; like a big, mama black-widow spider in the center of her web. It was her show entirely now, from soup to nuts. She was *the* power-broker of fight-dog commerce in Youngblood, and she enjoyed her position at the top to no end.

Sonny received his ten percent cut from the house receipts each weekend evening for his 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 evening of illegal revenue for him. They entered the unbelievable cash figures in the bar ledger and Liz placed the receipts and account book in the office's combination safe.

Sonny was feeling amorous after experiencing a night of easy money and Roscoe's victory in the battle-pit. He moved over to where Liz was standing, lifted her up on to the office desk and slipped her leather skirt up over her toned haunches. He was slowly unzipped by her, and they were joined at their hot crossroads in only a few moments. Liz bit into his shoulder during his locomotive-like thrusts inside her, and she nearly passed out from ecstasy at the taste of his red blood in her mouth. Their climax was

loud and breathtaking, like the groans and howls one hears in a professional wrestling match. Within minutes 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 desk. She motioned with her hand for Wanda to come over to her. Liz put her both her hands over Wanda’s shoulders and softly brushed her lips over hers in the most delicate kiss imaginable. Then she produced a 100 dollar bill from the pocket of her skirt, and placed it down the front of Wanda’s tight jeans.

“We had a *very* good night,” Liz crooned to her. “Listen kitten,” she continued, “I want you to start working at the bar on the weekends. All those crazy, rich assholes 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 bullshit. 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 timorously 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., I was a waitress at 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 who worked there 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 in the crowd always like to show off for their dates, and they’ll buy anything their girl even looks at to impress them. The vendors who cruise the bars selling roses and cheesy, rocker-style 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 Wanda's business proposal.

The Cleopatra Bikini Shop's inventory was backing up. They were selling plenty more merry widows and bustiers for the fall season now instead of beach-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 for the IRS boys. 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 bloated, well-off twits with too much dough in their pockets?

Liz decided to have some fun with the situation, and thought she'd pull a Tom Sawyer trick on Wanda. Just for a minute. Just for fun. She looked pensively into the air, frowned a bit, and shook her head sadly at her.

Wanda's lower lip actively 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 the old inventory anymore. There's no room anywhere in the Cleopatra. The place looks like a ghetto 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 more than she liked to admit.

Wanda was losing her enthusiasm for the project, and becoming maudlin. She knew from experience that when Liz Fury didn’t want something to happen, it usually didn’t. She shrugged her shoulders and began to turn and leave the office.

“OK, Liz,” she said dejectedly, “you know what’s best for the bar. Thanks anyway. See you tonight.”

Liz let her get to 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?”

Wanda turned to face her with a look of pious gratefulness on her face. 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 in the show. 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 exchanged a long, tasty lip-lock. Sonny, 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 Sonny crowed out to his boss, “Liz Fury, baby you are one *live wire, girl! Absolute freakin’ 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 and nothing more. There's no sense in messing up such a pretty face for no reason- unless it becomes an absolute necessity, of course.

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 Liz Fury the bad fate that had come to his prize animals yesterday 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 country music legend George Jones sing a slow lament about being hopelessly stranded in some remote southern town.

He swung the truck into the Clean n' Jerk 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 he 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 everybody inside the place to pieces. The thoughts of his slain animals kept flashing through his mind and it was driving him to something like madness: moments of rage would subside into sudden heartache and then ricochet back into wild, uncontrollable anger.

He had to keep reminding himself that he only wanted information now. Revenge against a guilty party, he was sure, would come later. For the time being, he should be nothing more than a calm country boy with some bad news to share about his life's investment. Then when the time came for retribution, he would first 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. The bar was open and 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. He 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. The alcohol was slowly saturating their body tissues and preventing any further flesh decomposition. 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 vat. 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 canine cadavers 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.

*

Michael Vick closed his cell phone after speaking with the Spazz in Rome, and went to where Dasha lay on the Swedish sofa-thing. He looked at her sleeping there and made sure she was out cold. Then, because he's not stupid, he took her Claude Montana shoulder bag and retrieved the five thousand dollars he'd given her for advance money to lure Boo Smalls into a commercial transaction. He knew from past experience that there was an unspoken, "implied ownership" involved in every scenario when Dasha dealt with cold, hard, cash. She liked to receive it, she didn't like to give it back. Ever. She was an agency supermodel and made extremely good sums of money during the various

designer fashion week extravaganzas in Europe and America. But she could pour on the hot, tormented tears in a tick and cry like a wounded cheetah when money had to come out of her pocket. It probably had something to do with her early childhood living environment, which Vick had the good sense never to ask her about.

He went to the far end of the cabin's living room and removed a framed and signed Ed "Big Daddy" Roth lithograph of the famed Ratfink from the wall. Behind the picture was a combination safe where Vick kept any variety of valuable papers, bank account numbers, jewelry and large sums of money in various currencies. And, of course, it also contained the "for-your eyes-only" phone book full of the names, telephone numbers and addresses of personal contacts that he dared not enter into any computer's memory or personal organizer menu. In the phone book was the contact information for those privileged and trusted few, who helped him in his operations at his clandestine Surry County dog compound; the official headquarters and secret inner sanctum of the NFL superstar and international man of intrigue, Michael Vick.

He dialed the proper numbers on the combination safe, opened it, and tossed the five thousand dollars into an open box which contained roughly eight-hundred thousand dollars in cash, the entire Motley Crue CD discography, and the keys to the front door of Nikki Sixx's summer home in Laguna Beach, California. He removed a fake, Japanese-manufactured Lady Rolex Day/Date model wrist watch and Motley Crue's critically overlooked and underrated third album, *Theatre of Pain* from the safe's furthest corner.

The Lady Rolex, along with dozens of other undetectably perfect counterfeit watches, including models from the famed manufacturers Baum and Mercier, Patek Philippe and Franck Mueller, had been given to him free by the group of specialized automobile mechanics who had hand-restored his classic 1981 model Delorean DMC-12 coupe.

Vick had visited their pristine garage facility when he was in Osaka, Japan, last year to oversee the car's restoration process. They handed the watches out to their customers like candy corn on Halloween. They had thousands of them in their tool rooms and didn't have any idea what to do with them. Nobody, not even the experts, could tell them from the genuine articles and the mechanics who worked in the garage didn't care a fig about them. The Japanese mechanics all wore cheap, Casio digital watches as they kept better time.

The Motley Crue CD he had bought at the Dulles International airport duty-free store, on sale, for \$7.99.

He closed the safe door, spun the lock's dial to secure it, and replaced the Ratfink lithograph to its proper place. Then he repaired to Dasha's Claude Montana shoulder bag, which always smelled of Channel Mademoiselle perfume, and placed the practically worthless watch inside of it. "A penny saved is a penny earned," Vick smilingly cooed to himself. "The day I can't save twenty-thousand dollars or so by putting some over-shiny piece of bullshit into an avaricious model's handbag, I'll close-up my business for good and start wearing primary-colored, polyester-blend clothing."

He then moved over to the Polk Audio component stereo system. He placed the *Theatre of Pain* CD in the tray, hit the play button, and placed his Koss headphones over his ears. Vick lay down next to Dasha on the Swedish sofa-thing and listened to the infinitely sexy, noire-glam-boogie opening track, "City Boy Blues." A plan was brewing in his head, but he would wait for the Spazz to arrive from Rome with his linguine before any new action would be taken in the Pit bull acquisition department. He closed his eyes, put his arm around his snoozing Russian babe, and blissed-out the music in his head.

*

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 hand practically fell off of its own accord during the surgery procedure. When he'd arrived at the hospital, his personal

information hadn't been processed by the Admittance Desk, or entered into the ER's computer system. Because of the severity of his wound, Lester had been wheeled instantly into the only available Procedure Room at the hospital, and immediately anesthetized before the attending docs brought out the Black and Decker power saw for quick and easy removal action on his completely masticated paw.

Les never even needed to tell anybody at the facility that his assumed name, as instructed by Sonny, 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 several hours. Miraculously, he'd remembered Sonny's instructions from the early afternoon to the letter. "Fear is a man's best friend," Lester used to say to himself, and fear had probably helped him recall all of his instructions in verbatim fashion.

He had slipped out of the Hospital's trauma center that evening, as he had been instructed. Then 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 on-duty orderly happily complied with the somewhat unusual request without asking a single question or even blinking an eyelid in the mildest of remonstrations to Lester's demands.

The two of them exited the hospital grounds in the orderly's Dodge Ram pick-up, and went directly to Lester's grocery store. With his untrained left hand, Lester worked the combination safe in the back room of his business and finally got its door open. 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 change of 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 unquestioning, compliant orderly replied, "no problem, boss-man."

Now Lester Ganz sat like a Haitian zombie in an air-conditioned Greyhound scenicruiser. He was whimsically watching the traffic zip by on his way to Atlantic City, New Jersey. Despite his diminished physical and mental condition and painful, medicated state, 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 from his terrible injury, pop morphine pills, play the one-armed bandits, and possibly find himself a good, cheap, Garden State hit-man for hire in his process of rest and recovery.

*

Liz, Sonny and Wanda were sitting around the office desk when Boo Smalls slipped into their quarters to join them. None of them had noticed his entry. Wanda was drawing sketches of the Clean n' Jerk's bar on a legal-sized notepad and showing her two companions how the bikini-babe show would be put together next Friday. Liz and Sonny endured her enthusiastic descriptions like parents listening to a mongoloid step-daughter jabber about ballet lessons.

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

Scores of potential reactions flashed through Sonny's mind at fractal speed. His hand started for his pocketed gun, but then stopped. He intrinsically 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 suppose that they were the perpetrators. It was time to bite the bullet, and play straight-faced poker with Boo.

"Good mornin' everyone," Boo Smalls said cautiously to all in the room.

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. 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 once again, and got up slowly, approaching him with a cheap smile and a wink like a Piccadilly whore.

“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.

Liz, Sonny and Wanda were well armed, but couldn’t make a move on Boo Smalls. 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 Sonny 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 clean animosity in their gaze for a tense moment. Their breathing became quick and erratic, and their eyes shifted nervously back and forth.

Their collective silence and anxiety 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 Liz Fury like a haughty, Catholic-school teacher admonishing a negligent, third-world, foreign-exchange student.

“Liz Fury,” Boo said, “your fine-looking employee, Miss Wanda Jackson, paid a visit to my cabin yesterday. She told me she’s looking for a Pit to keep the local 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 Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant on Cork Street. After that little snafu, she was *real* nice to me, and compensated me for my unused canine appraisal servicess with malt liquor and copious amounts of the tender trap at the Super 8 Motel.”

“You’re on private property, Boo,” Liz snapped at him, “I could have you arrested right now.”

“Aren’t you even going to ask where I was last night, honey?” Boo sarcastically rejoined. “Didn’t you miss me on our standard Friday evening date at the Clean n’ Jerk?”

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 Liz’s head. The report was volcanic. A section of wood paneling behind her office desk splintered into strips and fell to the floor. Boo’s gaze did not falter one iota. He stood there as calmly as ever, eyeballing all three of them.

Liz, Sonny and Wanda instinctively whipped their heads down hard in absolute terror, flat on to the surface of the office desk. When they lifted them back up, the looks on their shocked faces were 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, Liz,” Boo politely 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* investments. And considering the extreme coincidence of Miss Jackson’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 like a caged harpy, “but I’m not too upset that they’re history, either. You could be making easy cash, Boo- and lots of it. So what if you set a street dog up from time to time to bite the dust at the Clean n’ Jerk. It’s all just a numbers game, babe. And it’s all *good* money. Dog fights are dog fights- a bunch of dickless, rich screwballs come from all over the goddam globe to see some blood spill that they’re too afraid to make 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 mean 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 scare off my big-time gamblers. And for what reason? I ask you, for what?"

Sonny could not believe what his ears were picking up from Liz's tirade. "No *pride* in the fights?" could he have heard her correctly? Liz wasn't from these parts of Virginia; she didn't understand the deal here. 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 situation in Youngblood. Namely, that the dog-fight circuit was *the life* for career bad-asses in this town.

Sonny had lived here all his life. The dog trainers, although feared by many, were actually 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 legitimate living like anyone else, and people left you alone. Then he shook his head to clear it from the irritating, blasphemous bullshit he'd heard, and returned all his attention to the tense situation at hand.

Boo Smalls calmly answered Liz's inquiry. "For what you ask? For real 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 and elsewhere. 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 wasted hicks to you. But many of those drunken businessmen represent

commercial 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 please spare me the economics lesson. If you get some new 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, with expressionless eyes, stared at Liz Fury. He raised the .38 from his pocket and leveled it at her head. "I've never killed a woman before," he flatly intoned, "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 ear-splitting sound. Like lightning, Liz, Sonny and Wanda pulled their carbines from their places of concealment and had the sights pinpointed between Boo's eyes. Boo returned his gaze to Liz Fury with beatific composure. His Glock .38 was still trained at the center of her skull.

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

Boo's composure was calm, but his 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. Now, he stood still in the office of the Clean n' Jerk saloon, 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 stoic, face-off stance with the ominous trio before him.

Also, he was sure none of Liz's people wanted to deal with a murder conviction and the hard jail time resulting from this difficult predicament, and neither did he. When he'd pulled the gun on Liz, 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 of this pretty clusterfuck 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 the edges of her lips like the crafted arc of a surgical metal blade.

"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 quickly stepped out of Liz Fury's private office.

*

The electrical storm was going full-throttle when Boo sprinted to his F-10 pickup truck and fishtailed out of the Clean n' Jerk's loading zone. The wiper blades barely pushed enough water from the windshield for him to see the road. Sheets of lightning pitchforked all around the town of Youngblood and counties beyond. He drove his vehicle with caution on the dangerously wet road and absentmindedly fingered the hole in his jacket where the bullet he'd fired at Liz Fury went through. He wished he'd brought his flask of corn with him.

*

Liz, Sonny and Wanda were knocking back shots of Jack Daniel's in the office, and trying to calm down from the unnerving events of the last few minutes. The consensus among the three of them was that Boo Smalls was certain of their guilt, but was 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 at the Clean n' Jerk for a future rendezvous with them at an unspecified date.

"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 remove that same fucked-up pair of Lee jeans he's been wearing every day for last two years and 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 see the dogs go at it every Saturday was better than the 4th of July parade. My daddy took me every weekend in

the summer months. Now the local kids just have that happy-ass pro-wrestling bullshit, NASCAR races, and whatever else the media business-people come up with to keep them distracted. The fights are the real deal, Liz; the fights are like *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 as far as the big money goes. Boo's telling you the truth about that."

Liz looked at him with more-than-a-little impatience in her gaze. Then she said in an exasperated tone, "honey, stay put 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 town for your very own. You can re-name it Sonnyville or Bad Dog City or any goddam thing that strikes your fancy. Then you can grind it up, feed it to Roscoe, and put what's left of it on your garden geraniums if that's what you want to do."

Wanda downed another shot of Jack Daniel's, and looked apprehensively at Liz. Liz caught her troubled look and smiled her best reassuring, boss-lady grin. "Don't worry baby," she cooed, "I'm not going to let anything happen to you. And I've got a feeling in a few weeks you're going to have more money falling out of your g-string from tips than you'll know what to do with. I can almost promise you that. You're going to be fine. I remember the people who do favors for me."

Wanda got up, tottered slightly, and walked over to the office radio to turn it on. On the local country music station, the disc jockey informed the listeners that the tropical storm was now directly over Youngblood and would stay in the area for the next few hours. Then, after commercials for Mud-buggy 4x4 shock absorbers, chocolate milk syrup, and an advanced, depilatory system for removing unwanted hair from sensitive places, the Tanya Tucker song, "It's a little too late to do the right thing now," spilled out of the radio's small speaker. The three of them listened to the sleek, sassy barroom tune fill the office and the thunderclaps booming outside. Liz, Sonny and Wanda finished off the bottle of Jack Daniel's in short order, and their conversation incrementally came to a dead standstill.

*

The tempest was not merely positioned over Youngblood; the epicenter of the electrical activity was situated directly over Boo Smalls's property. Gale force winds drove the sheets of rain into horizontal waves. Thunderclaps 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 metal stills was wildly flapping by a single hasp.

Boo 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 to himself if his fortune in life could have turned out much worse: his fight-dog investment had been shot to hell by a bitch-goddess club owner who wanted to control every facet of the local betting action. He'd been grievously taken in by Wanda Jackson and had been played like a violin by her. Although his afternoon with her had been extremely satisfying, he couldn't believe he'd been so easily suckered into leaving his animals so vulnerable, alone and 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 massive fireball of lightning exploded out of the sky and blasted the supply shed by its stills. The aluminum siding and plywood detonated with the impact, and flew into the air in fiery jets. The tin door of the erupting shed flew into the sky like a rocket. Within seconds, a second mammoth fireball spewed from the black clouds and pierced the twisting tin door in the wind; the fireball disintegrated it into powder within a nanosecond. The massive lightning bolt curled in mid-air after its collision with the door and impacted directly onto the top of still #1 with the force of a pre-atomic weapon.

The savage, elemental, super-charged electric bolt scissored through the metal still like rice paper, blasting ragged shards of its steel shell skyward. The charge touched off the highly flammable ethyl alcohol in its base and the remainder of the vat blew-up in an epic eruption. Cascades of flame

from its charred remains 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 the top of 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. He 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 with its usual habitués.

Liz Fury wasn't too concerned by the lack of attendees in her bar. 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 the Clean n' Jerk were treated to three expertly crafted, tailor made dog-fights, designed to order by Liz and her famous bookies.

The fighting pit behind the bar had become a veritable swamp after the storm. During the fights it was difficult to recognize the individual dogs that were frantically slipping around and savagely slashing at one another in the thick, brown murk. But once again, after a lengthy scrap, Roscoe had taken down and eliminated his adversary. Although Sonny knew Roscoe was winning its 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, he might even join Boo Smalls in the pantheon of world-recognized, bad-ass animal trainers.

Wanda Jackson was packed into a Union Jack motif string bikini while tending the bar at the Clean n' Jerk that Saturday night. She was telling all the unusually attentive people there that the sexy-blowout, bikini clearance-sale 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 swimsuit inventory.

When Wanda had finished her duties as bartender that night she'd received six hundred forty dollars in tips. She had also been handed no fewer than seventy-one personal business cards from patrons who had interest in any possible "private escort" services she might be willing to provide.

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

*

"Well known slide guitarists such as Ry Cooder, Bonnie Raitt and Ronnie Wood are all fine musicians, and their talents should be applauded," Michael Vick said aloud, "but Aerosmith's Joe Perry is unquestionably the most inventive and underrated slide guitarist in the history of rock music. I take issue with this gross oversight of Joe and the American icon-band Aerosmith by flabby, ivory-tower isolated music critics who overlook the hard rock genre and couldn't really bang their heads and get psychologically-bent on a hard, sexy, killer riff even if their lives depended on it."

"Mik-ail," Dasha said.

"Yes, Kroshka-moy," he replied.

“The bathroom smells like pot roast, could you please take your big shoes from the bathroom while I take shower?” She asked.

“Of course,” he politely rejoined.

“Mik-ail,” she repeated.

“MmmHm” he returned.

“Vot is slite-gitar?”

“I’ll tell you later,” he diplomatically replied.

Vick and Dasha had watched the Saturday dog fights at the Clean n’ Jerk from the plasma screen in the cabin’s living room via their personal satellite broadcast signal. Boo Smalls’s absence from the battle pit was palpable. Although the fights were, as always, visually gripping to watch, they lacked the elemental, brute, raw power that Boo’s animals always brought to the games. The difference was profound and neither Vick nor Dasha felt satisfied by the night’s attention holding, yet anticlimactic fights.

Dasha had slept on the Swedish sofa-thing for the remainder of the day on Friday and was on the phone to Storm model management in London for most of Saturday attempting to score a quick modeling job for a slight repo from the Youngblood scene. Vick had informed her of the Spazz’s upcoming arrival from Rome and that they would have some support soon in their quest to acquire a world class Pit for their own use. They were in a holding pattern for the time being, until assistance arrived.

Vick went to the bathroom and removed his size 17 Bill Cost vicuna-skin ankle boots from behind the toilet bowl. They did smell a bit like pot roast. He’d been wearing them quite a bit lately, without the benefit of socks. Dasha thanked him for his courtesy, and went inside the bathroom to shower. Vick returned to the sofa-thing and turned on the plasma TV. He began watching Wesley Snipes as the stoic, ultra-cool, never-sweat, bipolar vampire Blade as he dealt-out some serious whoop-

ass to any variety of fashion-victim, insect-like vampires who still like to try and mess with the few good guys in town.

“Awwwwwww,” Vick heard Dasha’s voice emanating from the bathroom.

He froze in terror.

Vick had learned from past experience that this sonically escalating, monosyllabic sound coming from Dasha’s mouth was something of an early warning system of inevitable difficulty coming down the road. When the world is not conforming to her sense of order, or she believed that she had been slighted in some way, or that even the smallest of injustices had been performed against her, the “awwwwwwww” vocal mechanism involuntarily kicked in. It nearly always preceded a tirade of weird shit, drama, extended monologues about other people’s character flaws and, invariably, more drama.

“Oh, man, don’t start with the awwwwwww-shit,” he anxiously said to himself. “I really hate the awwwwwww-shit. I really do.”

Dasha emerged from the bathroom, eyes crossed in clean rage. She was clad in a pair of Perfect Victim label string panties and pink, fuzzy bunny-motif bedroom slippers. She had her Claude Montana leather shoulder bag in one hand. Her other hand was balled into a fist and was shaking it in confrontational style at Vick. Although he weighed more than twice her body weight and was head-and-shoulders above her in height, the all-star NFL quarterback was becoming a bit uncomfortable in this situation. It was time to proceed with caution with Dasha.

“Awwwwwww,” where is money you give me?” she barked. “Awwwwwww, Mik-ail, you are taking money back? Awwwwwww, Dasha is so mad. Dasha is mad. Awwwwwww”

“Look a little deeper in that pretty leather bag you take with you everywhere,” he cautiously told her.

“Look deeper in bag?!” she spat at him, “look deeper in bag? I show you bag, Mik-ail!”

Vick sat on the sofa-thing, straight-backed and poker-faced, unsure of what would happen next.

She moved over to where he was sitting and dumped the entire contents of the bag onto the sofa-thing. Several sample bottles of Channel Mademoiselle perfume, four Nokia brand cellular phones, cellophane-wrapped packets of dried figs, a worn paperback copy of Xaviera Hollander's novel *The Happy Hooker*, guest-suite bottles of Four Seasons hotel shampoo, conditioner, shower gel and body lotion, a Russian-manufactured, rosewood-handled stiletto with the word "moloko" etched onto its side, ancient boarding passes from endless commercial plane rides, and an impeccably-perfect faux Lady Rolex Day/Date model wrist watch fell from the bag's maw onto the sofa-thing, next to the somewhat anxious Vick.

Upon viewing the watch among the items on the sofa-thing, Dasha's pupils involuntarily dilated to their widest possible aperture. A cartoonishly-large smile spread across her face, similar to the one seen on the mouth of Batman's flamboyant arch nemesis, the Joker.

The tone of her conversation with Vick changed into what one might call a dramatic fashion.

"Oh, Mik-ail," she cooed to him in her best baby-talk, "my sweet baaay-bee. How you love your Dasha. Lady Rolex is what all men give the girl they love best. Now I know you love me. Men also give the women they love so much nice cars for Christmas present- Audi cars, mostly."

"I couldn't be more certain of anything- I mean about the theme of Russian women, Rolexes and the Audi car-thing," Vick calmly replied.

Dasha stood before him, expertly and effortlessly slipped off her Perfect Victim string panties and bunny slippers, and coiled herself around him on the sofa-thing. Vick wrapped his python-like arms around her, stood up with her draped in his arms, and relocated the center of their action to the cabin's bedroom for a full and frank exchange of private communication.

*

Lester Ganz had passed-out cold from morphine ingestion on the Greyhound bus on the way to Atlantic City, New Jersey. He had to be revived by the driver with splashes of cold water on his face

when they'd arrived at the terminal. Lester then 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 so tired and disoriented, and the pain throbbed relentlessly in his hand no matter how many pills he took. He went inside the motel, haggardly signed his name as Joe Brown in the guest book, and took a small room which overlooked a street corner hamburger stand. The burger stand also sold New Jersey State lottery tickets, an eclectic array of 14 carat gold-plated jewelry, and discount international phone cards. He laid 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 to go outside. It was nearly impossible to do things exclusively with his left hand and his constant fumbling with the razor, washcloth and clothes buttons was terribly discouraging for him. After fixing himself as best he could, he wobbled downstairs, head still buzzing with pain-killers, and inquired at the front desk in which direction the famous Atlantic City boardwalk was. The pale, disinterested teenager behind the counter was reading an X-Men comic book and wearing a badly worn San Jose Sharks T-shirt. He answered Lester's question while not raising his eyes from the comic. "Go left, young man, go left!" he crudely warbled to Lester.

Lester exited the motel and turned left, as instructed. He found the boardwalk and began ambling 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 to cool off from the sun and choking humidity.

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 of antiquity at an enormous frat-party. An unoccupied cocktail waitress spotted Lester resting on one of the guest sofas and approached him.

He was feeling a bit more together now than he had been feeling outside, but the pain-killers were still tweaking his system. Lester 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, in the opinion of Lester Ganz, it was nothing to be trifled with.

The bleached-blonde, toga-wearing, knock-out cocktail waitress stood in front of Lester and examined him like an anomalous lab specimen. Lester's head was bent down towards the floor, but he began to raise it slowly. His gaze started at her laced slave-girl sandals, continued up her creamy legs, and eventually stopped at the bronze rope brocade at the neckline of her roman costume. Then he looked at her name tag. On it was printed the name "Kim" in classical script.

A slow, mind-spinning wave of morphine curled up through Lester's spine and into his unsuspecting hypothalamus. He groaned a sotto voce, but satisfying "oh, wow," and crossed his eyes in confused ecstasy like a misplaced but contented farm animal. 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 Kim. "Am...am I in Heaven?"

Kim intrinsically understood from Lester's first syllables of conversation that he was an over-polite, half-wasted puppy, and completely harmless. She thought she'd indulge his question, as he was so unlike the standard-issue loud, tacky, big-balled Caesar's casino patron, he was actually kind of interesting to be around.

"Indeed you are," Kim politely replied.

Lester's eyes bulged slightly from their sockets and a streak of goose flesh rose on Lester's right arm. He thought, for a split second, he could feel something like tactile sensation moving into the area where his hand was formerly located. He found this feeling to be unusually disconcerting.

"C-could you please repeat that, Miss?" he stammered.

"Oh, you're in Heaven all right," Kim repeated, "Heaven, New Jersey, USA- the home of 'Old Blue Eyes' himself. My name's Kim. Caesar welcomes you. Would you like a drink?"

"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.

"That's correct, sir" 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 in a few minutes with a double shot of rail bourbon and Lester's gambling chips. She had purchased 20 of the 5 dollar slot machine tokens for him. Kim did this service for Lester mainly because she wanted a 5 dollar gratuity, but also because he seemed kind of lost and alone. That's why she got the half-sawbuck increments from the house bank.

She sat next to Lester on the banquette and asked him about his terrible injury; she seemed genuinely sorry that he didn't feel so great. Lester carefully 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 the morphine, and watching the proceedings in the Caesar's casino.

Kim became apprehensive for a quick moment.

“OK, mister,” she flatly 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 in the perineum with an electric cattle prod. He looked at Kim for a long second, cleared his throat, and asked her, “You’re boyfriend is in, how shall we say it? *Alternative* business practices?”

“Yeah, that sounds like an accurate job description,” she answered while mechanically snapping her sugarless gum.

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

*

Sunday morning after the dog-fights, Youngblood, Virginia.

Boo Smalls’s head felt as though it had been removed from his shoulders and fired from a civil war era cannon. Last evening he’d started hitting the white corn, as promised, upon entry into his cabin. The storm had still been going on when he’d reached his home, but with only a fraction of its intensity from when he was at Liz Fury’s bar. He’d sprinted inside his home from the F-10, but was nonetheless drenched by the residual rain. 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, VIP corn before it claimed his brain 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 his oxygen starved muscles screeched in protest. He nearly vomited from the strain of the minimal exercise but 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 day. 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 some of his “local” breeder friends to see if any especially promising young canine talent might be available and for sale. Yes, he thought, it was a good day to try and get some semblance of normalcy back in the old system.

Then he noticed the wisps of black smoke off in the 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. He then walked away from his house and into the back yard in a near trance-like state. A feeling of absolute dread had seized him; his guts heaved and his throat’s gag-reflex began going full throttle. He quickly placed the Glock on a tree stump, steadied himself, spread his feet, and literally blew the holdings of his stomach onto the topsoil with a hard, resounding splat.

He shook his head to try and clear it. Then, shortly after his difficult and unexpected digestive elimination, Boo felt more like he was able to investigate the unusual situation by his stills. He picked up the Glock 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.

He 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 former supply shed was in thousands of kindling sized pieces. The bags of grain and containers of purified water were shredded into strips of confetti. The charred grain looked as if it were 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 lid and top half had been

completely destroyed, and the sides had been mangled into teeth-like points all around its scorched perimeter. It looked like some kind of hideous, incinerated, metallurgic flower. Strings of black smoke lazily curled out of its torched substructure.

He 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 some kind of a reply, but received no explanation, metaphysical or otherwise.

After his unanswered wait, Boo's usually iron-clad reasoning abilities, not unexpectedly, started to slowly splinter like dry match sticks. Too much bad juju in too short a time had taken its toll on the solitary man, and a crack-up which had been in the mail for too long had finally arrived. And thus began the piecemeal mental unraveling of Boo Smalls.

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 bad to him at the moment. And he had his Glock stuffed in the front of his pants. It would take only 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 for all time. Then, the big sleep: no more looking over his shoulder, no more of life's evil BS, no more anxious loneliness.

Then, all at once, like a cannon-shot, his vacillating faculties seemed to come rushing back to him in perfect working order. Solid common sense and logic regained their controlling positions in his mind. Or so he thought, because there's a big problem involved with losing your mental stronghold on reality: namely, all your routine actions seem to be fine and hunky dory, until the horrifying realization of what the hell you've done comes 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 topping himself off because of this minor setback. A sense of relief hit

him like a shovelful of icicles in the face. He whooped like a like a horny caballero at remembering his pledge of revenge at the Clean n' Jerk and he gleefully fired several rounds from the Glock into the air over his head.

The strings of civilized thought were slowly unraveling in his head, although he didn't know it. He was now experiencing the same type of infected liberation that the indescribably wacked-out character Leatherface felt in the final scene of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, as he whipped his Black and Decker power saw around his head in Pete Townshend-style windmills while simultaneously screeching gibberish into the void.

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. While standing by his wasted shack and seared white corn still, he was transforming into his own twisted, personal angel of vengeance.

"Liz Fury did this dirt to me," he wistfully thought to himself. "It wasn't enough for her to kill my perfect dogs. Now she's going after my white corn vats. Well, if that strange, hard-bodied, protein-freak woman wants to drive me out of Youngblood, or financially ruin my interests, it would be my pleasure to respond in kind to her invitation to lock horns. Yes indeed, that would be a fine thing for me to do."

Boo began whistling 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 still #1 used to be. Then he spent the remainder of the afternoon cutting down the base of the destroyed vat. He shoveled and raked the remains of his shed and still 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. He believed he would 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 yet another episode of *Murder, She Wrote* on 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 shit-bag associates had 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 burning rags on their tops, and deliver them through the glass windows of her bar? Liz Fury had screwed-over the wrong dog-trainer country boy, and now it was 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 a low, guttural champing was audible. The growling sound was muted, as if the teeth of the predator were buried in the soft hide of the prey, tearing large mouthfuls of flesh from its body.

Boo Smalls silently drew the Glock 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 the sexy police TV shows. 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 high 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 him in the slightest of ways. He went on one knee, braced his firing hand, aimed, and peered down along the muzzle of his carbine. The beast appeared in the clearing.

It was Nitro.

Six

And it wasn't Nitro. The four-legged creature standing before Boo Smalls was like something that had popped-out of a mental-defective patient's deepest nightmare. It looked like the filthy dog atop of Charon's mythical barge- the vessel that carried the souls of the damned across the river Styx into Hades. From another angle, it resembled a hastily sketched, lesser-demon's canine companion drawn in the margins of a William Blake notebook. From a direct, head-on view, the creature could easily be envisioned as one of the cartoonish surf-punk beast-monsters driving a garish, wildly tricked-out hotrod in an Ed "Big Daddy" Roth lithograph. It was something the dark, subconscious mind coughed up and spat out in a green fever. And it was looking at Boo Smalls with a glimmer of recognition on its face.

The beast was, for the most part, pink-skinned. Its remaining fur was clumped into rough patches, and it was covered with what looked like black powder burns over most of its body. Its open mouth was crimson colored and clotted with fresh blood from its kill moments before. It breathed quickly, and pawed at the ground incessantly, as if looking for some misplaced ancient bone. But the feature that made Boo shudder was this one: it had *no* pupils in its eyes. The usually white sclera tissue around the iris was nothing but a solid crimson sheet from eyelid to eyelid. It regarded Boo with interest, and growled intermittently to itself; it seemed almost as if it were searching its memory for references and clues as to its current location.

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

A long moment passed between Boo Smalls and the re-animated Nitro. Boo's brain frantically reached for any kind of explanation that could justify this situation. This beast wasn't some stray,

fucked-up creature from off the highway or his land. It was *his* dog and he knew it. He recognized the facial-scar stitches that were still visible on the area around the dog's eyes. 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 over its cheeks.

Nitro directed its gaze elsewhere. 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. It turned back around to stare at Boo Smalls and, through its glowing, red eyes, seemed to be beckoning him to follow.

Boo had always considered himself to be a rational, clear-thinking man. However, on this summer morning, he'd lost the ability to summon his higher reasoning faculties with any degree of success; they had simply become too much of a burden to deal with. He stared at Nitro's face for a brief moment, and then began to follow it into the thicket and towards the house.

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Dasha Mercury had at last scored a quick modeling gig from Strom model management LTD, London. Her one-day assignment was for her inclusion in a Calkin Klein jeans ad group-shot which would be used in the upcoming mammoth CK billboard advertisement in New York City's Times Square. As per usual, Klein's glam-deluxe photo-shoots would include ten or twelve jeans-wearing models, both male and female, looking simultaneously defiant, blasé, hurt-by-love, insouciant, and having a mild, yet seemingly constant need to urinate.

She was to report the next day to the White Trash Fast Food rock club in Berlin, Germany, which would be the trendy, visual backdrop for the photo-shoot. One of the male models who would be participating in the group-shoot was the current rage of the fashion cosmos, the chiseled, tall and tanned new phenomenon, Ridge Reynolds. He was a cosmetically perfect, twenty-three year old trust-

fund Navy brat out of San Diego, California, who also dallied in trance, psychedelic-trance and ambient electronic music production. His etched good-looks scored him top-modeling jobs several times a year, although his music was never in great demand in the jet-set warehouse clubs. He was also Dasha Mercury's previous romantic paramour shortly before her association with Michael Vick. When she informed Vick of her upcoming quick departure from the Youngblood scene, and the details of her assignment, his reactions were less than enthusiastic at hearing the news.

"Mik-ail," she said, "I leave in an hour for Berlin for work. I'm gone only two days or so and I be back soon. I can't tell you how I need vacation from devoid-of-chic Youngblood. I need culture, culture there is not here. I need new shoes, too. "

"I met you at a monster-truck rally in New Orleans," Vick replied, "and you're going to report to work at a place called 'White Trash Fast Food' and you're telling *ME* about devoid-of-chic culture?"

Dasha ignored his poignant comment and began collecting things to take with her to Berlin. She began cramming a Tous brand, cabin-sized flight bag with her own, overflowing-with-chic, wardrobe, make-up and personal belongings. Their conversation became cold and silent for a long moment.

"So that high-assed international house of pussy you work for finally got you something to do and that Muppet-lookin' furball Ridge Reynolds just happens to be involved in this thing?" Vick incredulously asked. "I mean there's like six billion people in the world, and you only need ten or so of those skinny little fops you work with for this photo-thing, and Ridge just happens to be one of them? Doesn't that seem just a bit too coincidental to you?"

Dasha stared at him and involuntarily smiled a cruel, almost-reptilian grin at the NFL superstar. Then she flatly said to him, "you are jealous because you love me, Mik-ail. I be back soon. This is promise from Dasha."

She collected the remainder of her things and crammed them into the flight-bag. Then she got her passport, cell phone and car keys, and went to the door to leave. She flash-kissed Vick, told him

she'd call soon, and went to the blue mamba Viper behind the cabin. Within seconds she was roaring out of the driveway towards Dulles International Airport and the VIP parking area behind terminal 1.

Vick pondered his situation for a long moment. He then went to the kitchen and prepared an enormous iced green tea in his favorite Salvador Dali flower vase and sat down on the Swedish sofa-thing. He decided he needed some expert advice in the field of women and romance, and knew exactly who to call. He flipped open his cell phone, scrolled down the list of contacts, and hit the dial button for his older, wiser, friend and confidant, the incomparable L.A. ladies man, Nikki Sixx.

Sixx answered his phone after several rings and was instantly greeted with the following monologue:

Sixx: "Hel-"

Vick: "There are only three, and I mean three, great titty-bar bands in the history of the world. Unfortunately Motley Crue finds itself settled in the number two position. The unprecedented number one rating, of course, goes to the indestructible ZZ Top for dedicating a lifetime of weirdness to the pursuit of perfect, three-chord, pole-dance boogie. The Crue, although legendary in the American west and Japan, finds itself sandwiched between the incumbent ZZs, who cannot be legally removed from the top position without subpoena, and the brilliant but occasionally over-noodly Stevie Ray Vaughn.

Sixx: "Wow."

Vick: "Hello..."

Sixx: "Umm, holy cow. I believe I'm in full agreement with you, Mike. But, in all fairness, hall-of-fame status must also go to James Brown, Rod Stewart when he was with Mercury records, and Link Wray and the Ray-men. I'm sorry but it simply has to be that way. I'm sure you can understand my insistence on their inclusion."

Vick: "Fully noted and approved by the committee. Sixx, I have some female trouble in Camp Vick. I need advice. I figure the man who wrote the music and lyrics for the album *Girls, Girls, Girls* would be the one to talk to for answers.

Sixx: "Dude, I've told you a hundred times but you don't listen: chicks equal trouble. I'm sure as hell gonna have to write a serious song about that issue one day. So tell me, is Dasha giving you a hard time?"

Vick: "You could say that. She's always needling me for expensive toys and still dicking around with old boyfriends when she goes out of the country for work. It makes my butt twitch that she takes me so much for granted. What do you think you would you do in such a sitch?"

Sixx: "Every sitch is a unique and discrete entity. This could be an opportunity for you to check out her level of attachment to you. I know one thing about chicks. They all get jealous, but Russian chicks get homicidally jealous, I mean Vito Corleone-style pissed-off when they think their guy is fooling around. There was this one chick named Oksana whose daddy owned an ammunition warehouse in Irkutsk, but, oh my God, don't get me started on that subject. Listen, call a few babes, go to some bars, spend some cash, and get noticed. Then see how she reacts. You'll have your answer real soon if she's just playing you or if she wants to stick around for the long run."

Vick: "I owe you one, buddy. You enjoying those digital-pix of Tyra and Gisele?"

Sixx: "More than I like to admit."

Vick: "Talk to you soon, Sixx."

Sixx: "Ciao, quarterback."

Vick sipped his iced green tea from the flower vase and considered his friend's sage advice. He went over to the Polk audio component stereo and placed his Japanese import CD of Jeff Beck's *Wired* album into the tray. Nothing cleared his head better than a critically-acclaimed Jeff Beck jazz-rock fusion period album when it was time to give serious consideration to the matters at hand.

After a few minutes an imperceptibly delicate, poison-tipped grin curled up on the ridges of his mouth. He thought aloud to himself, "I wonder what my old friend Ms. Devil-food Del Rio is doing right now. I haven't been to Georgetown in months." He flipped open his cell phone and dialed Devil-food's private number. After several rings her voice came over the line.

Devil-food Del Rio: "Ola...?"

Vick: "Ola yourself, babe-"

Devil-food Del Rio: "Michael Vick!" she practically groaned in happiness when she heard his voice on the phone. After a pause to collect and fix herself, she continued, "Oh my, now this is a *nice* surprise. So baby-boy, how is my big, hot, ebony football-chuckin' gaucho doing these days?"

Vick: "Oh, no worse for wear I guess, *senorita*. I was just thinking I haven't seen my favorite size 44-D Brazilian exotic dancer perform in a while. I'll be in DC tonight for a brief repo. You still at the Good Guys bar on Wisconsin Avenue? Me and a friend need to see some of your famous, oh how shall I say it, *a-gravitational* entertainment and a friendly face. You game for some company and, perhaps, an aperitif this evening?"

Devil-food Del Rio: "Oh my God, yes *senor*, I'm still at Good Guys. You just bring your hind-parts over to the club any time you please. Just so you know Bunky, I had a breast reduction done last spring. My tits were really starting to kill my lower back. I started walking kind of funny, like Jimmy Page does. I'm just a 42-D now. Is that ok with you, Hon?"

Vick: "My goodness me, a mere 42-D?"

Devil-food Del Rio: "It was either that or start with the lap dances."

Vick: "All is fine and forgiven. Long live the 42-D!"

Devil-food Del Rio: "I knew you'd understand."

Vick: "To err is human, to forgive, divine."

Devil-food Del Rio: "My show starts at 10:00. I've got a couple of new chiquitas who are working with me now, Selena Heat Seeker and Anita Afterburner. We've all got the same upper-frontal assets on our resumes if you catch my drift. We've got a new show that'll melt your eyeballs into hot Texas chili."

Vick: "Oh, I'll be there tonight, no doubt about it, with my friend Dwayne. Perhaps we can all have a cordial together later? What do you say? "

Devil-food Del Rio: "Tsssssss!" she sweetly hissed like a burning fuse on a stick of TNT. "I'm waiting for you like a young lioness waits for feeding time. You and Dwayne get ready for a night you won't soon forget. Bye-now."

He closed his cell phone, went to the bedroom, and began packing a few things in his off-white, Corinthian leather, Louis Vuitton signature-edition cabin bag. Jeff Beck was still flashing his Strat like a virtuoso mad-scientist on the Polk Audio component system. Then, without warning, the home security intruder-alert system sounded. Vick abandoned his bag and went to the door to see what was happening.

Dwayne "Spazz-man" Watts was standing outside the cabin's front door. He was immaculate in his ecru Fendi seersucker summer suit and canvas Ferragamo beach moccasins. Vick opened the door to greet his long time associate. He was instantly handed a shopping bag which contained three packages of three-colored linguine and an assortment of Italian chocolates, hand-selected for him by Mrs. Gina Antonelli, the owner of the mini-market on the north end of the Barberini metro station in Rome.

"Ciao Bello," said the Spazz, "I got here as soon as I could. Mrs. Antonelli wouldn't let me pay for the pasta and candies. She was adamant. She's a big woman."

"Don't I know it," Vick replied. "Listen, we've got a short term change of plans. I'll explain on the way to DC. I'm glad you're here man, we've got strange times in Youngblood."

“DC?” the Spazz questioned. “Why are we going there?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” Vick answered.

“Try me,” he rejoined.

“We’re having drinks with Devil-food Del Rio, who, as you know, is the most famous striptease artist in the western world. Your dates for the evening are the up-and-coming Brazilian exotic dancers Selena Heat Seeker and Anita Afterburner. Is that ok with you?”

The Spazz was momentarily stunned into a perplexed, but pleasant silence. Then, slowly, a fiber-optically thin smile began to appear on his face. “Are you...serious?”

“As a heart-attack,” Vick rejoined.

Vick repaired to the bedroom, retrieved his Louis Vuitton bag and joined the Spazz at the cabin’s front door. The Spazz had his suitcase with him, as he’d just returned from his brief European leather-buying bonanza. The two of them piled their things into Vick’s Trans Am Firebird and headed off towards interstate highway 81 and the Route 66 interchange towards Washington, D.C..

*

Lester Ganz sat quietly in his room at the Friendly Arms Motel on Virginia Avenue. It was time, he believed, to change the bandage on his arm. He was getting good at doing it, but always felt a bit queasy when looking at the fleshy, oozing stump that was formerly his right hand.

He’d attended a civil war re-enactment battle last year at the Sully Plantation and had seen how surgeons during the great conflict attended to infantry soldiers with serious injuries on the battlefield. The somewhat unsavory amputation procedure the doctors perform on people today is almost identical to the one used then. Only now the anesthetic drugs are a hundred times better and they use big, shiny power tools instead of rusty 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 at Fauquier Community Hospital had 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 with a hand held, electric saber saw and discarded the withered hand in the trash. Then the surgeon rolled the skin back up over the stump and cleanly tied it off, like a length of salami.

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

Kim the cocktail waitress at Caesar's casino had given 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. Lester had thanked her endlessly for them, and had abandoned his more powerful drugs in favor of the new medicine. So now, for the most part, he was successfully returning to his beloved state of normalcy which he liked to call "consensus reality," and his general comprehension of life in Atlantic City, New Jersey, was becoming clearer by the hour.

Before leaving Caesar's on that day, he'd arranged a meeting with Kim and her boyfriend Carmine Angelini for a dinner date in the evening. They were going to rendezvous at Lester's room at The Friendly Arms hotel, 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 had made certain that he knew Carmine didn't go by his *real* name when talking to strangers at any time. The name he used for his daily movements around town was the much simpler, Chuck Jones.

"Please don't call him Carmine, Mr. Ganz," she reiterated. "He doesn't like it at all when people know his family's name. 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 had told her before exiting her casino, quickly downing an extra Talwin to calm his nerves.

Now Lester waited for his dinner guests in the small hotel room. He clicked on the cable television channel and watched fragments of an Asian pornographic film entitled, "Curling-Iron Girls." Lester 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 Carmine, casually late by ten minutes. The hellos were short and courteous to a fault. Kim was decked out in a black-satin pants suit and silver high heels. She looked sexy, well-nourished and squeaky clean, like the personal secretary of a mattress store owner. Carmine's appearance was, however, not even close to what Lester had anticipated. He'd expected to see a man in his twenties, muscular, cocky, and a little too flashy and loud for his own good. Carmine was the antithesis of what Lester had imagined an Atlantic City mobster 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 brand polo shirt, cotton-twill pants, and oxblood loafers.

He shook Lester's left hand and the grip was like cold steel. At that moment, Lester knew he'd come across the right man for his eradication assignment. Now, he 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.

Carmine and Kim were patiently sitting on the divan. Kim had changed the television channel from Asian pornography to the more family-rated Disney channel. They watched skinny, spotlessly clean teenagers in designer shorts and headbands drive their 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 few moments, the lack of conversation was becoming embarrassing for everyone. Carmine finally broke the quiet spell in the room.

“Kim has told me a little about you,” he said to Lester. “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?” Carmine nodded to Lester’s right arm.

“Last week,” Lester rejoined. “I didn’t think I could handle the morphine they gave me at the hospital back in Virginia much longer. I was always about to faint or be sick when taking it. However, the pain was still terrible when I got to Atlantic City. 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. Carmine 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,” Carmine calmly responded, “now to be completely 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?”

“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, *indemnifying* photos of me with a certain local woman there,” he creaked in clean embarrassment. Now it was Carmine’s turn to be still and consider the situation. After a short moment he resumed speaking.

“Mr. Ganz,” he continued, “as coincidental as this may sound, I have a bit of business to attend to in your neck of the woods. 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 sat gaping in fascination at the intuitive problem-solving skills of Carmine Angelini.

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

"What's that?" Lester anxiously asked.

"Are you hungry?" he queried. "I could eat an entire 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 mammoth casino with its world class fare and fabulous entertainments.

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Boo Smalls followed reborn Nitro through the woods with an uncanny feeling of fear and desire coursing through his nervous system. He stayed twenty to thirty feet behind and kept his Glock trained on Nitro's head while they moved through the brush. The fear was easy enough to understand. He believed he'd just lost all of his yearly investments to murderous, scumbag vandals, and was now presented, without warning, with the glowing, resurrected body of one of his former prize fight-dogs. It was enough to make anyone feel more than a little uncomfortable about their personal situation. 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 . Almost as if he'd made peace with the world, as if he had his earthly affairs settled, and was sublimely ready for oblivion. He watched as Nitro passed through the edge of the clearing and into the area which was his unofficial back yard. The dog once again checked to be sure that Boo was behind him and headed directly towards the cabin's rear entrance. Boo looked ahead past Nitro towards his home.

The re-animated corpses of Jet and Nails were sitting quietly by the door; they were awaiting Nitro's return. Their red eyes were glowing like electric diodes.

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

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

That is, if he got inside.

Boo could not be completely sure that all of this insanity was 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-land, or what was actually going on. It was a feeling he'd never experienced before.

He began to think about various situational possibilities: maybe he'd been knocked unconscious in a car accident after the storm, or been shot by one of Liz Fury's crew 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, with absolute certainty, the dogs' weird howling begin, and he knew for a fact that he wasn't dreaming.

Their moans weren't the intonations any flesh and blood creature could create. Their throaty rumblings sounded as if they were coming from a great distance, like muffled thunderclaps from miles away. But there was an oddly 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. It was a deadly texture of sound, shifting between dull, oceanic roars to the ear-splitting fin-shrieks that a falling bomb produces.

The trio of dogs 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 highest level of incredulity, his survival instincts, or what was left of them, whipped into action. He drew the .38 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 to 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 the back lot of his property- a literal meeting of life and death outside of his own cabin's rear door. Boo realized the animals could destroy him in moments if they so desired, but he chose to take his chances with fate and continue advancing towards them.

Boo 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, then so be it.

He moved to within a few feet of the animals and their low, metallic rumbling began, but with nowhere near the frenzied volume of their first salvo. Their groans came in precise increments, like an automated factory machine doing rote work. He braced himself, walked between the animals, 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 dogs stared at him with what looked like a melancholy appreciation. Then all three of them walked quietly into the cabin, and went downstairs to their training area.

Boo began to experience a new sense of complete psychological freedom; a great feeling of emancipation from any of the normal bonds of societal restraint. The concepts of right and wrong were passing out of his mind and into the mercurial emptiness like runaway daydreams. Almost 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 into the cellar. Boo calmly closed the basement door behind him as he escorted them back into their dank domain.

*

Upon Vick and the Spazz's arrival in DC, they cruised up Connecticut Avenue and rented two penthouse suites at the Washington Hilton hotel. They left their bags on the sitting room banquette in Vick's suite and went to the terrace bar to unwind for a while. After some short time they went to the hotel's parking area, fired-up the Trans Am, and headed towards Georgetown. Soon they were on

Wisconsin Avenue and pulling into the parking area behind Good Guys gentlemen's club next to Guy Mason Park.

In short order they were seated at the club's bar and watched the cornea-blistering pole-dance show of Devil-food Del Rio and her two very flexible companions. As per usual, in any self-respecting strip bar in any corner of the globe, the musical fare included scads of timeless testosterone hits from the bands ZZ Top, Motley Crue and the occasionally over-noodly Stevie Ray Vaughn. Upon Vick's arrival in the club, cell phones began clicking and the inescapable paparazzi, that follow him practically everywhere, arrived within the hour.

After Ms. Del Rio's spectacularly agile performance, she sat with Vick and enjoyed the evening in his company. Before the night was through, photos of her sitting with him and short tabloid articles were on the AP and Reuter newswires with titles like, "Vick Has New Hot Tamale," and "Devil-food Does the NFL." Within hours they were being printed in the daily gossip-rags worldwide.

After an evening of fun, drinks and blah-blah with Del Rio and her sidekicks, Vick and the Spazz repaired from the Good Guys club in the early morning, and slept until the next day in their twin suites at the Washington Hilton. The day after the fun at Good Guys, they went downstairs to the hotel pool area and began their serious discussion of what needed to be done with Boo Smalls..

"My man," Vick said, "I've got a sensitive bit of work for you when we get back home. I think it's best to keep Dasha out of the equation for a while. There's some bad mamma-jammas in Youngblood these days and I don't want her getting mixed-up with them. I sent her to try and schmooze Boo Smalls into selling me his prize dogs. She came running back home lookin' like she was on a serious boat-trip and freaked into the next week. I mean that chick was *completely* trippin' when she got back to the cabin. Some very mean hombres killed Boo Smalls's dogs in his own house while he was out and the basement of his place, she told me, was like a slaughterhouse. That being said and out of the way, I'd like *you* to pay a visit to his place this week. I'll give you PLENTY of hello money for the job and

compensate you for your time in grand fashion. What I want you to do is buy a dog from HIS sources and find out from where he gets the dogs to train into such fierce, fucking little monsters. He's got to GET them from somewhere. He likes money, he'll listen to you. He's not a breeder, he's a trainer and he does this shit for cash. If we can get him to 'fess-up where he finds these beasts, then we can start rounding some of them up for the Surry County compound. Then, IF we could actually get Smalls to start working with us, we'd be un-fucking-stoppable."

The Spazz considered his friend's lengthy statement, and asked him, "Vick, I'm just making conversation here, but you make an eight-figure salary from the NFL for a six month work schedule. Product endorsements for all that pathetic crap you pimp on TV makes you piles more free bucks. Why on earth do you do this dangerous bullshit with fight-dogs. Can't you just occasionally go to a fight, undercover-like, and not get your hands dirty? I mean, I *love* to watch a good fight too, believe me, but I'm not telling millions of people each week to contribute to the United Way Foundation or Ronald McDonald house for runaways. If your ass get caught doing all this shit, you are gonna be one hurtin' puppy."

Vick calmly replied, "I don't know, man. I guess, really, in the larger sense of things, that it's just way better for some people, people like me for instance, to rule in Hell than serve in Heaven." He thought for a long minute and asked the Spazz, "Did you ever hear that song by the Cramps called 'Human Fly?'"

"No, I don't believe I have," he replied.

"The words go something like this," Vick rejoined, "I'm a human fly, and I don't know why, but I say 'bzzzzzzz.'"

"That's some pithy shit," the Spazz sarcastically replied, "That's why you do all this crap because of a stupid song by the Cramps?"

"The Cramps are NOT stupid," Vick quickly shot back.

“I can’t help myself, and I say bzzzzzz,” Vick dreamily said to himself, “and I get to play God with little lives like Satan himself, who was once the most beautiful angel in Heaven. Spazz, I’ll tell you something, it’s a weird feeling when you can’t stop yourself from doing something you know is wrong. At first you’re afraid of the thing you can’t control, but slowly-slowly, after a while you actually start to like how it feels. I know it sounds insane, but it’s true. I dance around a football field for sixteen weeks, keep the masses from burning down the White House and asking too many questions, and I’m compensated with so much cash I can live like a demi-god and indulge every whim. Money is great, but *power* is the real game. The NFL club owners have just the same nasty little affliction as me. They’re rich cowboys who are unable to buy private armies like in the olden times, so they have a boys club called the NFL and play God with the lives of a bunch of bone-headed punks who would just as soon have turned into career hit-men if they hadn’t become football players. But the dogs, baby, the dogs are power. Raw power. Unthinking, unyielding, uncompromising raw power that doesn’t stop, ever, until it’s dead. It’s the real deal. It’s the animal-power that I can’t get enough of, no matter how much I know it’s wrong or want to stop my association with it. Am I just a human fly who sold out for big bucks or a fallen angel who can bankroll his own demented power-trip? I’m not really sure anymore. I can’t help myself, and I say ‘bzzzzzz’ and I’m gonna keep going on with this insane shit until someone stops me.”

“You, Vick, are a *great* man,” the Spazz said in a humbled, pious tone of pure respect.

“Now let’s chill for the rest of the day and enjoy the pretty poolside scenery,” Vick calmly said, “we’ve got plenty of work to do in the next few days when we get back to Youngblood.”

*

Sonny was training Roscoe in the empty lot behind his and Liz’s apartment. He had collected several discarded Fauquier County telephone directory books in a pile and was holding them with a protected, gloved hand while Roscoe shredded them into ticker tape with its powerful jaws.

He was now the happiest man in Youngblood, Virginia. His dog seemed to be unbeatable in the battle-pit, regardless of what Liz and the bookies were pumping into the blood of the competition. His gut feelings told him this particular animal had the potential to be a future gold mine, and would be pulling down the serious money in a few months when the private interest stud-sale representatives came to town. Little did he 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 as they lay on their chaise-longs and chatted among themselves. 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, drinking white corn and Lite beer from plastic champagne glasses, and reading the current issues of *Celebrity Hair*, *Glamour*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Tiger Beat* magazines.

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

Wanda told the girls about the astronomical tips she'd received at the Clean n' Jerk last Friday and also informed them that there were great numbers of single guys with money falling out of their spotless Levi's blue jeans at the bar that 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 to decorate

the bar with the colorful civil war gear for the weekend. The girls 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 CSA infantry caps as a bonus to complete their outfits. "What randy businessman with a snoot full of white corn could resist buying a half-price string bikini off of a gun-slingin' Dixie-chick?" they giddily asked themselves.

The girls conferenced among themselves for a while. They thought maybe some of those horny, cash-carrying boys might like some *serious* companionship when they arrived the Clean n' Jerk that evening. If Wanda could make six bills in one night passing out bourbon and beer, why not ratchet up the ante a few notches, and make some real money taking the fellows back to the haystack for some X-rated, 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' basement looked like something out of a surrealistic prison movie. The pink, blistered trio of canines was 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 dogs.

Soon the three of them began calmly pawing at the front crossbars of their cells. 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 dogs and unlocked all three cell doors. They walked into their individual places deliberately, and immediately began pawing at the oven grates on the clay floor covering their individual spaces.

Before their re-awakening, 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.

Boo S watched them with continued, clean amazement. The scalded, eyeless dogs held him in a state of dumb fascination. He went to his work bench to collect the rib-eye steaks, and then returned to the animals. In an odd replay of the scene with Lester Ganz's gory murder [the night before], Boo held the cut of meat out in one hand for Nitro to inspect. The dog came to the front of his cage, gently took the steak from Boo's hands and dropped it to the ground. Regarding it like something new and unknown, Nitro finally pulled it into the corner of the pen and left it there untouched.

The three dogs were beginning to fidget in their pens and continued the almost uncontrollable exercise of scratching the electric iron slats on the floor. Boo, for the life of him, could not understand their interest with them.

Their scraping of the bars on the ground 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 pen, and their scraping and moaning was becoming terrifying; in a matter of moments it was almost unbearable to watch.

Boo was getting scared of what might happen if they got wild and started clawing at the front crossbars for escape from 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 got out of their cages? He didn't know.

Subconsciously or of his reactive-mind, he understood exactly what he had to do to cease the spectacle in the basement training area. He had to turn on the juice from the Die Hard battery, and hope it would do something to stop these creatures from tearing themselves to shreds. Jet's paws were

becoming meaty clubs from the machine-like drubbing of the current-conducting slats. Nail's and Nitro's pads were almost as bad from the incessant smiting.

Boo 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 heated battle in the fields of Perdition. He 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 in the pen were explosive.

And then there was serenity in Boo's basement cabin.

Boo watched in mute amazement as the animals lay down across the quietly humming metal grates, soaking up the unregulated current from the huge car battery. He slowly walked over to the front crossbars of their pens and saw each of the beasts slowly panting, with their tongues lolling out on one side of their mouths.

He 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 previous mad howling and scraping, what was inconceivable to the mind of the viewer, was plainly evident in the training pen. It looked like the wild 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 absolute impossibility. He took a penny nail from his workbench and tossed it through the crossbars of the pen and onto the kitchen grate in Nitro's pen. When it made contact with the grate,

the nail jumped around like a ricocheting bullet, sending a wake of sparks in its path until it bounded clear of the pen. The quiet animal paid no attention to the nail as it darted around inside its cage.

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

Then a perfect moment of comprehension and understanding came to Boo Smalls.

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 it. If Liz Fury's people had tried to detonate his distillery, they'd have placed the explosive charge at the outside bottom of the vat to make the blast point destroy it 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 with the lightning that had 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 small amounts of strychnine in the ruined white corn. Then, later, he'd preserved the dogs' bodies in it and their tissues had become saturated with the liquid. An inconceivable, alchemic reaction must have taken place when the lightning touched off the white corn- an extraordinary, chemo-electric action 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, as now he was sure this seeming divine intervention was a sign that his meager plans of destruction towards Liz were made in haste. In his

crumbling mind, he abandoned the idea of burning down the Clean n' Jerk with his crude Molotov cocktails.

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 together hard. The report they made was like a gunshot.

Of course he did not realize that radiation poison was in his body and slowly creeping into his central nervous system and brain cells. When the lightning bolt had blasted still #1, it had not only destroyed the top of the still and the corn liquor, but the small radioactive-waste container of P-32 had also exploded from the bolt's impact. Its contents had been sprayed into the atmosphere around his supply shed.

Boo's skin was beginning to blotch, and his thought processes were becoming erratic and confused. None of that mattered in the larger sense however, because he 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 her 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, 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 monetary 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 at the Clean n' Jerk. Things were looking good for an incredible night of sales and easy money for everyone.

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

Sonny walked over to the house stereo system and placed his Albert Collins, *Don't Lose Your Cool* CD into the player. Soon the club was filled with Collins' famous high-end Telecaster guitar licks and Sonny and Wanda started boogying around the bar to the ferocious jam, "Meltdown."

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

*

This time Sonny and Wanda weren't caught off-guard by his visit to the Clean n' Jerk.

Wanda flashed her flat .38 from out of her black spandex running shorts in half a heartbeat. She held the gun firmly in both hands and had it aimed squarely between Boo's 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 Boo 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 his omnipresent Lee jeans. 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 Sonny and Wanda and waved off the need for them to keep his head in their crosshairs.

"Don't you people ever take a break from all this Clint Eastwood bull-stuff?" Boo questioned.

"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."

Sonny noticed that Boo looked kind of strange and disoriented. He changed his tone of voice from the badass-bouncer mode to a light and mildly sarcastic style to see how he'd react. He was sure something was really wrong with him.

"Boo, I'd like you to think of us as like a couple of stoned, smiley-faced, hippie-people from the 60s. Peace and love is our game at the Clean n' Jerk, ain't that right sweet cheeks?" he said to Wanda.

She quickly picked up on Sonny's off-handed, break-the-tension-and-see-what-happens, flower-power conversation motif. She rejoined in a terse, satiric manner with her voice attempting to imitate that of former U.S. President Richard Nixon.

"Uh, yeah, of course- well let me say this about that. I mean we gotta have peace in our time, and peace with honor, baby. It's all about serenity, baby- serenity and groooooovy times. That's what it's all about here at the Clean n' Jerk."

He casually regarded the two of them for a long second, shook his head to clear it from its internal cloudiness, and smirked like a spoiled child.

“Save me the ‘Tricky Dick’ one-liners, *please*,” Boo 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 man who had almost taken them out of the game permanently only a few days ago? He looked different, like he had a bad eczema 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 more than a little mentally unglued.

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

“I actually have never felt better in my life,” 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 and bookies. 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 and some spectacular action 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. On the house stereo, 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 Wanda after the long pause.

“You had sex with that man?” he questioned. “My God girl, 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 to melt 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 has gotten him to see things her way. I always like to bring her the good news; she kisses me like a marine sergeant and puts lots of 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 get French-kissed by 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 the bizarre tale of Boo’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 normal “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 potential revenue and incredible spectacle that was about to happen at the upcoming blood-matches. They were somehow going to be more amazing than ever. Something no one on the circuit could even hope to dream about.

After he’d called the liquor vendors, he took his sedan into Winchester to buy several gallons of white corn from Liz’s private distillery source. The cruise on Interstate 81 was relaxing and the day was shaping up nicely for Sonny. He mused about his situation and smiled broadly- 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 Boo had predicted. This weekend would be his kick-off into big money and fast times. He couldn't wait for it to begin.

*

Vick and the Spazz left the Washington Hilton later that day and arrived in Youngblood in the early evening. When they got to the cabin, Vick turned off all the intruder alert, intruder pacification, and home security devices which he'd activated before their departure. Dasha had not returned from Berlin and, according to the security system, no one had entered the cabin while he'd been away. He went to the Polk Audio component stereo system and turned on the radio to the local classic rock station. The Nazareth classic "Love Hurts" filled the room with its chiming, moody melody..

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They both threw their bags onto the sofa-thing and went into the kitchen to sit and talk. Vick took a large Calphalon spaghetti pot from the bottom cupboard shelf and filled it with water from the tap. Soon he was peeling onions and slicing green, red and yellow peppers and preparing his secret personal-recipe, Salsa-Mike, for the linguine that the Spazz had brought courtesy of Mrs. Gina Antonelli from the mini-market at the north end of the Barberini Metro stop in Rome, Italy.

"I've always preferred Calphalon to Le Creuset cookware," Vick said directly to the Spazz. "It cooks more evenly. True, Le Creuset ware does have that pretty, sunburst-finish, enamel lacquering to it that makes it oh-so provincial and picturesque. But I'll take the gun-metal gray, even-cooking Calphalon any day. I don't care how banal the critics say it looks."

“Whatever you say, man,” the Spazz unwittingly replied.

Soon the two of them were sharing a bottle of burgundy, devising plans, and noshing on their sumptuous linguine dinner.

“This is some fine linguine,” the Spazz complimented to Vick.

“I find it absolutely decadent,” Vick smilingly replied.

“So,” Vick continued, “tomorrow is gonna be a rock and roller for sure, my man. I’m gonna fill your country-boy pockets with a cool one-hundred-thousand dollars for Boo Smalls and 20K for your personal services in securing me the baddest dog on the block. One thing I can tell you for sure is Smalls is not gonna be a happy camper when a stranger comes a knockin’ at his door. Things could get a bit, well, snarly, is guess is the word for it. But I imagine he’ll calm down considerably once he smells some cash coming his way. Are you in for this, as we say, twitchy little piece of business?”

“Are you serious?” the Spazz incredulously replied. “Of course I’m in, man. For a one-day, 20K-job I’d eat Chicken McNuggets off a gas sation toilet seat. I’ll get your dog for you or my name isn’t Dwayne ‘Spazz-man’ Watts. All I need is a map to the place where Boo Smalls lives and an address where you want this super-pooch delivered.”

They continued their chat and delicious meal for some moments, then, suddenly, Vick’s cell phone sounded. He looked at the phone’s screen. It was Dasha calling him.

“This should be good,” he said. He hit the answer button and calmly said, “hello, there.”

“MIK-AIL!” she wailed with such intensity that Vick had to violently whip his head away from the phone to avoid permanent hearing damage. But it wasn’t enough to save him from the high-volume rage that was emanating from the other end of the phone. She was projecting her voice with such unbelievable, near super-human force, that the speaker cone in her mobile phone’s receiver perforated into strips. The international broadcast satellite signal from Berlin had reached its redline

maximum sonic threshold from her screams. In a preprogrammed, preemptive, damage-control switch-relay, it skipped to the nearest compatible sister signal, which happened to be the analogous broadcast frequency of the local classic rock station in Winchester, Virginia, USA.

Dasha's voice came blasting out of the Polk Audio component system's massive speakers at incredible volume. Michael Vick and the Spazz dived in clean terror out of the sound's direction. They covered their ears and hid behind the sofa-thing like terrified children, but nothing could stop them from hearing the young Russian's air-raid siren like tirade.

"Awwwwwww Mik-ail, you are most American asshole. You are biggest asshole- like from outer space. MIR space station has not such big asshole! Awwwwwww Dasha is gone for two days and you go with mutant-Brazil woman with tits big as sheep! I hope you are happy together. I hope you have 200 babies all look like pot roast sheep. Awwwwwww Dasha is so mad!"

She closed the phone hard and the classic rock station signal went back on-line. The Rolling Stones's classic tune "Start Me Up," took the place of her fin-shriek voice. Vick and the Spazz were still in their place of hiding behind the sofa-thing. Their hands continued to cover their ears and their eyes remained shut tight from fear. Slowly, after some moments, they moved from their place of concealment, turned the stereo off, and went back to the kitchen to finish their hastily abandoned meal.

After a short while the Spazz said to Vick, "I guess she really does like you after all."

"It would certainly appear that way," Vick smilingly rejoined.

Nine

Dr. Ivan Hu shifted his body's massive frame on his German-engineered, tungsten-steel swivel chair and extinguished a Gitane cigarette in an ashtray already overflowing with spent butts, stale ash

and scads of balled-up candy wrappers, mostly of the Almond Joy variety. He began twiddling a jade-inlaid, dagger-like letter opener between his banana-sized fingers and became pensive for a long moment.

His conversation with Boo Smalls earlier did not seem like their usual chats and the general tone of his conversation seemed rather overcast and twitchy. Something was wrong in the big picture of things. He could feel it. Instead of Boo's laconic, overconfident, telegraphic speech, he sounded shaky, unsure of himself and exhausted. His lack of information regarding the three brush war experimentals, AKA Nitro, Jet and Nails, was suspicious. His asking for delivery of the highly secretive SPECIMEN-210 to Youngblood was unilaterally unheard of; it was almost an insane man's request.

However, Hu thought to himself, he must have his reasons for wanting it there in his home-training basement. Boo was in a league of his own when it came to taking Gen-Y experimentals and turning them into field-ready combat units. He'd proven this many times in the past, as their sales of private-army and security-force black market attack dogs to purchasers in Libya, Iran, North Korea, India and Pakistan had surpassed all expectations. The demand for more powerful, stronger and well-trained animals was nearly constant. The unsuccessful prototypes from the Kowloon lab were given to Smalls gratis to train and sell-off as he wished to any interested local party for quick money, or his "yearly investment," as he liked to call it.

Hu continued to flip the letter opener in his hand and then lit another Gitane. Hong Kong pop-music star Karen Mock was singing her hit, "So Close," on the small transistor radio which was situated on the far corner of his desk. At last, after some minutes, he hit the intercom button on the conference phone and spoke to this personal secretary, the exotically stunning and inscrutable Miss May Pantang.

"Yes, Doctor," Miss Pantang efficiently answered.

"Get SPECIMEN-210 prepped for transport," he thoughtfully said to her. "And have the Gen-Y corporate jet readied for Trans-Pacific flight next week. We're going to visit Mr. Smalls at this home and bring him his requested animal. This promises to be something of an interesting business meeting for all of us. That's all for now, Miss Pantang. Thank you."

"At once, Doctor," she coolly replied, and closed the line.

*

Lester Ganz's scenicruiser pulled into the small Greyhound station located at the intersection of 9th and F Streets in North West Washington, DC. After disembarking, Lester 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 walls for amusement. Epithets such as André of North East; Darnetta as Peanut; Park Hill 'bamas; TJ eats white cock/ 555-9353 any time; The R Street Killas; Prince runs like a girl; and Little Man Tate was here, decorated the grimy, sea foam green tiles of the decrepit stalls.

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, an abundant mulatto woman who sat like a Buddha was reading the current issue of *Soap Opera Digest* magazine, drinking an Orange Crush soda from the can and noshing on fistfuls of Bar-B-Cue flavored Lay's potato chips from a family sized bag. Her small, suspicious eyes practically glazed over with antipathy when she saw Lester approaching her. He looked like he had a problem with his travel itinerary, and she, to put it mildly, despised dealing with unfortunate travelers who had scheduling problems.

Lester 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. She looked at him with extreme distrust, almost as if he were about to pull a spitting cobra out of a canvass bag.

"Did my *supervisor* send you here?" She snapped at Lester.

"W-what did you say?" He nervously 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 difficulty with deportment and *courtesy* with my customer service skills. 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?"

"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."

“Thanks a lot,” he 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 information booth agent.

“Yes?” he said.

She had indeed forgotten to tell him something. She’d recalled, upon his departure from her post, the proper way of completing a conversation with a patron as *demand*ed by the regional director 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, spotter-service 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 cashiers and the sales floor. 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, scads of Japanese digital cameras, wildly colored electric guitars; ratty snakeskin boots, complete sets of Snap-on socket wrenches, dusty, particleboard-housed stereo systems and outdated computers. No firearms were displayed in the front of the store, and no one appeared to be inside of the place.

He pressed his nose to the glass to see deeper inside the store's confines. He tried to open the door but it was locked. Then a shadow of a thin man came into view from the back office of the shop. He buzzed the security lock and Lester stepped inside.

The man then clicked on the remaining overhead lights and Lester approached him with caution. He looked like the Samuel L. Jackson character "Jules Winnfield" from the Quentin Tarantino movie *Pulp Fiction*.

Lester continued to look nervously 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. He 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. He at last broke the awkward silence in the store, and began a conversation.

"You don't look like a Solomon," he smilingly said.

"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?" TJ asked him.

Lester paused, and then said, "Do you carry any firearms?"

He 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. I got a big spear gun in the back if you wanna see it, though."

"You don't carry *any* guns?" Lester carefully questioned him, "I thought, well, I pretty much thought, that all pawn shops carried them."

TJ paused, smiled like a seasoned croupier, and said, "D'you ever see that movie called *The Terminator*, the one that had that big-ass, Arnold Schwarzenegger-man in it?"

"Yes," 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 you'd like 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-up a handgun, but now he'd have to figure something else out.

"Oh, that's all right Mr. TJ," Lester wheezed in disappointment, "Thank you for your time." He began walking towards the door of the shop, but then turned around when TJ spoke to him.

"I don't mean to get personal," he said to Lester, "but to be honest, you don't really fit the customer profile-type to be buying a firearm. You seem more like the kind of person who'd be looking for a real good graphic calculator for his home or office. Does this visit to my store have something to do with what happened to your hand?" He looked at Lester with honest concern and continued, "It looks like it's time to change that bandage on your arm, too. It appears to be getting a bit, you know, crusty."

"That has something to do with it," Lester atonally 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 hear *that!*" TJ sympathetically responded. He looked at Lester intently, almost as if he were trying to see through him. After a few seconds he said, "wait here a minute. I might have something you'd be interested in." TJ disappeared into the back room and returned with a large paper bag in his hand. "I found this in the trash can yesterday." He looked at Lester 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 him. He almost dropped the pistol from its sheer weight. He examined it for a brief moment, put it back down on the counter, and thanked TJ for showing it to him.

“If anything could protect you and your store,” TJ said to him, “that baby’ll do it. You could kill a herd of rabid rhinos with that mutha. Listen, why don’t you sit down for one minute and relax. 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 and 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 TJ brought him a small ceramic vessel with a shot of the rice wine in it. Then he cleaned and dressed the 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. Lester sipped his drink carefully while TJ downed his sake 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 scenicruiser 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 at the information counter who possessed the *gauche*, bordering on *déclassé*, social skills.

TJ grinned and his metal tooth was radiant in the light. “That, my friend, is Miss Trineeta Durant of Southeast DC,” he said laughingly. “She gets kinda nervous sometimes. That woman’s on some funny new diet she heard about on the Oprah Winfrey show. Now she only eats peaches and rice, or something on that order. However, sometimes she goes over-the-top with the potato chips and Mars bars like a ravenous boar straight out of the woods. You don’t even wanna be around her when she’s hungry. No sir, you don’t.”

Lester thanked him for all his kindness while he’d been in his company, and said he’d enjoyed spending time with him, although it had been only for some few minutes. 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 DC Police Department has some new kinda thing going now where they buy unregistered handguns back for a hundred dollars each from anybody who brings one into the station- no questions

asked. Can you believe that shit? Now every kid on 9th 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 HK-piece I showed you before into their headquarters on 14th Street tomorrow and pick-up a quick c-note."

TJ then paused, looked straight at Lester, and said to him, "friend, I'd sell *you* that gun for a hundred bucks. I think you need it more than the North West precinct does."

Lester could not believe his ears. He turned to stare directly at TJ. A look of wild gratitude filled the features of his face. "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, right?" He asked.

"Like you wouldn't believe," Lester 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 it fit. 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 it 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 key 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 which 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."

Lester repeated his performance with the billfold and retrieved a sawbuck. He handed the money to TJ and put the box under his right arm.

"What about the key to the strongbox," Lester asked, "I'll need it to open it 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 of the game with a gun I sold him in my own store. You look like a nice enough fellow, and I believe someone has done you a terrible injustice. But Jeffrey Dahmer was a nice 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 large-caliber protection you'll ever need. I guarantee you that. Yes sir, I do."

Lester 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 tardy passengers stranded in strange, usually inhospitable 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. TJ looked at Lester for a long 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 some 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 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.

Lester stared in disbelief, and was struck mute at the remarkably astute information given him by the pawnshop owner. Then he recalled his previous conversation with Trineeta Durant 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.

He dashed back towards the station like an obsessed man. 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 it. 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 bus as the last person in line stepped up to the door to take their seat. The motor was running and the driver was ready to pull out. Lester was too winded to even cry out to him to wait for his arrival.

The bus driver looked at Lester with cold, indifferent eyes. He'd seen that same peculiar little man giving his friend Trineeta a hard time in the depot when they'd first arrived; he didn't give a damn if the arrogant bastard got stranded in the shit-holes of 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 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 bus and pouring on what little strength he had left to reach the slowly shutting doors. He was only five feet away. Then, without warning, he lost his footing for a split second, but managed to hurl the strongbox containing the 9mm handgun at the closing doors.

They closed directly on the strongbox; it stayed limply suspended in mid-air, like a dead, office building pigeon, between the pneumatic hasps.

Lester nearly collapsed onto the bus portal. He stared up at the driver, and then pointed to his box which was suspended right in front of him. The bus driver released the lever, and the doors opened, releasing it. He boarded the coach and gave the driver the murderous look of an enraged, barnyard psychopath. He was glad the container had to be bashed open to release its contents, because he was afraid he might like to use the weapon on the driver. Lester, after gaining his breath, wheezed out at him, "W-why didn't y-you wait for me?" He was livid, which was a feeling he was unused to experiencing.

"I have a schedule to keep, sir, and you appear to have a problem with punctuality," the driver arrogantly and laconically responded. Lester crimsoned in clean rage. He 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. Lester tempered his anger and glared directly at the driver. "I'll attack his strategy of being blasé about the matter," Lester 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 sick 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.” Lester knew this was a cheeky, elementary-school level attempt at generating psychological unrest in the mind of the scumbag driver, but he didn’t give a damn. It actually felt kind of satisfying to him.

He put his package down in a nearby seat, stood in front of the driver, and set his eyes on him. His gaze bored through the smug man like microwave beams. After a long moment, the driver became anxious and fidgety; like an amphetamine-imbibing, Anthony Perkins might have reacted to the same treatment and situation. The driver cleared his throat, and said he needed to take off if they were going to get to Alexandria at the appointed time. Lester continued eyeballing him like a rabid animal and sat down in the seat directly behind him. His malignant, watchful gaze was something akin to how an unrepentant serial killer stares at a collection of perfect kitchen knives in a boutique culinary store, or how a farmhouse snake stares at a fresh chicken egg. It was pure RNA hatred, pure violence, pure virus.

After several terribly uneasy moments, the driver glanced back at Lester with something like restrained panic pasted on his face. He swallowed his pride, 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. He held the fire directly above the pool of almost pure alcohol, while Sonny kept his carbine trained on Nitro. The dog 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’s eyes darted between the two figures at lightning speed. The flame was almost in contact with Boo’s fingers. She 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 she was right. Also, he 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 stared intently at Boo. He slowly retracted the flame from over the puddle, 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,” Boo muttered to her, “you’re a smart lady.”

Boo aimed his Glock .38 in the general 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. It then tore out of the saloon with unimaginable speed, and began heading towards the battle-pit.

After he fired the last shot, Boo nearly collapsed from nervous exhaustion. He 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.

He 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." He 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 Sonny. Liz came up behind him in a flash, and clamped her hand onto his wrist with unbelievable strength. He cried out in suffering as Liz 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 his shirt, and 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." She 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. 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 now." She gazed at him intently a second time. "And go to see a doctor," she continued, "You're starting to look nasty as cat shit."

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 the 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 them.

*

Dasha Mercury impatiently stood in the vocal recording booth of Tiger Tank studios in Berlin, Germany, noshing dried figs and awaiting instruction from the self-proclaimed new name in House, Trance and Techno music production, the stunning male model Ridge Reynolds, who was represented exclusively by the Ford Model Agency in New York City. It had been several days since her Calvin Klein jeans photo shoot at the White Trash Fast Food rock club. She had remained in Berlin, at the request of Reynolds, to put vocals on a dance-track club-single, which he believed would be his breakthrough piece into the big time of European DJ and producer stardom.

Ridge Reynolds had self-published his first volume of poetry, *Anti-syllabic Haikus of the Savant*, one year before to disastrous critical reviews and near negative sales. Even among the fashion-elite and supermodel fan club yo-yos, his stuff was considered banal, dilettantish and just plain goofy to read. His decision to add swirly, high-BPM music background to his poems to market them as club singles was not going as well as he would like. Dasha stood in the recording booth, reading the libretto of the poem she was supposed to recite, with clean distaste.

Outré Knockoffs and the Ateliers of Calcutta

Love is like

Last season's handbag from Gucci or Vuitton

Stuffed with balled-up Thai newspapers

And little sachets

Of moisture absorbing chemicals

With instructions not to eat them

Or keep them near your children

Love is like

An avocado green, short-sleeve rayon shirt

Machine-folded in a polyurethane bag

With cardboard collar and pins

Sitting there- plain as steel wool

In a room full of stolen Japanese lanterns

Woo-woo

“Vot is this shit?” she agitatedly said to herself. She distractedly disregarded the paper with the song’s words and began to think about her situation back in Youngblood.

So I try to make Mik-ail jealous of me, to love me more, and it goes boom-in-my-face like pipe-bomb. I am so stupid sometimes. Here I am with Ridge and he tries to make music that sounds like Czech washing machine with loose fan belt: ga-joonk, ga-joonk, ga-joonk. I see no future here. It is not just devoid-of-chic, it is fucking lost cause.

She shook her head to clear it from incredulity of the incomprehensible lyrics and tried to figure out why she was standing there, in some rich kid’s glitzy recording studio, in the first place. She was still upset with Vick about his highly-publicized rendezvous with the Brazilian exotic dancers Devil-food Del Rio, Selena Heat Seeker and Anita Afterburner at the Good Guys gentleman’s club in Georgetown. However, she was beginning to calm down a bit and understood that her association with Ridge Reynolds was making him not just jealous, but jealous enough to see other women. She also understood that Vick had no problem whatsoever playing hardball with her, and could easily turn the tables in the game of emotional blackmail and date practically any babe on the planet with a single phone call. The near powerless situation to control him was making her more than a little upset. She knew she’d have to call him, and call him soon, to apologize for her actions or she wouldn’t have an eight-figure salary NFL superstar to take her shopping anymore. Also, truth be told, she was starting to miss the pineapple, kiwi and coconut salad he made for her every Saturday morning when they kicked-back and read the fashion newspapers in bed together. Her decision to split the scene in Berlin was made in a nanosecond.

Ridge Reynolds was cluelessly twiddling the knobs of digital sequencers, faders, beat loop generators and found-sound samplers and emulators in the studio’s control room. His hair was perfect, but his face showed the stress and confusion of one who was completely ill at ease with his chosen vocation. He forced a smile when Dasha entered the room.

“I’ll have the beats ready in a moment, Dash,” he unconfidently said to her.

“Ridge, take a freshman writing class and hire a sound engineer. Dasha is gone. See you next fashion week.” She popped her final fig into her mouth, exited the studio, and hailed a taxi to return to her hotel. She decided that she would call Vick and apologize for her devoid-of-tact behavior and her next itinerary stop would be the town of Youngblood, Virginia.

*

Kim and Carmine 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 knew a good deal when she saw one, and knew that a dollar saved was a dollar earned. She was 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 state 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. Carmine was anxious to get on Route 50 West, which was the famous road that became John Mosby Highway after the corporate limits of Fairfax County. In his mind, 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 sentimental 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 the 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. Carmine 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 him. 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 felt like she could motor Carmine around anywhere he wanted to go in that beautiful ride. It made no difference to her where they went, as long as she could freely tool her luscious, sleek, high RPM 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 Carmine 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. Carmine's eyes widened in clean 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 Carmine. 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*," Carmine 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. Carmine made a polite apology to leave them for a moment, and went outside the building to wait for them to finish their chat. 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. They 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 Carmine 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.

Carmine jumped in 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. They 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 TJ had given him. 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 its seal. He'd put lots of impressive looking scratches and dents into it, but was unable to break the lock open. The strongbox was tougher than it appeared to be from its external appearance. 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 in Youngblood had been a completely uneventful episode. The bus 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 Lester had avoided eye-contact with the driver during the ride back into town. Lester had instructed the taxi driver to let him out at the crossroads near his home, and he walked the remainder of the way to his cabin by moonlight. When he reached it, 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 for emergencies and when deep snows blocked the roads. Lester was thankful that he'd purchased an electric can opener last Thanksgiving when they were having an inventory blow-out sale at Wal-mart, as 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 could free the gun.

His eyes scanned the contents of his basement. He considered using his hatchet on it, 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 nail gun 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 it, 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 nail's head. His fix-it project under the stairs of his home had been almost too easy with the new machine. 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 various 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 he tested the unit at its highest point, 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.

He walked over to the closet, opened the door, and brought down the package containing the high pressure gun. It was still in its original packaging. He'd only used it the one time, and it looked immaculately clean and unblemished wedged in its 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. He had two large clamps attached to its opposing corners. He 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 package 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-round 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 plastic safety goggles from the closet and placed them securely over his eyes. Now he needed a blueprint of attack. Lester 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 parabolas of jagged shrapnel.

The report was like a .22 round fired against a massive church bell. The nail that discharged from the magazine flew straight up in a ninety degree angle after its contact with the metal 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. He 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 plastic 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, myopic patterns.

He 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 basement's dull light like the skin of a great snake.

Lester picked up the powerful weapon in his left hand and held it up to the pale light for inspection. He turned it this way and that, admiring the contours and design of the ballistic 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 Sonny. Lester's memory jumped back to the moment when he first threw the sheaf of photos onto his desk at the store, and chuckled at his compromised position in the blackmail scheme. Then he regained his awareness, returned to his precious consensus reality, and said to himself with clean determination, "laugh while you can monkey-boy, and look out all you country people."

*

Doctor Ivan Hu and Miss May Pantang, boarded the luxury class, Gen-Y Genetics Laboratory Gulfstream-1 corporate jet at Kowloon international airport. Their flight's final destination was Dulles airport in Washington, DC. From there they would travel by car to the small, infamous southern town of Youngblood, Virginia, for their business rendezvous with Boo Smalls.

In the holding area of the private plane was a heavily sedated, muzzled, bound, steel-cage incarcerated, genetically engineered masterpiece of transcribed DNA. It was, simply, the jewel in the crown of the pit bull kingdom- the strongest dog ever created by Man and Nature. Its existence was known only to a select few in the private world of selective bio-engineering. It was known, with reverence and foreboding, as Gen-Y's ultimate genetic creation. It was known, simply, as the feared and dreaded, SPECIMEN-210.

Ten

Nitro had bolted from the club and was headed towards the fight-pit. His eyes were glowing like hot roman candles, and the scent of fresh prey was filling its nostrils; he almost flew towards the area where Boo had parked his Ford F-10. Roscoe's carcass lay in the middle of the pit where Nails and Jet had torn it to shreds.

Everyone who had been around the fight-pit had fled when the 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 the Clean n' Jerk's parking lot like a Texas flood when the unbelievable proceedings had started and had inadvertently forgotten his caged pit bull, Screwball, at the gaming site.

With Screwball now gnashing at the bars of his travel container, Nitro sensed his anguish as it approached his territory and poured on the speed to attack the imprisoned creature.

But, as approached Screwball's cage, he got a whiff of the vital fluids from Roscoe's tattered remains. It became crazed with the sanguinary perfume, altered the course of its pursuit, and jumped into the pit to investigate the delicious, sensual aroma of fresh blood.

Meanwhile, Sonny was in hot pursuit of Nitro and, with his .45 in his hand, he was sprinting like a track star after it. Screwball was in his travel crate, barking like an enraged debutante at Nitro who'd neglected him in favor of another quarry.

Sonny reached the lip of the pit, and stared down into its chasm. He was breathing hard, sweating, and observing the hideous demonstration taking place below him in the ditch.

Nitro held Roscoe by the gruff of the neck. The vibrant, electrical glow from its eyes was pulsing like a squad car light. It 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 Sonny's direction, who was now jumping down into the trench.

Sonny clicked a fresh 7-shot clip into the handle of his .45 and aimed it at the dog. Nitro sensed the additional quarry in the pit; it set its gaze on the new target and began hurtling towards it. Screwball was in his carrier and howling at the proceedings taking place below him like a rutting tiger.

Sonny set the firing pin on his carbine. He went down on one knee, and lined Nitro up 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 him. Nitro closed in on him. Its eyes blazed like afterburners on a speeding rocket ship as it roared towards its confrontation with Sonny.

Nitro was twenty feet away from Sonny and approaching at break-neck speed. Sonny aimed his carbine at Nitro's breast plate, held his breath, and fired a round at it.

The shot shattered Nitro's rib-cage, missing its heart by centimeters. Nitro jerked slightly from the bullet's impact, but continued its monomaniacal charge at Sonny. He was now fifteen feet from where Sonny crouched.

Sonny fired four scorching rounds in succession and saw flecks of skin and bone spraying out from Nitro's body as the projectiles passed through its anatomy. It flinched with each contact the slugs made with its figure, but continued its intense stampede. It was now a mere ten feet from Sonny and still determined to reach and destroy him.

Sonny went down on both knees and faced Nitro at eye level. The two locked visuals for the final few seconds of their blood contest. Sonny raised the .45, aimed for Nitro's heart and fired.

Nitro's chest shuddered as the hot lead passed through its ventricles. Its back legs gave out entirely with the last shot. Through sheer will power and momentum, it continued to advance towards Sonny. The dog was only a few feet away and began using its front paws to pull itself forward. After a few seconds, its upper body shook violently, and it collapsed. It lay dying only a few inches in front of Sonny.

Sonny still had the pistol trained and was about to dispatch Nitro with a final shot when he heard the death-rattle in its lungs. 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. It raised its head with unbelievable difficulty to stare at Sonny for a final second.

Sonny, for the first time, 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 fuck."

The luster in Nitro's eyes flickered back to life for a split second. Then it completed its final action on earth; it snapped its neck straight up, and spat a massive, thick clot of bright red blood, laced with carpet nails, directly in Sonny's face.

Sonny 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. It had been run through with .45 caliber ammunition and would present no more menace to the people of Youngblood, ever.

Sonny 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; he was at the nadir of his self-worth, the sense of personal devastation was complete. He hung his head and reflected on how small and meaningless his actions were 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 continued his frenzied yapping as Sonny contemplated his meager participation in the events of the cosmos. He 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. Sonny grew weary of the unyielding cacophony, and fired a round in the direction of the beast.

The slug whizzed through the upper corner of the carrying vessel, and made a sound like a small gong being struck as it blasted through the thin metal. Screwball made puny, whining sounds as he wedged itself into the corner of his carrier. He cowered there, fearful of further retribution.

Boo came up silently behind Sonny. and put his hand on Sonny's shoulder. Sonny didn't move when he sensed the physical contact.

"Liz 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, Boo," he cautiously answered, "I don't believe she does. She comes from out of town, from southern California, I believe. She 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 Nitro's carcass lay. He knelt down, picked up the limp body and looked Sonny directly in the eyes. The stains of the animal's blood began spreading on his shirt. Immediately after retrieving the remains, the tone of their discussion dramatically changed.

"You and Liz shouldn't have broken into my home," Boo snarled.

"Those *things* shouldn't have killed Roscoe!" Sonny angrily shot back, and leveled his .45 at Boo whose hands were shaking. The streaks of Nitro's blood on Boo's face made him look like some kind of bizarre ghoulish figure 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? We’re the only ones who remember the triumphant days of the fights. Most of the trainers in town these days are not from around here, 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 is their quick-fix queen. We’re just about all that’s left of the A-team. The last of an elite group who remembers the way things used to be.”

Boo continued staring at Sonny sitting on the ground and said, “by the way, 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.

Boo continued to stare up at Sonny with his increasingly beatific, monstrous smile and said to him, “you’re 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’re a 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, *Sonny*, you’re Liz Fury’s personal dupe and you *know* it.”

Sonny shuddered at Boo’s last penetrating pronouncement and violently pulled the trigger of the .45.

An empty, metallic click was the only report.

Boo didn’t so much as flinch when the gun’s hammer fell and nothing issued from its barrel. Sonny twitched his head like a startled animal, and gawked in astonishment at him. The murky sodium-arc light 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 battle pit. Boo continued to stare at Sonny behind the endlessly black lenses of his sunglasses.

After a strained moment, Sonny 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.

Boo 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 him 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 poison 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 the box 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 hour. 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 then passed by the side of the club, exited the property, and drove onto the empty rural route towards his cabin.

His mental faculties were fading from the toxins in his body. His physical deterioration from the nuclear material in his blood was also 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, a seed crystal of a plan was beginning to take shape in his mind. It was a scheme that concerned the medical skills of Chester Byron, the local veterinarian in Clarke County.

It also included a need to harness *large* amounts of electricity

*

Michael Vick fell on his knees like a devotee before the plasma screen. A look of something almost above pious reverence lined the features of his face. The NFL superstar, who had been in countless confrontations with the largest, strongest, most physically well-trained and hand selected monsters the sports world could throw at him, was humbled to the level of a trembling mite before the

unflappable, cold steel image of Boo Smalls on the giant television screen. In his mind, at that moment, Boo Smalls had become something more than human- something more than a demigod. He'd become pure light, pure thought, pure balls, pure black enzyme.

The Spazz had also stood in slack-jawed amazement as they'd watched the proceedings outside of the Clean n' Jerk. They'd zoomed-in with the satellite camera to the highest level of magnification and had witnessed the details of Boo and Sonny's quiet showdown inside the battle pit as if they'd been there themselves. Both of them were psychically measuring themselves against the fearless, falling-apart man who had nothing but pride for the games, raw power and unashamed avarice as his life's only friends- and both of them were coming-up short in their self-estimation of all things human. They both knew, deep in their hearts, Boo Smalls was a better man than either of them, and it was a bitter pill to swallow.

Vick slowly got up off of his knees and went to the bar in the kitchen. He retrieved two bottles of seven-star quality, VSOP Martell cognac and two elbow straws from the condiment area. He returned to the Spazz, snapped the tops off of the bottles, and handed one to his friend, along with a straw.

"To Boo Smalls," Vick said in a sotto voce, almost inaudible voice. "No predecessor, no successor."

"I'll drink to that," the Spazz replied. The two touched bottle necks in a toast and Vick placed the elbow straw in the bottle's neck. He took a long draught, and another and another. The Spazz watched him in wonderment. He turned his bottle upright and took a long shot himself. When he could contain his curiosity no longer, he asked Vick what he was doing.

"Why are you drinking this beautiful shit with a straw?"

"Because it fucks you up faster that way," Vick replied, "David Johansen told me that himself. If Johansen said it, it's gotta be true. Look at the New York Dolls first album cover. They're all sitting on a bordello sofa looking like a pack of complete wasters. On the floor is a can of Schlitz beer with a paper straw poking out of the tab-hole. What more proof do you need?"

"I can't argue with you," the Spazz respectfully replied.

Vick repaired to the Swedish sofa-thing, set his drink down and closed his eyes. There was nothing left to say or do. He would wait for the next few days to hear from Smalls about the delivery of his new fight dog, the mysterious SPECIMEN-210. His epiphany was complete. Boo was his avatar, his guru, his psychic master. It was a done deal. No other man had ever touched him this way; he felt pure connection, pure allegiance and pure surrender to his superior being.

Then his cell phone sounded. He looked at its small screen to see who was calling. It was Dasha.

"Oh Holy Saint Jerome, not now," Vick groaned aloud to himself, and picked-up the phone to answer it.

*

Several of the overhead lights in the Clean n' Jerk had blown-out when Sonny accidentally shot-up 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. She 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 wood 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 Jet with Liz'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, to give to Liz. 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.

Wanda 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 non-specific, tricky bullshit 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. Liz appeared to be on the verge of tears. She discontinued her swabbing duties and returned the intimate gesture. The two of them stood there, clinging to one another for a moment.

Wanda broke their embrace, and stared into Liz's face. A single tear *was* rolling down her 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 Liz's leather pants, and wiped the teardrop off of her face with a finger. Wanda brushed her lips over Liz's mouth and said, "everything will be fine. 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. After only a few moments together, both of the powerful women were consumed with an absolute sensual heat.

They shared a long, burning kiss in the scattered debris of the Clean n' Jerk Saloon.

Liz broke their protracted lip-lock and held on to Wanda with unquestionable feeling. She recovered her composure after a second, and took Wanda 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!*

She poured two shots up to the rim and handed one to Wanda. The pair downed their drinks, and poured two more. After the second fast-round of hard liquor, Liz was ready to have a serious talk.

"Do you know what Sonny's doing right now?" She asked in a disgusted tone.

"No I don't know," Wanda responded, "I have a feeling you're going to tell me, though."

"Well," Liz went on, "a few minutes ago, if my guess is correct, he took care of the infestation problem we had earlier with Boo'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 Boo, bothering us again. Ever. Those beasts killed Roscoe out in the pit earlier tonight; *that* pissed him off. Now listen, 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 cocky-ass, good bang in mattress-land in my honest estimation of things. 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 chunks of smashed-to-hell 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-eatin', fleabag, pissant dog! A lousy freakin' fight-dog for Christ's sake!"

Wanda held Liz's hand. "Men don't know a damn thing about how women feel sometimes," she told her. "Believe me, I know. But I'm here for you. Don't worry about him right now. He'll come around when he feels better. You watch and see if he doesn't."

"Listen," Liz rejoined, "do you remember when I told you that I remember the people that do favors for me? 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' world-beater mess that has screwed me sideways for at least the next good while."

She 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. "I have a strange feeling Sonny and I are about to hit the final snag in our relationship. I have to admit, he's a good strong-arm for the bar; 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 for me. That easy job I gave him to do with Lester Ganz turned into a shit-storm nightmare. He's a country boy who wants to be a badass 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, I'm more than pretty sure, it's going to be time to say sayonara to him."

Liz 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, roadhouse 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."

She stood up from the table. She took Wanda's hand and pulled her up to where she was standing. The two held each other in the pale light of the neon beer signs. They exchanged a long, dreamy look into each other's baby-blues. Then Liz whispered into Wanda's ear, "do you want to be with me? Do you think you can share your life with me? Share my bed, always?"

Wanda was silent for a few seconds while considering Liz's intimate proposal. Then she gently touched lips with her. Then the beginnings of a playful smile began to form on Wanda'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?"

"You can bet your last crocheted string bikini on that one," Liz cooed.

*

Lester Ganz was in his cabin rummaging through bookshelves, boxes of old college term papers, and folders in the closet looking for his copy of the famous warfare text, *Art of War*, by Sun Tzu. He'd taken a World Literature survey course as an elective in community college many years ago, and it had been one of the recommended titles for that class. Lester had never purchased or 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.

Upon hearing this coveted information, he quickly bought the bulky psychological novel from the school bookstore, but barely completed his reading of the tome during the course of the semester. After finally 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 exasperating, over-complex and flat-out headache provoking to read; and Fyodor Dostoyevsky, no matter how boulder-crushingly smart he was supposed to be, couldn't pack a wallop in his tales like the all-time heavyweight champ of the southern states, 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 just to get rid of them. They were selling the overflowing containers of literature for one dollar each. Lester had purchased one of the parcels out of pity for the sales staff and took it home.

He 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 previously-owned paperbacks.

Now he was combing through the belongings of his cabin, looking for the long forgotten translation of Sun Tzu's Asian military text. He was hoping that the revered, respected and relished age-old title of discreet-yet-brass-balled military savvy 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 night, he had to remain in the basement so no inside lights from his cabin would be detected from the streets.

He checked everywhere to locate the text, without a scintilla of luck. He at last went downstairs and began an inch-by-inch inspection of his residence. Lester inspected the bathroom, and then went into the small utility room where the hot water heater was located. The box of forgotten 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 books 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. He thought that possibly, if Sun Tzu's strategic advice was insufficient for his needs, the words Dick Nixon, a man who formerly had a globally entrenched, satellite-controlled, push-button nuclear arsenal at his fingertips might be of some use to him.

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 DC for his snotty, prissified insolence.

Also, the thought of purchasing a lethal weapon, a large caliber handgun in this instance, had also been a completely alien concept 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 memory stick 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 podiatric-arches seemed ridiculous to him now. Lester began to realize that the problems with his life, previous to the last couple of weeks, were lack of self-confidence, the complete absence of self-respect, and clean, unadulterated boredom.

"Any circus clown with half a mind can run a roadside 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; he got on his knees, and awkwardly attempted to perform a one-handed push-up. Many 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 to behold. Now the exercise was not nearly as mirth-provoking and 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. He needed to do something, 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 things. 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 text from 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. He was beginning to feel quite comfortable handling the powerful firearm; he was getting used to holding the weapon in his left hand.

Lester picked up the gun and held it horizontally in front of him, visually soaking up every detail of its composition. Then he 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. He 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, koan-chirping, 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.

*

Dasha Mercury trembled in anticipation of what Vick might say to her when he picked-up his phone. Her manner with him last time they’d spoken had been somewhat, as they say, *unrefined*, and she was apprehensive of any verbal retribution he might have in store for her. She choked back tears and repent about her backfired jealousy-provoking plan she’d cooked-up with Ridge Reynolds. She took a long drag of her Bulgarian-brand King cigarette and steeled herself for any strange, high-volume shit that he might want to blast her with over the line. Strangely enough, Vick was cordial to a fault when he came on the line and spoke.

“Dash-honey,” Vick calmly said when he answered his cell phone, “I’m really kinda busy right now. Almost per usual, there’s some intense shit going on in Youngblood, is it something important you need to tell me?”

She was completely taken aback by his genteel tone and manner. She paused for a long second and answered him in her rich Russian accent. “I am bitch- that is vot I am. Mik-ail, I am so sorry,” she said with real sadness in her voice. “I try to make you jealous for me and I have tampon for brain. You are good man and I want to be your woman. I mean this what I say. May I come back to you, to Youngblood? I miss you too much. I also miss fruit salad with kiwi too much.”

“Who wouldn’t?” he said.

Vick took a long sip of seven-star brandy from the elbow straw in the Martell bottle and almost cheerfully said, “of course baby, I’ve got the figs and vodka waiting for you. I hope you had a good time in Berlin, as we’ve got plenty of work ahead of us when you get back here. By the way, the plasma screen works greater than you can imagine, you’re a real little gear-head.”

“Oh, I am so happy!” she chimed, “happy like victorious national hockey team! My plane comes to Washington on Friday afternoon. I drive the Viper to Youngblood and we watch the dog-fights at the night.”

“It’s a date,” Vick merrily responded. “But now I’ve gotta bolt. There’s too much action here to talk about this minute. See you Friday, ciao-ciao for now.”

“Dasvidanye, Mik-ail,” she said, and closed the line.

A mega-sized, shit-eatin’ grin curled-up on the corners of Michael Vick’s mouth. He sat back on the sofa-thing and took another long sip of the cognac. The Spazz noticed his apparent personal contentment and started to talk to him.

“That was Dasha on the line?” he questioned.

“The girl, the legend,” Vick casually responded.

“She’s sorry she blew-up at you and played lots of catty games?” Spazz continued.

“That is also correct,” Vick said.

“She did exactly like you said she’d do?” Spazz asked, “she called you back and asked for a second chance?”

“Yup, yup, yup,” Vick said, “she’ll be back Friday afternoon.”

“Man, you are *really* something to behold in the psychology department, the Spazz said in near awe of Vick.

“Guess I’m just a lucky so-and-so,” Vick chuckled, and sipped his brandy from the elbow straw with great satisfaction. He then went to the Polk Audio component stereo and placed his CD of Johnny Guitar Watson’s, *A Real Mother For Ya*, in the tray. He hit the play button and the first notes of the title song spilled out of the massive floor speakers. Vick returned to the sofa-thing, lay down in a supine position, and let the funky, bursting-with-chic minimalist runs of the master guitarist wash over him.

*

Kim and Carmine 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 along the way Kim had purchased these items: pints of fresh blueberries, bags of homegrown tomatoes and peaches, and several carafes of sweet, home-made preserves, oblivious as to what kind of fruit jelly or marmalade was stored inside of them.

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 their 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. Carmine popped open the trunk of the ‘vette 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 bar 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. They both ordered their all-time favorite libation- a frozen Margarita made with double-shots of Herradura tequila.

Carmine got up from their table and began to look appreciatively at the photos and etchings of General Mosby and his Raiders which were 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. Carmine was thrilled with the historic décor of the place.

The remarkable bartender had their orders ready in moments, with a complimentary tray of Macadamia nuts on the side. Carmine 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 Carmine 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 Carmine 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 besides family business 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-polymer 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 sixty-foot tall, epoxy-based Brontosaurus. The woman chatted on about the time she'd been there with a student group from Wakefield High School on a class trip. Kim was becoming more wiggly by the moment for the opportunity to see the funky spot as the woman talked on about the plastic beasts of the Mesozoic era and Pleistocene epoch.

Kim the cocktail waitress had become ecstatic with the Sheraton's hospitality specialist's description of the prehistoric theme park. She couldn't wait to visit Dinosaur Land.

Back at Gray Ghost Tavern, Carmine was having a good laugh about Kim's coy manner of asking him to go to the schlocky 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 digital camera and I'll take your photo with every monster in the park. That's a promise, kiddo."

Carmine was personally unable not to stare in appreciation at Kim's rapturous face when she smiled her big, showgirl smile for him. The man's resistance went down to nothing as she pressed herself against him and kissed his cheek. The giddy pair was surely going to see famous southern monuments, historic battlefields *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.

*

Dr. Ivan Hu and May Pantang sat in the Gen-Y Genetics Laboratory Gulfstream-1 corporate jet headed for America. Dr. Hu leafed through the current issues of *Harvard Medical Review*, *Dubai Today* and the Ukraine edition of *Playboy* magazine as the sleek plane whispered through the skies. He sipped a Grand Mariner cognac from a crystal snifter, ogled the centerfold girl's perfectly refined features and remarked aloud to no one in particular, "good genes."

May visually scanned that day's *Wall Street Journal* and *International Herald Tribune* while sipping her Earl Grey tea. Frederick Chopin's infinitely delicate nocturnes played on the jet's intercom and gently wafted through the cabin.

"Boo Smalls reminds me of the tragic dark, composer Hector Berlioz and Wesley Snipes's Blade the vampire," the enormous Dr. Hu said to Miss Pantang.

May arched a perfectly manicured eyebrow towards him and coolly responded, "how so, Doctor?"

"Because they're both, well, thoroughly alone and thoroughly nuts," he thoughtfully replied. "They both believe, in their furthest, deepest, seed-crystal selves, that what they're doing is right. Their faith in themselves is unshakable; every brainwave they generate, every secretion from every gland

reconfirms their belief. They're also the absolute best at what they do: slaying vampires and writing dark symphonies. Please believe me when I tell you that nothing in the world is more dangerous than an obsessed, insane loner on a mission- especially a well-armed one. We'll have to be ready for anything when we get to Virginia. I have a feeling that Smalls is a dangerous man at this point in time. If we don't proceed with caution, it could possibly turn into something of a flap."

"Not to worry," she responded. She raised the hem of her Bordeaux-red, Ferragamo business dress to reveal three, seven-point throwing-star shirokins tucked into the floral-print elastic band of her right stocking. She deftly picked one out and with nearly undetectable movement whizzed it at blinding speed into the empty seat next to Dr. Hu. It went deep into its upholstery and penetrated its springs and metal skeleton. Bits of foam rubber ticking, all-weather seat material and jagged bits of metal coil now covered the area in front of it.

"We'll have all the protection we need," she continued while adjusting a single strand of hair which had come out of agreement with her perfectly coiffed, jet-black tresses.

Eleven

Wednesday, early evening.

Berlin, Germany

Peter Liberosa, the part-time Hollywood stunt double for Antonio Banderas and full-time Lufthansa airlines steward, was early for work. The reason for his early arrival at the airport was easy to explain. His new sunrise red Kawasaki Ninja 850cc motorcycle had nearly flown him down the highway and access road to the airport; such breakneck speed he'd only thought to be possible in Saturday morning cartoons and black market Asian microchip processors.

He now sat in the employee lounge, perusing the Spanish language editions of *Elle* and *Glamour* and skimming the passenger list for this evening's flight from Berlin to Washington DC. When his eyes came across the name of Dasha Mercury in the first class cabin, they bulged from their sockets as if he'd been rammed in the stomach with a grocery cart. A mild erection immediately followed.

The self-admitted supermodel junkie was a great fan of Dasha's work and indeed, her entire *oeuvre* as a photo-model. He then made a mental note to bring along his personal copy of the current Paris *Vogue*, which he kept in his employee locker, to get her autograph during the flight.

Dasha, meanwhile, was sitting in the VIP passenger lounge at Berlin airport, sipping chardonnay and musing to herself about her relationship with Vick and her *surprise* early-arrival in Youngblood. Even during the times when she thought to herself, her heavy Russian accent was omnipresent.

"I come to see Mik-ail a day early and make nice-nice to him for all the greed-head and jealous bullshit I try before. He is good man- crazy but good. He likes dog fights too much, as do I, but one day this too shall pass. It is true I still want Audi car as present, but I want him to drive it for me and go places together. This is fair exchange. And if, I say if, we have babies one day they will be many colors, extra-big in size and beautiful- not like pot roast sheep. This too is good. They will survive. Dasha is happy now."

The announcement was made for passengers to board the flight to Washington DC. It would stop in Paris to collect some additional passengers and refuel, and would then proceed to the United States. Dasha collected her Claude Montana shoulder bag, downed her wine in one throw, and proceeded to the gate.

*

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 usually 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 he was sure of, whether hallucinating or not, was that he could go to sleep for at least a week once he returned home. 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 of 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: namely, his Remington 7400 .30-06, and as much ammunition as he could carry. Also, he'd need several gallons of the bad corn liquor 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 the cover of night, but time was not on his side in right now.

He continued tooling down the road with bizarre images popping up before his eyes. In a cloudy background, visions of 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 like sabotaged oil wells 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 continued to imprint itself on his forebrain. Garth Brooks's fabled hard-drinking anthem, "I've Got Friends in Low Places" crackled out of the speakers mounted in the door panels. The ironic content of the tune started to make Boo laugh while he drove down the poorly lit road. Soon he was cackling with incredulous, malignant, infected guffaws as he navigated his truck down the long path, and finally, back onto his own land.

He followed the worn path up to his cabin and went around the side to park by the back door facing the woods. He exited his truck, leaving the parcel containing the cadavers in the flatbed compartment.

Boo pulled the house keys from his pocket and opened the door. He began walking towards the staircase leading down into the training area when the first wafting aromas of spoiled meat met his nostrils. He 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 scent.

He turned on the small light and saw the remains of Nitro's shredded raccoon 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 it 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 the training area, and flipped the body of the decomposing coon into the polymer bag with the shovel.

The bag with the remains was feather light compared to the box he'd been carrying earlier with his dead dogs in it. Boo brought the sack upstairs with him and, opening the back door, went to the perimeter of his yard 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 from the thicket, a wave of fatigue swept over him that almost knocked him to the ground. He 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 and with all the hometown people at the club congratulating him on his astounding wins, 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 from Front Royal who'd come to see the fights in person.

Becky Chambers, a corn-fed, *very* horny local darling, had found both Boo and pit-fights *exhilarating* in the fullest sense of the word. When she discovered that he was the top-man at the thrilling events, 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 him, Becky had a secret preoccupation that had been fascinating her for the past several months. Over the course of the springtime, she'd 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. Becky 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 photographs, and festooned her room at home with them.

The obsessed Becky had exactly one desire in life. She wanted to have her stomach look as smooth and muscularly defined as Gentry. Her signature look of the 1960s was a composite image of form-fitting hip-hugger jeans, deep chestnut-colored, beauty pageant tresses, and a man's work shirt, tied in the middle, exposing a perfectly contoured, tanned stomach.

Becky was doing sit-ups like a fixated devotee and dieting like a reprimanded, religious stoic 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 one-hitter coke-bullet filled to the rim with high-grade crystal methamphetamine.

The night she'd gone home with Boo, she kept dashing into the bathroom for a quick jolt of powder from her bullet. Then she'd emerge from there like a shotgun blast; eyes like pinpoint and jabbering nonsense incessantly. She was ready to continue their orgy for as long as her body would stay in one piece; she was ready to combust with pleasure from the high-octane speed.

Boo had known something was up with her when she kept disappearing but, in the larger sense, he didn't really care what she was medicating herself with. When she was with him, she did all the flamboyant, *Kama sutra*-esque acrobatics he desired of her, and that was just fine with him.

Because of the massive amounts of stimulants she'd consumed, it was possible for Becky to drink great amounts of white corn while she was partying with him that evening. Boo had told her that she might want to slow down with the alcohol and had advised her that his homemade blend of corn had a nasty kick that could sneak up on you like a mongoose, as well as have a powerful first impact.

Becky was oblivious to his warnings and downed shot after shot of the corn. Then, every twenty minutes or so, she'd supplement it with her own, personal pharmaceuticals and craft her head to complete perfection. For the time being, the adrenaline and dopamine her body was producing from the speed 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 and hard drinking, Becky was scorched to the point of having near epileptic fits. She would begin crying hot tears from the intensity of the

crashing headache she was experiencing, and then become abrasive, loud and wildly agitated when she couldn't locate her one-hitter vial.

Later in the morning, while Boo drove Becky 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 with the intensity of an electrified mandrill, and nail bitingly 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 her. He was glad and roundly relieved to see her scat.

Upon returning home that morning, Boo located the vial 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 during her hurry to return to the proceedings last night, and then given up hope of finding it once the amphetamine-horrors and shakes started tormenting her in the morning.

He popped the vial out of the crevice with his pocket knife and examined it. Inside was a tiny crucible on a hinge which could collect a small amount of the powder when inverted. Then the filled cavity would be turned upright, and the entire delivery unit would be placed in the user's nostril to be snorted-up 70s rock star style. In essence, the coke-bullet was similar in design and application to a Vicks vapor-action inhaler, only it was way more expensive, and usually filled with top-of-the-line, kick-ass pharmaceuticals.

Boo was feeling adventurous after his night of sexual exploits, and decided to sample a small amount of from the vial. Soon after snorting a blast directly into his mucosa, he was *wide* awake and doing fix-it jobs around the cabin which he'd been putting off for months.

Later that morning he'd put the one-hitter vial 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 there. But after some failed seduction attempts, he'd given up on that particular notion.

But now, sitting in his cabin after the brutal night of carnage and insanity at the Clean n' Jerk, Boo was certain he could use as much methamphetamine as he could get his hands on.

He got up from the couch and quickly walked over to the shelf where he kept the jars of corn. He hastily shifted the containers about looking for the concealed vial. In his haste and agitation to get to it, 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 Clean n' Jerk. He trembled as he recalled it, and was quietly thankful that he'd gotten out of there with his skin still on his back.

Boo collected himself as best he could, and began taking the bottles down one at a time. At last he saw the vial in the far corner of the deep shelf. He controlled himself with steel discipline, slowly reached between the remaining mason jars, closed his hand on the bullet, and delicately pulled it to him.

He held it between his fingers and shook it to see how much of its contents remained. It was three-quarters full, and remarkably, it hadn't clumped from the savage Virginia summer humidity. He prepped the chamber and raised it to his nose.

Inhaling, Boo instantly felt a sensation 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 mind's eye as the drug began circulating in his system. He was beginning, just beginning, to feel less fatigued than he did a few moments ago.

He fixed another few hits 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. He then 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 ammo in his denim jacket, and the vial in the front of his Lee jeans. He placed the container of alcohol by the front door .

The Remington 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 white corn from over the TV stand and proceeded to exit his cabin.

He blew out of his residence, placed the rifle and jar of corn on the passenger seat, and then returned to the house to get the container of the bad liquor. After retrieving it, he exited his place and locked the door. He threw the jerry can of bad corn *and* the large, stainless steel trash can that was next to his cabin into the flatbed of the F-10.

He then got into the cab of his truck and turned the ignition. The battery screeched and coughed in resistance. After several attempts to start it, the engine finally roared to life. He threw the truck into gear and headed off towards Clarke County for an unannounced, early morning rendezvous with Chet the Vet.

*

Michael Vick and the Spazz drove the Trans Am Firebird and Aston-Martin Lagonda town car to Dulles airport. Once there, they tooled their rides to the private car park of Suleiman Luxury Car Rentals. They returned the Aston-Martin to the valet driver, paid the rental bill, and then commenced

to cruise west towards Vick's clandestine Surry County complex. It was time to inspect the construction progress of the new steel-reinforced training area for = SPECIMEN-210, whose delivery was not far off.

Vick had called the compound's trusted caretaker, Jimmy, earlier in the day. Jimmy had informed Vick that the contractor team from NO-RAD's bomb shelter construction crew had been courteous to a fault, professional and quick in their work, and that the practically indestructible training area for the new dog was nearly complete.

After a lengthy cruise down Route 66 and Interstate 81, they finally arrived at the compound. As they drove past the front gate, Vick's eye caught sight of his newly restored 1981 DeLorean DMC-12 coupe, which had been hand delivered from Osaka, Japan, several days before. It was parked on the far side of the building, under a metal awning to protect it from the fierce Virginia summer heat. He made a mental note to give it a test run as soon as possible. But for the moment, he had other things on his mind besides flashy rides and expensive toys.

Jimmy greeted Vick and the Spazz as they entered and informed Vick that the NO-RAD team had finished their construction work roughly an hour before their arrival. Everything appeared to be in apple pie order as far as the workmanship was concerned, and Jimmy handed Vick the keys to the epoxy-concrete-titanium walled, steel-bar reinforced training room.

It was situated in the center of the facility, with several more conventional training areas flanking each of its sides. Inside the various cells were a collection of world-class fight and attack dogs including Akitas, German Shepherds, Rottweilers and dozens of Pits. Also, in the far corner, was a sleepy-eyed, retired police department Bloodhound, whom Vick playfully named Sir Nose. Vick began a friendly conversation with Jimmy.

"Everything worked out ok with all those shoppy-boutique Defense Department private contractors?"

"A more professional group of retired, over-paid gear-heads would be hard to find," Jimmy replied. "Harry Houdini with a crate full of Stinger missiles couldn't get out of that new training cell they welded together."

"That's just what I want to hear, Jimbo," Vick rejoined.

Vick and the Spazz checked-out the new training cell and found it to be more than satisfactory. It was, indeed, the most forbidding-looking, stark, impenetrable four walls either of them had ever seen before in their lives. Crazy bull elephants, in-season rhinos or adult male gorillas with extra y-chromosomes couldn't dream of escaping its confines. All that was required now was its new, mysterious occupant, which, according to Boo Smalls, would be arriving very soon.

Vick thanked Jimmy for his services and told him to keep all lines of communication open for the next few days. He was expecting the new dog to be here any time soon, and was itching to get it to the compound to see it for himself. Jimmy said goodbye, told him not to worry about anything and then playfully tossed him the keys to the DeLorean which he'd had in his pocket.

Vick gave the keys of the Trans Am Firebird to the Spazz, and then jumped behind the wheel of the DeLorean. He told him that they'd convoy back to Youngblood together and that he was to follow him on the road. Then they both fired-up their flawless vintage sports cars and whipped out of the driveway of the compound towards Interstate 81.

*

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 his thoughts jump and flutter through his mind. His teeth chattered and felt like chalk as he rubbed his tongue over their enamel coating. He took the cap off of the mason jar of white lightning and slowly sipped its contents, trying to take the edge off. He then replaced the top of the liquor jar and jammed it into the huge inner pocket of his jean jacket.

Boo settled into 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 his pocket, 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.

He snorted vicious laughter as he recalled the havoc his trio had caused in her bar. Liz Fury and Sonny were lucky to have the place still standing after his animals' siege there. He stared at the two hypos for a moment, shook his head in amusement, and then pocketed them. He 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 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, behind his façade of good social caste and community responsibility, *Chester liked to gamble*. He would occasionally bet large amounts of cash on the fights through the Youngblood trainers and Liz Fury's bookies. Ergo, 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 badly bleeding Pit waiting for medical attention.

Finally, Chet had to enforce a strict separate-hours policy for his regular clients and his gaming 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 the Clean n' Jerk. Now he was about to receive a visit from a member of his gambling-habit clique that would be unlike any other he would ever experience.

Boo turned his truck onto Chet's street, shut-off the headlights and killed the motor to coast down the road. The F-10 was silent as a shark as it rolled to a resting point opposite the house. He looked around the streets to see if anyone had witnessed his arrival. The town road was as still and quiet as a forgotten desert tomb.

He reached in his pocket and retrieved a box of rounds from his jacket. He released the drop-out, four-round magazine in his Remington and loaded it. He then refitted the clip in the stock and cautiously exited the vehicle.

He circled behind the flat bed of his ride and retrieved the box with the cadavers, placed the Remington on top of it and walked up to the front door of Chester'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 blood, viscous vital-fluids and opaque-colored, oozing interstitial juices of the cadavers.

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 it resembled a miniature flag of surrender as it flapped in the early morning breeze.

Boo kept the buzzer depressed for several minutes until he heard a series of thudding footsteps approaching the front door from inside. He steadied himself, and waited for the door to fly open. However, what emanated from within the house was the confused and heated voice of Chester Byron, demanding to know who the hell would come and bother him at this god-forsaken hour of the morning.

"Get your freakin' hand off of my goddam doorbell you ignorant, cock-sucking, pissant douche bag!" he screeched, "Who the hell is it? This better be good, I mean really good, or I'm calling the cops this minute!"

"It's Boo Smalls," he responded to the surly interrogation, "it's something of an emergency I'm afraid."

"Boo Smalls?" Chet rejoined. His angry voice changed tone instantly and the heat subsided after hearing it was his friend on the other side of the door. "Jesus Christ, 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 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. I believe it’s something of a prophetic statement, my friend. I really do.”

Chet nervously examined Boo from head to toe while being held at gunpoint: his hand had been lacerated and was poorly bandaged, the arms of his jacket were 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. He looked like a killer clown who’d recently been fired out of a circus cannon.

Chet’s gaze went to the cardboard box containing the remains of Boo’s fight-dog champions. His eyes widened in astonishment, and then horror, as he viewed the contents of the package. He returned his attention to Boo and carefully said, “What on earth has 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 Chet 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 loudly spat out one of his incisors onto Chester’s front lawn. He then returned his gaze 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,” he 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?”

Boo Smalls fixed his diminishing eyesight on his friend, still aiming the Remington directly at his 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. 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. This is the real deal."

Chet looked in clean bewilderment at Boo as he wielded the powerful carbine in his face. He wisely thought this was not the best time to argue with him. Perhaps he'd try reasoning with him once he got him downstairs. Chet was just now beginning to become fully conscious, having been pulled out of a deep sleep by Boo's arrival.

Boo, on the other hand, was *wide* awake, eyeballs practically vibrating in their sockets, and was staring him down like Chief Sitting Bull. Chet looked at him with concern, and spoke to him in as calm a tone as he could muster. "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 him and replied, "well, it wouldn't be for the first time. Not for the first time at all."

Chet picked up the heavy parcel and walked into his living room. Boo followed him and the two of them slowly went down the stairs and into the clinic.

*

After having refueled in Shanghai and Nagasaki, the Gen-Y corporate jet now sat in the Central Pacific island of Guam, awaiting routine service and refueling for its jump to San Diego. Dr. Ivan Hu sat in the hanger of the private airport, munching toffee candy and drinking jasmine tea. May Pantang was feeding a few bricks to the heavily bound SPECIMEN-210 through the slats of its steel travel cage. She began a conversation with Dr. Hu after a few moments.

"Why does SPECIMEN-210 eat rocks and granite and such things, Dr. Hu?" she questioned.

"Because it likes them, I guess," he replied.

"Doesn't it eat food? Like normal food?" she continued

"Nope," he rejoined.

She arched a manicured eyebrow and said, "that's not possible, now is it, Doctor?"

“I’ll tell you the story behind SPECIMEN-210 one day soon,” he cordially answered her. “That’s a promise. However, today is not the day. For now, let’s just say there’s something a bit *contra natura* about our friend in the cage over there.”

“As you wish, Doctor,” she coolly responded. She returned her interest to the cage where SPECIMEN-210 lay and observed it with something like pity in her eyes.

*

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, in the semi-darkness, the couches, coat racks, lamps, chairs and tables cast unusual, grotesque shadows against the walls of the office.

Chet continued walking into the operating room and clicked on the overheads. The brilliant luminance from the bulbs momentarily hurt Boo’s eyes as he continued walking behind him into the bright light being emanated from the surgery room’s ceiling.

He set the grisly container on the stainless steel examination table, and stretched a pair of latex gloves over his hands. He slowly removed the three misshapen corpses from its insides, and placed them on the polished metal table.

Chester was simultaneously fascinated and repulsed by the features of the three cadavers. They had been riddled to pieces with large caliber ammunition during the course of the evening at the pit-fights and now constituted a complete grab-bag of miscellaneous body parts. But still, their grotesque physiques were unbelievable to behold. In all his years of practice, he’d never seen such remarkable, strange vertebrates. He lifted one of the eyelids 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, who was standing several feet away, and had the gun still trained on him.

“Not a pretty sight, is it doctor?” Boo questioned.

“Boo, 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 fried chicken with no instructions attached. And, unfortunately, most of their internal organs and skeletal frames have been run through with gunfire. So put the gun down, come over here, 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 replied. He retrieved the coke-bullet from his pants pocket and the bulging liquor jar from his jacket and placed them on a Formica cabinet counter between a small Panasonic radio and a box of Kleenex facial tissues.

Boo inverted the coke-vial, prepped himself a blast of crank, and snorted it with gusto. Then he popped the cap off the corn and took a long, sloppy draught of its contents. Boo let out a thunderclap of laughter from his lungs. The sensation of the mingling intoxicants in his system was wonderful and he hadn’t felt this energized in time immemorial.

He motioned with the barrel of the rifle for Chet to help himself to the stimulants and depressants available to him on the Formica tabletop. Chet was hesitant, but thought it would be in his best interest to humor him at all costs. He went to the counter and sipped some of the powerful white corn.

Chester’s cheeks convexed and he began sputtering as the alcohol 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. He was smiling broadly now, but kept the rifle leveled on the doctor.

Chet was familiar with the mechanics of the Plexiglas coke-bullet’s delivery system. Many of his colleagues in veterinary school, during the crunch time of final exams, had used amphetamines to get through their nerve-racking tests and heavily scrutinized lab experiments.

He took the vial, prepared an increment of the crystal meth, and placed it to his nostril. He inhaled deeply and the powder flashed into his membranes. His nasal passages burned as the drug moved into his nasal passages and began to drip down his throat. He prepped another salvo of the meth for himself, and snorted a shot down the other nostril. He did this for two reasons: firstly, because he enjoyed it, and secondly, because it would undoubtedly make Boo feel a sense of trust and connection with him. Boo needed to be placated at all costs.

Chet shook his head to regain his bearings, and then looked at Boo. They exchanged glances for a few seconds and finally he said to Boo, “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 table 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.

His body raved with radioactive poison, speed, liquor and rage, Boo realized that Chet 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, he was beginning to feel the deleterious effects of the corn and crystal he'd taken a few moments before. He gave Boo the best 'concerned smile' he could muster, and moved forward in an attempt to console him.

Boo's loaded rifle, however, remained set on the doctor. Boo wasn't ready to call it a night yet. Boo walked over to the Formica counter, lifted the jar of corn with his free hand, and quaffed another dripping mouthful; he was beginning to think that he could drink forever at this point. He didn't even feel the analgesic effects in his system as he stood looking at Chet and his animals.

He reached over to turn on the Panasonic radio on the counter. As he touched its 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 Chet 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 cheap 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.

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

“Out of many, one.” The words stood out like standing, male polar bears 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, Liberace and Karl Lagerfeld would have approved of his vision’s absolute fabulousness.

And at that moment, Boo 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, Boo appeared to be in a semi-conscious state of reverie. He called out to him and, while he seemed to hear his name being sounded, he was unable to respond. After Chet called his moniker for a third time, Boo snapped into a clean consciousness and looked at him with a sense of urgency.

The psychically renewed Boo walked to the corner of the lab and set-up a folding chair for himself and one for Chet. He motioned with the rifle for Chet to sit down next to him.

Boo reached in the top pocket of his jean 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 he thought this was as good a time as any to begin burning a few more than usual. He produced his famous package of Ohio Blue Tip matches and one-handedly scratched one into life with a blood-streaked fingernail. He lit the cigarette, inhaled deeply, and put the spent match on the Formica counter.

Chester was in near paroxysms of nervousness, waiting to find out what was going to happen in his clinic. Boo, at last, put his gun across his knee and leaned over to talk to him. For the first time that morning, Chet began to feel as if things might soon settle down. 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,” Boo said, “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 heads of a few scraggly-looking alley cats and gerbils and putting them in the breast pockets 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 Boo and then began laughing in spite of the incredible situation he found himself in. He regained his composure after a moment of suppressed, toxic chuckles and answered the question.

“My grades in vet school were fine back in the day. The Anatomy classes were a real cinch.”

“I’m glad to hear of your competency, my friend,” Boo told him. “Because tonight we’ve got a 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 him. Boo 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. He spread his arms wide and said, “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 brutal, merciless laughter at the ceiling of the animal clinic.

*

Wednesday night.

Paris, France

The Lufthansa whisper jet sat on the runway of DeGaul airport in Paris, France, collecting passengers for the continuing flight to Washington DC. Dasha sat in the first class cabin reading a tabloid magazine which stated that pop star Madonna had a deep, dark subconscious desire to die in a hotel fire in Central America. Her entire phalanx of personal mediums, gurus and psychiatrists were in a near state of panic, practically lathering in fear, because of her assumed, unstable mental condition.

Dasha was thinking of Vick often now; he was practically in her every thought. She couldn’t control her desire another minute to let him know she’d be arriving a day early in Virginia. She reached in her bag, retrieved her cell phone and composed a text message telling him she’d see him tomorrow.

Michael-

I see you tomorrow early.

Dasha is in jet now.

Please take yr big shoes from bathroom.

Kiss u, D-

She hit the SEND button and the message zipped through the satellite airwaves. In seconds she received the confirmation report that the message had been delivered. At that moment, she was touched on the shoulder by Peter Liberosa, the first class steward of the flight.

"Ms. Mercury?" he timorously asked her.

"Da," she automatically replied. She turned to see who was talking to her. The man looked remarkably like Antonio Banderas. She shook her head slightly to clear her thoughts, craned her neck to get a closer look at him, and said, "*pri-vyet*, er.. I mean, umm, hi."

He flipped open the current issue of Paris *Vogue* magazine to the Channel Mademoiselle scent page which had her image on it. He smiled his best Banderas stunt-double smile and said, "I'm a huge fan! could you please sign this for me? It would mean a lot."

"But of course," she said to him. "Anything for fans. Without you I'm working in chemical plant in Naberezhnyye." He handed her a pen and she signed her name on the page with a flourish. Then she reached into her Claude Montana shoulder bag and produced a small sample bottle of Channel Mademoiselle perfume. She sprayed the page in the magazine and playfully let a spritz fly at Peter Liberosa.

Peter nearly barked in ecstasy.

He thanked her endlessly for her autograph and said if she needed anything during the flight to let him know personally. He then gently informed her that she would have to turn off her cell phone before the take-off.

*

Michael Vick sat in his cabin in Youngblood, listening to Parliament's timeless CD, *Motor Booty Affair* and drinking green tea from his Dali flower vase. His cell phone beeped, letting him know a text message had been received. He read the message from Dasha, letting him know of her early arrival. A sly smile made its way across his mouth. He then hit the phone's speed dial button for his friend Nikki Sixx to let him know of the news. After several rings, he picked it up.

Sixx: "Mikey, que pasa, babe?"

Vick: "Just calling to let you know your advice about playing defense with Dasha worked like a charm."

Sixx: "You starved her out, huh? Good man, you gotta be an iceberg sometimes. She called you all-cryin' and sad and doing the 'I'm-a-bitch thing?'"

Vick: "That's pretty much exactly what happened."

Sixx: "Stay strong babe. Remember now, never, ever give 'em everything they want at once. If you look soft or needy for their, uhh, "*woman-love*," they'll eat you up like non-fat salad dressing. Spoon-feed 'em some gifts and candy, real slow, every once in a while and everything will be fine. It's the law of the jungle. Talk soon, tough-guy."

Vick: "Dasvidanye, Sixx. You are legend."

Sixx: "Just doin' my job, amigo."

Place text here