



NOWHERE ELSE TO GO

SOMEBODY'S GOING DOWN FOR THIS.

— **ADRIAN DAWSON** —

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In the lower section of my L.A. apartment - the only place I'd actually managed to hang on to - and about fifteen feet from the wall of smoked glass that looks out across a large section of prime Malibu Beach, was the body of a young woman; twenty-four. She had two bullet wounds; one to the upper chest and the other to the face.

I think.

Truth is, nothing was clear as it should have been. It's perhaps a little clearer now than it was, but still not clear enough. It was all dark haze back when it happened. Too many images fighting for recognition. Too many thoughts.

What I did know, then and now, was that there was one hell of a mess somewhere out there. Not just across the floor either; but up the walls as well. The cream leather sofa, which I don't even remember buying if I'm truthful, was splattered like somebody had filled a kid's balloon with red paint and, well... just kept right on filling it, I guess. There were bits as well. Deep red bits. I saw them. Those were the kind of bits I don't even want to take a guess at.

None of it looked good. Know what I mean?

And to top it all, not four feet from my own size nines, in the room I was in now, was another body. Bit older than the girl; twenty-six. Single shot to the head, and that had been more than enough to take him straight out of the loop. There was more red on the tiled floor of the bathroom than there was white, and it was still running, finding itself a route through the gaps like mercury with a scent for heat.

Warm. Runny.

All too fresh. In my mind.

And me? Now? Sitting on the can in a sheer state of fucking shock is what I am, seeing it strewn around me like the discarded remnants of a bad dream, some real bastard of a deep-set nightmare from which I doubt I'll ever awake. There was no way that either of these people could have taken shots like that and had a further chance at life.

Which meant that it was over. All of it.

Somebody was gonna go down for this and that somebody was going to be me. Nowhere else to go.

Save for the steady drip of the tap, the sound impersonating a slow metronome to the sombre music that should have been playing, I hadn't heard a single sound for almost fifteen minutes; not even my own heartbeat. All I'd heard had been the thoughts; dark thoughts that I could not even try to pretend were not real. Because they were real. Very real, in fact. At least as real as the stiffening corpses for which I now found myself completely, totally and one hundred percent responsible.

* * * * *

Footsteps.

In the other room, where Keeley's body was. Not the hard defined clicks of Italian leather soles or the thump of jack boots either, but delicate pondering squeaks on the polished floor. They stopped momentarily, I'm guessing to examine the after-effects of my handiwork, then continued. The pace was slow but I could sense a purpose. I could sense so many things all of a sudden; as though the

steps had not just opened my eyes but also brought all my senses back with them; sharply honed and so much less fragmented than before.

I was already looking up when the guy appeared at the door.

“You’ve been a busy boy,” he said, showing no emotion. His glance at the body spread-eagled across the floor told me he’d seen it all before and his glance at me told me I was no more or less unique than a thousand other dirtbag cases he’d dealt with in his time.

He looked like you’d expect a cop to look, I suppose; a big guy in teacher’s clothes. I’m sure you’ve seen the type; a face that’s leathery from too many knocks and patches on the elbows to prolong the life of what is quite probably the only jacket he owns. The shoes could only be described as comfortable. Unless, of course you wanted to add ‘cheap’ or ‘bland’. The trousers were corduroy slacks; an awkward cut - the kind you only ever thought you’d see again on seventies TV re-runs. He slipped his hands into those deep, comfortable pockets and leaned back against the door jamb.

“Seems we got ourselves a bit of a mess here, doesn’t it?”

I could feel myself nodding lamely. There was no point denying it any more than there had been any point trying to run. The truth was lying all around me, silent as winter. There really was no way out of this.

“Wanna tell me about it?” he said. Calmly.

I’ve never seen a guy with so little feeling before. I’ve seen people who didn’t care of course, and I guess I would have to count myself among their number, but never one whose face was showing absolutely nothing. Usually, in place of regret or sorrow, there would perhaps be a sense of pride or of some small victory; a game of one-upmanship that had just been won. Perhaps even a touch of disdain. This guy? Nothing. Not one damn thing. His face was just... stone.

I didn’t reply.

“Sure is a nice place you got here,” he said idly, changing tack as though he’d just popped round for sugar. “My wife always had a hankerin’ for a place like this.” He looked out into the hallways, down to the living space and out to the sea. He sounded regretful. “Never managed it, though.” He turned back to me. “Must have cost you a pretty penny.”

I didn’t look at him now. In the silence that followed I heard only the rhythmic crash of the tiny breakers catching the sand somewhere very distant, fighting for space in my head. “I guess so.”

“Bet you got a few little haunts like this dotted around the globe,” he said, nodding in admiration.

“Not any more,” I said, trying to throw him no emotion. “Just this.” There was something in my voice, though. I could not be entirely sure what it was. Regret perhaps? A sense of loss? Something.

He nodded like he understood. “Yeah, I guess things have been a bit tough for you of late.”

“Tell me about it,” I said.

By which I meant, of course, don’t.

He smiled and turned to face me. “Nah,” he said, “I’ve got a much better idea. Why don’t you tell me about it?”

I looked up at him, scornful as I could muster. “You read the fucking papers, don’t you?”

“Sure I do,” he said with a shrug. “Don’t mean I have to believe ‘em, though, does it?”

He pulled himself away from the door and walked over to the body on the floor, crouching down. He reached out but didn't actually touch it. Evidence I guess. Then he stepped over it like it was a roll of carpet, careful to avoid the spreading pool, and took a seat on the side of the bath, facing me.

Now the bath I do remember; it's what sold me on the apartment when Keeley first showed me the pictures. Triple Jacuzzi with gold taps. Not coloured. Not plated. Gold. Never got the chance to try them out, of course. Had this place over a year before I spent so much as a night here and by then word had gotten around. I'd be lucky to drag one girl back to soak with me, let alone two. I'll bet even the hookers would have thought twice before taking what was left of my dwindling account.

"You're British, right?"

"Yeah."

"Which part?"

"Yorkshire."

"Ah, Heathcliffe...?" he said, as though it had just clicked. "I had a friend once. He got married, moved the UK. Bob Shelton, you know him?"

I almost spoke and then stopped myself and narrowed my eyes. Why did the Yanks always think the UK was, like, some little town just down the road from Sweden or something? "Nah," I said eventually, as though he was either mad or stupid. "Never met him."

He nodded and pulled out a packet of Lucky Lucerne's. Christ, it had been a few years since I'd seen those puppies. They'd run ads on British TV for them when I was a kid: Throats that discern smoke a "Lucky Lucerne". I think we banned the adverts first, but the Yanks weren't so far behind. He slid one up the pack, grabbed it with his mouth – real thick lips this guy - and lit up. The angle I was at I could see the flame flickering in the pool of blood on the floor. It looked way too weird. Way too real.

He held the pack out but I declined. I don't think I had the stomach for it.

"So how'd you come to be in a band in the first place?" he said, slipping the pack away and crossing one leg over; getting comfortable. "That what you always wanted to do?" I could sense that he had deliberately changed the subject yet again. Perhaps he thought he could enter my head the back way.

I looked at the body on the floor. "Shouldn't the paramedics be here by now? Or the coroner or somebody?"

"They're on their way," he said. "But I really don't think it's gonna alter the end result, do you?" I shook my head. "So, the band. How'd it all kick off? See... I played a mean guitar myself - at college. Mind, couldn't even get the cats in the neighbourhood to scream at me. You...? You had the girlies screaming by the bucket from what I hear."

I took a deep, reticent breath. The fact that he had furnished the sentence with the word 'had' (very much in the past tense) not escaping me for a moment. Perhaps he was right. Perhaps it would help to talk about something else, something a little more distant than the scene which surrounded me. Of course, perhaps that was the reason he was asking in the first place. "When I was eighteen," I said. I could feel my hands starting to shake. Once they could do a perfect five minute roll, now the fuckers wouldn't even stay still when I asked them to. "A few of the guys I knew just, kinda, got together."

He pursed his lips. "And they needed a drummer?"

Any other time that might have made me laugh. “I couldn’t play drums for shit. I was the singer.”

“Ah...? Any good?” he asked. He sounded genuinely intrigued. I had to remind myself that cops, when they’re questioning a suspect, have a knack for sounding both genuine, and genuinely intrigued. Just like I had a knack for sounding sober. Sometimes.

I shook my head. “Not really. I was just desperate to be in a band - any band - that was all.”

“So you said you could sing and they bought it?”

“Kind of. Or rather they needed a van and I bought it. We got together, y’know, rehearsed for about a month. About a month too little, I guess, given that we were pretty much heckled off the stage at the Pig and Dragon on our first Friday night.”

“Pig and Dragon...?”

“It’s a... pub... you know?”

“Ah yes,” he said, feigning an accent. Very, very badly. “A ‘British pub’.” It sounded more like ‘Pob’ the way he said it. “So why’d they heckle you?”

“Because we were a pile of shite, that’s why.” I thought for a moment. Thought back. These were the days when it was all still laid out before us. A carpet ready to walk, if we had the shoes. “And it really pissed me off, you know? See...I just knew I was going to be a major fucking player one day. I could...” I clenched my fingers (as best I could), “...feel it. All it would take would be for everyone in the band to hold the same fucking tune for three goddamn minutes at a throw.”

“So how come you weren’t over before you started?”

I smiled a little at that. I guess we should have been. “Smokey - he was our guitarist - asked Big Dave, the landlord at the Pig and Dragon to give us another shot. He agreed, but this time he put us onstage on a Tuesday, just before the bingo. It wasn’t quite as big a gamble for him, you know? He reckoned we needed more experience in front of a crowd. If you count fifteen incontinent old ladies as a crowd, then... well, I suppose that’s what we got. They didn’t heckle us off because they didn’t fucking listen to us. Batteries dead in the hearing aids I reckon.”

“Go on...?”

“After maybe four or five of the Bingo-Tuesdays, Dave gave us another Friday night opener and we did a bit better. Not a lot, but a bit. He said he only wanted known covers though; that we ‘shouldn’t go playing any of our own shit’, but we threw a couple of Smokey’s tunes in. Just said they were obscure rock classics. After a few gigs I’m pretty sure he’d sussed us out, but the crowd was either way too happy or way too fucking pissed to care so he just let us run with it. Word was getting around, numbers were going up and so were the beer sales. That’s all Dave ever gave a fuck about anyway.”

Just talking about those days brought them back so clearly. Like innocent little picture cards laid out one by one before me. It was a time that, although only a few years old, had been lost in the deep fuckup of my head until this guy came along and edged it out. Too many hotels and limos in between, I guess. Too many girls and long lines of coke building walls. It was weird; seeing it all playing grainily in my head like some second rate biopic. It also made me remember that life was actually pretty good back then – perhaps not so good as when we made it big, but certainly a damn sight easier.

He flicked ash into the sink; a gentle sizzle as it broke the thin sheen that had been dripping steadily. Yesterday I would have kicked his ass for a stunt like that, but I doubted now that it

mattered any more. What the fuck was an expensive bathroom suite to a guy who's looking at the rest of his life shitting in a bucket?

"You still the singer at this point?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said. And I did say that with a smile. "I mean, I wasn't great in the Paul Rodgers, David Coverdale or Danny Bowes mould, but I could hold a tune. Kind of. Always saw my delivery as far more Rod Stewart meets Joe Cocker whilst travelling on a bus with Joe Elliott anyway. Raw... y'know, gravelly. Thing was, after a couple of months Smokey got this call on his mobile: an A&R guy at CBJ Records. Andersson they called him. Big fat fucker. We didn't know it but Smokey had sent off some of the demos we'd been mucking about with; this Andersson guy had heard 'em and he must've liked 'em. Said he wanted to come up and see if we could cut it as a live act."

"And he thought you could?"

"To a point. Personally, I thought the gig went smooth as, but as I recall his exacts words were: Get a new singer, add four more songs - same quality as Love Ain't No Friend and that last one you played - and start wearing clothes that seem like they've been bought in at least the same fucking town, then come and talk to me again. We might be able to do a deal. If not, then I rather heartily suggest you don't fucking bother."

"So they sacked you as singer?"

"Kind of. In a way. I guess. You see, all along I'd had the van and it was me that had come up with the band name. So it never worked out like that. What happened was that I sacked Animal."

"Animal?"

"Yeah, y'know, like in 'The Muppets'. Pete, he was our drummer. I took over on drums. I mean, I wasn't gonna miss a chance like this, was I? And like I say, I owned the name. No-one thought about changing it, they just went with what I did."

The guy narrowed his eyes. "Now why would they do that?"

I shrugged. "Dunno. They just did."

He shook his head perceptively. "No, I don't think so. I think if you're going to be honest about this, then now's the time. So I ask you again... why would they do that....?"

I didn't answer straight away, so he leaned forward a little. Head down, eyes up. "You might not choose to believe this now, Andy, but I really am on your side."

I took a deep breath, thinking back. I didn't want to tell him anything, to be honest, but it was like he said. If there was a time for honesty, then it was either going to show its face soon or now. Might as well make it now and give myself time to get to know it better. "I kinda went to see Animal myself," I said eventually. "I told him the others wanted me to take over on drums and that effectively he was out."

"So what happened to Ani... Pete?"

"He got himself drunk."

"And...."

"And he totalled his car. I heard they pulled him out in bits."

The guy's face showed no emotion. I think he was just waiting for some to show on mine, but it didn't. Of course. Not until halfway through the ensuing silence when I started to realise, perhaps for the first time ever, that it really had been me that had killed Pete. Not with a gun, perhaps, like those currently spreading across my 'more-than-you-earn-in-a-month-per-square-metre' flooring,

but I'd pulled some kind of trigger on him all the same. I could see Pete's face in my head again now. So fucking clearly. His eyes. Staring at me, like those of a dying man. Scared. Pleading. Begging for me to tell him that it had all been some big cocksucker of a mix-up and that he was on his way up the greasy pole along with the rest of us.

Then a nasty glint and a sly laugh from the other side. Sent me cold.

"The others never really wanted him out, did they?"

I shook my head. "No," I said. Soft. Embarrassed. "They never knew. Next thing he was gone and it wasn't an issue."

I took a moment to think back, staring at things had been gone from - or hidden in - my mind for too long. Shit, had I always been this big a bastard? Had I been born a bastard? Truth was, I didn't know the answer any more. What I did know was that if I hadn't been born in bastarddom, then I'd sure as hell graduated from whatever High School it had been sending me to.

"Smokey, more than anyone, fucking hated the idea of me on drums," I continued. "Tony thought I was mental to even suggest it, but could see my point, Animal being gone and all. John-Boy thought I was a twat and Animal's girlfriend Nisha, understandably I suppose, called me a cunt. Didn't matter a toss to me. As far as I was concerned it was me who'd named the fucking band and I was staying put. I learnt to play, kind of, and we found a new singer - a guy called Reece. He had his head wedged firmly up his rear but a damn good set of pipes."

"So the CBJ guy came back and signed you?"

"Yeah. We brought out the album eight, maybe nine months later and that was that. By album three we were Top Ten."

"And rich...?"

"Oh, fuck, yeah. Beyond our wildest. How d'you think I got an apartment like this?"

"And the others?"

"Yeah, and the others."

He blinked slowly. Knowingly. "All gone now, Andy. Aren't they?"

I sighed heavily. I think I expunged every drop of breath in my lungs. It hurt to say what I was about to say. "Yeah," I replied, "they're all gone."

He ran what was left of the cigarette under the cold tap in the sink, placed the sodden stub on the side and then got comfortable again. I sensed that a change of tack was coming.

I wasn't wrong.

"Tell me about Shelley Carson," he said. There was no malice in his voice, though from the mention of that name alone there damn well should have been. Nobody else had ever mentioned that name to me without a sharp bite to their tone. Not since the day it had happened. Yet he was different. He was asking as though maybe we were on a talk show and it had been Shelley who had pawned her jewellery to buy me my first kit or written our first number one.

It took me by surprise. "How do you know about her?"

He shrugged, his face still giving nothing away. "Because, to coin your phrase, I read the fucking papers."

I was not enjoying this. Maybe he was on my side, and maybe he wasn't. Either way I don't normally show off my dirty laundry, not even to my best friends. Best friends? Ha, that was a laugh

and a half. Like I had any friends. Even those who once might have thought they were never really were. Not to me.

“She was just a girl. I picked her up in a bar. She was in my car. We had a crash.”

“She was just a girl, you had a crash...? And she... died. Correct?” Not a question. A statement. Point of god-damned fact, your honour.

I looked straight down at the tiled floor that was sitting like reflected truth between my shoes. I could see my own face looking back at me, a ridge of red creeping into view from my right. Don't know which looked worse.

“Yeah,” I said. “She died.” What of it?

“What kind of car was it?”

I looked up again. “Does it matter?”

“I don't know, but I'm asking all the same. What was it? Ferrari? Porsche? One of those new Aston Martins I've seen?”

“TVR,” I said. “Cerbera - 4.5 V8.”

He raised his thick eyebrows. Limited as it was, it was the first real sign of emotion he had shown. “Fast then?”

“Oh yeah,” I said. “She was fast alright. Body kit; private plate: 4-NDY.”

Suddenly I realised how proud I sounded. And just how shit that made me sound.

“I heard she was decapitated...?” he said. It came out like ‘I heard she broke her nose’. I nodded. It came out like ‘you're a shit, Andy and you know it’. “But you didn't stick around, did you Andy? You were gone by the time the police arrived?”

“I went to get help,” I said. “But I got lost.” Christ, it sounded weaker in my voice than it did in my head.

“You didn't run off to sober up then?”

“Hell no.” Hell, yes.

“So you hadn't been drinking?”

I shrugged. “Yeah, but not much.” Define ‘not much’ Andy. Go on. I dare ya. Fuck it, I double dare ya.

He smiled. Not a warm smile, you understand, but a knowing one. One that told me I'd better start offering my whisky over neat, instead of watering it down like I did. “The guys at the... ‘pub’... you left,” he said. “They said you'd had more than a little. They said that you'd been mouthing off; that you were slurring like a stretched videotape and challenging them all to a race. On your way out with Shelley a guy in the parking lot was getting into a Porsche... a Boxster, I think it was called... and they said you were shouting at him. Calling it a ‘Baby Porsche’ or something and bragging that he obviously couldn't afford the real thing. They said they could hear you yelling from inside.”

He paused and looked at me for a long time, as if he was reading me. I hoped not. “Did you race the guy Andy? Did you climb into that deep red leather trim and show him what a Cerbera can do when you put your foot down? Did you do the 0-60 in three-point-eight to show him what you could afford? Is that about right?”

“There was no guy and no Porsche,” I said defiantly. “They just made that story up because I was a rock star and they didn’t like it. They were jealous.”

“Yeah, okay,” the guy said. “So Paul Phillips and his 2002 flame red Porsche Boxster never existed....?” As I looked up I caught his stare. He knew he’d got me, he could tell by the look I could already feel crawling across my face. “And I don’t suppose you ever wrote him a cheque for twenty-five grand, either? Because if he had existed and you had written him a cheque, then that would have sounded an awful lot like silence money, now wouldn’t it?”

I looked back to the floor. The blood was creeping around my feet now; my reflection a deep, haunting red. It was getting sickeningly hard to tell whose face I hated seeing most; mine or his.

“How much did your lawyer get?” he asked softly, though I could sense that his question was nothing if not rhetorical. “I mean, let’s face it... this Phillips guy got twenty-five-k more than anyone in young Shelley Carson’s family, short of your humanitarian gift of her funeral expenses, but I’m guessing the suit who got you off the hook got a whole bundle more.”

I could actually feel tears welling in my eyes, maybe even the first ever, and everything went cloudy. Inside and out. Even then I knew that the tears were not for Shelley. They were for me. Shit, I’d only ever waste a tear on me.

His voice took on a probing edge. It was a soft spade, but he was digging alright. Digging deep into something I didn’t really want uncovering. “Did she scream at you, Andy? Did she beg you to slow down? Did she pull at your arm, wailing at you and begging with all she’d got for you to slow the fuck down and take her back home?”

Suddenly Shelley was back in my mind. Not the Shelley I had seen standing at the bar with her friend; the one with the short, tight skirt, the halter top and the eyes that said she was up for some fun. Instead I saw the Shelley in the car. The one which was crying as though her mother had died and those same eyes red and black as the mascara started to run down her cheeks like haunting gothic make-up. The one who never once pulled at my arm, never once caused the accident. Just the one who shrieked louder than I can ever remember as the right-hand wheels caught in the water gathered on the road and tore the steering wheel like a rescinded gift from my hand.

We hit the wall less than a second later. I guess we... I... was doing a little over a hundred.

“I thought you were on my side,” I said.

He smiled again, though there was still no warmth in it. “I am, Andy. Believe me, I am.”

“I had a reputation to protect. We had a duty to our fans.”

He didn’t even bother to furnish that comment with a retort. He knew as well as I did that it was a pile of crap. Marketing speak, should the truth ever come out. Which it hadn’t, of course. Not until now.

“Of course, Shelley pales a little when you compare her to Lena Xiang, doesn’t she?”

“I don’t know anything about a Lena Xiang,” I protested.

“Now that’s not true on any level, is it Andy?” He looked up to the ceiling. Half thinking whilst making it look like he was idly checking out the fittings. “I mean, I know of eighty year old ladies who wear plastic pants and sip liquefied food through tubes in backwoods retirement homes who know all about Lena Xiang. Highest paid rock star in the world; lead singer with the nation’s biggest ever all-female group, found dead in a hotel room in New York. Overdose. And this little snippet somehow passed you by?”

My answer was delivered slowly; defined. “What I mean is, I don’t know anything about her death.”

“So you weren’t there?”

“Hell no.” And neither were you, buddy.

“But you were on the same bill.”

“The same bill, not the same hotel bill.”

I looked back at him again and I felt something. Something I can’t explain. It was like... a sixth sense, if there was such a thing. He knew. Don’t ask me how he knew or how I knew that he knew, if you can follow that messed up logic, but he did. I’m not even going to get into if he knew that I knew that he knew. It was as though I could have reeled off everything that had happened that night just by reading it from his eyes. Big, dark, inimical... knowing eyes.

“We hung out,” I said eventually. I really could sense that there was little point in hiding it any more. I had no idea whether it would make me feel better or worse to get the story out, only that I had to do it. It had been inside me for three years now, banging away inside my chest. “We had a few drinks. She suggested that...”

I stalled. Only I knew this, and that was how it was always supposed to be.

“That you go to back her hotel. Up to her room.”

“Yeah,” I said. He knew alright. “She went in the front and I climbed the escape. She let me in the back window. She had a boyfriend, see...? Big fat guy called Tony Maxon.”

“And Tony ran her record company, didn’t he?”

“Yeah. Had her on a tight deal as well. She was optioned to T-Max on a ten year exclusive. If he decided for whatever reason that she couldn’t record for them, then she was contractually bound not to record for any other label either. Effectively she’d have been finished until she was thirty-five and by then...”

“And yet she fucked anything that had a pulse? Including you...?”

“Yeah we fucked, what of it?”

“Well I’m guessing that - to heighten the sensation - you took along some... ‘shit’... to the hotel room. Some bad shit that maybe you’d bought on the cheap. You heated it and offered to syringe her first. Am I right?”

I nodded again. He knew he was. Shit, everything this guy said was right. He was damn good at his job. A sight better than the useless fuck detective who’d interviewed me the day after Lena’s death. The one who had shrugged at more of my answers than he had ever questioned.

“I was heating the second batch - for myself - and she just... you know... keeled over. First it was like she was having some really cool orgasm or something, writhing around with her eyes rolling and shit. Then she started to go a real bad colour. I couldn’t describe it to you, even if I tried. I mean, what colour’s an orange, right?”

“It’s orange,” he said, with a slight smirk.

“Yeah. Yeah, it is. But then there was blood coming out of her mouth and her eyes went really weird. Huge and black like... like... there was some pool of ink spreading in ‘em or something. I don’t think she could breathe properly either; she was gasping from real deep. I thought about calling reception, ‘course I did but... well... I didn’t think it was a good idea.”

“So you just high-tailed it out of there?” He shook his head and though his face remained stony-cold I could feel a clear sense of disappointment in the subtleties of the way he moved. “From what I heard it took her almost three hours to die, fighting for breath and getting eaten piece by piece from inside. Yet you just.... left her to it.”

Suddenly I couldn't breathe myself. I felt as though there was a loose strand in my t-shirt and someone was pulling it tight around my neck, strangling me. The sweat was building not just on my face but all over my body. “Jesus Christ, it's hot in here,” I said, pulling at my collar.

He smiled. “Jesus can't help you now, Andy. And the heat...? You'll get used to it.” Shuffling on the side of the bath, he reached into his jacket for the Lucerne's. When he leaned over and offered the pack this time around I took one, shaky handed, and he lit it for me. It tasted good; better than the cigarettes you normally see around these parts. He leaned back, placed another in his mouth and lit that too. “So tell me, Andy, and tell me honestly... why did you run from the hotel...?”

I drew heavily on the cigarette, like I was using it to pump some kind of courage into my lungs, I don't know.

“Tony... her boyfriend...” I said. My voice was shaking. Shit, I was shaking. Up and down, all over, inside and out. “His label was our American label. If he'd found out that she... I mean that we...”

He lifted his eyebrows and puffed a plume of blue/grey smoke into the air. “What? Fucked? Shot up together?”

“Both,” I agreed. “The band would be just as dead as she was. Besides, when you're the support band, killing the lead singer of the headline act could be construed as... well... a bit of a faux pas.” I smiled at my own joke.

Which was odd, really, because I found it anything but funny.

Again, he nodded like he understood. I mean like he really understood.

“I didn't think she'd die,” I said, looking him straight in the face. “Not at the time.”

He looked at me again. Straight at me. No feeling at all. “Yes you did.”

Yes. I did.

“How do you know all this?” I asked. Because nobody knew any of this but me, and I sure as hell hadn't filled him in. Well, not before today at any rate.

“I get paid to do a job,” he said calmly. “And if I'm going to do it well, I have to do my research.”

He held the cigarette in his fingers and turned it around, smiling at the burning embers as they shrivelled into grey ash. “How long had you been using, Andy?” He looked at me again. “And don't you go lying to me now.”

“Since before we got the deal,” I said, even though both he and I could tell I was reluctant. “When I was singing. I met this girl in a club in Aberdeen - that's in Scotland - and we went back to her place. She asked me if I'd ever done coke and I said no. She laughed at me. Told me if I'd never fucked on coke then I'd never really fucked. So, I figured what the heck... I gave it a shot.”

“Was it good?”

“The coke or the fuck?”

He shrugged. “Either? Both?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Both. I stuck with coke for a bit but, like I say, I wasn’t really a drummer. By the time we were recording the second album it had gotten so that they were talking of using a machine. I was having none of that shit, of course, but the sessions were stretching out. I couldn’t get the rhythm going or the hooks right. A friend of a friend said I should try horse; said it would keep me alert. Wake up my senses.”

“Did it?” he asked.

“Yeah it did. It kept me awake, kept me focused. We had the sessions done in two weeks. I guess it brought an edge to my stuff too, because I got an award from ‘Q’ the following year. ‘Best Rock Drummer - 2000’. Before long I couldn’t get behind a kit without it, studio or live. Not long after that I couldn’t get out of bed without the damn stuff in my veins.”

“And the others caught on? How?”

“Smokey saw me taking a piss. Saw my.... well, you know.”

“No,” he said. “Enlighten me.”

Don’t ask me why but it annoyed me just to have to say it. “My cock, dumb ass. I was a drummer, remember? You don’t drum in long sleeves and I had to find a vein somewhere, didn’t I?”

He winced. “Ooh, Andy, that’s not nice.”

“Yeah...? Fuck you.”

“But they didn’t fire you?”

“No. They booked me into rehab. Told the press I was suffering a burn-out. Gave me a few weeks to get back on track.”

“Did any of the band visit you when you were in rehab?”

I had to think about that. It hadn’t occurred to me before. It should have done, of course, but it hadn’t. I was too wrapped in my own problems at the time to have seen it. “No,” I said, slowly. “No, they didn’t”

“And why do you suppose that was?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know.” Another look at him told us both that I did know. It was because I was an ass-hole. Nobody liked an ass-hole and nobody fucking liked me. Looking back, I bet they were actually glad to get me out of the way for a while.

“Did... anyone visit you?”

“Keeley,” I said. Then I just stared. Out into the distance beyond the open bathroom door. Around the corner and down the half-flight of stairs. Right across the main room to the windows, the afternoon sun no doubt streaming in through the blinds and casting long strips of barcode-black across her lifeless body even as we spoke. “Keeley came.”

“Yeah,” he said. Like he knew what I was thinking. “Keeley came.”

Keeley always came.

She was fifteen when we met. Just a kid really. She came to one of the gigs at the Pig and Dragon and danced right at the front. I sang five songs without ever taking my eyes off her tits. We went for a drink one week, went like rabbits for a whole night the following week and we’d been together ever since. On and off. She had the most amazing eyes - if I could ever lift mine to that level - and a smile that just made you feel really good about yourself. Long dark hair and long dark legs. Beautiful girl. The most intelligent one I ever met.

But she never came on the road. She wanted to do her law degree and so she wouldn't come along. I guess me saying that makes it sound like I asked her to come along, but I never did. It was she that had told me not to expect it.

I hadn't.

She knew there were groupies and she knew I'd indulged. She never knew the extent, of course and I wasn't about to extol it to her. I just lied and told her that I always used protection (which usually extended no further than a guy watching the door if it came to a quick fuck-and-blow-dry back stage) and she always came back to me.

I looked up at the guy. He'd been watching me think like somebody might sit in a café watching a couple across the way having an argument. Hell, knowing him he might even have been reading me think, and I guess he knew that the only arguments I might be having right now would be with myself. Me against the cold stark facts of truth that seemed to sit like lead on my shoulders. Eventually he opened his eyes wide, as if waiting to catch something in those big dark circles that I might choose to throw his way.

"Why did she always come?" I asked. I sounded lost.

"Because she loved you," he said softly. Somehow, from his mouth I felt it was the truth. Never from hers. "And I guess she knew that one day you might just need her."

"I did need her." Why didn't I ever tell her that?

He nodded. "And she came."

For a few moments I couldn't talk. I didn't even bother trying because I knew nothing comprehensible was going to come. My throat was clicking inside, like words building up but not ready to flow. Not yet. When they did they'd screwed themselves into a tight little ball, one that contained the only three words that mattered.

"I killed her."

"Yes, Andy," he said. "Yes you did. So, are you ready to tell me how it all went down?"

And for the first time I did actually want to tell him, just so that somebody understood. Clever bastard. His back-door approach had actually gone and worked.

"We - the band I mean - were in Australia. Smokey caught me shooting up backstage. I'd been out of rehab less than three weeks so they knew I was never gonna get out of it. I was fucked and if they kept me on I guess they figured they were too. They dragged me to one side and sacked me on the spot. Got the support band's drummer to fill in. He'd been at the gigs, you see? Knew the songs."

I could feel my face scrunching; thinking. Some of it was still blurred. I could see all the pieces, but it was the order in which they belonged that had gone fuzzy. "I told them they couldn't do that, that I owned the name and that it was my band."

"But...?"

"But I'd never read the contract, had I? I mean Keeley had once told me she'd take a look over it, but I'd told her that there was no point. All I saw was the money. It was all I ever saw except, perhaps, what I could buy with it. So, what I had never taken the trouble to note was that the new management were not as naive as the band and from the moment we signed they owned the name. They'd written it into Clause 78, just in case."

"So what did you do?"

“They put me on a plane to London and I went to my dockside apartment. Keeley had heard on the grapevine that something had gone down and she tracked me down and phoned. She told me she’d come down from Leeds if I wanted her to. I told her ‘no’: went out and got a couple of ounces and a couple of hookers instead.”

I took a deep breath. That’s what people do at the point where they’re about to leap off a cliff, even if it’s a metaphorical one.

“The following day the phone rang again. I was too wasted to answer it so I let the machine kick in. It was one of the lawyers acting for our management company. They wanted me out of the apartment. Turned out they didn’t just own the band name; they owned the apartments and the clothes and the fucking cars as well. All of it. It was theirs until all the studio time and promotional costs were covered. Only then would any of it start to become ours. Slowly. It was like they’d... loaned us the lifestyle, but of course the other guys were fine because they were still earning. It was a contract you needed to be in for years before it really started paying.”

“So you’d blown it?”

“Yeah,” I said, realising. “I’d blown it alright. Turned out that the only place that was really mine was this place.”

“How so?”

I smiled lamely. “Because.... Because Keeley bought it. From the limited royalties I did have. She’d be careful on my behalf. She liked it out here and she bought it in my name while we were in Japan a year or so ago. Told me at the time that property would be a good investment whilst I was on the road.”

“Seems she was right,” he mused. “So... you parked your ass on yet another plane and high-tailed it over to my patch?”

“Yeah.” I paused. Thought. “Figured I’d just put another band together, you know? Four guys that I knew were good, bought some songs and we called ourselves ‘Remedy’. Made damn sure I registered the name as my own this time, I can tell you. I really thought that it would be easier this time around because I was, you know... known. But it wasn’t...”

I could feel the hate crawling like leeches across my face; the sneer. “It was ten times harder. All the little stories had started hitting the shelves by that time. Producers and Promoters and shit all getting in on the act. What a bastard I was to work with; what a shit I’d been in the studio and on the road. The drug stuff. There was no protection any more, see? No PR people payed money I’d yet to earn to keep me snowy white. Plus, it wasn’t like I could write my own stuff or anything that might give me an edge and I’d never been behind a mixing desk in my life. Not like the other guys. Hell, I must’ve knocked on fifty doors....” I started shaking my head. I couldn’t even tell now whether it was unfair or not. I wanted it to be, sure... but that didn’t mean it actually was, did it? “Not one of them opened so much as a crack.”

“Must’ve hit you hard.”

“Yeah,” I said. It did. It really did, (but not as hard as I hit myself, I don’t think). “So... last night I went to The Voodoo for a few hours. I don’t remember even one of them. Then I came back here and scored myself big time - just laid floating on the sofa and prayed to God that something came good before the money ran out.”

“Did you score again this morning?”

Suddenly I could feel the temperature that had been building inside the room sinking like a dying ship. When the guy had arrived it had been warm - the kind of sticky warmth that I guess you’d

expect from a dead body. Viscous blood and slow heat spilling over the tiles like it was. For a while it had seemed like each of the questions had taken a coal and lowered it carefully on top. Not any more. Now that same heat was seeping away through the cracks, and the tiles in between were simply cooling the rest down until there was nothing floating in the air but the stark cold of death, the body that lay between us slowly drawing rigid in response.

I nodded. "Nearer lunchtime I guess. I came to and there was nothing on the machine or the caller display...."

"Nothing....?" He sounded sceptical. Perhaps a little too sceptical for my liking. Maybe he'd checked out the display for himself on his way in.

"Well, there was a message from Keeley," I said, like it had been from my dry cleaner or something. "She said she was coming out for a few weeks; that she missed me and that she was going to take care of me. But there was nothing from any of the record companies."

"And that was all you cared about....?"

I didn't need to answer that one. Yeah, that was all I cared about. All I ever cared about. Me, myself and I.

"I heated myself another wrap and decided to just lose myself a while more. Only this time - when I hit - the room started spinning. Weird shit. Nasty. It got faster and faster and everything seemed to get really fucked up; y'know the colours and shit. Then, when it stopped, there were faces everywhere; all around me. They were screaming at me. Laughing at me. Right in my face, you know...? Goading me."

"What kind of faces, Andy? People you knew?"

I was staring at everything and nothing. Speaking more to myself than to him. "Everyone. Shelley screaming to slow the car. Lena begging for help, reaching out to me with those long black nails she had. A girl I once fucked begging me to stop; saying that she didn't want it. That I was hurting her. Don't know her name. Animal pleading for his job; crying and telling me how he'd dropped out of college for the band; that without it he was fucked. Loads of other people, too. A couple of just-teen groupies. Just people I met along the way."

"People you fucked, you mean."

"In one way or another, yeah. People I fucked."

He seemed satisfied with my answer. Perhaps with my honesty. It was a few seconds before he spoke again. Sandwiched in between was a long, regretful silence; the kind where you'd pay good money for anybody to say anything - worthwhile or not. If you had any good money left, that is.

"Where did the gun come from, Andy?"

"It was in a drawer by the sofa," I said. I don't think I was talking to him any more so much as talking to the room, staring into another place. "I think, I mean I guess I just freaked; started shooting. Aiming at the faces. Killing them off one by one. But they kept coming back. Animal, Shelley, Lena, the girl." I took a deep breath. Deepest of my life, if there's no irony in that. "And Keeley."

The guy actually looked saddened on my behalf. Looked like he felt for me.

"Keeley?"

Shit, yeah. Keeley. I couldn't even answer that one. I didn't want to.

"Keeley wasn't just a face, was she?"

“She came,” I said. Slowly. “She came like she said she would. Must’ve come into the room when I was shooting the place up. I can see her face now. Just.... sheer horror. Then she screamed and I turned. I thought she was just one of the others. Just a face. So I pulled the trigger - twice, I think...” Was it twice or was it three? “...and she just fell. Quietly. Awkwardly. Suddenly all the other faces disappeared and there was just hers. Laid on the floor. Blood everywhere.”

“So you’d shot up, shot the place up, and somehow managed to kill the only person who actually gave a damn about you?”

The kind of summing up of which Perry Mason would have been proud. “Yeah.”

“And you came in here...?”

“Came in here, yeah. Took a good long look in the mirror. Didn’t like what I saw.... know what I mean?” He nodded. He knew. “There was one left. One in the chamber. In the gun. So I just...”

He looked at the body on the floor, raised his eyes and sighed. “Just found a route through your face and took the back of your head clean off is what you did.”

He got that right.

Suddenly I heard the front door go. A loud crash that told me that it wasn’t being opened so much as being broken down. Then more sets of footsteps than I could count. Heavy boots across the floor. I heard somebody say ‘awww shit,’ or something like that and then ‘chief, we got one’. Then some of them were coming up the stairs. A few seconds later a face appeared around the door wearing a blue cap, then disappeared in a flash. He shouted ‘clear’ and then there were two of them coming in, both holding guns, barrels safely toward the floor.

“Self inflicted,” the first guy said. “I think we found our shooter.” He holstered his weapon and walked right over to the body. Never looked at me, never looked at the investigator with the wry smile sitting on the side of my bath. The kind of smile that suggested he was reminiscing; that he missed all this. The SWAT guy checked the lifeless body for a pulse, turned to his pals with an unfeeling raise of the eyebrows and shook his head.

My guy stood up, stubbed the last of his cigarette into the tiles and walked over to the door, still smiling like he’d watched an old home movie. The thing was; and here’s the freaky bit, he just walked straight through the two SWAT cops. Not around, not close by, but through. Like he was mist. A moment later two paramedics walked swiftly and purposefully into the room, green all-in-ones just breezing through him, and knelt by the body. The guy looked at me, the shape of his body reforming like a strange digital image projected into swirling grey around him.

When he was all together again he turned and smiled right at me. “Time we got out of here, wouldn’t you say?”

For a moment I didn’t move. I just stared at him, wondering. I mean, he seemed like an okay guy and all; better than me as an example of the human race I’m sure. But it was for this reason that there was something eating at me. He was too nice a guy to be here. Too nice a guy to be working for the guy who sent him.

Besides, I’d spilled quite a portion of my life; so now I wanted to replace it with just a little something of his...

The air is empty all around and the world which lies somewhere beyond it has fallen hollow, if indeed it even continues to exist. My body feels as though I am immersed in tiny prickles of electricity, as though I am completely detached from reality.

“You said you were... on my side...?” It’s a statement, but my tone isn’t. My tone is 100% home-reared question.

He gives me a couple of gentle nods. “Oh, I am that,” he says resolutely. “So yeah, I guess now you’re of a mind to be wondering why.” He draws another cigarette from the pack, places it in his mouth and cranes his neck to light it.

“Well, it’s like I say, my wife always fancied a place like this. I’m guessing that was why she was fucking the plastic surgeon who had a place just like it. That was back in the mid-seventies. I followed her one night when I was supposed to be on duty. They hadn’t locked the door or anything and that just reeked of stupid. So let myself in and found them at it in the bedroom. Hard at it, I might add. She was screaming that he was the best she’d ever had, you know?” His eyes glaze over. He doesn’t like spilling his sorry mess any more than I’d liked spilling mine. Like me, though, I guess he knows it has to be done. “It hurt,” he says, regretfully. “Hurt like nothing I’d ever felt in my life. Been married fifteen years.”

He takes a breath and now I feel for him. For the first time in my life - or my death I suppose - I actually feel for another person’s pain. A kind of empathy, if you will. The only difference between us now was that he was a good man gone bad, and me....? Well, I was always everything that I was.

“I drew my service revolver,” he explains, his tone lowered, “and a few minutes later the rest - like them I guess - was history. My section chief found me at home the following day when I didn’t report in. Mine was a temple shot.”

He presses two fingers firmly above and in front of his right ear and drops the very same thumb he might once have used to pull back the hammer.

He’s only taken a couple of drags from the cigarette but now he takes it out from between his lips and stares at it like it’s fruit gone bad. With a casual flick he throws the rest out into the hallway. I catch sight of it sparking momentarily on the high mahogany sheen of the floor before it turns into a carpet of dark flame which spreads like flood water. In an instant it leaps and everything outside turns a blinding orange-red. I can feel the heat burning into my face and though it is undoubtedly painful, it is also strangely enticing. As though it’s somehow asking me to come home.

The SWAT guys and the paramedics don’t notice any of this of course. They’re still living their lives on the other side of the fence. The side where the all the little games of chance (and chances missed) have yet to be played out.

My guy turns and gestures for me to follow, then calmly steps out into the hallway. The flames don’t lick, rather they curl gently around his large frame like soft mud into which he is slipping. He becomes a black/red silhouette in the midst of the inferno and then he is gone. I take one last, lingering look at my own body as the zipper on the body bag gets pulled swiftly up. Soon it covers my face - or what’s left of it - and I’m gone as well. I suppose the tabloids will keep me alive a little longer, but not for too long. There’ll be a better story begging for column inches soon enough.

It’s like I told you before, somebody’s gonna go down for this and that somebody’s going to be me.

Down. All the way down.

I lift my butt from the gold-plated seat and head out into the hallway. Into the waiting flames.

Nowhere else to go.