

Salvation
Danny Wayne Cotton

“And father, bless me for I’ve sinned, and know that I seek your forgiveness. And, father,” I pause, “watch out for Grace.” I choke a little on that. “Amen.” I always need that, especially on days like this. I get up from behind the pew. Wave up to the front, and I stroll out. The clouds are over Mobile, it’s about to rain. I take out a Lucky and give it a light at the corner. Figure I better get it in before the drizzle and wind take over. I walk a few blocks to McGinty’s. The place is a stone dive where fathers, grandfathers and bums hang out to drink away afternoons. It’s getting infiltrated by the young, hipster types that wear work shirts, while never having worked a day in their lives. Some band is playing old blues songs over the smoke.

“Ah-awww, smokestack lightnin’... shinin’ just like gold.”

Either way, I aint there for the crowd. I’m there to meet Pat. He’s a balding, middle aged fellow who’s been running this place for the better part of his life. He’s always known Boss, so he’s always been where we go for a new hit.

“How the hell are you, boy?” He always greets me so cordially.

“Fine, fine.”

“Usual?”

“Yeah, and the unusual.” He pours me two fingers on the rocks. He slips me a white envelope as a coaster. I nod in acknowledgement.

“They got you goin’ overtime.”

I laugh at him. “Well, I’m good at what I do.” And I smile wryly. There’s nothing good about being good at what I do.

“Whatta ya know?” I ask him.

“Moved a little too much off the top. Probably gonna be down at the club all night.”

I lay a little down for Pat’s service, and I stroll out, lighting another one on the way. I’m headed back to what’s passing for home right now. Some of my pay is for Boss to hold me up in the Malaga Inn. It’s a pretty little expensive place for people wanting to live out some damn antebellum Confederate fantasy on the bay. I get into the room, slightly illuminated by the bedside lamp. I get out of my jacket and my tie. Boss likes us to look good, and I’ve always been a clotheshorse. Or maybe I’m just a showoff. I’m in the room now, so I strip down to my beater, take off my boots and sit at the foot of the bed. I haven’t opened the envelope yet, I don’t have to do the job tonight anyways.

It’ll wait. I think to myself, as I find my bottle of Bushmills. I pour myself a couple fingers and have a sip. *It’s too goddamned quiet.* I always think that. Being left alone with my thoughts hasn’t been comfortable to me for a long, long time. I flip the TV to some dumb sitcom and let it wander into the background as I sip. Eventually, though, the thoughts start to catch up with me and I figure it’s time enough to give her a call. I use to call her Savannah. She was from there, and was introduced under that name. But I came to know she was really just a harmless Maria who liked the company of a brooding man.

She has a dark tan she always claimed was thanks to Melungeon heritage. She’s tall and svelte, but not without feminine curves. Her breasts, her belly, her legs, they all flow like some long, slow legato. She framed strong facial features with a platinum

blonde dye job and gold hoop earrings always dangling at her side. Her eyes could kill a man better than any .9mm, or at least stop him cold. You could see most of her soul in those eyes, but you always knew some little piece of innocence, of a shy little girl, was hidden. I use to love staring into her deep, smoldering brown eyes. Me and her were together a while, close as I got to being married. She didn't like the way I kept secrets, I didn't like the way she kept me jealous and we were both young, stupid and confused about everything in front of us. That didn't stop us from bringing a little girl into the world.

My little angel. I think to myself, *my angel.* That's what that little girl is. Seven years old, her name is Grace. I still call her baby Gracie. In spite of Maria's Melungeon blood, Grace got red hair. She's a curious little thing, has a mind that can't be from me and her momma. The only time I really feel comfortable, or right by the world, is when I can hold her in my arms, kiss her little forehead. I guess I feel like she's always been watching out for me, and always will be, you know? Baby Gracie, that's what I'd call her. She's kept me awake more nights than her mother and Baby Gracie was always the one who made me wonder about my line of work.

So, whenever I call those two I take some precautions. No easily traceable stuff. I aint about to call on my cell, or direct from the hotel, then risk somebody tracking it and hanging those two over my head. Not that it's the biggest risk now days, with them far off in Needham County. I still don't feel like taking any chances, so I pull out one of those cheap plastic cards you can pick up at the Wal-Mart. Mine has a couple of hours on it, maybe. Plus, if I call her from there she might pick up, and if she might pick up, she might let me talk to Gracie.

I take a swig before dialing the number. I take a few more as the computer tells me which buttons to push and when to actually dial the damned number.

"C'mon goddammit!"

Ring

Ring

Ring

Ring

"Four, she's prolly not gonna answer."

Ri-click

"Hello?" The voice is a smooth drawl. It started out wispier, but long nights and Ultra-Lights have started to take their toll.

"Hey." I answer.

"Hey." She says back, a little angry, realizing it's me. I've got to jump in before she just decides to cut me off.

"Look, I'm sorry if I've been an ass lately, alright. I just, you know I get to missin' you and missin' Gracie. I just, I'm kind of lonely tonight."

"Where are you?"

"Down south."

"Dammit, Michael, where?"

"Look, that isn't important babydoll."

"Don't call me that."

"Fine. I'm sorry." I'd forgotten she had found another beau. "Look," I continued, "could I just tell Gracie hi?"

“Gracie’s taking her bath, she’s getting ready for bed.”

“Well tell her that her daddy loves her, alright.”

“Fine. I will.”

I can’t stop myself, “I love you too, Marie.”

“I know.” It stings when that’s her response, but it almost always has been. How I take it is all in inflection, tonight it wasn’t inflected sweet.

“Well, I’ll see you... some time.”

“Bye.” She answers curtly.

click

It’s damned funny how sometimes I can call her, and she’s sweet and wondrous and brightens a whole week. Then sometimes it’s like trying to talk to a brick bitch. Well, now’s as good a time as any to read my assignment. I take out my little knife and open up the white envelope. One sheet, folded, one picture. It’s a mugshot. *Damn, looks young.* I start to read the sheet.

“Wayne Lavert. 19-maybe 20.” Any kid that young must just be moving a little. Probably doesn’t know who Boss is, hell might not even know that the boss is after him. He must have some serious balls to have skimmed enough to get me sicked on him. I figure he just thought the boss was dumb as him and he could keep a cut here or there. I’ve read enough. I know enough. The kid’s too goddamned young. I’d never wasted no young kid before. Hell, I don’t think I’ve ever killed anybody younger than me, sure not much younger. I’ve killed two-bit embezzling shits, I’ve killed ignorant redneck thugs who’ve seen too damn many dumbass mob movies, and want to challenge the Boss. I’ve killed Deputies, crooked preachers and men who got too close to Boss’ wife.

Once I wasted a judge. He had a half assed record there in Tuscaloosa, but his daddy knew the Boss. Boss could pull strings, get the half-promising boy into law school. Boss always had a way of knowing who’d make good. This son of a bitch did.

The boss didn’t ask much, just a little quid pro quo and protection. They didn’t even have to fix this Judge’s election. He was one of those charismatic types whose best days are back in high school, back when all you’ve got to do is have a pretty smile and a pretty car. The judge came home for Boss. He was a judge who knew when to turn his head. He was instrumental in getting one of my buddies off. But his honor started to question things, started to wonder. He started to think that a life with the Boss wasn’t for him. He didn’t understand. Once you choose the life, you live the life. You can’t question it, anymore at least. The first time he banged that gavel was no different than the first time I squeezed that trigger.

I remember it, to. It was some smartass old codger named Luther Fox. He probably made his money pissing off Buford Pusser. He ran my Needham County. The son of a bitch had been fixing every election since before my dad ever grew a weed patch. He was a fat old bastard who decked himself out in one of those cardboard, short sleeve white dress shirts. The damned thing wasn’t enough to keep you from seeing his beater or his sweat stains. He smoked fat cigars and drank what he said was the finest Kentucky whiskey. He had a pissant gambling operation running, a little weed money and even the remnants of an illegal liquor ring. But, goddamned, he was the stinkiest shit in Needham county. He even drove a Cadillac.

“Boy, I don’t drive ‘em long, but I drive ‘em first.” He use to say that, sitting in the back of Hattie’s. Hattie’s was a restaurant on the south end of Main Street. In the

back they had a pool table and a couple of tight slots. The guy took a shine to me. I knew how to grow green and I knew how to separate business, pleasure and family. So I got to be there while he held court in the back of Hattie's.

"Boy, you got you a future in this county. I swannee you're a wise lil sumbitch. I can get you money like you won't believe. You know why boy? Cuz you know, only way you can get it's t' take it. My deddy," he'd look down at the ground, "my deddy was good man, worked that land out there with his hands in that dirt til the day they covered hem in it. Worked and worked. What in the shit did it get hem? What in the SHIT?" Greener than goose shit I looked up at him unaware. Just caught in the rapturous fervor of what he was saying. He squinted, pointed straight at me with two fingers.

"Nothin'. Nothin' boy, not a goddamned thing. In this world, you gotta take. You gotta take whatever you can take, you understand?"

I understood. My own daddy was a laid off, laid up, weed growing redneck who had gotten a little girl pregnant just in time to wait around to die. But this old son of a bitch was holding court in the back of Hattie's with everyone in town afraid of him.

Still, he took too much. He was as beholden to the Boss as anybody in this state who got himself into the line of work we were in. But he kept taking. Eventually Joe, the Magistrate, took me aside one night in Hattie's when the boss was out and I was shooting pool. He took me over to the back corner, next to the makeshift bar, and poured me a glass of whiskey.

"Listen boy. Boss, down in Mobile, he's getting a little tired of the way Luther's been running things in this county. He takes a little too much off the top, he doesn't play ball with his higher ups."

I was still greener than goose shit and didn't understand.

"He don't play ball?" I asked a little dumbfounded.

"Naw, he don't. And in Alabama you have to boy. Now, let me tell you... We need to do something about him. We need you to help us. There'll be plenty of reward if you do, nobody here's gonna turn on you... understand me? Boss, down in Mobile, he knows how to reward you if you do him right."

So, late one night the old man was drunk in back of Hattie's. He was sitting there at the table, bragging about his time in prison.

"Man like me, man like me don't do nothin' too hard to come back from. Hell, I put more sunsabitches in the ground than all a Alabama put cottonseed. Heh, heh, I got a forty five here in my boots and I got that pearl handle on the bar and aint nobody in Needham county got the balls to come after me." I strolled quietly behind him and quickly drew my 9mm. I put it to the back of his head, and pulled.

Once you do that, you aren't allowed to think about it anymore. You don't get to worry about salvation and you don't get to worry about right or wrong. You're livin' in that shadow for the rest of your life.

I had to wonder if the kid had made his way into the shadows yet. I didn't know, but it was best I didn't wonder. Empathy doesn't do you much good in my line of work; it gets you killed quicker than the son of bitch they send you to kill. I hate when I worry like this. I pour myself another two fingers. I finish it quick and pour myself some more. I'll need to find sleep for tomorrow.

I wake up the next morning and I'm still seeing the kid. *You can't just off some damned kid. He's ignorant, he's green, he doesn't know what he's gotten himself into...I*

can't think about the kid. The kid's problems aren't mine I just need a shower. Before I get there I manage to ask myself if I should call Maria again. She's off today, she doesn't sleep as late as I always do. I could call her and she could let me talk to Gracie. First thing in the morning, after I shake off the hangover, and before I shower and smoke, I go to my wallet and I check the little picture of Grace that I have. I mean, her mother's beautiful, but I can't see how either of us had a hand in that little angel. Her red hair is down beyond her shoulders and her momma had it all prettied up. She was in a cute little sun dress that her momma bought her. Her smile is like the sunrise, to me. Only light I see all day is in that little picture.

This job's too much. This is a damned kid you're talking about, a kid. I can't shake that thought. I can't shake the thought that the guy I've got to off is a kid. I could do it like every other one. Go down where he lives, pull the nine, squeeze. It's a simple thing, really. I don't even have to think about it anymore. Load up, go in, leave him. It's always been a simple job. So there's no reason that I should worry about the kid. He's just another person dumb enough to step on the Boss' bad side. Boss is a fair man, but he's never been kind. Let's just say he always knows how to repay you. I know that I'll never find any Heaven, but I can't help but wondering what part of Hell they'll send me to if I kill this stupid ass kid. Then again, maybe he aint green, maybe he knew what he was getting into and needs to pay for it. I got no way of knowing. I have to just kill him.

He'd be at the titty bar, you could just... No, that's a stupid idea. I don't want half the world to identify me as the last person he was ever seen with. Still, I can't shake the idea that killing him is too much. I go down to McGinty's. At three in the afternoon the only folks in there are the real regulars, the assortment of low down drunks and retirees who don't mind sitting in a smoke cloud in the middle of the afternoon. I make my way to the back and take a seat at the bar. Pat looks up a little confused.

"I don't think we have your usual, boy." He says staring at me.

"Then gimme a Bushmills, just for the nerves."

"Rocks?"

"Rocks."

"Didn't expect to see you, aren't you workin' hard today?"

"Will be, I spose. Just need to clear my mind."

"Don't get it too clear, that boss of yours can be particular."

"I know what I'm doin'." I answer, perturbed. I didn't ask him to give me shit, I asked him for a drink. It sounds to me like he senses my loss of faith in the job.

"You headin' up to the Club?" Pat asks, referencing the tit bar that boss runs, and the kid is known to frequent.

"Ahh, I might later."

"Just, yknow, keep your nose to the grindstone."

"Always do." I finish my drink, lay down some cash and head out.

"Hope to see you again." The hint wasn't lost Pat.

But nobody said a bartender had to be subtle. As I walked out the door I found myself a Lucky and stood there for the moment thinking.

I need to scope the kid out. I'll head to the club later. If he just needs scarin', I'll scare him. Boss can trust my intuition. It'll be just like that Sheriff up in Colbert Heights. That was a bastard who got scared enough at the prospect of being killed. I worked him out a deal, and warned him I'd be back if he didn't follow through. Explained that not

following through meant a bullet in his head and his body flying over Wilson Dam. He followed through.

But I had never been so damn scared as when I was sitting across from Boss' desk explaining what was going to happen.

"I think we put the fear of god in him, boss. He'll get everything back to you, he'll lose the next election, he'll be out of the life and out of your hair."

All six foot four of the Boss was sitting across from me lazing in his leather chair, looking a little unimpressed. He pondered over what I told him. Then he raised that dark, slow, Alabama baritone.

"I asked you to get rid of him." He said nonchalantly. "He's done me wrong, he's done my organization wrong. What makes you think he'll be any different now?"

"Fear, he didn't fear anything. He thought he was walking the Earth a god. Now," I looked at Boss as I lit a cigarette, "he knows the consequences. If that doesn't mean anything to him, then his life doesn't mean anything to me."

"And if it does, your life is mine."

I knew Boss was testing me. I was the coldest son of a bitch he had, and he figured as much. I guess he just had to see if he could strike the same fear into me, the same understanding. I drew in on my cigarette, thought a minute and smirked. The Boss stared at the smirk.

"Did you hear me? If you're wrong, your life is mine."

I laughed, "aint it already?"

From then on Boss knew I understood the consequences. Boss knew that I understood the life. There were times he'd ask me if a son of a bitch was worth killing. One time the boss even asked me to make this dumb lawyer THINK he was going to be floating in the gulf. He was too good a lawyer for Boss to want to kill him, but he was too frisky around the Boss' daughter. He learned his lesson, and now he's one of the most powerful men in Birmingham.

So the Boss was going to have to trust my intuition on this kid. Hell, I might still kill the little bastard. I'll head to the club.

The Magnolia Club looks like a debutante gone wrong. It shows the graceful architecture of the old south, done in cheap plaster and Las Vegas charm. Some of the most beautiful bodies in Alabama are on the pole their every night. No wonder the kid likes to hang out there. He's probably making enough dope money to throw around lapdances for himself and his friends. He's got enough scratch to go and have a good time, but probably too little to know the back-room. Certainly too little to know what happens when one of those fine girls escorts you back to the Malaga. As I stroll inside, the kid at the desk asks me for cover. Little bastard must be new.

"I know Kay." I tell him, Kay runs the place and me and her go back a ways.

"Maybe you do, but Kay aint here."

"Well, she knows my name I..."

"Look man, just cuz your friend from Birmingham told you to ask for Kay when you're down here on business... You think cuz you're wearin' a damn suit I'm gonna let you in free?"

I wish I could just shoot this smart mouthed prick. I could pull the nine out from under my boot, but I aint hot headed. I take out my wallet, and pull out a card, it's the

Boss'. The kid looks down at it for a minute, then re-examines me. I tap my bootleg nonchalantly. The kid lets me pass.

Soon as I'm in I light up, and sit down at a table. I got no need to draw any attention to myself right now. The waitress comes by.

"Anything ta drank sweetheart?" God, I love the comfort of a woman with a southern accent. It puts me at ease.

"Coke."

"Coke? Darlin', you need some alcohol. Get the party goin'"

I smile at her. "Naw, just Coke right now, maybe something else later."

I scope the room for the kid. Right now some gymnastic blonde with fake tits is twirling herself down the pole. I'm not interested, really. She's got the fake tits and the nice tan, but no sensuality. I scan around the stage. The kid is at the far left corner. He's leaned back like a big spender, throwing every girl a single. He's wearing a Bama cap, hoodie and a pair of jeans. Well, at least he can keep himself low profile. I'll approach him a little later, let him have his fun. The dance on stage ends, and all the ladies file out into the crowd.

I hear one of the ladies. "Michael?" I turn my head to see who it might be, or if she's even talking to me.

"Sapphire? How the hell are you?" Sapphire is a bomb of a girl. God gave her natural double D's and an apple of an ass. She has a charming, almost girlish smile that belies how bitchy she can sometimes be. But never to me. She's always good to me. One night she was even good enough to head back to the Malaga and give me something to hold on to. Strange enough, in the morning we both were happier to hold on to pictures of our little angels. Oh the touching humanity you can see over room service breakfast.

"I'm alright, slow night," she answers brightly. "How're you?"

"Little work, a little play, same old, same old."

"How's little Gracie?" She asks me in a sweet baby talk voice. I've always seen a thin line between stripper and angel.

"I... I aint seen her in a while." I hang down my head. I'm glad she mentioned Grace. But I can't take hearing the name. "I hope... I hope I'll get up there soon. How's yours?"

"What? I didn't catch that last part."

"Nothing." I wave my hand. Don't need that kind of conversation tonight.

"You look tired." Her voice is dripping with sympathy.

"I got a lot on my mind."

"A dance could ease your mind." Sapphire tells me in mock persuasion, nudging my shoulder.

I smile at her. "Sure could."

Sapphire leads me over to one of the couches. A waitress stops us and I slide her the ten dollar drink. Sapphire smiles at that. She sits me down and starts to get ready *This ought to give me a little peace for a while*. Before she starts she blows in my ear and whispers, "*lay back, you're so tense Michael.*" She's masterful, her hands hardly leave my body, tickling and massaging, she kisses me on the neck. I whisper, into her ear.

"I'm working a little tonight, I might need the break room."

"It's fine." She whispers after nibbling a little on my ear.

"Nobody knows I'm here."

“Nobody,” she says brushing up against my cheek. I sit back and let her slide across me. Some girls bounce, some girls just go through the motions, Sapphire moves over you like a warm, slow, tide. The dance ends and she kisses my cheek, I pay her the twenty. After the dance is finished she leads me to the back. The bouncer at the door doesn’t know why I’m here, but he knows I work for the Boss and that I aint *really* here. A few of the girls are in back having a smoke, or just sitting around in their lingerie. Sapphire motions all of them out.

“Why’re we getting out of here?” A redhead says, indignant.

“I’m a friend of Kay’s, alright. I’m not even here. I’ll be out of you lady’s hair soon enough.”

“Look, I don’t want to miss a smoke break here soon, so don’t you waste time in here,” a familiar one named Jessica tells me.

“I won’t bother you chicks, you’ll forget I was even here.”

“Threat?” Jessica jokes.

“Honey, I couldn’t harm a hair on your cute little ass.”

“You couldn’t. I get Brazilian wax.”

“I know.” I laugh. All the girls, except Sapphire, file out. I’m ready to see about the kid. I signal Sapphire over to me. “Hey, there’s a kid Wayne...Lavert? He’s the big spender there in the circle, the one in the Tide hat. I need that one.”

“In the hoodie?”

“Yeah, that kid.”

“Mmk.” She answers, kissing me. Her lips have a faint bit of rum on them, but they’re sweet. I take out a hundred and hand it to her. I smile at her.

“You are too sweet, boy.” Half the women I know always tell me that. “I’ll get him for you.”

“Thanks.”

I figure I have enough time to light up a Lucky. I light it up and take off my jacket.

You know you can’t off a kid. You off a kid, there’s no chance for you, boy. I don’t care how damned dumb he is...what he did...he can’t be worth this, five grand can’t be worth it, the Malaga can’t be worth it...

...this time away from Gracie sure aint worth it.

The kid comes in. “Hey man you wanna see me?” He has a stoned redneck accent, too lazy or cool to open his damned mouth.

“Yeah. Thanks Sapphire,” I kiss her on the forehead, “stay in touch doll.” Before she leaves the room she whispers in my ear. “I don’t know what Boss has you do, or what he did, but the boy’s really not that bad.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” I say aloud. Then I whisper in her ear, “Next time I’m in Mobile.” I give her ass a tap. She smiles sparkling and nods suggestively. I stroll back to the table, where the kid is sitting staring.

“You fuckin’ her?”

“None of your damn business. You got bigger worries, kiddo.”

“Kiddo? Man I’m twenty one...”

“Shut up. Look, do you move for Boss?”

“Boss? I got no damn Boss.”

tease SWFT

“Look, I know damn well you have somebody above you. You don’t deal from your own deck, boy, who do you answer to?”

He adjusted himself in the chair and tried to stare me down. He took out a dip and put it in his mouth. He spit a little into a cup he brought with him. I had to admire that he tried to have guts. I lowered my voice.

“You know why I’m here?”

“Yer onna Easy’s thugs.”

“No,” I laugh, “Easy?” Easy got his start up around Needham County. I forget where the dumb bastard came from. “Easy aint even goat shit. Boss sends Easy out to the sticks to get all you dumb hillbillies hooked on OC. That’s about the only thing,” I’m still laughing, “Easy can pull off.”

“Man, fuck you. You think you scare me?”

I lower my gaze to him. I finish the Lucky and flick it, I don’t aim for him, just to go by him. Then I get serious.

“You know who Boss is? Here in Mobile? Because he knows who you are. He knows you’ve been skimming plenty of money. That’s why he hired me. You know what I do for Boss?”

I could see he was a little shaky, but he was doing his best not to show it. He spit again and looked at me.

“I asked you a question Wayne.”

“Man, what in the hell you here for?”

“Why’re you dealing?” I change the subject, but not my tone of voice.

“What?”

“I studder?”

“Cuz it makes me good money, I can live fat.”

“Live fat? Boy, you watch too much MTV. You been trimmin’ too much fat, ya ask me.”

“What the hell you mean?”

“Take a little money here, come up a little short on that meth, or some dirty doctor’s OC. Then it gets good to you, don’t it? You feel bigger than Easy and my money is that Easy didn’t even catch you, but one of Boss’ bean counters did. Easy added two and two and ratted your ass out.”

“Man, I took maybe five hundred. But I swear I aint been skimming nothing since then.”

“Five hundred?” I’m skeptical

“Grand, the most. I mean, my cousin grows some weed, but that’s strictly family.”

“Boss understands family.” Then, I’m taken aback a little by what I heard. “Five hundred dollars?” There’s no way I was killing him for five hundred, even a grand. A little hit like this will earn me five grand, plus the stay at the Malaga. I mean, there’ve been deputies that are worth twenty. But this is a kid... kids aint worth much. *Don’t start sympathizing with him. This little bastard can still kill you.*

“Look, kid.”

“Don’t call me kid.”

“Look, boy,” I don’t like being told what to do, “why the hell would you take money you know aint yours?”

“None of your damn business.”

“No, my employer made it my business yesterday.”

He senses that I’m not about to back down. He looks up at me and takes a deep breath. “Sister’s pregnant. Aint like the boy’s bad or nothin’, they’re gettin’ married. Still, he’s fresh out high school and works a couple jobs. She works. They’re both...” he thinks for a second, “honest, you know, real good kids. But they needed the help.”

“Now come on, that sob story aint the only reason.”

He smiles a shit eating grin. “You said yourself Easy was a dumb shit.”

“Yeah, well I’m startin’ to think you’re dumber.” He looks offended. “Look, boy. We’re gonna get you out of here, alright, take a little ride. You hungry?” I light a cigarette.

“Yeah,” he answers unsure, a little scared, “I could use some grub.”

I get my jacket and we slip out.

He sits uneasy in the passenger seat, as we’re getting in I lift my cuff and take the 9 from my boot. I close the door without him noticing it. Granted, it would be the clumsiest way in the world to go about killing him, but I don’t know he has any idea that was ever in my plans. I start to speak.

“Wayne, I was sent,” I finish off my cigarette, “to kill you.”

He fumbles a little bit, but manages to pull a snub nose 38 revolver. *Jesus shit, a .38? What in the hell does he think he can do with a .38?* I whip my 9mm in front of his face quicker than he can undo the safety. He goes white, his mouth gapes open and his ice blue eyes grow. He looks like he’s staring at the devil. Staring straight at the kid, and never letting my finger off the trigger, I take the .38 from his hands. I pocket it. He looks certain, certain that he’s hit the end of the line.

“Man, I knew I fuckin’ shouldn’t’ve taken no ride. That bitch sold me out to you, she fuckin’...kiss of death man...I fuckin’... I didn’t mean to take no money from nobody but Easy, nobody but Easy man. I got family I got...”

“Take back what you just said about Sapphire, understand?”

“What?”

“She didn’t sell you out and she aint no bitch.” I tell him with ice in my voice.

“What’s it matter man? You gonna kill me any goddamned way.” *It looks like he’s holding back tears.* I’m surprised he’s dumb enough to think I would splatter my window with whatever the hell he has between his ears.

Then I slowly start to drop the 9mm. “No, I aint. I don’t think you’re gonna die. I don’t THINK. Understand?” I boot my nine. Assassins aren’t in it for quick access.

“Now,” I ask, “you ever had Thai food before?” I take him to Boon and Pattie’s little place. It’s an all night curry bar where the proprietors act like your grandparents. They’re always happy to see you and even happier to feed you. I figure the kid probably needs some nourishment.

“Ah, hello, a how are you?” Boon, the old bespectacled fellow that runs the place, greets us in his thick accent.

“Fine Boon, fine.”

“Two?”

“Two.”

He leads me and the kid over to a table. “What would you lahk to dink?”

“Give me one of those Singhas.” Only thing that beer goes with is Boon’s food.

“Mella Yella.” Wayne orders.

“Sank you.”

“Thank you.” I nod.

Boon laughs a minute, and points to the kid’s hat. “Row Tide.” The kid finally shakes a little of his fear, some color comes back to his face, he smiles and answers back.

“Roll Tide.”

Boon ambles away while the kid examines the menu. I know what I want.

“Man, what in the shit should I get? I aint never eat at no place like this.”

“Well,” I ask him, “you like hot food? Spicy stuff?”

“Yeah man, hotter the better.”

“Watch tellin’ that to Asians,” I warn him. “But, if you like it hot red curry’s as good a place to start as any. Just get it with chicken.”

“Alright man. But I might need to stop at Krystal’s after this.”

I chuckle at him. “Boy, you are from the sticks aint ya? Enjoy a little culture now and then, it’ll do ya good. Besides, this place is as cheap as Krystal, ten times tastier and less likely to indigest you.”

“Somethin’ tells me that’s hard to believe.”

Boon’s wife, Pattie, always takes the orders. She comes by with her pen and paper while Boon gives us our drinks.

“Ready to order?”

“Yes m’am,” I answer, “I’ll have the Panang, hot, and let him try the red curry.”

“Make mine hot too.” The kid answers.

“Extra hot?” She asks him, making sure.

“I’d stick with regular.” I warn him again.

He smiles, “Naw, extra hot.”

Pattie walks away and I look up at the kid. “What made you want to go into this line of work?”

“Money, dumbness. I guess I was always a mischievous lil prick. Too damn stupid to finish high school and too damn ornery to hold down a straight job. I just liked it, I guess.”

“How long you been dealin’?”

“Well, did a little here and there back in school, but no big money. Bout a year I’ve been really makin’ bank off of it.”

“And you took the money to help the lil sister?”

“Yeah. And to get the money. Easy’s a prick, he deserves it.”

“I’ll second that, boy, but I think Easy might be the one who screwed you. You got any idea what my time is worth?”

“Naw.”

“A lot more than I think you can steal. I think Easy’s the thief.”

“I’ll kill that sumbitch.” The kid almost spits the words in a rage.

“No, you won’t. You’ll do what I tell you.” I explain to him. Pattie brings the food.

“Now eat up boy, it’s a long ways to Needham County.”

“Needham County?” He seems surprised. “Why the hell we goin’ up there.”

“To get the heat off you. I got friends up there. Eat.”

He takes a taste of the curry. At first he likes it. Eventually, though, he figures out why you don't ask Boon to fix it extra hot. We finish off our meals and I pay. When we get to the car I light another Lucky and explain the plan to the kid.

"Alright, we're taking you up to Needham County. It's a two, two and half hour drive. I'll be alright to make it though... insomnia. When we get there, we're gonna meet some friends of mine and they're gonna set you up. I want you to get a phone card, and stay in touch with that sister of yours. Understand? And if I ever catch you involved in any shit like this, especially in Alabama, I'm gonna kill your little ass."

Wayne looks up and seems to accept what I said. "But how'm I gonna hide?" He asks me.

"Well, when we get up to Needham County I've got some friends who've got some friends who can give you a place to stay and a little job until the heat dies. If we need to get your ass up north, or even to Mississippi, we can."

"Man, I can't go over to Mississippi. I...man, I gotta watch out for my sister."

"That's why you get the phone card. You stay in touch that way. For right now we've gotta get you off Boss' radar. It might just be an issue of me talking to him, it might be bigger than that." I look over at him and have a thought. "You ever work for the Wal-Mart kid?"

"Naw."

"Well, listen. That's the only place in Alabama too big for the boss to touch. You might wanna look into work there."

From there we set out. There's a slight drizzle, giving the road a slick shine and a misty rhythm on the windshield. I keep the wipers on low and watch the road, I have the music going to keep me awake and focused. The kid is starting to doze a little bit. *How can he sleep when he's in this much trouble? How does he know I'm not about to off him?* I guess the kid isn't hardened enough to think all those kinds of things through. I am. I still don't know what the Boss is going to do to me for going out on this limb. *T'Hell with Boss, I aint about to kill this dumb kid. Most of 'em had it comin', but not this kid. He's just young, dumb and mixed up. No more mixed up than me...* That's a dangerous thought. I just need to keep my mind on the long, arrow straight road back to Needham County. After about an hour, the radio is starting to drone and the road is starting to become unfocused in my eyes. Watching the gas gauge die down I decide to pull of at a truck stop, get a little gas and my head back on. I wake the kid.

"Listen, I'm gonna go pay the lady twenty for our gas, fill that much up when the machine lets you."

"Alright."

"Try to run and you're fucked, understand?"

"Man, where'm I gone run to?" The kid shoots me the obvious question.

I go inside and pay for twenty on pump five, then set about doing a little shopping. I grab the kid a phone card. Those things can confuse Boss' stalkers. Nobody knows you've got it but you. Figuring that a trip to Needham County means a shot at seeing Gracie and Maria I buy two gas station roses and a little teddy bear. I'm going to need a strong black cup of truck-stop coffee to get through tonight. I take all of this up to the counter and realize I don't have enough of a peace offering for Maria.

"Gimme a pack of Marlboro Ultra-Lights," those ought to be enough for her, "and...do y'all have Lucky Strikes?"

“Unfiltered?” *They come any other way?*

“Yeah, them and,” I point to the mass of crap on the counter, “all this here.”

When I get it I return to the car. The kid and I are the only ones at the whole place. We get back into the car and get ourselves situated.

“Here’s a telephone card. Don’t use that damn prepaid cell in your front pocket, understand? This thing is harder to trace. Nobody, NOBODY, knows you have this but you.”

The kid doesn’t quite look like he understands, but he answers. “Understood.” Then he eyes the other crap in my bag.

“What’re the roses for?”

“Personal business?”

“Got you a woman up there?”

“A couple.” I wink.

“Sheeit man, I guess that suit does the job...A couple... shit.”

Yeah, I got a couple. One I’ve been dying to see for a while. This damn job has done a hell of a lot to me, but nothing worse than taking her for so long...I would pull out the picture, but not in front of this kid. Last thing he needs to see is me weak.

We keep driving. The drizzle has died down to a soft, humid, slick on the black snake of road. I sip the coffee and light another Lucky, just to keep the head clear. It’s been about an hour and a half as we start to hit what is, to me, the most familiar stretch of road in the world. Once I exit the highway, the road I’m on is the only way in or out of Needham County. My view narrows, I flick on the high beams and thump the accelerator. The winding curves of this road can be too much for some people, especially when it’s this satin black dark. But for me it’s just like strolling through my house in the dark. I’m careful, but I know it all like the back of my hand. Nothing here is unexpected, and that’s how I like it. *Driven this a million times, give it a little more gas...I’m hitting maybe 65 or 70 on the two lane blacktop. The place we’re headed is right before the outskirts of Needham Creek. As we approach I get out my cell and dial.*

“Hello,” a rough, female drawl answers.

“Hey there.”

“Michael?” Sounds surprised to hear me.

“One and only. Hey, you and the Reverend up tonight?”

“Always are.”

“Damn glad to hear it. I think I’m gonna need you two’s help.” I already feel a little relieved about the kid.

“With what?” She asks me a little skeptical.

“Well, I’ll explain when I get there. I got a sumbitch with me who’s in a little trouble.”

“Well, the Unicorn’s always here.”

“Always one of a kind.” I laugh at her nickname, inside joke. “I’m about to turn onto Pollard, be there in a minute.”

“We’ll be waitin’.

I turn onto Pollard Lane. It’s a gravel snake that runs through an old family property. Laura, the Unicorn, and my old buddy Ray have been a sweet little homesteading couple out at the back of the property. It use to be a party house where Laura would have everybody cool in the county out to drink, smoke some grass and set

off fireworks. But when her and Ray decided to settle down, they fixed the place up. It looks just like any other domestically blissful place nowadays. Ray and Laura help her Papaw with the [PEANUTS? COTTON? DON'T KNOW WHAT THEY GROW HERE]. Ray teaches up at the high school, but they never really have to worry about being comfortable. Laura's kin have had a knack for holding on to all those Confederate dollars they accumulated. I park right outside their gate and jimmy the gate lock to let me and the kid in.

"Why're we out here?" The kid asks groggy, and a little scared.

"This is where you meet the friends that are gonna save your ass."

"As long as it aint where I meet Jesus."

I laugh at that one. "Boy, why would I drive you all the way to Needham when we were right next to the goddamned Gulf of Mexico? People'd notice if you washed up Needham Creek." I can't blame him for being less than trusting, but I figured I'd established that I wasn't in it to off him. Hell, I was starting to lose my taste for the work anyway.

We stroll up to the front door and I ring the bell. I hear a dog bark and can faintly see a short, female figure heading to the door.

"Hey there. Down Guinness." Laura greets us, and admonishes the dog.

"Hey Guinness," I start to pet the mutt. He's a sweet little well trained booger and always liked me. "Been a long time since I seen you, yes it has."

"Well, forget me, just say hello to the damn dog." Laura drawls sarcastically.

"How're you Miss Unicorn?"

"Fine as ever, who's the friend?"

"Well, that's why I'm out here. I need you to help him get below Boss' radar."

"Why's that?"

Wayne offers his two cents, "Cuz the sumbitch wants to kill me."

Laura looks up a little shocked. "Why'd you bring him down here?"

"You know," I say, "Boss aint got many eyes down Pollard Lane at One Thirty."

"Guess Not." She answers, leading us into the living room. Ray is on the couch watching some late night crap.

"How's the Reverend?" I ask him. He got some sort of Divinity Diploma off a website. He could legally marry folks and, I suppose, call his house a church for tax purposes. "I'm alright hun-buns." He answers me. We go back a long, long ways. Me and Ray went through school together, and use to do a little rough up work for the boss. Ray was never in deep enough to worry about stepping out of the life. When he went off to Tuscaloosa, I went off and killed Luther.

"So," Laura sits down and starts to get down to business, "what do you need."

"This kid here. Let him crash here tonight, alright. Then I want you to get him where Boss can't find him for a while. I want him to be able to stay in touch with his sister."

"Can do," Laura answers. "I know who to call. We prolly ought to get him a job at the Wal-Mart."

"Only place killin' more people than your Boss." Reverend Ray jokes.

"At least Boss kills 'em fast."

"Who the hell is this Boss fella?" The kid asks. I've been around him long enough to know he's honest. Laura hasn't.

“Drop the innocent shit, we’ll help you, but we aren’t stupid.” She tells him, brushing back her hair and shooting him a look as icy as her blue eyes.

“Naw,” the kid says back on his feet, “I really don’t know who it is. I aint met nobody higher than Easy.”

Laura cops an expression that’s half shock and half humor. “Easy? Shit.” She looks over at me. “He really doesn’t know who your Boss is?”

“Don’t believe so.”

“Well,” she says looking at the kid, “let’s just say you better never step foot in Mobile again. Or Birmingham. You’re probably in trouble here in Needham County. You could get by in the Shoals, but I wouldn’t try. Just,” she pauses to think.

“He’s got a lot of friends, and he don’t hold on to enemies.” I finish the thought. “Look, Unicorn, you can help the boy out can’t you?”

“Yeah, we’ll get him on the road, I’m friends with everybody... honey I’m the Unicorn.”

“One-of-a-kind.” I drawl out laughing. Ray raises his eyebrows joking. The kid just looks at us confused. “Anybody else use a cigarette?” I ask.

“Not in my house!” Laura yells. That throws me back a little bit. She use to go like a damned train.

“Alright, out on the porch.” I answer.

“I’m game.” Ray answers.

“That kills you, and I don’t want my baby dead.” Laura tells him in a tone like Southern Comfort; a mixture of meanness and sweetness.

“I’m just smoking until my goddamned knee starts feeling better.” Ray answers her.

“Flare up again?” I ask, as we head out.

“Can I bum one?” The kid asks.

We all take a seat on the patio. I offer to lend the kid a Lucky, but he doesn’t seem ready for them and takes one off Ray. We sit in the silence.

You’ve done this much...can’t take the kid any farther. Better start figuring out how to fix this one.

“Seen Marie in a while?” Ray breaks the silence.

“Naw, goddamned bitch. She’s playin’ games. Better not try and keep me from Gracie. Aint much worth fighting with her for no more but...dammit.”

Ray nods in agreement.

“Worst part,” I start to laugh, “I think I still love the damn bitch. But she’s with what’s his shit nowadays. That orta last about three weeks. I don’t even care what happens with her no more, man. Just my Gracie.”

“Wait,” the kid interjects, “I thought you was with that Sappho girl.”

“Sappho? The lesbian goddess?” Ray always had a quick sense of humor.

“Sapphire, you little dumbass,” I say correcting him, “Sapphire’s a good friend.”

“Sapphire?” Ray asks.

“From the Magnol-ya Club in beautiful Mo-beel AllyBama.” I announce in an exaggerated accent.

“Ah,” Ray shakes his head, maybe reminiscing.

I finish my Lucky off and stare out into the night. "Look, I'm heading over to the apartment. Make sure Unicorn takes care of that boy, alright. I want him out of Boss' sight and mind."

"Can do, we'll treat the kid right."

"Hey, boy, come with me." I motion him as I walk to the car. As we get away from the house I look him in the eyes. "Look, Wayne, I'm going out of my way for you, understand? If you do anything worse than get a speeding ticket in the state of Alabama and I find out about it, I'm gonna kill you. If I find out you've been lying to me, I'm gonna kill you. If you ever have a thought about getting into this damned life...I'm gonna kill you. This aint what you want. This aint what you need for you, or your little sister or your fat old momma or your crazy granny... understand? You'll never see Heaven in a life like this...now go back to that house and do everything Unicorn tells you. She's got more brains than you or me times ten, same goes double for friends."

"I understand, man."

"Good."

"Thanks, man."

That's over with. Tomorrow I'm gonna try and catch up with Marie...I hope to hell I can see Gracie. I aint lettin' no damn job like this take me away from Gracie anymore...I'm not letting anything take me from my Grace anymore. T'Hell with this life. I may never find Heaven, but I can hold on to Grace.

Chapter II

Back in Mobile again. Back in the same damn room at the Malaga. It was good to be back home. I got to see my little Gracie. That's all that matters when I'm in Needham County. It was sweet too. After I got the kid to the Unicorn, I stopped by my little apartment in Needham Creek. It was an easy place to sleep and soak my nerves in what was left of my whiskey. The next night, though, I needed to do something. I called up Maria.

"Hello."

"Hey." I answered flat.

"Hey." The voice on the other end answered sweetly.

"How're you Marie?"

"I'm fine, Gracie and I are watching cartoons."

"She finish up her homework?"

"It aint that hard for second graders."

"And she's so damn smart." I laughed proudly.

"She's cunning." Maria answered. "Like her momma," "like her daddy," we almost were in unison.

"Where are you?" She asked.

"Needham Creek."

"Well hi diddly ho neighbor." Maria always was quick with a joke.

"Look I'm gonna get some Chinese, I'll be there in about 30, we can have a little dinner."

"Michael."

"Please, Marie. I just... I really been missin' Gracie. I got you both something. I won't be an ass, I promise."

"Alright, just dinner, and Gracie has to get to bed soon."

I got some Chinese for us. When I got to the door I gave them both their flowers. It felt so good to be greeted by Gracie, bounding into my arms. I kissed her on her little forehead and stooped down in front of her to hand her the rose and stuffed animal.

"It'll keep Mr. Rabbit company." I said, as I handed her the bear. Mr. Rabbit was Gracie's favorite, I bought it for her when she was a little baby and she loved to cuddle with it. Grace promptly showed me to her room, where Mr. Rabbit seemed to be holding court. She even gave me a little picture she had drawn at school. It was a marker drawing of me pushing her on a swing.

"I love my daddy," she wrote under the picture. "Daddy takes me to Luther Fox Park and swings the swing." That was my favorite thing to do. I was always so happy when I watched her fly into the air, those flaming scarlet curls glowing in the evening sun. I didn't have to worry about anything when I was there, the rest of the world stopped turning. Grace and I played a little and I showed her a few card tricks, she thinks every damn stupid thing I do is amazing.

Marie admonished me for getting Gracie so wound up before bed and gave Grace her bath while I cleared what was left of the Chinese. It was the first time in forever we both got to kiss our little angel good night. After she said her prayers I picked her up and put her in bed, kissed her forehead and whispered in her ear.

“Sweet dreams baby Gracie, daddy loves you...” I paused, “more than you’ll ever know.”

When we got Grace to sleep, I gave Maria her gift and we went outside to have a cigarette. I was finally able to talk to her for a while. It always feels good to have her company.

“You’re still good with her.”

“I’m her daddy.”

“Sometimes I wouldn’t know it.”

“Look, Marie, what do you want from me? I see her as often as I can I just... work, y’know.”

“I don’t know Michael, nobody knows. I just know you’re away all the time.”

“I never wanna be away from her... I lay awake nights thinking about her.” I yelled, halfway between offended and aching. Maria breathed out a little smoke and stared across the yard. I looked into those damn brown eyes. They were deep that night, reflecting every bit of the waning moon.

“What are you doing?” She asked me.

“I never get tired of looking into your eyes.” She smiled her little girlish, embarrassed smile. For all the armor she seemed to wear around me, a little look dropped her defenses.

“You are so full of shit.” She laughed playfully. She knew damn well I wasn’t.

“Yeah, I spose.”

“Tonight was really sweet, Michael. Sometimes,” she inhales, shaking her head in disbelief, “you’re the sweetest boy.”

“Too damn sweet.”

“Nobody can be too sweet.”

“I guess I need to head. I’ll be down her a couple nights, but I probably have to get back to Mobile soon.”

“Why Mobile?”

“Business.”

“Business.” She repeated. I hated that she’d heard it a million times before. As I left I motioned her over to me, just for a kiss on the cheek.

“Don’t kiss me tonight Michael.”

“Why not?” I was taken aback. I may not officially be her man, but she never acted like there wasn’t enough feeling for that one little kiss.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea... I’m starting to...”

“Donny?” I interrupted her. She shook her head.

And that’s what I’m thinking about sitting here at the Malaga. I apologized for getting the way I got about it, but I just can’t help it. Maybe I want her for me, maybe I want her so Gracie can have her mommy and daddy. It’s little worth worrying about right now. I’ve got Boss to worry about. He called me earlier, told me he’d like to meet at 4:30 tomorrow. Hopefully he’ll just assume that Wayne kid is gone. Thanks to the Unicorn, in a way he is. I was glad to hear Unicorn agree with my assessment of the kid. If worst turned to best, Boss might agree too.

I’d like to think Boss won’t sense my desire to get out of the life. But he senses everything. I’ll sit there across the desk from him and see what happens. But that’s tomorrow, I can’t worry about tomorrow.

You need to get out of this room...if just for a Lucky...this damned room is driving you crazy. I hate to be alone this way, I have for a long time. It feels like this room is collapsing like a whirlpool and I don't have anything to hold on to. If I could, I'd be holding little Gracie. I'd give up the moon to be holding Gracie.

Can't do that tonight... this damn job gets less and less worth it. I let my mind meander a little while and break the seal on a new bottle of Bushmills. I'm not even in a mood to find a glass, I just tip it up and turn on the television. Nothing's on when you're this lonesome. *This damn room is gonna drive me insane...* I start to pace around with the bottle. I tip it up a few more times. I decide I'll need to go out tonight. *Take a shower, head out...maybe.*

I head into the bathroom and let the shower work up a little steam. The heat relaxes me some. I just hold my face under the water. *I don't want to see tomorrow...I didn't want to see yesterday...goddamn.* But, between the warm water and the whiskey some of my kinks start to unravel. Everything starts to feel a little more on kilter. *Mmmmm...damn...I need to get myself out of here tonight.* For once that ornery little voice is right.

After I get clean I dry myself off and shave away the stubble, comb my hair and down another shot. I stare into the mirror and start to feel a little bit better. *I think I'll go out tonight. No suit, no gun, just out... I'll just put myself on a t-shirt and head for the Magnolia Club.*

Before the door closes behind me I check for everything. Lucky Strikes, keys, lighter, little knife, money clip, all there. I figure I'll head to the Magnolia Club and see what Sapphire's up to. I told her, "next time I'm in Mobile." She can always ease my mind and, goddamn, I'm going to need it before a day like tomorrow.

When I get into the Magnolia Kay and Sean are working the door. Sean is a younger guy, but has enough of a head on his shoulders to practically run the place. He's a tall built kid with a tight flat top and one gold earring. Kay does run the place. She's a longtime blonde with aging curves and a seen-it-all smile, she wears two huge hoops. They both know my face.

"Michael, I heard you were here a few nights ago." That's the first thing Kay says to me.

"No I wasn't."

"I know that, everybody knows that, just the kid...Jake, new, scrawny, little bit of a mouth. Says you roughed him up."

"Kay, I pointed to my damn boot."

"That's enough to make me piss my pants." Sean answers.

Kay holds up her hand, like you would to tell a secret, and speaks in a normal tone. "He doesn't work door anymore."

"Good." I answer.

"He's wearin' the boots." Sean jokes.

"Don't worry you two, I aint workin' tonight. Just havin' fun."

"Well that's our es-speciality." Kay smiles, raising her hand towards the door.

I stroll in, sit down at a table and light myself a Lucky. I sit back and try to strike a Bogart cool pose. I have no need to scope the room, but intuition and force of habit makes me. A waitress strolls up beside me.

"Hi, need a drink?" She isn't as cordial as most of them are.

“Yeah. Bushmills on the rocks and bring me an ashtray honey.”

“Sure.” She answers in a perturbed tone.

Immediately, one of the ladies spots me, Ivory, a friend of Sapphire’s. She’s tall and lithe, with skin that does the name justice. She has a short, dark crimson dye job, a couple of well placed tattoos and a knowing, heartbreaking, half grin. Tonight she’s dressed as the prettiest cop to ever wear hot pants. She waves, comes over and runs her fingers through my hair. I tip my head up to look at her.

“Haven’t seen you in a while.” She says, her long fingers still caressing my head.

“It’s been a while.” I answer. “Sapphire around?” Sapphire has always been one of her best friends. Strange, I never knew Ivory and Sapphire went together.

“Yeah, she’s here. Should be out in a little bit.” I smile at that.

“You need a dance?” She asks.

“I don’t know. I never got along with the law.” She smiles like she thinks that’s funny. “How much?”

“Twenty right now, thirty five to go double.”

“Sounds like as good a way as any to start the night. Let this girl bring my drink.” I get the drink.

“Finish that damn cigarette or you aren’t gonna get full time.”

I toke down hard, holding the burley air in my lungs. I put out the ash and give her my hand, still holding my breath. I let the smoke flow out right before she sits me down. That always buzzes me a little, and buzzed is a good way to be as Ivory gets rid of her cop shirt.

“Got handcuffs?”

“If you spend enough” She smiles wryly. I smile back. She listens for the DJ’s signal and warms herself up a little. When the music starts she prowls over to me. She’s just like a sweet stray cat. She’ll let you pet her, but watch for the claws. After the roller coaster ride of a dance, I only half remember what happened.

“Want another?” She asks. I check the money clip out of habit. I still have more than plenty. Taking lives can be lucrative. I swing for the extra and start to make small talk.

“Long night?”

“Good night, plenty of spenders.”

“Sapphire’s around, right?” I’d already asked, but I get nervy.

“Missin’ her?”

“Always am.” I confess.

“Why don’t you ever miss me?” She teases. Then she twirls herself down, around and over my body, ending up between my knees. As she brings her hands across my legs she finishes her thought, “I’m worth missing.”

“Sure are.” I’m not completely lying. Ivory is beautiful and friendly, but she doesn’t have Sapphire’s charms. Sure, she could seduce every bit of you, but I always need a girl I can kiss good morning. Anyway, I’ve always been fine just being friends with Ivory. Besides, Sean spent some time with her and seemed to think she was crazier than hell.

The dance winds down and we take a seat at the table.

“So why are you back here in Mobile?”

“Work. But, I’m lookin’ to change my line of work.”

“What do you do?”

“I got the same Boss as Kay.” The look on her face tells me that doesn’t mean much to her. But that’s all I need to tell Ivory. The DJ cuts through the place introducing Sapphire.

“Your sweetie’s on.” Ivory jokes, smiling big and giving me a playful nudge.

“I believe I should go up front.” I find myself an open seat by the stage and light up a Lucky. Sapphire strolls out in a sparkling black top, black thong and black boots. *Damn she’s a sight for sore eyes.* The DJ puts on some growling band or another. The bass thuds as the guitars start to rip the room. Sapphire sways in seduction, as if the rhythms are some electrical force just pulling at her. I feel like that longing voice in the speaker could be mine.

“You give me something...I understand. You give me lovin’...in the palm of my hand”

The guitars thunder to a crescendo as Sapphire loses the top. Her eyes catch mine. The boy keeps singing.

“And I... can’t tell you how I feel”

She slides the pole and then crawls to me and flips her hair with the music, she’s smiling dead at me. I take a draw on my Lucky and hold it between two fingers. She’s mesmerizing me. The DJ cuts through as Sapphire loses the thong. I throw a ten down.

“I’d like to tell ya...and now’s the time. I gotta tell ya, that you’re going to be mi-i-i-ine”

She comes over to me after getting a few singles. She makes it every bit worth my wile, smiling the whole time. She swings around and leans in to kiss me.

“You are too, too sweet Michael.”

“See me later babydoll.”

“You know it.” She winks.

When she finishes, I go back and find myself a table, I finish my Lucky with a smile. Eventually she comes out, and right to me.

“Hey.” She seems happy to see me.

“How’re you?”

“Well, my little sugar daddy’s here.”

“Hell, girl, I aint that sweet,” I laugh at her. She takes a seat next to me as the other chicks find dances.

“How’ve you been?”

“A lot on my mind. Work stuff.”

“Honey,” her voice is sweet as wine and dripping with sympathy, “you always have a lot on your mind.”

“How’s that little darlin’ of yours?”

“Casey has had her the last few nights, I get her back tomorrow. Three days off, I’m so excited.” She sounds it. “How is your little angel?”

“I got up to Needham Creek and seen her and her momma.” I smile and stare down at the table. I look back up at Sapphire. “She drew me a picture, sweet little thang...goddamn...but I’m just here to party.”

Sapphire can sense that Gracie is too much for my mind. “Hell yeah, I’m always ready to party. How bout a dance or two?” I just smile at her. She knows what that means and she leads me over to one of the more secluded couches.

“Sit back,” she says, positioning me. “How do you get so tense?” She asks, massaging my shoulders.

“Stress at work. Loneliness... I’m just a ball of nerves.”

“*Let me calm you down.*” She whispers in my ear as the dance begins. Sapphire is always artful. She starts by putting just enough breath on the back of my neck to raise every nerve. Then she moves her whole body past my face like a slow storm cloud. She gives me a little storm. Then, calmly, she swoops back down and liberally kisses my cheek. She teases me, a little tit to the lip, then she comes back down, between my legs, looks me dead in the eye, and pops her tongue into her cheek.

“Mmm... damn Sapphire.”

“*Like that?*” Her whisper thunders through my head as her hot breath hits my ear and neck. “*You don’t seem as tense.*” Her voice is a sweet breeze from the Gulf.

As the dance winds down, Sapphire squares up and looks at me face to face. I stare right into her eyes, and she doesn’t stop staring into mine. She smiles mischievously. Then she plants a kiss on my lips.

She knows how to make those few minutes worth it.

“Oops, shit, I gave you a double. You don’t have to pay for the second if you don’t want.” She says, snapping back into the world.

“No, no, don’t worry about it. I can pay the double. Honey, I work for Boss.”

“Really, Michael, don’t waste your money.”

“I insist sweetheart,” and I hand her enough for a one more double. She gets her mischievous grin again.

“Well, now I’m gonna have to make it worth that.” Then I grin, big too. I don’t grin big very often. The unenthusiastic waitress comes by our couch, Sapphire shoos her away. First time I’ve ever seen one of these chicks wave off a waitress, but I guess Sapphire aint just one of these chicks.

She decides to start the second dance by straddling over me, and playfully grinding. Before the music begins, she leans in and kisses me. Now, every boy knows the stripper kiss. It’s an unemotional peck of gratitude. Just a somewhat sexualized thank you. Sapphire didn’t kiss me with a stripper kiss. She slowly opened up and let her tongue glide over mine, then found a slow rhythm as I let the last kink fall out of my nerves.

Then she starts to dance. She’s closer, more seductive, more teasing. She’s found every button I have and is content to push. She slides a nipple over my lip.

She glances down at me, “I won’t tell if you don’t.” All the permission I need.

Then Sapphire glides back down to kiss my neck. “Come to the Malaga with me tonight, I’ll pay you whatever.” She moves to whisper in my ear, “*You don’t have to pay me anything.*”

“I’ll tell Kay.” I whisper as she finishes. We kiss one more time. Tomorrow is already off my mind.

Glad you decided to go out... give that goddamn room some scenery and that goddamn bed some warmth. But first I’ll have to clear it with Kay. I light up a Lucky as I stroll towards the back. The same bouncer is at the door. I’m in a good mood so I shoot him a wink as I stroll in. A few of the girls are lounging, including Ivory.

“I thought you were enjoying Sapphire,” she jokes.

“That a crime, officer?”

“Ha ha. What are you back here for?”

“Lookin’ for Kay.”

“She went out to tend bar, crowd was getting a little rowdy.”

“Well, ladies.” I tip an imaginary hat.

“Give me some attention next time.” Ivory tells me.

“Long as you’re still in that cop uniform sweetheart.”

I go out the door and walk the two steps to the bar. I sit down, and Kay see’s me.

“You know, the titties are up that way hon.” She says pointing towards the stage.

“Yeah, I know,” I turn around, “they’re nice too. And young. Stefanie her name?”

“Mhmm.”

“Like the little freckles.”

“Lolita angle,” Kay says without missing a beat.

“I’ll bet.” I decide to get down to business. “Listen, how much to take Sapphire home with me? I mean, what’s she gonna be here? 3 more hours? Two?”

“About three, but Sapphire’s a pretty big draw. Whatever you settled on with her, you’ll owe me five. And that’s generous.” She emphasizes the last part.

“Always good to a friend.” I kid her. Then I unroll five new pictures of Benjamin Franklin and slip them to Kay nonchalantly. She knows how to shake hands.

“Take care.”

“I always do darlin’. I always do.”

Sapphire comes out from backstage in one of those simple, tight, black dresses that has easy access, but could be worn outside a titty bar. She makes a bee line for me.

“What’d Kay say?”

“It’s all taken care of. Get your things and I’ll pick you up out back.”

“Mmmk.” We both start to walk away. “Oh, Michael.” She stops me.

“What?” She plants a little kiss on my cheek. I smile at that.

We get to the Malaga. Thank god the Maid tidied up. She even turned down the bed for us. And there’s my bottle of Bushmills, still on the fuller side.

“Honey I’ll go get us some ice. You make yourself at home.”

“Gladly,” she says bouncing down on to the bed, “I always loved this place.”

When I get back she’s lounging on the bed, with the black dress and the high class room she almost looks like some refined young belle. I get a little ice and fix us both drinks. I hand her the glass.

“Whew,” she makes the whiskey face, “that Irish stuff always hits me the first time.”

“It’s smooth though.”

“Now, Michael,” she says, taking both drinks and putting them on an end table. “I want you to sit at the foot of the bed.” I oblige.

“Good.” She stands in front of me and gets rid of the dress. She’s in a simple, silky black bra and that same black g-string. “Now, don’t worry about a thing.” She leans me back and straddles my lap. She kisses me hard, again. Her kisses are freight trains I’m happy to let hit me. She unclasps the bra and as I lay down and I wrap my arms around her.

“Sapphire.”

“Amy.”

“What?”

"Call me Amy..." She whispers soft in my ear.

This is gonna be a good damn night...

I was right. Sapphire and I wreck the bed. I wouldn't be surprised if she woke up half of Mobile. We crash in a heap, too hot for the covers, she falls asleep with her head on my shoulder. I make it to slumber soon after.

In the morning I wake her up with a soft kiss.

"Mornin' babydoll." I smile. She smiles back and gives me enough of a kiss to make me want to stay in that bed all day.

"Mmmm... damn Amy." She smiles, first smile of hers that's all sweetness and not a bit of mischief.

"What time is it darlin'?" She asks.

"Ten."

"Good. I need to go pick up Jasmine. Can you take me over there?"

"Of course."

While she's getting herself ready I go over to my picture of Grace. She's still the sun in my sky, even if Sapphire can get rid of the clouds. I forget that the wallet still holds a picture of Marie and me during happier times. It's from when we went to Savannah for a little trip, she always told me I needed to be there on St. Pat's day. She was right. But I didn't really have Marie anymore, too damn bad I guess.

After I get Sapphire squared away, enough of the day has passed that I need to go get ready to see Boss. I get clean and put on a suit. I try to look impeccable. I always want to give Boss a good impression, but especially today. I figure it won't hurt to carry my nine in there with me. When I look together, I decide to head out. I'm walking to Boss' mainly because that should give me time to think everything over and get my nerves down a little bit. When I get outside, I light up a Lucky and make my way down the street.

Bluff, first, just play it like the Kid's dead. This meeting isn't out of the ordinary, he always wants to see you after a job. Hell, he may not be the wiser... Boss is always the wiser. He can always read me, anybody for that matter. T'Hell with him. I didn't wanna off the kid and I'm not too sure I wanna off anybody else. I'd like to just tell him that I want my Gracie and he can go to Hell... Lord, I wish it was that simple. You don't tell the king of Alabama to take his job and shove it. I guess I'll have to read the situation when I get in there with him. I need another Lucky... I take one and give it a light. I need that little bit of edge off for today.

I get to Boss' office, walk in. His secretary recognizes me and so do the two thugs Boss has at the door. The secretary is the only one in the room without any heat.

"Here to meet Mister Traylor?" She asks.

"Yes maam." I answer stone cold. It's a subtle way of letting these big thugs know they don't worry me. Never have. Once you've killed a judge, a half-brained goon in a cheap suit doesn't scare you very much.

"Mister Shamrock?" Boss never puts our real names on his appointment list, bad form to write down your assassin's name.

"Yes maam."

"Mister Traylor is ready to see you."

I walk into the office. Before I take my seat, Boss stands and gives me his hand. I shake hands.

* Boss
accent

"How are you Michael?"

"Same as always."

Boss looks up at the hulking turd watching his door. It's a dumb son of a bitch named Adam, fancies himself a professional like me. I've had to clean up a couple of his messes, I might have had to pull the trigger, but their blood was on his hands. That's why Boss just lets him watch his door. Anybody dumb enough to try and kill Boss in his office, Adam can take care of. Boss motions him out of the room and he closes the door behind him.

"So, how'd that last job go Michael?" Boss asks me without a tinge of irony. Just in his dark, roaring drawl.

"It was a job. Nothin' too complicated."

"A couple a people saw you at the Magnol-ya."

"Nobody dangerous." Boss smiles at that.

"True. So, tha boy's gone?"

"Gone. The kid isn't a problem."

"He aint?"

"Nope," I light up a Lucky. "You'll never see him again."

"I hope not." Boss says. *It sounds like he might know.* "I really hope I never see or hear about that little shit again." I take the Lucky to my lips and stare at the Boss.

"So he's dead?" Boss asks

"Dead."

"Because, Michael, I have sources, reasons, to believe he may not be."

I just give him an indignant look.

"Michael, this boy took money from me, he took money from Easy, he cain't be trusted."

"And you trust Easy?" I'm not here to mince any words.

"I don't have much choice, Michael."

"Look, Easy took the dough to pin it on the kid."

"Probably, probably." Boss shakes his head. "But Easy knows a little too much and is a little too untrustworthy. I've come to understand that's the way Easy works. Sometimes I have to kill for him; it's the business I've chosen for myself."

I take a long draw and let out a little laugh. "You take orders from Easy now? Shit."

"No, Michael, not orders. I do business with the little son of a bitch. I aint took an order since I left Atmore."

"Lucky you." I finish the cigarette. "Why don't you just turn me loose on Easy? I could get rid of him so quick you wouldn't notice."

"I don't need him to feel like he's intimidated, I keep him close." I just shake my head at that.

"A few people have told me you seem like you're just..." Boss searches for the word, "unhappy with the job." Well, he's decided to change the subject.

"How happy can you be?"

"Michael, I remind you that you chose this life for your self. Long time ago, when you got rid of Luther Fox up there in Needham County. You've been real good to my organization." He stops, smiles a little, "I shore would hate to lose a man like you."

I get up from the seat, stroll over to Boss' window and look out at Mobile. It's one of those days when you can tell the lord is smiling down on the south. Or maybe he's just giving it a closer look. I aint been many places that need it more.

"You ever think about salvation Boss?"

"Michael," He chuckles a little. "I nevah have liked to darken up a church house door."

"I didn't ask if you did anything about it, you ever just think about it?"

"Naw, I spose once you been in my line a work so long it aint worth thinkin' about."

"Maybe."

"Remember boy, you chose this life. It didn't choose you. And I know it's been better to you than just sitting there a hick down in Needham County." *Really? At least a hick gets to hold his little girl. I'd give up this suit, these boots, the city of Mobile and my goddamned gun...just to...*

I turn around and look Boss in the eye. "I suppose I'll always be part of this life." Take enough lives and you can look a man in the eye and tell him any lie.

Boss looks up knowingly. "We all gotta question it sometime boy. But we cain't nevah get out."

"Well, I'm sure you got another appointment here soon." I say heading towards the door.

"Yeah, yeah. Glad to hear that boy's took his place in hell."

"He sure did." I answer, walking out. *No, Wayne got himself a stay. But if the Devil needs somebody I know just who can take his place. You may not put a hit on him, but sometimes I have to do something personal...* I never was a good businessman.

After that meeting I understood. If I wanted out of the life, I had to make it clear. No more wondering, no more wanting out, *NO MORE MISSING GRACE*. I walk down to the church after the meeting. I find my pew at the back and kneel down. In my jacket pocket I have a silver cross. It's a little Irish cross my grandmomma gave me forever ago. I take it out of my pocket and look down at it. I hold the cross between my thumb and forefinger and rub it a little. I clasp it between my hands. I whisper a prayer.

"Father, forgive me for what I've done. Forgive me for what I know I will do. I know...I know I may never walk in the light. But, father, I'll find my way from these shadows." I remember one of those old church songs.

"The night, it gets the darkest, just before the dawn." I hope that's true. I know everything is about to get awful dark, but Hell calls Hell.

"And father, please, please, watch over my little Gracie." Maybe Heaven calls Heaven, too.

Chapter III

"abyssus abyssum invocat"

Tonight, I've got something personal to do. You can only forgive, or put up with, so much. And I'm tired of it. Maybe the Boss is too, he'll owe me for this, whether he sees it that way or not. I'm going to take care of one of his problems. I just have to bring the problem to me. First, I need to call Sean.

"Hello."

"Sean?"

"Yeah."

"Hey man, recognize the voice?"

Sean knows how to answer that, "Sure do man."

"You know how I can get ahold of Easy?"

"Easy?" He seems a little surprised that anybody gives a damn about Easy.

"Yeah, I got something to take care of with him." Sean gives me the number.

"Thanks buddy, I owe you."

"Always one to help a friend. And fuck Easy over." Tell you what, it pays to have friends, or know who has enemies. Then I make another phone call. Since he doesn't recognize the number, I get the machine. Good, no small talk, no bullshit. I can just leave a message.

"Traylor Industrial, number 4, 1AM. Come alone. Be ready to do business." Boss is smart enough to never drop a message like that himself, so Easy won't think anything of my voice on his answering machine. Traylor industrial is a drag strip of buildings the Boss uses as a front, makes it easier to do business when somebody comes into the Bay or when he needs to get something big to one of his boys. It's also a place where I can get a lot of work done. Nobody, who doesn't know Boss, ever makes it past building two. Boss knows how to dispose of everything beyond that. Maybe this'll send a message.

I find my way there around 12:45. I've got the nine holstered under my jacket tonight. I don't need to fumble, and I don't have time to sneak. The place is quiet as a cemetery and empty as a new grave. A dim streetlight, about fifty yards away, is all that illuminates the black top. The night's humidity wraps me in her embrace. She kisses me with the mist off the bay.

12:55; and Easy doesn't disappoint. Navigator, brights on and underbody lighting. That's Easy. *He made you do this...besides, this is a son of a bitch who has it coming...has for a long, long time. Now turn the car off dipshit, I want out of here quick.* Easy is about five seven, 160lbs. of whigger boy. He's got on an overpriced velour jumpsuit, a Braves cap turned sideways, a little bit of bling and shoes that cost more than Gracie's bedroom suit.

"Mikey, Mikey, what up, what up?" Goddamn, I hate being called Mikey. I light up a Lucky and take a little in.

"You alone?" I don't let any emotion into my voice.

"Yee, got the message, aint riskin' nothin' money." Easy is a bastard who spent entirely too much time in front of the television. "But why you be here? You usually don't go down these deals."

"I needed a little extra scratch from boss."

"I feel. I feel."

"Good for you."

"What you got?"

"15 kilos, uncut."

"Aww yee, I knew Boss gonna let me break into the money shit now." *Sheeit, I should've known boss didn't trust this dumbass with coke.* "I got rid of that little thief kid, righ homes? You helped me out righ?"

I stare him down, unblinking and smirk a little. "Rye." I stretch out his word.

"So you gonna give me a taste money?"

"Sure am." I open my jacket, unclip the holster, and pull out the nine slowly. Easy realizes what's happening, but too late. He freezes like a dog in front of a Mack truck. It's too late. I squeeze. Perfect aim, top of the forehead. *Thump.* Easy hits the blacktop. I finish my Lucky and flick what's left of it at what's left of Easy.

"Shame what you tried to do to Wayne." *A man can only handle the life so long before the levy breaks...mine just broke. Hell calls Hell. If I'm done, I'm done...If I aint, then this is sure a nice start. Hope Boss gets the message.*

Now, I know Easy has some dough... I find the duffel bag in the back of Easy's Navigator. Two grand. I leave four hundred of it behind so nobody can accuse me of stealing Boss' money. I'm going to make sure the rest gets to a kid I met a while back.

I go back to the Malaga, pour myself a stiff glass of whiskey, and watch the Late Late Show. I'm glad I got that out of my system.

The next day, I head back to Needham Creek. Mobile's making me insane. Besides, I need to hide out a little while. I would go see Gracie and Maria, but that's too dangerous right now. I find myself a pay phone, just so I can hear my baby Gracie. I wish I could let Marie know what was going on. But I can't. Besides, it'd scare her too damn much anyway. She'd never let me see Grace.

After a couple of nights, I get a call, on the cell, familiar number.

"Michael."

"Boss." I answer same as always.

"Get a little ovahzealous did ya?"

"A little."

"Well, I cain't say that I disagree with your puhsonal feelins, jus your business acumen."

"Never was much of a businessman."

"I want you back in Mobile. I honestly wanna talk to ya boy."

"When."

"Office, tomorra night. Eleven thirty five."

"Just me and you?"

"Just me and you." He hangs up.

Either Boss understands, or boss is ready to test me. *Always had balls didn't you old man?* Well, I've got a pair too. I find my way back to Mobile that next day. I figure I'd be expected at the Malaga, so I get myself an Econo-Suite. No luxury, but it doesn't drain the money and I don't expect to bring Sapphire back here. I lounge for a while. Finally I have a smoking room, so I have a few Luckies to ease my mind until I need to go meet with the Boss. Before I leave, I make sure to check for everything. Keys, Money clip, Lucky Strikes, lighter and a nine underneath my jacket...*just in case.*