

The book cover features a male and a female model. The male model, with short brown hair and a light blue t-shirt, is positioned in the upper half, looking towards the camera with a serious expression. The female model, with blonde hair, is lying down in the lower half, wearing a black and red patterned bikini top. She has a large, intricate red tattoo on her right arm. The background is a warm, golden-brown gradient.

Rachel  
Dunning

# Know Me

Truthful Lies - Book 1

**KNOW ME**

**TRUTHFUL LIES - BOOK**  
**ONE**

**BY RACHEL DUNNING**

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Girl-Nerds Like it Deeper, #3 Girl-Nerd

Series

Girl-Nerds Like it Longer, #4 Girl-Nerd

Series



To the good ol' days, and everyone in  
them.

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# TO KNOW...

**To know** (*transitive verb*):

1. To perceive or apprehend clearly and certainly; **to understand**; to have full information of; **to be convinced of the truth of** to be fully assured of; **to be acquainted with**; to be no stranger to; to be more or less familiar with the

person, character, etc., of; **to possess experience of**; to recognize; to distinguish; to discern the character of;

2. *Archaic*: **To have sexual intercourse with.**

*Webster's Revised Unabridged*

*Dictionary - 1913*

# PROLOGUE ONE

## THE BASTID

Love is a rift. It is a break in the fabric of whatever substance makes this universe.

Love is not your friend. Love is not the gentle green slopes of Prospect Park. It is not the condo being built down in Brooklyn Heights looking across at The City's breathtaking skyline.



Love is your enemy.

Love is an earthquake.

It rolls in like a Tsunami.

Love is black smoke.

Love swallows you whole and takes  
you with it.

Those that find happiness in love  
are those who ride its waves wildly,  
knowing the trip will be short, always  
destined to fail. Painfully.

Love is a bastard. Or, as they say in

here Brooklyn, a *bastid*!

Love is the electric surge which blows your speakers, it's the feedback that ruins your gig. It's the crackle of lightning and high-wattage static before you're finally struck down.

It's your Molly—E, *The Doctor*, Adam. It's your Crack Cocaine, your rocks, the *Devil's Dandruff* you smoke in a pipe. It's the sweet poison in your blood,

the taste of honey in a frenzied beehive.

It's your H. Your Heroin. Your  
*Smack.*

But Love is also the hot touch of velvet over your sweat-glistened skin. It's melting chocolate on your lips, the taste of human salt on your tongue, the feel of slick perspiration on your body...

Love is a rift—in the fabric of this universe. An anomaly. A Not-Meant-to-Be.

And also a necessity.

Love is the Mike Tyson we all must face. Love is that fist to your face. A slave-driver, a whip-cracker. Love will kick you to the ground and watch you spit out a bloody tooth. Then it will laugh at you.

And you? What are you?

Or...what am *I*?

I'm the idiot.

Because I stood up again. And I let  
it hit me again.

And again.

Love—now hear me on this one,  
hear me; please for the love of god, *hear*  
*me!*—*Love*—is a *traitor*! Love will make  
you cry. It will make you scream. It will  
twist your heart in its gnarly hands and  
laugh an echoing cackle in your ear while  
it beats you down on a sidewalk behind

an abandoned warehouse.

Love will *hurt* you.

But Love—maybe because it gets more pleasure out of it this way, I don't know—will also offer you a way out of its grasp... With a smile. It'll say, *Leave me. Don't love anymore, and the pain will go away...*

Love—The Liar. That *Truthful* Liar.

Because the pain might go away indeed—replaced by a thudding dullness no man or woman could possibly bear

after having tasted of its Meth.

But so will the joy go away.

Love buries itself deep in your vital fluids until, eventually, you cannot live without it.

Without *him*.

Love is riding a rollercoaster with no lap bar.

Love...is something I thought I would never find, something I didn't care

for, something I didn't even believe existed.

It found me.

It grabbed me. Snatched me. Did what it would with me and then tried to get rid of me.

But I kept coming back, kept taking more, kept getting my jaw knocked out for it. So then *it* tried to get away from *me*.

And I caught it, bloody mouthed



and bleary eyed. I *caught* that sonofabitch.

And now I'll never let it go.

Even if it kills me.

*Blaze Ryleigh*

# PROLOGUE TWO

## THE OTHAH BASTID

*Declan Cox*

“Damned if I thought I’d live to see the day when my girlfriend had to pull a gun on my son’s head to get him off o’ me.” Pops’s eyes are glued to the TV, not even taking a moment out to look up at me—his right shiner still bright and swollen from the one I landed on him

two days ago.

*And damned if I thought I'd ever live to see all the insane shit you pulled in the last few days.*

I'm standing at the doorway of his tiny, shitty TV room. Pops's face glows pale white from the flickering TV. My fists clench. My teeth grind.

I let the "girlfriend" statement go.

"So, I'm done," I say, "I got all my stuff."

Pops takes a slurpy sip out of the *Pabst Blue Ribbon* in his hand, stares at the screen. Four other crushed cans lie on the ground next to him. Catalina—the squeeze whose neck I'd like to squeeze—sits languidly next to him, beer also in her hand, probably to chill out her Big C buzz.

Her legs are erotically placed over pops's lap while she chills in her robe

next to him on what was once *my* couch.

*Our* couch.

*Mom's* couch...

*And mom's body is barely even cold, you*

*bitch.*

I feel myself getting sick.

Anthony Fortunato of *Auto Wars* is cursin up a storm on the tube, in a southern Brooklyn accent second only to pops's own.

“You see this other bastard?”

When Pops says it, it sounds like *othah bastid*. He points at the TV. “See what he’s done? It’s not right I tellya. That’s *his* fuckin auto shop!”

My eyes flick briefly over to the TV, barely noticing it, then back at pops. “Well, I guess I’ll get outta your way then.”

Pops says nothing.

Catalina says, “Close da door on

*your way out.” I can almost hear the rest of her words: Or the Beretta I pulled on your ass two days ago is gonna be back at your temple!*

I hang back for half a second, just hoping pops turns and says something...

He stares at the TV. Says nothing.

So I leave.

The last thought in my mind when I close the apartment door is:

*Othab bastid indeed.*





# ONE

## HOUSE MARKET

-1-

*Blaze Ryleigh*

A folded yellow note is stuck on my door. I stare at it, paralyzed for a moment. Thoughts of eviction and raised rent and getting thrown out on my ass pummel me. My right hand trembles beside me. I take in a deep breath, smell

the moist brick of my hallway. My spine shivers from the cold.

Maybe my music's been too loud. But I've been careful to keep it down after ten. Besides, none of the other tenants are gonna complain in Bushwick anyway—too afraid of getting on Mr. Bernstein's bad side. *Little do they know he's just an old Santa in wolf's clothing.* But I hate letting him down.

I reach for the note and open it quickly, like ripping a Band-Aid.

*Blaze,*

*I'm so sorry, the schmucks pushed me into a corner. I'm selling.*

*Please keep it quiet until we talk.*

*Sorry. It's the market. It's all these darn rezoning laws! They been schmoozing me for over a year. Finally,*

*they gave up on the Mr. Nice-Guy act and put the thumbscrews on me. I'll come by on Sunday so we can chat. Don't worry, Blaze—I promised your mama I'd look out for you, and I will.*

*Mr. B*

Selling. That means I'll have a new landlord. That means I'll need to renegotiate my lease. Which basically means the new owners are gonna throw

me out on the street and tear the building down for a new expensive condo—or another hotel, like *The King & Grove*.

“Shit.” I stare at the note, as if looking at it will burn the words off and miraculously replace them with friendlier ones. A gust of frozen January air rushes in from a broken window down the hall and chills the shaved side of my head. I sneeze. I crumple the note up and take

my groceries inside.

“Shit,” I say again. “Shit shit *shit!*”

-2-

I grab a can of *Amp* and *Rockstar* from the fridge and pop it open, drink half of it. I smack my lips and down another quarter. “Shit,” I whisper. “Fucking *shit.*”

The note is dated yesterday—Friday. I must’ve missed him or, more

likely, not heard him while House Music bore a deafening hole in my ears. And I failed to see it as I stepped out the house today to go and get some groceries.

I head to my window and look down at the street. I see Patryk's graffiti tag next to his masterpiece on the bottom right wall: A colossal Rube Goldberg-Jackson Pollock mix of floating heads with wires coming out of their necks. I laugh, and feel a smile bubble up inside

me. I remember sitting on that sidewalk at one A.M., so tipsy that I thought the building would fall on my head, watching him paint that one. Patryk the Painter, we used to call him. That was the same night he sketched out a rough draft of some of the tats for the upper half of my sleeve.

I remember dancing till three A.M. with my girl Savva on this very street, waving my hand in the air, oblivious to



rent, to needing to send money over to  
*Mamah.*

Oblivious to loss.

*Good times. Good times.*

I wipe the stray tear from my eye as  
I think of her...

*Savva.* Only I used to call her that,  
everyone else called her Savannah.

Night falls fast. A skateboarder  
arrives and starts doing flips on the  
sidewalk. I guess he'll also be kicked out

when the big real estate moves in. When they open Bushwick's own version of the *Wythe Hotel* for out-of-towners who don't know the first thing about art but who "want to experience it firsthand."

An acute sadness stings me with its tiny needles. It starts off at my skin but quickly burrows its way into the chambers of my heart.

*And three years have come and gone.*

Three years, and I'm still at the whim and mercy of city zoning laws.

Three years, and all I have to show for it are two *Pioneer CDJ2000* decks, a gazillion MP3s, a *Serato* Digital DJing license, and endless other DJing gadgets that still haven't gotten me into the big time.

Three years, and the dream I had has remained just that: A dream.

I finish the energy drink, fling it and—*score!*—three point it into my trash can. I go to the fridge and grab another, sip it slower this time. Then I do what I always do when I'm depressed:

I slap on my *Allen & Heath* headphones, crank up the volume to dangerously high levels.

And I mix.

At some stage I fall asleep...

Some time past midnight, headphones still on my ears and blaring away, I'm woken up by a buzzing in my jeans pocket. In my half-dream state, I mistake it for a hornet. In a dazed panic I almost throw the iPhone against the brick wall at the other end of my loft, then almost crash my decks by getting up too quickly from the couch behind them.

The phone buzzes again. I rub my bleary eyes and gingerly ease the expensive headset from my ears.

*Can't afford a new one, I think.*

*Couldn't afford a new iPhone either.* Who am I kidding? I didn't even afford the first one! If Patryk hadn't given it to me—

*Buzz!*

I look at the screen: *XAVIER*.

And that just makes me feel sick to

my stomach.

-4-

“What the fuck?” I whisper to myself. The phone trembles slightly in my hand.

I almost don't answer. Almost. “X—Xavier...long time no hear.” I don't ask him how he is, because I don't really want to know.

“You haven't taken my name off

your phone?”

I don't comment.

Judging from the beats I hear in the back, it sounds like he's at a party.

*Nothing's changed.* I recognize the song as a Miss Kittin track—*Come into my House*.

“*Que passa, chiquita?*” I hear him sucking on a smoke. “It certainly has been a long time. I wish this was a social call...but I know those days are over.”

A minor sting. I can live with that.



“Look, you still mixing up a storm?” he asks.

“Twenty-four seven.”

“Still hooking up all that local indie house with Chicago beats and G-Funk Hip Hop and all that eclectic stuff and shit?”

“Whatever my fingers can touch.”

“Would you be willing to accept a gig from me...knowing how you feel

about the old days? And about us.”

I could do a gig every night of every week and I still wouldn't have enough dough to send over to Mamah as well as get a new place. “Business is business. And, Xavier, for the record, I don't hate you. It just *hurts*...when I'm with you.”

“So you still blame me.”

I sigh out. “Do we *really* need to do this? *No*, I don't blame you. If you must

know”—I swallow hard—“I blame myself most of all. Now why did you call?”

“I hear you. I’m sorry, it’s just been so long since we talked.” his Hispanic accent is coming out stronger now. “Anyway, I just wanted to make sure you don’t wanna slit my throat before I tell you this next thing. You ready?”

I sort of feel like a knife’s gonna

jump up from behind the door if I say yes. “Uhm, ready as I can be, I guess.”

“Now, Blaze, you never gonna believe it, baby, but Xavier got you the gig”—he pauses—“of *gigs*!”

That Xavier has called me a year after we last spoke and, of all things, offers me a *gig*, leaves me slightly confused. “Excuse me?”

“*House Market*, chiquita. I got you a chance at *House Market*! If, of course,

you're interested..."

I almost see the Pearly Gates themselves open up in front of me and shine their glorious light over my body.

"*H—House...Market. The House Market?*

Like, *the* hottest, baddest, finest underground party in Brooklyn since the Giuliani Dance Party Apocalypse? Randy Dhawan's baby? *That House Market?*"

"Da one and only. Me an' Randy

are like *hermanos* now. We like *brothers*, man.”

*So I take it he buys from you.* “I see.”

“Baby, there is *so* much you don’t know. We really should hang out again sometime”—my throat tightens —“but...yeah...whatever. I know you don’t like my lifestyle choices. So, anyway, there is only problem wit da gig, sugar-pop. Um—”

“What?”

“Well, it’s kinda running *right now*.”

“I don’t understand.”

“The party, chiquita, like, it’s

*on*...right the fuck now!”

I listen to the music. The song has changed. I don’t recognize it, which vexes me on a very fundamental level because it sounds like some commercial stuff, and I should know that shit. I should know it backwards if I have any hope of ever

making it in this biz.

Xavier is silent, and I figure it's probably because he's letting the news sink in. Three atom bombs: One. He calls after a year. Two. House Market. Three. *Tonight*. "Xavier, you gonna explain? As far as I know, parties like *House Market* get booked months in advance."

"Tragic story, honey. Tragic story, but in this business, we only look to the love, know what I'm sayin?" He says *Love*



like *Lobv*.

And, no, I don't understand what he's saying. He's not making any sense at all. Which probably means: "Xavier, you rolling?"

"Like a Mofo, baby. The only steady girl I date is Molly, you dig? Anyway, babes, the Deep House DJs for the night, well, they had a little date with Johnny Law, comprende? Tough love,

tough love. Anyway, Randy's freaking out. The dude spinning at the moment goes too much into the commercial shit. Good for an opener, but not for the whole night—if that were even humanly possible—and not for *House Market*. Randy takes pride in his parties. And, well, the *House Market* label has also just come out as well, so, the parties bring in sales.

“All the big names are booked for the night. He's desperate. He wants some

classic stuff for the night, 'cause that's what he promises people. So I put in a word for you because I know you can spin that shit in your sleep.

“Randy usually never listens to me on these things. I mean, I'm just nothin but a consultant, dig? But, hey, desperate times, un'erstand?”

*Consultant. Mm-hm...*

My mind is a whirl. “Xavier, what

exactly are *you* getting from this?” Silence from him. “X. Speak to me.”

“Look, Blaze, you *know* me, OK? Don’t ask that stuff of me now. Just...*accept* the help. I’m not gonna admit to no shit—but I’m also not gonna plead complete ignorance. I understand what happened, and it sucks, and we all suffered.” I note his referral to our greatest mutual loss merely as “it.” I also see that he’s in his *Dr. Jekyll* form right

now. The one that regrets. *The one that is human.* “I’m reaching out, and I’m offering you something I know you need. Something that *DJ Heaven-Leigh* needs. Remember when we came up with that name for you—the three of us?” *Don’t go there, boy. Don’t go there!* “Good times, good times. Anyway, Blaze, I ain’t gonna beg you for *dis*. You take it or you leave it. *I* don’t need it. You do. I know it, because

even though we ain't spoken in a year, I know I ain't seen your name headlining at *Output* or *Nine-Ts* or any other hot New York club yet. And you *know* that getting into *House Market* is like getting into a virgin's holiest of holies—a *catholic* virgin on top of it." *Gross*. "I don't need to explain that to you, or explain that if you do a good job on it, you're in the door—*everywhere*. It's all you've ever wanted. But I *am* explaining it—like you're *stupid*

or something, because if you didn't have the opinions you have for me, you *prob'ly* woulda jumped at the opportunity already. Now, take it or leave it. I ain't gonna beg you. And I sure as fuck ain't gonna admit to something you know isn't true about Savva either just so you can take the gig on a 'clean conscience' or some shit like that. Ya dig?"

“Uhm, yeah, I dig.”

“Now, aside from the great exposure, the gig pays five hundred. Less than the guys who were gonna be here before you, but, hey, you’re an unknown.”

*Or you’re taking a commission.* Which starts to explain things a little, and which sounds a lot more like the Xavier I know. But I can live with that. And I can also live with a bone being thrown my way, no matter who’s doing the throwing.



I think about my rent.

I think about Mamah.

I think about being cold at night.

I think about Mr. Bernstein's letter.

I think about Savva's final note, her

last words to the world—"it":

*I believe in you, baby. I only wish*

*I believed in myself as much as you do.*

*I'll be looking out for you from below.*

*Don't be such a screw-up like I was.*

*Your best friend, in this life and  
in the next,*

*Savva*

I scratch my eye. "I'll take it," I say.

"Awesome. Now, baby, you gonna  
have to brave the fine streets of Brooklyn  
to get here because, well, I'm a little  
incapacitated at the moment, and there  
ain't no train that comes this way. If I

picked you up it'd be DUI in a *whole* new way of seeing things, if you catch my drift. Got some good shit for you if you want —”

“Xavier.”

“Sorry. Old habits.”

“Where’s the party?”

“Abandoned warehouse on Grand.

By the Newtown Creek Bridge. If Randy accepts you, you’ll be on at about one

A.M. He'll want to hear you play for him beforehand. Thirty minutes or so. I mean, he's desperate, but he'll never put an untested DJ on without hearing him first. Sorry, *her*. And he's willing to do the set himself if it comes to that. He's not the best, but he can spin a few tracks if worse comes to worst."

"How long's the set?"

"As long as you can stretch it, and as long as NYPD don't shut us down.

You'll basically be covering for two other DJs. So, who knows, could go till seven, eight. You sure you don't want some uppers?"

"I'm sure."

"Can you get here?"

"I'll be there in twenty. What decks do they have?"

"CDJ one-thousands."

One model below mine, industry

standard. I pause for a second, feeling like I'm looking down from the top of the *Oro 2 Skyscraper*.

*House Market*. Regardless of mine and Xavier's history, it's an opportunity like no other. Hell, I'd do the fucking set for free just for the exposure. "Xavier, I hope you're not too trashed to appreciate the full gratitude I feel for this."

"Yeah, well...maybe I owe you. Who knows. Now hurry that ass of yours

before Randy gets cold feet. No matter how high he's flying, his head somehow always stays straight when it comes to business—and to music. Or maybe it's his heart. Dunno. My skills don't work on him when it comes to the music and to these parties. I know he loves these parties more than he loves the goods. Anyway. Get here. Before he changes his mind.”

*The goods. From a “consultant.” With  
“skills.”*

I stare at the phone for a second after Xavier clicks off. Two lights are on in the apartment building next door. *Her apartment building.* The rest have been vacated. Soon those two will be gone as well.

My skin goes cold.

I pack my MacBook Air in my



backpack—also given to me by Patryk the Painter after he left. When I get downstairs, I ponder—as I always do when I walk the streets at night—how disastrous it could be for me to be robbed of it. Not even Craigslist and eBay have good deals for the models I own.

But what would life be without risks?

# TWO

## HEAVEN-LEIGH

-1-

*Declan Cox*

“PAAAAAARTY!!!!!” I close the door of my newly bought second-hand 2010 XL Ford F150 truck. The thing’s a *bewt*. Silver, no scratches on the body, purrs like a horny kitten.

Hard work. Hard labor. I earned

this baby. And now it's mine. As is the profit I turned last week after three and a half years of fighting to keep my head up from water. Three and a half years since moving out of that cesspool of an apartment with pops and his squeeze in Canarsie. Three and a half years of lugging furniture.

And here I am. Making it. Not rich, but making it.

“Yo, Deck, let’s get walking before you have an orgasm, bro.” That’s my best friend, Trev Perkins. Baddest QB to ever play for Penn State. Baddest QB to play for all of college Americana in my opinion. Good thing Penn State had their scholarship sanctions lifted in 2013. Trev took them to two back-to-back Bowl Championships (ahem, *College Football Championships* as they’re now called),

throwing a mind-staggering five-thousand-two-hundred yards last season!

That's another thing we're celebrating.

Or maybe we're just celebrating that he's up here for winter break. I could come up with many other reasons to go out tonight and trash my mind on this freezing Saturday night.

Trev, Skate (another homes of mine that I play Semi Pro with), and I head on

over to the *House Market* party. Randy Dhawan's baby. I cross the chain-link fence of the abandoned parking lot and already I feel the anticipation in my blood. The anticipation of the fresh rush of E under my skin, sending thrilling goose bumps across my scalp and over my flesh. And I haven't even taken the thing yet!

“So, Trev, you're on ground

control, right?” I ask.

Trev’s eyes flicker briefly toward me, then away. I can tell he was maybe hoping I’d be going it clean tonight. “Nothing’s changed, bro. I still gotta get that college degree.”

I don’t push him. He used to drop a little with me before he made it to Penn State, a few party-pills maybe twice the entire year, but then stopped. Too afraid someone would find out and not renew

his scholarship. Makes total sense. College has always been his dream. I can respect that.

Me, I'm a chipper (that's like a baby user) all the way. Never done more than five times a year since I left home. In high school I did a little more. But things were different then.

*Tougher.*

“No sweat, homes,” I say, “so I’m



definitely rushin tonight, in case you were wondering. Skate here, too.”

“I figured. Like I said, I’ll be the ground man.”

“You know I respect that, right?”

“Say what?”

“I mean, you know I respect that you don’t drop ’cause of your scholarship an’ all, right? Actually, if you were to come to me and say you were gonna drop, I think I wouldn’t let you. You’re the

smart one, Trev. You always were.”

Trev gives me his best Will Smith smile. Then he punches me on the shoulder. “You’ve become so emo since I left you. Or are all white people like that? Besides, you know that ‘you’re the smart one’ crap is running old by now. Lincoln woulda never accepted your out-of-zone ass if you didn’t have nothin up here!” He taps his forehead.

“I still think they took me because they knew you’d have no hopes on the football field without me.”

He hits me again! So I try slap the back of his head, but he ducks, and before I know it I’m in a headlock! I struggle and land a light punch on his ribs. “You *bastid!*” he says.

He lets me go and then ruffles my hair. “Hey! Watch the do!”

Skate is standing back, hands in his pockets, blasé and bored. “Are we gonna go to this fuckin party or what?”

Now both Trev *and* I run after his ass!

But we give up quick, because the music’s calling, and I can already hear it from here.

The air is icy. Nothing compared to that Polar Vortex shit we had back in ’13,

but still, it freezes my pores as I head bravely through it in nothing but a sleeveless tank and some denims. I'll be overheating in less than an hour, so I left the jacket and sweater in the car.

We parked about a ten minute walk away. I can hear the *thump-thump* of the bass. We pass a gutted warehouse that looks like it might topple over from the wind, then a shuttered Deli on our left. Then two places I assume are auto shops.

There's pictures of cars on the brick walls  
but the signs are in Chinese or Japanese  
or Korean...

The music's so loud now I can  
almost taste it. I see two babes with  
electric blue hair, and less clothes on than  
me, standing out on the sidewalk, sharing  
a smoke. They check out my sleeve tat,  
and I let them. I give 'em my best smile  
and they smile back. *Oh yeah, it's gonna be a*

*good night, baby!*

A dude in plastic shades drinks *Modelo* beer from a can. I smell the cloying stench of weed, see the zombied-out faces of *artistes* leaning against the wall, baked on *Downtown Brown* (because they can't afford the good shit.) You know: *Because art and self-expression and all that "are above the fundamentals and laws of basic economics" and shit—yeah man, wow, peace.*

And then I see the lights from the

dilapidated warehouse's cracked windows  
—blue and red and strobing in time to  
the beat. *House Market*. We visit the dude  
at the door who is probably supposed to  
be the bouncer (I'm twice his size, Trev  
almost three times) and show him our  
*Approved for Entrance* tickets. We get  
inside. Outside it might've been freezing.

But in here, I'm already sweating.



Skate sees the Candy Man and brokers me the X. White strobe light glimmers off his shaved head. The snake tat surrounding his neck pulses.

Trev's already jamming next to me. Dude can dance, I gotta give him that. He scopes out a ready-for-it blonde and starts grinding against her. She grinds back—yes, *like that*. I'm about to drop The Doctor, the pill already on my tongue,

when the music shifts...

And so does the dance floor.

And so does my heart...

*Little did I know, that in less than  
twelve hours, so would my entire world...*

**-3-**

I pause, the round white tablet,  
with the little engraving of a heart on it  
poised between my front teeth. I look up  
at the DJ box, see only smoke and laser

lights, covering it in a hazy glow.

Could it—?

I squint my eyes. Too much smoke, too many strobes.

The energy in the crowd has already lifted. There's a lightness in the air. A *power* of some sort.

*Who is this DJ?*

Meanwhile my heart sings. Trev's going wild next to me, blonde babe ever getting closer to him. Because the shit

coming through the speakers now is not that Electroclash New Wave *Synthpop* *Dubjet grimy* crap that's so dominant in the commercial club scene in NYC right now. None of that *speedcore skank-mank* trash that you need to be tweaking on fifty keys of glass just to discern a rhythm out of.

This stuff has *groove*.

An angel sings from the speakers, backed by a deadly thump that's so old

school we could be in one of those Deep House underground parties of way back in the nineties that people like you and me only get to read about. Or hear about. Or watch a *YouTube* video about.

Then the beat changes again.

I crane my neck, wrapped in the warm sound-blanket reeking of Chicago House buried in a bassline so resonant that my legs can't help moving to it.

I take the E from my lips, stick it in

my pocket, look around at the dance floor. A circle has formed. A babe in high denim shorts swings her legs in the center of it, cheered by the rhythmic claps and drumming hands of ecstatic dancers.

“Oh, yeah!” someone groans.

“Oh. Hell. *Damn!*”

And then, almost like a lion on Crystal getting fucked sideways—and having a groaningly good time of it—

someone growls: “Oh, GOD!” Only, *GOD* becomes a Germanic sounding three syllable word of “*GOWAHHHET!*”

The music wraps its fingers around me. *Who is this DJ!?*

I recognize the vocals in the song: Gabrielle Aplin, Indie rock. Mixed to a *House* beat?

*Fucking genius...*

I need to get me a mix tape of this

jock before I leave.

But not now. Now, I start swaying.

Trev's dark skin shines with sweat. The blonde he's now with wraps her arm around him and her tongue's inside him faster than the next beat can hit. Skate's rushing—or maybe not, I didn't actually see him take The Doctor.

I'm swinging, bass ripping into me.

The crowd shouts and cries and—



*Aw hell, this is so hot!*

There's still smoke from the smoke machines ahead of the DJ box, blocking my view. Then it moves over a bit. I make out long blonde hair on one side, streaked with pink and green. The other side is shaved. *Weird for a dude*. And he's skinny. That's all I can see. That and a headset sitting kitty-corner on his head, one ear covered. The DJ sways, engulfed as much

by the music as the rest of us. The bass dies... A siren appears... A tinny base pops up.

The smoke disappears.

And then I see...*her*.

*Oh, mother, it isn't a dude.*

The bass crashes down.

The crowd. Goes fucking. *Wild.*

**-4-**

The DJ is a babe. Like, *female*-Babe,

and also *hot-sexy-babe*-Babe.

I stare at her for a while. She's in a black tank, sleeveless. But she has a tat sleeve. Her left arm sprawls with colorful designs.

*Just like mine.*

I can't see from the middle of her forearm down, but from that point up I can see she's inked to over her shoulder. The only piece I can make out clearly is the one on the shoulder itself. A huge red

flower with green leaves. Not an entirely original piece, but it always works on woman.

*Beautiful.*

I start dancing, my eyes constantly locked on her jiving body.

I forget about the E. I think I don't take my eyes off her for another two hours.

Skate says in my ear, "You empty?"

I'm gonna go get us some more.” I shake my head, dig into my pocket and pull out the E. He frowns at me. “You didn’t take it?”

I shrug, still holding the pill up in mid-air. He snatches it from my fingers! It disappears into his mouth. He shouts, “Snooze you lose!” Then he smiles at me with all the love in the world. When you’re flying, you just don’t ask any questions. Things just make sense, even

when they don't. "Thanks, bro! You're the best!" He wraps his arms around my neck and hugs me like he loves me more than his own mother.

Right now, he probably does.

My eyes lock back on the girl.

Locked completely.

-5-

Into the third hour. The babe's golden hair is a matted mess of tendrils

sticking to her skin, the blonde parts now the color of hay because of the moisture the pink and green streaks now bright as glow-sticks.

And still she sways, she swings. She puts her index finger up, rocks her body back and forth, bites her bottom lip, lowers the beat...

Slowly.

*Slowly.*

I feel the surge of the crowd before

it hits. Goosebumps climb over my skin as she brings them up through towering bliss. Skate is going absolutely ballistic. I think the dude's found true Music Heaven. He roars when the bass hits, as does the rest of the crowd.

I'm getting tired. I haven't raged all night without an upper in a long time.

*And never with so much pleasure.*

Trev is back from wherever he and



that other blonde disappeared to—a big grin on his face. He stretches down to the two backpacks inside our dance circle, pulls out three Orange G-Series Thirst Quenchers. He throws me one, hands the other to Skate. Then he grabs three packs of *Jack Link's*. One for each of us to munch on.

Skate's brow is dripping. He's flying high and out of control, a gentle but aloof grin plastered on his face. We

need to keep him hydrated, because he'll forget. I can only imagine what he's thinking, what he's seeing. All the love and joy and pleasure that will come tumbling down like a thick mudslide on his head when the 'Tuesday Blues hit. Because I don't think he took any pure-grade shit tonight, I think he got the stepped-on stuff. He never buys from the thoroughbreds, always gets the cheap shit

from beat artists who cut the junk up  
with low-grade H and maybe even a few  
household chemicals.

*Rat poison's a real fave.*

But that'll be later. Right now, it's  
just us. And the music.

*And...that girl.*

**-6-**

Into the fourth hour my legs are  
giving in. Trev's in his own cloud nine.

He grabs my neck like a football and pulls me down to him. (Trev's a big guy, but few people reach up to my six-four.)  
“This beat's the bomb!”

I see he's tired as well, sweat pouring down like Niagara on his brow and the sides of his fade hair. He's taken off his shirt and I swear he looks as large as Adrian Peterson. Dude's gotten big in the last three years. *Mammoth* is more the word, and ripped.

He pulls me down again. “I’m prouda you, homes.” He fixes me with his gaze. I almost can’t look at his honest hazelnut eyes.

I know what he’s talking about. *The E.*

I look over at Skate, lips slightly parted, oblivious to the room even if the roof were to fall on his head right now. Soaked.

I give Trev a tight nod. I was lucky tonight. I lift up my fist and he taps it.

I look up at the DJ. She rubs her eyes, still rocks to the music, but I see the exhaustion.

*Not rolling?* Impossible...

A skinnyish Hispanic dude about my age, with curls to his shoulders and wearing red tartan pants, comes over to her and talks in her ear. He holds a plastic

bottle out and she grabs it and downs it greedily, spilling some of the water (or Vodka?) on her black tank, not once taking her eyes off the mixer.

Mr. Curls steps away and plants one on—*Oh, my god she's hot!*—another bottle blonde with tits that damn near poke his eye out. He grabs the blonde's hand in his and raises it up to his lips, looking up at her like the Don Juan he clearly wants to be. Then he slides his

hand away from hers as if they're exchanging—

*Oh, I get it.*

They smooch, and their tongues look like wild snakes in a jungle. It grosses me out a little. Because I can't help wonder if the hand “exchange” was really just a one way exchange, and if payment for his goods is being expected in another way, at another time. In



another place...

*Later.*

Curls moves back to the DJ-chick, talks in her ear. She shakes her head—eyes constantly on the mixer.

He pauses, looks a little worried, then smiles briefly. He turns to Randy Dhawan behind him and Randy's smiling. The Hispanic with the designer curls gives Randy a thumbs up. Randy's bobbing his head—no doubt blasted up

to the high heavens himself—and smiles back, thumbs up as well, then nods to the girl DJ.

Balding or not, Randy's still sporting one helluva pony-tail with the hair he has left.

Then Mr. Hispanic Curls turns back to the female DJ, pats her on the back, talks in her ear. She shakes her head again vehemently, eyes locked on her

decks.

He rubs her back a little more, then turns back to Randy and shrugs.

Randy shouts “Woohoo!” He gets up, starts clapping and—*Oh my god*—Randy’s heading down to the dancefloor. Randy *never* heads down to the dancefloor during one of his parties!

He’s actually partying! His middle-aged big belly rumbles away. He undoes the pony-tail and soon he looks almost

like a Native American in a trance.

Normally he just sits back and watches the crowd, handles interference for the DJ, makes sure things are running smooth, drops a few Es and just lets it all roll. But he never takes his finger off the pulse.

Whoever this DJ is, she's got his attention. I wanna pull out my phone and snap a photo. I wanna tweet how totally

awesome this party is. I wanna scream out  
to the world how I'm grooving without  
an ounce of dope in my system!

But none of these things are  
allowed in here. Randy's rules.

So, instead, I just dance.

I dance until dawn.

Sun comes in through the  
warehouse windows.

By eight A.M. the party's still going.  
Eventually, the DJ nearly collapses back

away from her decks, held up by Mr. Curls. She's smiling. And he's completely elated for some reason, pumping a quiet fist up in the air.

Randy goes up to the decks. He eases the music down and sets a mellow beat on loop. He pulls out a mic.

Curls leaves the DJ to get down with a redhead, hands all over her nearly naked body.

Randy: “Party people...give it up for

Brooklyn’s hottest undiscovered  
talent...discovered *right here at House  
Market*...DJing solid for a mind-numbing  
*seven* unbelievably groovy hours! I’ve been  
told she can do everything from Hip Hop  
to Chill to Electro to—as you heard  
tonight—a mix of genres which is entirely  
her own. The girl is a genius, a gift from  
the Underlords of House Music

themselves”—and then, when he says her name, it comes out like an announcer at a Heavyweight Title Match—“Give it up for...Brooklyn born and raised: DJ—Heaven—*Leighhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!*”

*Nice fucking name.* I feel like a total groupie, let me tell you.

*DJ Heaven-Leigh* sits back, behind the box, drinking liquids, her head falling from exhaustion. Mr. Curls extracts himself from the redhead, goes to the DJ.



He claps, then raises the DJ's hands like she's just taken the belt. But when he lets them go, she just drops them.

She lifts her half-shaved head and gives a wan smile to the crowd. It seems to take all the effort she has. She nods to them, acknowledging their applause. They cheer, they clap, they fucking roar. Randy takes over the box and starts mixing slowdown tunes, Chill House.

And just like that, bit by bit, the crowd starts to leave. Their voices buzzing audibly about the babe DJ. Several of them go past and she shakes their hands politely enough.

At twenty-two, I'm too old to be infatuated with someone. But I'll be damned if this chick with the wild and crazy hair is not the only thing dancing around in my mind right now.

Trev sucks down the last of the G-Series, then backhands me on the chest. “Let’s beat it. I need to sleep. And all the pussy’s gone home anyway.”

I look over at Heaven-Leigh. *Heavenly indeed*, I think. Trev tugs at my arm absently. Skate’s coming down from his high and I see him getting tired.

I stand firm for a second, wondering if I should go over to her and

ask her for a mix tape. That had been the plan at the start of the night. Only now, it's different. Now that would sound like the lamest pick-up line to ever be uttered by anyone anywhere—like...*ever*. Because the last thing I want from her now is a freaking mix-tape.

What I want now, the *only* thing I want— Call it hormones, fine, I'm weak, I admit it, and I'm also male. But the only thing I want now, is her.

I want her bad. I want her...in all the ways a dude should (and shouldn't) want a girl.

I'm *so* glad I didn't roll tonight. Because Molly makes you feel all sorts of shit for all sorts of people. And although I confess this might be a little bit of infatuation—a *female* DJ, hot as far as sounds go, hot as far as *looks* go; I like the wild look, always have—I also know that

she seems damn interesting. And I'd hate to think I was thinking that only because I'd been rolling. So I'm real glad I didn't.

I feel Trev's grip leave my wrist. Skate lumbers past me. I feel a cool breeze around me from other people's sudden absence, the body-heat now being replaced by a Sunday morning chill blowing in from some of the broken windows.

I'm motionless. Staring.

I decide I'll go touch fists with Randy, say hi.

My eyes flick over from her—still sitting behind the DJ box—to the box itself.

When they flick back to her, she's looking up at me.

And she's smirking.

-7-

I head to the DJ box, touch fists

with Randy. “Declan baby! Nice to see you! What you think of the set?” He swings his head over at Heaven-Leigh. In his Sri Lankan accent he says, “Da babe is good, eh?”

I raise my eyebrows, and I mouth,

WOW!

“Hot, eh? Hey, Xavier!”

Mr. Curls seems to have permanently dropped the redhead—she must’ve gotten what she wanted, and



promised to see him “later.” He’s standing next to Heaven-Leigh. Or, as I’m starting to think of her, *The Heavenliest Heaven There Is*. She looks so bad-ass, and yet, so tiny and delicate...

Mr. Curls comes over to the DJ Box. He puts a hand in his tartans, then pulls it out, gives Randy some skin. And then runs the hand around his greasy hair and looks around like he’s expecting five-

oh to jump him or something.

*Uh-huh. As I thought. Dealer.* And his name is Xavier. Mental note.

“Xavier, this is an old friend of mine, Declan Cox.”

“Cox?” Xavier Curls says to me.  
“Like the DJ—”

“Yeah, like Carl,” I say, already anticipating the statement. It’s a regular one around this crowd.

“Alright, *esseh!* Cool, man!” Xavier

fires an imaginary gun at me. Randy flips some dials and changes the beat, sticks his hand up to let me and Xavier know he'll turn his attention to us in just a sec.

“So, where was I?” Randy says.

“Oh, yeah, Cox here. Best damn football player Brooklyn’s ever seen.”

“No, Randy, that’s Trev.”

“Bullshit. It was both of *yooze*. That he has the limelight now doesn’t change

the facts. He threw, you caught and ran. You guys were dynamite on the field. Beyond increasing my cholesterol levels on Bowl Weekend, I don't know shit about the game—but what I do know is the two of *yooze* was chain lightning over at Lincoln.” In Randy’s accent, *threw* comes out as *true*. But he’s straight Brooklyn when he says *yooze*. As in: *Da two-a-yooze was chain lightning*.

“How’s your pops?” he asks.

“Still hating the world as far as I know.”

Randy rolls his eyes, shrugs. Pops is a slimeball. But compared to Randy's own father, no truer angel has ever walked the earth. “You still not talkin to him?”

I shuffle my feet, look around. I'm trying to figure out how to change the subject when Randy puts his finger up again to pause our conversation. He turns

a few knobs on the mixer. I stand there uncomfortably for a second. Waiting. Xavier looks wired, eyes too jittery. It looks like he's got more than a little ice-cream habit going (that's the same as being a chipper.) Maybe he does a bit of dragon chasing on the side as well. But he doesn't look like an H addict. Big C? That's likely. He's sniffed and run an arm over his nose more than once since I've been standing here.

Dudes like him make me nervous.

Time bombs. *Like pops's Catalina.*

Randy turns back to me, forgetting his earlier question. “I put on some premixed *Café del Mar* so we can talk some more. Had a good roll, Deck-Man?”

“Uh, no, didn’t roll tonight.”

“Problem? Xavier here’s our in-house thoroughbred, sells only pure-grade; but you can never turn away the

dudes who sell stepped-on shit. Not everyone can afford the high-quality stuff. Hey I got some for you if—”

“No, no, Randy. That’s not it.” I put my hands up to say I definitely don’t want the drugs. I do too many of them as it is. “No, actually, the sound was so good I outright forgot to drop. By the time Skate was hitting his peak and wanted more, he just took mine.”

“No shit, eh?” Randy says this with



all the disbelief of a guy who's been in the scene too long—and done too many drugs—to have come to consider that music and drugs are not separately discernible entities. “Well, Xavier here knows her. First time I ever took anyone's advice on picking a DJ for the night. It was a gamble. But it worked out. She took the spot of two other guys!”

“What happened to them?”

“Uncle trouble.”

“Cops?”

“Yeah, we were expecting a raid any time tonight because of it. But it seems they kept their mouths shut. Seems one of them was so high he lit up a blunt right next to a Johnny Law! Maybe was for the best. I’m all for a little Molly and weed when doing a mix, but you can’t take that shit too far. You’re working and

providing a service for money at the end of the day.”

“I hear you.”

“Hey, a bunch of us are gonna mow some grass at a Chillout party at my loft after this. Wanna come?” *Mow some grass...*

“Nah, I’m cool. Trev is up here from Penn for a few days, so I’ll be kickin it with him for a bit.”

“Trev’s in town? Shit! Where is that

damned QB?” Randy’s really taken to football—despite his comments to not knowing anything about it. That and strip clubs. Real All-American boy now.

“Uh, he’s outside. Probably chatting up the seventh chick for the night. But I’ll tell him you say hi. I think he grabbed a few *House Market* shirts from the merch table on the way out as well.”

“Awesome. It pays the bills. These parties don’t pay for themselves, you know. Although the record label sales *do* pick up after the shows anyway. Word of mouth. So maybe they do pay for themselves at the end of the day.”

“Good to hear. Good to hear. Hey”—I point to the DJ—“I’m just gonna tell her what a kickin set she played.”

Mr. Curls scowls at me. What is he, her freaking big brother? I ignore him.

Randy says, “You know she did her entire set without so much as even a sip of *Absolut* to soothe the nerves? The girl is a musical goddess, I tell you.”

I don’t comment.

Xavier Curls is still eying me. In my imagination, I give him the finger.

When I get to *Heaven-Leigh*, her

head's down on her arm, which is on her knee. And it looks like she's sleeping.

*Fuck!* For a very brief moment, I consider waking her. But that would be pushing it too far.

I turn away.

Back at the DJ box, I say to Randy, "She's asleep. Would you tell her I thought her stuff was kickin when she wakes up?"

"Declan, Xavier was just telling me

here that she needs a ride home. She's over on Bogart. By the Morgan station. Xavier would do it, but he's too loaded to get behind a wheel."

Xavier—who is now a little unsteady on his feet—says, "I'm fine. And how can we trust"—he waves a floppy hand at me—"this *random* guy!?"

"Xavier, Declan is no *Random Guy*. And me and him go way back. Heck, he's



also probably moved half the people who came to this party in and out of their apartments when their leases were up—or when they got evicted. How's business, by the way, Deck-man?"

"Good, very good. Got a new truck today. Ford F one-fifty—" I remember that Randy's not much into cars, so I shut up.

"See? And he's successful. Not like half these airheads around here

complainin about rent and then thinking the world owes them something because they're '*artistes*.' You see all those muscles?" He points at me. "Football and furniture removals. Both of them from hard work. And he's trustworthy. More trustworthy than me, I tell you. If I were your ages and I had *that* candy in my car"—he points at *Heaven-Leigh*—"I'd be much less of a gentleman than I'm sure

Deck here will be.”

I swallow. Because it’s true that I wouldn’t take advantage of her. But it’s also true that I find her so damned appealing that I can’t stop thinking about doing just that!

Randy fixes an eye on me. “*Right,* Deck-Man?”

That was a hint. And Randy is too well connected for me to ignore it. Going “way back” has shit to do with it. I

swallow a dry lump. “Uhm, right, of course.”

Xavier sticks a hand in his checkered pants’ pocket—eyes glued to me—and eases out the butt of a small pistol, then slides it back inside; smiles gently. *Another hint. OK, Point taken, dudes.*

What gun is he packing, you ask? It wasn’t a Beretta Nano. That’s all I know. *Because I’m intimately familiar with that one.*

I look over at Xavier waking *Heaven-Leigh* up. She wipes her eyes—an entirely human gesture; the goddess down from her pedestal—and I have to look away because *Infatuation* has taken on graffiti blockbuster dimensions in my head. But, just as I'm doing it, just as my head is skimming left, I catch the gentlest tug of a smile on her lips again as she looks me over. Full, red lips in the shape

of a gentle O.

*Oh, damn, the game is on!*

My own lip tugs into a smile of its own. I keep facing the dance floor because I can't have her see me all embarrassed like this.

I'm trying so hard to forget she's behind me—packing her bag or whatever she's doing—that I'm a little shocked when she instantly materializes on my left, shaved side of her head—the right—

facing me.

The smell of her rosy-perfume mixed in with her all-night sweat makes me light-headed. She looks up at me with eyes the color of glowing jade. Sweet, searching eyes set in a porcelain face, eyelashes dark and long.

She's smiling. She steps in front of me, sticks out her purple-nailed hand. "I'm Blaze Ryleigh. And you're the guy

who was checking me out all night, right?”

Yeah, uhm, I have no mirror, but I *knows me cheeks is swimmin in da redness* right about now.

“Cat got your tongue?”

I grab her hand, shake it.

“Dig your ink,” she says, looking at the sleeve on my right arm.

My eyes move over to her own tats—left arm, mirror image—shoulder to



wrist. Colors wild and passionate. Crazy red rose on the top, huge; but darker, much darker, images on the bottom.

*Fucking beautiful.*

I try and say something, but nothing comes up.

*So much for cool.*

She laughs, grabs me by the upper arms, then says, “Let’s get the fuck outta here. You might not be able to talk, but I

sure hope you can drive. 'Cause I'm  
freaking wiped, and I need to sleep.”

Her hand on my skin is like a  
sheepskin rug.

Did I mention the word  
“infatuated”?

Well, it isn't that. This is something  
else entirely. And damned if I don't like  
rolling on it.

THREE

RYAN GOSLING

DREAMBOY

-1-

*Blaze Ryleigh a.k.a DJ Heaven-Leigh*

I wasn't oblivious to the sinewy Ryan Gosling Dreamboy that had been staring at me all night. He just wasn't my priority. David Beckham himself could've

been standing dead center in that dance floor with his cock screaming to the stars and I wouldn't have noticed.

The set was all there was. Win or lose, all or nothing. That's how I treated it in my mind. Because that's how it felt to me.

Melodramatic? Maybe. But after three years of fighting, losing, and getting older, melodrama starts taking on a whole new meaning: Life itself.

And I don't agree with that.

But now the set is over, and now I notice him. I notice him good.

Golden hair styled to look like a cocky, confident wave, now ruffled from all night dancing and sweating. Eyes the color of cloudless skies. Muscles tight, *hard*. Tall—over six feet for sure. My head only reaches to his shoulders and that makes me all nice and warm thinking

about it. Not sure about his age, but looks about the same as mine. Twenty or so. Twenty-three? I've never been good with figuring out dudes' ages.

And then there's the ink. That didn't make me hot at first, not at all. Because I have my own ink. And I know what it means to someone who decorates himself so completely they way this guy has. It's an expression of self.

At least that was my first

impression of it: Until I saw the naked babe riding a tiger's head on his forearm. Then I *did* get hot.

There's just one problem: I'm so *freaking* tired that whatever thoughts I have of hooking up with him for a drink or something are gonna need to be relegated to just getting his number and calling him up later—*much* later. Not to mention that I probably stink real good.

(Then again, probably so does he after pulling an all-nighter like this.)

His pupils are not cooked, which means he's either at the bottom of his downer, or he never rolled in the first place. I'm hoping it's the latter. The former would be a deal-breaker for me. Completely. I just can't go that route with anyone.

*Not after Savva...*

We get outside and the cold wind is



a blast of relief on my skin. Maybe in ten minutes it'll be too much, but not now.

Before Xavier told me Declan's name, I'd already named him in my mind: Mr. I'm-So-Inked-and-Hard-and-Hot-I-Drop-Babes'-Panties-All-Over-Town.

My eyelids are too heavy to even try and start up a conversation with him. And it's been so long since I've been with a guy that I wouldn't trust my ice-breaker

topic choices in my current state of mind either. The only thing on my mind now is a bed. Or any surface for that matter. Even this icy sidewalk or the lumberyard next door would do.

I see his two friends: The Huge-as-a-Mountain black dude and the Snake-On-The-Neck skinhead dude. Huge-as-a-Mountain Black Dude's eyes go wide when he sees me, like he's looking at Brooklyn's very own socialite. The

skinhead's reaction is typical of someone who's been rolling all night. That is: "Hey, whoa, awesome! You rock!" And then he hugs me. Like, truly *hugs* me as if this were a sixties Free Love party.

Declan starts with the intros: "DJ Heaven—"

"Blaze," I interrupt.

"Sorry, Blaze...what was the last name again?"

“Ryleigh.”

“Ryleigh, that’s right. Damn, I’m tired,” he says.

*You’re telling me, dude.*

He continues: “Blaze Ryleigh. This monster here is my best friend, Trevor Perkins—everyone calls him Trev. And this skinhead here is Skate. We promise he’s not a member of the Aryan Nation, although he’s really got that look going

for him”

Trev’s one bad looking emm-eff. Shorter than Declan by a little, but wider. Seriously wider. At one stage during the party, he had his shirt off, and I saw a sick tribal tat spanning his left pec. I shake his hand and, even in my bleary state, can’t help but stare at that same massive chest.

“You’re incredible,” he says. “*So* good.”

“Thank you.” I don’t even have an

emotion about the statement. Maybe it will all sink in after a few hours of Zs.

Declan: “So, we’re giving *Blaze* here a ride home.”

Trev’s eyes bulge. Skate says, “Awesome! Right on!”

Skate here looks pretty buzzed up, and someone who’s not part of the scene might mistake him for something dangerous with his own solid build and

shaved hair, snake tattoo curling all around his neck. But his gray—just *slightly* blue—eyes are warm. *Just another dude rolling his problems away on a weekend*, I think.

“So, we parked a little way away. Ten minute walk.” Declan points up the road. “I can get the car so you can rest, or you can walk with us.”

I ponder both options. The thought of anyone else coming over to

me in what is already too bright a day (it's cloudy as hell, but my eyes can't take it), and then telling me I was so "Awesome!" is too grueling to ponder. More grueling than a ten minute walk. Then, of course, there's the stench from Newton Creek currently making me feel ill... "I'll walk. The smell from the creek might just make me puke."

"It is pretty skanky," says Declan.



Trev says, “Skate, c’mon.” He flicks his head back. Then he steals a glance at Declan. Skate doesn’t move. Trev grabs his arm and pulls him. Skate almost trips over, then starts walking. Before Declan and I even get going, they’re already ten or fifteen yards ahead of us.

The intention is clear.

“Want me to take your backpack?”

For a moment I clutch the bag

instinctively. Then I give myself an internal laugh. The bag feels like it has rocks in it. Now that the adrenal rush is slowing down, my whole body is aching. “Uhm, actually, yeah, if you don’t mind.”

I hand him my backpack and we start walking.

My eyes blink in rhythm to my footfalls. Music plays in my ear. I remember what it used to be like, coming home tripping or rolling after a night like

this, music slamming so hard in my cranium that I wouldn't be able to fall asleep until three in the afternoon. And even though the sound is as loud in my head now as it had been then, I know that when I hit the sack I'll be out like a blown speaker.

“So, *seven hour* set,” Declan says, “that’s...wow. That’s freaking unheard of.”

“Did I really mix for seven hours?”

He clutches the strap of my backpack, turns to look at me. “Yes, *seven* unbelievable hours of *unbelievable* music!”

“Th—thanks.”

“No, I freaking mean it. *Hot*—HOT!—music.” He looks up at another gutted warehouse, on our right.

I sneak a look at his ripped bicep, his chest popping out under his tank. Trev is pure size, smoothed out and even.

But Declan is ripped and solid.  
Unadulterated strength.

I decide to change the subject about the music, because praise makes me uncomfortable. “So when did you start getting your sleeve done?”

He stretches out his right arm, looks at the top of his forearm, then the bottom. I see some of the images close-up now. The gaping mouth of a tiger, bright orange, on the forearm. The voluptuous

nude on its head. Riding it like she's in charge. Higher up are vines, so that the tiger's head and its rider are riding through the vines, surrounded by them.

There's a name in between all of that. I don't quite make it out.

“Well, it all started out with this one—*Priscilla*—that was my mom's name.” He pauses, looks at it for a bit.

“That was almost four years ago.”

*Was* her name, I note...

“Then I figured she should be remembered with beauty, so that’s when I got the leaves and the vines and the tiger’s head done. The naked woman”—he laughs—“well, that’s the male in me coming out. That’s like Superwoman or something. I don’t know. It just looked cool. Or maybe it’s symbolic. Who cares. It just seemed bad-ass. And, well, I kinda

wanted to be a bad-ass in those days. Fuck the world and all that shit, you know? The tiger—it's a *Fuck the World* kind of thing. Charge against it no matter what. Something like that.” He turns to show me the inside of his arm. *LIVE IN THE NOW*, it says, surrounded by intricate tribal lines of different colors, wrapping up all the way to the top and around his shoulder.

*Did I really say that his tats didn't turn*



*me on?*

“They’re...beautiful.”

I don’t ask him how his mom passed.

He stops and takes my left wrist and starts turning it. It makes me feel naked. All the ink on there has a meaning, starting from the joy I felt when getting my first one with Savannah, on my shoulder—the one Patryk had designed

for me—and then the ones I got later.  
After she was gone.

Declan looks at the red rose  
covering my shoulder, surrounded by  
glowing green leaves. Blood falls in a  
single line from its stem. I added that  
later. *After Savva.*

He lingers on the intricate lace  
bracelet underneath it, around my lame  
excuse of a bicep. When he looks at the  
darker, deadlier pieces lower down, he

says, “This must’ve been a heavy time in your life...”

He’s looking at the skull surrounded in bright red and orange flames, a knife going through its head. I think of Savva...

He turns the arm over, sees the leafless tree, the wolf behind it. The wolf which, when I got it done, I took as being death and failure. Always lurking, always

watching, inevitably there. *So, make the best of your time. Because you can't outrun the wolf.*

In my discomposure from the all-night exertion, and maybe because of hunger and dehydration as well, the emotions burgeoning within me are too strong to fight down. Savva's lifeless body and blue lips stare at me now, a dirty needle in her arm, dark and blackened eyes looking up at me.

I twist my arm away, as gently as I

can, but he notices the discomfort.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to intrude.”

I say nothing, only turn my head so he doesn’t see the tear almost breaking out from me.

Silence follows us as we walk. Trev and Skate have since disappeared. My pace picks up and soon I’m a foot or two ahead of him.

The rift in the air between us is

solid. I didn't ask for it. He didn't mean to pry. It's bullshit that my lip is trembling. It's bullshit that I can't talk to him now because I'm afraid I'll break down in tears.

And I know it's because of my physical state—that I'm dead-tired, and famished. I know I'm not like this usually, that I have it mostly under control on good days.

*Savva. Patryk.*

I try to explain this, but my lips are frozen by terrible memories. Wind sings across my ears like a banshee howling the approach of death.

The bitch of it all—the absolute *crummer* of it—is that I actually wanted to give him my number. I wanted to tell him to come by and maybe we could drink coffee or a beer or something. I saw him checking me out all night. *All* night. He'd

be worth at least one good hook-up.

*Maybe more?* I'm not so good with boys, but, yeah, probably more.

*Damn it!*

“We’re here,” I hear him say from behind me.

I see Trev and Skate inside a desolate parking lot which is surrounded by a chain fence.

It’s now or never. I have to tell him it’s OK while we’re still alone.



I have to—

I can't talk. Somehow I have to fix this—

I stop. I turn and snatch his forearm. I look over at Trev. He seems to have a sixth sense about something happening here. He grabs Skate by the nape of the neck and starts wrestling him down like little boys at a schoolyard, effectively giving me and Declan some

“privacy.” Or as good as it can get.

My chin trembles.

*Oh god I can't believe I'm about to do this...* But I can't talk now. All I could do is...

I stretch my hand up to behind Declan's neck—*damn he's tall!*—and pull him down.

He goes with it. His arms wrap around the small of my back.

Our lips meet.

Our tongues touch.

Before I know it, he's dragged me left—away from any possible view of his friends—and rams me up against a concrete wall.

He pushes up against me, pressing at me with his crotch.

And suddenly I'm awake.

-2-

The wind picks up, rushes at me

from the left. My hair swings all over my face and gets in between our lips. It also wraps itself around his head. My eyes flutter back. My skin freezes up and I shiver, but inside...a fire burns.

I try pull him closer, which is just not possible. My head's up against a concrete slab of a wall and he's pushing harder and harder so that even the back of my ass hurts.

My eyes are half open, his are

closed. The way he kisses me is  
passionate. *Needful.*

*He wants me, I think. He wants me  
more than air.*

A million thoughts howl through  
my mind. Buffalos on a stampede. It's the  
J train rattling the rafters on Broadway  
Junction. It's TNT. Hard House. This had  
meant to be just a sign to let him know,  
*Hey, it's cool, I saw you checking me out. This is*

*just to let you know I'm interested...maybe.* And what it turned out to be—

He bites my lower lip, licks it. His hands are all over my tank, side and back. And then they're on my head—his left hand on the shaved side, the other weaving through the long side.

His eyes are closed. Shut tight.

He pecks my lips. His tongue eases out, just licks me once, then he buries his tongue in me again.

Me? I'm lost. I'm in an ocean. I'm wrapped in a Leddra Chapman song or Kate McGill singing indie rock at a café with only fifty true die-hard fans, swaying and sipping Bourbon, carried off in a cloud of intoxicating music.

I...I'm adrift in this boy's grip, his smell of sweat and male cologne.

I try kiss him back but I'm definitely the one *being kissed*. It's all him,

he's in control of this now. I might've started it, but that was just the sparkplug. And now I'm merely going along for the ride.

His sublime lips move onto my cheeks, my neck. His tongue cuts like a small razor across my neck. My eyes fire wide open. On my right I see colorfully clothed people, far away, strolling away from the party.

A car rushes by, playing Chill.



The gutted warehouse looms over

us.

Gray skies cover us.

And none of it really means shit,

because one hundred percent of my

sensory perception is busy with the

moisture he's currently placing on my left

ear, under my hair. No doubt he's seen

the three small star pieces I have there,

because his tongue's going pleasurably

wild on each of them.

My heart whirs like a pinwheel.

Then an entirely new thing takes over me. And I have no name for it just yet. It's like a blanket, warm and fleecy, but filled with a chemical of some sort that causes a slight irritation on my skin. It enters from my toes, and I feel it embracing me, taking over me, warming me up and—and this is what I feel most about it—making me feel weaker...

*What fuckin bastid emotion is this?* I think.

My legs start trembling. This blanket-thingy is all over me. I lose all strength in my body. My arms flop around Declan's back like a puppet without strings.

And in some part of my mind that I'm not entirely certain of yet (*bastid!*) I sense something deep and fundamental

about this golden-haired boy that I'm holding onto right now. And so I hold him tighter. I hold him like Winslet and DiCaprio. Pattinson and Stewart.

Suddenly (*BASTID!*) everything in my mind makes sense in some incomprehensible, intangible way. Suddenly, letting him go feels like letting go of some essential anchor pinning me to reality itself. As if the gutted warehouse and Chill House car and the

colorful people and even the sidewalk upon which we stand are all somehow hinged upon this moment's embrace in an entirely weird and super-cosmic way.

Abruptly, holding onto him feels like the thing I've been working toward all my life, like the culmination of every dream I've ever had is made complete by the emotions of *this* moment, *this* kiss.

In a heady moment, all makes

sense. There are no questions, no noises, no doubts.

Just *this*.

I wrap my arms around his neck and tighten. Moisture slams me in the most romantic of places. I rock back on my heels and lift my toes, hang on him. And for the first time in forever, I just *let go*.

“Yo, Deck! Let’s go, bro!”

It’s Skate’s voice, or, better, his accent. Because Skate and Declan have a tinge of Southern Brooklyn to them Trevor doesn’t. As to voice tones, Trev’s is the deepest, Declan second up.

Declan moves away from my lips, holds me in place by my shoulders. Stares at me. The moment of eyes locked feels like an eternity. His own eyes tremble.

They question me. They look at me in a way that says, *Blaze, wtf? WTF!?*

I'm sure mine look the same to him. We explore each other's depths, asking, but getting no answers. Wondering.

An infinitely small twitch appears above his left eyebrow. He smacks his lips.

A nervous "Hah!" escapes me. I lick my own lips.



*Should we kiss again? Should we just  
say Fuck the World and stay here for the rest of  
the day, my back pressed against this gray wall?  
Declan's hands all over me?*

I know this is what he's thinking,  
too. Because it's what I'm thinking. And I  
can feel that, at least in this very moment,  
there's a connection.

“I'm so glad I didn't roll tonight,”  
he says.

See? Because that's what I was thinking as well, and I even know why he says it, although he doesn't explain it:

*I'm so glad I didn't roll tonight because now I know that this euphoria I'm feeling is the real deal and not some chemical screwing with my brain.*

Skate again: "Deck. Dude! I'm hungry!"

I try say, *I guess we should go*, but my

throat catches. He says it instead. “I think we better...”

“Yeah,” I croak.

He turns from me, taking my hand with him. *Don't let it go*, I catch myself thinking.

Our fingers stay locked as he strolls ahead of me in slow motion, his hair splaying left and right from the wind. I move my own hair back, still not believing any of this.

I'm in another world. As if the rules of something as integral as gravity or the fact that the sun rises in the East every day, have been changed. As if I'd been playing basketball, but am now suddenly thrown into a baseball diamond, and I'm next at bat. And I don't know shit about ball, but I'm on the team...

When we turn into the parking lot, Skate says, "Finally!"

Trev leans back against what must be Declan's car—a monster of a silver pickup that looks like it came straight out of the shop. Trev's arms are folded, chest bulging. He smiles at us, almost indiscernibly. Skate looks a little confused (of course he does) but Trev's totally with the program. And it ain't because I had lipstick on and it's smudged or anything, because I didn't—I don't use make-up

when I spin. “Blaze, why don’t you ride up in front?” Trev says. And he opens the door for me.

I’m a little embarrassed at how obvious it all probably is. I’m feeling more like a little girl than like the woman who’s been living on her own since her mom and gramps left for back home.

I step up into the truck, pushing up on Declan’s forearm for support. And I can’t help the thought coming into my

mind of feeling like I'm a princess being led into a chariot...

By one *fucking hot* knight.

-4-

Declan jumps behind the wheel and my eyes linger a second on his flexing bicep. I feel like such a kid—and damned if I don't like that simple feeling. He looks in the rearview and says, “*Tom's?*”

Trev looks at the clock on the

control panel. “Only place that’s open, isn’t it?”

“There’s also Mickey Ds. Burger King?” Declan smirks.

“Just step on the fucking gas, homey. I need some real food—bacon and pork and eggs and... Damn, I’m hungry!”

Skate: “You dudes know I hate going to *Tom’s*.”

Trev: “No, we know you hate



seeing Clarissa. Not our problem you did her and dumped her. It doesn't change the fact that they serve the best damn Huevos Rancheros in Brooklyn."

"Fine, fuckit. I'm freaking starving. Let's just go." Skate's eyes are lidded. He wipes his face.

*Here comes the downer.*

I would've never taken him for a roller with that snake tat around his neck.

But, then again, I would've never taken me for a roller a year ago either.

“And, FYI, I didn't ‘do her and dump her.’ Things just...didn't work out.”

Deck fires up the car, looks over at me. It's a look I recognize: He wants to know if I'll come with them.

And I do want to. I wanna sit with him and talk and...well, I *really* wanna kiss him more, on my couch, with Lauren Aquilina singing *Fools* or *Sinners* or *Ugly*

*Truth* in the background.

But I'm beat. I mean, I'm totally *whacked* for the night. My physical self clashes with my mental self as I consider letting go of this mysterious anchor to which I now feel suddenly attached.

But the physical wins. "Rain check? I'm so wiped."

Declan doesn't pull off. He looks at me for a while, both of us paused in a

space somewhere else, somewhere outside this car and where there aren't two dudes in the backseat and where the add-on GPS isn't lighting up and asking us where we want to go...

“How long would you need to feel fresh again?”

I can still taste him on my tongue... His lips are bright red from the cold, maybe also from dehydration. I'd probably need about three days of sleep

to feel fully awake again, but only an hour's nap to be able to push it another few more hours. Not ready to let go of him just yet, I say, "An hour?"

Declan looks in the rearview. "Dudes, you're gonna have to stave off your hungers off for another hour. Blaze is coming with us." The way he says it leaves no room for argument. (And that he says *hungas* instead of *hungers* only

makes me want to touch my lips to his even more.)

Skate complains like his leg's just been broken. Trev says casually, "I can do that." I'm looking straight out the windscreen at that looming warehouse ahead of us. I feel a finger press against my arm. I look back and see Trev. He winks, gives me a thumbs up.

I shake my head at the surrealism of it all, as if it were all falling into place.

by some magical force I've never met.

Declan stretches over into the glove compartment. There's an e-reader in front of the truck's manual. Beyond that are several packs of *Jack Link's* beef sticks. He pulls two out and throws them in Skate's lap behind him. "Here, that'll have to be good enough until Blaze has gotten some rest."

I say, "Declan, I don't wanna

impose. Let's rather—”

Trevor cuts in. “No, no, no. Hell, Blaze, you're probably gonna have the entire city calling you up for gigs later today. We'd like to spend some time with you before you're playing it up with Calvin Harris and Kaskade over at Ibiza. Skate here's just crashing, we'll keep him hydrated and fed and he'll be alright.”

I don't know what to say, so I just bite my lip.



“Declan, drive. Get this lady home.

And gimme some o’ that *Jack Link’s* as well before I eat your head off.”

On the way to my place, I start realizing that, once I hit the sack, I’ll crash until tonight... It’s not gonna work.

“Declan, would it be OK if I just crash in your car and then come in and join you guys at this *Tom’s* place, or whatever it’s called? A half hour should be more than

enough to keep me going until lunch.

And after a good breakfast...”

Declan smiles, then his right cheek goes red. And he looks out his window.

“I was hoping you’d say that.”

-5-

I never took that half-hour sleep break. I just wasn’t ready to let go of the anchor yet when we arrived at *Tom’s* and Declan and the boys started getting out

the car. It's not the first time I've pushed my body beyond the limits like this. *I'll manage.*

*Tom's Restaurant* is a breakfast and lunch diner that Declan says is “one of the few places in Prospect Heights that's maintained ‘its Brooklyn’ over the years.” There's an old-style red and white *COCA COLA* sign outside, right next to the nondescript neon sign which says only *RESTAURANT*. A handwritten menu

on a pinewood easel stands by the door outside. Inside, there's an American flag and porcelain dishes on the walls, as well as photos and balloon signs in green ("HOT OTAMEAL") and orange ("FRESH VEGGIE BURGER") and a big black one that says "TOM'S REST. 1936." On the counter, next to the photos of little babies and kids that must no doubt be "Tom's" kids and grandkids,

there's another sign that says "THE GREENEST BLOCK IN BROOKLYN."

The old guy behind the counter greets the boys like they're family. He looks at Skate suspiciously. "All nighter?" he asks none of them in particular. Declan nods. "I hope *yooze* is not getting into trouble, are yas?"

Declan looks him in the eyes and says confidently, "Not last night, Mr. De

Luca.”

“I hope not! Trev, nice to see you my man. And well done for taking the bowl for the second year in a row! How’s PSU?”

“Very good, Mr. De Luca. Tough, though. Lots of studying, then off-season training, keeping up my grades. But the team is good, sir. That’s really what won us the bowl this year.”

“Modest, but we all know PSU ain’t got a hope in hell of takin the trophy without ya. But I’m glad to hear you’re pushin on the grades. You was always the smart one, not like these losers!” He smiles and laughs. “You entering the draft? You’re eligible this year, aren’t ya?”

“Yes, sir. I’m eligible. But I’m not entering. Football was always a means to an education for me. I don’t wanna play

pro.”

“See what I mean, the smart one. Take a seat, fellas. I’ll send Clarissa over to get *yours’* orders. Who’s the attractive lady here *wichyoo?*”

“That’s Declan’s new girlfriend,” says Skate. “Least that’s what I think...”

*Girlfriend?* I can’t say I don’t like the sound of that.

Mr. De Luca gives an approving smile, tips an imaginary hat. “Pleasure to



meet you, Miss...”

He stretches out his hand over the counter. “Blaze, sir. Blaze Ryleigh.”

He gives me a warm smile and looks at me and Declan a second. “Well, you look like you’ve been at it all night as well. I recommend a *Tom Burger Deluxe* for a large appetite.”

After sitting and checking out the menus, “Clarissa” comes over—a dark

haired girl that reminds me of Kat Denning, only with bigger boobs. She chews on gum and stands with her hip cocked. “Skate. Boys.”

Declan: “Waddup, Clariss.”

Trevor: “Yo, Clarissa.”

Skate clears his throat, looks down at his hands. Mumbles something which I guess is a greeting.

The boys order up a feast (Huevos Rancheros, Spicy Chicken and Cheese

Omelet, extra Pancakes, extra bacon on the side). I end up going with a salad, because I need some sleep before I put anything in the burner or I might get sick. Declan orders a Vanilla Egg Cream to drink. I take straight coffee and Trev and Skate go with virgin Cherry-Lime Rickeys (*Tom's* serves no alcohol.)

Turns out the coffee is free, and so are the cookies we're served while we wait

for our meals.

“Your set was kickin, Heaven-Leigh,” says Skate. *Again!*

I look down at my coffee. “Uhm, thanks.”

“So why haven’t we heard of you yet? I mean, you should be all over town.”

I twirl my cup. Trevor picks up on my discomfort. “Skate, what’s up with the twenty questions? Leave the girl be.”

“No, it’s cool. Uhm, well, it’s real tough getting your foot in the door. Tonight—*last* night—well, it was a lucky break.”

“You mean that Uncle shit?” says Declan.

“You heard about that?” I ask.

“Yeah, Randy told me.”

“Yeah, well, sorry to hear what

happened to those dudes. But, you reap what you sow, y’know. How do you know Randy?”

He hesitates. Trev answers for him.

“Declan here was a wild boy once—”

“No I wasn’t.”

Trev leans forward, eyes bulging playfully, “Yes you *was*.”

“Trev and I,” says Declan, “used to

play this scene a fair amount back in the day. Anyways, I did more than him. And, well, Randy's a man about town, you know." He whispers quietly. "He'll give drugs to anyone who's taking them, just for some good company. I guess it's loneliness or something."

*Loneliness.* The story of this scene.

"Deck's playing it down. Because Randy took a real liking to him. It seems

Deck here has a real good ear. I wouldn't know, he never listens to shit I tell him!"

Declan cocks an incredulous eyebrow, looks at Trev. "Whatever. Randy and I just had similar, uhm, *issues*. So, we were a mutual ear for each other I guess." He turns to me now. "And you? I mean, you must know him to have gotten the gig."

"No, uhm, Xavier. He and I... He's



an old friend. I know him from back in the day when”—I look at the three guys, realize I can talk openly to them—“back when I used to roll.”

“You don’t roll anymore?” asks Skate.

I shake my head.

I feel that sadness approaching in the distance, like black ink poured into a

pool and spreading. I only hope he doesn't ask—

“Why?”

The coffee has mellowed me out, so I don't feel as vulnerable about the subject as I did when Declan asked about my tat earlier. But I don't tell the complete truth. “Dunno, just...enough was enough, you know?”

I sense Deck's crystal eyes

forcefully on me, and I get the distinct impression that he knows I'm BSing.

Our food arrives which, thankfully, swerves the conversation from me toward one of full mouths groaning orgasmically over how good the bacon and Huevos are.

“Xavier,” says Declan, “that’s that dealer dude, right? The one who sticks his

tongue down girls' throats in exchange for E?"

I clear my throat uncomfortably. "Yip, that would be him." I spin the coffee in my hands. I wouldn't be surprised if he thinks I was one of those girls.

Only, I wasn't. Not really. He and I go *so* much deeper than that...

Deck: "He flashed his piece at me,

just before I gave you a ride home.”

“The *Ruger*?”

“Oh, you’re familiar with it...”

*No, but one of my exes is.* “Uhm, yeah, a little. I mean, I don’t know if it’s the same gun these days. Xavier and I haven’t spoken in a year.”

“Was it a concealed carry? The one you saw back when you hung out

together.”

“Concealed carry? I know Xavier had a revolver called a *Ruger*, but that’s as far as my knowledge of weapons goes.”

“Small. Was it a small gun?” he asks.

“Yeah, tiny.”

“Then it’s a concealed carry. It’s probably the same one. Concealed Carry

means it's a real small gun so you can hide it easily. Never mind that owning a gun legally in New York for a dude like him would be damn near impossible—I doubt a dealer would pass the background check. Anyway. Pushing dope's also illegal. Doesn't seem to stop him either.”

“I don't agree with his lifestyle choices, in case you're wondering. We're

not even friends anymore. *Because* of those choices.”

“Oh, I hear you. I wasn’t commenting on your friendship. Just thinking out loud. I didn’t mean to put you on the spot. It’s amazing how a dude can be rolling and still think to pull out a piece. Anyway. I guess the ‘love’ is stronger for some than others. But I saw him sniffing and wiping his nose a few



times. I wouldn't be surprised if he was snorting up the Big C along with the E, which would explain the aggression."

When we're done eating, Trev's eyes closing from exhaustion, he says, "OK, peeps, Skate and I will take the train home." Trev smiles at me. Something tells me this hadn't been the plan before.

Skate says nothing. He's down

enough now to be perceiving his real environment again, and to realize that there's something sparking between Declan and me.

“Right, Skate?” Trev gets up.

Skate bites into one more piece of bacon, slurps down his Cherry Lime and gets up. “Right,” he says with a full mouth. “Deck, weights tomorrow?”

“Five o’ clock.”

Declan and I get up to let the two boys out. Trev and he touch fists and then bump shoulders. “Peace, homey.” Trev grabs his neck. “Don’t forget we’re riding on Tuesday, OK? And tomorrow we’re hitting the weights in the afternoon. Whatever you do today, that time is ours.”

“Never would forget, homes. You

know you could ride with me tomorrow as well. I'd prefer having my boy lugging shit with me than some hand-for-hire off Craigslist."

"Family, bro. You're not the only one I got, and I gotta spend some time with them tomorrow." Then, he puts an arm around Declan and turns him so their backs are to me. Trev talks softer, but I can still hear him. "Speaking of

which, when are we gonna see your pops?” Trev’s got his hand firmly on Declan’s neck, and their temples are almost touching.

Declan looks directly into Trev’s eyes. Quietly, he says, “Trev...”

“Deck, you and me, together. We’re gonna go see him.” Trev looks over at me, decides to drop the subject. “We’ll talk about it tomorrow.

“Blaze”—he bends down and hugs me with a strong, manly hug that makes me love Declan even more because of his friends—“it was more than a pleasure to meet you.”

I clear my throat, suddenly overwhelmed by that chemical covered blanket I told you about earlier. “Uhm, you too, Trevor.”

“Peace out.” Trev and Skate tromp

out.

Declan sits again, says nothing. He sucks his Egg Cream clean with a loud slurp. Maybe his mind is on this statement about his *pops*...

I feel I must mention something here before we go on. Maybe you noticed I used the word *Love* earlier. Don't misunderstand me there. Of course I love Declan, just like I love Trev (at this stage

I guess I only *like* Skate.) Doesn't mean anything necessarily. Deck makes me feel warm, welcomed. He makes me feel something entirely new. Something I don't fully understand if I'm being honest with myself. No matter what's happening in my life, I try and tell myself things straight. Beating around the bush gets you nowhere.

So, lacking a word for it, I call this



emotion love. I guess I'm thinking, *I love him, just like I loved Savannah, like I loved Patryk.*

Love is an all-encompassing word in English. "*There are many words for love, and many nuances to those words, in Polish,*" Mamah said to me once. This was when I was sixteen, crying on my bed because I'd caught Eliazs Piscor ("*The totally coolest guy in all of Greenpoint High, Mamab!*") kissing

Zuzanna Osik (“*A total skank lying bitch if I ever saw one! She’s no good for him!*”) behind a school dumpster. At that stage, I thought his tongue in her throat and his hand on her tit under her sweater was the worst thing a person could ever see in her entire life.

Fast forward to today, *Tom’s* Restaurant. Is it my subconscious using this word in a very calculated way?

Or is it, you know, someone—*or something*—else...?

-6-

Moments of unbelievable silence go by while Declan and I sit here, me playing with my empty coffee cup, him turning the straw in his empty Egg Cream glass.

I look up at him, instantly smile at his beauty. If I don't know where this is going, at least I'll have *that*—a memory of

just how innocently bad and troubled he looks.

The heat of him pressing against me and that wall is gone. Not that I don't find him sexually attractive, it's just that I don't know shit about that area. I've been with *one* guy in my life *Like That*. And the other, who came close to *Like That*, was, well, we'll get to that later...

“Uhm,” I say, “Just FYI, I don't

usually...uhm...take guys home...after— I guess what I'm trying to say is...that I'm more of a go-out-for-coffee-and-get-to-know-each-other-first kind of girl.”

He can't help himself smiling. “Did you think I was going to jump you and race you to bed?” His eyes glint mischievously.

I like the flirty comment, and I like

the prickliness it brings to my cheeks. But it also makes me a little nervous. “No, uhm, well, I don’t know—”

“May I remind you, that it was *you* who kissed me—”

“I don’t regret it.”

Pause. Then, “I’m glad you did it. I have to confess...” He eases a hand to mine, caresses it. It sends lightning all over my skin, makes my insides bubble

like boiling water. “...I was a little”—he chuckles—“I don’t know how to put this —”

“Put it any way you like.”

“I was a little...taken aback by you...when you mixed tonight. I...wouldn’t call it ‘infatuated’...but—”

I start laughing. “Are you going to tell me you were idolizing me and

couldn't imagine ever matching your lips to mine?"

"That's exactly what I was gonna say."

All time stops. The protective walls I've erected around me crash. I process the statement, swallow hard.

*That's exactly what I was gonna say...*

"Declan"—I feel my insecure lips



tremble—“I’m just a regular girl. You might get disappointed if you put me up on a pedestal.”

“I’m not disappointed yet. And FYI, I’m also a coffee-first kind of guy...when I *have* to be...” he squeezes my hand harder.

“What—”

“Coffee?” A bubbly and happy Clarissa arrives at our table, holding a pot

of it. I nod, so does Declan. She pours, then leaves.

“What do you mean ‘when you have to be?’”

“Never mind, I don’t wanna scare you off.”

I look up at him. All manner of intensity rages in his aquatic eyes. I don’t pursue the last statement. All I know is

his gaze burns into me. My chest lights up. I feel the scrim of sweat on my skin from last night's party liven up again. I imagine his lips on my skin—*Why!? The thought comes out of nowhere!*—and realize I'd probably taste like an athlete right about now.

So would he. And yet...the thought of his briny flavor on my tongue is enough to make me shift in my seat.

There's only one explanation to this, of course: I'm completely tired. I need to sleep and think straight again.

Of course that's what it is.

-7-

“So why did you really stop dropping?” he asks me.

I pause as an argument rages in my mind as to whether or not I should

answer truthfully. Or should I pepper it, tell a semi-truth, a lie that isn't completely a lie? A "truthful" lie. But a little voice in my head tells me not to, tells me that I should be open with him, completely, and see where it goes.

I say it quick: "Friend of mine ODED." *Jackhammer* hits me! *Savva's face, on the ground, swollen eyes looking up, fingers curled halfway...* "Can we change the

subject?”

Silence. I sense that he knows that the dead tree on my arm is because of that. “That’d do it,” he says. And then he changes the subject. “So how long you been mixing for?”

“As long as I can remember. I got some cheap-ass decks when a friend of ours moved back to Poland. I was twelve then, but I’d been mixing at his place

already since I was eleven or so. Then I sold those and got some other decks off eBay. The current ones I have were given to me by another friend who also went to Poland. A...uhm...year ago. He DJed in his spare time.” Patryk was never much of a DJ, but he was a big spender, always liked getting the best gear even if he couldn’t afford it.

Savva really liked that about him...

“Wow.” He says it slowly.

“Just...*wow*. So, that’s what you do? I mean, mix full-time?”

“Yeah...I try at least.”

He taps his finger on the table.

“Blaze.”

“Yeah.”

“You mesmerize me. And I know that’s forward and all and maybe I’m



stuck in the moment of heat, or maybe I'm still 'infatuated' and all but...I need to kiss you again. I mean, *need* to."

*I need it too.* "Then kiss me."

Electric sparks fly across our table. I actually hear the crackle of static. Declan pays the bill. We stand to leave but Clarissa grabs him by the wrist. She gives me a cold look that says to me, *Gimme a minute, this is private!*

I go and wait by the door. I overhear: “Gina’s not doing so good, Deck. You need to go and see her. The doctors think it’ll help. You know, her last touch with reality and all...”

“It’s not my business, Clarissa. She did what—”

“It *is* your damn business. You owe it to her to—”

“Clarissa, I don’t owe her shit. It was her choice, and I tried to stop her.”

“She would’ve walked to the depths of the earth for you, Deck. And she followed you when you got into the scene. Hell, *everyone* followed you in. You know everyone in school looked up to you. You can’t make out like you didn’t know you had that kinda influence over people.”

A pause. “I didn’t know back then...but...it was still her choice.”

“Fine, whatever. Look, that may be true. But right now it is *your* choice. She needs help. Go see her. Go—”

“And take another beating from her brother who thinks I’m the devil consummate?”

“Maybe. But everyone knows you

never put up much of a fight on that one Deck. You coulda taken him in two or three punches. Something says to me you *wanted* to get beat on. Like that woulda make it OK or *sumthin*. You *know* Gina's in the shit she's in in a large part because of you."

"Damn it. I don't need to take this crap from you. This was years back—"

"Clarissa!" It's Mr. De Luca to the

rescue.

Declan calls out to him. “Sorry, Mr. De Luca. It was my fault. I was just catching up with Clarissa on some old high school friends.”

“OK, Deck. But she’s got work to do.”

“I understand, sir.” Then, to Clarissa: “Look, I hear you. I gotta think

on it.”

“Think fast. Because time’s running out.”

He exhales, exasperated. When he turns and sees me, his eyes are a raging red. He catches himself short, as if realizing where he is, and forces a smile at me. As if he’d been dragged into the past by the conversation and was stuck there a second.

I know the feeling.

Outside, I say to him, “Everything OK?”

He runs a hand through his hair.

“Uhm, yeah, yeah. Sorry about that. Old ghosts, you know?”

“Yeah, I know about old ghosts.”

That gets a smile out of him. He eases his left hand to my shaved hair, rubs



it once, then moves it down to my cheek.

Instant heat slams me. “I like your hair.”

“The lack of it? Or the hair itself.”

As if checking, his right hand slides under my full-length side. His hand is warm, and my eyelids wanna close. He eases my head back. My chin moves up, my eyes close, then open, my lips part...

I breath in expectantly. With half-

closed eyes, I see his own head move down to mine.

“Both,” he says. And then he kisses me.

I almost choke on some of my spit. I start coughing, and he laughs, but he doesn't let go of the back of my head. My arms start moving on their own, my hands start wrapping around his hard waist. He moves down again, lips and

tongue to mine, quietly, gently.

My nipples tighten. But then a gust of cold air gets the better of us—and my whole body breaks into a shiver.

I grab his wrists and pull away, because not only do I want to kiss him more. I want to lose myself completely in him.

And that can't happen here...

It's clear he wants to take me somewhere quiet, but I can't wait anymore. I want to feel that toxic blanket again. That...*bastid*. I wanna be wrapped up and sleep in it. But whatever else, I need his tongue on mine.

We get to his truck and I push him against its door. And I do lose myself in

him. When he pushes me away and says, “We need to get out of here,” I don’t listen. My lips hunt for his, and he gives in.

Together, our body heat increases. When his hand slides under my sweater, on the back, and he pushes me firmly against his solid manhood, I say, “I think you’re right.”

Letting him go feels like stopping a

train on a track.

# FOUR

## DELICIOUS HOOK-UP

-1-

*Declan Cox*

Her hand's on my thigh as I drive.  
We share nothing but silence as I make  
my way from Prospect Park over to  
Bogart Street in Bushwick. Her loft, she  
said.

There's nothing but velvety quiet

between us. Until she says: “You read much?” At my hesitation, she clarifies. “I think I saw an e-reader in your glove compartment—”

“Oh, yeah, when I can.”

“Mind if I look at it?”

I get a sudden insecure feeling—*crazy, I know!*—like letting someone look at the literature I peruse would be like letting them look deep into my soul.



*And is that safe?* “S—sure, go ahead.”

I reach over to open the glove compartment. “That’s cool. I got it.” She smiles while she says that, and it breaks me apart.

She fiddles with the reader.

“Stephen King fan?”

*Looking deep in the soul...* “Uhm, yeah.”

After a pause. “Does it sing to you?”

“Wh—what?”

“King’s work. It sings, doesn’t it?”

“Like a screeching banshee.”

“To the soul,” she murmurs. Then  
puts the reader away.

*A demented and troubled soul.* “You  
read much as well?”

She smiles demurely. “Wait till you  
see my place.”

I have to be careful with her, because I *did* put her on a pedestal. And I have to make sure I don't treat this as some novelty—"screwing the DJ" kind of thing. Because it isn't. It so isn't. I don't know what it is—some force or something; the alligator in the sewers, maybe—that's boggling my mind and turning my thoughts to mush. It makes me think the weirdest shit about her.

Makes me think stuff like: Sitting on the grassy hills in Sunset Park with her, and looking down over at Red Hook sprawling below. Makes me think of sipping a cocktail at *The Ides* rooftop, watching the sun go down behind the city, with her in my arms.

*Why is this happening to me?*

It's clear. She *is* on a pedestal. I've put up an image of her in my mind and am making my life fit around it. But I

have to see her for what she is: A girl I dig. Because I do. And, sure, it's physical. The green of her eyes, that crazy pink and blonde hairstyle. And the ink...

*Oh, damn, that ink.* First babe I ever saw to sport so much of it. And it's *hot!*

She squeezes my thigh and my thoughts skyrocket.

She's not helping.

And then there's her voice, soft and

gentle. The way her gaze flickers when she tells a lie; *I stopped rolling...just because enough was enough.*

And her music. The pain betrayed by the images on her arm...

No, it's bullshit—this idea of putting her on a pedestal. Because I do know her. I know she's suffered. She's been talking to me all night, through her music. Soulful, heart-wrenching music. I know that her grip on my leg is an

unconfident one, one that says, *I'm doing this, but I'm not sure why...*

We get to her place, a building right next to a monster wallpiece of floating heads and wires. *Skate would like this*, I think. Most of the apartments on the left side—the apartment building across from hers—look abandoned.

She hesitates just before she opens the car door. I pick up on her anxiety.

“Blaze, I’m not expecting anything from you. Heck, I’m not even normally like this. You’re more than a little interesting to me. All I know is...something’s maybe happening here. And I’ll be damned if I’m gonna let it go. I’m a good guy. You can call Randy and check with him. You can trust me. You—”

She stops me short. “I know.” The statement comes out as a raspy whisper. “Just so long as you know that...I’m not



—” She laughs nervously.

“You’re not a slut. I get it. I think I’ve figured that out already. And I’m glad you’re not. Because I don’t think we’d still be hanging out if you were.”

And I guess that statement pushes her over the edge, because before I know it, she’s up on me, over the gearshift, kissing me like her life rides on it. And I’m kissing her back, fumbling on the seat

and not knowing where to put my hands and shit...

Hers are all over my hair and mine don't quite reach her own hair but now I'm tugging at her tight sweater and—

She pulls away, flushing red, grinning. “So much for not being a slut —”

I kiss her again. My blood boils. She's tipped me over the edge. It's her eyes, I tell myself. It's her hair, I tell

myself. It's her music, her tat, the honesty in her speech...

It's the *gestalt* of all of that crap—the whole being greater than the sum.

But somehow I don't believe my own lie. Because it's none of that crap either.

It's something else...

She pulls away, grinning and smiling and—OK, *I glanced down at her*

*tautened nipples through her top and now I look away.*

She gets out the car, starts walking away. Fast.

I get out as well, slam my door closed. Follow her.

She doesn't wait for the elevator, runs up the stairs. We get to a nondescript brown door with a yellow note on it, heaving for breath—several floors up, ten or twelve. She grabs the

note, looks at it quickly, then crushes it in her fingers. Before opening the door, she turns, breathless, puts her arms around my neck. And kisses me again.

My tongue's all inside her. Tasting her, feeling her. I rub her tight sweater, only now feeling the cold on my skin that I've avoided all day. When she notices my goosebumps, when she feels me tremble, she pulls away gently, and points to a

cracked window up ahead.

“Is that why the rent’s so cheap?” I say.

“I never said the rent was cheap.”

She unlocks her door, walks backwards into her loft while my arms are around her waist, hers still around my neck. I barely glance around. But I do see the mammoth wall-shelf with so many books on it it could be the goddamned Library of Congress. Then two mixing

setups—each in a different corner. And a yellow beanbag under her personal *biblioteca*. A kitchen on one side with a kitchen-island thingy separating it from the rest of the loft.

Beyond that, I don't care. All I care about is her lips, her breath. Her tongue going wild like a lizard inside my mouth. Before I know it I have her up against some windows facing the other building.

She makes sounds that drive me insane.

I'm hard, and this is going so much further than I expected it to. I'm gonna need release. I can't deny that now. And I know she needs it, too.

But I can't disrespect her. I can't scare her off because our hormones just got the better of us despite our plans. And when it comes down to it—I know this from endless experience and even one slap to the face—a man's hormones tend



to be a little less controllable than a woman's.

*I think.*

I try tug away from her. Her breathing turns wild and ragged. She kisses me, licks me—

She tugs at my tank, starts taking it off. She has it up to my chest when I say, “Blaze, where’s this going?”

I say it for *her*, not for me. Because,

heck, if she'd been any other girl, I'd want it over at that fourth base before you can say "*Batter up!*"

*But she's not any other girl, is she, you doof? You know that already, right? You know there's something here...*

She pulls my shirt down, her eyes frantic and wild while she ponders my question; ponders—maybe—the same moral dilemma in her mind that I've just considered in my own.

Forcefully, she places flat hands on my chest and pushes me—her eyes constantly locked on mine—and I hit a sofa-bed (didn't notice *that* one!) and fall back. Then she's next to me, lying down, her delicate and magical hand on my crotch above my denims.

And she  *rubs*. Like I'm some vinyl disk being scratched by a pro DJ. I start burning, sizzling...

It doesn't take me long. I move my hand to between her legs, my mind exploding with need.

I can't control it. I fire! *Oh GOD that feels good!* I groan and hold her with my right arm while my left hand rubs between her legs, also over her jeans.

I let out a desperate roar. My body shakes and then—

While I shudder, while my body

trembles and I try and regain some level of manliness and stay strong and rub her up to her own climax, she holds me, tight, *squeezes* my body against hers.

Suddenly it's not just "a chick," "a babe."

It's *Blaze*.

And there is only one.

She keeps rubbing while I'm climaxing and the endorphins make me mellow, but at least I'm not ravenous

anymore. At least I can think clearly again.

I push her onto her back, press hard up against her center with my hand. She whimpers. Her eyes scan the room, they go crazed with something that looks like anxiety. “Blaze, look at me.”

She does. She groans. She squirms. “Oh, oh, oh...” Her sounds come in short spurts. I feel her begin to pulse. She’s

whispering now, husky, “Deck, Deck,  
Oh...”

She clenches her eyes. Her palms  
make it to my shoulders and rest there  
gently, as if only poising herself to grasp  
at something before the oncoming fall.

Then all movement from her stops.

And she fractures in half.

It's an *earthquake*.

She pulses up from the bed, waist  
high up, resting on her shoulders. She

shakes, convulses.

I keep rubbing her over her jeans,  
my hand getting hot.

Her neck tenses, her eyes flutter.  
She doesn't scream, just groans, throaty  
and guttural. *Fucking sexy groans.*

She hooks on my neck, practically  
dangles down while I keep moving down  
below.

She slows down. Then, so do I. She



sighs out a stormy relief. A faint smile crosses her face. Her eyes droop just a little and her eyelids go heavy. She forces herself awake, exhales forcefully. “Deck, I’m gonna pass out shortly. And...someone’s coming by as well. And then I really need to sleep!”

I can’t help the quick pang of jealousy that hits me. *Someone’s coming by.* Crazy, I know.

“My landlord,” she says. “The note

on the door? 'That was him.'"

"Oh, yeah, sure." I guess my knee-jerk reaction was that obvious. *And now I feel like an idiot.* "I'll let myself out. Uhm, should I call you?"

Her eyes open abruptly. "You better!" She grabs my neck, and as she kisses me, I already feel her fading away...

I get up, every muscle in my body pulling me back to be with her. Halfway

to the door, I turn back around. She's got her head on her hand, lying on her side. Cheshire grin, eyes still somehow awake.

I stride back to her and she welcomes me when I get on her, kissing her feverishly. I guess another half hour goes by. And when she's practically passing out while our lips meet, I finally do leave. She's probably asleep before I even close the door.

When the elevator door opens, a

short dude wearing a yarmulke steps out. He smiles at me and I smile back. I'm in a smiling mood. The thought crosses my mind that I'll be smiling all week because of *Heaven-Leigh*.

It's like I've entered into some vortex and come out the other side where all the rules are changed. Everything's different. You only hear about that shit in *Harry Potter* or *Narnia* stories.

When I open the door to my cab, I feel the tiredness run over me like a tidal wave. I can't drive like this. I check the time and see it's eleven A.M.

I decide to crash in the driver's seat for a bit.

To help my mind rest, I pull out my reader and flip to Stephen King's *Under the Dome*. It looks like Dale ("Barbie") and Julia might hook up after

all. Which I think is cool, because didn't it look like they were destined to right from the start? I know I've been rooting for it since the beginning...

But I don't find out if they do. Instead, my eyes close. My hand drops the reader onto the bucket seat next to me. And I dream of a certain ex military man (me) and a certain newspaper woman (Blaze) sitting under a mysterious dome, looking up at it.

In my dream, we do hook up.

*Deliciously.*

# FIVE

## LOGIC LOSES

-1-

*Blaze Ryleigh*

When I hear the banging, I think the bass-drums at *House Market* have blown. A few cloudy seconds later, I come to understand that someone's knocking at my door.

*Deck?*



“I’m coming!” I drag myself up.

Two things happen when I open the door: My heart sinks—it’s not Deck. My heart lifts—it’s Mr. Bernstein. He smiles his concerned smile.

Remembering life and its problems again, as if being with Deck the last few hours took me completely out of them, I say, “Tough life, isn’t it?”

“Feh! You’re telling me, honey.

Those schmucks at *Real Developments* got real chutzpah, you know! They're tightening around my neck so bad I had no choice.

“They think they can just *plotz* into Brooklyn and raise the prices without consequences!? I mean, people gotta live!” He squeezes one of my cheeks. “You look awful, everything OK?”

“Uh, yeah, I’ve just been up all night.” He frowns seriously. “I was

working!”

“You’re not hangin wit dat schmuck—what was his name, the one with all those drugs and things...?” He waves his hand.

That would be Tolek Two-Face Tomas he’s referring to. A dude I “dated” for, like, three months or so. “Tolek,” I remind him. “The ‘schmuck’ you’re referring to.”

“*That’s* the one!” He wiggles his finger in the air, thinking. “Even his name sounds bad!”

*Well, Xavier’s name sounds like honey on the tongue. But he wasn’t much luck for me either.*

“No, I’m not hanging out with him anymore. But I already told you that I was into that bad stuff before Tolek came around. You know...me and... *Savva*.” I say

this last part silently.

“Oh, honey...” He wraps a short arm around me, causing me to bend down at an awkward angle. “...I don’t care if you were into that *drek* before him. I just never liked him, you know. It’s as if bad luck follows some people, and good luck follows others. And he was bad luck. I just know it. You gotta surround yourself with people who bring you luck, you know?”

“Yeah, I know.”

Mr. Bernstein moves over to my windows. I follow. I see that Deck's still here and wonder, a little excitedly, why. Mr. Bernstein takes a sad breath, sighs out. “I'm sellin that one as well, Blaze.” He points at the practically abandoned wreck across the street. *Savva's old building*. “I'm just too old to deal with this drek. I can't raise the rent because I'm not in the

business of making people hungry. It's just the prices, they're all going up. They're building hotels here—I don't even recognize Williamsburg anymore. And I got expenses as well, you know?"

He shakes his head. "Forty-five years ago this year, it is, that I bought my first building. These apartments were *packed*—people coming from all over the world, settlin in New York. Sure, we had gangs and a lotta bad stuff happening as well

Giuliani sorted a lot of that out—or he likes to think he did—but the place was bustling. We got the crime out, and then we got a good bunch of people here Artists. People like you, you know?”

I realize, during his monologue, that he probably came to see me because he wanted to unload a little himself. Maybe I’m the only one of his tenants that gets him. I don’t know. I’ve heard the



other tenants talking. They speak really badly about him, like he's some monster that's only out to make a buck and charge high crazy rents. I don't tell them he only takes seven hundred or so from me, and sometimes not even that! At current rates, a "normal" tenant could pay as much as three or four times that amount for a loft my size.

“Well, that's what happens with artists, isn't it? They come in, raise the

value—then those Wall Street types walk in, see a quick buck to be made, and they put up million dollar condos. *Two* million dollars! With ‘a few affordable apartments’ in each one. Affordable to whom, Blaze?” He turns to glare at me. “To *whom!?*”

The question is rhetorical. “Mr. Bernstein, you want some coffee?”

“No, no. Blaze, I’m sorry for taking

up your time. I wanted to come by and check what your plans are. I also wanted to let you know I had no choice. These lofts are bleeding everything I have out of them. I need to unload them. And then...don't even mention what happened to that landlord back in '13. Remember that? They *burned* him, Blaze. Actually, maybe I will take that coffee..."

I make us a cup each. We sit at my rough-hewn kitchen-counter, the one

separating the kitchen from the rest of the loft. Mr. Bernstein looks up at my fifteen-foot wide wall shelf. “I see your library’s growing.”

“There’s still space for more.” I look at the bottom row of the shelf, on the right.

“How many?”

“Well, it depends, but it averages out to about one book per inch so...” I

count. “...forty more? Give or take.”

“One per inch?” I can see he’s counting.

“There’s about four hundred and eighty up there now.”

He smiles, realizing I caught him out. He also knows I’ve read every one of them, so he doesn’t ask that. But I see in his gray eyes that he wishes I got out more, that I would associate with people more.

That I would let them closer...

*In time.*

“Your friend built them sturdily.”

It takes me a second to realize he’s talking about the shelves. I nod, thinking about how Patryk also built this very counter on which we’re drinking coffee now, as well as the stands on which my decks sit—the vinyl *and* the CD decks—and the protective casing for my top-of-

the-line B&W 683 speakers. (Which, incidentally, he also gave me when he left.)

*Take it all. I don't want any link to the past. Don't want any link to...her.*, he'd said with red-eyes just before he left back to Poland. And where is he now? I wouldn't even know where to look...

He's the only dude I know who turned his graffiti skills into a paying gig (that and a little carpentry on the side.)

Not rags to riches, but enough to have me constantly ogling the dough he sometimes brought in. Mostly bedroom walls in the city. *Because they pay like a mofo*, he used to say.

Out of the blue (or maybe not, because I was distracted) Mr. Bernstein says: “Forty-five years, Blaze. Forty five years I been doing this for. And now...” He shakes his head again.



“What you gonna do...I mean, financially?”

“Oh, I’m fine! Don’t you worry about me. Decades of smart management. But it isn’t about the money. It’s been about providing homes for people. I remember a couple who moved next door about twenty years ago, young, just had a baby... Oh, never mind. Memories of an old fool. That’s all. You know I turn

sixty-eight this year? I'm too old for this stuff as well."

"Can't you sell to another landlord?

I mean, instead of selling to the developers. A new landlord might raise the rent, but I could manage that. Developers will surely offer no option to renew."

He gives a regretful, slow shake of the head. "No one wants to buy, sweetie. Too much pressure from the big boys. As

more and more condos go up, services and upkeep goes up. Landlords will be *forced* to charge higher rents. You can't charge higher rent for an old building like this when, next door, in the up-and-coming high-rises, people will be paying similar rents for five times the quality. Ten times! *Feh!*"

"It feels a little like the end of an era, Mr. Bernstein."

“Or the beginning of a new one.”

He smiles, trying to cheer my spirits.

“You and I been through a lot, eh kiddo?” I feel embarrassed as he says it.

“How’s your Mamah doing?”

“Good, thanks. She’s got regular work now. Cleaning.”

“That’s good, that’s good. You still sending money up to her?”

“Yeah, but that don’t hurt me

nothin. A couple hundred dollars goes a long way in Poland.” *And a very short way in New York.*

“Blaze, I know you send much more than a couple hundred a month. You’re an angel, kiddo. Tell you what, forget the rent for the next six months. Just put it into savings up for your next apartment. Who knows, maybe you’ll be one of the first to take up one of these new luxury condos.”

“Mr. Bernstein, you know I don’t like charity.”

“It’s not charity, Blaze. I promised your Mamah I’d take care of you, and I don’t feel right about taking *any* rent from you!”

“You know very well she never meant *that*. And if she knew there were months you just let the rent slide, she’d be the first to call you up on it.”

“She is a proud woman, isn’t she?

Never took anything from anyone.” He sighs. “Anyway, but this is between you and me, Blaze.” He cocks his head like a naughty kid.

I blush. “Yeah.” My voice croaks.

“And...*thanks*. I don’t know how I woulda made—“

“Oh, shoosh!” He flicks a hand at me. “When you get to my age, you realize

the only reason you probably wake up in the morning is because you see spark and hope in people younger than you. *Much* younger than you! I probably needed you more than you needed me. I'm just an old fool who took a liking to you. Don't worry, I'll squeeze it out of these other schmucks who complain too much about what peanuts I charge them as it is."

"I can cover *some* of what I owe you."



He sips his coffee. “Blaze, you’re also a proud girl, just like your Mamah. But, as you’ll get older, you’ll realize that money comes and goes. I was fortunate, I’ve made a lot of it in my life. I know this is getting all schmaltzy, but I consider you almost like a daughter. After what happened next door...oh, goodness...” He puts his hand to his eyes. “...Well, let’s just say I believe you’re a good luck

person. And Good Luck People should be supported. You never let life drag you down. If you insist on paying me, then pay this old fool in kindness. I'm gonna retire over in Long Island. Come by and visit me every now and then." Mr. Bernstein's a true-and-true Brooklynite, one who doesn't consider Brooklyn itself to actually be a part of Long Island. And when he says it, he actually means the suburban counties of Nassau or Suffolk.

The back of my throat and all behind my ears is *twanging* with uncried tears of gratitude—*and of those memories of what happened next door...*

“Anyway.” He gets up. “I better get going. I just wanted to come by and check on you. You did get my note, didn’t you? It looked like I woke you—”

“Yeah, I did. I played a late gig last night. Been up all night.”

“Then let me get out of your way so you can get some sleep. Lemme know if you need help finding a place, Blaze. I’ll keep my eyes open as well.”

“Thanks, Mr. Bernstein. I’ll walk you down.” I’m thinking I want to see what Declan’s still doing here.

“Oh, no, I’m good.”

“I was leaving anyway.” He looks at me suspiciously, and I realize the lie is

obvious—because he woke me up, hello!

“OK, fine,” I admit, “there’s someone I want to go and see.”

He breaks into a smile. “I saw the blond-haired boy getting into the elevator on this floor. New friend?”

I shrug. “Maybe.”

“He feels lucky.”

“Mr. Bernstein, I think I’m definitely gonna visit you in Long Island when all this is over.”

“Oh, sweetie, even before it’s over.

The people over there are about as exciting as snails. I miss the good times, the excitement. Anyway...”

I wrap my arm around his round shoulders, and we catch the elevator.

Downstairs, he turns and holds both my hands. Thinks. “Is she good? Your Mamah. I mean...is she *happy* now?”

I swallow. “She’s...surviving. I

Skype with her once a week or so.”

Mr. Bernstein’s pretty short, with one of those wise and cuddly faces. No James Franco, but I think it works differently when you’re older. I think you look at other things other than the instant visual gratification of *Sex Appeal*. Mamah was never one to get involved with men in my presence. For all I know, she and Mr. Bernstein did get together. Mamah was always very shy. I never met my

father, and as far as I know, Mamah never saw anyone else after him. Even back home now, I don't get that she's seeing anyone. Is that how it gets when your heart is broken once? Do you become afraid to reach out one more time for that hot passion that just might get you burned? I like to believe that it's because I became her life, that I became the most important thing to her—I like to think



that's the reason she never followed a romantic life of any kind here; not that she was burned by love.

“OK, Polish girl with an Irish name, say hi to your Mamah for me next time you talk to her.”

“I will, Mr. Bernstein.”

He lingers just a second longer, need and longing evident in his gray eyes. Then he leaves.

*A blast from the past...*

We were all into the drugs back then, not just Tolek. And I'm pretty sure Mr. Bernstein knows that, but I've always found that he tends to assume I'm the innocent cherub who only got in with the wrong crowd and made mistakes.

I wish it were true.

Tolek was older than me by four

years or so, so I guess he must be around twenty-five now. But he's not the reason I started dropping—*oh, please no*. Savva and I had been in the scene long before he came around!

All he and I had ever done was tongue, some rubbing with our clothes on (mostly uncomfortable on my part), until the day we broke up—and, by the way, I've always had a resistance to using the words “we broke up” when referring to

him, because it never really even felt like we'd dated in the first place.

I'd always had a resistance to having him touch me, a resistance I didn't understand but which was nonetheless there. I'd gone all through High School without a boyfriend (the "totally cool" Eliaz Piscor and I never did get it on, not even behind the school dumpster), and I was starting to get a little self-

conscious about it. So I'd hooked up with Tolek at a party I was mixing at (one of my early ones, where the pay was beer and the people passed around a hat "for the rent.")

Savva used to tell me that if I'd had real feelings for him, I'd let him get nearer to me. It was a foreign concept to me. All I knew is I didn't like him being *there*. Once, right at the end, I did let him put a finger inside me—at his constant

insistence. It disgusted me so much that I called the whole thing off afterwards. I told him we weren't "compatible." I remember using that word: "Compatible." I'd picked that one up from one of Savva's many philosophical ponderings on the state of the universe while we mowed the grass at her appointment.

*Mowed the Grass*—that was Savva's

favorite euphemism for smoking weed. Mine was *Firing up the Colorado Cocktail*. There were other minor differences in our lingo: She called ecstasy *Molly* or *The Doctor*; I stuck with *Adam* in those days. Now? I don't call it shit. I think I stopped caring what name you use for any of it when Savva graduated onto shooting H (which she called *Chasing the Dragon* or *Meeting with Aunt Hazel and George Smack*.)

She only ever smoked “the good

shit” (another favorite term of hers.)

And she never knew when to stop,  
either...

But, back to Tolek: After he  
touched me, I thought, *If all boys are tha*  
*rough there, then I don't want any part of it*  
And I certainly wanted no part of it with  
*this* boy. So I explained that to him.

He didn't take it well.

Mr. Bernstein had come knocking



while we were in the middle of the argument, Tolek's voice (and hands) high up in the air. The walls of my loft damn near reverberating with how much he was shouting at me, telling me I'd "led him on." I remember that day well—it was a Thursday, around five. And it was high summer. I remember this because a fierce sun was up and shafts of it shone across the grids of my loft's windows, cutting Tolek's face in half with its shadows. I

recall thinking, as he stood there blaring at the top of his voice at me, that the shadow down the center of his face made it look like his face was cut in half—just like *Two-Face* from Batman, one face dark, one light.

Tolek had always been a little on the “rough” side—a real tough guy—but this was the first time where his anger had flared up like a volcano, as if he’d been

playing Mr. Nice Guy all those months just to get me to go all the way, and then, when I didn't let him, he snapped, and Face Number Two came out.

I've never been able to get that idea out of my head: And he's always been Tolek Two-Face to me since then.

Xavier is similar, I guess, but the two-facedness in him is not part of his essential nature. The way, I believe, it is with Tolek. Xavier's double-naturedness

comes about because of his *Mujer* (a certain white powder better known to most as Big C or, Savva's fave term for it, *California Corn Flakes*.)

While Tolek Two-Face shouted and raged, I slid away from him and answered the door. Mr. Bernstein scowled him down and asked, "Everything OK, Blaze? This schmuck giving you drek?"

"No, Mr. Bernstein. We're good. I

think...Tolek...was just leaving?" I looked at Tolek.

"We NOT OK!" Tolek said. He put his pointed finger an inch from my nose, and said, "Is NOT over, Błażej!" (Tolek, like many of the Polish Greenpointers who knew me before I moved to Bushwick, knew me by my birth-name, the one before I changed it.)

Then, before leaving, he glared Mr. Bernstein down like he was a turd on the

sidewalk, and then left in a storm.

I never heard from him again. I guess he must've found some other *tussy* who didn't mind his feely-feeliness as much as I did.

Since that day, Mr. Bernstein has always equated Tolek with everything bad in the world, or everything bad in my life for that matter. In some way, maybe even for Savva's death.

But he's wrong on that last count.

That one was all me. I know that to my very core.

And I have to live with it.

**-3-**

*Annnnnnnnd...we're back.*

I knock on Deck's window and startle him awake. He rolls it down, rubs his eyes.

“Did you think I was NYPD?” I

say.

“I was thinking more on the lines of *Latin Kings* or *TBO Gang*.”

“Nah, you don’t find those types here no more. And besides, that’s more East New York side.”

“That’s not too far from here.”

“You sure sound like a wuss for someone who’s lived in Brooklyn all his life.” I realize I don’t actually know if this is true, I just assumed it because he has a



light Brooklyn twang to his speech. “That is true, isn’t it?”

“Born and raised,” he says proudly, exaggerating the accent. *Bobhwen an raised.*

I take a guess where he comes from—a snide guess. “You know Brooklyn Heights doesn’t count as Brooklyn. In a few years, maybe even Williamsburg won’t.”

“Nope, I’m all working class.

Canarsie.”

“Damn, that’s even worse than East New York!”

“No, it’s not.”

“I’m just kidding. I never been there so I wouldn’t know. Is it really all working class?”

“Some of it, yeah. We weren’t quite working class though, more like ‘upper working class.’”

I laugh. “Sounds like us.” I lean my

elbows in his window, rest my chin on my wrist, look up at him. I guess I must have a pretty dreamy look to my face, because that's how I feel right now.

Let me just say this here: This dude has eyes that are unmatched in anyone I've ever seen. I mean, yeah, I've seen that shit in movies and Photoshop pics and stuff, but not up close. Not for *real*. You seen Alexandra Daddario—the badass

babe from those *Percy Jackson* flicks? Well, Deck's eyes are like hers. They're so light, almost ghostly.

“Where *you* from?” he asks.

“Greenpoint.”

“I thought only the Poles lived there.”

“Mm-hm...” I wait for the penny to sink.

He looks confused. “Ryleigh is not a Polish last name.”

“I changed it. I didn’t want to be stereotyped when people spoke to me. Because, I, like you”—I do my best to exaggerate the Brooklyn—“am *bohbwen an raised.*”

Now he’s the one who laughs. “I see.” He taps his steering wheel, looks up ahead. “So what’s your real name then?”

“Well, technically, *Blaze* is my first name. Only, in Polish, it’s pronounced

*Bunbazzhay.*”

“*Boo—wahh—ssay?*”

“*Bunbazzhay.*”

“*Booyah—shay.*”

I can’t help cracking up. “Let’s just stick with Blaze.”

“That I can pronounce. And at the risk of sounding corny, *Booyah-shay* is one helluva sexy name. No kidding.”

My cheeks prickle, and I look down to hide it. “Now, my last name is a

different story. That one I only tell people who I know *really* well.”

“Well, I hope that’s us soon.”

I’m stunned for a second. “Uhm, yeah, me too.”

“So? What is it?”

“Huh?”

“Your last name. Tell me.”

*Aw, hell. Why not.* “Kieliszewski.”

His eyes bulge. “Hell, I’m not even

gonna *try* and pronounce that.” Silence for a second. “So, that’s the reason you changed it—the stereotyping?”

“Mostly. I’m American, born and raised. Besides, I got tired of all the Ke\$ha and Dorota comments when people discovered I was Polish.”

“Who?”

“Ke\$ha—the singer? The one where the S in her name is spelled with a dollar sign?”



“Not her—although I had no idea she was a Pole—the other one.”

“Dorota? That’s Blaire Waldorf’s housekeeper in *Gossip Girl*.”

“Oh. I never seen it.”

“Me neither, I’m more of a *Breaking Bad* and *True Blood* fan. But one of the girls I went to school with looked a little like her and, well, you know kids... It got outta hand and so a few Dorota scenes

from *Gossip Girl* went viral in the school.

That's how I got to know about her."

"I see. And that was enough to have you change your name?"

"As I said, you know kids. They can be pretty vicious little bastards." He looks at me, the question plain on his face.

"And, yes, I was also one of the people who teased the Dorota chick!"

"Thought so!" He laughs.

"The Poles are just stereotyped

here. You ever see Sophie in *2 Broke Girls*?”

He shakes his head.

“Yeah, well, I just felt like people would equate me with all the freaking *moronic* characters on TV and movies. *The Big Lebowski*?”

His lip twitches up, and he suppresses a grin.

Me: “Oh, you’re a Lebowski fan?”

“It’s a classic.”

“OK, I confess, it is.” I’m struggling to suppress my own grin. Then, spontaneously and together: “*Shut the fuck up, Donny!*”

“So, why *Ryleigh* of all names?”

I look down a second. “I never met my father. All I know is that he was Irish. At least that’s what my mom says. I know *Ryleigh* ain’t a true American last name

either, but what is? This whole country is made up of immigrants. But it's sure more American than freaking Kieliszewski!"

"Yeah, I guess. I don't know what the origin of Cox is." He looks at me. Waits. Then, "You're not gonna comment on Carl Cox?"

"Nope."

"Oh. Surprising."

"Why?"

“Well, everyone I meet in this crowd always feels the need to comment on me sharing a surname with Carl Cox—like it freaking means something and, well, I just expected you to do the same. You know, because you’re a DJ?”

“You see how stereotypes work?”

“Yeah, uhm, touché.”

“And if you must know, I figured that’s exactly what people did to you, so I

decided not to mention it.”

His eyebrows go up. “Oh, cool.”

He smiles. “About your pops, why did you never meet him? If you don’t mind me ask—”

“I don’t mind. I hate it when people *don’t* ask. It’s quite simple actually: He and Mamah fell madly in love, they had sex. I was conceived. And he blew the scene. Never to be found again.”

“Jeez. I’m sorry.”

“What for? I’m not. If he was an asshole then he was an asshole. Maybe Mamah coulda gone searching for him, but I think she never bothered. She’s proud that way. Anyway”—I stretch my arms—“whether he was a prick or not, I’m still half Irish, and, like I said, it sure as heck beats *Kieliszewski* as a last name.”

“Was *Ryleigh* your father’s last name?”



I lift my shoulders, drop them.

“Dunno, my mom never told me. She didn’t want me to go looking for him, I guess.”

“Would you have? If you had the chance?”

“Nah, I don’t think so. Like I said, if he’s an asshole then he’s an asshole. I ain’t gonna go chasing behind his ass if he decided to leave a kid behind. And what

would I do if I found him? ‘Oh, hi. I’m the kid you never wanted.’”

“Yeah, I hear you. Well...” He sighs. “...fathers can be assholes sometimes. But Ryleigh’s a cool name. That other one, well, forgive me if I don’t remember it. So how do you do it? Change your name, I mean.”

“Pay sixty-five bucks or something, fill in a petition, attach a birth certificate. Then they print it in the newspaper unless

you can prove your life is in danger. My mom took care of it for me, 'cause I was a minor when we did it.”

“And she didn’t mind?”

“No. She appreciates that I consider myself fully American. It’s different when you were born in a country—it’ll always be your home. She’s real understanding that way.”

He heaves in a breath. “Yeah,

moms are that way.” He presses two fingers into his eyes, then taps the steering wheel. My ears start hurting from the cold.

“Hey, um, I didn’t expect you to fall asleep in your car, you know. If you wanna come and crash on my sofa-bed it’s totally cool.”

“Will you crash next to me?”

A fist to the gut. But one which fills me with air instead of taking it.

“Uhm, sure. Why not? I also need to get to sleep eventually.”

He answers me with a deep kiss that gets my heart racing, a kiss that makes me forget I still do need to sleep.

And I do. I *so* do.

“This is so crazy, you know?” I look down at my feet.

“What?”

“*This!* All this kissing and...I mean,

we met at a club for chrissake! And we're acting like..."

"Like we've known each other for years."

"Something like that."

"It is crazy," he confirms. "Now, are you gonna let me get out my car, or should we continue kissing here?"

"Hmmmm, the conundrum."

"Oh, yeah, you're definitely American. I haven't ever heard a Pole use

the word *conundrum*.”

“Do you actually *know* any Poles?”

“OK, busted.”

He gets out the car, intertwines his fingers in mine. We swing our arm as we walk to the elevator.

I’m thinking all sorts of things I shouldn’t be. I tell myself I should get to know him. I tell myself to get the hormones under control. I’m thinking of

the sun going down through my windows; of The Boom Circuits playing *Everything and Nothing* on my speakers. I'm thinking of my silhouetted body being undressed by his. I'm thinking of his lips on my skin, my naked breasts. I'm thinking of gasping for breath, his hand between my legs...

But, when we enter my loft, the physical need for sleep takes over me.

Declan lies on my sofa-bed. I lie



next to him and hold him. His hand engulfs mine. I feel him doze off, breathing deeply. I kiss his ear, then his neck. “Goodnight, or good afternoon, Declan Cox,” I say. He’s already asleep, doesn’t answer. It doesn’t take long before I join him.

-4-

Judging from the golden light fading in through the windows, I guess it

must be around four-thirty P.M. when I wake up again. Declan's on his back, looking up at the ceiling, his inked arm—the right one—behind his head. He looks rested. “Good morning,” he says. “Wanna grab some supper?”

I sit up, clear my throat. “Sure, why not. I'm just gonna jump in the shower.”

“Only if I can as well. I mean, *after* you of course.”

I laugh, because I wasn't averse to

him joining me *in* the shower either—which I end up thinking of endlessly while the hot water sprays over my head and shoulders.

Declan grabs a bag from his car and jumps in after me.

While he showers, I turn my phone back on. It's been off since I started the set. It starts going crazy with blinking lights and beeps and notifications:

Congratulatory messages for a great set, forwarded to me by Xavier. Randy's been getting them all morning, he tells me. Then there's a message with a link. Xavier tells me to visit it.

I do.

It's a forum. And the title on the page is:

*HEAVENLY: HOTTEST NEW*

## DJ? YOUR OPINIONS:

One user (“Skitz-O”) disagrees.

Says:

*I disagree, Heavenly’s stile[sic] is stale.*

*Her excessive dependence on automatic effects is overused. Beatmatching doesn’t make someone a*

*DJ. Neither does mixing one song into another.*

*Let’s face it, Paris Hilton taught us that.*

*Heavenly’s [sic] taste is also questionable*

*[sic]. She's trying too hard. The 90s r over. And as for my trip? She ruined it. I'm really bummed that the two other DJs didn't make it. I beleive [sic] it was Uncle Trouble? I hope House Market can recover from this. It was a mistake I don't think randy [sic] will recover easily from.*

The phone feels heavy in my hand. But, like someone staring at a gory body in a car crash, I keep reading.

Username “Trippa” says:

@Skitz-O

*Quit trolling. You come in here week after week bitching about Randy's parties. Last month you bitched about the very DJs you're praising this week! I'm gonna ask an Admin to ban you. You've overstepped yoru [sic] boundaries. Your comments are not constructive*

*and don't help anyone.*

*So, in the interests of slightly more constructive points on her set, here are a few pros and cons for Heaven-Leigh's gig last night (note the spelling of her name, folks):*

*- A seven hour set. Impressive.*

*- She mixed local talent into freaking HOUSE MUSIC. I mean, local Indie bands. That's slow rock. This is unheard of. I assume that's all her own pre-made mixes, done on her own time, because you just can't beatmatch*



*Bushwick indie (70, 90 BPM?) with House (120 - 128 BPM) on the fly.*

*And she did that **all night**. So how much music is she mixing in her spare time? How many bands is she seeing a week? How many songs is she downloading, then cutting, to be able to play a 7 hour set and not go stale and fall into all that Kaskade and Guetta crap we're so tired of hearing at our underground parties?*

*Her Magic Set showed a dedication I*

*haven't seen since back in the nineties. (And, yes, I've been raving since then, FYI. Before, during, and after Giuliani.)*

*IMHO, this girl (how old is she? 19? 20?) is gonna make it big. I mean, Kaskade big (yes, I have nothing against Kaskade—just not at my underground parties.) And she's home-grown, folks. Right here from Brooklyn from what I heard!*

*Ten bucks Randy signs her up for his new label. Fuck it: A hundred bucks.*

*So, now the cons:*

- *She was nervous. It was apparent. She played to the crowd but didn't embrace it. No biggie, the music came out cool, but our scene is all about the unity, and I think she needs to improve on that.*
- *Perhaps a little too old school. Then again, this is more a question of taste. The original stuff was cool though. At least thirty percent of her gig was stuff I've never*

*heard of before, so she's probably making  
her own original tunes in her spare time.*

*Now, I know this has nothing to do with  
the set, but, hey, I'm just gonna put it out there:  
Thank FUCKING god we finally got some  
female talent at these damned parties! And, er,  
can I get a hoot from any other dudes who  
think she was freaking smoking hot!*

*Heaven-Leigh, send me your number if  
you're reading this. Let's hook up. ;)*

“I’m twenty-one,” I say at my phone, as if “Trippa” were listening.

“Skitz-O” says a bunch of other negative things, including “*Hot? Yeah, if you like that skank white-trash look three degrees removed from screwing your half-brother.*”

I decide to skip the rest of his (or her) comments.

Then, Username “Lucy-Sky”:

*HOT. I mean, this is as big as A-Trak winning DMC World Champs at the age of 13 in '97!!!*

Username “Darth”:

*Oh, pableese! A-Trak was a turntablist, a prodigy. Vinyl and “pretend DJs” who hit a*

*button on a deck these days and have everything run on auto-mix will never be “the next big thing” because the skill level needed to mix in the 21st century is, well, as Skitz-O said, Paris Hilton bullshit. And Disco Mix Club Championships are only for vinyl DJs.*

*I will admit though, mixing that local indie rock with deep house—and calling back to all that old school Detroit and Chicago stuff—I haven’t seen that done before. I, too, was impressed. (And I’m also an old-skool nineties*

*raver FYI, Trippa.)*

*So I'll give Heaven-Leigh my thumbs up.*

*(And, yes, she definitely is a beauty, too. But I put her more at 22 years old or so.)*

“I can also do vinyl, you prick. And Auto-Mix my ass, you mother—”

“Say what?” Declan’s voice gives me a start. I turn and see him rubbing his wet hair with a towel. He’s put on a gray



sweater that does nothing to hide his macho chest.

I'm still so zonked and stunned by the comments on my phone's browser that I just blurt out the following: "I need to know how you got so *huge!*"

He looks at himself, almost a bit surprised. "Trev's huge. Not me."

"So what's the answer?"

"Football. Weights. Work?" He shrugs.

I park that one for later. I don't care *how*, I just care *that*.

“You said something when I came in.”

“No, uhm”—I laugh—“it seems I'm an internet sensation...”

“Really?” He takes the phone from my hand. After reading for a bit: “Who is this fucking asshole?”

“Oh, that *Skitz-O* prick? Forget

him. Read the others.”

After a few seconds, he smiles.

“What?” I reach for my phone, he snaps it away. “What!?” He holds the phone in the air and looks up at it, and I can’t reach it! “Hey! What are you smiling at?” I jump up but the phone is still too high up. He’s so tall!

With a grin, he reads out loud:

“*Hot? More than hot. I’d do her. Oh yeah baby.*”” He cracks up laughing, then fixes

me with his glorious gaze. “I’d *have* to agree.” He eases down to my lips and manages one peck before I slide away and *snatch* my phone back!

“Hey!” he says.

I run! He chases me to the back of the loft and lifts me off my feet. I start kicking! We’re choking crazily with laughter. My phone’s slipping from my hand. “Let me go!” I say as a joke.

“One kiss, then you can go.”

I instantly flush hot with heat. I don't even bother putting up the façade of a fight. “Fine, put me down and kiss me then.”

He does put me down, and when his lips touch mine, my fingers and hand relax. And my phone falls to the ground. My nipples harden.

He eases away gently, licks his lips.

He looks as dazed as I feel. “Deck?”

“M-hm?”

“You look like you’re in a dream.”

In a deep rumble of a voice, he says: “Feels like it.”

**-5-**

I pick up my phone (grateful as hell that it’s got a sturdy cover on it) and I scroll through the rest of the forwarded messages from Xavier. For a short,

confused moment, my mind takes me back, and seeing the name *XAVIER* next to all these unread messages throws up images of the past which I don't care to look at. And for an almost indiscernible second, I even expect to see Savva's or Patryk's name in amongst the messages. Something like, *Hook up at ten tonight?* Or *Awesome set, love, S.*

The mind is a funny thing. If it could just let go of things, maybe we

wouldn't all suffer so much.

But the messages I'm reading now, although from his phone, are not from him, they're other people's messages. Each one lifts my mood up more and makes me forget *Skitz-O's* crappy comments (although, not completely.)

The last one he writes is:

*Xavier: Need 2 talk money. Call me.*

I call him.



“Ola, baby. Get a good night’s rest?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Get all my messages?”

“Uh-huh.” I’m waiting anxiously for the money subject.

“So, Randy said he gonna give you da full payment for *both* the other DJs. Now these are small parties, so even the top DJs don’t get paid a lot, but how’s

two Gs sound to you?”

“Two...*grand?*” If I’m getting two, I wonder what the other DJs were *really* getting, seeing as Xavier wouldn’t be Xavier if he wasn’t lining his own pockets at least a little.

“Dass right, baby.”

Pause.

“Blaze, you there?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Good news, right?”

I've hardly ever even made two Gs in an entire month before... Cut or no cut, it's a mountain of money to me. And I'm not ungrateful for it. "*Amazing* news, Xavier. Thank you."

"Yeah. Well. Now, our brains are too fried today, but stay by your phone. Randy's keen on getting you into a few clubs. If you generate enough interest, maybe he'll get you on the label. He

wanted to know if some of the stuff you mixed was all your own. I told him yes because I remembered you creating all that EDM stuff on your computer back when we used to hang. So, was it?” *EDM* is Electronic Dance Music, the equivalent of our crowd’s *Rock n Roll*.

“Was it what?”

“The stuff you played, was some of it your own?”

“Plenty of it was.”

“*Dass* what I told him. Yeah, so that means he’ll definitely wanna talk about releasing a single. You interested?”

“If it pays, sure.” Getting a record deal has never been my goal. Making music has always been. That and paying the rent.

I remember the two Gs again. The earth shifts. I lean against my kitchen counter.

Xavier says, “You still doin’ those kiddie parties for dough?”

“It pays the bills.”

“I guess. Well, each to his own. We all do what we have to to survive, eh?”

I don’t comment. Xavier’s been talking to me again for less than two days and he’s already getting on my nerves.

“Anyway, chiquita, there’s big things coming, so you might wanna take

on less work for now.”

“I’ll take on less work when I get the gigs.”

“You always played it safe, didn’t you? I guess that’s a good thing. Would’ve helped if Savva had done the same. Anyway, what’s done is done. Send me your account info. Randy wants to pay you *tonight*. He said you’re the hottest news of the underground scene right now. And he wants dibs on you.”

“Tell him I appreciate it, but the landlord’s knocking, and realty developers are kicking me out my home. So, first come first serve.”

“That old fart? Fuck ’im. You tell him—”

“Xavier, stay on track here.” Xavier really knows nothing about Mr. Bernstein. Few people do. *And his constantly blasé comments about Savva are really starting to*



*piss me the fuck off!*

“Fine. Well, I’ll pass the message. But don’t go gettin too much of a big head. *One* set you did. I’d take what Randy can throw your way.” I tense my teeth. If Xavier wasn’t the way in for me here, I’d be slamming the phone down. Then, on a total one-eighty, he says, “Look, Blaze, about them haters online. Fuck ’em. Haters are always gonna hate—goes with the territory, comprende?”

“Yeah.”

“Best is to ignore them.”

“I’ll try.”

And that’s the thing that always confused me about Xavier. The Yin and the Yang. One minute sweet as a rose, the other, vile as a festering wound. Not the same as Tolek, no. Because I *do* believe it’s the chemicals screwing with Xavier’s mind that make him this way. Doctor

Jekyll's potion. (And, you gotta ask yourself, was Robert Stevenson really referring to *A Certain Corn Flake from California* when writing about a potion that "removed inhibitions"?)

"OK, chiquita. I gonna get me some rest. I been up since yesterday morning. Damn, you played a fine set. Do something for yourself tonight. Hey, you wanna grab some coffee some time? You know, you, me, some music, some X,

hmm? Like old times?”

*Urgb!* “Xavier...look, I appreciate the gig. But don’t expect this to be more than it is.”

“We’ll see.”

Part of me wants to jump down the phone line, wrap my hands around him and say, *No, we won’t see, you fucking punk!* The other part of me tells me not to overreact, tells me that this is just the way

Xavier is.

“Lemme know when Randy wants to meet.”

“Will do.” A pause. Then, Hyde goes away again and Jekyll comes out: “Look, Blaze. I’m...I’m *sorry*. You know. About... About everything, OK? I really am. No one expected it to happen, or for it go so far.”

It’s as if someone just winded me with a *whoosh* of a punch in the gut

Trembling, I say—no, I *whisper*. “Yeah, rearview regret. But...thank—thank you, X. I appreciate you saying that.”

He sighs. “OK, babe. We just gotta move on, no?”

*I wish I could*. “Yeah. Look, Xavier, after you tell Randy ‘first come first serve’...uhm...also thank him for me. From the bottom of my heart. Really. A *lot*. And, er, thank *you* again, OK?”

“I knew *joo* was a softy underneath all that riot grrrl bullshit.”

When I put the phone off, Declan (who is now chilling on my beanbag with a copy of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*) says, “That sounded intense.”

A tear almost cracks through as I think of Savva’s beautiful face, marred forever in my mind by that final blue image of her. “Uhm, yeah, lots of early

stuff resurfacing.” I go to the faucet and wash my face. Then, remembering again that I just made *two freaking Gs*, I say with a smile, “Deck, I think supper’s on me tonight.”

## -6-

I intended to take him out right away. I did. I intended for us to eat, to talk, to do what...I guess...people do in these kinds of things.



But then he grabs me. His hands graze against my waist as I reach for the door on our way out. And my gasp betrays that it's already been too long since he's touched me.

I hear him breathe of me, feel his nose by my hair, inhaling; his hands moving up my sides.

I move my own hands over his. Logic tells me to wait. Logic tells me to

not let it get too physical before it gets emotional.

Logic loses.

I turn on him. Slam my hands to his chest and push him back against the *Grandmaster Flash* poster near my bookshelf. And then I dive into him with my tongue.

My kisses are headlong and furious. Hungry. I slide my hands under his sweater, ease them over the granite of his

body. I kiss his neck, lick it. His own tongue goes ballistic on my ear, then my chin.

Fire burns in me. Sounds play in my mind but the only beat is the syncopated one of our breaths. Hot and violent.

He cups my cheeks. His gaze is molten lava. It burns through me. It feels like he sees every dark secret of mine

every fear. Every bone-gnawing worry I've ever felt anywhere and at any time. *Like he knows me.*

I start pulling him closer, but there's no more space to fill. I tug, I grab. He clutches my back. Before I know it, my top is off, then my bra. And, small as they are, I bare my breasts proudly to him, for the first time completely comfortable showing them to a boy. Only one thing is missing now: "Wait," I say.

His face shows momentary shock, but I kiss him to let him know I'm with it. I don't know why, but I am. "I just need music."

I take out my phone, scroll down to *Girl with One Eye* by Florence and The Machine. I place it in its dock and turn up the volume. Then I dim the lights so the one or two people who actually do still live across the road, can't look in.

Florence's mellifluous—and *angry*—voice crashes into the room. I've set the sound to loud and my top-quality *B&W 683s* don't let me down. *Thanks again, Patryk.*

I stand still, close my eyes, feel my body sway. Feel the music wrap over me like warm hands.

Declan moves over to me. Snatches me toward him and presses my tits to his.

“Interesting choice of music.”

“You should hear the mix I made of it.”

His lips are on mine before we talk more about it.

My arms flop to my side.

He swipes me off my feet, slides me onto the bed.

Drums and guitars clang. And Deck kisses my stomach, licks my belly button. Then moves onto my breasts. I

get his sweater off. He says, “How far can we take it? I mean, so you’re comfortable...”

“I think this is my limit,” I confess.

“That’s cool.” He slides on top of me, lying above me. “This OK?”

I groan, then nod, smiling deliriously for sure.

He rubs against me. I feel his hardness behind his jeans.



“Still fine?”

I hold him. “Oh yes. I’ll tell you if it’s not.”

The kissing throws me into a whirlpool. Florence sings about cutting a girl’s eye. Declan laughs. “Damn fine choice of music.”

“It’s just so you know what you’re getting yourself into.”

In between kisses, he says, “I don’t

think it's really you. I think it's a front."

*You're right.*

I turn him around. Then I'm on top of him, straddling him. I push down hard with my crotch until I see him wince; I wriggle lower, slowly, in rhythm to the thumping bass drum and crashing rock. I ride him. When he groans I tighten the grip of my legs around him.

"You make me crazy, Blaze. I—"

He clutches my waist.

I speed up, pressure building, the eighth-beat loop just before the explosion. *Down There*.

When it finally comes crashing down, for both of us, there is no world left. The walls collapse, implode. Declan's roar echoes in sync to *Drumming Song*—the next track.

I break out in a sheen of relieved sweat.

And I fall on him.

-7-

Lying on his chest, I remember the call with Mamah a few days after Savva died, telling her I was still gonna stay here. “Because I’m American, Mamah. I was born here, and I will die here.”

I was thinking a lot about dying in those days.

I remember Patryk, torn and

broken, leaving for Poland. Thereby abandoning me to fend for myself. The three musketeers now becoming the Lone Ranger.

I remember the very first conversation with Mamah about me staying in the US when she first planned on returning to Poland two years before that. I told her I would survive. That, where there was a will there was a way. I remember the sadness in her brown eyes.

*The disbelief of adulthood in youth's constant insistence on the existence of hope and promises in a hopeless world.*

*Or their insistence on the existence of dreams...*

That was about three years ago.

Besides Tolek, there had been *some* boys. Mostly when I was slammed. And none of them serious. All of them the same. All of them wanting one thing.

Xavier being the last of them. But at least for Xavier, there had been *some* emotion on my part, even if it was only that of a lingering childhood friendship which never really bloomed into anything more for me, even when we tried.

It's Xavier's Jekyll that keeps people returning to him. The knowledge that, deep down, hidden though it may be, is a real and caring person.

Tolek had no Jekyll. He was all

Hyde—just different shades of him. *Two-Face*. Black-haired and big. Rough. Angry. I wanted something from him he couldn't give, just as he wanted something else from me that I couldn't give. Ironic. Different, and yet the same.

I wanted from him what I feel I'm getting now from Deck. Do I have a word for it? No. Just as a child has no word for needing food, only an innate sense that,



without it, it would starve and die. *Declan feeds me*, if that makes sense.

I think of the two grand I just made in one night. If things go well, I might be making two grand a week not too long from now. And then finding an apartment might not even be so bad.

And, while Declan's hand makes it to the shaved side of my head now, and while he kisses me silently on my sheening forehead, most of all, I think

how none of all this fucking matters  
anyway. I think of how, if all I could do  
would be to lie here, and breathe in his  
soapy scent, I'd be OK. All I'd need  
would be this feeling, and my music.

And nothing else.

A real game changer.

So *let's play ball.*

-8-

We do go for supper, at a tiny

rustic place with tables that were probably workbenches once before. It's dark, and a solitary candle glows between us. Declan's eyes look almost demonic, lit only by the white flame.

We do talk. But mostly we stare. Or he stares. I catch him a few times. I say, "You there?"

He shakes his head, says, "Oh, yeah, sorry, I was just..." Then he looks away, the candle on the table guttering away.

He looks back at me, eases a hand to mine, holds it, tilts his head and doesn't let his gaze stray from mine.

“Why are you staring?”

“I just...want to.”

I laugh it off, embarrassed.

We talk. I find out he plays football—a *lot* of it. I find out Trev's like his brother and that Deck knows him and Skate from back in their school days.

Skate since High School, Trev since they were little kids.

I tell him music is my life, that I can lose myself in it and not come out for days—no food, no sleep. The only drug I need.

He tugs my hand toward him, starts kissing the top of it. “What are you doing?” I look around nervously. He says nothing, puts the tip of one of my fingers in his mouth, licks it.

I melt. Heat rushes over me.

“You’re going to ruin me.”

“Why?”

“Because all I can think of is being with you for hours and hours every day.”

“And that’s a bad thing?”

“Yes, because I need to mix. I need to practice.”

“I have to work tomorrow, so it should give you time to focus on that.”

“Somehow, I think I’ll be thinking of you all day tomorrow. Too distracted to actually catch a beat.”

“Then mix me a tape.”

“They don’t call them tapes anymore, you know.”

“What do they call them?”

“Just mixes.”

“Then mix me a mix.”

He makes me laugh, regularly, and

every laugh is a quiet release of worry

“No problem.”

“You got a Spotify account?”

“Of course.”

We exchange usernames and I start following him and then he follows me. I follow him on Twitter, friend him on Facebook, and add him to my circles on Google Plus. He doesn't use MySpace so I give him my username and tell him he's welcome to subscribe to my updates. “I'm



hoping to get the ‘live’ feed, instead,” he says. “You got a blog?”

I give him the address.

“Damn, you’ve covered all bases, haven’t you?”

“And still, what it really took was just a phone call from someone to get a break. Makes me feel like the internet’s the Pacific Ocean and I’m just a raft in the middle of it somewhere.”

“I got most of my biz from word of mouth as well. I did some internet advertising, and it helped a bit I guess. But my biz is local, so, I think that makes it easier when people search.”

“What business are you in?”

He reaches into his pants pocket, pulls out a card and flings it in front of me.

*“DWAT?”*

“Read the heading underneath.”

“*Dude with a Truck.*” Another laugh

from me.

“That’s me. I take my truck, lift shit, put it in the back of it, and move people to new apartments or houses.”

“No shit.”

“No shit.”

I steal a glance at his body, smirk.

“Well, I might end up needing your

services soon.”

“Yeah, I kinda figured that when I heard you talking on the phone.”

“Yip. Realty developers are wolfing down the neighborhood. My landlord’s caved in to the pressure, and, well, in six months I’ll probably be out on my ass.”

He frowns. “Damn it. It’s fucking bullshit. Anyway. Keeps me in business. People moving left and right. Williamsburg is an exodus of talent, and

an influx of yuppiness ever since I started this gig.”

I put the card in my pocket.

Silence passes for a second, then he resumes nibbling the fingertip he'd since stopped kissing.

I melt, and gush. *This is so unlike me...* “Should we get outta here?” My heart dances psychotically in my chest.

Deck throws cash on the table

(completely ignoring that it was supposed to be on me tonight), and grabs me by the wrist.

In a breath, we're back in my apartment and on my bed, going at it. Ferociously. I can't get his shirt off fast enough. I can't climax fast enough.

And, after, I can't rest on his warm body again fast enough.

We fall asleep.

In the morning, before the sun is

up, he wakes me with a kiss, already fully dressed and freshly showered. “I gotta go, Blaze. Moving furniture all day.”

It feels like a sword to my heart.

“Oh, right, sure.” I get up, rub my eyes.

“After that, I’m training with Skate; Trev as well. It’s typical Alpha Male shit. Lots of sweat and grunting and showing off. But...if you’d like...I could pick you up...”

The sword eases itself out of me slowly. “And watch you grunting it with all your buddies?”

“Right, I know, stupid—”

“Sounds awesome.”

“Cool. Cool. Can I pick you up around four?”

“Sure, or I could meet you if there’s a subway near it.”

“I think there’s a station there, no



idea. I haven't used the subway as a regular form of commute in years. I'll pick you up. I'd...uhm...like to see you a few minutes before grunting it out with a bunch of sweaty men."

*I think of grunting it out with this sweaty man...*

"Awesome. Around four then."

We stare at each other for a second. Then he bends down, holds my cheeks, smothers me with a debilitating kiss. In

my now-dazed state, he whispers, “Blaze Ryleigh, I feel like I don’t know the first thing about you. And, at the same time, like I know everything there is to know about you.”

And with that, he goes. The door closes. And I’m alone. In a big empty loft.

With all my memories.

But they’re further away now, I can feel it. They’re no longer slapping me and

smothering me. I feel like I can actually breathe, not rocked by their penetrating pain.

Did someone mention earlier about a certain game changing?

**-9-**

Declan DMs me on Twitter.

*Hey Blaze, had a good time. Just FYI.*

*Looking fwd 2 2nite.*

He also messages me on FB saying

the same thing—except for right at the end where he adds: *Sent this here as well 'cause I dunno if you're an FB or Twitter fan mostly.*

I'm about to respond with *Actually, I rarely use either*, when I notice I have a friend request. I usually get one or two legit ones a week from local indie bands that I reach out to during the week.

But the request isn't from an indie band.

*“Hello baby, heard you played fuckin unbelievable [sic] set on Saturday. I want us too [sic] forget past and talk. Be friends? Tolek”*

Even the written word betrays his accent. It's almost like I can hear him speaking above me, hands raised: *Is NOT over, Błażej!*

A shiver crawls slowly down my spine, like a hairy-legged crab.

I decline the request and click that

I don't know him. An innocent lie for a little peace of mind...

I have most notifications turned off for my social apps because they get too distracting, but there were a few on Twitter that I noticed when I got Declan's DM notification. I go back to the app and incidentally notice: "*Thirty-seven* new followers?" For me, with the whopping ninety-two I had yesterday (of which I think half are spambots), this is

one *serious* improvement! I look through my follower list and they mostly look legit, not bots.

I look at my reply stream.

@DJHeavenLeigh OMFG OMFG

OMFG. PLEASE TELL ME WHERE YOUR PLAYING NEXT!!! YOU ARE INCREDIBLE!!!

@DJHeavenLeigh WOW! TKU so

*much for mixing our demo tape into your mix!*

*We've had calls all morning!*

*@DJHeavenLeigh Call me. Ur hot!*

*@DJHeavenLeigh Our agency would like to chat about representing you. Please send contact details through.*

“Oh. My. Freaking. God.”

I answer a few. Funnily enough, although there are indeed a few spammy tweets (“*Wanna know more about Heaven*



*Leigh's latest singles? Visit:*

*link.to/gHyy6Rt*”—this then lands on a porn site), I get no hate tweets. Maybe it's easier for people to hate on you when they're talking behind your back?

It's the same with my email account —notification emails about comments on my blog (First one: “Heaven-Leigh, you rock! R U single?”) I pull open my laptop, log into the blog and turn off the email

notifications (and approve the one saying I'm hot.) I log onto FeedBurner and see I have a staggering forty new subscribers. Staggering to me, because that's about as many subscribers as I got in the last four years since creating the damn thing! If you take off Mamah and a few friends of friends, probably I only really had twenty actual subscribers.

It's a similar scene on MySpace, Google Plus (I'm added to twenty-nine

new circles.) My mood lightens the more I read some of the positive feedback. I feel on top of the world. I feel like luck is on my side. It seems *them haters* were only on that one forum.

Time flies by, and before I know it, it's twelve P.M.

I haven't done a damn thing for the day! Not even eaten! "Shit!"

I'm making myself some coffee

when my phone buzzes. *XAVIER*.

“Chiquita, moolah’s on the way.

Randy want to meet *wichyoo* tomorrow.

He want to talk about clubs, the label, all those things.” Xavier’s accent only comes out thick when he’s either in *Business Mode* or *Gangsta Mode*. Which, sadly, is really one and the same...

“What time can you make it?” he asks.

I’m such a terrible riser. Who is,

when they work at parties all night?

“Eleven?”

He bellows into the background. I think Randy answers. “No problem. Eleven. Look, he want to know as well what he need to do to guarantee at least a few more gigs *wichyoo*. I mean, you seem to be getting a lot of buzz right now. Know what I’m sayin?”

“Not really.”

“Can you guarantee him you’ll sign with him? As a favor. Seeing as he’s the one who broke you out?”

*Uhm, hello!?* Can anyone spell *déjà vu*? “Didn’t we just have this conversation yesterday?”

“Things are heating up, so we havin it again.”

*He’s like a dog to meat, and I’m the meat.*

I feel a sting of discomfort. And although I can't speak for Randy, I know Xavier too well to think he isn't getting a cut out of this. Maybe it isn't Randy pushing the deal at all. Maybe it's Xavier. Because why isn't Randy calling me personally? "Xavier, how much of a commission are you getting on this?"

He hesitates. "Well, a man has to live."

“I see.”

He says nothing, doesn't even *try* to defend himself.

“Look, Xavier, fine. Tell him I can't guarantee taking 'his' offer until I know what it is. But that I also won't take anybody else's until I've heard him out. I can promise him that at least.”

“I can live with that. Meet us at Randy's store at eleven. You know the



spot?”

Randy owns a DJ gear store.

Whatever money he doesn't make directly on his parties, I'm sure he makes it in kit sales to wannabe DJs. “Sure. See you then.”

Sipping my coffee, I check out MySpace and discover that my track plays—my original music, made with *FL Studio*—are through the roof. And I know that my idea of “through the roof” is tiny

but you gotta start somewhere. On a hunch, I go on YouTube. Against Randy's wishes, someone did make a video of Saturday's session. It's not viral, but it's got lots of upvotes and has quite a few comments. The quality is typical YouTube comment-quality ("Dope shit cuz I digzz some musicz shitz!! PIECE!") so I don't bother looking at any more of them.

It's all very sudden. I mean, this has always been my dream. Hasn't it?

Suddenly I'm seeing floating envelopes around me and tax forms and men in suits and YouTube comments and people putting me down, others pushing me up, people wanting things from me, unpaid rent, no guarantees but plenty of hope, web pages, Facebook accounts, lease agreements—

*It's too much.*

I can't deal with it right now. So I put my phone on flight mode, slap on my *Allen & Heath* headphones. And I bury myself in creating Declan's mix.

**-10-**

When I mix, I don't think. The thinking is done outside the mix. Inside the mix, there's no time for it. So I spend my days with headphones in my ears.

Yesterday—the day I spent with Declan —was the first day in four years where I wasn't listening to music most of the day. Usually, it's Spotify or Beatport or my local iTunes library on the road. Getting to know the BPMs by heart so I'm not dependant on the digital display of the *Serato* software on my Mac, or on my decks.

That part is the work.

The mix is the fun. The mix is the

escape.

*My Adam.*

The real Adam. Or, if Savva were saying it, *The Real Doctor of All Ultimate Molly Doctors Everywhere, baby.*

Patryk—he once told me that an artist should be completely cool with her tools, so she can simply create. Actually, he used the pronoun “he.” The creation comes from somewhere else, somewhere

inexplicable, he said. “You have to feel it. In *here!*” And then he slapped my upper chest firmly.

Then he slammed his own chest like a gorilla. “In *here!*”

He was a really intense dude. Still is, I guess.

“It brings out the dark in a person, Błażej.” He also knew me from Greenpoint. “It calls to a level deep down, far beyond anybody’s reaches. The

head-doctors”—he tapped his temple —“they never gonna figure it out. It’s too ugly down there. But it also takes you up into the heavens—the art, the creation.” He raised his arms, pointed up to the sky. He had a fat hipster beard back then, so he reminded me of Moses or some such guy. *Like I said, real intense.* “And they’ll never reach up there either.” He looked at me. “The art—it brings out the *real* in



you. Even if it's a mucky cesspool. It shows you who you really are and makes you face it. Brings out what you're hiding, what you're too scared to talk about with words. You, me, the ones who created this stuff..." He gestured around to a back-to-back graffiti piece on a wall that we were looking at. "...We *know*."

*See what I mean about intense?*

When I mix, I'm vaguely aware of what I'm mixing. This time, I start with

*Seven Devils* by *Florence and the Machine*. It's a dark song that makes me think of old cathedrals with hidden waterways in them and rafts on those waters being sailed by vampires, blood dripping from their teeth.

And it's also got a good BPM—one hundred and seventeen beats per minute—which makes it such a killer song to mix with something equally gothic and

housey.

I scratch in Birdy's *You Light me Up*.

Because, despite its pie-in-the-sky name,  
its lyrics scream of pain.

I think of falling into pieces, being  
picked up.

Images form in my mind like  
billowing clouds of color.

The drums crash.

The guitar riff kicks in.

Her voice sinks deep into my

blood.

I set an echo effect on it.

The images turn to ones of me and  
Declan in the near-darkness, on the bed  
to my left, a light golden glow washing in  
from the windows. Me riding him.

The drums crash again.

The guitar riffs harder.

I ride him.

I throw in a bass loop, four beats.

I'm sweating. I put Birdy's voice on  
a lower, longer echo. It makes it sound  
lonelier, darker.

*In my mind, I hit Savva's face.*

I see Declan's face.

I see me riding him again.

My skin breaks out in goosebumps.

Birdy's voice is everywhere,

towering, screaming, high in the heavens.

A sweat breaks out on my forehead.

Before I know it, the sun is low near the horizon. There's banging on the door. *In my mind...?*

No, the banging is here!

I take off my headphones, realize I've been mixing for close on four hours.

*Bang bang bang.*

I wipe the sweat off my face. *I'm in that dark place Patryk told me about*, down in the depths of it, and I'm trying to bring

myself back up to reality.

The door bangs a third time.

“Blaze, you OK? Blaze!”

It's Deck. It comes to me that he's probably been banging frantically for minutes and I didn't hear him. “Deck, I'm OK. Just give me a second.”

I look around the room. See my brick walls, menacing at first, then, simply tiring. *Same old...* I shake my head, come up slowly from the past.

A year ago, I might occasionally even throw in the likes of sunshine-loving artists like Colbie Caillat or that chick who sings *Call me Maybe* into my mixes. Now, except for those teeny-bopper parties I have to mix over in the city to pay the rent, those songs never even see the light of day in my tunes.

This is what I mix now: Four-hour long stints of screaming pain.



“You OK?” Deck’s face is a wash of worry. In his hand is a brown paper bag.

“I’m good. I’m sorry. I was mixing. I didn’t hear you knock.”

“I called as well.”

“Phone’s on flight mode. Come in.”

He looks at me suspiciously. My

mind's still adrift. When he kisses me, I hold onto him a little tighter than I did earlier. And he brings me back. "You know, you have an amazing kiss, Declan Cox."

"I could say the same about you, Blaze Ryleigh. You sure you OK? You feel a little shaky."

"I haven't eaten much. Haven't eaten at all actually. Maybe that's it."

He doesn't call my bluff. "Good

thing I brought a sandwich.” He holds up the brown paper bag. And just like that, my stomach catches up with my mind, and my mouth starts to water with ravenous hunger. He holds it out to me.

“Are you, like, psychic or something?”

“Nope. Took a long shot. And if you weren’t gonna eat it, I would’ve.”

I stop mid-bite of the warm

chicken and mayo sub.

“It’s cool!” He laughs. “I’m not hungry. I can just eat anything anytime so, if you didn’t eat it, I would’ve.”

I don’t even answer. I just start wolfing the thing down. Even my head hurts suddenly. “God, I can’t believe how hungry I am.” In a dim state of consciousness, I realize I probably have lettuce and mayo on the side of my mouth. But I just don’t care. I’m freaking

starving!

“So, you ready to go see a bunch of sweaty guys lifting weights? I mean, after you finish eating of course.”

It's just me and the sandwich now. Deck's gonna have to wait *just* a second longer.

When I'm done, and after the food has settled like lead in my empty stomach, I say, “I can't wait.”

# SIX

## DECLAN STARTED IT

-1-

*Declan Cox*

After she's done guzzling the chow down, I hold her small oval face in my hands. She licks her teeth and tries to pull away—maybe to go and brush them—but I don't let her. I want her lips to mine, salad and all. I press mine to hers. They

tremble. Her body joins in, quivering lightly. And mine quickly follows suit. There's an intensity about her that oozes out into my space, my aura. *Our* aura. It radiates off her skin like hot fire.

All day I was moving shit—a dresser the size of the Statue of Liberty; a TV large enough to replace the ones at MetLife stadium; a cupboard larger than what Brodrick Bunkley probably lifts in

one hand while eating a cheeseburger in the other.

But now, she and I kiss. Every moment that I think, *OK, enough now*, I linger a little longer. Maybe it's her flavor—that flavor of *girlness* under the tomato and chicken. Or her softness...

My arms feel weak. The thought of benching two hundred tonight seems more and more impossible.

I let her go. I've probably got a *gaga*



look in my eyes, dopey and stupid.

She smiles. So I kiss her again, because I just have to.

“You have an interesting way...”

She bites her lips, puts her hands to my waist, looks down. “...Uhm, an interesting way of making me forget.”

“Forget what?”

“Stuff... Should we go?”

I don't want to. I want to stay here.

But Trev's gonna be gone in two weeks. And I gotta spend time with my boy. I'm even hoping, maybe, Blaze turns out to be "my girl." I know I feel something for her. Maybe it's just that infatuation of having seen her perform. I want to make sure there really is a connection that's more than the heat of the moment.

"Deck?"

I love it that she calls me *Deck*.

"Uhm—" Ah, fuck it. I kiss her again. I

push her up against the door.

It gets hot quickly. She's got her hands all over my back. It feels like she needs this as much as I do. She turns me, and now I'm the one against the door. We go at it for a few minutes. Finally, we exhale, force ourselves apart. "OK, I think we do *have* to go. I can't leave Trev hanging. He'll be back at Penn State in about two weeks."

Red and flushed, she says, “I think you kissed *me?*”

I feel the grin forming, *because I want to kiss you again, and again, especially if you look up at me like that.* Behind me, I fumble for the doorknob. “Let’s go. Let’s go before”—*I take your clothes off and make love to you*—“I... Never mind.”

I somehow stumble out into the hallway with her, weakened by her

kryptonite eyes.

## -2-

In the car, I ask her about her day. She tells me about people wanting a piece of her, about the gazillion tweets, the so-called agents. She plays it down, tells me it was “a little overwhelming.” But I can see through the armor. I don’t call her on it, because we all need to feel like our armor’s on good and solid sometimes.

But she looks a little freaked by it all.

“You freaked out by it? All the attention?”

She tugs at a strand on her jeans.

“What do you mean?” Her eyes flick quickly to mine, then out the window.

“Look, Blaze, I know we just met and all, and I don’t expect you to spill your guts out to me. But you can trust me, that I can promise you. I’m told I’m a good ear. And I *never* spill what people

tell me in private. So if there's something else you wanna say about these things that happened today, go ahead. There's no judgment about it on my part. I swear it."

She swings her gaze briefly at me again. "Well...it just kind of made me nervous, all of it. You work and work and work for something for what feels like your whole life, and then it just falls in your lap? It almost feels like it's weird

that you suddenly *don't* fail. It's like it's not real if something doesn't go wrong. I'm just waiting for the piano to drop, or for reality to strike home. That's how it always seems to go..."

She looks away, clearly thinking of that dropping piano.

*Friend of mine ODee* she said to me yesterday, after I asked her why she stopped dropping Es. "Blaze." I put my hand on her leg (her sweet, soft, beautiful



leg.) “I’m gonna tell you something,  
OK?”

She nods.

“My mom died when I was  
eighteen. Almost four years ago.” I stop  
for a second to catch my breath because  
mentioning it always hurts.

“Uhm...cancer. She suffered for years with  
it. Suffered horribly. In the end, I swear I  
cursed the government for not letting

that euthanasia shit into this country. I cursed New York for not having something like that *Death with Dignity Act* they got over in Oregon. Because she was hurting like crazy. Unable to empty herself properly. Needing constant care. Shaking most of the time. Not able to recognize people. It's... *hell*...just...nobody should go through that, you know?

“Pops, well, it really ruined him. Or maybe he ruined himself. We had a

fallout after she died.” *Because of his fucking whore.*

We arrive at the gym’s parking lot and I stop the car.

“Anyway, my pops had this piece-o-shit truck in the back that needed fixing but which he never fixed. So I learned about cars, got a new carburetor for it. Wheeled and dealed in various ways with people. Exchanged with hard labor for a

bit of cash. Anything I could do. And I got that fucker fixed and drove it outta there as soon as I could. Trev put me up for a bit—over in *East New York* FYI! So, I started moving shit for people, and soon I had enough dough to rent a place in Bushwick. And, well, things took off after a while.”

Blaze is staring at me with her adorable little mouth open.

I turn and stare out my window,

suddenly thinking of Trev's insistence I go see my pops. *Because he's your father...*

I feel Blaze's hand on my leg.

“Uhm...it seems I got a little carried away there,” I say. “I actually just wanted to let you know that I understand what it means to lose someone...” I pause for a long while, squeeze the shit out of her hand for stability. Then: “...But turns out I ended up giving you my life's story.”

She whispers. Because that's how Blaze talks: In a soft, angelic whisper. Always. "I don't think that's your life's story. I think there's a lot more to you than that. And I appreciate you telling me.

"Deck, I'm...nervous. And I'm just gonna go out and tell you why. Things are suddenly so intense between me and you. Out of *nowhere*, and I'm trying to find

reasons why they shouldn't be. I'm trying to fit it all into logic. I'm trying to fit it into the perspective of what my mom always used to say, you know. 'Take it slow. Get to know a boy first.' But with you, it's none of that. I..." Her lip trembles. She clears her throat. "...Hell, Declan, it's a freaking rocket ride. And it hit me out of nowhere. And...you said you know so little about me, and yet you feel like you know all there is to know. And,

like, that just doesn't make sense."

"Why doesn't it? Maybe it does. Maybe it's... *this*"—I point outside—"that tells us otherwise. 'Society' or whatever. I know this is gonna sound crazy but, that look across a room full of people..."

"Yeah!" Her eyes are wide, as excited as mine.

"...Who's to say there *isn't* some force, some element? Hell, maybe it's



scientific. I don't know."

"Listen to us. We sound like teenagers. *Young* teenagers!"

"And there you go again. Do you see that?"

"What?"

"Looking for some reason why it can't be. You're looking for the piano that's about to drop."

"This is so intense. I keep getting the feeling it's all gonna topple over

sometime. It's just too fast. 'The...the feelings. They're...*fast*."

"Well, it's fast for me too. So if we fall, we fall together."

"You definitely read too many books, Declan Cox. Don't think I didn't see that romance collection in your e-reader."

I shrug, trying to play it cool.  
"Don't think I didn't see your own

collection at home, neither.”

“Not all romances have a happy ending. In fact, some of them have a downright *shitty* ending.”

“But the middle is always good, and so is the beginning. That’s always the best part. That’s when it’s hot. That’s when there’s hope and sparks in the air; chests bared boldly to the raging forces of the universe, ready to take them all on.”

Her hand trembles under mine.

“It’s not the beginning and the middle I’m worried about. It’s the end. When the universe wins because of a fatal character flaw or something.”

“Romeo and Juliet?”

“And others. All the timeless classics end without a Happily Ever After—*Casablanca*, *Tristan and Isolde*, *Titanic*? You think Leo DiCaprio woulda been so famous if he’d gotten Winslet in the end?”

Or was it that endless holding onto hope, him on that plank of wood, drowning, and hoping, forever hoping—right to the *very last whimpering breath!*—that keeps that story with us forever? Look at Nicholas Sparks. And people talk about his stories forever. *The Notebook?*’

I can’t answer.

Because she’s right.

Too right.

And I’m scared shitless because of

it.

Scared out of my fucking mind.

-3-

I don't realize I'm holding her hand until I get in the gym with her. Trev's on the bench and Skate's spotting him. Or, supposed to be. Because what he's really doing is staring open-mouthed at mine and Blaze's interlaced fingers.

He shifts the woolen beanie on his

head, swallows hard, convincing himself that what he's seeing is no illusion, and then gets back to spotting the barbell after Trevor groans,

“MOTHERFUCKER GRAB THIS GODDAMNED WEIGHT BEFORE IT CRUSHES MY HEAD!”

Skate steps into action quickly, helping Trev up on his last rep, then hooks the barbell on its stand.

Trev sits up, flushed, downs water

from a bottle. He smiles when he sees Blaze. “Waddup, Ms. Ryleigh? I assume you’re the reason this boy here is *late* for training! You know we’re trying to get him into the NFL, don’t you?”

Trev looks so serious that Blaze starts to feel like she’s done something bad. “Uhm, no, I didn’t know that... I—”

“He’s screwing with you,” I tell her.

“Am not!” He stands, moves closer



to me. “Antonio Gates. Ray Seales. Darren Bennett. The list goes on. None of those boys played college football.”

She says, “I’m sorry—”

Now Trev grins his wide grin.

“Blaze, it’s cool. Whereas I do believe Mr. Colorful Arm here *could* play for the NFL if he tried out, being ten minutes late for a workout is not what’s going to get him there. It’s changing the attitude in *this*”—he *thwacks* me upside the head!—“piece of

machinery up here!”

I jump him and we start tackling right there in the gym! Skate shouts, “Dudes, the weights. The weights!” We almost make a whole stack of them fall and break toes.

Almost.

We stop our shenanigans and touch fists, bump shoulders.

Trev looks at Blaze and me. “You

two make a good couple by the way.” He says it with all the honesty in the world. And I stretch my hand out behind me absently for her to touch it, which she does, gently. Just a light caress. “So, lazy-ass, you’re up. And because you’re late, you’re skipping the first warm-up set. A hundred-and-sixty. Do it in front of your new girlfriend.”

“I’m not that desperate to impress her, bro. I’m gonna do some warm-ups

with the dumbbells over there while you two monsters finish it off up here.”

“Hey, Blaze,” says Trev, “why don’t you spot him?”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Spot. It means to help him lift the weights if he can’t. It’s really easier than it looks. You just need to push up gently under his elbows on the sticky spots. Go on. You can do it.”

And she does. I confess that it embarrasses me a little, and I don't know why. I even try and reduce the groans on each lift. But mostly it just distracts me. Looking up at her one-sided hair, eyes so green they look like clubbing laser lights. O-shaped lips. A gently beaked nose like the head singer of *Lorde*. I manage little more than seven or eight reps on my first set. A *ridiculously* low number. But I do

get warmed up. Eventually.

While us three gorillas edge each other on with the benchpress, trying to see who can out-ape whom (or maybe it's who can out-groan whom—Trev won), Blaze hangs back and just watches, fat-ass headset on her ears. On occasion, while we slap each other and punch each other, she laughs.

Skate edges her on to try some of the exercises. She takes the headset off,

shakes her head and says, “I’ve never exercised in my whole life.”

He insists. Soon he has her on the circuit-trainers, showing her how the different machines work. She laughs as he does it. After three machines, she’s hung over the bar on the lat-pulldowns machine. But Skate coaxes her on still.

I think to myself that life could not be more perfect. My two greatest friends

in the world, a girl who makes me think I've been chasing all the wrong things in my life. A girl with a laugh so catching I find myself smiling and ogling her absently, while *I'm* supposed to be spotting Trev!

He stands beside me, puts an arm around my shoulders. "You gotta go see your dad, bro. He's your father. Asshole as he is, that's still the truth of it. You know, there's this thing called Karma.



Something this good”—he looks at Blaze —“doesn’t fall into your lap without wreaking havoc in your past and throwing it all up in your face again. If you wanna keep her, you better make sure your slate is clean, homes.”

“I know, bro. I been thinkin on that myself since I met her. It’s almost like someone—*something*—threw her in my way, just to show me what I could

have if I got my shit together.”

“C’mon, Deck, it’s not like you’re wasting your life. Things are going well for you. So you gotta make good on this one thing. So what? I only mention that Karma shit because I see it in your eyes, homes. There’s something there that doesn’t sit right with *you*, you know? About your pops. I mean, if I didn’t see it in your eyes every time you speak about him, I wouldn’t push it.”

“I hear you. But there’s something else—on this ‘Karma’ shit or whatever—that has me a little more concerned.”

Trev’s lips tighten. He knows damn well what—or *whom*—I’m talking about...

He says nothing at first, then: “Well, Deck, you know my position on that. Gina Moretti was a big girl when she met you. And she knew damn well what she was doing with you, and with herself.

Drugs don't take themselves, you know?"

*I know that. But she did it because of me.* "None of us were big boys or girls. We were all fucking kids. And some of those kids followed me into the scene."

"Bullshit! I dropped because I wanted to. Just like I stopped because I wanted to. Kids or not, people can *think*. And, FYI, seventeen ain't no kid anymore. Kids grow up fast these days. And you can't tell me a fucking seventeen

year old doesn't know what A is. She knew damn well what that shit was when she took it. Just like you and I never took it for the same reason."

I don't comment. It's a never-ending point of contention between me and Trev. *And me and Clarissa.*

I get on the inclined bench, under the bar, and put my hands around it. Trev gets behind me, ready to spot. I lift the

bar, groan. It's been a long day. My delts are feeling the weight more than usual.

I try and focus on the two hundred pound weight. Every negative rep thrusts Gina's gaunt face into my mind; every positive one—the upward motion—brings a sting of pain—her brother's fists—into my ribs and chest.

I took a beating on that one. I hardly fought back. I had kind of hoped it would work like a type of spiritual

flogging. A kind of cleansing. But it didn't. All it did was leave me with blue ribs and a broken nose.

I sit up on the bench. Trev looks at me with concerned eyes. "So what's your game plan?"

"Dunno, I might go see her. Clarissa said she's 'getting worse.'"

"What the fuck does that mean?"

I shrug to show I don't know. I

look over at Skate pushing an exhausted and shoulder-slumped (but absolutely gorgeous) Blaze around the circuit machines. I look at the mirror on my right, flex my bi once.

Trev sighs. “I thought you weren’t allowed to see her.”

“Clarissa said the doc figured it might help her. Like I’m the last link she has to reality or something. Maybe her parents have taken me off the blacklist—“



“You shoulda never been on that fucking list in the first place. You didn’t force the damn A down her fucking throat—”

“Trev, chill. I hear you.” Like I said, point of contention.

“And what about Dino. Dude damn near killed you last time.”

“I let him. And, besides, I don’t want it to come to that. He had his

reasons.”

“Sometimes fixing the past just isn’t possible, Deck. Sometimes, the only way to fix it is to let it go, acknowledge it was crazy and screwed up. And then *move on*.”

“I hear you, homes. And I’ll do that if I have to. But I think I screwed up a lot of people’s lives back then, just by not realizing that maybe I had some influence over them. And I ain’t trying to come

across as conceited or anything, it's just...a fact. I think I'm only realizing that now."

"Deck, you were the only one who never realized you were every pussy's wet dream at school. If you hadn't been too stupid to see it, you might've hooked up a lot more in high school!"

"I hooked up plenty!"

"*More*, I said. You could've hooked up *more*!"

“Maybe. But it’s not hooking up I’m talking about. And Gina...well...she meant something to me. Even if it was only a little. Acquaintances is one thing. But people you’re close to—well, you can’t just let em slide down the chute and not go after them.”

“Whatever. Do what you have to do. Go see her. Don’t go see her. Just know that I got my scholarship to think

of, homes. I can't bail you outta this one like last time. If you find that Big Brother Dino Moretti has suddenly taken a liking to juice or something, and is now the size of ten Arnold Schwarzeneggers, well, you're gonna have to fight your way out of that one with Skate only."

"Skate's a good fighter."

I see the giveaway smirk on Trev's face. Almost at the same time, we both say, "Except against Midwood!"

High School Football. Only, the Midwood game was no football game, it was a bunch of dudes throwing fists at each other when they'd realized the actual game had been lost. "Skate really came out blue and black in that one," I say.

Trev starts going into fits of laughter, demonstrating an upper cut connecting with Skate's bloody jaw. Even their Tight End got in on the action!

Kicking Skate on the ground.

I'm in hysterics now. We both start reliving it. I say, "And then he cries, 'Hey, dude—*oompf!*—Declan started it! Declan started it!! It was his idea—*oompf!*' I demo a kick to the gut.

I'm almost on the floor with spasmodic laughter when Skate shows up. "You guys are assholes, you know? *Every* year. *Every* damn year it's the same shit. Let it go! I was sixteen, OK?" Trev and I

can't stop the fits. Skate mumbles, "Assholes." He fills Blaze in on the details—*just*—and soon she's giggling as well. The laughter's so hard that my stomach hurts.

Blaze looks up at Skate. "Declan started it? Is that really what you said?"

"Oh, Blaze, not you too now!"

She suppresses a laugh. She sits next to me on the bench, puts her hand



on my leg. Skate argues with Trev on the fine details of what really occurred. He tries to convince Trev that it really *was* my fault.

Soon, it's just the two of them arguing. My own laughter settles.

I turn and look at Blaze. She looks otherworldly in her exhaustion, her hair matted and sticking to her face and shoulders. "I'm wiped." Her soft voice is dizzying.

Surrounded by a background of playful teasing, I move down and touch my lips to hers. They're salty, and her skin is wet. She places a small hand on my cheek. I meet it with my own, feeling my eyes close.

I'm almost drifting off into another world when I hear the mutual roar of my boys behind me: "OH, *FUHGAWDSAKE* GET A ROOM!"

*So we do...*

**-4-**

I drop her off at home. “Did you enjoy it?”

She grabs the car’s door handle. Looks down, ponders her answer. A gentle smirk hits her face that makes me grip the steering wheel tighter.

*I want you*, I think.

“I especially liked the line, ‘Declan

started it!””

“Oh, you liked that, did you?”

“Yeah...” She bites her lip.

“What?”

“I...” She exhales. “You know, this ‘spilling my guts out’ to you might be harder than I thought.”

“You gotta start somewhere. Now confess.”

She aims her gaze at me, a rifle to a buck, and says, “Just like you started

*this?*” She gestures between me and her.

I look out the windshield, see someone’s spray-paint tag on the brick wall. “Blaze, I’m tryin to be a gentleman about this. I’m trying to...not scare you off...because...” I turn to her. If I tell her what I’m really thinking she’ll run. I shake my head of the rest of it. “Never mind.”

“Now *you’re* the one hiding your thoughts from me!”

I feel myself blush. I look at the gearshift, anything to not confront her beauty. “I’m scared that if I tell you, that I’ll come across as too intense. And it’ll make you think you need to get a restraining order against me or something.”

She says nothing. So I look up at her. I can’t tell if it’s shock in her eyes, or desire. “May—maybe...” She clears her

throat. “Maybe that’s what I...*like*...about you. How intense you are.” When she says *Like*, her bottom lip trembles like a flag in a storm.

Our eyes burn into each other. Eons pass. For the first time in my life, in front of a girl, I’m speechless—*oh, no, wait, that was on Saturday night, when I first met her, so this is the second time*. But it’s because none of the bullshit lines I’ve ever fed a girl would fit in here. *She ain’t*

*just some girl, Deck.*

I'm watching my step, trying not to step on that thin layer of ice that might send me crashing down into the frozen lake—*the grand piano falling*. Because this one—*Blaze*—I don't want to throw away.

I reach over to touch her hand, and as I get there, she moves toward me.

Her tongue touches mine.



It's slow. Passionate. Deeply moving.

My body starts trembling, much like the tremble she had in her chin a second ago. My skin breaks out in chills. My manhood...grows.

I close my eyes, run my hand over the shaved side of her head. The side I love the most, because it's the *bad* side.

Blaze is far from bad. But she tries

to be bad. It's the look of someone who's been kicked so hard, *stomped* on, and yet gets up again, with a look of defiance.

I imagine her standing in a road with the bulls in Spain and, tatted up and hair whipping in the wind, giving them the finger while they charge toward her. That's the type of babe Blaze is.

I also imagine her getting trampled.

And getting up again, and saying,

*I'll do it better next time.*

But getting run over by bulls leaves you a little shaken the next time you see one. *Who was the bull that makes you shake like this when I kiss you?* I think.

I feel her hesitation now—physically. And I also feel her desire to push through it.

Her gentleness on my lips, the unsteady caress of my hair (which drives me crazy, I must mention), tells me this

about her: *I'm afraid. But I won't let this fear get in the way of us.*

The smacks of her lips on mine is the only sound in this car. That, and the ever-loudening breathing.

A second ago I was getting cold—forty or so degrees outside, the car off. But now, I'm sweating. Sweating everywhere.

She pulls away, her hand behind my neck. Her eyes flying furiously left and

right. She wavers a second before kissing me again. No need to rush this. And I like the slowness. I've never liked slowness with a girl.

Gina Moretti is a testament to that.

But hormones will be hormones, and the more Blaze's sounds change from breathy whispers to moans of

*Mmmmmmm,*

*Mmmmmmm,*

*MMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM*, the more my male

hormones take over me.

I hold back. I force myself to. *Ice on a lake*, I think. *And what a beautiful lake you are...*

She pulls away again. I expected her to. Because she has her pace, the pace that she's comfortable with. The pace that makes her face that bull successfully.

Her face is red. She leans back. She laughs at the fogged up car windows. "I always thought that only happened in

movies.” It’s clear she hasn’t been with a dude in a car before. “Deck...I...” She puts a hand to her forehead. “Oh, god. Uhm.” Then, steeling herself: “*Would you like to come upstairs for a bit?*”

I smile. “Sure. I’d love to.”

-6-

I get a closer look at her apartment now. Especially at the two mixing setups she has—one in each corner. And, if I’m

not mistaken, one of them is vinyl. The kit sits on a wooden stand that looks homemade, and I guess the vinyl records are below that, on a built-in shelf behind it or something.

“You scratch?” I ask her.

She nods. “I do it all.” She eases over to the decks, walks behind the wooden stand. Puts on a hip hop LP that I don’t recognize, only that it’s from back in the day, and starts grooving some



scratches that make me wanna get my groove on.

“How much time do you actually spend on mixing a day? Or...” I gesture to the vinyl decks, “...scratching.”

“My life consists of buying groceries, reading books while listening to music, and mixing. Well, that’s how it’s been the last year or so...” She turns her back to me, and I see her hand go up to

her face.

I don't ask about the friend, although only an idiot wouldn't figure out that "*Friend of mine ODee*" happened about a year ago.

"Wanna drink?"

*Actually, all I wanna do is put you against that counter there.* "Sure, something...*cold.*"

"Alcoholic?"

"No, uhm, I gotta drive home

still.”

She pauses in her stride to the fridge. “Uhm, oh, yeah, of course.” When she opens the door, I see the mountain of *Amp* and *Rockstar* energy drinks, as well as a few *Dale’s Pale Ale* cans. “*Amp?*”

“You have soda?”

“Pepsi.”

“Sure.”

She pulls out a can, pops it open

with a squish, and places it on the scratched and grooved-up counter. Must be an art thing, because it doesn't look ugly or cheap. I pull up a stool, sit. She's tracing purposeless fingertips over those same grooves on the countertop.

I sip. Wait.

Her eyes are down, then up, then down again. "In the car, I wanted to say...uhm...that the line 'Declan started it' was funny because"—she bites her lower

lip, looks up at the back left corner —“because I can see that in you, you know. That you start things. I mean, because you kinda started *this* as well. With me. Like I said in the car.” She stops.

My drink is paused to my lips. “So did you.”

“After you checked me out all night.”

“Because you played a crazy hot set.”

“So you’re denying you actually started this?”

“Nope, I can live with starting this. But that fight Trev and Skate told you about, that was all them!”

“Well, you seem like that kind of person, you know? The one that will go out and get the things he wants. So, well,

I just thought it was funny. You know, ‘Declan started it!’ And, when Skate was saying it, I couldn’t help thinking, *Yeah, tell me about it! ’Cause he damn-well started this shit, too!* Anyway, I didn’t wanna say anything because, well, it was embarrassing. I mean, *this* is not even necessarily anything, you know.”

“Hmmm?”

“Us. I mean, it’s been”—she counts with her fingers—“not even two days and

—”

“And nothing. Last night, Blaze...it wasn't just...*nothing*. You understand? Look, I'd tell you 'I'm not that kind of guy' but, well, maybe I am. Sort of. But with you it was different. And I don't know what it means, I just want you to know that I was sincere there with you on that bed.”

Thinking of it makes my bad-boy



cringe for some more.

She trails her finger on the wood, looks down. Always thinking. *About what?*

“Well, I haven’t been with...a lot of guys. God, I can’t believe I’m telling you this. Anyway, I *haven’t* been with a lot of guys. But there was a time when, doing what we did yesterday, was just physical. You know, get high, get it on with someone. Say *sayonara* the next day. That’s not me anymore. So...yeah, for me too—it

was more than just... How do I put this?

*Rubbing.* It was more than that.”

“Glad we’re on the same page.”

“Your turn. To tell me what you wanted to say to me in the car. After you said ‘Never mind.’”

“Nah, let’s skip that.”

“Spit it out.”

I swallow a big gulp of Pepsi, because my throat’s feeling suddenly a

little swollen. “Well, when you looked at me in the car and said I started *this*”—I gesture back and forth between us like she did earlier—“I flashed back...to last night. And, your eyes, well, they made me hot, Blaze. And I wanted to jump you. Right there in the car. All the way. That’s what I wanted to tell you.”

She says nothing for a second. I see the sweat glistening from her brow. From the talk? The workout? “Do you wanna

jump me now?”

The Pepsi's empty when I try take a cooling sip. “I wanna jump you all the time.”

-7-

Looking down at the can, I pretty much miss the fact that she moves out from behind the counter. I look up to see only a budget *Frigidaire* where she was a moment ago. Then I feel an unsteady

hand on my sleeved arm—the tat sleeve.

She grabs it, looks at the inside.

*LIVE IN THE NOW*. She traces it with her finger and it tickles like a mofo. It also makes me horny as a mofo. I put the empty can down and crush it a little, unwittingly. My mind's not oblivious to the sex-talk we just had, before she so delicately started lighting fires on my pores with her bright purple nails, and now—

*Oh. Holy. Christ.*

Her tongue's on my upper arm—  
the inside of it, on the *W* of *NOW*—and  
I almost hear the shudder as it courses  
down my head and back. I wanna grab  
her and rip her top off and take her pants  
off and wrap her in my arms and legs. I  
feel the Pepsi can crush even further  
under my grip and decide to let it go; at  
least it's empty, lest we suddenly needed

to get involved in some serious cleaning of her pine floors because of my agitated physical state!

Her tongue keeps dancing down my tat, down every letter, tracing lines on one of the most sensitive parts of the body. I hold myself back, because as much as I'd like to let my testosterone take her and push her up against this counter, what she's doing is so unbelievably sincere and romantic that I

realize I'd be a fool to do it. I realize it like an anchor to the head.

I grab the edge of the counter. When she gets to my wrist, I decide to get off the stool because I need to *move*! My legs thrum, my heart puts on boxing gloves and starts punching. I'm so fired up that the stool falls with a clang as I get off it.

It doesn't faze her. She twirls and



swirls with the most exquisite tongue I've ever come across in the entire universe. And I know that's a hyperbole, but I'm in that ninth cloud you only read about, baby. Mother *fuck*!—I'm on number nine-thousand right now!

She eases herself back. Her back touches the counter. She tugs my arm so that my body presses against her.

And this is when she slides her hands against the back of my shirt. And

presses her forehead to my chest.

The intimacy of it is like a sharp  
axe through my head.

I actually feel my heart skip a beat.  
Like, *really*—one beat. For goddamn real.

-8-

I start kissing her head, the shaved  
part, on her right—my left. Because that's  
the part that drives me wild. The  
prickling of the stubs of hair on my

tongue makes me see hazy images of lust and desire in my watering eyes. I don't know where this is going, how far I can push it. I don't know how far I can push *her*.

Although I would not say her kisses and her tongue on my skin (*My GOD!*) was unconfident, I also wouldn't call it Stripper at a Nightclub confident. The kisses were intimate, the kind of intimacy you get only after months of

being together with someone.

Passionate. The fire-in-the-eyes kind.

And Fearful. A fear I can tell—by the gentle quivers of her fingertips, the slightest hesitations as her tongue sometimes fails to touch mine—that there's a darkness there. A black hole that she feels she could fall into at any moment, pulling everything she knows

with her.

In a *snap*.

I put my other hand behind her head, because I *know* that damned fear. I *know* it. I've felt it, walked in the sewers with it. I've tasted its foulness and swum in its filth. Although no words are spoken, I want her to know this. I want her to know that I, too, *know*.

She takes the cue on my kisses moving down to her neck and eases her

hands up my back.

I groan, trying to release something. But it's no good. I've passed the edge, and I need something else. I'm too scared to take it from her. So I let it ride, feeling each of her fingertips—her *nails*—like a blade to my skin. Each one calling to me, telling me to follow my instincts and do what men and women have been doing since the beginning of

time.

And to do it with her. *Now!*

“I’m too scared to take this further with you,” I admit. “I...don’t know what you’re used to. And I don’t want to screw this up. I *really* don’t want to screw this up.”

Her body clenches up as I ask her.

“Just...not sex,” she says. “I...I’m sorry...I’m just not ready for that. But...don’t hold back otherwise.” She

moves in on my neck. And the way she does it tells me she wants me as badly as I want her.

Or more.

Our lips collide. A maelstrom of mutual urgency. Her cries are pleas. *Pleas to be released from the blackened pits life throws us into sometimes.*

I'm sure my groans betray this as well. And it soon muddles itself up in my



mind: *Who* needs whom more?

The blood in my veins is a rushing river, my heartbeat is the pace of galloping horses—their asses branded and chilly thrown on the wounds. Impatiently, thirsty lips fighting and scrambling, I undo her belt. I fight with her jeans button, a battle which it's unfortunately winning. Pulling on it brings her waist forward to me like she was made of feathers. Her hands gc

below and help me and the relief of it—the *confirmation* of her telling me, *Yes, go there, touch me there*—is enough to make this button's stubbornness seem like Lucifer himself laughing at me. And then, after an age, it snaps open.

And so does her zip.

And my fingers slide up into her wonderfully sodden and slicked crevice.

The burst of moisture on my hand weakens every defense I have. Even *I* groan at its feel on my fingers. She groans as well, writhes, twists, *impales* her forehead into my chest as my hand plies her below. Her pelvis starts rocking under my hand. *Down*, she pushes.

*Oh, god, this is SO hot.*

Nails drive into my back, bringing my pelvis closer to hers so that my hand

—the one inside her—is very literally being crushed between us.

*And my boy down there starts screaming.*

Her teeth bite into my tee, just catching some of my nipple underneath. It hurts like a bastard, but, for one *microscopic* second, it actually takes my mind off...*that*.

But the moment flies out the window with a moan so guttural, so earthy and primal, from her, that for one

blissful instant, there is nothing.

Nothing but us.

And her exploding body on my  
hand.

**-10-**

Think of the first pink petals falling  
off a cherry tree after they bloom.

Think of that scene in your favorite  
movie, a setting sun gilding a  
skyscrapered city to a glorious backdrop

of violins and groaning cellos. Two sets of eyes meeting across an impossible distance, blocked by a throng of frenzied work-goers. And the owners of those eyes just *knowing*.

Think of that first snowfall, of that first snowflake, falling, drifting, twirling in the sky and, then, landing precisely on the tip of your nose.

Yeah, I think you get how I'm feeling about Blaze right now...

My right arm clamps her tiny body to mine while her own body shatters against me. My left hand supports her below. In the end, she's still. An inward breath of hers manifests itself as a quick wheeze.

And still, I hold her.

My need has fallen to the backseat. Lost somewhere. Gone. Disappeared into

a world that probably transcends the physical. I even feel my hard-on settle. As if that were possible!

But, yet, here it is.

My tee is drenched, especially where her head now rests.

And I am amazed.

We share a moment of united silence. I ease my hand out from inside her, and put it behind her back.

I feel the weight of her cheek on



my heart as it beats. I swear to god I can even hear that beat's thundering echoes in this empty room.

The world starts to swirl. And we're in the center of it.

Don't ask me to explain that. Because I sure as fuck don't know what it means myself.

Just like I don't know what the hell it is I'm feeling right now.

Except that I like it.

The middle's always good...

# SEVEN

## THE WOLVES

-1-

*Blaze Ryleigh*

The rush is intense. It's crazy. It's the wildest roll in the history of Molly rolls. It's inside me, bubbling in my blood, making my heart rush, my skin sweat. My breathing faster than a speedcore Dance Beat.

Standing here, as his hand moves out from me and to my back, then holds me—a staggering *thirty-four or so* hours since I met him—I'm starting to admit of the possibility of *Love* between us. But let me tell you, I don't use that word lightly. I mean, this is the pure-grade stuff. Spike it once and never live to tell the tale, you understand? This is the hundred percent shit, “the good shit;” the wickedest,

baddest, *deadliest* Aunt Hazel you ever thought of sticking on a spoon and chasing like the Bengal Tiger that it is.

His touches send chills over my skin the likes of which no Speed Pill ever came close to.

I'm mesmerized by his smile, his eyes, his strength. By *him*—the real man underneath all that veneer. *A broken man*, I believe.

Like me.

I'm hooked on him. Hooked on  
our Mutual Meth

And I'm loving it.

You always love the drug when  
you're on it...

-2-

I stand, held by his arms, until I  
can't stand any more. He zips up my  
pants, does up the top button. Does up  
my belt. I put my hand to his clothed

crotch, to rub him, and he says in my ear, “It’s OK.” Then he kisses me.

It sends chilled firebolts down my side.

I feel acutely aware of myself, as if nude, but not like it had been with...*that other guy*. With him, after he’d done the same thing—nominally, because what Declan and Tolek did are worlds apart—I had felt...dirty. I’d felt...*invaded* even.

With Deck, I simply feel open.

Bare.

And willingly so.

*I'm here. And I'm open to you. And I've let down all my defenses. So do what you will with me. And if you hurt me, there's nothing I can do about it. Because I've let you in. And I'm gonna keep letting you in for as long as you wanna stay...*

We move to my sofa-bed and lie on it, lights now off, bright moonlight



washing over my wooden floors, and over our linked bodies. He lies beside me, hand clasped around mine, stretched down below.

It's a position I already feel I need more than that first breath of air in the morning.

It must be around one or two A.M. when he says to me, "Blaze, I think I should go."

My stomach clenches. My hand

tightens around his fingers. “No. Please don’t.” I pull him toward me.

He kisses me, and then again.

Soon, his hand’s inside me once more. *Oh, yes.*

He takes me to climax. But this time, when I rub him back, he doesn’t say no.

I push him over the edge.

And there’s something piercingly

poetic about the way he shudders under my hand, his lips quivering under mine, while his arm holds me to him like a glass of water to a man in the desert.

### -3-

I wake up to a kiss, soft and yearning.

With my eyes still closed, I wrap my arms around his neck.

“Now I really do need to go.”

I open my eyes but: “It’s so dark.”

“It’s five-thirty.”

“Wow. I can’t remember the last time I got up this early.”

“I need to work. Got three moves today. That’s twelve hundred bucks. Then we need to train again later—it’s off-season but we can’t let our fitness slip. And...well, I’d also like to see you. If...you have time? Tonight?”

I can't stop the smile forming on my face. "Yes, I'd like to see you tonight. But don't think of putting me anywhere near that gym. Every muscle in my body aches."

He runs a gentle hand across my cheek, doesn't speak.

There's only one thing I'd like to do with Declan. *One*. And a little voice in my head tells me that I shouldn't be

doing that so early. That relationships are more than that. That they should be slow, and planned. *You shouldn't jump into them so quickly!* my mom had once said to me.

That same voice also tells me that Mamah is alone. That she had a perfectly good chance to be with a man who loved her, right here, and who could provide for her. *It's different when you get older, Błażej,* she also said.

Every cell inside me fights these

voices. As if there is something fundamentally wrong with their logic. As if their logic is all that is wrong with the world and every sociological and ideological problem within it. Because *all I want is you, Declan. You, now, in this bed.*

“My place again?” I say.

He grins, and his cheeks go rosy.

He moves down to kiss me. It lights my lungs up. Sultry, hot air. “Mmmmmm,” I

moan. I wrest myself away from him and lie on my hand, facing the other direction. If I look at him any longer, he won't be moving anything today, and I'll miss my meeting at eleven. "I think you'd better go now or else I'll hold you here all day."

When his warm hand rubs down my tatted arm, my eyes close as I wait for the inevitable touch of his lips to my skin.

That touch arrives, soft and hot. And down below, it moistens me up like



a crashing wave. I inhale deeply, exhale slowly.

When he does leave, I take a shower. A cold one. An extremely cold one. And when that's done, I'm *still* thinking of him. I'm thinking of nothing else, actually.

And that's bad.

Because life isn't only about a boy.

Clubs feel different in the day. They're colder. And the smoke in them is stale. In the day, you see rips and tears on the faux-leather couches. Couches which, under black light, look like nothing less than god's gift to his people.

In the day, you see stains. Tables have scratches, and gum peeks out from underneath their edges.

*Sacrament* is like the Brooklyn

Underground's equivalent of the huge and glorious *Club Pacha* in the city. Massive and thrumming. An underworld of decadence. There's only one dance floor. Leather couches along the walls. Stairs on either side leading up to a mezzanine with lots of other, more comfy, couches. Couches made for lying down. Perfect for two. At night, blue lights and red flames on the walls make it look like the bee's knees of

overindulgence. Now, it just looks like the gutted warehouse that it once was.

And essentially still is.

The meeting was changed from Randy's DJ gear store to *Sacrament*. "You'll see when you get here," Xavier told me.

Randy greets me with open arms inside the club. "Heaven-Leigh!" He hugs me warmly.

Xavier sits at a couch a few feet away, smoking. Dressed in a cream designer suit. He gets up and gives me a hug as well, not as warm, purely for form's sake. "Blaze."

He holds me back by arm's length, eyes me down with a Mr. Hyde smirk. A flashback hits me: Our backs against a wall in Savannah's apartment as Xavier and I sat with our toes pointing up at the

ceiling. She and Patryk on the couch, her pants to her knees while she giggled and he kissed her *there*. I was so zoned out that all I registered was smoke flowing from Xavier's mouth next to me like a dragon. And then, as if it were only an instant later, that same mouth of his licking me. *There*.

I knew little about boys in those days. And there's more history to me and Xavier besides drugs. *Mountains of it*. I've

known him since I was five and he was eight. One thing led to another. I can't blame that I was totally zonked out when it happened, because I know I played along with the obvious flirting even when I wasn't. I believed I felt something for him back then. I believed a lot of different things back then. *That drugs fuck with your mind* wasn't one of them. So I widened for him, and pushed him into me

with my hands, deeper...

*Urgh.*

“Xavier.” I keep my response as cold as possible.

“Keeping well?”

“Fine.”

Randy, smiling like he just won a game of high-stakes poker, says, “Heaven-Leigh—”

“Blaze,” I say. “Heaven-Leigh’s my stage name.”



“No problem. Blaze. Xavier will be joining us for our meeting. Is that OK with you? It’s only fair, seeing as he’s the one who discovered you.”

Oh, so *that’s* his pitch. My skin cools. Xavier smiles wickedly. “Is he with the label?”

“Oh, Blaze, we’re not in label discussions right now. We’re...just seeing where things might go with you.”

*You mean, how he can best use me to make a profit?*

My skin bristles...but I hold my cool. Best to hear them out. I'm still at the stage where I can pull out. *That's also what I said when I smoked my first joint.*

“So, Xavier here tells me *yooze* used to be good friends at one stage.”

“At one stage.” I burn Xavier down with a stare, try and reach the Jekyll

inside him. Because I'm not in the mood for his shit right now. He's right that I need a break—desperately, probably—but he's wrong if he thinks I owe him anything because of it. “But then we had a fallout. Call it *irreconcilable differences*. Isn't that right, Xavier?”

His smirk softens a little. His amber eyes—*Savva's eyes*—rage with an emotion I don't quite place. I wish it was regret, but I know it isn't. Sometimes I

think I'm the only one who regrets her death.

Maybe Patryk does. Maybe. But regret and “feeling sorry for something” are far from the same thing. I know Patryk’s sorry for it, but *regret*?

Xavier looks up at Randy. “It’s true, Randy. We had a fallout.” Then he turns to me, and, as a firm warning, “But that’s all in the *past*, isn’t it, Blaze?”

Sensing the tension, Randy says, “Blaze, we have some bubbly here.” He turns to show me a table behind him. Four glasses set up, and a bottle of *Krug*. “Not the most expensive. But not the cheapest, either. Consider it a thank you from me to you.”

OK, he’s trying to butter me up. I can deal with that. Let’s just see where it goes.

We sit. “Who’s the fourth glass for?” I ask.

As if on cue, a door opens up in the back. The man who comes out is tall and strongly built. He has a mane of golden hair that looks like an eighties shampoo commercial. His light brown eyes match his disco shirt.

And he’s tall. *Really* tall. “Randy, honey. Let’s go in here.”

Randy looks at Xavier and raises an eyebrow. “Well, Blaze. It seems Gavin’s more excited to meet you than I expected.”

We get up, bubbly in hand. Xavier grabs the fourth flute. When we enter the door that Gavin the Golden Haired is holding open for us, I realize there’s more to *Sacrament* than meets the eye.

Much more.

Like, cages and chains more.

And a whole new world beneath  
the one that's apparent. A world I fought  
so hard to leave. And which I'm slowly  
getting roped back into again...

-5-

“It's not a *secret* club, Blaze,” says  
Gavin the Golden Haired—owner of  
*Sacrament*, including its “not secret club”  
that we're currently sitting in. He lights



up a smoke on a cigarette holder, crosses his leg and exhales slowly. With one hand tucked under his elbow, close to his chest, he says, “It’s a *liberal* section to the club, let us say.” He flourishes a hand to the cages, the red ambient lights, the wall-chains. “And it’s on the right side of the law. There’s fire exits and all that jazz. It’s just...not everyone’s cup of herbal tea, shall we say. It pulls in a special clientele. High-rollers. Men and woman who like

things the way they used to be. You know, before the Giuliani apocalypse. That motherfucker really screwed things up for those of us who played it straight. Then again”—he takes a drag, exhales—“Gatien’s tax evasion didn’t help much. But, anyway, I’m probably boring you with this shit. People my age tend to reminisce about the nineties a lot. Not so, Randy?”

Randy smiles wistfully. “Those were the good ol’ days.” In his Sri Lankan-Brooklyn mix, he says *Those* like *Doze*.

Gavin smiles, eyes glinting. “Actually, if I’m honest with you, I remember more the *Club 57* days. Orgies with Madonna and Cyndi Lauper and Fab Five Freddy. Hoh! Those were the days. This was before AIDS and that shit of

course. How I didn't catch it is beyond me. Anyway, good ol' days. But that's because I'm the oldest one at this table. But amongst us girls, no one's gonna let that slip, now are you?"

Randy and Xavier shake their heads.

I say nothing.

After a bone-cracking moment of silence, Gavin leans forward and steeples his fingers. The cigarette dangles from

them like someone leaning off the edge of the Brooklyn Bridge. “Blaze, here’s the simplicity of it. You have talent. But you need friends. Talent will get you nowhere. The people at this table will.” I swallow. “Now, it’s no secret that a residency at an establishment like mine will have you voted up into *DJ Mag’s Top 100* almost by default. And then you’ll go off and make lots of money and chat with Paul van Dyk

about how bad drugs are for your body.”

This elicits a cackle of laughter from Gavin and Xavier.

I don't laugh.

Gavin notices and goes quickly serious. “But that's also if you DJ out *there*.” He points at the door we walked in through. “To get out there, you have to go through here. My rules. It's just the way I like to do it. It builds trust. And, to get out there, my regulars here have to

vote you out—or, vote you *in*, shall we say. You get voted in when you're good. I have very influential people who come in here for a good time." He looks at Randy. "It's a pity old Giuliani never came here!" And another set of cackles from him and Xavier.

I can't help but notice that, although he does laugh, Randy's heart's really not into any of the "jokes."

“So, what I can offer you is the following.” He raises an index finger. “*One* gig. Four hours. Two Saturdays from now. You’ll be the main DJ. Randy played me a recording of your set at *House Market*.” He leans back, exhales and fans himself. “Ooh, girl. *Hot*. But my crowd’s a little different. We need something a little more”—he waves his hand in the air—“*sensual*. Think: Paul Emmanuel’s



remix of *Give it to me Right*. Or Gus Gus's *David. To be Real*, by Lady Cop. *Love for Love*—Robin S. Maybe the greatest House song every made. You know the tunes?"

"Every one of them."

He raises his precisely plucked golden eyebrows like I'm bullshitting.

"It's my job to know music. Do you want me to sing them for you?" I'm feeling cockier now.

He almost grins, waves his hand

lightly over his face like there's a fly there.

“That won't be necessary. Those tracks have that rolling electric bass. And that gut-ripping sound that makes you *know* you're in a club, baby. It's very...” Again, he waves the hand. “What is that word, damnit?” He fixes a hard look on me, and his joviality is replaced by straight business: “*Carnal*. Your mixes have some of it. Not enough, but they do have it. It's

not your focus. Your focus is a little darker, perhaps even a little Goth—not in sound, but in feeling. That’s all good, but my crowd likes *carnality* in their sound more than moroseness. Did you know your mixes are *carnal*, Blaze?”

It’s as if Randy and Xavier disappear from either side of me, and this man—who I still can’t figure out if I can trust or not—is talking straight to me. Talking the straight dope. *Talking music*

*like he knows it.* “No, uhm, sir, I didn’t know that.” I take a small sip of the bubbly to wet my lips.

“Sir?” He chortles loudly. Then, gone as fast as it appeared, he’s serious again. “Yes, your music has that. And more. But don’t let it get to your head. And, for my people, you need to cool off on the dark, and bring in a bit more of the sensuality into the mixes. The

*carnality.”*

“I can do that.”

“I’m sure you can. Otherwise Randy here would not have suggested you to me. So, Blaze, one gig. My guests will then let me know if they like you. If yes we’ll give you a few more sets here. Not necessarily every week. Pay...well...we can discuss that. You’re no top DJ, so...”

I love it when people tell me I’m “no top DJ,” like they’re trying to

convince me of it.

“...say, eight hundred for the first gig. That’s way more than many resident DJs make.”

It really isn’t bad. Not great for what I heard guys make here, but it’s not bad. And add it to Randy’s extremely generous two Gs, and my January is looking pretty good.

“What’s in it for you guys?” I look

at Randy and Xavier, not expecting any particular one to answer first.

Randy looks at Xavier in his gangsta suit. Xavier doesn't budge or move, not even his facial expression changes.

Randy coughs, shifts in his seat. "Blaze, as Gavin here pointed out: You need friends in this business. At the moment, I'm making nothing off of this. But I'd like to sign you for a record deal

in a few months. Provided people stay interested in you. I don't want to commit to anything yet. But I hope that, when your name does start getting bigger, that you will give me top dibs before anyone else, no matter how delicious their offers might be.”

Randy's chestnut eyes are warm and sincere. More sincere than any of the others in here. It feels like sitting with a



pack of wild wolves when I look at the other two. “I give you my word on that, Mr. Randy.”

“Just Randy, Blaze. Just Randy.”

Gavin throws in his last two cents:

“The same friends that take you up, are the friends who can bring you down.”

He says nothing else.

Neither do I.

The silence is cut by a dude appearing from a curtain in the back.

(Another thing clubs are in the day, is quiet.) The dude's footsteps are like a bass drum. He's got a buzz cut, and is pretty trim, but sinewy—low body-fat. He's holding a folded laptop under his arm. He walks up to the table and, from the look on his face, it looks like someone just spat on his mother. He comes over to Gavin, stands next to him. Gavin doesn't even spare him a glance. "Yes?"

“I’m done.”

Blasé, Gavin says, “Brenda will wire you the remaining funds, minus three hundred for the damages. We warned you, Mad-Ass.”

“Yeah, whatever.” This so-called “Mad-Ass” (who does look pretty mad) glares at me and says, “You the new one? This ‘Heaven’ babe everyone’s talking about?”

My skin goes cold.

“Go ahead, Blaze,” says Gavin.

“Mad-Ass here won’t bite. He’s all talk.”

Mad-Ass clenches his teeth. “He given you the ‘friends’ speech yet?”

I look at Gavin. His face evinces nothing. Cold. All business. I nod at Mad-Ass.

“Yeah, well, don’t forget that the guys at the top are not the only friends

you need. Actually, they're not friends at all." The man's voice is a deadly growl. "Randy," he says. "Xavier." Then, back at me, "Watch yourself. One day there'll be another Heaven-Leigh, just like you, and you'll be out on your ass. Just like you're putting me out on my ass!" He points at me, almost leaning over the table.

I swallow, wanting to plead innocence. Because, really, *what the fuck did I actually do?*

Almost too bored to move, Gavin the Golden Haired flops a tired hand at Mad-Ass. “Oh, Mad-Ass. Whatever. Blaze here is just filling a gap. You were out a long time ago. Now, get out of here before I have security escort you out.”

Mad-Ass looks at me with a stare that probably kills rabbits when it's not aimed at young women. “*Watch* yourself!”

He stomps out, and the door clangs

shut. I actually jump off my seat a bit.

“DJ Mad-Ass Hat.” Gavin sighs, folds his arms. “Lives up to his name. A has-been. Never played with enough heart. Besides, he got in too deep with Helen.”

Gavin notices my confusion.

“Big H? Smack?” *Abhh. Auntie Hazel.* “That shit doesn’t mix well with DJs. I hope you’re not into that stuff.”

I look over at a fidgety Xavier. *You*

fucking *asshole*! I think.

“Uh, no, I don’t do...H.” I almost said *drugs*, but I decide not to go there right now with the current crowd—dealer on my left; definite user, Randy, on my right, even if only casually.

The meeting ends and Gavin stands up tall, bares his chest out, takes in a big breath. “OK, Blaze. Two weeks from now, Saturday.” He shakes my hand. *It’s*



*not cold like I expected, but his eyes are cold.*

Gavin stays behind, the rest of us walk out.

I half expect Mad-Ass to be waiting for me in the main dance-floor section—the “non-underground” section next door—but he’s not.

Outside, Randy looks down at me with his pudgy and friendly face. His ponytail flicks wildly in the wind. My own hair does the same. “Did you and Declan

talk at all on Saturday?”

I’m stunned for a second, until I recall Deck mentioning that he and Randy know each other. That they were a “mutual ear” for each other.

“Uhm, yeah”—I cough—“we went to *Tom’s* for a bit, and I hung out with some of his friends.”

“Trev and Skate?” Randy’s face lightens. Color actually returns to his

caramel skin.

“Yeah.”

“Oh.” He smiles a little, and it’s so genuine that I start to feel a little embarrassed. I look down at my Skechers. “Well, no point in me hanging around. Good work, Blaze.” He shakes my hand. Then Xavier’s. “Xavier. Later.”

After Randy’s gone, Xavier lights up a smoke. And I decide enough is enough: “So, what’s in it for you,

Xavier?”

“At the moment, nothing. But, you know, maybe later...”

*It seems everyone wants a piece of me  
“later.”*

“Client of yours? This Mad-Ass?”

He looks away. “What’s it to you?”

I clench my teeth. “You know, Xavier, if I hadn’t known you all my life I’d have turned you—” I stop, not

wanting to go there.

“What, turned me *in*? Is that what you were gonna say?”

*Take a breath, Blaze.* Take a damn breath.

“Whatever, X. Just...damn it...I wish you’d fucking— Urgh, just forget it.”

He turns on me, puts a finger between my eyes. “Look here, Blaze. She did dat shit because *you* did it! I just became a means once she was already in

it, comprende? So don't fuckin come to me and tell me *I'm* da one who killed my baby sister!"

*You gave her the H, you fuckturd. That was all you. I never touched that shit!*

Hot magma courses through my veins. I wanna kill him now. I wanna take my hands and wrap them around his neck and just, fucking, *squeeze!*

I breathe deeply, get myself under

control.

*Because who's fault was it really, at the end of the day?*

Xavier backs off a little. His eyes start quivering.

“L—look, Xavier. Just...” I exhale. “Forgetting the past, living only ‘in the now,’ I appreciate it, OK? The gig, the opportunity, I appreciate it. And if you get some dough out of it higher up the line, whatever. I guess it’s the business.”

The rage in his eyes chills. But he doesn't apologize.

He flicks his smoke across the street where it lands underneath a poster ("OCCUPY WALL STREET! JAN 27! WE ARE THE 99 PERCENT!")

Coolly, with swagger, he stalks off in his fancy loafers.

Standing there, wind chilling my cheeks, I can't help get the distinct feeling



that I've just been gangbanged by two of the three guys I just met with.

Oh, wait, there was also DJ Mad-Ass—so, gangbanged *and* shot.

-6-

At home, I call Mamah.

“Błażej! Everything OK? Why you call now—on Monday?”

The only two words I know in Polish are *dziadzia* (grandpa) and *kochanie*,

which is what Mamah always calls me. So we always speak in English. “No, uhm, Mamah, I just wanted to let you know that I’m doing really well. Uhm, I made a lot of extra money this month.”

“Oh, Błażej, that is good. I am so proud of you!”

“Yeah, so I’ll be sending a little extra over for you—”

“No! Błażej. That money is yours. We are fine here.”

“Mamah, as I said, I made quite a bit extra—”

“Błażej, you are not doing illegal work, are you?”

“No, no. I DJed at a big party on the weekend. Made two thousand dollars.”

“TWO THOUSAND DOLLARS! My god, Błażej!” She hollers over in Polish to my gramps. I think I hear

coughing. He says something. Then, some more hollering. “*Dziadzia* says he always knew you could do it! Wow! So, you make this every month now?”

“Uhm, no. I mean, maybe. I have another gig set up for next Saturday. I’ll make eight hundred from that one. In addition to my usual gigs.”

My usual gigs don’t pay me shit, but she doesn’t need to know that.

“WOW!” She really extends the

word. Her praise makes me feel better. I think that's what moms are really for: To help you forget about the *Skitz-Os* and *Mad-Ass-Hats* of the world.

“So, uhm, it's no problem at all to send five hundred through this month.”

“Oh, Błażej. No, we cannot—”

“Mamah! Please. I don't need it!” *A small lie, no harm. And there is some truth in it.*

She's silent. Then, "We will pay you back, Błażej. I promise—"

"Mamah, why must we go over this every time? It's no biggie for me. I'm doing well here." I try my best to sound convincing. "Who knows, maybe one day you guys can even move back here?"

Silence again, deafening this time, as it waits to be filled with an answer I know isn't coming—an answer which

never comes.

Mamah's voice is sad when she speaks again. The kind of sadness a parent must feel when unable to give her child what she wants. "Błażej, you know we cannot come back to America. We struggled too many years. Poland is different now, *kochanie*. Now that it is in EU, there is businesses opening, people are getting work."

"Yeah, I guess," I croak.

“Błażej, thank— We appreciate.”

In other words, *We really do need the dough.*

“OK, Mamah, I just wanted to give you the good news. Tell *dziadzia* I say hello.”

She stays silent.

“Mamah?”

“Yes, yes, I do it.”

“Mamah, everything OK?”

“Y—yes, of course!” She’s fooling



no one.

“Mamah, *don't* lie to me! I'm thousands of miles away. I *need* to know if something's wrong or else I'll be thinking about it all day and it'll affect *my work*.” I emphasize that because I know she listens when I talk about “my work.”

“Is just...sweetie...*dziadzia* is not feeling so good. The lung infection is back.”

“Can't he take antibiotics or

something?”

“Yes...yes...we give him that.”

“O—OK, Mamah. I’m sure it’ll get better. I’m wiring the money right now.”

“OK,        Błażej.        Congrat—  
Congratulations again. Mamah must go.  
Bye!”

She puts the phone off. And I could swear that was a sob I heard just before she clicked off.

I wire a grand instead.

-7-

You'll note I never said shit to Mamah about being back in touch with Xavier again, the brother of my best friend who I took drugs with and who ODeD a year ago?

I'm sure you can figure out why that is.

# EIGHT

## HATERS GONNA HATE

-1-

*Declan Cox*

“Mother~~hell~~!” Trev stares out at the city across the East River. The luxury condo we’re in sports large windows, a high ceiling, plush rug. Not to mention the top-grade furniture we’ve been moving into the place all morning. As his

eyes look around the apartment, it's like he's rolling. "Mother...*fuck!* Deck. This isn't Brooklyn. I mean, you pulled a Marty McFly up on me in here, didn't you?"

"I wonder myself sometimes, bro. Now you gonna help with this couch, or what?"

"I'm almost scared to touch it. Somehow I think the couch is worth more than my entire life savings."

“You have no life savings.”

“Thanks. Rub it in.”

We move the cream couch over against the wall so it'll catch the sun from the large terrace doors. “I don't know exactly where she wants it...so...just leave it here. That's the last of it. You've successfully moved your first apartment. There's always a job waiting for you here if you screw up your college education.”

“Har har, funny.” Trev looks at the mammoth flatscreen. “Incredible. When we picked it up at the Lower East Side, I figured they were moving *down* in the world by coming here.”

“Yip, they’re moving up now. *Up* to Brooklyn.”

He laughs. “Send em over to my place after this, then they’ll get a taste of what it’s really like to live in Brooklyn.”

I fall on the couch, my arms burning from all the lifting we've been doing. "Dunno, bro. You've seen what Williamsburg looks like now. It's like freaking yuppieville in there now. Bushwick's not far behind. Who's to say East New York won't be next?"

He snorts an incredulous laugh.

"Because East New York's predominantly *black*, Deck."



“And?”

“Black neighborhoods never get gentrified. They need a place to put us.”

“Har har back to you, dumbass. Anyway, it’s the artists that bring the market value up. Then the big condo men come in and kick em all out like roaches. East New York doesn’t have no graphic artists there for shit. Plenty of musicians, rappers, but not enough *pre-yuppie* clout.”

“And plenty of gangs.” He turns to me. “Hey, do you always chill on the client’s furniture when you’re done lifting it?”

I lift a tired head. “Just a little wiped today.”

He smirks.

“It’s not like that! Well...sort of.”

“She was hot, homes.”

“Mrs. Watkins?”

He laughs again. “Her, too. The Yuppie blonde for the Yuppie condo.”

“And don’t forget the Yuppie husband.”

Trev’s bent over himself laughing, and I’m doing the same, when we hear the cough. We look up. Mrs. Yuppie Watkins is leaning against the doorjamb in her cream pencil dress (which has betrayed—more than once today—that she likes to

go at it commando, both top and bottom.) She's sipping a drink from a straw, umbrella and everything. If she wasn't smirking, I'd be panicking. You don't talk about clients like that. No matter what you think of them. But, well, having Trev around has brought out the worst in me today. We've commented on everything from her ass-length straight blonde hair to her athletic legs to, finally—and absolutely *guaranteed* to happen

when you put two guys together—  
whether her C-cup is truly *au naturel* or a  
masterpiece of man-made engineering  
(“Deck, if it wasn’t natural, it would be a  
D-Cup. Why pay for it if you don’t take it  
all the way?”) We’ve ogled her legs,  
discussed the sexual performance of her  
lawyer husband (or, in our typical male  
imaginings, his lack thereof), pondered  
whether or not she’d be willing to cheat

on him...

Yeah, uhm, OK, we're guys, and I think you get the point. Let's move on...

I decide it's time to grovel: "Er, Mrs. Watkins, I'm sorr—"

Her smile goes wider, and she sucks her drink down more loudly, making sure to openly flex her lips outward. Still looking at the straw, mouth barely away from it, she says, "Mr. *Cocks*...is it?" She bounces off the doorjamb, catwalks over

to me.

“Yes, ma’am.”

She giggles. “Please, call me Tatiana.”

I catch her—very obviously—eyeing my pumped-up biceps, especially the colorful one on my right.

“You boys don’t need to worry about me. This *yuppie* woman is very happy with your”—she sucks the straw

again, even though the drink is nearly empty—"services. Now, what do I owe you?"

"Fift—fifteen hundred, ma'am." *So I changed the price after I saw their Mercedes. Sue me. She never asked me for a quote beforehand, just said she'd read "great things" about my services on Yelp. And have you seen their TV?*

She does the equivalent of a female swagger on her way over to a cupboard,



then bends over...*slowly*...and lingers at a bottom drawer. I look away, because I'm not gonna screw things up with Blaze in *any* way. I know I just met her, but I'm gonna give it the full chance it deserves.

Trev, on the other hand, has broken out in a sweat. And his eyes ain't goin nowhere!

From the corner of my eye, I see her walk back over to me. The way her

tight pencil dress hugs her curves is not helping my resolve. She holds out a wad of cash, “Here’s seventeen hundred. Consider it a tip.” I almost tell her that I overcharged her already as it is, but I swallow my tongue. Business is Business.

“Thanks, ma’am.”

With a glint in her eyes, she says, “May I show you the terrace? Or”—she flicks a lascivious glance over at Trev —“do you boys have somewhere else to

go?”

I can almost hear Trev begging me to stay, if only for the view. And I ain't talkin' about Manhattan. “Er, sure, ma'am. But, we have another two moves to do today, so it'll have to be fast.”

“Oh.” She sucks the straw again. The drink is most definitely emptier than empty now. She puts it down on the glass table and, while still looking at it, bent

over just enough for the double meaning to be clearly there, she says, “I can do *fast*. No problem.” She straightens up. I swear it looks like she actually pumped her tits out an inch while doing it. Then, casually, easily, her hand makes it over to my tatted bi!

I won't BS you here. I'd love to say, *Oh, yeah, I'm such a grand guy that I gingerly take her hand off my arm and politely tell her that my damsel is waiting for me to place a coat*

*on the puddle she's about to walk over.* I'd love to say that shit. But of prime importance in a tale is honesty. So this is what really happens:

When her hand caresses my tatted bi, I feel some primordial part of me jump her right here on her *Wundaweve* Carpeting. *Where would we be without imagination?* I actually even feel myself inch toward her, like my cock's taken over

all the blood from my brain and stuck me in a momentary stupor. *Oh, wait, that's precisely what's happened.*

But, dazed as my mind is, it hasn't completely shut down. So, instead, I shift a little left, and break contact smoothly with the hand.

She looks at me “innocently” in the eyes, cocks her head just slightly to the left. “Mr. *Cocks*, please, it's *Tatiana*. Not *ma'am*.”

*Yes, ma'am.*

She sashays past Trev—who I'm pretty sure will faint soon due to a similar lack of cerebral blood-flow; only worse, because he doesn't have a gorgeous babe waiting for him at home like I do. Tatiana opens up the glass-pane doors to her terrace. Trev's quick on her tail, hypnotized.

Before joining them, I pull out my

Motorola and DM Blaze on Twitter, just to remind myself of her. And to remind myself of how I felt last night with her. My hand on her moist center. Her gentle quake under my body as she climaxed.

And holding her after...

*Yeah, no contest here, I think. There's something...sparkly...about that girl.* And this one—this Mrs. Watkins—well, she is what she is...

DM DJHeavenLeigh: Hey, sexy,



*thinking of you. Got a crazy client this morning*  
*Hope all's good.*

*DM DeclanCoxDWAT: Thinking of*  
*u 2. All's good. Sure. Had a crazy meeting.*  
*Pack o' wolves.*

That worries me...

Outside, on Mrs. Pencil Skirt's  
wrap-around terrace, I find her leaning  
against the wall, head tilted back while  
she laughs at Trevor's no-doubt extremely

pinpointed jokes and stories. As she waves her hand and displays more than necessary neck, her fingers graze lightly over his shoulder.

Trev's a big boy. I mean... *big*. The dude's a monster in the muscle department. And her interest in him is not even remotely disguised.

“Can I get you boys a drink?”

Before I can decline, Trev says,

“Sure. What you got?”

“Well, the apartment block offers room service”—*what!?*—“so, whatever you want.”

I clear my throat. “Uhm, soda for me. I’m driving.”

She scowls, then, looking at Trev, says: “Surely you’re not gonna get a *virgin* drink like that. Are you?”

Trev ponders it a second. He looks over at me and I know he can read my

mind. He says, “Actually, Mizz Watkins, we really do need to get going.”

Wind rushes past my ears. Her eyes flick to the view of Manhattan, her own hair a mad howl straight out of a romantic Hollywood scene. “Well, fine. Mr. Cox—”

“Declan, ma’am—uhm, *Tatiana*.”

“Declan, thanks again for the great service. I’ll certainly be giving your name to all my girlfriends.” She grabs Trev’s

wrist, leans in a little. “*And* yours, honey. I’ll be sure to be watching that *cup* or *bowl* or whatever it is you call it.”

“If we make it there this year,” he says.

“Well, maybe I’ll see if we have it on DVR. My husband’s not much of a sports fan, but he’s got a few things recorded on there. And if you say the last game you won was in December I doubt

it would have been recorded over. It's really a pity you guys can't stay for a drink. Maybe next time..."

On our way out, she grabs my wrist just after Trev's out the door. I turn, and before I know it her chest's touching mine! *What the fuck!?*

She smiles, and waits, not making any further move, *as if she can blame it all on me if something happens...*

I almost fall backwards over myself

as I hightail it outta there.

-2-

“My *GOD*! Are all white women like this in this part of town?”

“It’s the new Upper East Side, bro. Did you see that view?”

“The babe or the skyline?”

I press the elevator button. “The skyline. And, hey, you know she’s marr —”

Trevor *thwacks* me with a backhand on my shoulder! “You *really* think I’d go for a married woman? Besides, I ain’t the one throwin my pussy around to be fetched.”

“Pussy *and* titties *and* tongue. Damn, the freakin woman is on heat or something.”

“Times ten, homes. *Tatiana the Titty Toter*. Seems we were right about lawyers



being all talk and little dick.”

The elevator arrives and we ride it down.

“Deck, she was all *over* you! Did you see how she caressed your art? She was all over those vines, bro.” In a hilariously seductive whisper, he says, “*Mr. Cocks, please, it’s Tatiana.*”

“You didn’t see what she did at the end?”

“No.”

I tell him.

He's laughing so loud when the doors open on the first floor that the prissy woman holding a briefcase outside it scowls.

We get out and I look around, feeling totally out of place in this lobby with all the folk in their suits and fur coats and fancy shoes. "Come, lemme show you something." I've done a few

moves at this condo block before, and I wanna show Trev the facilities.

“The way she said *Cox*, I thought she was damn near sucking you right then and there and I was watching it.”

“It did sound pretty slutty.”

Trev doesn't answer, because we've gotten down to the fitness center area, and I'm not sure what he finds hotter—Mrs. Tatiana Watkins, or the top-of-the-line gear in her building. “Brooklyn. This

ain't Brooklyn.”

“Brooklyn’s the new Black, homes. Now, check this out.” I walk him around the corner to look at the indoor pool. All he can do is stare open-eyed. “They also got a game room, children’s room, golf simulators”—Trev laughs at that one —“bike storage, on-site parking.”

Slowly, he says, “Wow.”

That was pretty much my reaction

the first time I did a move for someone here a few months back (someone several decades older than Mrs. Watkins, but nearly as flirtatious.)

The second time I did a move here, I was still amazed.

“Then you got Pier Six out here—the water park, picnic tables. This is all renovated, bro. It’s a regular old Suburban Heaven right here.” We step outside and look at Brooklyn Bridge Park

with its Hibachi grills and swings. Manhattan looming behind it like a forgotten daughter. “This is the new city, bro. But get this, Trev. These guys”—I point to Mizz Watkins’s Condo building behind us now—“were actually throwing in a free *BMW 528i* for anyone who purchased before the end of last year. I mean, can you freaking believe that?”

“Bullshit.”

“I swear to you. They’re not merely making room for the yups and kicking the rest of us out, they’re downright throwing free cars at them!”

“Deck, you are *so* bullshitting me.”

“Am not. Another realtor did the same shit in two thousand and nine. Only there it was an Audi, not a Beamer. They offered it to the first ten people to lay down two mil for the condo. So, get that,

it's two mil for the condo. Thirty-twoGs for the car. They actually make a profit with that shit."

Trev whistles slowly, staring out at the skyline as if it were a lady in lingerie calling to him. "Two million, huh? Wow. Guess you're gonna come down and live with momma and me again in East New York one of these days, after gentrification makes the rest of Brooklyn completely unaffordable."



“Fuck that shit. Those days are over for me!” Then, also looking at the skyline, I say, “It’s like a woman taking a babydoll off, isn’t it?”

“The view? It’s like a woman with big round titties and a finger in her wet cunt taking a babydoll off, homes.” Trev looks at me. “Well, Deck, two mil’s not impossible.”

“*Pft!* Whatever. Maybe not for a pro

ball player such as yourself. Those scouts and agents still all over you?”

“Like flies. They can go fuck ’emselfes for all I care. I’m getting an education, Deck. Then I’m gonna work myself up slowly and gruelingly up the telecom corporate ladder, and maybe, one day, settle up there”—he points over at the city—“where the prices are probably gonna be more affordable than here!”

I motion to start walking to a

picnic table.

“Don’t we have another two moves?” he asks.

“Sure, but I’ve never been one to miss a strip show.” We sit, eyes still glued to the glorious skyline. “I been working out how I could do it, Trev.”

“Do what?”

“Move. Into a place like this.”

“Two million? It’s a bit of a waste,

don't you think?"

“Not if you're making ten. But I'm serious. I'm gonna do it. I'm not gonna make it on my own. But if I go national hire up a few guys... I've even been thinking about a gimmick, you know. I was thinking...” I feel the smile forming. Embarrassment.

“Oh, no, this is gonna be a Declan idea, I can feel it.”

*He knows me too well.* “Well, imagine

we promote to a niche market, you know?  
Like...” I point up to Mizz Watkins’s  
terrace.

“Like young white woman who like  
flirting with even younger white and  
black boys?”

“We’re *men*, Trev. Not boys.  
But...yes, that’s exactly what I mean.”

He starts laughing slowly. It’s not  
even a laugh, really. It’s like a gently

forming rumble of incredulity. Then he goes serious. “You’re not kidding, are you?”

I shake my head. “Think about it, bro. You call a moving company. They’re either unfriendly and the dude who shows up smokes a cigarette and doesn’t speak English. Or, they’re totally friendly, but you pay an arm and a leg. But the dude who shows up is still some loser smoking a cigarette, wearing overalls with empty

beer cans in the pockets.”

“And you didn’t just charge Mizz Watkins up there the same? *Three* times your going rate?”

“Well, I got my boy working with me these two weeks. I ain’t gonna pay you peanuts. But that’s exactly the point, homes. You think she doesn’t know I just screwed her on the price? If she’d bargained it down, I would’ve gone down

gladly. But she didn't. And why? Because she *wanted* to pay for it! You see, she's got it all. The looks. The money. A rich husband. I'll bet you ten to one that, in a year or two, he's screwing his way up the secretarial ladder. Or down it. You know they're *newly* married? She told me when she first called me for the job."

Trev's eyes bulge. "And she's *already* wanting someone else's cock?"

"Maybe she does. Maybe she



doesn't. I wouldn't know." Then, almost to make sure, I say, "*And neither will you!*"

When Trev tries to thwack me again this time, I move away. "Point is, there's obviously something missing there. Maybe the dude's already screwing around. Maybe she married him knowing he screwed around. Maybe she married him for his money. Hell, I wouldn't know—I never seen the dude.

“But, regardless, she likes to feel special. You know. She’s living on a timebomb. In a few years, she’s gonna start counting wrinkles. Her sex life’s gonna die down—if it ain’t dead yet. She’s gonna start wondering what she did wrong. And, just statistically speaking, women tend to be more faithful than men. So, even if her man *is* going around doing his and everyone else’s secretary,

she probably wouldn't do that herself. But she *will* grab some dude's tatted bicep. Or graze her fingers across a sexy black man's shoulder. Or, hell, maybe even just grab a drink with one of them and, I dunno, *feel special*.

“That's how women cheat. To them, that's like...sick as sin. I mean, sitting and *chatting* to 'a virile young man' is the equivalent of her husband sticking it to someone or having some busty

redhead put her lips around his shriveled shaft.

“For a babe, it’s the make or break of her state of mind—feeling wanted and sexy. You know, some guy comes along, lifts some furniture. Flexes a little more in front of her to make her feel hot or something. Makes a little small-talk. Has a drink on a terrace. The dude takes whatever tip she gives him—”

“And whatever side benefit!”

“Trev! Pay attention!”

“Pfft!”

“Anyway, so the dude gets the tip, I get my fee. Depending on how much in demand that particular stud is, I will charge more for it. I thought: Be damned open about it, you know? Market to single women, married women. Have a website where they can select a preferred mover-

dude—black, white, tall, color of eyes. Photos of muscled dudes. Heck, I even thought of having the guys go out with no shirts—”

That last point sends Trev over the edge. He’s damn near on the floor in stitches.

I’m laughing too, because it *is* funny. And it’s also genius. I know it is. All I need is the cash for it.

“Deck”—he fights for breath

—“Deck, homes”—still laughing, eyes watering now—“Oh, my god! Deck...”

“What!?”

After a minute of catching his breath, he finally gets it out: “Deck, you’re starting a damn escort agency!”

“Asshole!”

“A website where they can pick the dude?”

“Yeah—”

He cracks up. “Homes, I’m just ragging you. It’s definitely...a *niche* market. And a very definite *Declan-Only* idea. But, I gotta hand it to ya, I can see how it could work. Hire up some good looking dudes to help all these single ladies move out. Although...” He puts a finger up, thinking. “...could we also get some babe movers? I mean, I’d love to watch some sexy chicks move *my* furniture!”



It's too much. My stomach hurts from the laughter.

I feel my phone buzz. I pull it out to read the text and the laughter slowly recedes. I turn up to look at Tatiana's terrace. She's there, in a robe now, smoking a cigarette. "Look up."

"Deck, I don't think she's the type who would just *look* at one of your employees. I think she'd do a whole lot

more. *And* tip him afterwards.”

“Tip him? Or *pay* him for his ‘services’?”

“Probably the latter.”

“C’mon, let’s beat it.”

Walking to my truck, Trev asks,

“So, what did the message say?”

I throw him my phone.

He looks at it. His eyebrows rise.

*Tatiana Watkins: Let me be blunt,*

*because hints haven’t worked: I’d fuck you and*

*your friend's brains out if I wasn't married.  
Keep my number, because I might not be for  
much longer.*

Then he says, "I'm writing down  
her number. Sorry, homes, but you're  
taken."

**-3-**

In the car, on the way to our next  
move at Park Slope:

"So, what's the deal with Blaze?"

My mind drifts to her, to her softness. Her green eyes and how she held me after she broke under my hand. “She...uhm...I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? What’s there not to know?”

“Uhm, well, it’s too soon, you know.”

He whistles. “Mother*fuck*, bro. You ain’t foolin no one.”

I look at him while taking a turn.

“Huh?”

“Don’t *huh* me. You’re all like *uhm-er-what-huh* hedging. Spit it out. What’s the deal with her?”

I scratch my head. “Like I said, uhm, it’s too soon.”

“Well, do you *like* her?”

“I do. She’s got...substance.”

“Substance.”

“Yeah. A lot of it.”

“Well, that sounds pretty good.”

“Is it OK with you if she hangs with us at night? I mean, I know you only come over twice a year—”

“Deck, please, that you even have to ask me that... Besides, something tells me I need to get to know this girl a little better.”

I clear my throat. “Uhm, yeah...I

think you should. And she should get to know you...and Skate.”

“Man, what’s up with him, Deck? You’d think he’d have grown out of the roll and the weed by now, you know? I mean, I know we all did that shit and we all grew out of it—”

“I never did.”

“Of course you did. So you pop a few times a year, but Skate’s like high all the time, man. It’s not good. Who’s to say

the dude isn't gonna move onto Big C one of these days? I've seen it. Down at Penn, there's plenty dudes who started out with a trip here, a Molly there. And they're chasing big H these days, or snorting up snow."

I swallow hard. "Yeah...maybe we should talk to him. Or...maybe *you* should talk to him. He takes you a little more seriously than he takes me." *Because you're*



*the least screwed up of the three of us. And you're the only one who grew up.*

“Deck, it’s about time you stop rolling for good as well.” He smacks me on the head.

“Damn it, dude, I’m driving!”

He smacks me again! “I’ll say this next corny thing because it fits: You’re also driving your life, and driving it on Molly’s gonna take you over a cliff.”

“Trev, that was *fucking* corny.” *And*

*fucking wise.*

“Don’t BS me, homes. I know you heard it.”

*He knows me too well.*

-4-

“Have you thought of a name for your escort-slash-moving agency?”

“*Steady Studs* or *Macho Movers* or, even, *Muscled Maneuvering*.”

It takes ten minutes to get Trev out

the car to start our next move. Because he can't stop laughing.

-5-

After the move:

“So, did she mix this for you?”

Trev bobs his head to the Birdy-slash-Groove House mix playing on my radio.

I nod.

“It's *so* good...” He fades off, looking out the window.

“It really carries you, doesn’t it?” I say.

“Hmm?”

“The music...it really...transports you somewhere else, don’t you think?”

“Like a mofo. She has talent. She has an ear. It’s freaking amazing.”

Trev starts slapping his pants, then the dash, with drumbeats. I smack the steering wheel. He attempts some

beatboxing. I do the same and that brings out more laughter from us.

“If it weren’t a world where the strongest publicist gets the deal, she’d be right up there with Tiësto and Afrojack,” he says.

“Maybe Tiësto and Afrojack have great publicists.”

“No doubt. Hey, Deck, you wanna know another reason I don’t care for the NFL?”

“Shoot.”

“I’d hate to be in the limelight like that.”

“You’re shitting me.”

“No, I’m not. People eat you up up there. You’re everybody’s breakfast. They know about your ACLs and MCL injuries and Meniscus Tears and who you’re doing on the side.”

“I thought *I* was the one who hated

that shit.”

“Yeah, well, I just never mentioned it. I mean, making several mil a year, that’d make it worth it. Or would it? The debate has always been easy with me, because I know I want my degree. So there’s never been a contest in my mind. But what if I didn’t have that? Would I turn down all that dough for fear of being torn to shreds by the media?”

“You just thought you’d mention

this to me out of the blue?”

“No, dumbass. Your girlfriend—”

“She’s not technically my girlfriend.”

“Well, I’ll call her that for now. Besides, *I* like her. She has that, you know? That”—he moves a hand up and down—“bigger than life *flare* that’ll take her all the way to the top. Worst of all, she also looks like she *doesn’t* have the



teeth necessary to fight off the vultures up there. They'll tear her to shreds, bro."

"Damn, Trev, talk about the cart before the horse. And talk about *depressing*."

"It's not depressing. It's the truth. Haters gonna hate. You seen what's being said about her online?"

"Yeah, she showed me yesterday. Reminded me of some of your bac games."

He rolls his eyes. “Tell me about it.

The only difference between the NFL and varsity, is that at least at NFL level you’re getting paid for taking the beating. At college, you’re just standing in the way of the gunfire and baring your chest out—for free. Remember Ohio? When I threw less than a hundred yards?”

“*NO MORE PERKS FOR PERKINS.*”

Trev laughs coldly, remembering the fat bold text on the *CollegeDrools* website (“YOUR ONE-STOP SITE FOR ALL THINGS COLLEGE”). “That was the kindest headline. I was lucky Coach let me play another game. But that’s because he’s the coach. He knows the deal. That’s like a singer’s voice trainer or whatever they have. You know, they’re technicians. They can separate the

facts from the bullshit. Coach knew I was psychologically terrified for that game. My first major college game as QB. They probably ripped him to bits behind the scenes. Who knows. But coaches and the media are different things. And never mind the fans—or, what should we call them, the *masses*. Christ, *everyone's* got an opinion these days! Let me just tell you that if I hadn't had you and Coach kicking my ass to get back in there and

fight, I woulda given up. The pressure was *that* bad.”

“No shit.”

“No shit. You can build all this up, you know.” He flexes his gargantuan biceps. “But, at the end of the day...it’s all up here.” He taps his temple. “So, your girl—and I’m talking first impressions here, of course—”

“Well,” I interrupt, “we did spend

a lot of time at *Tom's*. I think that's a decent enough impression."

"Maybe. But, with limited experience around her, I just think she needs teeth. And claws. And maybe a loaded gun. Don't let nobody take advantage of her, Deck. Because the music biz is different to sports. And *this* music biz, House and EDM and the shit we've been into for so long, well, it has its share of vampires in it. Bloodsuckers."

I don't comment.

“Deck, chill. I don't mean to freak you out. I just notice that, well, even though it's been only two or three days, you're acting a little different.”

“What are you talking about? You barely saw us together.”

“Bro, I saw you and Gina together plenty. I'm sorry to say, but she was just a lay to you—”

“Was not. I had feelings for her.”

“You had *analytical* feelings for her.

You know: *I'm the boyfriend so I should respect her.* That's not what I'm talking about. Gina had a good rack. I'm sure she was a damn good lay as well. I remember the way she dressed, and I'm sure she knew what she was doing in the bedroom. You respected her when you were with us, sure. But you also fucked her. *A lot.*



And that's all it was. I don't see that attitude in you with Blaze."

"You talk so much bullshit." *So much true bullshit.*

"Say what you will, but I've known you almost all my life, homes. And all I'm saying is it's different with Blaze. I can see it. I've seen you with babes—flirting, acting cool, trying to get in their pants. And I *know* that a week ago you woulda thrown the payment out the window and

done this Tatiana Watkins three times in the bedroom while I waited in the car!”

“You woulda beat me to it. And *I* would’ve been the one in the car waiting!”

“Damn straight I would! But: ‘Oh, Trev, she’s *married!*’ Damn, nigga, like you ever gave a shit! You’re smitten. Smitten as a motherfucker.” When Trev gets into his cool-ass street-talk mode, *motherfucker* comes out as *muhfucka*. And he calls me—

his whiteboy friend—*nigga*.

I clear my throat. “Fine. Whatever. What’s your point?”

“My point is: If she does mean what I think she means to you, you’re gonna have to watch out for her. They’ll come for her. It’s happening already—online. And she is gonna make it. I know it. She’s clean—doesn’t do drugs—and she’s more than talented, so she *will* make it. She won’t be found ODeD in some

bathroom instead. So, just keep your eyes open, 'cause she ain't got no teeth from what I can see. Neither did I before that Ohio game. It took you and Coach to make me face the field again, and when I did, then the teeth grew. And then I started being able to face it on my own. But I couldn't have done it without that initial support.

“Deck, I been talkin my lungs out

here. I can't explain this to you any more simply. And you ain't no stupid dude, so stop acting it."

"Yeah, yeah. No, it's cool. I get it. I get it." Pause. "And, uhm, thanks. I appreciate it. You're right."

"Now, while we're on the subject of advice..." I look over at him, ready for the inevitable explosion to what I'm about to say. "How's your brother?"

Trev's face darkens instantly. He

clenches his teeth. “Fucking asshole. I could break his damn neck he’s so far into that shit now.”

“Maybe I could talk to him? You know him and me were tight once.”

He does a raspberry. “Deck, forget that shit. You guys were tight when he wasn’t so far deep. Nah, fuckit, Tramone don’t listen to fucking no one. Fuckin nigga’s packing again as well. Illegal

firearm while on parole, damnit.” Trev runs a hand over his short hair. “Fuck him. He’s had his chances. His business, not mine.”

*We might as well be talkin about my pops.* But Trev and I have always had similar ideas about people we don’t like. Even when they’re family. “He still gangbanging?” I ask, not quite ready to let it go.

“Deck, you never stop

gangbanging. It just isn't how it's done.  
Blood in, blood out."

"I've never understood that."

"Huh?"

I look over at him. "What does that mean? Blood in, blood out. I've never understood it."

"It means you get *into* the gang by blood—murder on your part, or a beating, or something. And the only way



to get out is with your own blood. Spilled on the floor. I can only pray to god that Tramone didn't kill nobody, bro."

"Damn. How long's he been out now? Of jail, I mean."

"Three months or so. Momma ain't too happy to have him around the house doin' nothing there all day. Tells him to go out and get a job. Truth is, Deck, I think he *wants* to get out of it all. I mean, a part of me really believes that

But...whatever. What can a brother do? Anyway, two out of three. Momma did alright on her own. Jacinta also came out alright, I guess. Tramone's the only fucking loser of us all."

"She still cool?"

He looks over at me. "If being in Cali is considered *cool*, yeah."

"You know what I mean."

He laughs. "Don't I. Yeah, that

punk never even *looked* in her direction after we paid him a visit. Probably the swollen eyes had something to do with it, but, hey, that's what you get for getting frisky with my sister."

I look at the street, not caring to remember our vigilante days. The punk we beat up on—the one who'd laid a hand on Jacinta—had some trouble walking for a few days. And it had felt good to do that to him. But was it right?

You don't think of consequences when you're young and hot-headed. I still don't. Not even since pops and I had it on—fists and kicks and all.

“She says hi by the way. Every time I talk to her, she tells me to say hi to you. I swear she's still got a fuckin crush on you, Declan Cox.”

“Whatever.”

“Whatever my ass! Every fucking

chick at Lincoln had the damn hots for you.” Then he gives me the evil eye. “You *swear* you never went near my older sister, don’t you?”

“And have my neck broken by you?”

“You didn’t answer the question.”

“For the gazillionth time: I. Did. Not. Screw. Your. Sister!”

He smiles. “I know you didn’t. I just like seeing you sweat.”

The imp in me rears its head.

“Now...if she *wasn't* your sister... Hm-hm-*hmmpf!*”

“Nigga, you know I don't care that you drivin, right? I'll fuckin whip yo ass if you talk about her like that again.”

I fix an eye on him, roll my eyes back, and say mischievously: “*MMPF!*”

“Fuckin white boys, always startin up shit.”

Silence for a while.

“Hey, Deck, thanks again. For... *this*.

You know I can use the dough—”

I put my hand up to stop him.

“Don’t go getting emo on me now.”

“Fine, I won’t. But thank you.”

“No sweat.” We touch fists.

After a while, he says, “You wish I was emo. You’re the emo one. Always have been.”

*That's my man.*



# NINE

## TEETH AND CLAWS

-1-

*Declan Cox. Again.*

There's a palpable chasm between us when I walk into Blaze's loft at six. Too much time apart. Too many traffic lights. Too many cardboard signs saying *SPARE A BUCK, GIVE A FUCK*. Too many presses of the gas pedal. Too many

clouds, too much cold.

Too little Blaze...

Too many alloys, maneuvering  
themselves into that magical feeling I had  
for her the night before, and before that.  
And before *that*, when she played at *House*  
*Market*.

But quickly, now, when I see her  
making a sandwich behind the counter.  
When I see her cheek pink up as I close

the door gently behind me. When I look at the cascade of her golden hair, counterpointed by the riot grrrl buzz cut on her right... When I see all that, the chasm disappears. *Gone*. Vanished.

And my arms go weak.

“Good day?” she asks.

For a second, I’m too stunned to speak. “Uhm, yeah, made more than usual money.”

“Oh, good. How was your

workout?”

“Grueling. Trev’s a monster. I can’t keep up with him.”

“You want a sandwich before we head out to meet them?”

“Sure. I’m...actually...starving.”

“I can see it.” She licks sauce off her finger. *Damn!* “How’s peanut butter and jelly sound? I was just making myself one.”

“Sounds amazing.”

I planned on sitting down. But plans change. I stroll around the counter and wrap her in my arms. Then I breathe of her scent. And all the tension I didn't realize I was feeling, disappears.

She stretches her arms up around my neck and places her head on my chest like she always does. *This woman's going to be the undoing of me.*

On my way to my seat, she says,

“Meet anyone interesting?”

I pause for a second, not really wanting to get into “Mizz Watkins.” Because she isn’t worth it. “Uhm, every day.”

I turn and face Blaze. She looks at me for a bit, expecting more, but then goes back to the sandwich.

“And you?”

She stops spreading peanut butter.

And she tells me about the wolves. Her face is a mass of anxiety as she does it.

“Or vampires,” I say, “waiting to suck of your blood just to extend their own lives.”

“Thanks, you’re making me feel a lot more secure.”

“But Randy’s a good guy. I can vouch for him. I wouldn’t even be

surprised if he was just there to make sure these other fools didn't dig their teeth into you."

"But he uses, doesn't he?"

"Only casually." I bite my sandwich. "Damn, this is good! Why do you ask?"

"People are different when they use."

"He doesn't use any hard shit. Only a bit of E, some weed."



“You don’t consider E ‘hard shit?’”

I pause the chewing for a second.

“Good point. Wow. It’s crazy. You get into the scene and what you once thought was the hardest drug in the world is suddenly the equivalent of a beer to you or something.”

Absently, almost as if saying it to no one, she says quietly, “I know...”

“Look, I’m just saying—Randy

aside—all that talk about ‘needing friends’ and shit... I dunno, it sounds like something out of an old mafia movie with Robert DeNiro or Al Pacino or something. And when they’re through with you, they’ll stick you in the trunk of a car. You’re *good* Blaze. You’re...like...an *incredible* artist. I’m sure you can make it without these bozos.”

She’s silent.

“Blaze?”

“I’ve been trying to make it for three years. Actually longer, but I’ve been on my own for the last three years. So...that’s when I really started trying, you know. Before that there was no threat. Now... Never mind. I’m gonna depress us.”

“No. Tell me.”

She puts her own sandwich down.

Looks out her window. She always looks

fixedly out that window, at the same spot —the same *apartment*—next door. “It just feels like a losing battle, you know? You wake up and you go out there and you put your heart into some goal and then...well...you wake up three years later. And nothing’s changed. Or it’s changed for the worse.”

“I started my business a little over three years ago as well, Blaze. I had *nothing*. I printed flyers, handed them out.

I canvassed the streets. Put up ads online. And, well, all I needed were a few good leads. Then word of mouth took over. Well, now I have a pretty decent apartment, a nice TV. I did it all alone. Skate and Trev helped spread the word out a little, I confess. Maybe that was the clincher.”

“Friends,” she says.

“Yeah, friends.”

She looks down. “Yeah, well...anyway. I took the deal at *Sacramento*. I’m gonna go with the wolves for now, gonna do that first set. Two weeks from now. It’s eight hundred bucks guaranteed. And hopefully a foot in the door.”

“Hm, that’s pretty good for a few hours’ work.”

“Yeah. Better than I’ve ever made—except for *House Market*—but

apparently the res DJs get even more.”

“Damn, even I’d stick with the wolves for that cash. How’s the online buzz?”

“Dying fast. I don’t know if it’s because everyone was too high to remember, or if they just have short attention spans.”

“Nah, it’s just the nature of the beast—the internet. And you’d be amazed how few people actually roll at

those parties. Maybe once upon a time, but not anymore. The online buzz is dying down because that's what it does. We just gotta keep getting you out there, keep getting you heard. It's good that you took that deal. The more known you are, the better 'friends' you'll get. I mean...if it's even possible to get real friends in this business.”

She crosses her arms, her back



facing me now. Her voice is cold. “I don’t need friends in the biz. I just need the business itself. Dillon did it like that, you know?”

“Who?”

“Dillon, EDM artist from Brazil, based in Germany. She gathered a following on YouTube, then got a concert in Cologne from it. There’s another dude—*Mr. Probz*. Not YouTube, but online also. Indie artist—Dutch.

Released an album for free through *SoundCloud*. Even won an award for Best Artist and was the first unsigned artist to do that—some local awards ceremony or something, but a big deal anyway.”

“See? So it’s possible!”

“Just not probable. Look, I hear you. Just know that I’ve been trying all these years to break it through—I’ve put stuff on YouTube and MySpace and

wherever else I could think of. But this gig, at *Sacrament*, this is something tangible. I'm not gonna throw that away."

"I hear you. So they really have a secret section to this *Sacrament* club? Do you think I could get in there? And hear your set?"

She shrugs, turns back to me. "I don't know *what* I can do."

"We gotta get you out there."

"You keep saying 'we.'"

I pause with the half-eaten sandwich to my lips. “I guess I do.”

Her eyes betray what Trev noted:  
Heart of gold. But no teeth. No claws.

No bite.

*I have some claws, I think.*

“I mean...” I run a hand through my hair. *How to approach this without making her think I’m just another bloodsucker?* “Blaze, see if you can get me in there. Maybe I

can just check out the scene and get a feel for these guys.”

“And what, protect this little mouse from the big bad wolf?”

“I... No... Wow. Uhm, I’m just trying to help.”

She bows her head. “I know you are. All I know is my name’s being trashed on the internet. I got some *Mad-Ass* threatening me because I ‘took his spot’ at *Sacramento*. I’m hanging out with

my old dealer—”

“What?”

She stops, pupils quivering.

“Xavier?”

“Ah, right. I guess I didn’t put that together before.”

“He got me the gig on Friday so it seems he thinks he can also get a piece of me. But not now—he wants that piece later. It’s like he’s savoring the flavor or

something. Urgh. *God.*” She rubs the shaved side of her head.

“Damn it, you really did have a rough fucking day.”

“When I got home I was shaking. Like, *really* shaking. I felt like I’d just been gangbanged by these fucks. God. If I wasn’t so damn desperate— Whatever.”

Blood boils under my skin. Suddenly, I wanna take Mr. Curly Smiles Xavier and crack his head against the

nearest wall. I wanna put Randy in his place and tell him he should know better, tell him that he should be the one watching out for her here! That's how it goes with these party dudes, they smile, they coo, they rub your back—but when it comes to their stash, or their music while smoking their stash, they're spiders. Every one of them.

I wanna grab this Gavin punk and



stick my foot in his ass.

*I need to chill.*

“I can speak to Randy,” I say. “We go back. I don’t know about this Xavier dude, but Randy has some sense in him. It just needs to be re-awakened sometimes.”

She shakes her head. “No, that would be mortifying. I mean, I’ve hardly met you. And even if I hadn’t... Let’s say we *were* dating. I mean, how would it

come across? I don't know if you've noticed, but there aren't very many female players in this game. How many clubs have you been to where the spinner was a chick?"

"Yeah, I see your point. It would be stupid for me to go there. And it was chauvinistic of me to think it."

"No, it was...*sweet*." She smiles. It's that girly, mousy smile of hers.

*No teeth.*

*What kicked her down?* I ask myself.

Was it the friend? There has to be more there. What put its boot on her face to make her like this? Because I don't see "no" teeth. I see broken teeth. *Broken* claws.

And something broke them.

"Blaze, it's just that... I just wanna help. It pisses me off that guys wanna do

this to you.” I tell her about Trev, and how they dragged his own name through the mud after that crappy Ohio game. “And, well, maybe it’s because I have some history on this. But it just pisses me off. Big guy stepping on the little guy, you know?”

“Little girl,” she corrects.

“You’re not so little.”

“Yes I am. Look at me!” She stretches her tiny arms out. The beauty of

the tatted one makes me want to lick it  
top to bottom.

“I meant big in spirit. I loved that  
mix you made for me.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. And I think I know you  
better because of it.”

“How so?”

I think of how best to answer this...

“Sit,” I say.

*Let's see if we can't start those teeth and claws growing out again.*

**-2-**

I stretch out to grab her arms to ease her to the chair, but when my hands touch her skin, I'm undone. Almost without will, I've clutched her to me and put her lips on mine.

They burn like fire.

“You smell smoky,” I say.

“*Sacrament* stinks.”

I ease her to the stool, lick her lower lip. “Close your eyes.” She does. I ease my hand over the wild skull on her arm, look at her. “Keep them closed.”

Her left hand moves to my waist. Her partly opened lips make my manhood yearn. I’m bursting with need.

I slide my hand over her left arm and her skin breaks out in goosebumps.

“Keep your eyes closed.” Lightly, I lick her lower lip, left to right. Wetting it.

She starts to smile. “Keep your lips open,” I say. “Don’t move them.”

My hands are at her shoulders now. From the right of her lip, I lick along the top now, all the way left. Hot breaths burst from her, and her shoulders relax. Under her tee, I see her nipples tighten. *No bra.*

I’m hard now. *So* hard for her.



Her grip tightens on my waist. I start moving my hands, flat-palms, down above her chest, lower, pressing down on her soft body.

As the heel of my palm reaches to just above her nipple, she *clasps* on my waist and pushes me back. “Declan Cox, don’t think I don’t want you. But you can’t start a conversation about my music and then expect me to be worry-free

while kissing you.”

“But you’re not kissing me, I’m kissing you.”

She sucks in a slow, ragged breath.

“You’re going to be the undoing of me, this much I know.”

“You’ve already undone me, so fair is fair.”

Her eyelids open. And I almost fall because of their beauty. “You have got the *sexiest* motherfucking eyes I have ever

seen.”

“Sexiest *motherfucking*?”

“*Sexiest* motherfucking.”

“You thought of that adjective all day?”

“This from the girl who puts on music about digging out a girl’s eye while we make out.”

“Wait until you find out what’s playing when we make out today, so tell

me fast what you thought of my damn  
mix, or you're gonna leave us both feeling  
*motherfucking* frustrated.”

# TEN

## QUARTERBACK

-1-

*Blaze Ryleigh*

It took all the resolve I had to push him away. My skin burned and sizzled and my blood was overflowing, moisture soaked my panties. Thoughts of his hand—his gorgeous fingers—inside me, slapped and pummeled me like fists. All

of this from only one kiss.

But he commented on my music.

So I need to know. I *need* to know.

He asks, “Did you think of which songs to put on there? I mean, did you plan it beforehand?”

“No. Why? Did it suck?”

“No, no. Wait—” He grabs me by the arms and pulls me off the stool toward him. It’s only when his tongue is

inside me that I realize we're kissing again. I pull back, "Deck, I— Just tell me what you thought."

"I'm already doing it."

*Huh?*

He stands straight, and it's the first time I fully take in his towering tallness, his strength and masculinity. Leaning down, arms on the counter, he pins me between them. And then he plants one on my lips again.

Slowly, like a sailboat fighting to reach the shore, stuck ten miles away from it in a raging storm, I come back...to this room, only remotely feeling the tremble of insecurity which was brought about by the statement: *I think I know you better because of it.*

As his lips massage mine, and his tongue washes away my tension, my muscles soften. My grip on his solid



forearms eases.

And I can breathe again.

“Are you with me here?” he says.

I nod, swallow. “Yeah, I think.”

He smiles. “Your voice is always so soft when you speak to me.”

“I don’t usually communicate with words.”

And when he says the next thing, it unravels me, because now I know that he does know me, knows me through every

solidified barrier and fortification I've ever erected to protect myself. *Especially the ones I built in the last year.* He knows everything about me.

He says: "I know. You communicate with music."

-2-

"I'm gonna jump out on a limb here, OK?" His grip is firm on my upper arms, holding me steady so I don't get

blown away by the whirl which is the world. “Now, I listened to your mix the entire day. Trev and me. And Trev was talking, yapping, and he was saying some things about it. But I think I looked a little deeper than he did.”

“Him too?”

He smiles politely. “Blaze, I don’t think Trev can see into you like I feel I can. Now, I know that sounds crazy and...maybe you’d expect me to put on a

hockey mask and pull out the chainsaw because I say it. But, it's just how I feel.

“I ain't gonna beat around the bush here anymore about how I'm feeling about you. Because, out there, today, in the world...the magic started dying. And as true as fuck, I felt like *I* was dying. You know? Like I'd finally tasted of the sweet water of life, and then it got ripped away from me—”

“Meth.”

He laughs. “I was hoping more like oxygen.”

“No, it’s Meth. Or H.”

His hands climb up my arms, to my neck. My cheeks. He holds them steady, and tilts my eyes up to look at him. “I’m gonna go out on a limb, and if I’m out of line, you tell me, OK? You kick me in the shins or slam me in the nuts with your

knees. I'll take it. But I gotta say it. You ready?"

"No."

"I think you're scared. And that fear comes out in your music. So much so that, when I heard the mix, *I* got scared—like, real fear. *In here.*" He taps his chest.

"Then, it rose. It...I don't know the musical term for it... It got...*higher?*"

"Crescendo."

He snaps his fingers. "That's it! It

started *crescendoing*.”

I laugh, because it’s not a verb.

“And when it hit the top, my heart exploded into millions of sparkling pieces of confetti, and I felt like I was in an open field— This was on the corner of Flushing and Union, Blaze. You know, with those ugly brown buildings and black palisade fencing? So, I was not confusing the current environment with

your music.

“When that crescendo hit the top, there was confetti. There was sunshine. There was elation, unreachable by any drug I’ve ever hit. There was blue sky and there were freaking glowing Angels in the goddamned heavens. And then—

“Blackness. Red and sad. I don’t know what that song was.” He sings a few lyrics for me. He has a terrible singing voice. *And I love how it sounds.*



“*Seven Devils*,” I say.

“Wow. What a name. Appropriate.

You see, and I didn’t even know the name. But there was this hollow echo and, I felt like I was in an alley, with rats in it. And a dripping faucet in the corner that’d just keep me up all night.

“And I felt cold.

“And...what I’m trying to say is,

Blaze—and here’s what you need to be

ready for: I know there's a big freaking Black Hole in your world. I don't know what it is, but I can see it. It's like this hole's in the center of the room and you're...*gripping* onto the walls and there's blood under your nails and it's sucking you in and—”

I grab his shirt, clutch it for stability. Rip and tug at it!

“—there's another thing, Blaze.

Now, I want you to look at me for this,

OK? Look at me.”

My eyes sting. The tears slam up inside my head *but I won't let you out, you bastards! I won't!* I look up at him, barely. My eyes are foggy, and I know he sees it; I'm ashamed to be nearly breaking down in front of someone I hardly know. *But I do know you, Declan Cox. I do.*

“There's another thing. You know what I find incredible? What I find mind

blowingly *insane*? Do you? I'm asking you."

"N—no."

"It's this: How the *fuck* is it that you're still holding onto that wall? You should've been sucked into that hole and been dead a millenium ago."

-3-

*A year ago:*

She died, and Mr. Bernstein took

care of me. But, when he left, days later, I stood on the roof—*my* roof. And I looked down. *Will I die? Is it high enough?*

Her letter:

*I believe in you, baby. I only wish I believed in myself as much as you do. I'll be looking out for you from below. Don't be such a screw-up like I was.*

Patryk's words:

*"I cannot do it, Błażej. Take it all. I don't want any link to the past. Don't want any*

*link to...her.”*

And Xavier:

*“I didn’t kill my sister joo fuckin puta!*

*FUCK YOU! FUCK YOU!”*

*“You...murderer! You gave her the drugs yourself! You mother...fucking killer!”*

*“She would’ve never even gotten on the drugs if it weren’t for you, Blaze!”*

I spoke slowly: *“You’re a fucking dealer. You gave them to us—to both of us*

*Who the fuck do you think you are, coming in here telling me it's my fault!?"*

*"Truth is truth, baby."*

*"Get. Out. Just get. The Fuck. Out!"*

He did.

And that's when I went on the roof.

And I looked down.

The wind blew my hair, froze my tears. I got up on the wall, a dizzyingly high wall. *Just one more step, Blaze, and the*

*pain will be gone.*

*One more...*

I lifted my foot.

And I saw Mr. Bernstein's car. He got out, carrying brown bags (bagels, I discovered later.) And all I remember thinking is: *If anyone finds me, it shouldn't be him. Not after what he's done for me.*

So I got off.

And we ate bagels.



He never said anything about it.

Did he see me there? Did he not?

Later, when he left, he said, “*Blaze, hang in there. No matter what, just hang in there, OK? You matter to people. You do. So, just hold on.*”

Water marred his gray eyes. The door closed. He left. And I fell on my knees and cried my tears. For hours.

The next day, I moved on.

*Never forgetting just how close I came...*

**-4-**

“Sometimes it feels like I already let go,” I tell Declan.

“Blaze, you’re as hard as they get, man. You’re like Bruce-Willis-*Die-Hard* hard. *Terminator* hard. You’re... You know, in football, after the Center snaps the ball to the QB, the defense is all *over* that motherfucker! They wanna *take him down*.

Because he's the man. He's dangerous. And if he didn't have a team, he'd get sacked all the time. *Sacked*—that means getting taken down. But even when he has a team and he gets sacked, he *knows* it's up to him. Even if his team's shitty and lets him get taken down all the time—or maybe he holds the ball too long and gets sacked that way, you know, *his* fault—even if that happens, he knows it's up to him again. In the next down, it's up to

*him*. No one listens to his bullshit, to his complaining, so he doesn't bother complaining. He takes the ball from the hike, and he does it again. And again. And *again*. You understand what I mean?"

"I get the gist of it. I'm not really into football."

"Well, you know what a quarterback is, right?"

“Yeah.”

“That’s you, Blaze. You’re like a freaking quarterback.” He pokes my upper chest hard so I have to take a step back. “*You*, you’re the quarterback. I know that. I can tell it. You get sacked and you get up again, and you charge for that wall with everything you have again.”

I’m not looking at him, but at my feet. “Maybe it’d be a better idea to stop

running at the wall? And rather to go around it?”

“No, it’s not. Because that ain’t living. Living is facing up to the pain. And charging against the failures.” He chuckles. “But, Blaze, maybe it’d also be a better idea to simply get a better team.”

And it’s that statement that throws me over the edge.

The gasp takes me like greedy hands to the stomach, and the tears

shatter my eyes. My hands go to my face.

*Get a better team.*

*— She's dead, Blaze.*

*— No! NO! NO! Stop holding me  
back. NO.*

I had a better team. And if I  
compare it to football, they were a bunch  
of misfits who'd always end up at the  
bottom of the league.

But they were my friends.

I hold him. Actually, I hold his shirt. And I fight the remaining tears. I do. But they win.

He holds me in return. He holds me throughout it all. When I'm done—it must be ten minutes later, fifteen?—I feel *different*.

Relieved?

*Absolved.*



I wipe my eyes with his shirt. And I actually laugh about that. You get that? I *laugh*. Mirth. Happiness. *A release*. And that in itself makes me almost wanna cry again.

But for a totally different reason.

-6-

As if merely to solidify this fairytale moment, his lips join my neck, under my hair, over my little star tattoos. I smile,

simultaneously wiping my eyes.

“I’m cancelling my night with the boys tonight,” he says.

“Won’t they be disappointed?”

“One night won’t kill them.” He sends a text, then carries on kissing me.

My hands gravitate to his hair. But we’re in a whole new world now. Suddenly this ain’t just some dude anymore. This is *my* dude. I can really feel it now. And for the first time since I met

him (*days* ago) I feel like there's really something here. Not just heat-of-the-moment. But *something*. An actual *thing*.

Hot, yes. Fiery, yes. Caught in the spin of the rushing moment, *oh yes*.

But that's not what I'm talking about.

I mean: Now it's no longer *This guy I'm hooking up with*.

*I know him*. And he knows me.

It's *Declan*.

*My Declan.*

It's also: Me moving his hand to between my legs for him—*Down There*—not letting him feel afraid to do it. Letting him know that, *It's OK...because I trust you.*

He rubs me there. Understand? He rubs *me*. Not my cunt or my pussy or my fucking crotch.

*Me.*

And I rub him back. But I go deeper this time. I lay him on the bed and undo his belt buckle, take off his belt. I unzip his pants, and I wrap my hand around his shining shaft, on my knees next to him.

I start rubbing him, twisting and moving him up and down. He slicks up, and so do I, most definitely. His hand slides down my side. He groans, manly

and low—the grooviest bass in any House beat I’ve ever heard. He sits up, and his lips touch my chin, lick my neck.

And I caress him more.

He gets my own belt off, slides his fingers into my panties and I—

“*Hah!*” I shake, and my hand pauses on his cock. “Oh, god.” Then I gather myself up, and I move him up and down again.

We start to rock in rhythm—he

rub, I pull. The strength in my legs gives way. I fall on the bed, and he lies back down, next to me. I'm on my stomach, he's on his back. My feminine sounds match his manly ones. Each murmur from him, each groan, sleeks me up further.

I feel him growing more, getting even harder. His cock pulses, shivers, shakes. His other hand tightens around

my shoulder. His teeth meet my flesh, by my shoulder. “Oh, Blaze, *urcka-mpf*.”

He moves his pelvis, raises it, moves his cock in and out of my looped hand *as if it were me there*.

I tighten my grip on him.

His finger drives deep into me and my hand stops moving while my eyes flutter back, expecting that stinging explosion. But it doesn't arrive. I keep my hand tight on him, and he does the rest,



riding up and down, pumping into my hand while his other hand bursts into me with passionate speed.

I'm greased, sodden. I feel my body twist, writhe. The taste of cloth fills my mouth as I lie on the bedsheet, face down, lying over his hand which is inside me. His growls increase, he pumps harder—pumps the hand that's inside me, and pumps his cock into the loop of my other

hand.

I start to *pump* him!

I steal a glance at his manhood. *It's beautiful.* Red and oiled and screaming out. Then:

His pelvis stays up. “Oh, god, Blaze, I’m gonna— You’re gonna— Oh, damn. Oh—“

I *yank* down, hold him there. His other hand—inside me—goes deep and stays there.

I squeeze, yank, hold. My own words, muffled into the sheets: “Oh..oh..OH FUUUUUUUUCK!”

The orgasm slashes into me with unmitigated fury. And I slam my forehead into the sheets while it takes over me.

**-7-**

He climaxes gorgeously. His juice spreads onto my arm, his chest, his stomach. And I rub him more.

But, after, the physical release is overwhelmed by something else, something more tender. Lips on lips. And tongue on tongue. And overwhelmed by yet another thing entirely. Something totally and completely cliché. But it's how I feel.

You ready for it?

Motherfuckin' *soul to soul*, baby.

Lying on my bed and staring at the ceiling (which is becoming an increasingly favorite pastime of mine), Declan twiddles a finger over my hair.

“You’re making me sleepy,” I say.

He turns and kisses me, says nothing.

“I want to get to know your friends. I mean, really know them. I like them. Especially Trevor. He’s cool.”

“I think he’s secretly trying to set us up together permanently.”

“Yeah, I noticed that! But...look, I got some baggage as you can see—”

“So do I, honey.”

“—but I don’t want that to get in the way of you spending time with your bros.”

“My *bros*?”

“Whatever. Don’t get me angry.”

“You’re growing teeth.”

“Huh?”

“You’re growing teeth. I can see you’re gonna punch me if I don’t do what you say.”

I smile, ’cause I do kinda feel like I could punch him if he pisses me off. Or anyone for that matter.

Even *Gavin the Golden*.

Or Xavier.

“Maybe I will,” I say. “Don’t test me.” I fold my arms over my chest proudly. I guess this pleases him because soon he’s on top of me, smiling so widely that I think I could just melt into him.

He kisses me.

And, well, we go *there* again... *Oh.*

*Yeah. Mmmmmmm.*

**-9-**

We’re still on my bed, looking up at



the ceiling.

“You forgot the music you wanted to play.”

“I thought the music we were making was pretty cool as it was.”

I stretch my hand out to his. Our fingers meet, interlace.

And that's how we fall asleep.

**-10-**

In the morning:

“Are we, like, officially dating?” I

say.

“Officially.”

ELEVEN

WHEN IT HITS THE  
FAN, IT SPLATTERS

-1-

*Declan Cox*

Blaze is like the walking *Yelp* for Brooklyn Indie Rock. “I like mixing their stuff into my music because it has heart. There’s nothing like a struggling musician

to put some real feeling into a song. It's when money gets involved that the music gets shit. You know, Ashley Tisdale, Selena Gomez, Miley Cyrus, all that crap."

The light goes green and I hit the gas. "You think they play only for the money?"

"No, I think that they're pop stars who never had to play in bars to make ends meet. That changes the music. When

you're surrounded by wolves, you sing about wolves. When you're surrounded by *Dom Perignon* and all that crap, well, you can try and sing about the pain, but generally your beats end up coming out smelling like roses, not like the ghetto. Cyrus tries to bad. But she never will be. She'll just always be a rich kid who had it handed to her on a platter and then shat all over it."

“And you don’t wanna make money with your music?”

“Of course I do. I mean, I can mix that Demi Lovato and Ariana Grande sunshine music into my sounds. I’ve done it, and I’ll keep doing it to make ends meet. But you gotta understand that that’s down at the bottom of the barrel stuff. As in: Being right at the bottom where the shit smells bad and you damn near hurl

just by walking in its vicinity. Real desperation.”

I stop the car because we’ve arrived. “City parties?”

She laughs. “Precisely! Where they hire the cheap Brooklyn DJ because the auto-mix expert from the Upper East Side’s too busy patting himself on the back in his limo while sipping on that same *Perignon*.”

She starts stepping out, but I grab

her wrist. With her lips inches from mine, so close that I can feel her heat radiate onto me, I say, “You fascinate me.”

The left side of her mouth tugs once up, then breaks into a smile. “And you embarrass me sometimes with your crazy magic stare-me-downs.” She tries to pull away but I hold her by her cheeks. “Hey!”

I move into her.



She softens under me, and my heart breaks into a gallop. “We’re gonna steam up the windows,” she says.

“Oh, so you’re aware of that now.”

“Hey! Don’t make fun of my lack of experience!”

“Let the windows steam up. I want people to know what’s happening in here.”

Outside the car, I put her shoulder

under my arm. She's a good head shorter than me. And I like that. I like engulfing her. Holding her.

Hold it against me if you will, call me chauvinistic, but I downright enjoy feeling like I protect her.

Because I do. And as we cross the street to the bar, I'm looking around me. Because I sense in my bones that there are wolves in the wings.

We're at *Slambam*—a bar (I discover later) whose bathroom walls are covered in old magazine cutouts of everything from beyond-impressive cleavage and high-on-the-thigh shorts, to the words *SEX* and *LUST* spelled out as if they were in a threatening letter from a psycho to a victim.

The place itself is a little cramped

—booths along the wall, a stage in the back.

Trev and Skate are already seated, three cans of empty PBRs on the table. Trev gets up and hugs Blaze who, I can see, is a little taken aback by the affection. “It’s nice to see you again, Blaze.”

She moves a lock of hair behind her ear and says, “Uhm, thank—thanks.”

Trev gives her a deadly smile, and if he wasn’t my boy, I’d be nervous.

She scoots over next to me and I lean back in the corner like I've just won the UFC title. Because that's how I feel. My two homeboys and my new homegirl.

We order beers and down them. Trev sticks with the Egg Creams. "One's enough for me." He points at the growing pile of PBRs in the center which Skate has taken to forming a pyramid out of, stopping the waitress every time she tries

to take them away. Soon after we move onto draft beers.

Blaze asks Skate what he does for a living and he explains that he writes on walls. She's too polite to prod and dig in and find out what he actually does for *money* so Trev and I explain that Skate, unlike us two losers, was actually born into money. "Whereas we have to actually work for our food, this dude just sits back and lives off his inheritance," I say.

He shrugs, relaxed about it. “If I don’t *need* to work, why should I?” But I can see the playful anxiety in his eyes. The conversation’s going where it always goes when we get onto Skate’s access to Old Money. From the corner of his eyes, he catches my grin. “Don’t!” he says at me.

I start laughing.

He looks up. “Deck, don’t!” Trev’s started snickering as well. “Trev! I will

fuck you up, man!” Trev’s stifling laughter.

“Blaze,” I say. “Guess what Skate’s real name—”

“Don’t you fucking dare, Deck!”

“—is? This pale mofo with the Black Mamba around his neck.”

He sits back, defeated. “Fuckin assholes.”

Blaze shrugs. Trev leans forward, and waits just a second, just to make



Skate sweat a little more. He flicks a thumb in Skate's direction: "This graffiti artist's—"

"Graffiti *writer*," he corrects.

"Whatever. This skinhead paleface who looks like he just came out of a cardboard box, is actually called... Now, wait for it..." In an exaggerated voice, he says, *slowly*, "*Sebastian Kade Darby*... But wait, there's more... Now, here it

comes...here it comes..."—there's silence for a moment—"THE SECOND!"

Skate slaps Trev on the head. "Asshole," he grumbles. Trev puts him in a headlock and they're quickly rumbling like kids right here on the bench! But it's too late, because Blaze is guffawing, her eyes watering.

She's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen in my life.

Ever.

When the gag finally dies down, Trev wipes his eyes. Blaze asks, “And...so...all this?” She waves at Skate’s rag-tag sweater and just generally scruffed-up look.

He shrugs. “It just wasn’t for me, you know. That kind of life. Deciding which fork to use when you’re at dinner. I’d just as fast use my hands.”

“So he moved out at eighteen, and

never looked back, right Skate?” I explain.

“It’s *Sebastian Kade the Second* to you.

Only my *friends* can call me Skate.”

More laughter from us. We’ve really got him by the balls here.

Blaze, although still chuckling, notices his discomfort. “Well, I think it’s *cool* that you stuck it to them. I think it’s cool that you’re living your life like you want to.”

Me: “Whoa! Skate has an ally now!”

“Two against two!” cries Trev.

Skate’s feeling cockier. Like

Eminem, he does a funky hip-hop *I’m Cool* hand gesture, and says, “Damn fuckin straight, homies! Me and Blaze here will take *yooze* on!”

“Truth is,” I say, “Skate here—”

“*Sebastian* to you!”

“—is about as suited to living the high life as a fish out of water. And we’re

OK with Skate interloping in our crew!”

I toast my glass at him.

He pretends to be upset still (which he never was in the first place) then raises his own glass. “Assholes.” We tip glasses, all of us, and drink down. “Besides, you know you wouldn’t get half the touchdowns you do without me saving your ass.”

“I’ll drink to that.”

“Where do you guys play? I mean,

isn't football only in colleges and then pro?"

Trev leans forward. "Blaze, what you're looking at here—these two yokels—is the most wasted potential in all of the history of the NFL."

I jump in. "Er, hello? Is this *Trevor Perkins* talking? I mean, *the* Trevor Perkins? Five thousand two hundred yards last season Trevor Perkins? Two

times bowl champ—”

“Yeah yeah yeah, Deck. I’ve heard all that. But you know my stance—before anything else is education. You two, now there’s a joke. You see, Blaze, it *is* possible to join the NFL without going to college. And Trev and Skate here have more than a small chance of being able to enter the draft—”

“English, Trev.” I point at Blaze.

“She probably doesn’t know what the



draft is.”

“I don’t.”

“See? It’s basically what you have to join to get picked for the NFL.”

“Like the army?”

We laugh. And I say, “*Exactly* like the army. Anyway, it’s complex. You have to play at something called a combine, and then from *there* you get picked for the draft. In short, there’s a whole scouting

process—and they only look at college  
—”

“Bullshit!” Trev’s body is chilled, but his voice is loud. “There *are* ways of entering, Blaze. And these dudes have been playing ever since they left high school, so it’s even easier for them.”

“Anyway,” I say, “I don’t even know if we qualify yet—”

“Do the math,” Trev insists.

“Huh?”

“Do the math.”

“Trev, it gets complicated when you don’t go to college—”

He leans forward. “Four seasons.”

“What?”

“If you don’t go to college, it’s four seasons. Four seasons of the NFL must elapse for you to automatically qualify.”

“So that’s four years. We haven’t been out of school—”

“Damn it, you’re an obstinate *sonofabitch*.”

“I was gonna say the same about you.”

Trev turns to Blaze. “I’m sorry, Blaze. It’s just that this pinhead—this *supremely talented* pinhead—doesn’t even bother to *look* at his eligibility. He leaves school, *continues* to play ball, so he stays in top shape—and the finest damned RB in

the Major League—”

Blaze frowns. “R-what?” She looks at me. “And you play in the *Major* League? I thought that’s what the NFL was.”

“Trevor?” I gesture casually, like this is *his* mess to clean.

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you? Veering off the subject?”

“Very much.” I give him my best grin.

“RB is a Running Back. It’s a position. Catches a lot. Runs a lot.”

“Gets hit a lot,” I interject.

“Ho ho ho! Not you, my man. You do all the hitting.” Trev’s eyes are wild with excitement, no doubt thinking back to the good ol’ days of us three playing together in High School.

“You were saying?” I gesture casually again for Trev to continue.

“Major League is not the same as the NFL—the *National Football League*. That’s pro football. Then there are many *Semi Pro* leagues around. Deck and Skate here play for one called the *Major League*—East Coast. Not very creative, but it is what it is. I don’t know how many teams they have—”

Me: “Nineteen. From New York, Connecticut, Jersey, and Penn.”

“Nineteen teams. So, Skate and Deck here play for a local Brooklyn team. The *Bluebirds*. Top of their division.”

“Wow—”

I stop Blaze right away. “*Division*. Not the league. A league is broken up into several divisions. So, Divisions are smaller. League champions this year were the Jersey Wolves. They’re miles better than us. The only team to have won the



championship three times. Our team, the *Bluebirds*, well, we do well locally, but not when it comes to competing at conference— Sorry, that's like *several divisions*. The point is: We're big fish in a small tub."

"I'm so confused."

"Basically, league is the biggest, conference is second, and division is third. In terms of size."

"OK, with you on that one."

“And the *Major Leagues* is not baseball, it’s football?”

“Actually, that’s true. For whatever reason, they called our league—the one the *Bluebirds* play in—the *Major League*. But it has nothing to do with Baseball. Not in this case at least.”

“Cool. I sort of get it. Carry on Trev. This is entertaining.”

My smile widens. “It is, isn’t it?”

Skate cuts in the way he usually does: A casual comment when no one thinks he's listening. "Pity that Brad dude had to leave. We could've taken the cup with him, I'm sure."

Trev: "Who?"

I say, "Dude named Brad. Lifted shit for a living. Real old school Bushwick type, thick accent. Fell in love with a babe—I mean, a *girl*"—Blaze gives

me a naughty smile—"from Park Slope and moved over to England where her friend's gonna marry some gazillionaire Software Consultant of some sort."

Skate: "You in touch with him? I mean, Brad from Bushwick, not the gazillionaire."

"A little. We email every now and then. But promises of winning a small-time league that you don't even get paid for don't do shit to convince him to

return to Bushwick now that he's sporting a suit every day of his life and pulling in the big dough up there in...I forget the name."

Skate raises a despondent eyebrow. Brad was truly a monster on the field. Played one season with us. But that's how it goes in the Semi Pros (which isn't pro at all, purely amateur.) They come, and they go.

Trev: “OK, sorry I asked. But back to the point.” He looks at me. “So, now pay attention.” Trev holds four fingers up. “*Four* seasons. Then you’re qualified.”

I tease him. “You’ve really been researching this, haven’t you?”

“*Four* seasons. We left school three and a half years ago. You do the math.”

“Skate, help me out. We finished school...?”

“June. Well, practically August.”

“Three and a half years ago.” I’ve got my fingers out like an old-time abacus now. “See? This is why Trev’s the only one of us who goes to college. So Football season’s in September, finishes December/January. So, that’s one season the year we left.” Index finger up. “Next year, another.” Second finger up. “Two years ago, three seasons.” It dawns on me.

“Hell, we’ve been out of school for *four* football seasons? Damn. Where did the fucking time go?”

Trev sits back like he’s just imparted the word of the holy book to his followers. Hands behind his head. “Four seasons, Deck. We been out of high school three and a half years. That makes it four NFL seasons that have passed. And that makes you punks instantly eligible.”



“And you not?” Blaze asks.

“Technically, yes. But I’m on a sports scholarship, and colleges generally don’t hand out four-year scholarships. So if I don’t play football, I got no education. And I can’t pay for college. I deferred for a year, so I’m in my junior year. I got one more year to go and I’ll have my degree. They’re waiting for January fifteenth to come and go before

they confirm my scholarship for my final year.”

“MLK’s birthday?”

“No. I mean, yes, but that’s not why. It’s the date this year that the commissioner—that’s the dude at the top of the NFL—has set for all potential players to announce if they’re entering the draft or not.”

“The draft—where players get selected for teams,” she says, checking if

she's following so far.

“Right. And if you're in college and you announce you're entering the draft, you can't play college football anymore. And I'm pretty sure Penn State won't be so happy to have me leech off them without playing ball this next season.”

“Oh.” Her eyes go wide.

“So, only after the fifteenth will they let me know if I'll be covered for the

next year.”

“Seems pretty cruel.”

“Yeah, well.” Trev waves a defeated hand in the air. “It’s rampant in colleges. It’s the nature of the beast. Ain’t nuthin we can do about it.”

“And what about you, Skate?” she asks.

We all look at Skate. When he finally checks us out, he says, “What? I’d go to the combines. If I wouldn’t be so

scared of them testing me for drugs.”

“*Combines?* You mentioned that earlier, right? I forgot what that is.”

Trev explains to Blaze that it’s like a “Tryout” before the draft. As in, you can’t just jump into the draft. You have to go to a Combine—which is a meeting where a bunch of men prove just how large a gorilla they are—and then there are scouts and recruiters for teams there

who then invite you to the draft. You actually have to make it to the draft to get selected. Finally, if you don't get picked by a team in the draft, you become what's called a "Free Agent." And that's when the hard work begins, trying to get picked when all the hype has died down.

"Fuck me. It *is* complex." The other thing I love about Blaze, is how much she freaking curses!

Trev turns to Skate. "It's a urine

test. Not a hair test. Means you'd have to be clean for *five* days only. You could do that, couldn't you?"

Skate thinks about it, leans back.

"Five days? Damn. I do that every week."

He picks up his beer, then puts it down.

"When's the regional combine?"

Trev: "February fifteenth."

"Damn it, Deck, I might just do it."

It feels like something heavy falls

into my stomach. And I really don't know why. Because Skate making it into the NFL would be awesome, wouldn't it? Just as Trev making it would be awesome...

Wouldn't it?

I grab my beer, and think about the good times we've had over the years. Partying it up, egging people's houses on Halloween, hitting on girls, boasting who scored the most (Trev always wins, we've given up pretending he doesn't.)



I think of when Trev first left for college. It was alright. Skate had been there. We still partied it up. We still had a good time. But if he goes...

Me: “Well, I ain’t doin’ it. I’ve never been one for the limelight. Just like you, Trev.”

“You’d get that two million for that place up in Brooklyn Heights in no time.”

“Yeah, and then I’d never live in it.

I’d be travelling all the time, working out all the time. I’d like to get that place. Sure. But not as some status symbol; as an actual representation of the fact that I worked for it. And I’d like to make use of it.”

By Trev’s glint in his eyes, I know he’s wanting to make a joke about *Making use of Desperate Housewife Tatiana* But he

stops himself after a quick look at Blaze.

“When Skate and I play Semis, well, we do it for the fun. We don’t get paid shit. We just like getting out there and hitting someone to the ground, you know. That’s cool for me. It’s all I want from this game.”

Trev sits back. “Couldn’t have said it better myself, homes. Understand now why I won’t do it?”

I do get it now. It’s the same fear I

have. The fear of making it all impersonal, of having it all lose meaning. Losing the simple satisfaction of slamming a shoulder into a dude's stomach and hearing the breath expel from his lungs, and then offering him a hand up.

The satisfaction of a job well done and, maybe, even, coming home to a wife to share it with.

“I think I finally do understand it,

bro. I think I finally do.”

We touch glasses. And Skate says,  
“Wait. *What* two mil place?”

-3-

Blaze snuggles over to my side and  
I put my arm around her shoulder, bring  
her to my chest. *This is what “Boyfriends and  
Girlfriends” do*, I think.

“So, why *this* place?” Trev asks her,  
referring to *Slambam*.

“There’s a band playing here that I’ve wanted to hear for some time. *Red Lipstikk*.”

“They any good?”

“Well, I heard some of their stuff online, but never seen them live.”

I explain. “Blaze hooks up with local talent and mixes their stuff into her sounds. This way she keeps her music unique.”

Trev raises his eyebrows.

“Impressive.”

Two dudes who look like secret service arrive. They get on the stage, kick a few things around. Nod at each other. The biggest of the two then gestures for someone to come in. I turn my head and see a frazzled blonde in torn stockings and thick black eyeshadow (or mascara—I never know the difference.) Her hair

looks like she's stuck her fingers in a plug (or just had one *helluva* good lay in the bathroom.) She's in a slinky red dress—top to bottom—skin so pale she could be on *Vampire Diaries*. Red heels.

The lipstick on her Liv Tyler lips is also red—redder than anything else she's wearing.

I look to Blaze. “Lead singer of *Red Lipstikk?*”

“How did you guess?”



“And what’s up with secret service there?”

Blaze doesn’t know either.

*Red Lipstikk* start their gig and I notice the lead singer’s accent is slightly Eastern. “Russian?” I ask Blaze.

“Yes. Viktoriya Golovkina, that’s her name. Great voice.”

*Not* gonna try and remember that last name, I decide. But Viktoriya should

be easy enough. *Although it's probably spelled in some really weird Russian way.*

Viktoriya's silver voice rattles the walls, and soon there are catcalls billowing up. Someone lights a smoke. Then another. There are no rules in Bushwick when the groove gets going.

*That will all end one day with gentrification.*

Soon the house is clapping and cheering and lighting up ciggies. Plumes

of their smoke whisk around the speakers, creating a haze ahead of the band. *Them and us*. Only, it's not.

*This band is like Blaze*, I think.

Playing *to* the crowd. Singing *to* the crowd.

Blaze starts drumming her fingers and rocking her head. She bites her lip, closes her eyes, and I can see she's disappeared into the music. Probably

meeting with Viktoriya already in her mind.

But it's not only her. The sound is all-engulfing.

Blaze's body twists and squirms...

I fan my shirt. Sit up. Tighten my legs. *My girl.*

We—the boys—get into the sounds as well. Drumming. Clapping. Singing along. The band does a cover, and the crowd sings with them. It goes on

for two, three hours?

Encore after encore after encore, we're beat, boozed up, and sweating like mad.

Blaze's head falls onto my chest; she holds my leg while *Red Lipstikk* mellows us out with easier tunes. Skate's jacked up a smoke himself. Trev's eyes are closing.

A peaceful scene, right? Just like in

an old movie? But every storm has its calm:

A large dude with black hair appears suddenly. Looming over our table, hands pressed down on it, looking at Blaze.

My skin bristles inexplicably. My fists clench.

Blaze shoots up straight, stiff as a board. The dude says, “Błażej!”

The way he’s looking at her—

scowling, questioningly, as if she were some *thing*—I think: *Don't. Fuckin. Move. Bro.* Or as god is my witness, I will slam your fucking head into this goddamned table.

-4-

“T—Tolek.”

He's scowling at her. And I don't like it. Trev's eyes have shot open, as if he can feel the sudden electricity in my mind.

Skate's a little mellower but I can see he's with it as well, he can see the threat.

Black-Haired Dude's eyes flick to mine. It's the kind of look that says, *Oh, she's with you now?*

It probably doesn't help that this dude's bulky and slightly pudgy frame, and his flat black hair, remind me so much of Dino Moretti. Gina Moretti's brother. *My Gina Moretti.*

*And the skeleton in my closet.*



Even their damned eye color is the same—a thick and dark blue that looks almost black in this low-lit room.

“Tolek” here (god, what a fucking name) lifts his chin in acknowledgment of my presence. When I don’t respond, he smirks. Now, to Blaze: “Heard you did good set on the weekend.”

Thick accent. And the fact he called her by her Polish name means he’s

probably from her old neighborhood.

Blaze says nothing, only straightens her back even more. The dude's so close to the bench that he's blocking her from getting up. *Keep her down where she belongs.*

I clear my throat, "Uhm, Blaze, I think I need the bathroom."

Her expression is confused. Like: *You need the fucking bathroom when it's clear this dude's making me uncomfortable!?*

"Blaze. Bathroom. Please."

She shifts forward. Black-Haired  
Weird Name Dude doesn't budge. Which  
is when I see my chance: "Bro. Move it."

And then he gets smart. Or not so  
smart, because there's three of us and  
only one of him. But you catch what I  
mean. He says, "I not your bro."

*Original.*

He glares me down. Real Clint  
Eastwood shit, you know? If my blood

weren't in a high rise, I might actually laugh. But I don't laugh. I'm about to say something—

“Tolek, please get out the way,”

Blaze pleads.

*Tolek.* But I'm just gonna call him

*bro* from now on. Or maybe *asshole*.

Tolek here shifts back, a *fraction*.

*Prick.*

I feel the nails digging into my palm.

I'm still in my seat, in the corner. I don't like this feeling. Trapped, unable to move.

Skate muscles in and, speaking slowly (and a little inebriated, I confess), he says, "You know, *bro*, I don't know if you can count, but there are three of us. And one of you." Skate's eyes don't move from the half-empty (half-full?) beer glass his hands are currently wrapped around

on the table.

And I'm *still* in the corner! If this mother-eff doesn't take another step back I swear I'm gonna jump on this table and slam into him!

Skate's statement, however, seems to bring reason to him. Because he does take a step back. And Blaze can now get up. But as she does, he inches forward just a little so that his chest momentarily touches her—

*Oh no you did NOT just do that!*

I *fly* in between the two of them!

Big and Black Haired Bozo stands tallish, but I'm still taller than him by two foreheads. He squares his shoulders (which are wider than mine, I admit, but maybe a little on the flabby side) and says, "I just want to congratulate Błażej for her set."

There's that thick accent again.

“Somehow I don’t believe that’s all you wanted to do. And, seeing as she’s *my girlfriend now*, I’m gonna have to ask you to leave. Because I can’t say I like your attitude so far.”

From behind me, “Deck, please—” She puts her hands on my arms, moves to my right. No one in the bar has picked up on the tension here, I notice.

With a smirk, Tolek (god, what a fucking *idiotic* name!) says, “She no



allowed to have male friend? You are crazy man who not let her be with other man?” He moves closer to me, so much so that I smell the mixture of tobacco and spearmints in his breath.

And the tobacco’s winning.

“You are...*jealous?*”

*What the fuck did you just say!?*

My arm moves—

If Blaze hadn't clutched my wrist the instant she felt it move, it would currently be against this scumfuck's cheek. And his cheek would be on the ground. Mouth bleeding.

But she grabbed it.

*Hard.*

"Tolek! Enough!" She gets around me, positions herself between me and him.

*I don't like this. Get behind me, Blaze.*

Playing the polite card, she sticks out her hand and says, “Tolek, th—thank you...for the compliment. Yes, I did have a good set.”

Her hand hangs there for a decade.

By the time he's grabbed it, three things have already happened:

One. He's smirked, again. And the glint in his eyes made my heart turn to

coal.

Two. Trev and Skate have stood up, standing on either side of me.

Three. His own posse has made itself visible outside the door. Three more guys. None very big, but their hands in their pockets make me think they won't be fighting with their fists alone.

*And if that shit's gonna hit, we're al  
gonna be splattered.*

“Trev, Skate, it’s cool. Sit. We’re cool.” I put my hands up in the air. I notice at the bar-counter next to me that a buxom redhead has picked up on the static charge here amongst us. I look at the three dudes by the door, blocking the exit. “Trev? It’s cool. Really.”

Tolek the Twat here gives a winning smile. He knows I’ve seen his

gangbangers. Staring straight at me, he says, “I want to talk to Błażej alone.”

She answers, because I’m too flabbergasted at his fucking insolence to even get my lips moving! “Tolek, what do you want?”

“To talk, Błażej.” Suddenly he looks like a puppy with a broken heart. *The most dangerous kind.* “Just talk. Please. Outside. You no accept my Facebook Friend request. I just want be friend

again.”

*You’re kidding me...*

It’s taking all the strength I have to not strangle him, slowly, and painfully. But I manage not to.

“We have nothing to say to each other. All we ever had to say was said the day you left my apartment.”

He chews on this a second. Very literally. (Either that, or he’s got some

bovine in him somewhere...)

He looks up at me. And, in a final defense, points a finger at me. “Dis not over.” Then, finger back down, he glares at Blaze. “And you and me *will* talk! I promise you!”

It feels like I’m resisting a semi-truck going at a hundred, not hitting this motherfucker this very second! And I would take him down. Oh yes I would. And when his mates came in, I’d go down



fighting. And I wouldn't care. Because *one* solid thwack to this dude's chops would be worth all the pain in the world.

One solid *crack*.

He turns and leaves. One of the posse doormen waits longer than all the rest, then slams a fist into an open palm. *Real original*. Finally, he disappears as well.

I put my hand on Blaze's petite shoulders. She's trembling.

I think the redhead chewing gum next to us sums it up best: “What a fuckin *asshole*.”

-7-

Blaze might’ve tried to play it cool, but I can tell the dude got to her. Because she just about forgets to hook up with that *Red Lipstikk* singer, Viktoriya—the whole reason we came to *Slambam* tonight in the first place.

The band has given way to a lesser known act, and Viktoriya sits at a booth with her band members, as well as one of the secret-service types who is most definitely *not* a band member—black suit, huge round face, chest nearly as large as Dwayne Johnson’s. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think Viktoriya here was the First Daughter or something.

We hang back while Blaze goes to

her table to exchange details. Viktoriya stands when Blaze gets there, smiling widely. Then gives Blaze a hug like they've known each other for years. She gestures for Blaze to sit. Blaze shakes her head, points over at us. Blaze takes her phone out, and types in what I presume is Viktoriya's number. The frazzled-haired blonde is really elated. She puts a hand on Blaze's shoulder, then looks over at me. Blaze laughs. The blonde gives me a

smirking *I'd-Do-You-Twice* look.

I look away.

Afterwards, Trev drives us home because the rest of us have too little blood left in the alcohol flowing through our veins after all those beers. He takes us to Blaze's place first because it's the closest to the bar. Outside her building, when I ask her if she'd like me to spend the night, she says, hesitantly, "Uhm—no

—no.” She runs a hand through her hair.

“Not tonight.”

“Was it this Tolek guy? I’d rather not leave you alone—”

“I’ve been alone for a year. Longer than that, actually. I’ll survive.”

Cold wind whooshes around my ears. I hear Trev turn off the engine. In the corner of the building, maybe I see a shadow. But I’m seeing lots of shadows tonight.

And lots of threats.

“I’m worried about you. Let me spend the night. Please.”

“Deck”—she rests a flat hand against my chest—“I *need* to be alone. Please. It has nothing to do with you. If you and I are more than just the heat of the moment, one day, maybe, my ‘alone time’ will include you. But right now, we’re not. Tolek is someone from my

past. And one incident from the past has a habit of bringing up all the others.

“I don’t want to unload on you all the time—”

“I *want* you to unload on me! Blaze, please. I know this is all new and—”

“That’s right. It’s *new*! It’s...a fairy tale. Maybe. Look, Deck, please, you see? I didn’t mean that. I *don’t* think it’s a fairy tale only, but I said it. Because I just need some alone time. I can’t think now. I just.



It's all coming back—”

She looks up, looks behind me. *At that apartment.* Looks back down again.

My hands fire to her shoulders.  
“Blaze, what’s in that apartment!? Tell me! You’re always looking at it—”

She turns, opens the door. And the building swallows her up.

“Blaze!”

I step into the road and call up to

her place. “Blaze! BLAZE!”

A light from another apartment comes on. A dude with a beard and a beanie comes out. Says, “Girl trouble, man?”

I ignore him.

Blaze’s light comes on.

“BLAZE!”

Then the light goes off again.

And I hear music.

Loud, thumping, blaring music.

Filling the whole street.

Something tells me nobody on this street is gonna sleep much tonight.

-8-

Inside me, a volcano erupts. I see red. And the red calls me.

“Wanna go get him?” Skate asks from the backseat.

Jaw clenched, eyes focused on the misty road. I say: “Damn right I do.”

We drive the streets for an hour, enough to settle my rage. And I know that's a good thing. Because, now that I think about it, this would have probably been an insanely bad idea.

“Let's go home, dudes,” I say.

As if relieved of lifting the Titanic itself, Trev says, “Thank fucking *god!*” He exhales. And, with it, come the unspoken

words: *Deck, I'll always be there for you, homes. But you put me in some motherfucking bad situations sometimes!*

“Sorry, Trev. But you know you can always back out of this shit.”

He throws an incredulous glance in my direction. “And let you fuckers kill yourselves?” He faces the road again. Then, *angry*, he shakes his head. “Fuckin asshole. Like I’d ever let you face this shit alone. I only wish you two fucks would

*grow up!”*

## **-10-**

When Trev's older brother was arrested for pushing, I was the only one who saw his tears.

When my mother passed, he saw mine.

When Jacinta was given a blue eye by a punk she was seeing, me and him paid that punk a visit together.

And Trev's the one who pulled me  
off of pops before I damn near killed the  
bastard.

In the nick of time.

Trev got me out of there before  
dad's squeeze could blow my head off  
with her contraband nine-mil, a weapon  
she caresses as if it were a stray puppy. *Or*  
*a fat hard-on.*

There's one thing Trev loves more

than his scholarship. One thing only.

And it ain't football.

I love him as well.

## -11-

Trev and Skate crash at my place.

As tired as I am, I can't sleep. I open up the Google Play app on my phone and put on Blaze's mix that I uploaded onto there. Then I text her:

*Deck: Sleep well. Sorry I overreacted. .*



*respect your need for alone time. And I understand it. Wanna grab some coffee tomorrow morning? My only move is at 12.*

She doesn't answer.

**-12-**

Tonight, I have my recurring nightmare. The only one that wakes me up in sweats and forces me to put the lights on. Some of it based on fact, much of it not...

*I walk into pops's apartment. Only, in here, it's not "his" apartment. It's "ours."*

*Mom's and mine and pops's.*

*Something's wrong. The floorboards creak. And the apartment looks like...a house? I'm in the entranceway. White moonlight shines in from windows in the back. Stairs soar up to rooms upstairs that, in this world, I get the feeling I should visit.*

*As if something's there for me...*

*When I take a step, I hear the sound of cans. I look down, and it's PBRs. Hundred of them. Everywhere. So many that I can't see the floor anymore. Not even my feet.*

*One of them leaks beer onto the ground with a gulp-gulp-gulp sound.*

*I realize I'm in pajamas. Light blue flannel. With flying elephants on them. The elephants each have a feather in their trunks.*

*And they're smiling.*

*“Declan, that you?” Pops’s voice feels like a scalpel down my chest. I also hear something else:*

*Faint and mumbled, but clearly there:*

*“Mmmmm. Oh. Yeah. Mmmmm. Umpf! Oh, god.”*

*“Declan, that you?”*

*The cans clatter. Gulp-gulp-gulp.*

*“Deck, what da fuck you makin’ all dat noise for?”*

*And the woman's voice: "Mmmmm. Oh.*

*Yeah. God yeah. God yeah!"*

*I turn my head into the tea room (finding it odd that we actually have one of those.) I see her. Golden skinned with thick hair, tumbling and curly. Voluptuous. Bent over a couch. Ass so wide I could be staring at a porno flick. Black lace stockings.*

*And dad's cock inside her.*

*"Oh, yes, Raymond. Motherfuck dat is*

*good.” Thick Hispanic accent. Seductive.  
Alluring.*

*Her groans bounce off the walls like  
they’re coming out of speakers.*

Who wouldn’t wanna fuck her? Of  
course dad would be fucking her. Right?

*Pops holds a PBR in his hand while he  
does her. He looks back at me while his pelvis  
pumps the Madame below—slap slap slap.  
Her torn stockings seem oddly out-of-place in  
this otherwise Victorian setting.*

A tea room of all places. Go figure.

*Pops's ass sags. He's still got his shirt on.*

*His pants are in a puddle by his feet.*

*There are red marks on his white legs.*

*Sores, maybe.*

*“Mmmmmmm!! GOD! RAYMOND*

*BABY! OOOH YEAH!”*

*“Hey, son.” He looks back at me and*

*raises his beer—slap slap slap. Takes a sip.*

*Then puts it back down. He looks away, puts*

*both his hands on her generous ass. "Say hi to Catalina, son."*

*Slap slap slap.*

*Catalina turns her head to me, sweaty hair matted to her forehead. But instead of hi she says "Umpf!" and squeezes her eyes just as pops rams another one into her. Her head bobs with each of pop's slap slap thrusts.*

*As if it had always been there, but only now am I aware of it, she takes out her nine mi Beretta, puts the smoking barrel in her mouth.*



*And sucks it, licks it, while smoke wriggles out of it. White, thick smoke. ‘Mmmmmmm,’ she says. Her tongue reaches out over it, caressing it.*

*And then it’s not a Beretta anymore. It’s something else. Something more fleshy. And pulsing.*

*I look away. Because it grosses me out.*

*Situation normal, I think.*

*I turn my head to the stairs.*

*And there’s an entirely different sound*

*coming from above them...*

*“Oh, god.” It’s a different voice, also female, from above the stairs. It’s a wail of pain*

*“Oh, god.” Then sobs. “God, help me!”*

*And, from the tea room, the sexy version.*

*“Oh, GOD! Oh, yeah! God, help me, baby!”*

*Slap. Slap. Slap.*

*And at my feet: Gulp. Gulp. Gulp.*

*And, from above, weak and faint, in between sobs. “Oh, god. Help me, please. Help me.”*

*“M—mom?” I look behind me at dad.*

*He looks at me, raises the PBR, smiles, takes a sip. Slap slap slap. Puts it back down. Fucks the babe with his hands on her charitable ass.*

*“D—dad. I think mom needs—”*

*Dad’s eyes turn to glowing red embers when he looks at me now.*

*I look away. From behind me, Catalina howls orgasmically: “Oh, yeah! Oh, fuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuck!”*

MMMMMMMMMMMMMM.”

*The wail above disappears.*

*I'm on the stairs now. How did I get  
here?*

*Gulp-gulp-gulp at my feet.*

*I take a step and the wood creak-creak-  
creaks. The sex sounds below start fading. The  
death sounds above get louder.*

*“Mmmmmmmmm.” A death sound.*

*At the top of the stairs now, I look left  
and right, and see only blackness. Mom's*

room is to the right. *Somehow I know this.*  
*Even though this isn't really my house, although*  
*it also is.* I don't want to go to the right.  
The sound is coming from the right.

*Convincing myself that everything's OK,*  
*too afraid to face the truth, I go left.*

*There's a statue of the Virgin in the*  
*corner, bright and shiny. The only thing glowing*  
*in this dark spot of this hallway.*

*And then she's a real woman. Nude.*

*With knocking breasts. Massaging them,  
sticking her tongue out and calling me.*

*And holding a Beretta...*

*I feel myself harden.*

*And dad's behind her now as well, the  
Virgin.*

Or is it?

*He holds a beer up to me, smiles, tilts his  
head back, takes a sip—gulp-gulp-gulp.  
Then puts his hand on the Virgin's pure ass,  
her tits dangling wildly while she says—*

*The moan from behind me becomes more desperate: “Declan. Declan, baby!” It’s hoarse, barely audible, but it cuts into my heart like a spear. “Declan, I’m dying. Get your father. Declan.”*

*In my hand there’s a joint. Where did this come from?*

*I smoke it, because it’s already lit. And it makes me feel better. Oh, yes, I feel so much better when I smoke this shit. Oh*

yeah, baby. Yeah!

*I puff it. I puff it so much that the room sways. Pictures of beautiful women swing around my head, a harem of them, wielding milk and honey and large brown breasts. Sounds fill my ears. “Oh, yes. Oh, yeah, baby.” And, “I’m dying. Help me. Declan—”*

*It’s a cacophony. All around me. Gulp-gulp-gulp. Slap-slap-slap. Creak-creak-creak*

*Naked women, blood, a flower. A bee on*



*the flower.*

*A cockroach.*

*“Declan!”*

*Dad smiles, eyes hot as fire. And the Virgin’s tongue is a snake now, licking her nose while her hands caress her bountiful breasts and she says, in a deafeningly manly voice that echoes as if it were spoken from an interplanetary loudspeaker currently manned by James Earl Jones: “Fuck me you irreverent BASTARD!”*

*From behind me, screaming now:*

*“Declan, help! I’m dying!”*

*“Mom?”*

*In front of me: “FUCK ME!”*

*The Virgin’s eyes go wild with passion,  
delirious with desire. I wonder if she’s smoked  
some of what I’m holding. The thought make  
me smile. And I smoke it some more...*

Ahhh, that’s better. That’s a little  
better...just a little bit...

What was I saying?

*“Declan, please, don’t leave me alone.*

*Don’t let me die alone...”*

Shouldn’t I be with my—

Did someone say something?

I feel hard. Very hard. Below.

*Irresistibly, the Virgin’s tongue licks my  
check. Her hand gets to my crotch. Inside.*

*Mmmmmm. That’s good. She holds me, juggles  
my balls. I feel my breath quicken, feel her hand*

*tighten around my shaft as she squeezes and caresses it—*

Wait. Something's wrong.

*—moves her hand up and down it. She takes the weed from my fingers and we smoke it together. Pops is behind her as well. Slap-slap-slap. Like father like son. How nice. But I feel like she's all mine somehow. I start doing her, wild and passionate and crazy. I'm all over her now, just me and her. And now she's someone else. Blonde or redhead or— It doesn't*

*matter. She's everything I wanted. There could be no better women than her, whoever she is. I'm elated. I'm over the moon. I'm almost over the edge. I shut my eyes, pump, slam, go WIIIIILD, feel her tits wobble against my chest—*

*It's cold.*

*My cock is cold.*

*Huh?*

*What?*

*Wait a minute. Wh—*

*I look down—*

Oh. Fuck.

*Oh, god.*

NO!!!

**-14-**

I knock the table over.

Howls fill whatever room I'm in.

Someone's shouting, screaming,

shrieks of abject terror.

“OH GOD! OH MY FUCKING

GOD! OH— I'm gonna be sick... I'm gonna—“

Light. Light. I need light. Where's the switch? Where am I? Wh—

“That bastard was fucking his whore when she died! And then I was— OH *GOD!* NO! OH—“

And then the puke comes, hard and forceful. *Out!*

Into a...bucket?

*Huh?*

I feel hands, solid firm hands.

“OH GOD! OH—“

And a voice... Somewhere... It’s—

“Deck, it’s cool, homes, it’s cool.

Just a dream. Just a dream. Just a dream,  
homes.”

“It’s my mother! It’s my mother,  
Trev! *MOTHERFUCK!*”

“Deck, it was just that dream.  
Skate, put on the lights!”



Trev's holding me. Somehow, I come to understand this fact. While the world spins. It won't stop moving. The TV is evil and the walls are ghostly—

A ram-rod finds its way into my stomach, driven in like a train. When I land back on the couch, I realize it was Trev's fist. He punched me.

But at least the world has stopped spinning. And the walls are not menacing

any more. And that's when I settle. When I realize I'm in my apartment, sleeping on my couch. "Fuck." I run a hand through my drenched hair, taste the acid vile in my mouth, feel its corrosion over my teeth.

After five minutes of fighting for breath, I say, "Thanks, bro. I needed that." I look at the bucket he brought for me, spit in it. "Just like old times."

Trev slaps me on the shoulder a few times. "We all have our demons,

homes.” I feel Skate’s hand squeeze my other shoulder.

For a moment I’m moved deeply by it, then severely embarrassed. So I say, “You guys are so fucking emo.”

I don’t add, *And I’m so glad you’re both here.*

I grab the bucket and go clean it out.

The next morning, Thursday, we chill out at *Tom's* while Clarissa eyes me evilly from the corner. When she pours me coffee, it spills out the cup, but doesn't quite land on my pants.

She doesn't apologize.

Usually I'd expect that shit when she and Skate were dating. But I know this is all about Gina. I still haven't gone to see her. *And don't know if I will...*

“What’s up with her?” asks Trev.

“If anything, I’d expect Skate to get coffee spilled on him, not you.”

“Maybe it’s just hormones.” I know it’s a lie. Clarissa knows I haven’t made efforts to go and see Gina. And guilt shows.

I keep checking out my phone, but Blaze hasn’t texted me yet.

“She’s fine, homes. She probably

just went to bed late, mixing.”

I want to believe him. And yet, I can't stop thinking about that elephant-sized monster with the black hair last night—Tolek the Twat.

And Gavin the Grande. Xavier the Sex Loving Dealer.

*Who else wants a piece of her?*

And I also can't stop thinking about my own tumbling state of mind.

For four blissfully ignorant days, all

was right with the world. I confess that I even had thoughts—brief, but there—of moving into one of those two million dollar condos with Blaze one day. The two tatted lovebirds whose romance transcended all barriers of the world. “Fucking load of bullshit,” I say out loud. When Trev and Skate stop drinking and stare at me, I say: “What?”

And then they laugh. Like it’s all a

big fucking joke.

But it isn't. I'm pissed about it. I'm pissed about my life. And most of all, I'm pissed about what that cesspool of a father did to my mother.

And I'm true as fuck gonna tell him! Again.

*Preferably without the fists this time.*

When I tell Trevor I'm "ready to visit pops again," he's not as excited as he was when he first asked me to do it.



Funny how things change with  
time.

TWELVE

ANGIE, BERNICE, AND

CHARLIE

-1-

*Blaze Ryleigh*

It's ten-thirty when I get up.

A body-thunking sense of loss hits  
me in the stomach, the kind that slams  
you when you think someone's alive, only

to realize, seconds later, that they've actually died. But that "someone" is different today. And it's not a death, but it feels a little like one. Because I sent Declan home yesterday. And gone is gone, alive or dead. So what's the difference, really?

And when I did it, I told him that "this is new" and so it isn't important. But the feeling I have in me this morning says something entirely else to me. It says

he's come to mean so much more to me than I allowed myself to believe. *Sinatra*, I think. *Under my Skin*. Not great to mix into a dark tune. But a classic...

It scares me. Not the song, that Declan's actually done it—gotten under my skin. *My thick skin*, I've always thought. But how thick can it be if I let a boy underneath it with only the force of a single breath?

*Not any boy...*

It feels like I've lost him today. It feels like I've made a deadly mistake. I sent him home.

*Because I was afraid?*

Because I was scared that, if he knew my past, completely, he'd leave?

And why did that scare me? Is it because I've led myself to believe that he's more than just a boy? More than just a

guy I've known for little more than four days?

This is what I tell myself. What I tell my brain. It's what I told it while I mixed *Rage Against the Machine* into *Tuneboy's Screamin Bitch Mix* of *Housenation* last night until four A.M. Or Alice in Chains's *We Die Young* into *Luca Antolini's Hard House (hard as a mofo)* song, *Heat 2011*.

*It brings out the dark in a person,*

*Błażej...*

I tell my brain lots of things. But the fucking bastard never listens.

And I hate to freaking admit it, but my heart's the one talking to me now. It's downright bleeding for him.

I don't know why.

I don't wanna know why.

All I know is I need him. Because I've only felt this way once before for

someone. Not a boy. A sister. And she was gone by the time I realized it.

And Deck's not gone. Not like she is.

I get up and grab my phone. When I see his message—the one asking if I'd like to go for breakfast—it's like a needle to the heart.

*The lost breakfast. The missed hug. The never again attainable time of the past.*

*Gone. Forever.*



I text him back:

*Blaze: I'm sorry. I'll do better next time.*

*Just...getting used to this whole "letting someone in" stuff.*

I don't care if it's blunt. In fact, I don't think it's blunt enough.

*Deck: Bet you my closet's fuller than yours. Meet tonight again? We're all counting on you to recommend a place with some decent music.*

It's a watershed of relief. I only realize I'm shaking when my legs give way and drop me to my bed.

**-2-**

Because I just can't help it, I go online and check out the forums to see what's being said about me. I don't know if I prefer that nothing's being said, or that crap was once being said.

My MySpace plays are still higher

than usual, but they're also dying.

Dying with the buzz.

And what do I have, really? I have one great gig that I did. Although that gig did give me a pretty decent—he used the word first—*boyfriend*. I smile at that thought.

But it's also woken up sleeping dogs: Tolek. Xavier.

And put some fresh dogs on my tail. Wild dogs.

Wild dogs that I, apparently, have to follow in order to make it at all. And hell knows I'm desperate to make it.

*Maybe they smelled that, like all dogs smell fear.* And maybe they capitalized on it. Maybe, as we sat at that round table surrounded by red lights and whips and cages in *Sacrament's* underground temple to all that's decadent, maybe they saw that in me.

And exploited it.

*Assholes.*

I pull up my calendar and check out the gigs I have planned. Two more this month—two hundred bucks each, and as artistically stimulating as a Q-Tip. The first one is on Saturday, two days from now. The other, the week after, on a Friday. That'll be a double-whammy weekend. My own Friday gig, and then

the make-or-break gig on Saturday at *Sacrament*. I have four more for the middle of February. All Double-Whammies. Three hundred each except for the last one, which is a whopping hundred and fifty.

Yeah, desperate times.

*They're right*, I realize. "I need them to get into the biz," I say out loud. And then, arguing his point of view in my head, I hear Deck's words again: *We just*

*gotta keep getting you out there, keep getting you heard.*

“But how?”

I call him. “Hey.”

“Blaze...it’s...*so*...good to hear your voice. Hold up. I’m stopping the car.”

I hear Trev’s voice. “Say hi to Trev for me.”

“Uh, yeah, uhm, Blaze says hi.”

In the background: “Waddup,

Blaze.”

“Hey.” I laugh. “Uhm, ‘waddup.’”

Deck mumbles, “She says *waddup* back to you.” I hear a door close, then a strong wind. Deck whispers, “Blaze, uhm, *damn*, you have *no* idea how good it is to hear your voice.”

“Oh. OK.”

“I know. I know. It sounds all forward and everything but, fuck, I had a rough night last night—”



“You went out again?”

“No, no. Just...didn’t sleep very well. Anyway, look, I know this is insane but, fuckit, I feel good around you, you know. I better shut up otherwise I’m gonna freak you out—”

“Don’t shut up.” I clench the phone tightly. “Tell me, please. I need to hear it. Because last night, with Tolek—I guess you figured out he’s my ex—”

“Yeah, I figured.”

“—and I panicked and...just...old memories came back... Anyway, I can tell you all about it later.”

“Please, yes. I’d like that. And, look, I don’t wanna come around all weak and soppy and emo and shit but, man, sometimes life’s rough, you know. And, well, then you find a smooth stone—I’m sorry, I’m not so good with words—”

“It sounds perfect.”

“—so maybe this is sounding really corny. But, you find a smooth stone after walking barefoot on shells and glass and cutting your feet up and... Well, Blaze, at the moment you're the only smooth stone in my life. Business is good, my friends are like my brothers, but only now do I see how much my damn feet have been hurting from walking on all that broken

glass. Know what I mean? Like I said, I know it's forward. But that's another thing I'm noticing. I don't think with my brain when I'm with you. And I don't think with that other organ either!" He laughs. "So, that's all I wanted to say. Crazy huh? Blaze? You there?"

I clear my throat. "Uhm, yes."

"Did I freak you out?"

"No. No. Not at all. Let's make it an early night tonight, OK? I wanna be

with you.”

“Deal.”

“Look, there’s another reason I called. Uhm, you’re good with business, right?”

“I’m OK.”

“Modest as well. Fine. Look...I was thinking about what you said, you know, about promoting myself and stuff. Uhm.. What I’m trying to say is—”

“You want some help?”

A lump catches in my throat.

“Yeah, I want some... *help*. Because, I gotta be doing something wrong. Before, I could blame it on the drugs. But in the last year, I don’t have that excuse anymore. So, yeah, I could use some business advice.”

“OK. No problem. I have some ideas we could try.”

We hang on the phone a little longer. Just like kids. I decide to pull off the band-aid, because that's the only way it works. "OK, Deck, really looking forward to seeing you later. Bye."

"Me too. Later."

I kill the call before my heart can stop my brain from doing it.

I put away my fold-out sofa-bed and then drop for a second on the sofa

itself. I feel easier. More relaxed. I feel, suddenly, like I'm not so alone anymore.

Like I could actually go out and catch this sucker and make a meal of it. Like I could actually do something to pull me out the rut I haven't been able to get out of since Savva...you know. Even thinking of her doesn't get me down that much—in this precise moment.

But then my phone buzzes.

And my elated mood disappears



quickly.

-3-

*Xavier: We need to meet. TODAY.*

*Blaze: Why?*

He calls. “Chiquita. Que passa?”

“Xavier.”

“Wanna get a drink?”

“No, I don’t.”

“OK. Fine. Maybe one day.”

“What do you want, Xavier?”

“Just sayin hi.”

“Well, hi.”

“You gonna be so cold to me after all I did for you?”

It takes all the will I have not to charge at him on that one. “Xavier, what do you *really* want? I mean, I know it’s all great and grand that you suddenly got me this deal at *House Market*, and now we’re into *Sacrament*. But I gotta wonder about

it all. I mean, what's in it for you? Why now? Why after a year? Because you keep calling me. You keep hinting at us getting together for a drink. Look, our days are over. You have to accept that. They died with Savannah.”

He's silent for a second.

“I always stay in touch with old clients.”

I almost throw my phone against the wall. But I can't afford a new one—

yet. “Is that all I ever was to you? A client?” *You make me sick.* “Like I said, I appreciate what you’ve done for me. And if you wanna rake in a cut from whomever you deal with in the background for my music, do it. But that’s all it was to me. A favor.”

In an ingratiating tone, he says, “Blaze, honey, you no need to worry about Xavier. Xavier understands. I just

lettin you know that, if you *need* anything, I here for you. OK?” His accent’s coming out, because he’s getting into the role. *If you need anything...*

I shudder. “Look, have you actually gone and visited her at all? Put some flowers on her grave or something? I mean, do you actually *realize* she’s gone, and what our role was in making that happen?”

Silence.

“Xavier?”

And, just like that, I sense Hyde disappearing, and Jekyll entering. And maybe this is where I make the mistake. No, I *know* this is where I make the mistake. Because that's always been my problem: I'm too trusting. I'm always looking for the good in people. Always expecting the best.

And endlessly getting the worst.

Jekyll says: “Blaze, you’re...you’re making this hard for me. I just want us to go back...back to what we had.”

“Xavier, we can never go back—”

“See me. *Please*, Blaze. *Please*, I’m begging you. Look, you’re right, I got you the gig because I wanted something. But would you believe that all I wanted was to be with the only person who was ever a real friend to me? *Please. I’m begging you!*

When Savva left, then Patryk... You're all I have left, Blaze."

And I can hear the sincerity. Jekyll.

No evil whatsoever in his voice.

*And I'm too trusting.*

"OK. Fine. *One* hour. Because I can't afford more. I need to practice."

When he says, "Thanks, baby," I can't figure out which of the two characters I'm talking to. And that makes me nervous.



“Xavier, don’t be high when we meet.”

“Honey, I’m never high. I don’t *do* drugs.”

OK, that made me even more nervous.

-4-

We go to the *Swallow Café*, a coffee bar with a huge blue swallow painted on the brick wall outside, the words

*ESPRESSO BAR* across its chest. Last time I was here, I recall there being a laminated sign on yellow paper near the restrooms inside which said: “CAFÉ” IS NOT FRENCH FOR “RESTROOM.” IT IS FOR PAYING CUSTOMERS ONLY.

Xavier’s in shades (it’s cloudy outside so I assume he’s hiding red eyes) and a purple-pink Panama hat, rosy dress-shirt, and his signature cream Armani

suit.

He doesn't take the shades or the hat off when we get inside.

A coffee grinder goes mad in the background, then a milk steamer. "At least we can talk privately," he says.

"And it's spacious." I gesture around. "And no one will give a shit what we're talking about anyway." I can't take my eyes off his shades. "Take your shades

off, Xavier.”

Hesitantly, he does. His eyes are white as china. *Too white.*

“You baked?”

A moment’s pause. Then, “I told you I wouldn’t be.”

“But your eyes look like they’ve been treated with eye drops. And your pupils are a little dilated.”

“It’s dark in here.” He glares me down. Only, it isn’t much of a glare. It’s

more like a deadpan, stoned gazed. I sigh.  
Shake my head.

I quickly remember running  
around with Xavier and Savva in the  
playground when were kids, how he used  
to throw mud on my dress...

*Different times.*

And:

*Things change.*

“It’s not too late, Xavier. You

know. To get out of it. To get out of the life. It killed your sister. Surely that should be enough for you to take stock and step back from it.”

He scratches his head through his hat. And by the ease with which he leans back, I just know he’s on something! *Punk!* “You know baby, I know Savvy is up there in the sky. And she never took no shit from me until later, you know. So, my conscience is clean.”

I look away. “I know the ghost I have to live with, and I’ll never *stop* living with it, OK? Is that why you wanted to see me?”

He leans forward, and squeezes my wrist. An incredibly *reminiscent* gesture. Sure, we’d been high, in love with the world and everyone in it. But still...

He slides the hand slowly toward my fingers. I snap it away.

“That’s not why I wanted to see you. I just want us to bury the hatchet, *Bunhazhay*.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Why? It is your name.”

“It reminds me too much...of the past.”

Silence. Xavier leans forward, talks softer. “Blaze, you need to let her go. She did it to herself. You gave her her first



Adam, but she *took* it. OK? *She* took it. You didn't force it down her throat. Just like I didn't force George Smack into her veins. *She* took it. I warned her about it. But she wanted it. If she didn't get it from me, she woulda gotten it from someone else. Maybe even someone who steps on the shit, you know, cuts it with bleach or some shit. Or *worse*! What if she'd gotten Krokodil from some beat artist who wanted to make a quick buck from her?

That stuff's fobbed off as H all the time  
to newcomers. Her skin would've been  
*eaten alive* from the inside after her first  
hit, Blaze! You know the Russian crowd  
here's bringin that shit into the country.  
*Eaten alive!* Would you have wanted that?  
Would you?"

"No! Of course not."

"Blaze, she made her choice. Just  
like you did. Just... Just like I make my

own choices. Like I *made* my own choices.  
Then *and* now. Look, this is what I do.  
You know Mama was never able to  
provide for us. How else is a Cubano  
supposed to survive in *dis focken* country?  
The son of an illegal immigrant! You  
remember how it was for us, Blaze. We  
had *nuttin, man!*”

The accent. The role. *He's in full  
gangsta mode now...*

“Xavier, it took your sister's life!”

“NO!” The rest of the bar looks at us now because we’re both talking louder. Xavier raises his hand to them. “Sorry. Sorry.” He looks back at me, speaks softer, but not less forcefully. “No, *she* took her life! She did it, Blaze. And that is the one thing you need to accept. *She* did it—”

Through clenched teeth, I say, “No, the *drugs* did it! The drugs *you* gave her!” I

point at him, accusing him! “And, yes, she started dropping and smoking weed because of me. I confess it. And I have to live with it. OK? But you need to face what *you* have to live with as well! We all did it to her! We could’ve stopped it!”

He sits back, sighs. Takes his purple-pink hat off.

Puts it on the table.

“I know.” He says. “I know.” He runs a hand down his golden face, flicks

his hair back. “Look, Blaze, let’s start again. OK? Please. I...” He shakes his head. “I need you, Blaze. I... You’re right. You were the only real friend I ever had. I lost two girls that day. Please. Just a coffee.”

He always knew how to get “his girls” to go along with him.

He still does.

We actually manage to have a normal conversation. We both order a coffee (made with a French plunger) and bagels. We don't laugh much, because there's too much history there for the air to be light between us. It always will be so.

He asks me how my practice is going. He asks me what I've been doing the last year ("Mixing, struggling for rent.

Thinking about her. Crying.”) He tells me he tried to stop dealing—really tried—but didn’t go more than a month.

I veer the conversation away from this because it makes me uncomfortable. *And unhappy.*

Finally, I ask him the question I’ve been avoiding all along. Even though I also saw him sniffing wildly at *House Market*, like Deck did, I didn’t want to believe the truth of it then. *Too difficult to*



*face*. “You still doing lines these days?  
And what about shooting up—still doing  
that too?”

Like a wounded dog in a corner, he  
says, “I have it under control. I’m not  
addicted.”

“You sound just like your sister.”

“But I really *do* have it under  
control, Blaze.”

I shake my head. “Xavier, I can’t go

through this again. I just can't. I... I just can't. It's as simple as that. I can't let myself get close to you. And not only because your choice of 'profession' disgusts me to my core, but I can't...allow myself to remember...that we were friends once. Good friends. I've lost one already. I won't lose another one."

"We were more than friends." He leans closer. My hand's back on the table and his fingers touch mine. I fire it back

again. Put my hands in my lap.

“We were *friends*, Xavier. Friends on drugs. That’s all.” *And that you took my virginity is something I will never let you discover. Because it didn’t feel like I lost it when we slept together.*

Disappointed, he eases himself back into the chair. “Fine. Whatever.”

I don’t comment on the apparent startings of a hissy fit.

After a grueling few minutes of silence, he says, “I gonna go to da bathroom.”

He's gone for five minutes. When he comes out, he does so with a swagger, wipes his nose with the back of his hand And sniffs.

He grins like 'The Man. Squares his shoulders and looks at the barista as if he's gonna eat him.

Then he sniffs loudly again, like there's some irritant up his nose.

*Oh. Shit.*

-6-

Xavier's favorite name for Nose Candy was never Angie or Bernice or even Big Charlie. It was always *Dama Blanca*—the White Lady—or, if the “shit was really good,” really *prime, esseh*:

Standing there now, he says to the

entire café, “Hola, putos. Me jus’ got me a  
blow from *mi mujer!*”

*My woman.*

*The only one who never leaves his side.*

He flicks out his lapels. Looks at  
me.

The next things happen too fast for  
me to react:

His hand flies suddenly to my wrist,  
*and squeezes!*

He rips me off the bench so hard

that I fall onto my knees below him.

And then he raises a hand high to  
strike me, eyes wild with chemical fury.

# LUCKY THIRTEEN

## OR IS IT?

-1-

*Declan Cox*

I bang on pops's third floor apartment door. The bottom of my fist starts hurting. Two P.M., asshole should be here. It's not like he's working or anything.

Faintly, I hear, "Eh, I comin OK?"



A woman's voice.

*Her.*

She opens up, and I have to look away because her tits are damn near popping out of her floral print robe. Sadly, the image brands itself in my mind. My dad's slut. Dark black underwear, golden skin, tumbling black hair, smoke billowing from her mouth, the cigarette in her hand. And huge dark nipples that,

even if the robe was closed, would likely still be visible.

*I think I'm gonna be sick.*

“What da fuck do *joo* want, *esseh?*”

If bitch wasn't a woman, I'd fucking slap her. “My business is not with you.” *It never has been.* “I'm looking for my pops.”

She drags her cigarette, then looks me up and down. I actually feel breakfast rise up to my throat.

She blows the smoke out, eyes Trev out on my left. Then she bellows out, “Raymond. Is your son.” Her eyes never leave my body, and she even starts smirking.

I snap. “Can you put some fuckin clothes on? You look like a goddamned whore.”

Trev’s hand finds my wrist. “Chill, bro. Just chill.”

“*Joo* should listen to *jour* friend, *puto*.” When she looks at him, she grins even wider, sucks her smoke like it’s...well...his fucking *dick* or something.

This time I have to say it louder. “I really do think I’m gonna be sick.”

“RAYMOND! WHAT DA FUCK YOU DOIN?” She clutches the smoke again. “What business you got here, Deck?”

“*Declan*, Catalina. It’s Declan.” I’ve always hated her own fucking name. I wished she’d been called Maria or Dora or freaking Irene or something. But, no, she had to go and get a goddamned sexy pornstar name like *Catalina*.

*Urgh. Disgusting.*

“Pft! Whatever.” She turns with a wild sway, her ass far too visible from underneath the silk gown. She leaves the

door open, and sits on the couch.  
Stretches her leg erotically onto the table.

“What a fucking slut,” I tell Trev.

“Dude. I hear you. Now, chill the fuck out. I told you, I’ll kick your fucking ass if you lay a hand on him. This is *not* gonna be that kind of visit again. We’re making good on that, OK? You have your say. And then we leave.”

“I heard you the first time.”

When dad appears a few feet from

the doorway...

*I fly at him with cocked fists and knee him in the nuts while simultaneously whirling at him with punches so hard and heavy that his face is quickly blue and red from broken teeth and bruises.*

...I imagine hurting him. A little.

His shirt's undone, belly protruding. But he's still big. Pops was always broad-shouldered. An old

footballer himself. But age has gotten him, and I can almost smell his fear at seeing me. He looks at Trevor, and I see him chill out a little. *Yeah, because my “nigger friend” won’t let me lay a hand on you. And you know that, don’t you?*

“Trevor. Son.”

“Pops.”

“Hello, Mr. Cox. May we come in?”

He turns to look at Catalina. “Cat, leave us be for a little while, would ya?”



“If you lay a hand on him, puto, dis time I ain’t gonna show no fucken restraint, you hear me? Dis time is gonna be *pow-pow*—straight to your fuckin *cabeza*.” She fires an imaginary gun at me, blows imaginary smoke from her finger.

*I don’t doubt it, bitch.*

“Catalina! Please! Let me talk to my son!”

She gets up like a petulant child

—*oh goddamnit I just saw her fucking left tit!*

*Urgh!!!!*—and storms to the bedroom. I hear a spray of curse words from her in there, bitching about how pops doesn't treat her right (*Old Dogs, baby*) and doesn't love her and—she's back out in the lounge again, dressed, now storming past him, then in my face, index finger treacherously close to poking my eye out —“You lay a fuckin hand on him and I gonna *kill* you, you little piece of *chit!* *Joo*

lucky dis *negro* punk got you outta here  
last time you came over. Dis time I *not*  
gonna miss—”

“CATALINA!                      ENOUGH!

PLEASE LEAVE ME AND MY BOY  
ALONE!”

You know, men are taught to never  
hit a woman. You have *no* idea how  
fucking hard it is to keep that rule in  
sometimes.

I sigh relief when she's too far for me to reach her. Because I came *that* close, I swear to you. *That* close. She decides to go for a walk or something, because she storms out the house.

“Son...p—please, sit.”

*Here goes nothing.*

-2-

I was gonna rip his heart out and watch it pulse its final beats in my hand.

That had been my plan.

But Trev calmed me down in the car.

And he convinced me that it's time to lay this dog to rest. That it's time to either have my say out with him, and end it for good; or have my say out with him, and start a new relationship with the dude.

I opted for the former.

We sit. "Would you boys like a

drink?”

I shake my head. I’m ready to go into it, but dad’s politeness is throwing me off my feet.

“Water, sir.”

“Deck?”

I shake my head again. I don’t feel steady enough to speak. When pops is out the room, Trev puts a hand on my shoulder. “Easy, homeboy. Easy. Just

breathe.”

I bite my fist. Tears fight to get out  
my eyes.

*Mom.*

*The night she died, I think, you were  
fucking that...puta!*

He brings in the water, a fresh can  
of PBR in his hand. “Trevor, that was a  
great game against the Wildcats this  
season.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Look, I know you and me’s had our differences. And...I just wanna say...I’m sorry...for attackin’ yo’ race an’ all. I was...just very angry about things and...you was in the way. I just want you to know that...if you’d been Mexican, I woulda made a wetback statement. Hell, if you was white, I woulda prob’ly called you a cracker. I was just...angry. Punchin at anythin in the way.”



“Yes, I always knew that, sir. It was a...rough night all around, sir.”

*Rough night? Talk about a fucking euphemism.* Bitch actually cocked her fucking gat aimed at my head. And I almost snapped pops’s jaw.

By now my leg’s tapping so hard I think I might crack the floor. Cutting into this dreamily pleasant Hallmark moment, I throw my blood-covered axe: “OK, you

guys had your say. Now it's my fucking turn."

-3-

"Raymond"—I can't call him pops, just doesn't taste right—"I was actually gonna come in here and crack your fucking head open. But, again, Trevor here saved your ass—"

"Haven't we had enough of that—"

I stick a trembling finger up. "I

wasn't finished.”

He sits back and bites his tongue. I can sense his rage as much as mine. Belly aside, Pops really is a large man, and when we went at it last time, he got in some good punches.

“So, I was actually gonna come here and rip your head off. Maybe commit Manslaughter One, who knows. Then Trev convinced me not to.” He gives Trev a tight nod. “So, on the drive

here, and a few times around the block, I had to go over it, you know. In my head: *What the fuck am I gonna say to him?*”

“I know, son.”

“And, it was all whirlin around pops. Flying at me in all sorts o’ directions. Because, you know me, I talk with my fists”—my chin starts trembling, my fists clench—“and...and... You know what I fuckin’ wanna know? WHY!?”

WHY!? How could you *fuck* her?

Knowing Ma was in the hospital, sucking in her last breaths! How?”

Trev lets me shout it out.

Tears sting my eyes, and I fucking hate that shit, because I’m trying to be tough here. I’m trying to tell this mother—this mother—this... “Just...WHY!?”

Pops shifts, sips some beer. He sits forward.

“Why, pops? *Why*? I mean, she was

your damned wife! My mother—”

“I know, son. I know.” His beer trembles. He puts it to his lips, decides against it. Puts it on the table.

He starts rocking back and forth. I’m also rocking.

He tries to explain. “I—I—I just... I can’t—”

And then a tear breaks through to his cheeks.

But that just ain't enough to make me forgive him.

Not *nearly* enough.

-4-

He doesn't talk. Only fights off the sobs. And I receive *some* consolation that at least he feels bad. It's nowhere near enough to absolve him. But, at least he's human. A despicable, sad human.

But...*human*.

And that makes me feel a little better.

He wipes his face with his hand. His chin's shivering so much that he can't speak. "I—I..." Then he breaks down, hands to his face. He breaks down into loud gasps of manly tears.

There's something very pitiful—*but also humbling*—about watching a grown man collapse into tears because of his



regrets.

*Heavy, heavy regrets.* The kind you  
can never pull away from.

I get up, go to the window. Run a  
hand through my hair.

*Give him time.*

On my part, one tear breaks loose.  
I'm thinking of mom. I think he and I are  
crying for the same thing in a way. We're  
just crying because, damnit, it needs to be  
cried about. Because there ain't nothing

you can do about that shit!

She suffered. And she died. And  
it's final. And it sucks.

What was then left of his and my  
relationship shattered to pieces.

And it's sad.

So we cry, *'cause there just ain't  
nothing either of us can do about it.*

I get my tears under control a lot  
faster than he does. Less regrets, I figure.

I turn from the window. Look at him. He's relatively under control now. Relatively. "If I could take it back, I would. There ain't nothin I can do about it son. I betrayed my wife, in the most despicable way. Living with it all these years has been my punishment. I know I ain't taught you shit. Hell, it was Trevor's uncle who taught you how to play football. I think the only thing I ever

passed down to you was my stubbornness, and my proclivity for booze. And weed.” He looks up at me. “Don’t think I never knew about you smokin it up.” He points at Trevor. “You too, son. I hope you not into that shit no more.”

“No, sir.”

“Good. Good. ’Cause you got a future. Anyway, Deck”—he looks at me now—“so do you, son. And if there’s one

thing I hope you can take away, it's not to be such a fucking *unbelievable scumbag* like your old man"—he sobs, several times —“like your old man is. Because livin' with that shit is impossible. I can't tell you...” He considers his next statement. “...Son, I can't tell you how many times I wanted to end it, you know what I mean here? After she died, after you left... Just...*end* it.” He pauses, and I know what

he's talking about. *Loud and clear, homes.*

“And when you and I had that brawl...I was *so* ashamed of myself. Trevor, you shouldn't have pulled him off me. Deck, I deserved it. Every punch.” He laughs a little. “I was actually a little...proud”—he clears his throat—“of you. You pack quite a punch, son.

“And Catalina... She just gets crazy sometimes, you know. She woulda never fired on you. That's just her way of acting

tough. She had a tough upbringing.”

He sees I’m not even half-interested about his attempted mitigation of Catalina’s insanity, so he moves on.

“But, I gotta live with that shit. And that ain’t no livin’. Because I loved —” He bites his fist, rocks back and forth like he’s about to puke. “I *loved* Priscilla, Deck. Your mother. And I know my actions don’t justify it, and that there’s no

forgiveness for what I did, but...it is what it is. I never knew...that night. I never knew it would be *the* night, son. And I know you was there, by her side, to the last breath. And...*thank you*, for doing that. At least she didn't have to go alone. So *I* have to live with it. Not you. You hear what I'm saying?"

*Clearly.*

“How long...were you with her, pops? With...the Mexican or Cuban or



whatever she is. Before...you know. How long?”

“Do you really have to know?”

“I do.”

He sighs. “Probably a year or so before...it happened.”

“A *year* before mom died?”

He nods.

“You mean, when we discovered there was nothing more we could do for

her.” I want to be more blunt: *In other words, to you, mom was already dead a year before. After we knew there was no more hope.*

But I’m in a more amenable frame of mind here. And even though I can’t say I forgive him, I’m less angry at him. I can’t even say I *understand* him. Because I don’t. And I won’t pretend to understand what could drive a man to leave the woman he loves when she needs him most.

*Less angry.* That covers it.

He bows his head. “I’ve cried myself empty over it, son. Like I said, it’s one helluva lesson to pass on, but, please, don’t never do what I done, kid. Because even though you might be walkin the same earth as everybody else, you ain’t livin in it—after you do something like that. It’s worse than death. It’s the living dead, son. It’s...*unbearable*.”

“Is she still using?” He knows who I’m talking about.

He shrugs, defeated. “Sometimes. It ain’t nuthin serious. Besides, you ain’t one to talk on that, are ya?”

“I never used coke. But, I guess not. I just... I just don’t get it pops. I just...”

“Because I’m stubborn, just like you are. You’re one tough *bastid* to get off

a course of action once you set your mind to it, Declan. And so am I. It's the flaw you inherited from me. Or, maybe it's a gift. How's business?"

“Going well.”

“See? Your stubborn ass made it happen, no matter the risks or the barriers. Look, son, I hear you. But Catalina keeps me in line, you know. Regardless of how we met, we're together now. And your moms is gone. There ain't

nuthin I can do to bring her back. Why take that out on Catalina? It's not her fault."

I'm a little incredulous at his words. *Not her fault?* I run a hand through my hair. "You gonna marry her?"

He shakes his head.

"So why you still with her, pops?"

He grabs his beer again, sits back.

"Everythin kinda lost meaning when you

left, Deck. Actually, it was more *how* you left. I think that's when it came crashing down on me. That's when I realized what it was that I'd really done. How deep it went. Before that, I had it all explained, justified. But when you found out, and when you came at me... Well...

“Then, when you left... I had nuthin left to live for. Do I love Catalina? Maybe. Would I do to her what I did to your mother? No. I won't. Because I learned

my lesson. And I might have done a terrible thing, but I ain't no animal. If she wants to leave me, OK. If she doesn't, well, I'll take all the companionship I can get. It's Karma, son. That's prob'ly the only thing I believe in now. 'Cause it makes sense. I know I done suffered my fair share of it since"—he gasps, sniffs—"since your moms left us."

*Less angry. Much less angry.* I heave in



a deep breath, look up at my man Trev. He nods, as if reading my mind. “Pops, I can’t forgive you for what you done to Ma. But”—another tear cracks in my eye —“I can...*respect* you...for what you learned from it. And for your attitude about it. I don’t think I’m gonna come by any more often. I’m sorry, it’s her or me. She’ll always be the woman you were with the night Ma.. Well, we been over that.

“I don’t think we’re gonna have

one o' those throwing-the-ball-in-the-park kinda relationships. But, I'm gonna take your calls. At least that. I promise you that."

Pops sucks it up. Stands. Sticks out a hand to me. I stand and shake it. It's all he can do to stop crying. Eventually he does crack again, huge sobs of male tears. I hold him, slap his back. "I love you, son. I'm...so sorry. I'm *so* damn sorry!"

I'm sucking it up myself. *Damn bastard's gonna have me forgive him if he keeps on like this.* "It's OK, pops. I hear you. It's all good. We can move on."

*I don't forgive you, yet, but we can move on now. We can try to move on. I promise you that...*

He's got a deathgrip on me. But it's all good. It's all good, 'cause he's my pops. Not a throwing-the-ball kinda

relationship. No. But it is what it is.

*My pops.*

And I'm OK with that.

I slap his back a few times. He slaps mine. He won't let me go.

I hear steps out in the hallway.  
Then a sound like *stomp stomp stomp*.

And a memory: *Gulp gulp gulp*.

*Slap slap slap*.

*Great, Catalina's back. Only she would  
stomp in a hissy fit like that.*

Then, muffled, but getting closer:

“JOO FUCKIN— I GONNA— HOW  
DARE YOU—“

And that's when the door slams  
open.

Catalina stands there like  
something out of a wild western flick  
Black Beretta Nano sitting snugly in her  
hands. Relaxed and poised. As if she's  
fired a hundred thousand rounds with it

in her life.

And it's aimed at us.

Fury and rage burn in her eyes.

“JOO FUCKIN MOTHERFUCKER, I  
GONNA KILL YOU YOU FUCKIN  
—”

She doesn't kill me.

Although she tries to.

But she does kill someone else.

**FOURTEEN**

**A WHOLE NEW**

**CHEMICAL**

**-1-**

*Blaze Ryleigh*

By the time they get him off me, I think Xavier's hit me already.

The tiny iota of time which passed is an eternal stillness in my head: My

knees hitting the ground after being yanked off the *Swallow Café's* bench. The scuff on the toe of his brown Giorgio Brutini Oxfords. A crumb underneath that. The instant reaction of my elbow to above my head. And his insane scream in my ear: “*Joo fuckin puta!*”

All followed by a clash and crash and tumble of shoes and pants and denims over my head (one stray foot actually kicked me in the top lip) while



men in the café flew toward him to get him off of me.

And then the sounds of Xavier fighting off the four men now on top of him, despite his smallness.

I turn my head and see them in a corner. Four above him, trying to hold him down. Xavier is a caged animal, a tangled mass of unreasoned fury, fueled by the cocaine pumping through his

heart. Even now, after a century of time has elapsed in my mind, I'm still struggling to piece together what's happened. In reality, only a few seconds have passed.

But a few seconds is enough.

Enough for me to realize that this motherfucker just tried to lay a drug infested hand on his dead sister's best friend, the very girl he *fucked* and declared his love for once!

*Me.*

And that pisses me off.

That pisses me off big time.

A whole new chemical rolls in and through my veins. Pumped out by my adrenals. My heart thumps in my ears. My fists tighten. My arms steel up.

I stand.

I look at Xavier, arms flailing and kicking. Never giving up.

“Leave him!” I scream. The bearded and dreadlocked dudes on him don’t let go. “LEAVE HIM!”

They stop moving. The blond one looks back at me. Then at his black-haired friend.

I grab a mug from the table. “Leave. Him.”

They do, finally. Slowly. Confused. Xavier has a little blood dripping from

his lip. Not much. Barely a scrape.

He spits out. “*Joo* fuckin assholes! I know who you are! I gonna kill—”

“Xavier!”

I hear various calls to nine-one-one from behind me.

He grins when he sees me holding the mug. “Whatchoo gonna do baby, commit Murder One with a fuckin coffee mug?” He laughs, proudly, smugly.

Haughtily.

I say: “Damn fucking straight I am.”

-2-

The great thing about Coke, is it makes you feel invincible. So invincible, that you think you can dodge a screaming bullet aimed for your head.

Or a mug.

It crashes against his right temple and shatters. A beautiful cut rips open on

his temple and sweet blood trickles down  
his face like juicy molasses, onto his pink  
*Pierre Cardin* shirt.

He hits the floor with a thud.

As I look down at him, I think of  
stabbing him with the shard of the handle  
still firmly clasped in my hand.

And soon the four guys who were  
holding him back, are now holding me  
back.

Seeing him lying there, blood

crowning his brow, I think of his sister.  
My best friend.

*The light in both our lives.*

All said, he disappoints me. That's  
all. I don't hate him. I don't feel anything  
for him. He is who he is. And the drugs  
make him someone else.

The men let me go.

I turn.

I hear some gurgles from him, a



chair falling as he tries to get himself up. I don't care. I don't care!

I leave. I chuck the mug handle on the street.

I'm walking away from him, from the gig. From all of it.

I'm pretty sure I won't be gigging at *Sacramento* next weekend.

I wouldn't want to either. Because I'm done selling my soul.

I'd rather be broke than a sellout.

Outside, in the bright light, I feel different than how I did just before seeing Xavier today. I feel free. I think of my music. I think of the beats in my head.

Most of all, I think of Deck. Of us sharing a glass of wine up in my soon-to-be ex-loft. Of us sharing a kiss.

Of sharing more than that.

I'm ready for it. With him.

It brings a warm smile to my face,

thinking about it.

And I don't care about anything else. Because he makes me happy. And that's all that matters.

Set to a backdrop of approaching NYPD sirens, I head on over to my apartment.

And I call him.

# FIFTEEN

WE DO. WE REALLY DO.

-1-

*Declan Cox*

Pops turns, puts his hands up.

“Catalina, what da fuck you doin?”

“Shut up, Raymond. Get da fuck out da way!”

“Cat, chill—”

“*Joo* fuckin chill! Dis punk! He

almost kill you *tree* years ago, and you let him come in here? And he have no respect for me either!”

“Cat—”

She shakes the gun, just to remind us she’s wielding it. “Shut up! Raymond, get da fuck out da way! I gonna kill him. I gonna kill—”

“Cat—”

“SHUUUUUT UP!!”

Silence. A car revs outside. I start moving out from behind my pops. He pushes me back behind him.

“Let him come out! Let the little *puto* come out. I shoulda killed you *tree* years ago you mudderfucker! She was dead already! He needed companionship! What kind of child strikes his own father!?”

I try calm her down. “Catalina—”

“*JOO SHUDDUP!*” The word is stretched: *SHUDUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUP!*

Then an idea strikes her—it’s evident. There’s a perceptible glow on her face. She looks at Trev. Smiles.

Suddenly, she flicks the gun over in his direction, on my left.

She grins. Cocks her head a little to the right. Her muscles seem to ease off. “Oh, da fuckin poetry, *esseh*.”

She eases her left hand up and over the slide of the gun. Racks it back with a ratcheting click. *Cocked and ready*. And starts squeezing down on the trigger...

-2-

“Cat. What da fuck you doin’, baby?”

She’s grinning widely now.

“Da little punk need to be taught a lesson, Raymond. But if he dead. He



dead. Nada. No suffering. *Nuttin*. He hurt you, honey. So I gonna blow his friend's head off here. Teach dis little punk a lesson about suffering. Because you suffered Raymond. You suffered, honey! Because of this puto! He need to suffer as well!"

"Cat, he didn't hurt me *nuttin*, sweetie. C'mon. Don't do this! What da fuck has gotten into you!?"

She sniffs loudly. Twice. And a

light trickle of blood creeps down her  
right nostril.

*La Cocaína.*

*Oh. Shit.*

**-3-**

Pops anticipated the trigger-pull.

I didn't.

He dove.

And when blood splattered from  
his head onto Trev's face, I thought

they'd both died.

Alas, only one of them did. “Before he hit the ground, son,” they would tell me later.

In an eternally lasting moment, I stare at my father's half-head on the ground. Commotion follows. More gunshots. Smoke. Some shouting—Trev's voice. I recognize that. Yes, it's Trev's voice.

*Pops?*

A woman screaming. Foul and wild  
and—

*Boom.*

Another shot. I don't know how  
many I count.

Then a click. *No more bullets.*

Eventually, the gore on the ground  
is undeniable. The brains on the wall,  
unmistakable. Spatters of blood on my  
sweater leaving no doubt.

None whatsoever. Finality. *No going back.*

As I stare at it. As I look at it. At *him*. A sadness so large, so heavy, so colossal in its weight, and yet so brittle, hits me. I don't fall to my knees so much as the world climbs up to reach them. And then it topples over, causing my head to hit my father's bloody chest.

I don't scream. I do something else.

I cry to god himself. Up there,  
somewhere. *Or nowhere.* “WHERE THE  
FUCK ARE YOU, YOU  
MOTHERFUCKER! WHY! WHY!!!!  
WHY BOTH OF THEM! WHY BOTH  
MY PARENTS!”

I call him back. I call pops. I urge  
him to wake up. I tell him I’m sorry. I tell  
him I didn’t mean it. In the distance—  
another country as far as I’m concerned  
—the bitch screams. Wailing tears of

realization for what she's done. I shake him, watch his bloody head ooze out the same liquid which pumps through my own veins. An eye missing. A hole where there should be flesh. My hand trembles over what's left of him.

Soon, there's nothing left to do, but shake.

And cry.

And think of death.

And hope my head doesn't explode  
with rage and sadness and fear and  
everything bad and horrible a person can  
think of, all concentrated and magnified  
an eternal number of times.

Afterwards, there's not even that.

There's just nothing. An emptiness.

A hole. A chasm. A *not there*.

And a deafening silence in my head.



Gloved hands reach out to move me. Like a belligerent child, I fight them off. *I must be here with him.* Then there are Trev's hands, gentle and firm.

And I leave my pops.

Forever.

*It ain't no throwing-the-ball-in-the-park kinda relationship. Never was. Never will be.*

-5-

In the car, the silence continues. A

silence composed of loudness. So many clashing thoughts in my mind that I can't hear a thing. But I can feel something. A buzz. On my leg. Like an incessant wasp digging into my skin. *My phone's ringing.*

I pull out the phone, and look at the screen.

I don't answer it. *Blaze.*

But I ask Trev to drop me off at her place.

*It's Karma, son. That's prob'ly the only*

*thing I believe in now. 'Cause it makes sense.*

**-6-**

I say nothing when she answers her door.

Trev stands behind me.

“B—Blaze, Deck—Deck’s father was...murdered...about an hour ago. While saving my life.”

Her hand flies to her open mouth. Tears well up in her eyes. As they do in

mine.

*I'll share this with her, I think. Because  
I won't survive it alone. I can't survive this  
alone.*

She opens her arms to me.

And I crumble into them.

**-7-**

I make Trev stay awhile, because I  
don't want him to be alone either. He  
calls Skate. Then he explains to Blaze, in

hushed tones, what happened, that the woman shot my father, that there was a brief moment of incredulity in her after it happened. That that's when Trev went for her, and got her—or else she would've shot me after as well.

I sit by the window, staring at the setting sun. Darkness engulfs Brooklyn like a widow's veil.

Skate arrives, and he and Trev go out “to get drunk. In the old man's

memory.”

I nod my head at them, but say nothing. I’m out of words. I’m out of tears.

I’m out of everything.

When they leave, Blaze kneels beside me. Grabs my hand. Kisses it softly. Then again.

It makes another tear break loose.  
A tear for a man I stopped loving a long

time ago, but never really hated either. I learned that today.

My hand tightens around hers, so much that I'm sure I'm hurting her. But if I let it go, I'll fall off the Brooklyn Bridge.

The glands by my jaw feel just about ready to explode.

She rises. And her lips meet mine. Slowly. Dryly.

The swirl of the earth slows down, microscopically, but discernibly. The

noise in my head softens by a miserly decibel.

She kisses me again. Runs a hand across my cheek. I clutch it. Press my lips into her palm. I'm grateful for it. For her. For this anchor in a spinning world. I bring her closer to me. Drown my lips in hers.

“We don't have to do this now,” she says.



“No. We do. We really, really do.”

# SIXTEEN IS SWEET

## SNAP

-1-

*Blaze Ryleigh*

Tremulous blue eyes struggle to connect with mine. I press my palms to his cheeks, feel the heat of his breath in my mouth. It's a quivering breath. Afraid. Alone.

Left with nothing.

“I know you,” I say.

His chin trembles, but he fights the sorrow back.

*It's OK*, I think. But I don't say it with words. I say it with actions.

I turn, move over to my sofa and pull out the bed. I lie on it. Rest the back of my head on my arm.

And I wait for him.

He stands from his seat, takes off

his blood-marred sweater in one motion. Throws it on the ground. I ease off my pants. “I need to clean up,” he says.

“Yes, you do.” I smile at him, and try and fill it with all the warmth I can find.

While he’s gone, I look out my windows. I look at Savannah’s apartment. And I think about her. And I think about Xavier.

And Gavin.

*Mad-Ass-Hat.*

*Forget 'em all, I think.*

When Deck returns, I'm on my stomach, hugging my pillow. He's behind me now, talking in my ear. "You OK?" he asks.

Croaky voice, I say, "Yeah. All's good." I reach out my hand to his behind me. "All's good when I'm with you."

He releases his fingers from my

grip, takes off my top, slides his hand under my belly. Twirls my naval. Kisses my ear, runs an unsteady tongue down my neck.

Shivers run down the side of my body. *Like a Speed Rush. Only...real.*

I feel the wetness of his eyes down my shoulder.

His left hand eases over my butt, and my need for him triples. Quadruples. Tightness grabs me, engorges me. Fills me

with moisture as I wait for his manhood to caress my mound, and then enter me.

I hear myself whimper with every slow motion of his. Every calculated kiss, now on the nape of my neck. My spine. His hand simultaneously caressing my butt-cheek, above my underwear. Then, inside it. He grips that cheek, then eases the hand around, over my hips, and under...

Above, his lips make it to my ear, to the stars on my neck. His breath warms my skin.

Below, gentle fingers press up on my swollen lips. And my legs instantly widen. Just one tip of his finger enters me. A squeak escapes me. My skin burns. My breathing goes hot and my hand stretches out to his ass behind me. I push him toward me, feel his hardness against



my ass, my lower back.

He rubs himself against me. “Take them off. Your pants. Take them off.” I say. “I want to feel you on me.” I tug at his belt behind me. He undoes his buckle, undresses.

I turn to see him, large, erect. His tip moist and calling.

My mouth can't reach his soon enough. I swallow his tongue, clutch his hair.

I haven't told him I will. Haven't told him I won't. But when his fingers loop into the seam of my underwear and push it down, I just let him do it.

When the tip of his shaft touches my clit—skin on skin—I almost snap.

-2-

Instinct takes over me. I put my hands on his shoulders and push down, lift my right leg, then my left, widen, and

I wait for him to dip inside me...

*This is how it should be. This is what I  
always thought it should feel like to wait for it.  
The feeling that it can't happen soon enough.*

But he stops.

He gets off me, goes to the edge of  
the bed, picks up his jeans and pulls out a  
wallet. My eyes scan the mad riot of  
colors on his heavy-duty arm. It sends an  
ache of need into my stomach. I throb.  
Wetness seeps onto the insides of my

thighs.

I put my feet on the bed, knees to the ceiling, still wide open. And happy to be, *comfortable* to be...

He rubbers up, and I don't tell him I'm on the pill, because exchanging words now is the last thing I want to do. When he's done, I use all my strength to push him down onto his back. And I straddle him.

He stares at me with red and blue eyes.

On my knees, over him, I bend down and give him one final kiss before we finally become one.

With my tongue inside him, and his inside me, I stretch down below, grab the hardness of his shaft. And I put that inside me as well.

The certainty of an approaching orgasm hits me instantly, a chugging train in the distance. Unstoppable now. Inevitable. My head slumps. My mouth widens and exhales hot air. I gasp. My shoulders drop. And now, my hands on his own shoulders are not to keep him down, but to brace myself up.

I lose touch with my senses, except down below—there I feel everything,

every movement, every tug and tightness, every rub. Inside me. I feel him pulsing, pushing, thrusting right up to the top of me. Scraping the sides of my walls like a bow to a screeching violin, tightening me up with every motion.

I'm a balloon with a flame on its side, just too far to not instantly burst it. Just close enough to know it's gonna happen definitely. So soon.

Declan takes over. Soon, all I know

is that my head's bouncing, my breasts are bouncing, my body's being slammed up and down. His cock feels larger and larger as it impales into me. My ass loses contact with his legs on the upward thrust, then lands again on them on the downward motion.

It's mad. It's wild. It's out of control.

*It's fucking incredible.*



I lose control of my voice. I start moaning. I bit my lips, pant. My eyes are open, then they're closed.

*Slam. Slam. Slam. SLAM!*

His hands push down on my shoulders. Barometric pressure builds. All the muscles in my face scrunch up. *Oh god just go over the fucking edge now!* “FUCK. Oh, god. Deck, baby. Oh, this is so good. Oh, my goodness, sweetie. I— I—”

It's not happening yet. *So close. So close!* Fire rages inside me. Flames lick at my skin and my pussy, cutting me deep inside and pummeling my nerves—

“Blaze! Blaze, look at me!”

I open my eyes. Declan's own eyes stare at me with such intensity that all I can think of is a song. “Declan. Declan. Deck...you light me up, baby. You light me the fuck up!”

He thrusts. *Up*. And holds himself there, ass not touching the bed.

I dangle in the goddamned air, his cock spearing so deep into me, my hamstrings not touching my calves, my hands on his chest and...and...and...

“Uuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuurgh GOD—”

My eyes shoot open.

I stop breathing.

...

*Snap.*

# SEVENTEEN

## REAL BEAUTY

-1-

*Declan Cox*

In a world where everything turns black, where wounds fester and loss reigns. Sometimes there is beauty.

Real beauty.

The kind you expect in a Heaven or in any of the Paradises you hear about

when growing up. The kind that shines its light across a cold and barren desert. The kind that sings like an angel across a cacophony of screeching wails of pain and sadness rising from the murkiest depths of a filthy hell.

Blaze is that beauty.

-2-

Her body detonates. Her repetitive cries of orgasmic release are intermingled

calls of both pain and joy. She wraps an elbow around my neck, presses her temple against mine as the tidal wave rips into her.

We're falling down a waterfall, and all we have is each other to hold onto before we hit the rocks below.

Her pussy clutches my cock again and again, and soon, I fire. Torrents of pleasure flood out of me, *bam, bam, bam*. I almost snap her I'm holding her so tight.

So tight that I feel two of her vertebrae  
press hard into my left wrist.

I roar.

Her screams are ecstasy.

Our mutual calls are cello and  
violin.

She pulls my hair, meets my lips  
with hers so forcefully that it cuts the  
inside of mine.

It feels like it will never end.



Our moistened chests slide against each other. I try reach down to lick her nipple, bite it, but she won't let go of me. Grips me on the neck too closely.

In the end, it's just a light shiver from her, and the occasional pulse inwards, tightening my shaft once again.

And then it's over.

She rocks on me, eases back.

I look at her: My riot grrrl princess

My fire.

I lie back. Our mouths meet and her tongue can't reach deep enough inside me. I flip her over, not taking myself out of her.

Because it feels like I've wanted her forever.

And I'm not done having her.

*THE BEGINNING...*

# EPILOGUE ONE

## TRUTHFUL LIES

*Blaze Ryleigh*

The sensation is one of falling, being with Declan. Falling off a cliff, a waterfall, a building? Falling in love?

*If we fall, we fall together,* he said to me.

Do I hold on? Do I let go? Will I hit the ground? Will I bounce off a

trampoline? Take a dive into a refreshing pool?

You know how you never see yourself hit the ground in bad dreams?

*The beginning and the middle are always good. It's the end we worry about.*

But what's happening with us now is no lie, it's the truth. Will it last? I sense it will, even if it ends. Because I'll never forget Declan, no matter what happens to us, no matter where he goes. He'll always

be with me, in my heart, in my soul.

So, *is* it a lie? That we will be together forever?

I guess it is, and it also isn't. No matter which way you look at it. Because nothing lasts forever.

It's most truthful damn lie I've ever heard.

# **EPILOGUE TWO**

## **AND NOW, A WORD**

### **FROM OUR SPONSOR**

Sometimes life hits a stasis where everything is fine for a moment, a minute, an hour.

A day?

But people don't disappear, enemies don't go away, the past doesn't climb under a hole and bury itself. Quite

the contrary.

You've met some people in this tale, a *lot* of people—Titty-Toting Tatiana. Tolek Two-Face. Gina the Girlfriend. Mad-Ass. Dino “Big Brother” Moretti...

They all come back. Each one of them.

And each causes trouble.

A lot of it. I can promise you that. I tell no lies. Because the past cannot lie,

it's only the future that does. And the past always catches up. Sometimes slowly, sometimes faster. But it *always* catches up...

We're in a stasis now. Things are fine. Things are OK.

*Now.*

But stases never last long... It's just the nature of the beast.

*The Bastid*



# **BOOK TWO**

## **THE STORY**

### **CONTINUES...**

The story of Declan and Blaze continues in Books Two and Three. Book Two will be out in early March. Please subscribe to my blog for news of its release:

<http://racheldunningauthor.blogspot.com>

I'd love to hear from you. Send me

an email if you'd like to chat or just say  
hi: [rachel.dunning.author@gmail.com](mailto:rachel.dunning.author@gmail.com)

You can also send me a message on  
Twitter here: [@RachelDAuthor](https://twitter.com/RachelDAuthor)

If you enjoyed this book, please  
consider reviewing it at the site where you  
purchased it.

Thanks!

# FROM THE AUTHOR

Notes on research and other comments about this story will appear at the end of Book Three.

## **Also by Rachel Dunning:**

Finding North, #1 Naïve Mistakes

Trilogy

East Rising, #2 Naïve Mistakes Trilogy

West-End Boys, #3 Naïve Mistakes

Trilogy

Like You, #1 Perfectly Flawed Series

Christmas Comfort, #1 Hot Holidays

Series

Girl-Nerds Like it Harder, #1 Girl-Nerd

Series

Girl Nerds Like it Faster, #2 Girl-Nerd

Series

Girl-Nerds Like it Deeper, #3 Girl-Nerd

Series

Girl-Nerds Like it Longer, #4 Girl-Nerd

# Series