

Thunderstorm

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ABSTRACT

Thunderstorm

Brandon Jacobs

James Thunderstorm, a Blackfoot Native from Northern Ontario, travels to Montreal to pursue a college education. His girlfriend Madeline Swift doesn't want him to leave, citing her clairvoyant grandmother Ruth's prediction that James will die a horrible death in the city.

Ignoring the warning, James arrives in Montreal. Once acclimated to the city, he becomes involved with a fellow student named Erica Frost. Then one night in Chinatown with his friends, James takes a hit of a mystery drug that replicates a near-death experience. Weeks later, he suffers nightmare flashbacks, particularly the recurring image of a demon. This image is used in the creation of a Halloween effigy by James and his friends at a party. Soon after, everyone involved in this creation suffers varying degrees of bad luck -- some of it incidental, some of it fatal.

James discovers that one of his friends is dealing out the near-death drug, infringing on the territory of criminal gangs in the process. James is dragged into the conflict against his will. He doesn't realize that the drug has caused a dangerous side-effect in his body. The visions he experienced -- stemming from a previous life, according to a psychic -- might manifest themselves in reality. Threatened by both the criminal underworld and an ancient spirit world, James is forced to confront it all.

ONE

Pacing the train station, James refused to look toward the main entrance. With each step, his mountain boots echoed on the granite floor. Madeline arrived only ten minutes before departure.

"The clothes you left in my bedroom," he told her. "In case you changed your mind... I have some of your clothes in my backpack."

That was a fire and forget remark, ready to ignore if necessary.

Madeline sighed. No other gesture made her both desirable and frustrating at once. James was pissed off about what little time she'd left them to sort things out. It was as if she was afraid of being persuaded, and deliberately handicapped his opportunity by being late. So when Madeline's footsteps echoed to his right, James kept staring straight ahead. It felt stupid, but looking at her first would have made him feel weaker. There was no winning path for his pride at this point.

"So what," she took a jab at him, "You just wanna fucking ignore me now?" Peripherally, he glimpsed her half-deadly, half-pleading eyes.

"I'm not the one who went into hiding for the last day and a half," he answered, forcing a scowl, knowing she would match it. With six minutes left, he wanted to go eye to eye, to sweet-talk her into doing things his way.

Their eyes locked into a cold, mutual stare.

"This is like a funeral," Madeline broke eye contact. "No one else is at the wake, so the corpse is making conversation with me."

James didn't bluff the look on his face.

"You know", he muttered, "your grandma telling me that I'll die soon -- that was bad enough. But what you're saying now is even more fucked up."

The train engine began to rumble. James reached into his dark, worn-out coat and pulled out two tickets. He handed one to Madeline, as the station intercom blared the

train's departure time. There were three minutes left at that point. Madeline smacked the ticket in the palm of her hand.

"I'm never gonna use this."

She looked too serious to influence. James scraped his boot on the floor.

"If you're not coming, I won't argue about it. I'm done with that."

"That fine with me" she replied, "I stayed away from you for a reason." she paused. "You know... life without you. I wanted to know what it felt like before it happened."

"What good did that do?" asked James. His mind harbored thoughts that defied category.

"Do you really want me to stay?" he asked her.

"You mean, for a couple of hours, or-"

"No, for good."

Madeline was unaffected.

"I'm not pregnant, you know." She'd laid it right out.

"I wasn't even gonna bring that up. Do you want me to stay or not?"

"No." she quickly blurted. "I think you ought to go."

James hesitated, then brought his face close to Madeline's.

"Without you, your Grandma Ruth swears that I'll be dead in less than a year."

"That's not my problem any more," she answered.

Lifting his backpack, James walked toward the boarding area. Madeline followed, sliding her arms under his open coat and hugging him. They pressed a hard kiss, then quickly let go.

Madeline remained on the platform as James climbed aboard. By the time he found an available window on the train, she was nowhere in sight.

Arriving in Montreal, James walked out of Central Station, into the downtown area. The level of detail filling his eyes -- decades and centuries of stone, wood, glass and steel -- mixed along the curves and grids of the streets. The eagerness of his craving eyes, the crackling energy in his frontal lobes, were diluted with one nagging thought -- *I'm seeing all of this without her*. The rush of exploration disintegrated into a reminder of loss. The city's first impression became a consolation instead. He couldn't stop wondering how it would have been if Madeline had been there with him. That alone reduced him from proud Native to anonymous zombie in black clothes -- because he'd only learned to express himself with the girl he loved. Now that Madeline Swift was unavailable to contradict him, James Thunderstorm was mute in the new concrete wilderness, just as he'd been before he ever met her.

He glanced over his shoulder while dialing a number on a sidewalk payphone. An August breeze filled the night as he listened to a distant ring through the receiver. Miles of lights and shadows were in every direction, and dozens of unknown faces passed him by on the street.

"Hello?" answered Madeline.

"It didn't take me long to call you, did it?"

"James."

"I thought you'd be at Lookout Hill with everybody else."

"Well, I'm not," she muttered,

James gripped the phone tighter.

"Look, are you pregnant or not?"

"I told you the truth when we were face to face. That wasn't enough for you?"

"Why else would you be home on a Friday night?"

"That's my business."

James braced himself whenever someone passed the phone booth.

“When Ruth saw my future, she said nothing bad would happen, if you and I were here together.”

“I never heard my grandmother say that. Not once. You’ve said it a thousand times, but not her.”

James’ stomach growled as he paced in front of the phone.

“Madeline, if you found out tomorrow that I’d been killed or something -- what would you think?”

“What would I think? I’d lose my fucking mind, James. But you weren’t thinking about that when you got on the train, were you?”

“Fuck the reservation, Mads. It’s a government cage. No one who stays inside amounts to anything.”

“Well, sorry if I disagree.”

“You and your Grandma made this happen. She psyched you out of coming with me, then the two of you tried to scare me into staying. All because the old bitch can’t be alone. Just because of her, you let *our* future get screwed over. It’s that simple.”

“Is this really what you called me for?”

“I want you to admit that her premonitions were lies. Because as soon as I arrived here, it was supposed to be a great moment, but thanks to you, it wasn’t. I’m actually starving like hell because I’m too paranoid to go out and eat. That’s how much you fucked with my mind.”

“Well, I’m sorry, James, but my Grandma didn’t bullshit you, and neither did I. I’m sick of fighting about it.”

“Where’s your train ticket?” he asked.

“Gone.” she answered dryly. “You left *me*, James. My family, my friends, the Sundance ceremony -- everything I need is here except you, and I’ve chosen to live with that.”

“What difference does it make, when you think about it?” he asked, “Living on the reserve was like already being dead, except for one thing.”

James put the receiver back on the hook, and began walking along the curb. Hundreds of people swarmed him along boulevards gridlocked with traffic and side streets lined with cafes and nightclubs. He walked past crowded movie theaters, restaurants, and packed parking lots, waiting for his alleged doom. The night air was hot, and the more James kept moving, the more logic began to sink in -- there were no street fights to be seen, and no gunshots being fired. People weren't marauding like hunting packs, but were enjoying themselves, oblivious to him. Yet inside a dingy pizzeria that neighbored both a pharmacy and a strip club, James felt so nervous he could barely keep his food down.

There was a bronze engraving on an Old Montreal office building, bearing a message that caught James' attention. It referred to murders of natives by 17th century colonialists as deeds of heroism, and referred to murders of colonialists by 'savages' as tragic massacres. It completely polarized his train of thought for hours afterwards. For the rest of the night, he wandered in resentment, venturing into places he didn't belong, simply to spite restrictions.

James trespassed so successfully, he felt invisible and untouchable, like the ghost of ancestors who walked across the ancient land. The city of lights, smoke and noise was easily reconquered. James wandered fire escapes and rooftops, slipped under gates and climbed over fences -- absolutely everywhere at random -- respectful of the land but not the boundaries of the city.

James stood before a huge fenced gate -- the first dead end he encountered in over seven hours of continuous walking. Earlier he'd been swamped in crowds and lights, but now only a glistening river and a few factory sites were in view. The smell of unidentifiable metals, rotten wood and century-old asphalt filled the air. On the other side

of the fence stood a factory that seemed to stretch out for a quarter mile. After walking free for the entire night, in spite of Old Ruth's premonitions, James wasn't about to let a rusty sign with the words '*Ne Pas Trespasser*' stop him.

He scaled the gate. His arms jittered as he gripped the support bar, and he climbed down the fence to the graveled earth. The factory yard, like the rest of the city, had become part of his personal hunting trail. As a tribute to the conquered land, James lit another cigarette.

Just as he stepped forward on the gravel, James saw two shadows moving about under a warehouse spotlight. They immediately spotted him, and darted toward him at top speed, ears flat with rage. They didn't even bother barking. James scrambled back up the fence. Losing his footing twice, James managed to pull himself over the barbed wire. He caught his ankle, and fell straight to the ground on his back, with one of his pant legs ripped open. The angry pattering of paws drew close, and the fence shuddered. Fanged jaws were snapping away, and James scrambled away from the gate, slowly regaining his breath. He then got to his feet, threw his empty cigarette pack on the ground, and left the area. Even from a distance, he still saw the dogs raging behind the fence.

TWO

Next morning, James stepped into Montreal's Native Friendship Center and couldn't shake the feeling that he was an unwelcome guest.

"How can I help you?" sighed the secretary.

"I heard there was a free lunch for students."

"There's a free lunch" she answered, "but it's for all Natives, you know? Not just students."

"Just point me in the direction." James replied. Five minutes later, he stood in line putting baked potatoes and hamburger on a paper plate. A middle-aged Native man in faded denim approached him.

"I'm Stu."

"Uhh... hey," replied James.

"Nobody's seen you here before."

"Yeah... I just arrived in town."

"From where?"

Each of Stu's words were graced with the stench of wine, and he followed James to a table where they sat.

"I'm from Ontario," said James, "from a Blackfoot Reserve up North."

"How's the livin' up there?" asked Stu.

"Not the best."

James read the posters and bulletin boards on the wall. Among the headlines: *Conference for drug addiction on September 8th, Conference for natives with HIV on September 29th, Free Bingo every Thursday at 7:00 p.m.*

Stu was nodding his head. "You know, us guys from the rough reserves have to watch each other's back, eh?"

"What do you mean?" asked James.

“The people that make the decisions around here, they got the government's hand up their ass.”

“Oh yeah?”

“They look down their noses at anybody from the street, then at five o'clock they go back to hide on their rich fucking reserve across the river.”

“A rich reserve? Are you kidding me?”

“They don't even have a casino.” Stu ranted, “Just the federal government pulling on their tits with promises we'll never hear.”

James had the impression that if Stu didn't like him, no one else in the lunchroom would either. He took his last bite, and emptied his tray at the garbage can. Looking for the washroom, he asked an Inuit woman for directions.

“Got a cigarette first?” she replied with a raspy voice. Her body was short and small boned, and her wide grin revealed yellow teeth. James reluctantly gave her a cigarette.

“Got 20 bucks, too?” she asked, “I'm good for it.”

“Nope.”

She hooked her finger into his pocket.

“What, you think you're too good to share?”

“Forget it.” replied James.

James ignored the whispers and chuckles as he exited the Centre.

The McGill ghetto loft that James roomed in had originally been set aside for Native students, but an administrative loophole allowed non-Natives to stay there, according to the building's superintendent. James returned to his new home, carrying take-out food, a cheap lamp, and a small folded mat to sleep on. At the top of the stairs, he saw three of his roommates placing furniture into the shared lounge. Like James, each of his newfound neighbors had their own rooms to sleep in, but the kitchen, lounge and

bathroom were shared by everyone. A short stocky guy with uncombed hair approached James at the top of the stairs.

"The Salvation Army had a hell of a sale today. The name's Dario, by the way."

"I'm James."

"This here is Chen -- the Chinese immigrant with attitude -- and to my right, hailing from the evil empire of Boston, Massachusetts... is Gordon."

"Evil empire?"

"Dude, are you a hockey fan or not?"

"Habs versus Bruins..." James nodded. "How could I forget?"

"Hey wait, James," said Dario. "This is some seriously short notice, but we're all gonna be heading out for a meal and a beer. You with us?"

Talk about a woman. I don't even need to drink any more. She looks exactly how she ought to look. With her hair so dark and her legs so fucking soft. Ready to curl around me in my bed, every night in the city. Looks like I steered the ship and she followed me.

"Hey."

"Do I know you?"

"No," he said.

"You're looking at me like I should."

"You caught me off-guard, that's all."

"I did? Now that's a weird way to put it," she laughed, sizing him up. "What brings you to me?" she shouted across the music. "Most men give their reasons too late."

"What?" he shouted back.

"Show me your worst. Give me a preview of what's at the end of the line."

He swallowed his drink to the last drop.

"I know what you're getting at." James replied, "Maybe you've got your reasons," he shouted, "but not everybody knows the worst about themselves. Not everybody --"

"You're stalling" she said.

"What?"

"Think about it" she shouted, "You said I caught you off-guard. What does that tell me about you?"

"You look like someone I know. I wasn't expecting that."

"In this what?"

"In this club." he shouted, "I'm new in town."

"So?"

"So forget it"

When he turned away, she clutched his waist.

"The scariest, scariest type of guy" she said, "hides what's important to him. The ones that try too hard to be rough--"

"I ain't rough."

"See? Now that's interesting, because I don't believe you. I'm not stupid. Even before you talked to me, I knew you were watching me too long."

"Not exactly."

"And that's scary for a girl to see."

"Hey, if anyone's getting scared, it's me." James laughed.

"Well, then we have something in common" she rubbed her nose against his, "Let's get scared together."

Through a thick haze of smoke, she writhed in front of his eyes and onto his lap. A standard look of seduction continually flashed in his direction, mechanical and on borrowed time. A slightly older version of the girl back home, she was a vision stained in alcohol and cigarette smoke. But the woman's body was like memory made flesh,

materializing from the ether of his wishes. Soft brown skin, long legs and the gift of knowing how to use them to taunt his eyes. But like Madeline, the dancer had nothing left to say. After her final song, she walked away without a smile, lost in a sea of other women, searching for businessmen who bought time better than his pocket could.

“Dude, snap out of it.”

Dario's thick stubby fingers were right in James's face.

“You just spent \$30 on the same stripper, buddy.”

“Yeah... guess I did.”

THREE

Madeline arrived at Lookout Hill, ready to party for the first time since James had left the reserve. People were already looking at her differently. After a few minutes of roaming, she saw Gavin Cider's pickup truck pulling up.

"Hey," Gavin called out to Madeline from the driver's seat, "You don't seem like no Grade school teacher to me. Get that beer outta yer hand."

Madeline ignored him, and immediately walked back to her friends. Gavin got out of the truck and followed her.

"Hey, Madeline, how's that schoolteacher thing going?"

"I'm not a real teacher yet. Just a substitute."

"Well you know," he shot back, "Sometimes a substitute's better then the real thing, eh?"

Madeline paid no attention, but over the next few hours, Gavin made it a point to include himself in every conversation she had. If there'd been any other single guys at Lookout waiting for their chance to talk with her, Gavin made sure they didn't hold her attention for long. He fired one crude joke after another, waiting to see whether or not Madeline would laugh. But she'd had enough.

"Gavin, will you back off? I can't even enjoy myself with you sticking your face into everything I do."

"Hey, I'm just havin' a good time." he answered. "Like everybody else. So why don't you just chill? I'm not doing nothing wrong."

"I don't believe you" she said. "You're really stupid enough to think we can hang out, after what you did to James."

"What are you talkin' about? James hit me first."

"Whatever."

"I was defending myself. Ask anyone."

"Well," she said. "I'm leaving."

"You headin' home already? Who's takin' ya?"

"I was about to ask Alicia."

"I'll take ya home. S'no big deal, Madeline."

"I'm gonna ask her first."

Madeline asked her friends for an early lift home, but they turned her down.

"*Ohhh...* Mads, we just got here," said Alicia, "All I wanna do is get stoned. Ask somebody else."

Gavin drove his pickup into the yard, before shutting off the motor.

"Madeline" he said, "Mind if I ask you something real important?"

"Ask me tomorrow," she opened her door. He grasped her hand gently.

"C'mon, Mads. I'm not bein' a jerk."

"Then let go". She got out of the truck. Gavin got out from his side and followed her. As they approached her house, Ruth came out of the front door.

"What's going on here?"

"Nothing, Grandma." replied Madeline.

"So what's he doing here?"

"I just gave her a lift home from Lookout" said Gavin, "We're just havin' a chat."

"Chat's over." said Madeline. She passed her grandmother into the house, as Gavin slowly walked back to his truck. Old Ruth stood on the porch until he had driven out of her sight.

FOUR

James stood in line at the campus gymnasium, trying to register for the first semester of classes. It was like a flea market with nothing on sale but signatures. He signed up for a few classes, like Elements of Logic, Fundamentals of Architecture, History of Film, or Intro to Behaviorist Psychology. They read like arcane rites, sounded pompous out loud and looked great stamped out in sequence on his timetable.

A girl with dark red hair caught his attention at the Film Studies table. James tried his best not to stare at her. She glanced back at him twice. He looked at the registration list one name up from his and saw the name 'Erica', but the professor snatched away the sheet before James could read the girl's last name.

Twenty minutes later, James saw the red-haired girl again. This time, she was drinking from a water fountain next to the fine arts kiosk. A gypsy dress hugged her slender form, and James got ready to introduce himself. He was a mere ten feet away from saying hello, when an equally svelte black girl interrupted his plans. The two girls were having a conversation, and it was obvious they were friends. James took a sip from the water fountain and then went on his way.

James finished his course calendar, and found Dario in the crowd.

"Hey, saw your name on the Film Studies list."

"You signed up?"

"I got the last spot."

"No kidding. Where's Chen?"

"Haven't seen him in over an hour. Sure he's around?"

"He's over at the stairs, man. Look, he's got company."

James turned, and saw Chen talking with both of the girls he had passed by earlier. All three were smiling and chatting it up.

"I can't believe this guy" laughed Dario, "We're here to get classes, and he's already scamming."

James and Dario approached the stairway. Chen and the girls noticed them.

"Oh, hey -- these are my roommates. This is Dario, and James. Guys, this is Sondra and Erica."

Chen was going out of his way to charm Sondra, and it was working. James wondered if Erica was equally captivated by his Asian roommate, who at six-foot-one stood at least five inches taller than himself, and was a much better talker. But between the girls it was Sondra who was the extrovert, going toe to toe with Chen, while Erica remained demure. Still, James noticed her curious eyes glancing his way his several times.

"So how about it?" Chen asked Sondra, "A game of pool, a couple of beers..."

"Trade the beer for a Pina Colada" she replied, "And I'm in."

Erica focused on sending a solid six into the left corner pocket, which she did, followed by a combo in the side. Once the rest of the group caught on that she played well, they watched her every move in an amused silence. She took longer to set up each shot, trying her best not to appear self-conscious under the scrutiny of her new acquaintances. Finally, she failed a cross-corner attempt, which led to a scratch.

"You had a couple of nice shots there," James told her. "You must practice pretty often."

"My brothers have a table, in the basement of our house in Kingston." she smiled, "I usually play alone to relax."

"Kingston, huh? I passed through on the way here." added James. "I expected it to be a small town, but it wasn't."

"Compared to this city?" laughed Erica.

"You oughta see where I come from" he continued, "A place where a tool shed is considered adequate housing -- now that's small."

"So what do you think of Montreal?" she asked.

"I don't know," he replied, scratching his shoulder. "One minute, I'm intrigued. Next minute, I'm ready to head back home."

"Same here," Erica laughed. "Every morning I wake up thinking, 'Is this really where I want to be?' "

Erica had a sultry look -- fair skin, full lips and almost luminous green eyes -- yet the longer James spoke to her, the more down-to-earth she seemed.

"Uhhh... guys?" Sondra called out to them, "It's your turn, you know?"

James accidentally sunk the eight ball, and lost the game.

The group waited outside the door of one of Sondra's favorite nightclubs, where she chatted up the bouncer, trying to get everyone past the cover charge. Chen had his arm around her shoulder. Suddenly, there was an angry shout coming from the other side of the street.

"Sondra, who the fuck are you with?"

"None of your business!" she shouted back, brushing Chen's arm off her shoulder.

Everyone watched as a black guy ran across the street -- right through traffic -- toward Sondra. He looked like he was in his early twenties, wearing a large sweatshirt with the hood down.

"Been looking for you all day," he continued, stepping up to the curb. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Whatever I please, Luthor."

"Bullshit."

Chen put his arm around Sondra a second time. James was surprised at how calm Chen appeared to be.

"You're dissing me for a fucking China boy?" asked Luthor, his fingers clenched and shoulders twitching.

"He's my friend." replied Sondra.

"So why's he all up on you like that?"

Luthor swatted Chen's arm off of Sondra. Without missing a beat, Chen stepped forward with a smirk on his face.

"I think you need to relax, Luthor."

"You talking to me like you know me?" Luthor was incredulous, "Fucking chink, either you step back from my girl, or I'll be stepping on your fucking face."

Chen nodded no.

"Alright, knock it off," Sondra tried to intervene, "Both of you."

"So you're a tough guy, right?" Luthor shoved Chen. When he tried a second time, Chen caught Luthor's left arm, and threw an elbow right into his jaw. It happened so fast, that Luthor was already lying on the sidewalk before anyone said a word.

"Alright, that's enough," The bouncer stepped in. "Ain't none of you gonna bring this shit inside. Not when I'm here."

"I'm not a troublemaker." said Chen, "He came at me, and I stopped him."

"It's okay" Sondra told her bouncer friend. "I've been with these people all night, and we've had nothing but a good time. It only got ugly when Luthor came up. C'mon, you know the only reason we're here is because this is the best place for last call."

"Alright, Sondra. Just don't make a fool out of me."

Chen chuckled to James, "Hell, I'd say the fool is lying on the sidewalk."

The nightclub was a labyrinth of corridors, wide rooms, and terraces. The dance floors were filled with smoke and lights that pulsed to a ruthlessly loud beat. The group ended up splintering. Dario and Gordon hit the bar, while Chen and Sondra went upstairs to the second floor. James and Erica wandered the main dance floor. When the two of

them passed a wall of speakers, they literally felt themselves being hit with soundwaves. James laughed, holding his hand up against a violently spasming woofer. The overworked speakers were like living creatures. They screamed into his ear so loudly, his brain seemed to go static with white noise. When they walked off the dance floor and back into a crowded corridor, every other sound seemed muffled. Erica sounded like she was talking through a pillow. She hollered directly in James' ear that her hearing had become affected. They agreed to find a place to sit down, but every table was taken. James didn't know where he was going, but Erica held his arm as they navigated their way through the dense crowd. They walked upstairs into a lounge area occupied by self-absorbed cliques of people. Erica mentioned something about Sondra. James held his hand to his ear as a signal that she had to repeat herself. Cheek to cheek they shouted to one another, about how Sondra should have told everyone where to meet after being separated, since the club was so huge.

"Sondra's going to want to leave soon," said Erica. "She and I live in the same neighborhood, so we agreed to leave together at three o'clock."

"It's ten to three."

"I know. She's probably coming around."

"What's your neighborhood?" he asked, slightly raising his voice on the terrace to match the volume of the dance floor below.

"Park Extension," she shouted. "What's yours?"

"I live downtown," he told her. He liked the way the omnipresent wall of noise reduced the space between them. Eventually, the loudspeakers ceased to convulse. The club was winding down for last call, and a slow ballad echoed from the dance floor and out into the corridors. James had the germ in his gut to spite Madeline -- wondering if that was the only reason Erica Frost held his interest.

“Want a dance before you go?” he asked. Madeline’s eyes would sear him with disbelief. Erica nodded yes, before waving to Sondra. If Madeline was around, no other girl’s charms would have registered. Not that Erica even had to try. She put her arms around him on the dance floor, at a neutral distance, with a comfortable smile on her face.

Squirming her way around alternately drunk and lovesick couples on the dance floor, Sondra finally found Thunderstorm and Frost.

“Hey” she tapped Erica’s shoulder with a smile, “I’m heading to the coat check. Are you coming?”

“I’ve got to go,” Erica’s voice resonated against James’ ear. “I can’t even remember which bus I’m supposed to take back home.”

“Take care of yourself,” said James.

“You too.”

Later that night, James, Dario and Gordon climbed the stairs to their ghetto loft. Chen and Sondra weren’t far behind. As James unlocked the door, he and Dario noticed a blonde woman sitting on the dilapidated lounge sofa. Gordon shouted in surprise.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

“What does it look like, Gord?”

“But I thought-”

“Baby” said Lisa, “I didn’t come all the way from Boston just to think.”

“I- I don’t know what to say.”

“How about ‘I can’t live without you’?”

The two of them embraced in the center of the room, while everyone else watched in amazement.

James wondered how he would have reacted if Madeline had been waiting in the lounge instead.

FIVE

In the campus cafeteria, at a street level window speckled with drizzling rain, James stared at traffic on De Maisonneuve Street, while Sondra spoke to him from across the table.

"So there's no one significant that you left behind?"

"No..." he paused. "There was somebody."

"I knew it!" Sondra clapped her hands together. "That explains what you were up to that night we all went out."

"What are you talking about?"

"James, you were so easy to read, it wasn't funny. It was in your eyes. You wanted somebody bad, and she fit the role, right?"

"You mean Erica" he replied. "She caught my eye. Why? Does she talk about me?"

"Maybe."

"Do you know her number?"

"You're gonna have to ask her for it."

"I'm willing to bet that she talks about me, and you're holding out."

"So," Sondra averted her eyes. "what's the name of the girl you left behind?"

"Does it matter? She'll never come to Montreal. It's not like Gord's circumstances. His girl chased him back in less than a week. That'll never happen to me."

"And that bothers you?"

"I don't even think about it."

"James, c'mon." laughed Sondra. "How can you stand all those lies coming out of your mouth?"

"What does this have to do with Erica?"

"That girl's on her own. I've taken it upon myself to help her out, since we're both in the neighborhood. I see through you, but can she?"

"I'm a lot more easygoing than Chen, and you don't seem to have a problem looking past his flaws."

"He's something, alright." laughed Sondra, "I really liked the way he kept his cool no matter what Luthor tried. Compared to all these hotheads on campus, I've never met anyone like Chen, and I've been in this city for four years. I'm a wise girl with some serious curiosity. But Redhead's north and south. She still has to get used to things."

"I've got nothing but the best intentions."

"James, you only broke up with your lady a few weeks ago. You're chasing too hard, like you're trying to fill a void."

"Well, I came here to live my life. We all did, right?"

"It takes time. I ended up leaving someone behind when I first arrived," said Sondra. "I won't bother saying his name. In Haiti, they say just mentioning someone's name gives them power--"

"Voodoo psychology? I don't remember seeing that in the course calendar."

"Anyway, this guy -- this nobody -- was supposed to arrive here a month after me. I haven't seen him or spoken to him in four years."

"You adjusted, though. Right?"

"Sure, James, after all this time, who wouldn't? But during my first few weeks in this town?" Sondra pressed her collarbone. "Never spoke, never looked people in the eye -- I felt so betrayed, I didn't want anything to do with anyone."

James leaned forward.

"Her name is Madeline."

Sondra couldn't suppress the grin on her face.

"Madeline, right? She still has something over you?"

"She screwed with my mind a bit. Superstitious crap. Her grandmother's a clairvoyant -- she said coming here would cause me and Madeline to break up, but I didn't believe it."

"Till it happened, right? You should have known better. That's why you're all over the map, James. Do you know how many people I've met who've gone through the same thing?"

"So what's your advice?" he asked.

"Well" she stroked her lip, "I'm speaking from experience here... don't jump into a relationship, either locally or long-distance, until you've gotten *living here* out of your system. Right now, James, that fish out of water feeling can mess everything up. And I mean everything."

"All I think about is how jealous Madeline would be if she saw some of these chicks checking me out in the hallway," he replied. "Who's she to get upset? It doesn't make sense for me to tiptoe around an ex-girlfriend who's living hundreds of miles away. Anyway... have you really seen Erica around?"

"Of course, I've seen her around." sighed Sondra, "We're roommates. I cut my rent in half, and she got out of that depressing basement. Even so, she might not be in the city much longer as it is."

"Why?"

"Her parents are pushing for her to go back home. I keep telling her that it would be a mistake, but the girl's on the fence. She doesn't know what she wants."

"All the more reason for me to make my move."

"Are you crazy? You don't even know what you want either."

Once Sondra left for her evening class, James wasn't eager to go home. On the reserve, Madeline had all the spirit in their relationship -- which he fed on and took credit for. James expected to bring that spirit with him to the city. But the truth was, he

suffocated in his own company. It was a condition he reverted to when not sizing up conversations, or bouncing off of other people's opinions. Even in the presence of new friends, he projected Madeline into the fray, thinking *what would she say or do about this?* He felt like a soulless machine, waiting for a woman to make him function again. *Did I really try too hard?* Erica was the one thrilling element in a week's worth of uncertain nights. Yet Sondra saw right through his game, just like Madeline did. Now he needed something to coax him out of the deep end, to forget the girl who helped invent him.

Chen, James, Dario and Gordon were in a stockroom on the second floor of a Chinatown restaurant. They sat down at an old table covered with Chinese designs. Three waitresses had followed them upstairs, sitting on the onion crates and whispering in Cantonese as Chen pulled out a pocket knife.

"You guys ready to do this?" asked Chen.

Everyone at the table nodded yes.

"And nobody's got AIDS, Hepatitis, or any other weird ass shit in their blood?"

"Nope."

Chen sliced the palm of his hand with the knife. It was a small cut, just deep enough to draw blood. Dario, Gordon and James followed suit.

"Don't get blood on the table." said Chen.

"Why?" asked Gordon.

Chen shrugged, "The restaurant owner will give us hell, and I'll lose my part-time gig, you bastards."

James had a small pool of blood in his palm, which he spilled back and forth in the creases of his hand.

"Alright, guys. Here we go." Chen pulled out a clear plastic bag filled with grey powder.

“So, Chen. What is it?” asked Gordon.

“Chinese medicine. Trust me.”

“Looks like ashes.” said James.

“Ashes?” blurted Dario.

“Ceremonial mumbo jumbo from the rez,” replied James. “It’s complicated.”

Chen laughed.

“James, unless your Great Elders ordered direct from Hong Kong, I doubt we’re talking about the same thing.”

“I know it’s not the same. All we did was rub ashes on someone’s scalp to cleanse the spirit. Leave it to the Chinese to actually consume this shit.”

Dario’s eyes darted back and forth.

“I don’t know, man. Fucking ashes. Ashes of what? Is this some cremated shit?”

“Hey,” Chen fired back. “Are you gonna be a pussy now?”

“I just don’t wanna fry in hell because of some stupid trip. I thought we came here to get buzzed, Chen. But you’re pulling some demonic crap.”

Chen chuckled.

“Kiss your cross and you’ll be fine, Dario.”

“I’m not afraid” said Gordon, “I’ve tried acid, mushrooms, crystal... you name it. I’ve even tried peyote in Arizona about two years ago.”

Eventually, each of them held a portion of the strange ash in their bloodied palms.

“Okay” said Dario, “Now what?”

The three girls sitting behind him were giggling.

“Shut up and wait, Dario.” said Chen, “Man, talk about impatience. No wonder Rome burned to the ground.”

“Yeah? Well at least Italians never tied up their women just to keep them around.”

“No” laughed Gordon, “You used cement blocks instead.”

"Keep it up," said Dario, "I'll bitch-slap you back to Boston with Grandma's ashes on your face."

The longer James laughed, the darker the room became. He wasn't the only one losing consciousness. By the time he blacked out, his three friends were already out cold in their chairs.

He awoke out of the darkness into the burning bright light of the sun, which appeared four times magnified in the glowing sky. The leaves on trees slowly burned to ashes, infecting the entire forest. And in the center of it all, when he attempted to rise to his feet, his skin began to tear open. And all that was sealed within him threatened to spill out. All that was vital and beating and flowing seemed to come away. The pain was encompassing, all-consuming, like hidden teeth gnawing at his body. He clutched at his own exploding flesh, at every corner of his form that tore down to the bone. Blood filled his eyesight and dulled his ears. Yet he remained alive. Packs of wolves emerged from the distant horizon, following his trail of broken flesh and skewered vitals, the footsteps of blood left imprinted in the dewy earth. He looked back with reddened eyes at the growing legion of wolves emerging behind every dead tree. He asked them, "If I leave you a part of my woundedness, would you spare my spirit? You can devour everything else. Send this flesh back to the earth, but leave my spirit to me."

Though he fed the wolves and earned their loyalty, his spirit would not remain unharmed. Something else existed in the forest that wished to devour his very core. The wolves cowered, retreating as the entity parted the trees to reveal itself.

James woke up, unable to burn the image from his brain until he heard Dario's panicked cries. Gordon was still out cold, and two of the waitresses were helping Dario get to his feet after he had fallen to the floor. Chen had his back to the wall, laughing at Dario.

“What the fuck was that supposed to be?” shouted Dario.

“What did you see?” Chen was smirking.

“I can’t even explain it.”

“Is it just me,” James asked, “or does anyone else have pain in their chest?”

“That’s exactly what I was about to say.” Dario glared at Chen.

“Look, nothing dangerous happened, alright?” Chen assured them. “Your heart temporarily stopped. That’s one of the effects, and it was necessary for the trip. That’s what it does.”

“You fucking asshole.”

“Chen, you could have warned us.”

“What was I supposed to say?” laughed Chen, “Hey, guys, wanna see what you’re brain will do when it expects to die?”

“What is that shit, anyway?”

“Can’t tell you.”

Just then, Gordon woke up. He too was on the brink of panic.

“Jesus...” he stammered, “What’s going on? What did I just see?”

SIX

Later that night James called Madeline once again, from the payphone on his street. Once she got on the line and realized it was him, she wouldn't stop talking. It was as if she was throwing up a wall of noise between herself and anything he might say. Still shaken over what he'd experienced in Chinatown, he listened, mystified that Madeline wouldn't let him speak.

"My Grandma was having coffee in the kitchen when I got home," she told him. "I started making myself a ham sandwich, and suddenly she starts with me. She says, 'You know, Madeline, I'm getting really tired of seeing that black cloud follow you everywhere you go.' So I say, 'Maybe I'm being witched' and without missing a beat she answers, 'By your own self, maybe.'"

"Why's the old bat still getting on your case, Madeline?" James asked her. "Can't she just be happy that you're still there?"

"That's just it, James. We started arguing about whether I could be happy without you. Then I made a stupid mistake. I admitted to her that once in a while I'd imagined myself going to Montreal. It went right over her head that I was being hypothetical, so I asked her, 'How would you feel if I left?' and I told her to be honest. Know what she said? She said, 'I'd buy less groceries and have more money for bingo.'"

James seemed to be stuck on the moment Madeline had mentioned coming to the city.

"I got so pissed off", continued Madeline, "I said to her, 'No wonder my mother was so fucked up. Because everything Mom did -- boozing, sleeping around -- she did for attention she wasn't getting from you, Grandma.'"

"I find it hard to believe you actually said that to her."

"Oh, I said it. So suddenly, my Grandma gets this real sour look on her face. She slams her coffee cup on the table and yells at me, 'Did your mother's ghost tell you this

after she killed herself?' I say "No", and she goes, 'Then who made you the psychologist of why she did stupid things? You're not your mother, Madeline. At your age she'd run circles around you.' So I told her that my mom and I had one thing in common."

"And what was that?" asked James.

"We fell in love with men who ended up ditching us," she answered. "You wouldn't believe how self-righteous my Grandma got after that. And just to piss her off, I said I'd start sleeping around with whoever wants me."

James was startled, and Madeline continued her rant as though she'd been talking to herself.

"You know my mother was justified, right? My dad dumped her ass for some Manitoba bitch, but she got back at him. She fucked all those guys, and let everyone know it. And I told my Grandma that when some of those losers who couldn't score my mom came after me instead, James was the one who made me forget about them. We could still be normal kids together, even if I couldn't stay at his house every night. James, you didn't even know it. You didn't have to try to make me love you."

James was at a loss for words. Madeline's dam had burst just like it always had, and most likely always would. Behind her assured veneer and quick temper was the same girl who'd once knocked on his aunt's door at three in the morning, blood running down her thigh, asking for someone to hide her until the sun came up. By now, he'd asked her too many times why she chose to stay in a place with that kind of history. James knew she'd summon her old defenses, and slip into the same passive-aggressive attack patterns that once had him punching trees in the woods out of frustration. At her worst, it was as if she played the smiling, sexy card only for party people at Lookout Hill, saving the broken-winged banshee act for the not so tender moments she shared alone with him. Madeline had every right to feel angry, but in the twilight of their relationship, he had to question if it was worth the energy lost in those arguments. Yet here they were, hundreds of miles apart, threatening to continue the damage over a phone line. The bait had been

left -- she had made it clear by alluding to her mother's mistakes as though destined to make them herself. James was perfectly set up to lose the battle. Agreeing with her would mean he didn't care, and that would become her cross to bear, from one bed to the next. Yet disagreeing would put him on the same ground as her Grandma Ruth, whom he never got along with, giving Madeline the opportunity to brand him a hypocrite.

James thought about what Sondra had told him. How could he get living in the city out of his system if he kept his mind on the reserve? It was like having one eye and one ear underwater while their counterparts were dry above the surface. Hanging up the phone was an act of vindication. Choosing not to bother with Sondra's advice was equally liberating. Living in a city with hundreds of streets to wander at any given hour was the new solution.

"Madeline" he said, "I know I'm the one who called, and it is cool to talk to you again, but I gotta go." There was no point even talking to her about the vision he had in Chinatown. She'd probably twist it to suit her agenda.

"So" she asked calmly, "What are you doing tonight?"

"I told my roommates that I'd meet them at a pub across town."

"Oh."

"We'll talk again, alright?"

"Sure... James."

She hung up before he could say goodbye.

SEVEN

With a fortress of stacked books on the table, Erica sifted through several texts at once as James massaged her shoulders.

"That feels great" she whispered, "Here we are. Look, that's the two different types of the condition I was telling you about. My mother's side of the family has the first, and my father's, the second. Of course," she smiles, "I'm the strange one. The doctors in my hometown knew I had some form of diabetes but never made a clear-cut diagnosis. At different times in my life, I showed symptoms of both types."

"That's messed up..."

"I want to solve it, James. To understand and to fix that glitch in my family's genes that condemns us to short lives. I want to solve it before I even think of having kids of my own. I mean, the way my body metabolizes sugar... it's like some kind of a curse."

"You'll never have kids if you don't find a cure?"

"No."

"You sure?" He stroked her hair. "You never know. Ten, fifteen years down the line, you could change your mind about that."

Erica ran her finger along a diagram of the carotid artery. "In my mind, I've got no business giving birth to someone only to explain to them their life is guaranteed to be limited. Can't go swimming, can't go to camp or sleepover at a friend's house because of fussing with needles or medications. Loss of sight or limbs, or sex drive..."

"I hear you." he smiled at her, but she simply stared down at the text.

"So," Erica rested her head on James' shoulder, "I'm a little tired of hanging around school so much... What do you want to do?"

You, he thought.

EIGHT

"Why are you calling me this early in the morning?" Madeline shouted into the receiver.

"I... I thought you were always up at this time, Mads," answered Gavin. "Are you... are you cryin'?"

"No," she sniffed.

"I'll just let you go, okay Mads... Madeline?"

She didn't reply.

"Why you cryin'?"

Gavin stayed on the line, accepting her silence.

"It's been over a wee," she said. "Did something happen to James, or is he just being a bastard?"

Gavin didn't answer.

"I expected him to call," she said. "I waited, then gave up, and waited again. Now this."

The line was dead quiet.

"What did you call me for?" she asked.

"I get up early in the mornin' these days" he replied.

"Why?" she asked, "because of me?"

"No... no, I found work landscaping at Morty's. I'm supposed to be there all week at uhh..." he paused, "Ahh, fuck it... it's true. It's because of you."

"What do you want?"

"Breakfast, Mads. I was wantin' to take you out for breakfast."

"I'm fucking exhausted, Gavin."

"Exhausted?"

"I can't sleep," she sniffed.

"This ain't really you," he said.

"Oh, and what's me, then?"

"The best thing goin' on in this town."

"Well, I haven't slept in thirty hours," she said.

"Whoa... okay," he said. "Screw breakfast."

Madeline was doing her best not to cry, but couldn't help herself.

"I feel like... something happened to him," she said.

"He probably has a new chick," said Gavin.

"I thought what we had was so strong. I thought something had to linger.

Friendship. Curiosity. *Something*."

"Well, he can't be feelin' what you're feelin'."

"He used to say not knowing something was the worst feeling he could get."

"He's doin' it on purpose."

"I shouldn't be surprise," she sniffed. "But I am."

"So? You're better off, Mads."

"Gavin, you don't know. James is..."

"Madeline, gimme a shot. I can make it go away. You'll never be done wrong like this with me."

"You want to be with me? All we've done is talk for a few weeks, Gavin. That's not knowing me."

"But I wanna know, Mads," he paused. "I think about you all the time."

"Fine," she said. "but I don't know if I can be fair to you."

"So be unfair. I don't care."

Madeline laughed.

"Aha," said Gavin. "Maybe there's possibility."

"I need time, Gavin. Just, don't ruin your chances by being... desperate. There, I said it."

"Fine. You call *me*, alright? I won't bug you."

After a long silence, Madeline sighed.

"Gavin, I'm pregnant."

It took a few moments for him to respond.

"So... so who's -"

"It's *his*."

Another silence.

"Well," she said, "You wanted to know why I stopped hanging out all these nights, why I stopped drinking and smoking. All of it."

"Guess I'm feeling pretty stupid now."

"You're the first person to know. It should have been James, but he never left me a phone number. I don't even know his address. There's no god-damned way I can get in touch with him."

She took a deep breath.

"Well, Mads," said Gavin. "Anything you need, anything at all, you just ask me, alright? I'm bein' serious here. I mean it."

"Fine. I'm just trying to be fair, Gavin. If you feel anything for me at all, it's important you know the truth." She broke down, "At least somebody knows."

NINE

James and Erica went off on their own for the afternoon, going for lunch at one of the malls in the underground city, where a makeshift Halloween theme park had been constructed at one of the food courts. Since it was Saturday afternoon, and the day before Halloween itself, the entire floor was overrun with families who had come for the theme park.

On a whim, they entered a line to a ghost mansion, where costumed ghouls and paper-mache gargoyles lined its entrance. They were the only adult couple out of dozens who didn't have any children with them. When it was their turn, James and Erica agreed to let themselves be scared, adopting a completely uninhibited approach. Sure enough, in the final hallway of the dark mansion interior, they were startled by a demon descending from the ceiling. It wasn't the image of the monster that frightened them, but the suddenness of its appearance.

"What did you think of that?" asked James once they were outside.

"It reminded me how much fun it is to be scared," she answered. "Stripping away pretense, letting our lizard brains go loose for a few minutes. It was refreshing."

"The anticipation's the worst part," he added. "Being ready for a surprise is worse than the actual surprise."

They continued walking through the underground city, where each new mall seemed to offer the same items for sale, and similar fast food restaurants. James remarked how the city seemed to regurgitate its basic sights and sounds at every quarter mile, whether it was above ground on the rainy sidewalks, or below in the labyrinth of stores and metro tunnels. His goal was to get to Old Montreal without having to go out into the rain, and he nearly succeeded. South of the business district, James and Erica had no choice but to re-emerge from the concrete depths into the wet chill of the streets. They

stepped out of the Palais de Congres, a trade show building that straddled the border between Chinatown and the Old Port, not far from the theatre they planned to visit.

A beautiful Victorian woman was desperately fighting off her would-be rapist within the confines of a blacksmith's shop. She reached for a handheld scythe and brought it down across his arm. Glistening strips of red cloth exploded from the man's severed limb, and for a split second, the illusion was concrete. Startled gasps evaporated into laughter within the audience, and Erica gave James a sideways glance.

"What exactly did you take me to?" she laughed.

"Gordon recommended this show. He saw it with Lisa on Thursday night."

"We can't go three minutes without seeing someone get a sword through their heart, or their hands chopped off. It's like the story plays second fiddle to the costume effects."

"It's awesome. I've never seen anything like it."

During intermission, Erica noticed a make-up artist painting the faces of patrons at the bar. She convinced James that they should get themselves done. With fifteen minutes left in the break, Erica was loosely transformed into an ancient Egyptian princess, with cat's-eyes, shimmering gold paint on her cheekbones, and ruby lips. When James took the seat, the make-up artist began painting Native war colors on his face, without even asking. With two minutes to go before the play's second act, James received the finishing touches, prompting the make-up artist to comment.

"You've got great cheekbones," she told him. "Actually, both of you have the best faces I've worked on tonight. If you haven't considered modeling, you ought to try it out."

"She took twice as long to paint your face," laughed Erica.

“Yeah, I thought so.” James was laughing as well. They were inside an Old Montreal blues club, sitting at a table framed by a stone wall, a glowing red water fountain, and a huge window with a view of the cobblestoned streets outside.

“No, really,” said Erica. “Her eyes were practically sparkling. I mean, it was like she couldn’t paint any slower. It was the only excuse she had to stay close to you for as long as possible.”

James looked around, “Do we get served at the table, or do I have to go to the bar?”

“Wait.” Erica waved down a waitress. “Aren’t we supposed to be getting back to the loft? I thought Gordon and Lisa were throwing a party tonight.”

“No, they’re planning to have everyone play Ouija or something,” he replied. “You should know Gordon by now. I think his year begins and ends with Halloween.”

The waitress arrived at their table.

“Looks like Halloween starts early for you two,” she joked. “So what would Cleopatra like to drink?”

“I’ll have whatever he’s having.” Erica smiled.

“So it’s your call, Dances with Wolves.”

“Actually, it’s Geronimo, but I digress,” answered James. “What brands of firewater do you have available?”

“We’ve got everything. Molson and Labatt. Heineken, Corona. Local brews, and any spirits you can think of. You name it.”

“How about white wine?”

“Sure.”

“A litre and two glasses, then.”

“You got it, Chief.”

As the waitress walked away, Erica mocked James.

“Smooth choice.”

"That's me" he teased, "I like red wine with my red women, and white wine with my white women."

"Oh my god," she rolled her eyes.

"Oh, you like that, eh?" he laughed, adopting a stereotyped tone, "Do you not know of this Lone Warrior? I've walked many, many forests for many, many moons to come to this place. I've heard that there is strong medicine here, and many gifted women. This is why I've come to live among the giant square mountains filled with magic lights. I've come to seek the pale-faced girl with good legs. I have plenty of beads to give to her."

"Stop it," she laughed. "I can't believe you're disgracing your ancestors like that."

"Do you want the beads or not?"

On their way back home, James and Erica tried to keep out of the rain as much as possible, walking under as many awnings they could find in the tourist trap section of the Old City, when both of them saw a Fortune Teller sign. She glanced at him, with her crimson hair half-wet and her cat's eye make-up slightly smeared from the rain.

"It's a lot drier in there."

They stepped inside, and passed through a second doorway lined with gypsy beads, where they saw a woman sitting at a mahogany table. She looked to be in her mid-fifties, cloaked in a long black shawl, playing the role like a pro.

"Bienvenue, mes amis."

"*Merci*," Erica replied. "Do you do readings in English as well?"

"*Ben oui*, yes I do. Especially for a beautiful couple like you," she told them as they stood in the doorway. "You share so much energy. I can see it everywhere, like -- *l'eau tomber*, like falling water. Even though your minds are working hard, you find the time to enjoy yourselves."

"You're a good talker," said James. "I'll give you that."

"*Bon*," the woman smiled. "Have a seat, please."

James and Erica saw themselves in the mirror on the wall behind the fortune teller's chair, and they grinned as their eyes met in the reflection. Five antique chairs circled the front of the table. They picked the closest two chairs and immediately sat beside one another.

"My name is Marie-Josee," said the woman. "and I need to tell you now, that while this is for entertainment, I do not give out lottery numbers, I don't speak to dead relatives, and I don't reveal any hurtful secrets."

"Where's the fun in that?" asked James.

"Well," Erica countered, "I happen to think that's a dignified way of drawing the line."

"And I say you just want to stay out of the rain."

"James, I really want to do this. C'mon."

"Okay", he relented, but he couldn't help feeling defensive. He envisioned Madeline's grandmother Ruth taking up shop on the same street, pawning her witchery and dire warnings to anyone willing to give her bingo money.

"So are you going to do this individually, or together?" asked Marie-Josee.

"Together," replied Erica.

"And is this about your current situation, or would you rather know about future events?"

"I want to know how many kids she and I will have," said James. "I want to know if we're going to live in a mansion on the mountain. I want to know if Erica will find a cure for diabetes, and if I'll find a cure for madness."

Erica looked at him, wide-eyed and laughing. He took her hand and held it, waiting for the fortune teller's answer.

"You will never have children together," Marie-Josee told them. "You will share the same home, but not on the mountain. And neither of you will find cures for what you described."

"Wow," he muttered. "I was only kidding."

"What about school?" asked Erica. "Will I graduate from college, or med school? What are my chances of actually becoming a doctor?"

"You can succeed, but not in the way you'd expect. There will be a few obstacles in the way of that goal, and it's not entirely clear how you will handle them."

"Exactly what obstacles?"

"It wasn't your choice to come to this city," said Marie-Josée.

"Well, no," Erica replied. "But that doesn't mean I have any regrets."

"Sometimes," the woman told her. "It's better to be stubborn, and not settle for less."

"But... that didn't answer my question."

James imagined himself asking about Madeline, and about the chances of her coming to Montreal. As he pondered the ramifications, he noticed Marie-Josée staring at him. He looked down at the designs carved into the antique table, knowing that the fortune teller's eyes remained fixed on him.

"I have nightmares," he said. "I never used to get them, but I do now. Why is that?"

"You've taken part in something strange recently."

"No," replied James. "Can't say that I did."

"Do you believe in past lives?" asked Marie-Josée.

"It's not something I think about..."

"People are usually born with a clean slate," she told him. "Their former lives erased from their universal experience. Once in awhile, someone finds a window to their previous state."

"That has nothing to do with what I dreamt," he replied. "If you did know, you wouldn't mistake it for--"

"What you've seen... *monsieur*, do not mistake for a dream."

Dario sounded off as soon as James and Erica entered the loft, "Mister Thunderstorm and Miss Frost...somebody's freakin' late. You've delayed the festivities and must now choose your punishment."

"Don't listen to him, James," called out Gordon. "We've been occupying ourselves just fine."

"Wow. Everyone's finally here," said Chen.

"Okay" continued Gordon, "We'll take a look at the monster designs we made for the Halloween contest." He pulled a rough painting off the wall and placed it on the coffee table.

"That design will be hard to top," said Sondra.

"And why is that?" asked Dario, "Because it borrows the best elements of established sci-fi icons, that's why."

"He's got a point" added Chen, "It's a flashy creature, but kinda... generic."

"What do you expect" said Gordon, "I've got a limited amount of time and money to get this done. This design reflects those constraints. Drawing is one thing. You ever try making one of these with your bare hands?"

No one answered. Erica whispered in James' ear.

"Why so quiet?"

"Got nothing bad to say," he whispered back, "I think it looks cool."

Chen revealed his design, done in marker pen.

"Bleh!!" snorted Dario.

"Way, way too simple," said Gordon.

"The idea here is to make something that scares the hell outta everybody." Dario complained, "If people saw this coming up the street, they'd want to pet it, not run from it."

James unfolded a sheet of loose-leaf paper, and whispered in Erica's ear.

"You know those nightmares I've had?"

He placed the opened sheet on the table, revealing a large dark-penciled sketch.

"Holy shit," muttered Gordon. The others made similar interjections.

"Man, there's something about this that works. I don't know."

"Seems like it's actually looking at us," said Chen.

"Whaddya say," said Dario, "is this our design?"

"Well, we haven't seen yours yet." replied James.

"Forget it," blurted Dario. Everyone insisted on seeing Dario's design, but he refused. Gordon and Chen tried to wrestle the crumpled design out of his hands, but he shoved them back and ran to the washroom, locking the door. Everyone could hear him tearing up his work and flushing it down the toilet.

"Dario, for Christ's sake," shouted Gordon, "You can't flush sketch paper, it'll jam the pipes."

Dario flushed a second time. "Still works!" he bellowed. He opened the bathroom door, tweaking the nose of a vampire mask on the wall.

"James, congratulations -- you got a winner."

Later in the night, James waited for Erica to come out of the washroom. She'd asked him to stay nearby because that part of the loft -- which was nicknamed 'South of Heaven' -- creeped her out. Dozens of sculpted monster masks hung on the walls of Gordon's bedroom, visible to James from an open door. There were limbs and torsos made of latex and plaster, sculpted in horror style. He stared into the face of a demon bearing empty eye sockets. It was hanging in limbo, waiting for someone to supply it with sight, to wear its face in place of their own.

Old Ruth had made masks out of tree bark when James and Madeline were kids, but she quit by the time they were teenagers. He remembered Mad's grandmother telling

them that the spiritual maintenance of each mask became too much of a burden. According to the men and women on the reserve who practiced ancient medicine, any unattended mask which no longer served a ceremonial function could become malignant, punishing its maker and harming its wearer. It occurred to James that none of the masks in Gordon's room were attended to. Instead, the summoned faces and forms on the walls were gathering dust as trophies.

The group once again formed a circle on the lounge floor, holding their hands out over a lamp in the shape of a grinning baby devil. Gordon and Lisa stirred a jar of hot wax, and began spilling a drop at a time on the hand of each 'ritual' participant. Dario was the first recipient of the devil wax anointment.

"Arrghhh!!! I thought you said it wouldn't hurt!"

"Shhh!!! It cools off instantly."

"Your turn, James."

"Well, I'm glad I took that last shot of Southern Comfort," he joked, before holding out a clenched fist. But the wax didn't burn as badly as expected.

"Ready, Erica?"

"Not really, but... go ahead." She held out her slender hand, and quietly endured the anointing.

"Dario," James laughed. "Erica has more nerve than you."

"Hey, who was Pearl-Harbored, and who wasn't?"

"You'd think we were getting tattooed or something," complained Sondra. "I mean, isn't this a little extreme for a joke?" Finally, she played along, after taunts from her boyfriend. Then himself was the last to have the hot wax spilled across his knuckles.

"Mind over matter," he bragged.

Gordon began a speech in a mock ceremonial tone, "Thus, having produced a monster's image so horrible, and so apropos for this Hallowed Eve, we now confirm the Circle of the Chosen with the blood of our hands, to give said monster Life At Last."

Gordon then dripped the red wax on James' drawing.

"Golem! Familiar! Sacred Conjunction of those united here in this Circle, I summon you to reveal yourself in the form of plaster and clay, shaped in the coming day by my own hands, so that we of the... of the..." Gordon paused, chuckling, "What do we call ourselves, anyway? We're a mock cult. We need a mock cult name."

"I know," said Dario. "The Circle of Stone and Shadow", his voice boomed ominously.

Chen fired back, "The Stoned and Shallow is more like it."

"Well, there's seven of us here," said Erica. "That could give us something to work with."

"Sounds good," James backed her up. "How about a wordplay on the Seven Samurai, or the Seven Deadly Sins?"

"I think People with Too Much Time on Their Hands is a perfect name," said Sondra.

"No, I've got it," Lisa countered, "The Red Candle Gang"

"Great," mocked Dario. "like we're hard-core sadomasochists."

"You held out your hand for punishment," she taunted.

"The name you just came up with is punishment enough."

"I don't know," pondered Gordon. "I kind of like it. It'll always remind us of the shared experience."

"Shared experience?" asked Sondra. "A mock ritual with candlewax standing in for blood qualifies?"

"No", Gordon answered, "When we win that thousand dollar prize for best Halloween mascot tomorrow night, and split the money amongst ourselves -- *that* will qualify."

"Sounds good to me," said Chen.

"Fucking right," Dario eyes went wide, "Gord, you never said there was money involved, man."

"Because it doesn't really matter to me," Gordon answered. "Getting my work seen by everyone on campus, and maybe raising my profile within the film community, that's the real goal. And since you guys helped me with the design, it's only natural that we all get a cut if we win."

"I don't think I'd deserve any of that money," said Erica. "I mean, I didn't really do a thing. James came up with the monster, and you're going to build it."

"We all took part in the creative process," said Lisa. "We wouldn't have had the same result otherwise."

"Also," Gordon added. "It's only fair that the money gets divided between every resident of this loft."

"What do you mean?" asked Sondra. "Erica and I aren't living here."

"You aren't?" Gordon looked puzzled. "But I thought--"

Chen nodded no.

"Is there something we're supposed to know about?" Erica asked James.

"Well, it's not something that..." James paused, "I mean, like for the last few days, I was thinking, y'know, just wondering if..."

"What James and Chen really want," Dario interrupted, "is for you girls to move in, right here at this address, right here in this loft with the rest of us."

"What?" Sondra looked at Chen.

"Well, think about it," Chen shrugged. "We waste so much time and money going back and forth between our place and yours, yet everything we do is downtown. Not only

that, but you're both safer with the group than living on your own. You'll save even more on rent, and you'll be that much closer to campus."

"I don't know," muttered Sondra.

Erica kept her eyes fixed on James.

"Was this all Chen's idea, or-"

"No," James replied quietly. "I came up with it."

"Seems to be the running theme tonight," Gordon added, "James comes up with everything."

James saw Erica smiling. She was smiling big, as if she couldn't help it.

"I'll do it," she said.

"You are out of your mind," chided Sondra, when Chen suddenly nudged her shoulder.

"You mean you won't give it a shot?" he asked.

"After barely two months of knowing you?"

"C'mon, Sondra" goaded Dario. "We'll be like one big, happy family. Even better, we'll be a modern day commune. Y'know, where the men share the women, and the women share the men. All that good stuff."

"Not *even* in your dreams, dog."

Everyone started laughing, especially when Gordon threatened to pour the remaining candlewax on Dario.

"So," Chen again asked Sondra, "Are you in?"

She rolled her eyes and sighed, "Are you gonna make me regret it?"

"I won't," he kissed her. "I promise."

Erica wrapped her arms around James, overcome by her decision. He was amazed that she'd agreed so quickly, considering what the fortune teller had told them. Going against it felt both exciting and nerve-wracking.

"Well, that settles it," Gordon announced. "As of tonight, this loft will now be known as the House of the Red Candle, inhabited of course, by the Red Candle Gang - a group comprised of the very individuals presently convening in--"

"Windbag," taunted Dario. "Let's wrap up the formalities and break out the ceremonial wine."

"I second that," Chen raised his arm.

Hours later, Gordon was already at work constructing the monster, planning its scale at seven feet tall and four feet wide. Dario, quick to ensure his cut of the prize money, was helping him. Lisa sat alone in the lounge, flipping through late night cable shows. Chen and Sondra were hidden away in their bedroom. And behind a locked bathroom door, James and Erica shared a hot shower, their first as actual roommates.

"Will the super allow so many people to live in one loft?" she asked.

"We're all familiar faces at this point," he replied. "He won't notice the difference."

"So whose bed are we going to keep?"

"Yours."

"Why? The night we first made love was in your bed."

"You'd rather keep that old second-hand mattress? Who knows what karma it has floating on it other than ours? Crazy stuff that we don't even know about. And your bed is brand new. Your parents bought it for you, right?"

"Mm-hmm," she answered.

"And I'm the only man who's been in it?"

"What do *you* think?"

"How about other women?"

"Oh, I'm working on it."

Wrapped together in a beach towel, James and Erica were sneaking across the lounge, leaving wet footprints on the floor. Once inside their room, they shut off the lights and fell into bed, still damp from the shower.

“You know,” said James, “we’ve got the least impressive bedroom in the entire loft.”

“You mean the entire House of the Red Candle,” she laughed.

“No, seriously,” he continued. “Gordon’s room faces Mount Royal, both Chen’s room and Dario’s room have views of the city skyline, and here I am with a view of an alleyway.”

“I like it,” said Erica. “It’s private. We can see the world anytime we leave this room, but once we lock the door, it’s just you and me in the dark. I don’t know why, but the idea of it makes me feel good.”

“In that case, point taken.”

“I’m not kidding, James.”

“Neither am I.”

She reached up and slid her fingers through his hair.

“I can finally say I’m where I want to be.”

TEN

The entire gang went to the Mess Hall at McGill University to support Gordon's endeavor. Sure enough, his 'Dream Devil' sculpture, modeled on the drawing by James, won first prize. Everyone from the Red Candle hooted and hollered for Gordon as he accepted the prize money, even more so when he thanked each of them by name.

They celebrated with a toast, raising glasses of wine in honor of the immobile monster now displayed in the Mess Hall.

Erica wanted to go back to the loft, but James convinced her to join the others at a nightclub on St Laurent Street. All was well, until trouble started at around midnight. A fight broke out near the bar, and after the scuffle ended, someone in the crowd fired gunshots. Two of the bullets ended up embedded in the wall, five feet above the spot that James, Erica and the others were sitting at. Shaken, Erica demanded to leave the club, and at twelve-thirty, she and James left alone. They walked down St.Catherine in near silence.

"Everything's okay," he tried to reassure her. "That was like, totally random."

"All I know is that I don't feel safe," she said.

"I understand, but what can we do? Hide in our room for the rest of our lives?"

"This city is so damned violent. I was warned about it, sure. But until you see it for yourself, it's just... abstract. A newspaper clip here and there. "

"Well, it scared me too. I'm honest about it. But it's not like it's happening on every corner."

"Maybe for some people, that's not good enough."

"What are you getting at?"

"I don't know," she said.

"You're not thinking about going back home. You just told me--"

"I know what I told you."

“Well, you’re not alone here, alright? I’m with you every day and night. I don’t even think you realize how much you affect me.”

“How much?” she asked.

“Enough to stop *me* from running back home.”

She laughed.

“Before you know it,” he added. “I could be in love with you. Hell, I just might be in love with you now.”

“Be careful,” she kissed him. “I think it shows.”

James rented a hotel room so they could have total privacy. At the elevator, Erica was kissing him with the same level of excitement he felt for her. Suddenly, a blunt, unwelcome voice cut through their heat.

“Hey, you with the dogs! No animals allowed.”

A security guard bolted around the corner from the main entrance, only to stop with a look of bewilderment.

“What the hell...” the guard was stupefied.

“Hey, buddy” James answered, “I don’t think we’re seeing what you’re seeing.”

Erica stifled a laugh. The guard walked right up to the elevator, scanning the floor where James and Erica stood.

“There’s no animals here,” said James. “What’s wrong with you?”

The elevator descended to the lobby. Erica playfully clawed at James’ waist as the elevator door opened. Visibly embarrassed, the security guard walked back to the hotel entrance.

Erica was comfortable with herself every step of the way, unlike Madeline who had always seemed conflicted in bed. With Madeline, James associated sex with guilt. More often than not, she demonized his needs, giving him the mask of those who had

harm her. James was so demoralized by her ambivalence, he wondered what it was like to be needed by a woman as much as he needed her. So every time Erica placed her arms around him, pressing her mouth to his neck, the effect of being so accepted overwhelmed him. Erica's generous nature melted away years of doubts embedded in his mind, as she unashamedly matched his eagerness. The chance to love a woman without stirring trauma was a revelation.

ELEVEN

Gavin Cider strolled into Bin's Arcade, the main hangout on the reserve. His friends Brian and Alicia shared a table near the snack counter and noticed him.

"Hey, Cider," shouted Brian, "Over here."

"So where's James Thunderstorm's better half?" asked Alicia.

Gavin paused. "What the hell are y'sayin'?"

"She's kidding, Gav."

"You think Madeline still thinks about that fucker?"

"Why would she?" asked Brian.

"Are you on something, Gavin?" Alicia sneered, "I thought you quit drugs. I thought you were playing goody-goody to get James' leftovers."

Madeline entered the arcade, cutting through a mob of pre-teens toward Alicia's table.

"Oooohh," whispered Alicia, "Mads is getting fat."

"Shut the fuck up," muttered Gavin.

"It's true. Look at her," Alicia covered her mouth, "*I'm never getting pregnant. Ever.*"

"Have a seat, Madeline." said Brian.

"Thanks."

Gavin's eyes shifted from the arcade machines lined up against the wall to Madeline's hips and legs as she sat beside him. *She really is gaining weight*, he thought. *And it ain't fair. James got to have her when she was all tight and hot. Now she's losing it, putting on that pudge. The longer I wait, the less of her old self she'll be.*

Later that night, Gavin laid back on Madeline's sheets, wearing only his boxer shorts. She straddled his lap wearing only her panties and a T-shirt.

She wears T-shirts? That's not my T-shirt.

"Watch the stomach," she warned.

Yeah, whatever - who can miss the little bastard in the womb?

"I said watch the stomach, Gavin."

Can't get over how thick her legs look in this position... missed out on her summertime stems, in those short shorts. The tease is old news, Mads. Alicia's right, I'm settling for leftovers.

"Maybe you'd like it better if I was on my back?" she asked.

"Uh-huh."

Great, she thought, a control freak. Big fucking baby.

"Am I too heavy on you?" he asked.

"It's okay. That's it, up on the elbows. *Watch* the stomach."

Can't suck her nipples. She's a mother to be. It seems stupid.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothin'."

I'm in second place, somebody beat me here. Fuck, shut up, man, it's her and me now. Well, her and me and -

"That's nice," Madeline moaned. Gavin stared at the lump of her belly, and felt like a trespasser.

It's the spawn of James. James is inside of her. Fucking her would be like fucking with him.

"Why are you stopping?"

Gavin sat up, speechless, staring at the window. Madeline lost the tingle almost immediately. She pulled the blanket over her waist and turned away.

TWELVE

The air alternated between warm and cold breezes, the night itself hovering between fall and winter. St.Catherine Street was densely crowded. Primary neon colors coated everything in sight, from the passing traffic to James and Erica themselves. They met Chen and Sondra at the entrance of the Paramount movie theater. As they were discussing which film to see, an unwanted visitor casually strolled up behind them.

“Oh, no,” Sondra whispered.

“What?” Erica began looking around.

“Yo, what’s up?” It was Luthor. Chen immediately stood between him and Sondra.

“What are you up to?”

“I don’t have time for this,” Sondra was bitter and to the point. Luthor extended his hand to James.

“How’s it going? I’m Luthor.”

“I know,” James shook his hand. Luthor reached out to greet Erica, but she declined.

“What are you trying to prove?” asked Sondra. “What do you want?”

“It ain’t about you.” replied Luthor, “I’m here to talk to China-man.”

“So talk,” Chen clenched his fists.

“Not here,” Luthor shook his head.

Sondra cut in, “Chen, let’s go inside. C’m on.”

“Why? I’ve got nothing to worry about.” replied Chen.

“Hah,” Luthor chuckled, “I think you do, man.”

Erica nudged James toward the theatre entrance.

“Hey, Chen,” said James. “The movie is starting in less than five minutes. Are we heading in or what?”

"No, I want to settle this first."

"Well, I'm going in," said Erica. James escorted her inside. Sondra was still standing at the doorway, demanding Chen to follow her.

Inside, Erica whispered to James, "Luthor still calls her. He calls Sondra's cell phone almost every day."

"And do you know why?" he asked.

"James, all I know is that Sondra can't concentrate on her studies. I don't think these guys are worth the trouble."

Sondra lost her patience, "Chen, either you come in here right now, or I'm moving out of the loft tonight. It's that simple."

Chen kept his cool. He took Sondra's arm and walked into the theatre. Luthor continued to follow them inside.

"So what movie are we seeing, Sondra?" he teased.

"I swear to God," she said. "I'll call the fucking cops. You're not getting the best of me, understand?"

"I ain't even here to start shit. I'm serious."

Chen was furious at this point.

"I've had enough, man," he told Luthor. "Either you go, or I'll beat you right here and now."

Luthor stepped forward, "I know what you've been up to over there in Chinatown."

Chen remained stoic.

"Problem is," Luthor continued, "I'm not the only one who knows. You gettin' me?"

"What is he talking about?" Sondra held her hands on her hips.

"Sondra," asked Luthor. "You left me 'cause I was dealin', right? Well, I ain't dealin' anymore, and that's the truth. But I don't think Chinaboy here can say the same."

“What?”

Chen didn't say a word. Luthor shrugged and stepped back.

“Get out before it gets worse,” he warned. With no further comment, Luthor turned and walked out of the theater.

James and Erica sat alone in the fourth row, watching movie previews.

“James, I'm not comfortable around Chen anymore.”

“I don't think he and Sondra are coming in anyway,” replied James. “They're probably still arguing at the snack counter.”

“Do you know what's going on?”

“No, I don't.”

Chen and Sondra both arrived in a sullen mood. For the next half-hour, they continued whispering to one another in a heated debate. Erica was shifting in her seat, glancing over at them repeatedly. No one seemed to be paying attention to the movie. Eventually, Chen got up and exited the theater.

James found him standing alone in the lobby.

“Looks like things went to hell,” said James. “What's going on?”

“You really want to know?”

“Erica's nervous, and she's asking me questions. Hell, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't wondering either.”

“James, trust me. You're better off wondering.”

THIRTEEN

"Hurry up," said Gordon, "the sooner we get the sculpture back out of this rotten hundred year old chest, the less chance it'll get spoiled by molds or bacteria."

"It's stuck," said Chen.

"James," Dario started, "I 've said this a million times, but that design you came up with is ace, man."

Chen and Gordon kept trying to open the trunk, to no avail.

"Is this thing locked?"

"I got this trunk at the Salvation Army. If it could lock, wouldn't it have come with a key?"

"Then why's it not opening?"

"Guys" said Chen, "It's like the lost Ark. Maybe this is a warning." he laughed. "What do you think, Thunderstorm? Should you or should you not face the beast?" Chen said in an ominous tone before laughing again.

"C'mon, James," Dario said. "Let's show these pussies how to open this cheap ass old fashioned trunk. I'll come back with a power saw if I have to."

James and Dario tried hard to open the lid of the trunk. When they failed, Dario began kicking it. Gordon howled in protest about the monster sculpture's integrity. James got a putty knife and jammed it all around the seam of the lid. That and the prying effort of everyone in the room got the trunk open. Inside of it, the warped yet highly detailed features of the nightmare monster were in plain sight.

"Take it out, carefully."

"And as soon as we do, throw that bloody Salvation Army piece of crap out in the dumpster."

Now, the statue stood completely upright.

"The product of many sleepless nights."

"That's for sure." muttered James.

"Look at the detail on the head and face," continued Gordon. "I *captured* it. I captured James' vision."

"He did," said James.

"No man, *we* did it." replied Dario, "And that's why this thing won by a fucking landslide."

Later that night, Erica went to Sondra's psychology class as a guest, so James had the loft to himself. Impulsively, he called up Madeline's house.

"How've you been doing?" James asked.

"Considering how long it's been since you've called," Madeline answered. "I'd say the bigger question is how you've been doing."

"I'm doing really good, to be honest."

"Yeah?"

"Uh-huh."

"You must be seeing somebody."

James hesitated to answer.

"Her name's Erica."

"Uh-huh."

"We hung out for a bit, and now she's living with me."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah."

There was dead silence between them for several seconds.

"You must be over me," laughed James.

"Let me put it this way, James. In my mind and heart, yes. But in my body..."

What the hell is she saying, he wondered. He could still hear Madeline talking on the line, but nothing was sinking in.

"Are you even listening to me? Do I have to repeat myself?" Madeline snapped, "James, I said I'm having your baby. I'm pregnant with your child."

James slammed the phone onto the hook, and disconnected the wire. For several minutes, he sat on the couch in complete silence.

Erica arrived alone, so she and James were the only people in the loft at midnight. He had no idea how he could ever leave her. But he once vowed to himself that if he ever became a father, he would be there for his child at any cost. Never knowing his parents, he'd never truly felt secure in the world until he met Madeline. Now that she had told him they had created a new person, a new child, the choice was already made for him. His own life meant nothing in comparison. No other ambition, no other love could possibly find priority over the responsibility he felt for his own offspring.

His eyes lingered on Erica, watching the way her gypsy skirt hugged her curves. He wondered what it would take to give him a clearer perspective. Sex had a way of heightening reality in its wake. After the rush, he'd expect to notice how sad Erica looked in profile. Her crimson hair would hide expressions of sorrow she might not let him see. Was it her? Or was it himself, projecting his miseries onto the most gentle girl he'd ever known?

Lifting her skirt, he playfully sniffed at her, in one quick motion. She gasped, and laughed out loud, laying sideways on the couch with her knees together, coyly asking, "Would you have done something like that on the night we met?"

"Once you gave me the green light," he said with a smile, "my impulses began to take over."

"You're like an animal," She tilted her head. "Am I an animal to you?"

"A better one than me."

He brushed his face against her thigh.

"If I didn't love you so much," she said, "I'd think you were the strangest boyfriend I've ever had."

"Spoken like a sheltered princess," he said.

"Spoken like a beast," she fired back, smirking at him.

They both noticed the demon statue hanging in the far corner of the loft, its soulless eyes witnessing their intimacy. Its was like an ancient idol, waiting to be supplied with life from within its inanimate body.

"I can't stand looking at that..." Erica whispered. "Why is it out of Gordon's room?"

"Lisa must finally be getting sick of it herself."

"I don't know if you've noticed," said Erica, "but those two haven't been getting along."

"Gord and Lisa?"

"Last night, I think she was talking about leaving Montreal."

"So," he replied, "the fairytale comes to an end."

"I think she meant it, James. I think she's going back to Boston."

James got to his feet and started pulling off his shirt.

"What are you doing?" Erica asked, as James walked toward the demon sculpture.

"There was this story I heard about as a kid," he said, "that if you encounter a devil on the dirt roads, turning your shirt inside out would allow you to chase it, instead of having it chase you."

"God... why would anyone want to run after something like that?"

"I don't know. I never saw one myself. No one I know ever saw one, either."

He stood in front of the Dream Devil statue. In his thoughts, he spoke to the immobile monster on the wall. *I'm the one responsible for bringing you into this world, and look at what you've become. Trapped and undignified. You should have stayed out*

of my sleepless nights, whatever the fuck you are, because then you wouldn't be hanging from an apartment wall in the middle of this city.

He covered its eyes with his shirt, and shut off the lights in the South of Heaven section of the loft, before returning to Erica in the lounge. Slowly, she slid her skirt down her legs as he approached, keeping that coy look in her eyes.

“Let's see who's the animal now.”

FOURTEEN

"He knows?"

"About the pregnancy? Yeah."

Gavin clutched hard at the steering wheel. Madeline stared at the passing pine trees.

"What does he plan to do about it?"

"I don't know" she said, "He never mentioned anything. He sounded..."

"What about you, Mads?" Gavin interrupted. "What do you want him to do about it?"

"I don't have a definite answer."

"Then what does that make us?"

"Look at me, Gavin... You still matter to me, do you understand?"

He looked at the dirt road.

"James and I can't pick up where we left off. He's with somebody over there.

And I'm with you."

"Oh... okay", muttered Gavin. He loosened his grip on the steering wheel.

"Nothing's cut and dried, though." she added.

"What do you mean?"

"Is James selfish enough to stay where he is, or will he come back to support the baby? It's no longer about him and me, Gavin. He might bring his new girlfriend with him."

"Some white chick? To this place?"

"Who knows?"

"What if he comes back alone?"

"Then he'll stay alone."

Gavin slowly put on the brakes. A delivery truck passed them on the solitary dirt road.

“Well,” started Gavin, “I’ll just ask you straight out. Am I in your way? Am I screwin’ up some kinda plan you might have?”

Madeline sighed. “I’m near the end of the first trimester.” She rubbed the slight roundness of her belly. “In six months this baby will be born. This may be James’ child but it’s also mine, and I don’t want to raise it around violence.”

“Oh yeah? And here you are, secretly hopin’ James’ll come back when all he ever did was run. You don’t gotta wait. I’ll take care of that kid , just like I’ve been looking out for you all these months. Take a look at who’s tryin’, Mads, and who isn’t.”

“You’re right,” whispered Madeline. “I’m sorry. You bend over backwards to try to keep me happy, and half the time I’m just a bitch.”

“I wouldn’t put it that way,” he said, “but everythin’ about you is worth it.”

“Besides,” she whispered, “my grandma’s never wrong.”

“What are you talking about?”

“She told James that he would die in the city. If that didn’t mean he’ll spend his life there, I don’t know what it means.”

Gavin brought Madeline to his mother’s house for dinner, where he spent most of his time watching a hockey game with his cousins. That left Madeline at the kitchen table with his mom and her sisters.

Gloria Cider lit a cigarette even though her guests hadn’t finished eating yet.

“I don’t think you know this,” she muttered to Madeline, “but fifteen years ago... my husband was cheatin’ on me, with your *mother*.”

Madeline was silent.

“Veronica Swift, she was no good to nobody,” continued Gloria, with a ghostlike stream of smoke from her lips, “Not one person in this town’s got any good memories of

her. Not a fuckin' one. But you --" she pointed at Madeline, "You got your own character. I see how you are with my boy... and you're alright."

"I hardly remember my mother," said Madeline, fighting a lump in her throat. "I never knew her."

"No one did," answered Gloria. "But me, I don't hold grudges, okay? You're always welcome in this house, so don't be a stranger. Do you hear me?"

"I hear you."

"Can I lie down for a minute, somewhere?" Madeline asked Gavin.

"Yeah, c'mon."

Upstairs, Madeline lay back on Gavin's bed, ignoring a well-worn copy of Penthouse at the foot of it.

"I can take you back home if you feel uncomfortable," he told her.

"I'm fine. I just need some breathing room."

Just then, Madeline doubled over in pain. As she called out to Gavin, she took his pillow and held it in her arms. Even in her distress, she noticed something falling from the pillowcase -- a small bundle of herbs, wrapped with strands of hair.

"When did this start?" asked the doctor.

"I don't know," cried Madeline, "forty-five minutes, an hour -- I don't know."

"Miss Swift? I'm sorry, but I'll have to scrape away the rest in order to prevent an infection."

"No! Can't you do something? Can't you --"

"There's really nothing we can do now."

Madeline covered her eyes and remained quiet. She refused to speak to anyone at all.

FIFTEEN

Upstairs in an Old Montreal pub, James, Erica, Sondra, Dario and Gordon were having drinks after the final day of mid-term exams.

"To Erica," Dario held up his drink, "who put up with my big mouth in Film Studies without telling me off, and who puts up with James without telling him where to go."

The five of them laughed and raised their glasses.

Around nine-thirty, Sondra left the pub, pissed off that Chen hadn't showed up. Gordon was becoming depressed, constantly asking Erica her opinion on what had gone wrong in his relationship with Lisa. Dario was the most drunk out of the four remaining friends, and he sat down next to James.

"What's goin' on?" he demanded. "You and I are the only true beer drinkers compared to these posers. But you've been on the same bottle for forty minutes, you freak. This isn't the James Thunderstorm I know."

"Tonight's not a good night to get smashed." answered James.

"Erica," blurted Dario, "You've domesticated this guy so much, he's turning into a pussy right before our eyes."

"Just because I love him," Erica slid her fingers through James' hair, "it doesn't mean he's gone soft. It's not like drinking has anything to do with being a man, anyway."

"Poor girl," Dario teased, "You haven't read the rulebook."

"Doesn't matter," she fired back. "James is a no-rules kind of guy."

"No rules? Erica, you're boyfriend is completely ruled. Being ruled is all the boy knows."

"Dario," muttered James, "chill out."

"Why?" Dario raised his voice. "I've just endured two weeks of mid-terms, and it's finally hitting me that I don't have to study tonight. I don't have to wake up at eight

A.M. tomorrow morning for another fucking exam. Hell, I thought we all came here to cut loose.”

“Sure,” explained James, “but it’s our last get-together before everyone splits for the holidays. If you want to crazy, go ahead, but maybe some of us would rather relax, you know?”

“Oh yeah”, Dario spun his finger. “Great get-together, James. Chen doesn’t bother to meet us, Sondra gets pissed and leaves, Gordon keeps crying about Lisa, and now you two just want to sit around sipping tea, for Christ’s sake.”

“What’s with the attitude, anyway?” James shifted forward in his chair.

“You’re the last straw, James. I thought we were all friends, but I can see what a pose that was. Back at the loft, Chen’s either hiding away with Sondra, or out on his own. Everytime I ask him to watch a game or something, he comes up with some excuse to avoid me. And Gordon’s even worse now that Lisa flew the coop. But you were always reliable, man. You never lost that need to have a good time. It didn’t matter that you had a girl, it didn’t matter that you actually studied. When it came time to party, you could be counted on. You didn’t leave anybody out. But now you went from being cool to being full of shit.”

“Just because I’m not getting drunk? Dario, there’s a hundred drunk Indians on these streets, and you’re pissed off at the one who’s breaking tradition.”

“Drunk Indian, drunk Italian, drunk Chinaman...” Dario then pointed at Erica, “Drunk Irish bitch. We’re all the same when we’re tanked.”

“Lower your fucking voice,” said James. “You’ll end up getting thrown out.”

“Wouldn’t that make you happy? How about you, Erica?”

“No, Dario,” she replied, “I don’t want you in trouble. And if I wasn’t happy, I wouldn’t blame my friends over it.”

“It’s not like we knew you were down,” James added. “Look at Gordon - we know why he’s miserable because he can’t shut up about it. Why didn’t you say something?”

“Guys,” said Dario, “if this is gonna turn into some fruity pep talk, I’ll pass. And who said I was down, anyway? I came here to drink till my eyes bleed, not to be the odd wheel for the hundredth time. I think I’d have a better time crashing some frat party than hanging around with you boring fucks. I’m outta here.” He got up and took his jacket.

“No problem,” James fired back. “If you want to be like that, go ahead.”

Dario turned around, wobbling slightly.

“Do you think I’m the bad guy here? Is that what you think? Maybe that’s what I should be.”

James stood up to face him.

“Dario, all this hateful shit is gonna haunt you tomorrow morning. It’s only the booze talking, and I don’t want to get dragged into something that I’ll regret.”

“Putting on the gentlemen’s act for Erica, eh James? You really did it now, man. Talk about a phony. There’s no integrity left in you, man. I guess she must have sucked it right outta you.”

“I’ll tell you what’s phony, you fat fuck,” James raised his voice. “It’s you, always trying to act like the life of the party when the truth is, you resent anyone who’s getting laid. If you stopped embarrassing yourself, maybe you’d get in the game instead of crying at the window like a punk. Chicks already know what it’s like to be on the rag, Dario, they don’t need you acting it out for them.”

Dario took a reckless swing at James, and missed. Two bouncers saw what had happened, and darted across the room toward them. In spite of this, Dario continued his diatribe, incoherently ranting at James until he was outside on the street.

10:15 PM.

“I’ve been thinking about it all week,” said Erica.

“Thinking about what?” asked James.

"Okay," she continued. "Whatever I'm about to say, just consider it food for thought."

"Fair enough."

"Come back with me."

"To the loft?"

"No... to Kingston."

James could barely hide his astonishment. Erica kept her eyes fixed on his, waiting for his reply.

"I mean for the holidays," she smiled. "Obviously."

"Well, yeah," James scratched his chin. "That's what I thought you meant."

Erica ran her fingertips along his shoulder.

"Are you hesitating because it's too much to ask or..."

"No, it's not like that."

"Because you always talk about how much you hate where you come from. Most of us have families to go back to, but you don't. So I thought, well... instead of you being here, and me missing you like crazy..."

"It *would* be cool."

"But?"

James looked out of the window at the falling snow. Each flake was tinted blue from the streetlights, a contrast to the mahogany interior of the pub.

"James," Gordon approached them, as sullen as ever. "Can I ask you something?" He was already dressed in his coat and ready to leave.

"Can you just give me a minute, Gord? I'm in the middle of something."

"Sorry, I should've realized," Gordon shrugged. "Don't mind me, guys. I'll see you later, alright?"

"Gord, wait," said Erica. "Don't worry about it. I was thinking about calling home to check if Sondra made it back, anyway."

As she went to the payphone, James slowly folded his arms.

“What’s going on, Gord?”

“James, remember all that shit on Halloween? When we did the ritual and all that?”

“Well, yeah. It was a lot of fun.”

“So... did it seem like that was the last time we were all happy?”

“I wouldn’t say the *last* time...”

“Because, it seems like ever since then, every good moment’s been tainted with a bad one.”

“Are you talking about all of us, or just you and Lisa?”

“You noticed it too? How she just fucking alienated herself from me? The more I think about it, the more I realize it started that night.”

“How?”

“That stuff you told me. The native stuff, the approach to mask-making. You told me and Dario about it, remember?”

“I must have been pretty loaded,” James laughed. “I don’t remember telling anyone about that.”

“No, man, you did. And I didn’t forget, either. You said that your people destroy any mask that’s no longer in use, because it’ll become cursed. And I’ve kept all the work I’ve ever created since I was a kid. And none of it has relevance. My life has gone to complete shit because I disrespected my own talent. I cursed myself, James.”

“Gord, you’re being too hard on yourself. There’s no truth to what I said that night. That’s a dying notion from a dying culture. There’s nothing remotely Native about my people anymore, Gord. And Lisa didn’t leave you just because you kept monster masks on your wall. Nothing is that simple.”

“You’re blinding yourself, James. You need to wipe the slate clean. We all do.”

“Gordon, you’re talking crazy.”

"You know what?" Gordon walked away. "Forget it. I'm sorry we even talked about it."

Erica returned from the pay phone.

"I'm worried," she told James. "Sondra said she was going right back home, but there's no answer. I checked the messages, and it was nothing but one call after another from Luthor. So, where did Gordon go?"

James felt the sweat between his and Erica's clasped palms as they walked down the stairs, out into the snowy cobblestone street. Passing under a streetlight, they saw their silhouettes on the sidewalk.

"Why did we walk out of there so fast?" she asked.

"Cause I'm feeling nervous."

"You and me both. If you don't want to come with me to Kingston, just say so."

"I want to. That's not the problem."

"What are you talking about?"

They stopped, and he turned to her, wanting to kiss her while it was still good. But her lips betrayed caution.

"Do you have any idea," he said, "how perfect it's been being with you? Everything about living here turned out fine because of you. Even in the beginning when we were just friends, the city just seemed to be a better place with you in it. I stopped looking over my shoulder. I stopped thinking about that garbage that had been put into my head on that reserve."

"You've told me all of this before, James."

"I'm in love with you. I mean real fucking bad."

"I love you *just as much*," she replied. "But what's going on?"

"Well, I..." he paused momentarily, then finally got it out.

"I'm going to be a father."

It scared him to say each word, knowing her response was finally pending. Weeks of secrecy evaporated into the cold air. The look of disbelief on Erica's face was too much to handle.

"Why did you never mention this?" she asked.

"I just found out."

"When?"

"A few days ago," he lied.

After an uncomfortable silence, she stared him down.

"What the fuck are you waiting for me to say, James?"

"I don't know. I didn't --"

"How could you get someone pregnant -- how could you have even cheated -- when we're together almost all the time? Who is she?"

He'd never seen her so angry.

"Well, James, are you going to explain anything, or will you just stand there all night?"

"I never cheated on you," he told her. "Since the day we met, I've never been with anyone else."

"Who is she?"

"Madeline."

"Your ex-girlfriend?"

"She was pregnant before I even left the reserve. She kept it from me until now."

"Well," she said. "Since you've kept it to yourself for the last few days --"

"We were in the middle of exams," he said. "I didn't want to throw off your concentration."

"So... what are you going to do about this?"

James didn't answer.

"You're going back?" she shouted. "Why would you go back if there was nothing left between you and her?"

"I'm not going back for her."

"So," she wiped her cheek, "you've decided to be responsible, at my expense."

"I can't ask you to throw away your life to follow me."

"You've thought this completely through, without offering me any choice."

"My problems shouldn't be yours."

"There's one thing that I've learned pretty quick," she told him, "if a relationship can fail once, it always will."

He wanted to hold her, but she wouldn't let him.

"Think about it, James," she continued. "If we're through, we're really through. I have no idea what I'm supposed to do with what I'm feeling right now."

"I don't *want* us to be through," he replied. "I'm feeling the same fucking way. I don't want to leave."

"Apparently, you didn't want to leave Madeline either, but you did."

She held her forehead, closing her eyes.

"God, you've wanted sex so much recently," she wiped her eyes. "I thought it was just because of the Christmas break being so close..."

"I wasn't using you."

"Did I say you were using me?"

"Erica, you're *everything*. You have to know that. I feel like I'm giving up everything here."

"Enough, okay James? I don't want to hear any more."

She walked away, and he followed her.

"Erica... c'mon, we don't have to go about it this way," James lowered his voice as a car approached them on the cobblestone road. "Erica, I mean it. I decided to tell you

tonight, because we still have a few days left. The last thing I wanted to do was just disappear.” The passing car slowed down considerably.

Erica stopped and turned, “You don’t get it,” she said. “I don’t care if you mean well. That doesn’t make a difference to me at all, don’t you understand? I want to be--”

She glanced toward the car as it came to a halt. As James eyed the driver’s window, footsteps sounded from behind. He looked back, and felt the impact of a clenched fist below his right eye. Erica gasped. The car door creaked open as James stumbled onto the sidewalk.

“Get in the car,” someone shouted.

“What are you--” Erica cried, “No!”

James saw her being taken. He got up from the pavement, and was sucker-punched again. Landing on the road, he saw Erica being thrown into the back seat of the car. Suddenly, he’d been pulled up by the collar and sleeves of his coat by two men.

“Keep your head down, and get in the fucking car.”

James did as he was told. The two men shoved him into the back seat as well, holding his head down the entire time.

“Shut the fuck up,” hollered a voice beside him. In the corner of his eye, James saw the boots and black jeans of the man sitting next to him. James then saw Erica’s legs pressed together against the other passenger door. Strands of her hair dangled low, indicating that she was hunched over. The stranger between them was placing something on her head.

“What do you think you’re looking at?”

James darted his eyes straight down, focusing on cigarette butts along the carpeted car floor, when he was hit again -- so hard, that his eye began swelling up. A dark cloth was pulled over his head, tightening at his throat.

SIXTEEN

James sat in a wooden chair given to him by his captors. The floorboards creaked under his weight. Blinded by the cloth sack over his head, he leaned back, listening to voices from the next room. His right eye was swollen, and he couldn't lift his head without feeling a sting in the base of his neck. He heard several people entering the room.

"You, in the chair," a stranger's voice blurted out. "Do you speak English or French?"

"English."

"Oh, yeah? And what do they call you?"

James hesitated to reply, and then heard the speaker walk toward him.

"*Maudit tabarnac*... You know, at this point in time", said the stranger, "The last fucking thing you want to do, is not answer me. So, let's hear your name, alright?"

James heard Erica's stifled sobs from the far right of the room, at floor level.

"Alright." he said, "It's James."

"What?"

"My name is James."

"That's the way," said the stranger. "Now you can tell me a few more things."

The sound of footsteps and shuffling clothes passed James, until he heard what sounded like a body being thrown to the floor.

"*Ca va*, James" the stranger continued, "We're gonna take that sack off your head in a few seconds, but there's a few things you need to know before we do. First, keep your eyes straight ahead. If you try to look at us, instead of what's in front of you, consider yourself fucked."

James nodded yes.

"Second of all," the stranger added. "Don't try to stall for time when I ask you a question. If I sense bullshit, you won't recover from what we'll do to you. Understood?"

Again, James nodded yes. Someone began to remove the the material that covered his head. As soon as it came off, James saw Chen on the floor in front of him, Chen's face was nearly unrecognizable.

"Do you know this guy?" asked the stranger .

"I don't think so," replied James.

"You sure about that?"

"Yeah... yeah, I'm sure."

"You're not just saying that to have a quick answer, eh?"

"His face is so fucked up, I have no idea who he is."

"You really don't know?"

"No."

"Ever been to Chinatown?"

James paused.

"I've passed through it, now and then."

"Considering you've been seen there, I should hope so. I also know that you've been seen with our friend here. At least, that's what I've been told."

James' throat went tight, and each breath became shorter. He tried as hard as he could not to let it show.

"Look at me," said the stranger.

"You said not to look anywhere but straight ahead."

"I had no idea you were so easily trained," replied the stranger. "Fucking idiot, if I say look at me, that's what you'll do, right?"

James looked at his interrogator, and saw the eyes of someone ready to kill.

"Do you know who I am?"

"No," replied James.

"Who else is selling Pheonix?"

"What's Pheonix?"

"See, right there, you're full of shit, James."

"I'm not fucking with you. I don't know who you are, or what you're talking about."

"You know this dealer sitting right here, but you don't know me?"

"No."

"Leave him alone," Chen interrupted. "He's got nothing to do with it, and neither does the girl."

"Fuck you!" shouted the stranger. He kicked Chen directly in the mouth, the heel of his boot cracking several teeth. Chen fell back on the floor, and the stranger hovered over him, kicking his face repeatedly. Under the wayward glow of a flashlight, the left side of Chen's face was slick with blood.

"I'm Bedlam," the stranger told James. "I run with the motherfucking Bulldogs. The shit that stops your heart, takes you to heaven or hell - it's the Bulldogs that supplied it. These little crews in NDG and Chinatown, they think they can steal from me. They think I can't find out who's been pawning my goods like it was theirs. The niggers call it Coma, and the chinks call it Pheonix, but they couldn't hide it from me. I still found out. The only thing I haven't found out is who their pigeon was. So, I'm asking you, James."

James stammered, "I have nothing to do with any of it. This is the first time I've heard anything about this. You've got the wrong guy."

"*Maudit colis*" shouted Bedlam. "And what about your girlfriend?"

"What?"

"Don't act stupid," said Bedlam. "I've got the flashlight on her right now. Don't be afraid to look. Go ahead."

James saw Erica lying on the floor. She was facing the doorway within the range of Bedlam's flashlight. Like Chen's, her hands were tied behind her back.

"Is she your girl?"

"No," James replied.

"Well, James," continued Bedlam, "If you ask me, that sounds pretty convenient. Because if she was your girlfriend, I'd have the courtesy to take her to another room. *Biens sur* -- now that I know she's anyone's game, why don't we just fuck her here?"

James bit his lower lip, drawing a bead of blood in the process.

"You gonna talk or not?" demanded Bedlam.

"I'll talk."

"So where do you come from?" Bedlam asked, "You're not white, you're not black, and you don't talk like a foreigner. What the fuck are you?"

"I'm native." replied James.

"Motherfucker... a *maudit indienne*? History repeats itself. My ancestors stole from yours -- *bien*, at the same time they were allies. Are we allies, James?"

"No."

"You don't want to work with us, but you worked with these Chinese fuckers."

"That's... that's not true."

"Now you're making me sick," said Bedlam. "Your woman is lying right there, and you don't have the balls to make sure she's safe."

"If you let her go, I'll tell you everything," said James. "but you have to let her go first."

"Your girlfriend means something to you now? I should take some blood from her pussy, and use it to paint your face, eh? You know, like a... warrior?"

The other men in the room were laughing.

"Is there such thing as native warriors, still?" Bedlam mocked. "I've only heard of the smugglers, and the drug addicts. Or those political fucks who think closing off a bridge is an act of war. When I was a kid, I saw the funniest fucking thing. It was these *Indiennes* on the news, acting tough with their rifles on the Mercier Bridge -- until the Canadian Army ran them over. Fucking *Indiennes* getting their pants pulled down on national TV."

Bedlam looked at James.

"Maybe you really don't know anything. But you'll know *now*."

Erica was dragged toward James' chair, where she was left on the floor beside him. From the corner of his eye, James saw Bedlam holding a syringe.

"Chinese medicine, what bullshit," said Bedlam. "I can tell you right now, it's found right here in Quebec. No more ashes, *mes amis*. I've concentrated it. Now it's time to see, how much is too much?"

Bedlam planted the needle between Erica's shoulder blades.

"Worst case scenario," he taunted. "You wake up, you get more."

James felt the needle jam into his right shoulder. The hit was immediate, double if not triple the dose of what he'd tried in Chinatown. He wanted to warn Erica for what she was about to see. But the words never formed on his lips. He saw Bedlam walk toward Chen. The latter was attempting to break free, when Bedlam stood over him.

"*Chinois*... you get to go there the hard way."

A single flash of gunfire, barely audible, left Chen motionless.

The sky featured nothing but a cloudless red haze. From one horizon to the next, Warriors of every Nation were coming to seek his death. They seemed infinite in number, all sharing eyes of vengeance, united in their onslaught. Arrows shrieked past the crooked trees and bushes into his path. Yet his four-footed minions -- Grey wolves and White wolves -- were willing to sacrifice themselves for his safety. Under his command, they leapt in the way to protect him, falling dead at his feet. When the last of his wolves were killed, he alone faced the wrath of every tribe he once terrorized. His destructive ways would now come to rest, as blood roared out of his body, quickly taking his life. Each arrow and spear became the clawed fingers of the demon that greeted his death. The nameless entity stole his body, then stole the wolves, bringing them into the darkness of earth.

“He’s waking up.”

“*Osti...* so quick?”

“Fucking nerves of steel, this guy.”

“No... this’ll fuck him up now.”

“And her?”

There were about six or seven men laughing in the room. The second needle went into the right side of James’ neck.

The crooked trees became streetlights. The dark earth became asphalt. The red sky fell to night. And again he was under attack. The silhouettes advanced with guns drawn, opening fire. And once more, the claws of the demon took hold of him, this time in the form of bullets. But now the wolves returned, rising from his own spilled blood. Soaring from his very wounds, they fell upon his shadowed enemies, dismembering one after another. The claws of the demon were now reversed.

“What is it?”

Voices in the distance were shouting in French.

“Raid!”

“Leave no one alive, then take the stairs.”

“There’s no fucking time!”

Footsteps out of the room, save for one, breathing heavily.

“I said *leave no one!*” Bedlam shouted his way down the hallway.

Gunshots in the distance, followed by gunshots within in the room, so recklessly aimed that the bullets strafed the floorboards near James’ feet. Footsteps were heard ascending stairs up into the hallway, suddenly breaching the room.

“*Arret!*”

“Drop your weapon!”

A short burst of gunfire, and the sound of a collapsing body in the darkness. Though their speech contained a mix of French and English, James immediately understood he was in the vicinity of police officers.

“Suspect down on the second floor. Three hostages. Two males, one deceased, one incapacitated. One female, incapacitated.”

SEVENTEEN

As soon as James woke up, they started.

"Mr. Thunderstorm, we're from the MUC Police. We need to ask you a few things."

"Where's Erica?" asked James. "The girl I was with. Where is she?"

"Here at the hospital. Can you answer a few questions?"

James closed his eyes. The police asked whether or not he was a customer for the Bulldogs, and about how well he knew Bedlam.

"I didn't know them, at all," he answered.

"They're facing charges for weapons and drug possession. We might add forcible confinement, and possibly murder, to the list -- depending on your testimony."

"I don't remember much," said James.

"How well did you know Chen Lik Sang?"

The questions continued for nearly an hour, until the police finally left at around 4 AM.

Erica was asleep, hooked up to an IV unit, when James found her. As he approached the bed, a nurse entered the room.

"Excuse me, are you a member of Miss Frost's family?"

"I'm her boyfriend."

"I'm sorry, sir, but only family members are permitted at this hour."

"Can you at least tell me how she's doing, before I go?"

"She's recovering from diabetic shock. Were you involved in what happened?"

James didn't answer.

"If you've checked into the hospital as well, you should get some rest, sir."

"I can't."

“We’ve been trying to reach her family, but--”

“It’s okay... I’ve got their number at home.”

James stroked Erica’s hair.

You didn’t trust Chen. You hated the scene. Hell, you just wanted to get out of Montreal. But I had to be a fucking idiot. I kept you here for the same reason Madeline kept me on the rez. And if I didn’t waste your time like I did, you wouldn’t have been dragged into that car. It makes me sick to think about it, Erica, believe me.

Gently, he kissed her cheek, then left the room.

“Uh, sir?” the nurse called after him. “If you’ve been given a bed, you’ll need to check out before leaving... sir?”

James arrived at the loft at 5:30 AM. He shouted to his roommates, but no one answered. First, he went to his room to call Erica’s parents.

“Hello?” It was a woman’s voice.

“Hi... Is this the home of Erica Frost?”

“Who’s speaking?”

“My name is James. I’m a friend of--”

“Oh, you’re *James*...” she sounded more alert. “Why are you calling at this hour?”

“Erica’s in the hospital.”

“What?”

“She and I were attacked by some thugs, but--”

“Oh, my God!”

“She’s okay. Erica’s okay, Mrs. Frost. I saw her an hour ago, and she was sleeping.”

“At which hospital?”

James gave Erica's mother the information she needed, including the fact that Erica had suffered diabetic shock, though he chose not to mention that she'd also been drugged by Bedlam.

"If you see my daughter later on," Mrs. Frost was tense, "tell her that we're on our way."

"I will." replied James.

Was I the only one to come home?

The door to Chen's room was partially open. Inside, James found a note on the bed written by Sondra. She'd decided to leave Chen, after finding out what kind of trouble he'd gotten into. The note failed to mention exactly how Sondra had found out, but Erica had said that Luthor was leaving messages all night. Why he warned Sondra, but no one else, was anyone's guess.

Beside the letter was a glass vial containing black liquid. James knew it resembled the substance he and Erica had been injected with. There was no way Chen could have obtained this form of the drug, since Bedlam said he produced it only recently. Unless Chen had considered working for him, then decided against it. James was overwhelmed by the fact that Chen was actually dead, and that Sondra still didn't know.

"Dario! Wake up!"

James kept banging on the door, but there was no response. The door itself was locked.

"Fuck, is anyone here?"

Walking to Gordon's room, he noticed a breeze coming in from under the door.

"Gord, you there?"

James opened the bedroom door, and saw Gordon's lifeless body hanging from the ceiling. The latter's face was drained white, his neck garroted with sculpting wire. The floor was covered with ashes, and partially damaged masks filled a metal basin in the center of the room. The ceiling was stained from smoke, and the window was wide open. Gord had apparently broken and burned all of his creations, save for one -- the Dream Devil -- which stood at the end of the room, unscathed as always.

It was too much to handle, and James had no idea how to react. He retreated to his side of the loft, and stood near the entrance for what felt like an eternity.

James boarded the train at 7 AM, his mind filled with doubts. He was supposed to inform the police about Gordon's suicide, but hadn't. He'd already been questioned about Chen's death, and feared authorities might connect him to the death of a second roommate in the same night. James actually tried to erase traces of his presence at the loft, wiping door handles and mopping footprints, knowing it was in vain. His phone call to Kingston would likely be traced. Leaving Sondra's note would give detectives someone else to question regarding Chen. So now it would be up to Dario to discover Gordon's body, and make the distress call.

James knew that Erica was safe -- her parents would be there for her. He couldn't imagine how lucky she was for that simple reason, and it made his choice to go home all the more important. Yet James couldn't decide what was worse, leaving Erica at such a vulnerable time, or facing her family over what had happened. He expected them to believe it was his fault. Worse, maybe Erica herself would blame him. But beyond that, if the MUC cops traced him to the reserve through school records, at least he would have already made it home in honor of his firstborn child. That was all James had left to cling to. Even though he'd committed no real crime, he didn't want to go on record against Bedlam. An underworld grudge was the last thing he wanted his new family to endure.

Escaping Montreal at the worst possible moment was the best way to insure his child's future -- a future with both parents, something he had never known for himself.

As the train began to exit the station, James cried. It was brief, but hard. Because as always, he felt like regrets were second nature, and that his guilt would never cease. One thing was certain -- he would be able to look Old Ruth in the eye and tell her that he did die in the city. James wiped his face, then reached into his coat pocket, pulling out the vial he had found in Chen's room. He cupped it in his right hand so no one could see, and stared at its contents for the longest time.

EIGHTEEN

Madeline looked up and saw James walking past the classroom window, backpack and all, presumably straight from the train station. He never looked into the window, but went right on past it, like a ghost. There was no hesitation in his stride.

Instructing her students to continue their reading, Madeline excused herself from the classroom, and hid in the bathroom which had once been her haven. This was where she would go to avoid recess beatings, and to avoid hearing what the other kids said about her mother. The beige doors, the porcelain-tiled floor, the smell of disinfectants and air fresheners -- none of it had changed.

James walked into the grocery store, and asked Madeline's friend Alicia at the counter if he could use the phone. Every time he called Madeline's house, there was no answer. Alicia swore that Madeline was at the grade school. The run-around was too much, and he was exhausted. He needed to know how Erica was doing. He knew that avoiding the trouble in Montreal meant that he would be missing Chen's funeral. He would never have a chance to explain to Gordon's parents exactly what their son talked about before committing suicide. He thought of Dario, now the sole tenant in the House of the Red Candle, and remembered Dario's drunken rant about abandonment. He wondered how Dario would handle the fact that that two of his friends were now dead. James knew people needed to hear from him, but he didn't even know what was happening to himself. There was a thickness in his veins, and random discolorations beneath his skin. James realized that the injection given to him -- Coma, Pheonix, or whatever -- was having a long term effect. Exactly what that would lead to, and what it meant for his immediate future, he didn't know.

"So," asked Alicia, "how was the big city?"

There was too much and too little to mention at once. He wished someone important had asked the question first.

"I don't know," he answered.

Alicia held a lit cigarette in the air like a knife.

"You know," she started, "you wouldn't believe it, James, but a lot of people talked about you after you left, sayin' things like you shouldn't have gone, and all that." She took a drag, and quickly exhaled, keeping a straight face. "I mean, even I actually kinda missed you bein' around. Like, what the fuck is that about?" She suddenly laughed.

"You tell me," said James.

James arrived in the yard that separated his Aunt Beth's house from Madeline's. He lingered around the small bridge, above the frozen creek. There was no way he could go back to living in his aunt's basement, back to square one. He'd rather be staring out of the window of his own house, now that he was back in the town he always hated.

Madeline shouted at him from her second floor bedroom window.

"Why didn't you call before coming back home?"

"I thought you were at the grade school" he shouted, "What's the matter with you?"

"Stay there," she yelled, and shut her window.

Madeline came out into the cold, wearing a winter coat over her pajamas and moccasin slippers on the snowy path. James thought she looked tired, with a rounder face and more weight in her stride.

"You look like you haven't slept." said Madeline.

"It's true. I haven't," he replied, face to face with her.

"Did you break up with what's her name?" she asked. "That was your girlfriend wasn't she?"

"Right on both counts."

"You quit school? You quit everything?"

"Everything's finished there."

They came into the house without a word. Ruth was making tea in the kitchen when James removed his winter boots. He knew the old woman was ignoring him, which was truly unusual. The same was true for Madeline -- James hadn't seen her for months, yet here she was, already avoiding him. He went upstairs after her, and saw her lying on her bed.

"Why do I get the feeling there's something you need to tell me?" he asked.

He didn't get an answer, quickly realizing what Erica must have felt like in Old Montreal, when breaking up was still the biggest thing to fear. James, mindful of Madeline's reluctance to speak, chose to face another worst case scenario.

"Either you lost the baby," he muttered, "or you lied and never carried."

"Wrong on one count," she replied.

James tried to hold his temper, "After everything I've done to get back here, it sure would help me a lot... if you'd be more fucking specific."

"I lost the baby," Madeline answered.

"...how did that happen?"

"I don't know," she sighed. "How could I know that?"

"Well, aren't miscarriages triggered or something? What were you doing when it happened?"

"I was feeling sick, and at first I thought it was only because I ate too much."

"Did you ask Ruth what she put in her recipe that night?"

"It wasn't my grandmother's food" she said, "I was eating at Gavin Cider's house."

James couldn't hold his temper any longer.

"You're the one who wanted me to come back--"

"I never said that."

"You wanted me to come back here, and I did it. I threw it all away. I've lost friends. I've lost everything because I listened to you!"

"I can't believe this bullshit," Madeline fired back. "Have you even wondered how it's been for me? Our baby fucking died inside of me. I had to have it scraped out, and you will never even know what that's like. You've got no business judging me."

"Madeline--"

"No, you're worried about what you've left behind in Montreal? Well don't be, because you can go ahead and get it back. I can't say the same. I can't get the baby back."

James kicked Madeline's dresser, sending all of her handmade knickknacks crashing to the floor. He kicked it a second time, and the mirror splintered into shards. Impulses were flooding his mind. He could hear Old Ruth screaming downstairs, threatening to call the police. Madeline shouted to her grandmother that everything was under control.

"What am I supposed to do?" James bowed his head. "I don't know what the fuck I'm supposed to be doing. I... just don't."

Madeline got up on her knees, reaching up for a small false face mask hanging on the wall above the bed frame. Slowly, she handed it to him.

"My grandmother made this to protect the baby."

Confused, James took the mask into his hands.

"Turn it over" she told him.

He did, finding a small vial taped to the back of the mask. Atrophied tissue filled the bottom of the vial, and he dwelled on the sight of it for several minutes.

"My grandmother hates that I leave the mask on my wall," Madeline continued. "She said it no longer has a purpose... so I put what's left of the baby there, and argued that the mask is still working. It's still protecting him."

James looked up at Madeline, and saw her face covered in tears. He placed the false face on the bed.

"It was Gavin who did it," she said.

"What?"

"I told Gavin you were coming back, and things got pretty bad. I kicked him out of the house because he was unbearable. He broke the kitchen window, and screamed at me that he had caused the miscarriage. He said he used witchcraft to kill the baby."

James was silent.

"Did you even hear what I said?" she asked.

James waited outside of Gavin's cigarette store, until he knew that no one else was inside except Gavin himself. As soon as the coast was clear, James clenched his fists and kicked open the door. Gavin was startled.

"James? What the fuck? Wait a second!"

Gavin was dragged over the counter and thrown to the floor. Shocked at how strong James had become, Gavin scrambled to get to his feet.

James was trembling with adrenaline. "I heard you were acting all big and bad while I was gone. Well, I'm right here, right now. What are you gonna do?"

"Wait, alright? Just--"

James hit him twice. The first punch split Gavin's eyebrow, and the second one cracked the bridge of his nose. Slumping back to the wall, Gavin shrieked as blood spilled down his face.

"What the--? What the fuck are you doing?"

"Did you know that Madeline was pregnant?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You knew that Madeline was pregnant with my kid?"

Gavin stared up at James, speechless. James spit on him, and kicked him so hard that Gavin's lip looked like it had been sliced with a razor.

"She was pregnant! She was pregnant!" Gavin spat blood, "but she lost the baby. And she never told me that it was yours. She never said anything about you being the father."

"Well, who the fuck else would that be?" shouted James.

"Hey, you were gone for months, and she never told anyone about it." Gavin held his hands up to protect his face. "What does this have to do with me?"

"Where was Madeline when she had the miscarriage?"

"She was at the hospital."

"Before that!"

"I - I don't remember."

"You're so full of shit." said James as he looked around the store. "Fuck, I can't believe you're lying right to my face like this."

"Alright, James, alright. She was at my house when it happened."

"She told me it was your fault."

"What? what are you--"

"You poisoned her," said James. "You used witchcraft."

"No, man, that's bullshit. That's bullshit right there."

James pointed out the window, "When Madeline kicked you out of her house, you screamed at her that you killed the baby. You killed my kid. Do you understand what that's done to her?"

"No, man, that's not what happened! That's not wha--"

James hit him in the face again. Gavin crawled to the door, but James continued to beat him. In less than thirty seconds, Gavin was nearly immobile. All James could think about was the suffering of his child, and the man responsible was lying in a pool of blood at his feet. At least four of Gavin's teeth were loose on the floor, but the sickness in

James' heart remained. Gavin's breath was raspy and weak. *I'm one step away from murder*, James thought. This wasn't self-defense, and it had nothing to do with what was running through his veins.

James lifted Gavin up off the floor, and slowly sat him down into a chair. He picked up the phone and dialed, knowing that Gavin was staring at him the whole time.

"Hello?" James uttered into the receiver. "Uhh, there's... there's someone here who's hurt, real bad. I don't know... he's just in really bad shape. No... I said I don't know. Just send someone to help him, alright? He's at the cigarette store on Sparrow road..."

James hung up the phone.

"Are you gonna press charges?" he asked.

Slowly, Gavin nodded no.

NINETEEN

James went into Madeline's house while she was at school, stealing the small mask off her bedroom wall. He checked it to make sure that what remained of his unborn child was still there.

Old Ruth saw him leaving, and ran outside after him into the yard.

"Give that back," she hollered. "You got no goddamned right to take that."

"Bullshit," he fired back. "I have every right."

"That's nothing but bad medicine, the way you're treating it."

"You think you know what bad medicine is? Then what's this?" He showed her the vial of the drug.

"You've been doing nothing but the wrong things," said the old woman.

"Other way around," he replied. "Wrong things happen no matter what I do."

He swayed the drug in front of her face.

"See, this contains the formula for a near-death. Shit like this shouldn't even exist. Yet in this other vial, we have a near-life. It's what *should* have existed."

"You need to respect the fact that it didn't," she argued. "That child never had the chance to have a spirit."

"Just like me, Ruth."

"You came back for a good reason," she told him. "You've had your time out there in the city. Now it's time to stay. What happened there is over and done."

"You know what?" said James, "You're wrong. I was in that city for months, and no one killed me. I mean, my heart literally stopped, but I still came back. So spare me the fucking fortune-telling. If you were so damned good at it, you'd have told me Madeline was carrying my baby." As he stormed out of the yard onto the road, Ruth heard him one last time.

"...And you'd have told me that we'd end up losing it!"

Keeping the mask, James threw the drug vial onto Ruth's porch, and began walking toward the main part of town.

It was snowing heavily. Alicia started her father's car and was driving through the slush out onto the road when she saw James. Curious, she pulled up alongside him, rolling down her passenger window.

"What's goin' on, James?"

"Nothing."

She revved the engine to get his attention.

"Hop in if you need a lift."

She opened the door. James stared at the road, looking at a good forty-five minute walk back to the train station.

"What the hell," he said, and got in the car. After a brief exchange about where he was going, they drove in silence. He stared at the passing pines. She looked straight ahead, trying to repress a grin.

"So... it didn't work out between you and Mads."

"No... I guess it didn't."

"She told you everything?" asked Alicia.

James shook his head. "Only if everything means her being with Gavin, or losing the baby."

"Losing the baby?" her grin disappeared.

"Like you didn't know," he muttered.

They passed the reserve limits without a word.

"You know, James," said Alicia. "You never seem to think things through, do you?"

"Hey," he replied. "If I don't let Madeline or Ruth criticize me, do you think I'm gonna let you?"

“Who’s criticizing?”

For a few moments, he said nothing. Then he looked at her.

“Alicia, what the hell are you getting at?”

“I said you weren’t using your head when you first left town. You assumed Madeline would go too.”

“And what’s it to you?”

“You should have asked me,” she answered quietly.

By the time the train began to leave, James was too tired to wish he had never bothered coming back to the reserve at all.

TWENTY

James returned to Montreal for one basic reason, and that was money. As far as Indian Affairs was concerned, he was still a registered college student, and they would continue to pay his tuition. Government funds would still be deposited into a downtown bank account in his name. That was better than starting from scratch in Toronto or New York. Maybe he would just take the money and leave again. Considering how quickly he had abandoned those who mattered to him, nothing was impossible.

Stepping out of the train in Montreal was different the second time around. While he'd once dreaded the isolation and anonymity of the city, this time he craved it. He would not return to the 'House of the Red Candle', nor would he seek out any of his friends. The lack of a permanent address would prevent police from seeking his testimony against criminals. Bedlam was in jail, so the coast was clear for James to wander the streets the way he once had.

He never spent more than a few nights in the same area. He stayed in youth hostels and the YMCA, and sometimes sought out inexpensive motels before returning to the Native Friendship Center. He took advantage of their free meals, saving his bank funds whenever he could. Christmas came and went, and James continued to hover between establishment and homelessness. This was as cold as it could get, in terms of both the weather and James' state of mind. He could go for days without speaking to anyone, and that suited him. He wouldn't spend the rest of his life like this, but for the time being it was the right thing to do.

Eventually, James got a new apartment, a one-and-a-half on Fort street -- basically a single room with a stove, fridge and toilet. It would remain unfurnished, save for a mattress. There would be no cable or telephone, and the heating was covered in the rent. From now on, James would be ready to leave town if he had to. In the meantime, school was starting up again.

To his relief, there were no familiar faces in any of his new classes. For at least a week, James was comfortable living on a schedule. He sat in the back of every room, obscuring himself from others and quietly focusing on his work. But one night, as James walked out of an anthropology class, he heard an unmistakable voice.

“What... the ...*fuck*?”

It was Dario.

“Jesus fucking Christ!” he shouted. “I don’t fucking get it, James... Where the hell have you been?”

The two of them played pool in the same campus bar where James had first played with Erica. But the room seemed empty now, and James wasn’t particularly eager to hear what Dario had to say.

“Did you know that Gordon killed himself? Right there in our loft? Did you know that, James?”

James pretended he didn’t. Dario went on and on, explaining that he was the only one of their group who’d attended Chen’s funeral, and that Gordon’s family had come up from Boston asking questions about the suicide. It was so bad living alone in the loft, he said, that by the second week of December he gave up the lease, and had all the furniture delivered to second-hand shops.

“You still never answered my question, James. Where did you go?”

“Remember when you gave everybody shit in Old Montreal?”

“...Unfortunately.”

“Well... Erica and I broke up the same night. I didn’t even bother coming back to the loft. I left the city just like that.”

“I knew something went wrong,” said Dario. “because she never wanted to talk about you.”

“You spoke with her?”

According to Dario, Erica's family had come to get her things once she got out of the hospital. She didn't want to come into the loft herself. Her brothers were so overprotective, they wouldn't let Dario near the car to speak with her. When he finally did talk to her, she said she wasn't sure if she'd ever come back to Montreal.

"What made you break up?" Dario couldn't resist asking. James told him about Madeline's pregnancy and miscarriage.

"You know what, man?" said Dario. "I've said and heard about as much bad news as I can take without killing myself too. What say we settle for damaging some brain cells instead?"

"I'm actually up for that," said James.

"Great, man," Dario grinned. "I'm gonna give Luthor a call right now."

"Luthor?"

"Sondra's ex-boyfriend. Yeah, I know it's weird, cause he was always starting shit with Chen, but the fact is, Luthor has the best fucking weed in the city. Trust me, you'll see."

The three of them were in a dive on Sherbrooke west in NDG.

"So James," said Luthor, "How is it that someone like me, who had a beef with Chen, went to his funeral, while you were a no-show?"

"Woman problems," replied James.

"I can say one thing," continued Luthor. "That motherfucker could fight. You remember that?"

"I remember," chuckled Dario.

"Didn't I get a few shots in?"

James cleared his throat. Luthor glanced back and forth.

"So what, you guys saying I didn't?"

"No, you pretty much got dropped," replied James.

Dario burst out laughing. So did James, and eventually Luthor couldn't help it either. When the laughter died down, Dario went to the bathroom. For a few minutes, there was silence.

"So," James started, "how's Sondra?"

Luthor looked irritated.

"What's it to you?"

"I don't see her around school," replied James. "I wondered if she was doing alright."

"She's taking a break."

"I just hope she's alright, that's all."

"Why wouldn't she be? What you getting at, James? You here to stick up for the dead boy?"

"No. What Chen did was his own business."

"Well, you'd best be minding your own too."

Luthor then leaned forward slowly.

"You know... Word is, Chen wasn't alone when he faced Bedlam."

"I wouldn't know," replied James.

When Dario returned, Luthor got up to leave, saying he had a few things to take care of. Once he left, James began grinding a lit cigarette into the ashtray.

"Dario, where can we find a few sluts?"

"Christ, man. Listen to yourself."

"I'm sick of playing by the rules. If there's one thing I find appealing right now, it's the idea of fucking a girl, then forgetting her."

"Hey, in this town, is there any other way?"

They hopped at least seven bars on Crescent Street downtown. Each time, Dario had messed up the prospects by being too drunk. James would chat up a couple of decent

looking blondes, only to see Dario spill beer in one girl's bra. On the dance floor, James often caught the attention of several women, only to lose his cool once Dario started bumping into everybody.

"Do you have to be a fucking jackass?" James shouted at him. They were outside on the sidewalk, where Dario rested his arm on a parking meter, unable to stop laughing.

"Forget it, let's go." said James.

At 2:30 AM, they were having a last beer in a strip club on De Maisonneuve street. There Dario was free to be his idiotic self, and as long as he kept tipping, no one bothered him about it. Defeated, James leaned back in his chair and was lighting another cigarette when suddenly a stripper approached his table.

"Last chance for a lap dance," she teased.

"Hey... I remember you," replied James.

"I don't think so."

"No, it's true. You danced for me a few times, a couple of months ago."

"Well, then... maybe we'll start a tradition."

On her second set, she was taking off her bra, leaning close to his face.

"I have a friend over at the bar... She thinks your friend is cute."

"Yeah, right," James chuckled. "He's the missing link between man and Sasquatch."

"No, seriously. She wants to know if you guys are willing to party."

"Where?"

"Anywhere."

James called Dario over, and mentioned the girl at the bar. Soon, Dario was on the case, and the third set began.

"What's your name anyway?" James asked.

"It's Swan."

"Is that real, or a stage name?"

"All the same. So, are you guys gonna meet us outside?"

"Well, that depends on *him*," James gestured to Dario. "It's his place that's close by."

"I think it'll work out, don't you?" she slid her panties down her thighs.

At 4:00 AM, Dario was lying in his own bed, out cold. James was on his fifth shot of tequila, making out with Swan on the couch. Her friend, who went by the name Vixie, sat alone at the kitchen table, complaining.

"What a fucking waste of time. It's not fair."

"Stop bitching and come sit with us." Swan told her.

"Why, so I can watch?"

"Just come on. I'm feeling generous."

Swan smiled at James, pulling down her G-string just as she had done at the club. Completely lacking inhibition, James lowered his face to her crotch.

"Not yet," she teased, as Vixie sat beside her. As soon as the girls glanced at one another, Vixie ended up going where James wanted to be. Swan then looked back at James, her eyes glazed with pleasure.

"Be ready," she told him.

TWENTY-ONE

On his way to English class, James saw Dario following him up the escalator.

"When the hell are you gonna tell me what happened that night?"

"There's nothing to tell," laughed James. "Everybody got drunk, and that was it."

"How about we make a deal," said Dario. "You tell me what really happened, and I'll tell you something that's guaranteed to kick your ass."

"Guaranteed?"

"James, you have no idea."

"Alright, you win," replied James. "I fucked her. I fucked Swan that night. You happy now?"

"What about Vixie?"

"What about her? Wasn't she with you?"

"That's just it, man. I don't fucking remember."

"Anyway, a deal's a deal. What's the big scoop?"

"I don't know, James. I'm almost afraid to tell you."

"Why are you wimping out? Just say it."

"Fine," sighed Dario. "Erica's here."

James was momentarily speechless.

"Are you kidding me?"

"Nope, and I know exactly where she is."

They walked from one end of campus to the other.

"This better not be a prank, Dario. I swear to God, if you're pranking, you're gonna eat this book."

"Behold," Dario gestured toward the classroom on his right. James cautiously glanced in and, sure enough, Erica Frost was sitting in the third row near a window.

"I don't believe it." he muttered, "I'm looking at her, and I don't believe it. How long have you known?"

"Since this morning, man. What are you gonna do?"

"I have no idea."

They waited for her class to finish. They stood far enough that she didn't notice them in the crowd.

"C'mon," said Dario. "Let's go talk to her."

"No... I need time to think about it."

"Why? She's still a member of the Red Candle, man. We're all that's left."

"Yeah, and she's still my ex-girlfriend. You don't know what it was like at the end."

"You wanna hang back, James? Fine, I'll go say hello by myself."

"The hell you are."

They continued following her from a safe distance, until she reached the cafeteria.

"Alright," said James. "I'm gonna do it."

"Be the man, James."

Suddenly, Erica was approached by someone else -- a tall guy with blonde hair, wearing a hockey jersey. Whoever it was, he embraced Erica and she embraced him right back. They lingered in one another's arms, as James watched in disbelief.

Several days later, James was alone on campus, hoping to see if Erica was in the same classroom where Dario had originally discovered her. The gamble paid off, because she was there once again. It took several minutes for him to build up his courage, but finally he walked up to the classroom, standing under the open doorway. Everyone glanced at him in unison. Erica looked absolutely shocked to see him.

"Can I help you?" asked the professor.

"Sorry, wrong class," replied James, and he quickly stepped back into the hallway. Seconds later, Erica came out after him. If James was unable to believe his eyes a few days earlier, he could tell Erica was having similar same doubts now.

"What are you doing here?" she asked. "I don't understand what you're doing here."

"I skipped class so I could see you," he replied. "I wanted to see you alone, without your boyfriend around."

"You've been following me?"

"Only once," said James. "I couldn't help it."

"I don't know what to say, James."

"That makes two of us."

"Are you... are you living here again?"

"For the time being."

They stood at arm's length in silence.

"Listen," he said. "Can we meet somewhere later on? There's a few things I think we need to talk about."

"Meet me in the study room at the library," she said. "I'm there every day after lunch."

Erica was already in the study room when he arrived. Once they were alone, she locked the door.

"I don't know where to begin" James told her, "I wasn't expecting you to--"

Immediately, she began kissing him. Bewildered as he was, he responded. They kept going further and further, without a word. His pants, and her skirt, were pulled down to the knees, and soon he was inside of her. His heart was beating wildly as he thrust away, but she wouldn't look him in the eye. Eventually, it was enough to make him stop.

"Did you come?" she asked.

"Not yet."

"What's stopping you?"

"You're different," he told her.

She moved away, and got dressed, "I just wanted to know what it was like."

"What do you mean?"

"To do it, you know, without feeling a thing."

"Am I hearing you right?" he began zipping up his pants.

"Why, what's wrong, James? You don't like being used?"

She unlocked the door, and left the room without a word.

Each day, he found her in the study room alone. And every time he asked her questions -- about what she did after their breakup, or about her current boyfriend -- she never answered. Instead, she would say something like, "Wouldn't you rather get what you really came here for?" Every single time, he ended up playing her game. There was no love being made. The sex was so mechanical and uninvolved, it bordered on masturbation. But he was hooked -- every day for over a week, he had to be there. And every day, he had to see her run off with someone else who she really spent time with. It was as if they were never together at all. What made it hurt was that Erica was supposed to matter. She was someone important who no longer thought he was important. Eventually, it got to the point where he couldn't stand it any more.

"Madeline, is that you?"

"James, where are you calling from?"

"I'm back in Montreal, at my school," he paused for a second. "I called to apologize, Madeline. I was a real bastard in December -- to you, and to Ruth. I didn't treat you with any respect, and I never explained why I was so scared."

James quickly realized that Madeline herself was upset.

"She's dead."

"Who's is?"

"My grandmother," she paused, "she died on Sunday."

"How did it happen?"

"They said her heart just stopped, for no reason. I mean, they couldn't find anything wrong with her. She wasn't even sick at all, James."

"Madeline... I'm sorry. I wish I--"

"I don't want to be here any more," she told him. "I can't live in this house by myself. They cut my hours at the school, and Gavin still won't leave me alone. It's like he doesn't even care what happened. I wanted to talk to you so bad, James. I told myself that if you called, I'd probably do it..."

"Do what?"

"I'd go to Montreal," she told him.

James tried to answer, but couldn't find the words.

"If it's too late," she said, "if you're already with somebody... I know it's been too long."

"I'm not with anyone," he replied. "If you really want to come down here, I'd make you feel welcome, Madeline. It's not too late."

He heard her sigh.

"I guess I'll start packing a few things."

"There's a train that leaves at noon, on weekdays. I can call you tomorrow morning, so we can figure out where to meet... if that's what you want."

"Okay," she replied, "I'll be ready."

TWENTY-TWO

James was having lunch, when Erica came up from behind him.

"Hey, James. Got a minute?"

He turned, and saw her standing with her boyfriend.

"James, this is Chad," she said. "Chad, this is James, my ex-boyfriend that I told you about."

They shook hands, both of them looking cautious.

"Don't worry," she said. "I'm not looking for trouble. I'm just hoping we could all get along as friends."

"So there's nothing going on?" asked Chad.

"No," said James.

"I'll be right back," chimed Erica. "I want to get something to eat. How about you, hon? Are you hungry?"

They both looked at her.

"I can't," said Chad. "I've got a job interview in like twenty minutes."

"Just give me a sec, okay?" she replied, walking to the food counter.

"So," Chad turned to James. "Erica told me you were the one that brought her to the hospital. Last December, I mean... when she had that episode?"

"The diabetic thing," answered James. "Uh, yeah... I did."

"Trust me, her family was relieved when she turned out okay."

"You know her family?"

"Well, yeah," replied Chad. "We all grew up in the same neighborhood."

"So... you just came up from Kingston."

"Yep. I'm still getting used to Montreal, though. It's definitely different."

Later, James came through the door of the study room, where Erica was waiting as always.

“What the hell were you doing back there?”

“Didn’t you hear me?” she countered. “I said I hoped we could all be friends. I didn’t want any trouble.”

“No, I’ve had enough, Erica. We took this far enough.”

“But there’s one thing you don’t know,” she told him. “You’re the one I prefer.”

“What?”

“If it wasn’t for Chad, I wouldn’t have even come back here. Having him around was like being home again, so I felt safe in the city. But then you had to come back too, James. You had to come back and mess things up.”

“I messed it up?”

“When don’t you?” she put her arms around him. “No matter what I do, you make me weak. I told Chad that you and I are just friends. Give it a few weeks, and I’ll tell him the truth. He needs to be let down easy, you know? He’s done so much for me, he doesn’t deserve this.”

“Who does?” replied James. “It’s too late, anyway.”

“What do you mean?”

“Madeline’s on her way. She’s actually coming to Montreal, and I’m gonna make the most of it.”

Erica went serious.

“Whatever it is that we’ve been doing,” he added. “Whatever you want to call it, it’s not something I want to continue. It didn’t feel the same, and you know it.”

Well, what did you expect, James? I had to protect myself. Don’t you know what I went through after seeing you again?”

"You never answered any of the questions I asked," said James. "About Gordon, or about Chen and Sondra. Most of all, what happened to you the night we were kidnapped. You act like none of it ever happened."

"That's because nothing did happen."

"You were there when Chen was murdered. And I know those cocksuckers injected something into your body. Something else triggered the coma you went into."

Erica stepped back, refusing to answer.

"What did you see when you went under?" he asked.

"James," she replied. "If you wanted to ditch me for the second time, did you have to go about it like this?"

"What other way is there? We know what happened."

"No," she opened the door. "You only think you do."

Dario chased after James in the hallway.

"Man, am I glad I found you," he told him. "Remember Vixie? Not only do I have her number, but I'm seeing her tonight."

"Good for you."

"You mean good for *us*. She told me Swan's been asking about you too."

"Are you crazy?" blurted James. "I don't want anything to do with those skanks."

"I already told them it wouldn't be a problem."

"*Idiot...* Why didn't you check with me first?"

"Because I assumed that, like me, you had nothing else going on. Why... Do you?"

James took a deep breath.

"No way," Dario's eyes went wide. "You're having sex with Erica aren't you?"

"No, I'm not."

"Oh, the hell you aren't. Who else could it be? God, you're a bastard. She still has a boyfriend, doesn't she?"

“There’s nothing happening with me and Erica.”

“So who is it?”

“It’s Madeline,” James relented. “She’s arriving in the city tomorrow night.”

“Okay... now I understand. I got you, James. Don’t worry about it. I’ll just tell Swan that--”

“Don’t tell Swan shit. Who is she to know my business? She’s nothing.”

“Alright, alright, James... just chill. I won’t mention it.”

TWENTY-THREE

He dreamt of the wolves. He always dreamt of the wolves. When his heart stopped, and the path became clear, they had shape-shifted back into his life, clinging to his spirit. Now they ran beside him wherever he went, no matter where he was. Sometimes people would see them, and sometimes they didn't. But the wolves never left him. Even life and death itself could not sever their loyalty. The wolves swam in his blood, and through his heart. They shape-shifted their way through his entire body, and around everyone he knew. The wolves could become smaller than the eye could see, or large enough to kill with a single bite. And they waited for the chance. They would always wait.

James paced the train station for at least twenty minutes, waiting for Madeline to arrive. Her emergence from the stairwell was utterly surreal. His heart was beating fiercely, but he fought to keep his cool.

"Hey," she smiled nervously. "I can't believe I'm here."

"You look amazing," he told her.

Still smiling, she took a deep breath.

"Okay, where do we go now?"

James had drawn every last dime from his bank account, and was determined to spend most of it in a matter of hours.

"What kind of food are you interested in?" he asked her. "Italian, Mexican, Japanese -- whatever you want to try, I'll take you there."

She wanted seafood, so they tried lobster at a restaurant on De La Montagne. Afterward, he took her to the Paramount theater on St. Catherine.

"This place is so big, it's ridiculous," she laughed as they ascended one escalator after another to the cinema of their choice. When the movie was finished, they walked

outside to Rene Levesque boulevard, where James waved down a taxi that would take them to the casino on St. Helene's Island. There they gambled recklessly on slot machines and blackjack, losing about \$150 before calling it quits. As the night was coming to an end, he hailed another cab that took them to Old Montreal. Once there, they wandered a bit until he found a nightclub he'd never been to, wanting as much of Madeline's first experience to be a shared one.

"You've been keeping me so busy," she told him as they ordered drinks, "I almost get the feeling you're afraid of having a real conversation."

"Nah," said James, "I just wanted to make sure we had a memorable night. I almost went broke doing so, but... so be it. I'm receiving another bank deposit on Monday, anyway."

Both of them were drinking fast.

"Are you feeling happy to be here?" he asked.

She looked out of the window.

"I'm feeling a lot of things, James. It's almost like I don't even know what I'm doing. I'm awake, and I'm existing... That's all I can say."

"When did they bury Ruth?"

"On Tuesday."

"That was fast."

"The less people gawking at her, the better. That's the way she wanted it. No casket, not even a box. She always told me to have her placed on a traditional plank, with a ceremonial blanket to cover her. So I had it arranged, and that's how it went."

"Sounds dignified to me."

"It was."

When they arrived at his apartment, James apologized for the lack of furniture, and the piles of dirty laundry in every corner. But Madeline never judged. She showered

and changed her clothes. It was nearly 4 AM when she finally got on the mattress with James.

"It's freezing in here," she said.

"Yeah," he replied. "The heating is covered in the rent, so I have no control over the radiators."

They laid side by side in the dark, listening to the sound of a distant car alarm.

"There's something I need to make clear," she said. "We had a great time tonight, and I am happy to see you again, but... a lot of the excitement I'm feeling, it's a little bit mixed with fear too, you know?"

"I understand."

"So much happened," she continued. "It's like I can't even breathe. And I don't assume you were expecting anything, but I still have to say it. I'm not... ready. I'm not ready to get close. I need a little time to--"

"Madeline, it's alright," he stroked her hair. "I'm happy you're here, and that's enough. Hell, I'm feeling a bit nervous myself."

They shared a small kiss, then went to sleep.

After spending several days completely alone with James, Madeline became more comfortable as she toured the city. James found the courage to admit he had the remains of their unborn child, so one night on Mount Royal the two of them cremated it in a private ceremony. Madeline had spoken a prayer for the lost spirit, remembering as much as she could of her grandmother's Blackfoot language.

At the end of the week, Madeline wanted to visit James' school. He was hesitant, but couldn't come up with a valid excuse not to take her. At this point, he'd been too afraid to even go to class, much less mention that Erica was still around. But James bit the bullet, and brought Madeline on campus.

"Man, oh, man," crowed Dario. "You are one hot girl."

Madeline laughed.

"Sorry, James, but I had to say it," Dario kept smiling at her. "You are a total specimen, you know that?"

"Easy, Dario."

"Well, he's just being nice," said Madeline.

They were standing at the lockers not far from the cafeteria, and as James had feared, Erica Frost spotted them.

"Where've you been?" she asked James.

"With Madeline," he answered promptly.

"So this is Madeline. Hi, I'm Erica Frost. I'm a friend of James."

Madeline lost her smile.

"Are you the one who--"

"We're not involved anymore," said Erica. "There's nothing going on, we're just friends."

"I told everyone that you were coming to Montreal." added James.

"Can you excuse me for a second?" Madeline replied, going into the women's washroom across the hall.

"What are you trying to do?" James asked Erica.

"Keeping the peace," she smiled. "You want a piece?"

James shook his head.

"I'm just kidding," she said. "I'll respect the boundaries, if there are any."

"What are you two talking about?" asked Dario.

"Nothing important." James replied.

"No... there's something wrong with this picture."

"Dario, no need to try so hard," Erica taunted. "I'll go in there to talk to Madeline. I'll sort it out, James. I promise."

Erica went into the washroom, and Dario smacked James in the shoulder.

"You really are fucking her."

"Which one?"

"My point exactly."

"Dario, I don't need your commentary, alright?"

"This is not good, James."

"Leave it alone. I got enough to think about."

"Like what?"

"Like the sculpture that Gordon made. I saw it at your place that night."

"What about it?"

"I never told you this, but on the night he killed himself, Gordon told me he wanted to destroy every mask and sculpture he created."

"He fucking did," said Dario. "I kept the only one that was left."

"Why don't you just respect his wishes?"

"Because the guy was brilliant, and he threw his life away for a bitch that didn't care. The least I can do is pay tribute to Gord's talent, by preserving the only piece he left behind."

Madeline and Erica walked out of the washroom together.

"That's how it is," Erica told Madeline. "I've been with Chad for nearly two months, and we're living together. James and I are over."

"Is she telling the truth?" Madeline asked James.

"Yeah," he replied. "She is."

"So what do you say about tonight?" asked Erica.

"What?" James asked.

"Erica's invited us to go to a nightclub with her and her boyfriend."

"Consider it a welcoming party," Erica added. "I think it would be awesome if we created a brand new group of friends. Don't you agree, Dario?"

"Sure," he shrugged.

"So will you come, Madeline?"

Madeline looked at James.

"What do *you* think?" she asked him.

"If you're comfortable with it," he said, "then I'm comfortable with it."

"Okay," Madeline sighed. "Since I don't want to be the bad guy here... fine, we'll be there."

"Excellent," said Erica. "But we'll need something to wear. Listen, Madeline, my class finishes at three. Would you want to come shopping with me?"

"No... I don't know."

"Come on, I'm sure James hasn't been taking you to all the best clothing stores, but I *can*. Like I said, consider it my way of saying welcome."

"You're actually serious?"

"Yes."

Madeline agreed, and three o'clock the girls left campus to go downtown. It was the first time since Madeline arrived that she and James would be apart for an extended time, and it worried him.

James went alone to Dario's apartment, hoping to find a way to get in while the latter was still in school. James was determined to get rid of the Dream Devil sculpture. He was checking the windows when he heard a familiar voice.

"This is how you spend your free time?"

It was Swan. In broad daylight, she looked worn and tired, as though she'd aged ten years since the last time they spoke.

"You think you're hot shit, don't you?" she asked him. "You think just because I take it off, that's supposed to make me a hooker or something? You think you can just fuck me, and then act like you didn't?"

"I didn't think you'd care," he replied.

"Don't fucking flatter yourself," she said. "It's the attitude that I hate. You told Dario that I was nothing. What, you think you're so fucking great? You think you're so much better than everyone else? Well, you were wrong, okay? You were my fucking toy, understand? And if you had any respect at all, there wouldn't be a problem. But since you wanted to have attitude, you'll get attitude. My man's gotten out of jail, eh? Maybe you'll meet him."

"I don't want a problem," said James.

"Don't condescend to me, you little fucker," she walked away. "We'll see who's nothing, alright? We'll see."

TWENTY FOUR

The two couples -- James and Madeline, Erica and Chad -- stepped into the nightclub known as the Seventh Hell. They had waited forty minutes in line for the opportunity, at a cover charge of fifteen dollars each. Once they were inside, the girls insisted on handling the coat check, while the guys would get drinks and find a table for the four of them.

The Seventh Hell was massive. The main floor was actually below street level and contained a dance hall with mini-bars beneath each stairwell. The main bar was on street level, framed by a perimeter of tables and barstools that lined every wall, leaving the centre open for patrons to view the dance floor below. An elevator was available, adjacent to the men's washroom. The dance floor itself was atmospheric, lit by showers of multicoloured lighting rhythmically pulsing to the music at its center, while the remote areas of the room were dark. There, only scant tables and chairs lined the edges of the room, dimly illuminated by crystalline lights embedded in the walls. It was there that James and Chad managed to find the last available table on the increasingly populated dance floor, with beers in hand as they waited for the girls to arrive.

"So how's your week been?" asked James.

"You want an honest answer?" Chad replied, prompting James to shrug his shoulders.

"I'm not too crazy about Montreal", Chad continued. "I mean sure, on a Friday night it's a hell of a place to party, but for the rest of the week, I'm putting up with a real dead-end job. I swear, 60 percent of my co-workers refuse to speak English to me. I'm not kidding."

"So look for something else."

"Are you kidding? James, have you tried looking for a job in this city? You have to be bilingual for everything, even just to deliver the fucking mail. I'm telling you, if it wasn't for Erica, I wouldn't waste another minute in this town."

James had to admit there wasn't much to hate about Chad. He realized that Erica's boyfriend was a hard worker who didn't take any shortcuts. He also begrudgingly respected Chad's determination to win Erica back, as hollow as the result was. It was the least James could do to finally treat Chad with respect.

Down the stairs came Madeline and Erica, in tandem. James was blown away by the sight of them. Madeline was in a red dress, Erica in a black dress -- both of the same design, baring the shoulders and cut to reveal the right thigh on every second step.

"So what do you guys think?" Madeline asked, hand on hip.

"We bought them together," Erica added.

"Hell," James smiled. "I'm speechless."

"I have to be honest, girls," Chad remarked. "I'd say James and I are the luckiest men in the building."

The dance floor was filled -- from one end to the other -- with couples swaying to slow jazz. At the center of the mass were James and Madeline in one another's arms, with Chad and Erica only a few feet away in their own embrace. The two pairs seemed to revolve in shared gravity, both of them cast in a glow of shimmering colors.

"Why did I have to wait so long to come to the city?" Madeline asked James, lifting her head and closing her eyes. "It's been nothing but amazing. I never thought I could love it here, but I actually do. Can you believe it?"

"No, I can't believe it," said James. "That's how much you surprised me. I'm not kidding, Madeline. Every morning I wake up amazed that you're actually here."

She looked him in the eye, then pressed her cheek to his. "It took too long for me to realize what was important. I wasted so much time worrying for nothing, and I promise you, James -- that won't happen again."

Where Madeline's face pressed his, James felt a warm tingle. Then he saw Erica's hand gently touch Madeline's shoulder.

"May I cut in?" she asked. But when Madeline looked up with glistening eyes, Erica was stunned.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'm sorry, never mind."

"It's okay", Madeline wiped her tears and smiled. "Go ahead."

Even with Erica in his arms, James kept looking toward Madeline as she danced with Chad.

"What are you thinking?" Erica asked him.

"I don't know."

"Well, I've been waiting to ask you," she continued. "What are we going to do from this point on?"

"You picked the wrong time to ask."

"No," she whispered. "With the both of them here, it's the right time."

James remained silent.

"Are we happy?" she asked. "Did we get everything we wanted?"

"Well, what's more important, Erica? Getting what we want, or doing what's fair?"

"It's a little late to be fair."

"Coming from you, that's surprising."

She looked at him with dead serious eyes. Under the blue light, her red hair took on a violet tint.

"I find it ironic," she began, "that this was okay with you, when only Chad was in the picture. Now that Madeline is here, suddenly you're conflicted."

"It's not that simple."

"I don't believe you", she looked away. "Really, I don't. You know what else? I actually like Madeline. I mean, I didn't think I would, but it's true. She's beautiful, she's fun, and everything she says is sincere. I can see why she matters to you, and how happy you were that she came to Montreal. It's just like Chad coming back for me. They're both good people, James. And so are we."

James glanced up at the terrace above, and saw Dario -- with Vixie at his side -- waving down at him.

Holy fuckin' Christ, James panicked. He could feel himself trembling, and let go of Erica before she noticed.

"What's wrong now?" she asked.

"Nothing," he told her. "I'm going upstairs to get a round of drinks for everyone. Tell Chad and Madeline I'll be right back."

James stood at the main bar, sweating with anxiety amidst the packed crowd, when Dario tapped his shoulder.

"Well, look at you, Thunderstorm."

James glared back, "You fat fuck, Dario. What do you think you're doing?"

Without missing a beat, Dario pointed a finger at James' chest.

"I'm going to be your conscience tonight."

James snapped, "Dario. You have no idea what kind of trouble you're starting."

"Jesus, man, relax. I'm not here to start trouble. C'mon James, relax."

"Where's Swan?"

"Swan? Why would I bring Swan here?"

James held his forehead, "Why did you have to do this to me?"

"I'm sick of you and Erica pulling double duty on campus, when you already have someone waiting elsewhere. It's a disaster about to happen, and you know it."

"What's it to you, you jealous fuck?"

James spotted Swan leaning against a pillar on the other side of the bar. She grinned, and he looked away.

"Give me two shots of whiskey," he asked the bartender.

"Look, all you gotta do" shouted Dario, "is make a choice, James. And stick to it."

"Choice is no longer an option."

"No, man, it *is* an option. You either choose Erica, or choose Madeline", Dario continued, "because if you don't pick one of them tonight, I'll go right down there and spill the beans to everybody. Do you understand?"

James chased one shot with the other.

"And what's Swan supposed to be, Dario? Your insurance policy?"

"Swan?" Dario's eyes widened. "What the hell is she doing here? James, believe me man, I had nothing to do with that. There's no way I'd go that far. Hey, where you going?"

James locked himself in a bathroom stall, pressing his forehead against the graffiti covered door. He knew Madeline and the others had to be wondering where he was. At an absolute loss about what to do next, he felt nausea coming on, welling up in his entire body, right to the blood and bone. Then he heard someone entering the bathroom.

"I know this is stupid," said Dario, "but James, are you in there?"

"Yeah," huffed James.

"Dude, I'm sorry, alright? I had no idea that this would fuck you up so bad."

James kept quiet.

"Listen, James. I'm gonna go. I'm not gonna put you on the spot with Madeline and Erica, alright? I'm gonna respect your wishes and bail, how's that?"

James still didn't answer.

"Do you hear what I'm saying, man? I'm telling you to go ahead and live your life. I don't agree with what you and Erica are doing, but you're right, man. It's not my problem. That's all I wanted to say."

"Dario," James muttered, "get out of the club, and tell the others to get out too."

"Why are you so damned scared, man?"

The main bathroom door opened again, and James heard the clicking of heels on the tiled floor.

"If James is in here, Dario," said Swan, "you'd better say so."

"Why do you want to know?" Dario asked her.

"Stay out of it," said Swan. She walked up to the stall where James was hiding.

"Bedlam is here," she said, "And he wants you to see him right now."

"Bedlam?" asked James. *What the fuck?*

"All you have to do is step outside of the club, alone," she answered. "and we'll handle it from there."

"How do I know I can trust you?"

"You can't," she shot back. "Bedlam says if you don't come outside within ten minutes, the Bulldogs will come in after you. And they won't just be after you, James. I've been watching you for the last twenty minutes, and I've seen the people you came here with. So, you feeling sorry? Because not every girl you fuck is going to swoon and do your bidding, James. I mean, you knew that, right?"

She left the room, as Dario stood in absolute confusion.

"Man, what the fuck is going on, James?" he stammered.

"Swan's boyfriend is a drug dealer, the same guy that killed Chen. I never told you, because I figured the less you knew, the better."

"Jesus... I can't believe what I--"

“Never mind”, said James, “Just get Madeline, Erica and Chad out of here. Grab a taxi and go to the other side of town. Just make sure they’re far away from here. Can you do that?”

“Yeah, man. I’ll do my best.”

“...Thanks.”

Chad returned to the table where Madeline and Erica were waiting.

“James is nowhere in sight.”

“That doesn’t make any sense”, said Madeline, unable to hide the nervousness in her voice. “Erica, what did he say before he left?”

“He told me he was getting us drinks.”

Erica suddenly spotted Dario coming down the stairwell.

“Guys,” he shouted, “there might be some trouble. James asked me to get you out of here.”

“What’s going on?” asked Chad.

“Someone wants to fight with James. Some guy named Bedlam.”

“Oh, my god” Erica got up from her seat, and immediately went toward the stairwell. Madeline quickly followed her lead, only to be held back by Dario.

“No, Madeline, don’t. It might get real serious.”

“Why didn’t he tell me about this?” she shouted.

“Hey, I didn’t even know,” answered Dario. “But James insisted that I get you away from the club.”

Madeline felt panic coming on, remembering her grandmother’s warning.

“He needs me there,” she shouted. “Let me go, Dario!”

Shaking his head, Dario released her. Madeline ran through the crowd toward the stairs, with Chad and Dario following suit.

Escorted by Bedlam's men, James walked out onto the street. The leader of the Bulldogs emerged as a thick silhouette standing under the glare of several streetlights, with a frame that looked at least six-foot three, and over two hundred pounds.

"Fucking piece of shit," muttered Bedlam. "I know you... I remember you."

"What?" asked Swan.

"Hold on, *osti*," Bedlam continued, "This guy was in the room when I killed that Chinese fucker."

James remained quiet.

"*Maudit sauvage*," said the big man. "I don't remember your name."

"It's James" added Swan.

"James, eh?" said Bedlam "You fucked my old lady?"

Swan wouldn't shut up.

"I warned him that I had a boyfriend in jail, and he didn't give a shit."

Bedlam grabbed James by his shirt, and threw him onto the road.

"Get in the car."

James stood back up.

"She's lying," he told Bedlam. "And I'm not getting in that car. If you're gonna do something, do it now."

"*Colis--*" Bedlam threw a punch, and James swung right back. They both landed several strikes -- the fight was dead even in spite of their size difference. James was full of adrenaline, but Bedlam's men quickly outnumbered him.

Erica ran past the coat check, and out the entrance of the club, narrowly escaping the clutch of bouncers who warned her not to leave.

"James!"

He'd just been thrown on to the road, when the sound of Erica's voice caught the attention of Bedlam's crew. James scrambled to his feet and ran toward her.

"Get out of here!" he shouted.

Erica froze at the sight of James and his pursuers coming toward her. James grabbed her, pushing her ahead of him, past the club's entrance and into an alleyway.

"Get behind there!" James shoved Erica toward a dumpster, and where she quickly hid from his view. James turned and saw Bedlam's gang entering the alley. Swan watched as Bedlam held a gun on James.

"You know, *maudit*, you did the right thing by not testifying. I got out a lot quicker thanks to you. But why you're still coming around -- fucking my woman even -- I have no clue. Maybe you're an undercover badge, *Indienne*, or maybe you just want to steal my spot. Either way, you're fucked."

Madeline had seen James run past the entrance, followed by five or six other people. When she reached the door, the bouncers tried to stop her, but she was too frenzied.

"My boyfriend's out there!" she scratched and kicked her way out onto the sidewalk, when she heard the sound of gunshots coming from her left.

The bouncers slammed the entrance door shut, locking it as Dario and Chad arrived.

"Nobody else gets out of this club until the cops show up," shouted the doormen.

Erica shuddered in fear as the gun went off. That's when she heard the screaming. It wasn't coming from James, but from Bedlam's crew. Their screams were almost immediately drowned out by violent and distorted growls.

Madeline also froze when she heard the gunshots, rooted to the spot as she heard shrieks of fear in the alleyway, and what sounded almost like attacking dogs. The melee ended as quickly as it had begun.

After what seemed like an endless silence, Madeline approached the alleyway. Around the corner, she saw six bodies on the pavement. The corpses were outright mutilated. Terrified, she saw James lying down about fifteen feet away, and ran to him. Erica emerged from her hiding place at the same time.

"He's been shot. He's been fucking shot."

"We need to call an ambulance."

"I'm not leaving him."

"Do you expect me to?"

"He's not bleeding. How could he not be bleeding?"

"*God...* they're all dead."

"James, can you understand what I'm saying?"

James slowly nodded yes, his head still pressed against the pavement.

"We're gonna take you to a hospital, okay?"

James nodded no.

"Don't be fucking stupid. You could die. Do you want to die, James?"

Again, he nodded no.

"Someone from the bar might have a cell phone so we can call an ambulance."

James smacked the pavement with his left hand.

"Just get me out of here," he gasped. "Just us."

"What do you mean? Which one of us?"

James blacked out before he could answer.

TWENTY-FIVE

Wracked with pain, James kept drifting in and out of consciousness. Briefly, he saw a matchbook resting on a telephone table, bearing the name of the hotel that he and Erica had once stayed at. He also heard Madeline and Erica arguing, but he was in too much pain to respond. Madeline was a nervous wreck, a state that she thinly veiled with anger.

"He should be dead, but he isn't. Why the fuck is that? How do you survive something like that? And he had to have known that he would, because he didn't want to go to the hospital. What is he hiding?"

"I don't know."

"No, you *know* something. What was James involved in?"

"I-- I'm not even sure."

"I saw you panic when you heard the name of the guy who wanted to fight with him."

"Bedlam," Erica's voice was shaky.

"Whatever it was that happened in December, I know it involved you, Erica. It's written all over your face."

"James and I were held against our will, and we were drugged. Bedlam wanted to kill us with an overdose."

"An overdose of what?"

"I don't know."

"How could you not know what they gave you? Why are you bullshitting me?"

"I'm not bullshitting you!" Erica's voice became shrill.

"I swear to God, Erica. If you lie to me one more time, I'll slap you so hard--"

"Go ahead! You think I can't take it?" Erica broke down. "I've already seen James' die once before. I saw him stop breathing, and I realized I was completely alone."

And those fucking assholes kept taking turns! My hands were fucking tied, and they wouldn't stop. I wanted to be with James. I wanted to be dead too. And that's when he came back. That's when James started breathing again, and I thought that no matter what was happening to me, I wasn't alone anymore. He was there with me, and that's all that mattered."

Erica was crying out of control, and Madeline tried to console her.

"His nightmares were real," Erica told her. "And the demon was real. We all thought it was a joke, but it's true -- we were all affected."

"What are you saying?"

"James was meant to die, but something kept preventing it. And I know what I heard in that alleyway."

"I heard it too," said Madeline.

When the light of dawn struck the window, James saw a wound on his arm, looking as though it had been cauterized. Then he remembered Bedlam, and the gunshots. He wanted to get out of bed, but couldn't. The pain only subsided when he laid perfectly still. It was then James realized that the girls were asleep on either side of him in the bed, still clad in their matching dresses, both resting with their backs turned to him.

"Fuck, close the curtains, Erica... please."

This time, he was able to get out of bed, albeit slowly. He managed to shower, counting three deep scabs on his arm, shoulder and hip. He couldn't even remember the actual moment of injury. He knew it had occurred, and envisioned Bedlam's gun pointing directly at him, but the act itself was absent from memory. All he remembered was a wave of shadows in the alleyway, and then nothing.

Dario was in his apartment, sitting at the kitchen table with Chad, when James arrived with the girls. Chad got up and walked straight to Erica.

"I needed to know you were safe," he told her. "But that's all. As far as I'm concerned, there's nothing else for us to discuss. So don't even try."

Chad glared at James for a few seconds, not having a care that the latter appeared injured. Neither of them said a word, and Chad left Dario's apartment. Erica followed him, trying to explain what happened.

James walked up to Dario.

"Where's Vixie?"

"Locked up."

"What for?"

"Fuck if I know. As soon as the cops saw her, they arrested her. It's all about the company you keep, right?"

James looked down the hallway.

"Don't even say it." Dario told him, "You don't even need to say it, alright?"

Dario got up, went into the hallway, and dragged Gordon's devil sculpture into the kitchen.

"So how do we go about this?"

They took the sculpture out onto the porch, and saw Erica at the bottom of the stairs, alone. She didn't respond when they called out to her. James looked at Madeline.

"Just give me a second, okay?"

"What's to say, that you can't say in front of me?"

"It's the only way I can get her to listen."

Madeline bit her lip.

"If you take too long, don't expect me to wait."

James spent several minutes talking with Erica at the bottom of the stairs. Dario heard him mention Gordon's suicide, and Chen's murder. James pointed up at the sculpture, and Erica looked back. Madeline saw the tears in her eyes when James hugged her. The two of them embraced for at least half a minute more, when Erica seemed to regain her composure. They let go of one another, and looked upstairs.

"Go ahead, Dario," shouted James.

Dario threw the sculpture down the stairs. It lost two of its limbs as it tumbled down. James and Dario spent the next few moments tearing the sculpture apart completely. By the end of it, Erica was helping them. Madeline walked down the stairs, mystified as she watched the three of them toss the remains of wire and plaster into garbage bags.

"Does this make sense to any of you? Or will it ever?"

Dario, almost in spite of himself, began to laugh. Even Erica, her eyes stained with tears, recognized the absurdity of what they were doing.

"I don't expect it to make sense," James told Madeline. "But it had to be done."

Madeline stood at the train station, as James to came back with two tickets in his hand.

"I don't even know if I want to go back home," she told him. "Now that we're on our own."

"I intend to keep it that way," said James.

Madeline read her ticket. It was a one-way to New York City.

"Can we do it this time?" he asked. "Closest thing to a clean slate."

"But what about--"

"I don't care about anything else," he told her. "I don't even want to think. I just want to move."

James held her hand as they walked to the departure gate. He didn't even stop to take a look around. Instead, he only hoped to leave everything behind in Montreal, a city that seemed to thrive on uncertainty.