

## **Table of contents**

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

*Three, started off chasing a dream. And they are...*

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**Jennifer” Jen” Blacktide: former national merit scholar turned movie fanatic. Once garnered national attention for a newspaper she made in 5<sup>th</sup> grade called The Potter’s Pie (she was second at nationals).**

**Scott” Football head” Giddy: 3 time state chess champion. Founded the Zelda videogame Club; and took in 3 dollars per week from each of the 15 official members (for bringing the snacks, mostly Butterfingers and Little Caesar’s pizzas).**

**Fred Jamby: manages 7 kid’s paper routes around the city for a dollar per kid, per week (the job was grandfathered down to him from his father Earl, at age 11).**

# CHUM

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By JOHN T BUCKLEY

## Chapter 1

### Ice cream is for dinner

A brief sunbeam pierced the fog revealing a white haired, white bearded man named Gratus Tomlinson. He wandered out of the fog-and in one mentally for that matter-and over to Jen's side. Jen looked down and saw he was staring at her with pool cue size eyes (they were good enough to be out of any reputable horror shop).

"When you look back on your life," Gratus exclaimed as he slapped his hands together. "Don't borrow someone else's lens. This will be the only thing that truly matters to you, in this life. Forget tomorrow, and you'll be relentless," Gratus insisted as he spoke into her ear with a meditative voice. The words pulsating through Jen's face like a warm drink of coco.

"Jen?" inquired Fred reluctantly as he shook Jen's shoulder.

"Fred, this doesn't look like it's safe to be here," Jen said timidly. "I mean we could end up dead or worse. Maybe we should turn back?"

Jen rode along on top of a black stallion named Hoppa with Fred on back; they went through the thick Carterville swamp (that was engulfed in dense fog). They could see people poking out of the trees, dead as last week's losing numbers for the lotto. Fred aimed his gun out into the fog and fired a single shot.

He hit a crow, and it simply careened into the water and disappeared without a splash. The sun was red and rising like the hangman in the morning.

“Jen, if there’s any chance we can live through this,” Fred continued, “Then we have to take it.”

They felt the back of their horse starting to rip open. And they fell into the vast belly of the horse like jelly beans poured into a ditch.

“What’s happening, Fred?” asked Jen frantically with dead bodies and a river of backwash around her. “I can’t see anything!” Jen cried as she pushed some human bones away from her face.

Fred lit up his lighter; and he saw there were scores of human bones all throughout the horse’s stomach. Jen let out a scream that bounced off the walls and caused the horse to sprint (further into the swamp now, much further).

“Jen, stop going nuts,” Fred wheezed, knowing he was as scared as her. “Just hold on a second. If we wait it will be fine,” Fred assured her hardly believing his own words. “Or we’ll just get creative.”

The horse took a wrong step and they were suddenly submerged in water. The hole in its back had barrels of water rushing in; and Jen and Fred were starting to panic. The sounds of moaning people could be heard getting louder and louder in every direction.

“FRED!” Jen shouted nervously as she punched the side of the horse’s belly.

She punched so hard that it created an opening the size of a bathtub: and they were sucked out of the horse’s belly and into the depths of the swamp. Fred swam with Jen out around a sleeping crocodile. Jen saw a flickering of light and swam right for it. Fred did the same and they shot right up to the surface.

“We made it, Fred, yes!” Jen said knowing it was a taradiddle rolling off her lips. “I’m not dying in some swamp,” Jen declared as she started to climb up the muddy slope, and out of the water. Fred did the same; and his eyes were hardly looking up at all.

“I knew it, we lucked out,” Fred said as he spit out some water. “Man, I need some nourishment. Hey, what’s that light over there?” Fred asked cautiously as he walked the last few feet to the shore.

They saw a red light aimed at them-Jen hated all red lights from way back-and then Fred got shot once through the head. The shot killed him where he stood, Jen was terrified. She screamed and tried to run, but the mud was so thick she could barely move. Her knees rose lower and lower with every step. Then she saw the light in her eyes and screamed.

Jen awoke from her nightmare with a shrill scream. She looked at Fred as he sipped his coffee; and he looked at her like he’d seen Bigfoot in Bermuda shorts. She pulled her hair back from her face and smirked at Fred (she was not amused).

“Yup!” said Jen as she grinned.

“Yup what, Jennifer of Jenville?” asked Fred Jamby as he leaned back in his recliner.

“Yup!” said Jen brightly, as they were all lounging around in a cushion apartment. A cushion apartment doesn’t have a stitch of furniture: only large cushions, several televisions, and a bathroom. You have to pay 100 dollars a year to be able to use one of the nearly 5,000 of them, on Earth and in space.

Jen giggled and continued curling her hair with an electronic glove called a Storm Lover (it sends a charge through your hair curling it instantly). Jen is 5 foot 5 inches tall and has a cute face and good body (as she would say). She has on a, I PUNCHED YOUR GIRLFRIEND t-shirt and red Levis. Her hair is blonde and curly like she just had a day at the hair salon (she had gone the day before and refused to sleep on her new do).

“I agree with her yup, Fred the gas blower, screw you,” Scott said facetiously and in a deep voice like a blues singer; and he rolled over to the window that was covered in sweaters to take a look (he saw only people floating around on anti-gravity couches drinking beer). Scott is 5 foot 9 inches tall and has a trim

build with narrow shoulders. He has on a thin tan sweater (that he thinks it makes him look handsome) and a pair of black leather pants. And he also has on sunglasses (always tinted green or no dice).

“Fred, we’re just kiddin’ ya, man,” Jen said as she rubbed her back with the side of her hand. “You do smell, not that I noticed,” Jen said jokingly as she finished doing her hair and stared at Fred.

Fred threw his shaggy red hair back, and barked like a dog. He was all of 6 foot 3 inches tall and *bone thin*. He had on a white sweat suit jacket-he had won in a raffle-and black and grey striped dress pants. He always wore his multi colored flattop Adidas (where he hid all his cash in the soles because he didn’t have a wallet). Fred had dark green penetrating eyes that made people nervous (which made HIM nervous).

“That smell is my considerable manhood shaking you to your KNEES!”

“No, not so much,” Jen fired back as she watched TV. She was debating watching Shadow Thief again, but she worried she’d cry again (she didn’t mind the crying, but she thought Fred and Scott would mind). Jen loved Shadow Thief; and she thought of it whenever she made her decisions.

“Hey it’s sunny outside,” Scott remarked as he stretched out his arms over his head. “Sure looks to be another HOT ONE in Cali!” I want two things out of this life, and both are money. I’ll settle for either one I mean it. Boy, a man and his foxhole, what a place to die,” Scott said but the sound of his voice was too chipper to be funny. He eyed an old homeless man-dressed in O.R. scrubs-as he bumped into people walking down the street. And then the homeless man crashed into a pizza delivery drone. This sent the pizza pies flying into people walking by. Some were wearing designer clothes that got ruined (and they debated killing him over it).

“I’d give both forms of money to you, but I don’t have either,” Jen joked.

“T’anks, Jen, so nice of ya!” Scott replied as he rested his head on the window sill.

“You’re welcome,” Jen said with her eyes on the Shadow Thief laser stick (which was a small black lipstick shaped laser case. And it could carry entire movies to your TV by just firing it in that direction). “Hey, I just had an idea. What if we watch Shadow thief again? Come on, humor me before I die in a ditch somewhere,” Jen begged.

Fred laughed and rolled over Jen’s stomach; and then he grabbed the cinnamon pretzels before she could. Jen laid there with her mouth agape and her tongue sticking out. She felt great to have friends that she could be silly with.

“Shadow Thief, are we only watching that movie so you can open the Leo debate?” Fred asked.

“Yes!”

“Great, I was hoping you’d brightly say that, so I could do this,” Fred said sarcastically as he started gently pulling on Jen’s hair. Scott looked over at them and grinned like Charlie Brown finally kicking the football. And then he glanced back down at the street. Shadow Thief suddenly shot through his mind (and he knew he would feel that *ache again* for Leo if he watched it).

“Yeah, let’s watch it, and really talk it out,” Scott said loudly using a voice of an old man. “I need that scab picked,” Scott said as he watched the homeless man suck in, and then spit hard in the face of the woman helping him up. Scott saw this and cringed, but he wanted to laugh underneath.

“Me too, pick my scab for me,” Jen answered. “You know you wanna,” Jen said sarcastically as she danced around Fred and flopped down on her stomach in front of the TV. She motioned with her hand for Fred to get her an ice cream bar. Fred shook his head Yes; and then ducked into the fridge (that was hidden in the wall).

“I do wanna, even if wanna isn’t a real word,” Scott’s mind-still suffering from residual euphoria from the incident the night before where he kissed a random woman on the lips-his thoughts: took a chance, great kisser, should have asked her out, great kisser, and, of course, boy was she hot. “Jen, when you die,



can I have all of the 35 cents you have in your pants pocket?” Scott asked as he debated eating during the movie or not. “Like, I needs me some loot. I could go lootless, then what, right. That’s right you’re nodding means right, I’ll be eaten by wolves. I hate to say it, but that’s all I got to look forward too,” Scott confessed sarcastically as he mimicked the mannerisms of a young boy. He watched Jen giggling and knew he was lucky she was his friend.

“Nope, no deal,” said Jen.

“What?” Scott exclaimed as he grabbed a penny off the windowsill. “Why to the not?” Scott asked as he gently poked Jen in the back several times.

“Because, what else B. O.”

“Man I gotta shower at least once a month,” Scott watched Fred going for the laser to Shadow Thief intently (still debating watching it or not). “Damn, and eat more cookies,” Scott said as he watched Fred fall face first onto the cushions beside Jen. Fred reached for the Shadow Thief laser and fired it (starting the movie).

“Can we skip?” Jen asked coyly as she always asked to skip, but always made it seem random. “Come on, I love the end first,” Jen begged warmly as she grabbed the remote; a second later she was riffling through the chapters of the movie.

“Yes, yes we can baby!!!” Fred sang terribly as he pretended to be on the edge of his seat anticipating the movie.

“You know when you sing, people die,” Jen said jokingly as she kept her eyes on the TV (she hated hitting the button for wrong chapter). “Don’t sing in crowded rooms, Man, just don’t do it,” Jen said sarcastically as she finally made it to the final scene of Shadow Thief.

“Before we start, who thinks Ben Train should have won the Oscar?” Fred asked as he put his hand up along with Jen’s and Scott’s. Jen teared up at this-with Fred wishing he hadn’t asked; Fred and Scott knew that the mere fact that Ben Train had lost, really made her sad-and Fred hugged her.

“Obviously, he nailed every scene in the movie!” Jen said tearfully as she tried to pull it together.

“Except for one, Jen, the bet cost him,” Scott said as his fingers rapidly moved-making only the best guitar chords from the Halen-in the air above Jen’s head. “What was he thinking? You tell the director that in the final scene the KID, decides which parent to go with? Are you crazy? What if the kid secretly hated Ben’s guts, ya know?” Scott asked as he watched *Shadow Thief* start to roll; and Ben’s character entered the frame. There he saw his son Chum-played by a child actor named Jason Giddy who preferred people call him Chum at all times-standing in the rain between him and his ex-wife *BETH*.

“Wait, pause the movie,” Jen said as she shook her hands out like they were cold-even though it was 70 degrees outside-and moved to the edge of the mattress. “They screwed him because he had a nervous disorder. They want you to shake every hand, and kiss serious butt, and he wouldn’t do it. He changed acting forever, and this was *HIS YEAR!* I mean, even the guy that won was like, *WHAT,*” Jen said as she started to wipe away tears and shake her head like she’d been swimming. She still felt the same ache she had when Ben had lost the Oscar (she still owned her Oscar dress she had made from old sundresses that her aunt Tilda had given her).

“I know, he’d missed out on winning 3 times when he was young,” Scott answered as he opened a Coke can. “Which means they had to know he could win someday, but this scene-” Scott spoke with certain sadness in his voice. He eyed Ben’s blurred shaking hand-stuck there until Jen started the movie again-in *Shadow Thief*. Scott wanted to cry, but he knew Jen would breakdown if he did.

Ben walked towards Chum, holding a handful of movie tickets in his right hand, and cleared his throat.

“Chum, you hungry yet?” asked Ben warmly as he waved the movie tickets in front of his smiling face. “There’s plenty of those ice cream bars you like in the fridge,” Ben said as he stopped. Ben smiled at Chum who was 10 feet in front of him (while keeping an eye on Beth 10 feet from Chum on the other side). Her and Chum equally amused by this.

Chum froze in his spot-grinning like he’d eaten the last piece of pizza-and he turned his head to the side (showing the slap mark from where Ben had hit him earlier in the day on his cheek). Chum started to turn towards Ben, but Beth-seizing her moment-clapped her hands hard together 3 times fast.

“Come now, Chum, no more of this,” Beth begged hollowly, as she acted like she was sick to her stomach, by bending at the waist and coughing. “Your bum father doesn’t deserve a son like you, Chum, and you know it. Just wave goodbye and we’ll..,” Beth said calmly before stopping herself-realizing she already had the sale in hand-and she fussed with her white sun dress (and she watched Ben out of her peripheral vision for cracks in his veneer).

“NO, Chum, that’s not good for me,” Ben interrupted a second after she had stopped talking-the embarrassment of missing his moment was evident on his face (he was sweating like race horses past the far pole-and he searched for the words. “Tell that bitch, you’re comin’ with me, now. HURRY!” demanded Ben as he glared at Chum with a snake’s venom in his eyes.

“You hit Chum, you hit me hard,” Chum cried as he rubbed his bruised cheek. “Chum don’t like hit,” Chum said tearfully as he looked down. Chum kept tucking and then pulling out his red and blue striped shirt (always worried Beth would slap him if he was unkempt in the movie or *in real life*).

Jen watched-with the patience and anticipation of a purse snatcher-and she couldn’t hold back her tears (as she thought of her own dead father Royalton).

“Go with him, Chum, please go,” Jen pleaded with her eyes pinned, like little lasers, on Chum.

Scott had a tear working its way to his neck-through a good shave from the day before-but he couldn't stop now. He watched as Ben got infuriated with Chum (and he knew he was about to blow it, but a part of him still hoped he wouldn't).

"I'm sorry, Chum, but you were bad," Ben said apologetically-knowing he was winning with this voice inflection-as he offered Chum his hand. "You Took my Damn BEER, and THREW IT! Now You God Damn KNEW THAT WAS WRONG! I'm not asking you get your ass over here now, NOW, CHUM!" Ben growled as he bunched up his hand-that was holding the tickets-into a fist.

Chum cried harder now, more than a funeral, more than a pet dying, and he looked dead at Ben, shaking his head the impossible NO. Beth meanwhile knew Ben was blowing it-fighting back the urge to cackle-and she stood there just calmly playing with her hair. She was getting ready to steal the scene from him *heaven be damned*.

"No, Chum, I hate this part," Fred admitted as his eyes couldn't find a way to stop watching. Fred knew Chum's life was about to be destroyed; and he couldn't watch a man like Ben's dream die as well (but looking away wasn't an option either).

"Daddy, why did you push me down the steps for laughing, why?" Chum asked sharply with his lower lip quivering, couldn't stop it, slowly losing his legs beneath him. "I wouldn't push you. I just wanted to laugh because you hair was so messed up. Why couldn't I laugh, just once that day? I was a good kid, I didn't make any MESS. I didn't drink your Dr. Pep's, why hit and push Chum?" Chum asked tearfully with snot coming out of his nostrils, and tears hitting his shoes. His voice cracked, and he could barely speak. Chum looked at Ben and tears clouded his vision.

"That doesn't matter, get over here! You...you-" Ben lost his train of thought and froze up (in his mind he knew he was choking big time).

“Don’t listen to him, Chum,” Beth interrupted calmly with her hands batting away invisible dirt from her shoes. “He’ll beat you ‘til you’re dead. I’ll never hit you even ONCE, never. I swear to you, Chum, he’ll just keep on hurtin’ ya,” Beth said as she moved her foot like a young school girl would (from side to side in a youthful fashion) “All his days you’ll want him to be a good father. And all those days he’ll blow it. Jason, your favorite show’s coming on and yes, it’s Mister Bungle. Are you hungry yet?” Beth asked coyly-in a soft voice you heard only in church-as she knew she had him now. She watched Chum trying to decide what to do, his eyes down, and Ben at a loss for words. She knew then, she had toppled the great *BEN TRAIN*.

“Say something!!” Jen cried as she was pulling her hair out. “Anything, SAY IT!” yelled Jen angrily with diamonds of light bouncing off her fallen tears. Jen saw herself as Chum, both losing their father when they were young. She wanted to hug him right then and there. She knew Ben was blowing it; and it made her sick to her stomach to watch.

“Oh God, here comes the look,” Fred said with his voice sounding dry and cracking.

Chum looked left, felt his bruised cheek, and then looked at Ben. Ben’s eyes opened wide with shock-completely wrong moment for the scene, and what the Academy admitted was his undoing-and he gasped for air (as he knew he had lost him).

“I can’t, too many bruises,” Chum confessed as he rubbed his cheek. “I, I just don’t want to hurt all time. Bye, Daddy,” Chum said tearfully as he kicked off the new sneakers Ben had bought for him. Both shoes resting in a mud puddle as a frog was leaping onto them a second later. Chum ran over to Beth; and she threw a soft smirk to Ben. Ben knew then he had lost the Oscar.

Jen hid her head in the cushions like a groundhog and cried. She punched the seat beside her 3 times hard, as she was beyond heartbroken.

“I don’t know why we keep watching it if it rips our hearts out every time,” Scott continued as he stood up and went to the window. “I mean, it’s his own stupid fault,” Scott said as he grabbed a Dr. Pepper out of the fridge.

“You mean the bet?” Fred asked.

“Yeah, Fred, I mean it seems like a perfectly amazing premise, granted” Scott said with a voice that sounded more sad than pissed. “You enter the scene with no dialogue. And one person gets Chum to go with them. And then is decided by that kid actor, what’s his name, Jason or something,” Scott explained as he shot his hands through his hair and tried to slow his breathing (Scott didn’t like getting angry for any reason). “I mean it makes me angry, because the script had Chum going to Ben in the first place. If he would have just played the lines, he’d be an Oscar winner right now,” Scott said, his mind racing through the different scenes he remembered from the news when Ben was found out to be in a self induced coma (and that day people found out he didn’t want out of that coma on the 6 o’clock, for any reason). “Probably 5 or 6 times over too. Instead the guy’s been in a coma for 30 years. It just sucks,” Scott confessed as he knelt down, and rubbed Jen’s back with the bottom of his cold Dr. Pepper can, Jen trying to hold it together (and weeping).

“Yeah, and even weirder for me,” Fred said as he reached around the cushions for any loose change (or his bag of Skittles). “He has his New Life character taken from this movie-using his DNA to map out his entire brain scan-replaying the scenes from the movie on that planet, Verashit, I mean Veraclare,” Fred spoke in a voice that said I’m joking, but not really. “That would be cool though, to act with him. Like, considering he controls it from his coma,” Fred said as his eyes moved around the room like an eagle’s looking for his half eaten bag of Skittles; however Scott had already eaten them in the bathroom.

“No, no, please, Chum,” Jen begged as she rained on her chin. “Ah, I need to lay for a minute don’t ask me any questions,” Jen cried as she rolled over onto her back-her mind racing through the whole Oscar snub speech Beth had done (saying Ben was resting in space as she won)-and she watched the

credits roll past at the end of Shadow Thief. There she saw the bonus frame-she had timed it out to watch just that-of Ben collapsing onto his chest.

“Scott, what if we went there?” Fred asked with a glimmer in his eye.

“Go there, ha...hah, come on,” Scott rebuffed with his hand punching the wall now. “Look if we go there we’ll all flunk out. My dad would be none too pleased with that scenario. No, it’s just a dream to me now.” Scott said hoping he could have said yes.

“Wait, we could go and be back in a week,” Fred explained with his hands joining the conversation. “That’s only missing two days of school, Scott, come on yourself. Look, I’ll say I kidnapped you and made you eat dirt. But not sand, I don’t want that on my hands,” Fred said sarcastically now just walking around nervously (with a giddiness to his walk). “Oh, can we all just like do SOMETHING COOL, once with our lives?” Fred asked using his best shame the world voice. He reclined on a pair of pillows and sipped his Dr. Pepper like it was hot (to make Jen laugh, and she giggled at this).

“No way, no way, that’s crazy,” Scott answered mournfully, and the sun slipped out from behind a cloud (with Scott thinking this was a sign). “If anything let’s just go to the Balladerium and-”

“And play full body chess, in this weather, really, Scott?” Jen fired back without hesitation before Scott could finish. “No, *I need this and I need it bad*, Scott. Fred’s right who cares about school. You know you’re going to be working in your dad’s kitchen someday. You know, you know it,” Jen grimaced and grabbed Scott’s dangling hand. “And you also know you don’t need an ed-ja-ma-cation to do that. Come on, let’s rattle the stars a bit,” begged Jen as she tossed pillows at Scott. “Let’s be rude to strangers, Scott, think about it,” Jen said coyly-knowing he would love doing all those things-and she leaned into Scott and tickled his stomach. Scott grimaced, as he was staring up at the ceiling.

“I am so screwed,” Scott said sadly as he knew he was about to do something really stupid (or really fun).

Jen smiled and then Fred. And they started dancing around Scott and singing the Hungry Hippo movie theme song.

“If you’re a really smelly hippo! Then you know you’re not my friend! But if the RAIN DOES GET YA! You blew it once again!! I hate your neck, but what the heck, we knew it all along!! The Hippo is a part of us, and now he does beee-longgg!!!” Fred and Jen sang as they pushed Scott around playfully.

“Yeah, you only get one chance to really blow it in this life,” Scott said with his eyes looking down and his mind filled with thoughts of Veraclare. “And that time is now. And I’m TAKING IT! Let’s roll YOU MOLES!” Scott said as he jumped up and punched the ceiling; and then he danced around like a damn fool. He secretly wanted them to get him to go, because he had no desire to go school on Monday (seeing as he had a public speaking speech to deliver, *which he hated*).

They made their way into the gorilla head shaped car Jen owned (The Blinky Mousemobile). And it had the bumper stickers I SAVE TREES BY EATING THEM as well as the one YOU CAN SINK A SHIP WITH LOVE AND DEAD PEOPLE. SO I GUESS I’LL SWIM THEN. And they were stuck sideways on her back window (and the window was round and 5 feet across). They were on their way to Fresha Space terminal now. It was 3 miles away; and it rose up out of a manmade mountain.

At Fresha, Jim Kay a lean 6 foot 1 inch bald man-with no humor in his blue eyes-was arguing with security officer Jeb Brown (Jim had never lost an argument in his mind *IN YEARS*).

“That’s bull!” Jim shrieked as he glared at Jeb-hoping to get into an altercation-as Jeb just stood there stoically. “There’s no way you lost my luggage, bull-shit. I want my fuckin’ bags, and I want them now. I’ll crack that head WIDE OPEN, huh, Pal. That’s right, go get it, NOW! Worst damn service ever!” Jim barked angrily as he looked around for something-or someone-to punch. His beautiful purple haired girlfriend Kim Dealt stood there wanting to laugh-having seen this movie many times before-but she knew it would set Jim off.

Kim Dealt was all of 5 feet 1 and curvy (much like Mary Ann from Gilligan’s Island). Her eyes never



showed fear or worry (about dead people). And that is to say, she didn't care about the past she just wanted to enjoy her life. Jim on the other hand, loved history and playing internet poker. He had won the World Series of Poker 3 times (the last time still in dispute as to whether or not he had seen his opponent's cards). This put him in the class of Stevie Unger (the best ever to turn a card).

"Maybe he hid it?" Kim asked vaguely-knowing it would get Jim riled up-as she shrugged her shoulders. "Like, in a hiding place?"

"Kim, not now you're wearing me out," Jim responded. "God if I don't get my laptop and those checks, man. WHAM!" shouted Jim his eyes on a soda machine; it was nearby and he wanted to smash it. He saw a man standing there trying to buy a diet Mountain Dew. His thoughts quickly turned to how thirsty he was for the same thing.

"Jim, don't go Dew hunting," Kim demanded as she held onto Jim's stomach. "I need you to calm down, it will be fine."

"Kim, I just need a fuckin' Dew, not your yap," Jim said sharply as he pulled her hands off his stomach; like he was pulling spider webs off his shirt. "I just hope that peckerhead, hasn't snagged the last Dew. Hold tight here while I ah, go check. Serious I'll be right back," Jim said as he kissed Kim on the cheek, and then caressed her arm and left.

Jim jogged over to the soda machine (making sure to run like he was some sort of sports star out for a jog, knees high). He watched a: black haired, balding fat man named Harvey Smoke, shake the machine violently. They both could see the last diet Mountain Dew hanging precariously from a spiral hook.

"DAMN IT!!" Harvey shouted as he reared back like he was going to punch the machine, but Jim grabbed his fist and stopped him. "FAAALLL!!" screamed Harvey as he shook the machine. He lowered his shoulder and tried to smash it like a football linebacker, but it did little.

Jim stood there laughing to himself, but he still had his eye on the last Dew (he knew for him to have a good trip he needed that Dew more than this Harvey loser).

“Gee, I don’t know about that one,” Jim said hollowly as he grimaced and slouched like he’d been turned down for a dance at Prom (he hoped Harvey would bite on his deception and beat it).

“You don’t know about what, WHAT?!”

“I mean, I had this happen to me once,” Jim said hollowly as he tried to act like someone had died. “The same thing, where a Pepsi was stuck,” said Jim hollowly as he tried not to grin. “And, Man, I fucking shook that machine for HOURS, and it never dropped. Serious, you might want to go get the manager. I mean, ya know,” Jim said coyly as he secretly knew you just had to put in another 5 dollars and kick it-hard for that matter-and then the Dew would just fall like the stock market after a bad jobs report. He hoped Harvey was so mad and embarrassed he’d believe him.

“Yeah, yeah you’re probably right,” Harvey growled as he tucked in his sweaty Armani shirt.

“I can watch it for you, ya know, so no one takes it,” Jim offered, keeping his eyes off the delicious Dew.

“Thank you, I just love the taste of diet Dew, I mean I love it,” Harvey admitted as he combed his greasy black hair back; and then he blew snot out of his left nostril into the trash (Jim noticed this disgusting party favor but said nothing). “Alright ah, I’ll be right back,” Harvey muttered begrudgingly as he knew dealing with security was always a hassle. Harvey turned and walked off. Jim watched Harvey’s reflection on the vending machine’s glass front (just waiting ‘til he was out of sight to pounce).

“Keep going loser, just a bit further,” Jim whispered greedily as he eyed Harvey and then the diet Dew. He saw Harvey duck around a corner-relief washed over him the Dew was his-and then he felt a hand on his arm that startled him.

“Hey, Jim, I got your luggage,” Kim beamed as she showed Jim his brown leather bags.

“OH, yes that’s awesome,” Jim said as he quickly opened his wallet. “Did you check inside?”

“Yeah, it’s all there,” Kim said reassuringly as she rubbed Jim’s back. “You better buy that Dew or that guy will come back,” said Kim as she scanned around the terminal for Dew hungry tourists (all of the faces looking thirsty as sin to Jim).

“Yeah, I better before that assclown comes back,” Jim said as he got ready to scan his dollar in. “I totally duped that idiot. Hey, let’s walk further to the right over there on the way to the ship. I don’t want me and my delicious new Dew, bumping into that idiot. God, what a dope,” Jim said as he held the 5 dollar bill up to the scanner-rendering the bill useless after the bar code on the side was activated-and he greedily watched the diet Mountain Dew come almost all the way off and stop. The bottle teetered there unable to drop down; and Jim felt completely pissed off and kicked the machine.

“Yeah, that’s how you get ah 5 dollar Dew,” Kim said in a southern bell sounding voice. “Just break the 60,000 dollar machine. I knew you knew it, I did think about it myself too, Jim.”

Jim grabbed the diet Mountain Dew; and he chugged it like he was dying of thirst.

“What?” Jim asked as he felt the sweat under his eyes pop out (like it always did when he drank soda).

“Yeah, well fuck it! It’s my god damn Dew now. They shouldn’t have had a broken machine in the first place. I’d smash it too if that Dew hadn’t fallen. I swear, I need my Dew or I fly cranky,” Jim said as he drank the last of the diet Dew and blinked hard. He knew that was better than rocket fuel for him; and they headed for the terminal.

Harvey came around the corner-knowing he had a delicious Mountain Dew coming-and saw Jim had left. He felt instantly pissed and deceived. And when he got to the machine and saw the last Dew gone, he knew what had happened.

“You’re dead PAL, DEAD!!” Harvey screamed as he glared at an old lady walking past. “Man if I see that bastard again, oh is he screwed,” Harvey said angrily as he burned holes through the back of every face he saw.

Jim and Kim walked calmly arm and arm onto the anti-gravity ship called the Fresha (they were known by their terminal name all over). It used the gravity of a planet to slingshot itself 50 lightspeed to any destination. It did this by using a counter force to gravity called Ti.

Meanwhile Jen, Fred, and Scott had just parked the Blinky Mousemobile; and they were riding the moving couches on the sidewalk.

“Fred, you can’t ask me two questions in a row, it’s rude,” Jen said as she rested her head on Fred’s shoulder. “Just drift off a bit, get in your own head. Scott, talk to Fred he might be like ner...vous,” Jen said as she yawned. She sat back with the heels of her shoes dragging on the sidewalk (like she always did when she was young).

Fred looked around and saw there were hardly any people in the arcade. He eyed his favorite game- Caller Sky-and wanted to play it desperately. It was a basketball game that mimicked the real game; the only difference is you got to feel like you had a 50 inch vertical (Fred had about a 15 on a good day).

“Nope,” Scott said flatly- he started to feel hungry every time he got stressed-and he lifted his head to watch people hurrying to the Fresha.

“Scott, the load, the load needs shouldering,” Jen joked as she undid her bra (to let the girl’s breathe). “Sorry, I just wanna zone out, not think. Hmm yup,” Jen said as she saw they were riding past a man on his anti-gravity bicycle. The bike made the old long haired man riding it-a throwback to when people were obsessed with smoking pot for some reason-appear as if he was in flames using only holograms. She wondered why he wanted people feeling so stressed when they looked at him as he rode by.

“Nope,” Scott replied with his mind on the good looking blonde haired women they were riding past. His thoughts were, if only she would look at me, I could smile, and that would get her to like me.

“Jen, why don’t we think about some stuff?” asked Fred hoping she would fill in his sentence for him.

“O.k., but not boring I’m so nervous stuff. I can’t be so..., ya know what I mean, Fred,” Jen answered as she leaned forward like she was going to vomit.

Fred laughed, and Scott chuckled, as they saw the sun was getting taken over by the clouds.

“What if the whole trip goes like, beyond our wildest dreams?” asked Fred with his hands barely able to stop moving (like an ice cube lasting a full second in hell). “Come on think about that,” Fred said as he rocked out to invisible music (some old indie band he liked, Black Laces).

“Yeah I think it WILL, the whole time,” Jen said nervously with her body slowly moving all around-with no regard for anything-the cushion covered floor. “I’m just dying to see it. Boy I hope I don’t get too nervous,” Jen admitted as she shook out her hands like they were cold (and she thought of acting with Ben Train and seeing Chum).

“My head would explode if you did, Jen,” Scott said now feeling the power of a good trip coursing through his veins (screw working for dad he thought). “Now, let’s go and find some parking. It seems like Mr. Fatback is ahead of us. Can you please move that belly, I’m waiting Mr. Fatback?” asked Scott sarcastically as he frowned with a wink at a 400 pound man ahead of them (he was riding on a golden motorcycle and driving into the parking lot, and his name was Mr. Neck).

“Yeah, I just decided the thing, oh yeah that one!” Jen said as her mind tried to calm down.

“What one, Jen, what?” asked Fred as he reached back and snatched a map of Fresha-it was so large you could rent luggage racks by the month-from a newsstand as a man bought his paper.

Jen played drums on her head, but the rhythm didn’t matter to her.

“I am taking the scream-er.”

“No way, that’s too dangerous you could be buzzard breakfast,” Fred spoke using his less than manly voice. “I say we meander over to the terminal the long way, like long,” Fred said with his eyes on the terminal through a window (he felt insignificant and small coming even this close to it. *AND ALL THOSE PEOPLE*, he thought).

Scott tried not to laugh, but the car had a great energy in it.

“Yeah, no more Fred nerves to hold this cowboy WITH HORSE, back,” Scott felt his words sail through the echo of the parking lot. “I’m taking the screamer too, Fred, so suck it pluckneck!” Scott said jokingly and he did gentle karate chops on Fred’s arm, with Jen doing the same.

Fred grimaced and dusted off his other shoulder. His thoughts were of when he was pushed down the slide by his part time father when he was 5 years old (hurting that same shoulder).

“No, I want sprinkles before I do,” Fred said glumly as he felt the weight of the situation dragging him down. “Whole handful, that’s my price. No cheap Fred let me tell ya about the TELL.”

“Fred, we’re not walking the 2 miles to the train; and then up,” Jen considered his request for a second. “So, take off those panties and grab your bag, I see our ride. I love a screamer,” Jen confessed as she grabbed her bag-barely being able to contain her excitement-and jumped off the couch while it was still moving. Scott hit the parking brake-fearing she might wipe out-and the couch came to an abrupt stop. He left the cushion in a same spot; but they had to climb off the side to avoid some homeless people fighting on the sidewalk.

“Jen, she has had her moment before,” Fred remarked proudly. “Third grade, doing stretches in gym class in a small shirt, oh yeah. Still my hottest moment ever,” Fred said as he ran after Jen.

Jen had a hint of a smile on her face, as she ran towards a mushroom shaped terminal (that was 3 miles across in the center). It had flashing purple and orange waves of light traveling throughout it constantly. It also had people riding Screamers, which were pods you strapped into (much like parachuting only you went upward). They took off like a rocket; the whole mile and a football field up to Fresha Terminal. It gave the appearance of total chaos, but the mortality rate was only 40 percent. There were large red anti-gravity police cycles flying around (that had everyone's eye good or bad).

"Man, Fred, let's all race," Jen said as she pushed Fred's hand towards his launch button-that read BE CAREFUL NOT TO LEAN BACK on it-with the top of her head. "Come now, races with speed, and distance, awesome!" Jen said as they all swiped their credit cards. They laid down on the Screamers and got strapped in.

"Awesome, gruesome death, for no apparent reason, sign me up," Scott said anxiously as he held on tight and took one last quick breath.

"That's the SPIRIT!" Jen said brightly as she tucked her chin into the rubber chin circle. "Scotty Boy, borrow some of Fred's spirit. Then tuck in those tits, 'cause I win," Jen said as she smiled like she'd eaten all the tribe's provisions; and she rocketed up the side of the terminal. Fred and Scott did the same a second later.

"THIS IS CRAAAZZY!!" Fred screamed as he held on for dear life. Fred didn't actually mind danger: he just knew someone else would prefer it more. In his mind, he knew Jen and Scott saved him from his shy self.

They started to go more sideways-feeling cold and sick for the most part-and around a giant tower shaped like a dragon's arm. They saw several thousand people doing the same thing as them on either side (and it was exhilarating).

“This is FUUUNNN!!!” Jen cried with her voice filled with a pronounced vibrato-caused by the intense shaking-as they all ducked into the tunnel leading inside. It had bright blue and green lights showing the way; with walls of light you passed through every so often. There were people eating lunch; and some eyeing the Screamers racing past the windows.

“Nope, way fun!” said Scott happily as he eyed a red haired boy named Kevin Parsley, as he dropped his ice cream and cried.

“Can the fun be over now?” Fred asked with sickness hitting his stomach. “LIKE NOW!!” Fred yelled as they spiraled into their separate colored tubes; and then got blasted with anti-bacterial sprays. They did that as a rule of law (not a precaution).

Suddenly, they were blasted from behind with an air jet, towards a steel door. Just as they were about to crash into the door, it flung open. And they were gently helped out of the tube by 2-had been featured on romance novels-blond men named Arto and Sam.

“Wow, that was awesome,” Jen said. A profound certainty swept into her mind: I’m going to see my idol Ben Train, this is real. “Fred, let’s go do it again. Come on, Old Fred, we need the excitement,” Jen insisted as she put her elbow into Fred’s side. And she smiled-like a character from the 1950’s-to make Fred laugh (she knew Fred was always better to be around when he was happy).

Fred groaned, nodding his head sarcastically YES. Scott looked at the departure times; and he saw they had 2 minutes to get to their flight, or no go.

“Look, we gotta motor,” Scott said quickly.

“What, we just got here I want a massage and some gum,” Jen said in disbelief-she knew Scott was acting mighty Fred for her liking.



“No, serious our flight is about to leave!” Scott demanded. “If it does we’ll have to sleep in the terminal tonight. Let’s go!”

“Oh my god, WHERE?” asked Jen excitedly as she reached for her ticket. Jen knew-from all the news channels she watched-that there were unsavory characters and smells in the terminal at night (that she wanted no part of).

“There!” Fred exclaimed. “I SEE IT! Well I guess the bad streak of Fred luck h-”

“FRED!!” Jen and Scott interrupted in unison.

“Alright, let’s run!!” Fred yelled as he flailed his seal black leather bag over his shoulder-like a young boy carrying his sleeping bag-and ran like he had gone completely nuts.

Jen and Scott sprinted alongside him; ducking people left and right. They jumped over a small kid playing in a coin fountain-it was made to look like a mermaid sunbathing-and Jen kicked his beach ball good and hard into an old man’s lap. They ran quickly around a man selling fast food pasta (he barely looked up). And they each snatched a single square of ravioli off a fat man’s plate (assuming he’d thank them later).

“I loooove me some pasta,” Jen said with her eyes darting around the room for a drink she could steal. “They should call it Jen, just so I wouldn’t forget ya know. Big talker, Fred, here, if we don’t make it I’m blaming you,” Jen said as she snatched a Pepsi out of an African American man’s pocket-she knew he’d thank her too someday-and started to chug it. Fred eyed a delicious ice and orange juice concoction a college student was holding. And when he tried to steal it from the college student; he tripped and flung the juice right into Scott’s eye.

“Sorry, I’m a bad thief,” Fred apologized almost meaning it by the sound of his voice.

“Fred, you’re due a good talkin’ too young man, it’s coming,” Scott said jokingly as he wiped his eyes and accidentally stepped into a meditation pool (being used by a group of Buddhist monks). And when he did the water splashed: ruined their karma, and the good vibes of all in attendance.

“Hey, I think I see it,” Jen exclaimed.

Scott and Fred smiled at this-while people behind them were getting ready to pound them-and saw they were running parallel to the ship (and you couldn’t mistake the grandeur of that vessel).

“I can’t, is it invisible?” Fred barked sarcastically as he swung his bag; and he smashed a young blonde haired man’s ice cream right into his face (somewhat accidentally). The man started after Fred, but the ice made his eyes hurt, and he abandoned his pursuit.

“It is, I can see it, because it’s invisible!” Scott called like he was entering an empty house. “Hey, why are we shouting, ahhh?!” asked Scott as they ran past some power lifters working out (in a Pecs are Life floating workout studio). Jen slowed for a moment, and blew them some kisses. Fred pulled on her arm, and they were off and running again.

“Because it’s EMBARRASSING?!” bellowed Fred. “I don’t know why, it just makes my head and neck hurt. Aahh!” Fred yelled as he dove over an old woman-seeing she was spry to avoid him-and he did a forward roll around the corner.

Jen laughed to herself for a moment, but then she saw the ship. She could see people swimming inside; and they looked drunk as St. Patrick’s Day to her.

Scott eyed a piece of fried dough-covered in powdered sugar just like Scott liked-that a young boy had just bought. He knew if he took it, that kid would never catch him. Scott snatched it out of the tan skinned curly haired boy’s hand-named Rusty Nailer-and cackled like Krusty the Clown.

“I am the Law,” Scott said as he ate the fried dough (it covering his face in white powdered sugar).  
“Jen, I looovve trips,” Scott used a southern accent that was more *southern Maine than Georgia*.

Jen ducked her head and looked away like she didn’t know him. Jen yanked Fred by his left arm into the tunnel leading to the Fresha.

“Keep your, I need meds and I talk to myself shit to yourself, Dude,” Jen kidded with Scott. “Fred, let’s ditch, Scott.”

Fred started to act like he was embarrassed to be with Scott-knowing the future joke value *alone* of such a thing-by running to the opposite side of the tunnel into the Fresha.

“Boy this is good fried dough, I LOVE IT!” Scott said as he ate the fried dough, but nearly took a man’s head off with his Nike gym bag as he swung it.

Jen eyed the ship’s doors-her mind on Ben and Veraclare-and she could see they were about to shut, damn she thought. Seeing this she ran and slid softball style-one year of varsity softball-into the crack below the door.

“Hey, can you open the door please?” Jen asked brightly as she smiled. “My leg is stuck inside,” Jen said warmly as she pushed her leg further in; and then she smiled like a catalog model for L.L. Bean.

Scott eyed the large muscle bound doorman named simple Granny; and he tried to act pathetic.

“Look, come now I...alright. But I better see tickets,” Granny said begrudgingly in a voice too deep for Barry White. Gary had a face for movies, but they were the invisible kind you couldn’t see. He was so ugly he creeped himself out.

“Thanks, Handsome, nice of ya,” Jen said hollowly as she stood up and strutted past Gary (knowing she’d never see him again). Scott and Fred hurried in behind her; and they saw what can only be described as utter chaos. There were hundreds of teenagers and no mall. There were gossip circles

forming; and I HATE HIM lists being written. The smell of bubblegum and cheap plastic sunglasses permeated the massive playroom. There were so many backpacks Jen felt nauseas.

“Jen, what in the false hip is this?” Fred asked. “I can’t hang with these kids, I couldn’t even when I was their age,” Fred said in disbelief as he started nervously looking around for a girl to ask for a dance—as old habits die hard—and twitched.

“Fred, we’re not hanging out with these losers,” Jen said as she scanned the room. “Come on; let’s go find the spot where the cool people are. Come on, ya know, the spot?”

“Yeah, Fred, it was SO OBVIOUS!” Scott joked as he hid his face in his shirt (like he didn’t want to be seen with Fred). “Hurry up,” Scott muttered sarcastically as he pulled on Fred’s underwear to remind him of 8<sup>th</sup> grade (specifically the Jeremy Hodson wedge incident. Where Fred was given so many wedgies he walked on his toes *for THREE MONTHS*).

They walked through the mass of teenagers, and Jen saw James Kay waving to them from the upper deck. He was smiling and half in the bag (if it was filled with whiskey). Jim eyed Jen and he knew she could hang with anyone. She had a certain spark he had never seen under the microscope of daytime.

“Up here, above the time warp,” Jim cupped his hands and yelled in a deep voice. “Serious, there’s food and drinks up here. Hey I’m Jim Kay, nice to meet you. Oh don’t call me Jim or I’ll murder you.

Just kidding, follow me,” Jim said as he ushered them down a brief hallway (with golden picture frames on either side of the crew and their kids). He led them into the Total Visual Enhancement lounge. It was called this because you had robots interacting with people and playing drinking games together (yeah robots can drink). You also had swiveling stages; with anti-gravity boot wearing rock and roll stars shooting out sound bubbles. Once you pierced the outer shell, it sounded like you were at the best show ever.

“Man, I mean, what a cool zone,” Fred said as he tried to convince Jim he was cool. And Jim heard this and laughed to himself (he knew Fred was chess club material, but not the captain).

“Yeah, it’s a COOL ZONE,” Jim mimicked Fred’s voice and mannerisms perfectly. “Huh, I hear ya, Brother Bear. No, we’ve got a long ride so we might as well enjoy it, right?” Jim asked barely able to talk he was laughing so hard; and he walked everyone into a private purple and gold colored lounge (it was called the Dry Ocean).

The Dry Ocean was as sleazy as the men’s bathroom at a porno movie. There were seedy types and undesirables lurking and leering at Jen. The smell was of Richmond Virginia: pack 8, row nine, and hospital bed 197. Even the music sucked; as a droning Radiohead like singer sang about his kindergarten crush dumping him (why did you stop holding my hand sort of stuff).

“Wowee, this place is hot!” Jen said sarcastically as she tried to keep from actually touching any of the undesirables.

Scott laughed and Jim still hadn’t fully stopped, but Jim had a lurking surprise for them all.

“Well they don’t serve beer here either,” Jim said hollowly as he coughed into his coat pocket. “Nope, apple smoothies galore,” said Jim coyly. “Wowee, I could just die in this velvet. I’ll tell ya what, if the smell doesn’t tell ya you’re home, you are. Perk up, Fred, we’re in the COOL ZONE,” Jim said sarcastically as he could barely keep a straight face.

“I don’t feel so cool, less cool more hurl me out a window,” Fred spoke with a voice he saved for when he was uncomfortable. “Ya know, not to put down your favorite place, Jim, but this sucks,” Fred said as he grimaced like the meat was bad. Then Jim laughed into Fred’s sleeve with his eyes closed.

Jen eyed Jim cautiously-not sure if he was looking for a one night stand or what-and she saw he was up to something. She stepped through the last of the holographic walls in the room-unaware that there

was any-and she fell one step down and spun around; she saw hundreds of people playing a game reminiscent of chess, but with murder.

The hall was 8 stories high; and had thousands of small and large rooms throughout (accessible by elevator of course). Each of the rooms read like a who's who of Hollywood (as not only the tourists wanted to see Ben Train one last time, the stars needed to as well). Even Beth was making the trip this time, but not to see Ben, *but to DESTROY HIM*.

Inside Beth's lavish stateroom, she peeked out a small secret window at the game below. The scowl on her face was not anger; she just always looked like you'd eaten her breakfast. She was old now, much older than when she won her Oscar. The room was stately and extravagant, but reeked of white trash. Beth loved monster trucks and-punch you in the eyes-whiskey, but she was ever the lady in public.

"Gloria, Gloria, Gloria, that joke never gets old," Beth said firmly as she took another swig of whiskey (that could power a car).

"New crop of idiots uh?" asked Gloria with the excitement of a funeral.

"Same crop, different day," Beth snapped her hand drifting down her neck to make Gloria horny. "Find my *GOOD DRESS*. I need to stick it to those nut suckers! My, the day you stop giving it to the younger generation, is the day they bury you," Beth said sharply as she eyed Fred-and she thought him a worthy idiot to mock-as he rubbed his neck and grimaced. Her eyes started blinking and then stopped dead in traffic. She looked at Jen and saw *talent in her eyes*.

"Here, they can bury you in this," Gloria said, and she was certainly ALL of the seal black haired, 30 year old lover, Beth had always been lusting for.

"See that girl, no one knows her but me," Beth pointed with her glass to Jen walking. "I've never seen her before, but they wash up on the shores of Hollywood Boulevard every day. They dream like us, they may even have talent, but they're too damn kind to be nice to people. HER, that one is who I will

destroy. The *GOOD SUNGLASSES*, Gloria, hurry,” Beth said flatly as she eyed Jen at the moment she walked right out into the middle of the game. Jen started kicking the holographic chess pieces and giggling.

“I love this game, no one wins and we all care,” Jen declared with her actor’s voice loud and succinct. “Can somebody rub my neck, just a little neck rub here? Jim, it’s this neck, the one under my head,” Jen said as she smiled like a precocious child. She pulled out her shirt with both hands; and acted like she was a dancing monkey.

“Yeah, I’m down for that,” Jim said as he set down his drink and ran circles around Jen (literally).

“Jim, you passed me,” Jen spoke warmly eyeing Jim as he ran around her (she had an attraction to him she couldn’t explain).

“Now hold on, I just have to find the right angle to rub that neck,” Jim continued running around her with his tongue out the side of his mouth. “Which neck?” Jim asked. “The one carrying that chicken head of Jen’s,” Jim spoke as he’d known her all his life.

“Oh that neck, haven’t seen it,” Jen said as she used her clothes as a makeshift Matador’s cape. “Jim, these people are acting weirdo. They are definitely eyeing my neck, and want to yank it, yes yank my neck.”

“Jen, they wouldn’t dare. Back it up small fry,” Jim said as Jack Gouldville walked aggressively towards him. Jack was all of 5’4” and 300 game beats of *The Legend of Zelda*. He had eyes that made people get diarrhea, and legs that did the same (all stick like and gangly). He had on a jacket reading **BASEBALL’S GOT DADDY’S BOYS, AND BASKETBALL’S MISSING ITS DADDYS. AND HOCKEY STANDS RIGHTEOUS, AND JUST KICKS ASS!** His green sunglasses glowed when he spoke.

“OFF, the game board,” Jack demanded using his authoritative voice. “This match is sanctioned Hall of games, I don’t care to miss it. Move it along, still got your confidence in tow,” Jack said as he walked right up to Jim and looked him over. Jim looked at him and felt that Jack was hiding some sort of fight training.

“Jim, well, he’s definitely awfully close to my neck,” Jen held her neck in her hands. “I mean, I’m right here, Jim” Jen said playfully as she looked at Jack wolfishly grinning. Jack could see scene study in Jim’s eyes; and movement class in Jen’s hips.

“That is one fine neck yes, but I dare not touch it,” Jack said sarcastically as he acted like he was batting away flies. “So, Jim, here we are with our one man staring contest. How about this, I quit this stupid match and we use ah, well...we’ll see,” Jack said as he pulled out a solid gold game key (in the shape of a knife). He rubbed the blade up and down and the chess game disappeared (and the other players groaned).

“Good trick,” Jen walked around Jack poking his hips and arms. “I don’t mind you playing later when I’m gone, AT ALL.”

“Jen, glad to hear it, and it I hear. So, who’s up for some minor scene study, Jim?” Jack asked warmly as he started riffling through the different holograms of big time movies. Jen meanwhile watched in wonder as the movies formed around them. Scott and Fred walked out onto the game board, casually with drinks in hand and eyes wide. Fred wondered just how the holograms were produced out in space.

Beth started down from her room; watching the nauseating childlike glee on their faces with disdain. She knew a small town somebody could get lucky if you let them, *and cripple you*. She watched as Jim pulled off his jacket-showing his muscular chest and arms-and his heterosexuality made her gag.

“Wow, this is like being at the movies,” Jim said in disbelief as he watched the movies change. “Are there fist punches and wet seats too?” Jim asked sarcastically as he felt the eyes of Beth on him (judging



by the power of her he knew already it was someone famous. He knew this because he had met Rick Klingrow once at a cabstand, and it was that same feeling again. He didn't want to give her the satisfaction of looking over. That meant he looked for her reflection on the wall. When he saw her on the (Coors Light) mirrored door to the men's room, he froze. Jim spun around and looked up at her as she glared back at him.

"Jim, we can make them wet, to remind you of home if you want," Jen joked as she did a spinning turn. "And they don't even, what are you staring mo-bearing at?" Jen asked as she tugged on Jim's arm. Fred and Scott looked up and saw Beth burning holes through them all.

"Oh no, not that crazy bitch," Jack muttered sadly as he put his blade back in his pocket. Jack had a certain disdain for Beth, due in large part to an autograph she gave him once that read "Go fuck yourself you little troll" that he never got over.

Beth walked down, grinning now, and tossing her hair back. She walked past the now shocked gamers-her eyes undressing them for fun-and over to where Jen was standing. Jen for some reason didn't react, as her eyes looked at Beth, and then gently away. For Beth it was sheer agony, as she knew the hayseed had the jump on her.

"Hi there, how is everyone my little darlings?" Beth asked coyly as she flashed her 8 million dollar teeth (her last sham husband Larry Nurt paid for them).

"Hey, you owe me a god damn autograph, BETH. Why don't you-" Jack started.

"OH of course, here, hand me your jacket?"

Jack handed her his jacket reluctantly; and she promptly tore it in half and flicked him off.

“No, the *other jacket?*” asked Beth snidely as she put her hand over her smiling mouth. “Come now, go scurry off and find you one,” Beth said gleefully as she fought back her horse-like cackle (that was wine tasting ready).

“You’re paying for that Skank! I outta.-” Jack said sternly before Beth raised her hand and silenced him.

“Gladly, was that real white trash sofa cushion material?” Beth asked condescendingly as she made contorted faces. “Because I’ve never seen finer, PA!” wisecracked Beth. “Now, I can feel some animosity in this room, per qui?”

“Per quat!” replied Jen quickly. “That’s French for donut,” Jen fired back sarcastically as she grinned like Beth was a shack hag (there was a large community of people living in shacks in Portland from Somalia). Everyone noticed that it took the air out of Beth’s sails, but only momentarily.

Jim eyed Gloria carefully, and knew she was about to say something vile due to *a powerful intuition*, he knew she was bad news.

“The, bacon is a food group girl, cracked wise, I hears it,” Gloria spoke in a southern accent and her contempt apparent to all.

Jack walked over-his every step beating the game board into submission-and picked up a screenplay he had written titled Gaining Grip. He tossed it across the floor; where it stopped just at Beth’s feet.

“Are we acting or what, Bitch?!” demanded Jack.

Beth grinned mischievously at this-she always had a certain reverse charm with the little people that kept them at bay-and she kicked his screenplay across the floor.

“Rubbish, what you think I read *CRAYON* and *DOOBIES?*” Beth asked condescendingly with her hand grabbing her crotch (and her mouth contorted in a sexual fashion). “Please, let’s act something

with: class, intelligence, a defined moral compass. Something like, I don't know... Red Clay?" asked Beth nonchalantly as she took off her coat by simply throwing her shoulders back. She again disrobed and took off her sunglasses (and made sure to keep her eyes shut as she did, for appearances sake). She knew the sheer power of such an act; it could and would cripple every actor in the room. She also knew Jen was watching.

"That movie is unactable, don't waste our time," Jack rebuffed anxiously, his eyes never leaving Beth (he feared she was serious).

Jen smiled like a bicycle thief; and started to run the movie Red Clay through her mind. She knew the car scene all too well, but she couldn't remember the name of the town.

"Fred, or, Scott, for that matter, what is the town called in Red Clay?" Jen wondered aloud.

"It's Pastoon since you asked me like I was a child and emasculated me," Scott said as he filled his mind with calm thoughts: the windmill mini golf hole, Big Burger and Fries drive-thru, the backyard at his parents place. "Oh, I need a nap," Scott said curtly, as he felt Jen shouldn't show that side of him to Beth. Beth knew they were only schooled in the movie (and the book had *different lines in it*).

Beth curled her hair in her right hand; and she looked down at the floor. Jack began studying her intently; he was confounded with where she was taking this.

"Pastoon, god damn Pastoon," Jen declared loudly with her head tilted back. "I guess-and with no reason too-I miss it. I miss the air, always the streams, forever the sun, Cathy," Jen said sadly as she walked out to the edge of the game board. She curled her fingers and looked vacantly away. Beth strode out 3 steps; and stopped tragically like a caught thief on an island of shadows.

"No, we won't go back there tonight," Beth insisted her voice shaky and frustrated. "Maybe tomorrow when SATAN COMES!" cried Beth angrily as she tried to scratch Jen. "I'll kill you for that one!!" Beth screamed angrily as she punched her own chest and face. Jen eyed the skylight and refused to even react.

“I still miss it, more now for some reason you crazy, GIN SUCKER!” Jen shouted as she ripped her dress down the side. “Go bone up some rent!” Jen thundered as she pushed back now on the firing pin; and delivered a shocking blow to everyone. Scott looked at Jen and knew that was not how it was played in the movie (it was better he thought). Jim grabbed a bottle of soda from a gamer, and smashed it on the floor. It sent soda up to the feet of Beth; and she didn’t even flinch.

“We’re not doing this again,” Jim spoke with a dangerous voice. “Nobody’s crazy here, but I’m going to be, if there’s not some respect shone between you two. Cathy, go lie down and SHUT, THE FUCK, UP!” Jim said sharply as he walked briskly over to Beth: his hands shaking, eyes red, and chest heaving.

“No, no I won’t marry that idea,” Jen replied vacantly. “She stole me ya know, the real me. She hides me in her contempt and bad advice. Don’t ya momma?” Jen cried tearfully as she kept looking up and out of the scene.

“Ha HAH, you skank of a child,” Beth replied as she tossed little pieces of paper at Jim (she always carried notes to be camera ready at all times). “You were never anything to me but SHAME! You take after your father, fat and lazy with crude as your intellect. Why don’t you go suck some cow tit YOU TROLL!” Beth spoke as if she was acting with idiots (careful to keep smoking her fake cigarette though).

Jim walked right up to her and slapped the” I’m better than you” grin off her face.

“You’ll stop ruining us,” Jim said as he clenched his fist. “Or I’ll tell the bank you stole that sixty thousand. Huh, Cathy, bitches and love suckers like you, don’t find it hard to get *SHANKED, in prison,*” Jim said sternly, he had a cocky smile filling his face now; and he held onto Beth’s wrists (tighter than she liked). Beth sobbed with a tone of insincerity, this made Jack laugh.

Scott spun around in circles and sang the words,” Time can shake, the last of us still!!”

Fred suddenly remembered he had a line coming up. He walked with a pronounced limp over to Jen.

“Sorry to bother, but your horse big Dave uh, uh...I-.” mumbled Fred as he averted his gaze.

“What?” Jen interrupted as a tear bounced off of her cheek (she felt the old acting reflexes coming back now). Her face shook outward like a ripple of water from a raindrop.

Fred breathed heavy; Jim walked over with a scowl on his face and put his hands on Fred’s shoulders.

“What happened?” Jim asked cautiously as he watched Jen- her eyes red rimmed like Spot from the Little Rascals-as she was unraveling to the floor.

Everyone watched Jen *including Beth* (they all knew she was doing something amazing).

“Big Dave, he...ya know, horses are dumb,” Fred sputtered nervously with his eyes barely able to look at anyone. “He stupidly fell off my barn patio. Look, I’m not doing this, the whole hate the messenger thing. Big Dave broke his back, so I...I did what I had to do.”

Jim balled his fist up, and swung it wildly in Fred’s direction (just missing his nose).

“You killed my hor...you killed him,” Jim cried as he fell to his knees and disappeared into a ball.

Beth felt the time was right for an improvisation-it always was if you were losing-as she knew they were trumping her.

“OH fuck it he’s glue anyway,” Beth slapped her leg fast (to make a slapping noise that sounded like she was masturbating). Just, chop the head off we’ll make a stew. Hated that horse, and everyone that liked it,” said Beth as she fussed with her clothes. “Shame I couldn’t be there to see him snap his neck. Look, if it’s any consolation I wished you were on it, just saying,” Beth said as she strode over-using her hands like a locomotive-and mocked Jim by pretending to weep beside him. Even *JACK*-who hated her-had to laugh. Jen watched this and had an idea.

“Nope, na nope,” Jen said with a thrill of youth protruding her every word. “You didn’t harm *him*. You only showed your scales just then. Cathy, could you die more, and speak less?” Jen asked tearfully.

“Like, can I push you, off a nearby rocky cliff? Cause, if it’s yes, then I’ll push that head, and smack that crotchety smile GOOD-bye!” Jen said tearfully as she slapped Beth hard on the back.

Jack saw this and ran over to where they were and yelled, “Wait, there’s a technique involved! You can’t push that dumb head, she might escape. Let’s bury her instead. OR, she’s dying for poison, like maybe we-”

“What you sniveling worm, say it or SHUT UP!!” Beth thundered angrily as she grabbed Jack-making him feel like he was being dragged to detention-by the collar and yanked on it good and hard a few times.

Scott walked over and yanked Beth’s hair to the side.

“Nope, na nope, you don’t lay hands on him,” Scott put his free hand out like a wing.

Beth felt so embarrassed she longed for summer stock and shrimp cocktails. She eyed the other actors and then it all made sense.

“Yes, I am the apple no one eats, I am,” Beth admitted with her head low and some sweat sliding down her chin. “I’ve...I’ve lost my way. But you *fuckin losers* CAN SNIFF MY ASSHOLE!” Beth shouted.

“What is that shock I see? Hmm, I’ll tell ya what we’ll all go in, and have some soup. I mean, why would you think ill of a soup bringer?” Beth asked warmly as she motioned for them to follow her. “I know if it’s soup, I’m THERE. Soup party! Come on, stop poking your biscuits huh,” Beth reassured them as she used a not at home look in her eyes (she seen another actor at The Actor’s Studio do that. With theft being the primary reason anyone good went there anyway, she didn’t mind stealing it now). Jim saw the look in her eyes; and he looked away for fear of laughing.

“Cathy, I’ll do it, but can we walk down some rickety old steps first?” Jim asked, paused and then sat down on the floor. “Come on honey, I forgive you for being a ROTTEN BASTURD!” Jim yelled. “I honestly do, gorgeous,” Jim said as he rubbed his index finger gently down Beth’s thigh (this disgusted Beth more than a public pool).

“NO, I won’t let her live,” Jack said with his left arm unable to stay at his hip (Jack did that one in the junior high play, big applause). “Let’s just shovel some earth and drop her in? What? That’s what my 3<sup>rd</sup> birthday party brought, a deep hole and me gasping for breath. Thank you, Cathy, that showed me the evil in this world, I thank you,” Jack said as he hugged Beth closely to him. Beth grimaced and acted like she was dry heaving.

“Yeah, I remember that one, where’s my dirt party day,” Jim confessed as he slithered to his feet. “I mean, the shit that I have to put up with, and no dirt, none to speak of. Damn it, Cathy, I feel neglected and SHAMED!” Jim said sarcastically as he threw his soda bottle up over Beth’s head. Jim looked at Beth with distant eyes and she froze (for the first time in twenty years).

The whole room laughed and then exploded into applause. Jim pumped his right fist and jumped up like he was drunk. Beth peeled Jack off her; and she did the *EYES UP* bow. Beth looked at Jen and wanted nothing but the absolute destruction of her and her friends.

“Who wants some ice cream, like some that’s actually cold?” Fred asked.

“Fred, I will have some yummy ice cream. Let’s face it, ice cream IS dinner,” Jen said.

## Chapter 2

I lied Biscuit, I was telling the truth

Jim breezed up to the front of the observation deck and bar. Lots of people were sitting on cushions and singing songs-nothing from any reputable band or group-as they watched different planets go by. The front window was bowed outward-the captain's idea to scare kids-and had a see through floor if you dared walk on it. The smell of cheap wine and cheeseburgers permeated the air.

"Hey, did I miss anything?" Jim asked as he pushed a young boy aside (Jim was accustomed to being rude at every opportunity, or just when he could get away with it).

"No, Jim, we just passed a yellow planet, and Fred farted," Jen used her hair to catch Jim's eye as she fussed with it. "Aside from that, you missed Fred's pride in ruining a good time for everyone," Jen said sarcastically as she ran her fingers through her hair. Jen was really into Jim; she hoped he would get flirty with her at some point.

"So I missed everything, GREAT," Jim said loudly as he kicked the blue floor cleaning robot-the FCR-hard enough to flip it over. "Damn it, Fred, if you're going to humiliate yourself do it when I'm in



a smells length of you,” Jim said sarcastically as he was lying down on the cushions, and propped his head up on a light blue pillow.

“Duly noted, I’m warming one up for ya now.”

“No rush, I can wait hombre,” Jim said. “You know who can’t though?”

“Who, if I dare ask?” asked Fred as he stretched out his stomach.

“Everyone alive, they love the near death experience of your *Exploding* man cave,” Jim joked as he put a pillow under his chin. “Now run and get me a biscuit, I’m old and I fart a lot.”

Scott and Jack chuckled, but they were watching the blue planet of Greata getting ever closer. It was the first of 4 stops on the way to see Ben Train (with tons of life to be lived there and they knew it).

“Man, if I had known the beauty of existence in space I…” Jack started before stopping as a geyser of flames shot out of Greata’s north peak.

“I know, I feel the same way,” Scott agreed with his eyes on the geyser (secretly hoping it would increase in size).

“Jim, why aren’t you complimenting me and using words more?” Jen ran her hand down Jim’s back. “Gosh do I have to beg for tender sweet nothings and ALE?” Jen asked sarcastically, as she stomped her foot near the part of the cushion with Jim’s head on it. Jim chuckled and rolled over like he didn’t see her. Jen fell softly on top of him; and yanked his shirt collar hard.

“Hey, what was that for?” Jim asked playfully as he rolled over. “I thought I already gave you cab fare.”

“Jim, Jimmy, old Jim the slim, I just blew it all on waffles,” Jen said with her mouth on Jim’s shoulder. “So, I need you to carry me lovingly home. Like: we steal the ship, throw everyone off but our friends, and drink all the water in less than an hour. Then, we race back to my apartment and I force you

to read my 8,000 page diary. Jim, Jim slim, come on,” Jen said sarcastically as she pushed Jim off the cushion slowly with her feet.

Fred gave Jim a cold strawberry ice cream sandwich.

“You look lactose intolerant, so eat up,” Fred said with a dry tired voice (but he realized his joke sucked *mid-joke* and he started to feel nervous). Jim grabbed the ice cream sandwich and was quickly devouring it. He also made a mental note: Fred was weak, nervous, and easily controlled. Jen eyed Greata over Fred’s left shoulder; her eyes growing wide and more dream filled by the second.

“Jim, ah, Fred, Fred head, I need to show you something,” Jen said with her hand motioning for them to take a look (like a traffic cop directing traffic through an intersection). “Can you, ah, just kinda do, like turn?” Jen asked in disbelief as she stood up and saw a massive Greata dominating the view. Jim spun around to see; and Fred turned his head quickly like he had found money on the street. There, lying precariously in the sky was the planet Greata; as huge plumes of atomic fuel and magma shot out of it into space. It created a river of glowing matter that dripped like hot marshmallow off the edge of a smore out into space.

“Holy cow, is this safe?” Jim asked his voice almost fading into a whisper, as his eyes were locked on Greata.

“Jim, I thought you had balls,” Jen muttered with her hand holding onto Jim’s shoulder. “Now, come eye this thing here, to look right at, with me,” Jen said as she pulled Jim by the hand (over to where Scott and Jack were painting Tom Sawyer’s fence, lying motionless).

Jack looked at what seemed to be some fake special effects (in an old movie with reference to the Star Wars 4<sup>th</sup> trilogy of course). He had heard space killed your naiveté. And now he felt his skin warm and his body light. He wondered if even in a dream he could swim through the magma; through atomic waste that looked so beautiful to him.

They saw a large multilayered red and dark blue spotted racing ship pierce the atmosphere (some half mile ahead of them causing orange bursts out the sides of the ship). It smelled of money with the words I KNEW ME ONCE, AND NOW YOU KNOW HIM. I WILL NEVER BE ME AGAIN written in golden and diamond encrusted letters around the protruding neck of the ship. They could see inside through the plasma windows-no one minding the invasion of privacy-and there lived a party. People were frolicking: and covered in yellow paint, feathers, and not much more.

“Ya know, you see that every day, all the time,” Jim said pretending to cry. “I mean, can we get some originality in our orgies people?” Jim asked sarcastically as he leaned in; intentionally rubbing his shoulder against Jen’s neck. She looked down and halfway towards him; before licking her lips and patting Jim on the chest twice.

“Where are you from again, Jim?” Fred inquired his mind ripe with jealousy. “Because we have truck pulls, and underwear where I’m from, Portland way,” Fred joked as he pulled up his pants. “Now, invite me over now before I lose it!” Fred said sarcastically as he crossed his arms and looked back at Jim (Fred seeming the intentional goober to Jim).

Jim threw up his hands like he didn’t know, and replied sarcastically,” Come on, there’s a dress and *cool code*. You know you’re not invited right. But we do need wait staff and dirt scoopers. Because hey, we’re friends aren’t we,” Jim said as he hit his own chest like a silverback gorilla.

Fred jumped in the air and yelled like he’d won the lottery. They all started to laugh, before they felt a sudden jolt; and the underbelly of the ship bounced off the first ring of the atmosphere.

“Cool, I love a good crash,” Scott tapped the plasma window and licked it like a 3<sup>rd</sup> grader on your car window. “Because of all the crashing, and stuff I like,” Scott said, he peered at the second layer of atmosphere that glowed red, like Jen had...only unlike Jen, he felt more jovial upon seeing it, plumes of red death and sunlight bouncing off the large buildings, beneath Scott’s feet..

The ship shot into it; and everyone was tossed to the cushioned floor below. Jen rose up-her instincts telling her to get ready to act as soon as she could-and she looked at the white mountains and red lakes in and around the city of Num.

The sideways skyscrapers jutted out the sides of mountains; like they were forgotten toothbrushes falling out of their toothbrush holders. The white police ships lurking off to the sides-called Rodubs-were filled with drunken cops watching the new ships come in. There was also a yellow river-less water more poison to anyone who touched it-that looked like thick caramel flowing through a lake in the center. And to navigate the lakes and fiords, you had to ride to the sides of it (partially due to the inhabitants, who's unwillingness to fish tourists out of the poison waters made the government leave it be). Mansions of every color dotted the sides of the mountains; and they looked like unwanted children at lunchtime. The sky had gas pockets exploding in the clouds; that sent flames out every few seconds. The sky was littered with various luxury anti-gravity craft (if you didn't have one the joke was that you were serving breakfast instead of eating it). They even had a pair of pencil thin poles-with flower pedal shaped hotels on the top of each-reaching up just short of trouble in the sky.

"Yeah, we really need some eyes to see this," Jen continued as she checked her pocket for cash. "Hmm, I still don't see anything worth crashing into. And they call this a resort planet, lame. Oh, I meant to throw in a *really* there, excuse, excuse me now," Jen said uneasily as her neck felt cold. "Jim, why are you so staring out the window, huh? Is it some sort of whipsaw? I'm way more mountain fever than those mountains. Hey, say something weird, I mean just talk?" Jen begged, as she hung her arm around Jim's neck like they were old friends. She looked out the window peering into the newness of it all. Jim worried he wouldn't be able to be *just friends* for much longer. He knew he was leaving Kim for Jen (and happy to do so seeing as he and Kim were not suited for each other).

"Yeah, I hear ya, Small fry."

“Yeah but I can’t smell what you’re saying, I can’t smell,” Jen spoke quietly into Jim’s left ear. Because what if someone heard her talking like a child and made wise. What then. “I mean, how am I supposed to understand those words of smelly? It’s so simple, Jim,” Jen said as she poked her elbow under Jim’s neck, and then lifted it quickly. Jim snorted out Jen’s name between laughing and lifting her arm. They heard a voice bellow like a wolf in a cave come over the loud speaker,” Try not injuring yourselves here in Num. The world you left behind is not here, not now, not in any way you can count on. You all have some time here, but the latest you can be back at the hotel is 7:30. If you are not, I really hope you like it here, because you’ll be here for the next year. So there’s that. Now the fine people here have afforded each passenger 59,000 dollars on debit cards, for your vaca. If you should get eaten, please report the loss of the card. Thank you and don’t die today.”

Everyone started to laugh, but then the ship banked right suddenly. It took a hard left hand turn to correct itself-the captain started shouting out directions to the pilot-then it went straight down into the belly of a mountain cave. Red water surrounded the hotel Gasp; and it had walking bridges leading into it from every direction. It had been given the odd moniker The Gasp-like many a Beatles song in their day-because it was what everyone did once they saw where it was located (and Fred was no exception with his jaw dropped like he was having a root canal).

“No, you can’t have my kidney, I needs it, Jen,” Jim joked as he gently batted Jen away. “Hey don’t get frisky, or it’ll be *your* kidney I’ll be taking,” Jim said sarcastically as he wrestled with Jen (not minding her breasts rubbing up against the side of his face one bit). Everyone’s bags were on anti-gravity black and gold sleds-resembling dog sleds without the biscuit eaters-and they traveled directly to their rooms.

And above the entryway were the words in red ALL THINGS, ESPECIALLY THE BEST, DIE HERE Jack read this and felt unnerved to a certain extent. He wondered if they were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

“Found your gutter yet?” Beth asked snidely as she kicked Jack in the ass.

Jack spun around and saw the bane of his existence. He lifted his hand like he was going to slap her. Beth grinned triumphantly and tugged at the thin white sweater she had on.

“Ya know, Beth, someday I’ll forget what a gentlemen I am,” Jack continued as his arms felt strong and ready. “And then I’m gonna punch that smug smile off your face,” Jack’s lower lip quivered under the sheer celebrity of Beth. Beth cackled and pushed him into some flowers (like so many before).

“No, that day will never find you and I in the same existence,” answered Beth without even looking at Jack. “Now, fantasyland, there and there alone your pathetic dream will thrive. Hey, if you can’t play Broadway, there’s always the tobacco shop,” Beth said as she watched a young tan skinned woman adjusting her heel; she realized she found her attractive, and thought of bedding her down. But was she talent she wondered? “I’ll ruin your life a little more in the future. Please, have a round of warm waters on me, I insist,” Beth said in a voice that stiffened up more than a few spines. She walked past Jim with her eyes undressing Jen. She saw Jen was all the little heartbreaker; and wondered if she’d turn sexually for her.

“Ya know, that woman just has the worst intentions in everything she does,” Scott said while he watched Gloria French kiss Beth *hard* on the lips. Scott felt an inner pain-left unopened until now-that he didn’t know if he could compete with her talent.

“And she doesn’t slip and fall awkwardly enough,” Jen continued after pulling out her red wallet, “Things take time. I mean, I’m talking seconds, don’t getta me talkin’ about minutes. Then there’s cow patties Jim’s favorites,” Jen said as they entered the hotel. She watched their bags glide into the elevator-with a living room inside-and then straight up. It rose up just a few feet behind Beth’s elevator; and Jim made his way to the fridge (fearing his buzz would wear off at a weird moment).

“Nice!” Jim exclaimed.

“What?” Fred asked.

“They have a selection of Dew like products,” Jim was searching for the coldest Dew they had. “I just like it, not anything I want to share with you and your questions, Fred. No here, try one of these,” Jim said with a wink (still trying not to laugh at Fred’s awkwardness). Fred took the green soda and went to take a long swig, but he tasted so much sugar it caused him to gasp for air.

“Fred, you know that’s poison right?” asked Jack sarcastically as he gave Fred a look like he *could die*.

Fred’s eyes became a harvest moon-large and eerie-and he coughed several times into the back of his fist. Then suddenly, out of the wall came their personal butler and guide (as if he’d been hiding in perfect darkness). Fred fell back to his knees at this (and Jen literally caught him).

“Hello, I’m Simon Told, just call me Simon,” greeted Simon as if his smile was made of ivory. “I am your guide and butler, but I don’t defend your persons. So if you are attacked, you’ll have to die less.”

Simon was all of 5’8” inches tall; and in the great striking type of shape as a boxer would be on fight night. His hair was short and brown, not outlandish. He had a deep purple and red swirling colored skin that looked almost reptilian. His forehead had a white ivory bone in the center; that looked like a box you’d put a necklace in. His feet were size 10, but were exceptionally wide. On his back there was a rounded and spiked spine protruding out through his clothes.

“Hi, Simon, I’m Jen,” Jen said brightly as she offered her hand. “Boy, you almost came into the room in a creepy and screwed up way. Thank gosh buddy for that one. Gosh buddy is a round half pig doll I sleep with. You can’t borrow it,” Jen said as she gave Simon a one armed hug (he was grimacing as she did).

“You can’t borrow mine either, but you can try,” Jim said quickly as he rocked back on his heels. “I’m Jim and I usually don’t tip, so be sure not to ask,” Jim said as he offered Simon his hand, but Simon

didn't take it immediately-thinking Jim the unclean kind-and they all watched Simon examining it.

Simon could see Jim could handle himself; and that meant problems later on for them all.

"Nice to meet you, glad we started off on the sarcastic foot," Simon spoke as if his shit smelled better than yours (no one you'd trust with a secret). "Jen, you're a vision...of dung," Simon said sarcastically as he lowered his head like he was going to bow, but stopped short. Simon put a hand on either side of Jen's and Jim's heads, and shook them.

Jack laughed-seeing as he felt someone had to break the awkward silence, Jim preferred it though-and he looked around the room; his eyes finding a large bin filled with wine and Green Beast beer bottles (made from straining out dead alcoholics livers). On the bottle there was an alcohol testing grip that told you exactly-very useful if you didn't like jail-how drunk you were. There was also a red smiling face of a demon where you were supposed to drink from. The face opened up when it felt 2 lips surrounding it. It would then close without losing a drop of beer once you had finished your drink.

"Please, let me know where the fun stuff is?" Jim asked in a gregarious manner-his arms moving like Mick Jagger on the Steelwheels tour.

"Jim, if you would like to get going, we'll need to be going down," Simon responded with an air of superiority; as he waved his hand and the elevator stopped. And before they knew it, they were racing down and to the right (using the celebrity shaft).

They came to a stop in front of a white sports transport-with its windows tinted red. It looked like a swan's bill with rockets attached; and it stretched out 40 feet in length. It had windows that bowed out when you neared them (for effect of course).

"Great, which one are you riding in, Fred?" Jim asked sarcastically as he stepped into the transport-knowing full well he was using Fred to calm his own nerves. Jim read the word TRAITOR on the ship's front wall; and he deduced that it was the ship's name. He whispered," Traitor, I like this."



Fred scowled at Jim; and filled his own cheeks with air. Fred tapped Jim on the shoulder and popped both cheeks once he saw Jim's eyes.

They grabbed their seats around a variety of windows; on a set of white fluffy mattresses. The ship smelled of dinner and dessert all at once (making everyone hungry).

“Hey, heey!” Jim spoke like a burst of smoke from the tip of a Camel Light.

“Hey what, what hey is this?” asked Jack happily as he flopped down next to Jen. She was lifting her waist high when Jack did-he did sneak a peek for medical purposes, he said in his mind-and she looked out the window upside down.

“Hey!” Jim said this and made Jack-who was next to him-exhale unnaturally.

“Time for moving everyone, feel free to gasp,” Simon insisted as he fired up the engines-it sounded like being thrown out the back of a jet engine above their heads-and the sound system clicked on (the sounds of a trio of women cooing and singing the occasional note filled the ship). Then inexplicably, sounds of a ride through musical hell launched out of the liquid speakers. It created an all encompassing wave of sound; like a bucket of warm water being poured over your head as you slept.

“Nice, man I needed to relax, and relaxation helps,” Scott said happily as he tapped his leg. “Hey, look at those mansions as they disappear into the mountain, cool,” Scott remarked as he eyed the grand fortresses of wealth; they spun into the mountain leaving only a tree covered hill in their stead. It made Scott wish for wealth more than anything, but how he wondered would he get it.

“Nice is right, I say super duper rubber chicken underwear nice,” Jim said while looking around for a snack. “Nice huh, now we're talking nice, Chumly. What was it they said of new experiences in ah-?”

“They overtake the past, Jim, I love that movie by the way,” Jen finished his sentence as fast as she could. “Boy Ben really nailed that one,” Jen said as she stared out the window; this while the hills lit up with campsites and fires (of certain future family memories).

They started to pick up speed. Simon swerved like a raven through the campsites. He saw a large barbecue pit-mostly steaks and baked potato *like* things on the grill-and he knew it would stoke the fires of hunger in the group. Simon still hadn't figured out if he would be able to barter them for drugs. He needed those drugs, but he needed the rush of quick money more.

Soon the sky was shifting-making everyone feel hopeful-and the lake opened up to a settlement of dark green titled houses and huts. This settlement was called Gasp-owned by its namesake Hotel-and it was for the large number of freewheeling people living there. It also hinted at the drug lords-seeing as it smelled like Santa Monica and free love-and their grip on the residents. The sun shone off the roof of one house; and started a chain reaction to the others. The whole of Gasp filled with shards of sunlight from one house to the next. It reminded Fred of a game he liked to play on his Sega (*Assassins Creed*).

“Is anyone hungry, because I am?” Jim wondered aloud as he rubbed the back of his head. “Hey, Simon, my man, what kind of warm water comes on this trip? Because I loves me some warm tasteless water. I know you all do, but I asked first so I get the lion share,” Jim said sarcastically as he rolled over-knowing Simon was a bit of a killjoy judging by how stiff he was-and felt a rubber hand stretch out of the wall and help him to his feet.

“No way, I get it!” exclaimed Jack. “I am the strut baby, both legs,” Jack said as he rolled over and started hitting the cushion beneath him (like he was a child being denied dinner for telling his dad to fuck off).

“No, I have to say no to you,” Jim said, and he laughed so loudly it made everyone nervous. “Look, I need it, like worse than mud in my mouth. So tough, it's filet mignon and caviar for you, Sucker,” Jim said sarcastically-knowing the energy in the group had just changed-as he started sniffing around the ship.

“I have something prepared, just a minute,” Simon said as he breezed past Jim; and he pulled down on a fridge and oven hidden in the walls. There he had several dishes in glass enclosed plates that were warm and ready to eat (better than food after a day in the mines) There were so many things to eat, that it reminded Jim of grocery day when he was young and poor.

“Great!” Jim exclaimed. “Just as long as it sucks,” Jim said happily.

“No, don’t tell Simon he sucks or he might suck your blood,” Jen said unsure if Simon was a violent man-but he had to be didn’t he, she wondered. “Jim, you need that blood, don’t let a blood sucking weirdo like Simon here take your essence. Sorry, Simon, I know you can’t help your disgusting vampire ways,” Jen said.

“Yeah, Simon, keep your eyes off my clavicle,” Jack said as he reached for a bottle of beer. “Like, it’s not cool, Man, stop it, stop it now,” Jack insisted as he rolled over and slapped the back of his hand against Jen’s (he tried not to laugh harder than her for embarrassment reasons).

Simon pretended not to mind-he had plans to take care of any worries he had for this lot of arrogant losers-with his only worry being they wouldn’t all eat the sedative before people started passing out. And he knew his fight training would not be enough to overpower even two of them.

“Look, the sun is filling the whole town with light,” Jack said.

“Interesting, it makes me think this is a fun group Ed,” Scott said, and he got moving forward now.

“Scott, that joke died like turd for breakfast,” Jack said his eyes on Simon, but Simon caught him with a quick head turn (Jack saw years of abuse in Simon’s eyes). “Don’t be so crude,” Jack said as he looked at a grinning Scott.

“Please eat up, it won’t stay warm for long,” Simon insisted coyly-his mind running through contingences for dumping their bodies off-while he steered them closer to the opposite shore. His friends were waiting for them there.

“Good point, I need to be fat in case my carcass doesn’t cook well for the cannibals,” Fred yawning so awkwardly he made himself nervous. “I mean, they are like picky eaters and murderers,” Fred said as he hurried past an eating Jim-wondering how Jim always got what he wanted-and he burned holes through Jim’s meatballs (covered in cheese and bacon bits).

“Yeah, that’s what I was thinking.” Jim said as he ate in a really loud fashion (even wolves were offended).

“Jim, I don’t believe you,” Jen said, her mind on kissing Jim and grabbing his hard ass. Grabbing it in both hands in fact. “I’m sorry, I think you’re full of sand and rabbit necks,” Jen said as she pressed her hands to the window, and glanced at the people below. They looked to be happy as could be, but she knew that look; she had seen it many times at the Old Port Tavern. She started to think they were all high and drunk as Christmas Eve.

“It’s not all sand, there’s some meat extract involved,” Jim now finishing off his meatballs and moving towards Jen by sidestepping. “Like, I don’t appreciate your comment, take it back. Take it back now, Sister.”

“Nope!” replied Jen.

“Man, to lump me in with the Freds of the world,” Jim spoke as if his dog had died. “I won’t, no I can’t take this lying down. If I have to sit straight up and eat, then that’s my lot in life,” Jim said sarcastically as he sat down; and he used a corner of a black mattress to steady his back.

Jen saw a man being beaten with wooden bats and metal Blackjacks to the left of the ship. And when one of the men saw her, they ducked behind a hut (which struck her as odd). She looked back at Simon and caught him staring at her.

“Simon, why are we going to this town?” Jen asked, her eyes never leaving Simon’s, “Like, it looks pretty crappy.”

“Jenny, it’s just for gas,” Simon hesitated, “Should be a *cool* time.”

“Why didn’t you fill up before we left?”

“I ah...I was going too, but you arrived early,” Simon sweaty and breathing erratically-he knew he had to think fast. “Yes, that was it indeed. I will tell you though, these people are harmless. They drink and drug, but they’re nonviolent,” Simon said hollowly as he put on his best countenance-fearing the whole thing was blowing up in his face-and handed Jen a bottle of (delicious) sedative filled beer. He knew he could handle her, but not her and Jack.

Jen looked at the bottle cautiously; and took it from him a few seconds later. Although when he turned his head, she dumped it out under the mattress. Good move, be smart.

“Jen, aren’t you thirs-”

“Fred, don’t eat so much and don’t mention what I just did,” Jen said sternly-without hardly making a sound- her face was flush with the importance of what she was saying. “It doesn’t feel right, Fred, like the concert before remember?”

“Yes, yes I do. But what about everyone else?” whispered Fred as he calmly dumped his food under a chair, and looked out the window.

Jen started to talk, and then stopped abruptly when Simon turned his head. Jen started fussing with her hair, and making goofy faces to put Simon at ease. She knew then bad grapes were on the vine.

“MAN this food SMOKES, SMOKES!! Woo, I said SMOKES!” Jim shrieked jokingly, flexing his chest and spitting food out the sides of his mouth (Jim knew this trip was a great idea and he loved his new friends, especially Jen).

“Speaking of smokes, does anyone have a mist cigarette spray bottle?” Scott asked his eyes watching the odd way Jen and Fred were sitting beneath a poster reading THE WEIGHT OF FAILURE IS TEN MORE POUNDS PER BREATH “Like, the kind you inhale and stuff?” Scott asked as he continued watching Simon, who was working diligently. Scott suspected Simon was about to pull something, but he didn’t know what.

“Jim, my Man, is we riding the golden goose or what?” asked Jack in an overly confident fashion.

“Yes, and soon we’ll dine on said goose, Jack,” Jim replied, his hand rubbing his kneecap. “Bring on the new old food, and I mean kinda whenever. Did you ever see that one, that movie Goose? Man I love that one.”

“Yeah, I have and it was really inspiring to see something good happen to that old man,” Jack looked at him with sedative filled reddened eyes. “I wonder though, would he have lived if that cop hadn’t punched Cecil?”

“Yeah, and fucking Cecil was a badass, right?” Jim now leaning forward his interest peaked. “I don’t know, he may have still lived, but then I would have killed him. Just ya know, staying true to my character and all,” Jim continued eating his meal (and loving every bite). “No, I don’t know about my acting prowess, but I aim to lock horns with ah...the great Ben. Wow I feel sick. It’s like my head is heavy, and I’m sweating lunch ma,” Jim said nervously as he held his head in his hands like a small pumpkin.

Jen hopped up and rushed over to Jack and Jim. She dropped her voice like she was telling them something important,” Jim, maybe you shouldn’t eat and drink so much. I mean, just sit and tell me stories huh, Goofy Noofy?”

Jim shook his head a few times violently-his blood was rushing to his face (all red and puffy)-and then he flopped down on a mattress face first.

“Damn, I wonder what’s wrong with Jim, Jack?” asked Fred hollowly as he put his hands in his front pockets. “Maybe you should lay off the food it might have gone bad,” Fred suggested as he looked at Jack with a purpose and point. Jack looked at him for a few moments; and then set down his food realizing what Fred meant. Scott heard this and discreetly set down his beer, and turned to face Simon.

“No, Scott, you won’t be leaving or bothering me one bit,” Simon declared, his voice not friendly now or inviting. “Everyone, on your FEET!” demanded Simon. “We’re not going to pussyfoot around. I’m selling you, the whole lot,” Simon barked sternly as he aimed a chest breaker gun-called a CB5-at Scott. The gun could tear through a body like a rocket; sure as shit taking your organs with it.

“Damn it, I knew you were bad news,” Scott admitted.

“Simon, we have money, what if we pay you to let us go?” Jen asked as she helped Jim to his feet.

Jack eyed the terrain as the ship was heading up a hillside-fearing there was no walking back down-and then they went into a tunnel. Jack knew then he was going die.

Simon didn’t register that request; he brushed it off his shoulder like it was nothing. “What, your wad of nickels? No, I’ll get millions for the lot, and that will end all the bad things. Remember, you asked for this, didn’t you? Thought you’d violate our private lives, you’re *NOTHING*. Nothing but cattle and horse hair here, ha hah. I’ll be laughing when you’re dead, won’t it be grand,” Simon said snidely as he keenly watched everyone (his CB5 constantly ready to fire). He felt the ship come to a stop, a bit

different this time. "Let's go have a pot of beans, huh. It's best to eat on occasions such as these, trust me."

"Man, I'm going to kill your ass before this is over," Jim said drunkenly, his eyes blinking several times, and a deathly cough. Jim wanted Simon's neck for just a few seconds to squeeze like a ripe grape. Simon laughed, and opened the outside door. They saw 150 drug smugglers awaiting their arrival, in a mass of smoke and steam. Drugs were big money. People were big money too.

"Not so much, Jim, maybe I'll only piss on your grave, promise," Simon responded after a second of silence. "NOW GET MOVING you bitches! Money is to be made," Simon ordered as he moved to the side of everyone (his CB5 always sighting in one someone). Simon couldn't wait for his bounty. He'd have *drugs again, soon*.

"Jim, Jen and I are fine, don't worry," Fred whispered into Jim's ear; as he helped him down the stairs and into the vast echo loving cave.

The vats of hard drugs cooked throughout the cave...but of course it took some doing (and they looked like glowing green maple syrup bottles reaching for an apple). The smell was as fragrant as manure in the morning; and every one of the drug smugglers had forgotten to bath that month (they were too high to care). The smugglers were blue skinned; and had heads like handsome mutants. With uneven large eyes and jagged cliff like boney heads, they looked disgusting to any and all, but each other. They were 6 foot 10 inches to 9 feet tall and had folds of white skin around their necks. Their clothes were oily rags and their hands were sticky from mixing drugs all day. The sound of a dying jazz radio filled the caves. And the darkened tunnels went in every direction (they looked like traps for the daring).

"Hi there, Redgar, nice to see you," Simon said warmly as he offered-the 9 foot tall killing machine head smuggler Redgar-his hand.



Redgar had large lines of scars across the bridge of his large speed bump covered nose. He had a look in his eye for killing, and nothing else. He had red and green spotted oily and smell covered canvass clothing on.

“Yeah, are these the bait I asked for?”

“Yes, and they are topnotch, Redgar, trust me on this one,” Simon talked 1 second from nervous with every word. “You won’t have any trouble filling their dead bodies with drugs, I assure you.”

“Yeah, how much?” asked Redgar flatly with his eyes on Jen (he thought of keeping her as a sex slave). Jen looked around the cave; and saw a pair of black and blue stripped ATV’s next to the wall. Jen knew that might get them to the hillside (*and then all bets were off*).

“How about 6, maybe 5, o.k. 4?” asked Simon with his voice wilting.

“Done, now would you like to live or die, Simon?”

Simon laughed and Jim started to come out of his haze (much to his displeasure).

“Good one, very good great humor,” Simon feeling uneasy by how filthy-more so than usual-the smugglers were. Telling him they were as high as could be-and he shot his right hand into his pocket.

“So then, I must be getting back, about payment-”

“Simon, I’m going to bash your head in, and take these idiots here,” Redgar demanded. “Just, fight me a bit, I need the excitement,” Redgar finished as he called for a shock staff. He was quickly handed a red shock staff-the name saying it all-that could kill anyone with ease. He threw it to a shocked Simon.

“What’s this?”

“Certain death, enjoy,” Redgar said irritably. “Simon, I am gonna love watching your head splatter like a cheap egg in the pan. The rest of you, don’t bother fighting us, or running, we love torture here. Now, that ah...ear, looks like,” Redgar said coyly as he walked towards a scared and nervous Simon.

Simon looked around and laughed nervously...but Jim could see his days were numbered. Redgar was a serious man.

“Come on, really?” Simon inferred a bit of shame that Redgar did not appreciate.

Redgar snatched Simon by the left ear, and ripped it clean off.

“Damn, Jen, we have to run,” Fred spoke urgently out the side of his mouth. Fred eyed the other drug smugglers standing about-and knew they were dead if they sneezed off key around them.

Jen smirked, and kept using the reflection off certain windows and drug vats to find a way out (through the caves, that was it she thought). She saw a single beam of sunlight and froze dead. ” Fred, as much as I hate dying, I hate dying in a horrible way more. Get Jack and Scott, we’re heading for that single beam of sunlight.”

Fred started to walk slowly over to Jim and Scott, with Jack just behind them. Simon screamed-like a 2 year old-and clutched the spot where his ear had been (but it was only a memory now).

“You SON OF A BITCH!!” cried Simon at the top of his lungs. “I’m gonna kill your ass!” Simon screamed angrily, swinging the shock staff wildly. Redgar only grinned and moved to the left of Simon.

“Jim, Scott, we’re running for that beam of light, be ready,” Fred whispered urgently as he pointed to the vat of drugs and the ATV’s. Jim looked at the light-through still foggy watery eyes-and felt his adrenaline surge. Jim felt strong and ready all of the sudden. He nodded and then eyed the other drug smugglers for weakness. He saw the farthest one from him was nodding off (as he was as high as Franklin’s kite). Jim knew that was the weak spot in the web.

“Please tell me we have a way out of here,” Jack said hopefully.

“Jack, just be ready to run and follow Jen,” Fred told him with words that felt like daggers. “She has a great idea,” said Fred as he kept his eyes from making eye contact with any of the drug smugglers.

Jack said nothing, and instead saw out of the corner of his eye a small handgun sitting-lonely as a wallflower-on a dark brown bench. He slowly moved towards it, keeping his emotions in check.

“Simon, let’s forget the whole thing and be friends,” Redgar said hollowly, and he laughed showing his 4 tooth grin. “Come now, I’ve had my fun, let’s hug it out, Old Chum,” Redgar said hollowly as he offered Simon a hug (Redgar simply wanted to beat Simon to death in any way he could).

“Really, we’re cool?” Simon’s trying to convince himself. “Well then, I won’t need this,” said Simon as he looked at Redgar, and then his shock stick. Simon walked casually towards Redgar; acting like he was about to drop his shock stick, but instead planting it in Redgar’s neck. The shock sent him hard onto his back-and Jen had seen enough play time for one day-and Jen ran like Usain Bolt. She went straight through the smugglers, with Jim and Fred close behind. Jack grabbed the gun, and followed them close as jam to a piece of buttered bread.

Jim planted a firm punch-3 years of boxing when he was 9 through 12 years old-to the head of the sleepy drug smuggler. The blow sent him to the left, and into a hot vat of scolding drugs. It burned his flesh and suffocated his lungs, killing him in seconds.

“We’re movin’, Jack, keep up!” Scott said as he looked back at Jack. Jack aimed his gun at the nearest drug smuggler and fired; splitting his forehead like a pane of thick glass meeting its first baseball.

“I’m working on it!” Jack yelled triumphantly, as he raced through the same cave entrance everyone had darted into.

Simon meanwhile, ran like he was on fire back to the ship; he didn’t take long to head for home.

“This way, see there’s an exit up those stairs,” Jen said boldly, as she ran up a set of silver stairs with red rugs in the middle of each step reading DON’T LEAVE HERE WITH PROFITS. There was also a sign reading I WAS BORN HIGH, LIFE IS WHAT RUINS MY BUZZ hanging down from a broken wood ceiling.

Jack entered the tunnel diffidently, with all the drug smugglers giving chase. He felt his adrenaline pumping so much-more than even smashing Halloween pumpkins-it was like his blood was boiling him to death (from the inside).

“Come now Jack, you can do this!” Jack tried to pump himself up-disaster he thought, he could feel his smoker’s lungs catching up with him.

“It’s blocked with some sort of reinforced plastic, but I think we can smash it!” Jen explained as she kicked the door that lead out of the caves (and it had a crack of sun shining through a small hole).

Scott ran full speed and kicked the door as hard as he could, but it did nothing. Fred lowered his shoulder and barreled into the door; doing little more than hurting his shoulder, and his pride.

“I got this, move out of the way,” Jim ordered as he leapt through the air; and he kicked the door with both feet. The kick took out the bottom of the door, but there wasn’t enough room to escape through.

“Going somewhere?” Redgar spoke with his voice snatching their confidence. He walked casually up to the base of the steps and put one foot on the first step.

Everyone froze at the tone of his voice (they knew it meant they were trapped).

“Damn it, I mean god are we dead,” Jim admitted as he picked himself up; and he turned to see the tunnel filled with drug smugglers. He knew he couldn’t fight them off (no one could).

“Please, come get used as drug filled carcass already, on me,” Redgar barked, as his gang shot up the stairs and grabbed everyone-carrying them into a secret room to the left.

Jen took a look back at the sunlight. She never wanted anything more in her life than to feel that sun again.

They tied them all firmly to oily recliners. Then they pushed them up against the back wall; with Jim and Jack facing Scott, Jen, and Fred. Redgar started laughing like he was getting laid for the first time; and cooking up some acid to devour their organs.

The walls smelled of rude things. And the ceiling was covered-with a surrealistic collage-with bag after bag of unlucky tourist's luggage. They heard one of the drug smugglers start to sing the killing song. It sounded like the last thing you'd ever want to hear-barring a cannon to the back-with: low, arrogant, and jarring melodies.

"Just kill me already, I can't listen to this song," Jim spoke without the wisecracking confidence they all loved him for but desperation.

"Jim, I know we're dead now, I know it," Jen confessed her eyes heavy with tears. "I really cared for you, I'm sorry we met," Jen said apologetically as she looked into Jim's eyes and mouthed the words I LOVE YOU. Jim looked at her with a tear forming the size of a penny in his left eye; and he wondered how his life would have been different if they hadn't met.

"My I love a stew," Redgar spitting into the acid to watch the smoke bubble up. "You know, as far as arrogant, pushy, think they're so smart tourists go, *you're the best*. I don't say that often, just every time. Now, this can go many ways. I can, kill you first, and then hollow you out, that's one option," Redgar said as he tried to keep everyone calm before he killed them. More humane, I'm not a monster. "I can beat you up so badly you'll wish for death, fine option indeed. Or I can get really crude and let you live out your worst nightmares? Well then, nightmares it is," Redgar said as he stirred the large bin filled with acid; and he looked at each of them with dead emotionless eyes (like murder was his hobby, and it was).

"Jen, I can't take this, I HATE...wait, there's a hole here," Jack said anxiously, as he eyed the hole behind him where he had just kicked the floor. He could see green grass so sweet he could eat a whole pie of it. Jen looked at the hole, and made eye contact with Jim, her eyes telling him what to do.

“Alright, Fred, this is where I get to bash your head in!” Jim shouted coyly as he pretended to be going crazy. “I’ve had it with YOUR SHIT!” Jim shouted as he glared at Fred like he wanted to kill him. Jim started bashing the wall behind and below them, as hard as he could with his feet.

“What’d I ever do to you?” Fred asked nervously, he looked at Jim-who was filled with the devil in that moment-like he was a different person.

Jim bashed the floor and the drug smugglers laughed; but the wall behind Jim and Jack started to break more and more. And there was very little holding the recliners up now. Might work if we get lucky, Jim thought as he looked down. Scott and Jen started yelling incoherently and kicking the floor. The drug smugglers laughed harder now-their hands holding their knees, and their faces looked like out of work clowns-as it was like they’d one upped an enemy.

“There is no way out,” Redgar said. “You’ll all die one way or my way. Kick all you like,” said Redgar snidely as he stirred the acid with delight (having to switch metal spoons every few seconds due to the melting of the metal).

“Screw you, Fred, you bastard!” Jen shouted as she kicked the floor hard; and daylight crept up through a now *even larger hole*. Yes, this might work after all.

“Really, now YOU’RE pissed at me?”

Jim saw the support beam below him-with hack marks from rivals in the wood-and Jack could see it as well. They bashed the beam as hard as they possibly could; with the drug smugglers laughing hysterically.

“One last hurrah for the old smell, and the new hell,” Jim said as he kicked the support beam-like it was paper thin and not hurting his feet.

Jack used both legs and the beam snapped beneath all the recliners. They tumbled down a grass covered hill; still tied to their recliners except for Fred. He'd lucked out with loose ropes.

"This is awesome!" Jack yelled as he slid along the newly wet grass; heading towards the houses below (and the hope of safety).

"Man, help this hurts!" Jim shouted as he rolled end over end-the legs of his recliner catching the grass awkwardly and terrifying Jim-as he couldn't break his ropes.

"I'll try!" Fred slipped his ropes and slowed himself up enough to try and intercept Jim. This happened while the drug smugglers raced to break a big enough hole in the floor, for them to give *murderous chase*.

"Come back here and die!" Redgar thundered as he punched the floor again and again; glaring down the hill with blood soaked drug crazed eyes.

"Suck it, Chubs!" Jen growled as she broke free of her recliner. She felt like she was the most powerful person in the world just then. Yes, I could escape after all. And then her eyes focused, and her smile faded, when she saw the large white and tan stripped house that they were about to *crash into*.

Fred grabbed Jim and spun his head to the left, safely under the ropes.

"Just a second, Jim, I got this!"

"Hurry up, or we're both screwed!"

Jack saw his chance to help Scott and he kicked him hard in the ass (breaking him free and toppling his pride).

"You're welcome!" Jack grinned and slid on his back down the hill.

"The hell you are," Scott replied, as he righted himself. He saw Jen's recliner smash into the glass

doors on the back of the house. And Jen: slid, flipped, and landed butt first on her recliner in the living room. She looked up at Mr. and Misses Henry Pottle; and they stared back at her in amazement.

“Sorry,” Jen apologized as she crossed her legs.

“Yeah, this won’t be the time of your life, smashing my good tile floor,” Henry growled as he tapped his temple. He wanted her to know he was as smart as any video game designer. “I will tell you I am quite im-” said Henry firmly as he stood up-his eyes seeing a blur of something coming down the hill-and then Jim and Fred came smashing through the left wall (feet first) They landed on the couch with Jack on top of a face down Jim.

“Jack, you’re a little too friendly with my ASS CRACK,” Jim sighed and lifted Jack off of him.

“Could you go ahead and get your lovemaking hands off my ASS!”

“Jim, don’t let our love die,” Jack said sarcastically as he hugged a reluctant Jim.

“It’s already dead, flat lined just-” Jim started as he pushed Jack off of him, but he saw Fred and Scott come barreling in a second later. Fred accidentally smashed a priceless vase; while Scott went head first into the kitchen sliding across the linoleum floor. Scott stood, and stumbled into a large turkey shaped woman named Wend Perch (who was standing there holding onto his muscles).

Wend was 5 feet and had a radiant personality. She had on a pair of blue jeans and a t-shirt reading YOU’RE NOT THAT ATTRACTIVE, BUT I’M BLIND.

“Sorry, I couldn’t stop myself,” Scott said. “Can you, ah...let go, of my body? There, now I’m not so pregnant,” Scott said tentatively as he tried to look away from Wend. He found the middle aged woman quite attractive (her aura was so warm and friendly).

Wend grinned, and picked up a plate of porcupine shaped rolls with meat inside. ” Foods for eating, want some?”



“Maybe some other time, all this running for my life has ah... made me less hungry for food like stuff.”

“Well, I’ll save a little for ya, promise.”

Jim paced around the living room looking out the back window for Redgar. He felt like the last lobster heading for the boiling water. Jim knew if he died like this, it would be a life ruined on impact and spoiled forever.

“We gotta get outta here, like now,” Jim insisted as he looked up the hill. “Grab your shit we’re going!”

“Jim, how, where, we don’t have a ship?” Jack asked as he let out a long sigh and put his hands behind his head.

“Doesn’t matter, we’ll run,” Jim answered (only half believing it himself). “We’ll run and find someone who’ll help us. Look, we’re dead if we stay here, DEAD. I’m not dying. O.k. here’s how it’s gonna go, I’m leaving and you either come or die. Well, what’s it gonna be?”

“Jim, name’s Henry, and boy do I have a ship for you.”

“Really, where is it?”

“Here, right here in my mind,” Henry promised as he slapped the top of his head. “I’m gonna build one and we’re gonna fly the HELL outta here. Just hang here, and I’ll get to the business of saving us. Wend, let’s find some wood,” Henry ordered as he kicked the stool marked MINE out from under Fred’s feet. Jim looked at him in shock-as he debated punching his head in.

“GREAT!” Jim said with his mind racing and his body sweating like racehorses in the rain. “Some old fuckin codger is shafting us. That’s all I need,” Jim growled as he looked around the room for a weapon.

“The ship is almost ready,” Henry assured as he kicked the wall and sucked on a red marble statue’s foot (it pumped pure pot anytime he wanted). “Once you got the thought, you’re halfway home. I’m telling ya, I can think us a ship. One large: bulbous, almost can fly, ship. Here, watch what I do,” Henry said as he sat down in his armchair-Jim was about to beat him to death-and started acting like he was pushing buttons and flying a ship.

“OH my god, is this really happening?” Jen fiddling with her hair-she did that often when she was nervous-and rubbing the back of her neck. “I haven’t been this patronized since church. Henry, why don’t you fly your fantasy ship into the lake?” Jen asked as she looked at Henry like Really? “Because if you do, there’s trolley folk that have gold there, *yes gold*. And you’ll be able to breathe underwater, I knows it! OH, and if you die, don’t fret, ‘cause heaven’s in a cave beneath your house. Oh, and if the pain makes your head explode, don’t worry it’s only temporary,” Jen spoke with a sarcasm any other time would have had them all laughing, but not today. She looked at Henry with distant eyes and he her with indulgent father warmth.

Henry stuck out his tongue; and shot his head back like he was flying.

“We got company!” Fred said nervously as he eyed Redgar and his gang racing down the hill; and they were riding on sleds and large pieces of wood.

Jim raced to the back door and his eyes went dead quiet.

“Hey, we’re about to take off, grab a seat, and eat that meat,” Henry acted oblivious to the dire nature of the situation. “And when we fly, fantasize. And if we float, eat some goat,” Henry said as he kicked the floor-knowing something was about to happen-and kept his eyes on the large TV wall in front of him.

“You got any weapons here, Henry?” Jack asked bluntly as he looked thru Henry.

Henry spit and bayed like a horse. Then he heard Redgar drawing ever closer.

“Well, we can’t fight them off, there’s no way,” Jen murmured as she looked at an oddly smiling Wend. Why was she smiling like that just now? “What if we offer Henry here, as a human sacrifice? I mean, he doesn’t think and breathe normal anyway. Right, Henry, you don’t mind having your innards melted away now do ya?” Jen asked sarcastically as she smiled like an undertaker; and she watched Henry nearly convulsing now in his armchair.

“We’re dead, and we died like idiots,” Jack hitting every piece of furniture close enough to him. “I tell ya, if I had lived, I would have done great things. I mean it. I’m not just another person you met along the way. I have talent, and I could have shaken the tree of life down, to the ground,” Jack said sadly as he eased back on the couch, taking off his shirt as he did. The way he thought about it: why not leave the world as naked as you entered it? That made perfect sense to him now.

Jim looked at Jack (his neck stretching to the point it was almost painful) and then at Redgar which got him pissed off. He got so pissed; he darted into the kitchen and grabbed a giant carving knife. He ran back into the living room and screamed, “You wanna KILL ME!! I’m gonna cut your head off!! Come on, let’s have it!”

Jen looked at Henry as he opened the armrest (knowing something just wasn’t right). Suddenly the chair started to morph-with the crashing sound of wood and metal around them thrashing and breaking-and the whole house started to change like a set of toy blocks.

“Whoa, I am way past feeling this ice cream melty,” said Jen, her skin so sweaty and soaked her clothes almost slid off. “Henry, what’s going on?”

“Jen, hold on,” Henry said, as Redgar reached the back of the house. The middle section of the house lifted up out of the ground; with Redgar grabbing the edge and dangling there precariously as it rose into the sky.

Jim smiled, as he saw Redgar's bloody drug soaked hands holding on for dear life. Jim walked over to Redgar-as he fought through his trepidation-and used furniture to keep his balance as they continued to ascend into the sky.

"Hey ah, Redgar, can I help you up?" Jim asked snidely, as he laughed like he'd shit his pants in French class.

"YES!" Redgar answered. "Please help me!" Redgar pleaded frantically as he started to lose his grip. Jim smiled and got down on one knee (on the ever changing floor) next to Redgar's hands.

"Oh help's on the way," Jim said hollowly as he walked his fingers across Redgar's. "I like to help, help I is and help I can. Now about this help, it will come in stages. First stage: figuring out how to make you fall and die less, important stage. Second stage: trying to pull your lard butt up. This stage will be trying, but I am the man and try I might. Now third stage: do you need a snack before we start, and can I have that snack?" Jim asked hollowly as started slapping Redgar's fingers-hard enough to break most people's-and looking down at Redgar.

Jen smiled at this-she knew Jim was devious, but what was this-and she hurried over to Jim. Jen sat down next to Redgar's hands," Why's he still alive, Jim, is he good eats or something?"

"Fine good eats, best I've tried," Jim replied like a carnie selling wares at the Northern Maine fair. "We can skin him, and fry him, and then we dine him. Right, Redgar, fairs fair right? I mean you were going to kill us, time you paid the ante, Lightweight. Stop scowling, it demeans us both," Jim spoke like he was 8 years old, and he licked Redgar's fingers (not caring at this point where they'd been, but he would later).

Redgar started to sweat and glare at Jim-his worst fears coming true and this prick Jim sticking it to him-and then he let go of the side of the ship and plummeted; like a bag of sand out of a fighter jet. He knew they were going to kill him anyway. So why give them the satisfaction? Jim and Jen burst out

laughing; and they watched Redgar splat on the paved driveway of a mansion below (just missing the rich doctor who lived there).

“Boy the sympathy I don’t feel for that murderer, I’m ashamed,” Jen said sarcastically, her body feeling the ship jerk forward; and she almost fell off the side herself.

“Careful now,” Jim pulled her back like it was no big deal. “Oh god that was satisfying. I mean to know that prick was going to kill us, and then we get to do *that*.”

“Priceless, Jim, worth more than money,” Jen said, she looked extraordinarily stunning just then Jim thought. And then it dawned on her, they could miss their flight. She got up quickly and asked, “Hey, Henry, this trip is fun and all, but can you take us to the launch point for our flight?”

“What, I couldn’t hear you over the talking?” Henry was picking a wad of earwax out of his ear, and thinking that’s fresh. “Oh, you don’t like my hospitality, well bother me no more,” Henry snapped as he banked hard towards the ground below (everyone yelled at this). They headed right for a rock wall; and then just as they were about to hit it, Henry flew them back up into the clouds.

“Yeah, we can’t WAIT, to get some more of that hospitality,” Jack spoke in a midtown sarcastic tone.

“I thought as much, who’s up for shooting some stuff?” asked Henry as he let out a call like a dying mule. “Like, I got cannons, and more cannons, I mean, cannons,” Henry spoke like a person caught bluffing; as he drank a beer with one hand and flew the ship with the other.

Jim looked at Jack and Scott-and they knew Henry had gotten into the cough medicine again.

“Hey, Scott, why don’t you tell Henry here, about all the great stuff back at the launch site?”

“Sure, Jim, not a problem,” Scott said coyly as he cracked his knuckles. “So, Henry, you like good, I mean GREAT food, and ahh...like drinks and TV?” Scott asked awkwardly losing his confidence mid-sentence. He grimaced and looked away from Jim when they made eye contact.

“Drinks, we got plenty right here in your new home,” Henry assured them, his eyes darting around the room. “Hey, who wants to play kill your friend? I got dibs on Jim,” Henry said coyly as he tried to really sell it that he was crazy; while they all debated jumping over the side.

“Yeah that sounds great and all, but...what about taking us to the launch site?” Jen asked in her nicest way. “There’s an idea, Henry,” Jen finished as she coughed hard like she was sick, and rolled her eyes.

“Launch what, we’re home, this is your home from here on in,” Henry replied his hands waving around like flyswatters. “Wend, go ahead and get these kids the sleeping pill filled wine. And oh, let’s get out the whips and chains for later. See, you’re family!”

“I think this old codger’s crazy, let’s thrash him,” Jim said sternly into Scott’s ear.

Scott looked at Jim and nodded yes; but when he looked at Henry he saw he had a large bat, with a red ball of electricity encircling it.

“Jim, I’m not touching that bat,” Scott said as he turned and walked away from Henry. “No, those suckers can kill people like me dead. So, the Scotts of the world would appreciate it, if you keep your hair brained schemes TO YOURSELF,” Scott felt his anger frayed, and he blamed Jim.

Jim eyed the bat-he still wanted to see Henry go for a midday fly through the air-and he could see Henry was ready for anything. Jim knew Henry might really hurt him bad, but he wasn’t living on this *damn ship forever*.

“Jim, please, Henry, you’re just kidding around with us aren’t you?” Fred asked defiantly as he picked up a seat cushion and tossed it at Henry. “Come on, the jig is up, whatever a jig is,” Fred demanded as he grimaced-like seeing a rain cloud on a sunny day-and Henry let out a laugh like a hyena (that unnerved everyone). In came Wend with a purple tray of food.

“Anyone hungry, the pills are warm?” Wend asked nicely.

“No thanks, maybe pills later when you kill me,” Jim added, as he motioned with his hand for Wend to get away from him.

They felt the ship bank hard right this time; and race down into a grove of trees.

“Maybe rich people tell jokes, I just crash,” Henry spazzed out-knowing they would appreciate it later-and acted like his hands couldn’t hold the steering wheel. “That’s what I do, and I do it well!” Henry exclaimed as he smashed through some trees, sending Fred onto the carpet.

“Come on! Don’t kill us, please don’t kill us!” Scott pleaded as he watched tree after tree get mowed down like week old grass.

“I tell ya, Wend, the conversation is not up to royal standards,” continued Henry, “too many fart hellos and slap goodbyes. I won’t take it. No, it’s time to end it all, one last gasp and then ahhhhhh!” Henry finished as he banked through an abandoned house, smashing it to pieces.

Jim grabbed the leg of a couch; and fought not to fall out the back of the house. Jen screamed, and then saw Wend smiling, and Wend mouthed the words” He’s kidding, Dear”. Jen looked at her-with eyes suitable for a train derailment-and then let out a loud sigh.

“Henry, can you cut the fool me fool you stuff?” Jen asked. “I’m onto you, I know you’re messing with us, let’s have it, Slim,” Jen insisted as she walked over to Henry; and she put her hands on her hips like a child catching daddy putting on the Santa suit. Jen looked down her nose at Henry. Henry grinned, and then he flew the ship sideways. The ship locked into the lower bay of the launch site, perfectly.

“Hey, we’re back!” Jim declared.

“You’re not setting me up are ya, Jim?” Fred asked as his feet shot to the back window.

“Ah no, not even I, am that devious,” Jim said his mind replaying the crazed look on Henry’s face. Got to watch out for these guy’s in the future, he made a mental note. Jim muttered, “I lied Biscuit, I was

telling the truth. Well, Henry, you're a weirdo, bye!" Jim said as he ran off the ship; and sprinted up the walkway with Fred and everyone just behind him.

Jen stopped midway up, and blew a kiss back to Henry. Henry grinned like the devil, and nodded softly.



## Chapter 3

### Treading lightly

The ship left Greata behind; and soon it was up and flying at 50 times lightspeed. The crew played music in the dancehall (to a large adoring crowd of drunks). They played a style of music known as bad; and they played it all night.

“Jen, why don’t we just get wasted?” asked Jack as he flipped a grape up to his mouth effortlessly.

“Because, Jack, I don’t speak ah da right when I is ah wasted,” Jen said jokingly as she slobbered on Jack’s shoulder.

“I won’t hold you to a higher standard than myself,” Jack replied with a smirk. “So 8 bottles of wine each, none less!” said Jack as he threw his hand in the air.

“Jack, you crazy,” Jen spoke with a purring (not all there) voice. “Hey, is that Fred dancing?”

They looked up and saw Fred was spinning-something he thought made him look cool-and flailing his arms like a top. He hit an old passenger right in the mouth with is left hand; and then apologized to him.

“No, I wouldn’t call it that,” Jack said his mind still on Jen’s sweet body. “Assault, he’ll only be in Prisoncon for life, maybe more,” Jack muttered as he hummed quietly between each sentence.

Jen saw Jim eating a lobster roll-looked like it was almost eating him-and gabbing up two blonde women in spandex suits. She wondered if Jim was a player at heart, or a keeper.

“Yeah, I love being probed with sticks, it’s my forte,” Jim continued. “What, I can’t hear you, because you’re too drunk. Are you flexible?” Jim inquired.

“Yes, I bend and stretchy all night,” Sandi Soup confessed in a sultry voice. She grabbed Jim around the neck; and pushed his head towards her crotch.

“Whoa, you’re getting a little rough with the old Jim,” Jim was reluctant to go down on her in front of everyone. “Maybe we take it a bit slower, I got needs. Ya know, when you needs lovin’, don’t go head grabbin’,” Jim said sarcastically as he ate the last of his lobster roll.

Sandi punched him in the balls; and said angrily, “Screw you LOSER, I’m not waiting all night!”

Jim grabbed his balls-his ego hurting more than the physical pain-and he took a few quick breaths, as Scott came over laughing his ass off.

“Jim, that’s quite a come on line you got there,” Scott had all he could do to look Jim in the eye at this point. “Hey beautiful blonde, punch me in the balls and I’ll drive that pussy wagon. Got any tips?” Scott asked and he gave up on *trying to stop laughing*. Jim rose to his feet grimacing; and trying to catch his breath. He eyed Sandi, and wanted to give her a good slap, but he would never hit a woman.

“What, what did you say?”

“Come on you heard me, Jim.”

“No, what was it about anyway?” Jim asked coyly as he toyed with Scott (using his best insincere grin). Scott shook his head; and then ran away screaming for five steps, and then stopped.

“I can’t remember, but that was way funny!” Scott snickered.

“Good one, tell me a joke from a mile away,” Jim wisecracked. “That really got me you jerk off. Man, I need better instincts, that bitch,” Jim said angrily as he looked around. “Ah, god my balls hurt,” Jim muttered and he tried to hide his embarrassment. Jen saw the whole thing-and she knew Jim needed her.

Jen strutted over to Jim; like she was the conductor in a large parade. Jim saw this and he nodded begrudgingly (half hoping she’d turn around and go back).

“Jim, I need to make you very happy.”

Jim shrugged-still holding his hurting baby makers-and asked,” How ‘bout you don’t hit me in the BALLS? Like that crazy bitch,” Jim said angrily.

Jen fought back laughter; and turned so Jim could look at the side of her face.

“I’m not laughing AT YOU, it’s that crazy bitch that has me pissed,” Jen said hollowly, pinching her leg to keep from laughing. “This is me pissed, for future reference. Jim, why don’t we go beat up the band? Like, they suck so bad I want to smash their instruments, first. Then maybe, we can shove them in the garbage shoot? It could work,” Jen said as she put her hands on Jim’s chest; and then she gazed up at him with warm eyes.

Jack watched them talking for a minute-wishing he had someone just then to talk to.

“Jen, come back to me,” Jack launched his words like a wad of spit. He finished off his glass of wine and his finger crept up to his mouth.

“Jen, I’ll tell ya what, we’ll kill the band and take their leisure suits?” Jim said as he adjusted his shirt (putting up the collar to look cool). “Look, this is the type of big thinking Einstein used. We all know it,” Jim said sarcastically as he rubbed Jen’s back-all the while trying to calm his temper.

“Yeah, I’m all for it!”

“Fred, we thought you had died, why are you letting us down?” Jim asked his hand touching the top of Jen’s butt.

“Jen, I’m half dead, and I’m trying here,” Fred said with his eyes searching for a place to sit down. “Hey, what if we go grab a case of wine and go exploring the ship? It could lead to *certain death*? See I am trying.”

“Fred, ya know with all the stupidity that comes out of your mouth hole, that was pretty smart,” Jim confessed as he bumped his fist with Fred’s. “Alright let’s go, but we need to grab Jack and Scott first. My feeling is the more the merrier, right, just in case,” Jim said as he ran his hand through Jen’s hair (it felt like silk and he loved it). He could still feel pain in his balls though; and he wanted revenge.

“Jack, Scott, let’s have some funny,” Jen said brightly.

Scott and Jack looked over at Jen-doing an awkward dance-and smiled. Jack wished he could be with Jen, but he wasn’t going to wait for her forever. He liked her spunk and goofy side the most.

They all walked towards the doors behind the band. Jim got close to the guitar player and pretended to dry heave. Jim pushed him hard into the drums (harder than just playing around). The whole room looked up and Jim said apologetically, “Sorry man, must’ve have been that rickety c note that tripped me.”

“Jim, oh my god stop,” Jen begged as she pulled Jim towards the doors.

They found themselves in a video arcade-with the drunkest people on board half heartedly caring about the games themselves-and saw people playing the games. There were 5 rows of the games; and several living rooms set up for relaxation. There were suits you could put on and enter the holographic games that could trick your senses. At the far end, men in black leather long jackets were sitting around smoking long red cigarettes (the smoke smelled like dried beaver meat).

“Do you like the ambience of this room, Jen?” Jack asked. “It makes me think of home.” Jack walked leisurely through someone’s game, and quickly out the other side.

“Yeah, this room takes me back to the first day I ever played video games,” Fred reminisced while grabbing a video game controller. “And reminds me how I PISSED my life away. No seriously, these games look pretty dope,” Fred said as he looked around for a place that had an exit into the other parts of the ship (he was anxious to see the other female passengers).

“Yeah, been there done that,” Jim responded a moment later than normal. “God, the amount of time I spent playing video games I could have, done stuff. I could have been really rich, ya know?” Jim asked hollowly (he was independently wealthy from a tech company he sold).

“Yes, rich is good, Jim, but especially if you’re poor, uh, Jim,” Jen said as she pulled out Jim’s back pocket.

“It’s true though, if you don’t have money, you’ll only really live half a life,” Jim continued after eyeing a Jet Ski game he wanted to play (it used real water and skis that latched onto your shoes). “You can eat, and do some stuff, but you can never truly feel alive. I mean, I feel most alive when I’m acting and traveling,” Jim said as he thought of the highlights of the trip so far. “To travel it takes money, and to act it takes lessons. My old man had very little money, and I always wished he could have been rich. Like super rich,” Jim said as he walked through the room arm and arm with Jen and Fred (Jim thought back to his oatmeal for breakfast everyday youth and felt a chill go down his spine). And he could still feel the ache as new as Sunday clothes.

Jen nodded softly, and thought about her own poor life. It made her wish for luck and good fortune just one time if she could get it.

A man in black and blue clown makeup started doing forward rolls around them.

“Jim, we all know that feeling,” Jen confessed her mind going back to all those peanut butter and jelly sandwiches all the way through school (a sandwich she’d vowed never to eat again). “It’s like the cold of snow on your face, you never forget that sting,” Jen said as she pushed the clown hard in the back with both hands.

“You could try and steal your fortune,” Jack suggested as he nudged a small red haired boy playing the game Thunder Life (the boy just looked too happy for Jack’s sake). “Then again jail is worst than poverty. I don’t know why we aren’t all rich?” Jack asked as he walked along watching Jim take in his ideas. Jack was studying Jim; he knew he was smarter than he let on.

They got close to the men in the black leather jackets; and a short blonde haired man shot up out of his seat, and approached them. He was named simply Rand, and he hated tourists. His hands and face were green, because of his heritage. He had a handsome face, and large shoulders like a bodybuilder.

“No, no, no, turn the hell back!” growled Rand as he waved his hand like a clergy man. “Back, now! This ain’t no area for you,” Rand barked as he stretched out his back and went to push Jim hard into the wall-Jim saw this coming and was ready-and Jim slapped Rand’s hands away before he could (old playground move).

“Says who?” Jim said indignantly as he glared at Rand.

“Says me, idiot, turn around or get your ASS kicked!”

“Alright, Jen, let go of my arm and we’ll leave,” Jim said coyly-knowing he had to use the element of surprise-as he looked down and started to turn. Jen let go of him, and he clocked Rand hard behind the ear. The punch sent him to the floor in a mass of gangly legs and arms. His friends popped up out of their seats and glared at the group.

“Jim, I’m not a fighter per se,” Fred said anxiously as he tried to figure out how to throw a punch.

“Then learn!” Jim yelled his mind filled with adrenaline-he called it kickass juice. “These pricks are getting what’s coming to them. AREN’T YA, HUH! Mess with me and I’ll snap your necks!” Jim growled as he angrily eyed the 3 of them. Jack and Scott picked two of the men-named Pickle and Tento to attack. Jack had fight training for 5 years; and he was looking forward to kicking some ass.

“O.k., better late than never,” Fred said as he put his fists up (his long fingers unable to decide if they should punch or poke).

“You gonna die for that,” Rand said coldly his eyes never leaving Jim. “Out there, in space, it’s mighty cold. So cold, I hope you got a decent jacket,” Rand said coldly, as he pulled out a small gun with knockout bullets inside. When the bullets hit your body, toxins are absorbed into the skin. This makes you go limp and lose control of all your muscles. Jim pulled out a small pistol and smiled-like he was handing out Rolexes at Christmas.

“I got several, Pal, but I won’t be needin’ ‘em,” Jim responded dully his body barely moving. “Jack, Jen, pick one and GO!” said Jim as he aimed and fired into the belly of Rand. The bullet glanced off his large ribs, and spun him to the ground. Jack and Jen, along with Scott and Fred, ran at Pickle and Tento. Fred ducked a punch; and Scott rocked Pickle with a punch to the chest. Jen kicked Tento hard in the knee. Tento returned the favor bitch slapping her face with the back of his hand. Scott hit Tento in the head with a beer bottle, knocking him unconscious.

Jim laughed and pounced on Rand. He started punching him repeatedly in the back, and along the side. Rand stood up with Jim clinging to his back.

“I ain’t dead yet,” declared Rand. “Pickle, Tento, pick it up!” Rand said as he grabbed hold of Jim’s wrist, and started spinning around. He was strong enough to spin Jim off his back; and to throw him into the wall. Jim righted his body just before the wall; and ran sideways up and then down it. Rand asked in disbelief,” Who the hell are you?”

“The last face you’re ever gonna see,” Jim continued his hands bloody now, “let’s go, I love a parade.” And he clapped his hands hard together; and glared at Rand as he approached. Rand looked around and saw his gun lying up against a table (it was glowing red and had mist seeping out the gun barrel). Jim ran at him, and Rand went for the gun.

Jen punched Pickle in the mouth with the palm of her hand (a self defense trick her father had taught her in 5<sup>th</sup> grade). Then she kned him hard in the gut; and she and Scott tossed him hard against the wall (head first). A crowd was forming now of shocked passengers; they were all keenly watching the Malay.

“I’m kicking ass!” Fred said triumphantly as he punched Pickle in the back, but Pickle kicked backwards and hit Fred in the stomach. Fred doubled over and gasped for life giving air.

“I got this one, Fred, stay safe,” Jack said confidently as he sized up Pickle. Pickle broke for Jack; and Jack laid flat on the carpet, and pulled Pickle’s feet out from under him. It made him land face first on the floor (breaking his nose more sideways than a sidecar).

“Good work, Jack, but we need to help Jim,” Scott said his eyes not crying but he was close; his eyes glistened in the lime green light. Jim and Rand were punching each other in the face over and over again; this while Rand continued reaching for his gun.

“Come on Jim! Fight this prick!” Jim’s voice was completely his wrestling coach Mr. Smith from High School; as he tried to land a clean shot to the head of Rand, but Rand was moving awkwardly to avoid the blows.

“Just a bit and you can feel some space,” Rand said as he had his pointer finger-slowly pulling the final answer towards him-on the trigger and his eyes were wider than dairy cows.

He grabbed the gun and went to shoot Jim; but Jen dove on his arm and pulled hard on the gun with both hands.



“Jim, hit him in the...NECK!” Jen watched Jim hammering Rand like he was a prizefighter (she knew he was a badass where he came from).

Jim heard her cries, and locked his eyes on Rand’s neck; and instantly punched him as hard as he possibly could. The blow concaved Rand’s throat; and he started gasping for air and heaving forward like a snowdrift towards the street.

“Fun, man this is fun,” Jen said as she looked around at the large crowd of onlookers. Fred landed a good hard kick to Pickle’s chin; and knocked him *clean out*.

“Fred’s the man, just ask Fred,” Fred said this as he did-his awkward homemade version of-some breakdancing moves. “Woo, I am smokin’ and I ain’t got no candy fools, YES!” said Fred, now strutting around with his hands chugging like a steam engine.

Jim looked up and saw Rand choking, his face turning red. Jim stood up and walked a few steps back. Then he ran full speed-acting like he was going to kick Rand-and Rand looked up in terror and Jim jumped clean over him.

Jim considered the situation and then said,” What do I care, you’re already dead. Man, could you speed up the dying, you’re really dampening the mood? Fred, maybe we need to dispose of these filthy beavers? Like, these fine carcasses, Fred, these ones,” Jim said, making sure it was loud enough for everyone to hear. He smiled and mopped the back of his sweaty head with his shirt. Jim felt like his violent days were behind him. If only. It had been 3 months now and nothing had happened (no fights and *no real arguments*). Just then he realized they would never be truly gone for him.

“Good one, Jim, I don’t do beaver,” Fred replied. “Especially filthy, smell of ass beaver like this,” Fred said in a deep voice as he kicked Rand in the side.

Jim laughed for a few seconds; and then eyed the hallway Rand had been protecting. It smelled different, and air was oozing out of it like melted cheese over the sides of a meatball sub. He knew that smell, but he couldn't remember what it was.

"Oh, my nails," Jen exclaimed her hands fluttering above her head. "Is there a pedicurist in the audience?! Please someone, help!" Jen said as she showed the shocked and stunned onlookers her broken pointer fingernail.

"I can fix it, but you may lose the finger," Jack said sarcastically as he and Scott picked up Pickle by the arms. They tossed him into the garbage shoot. And they calmly walked over to the window; and then watched Pickle's body get crushed and launched off into space. Jack knew it was barbaric, but it was them or me, he thought. Better them.

"Look, ah let's, ya know...keep moving," Jim muttered his mind on getting some food. "I mean, chuck these LOS-ERS, and then let's leave the scene of the crime. Jen, can you get a hold of this guy's feet?" Jim asked as he picked up-a still gasping for air-Rand. Jen grabbed his feet; and they carried him over to the garbage shoot. Jim continued," we came, we saw, we killed you. Accept it, you're a deadbeat loser. Come on, that's why you're dead."

Jen laughed and then they tossed Rand into the garbage shoot. Jim and Jen hurried over to the window to watch the vacuum of space *crush him to death*.

"Jim, that man had feelings," Jen wisecracked as she tried not to laugh. "And our feelings killed him, killed him dead, Jim," Jen pushed Jim gently with her elbow. She didn't like violence, but she could still hear her father saying 'if it's your air or theirs, take a deep breath, Gorgeous'".

"Yeah whatever, space kills," Fred said as he watched the crowd of people disperse. "Hey, why are Fred and old Scott the only ones lifting the body?"

“Fred, at least lift him off the carpet!” Jen said unbelievably as she ran her fingers to the top of her head; and then stuck out her tongue like a cow would (the tongue drooping to the side).

“I’m trying, but he had a big lunch,” Fred said as he tried to carry Tento as best he could, but he was only able to drag him. Scott looked at Fred angrily-he knew he wasn’t pulling his end-and whistled.

Jen and Jack ran over and grabbed the sides of Tento. Then they hurled him into the garbage shoot (making a metallic thud sound when he landed).

“O.k., now we can go exploring,” Jim said with a sigh that made everyone relax. “If anyone asks, they tried to kill us. Which let’s face it, they did.”

“Of course, that’s what happened, Jim,” Jen said as she put her head under Jim’s arm. “Now, can we please go lookin’ for troub-le?” Jen asked as she walked with one leg dragging, for the fun of it.

They entered the hallway and saw pictures of all the great actors lining the walls. There were purple mini streetlights lining the hallway; with spade shaped doors every few feet. It seemed to snake its way through the whole backend of the ship.

“This is so,” Jim paused as a small blue man walked past him and he continued,” Whoa, didn’t see that dude comin’. I have to admit, blue men in the dark, kinda scary.”

“Jim, what’s that sound?” Jen asked her eyes darting around the hallway. “Everyone stop please.” Jen listened hard and eyed the different doorways. She walked a dozen measured steps forward, and stopped at a door. Behind the door she could hear raised voices and high emotion.

Jim heard the voices and he and Scott stepped forward. Then Jim went to kick the door open; and Fred gently pushed it open with side of his hand. Fred said,” Just needed some Fred magic, pure and perfect.”

They looked up and saw Beth standing there dressed as a man; and she was sporting a painted on purple handlebar mustache. Gloria was wearing: a pair of panties, white tennis shoes, and anklets (but nothing more).

“Oh, it’s the cleaning crew,” Beth groaned her cigarette doing double duty now. “We don’t need these toilets cleaned, they’re fine. Now, run along, this is for talent only,” Beth said dismissively as she sucked on her cigarette holder (of course continuing to stay in character).

“I have talent, that’s why you hate me so much,” Jen answered her bright smile making Beth nauseous. “Jim here, can out act what’s her name there, Jaybird is it, naked ass?” Jen asked as she walked right out onto the dimly lit stage. There were directors sitting in the shadows-debating a Beth comeback. The light on the stage was like a mosquito net; as there was no light beyond the edge of the stage, just blackness. There was a large Steinway piano near the back of the stage (made to look like a naked Liberace). And a single ivory chair with the inscription I DANCED, AND MUSIC FREED MY MIND FROM REMEBERING SOFT PAIN. DANILE EVES (Daniel was the best piano player in the world the past 9 months).

“No, you’re not going to dismiss my girlfriend, you little bitch,” Beth said sharply her hand at her side rubbing her thigh. “No, I’d hate to bust that nose of yours, hate as in love. Please, keep pressing the button,” Beth said as she glared at Jen.

“O.k., this is what I say,” Jen continued, “I say Ben Train won the Oscar and you stole it.” Jen kept her hands behind her back.

“What!” Beth said indignantly as her face looked genuinely appalled. “Nonsense, I am the Oscar. I’ll always be *that good!*” Beth said as she lifted her chin (that way the directors could take in her profile).

“Nope!” replied Jen as she lifted her chin the same way as Beth. “I saw the article in Vanity Fair. I know you and the director Limberg, cheated Ben,” Jen said happily as she moved ever closer to Beth. “Go ahead, tell us why you had a secret powwow without Ben before the final scene?” asked Jen.

Beth took in a deep breath and then exhaled loudly. She walked over and picked up a glass of red wine- it was sitting on a red table just in the darkness-and drank it down like pride to a poor man.

“Well, we discussed where we were going after the shoot,” Beth said hollowly as she intentionally perked up. “It was the last day, and typically I like to dine out with the director. And I do this because it’s common, courtesy. See, you’re a fool sharing a fool’s dream, with another fool. Go on, keep blowing it, Sweet Cheeks,” Beth shot back as she cackled like a dying horse; and she felt the room swaying in her direction.

Jim walked out into the darkness; and he saw 5 directors sitting in a cluster watching Beth keenly. He couldn’t tell who was who, but they looked intense.

“BULL-shit, Gerald Henry said you made up that lie up a week after the Oscars,” Jen continued after a short forced laugh. “And he said you and Limberg planned on only *you* winning the final scene. Huh, you did it because you felt inferior to Ben. Come on, let’s hear that country club lie next,” Jen said as she did a trio of jumps and laughed.

Beth’s body language implied she was unimpressed by Jen, but she knew Jen was telling the truth. Beth looked out into the dark; and she pointed to Jen with one hand. Then she made a goofy face and did a circle with her other hand. The directors laughed, and Jim snuck up behind them. He saw they had gold and silver cigarette holders; and they were all wearing expensive clothes and cheap glasses.

“Beth, why’d you do it?” Jack asked flatly. “Ben cared about you, he said he loved being around you,” Jack said as he walked half in the light and half out.

“He actually said he found me intoxicating, and I him,” Beth said her head held high. “Someday, as a collective group you’ll have a smart thought. And you’ll realize Ben just didn’t, have, it. End of story, cut and Print. Darling, where were we?” asked Beth as she kissed Gloria on the mouth.

“Bull, you are a bad liar,” Jen said pityingly, as she walked right up to Beth; and Jen bumped her chest against Beth’s arm. “The only reason Ben didn’t win *before that*...is because he didn’t like working people over to get things. He said it cheapened him, and ruined his gifts. Let’s face it, you’re a FRAUD!” Jen spoke in a tone Beth hated. The room laughed at the Gaul of Jen; and the directors checked her features through their small cameras.

“Please, Mall sucking cheap Shampoo, you’re grasping at straws,” Beth drew in a breath, coughed it out, and winked at Jen. “If you had what it took to make it, you’d have made it, already. I was a star at seven, a huge star at eight, but never a dreamer. Try finding a way off my set, we’re not using extras in this one,” Beth said sharply as she mimicked Jen and continued blowing smoke in her eyes.

Jim reached up and snatched a large glass of expensive bourbon from the director’s table. He moved slowly away from them; and then downed the *50,000 dollars a glass bourbon*.

“Wow, that was good,” Jim said under his breath. “Hey, Fred, let’s have some fun. Just follow my lead,” Jim whispered as he grabbed Fred by the shoulder; and then led him to the side of the stage where Beth was. Jim and Fred stood there inches from her, and she had no idea.

“Beth, you sucked as a kid, that’s why you never got nominated for anything,” Jack said with unmistakable joy. “They hated you when you were thirty, because you were a HAM HANDED nobody. I mean, without Ben, you’d be doing underwear commercials, face it,” Jack said as he walked out to center stage; and he offered the palm of his hand to Beth.

She eyed the hand-and didn’t know if she was out of the loop with such a gesture-then slowly moved her elbow. She looked to Gloria for help; and saw she had no idea either.

“Beth, go with this angle, let’s see humble, worthless, beaten!” director Stephen Green said as he eyed the energy coming off of Jack and Jen eagerly.

Beth looked into the blackness; and then lowered her head and forced her best smile. Beth said casually, “Yes, of course I will it’s brilliant. Please, Cad, continue sticking it to me.”

Jack laughed ever so slightly, and threw his hair back (all the while keeping the open palm still facing Beth).

“So, this is an Oscar winner,” Jen said as she tapped Beth on the ass and then the stomach. “I mean, there are lots of people who could ruin as many films as you have, *BETH*. What about *Lasting Through Breathing*?” Jen asked as she sat down on the ivory chair facing Beth.

“PLEASE, everyone takes chances,” Beth answered with a wink and a brief laughing breath. “Goddamn it! I made that film into something GREAT, and it faltered due to mismanagement. Hey, if you knew, how hard it was *after* you make a film. It’s hard, Stephen, with this angle to use my gifts. I mean they aren’t even guild members, this is torture,” Beth said hollowly as she stood there with nothing but sheer contempt for Jen (and thinking about having her cast out the garbage shoot).

“No, there’s talent there, let me see embarrassed, nervous, broken. You’ve got one good read in you, let me share the words!” Stephen yelled as he watched the smile on Jack’s face with wonderment.

Beth let her shoulders sag, and stomach stick out. She eyed Jen and started to fidget with her hands. Beth said nervously, “You’re so right, and so talented. I just wish, Ben were here so I could apologize. I loved him, I love him dearly. I stole it from him, I can’t deny that now.”

Jen walked over and put her arm around Beth. Jen said reassuringly, “Beth, you’re somebody now. You needed this stage to come out the other end. Now you just need to give back your Oscar, and tell the press the truth.”

“Oh fuck THIS!” Beth shrieked. “I won’t play dullard and loser, Stephen. This little bitch has taken it too far. Out of my head with this one,” Beth said hollowly as she tried to look like she was in physical pain. “Look, that was not a confession of anything,” said Beth as she grinned to herself. “I won that Oscar, and Ben became a fucking vegetable, and that’s it. History is only written, *once*,” snapped Beth angrily as she stood there eyeing a smiling demure Jen. Then she tossed her cigarette holder over Jen’s shoulder, and clenched her fist.

“Good, keep going with it!” Stephen said excitedly as he stood up and walked to the edge of the stage. “Try really feeling humiliated. Like ah...ya know a bad actor would at a screen test?” Stephen asked coyly as he was trying not to laugh (he knew he’d be telling this story for the rest of his life).

“Finally I can confess, to stealing the OS-car,” Beth spoke like she was high. “I just wish I hadn’t conned Ben, and sent him off without cookies and boners. Look, if I could change places, with that man, I would and will. It’s been, hard in so many ways. Oh the ahh...hard,” Beth said as she stretched out her shirt.

“Good, now drive it home!” Stephen said enthusiastically as he jumped back into his seat.

“You’re worthless, pathetic, pretentious, obnoxious and petty,” Jen said, her hair being tossed from side to side when she turned her head. “You stink of crass and entitlement. Most people hate you. You can’t act for shit, and I hate you. Beth, you’re nobody, but a poor farmer’s tit yanking kid,” Jen said as she walked towards Beth with purpose and intensity; like a bear would to fresh fish.

Beth shook her head and bore holes through Jen’s eyes. Beth eased back onto her left foot, and then said coldly, “I’m all those things you little bitch, and WORSE. I’ve ruined the careers of THOUSANDS, and laughed ha hah ha. I am the egotistical super dominant man, but I was born without a Johnson,” Beth paused to set her chin line then continued, “You’re all you’ll ever be right now, just *floating* through life. I see a diner in your future, and jam. Come now, you can’t rattle me. I’ve crushed your every hope and *your every thin torn bread dream, with ease.*”



Jen grinned and walked right up to Beth. She slapped her-knowing this was the best feeling ever to do just that-hard across the mouth. "Then why are you challenged by me?"

"Brilliant!" Stephen exclaimed with all of his lung power. "That's career starting good for you young lady. And soap commercial acting for Beth. Hi I'm Stephen and you're gonna be a star," Stephen said-sending Jen into super happy mode-as he appeared from the shadows and walked right up to her.

Jen looked at Stephen, looked again, and Stephen smiled causing her to smile. This while Scott and Jim snuck up on Beth (a tear rolled down Jen's cheek as it all seemed surreal).

"She's mid-morning porn, Stephen, please," Beth barked as she gave Jen the middle finger. "Torturous, sophomoric, and juvenile yes, but talented? I have a soup order in your future tramp, extra creamy. I-" Beth said snidely as she tugged at her shirt; but before she could continue Jim grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her.

"You're gonna die BITCH!" Jim screamed, scaring Beth and causing her to instantly sweat on her upper lip.

"I tell you, Stephen, you're blowing location shoots and craft service on this bunch," Beth said anxiously as she was unnerved by Jim and Scott's shenanigans. She slowly moved out of Jim's grasp (dreading his alpha male hands touching her blouse, which she would now have to burn).

Jim walked past her making sure she saw his cocky smile. Beth wanted him dead and soon for touching her pristine flesh. Gloria eyed Jim and debated bashing his head in.

Over the intercom they heard the ship's Midshipman Tony Pony say "We're entering the Ogalo warzone, please be ready to abandon ship. This is only a precaution, but we will need to land on Ogalo to stock up on anti-gravity fuel cells. Find your way to the exits, and be ready to spend a bit of time here. The people here will fight you, but thankfully not kill you."

“Great, another punch in the head,” Fred said as he covered his eyes with his hands. “Is it breakfast yet?” Fred asked sadly as he walked over and kicked a piece of furniture. He was pissed they were stopping; he knew that could mean serious trouble. Jen looked at Stephen and then Jim, took a quick breath and exhaled. And all three of them knew things were happening.

They made their way outside and onto floating motorcycles (with large front propulsion wheels). The motorcycles were spotted green and dark blue, and were called Jetsets.

“This looks promising, but where do we go first?” Jim asked as he eyed the sky piercing buildings-most of which ending in clouds-and the endless fields of soft red grass snaking through the city of O. It seemed to Jim as if the people there were unaware of each other. He wondered if they were drugged, or just worn down by the speed of their lives.

“There, of course, and then the place,” Jen answered with her eyes blinking wildly. “God, Jim, stop blowing it!” Jen said sarcastically, as she stepped up onto her own Jetset. Jim grinned, waved the middle finger goodbye to Jen, and walked over to a Jetset of his own. Jim climbed up onto a 4 person bike; and Scott and Jack sat down in the lounge (which was over the rear wheel complete with a robot DJ). And Fred and Stephen sat behind Jen; and they all started up a small hill leading into O.

They traveled for an hour-red rain pattered on their faces-and they came to a rotating red and black warthog shaped dance club-called Peter’s Funny Name For You-and stopped. It was alive and screaming with people. The people of Ogalo were blue skinned, and had large arms and thin legs. They had long jutting forward heads-common among people far enough out in space-and serious eyes like a judge. It reminded Jack of a movie he saw once called Snow Clone-a 3 hour docudrama that took liberties with an actual doctor’s demise-but it also scared him.

“This place sucks,” Jim howled like a wasted county fairgoer. “I hate good times and entertainment. Let’s burn it down!” Jim yelled as he sauntered into the club smirking as he did. They all chuckled nervously at this (Fred wished Jim would shut his big mouth *for a change*).

“Yes, I also would like a drink,” Jen said as she ran over to Jim and bumped him with her hip.

“No, Jen, try and not have a spec,” Stephen offered as he watched Jen through a square he was making with his right and left thumbs. “I want to see desperate, longing, uncoordinated. You’ve got this, fill the bar with you,” Stephen said as he continued to use his hands in a square shape to check Jen’s features in the frame.

“Or crack head, sock thief, turd for clothes person,” Jim wisecracked while his hands were making a square and following Jen’s eyes. “I mean, the camera eats that stuff up. Hey, you either fake it or they give you 50 bucks for your bus ticket home. Many a smart and talented person has failed on arrival, its called *failure*. I wouldn’t know, but I ah, yeah anyway,” Jim said sarcastically as he walked over, paused to look at a man’s beer, and then snatched it right out of a small man’s hand as he passed. Jim downed the beer and set the bottle back down. Jim continued,” it tasted terrible, I couldn’t let you drink that filth.”

“Hey, what’s in the back there?” Fred asked as he watched people almost jumping out the back door.

“I don’t know, let’s go find out!” Jack said in an eager for sex voice, as he grabbed a beer from a wooden bin (his debit card paid for it instantly, space rates though). They waded through the crowd and past several people fighting. Then they saw a bizarre sight, the shooting of an actual movie out back.

The dark green cameras were hanging in midair and aimed at the actors. Every few seconds, the cameras would rotate around the actors filming them from every side (in character of course).

“Boy, they’re making a movie, Stephen,” Jen said in a warm, soft voice. She grimaced and eyed the lead actor Tote Lart (son of a wine salesman father and aristocrat mother). Tote had chiseled features and a set of-early Elvis, comeback special-piercing eyes. He was all of 6 feet; and he looked preoccupied with his surroundings. He had on a black leather cloak, and white silken pants. Jim looked at him and thought he was a cult leader or some kind of deviant.

“Is that guy in a cult of what?” Jim wondered aloud (really loud so Tote would hear).

“What, he looks handsome,” Jen insisted, making sure Jim didn’t belittle Tote (and because she thought he was sexy).

“I bet within 5 minutes he’s trying to WARP your religious beliefs. Watch, I guarantee it,” Jim declared as he waded through the last of the crowd. They all made their way over to Tote; and proceeded to introduce themselves to him. And then they sat down and started talking (mostly Tote).

“The existential plane can’t be flown to, you have to live it,” Tote spoke with a seriousness reserved for late night comedy shows (but he was serious). “Trust me, before I met Lorashi I knew no God, nor He I. Find the way to Lorashi or die alone,” Tote said as his eyes glazed over-like a ten year old watching a deer run past. Jim sat there drinking his beer, and not wanting to make eye contact with Jen. He knew if he did, he was going to call Tote on the pretentious load of *SHIT* he was selling.

“Jim, FINE, he’s A crack-head,” Jen admitted begrudgingly as she looking intentionally down at her drink (she had to or she’d laugh in Tote’s face). “God, I can’t believe you’re right again. Tote, I’m not high enough to talk to you. Maybe some other time, when I find my plane ride to existence, huh,” said Jen with her voice dripping with sarcasm. “And tell Lorashi to SUCK IT, he needs to wear some blue jeans and *shower!*” Jen said as she stood up. Jim chuckled into his right hand; and then they all got up and left.

“It’s Lorashi that told you to say this,” Tote exclaimed loudly-the honor of Lorashi was at stake he thought-and he continued, “It has been foretold! The armies of no and yes will battle once more in your heart!” Tote said boldly as he stood there lifting his chin-for the camera-and flexing his chest muscles.

Jen ran off with her fingers in her ears, with everyone else running after her. She soon found herself out on a patio-drenched in green and red moonlight-and looking intently up into the hills. There she saw

a single mansion built into the rock face. It looked lonely and sad with its grass growing long-like you'd been away for a month-around it. There were also broken down cars littered about outside of it.

"Jen, I hate to say I told you so, but my name is really Raoul," Jim said as his lips started to grin, but he saw the house in the rock face and stopped.

"Nice home, very interesting statement about his world, and us in it," Stephen said as he plotted out the best angles for a night shoot in O.

"What do you mean, Stephen?" Fred asked in a less than thrilled voice, as he drank his beer and was sweating buckets.

"This whole place is immaculate except one home," Stephen said philosophically with his hands nearly trembling with fear and then he continued, "that man, knows he is smarter than them all, but he also knows they can't tell. Remarkable, I think we should go up there," Stephen suggested.

"Hey, come on we don't know that guy," Jim said as he snatched a large fly out of the air; then slowly put the fly on Stephen's shirt collar. "What if he kills us or something, I wouldn't like that much, then what?" Jim asked as he tossed his beer bottle down into a rocky gorge, but it failed to break or make a sound. He found this curious, causing Jim to walk over to the railing and look down. There he saw a mound of dead people buried in a mass grave (they did this to save money, as was their custom).

"What is it, Jim? OH god, that's disgusting," Jen said in disbelief as she covered her mouth with her elbow; as she was looking down into the gorge at the mangled faces (some of whom weren't completely dead yet).

"No, you'll find that nothing is out of the ordinary for *this world*," Stephen said as he made a mental note of the gruesome faces (he had plans to do a war epic and needed the realism). "They only care about the *living*, the dead can fend for themselves," Stephen said philosophically as he took off his coat; and then he offered Jen his right hand.

Jen looked at his hand-and thoughts of acting stardom filled her mind-and she grabbed the hand; and then they started up the long paved driveway that snaked through a grove of trees. The closer they got, the louder the sound of music became. Jim looked at the trees carefully (he was not willing to trust anything about this situation. Not today).

“Lame,” Jim said flatly.

“What’s lame?” Jen asked.

“This,” Jim answered with his eyes checking the trees for any signs of people hunters. “I don’t need to be dying today. Fred, what if we use you to barter with, hear me out? What IF, they want a human sacrifice, ya know? We could give them you, and then we wouldn’t die, it’s so simple, Fred. Why are you so greedy about living, Fred, you gotta die sometime?” Jim asked sarcastically (he could see Fred was only acting annoyed and enjoyed the attention).

“Jim, I like you right up until you start talking.”

“Thank you, Fred, that’s the nicest thing anyone’s ever said to me,” Jim said as he put his arm around Fred. “Stop you’re making me horny. I want you to raise my children, why I run off with YOUR wife. You’ve earned it, you have,” Jim said sarcastically as he patted Fred’s back; like you’d touch a small horse. And Fred nodded, coughed loudly, and then made his cough sound like a dying piglet.

“Jimmy, you’re odd in a way, but it suits you,” Fred said after a *long, snot filled spit*. “Hey, what say we run? Come on, Jen, this is taking too long,” Fred urged then he looked back quickly, saw no one following them, and he ran up the driveway. Then with all of his energy he had left, he sprinted up the hill leading to the mansion.

“I like him: raw, clumsy, untapped embarrassment, that has value,” Stephen said as he started to jog with Jen and Scott. Jack sprinted after Fred and howled as he did.

“Fred?!” asked Jen as she ran around the driveway.

“WHAT?!” yelled Fred back.

“Stop running in place, you’re already here!” Jen said as he watched Fred running in circles and laughing.

Then they saw the lights come on in the courtyard. It sounded as if the music was still playing, but quieter now, quite a bit quieter. Jen eyed the upstairs window; and she saw the figure of a woman there, but for only a second. The woman disappeared (Jen worried she was in some form of distress).

“They kick the living, to remind the dead they’re busy,” Stephen said philosophically, his face lighting up like a cigarette in the morning.

“Who?” Jen asked.

“The worst of us, Jen, let’s go see an original,” Stephen said as he pulled out a long red wallet, and slowly opened it. There were pictures of his Oscar speeches inside (and a get out of jail free phone number, the governor’s cell). And there was one of him in a woman’s dress with the caption **YOU MADE ME AN HONEST WOMAN, LOVER.**

Then they heard the sound of drums suddenly beating, but *only three times and stopping*. Jen looked up and saw a man standing in the upstairs window now. A second later, he had disappeared; like a flash of lighting outside of your window.

“Ya know, Jack, the funny thing about being available is the schedule. I mean, I have to do it all the time, is this Russia?” Scott asked sarcastically as he acted like his back was hurting him. Then he, Fred, and Jack walked up to the-dark brown flask shaped-front door.

The door had handprints on it; and an indentation of a fist on the left. The sign above the doorbell read I'M NOT HOME. And the windows were blackened out (and you couldn't see a second's worth of life through them).

"So, who's gonna get us all killed, *and* ring the damn doorbell?" Fred asked halfheartedly. "O.k. fine I'll do it," Fred shrugged and leaned forward; pressing in the hand shaped doorbell with his head. They heard a dozen piano notes, and then nothing, but the wind sleeping.

"Way to go, Fred, you blew it," Jim snorted sarcastically. He gently pulled Fred back from the doorbell and smiled.

"I know, I know, I lack hygiene and tight fitting jeans, I know!" Fred said as he made an awkward face; like a long jumper landing on pavement.

"Fred, those jeans are tight," Jen said as she rested her head on Fred's shoulder (she could tell Fred was in a great mood).

They heard a loud bang, and the ceiling above them appeared to be falling. It terrified them all-instant feelings of their murders-and they leapt back onto the driveway. Then they heard a restrained chuckle; and the door slid upwards into the ceiling and locked.

"It's really nothing," Sam Fish continued his eyes smiling at everyone, "just some fun in the wee hours. Maybe you'd like to get up off that dirty driveway, and come inside?" Sam asked as he appeared out of the shadows. He was handsome-more like a male model than anything-and had hair like a lion's mane. He looked right at you, but it felt like he was looking past. He had on a white silk suit, and blue frame, yellow tinted sunglasses. His shirt said simply, SAM.

They all rose up off the driveway; and Stephen tried to size Sam up for himself.



“Oh, yes we would like that, more than the dirt,” Jen tried to get up in a cool way, but she lost her balance. Sam stepped out of the house and offered her his hand. Jen eyed the large diamond bracelet he had on his wrist (that’d buy a lot of pasta and wine, she thought).

“O.k., I guess I’ll take it you’re not from around here,” Sam secretly watched Jim off the reflection of the gold handrail (is this her boyfriend?) “Where I come from, women never deny a man his courtesy or grace. Please,” Sam said as he took a step closer to Jen. Jen eyed the hand at first cautiously; and then grabbed it like a jeweler would a diamond. Sam casually pulled her to her feet.

“Thank you. I’m Jen, almost all the time.”

“Sam, almost never,” Sam answered his eyes still watching Jim. “Please, come inside it’s getting cold,” Sam begged as he smiled and caught Jim’s suspicious eyes on him. Sam looked at Jim; and they both felt an uneasy pause.

They went inside and found themselves in a dark purple hallway; it weaved through the front portion of the giant home. Then they heard someone yell, “HELP!!!”

“Hey what the hell was that?” Jim asked as he eyed Sam with eyes you saved for thieves and murderers.

Sam put up his hands, acted nervous, and he opened the door. They saw a red teddy bear sitting on the couch; heaving back and forth and yelling “Help, they’re killing me!” Everyone laughed, and Sam giggled, and he bent over at the waist (he knew it was working, but how well, Sam wondered).

“So, you’re torturing sweet Teddy,” Jack said, his two feet feeling light and nimble just then. “I don’t know, I don’t, I don’t know. Kinda strange, like...wax undies,” Jack joked as he used a nasal sounding voice. Sam patted Jack on the back, and said nothing.

They continued down the hall; and Stephen studied Sam knowing he was truly-and possibly tragically-gifted. He could also tell he was bored by simple conversation, and needed *the absurd*.

“Please, Sam, tell me something,” Stephen begged.

“What, Stephen?”

This startled Stephen as he hadn’t told Sam his name. He asked suspiciously, “How’d you know my name, I didn’t offer it?”

“I own everything for miles,” Sam said while pressing in red buttons hidden in the wallpaper (alerting his staff they would be needed for cleanup). “I heard you down at the bar. You’re all quite interesting, Jim, I did include you in that statement,” Sam breezed down the hallway. And Sam made sure to kick out his left leg-every so often-to keep anyone from walking beside him.

Jim looked around-knowing Sam wanted to hurt him with that joke-and didn’t respond to Sam’s joke. He had a feeling this guy was going to try something, and *cross the line*. Jim looked around for exits just in case, but he saw none, except for the way they had just come in.

“I could go for a bit of music, Sam, do you play?” Jack asked intently. His eyes were on a painting on the wall of Sam (that had 50 men all staring at the camera behind him). It sent a jolt through Jack, and he decided to keep his eyes on Sam.

“Music?” asked Sam in disbelief. “Yes, I remember music,” Sam spoke using a less than genuine tone. He walked into a holographic wall and up a group of stairs. Jen poked her head through the wall first; and then she followed him up.

“I remember chives, CHIVE ON!” Scott said as he clapped his hands together; and then ran up the stairs as fast as he could.

“Chives, that was his brainstorm,” Jim said as he felt the walls for secret passageways. “Yeah, I remember bologna and soup, SOUP ON,” Jim said jokingly as he headed up the stairs (continuing to check the walls for secret passageways as he did). Then he nearly fell through a section of wall; and he saw a pathway leading down into the garage. Jim took care to mark the spot on the steps by pulling out a corner of the wallpaper, and folding it over.

Sam got to the top of the stairs and then fell forward yelling, “Help! I’m falling!!”

Jen and Scott were startled by this; and they ran up to see what had happened. There they saw Sam lying on a floor filling for fun’s sake—red mattress; and he was blowing bubbles through a pig’s head.

“Thank you for saving me that was a rough stretch,” said Sam as he hit his own chest like he was having a sudden cardiac event. “I owe, maybe chives, maybe more, uh ha hah ha,” Sam said, and he rolled over and disappeared into the center of the mattress. Scott jumped onto the mattress-as he was determined to see where he had gone-and looked for a hole.

“Where’d he go?” Fred asked, and then he jumped onto the mattress back first (fearing possible rashes if his skin touched it).

“I’m not sure, there’s some sort of door here,” Scott called up the stairs. “There, see it goes down into a different room,” Scott opened the hatch, took a quick breath, and looked and saw Sam shooting pool (in a room even too damp for hustlers).

The room had chandeliers that were past their prime, and crooked. There was the sound of a detuned radio-much like you’d hear underwater at Disneyworld-filling the space with ancient jazz. The front of the room faced out over the fields; and down to the nearby artist community. The room had a pair of MR. SMELL’S GOODTIME GRAPE soda machines and a TV set up in the front.

“Whoa, how’d you find me?” Sam asked, bursting out with an unearthly cackle as he did. He strode over to Scott and put his arm around him and asked, “You shave nuts? I need someone who can keep me sanitary. Hey, only kidding my friend, do you?”

Scott smiled and nodded yes. Jim came into the room; and he looked at the door next to the front window. He knew then if worst comes to worst, he could get them to safety that way.

“Nice place, you need to remind me how to get out though,” Jim spoke as if he was trying to see if some kid stole his bicycle. “Hey, a soda machine, do I mind if I have one?” Jim asked as he looked around the room-his eyes really looking for potential weapons-and checked out the different soda flavors. They had names like Certain Demise and Hole Filler, and Jim grinned morosely at this.

Sam shot the 9 ball hard into the corner pocket. Then he poked the front door of the soda machine with his silver pool cue, it opened, and revealed a beer fridge behind the sodas.

“I can’t have you drinking soda and disrespecting this table,” Sam looked directly at Jen. “Grab one for each of you, and let’s ask some questions,” Sam said coyly as he fired the 2 ball in the side. He knew they had no idea who they were talking to, but he aimed to tell them.

Jim handed out the beers, and then stood on the opposite side of the table, watching Sam.

“I got mine!” Stephen exclaimed. “Excuse me if I sound like a gold digger ordering lunch. No I mean, what questions?” asked Stephen. Then he sat down on a chair made to look like a 7 foot tall orange alien sipping beer. The taste was smooth, but the alcohol was too powerful, he thought. He felt drunk like he’d just had his first beer *ever*. Stephen examined the bottle, and then blinked hard 3 times to clear his vision.

Sam handed Jim a red cue-with live fish living in the shaft-and stepped back. The pool cue had lights shining through the glass; that would light up the fish like a shrimp boat at night. And it made Jim’s eyes sparkle with wonderment.

“Jim, what would you say if I am God here?” Sam asked flatly.

“You mean like a cult?”

“No, so rich and so powerful I decide who lives or dies in O.”

Jim looked around for a shot on the table. And then he snapped a perfect bank shot through 3 balls into the side.

“There’s nobody that powerful,” Jim answered, then swallowed hard and looked at the different balls on the table (even though he wasn’t looking for a shot, he was just buying time). “At least not anyone I’ve ever heard of. If that’s true, how do you decide who dies, for one? And what gives you that right?” Jim asked as he looked around and mopped the sweat off the back of his neck with the palm of his hand. Jim knew he didn’t want Sam knowing he was a bit scared by what he had just said.

Jen peeked at Sam, and saw his entire countenance change, and his eyes grow larger. She wondered if he was being genuine now, or when they first met him. She walked over to the front window and looked out. There she saw 3 men beating a white skinned man to death.

“Hey, there’s someone being beaten up out here!” Jen cried. “Quick, do something!” Jen pleaded as she dropped her beer to the carpet. She watched in horror, as the man was hit repeatedly in the head and back with metal pipes.

“You’re kidding?” Jim asked incredulously as he shot over to Jen. “How’s that possible? Whoa, I guess it is they’re really pounding that guy. Sam, you don’t really seem to ah, care,” Jim said implying a question. He looked back at a smiling Sam (something wasn’t right about him). Jim knew now that no one needed to hear a tree fall to know *it would still kill anything it fell on*.

“Ya see, I am not who you would think me be,” Sam spoke with an arrogance that put everyone under his thumb. “I am the son of a powerful tyrant, from another world. He came here 200 years ago and

quickly took it over. Those men, they are killing an attempted rapist,” Sam said hollowly as the man was his brother Engeld (who had stolen the last piece of pie from the pantry). “So if you think me heartless, you need think once more. The things power can bring, all of them heavy, Jim. I know of this whole group...YOU are the one who can understand me. You, Jim, you don’t cry wet tears,” Sam said as he sipped his beer. And he calmly watched as the *now dead Engeld* was carted off towards THE GORGE.

“Yeah, yes I can, unfortunately,” Jim replied with a heavy heart. “My old man was ah...pugilist. He beat up half the city where we lived. Just for being his son no one dared touch me. That sort of thing, it’s only fun half the time. And the other half it’s lonely, because *everyone’s* scared of you, ya know,” Jim spoke with a fragility that made Jen love him even more. He drank his beer, and remembered his father beating a horse thief to death with a long metal pole. He wished he hadn’t confessed to what he just had, because it might scare Jen off.

“Yeaahhh!” shouted Sam as he air fucked the space around him. “And those people die funny and smell worse. Jim, if you only knew, if only,” Sam said as he grinned and chuckled at Jim.

“Knew what?” asked Jen, her voice as soft as a sliver of grass.

“Jen, that’s exactly the question and the answer,” Sam said as he stood still, head rocking back and forth gently, while Jen looked at him curiously. “I want to show you my collection of dead bodies. Just follow me down these steps,” Sam said as he smiled; and then he opened a staircase hidden beneath the pool table. They all froze in their tracks. And debated running for it right then.

“Aahh...ya know we really gotta get back,” Jim looked at the different pool balls and grimaced. “Maybe next trip, huh?” asked Jim hollowly as he rubbed his forearm and yawned. Jim knew there was no way he was going to see a pile of dead bodies (or become one for that matter).

“Yeah, our shippy will be leaving soon, sorry, Sam,” Jen said apologetically as she lowered her head and gently shook it no. She had no plans of ending up roadkill either, or part of someone’s *corpse collection*.

“Aahh, so sweet of you, but I was KID-ding,” Sam said hollowly as he debated killing them all right then. “The only pile I have of dead people is UP-stairs. Maybe we could take a quick peek? Won’t do you any harm, and there’s snacks,” Sam said. He laughed in such a way it unnerved everyone.

“No, I wish we could, but we gotta go, Sam,” Jim said as he kept his eyes on Sam’s hands. Jim knew something was about to go down. Just like he always knew before he got hit as a kid. “I’ve seen piles of bodies before, so trust me I know how cool they are. Look, what’s the quickest way back to the driveway? I mean, we’re gonna miss our ship, then what I ask, what then?” Jim asked as he fought back his wanting to scream at Sam. He knew certain death lay upstairs, and he wanted no part of it.

Sam kept laughing, and then casually showed everyone he had a high powered gun hidden in the body of the pool table.

“Hey, whoa, we didn’t mean to piss you off,” Fred spoke as weak as he had since getting beaten up in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. He watched Sam glaring at him, hardly moving, and aiming that *fucking gun* at his head.

Jim looked around, quickly scanned the room, and saw no other weapons anywhere. His heart started to race (home was only a wish for him now). Then Jim slowly walked over to the window; and saw there was a short set of steps leading down-with freedom in sight-to the driveway just outside.

“Oh, I know you wouldn’t dare mess with me,” Sam said as he waved his hand like he was in a parade. “Then again, you know all my secrets now, I mean...god, I can’t let you live,” Sam said dourly, he paused, and then swung the barrel of the gun around, and aimed it at everyone.

Jim walked over to where Jack was (and they both knew what they must do).

“Hey man, who’s that guy behind you?” Jim asked coyly as he sipped his longneck. Then when Sam turned, Jim threw his beer bottle at Sam’s head. It smashed across the bridge of his nose; and ripped open his head like a slice of apple pie. Jim and Jack grabbed Sam and throttled him to the floor. Fred and Scott looked out the front window; and they saw a single solitary guard standing under a tree. Then Stephen looked around for weapons.

“LET GO!! LET GO OF ME!!” Sam screamed crazily as he fought hard-he wasn’t accustomed to being attacked-to shed himself of Jim and Jack.

“Nope!” replied Jack as he punched Sam in the eye; and Jim wrestled the gun away from him.

“Hold him down, Fred, help him!” Jim ordered sharply as he inspected the gun. “O.k. look, we all know if we let him live, we are dead. I say, if you want to leave here alive...we smoke Sam and run for it,” Jim explained breathlessly, his neck sweaty and itchy now. They all looked around-and their thoughts were like fireflies in the night (all over the place).

“Jim, I’ve seen how these things end in the movie business, alright,” Stephen spoke in a sullen bouncing voice like a drug addict. “You let him go, you’re absolutely right, he’ll kill us all. Just, I hate to say it, but shoot him,” Stephen said morosely as he rubbed his temple in a circle with the tips of his index fingers (and stretched out his jaw like a lion).

Jim studied the gun-feeling the ass kicking power of it was easy-and then he studied Sam.

“You shoot me you’re all, DEAD!!!” snorted Sam. “DEAD, DEAD, DEAD!!!” cried Sam angrily, his hands trying to fight Jim and Jack off but failing.

“I don’t know, I guess if we stuffed your dead carcass in the pool table,” Jim thought out loud as he surveyed the pool table and then continued. “No one would know for weeks, we only need hours. Fred, Jack, prop his chest up, and make sure your hands aren’t on his back. This gun might shoot right through



him,” Jim demanded forcefully as he wiped the sweat from his brow with his shirt (showing off his chiseled abs).

“Don’t do it, I’ll pay you,” Sam pleaded his eye bloodshot and sending droplets of sweat down onto the carpet. “I’ve got gold hidden in these walls, enough to buy anything you’d want. Jim, I’m sorry I scared you, I was just kidding. Now, hand me the gun and we’ll go downstairs and have a drink,” Sam said tearfully as he looked at Jim-and wondered if he’d bought it-while his hands stopped fighting them.

“Jim, he’s lying,” Jen snorted as she smirked, her legs ready to kick Sam if necessary, and she watched Sam squirm.

“It’s all BS, Jim,” Scott said sharply. “He’s gonna kill us the second you give him that gun,” Scott kept checking on the guard out front.

“I don’t know, he’s such a good guy and all,” Jim said sarcastically with no one laughing at first; until it dawned on them he was joking.

Stephen accidentally laughed himself into a secret hallway in the wall. He looked inside, and saw a dozen corpses lying around *bloody and fresh*.

“What is it, Stephen?” Jen inquired as she rubbed Stephen’s back. “Are you alright?” Jen asked with the tone of her voice sounding small and nervous.

“This guy’s a mass murderer,” Stephen started to hyperventilate; and his words were half air, and half syllables. “There are dead people in here. He must be killing every tourist that comes near this place and then some. Ace him out, Jim!” Stephen said coldly his eyes unable to focus and his heart rate beyond safe levels. Jack shut the secret doorway-he had no desire to see the bodies-and coughed into his shirt.

“Those aren’t mine, honest,” Sam spoke his voice raised now and filled with obvious manipulation. “I would never, I mean come on. Jim, I know you hate these people, smoke ‘em, smoke them now. Lay

ruin to their heads!” Sam said coyly as he tried-hoping they believed his lies and he had the element of surprise-to break free of Fred’s arm hold, and then he was going to grab a loaded shotgun under the corner pocket.

They all laughed and Jim aimed at him and said,” Show me a king, and I’ll show you a million backs broken and bloody. Here, catch!” Jim said coldly as he fired into the chest of Sam once, it snapping his body hard back into the table. Sam was bleeding like roadkill on the morning commute; and then he slumped over and died.

“We gotta get THE FUCK, outta here,” Jack sounded impatient and rattled, but recognized the situation perfectly (he’d seen too many action movies not to). “Look around for weapons, and stuff him back in the table,” Jack ordered his left hand grabbing Sam by the legs; and Fred-covered in blood-lifted the torso.

“I think, we stirred up a hornet’s nest,” Scott muttered. “That guard is not there anymore, damn it,” Scott said nervously as he went to hit the window. And when he hit, it opened a doorway to the outside. What luck he thought.

“Hey, Scott, we have a way out now,” Jen said seeing the door open. “Jim, we have to hurry,” Jen said quickly as she poked her head outside, took in a breath of fresh air, and scanned the courtyard for guards.

“I’m on it, just a second,” Jim answered, right as he found 4 more guns under the table. He started handing them out to everyone.

“Jack, if you got the means to, we need you to take a good long walk in the tall grass,” Stephen said as he took in a deep breath, coughed, and rolled up his sleeves.

“Why?”

“Just in case they’re shadowing us in the grass,” Stephen explained as he stood beside Jack pointing to the thick wispy grass lining the driveway (and the entire property for that matter). “If you’re out there watching the grass, they can’t get the jump on us. I know it’s risky, but this whole damn thing is.”

“I’ll do it,” Jack said quickly without thinking-he just didn’t want anything to happen to his Jen. “Man, is this supposed to be my vacation from college? What is this crap?” Jack asked angrily, his eyes on that softly swaying grass.

They were all too wound up to laugh, but they knew they’d laugh about this all one day.

“O.k., it’s a quick walk, and then sprint like hell when you see the ship,” Jim said as he watched the sky fill with a small meteorite shower. “Nice, I needed that. Hooah, I need to live, and that’s it. Jen, stay by my side, and don’t be hesitant to fire. Trust me, they’ll kill you sure as shit, so don’t give them the chance,” Jim said as he took in a few: long, deep, unnatural breaths.

Scott looked outside, and saw no signs of the guards. Then they heard someone downstairs, just below them, and froze.

“Don’t say anything,” Jen whispered nervously as she put her finger to her mouth. They could hear footsteps-like rubber soled shoes fresh out of the rain-and someone mumbling in an odd dialect.

“It’s now!” Scott cried as he saw they had their chance to run for it.

Jim grabbed his gun, and they walked quietly towards the front window. Fred stepped on an old brown shoe-one of Sam’s victims-and lost his balance. The hard step was loud enough to be heard downstairs. They heard gunshots coming from below them; up through the thick floor, and they ran for it. They ran like a Zebra from a hungry lion.

“Keep moving!” Stephen barked excitedly as he finished off the last of the stairs.

“You’re damn right!” Jim howled as he checked his gun for bullets, and let out an unearthly crinkled paper sounding laugh.

“Jim, focus,” Jen said playfully as they sprinted down the last few steps. Scott was so scared, he nearly wiped out on the last 6 steps, before catching himself.

Then they heard windows breaking, and more gunshots. They ran full out down the driveway; with Jack out in the grass running full out as well. Jack saw a guard hiding behind a tree up ahead; and he spun around to flank him. He aimed, hands sweaty and shaking, and when he did the guard looked over. Jack shot him twice, hitting the guard in the head and killing him.

“RUN!” Fred shouted nervously as he heard the gunshots (louder than a B. B. gun for sure).

They ran a bit more, and could see the bar’s back deck just a few more *heavy steps* away.

“Go around the side, don’t go in!” Stephen yelled as he felt the night air in his lungs-and more coin than a banker filling his sails. They watched as Jack came barreling out of the grass, with Jim almost shooting him as he did.

“Jim, easy man, it’s just me!” Jack reassured, putting his hands up.

“I don’t know you could be a clone.”

“Clones are people too, Jim, you better learn that already,” Jack said jokingly as they ran up the walkway (that stretched around the side of the bar).

Jen ran into a middle aged black haired woman (who’s hair was thicker than concrete). She fell to the ground, brushed off her knees, and quickly sprung up. Jen said quickly,” Move it!”

They could see the thrusters on the Fresha starting to heat up-they knew it was readying to leave them behind (if they didn’t move it fast).

“Just a bit more!” said Stephen hopefully. “Follow through!” Stephen cried as he smiled; and he ran like he hadn’t since he was a young track star. He remembered running in the cornfields of Oklahoma; and finding a box of letters there once. He wondered *even now* who had written those letters.

Then they heard Tony Pony say over the loud speakers, “We’ll be leaving momentarily due to crew deaths here in O. Everyone board, and stay boarded!”

“Let’s hustle!” Jim spoke as if he was trying to convince himself, as he ran up the walkway and onto the ship. He ran inside and made his way to a window. He looked out and saw several guards coming down from Sam’s mansion. Jim felt his heart beating so fast he thought he might die from it.

Jen looked out the same window; and she saw the guards nearing the bar with *Deathmakers drawn*.

“If we die here, I am SO suing,” Jen said angrily.

“Jen, I doubt you’d collect on that one,” Jim responded a second slower than usual. “Fred, Scott, Jack, Stephen, alright we’re all here. Whoa, I can’t handle all this excitement. Look, the ship’s lifting off, and our new friends are checking the bar for us. Man, who’d believe me if I told them this story? Ya know, it’s so bizarre,” Jim said as he wiped the cold sweat out from under his eyes-he got that whenever he exercised in the cold-and took in a slow breath. He knew he was safe now, thankfully, and felt calm.

## Chapter 4

### Holker Stadium at dawn

They traveled the rest of the night, as the ship's captain Icabod Soft was worried about being chased by Sam's guards. They started to go through a red and green floating cloud of gas. The cloud made your vision of the planets, stars, and moons distorted. It looked as if they were driving through a dream with no end. They looked out the window; and saw a pair of comets speeding past.

"God I hate space!" Beth cried dourly, her hands fixing the thick blue curtains. "Is there anything else to look at?" Beth asked angrily, as she drank some wine with her legs propped up and spread eagle. She glared out at the odd visions she was seeing, and wished for a face to punch. Beth and Gloria were in their private suite enjoying some of the finer things, Doritos and Clam dip. The room was all red in color-golden ceilings as she had requested-with black pillows on the car shaped bed.

"It won't last forever, my love," Gloria said after setting down her crystal goblet. "You just have to think about glory, triumph...and success. These are the things you've earned in your career, you deserve them," Gloria said reassuringly as she took off her top; laying down beside Beth on the floor quietly.

Beth glared at Gloria, and raised her hand like she was going to slap her. And when Gloria smiled, she slapped her hard across the mouth and said angrily," Go reassure some cornfield PONY! I'm not that weak! Now, sorry about delivering your comeuppance, but you've been getting indignant. I won't stand for it, not now not ever. God, can we fly a different direction already?" Beth spoke with a never before

seen irritability in her voice (that scared Gloria and she was *used to Beth*). She kicked the outside window with both feet hard 4 times, nearly breaking it. Then she saw what appeared to be bright lights in the distance. She stood up, adjusted her shoulder pads, and eyed the lights intently.

“What is it?” Gloria wondered as she lay there nearly naked now.

Beth looked at the oncoming lights and felt her happiness level rise. They broke through a large section of cloud; and saw a Spacestop-which was another name for a convenient space station- some 30 minutes ahead of them. It was large like a ballpark on steroids; and shaped like a giant pair of lions. There were pathways leading out from the main body of the Spacestop. And these pathways were no more than 30 feet wide; and they led off in several hundred directions. It looked as if the people walking on them were walking on air, with lights guiding their way.

“Oh, thank you director, that was a good take,” Beth muttered her eyes never leaving the Spacestop. “Gloria, we’ve got to mobilize! We’re going captain hunting, and we’re going to divert this ship for some s and s. Sex and shopping, what else! Get up, we need to be swift and nimble,” Beth demanded as she started to fuss with her hair. She hurried across the room and put on some thick red lipstick; and a white sheer dress with the word FAME sewn around the hip in diamonds. Gloria put on her purple cat suit; and they headed up the outside hallway.

“This could be risky, Beth,” Gloria said as she fidgeted with her suit around her crotchless panties.

“Would you shut up already?” Beth insisted. “God, I can maneuver us through all obstacles. I just need some faith and a decent script.”

Beth spied the ship’s captain Icabod, walking across the hallway smiling to everyone and waving his hand; and then he ducked into his state room. Beth felt her face get sweaty, and her eyes light up. She knew this hayseed of a captain would fall under her spell like so many others had.

“Hello there, Captain, I wanted to tell you something if I may,” Beth breezed into his state room. She made sure her ass was facing him, as she pretended to care about his photos on the wall (mostly of his cat Drillbit).

“Hi there, aren’t you Beth, that famous actress or something?”

Beth turned and smiled with her tongue sticking just out over lower lip. She said in a sultry voice, “Yes, I’m that *good*.”

Gloria grinned, making her way over to the couch (next to Icabod’s favorite red velvet chair). She fussed with her breasts and smiled at Icabod.

“What can I do, do you for, do I mean, help you with?”

“Cap ‘in, I so love space, but I need a break from the beauty of it all,” Beth used her demure voice-one that sounded roughly 14 years old (as her acting coach Hal Pencil had taught her). “I mean, if only there were a space station where we could stop, ah, it hurts,” Beth said coyly as she rubbed nonexistent sweat from her brow.

“Ya know I’m really not allowed to make pit stops.”

Beth groaned and arched her back into a very sexual pose.

“I don’t know, Captain, she’s in dire need of a break from all this,” Gloria said her pouty lip not lost on Icabod. “Could you maybe, just stop for an hour? That’s not too bad is it?” Gloria spoke with an innocence she had learned from shaking down her rich parents when she was young; and she put her hands on her inner thighs and tilted her head back (causing her breasts to seem much larger).

Icabod was very aroused by both of them; and had impure thoughts on his mind.



“Yes, would it really hurt that bad?” Beth asked her finger running ever so close to her pussy. “I mean, I just feel awful all of the sudden. I don’t,” Beth stopped speaking and Icabod juttod forward. She pulled up on her dress, showing some leg.

“You know you’re right, we should stop,” Icabod agreed with a bright smile (the exact kind new employees at the gap are taught to master). “I just hadn’t realized how sick everyone was. O.k. then, if I see a Spacestop we’ll pull in. How’s that, happy now, Beth?”

Beth laughed into her hand and said firmly, “I believe we saw one just a short while ago didn’t we, Gloria?”

“Yes we did, you’ll need to slow the ship immediately.”

“Consider it done,” Icabod replied quickly, he sprung out of his seat and hurried into the control room. There were 50 crew members monitoring every aspect of the ship in a star design shaped room. The glowing control panels-using a dull light that reduced glare-had several staff members wearing royal blue helmets that locked onto your head (this way they were able to interface directly with the ship). There was a sign reading IF WE LAND SAFELY, I APOLOGIZE perched atop a stuffed crow in the corner.

Beth and Gloria followed him in to *close the deal*.

“I love a simpleton, they bring me endless joy and happiness,” Beth said honestly as she rubbed her back. “My, what a fine day we’ve found, Gloria,” Beth remarked as she stood there watching Icabod adjust the gauges; and slow the ship to a standstill in seconds.

“There we go, I see the station, and I’m turning around,” Icabod bellowed, his eyes focused to the point of really bad acting, Beth thought. “Every hand on deck be ready for docking!” said Icabod firmly. “We can climb this mountain before it climbs us,” Icabod said boldly, as he hoped to impress Beth and

Gloria. The ship stopped, turned, and headed into the Spacestop at a slow rate of speed. They came to rest and the airlock closed around the ship. Icabod said happily, "There, I took care of BUS'NESS! Ladies, would you escort me to the Spacestop?"

"No, god no we're not in the mood for company. Some other time, trust me, we'll have our fun," Beth said hollowly with her face smirking at Icabod; then she walked briskly out of the room. She strode down the hallway, smiling contently, and humming the closing credits to *Shadow Thief*.

Meanwhile Jim and everyone were wondering why they had stopped all of the sudden. Then they heard Icabod say over the intercom, "Just a stop to grab some supplies. Feel free to explore this Spacestop, but do not trust anyone. I repeat don't trust anyone, that person is invariably a thief or murderer. The Captain out," Icabod said boldly.

"Huh, fine by me, let's party," Jim said as he acted like he was doing arm curls. "If they give you lemons, learn how to sell them as grapes. Sorry, my old man used to say that, I'm not sure what the hell it means," Jim said as he popped the veins out of his arms by flexing his biceps.

"I only buy lemons if I get to PELT, the person that sold them to me in the EYE," Jen said as she threw soft punches at Jim's stomach. "Jim, you haven't broached pelting, I'm disappointed. Fred, you'd let me pelt you wouldn't ya?" Jen asked as she grinned and pushed on Fred's back with the top of her head.

Fred laughed, embarrassed but loving the attention. "Jen, I would, but only in fantasyland. See, those lemons leave marks, can't have, won't," Fred said sarcastically as he moaned like Jen was hurting him.

Jim walked out onto the grass covered walkway leading into the Spacestop, and breathed a sigh of relief. He moved the heels of his feet over the grass barefoot, left, right, and then left again and giggled like he was 9 years old.

“This is *real grass*,” Jim exclaimed as he smiled like a lottery winner. Who would have thunk it to do this, ya know?” Jim asked as he was giddy now and giggling; and he carried his shoes in his hands and walked barefoot into the Spacestop.

“Aliens, weirdos, Jim-kin,” Jen spoke in a southern accent and added. “I’ve seen ‘em, I don’t like ‘em either. I once had a whole grape stole by some Jim-kin, not good, hurt, hurt real bad.” Jen took her shoes off and ran past Jim.

“Hey, come back here!” Stephen insisted as he and Jack watched an unsavory crowd of people crowding up ahead. There was a small stadium behind them called the Holker at Spacestop. And in the Holker many things happened (none of them good).

“God, Stephen, they have small town shields on,” Jack said as he jogged with Stephen. “They really think people are goodhearted, it’s amazing to me. I can’t remember the last time I went somewhere like this, and didn’t watch myself,” Jack said contemplatively as he fussed with his shirt.

Stephen watched Jen run and jump into a small fish shaped fountain of purple water, quizzically. He would have given anything to be that free again (even once more). He started to well up with tears, before he caught himself.

“It can be very dangerous, people in large cities don’t care how liked you were back home,” Stephen coughed and wiped his eyes. “If they want you dead, then dead you be,” said Scott as he looked and saw a wild boar shaped blue building to his right. The building had nefarious characters lingering out front-long beards and visible blood on their hands and clothes-and it was making him nervous.

They each walked into the nearest bar. And when they did, Jim saw someone he hoped he never would again, his ex-girlfriend Danielle. Jim said angrily, “Fuck!”

“What’s wrong?” Jen asked.

“My ex is here, I have a favor to ask you, Jen.”

“Anything, but no human football stuff,” Jen smiled and continued, “been screwed by that be-fore.”

“I need you to pretend to be my girlfriend, can you do that?” Jim asked his voice shaky at best; and he watched Danielle-Gulp being her last name-laughing with 3 men in leather Mad Hatter style hats.

“O.k., but do I get to spend half of your money and treat you like dirt?”

“Of course, that was assumed,” Jim wisecracked his face trying not to laugh for fear of attracting Danielle. “Look, let’s not go near her, but if she comes over, lay it on thick. Oh damn IT! She just looked right at me. Now she’s waving, shit,” Jim muttered as he forced a one handed nervous wave (that he thought about turning around and giving the middle finger as soon as he raised his hand). And he smiled a more awkward smile than hitting on your aunt’s friend. He knew she would try something, and he just didn’t have the energy to deal with her negativity today (or any day anymore).

“Don’t worry, Jim, embarrassment only lasts forever,” Jen wisecracked. “Trust me, I can blow this for you,” Jen said sarcastically as she wrapped her arms around Jim’s waist and smiled up at him.

Danielle made her way through the people; with a bright smile on her beautiful face. She was all of 5 foot 8 inches tall-short for her family her mother was 6 foot 5 inches of mean-and her body was very thin. She had on a little black dress and one stocking was torn. Her purse was filled with an assortment of medicines she didn’t need, but wanted. Her hair was wavy and brown like chocolate.

“JIM NUTS, how are you?!” Danielle yelled as she cackled-sounding more like a wino than a woman her age-and she nearly vomited on a woman standing nearby when she did. Jim grinned, and tried to forget how many times she had cheated on him, and stole his money.

Jim rubbed Jen's back, and Jen tried not to laugh, but it was too funny. Fred watched everything from behind Jim (just in case he needed him). Jack and Scott grabbed black and turquoise colored and egg shaped-seats at the bar. Then they turned to watch Jim squirm.

"Jim Nuts, is going down in flames," Scott said his eyes undressing a blonde woman in the corner.

"You don't have to tell me that, Scott. He's cooked," Jack replied.

"Hey, ahh..." Jim said hollowly like he'd forgotten her name.

"Jim NUTS, stop acting like a burnout," Danielle said as she put her arms out for Jim to hug her and he didn't move. "God, I'm just not in the mood for jokes and pokes. Jim Nuts, did you miss me? Come on, you can tell?" Danielle asked as she pouted her lips and kept halfheartedly pulling her bra strap up.

"Yeah, oh now I remember, we dated once," Jim said hollowly as he gave her a few hard nods and no real eye contact. "Huh, well you sure are...standing there. Hey, this is my girlfriend, Jen, she's rich," Jim said as he smiled (he loved watching Danielle squirm). He folded his arms and started moving his neck like a chicken.

"OH, it's that chicken neck thing again," Danielle snapped as she kicked the side of a barstool. "Fine, be a total whatever person. Jim Nuts, your girlfriend here is not what I had hoped for you. I mean, you deserve better," Danielle spoke in a way that made you wonder if she actually thought her ploys would work. She grimaced, and pulled her red bra strap up slowly.

"You skank!" barked Jen. "Nice to meet you!" said Jen loudly as she made a fish like expression-her eyes showing her discontent-and offered Danielle her hand. When Danielle went to shake it, she jerked it away from her (a technique she had mastered in junior high, then called Slicking someone).

"You gotta be quick if you want that handshake!" Jim waited for the perfect moment to look Danielle in the eye, and it came, crushing her.

Danielle looked at Jim like he was an asshole-common among her ex-boyfriends-and Jim laughed hard like a jackass. Danielle snarled, her eyes filling with rage,” Jim Nuts, dump small fry half potato here, and let’s party.”

“Hold on, that’s large fry, and you’re just as smart as your dress,” Jen corrected while she grabbed Jim’s backside. “Is that a JC Penny’s summer half off sale? Are those men’s underwear you have on? Really?” asked Jen as she tried not to laugh (failing a second later). Jen walked in between Jim and Danielle; and tapped her pointer finger to her own temple.

“Jim Nuts, this little tramp here is bad times,” objected Danielle as Jim shook his head HELL NO. “You remember what I said about bad times?”

“Something about oiling up your neck or something, I don’t know,” Jim said dismissively as he waved his hand for Danielle to go. Jim was invigorated by how easily he was handling her. “Half the stuff you say is gibberish anyway. Did you go all the way through 5<sup>th</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> grade?” Jim asked sarcastically as he reached around Jen’s waist-a gesture not lost on Danielle-and put his hands on her hips.

Danielle saw this and she started to think Jim *wasn’t the same old boyfriend she had met at the redemption center*. Danielle sipped her beer and smirked as she looked down at her feet. She begged,” Look, don’t let our love die, NUTS. We can rekindle, find the OLD magic. Let us have our time in sun, warm sun, Nuts. Dump sassy face here, now!” Danielle spoke as if they were still dating. And she clenched her fist and got ready to pop Jen a good one.

Jim and Jen laughed in a demonstrative way. And then they just walked away. Jim turned and said slyly,” Ya know, I got no problem with you finding love. But it *is*, in that dumpster like you’d think. Keep your elbows clean. Just saying, you can do it!”

“This can’t be happening!” roared Danielle as she bit her lower lip and looked around for someone on her side (there was no one there she knew). “Oh, is that it, Nuts? You’ll wish for my sweet ass someday. And you won’t get it!” Danielle shrieked as she swung at Jim and Jen but missed.

“I knew somehow you’d pull that off, Nuts, I mean, Jim,” Fred said as he sipped his beer. “I had faith,” Fred said as he walked beside Jim and Scott, and Jack hustled over to join in on the fun.

Meanwhile Stephen was scouting some location shoots out on the space walkway. He stood there-inches from death-taking in a spectacle unlike any he’d ever seen. People were jogging past him; while others were lying down inches from the protective plasma tunnel.

“My, when time stops it really is lonely,” Stephen muttered softly as he walked along; and he marveled at the enormity of it all (unwilling to let one second of it fade from his memory). He knew he had to come back here and film someday, but who would finance his film he wondered.

“Move!” barked Margy Bits forcefully, as he rode up behind Stephen on his black horse shaped bicycle. Stephen spun around, and realized he didn’t have enough time to move out of the way. Instead, he shielded his face and ducked. Margy-a 347 pound powerlifter and beer taster-ran right into Stephen. The force of the crash broke Stephen’s nose sideways; and sent Margy into the plasma wall (hard enough to sober him up right fucking quick).

“Oh no, my nose is broken!” Stephen shouted his hair titled back and soggy with blood. “I can’t show up to work like this, in this state. You should watch where the hell you’re going, ASSHOLE!” Stephen cried angrily as he glared at Margy-his mind telling him he could take him if it came to that-and he tried to stop his nose from bleeding with his blue silk shirt.

Margy was a bit dazed, but he had heard the word ASSHOLE clearly and asked indignantly,” What’d you say to me? Did you just rise up, get tough ON ME?! Come over here!” Margy shouted-his deep

raspy voice making Stephen's confidence fade faster than the pet rock-as he picked himself up and stretched out his back. Stephen debated fighting him, as he knew he had the anger to win.

"You're damn right I did," Stephen answered without hesitation. "Let's dance, Chubs," Stephen said coldly as he remembered the fight training he'd gotten ON SET. Margy smiled a smile that killed vegetables. He put up his fists; and he walked towards Stephen.

"Chubs eh?" asked Margy, as spoke in a voice that suggested he wasn't mad, but mad he was. "Not the right answer, my friend. Just go ahead, really pop me one," Margy begged coyly as he smirked like a little kid; and then offered up his chin to Stephen. Stephen looked at that chin, his chest heaving, and he knew he could break it with just one punch. He hauled back-his mind filling with school bullies from yesteryear and bike thieves-and threw a right hand hook. The punch was ducked by Margy, and he grabbed Stephen by the balls and neck and tossed him into the plasma wall. Stephen's body nearly broke through the plasma; this sending the fear of weightless death quickly through his mind.

"Help!" cried Stephen as he tried to pick himself up. "Somebody HELP! I'm not a bad person, I recycle," Stephen blurted out, his hands clawing his way back out of the thick plasma. Stephen rolled over, looked around, and went out onto the walkway facing Margy.

Passerby's walked away from the fight; and said and did *nothing to help*.

"I'll help ya," Margy offered hollowly as he forced up a tear. "Do you need a lift back to your ship? Serious man, I'm not here to hurt anyone."

"How do I know you're telling the truth?" Stephen asked reluctantly as he eyed Margy's big powerful forearms.

Margy put his hands down to his sides; and he gave Stephen a look that told him he was telling the truth.



“Come now, you’re hurt bad,” Margy said coyly as he offered Stephen his hand (his own mind already debating how to kill Stephen best). Margy decided he wanted to break Stephen’s neck, but he worried Stephen might catch him with a lucky punch.

“O.k., you gotta trust somebody sometime, right?” Stephen replied painfully. “Here, help me up please,” begged Stephen sadly as he clutched his bloody nose; then he reached for Margy’s hand.

“That be the truth,” Margy said smiling. “Here’s a special *shore-cut*,” Margy said as he grabbed Stephen’s hand; and then he started to spin, as he lifted him clean off the ground.

“What are you DOING?!!” Stephen demanded nervously, as he could feel his arm nearly ripping out of its socket.

“Just helping an old friend, Chubs,” Margy said snidely as he flung Stephen into the plasma wall. “I showed you real trust today, Sucka Boy.”

Stephen’s legs were exposed out in space—a place where nothing ever could be exposed—and they were crushed flat to powder. His head, and torso, were still on the right side of the plasma. Lucky break, he thought. Margy ran full out and lowered his shoulder; knocking the rest of Stephen through the plasma and out into space. He died instantaneously with Margy getting his hand hurt in the process (broken index finger from righting himself clumsily after).

Meanwhile Jim and the group were walking towards Margy from the opposite end of the walkway. Jack had a bottle of wine in one hand, a time worn coat he had *borrowed from the bar* that he was wearing, as well as a rack of barbecue ribs in his other. Jack asked, “Isn’t space black?”

“Yeah, it really is except for those 60 gazillion stars,” Jim joked as he tried to let Jack off easy. “And, I hear it gives you quite a suntan. I mean, looking out for ya, you know it. Jack, those ribs really smell bad, I’ll eat ‘em if you don’t want ‘em,” Jim said coyly his eyes looking at the ribs out of the corner of his eye (he was dying for some ribs just then).

Jack took another bite off his rack of ribs, made a disgusting purring sound, and shrugged his shoulders.

“Yeah, Jack, why should you have to eat such filth?” Jen panted like a dog and barked a few times. “I don’t like it, and I *like ribs*, Jack. I guess, if Jim’s not getting them, I could take them,” Jen said as she flashed a bright smile-the free drinks smile-and clasped her hands together.

Jack laughed slightly at this, and then said happily,” Yeah, I guess you can share my tasty ribs. Just break off a section, but leave me the extra sauce,” Jack said as he handed Jen the ribs; and she broke off most of them with one yank.

“What?” Jim asked in pained disbelief. “What is this? I thought we were *sharing* the ribs? I mean, you left me a single rib. Boy, women steal a rib at birth and keep right on stealing them. You can’t have my kidneys though, mine all mine, Sister,” Jim said playfully as he grabbed the final rib from Jack’s sauce covered hands.

Jack grabbed a dirt sucking tissue from a dispenser; and rubbed his hands with it. Instantly they were clean of the sauce; and he kept moving down the walkway with the satisfaction of a saint.

“OH, these are good,” Jen declared her lips covered in sauce. “I bet these are the best, ribs, EVER! I’ve had tasty ribs, these are way tastier. Jim, or is it, Jim NUTS? I have to thank Jack for these ribs and not you. Jack, you’re the rib king, rib king Jack,” Jen said as she ate her ribs; and Fred suddenly felt hungry. Fred was walking near the left hand side of the walkway; and he was looking off into the far reaches of space.

“Jim, not Jim Nuts, I can get frisky, I’ve frisked before,” Jim said as he slowly ate his ribs (he wanted the satisfaction of being the last one eating any). “You don’t want my frisk, you can’t handle my frisk. Fred, why are you staring at that woman and man having sex? Isn’t there anything interesting to look at?” Jim asked sarcastically as he gently hit Fred in the shoulder with his fist. There in front of them, there

was a handsome man and beautiful green skinned woman having sex (without a care or stitch of clothing on their bodies). Jim looked at them and felt bad; he hadn't seen his girlfriend Kim since the Spaceport. He knew then he should have convinced her to go with him or move on (he worried she'd be waiting for him and he knew he wasn't going back).

Then they saw Margy grab a skinny man in a red and black business suit; and throw him hard into the plasma wall.

"Hey, did you just see that?" Scott asked wearily as he saw Margy pushing what was left of the business man, *through the wall*.

"I did, and we might want to turn and run," Jen replied anxiously as she eyed Margy. She could see he was coming towards them with mean in his eyes for breakfast, *and lunch*.

Jack frantically looked around for a spot to hide; and he saw a tower on the left side some 50 feet ahead of them (looked like a pair of Butterfingers glued together). He knew they could hide inside there, but they had to hustle. Jack cried, "The TOWER!" and added, "Let's get to running, my friends!" Jack pulled on Jen and Jim's arms; with Fred and Scott seeing the tower and sprinting.

Margy watched them running towards him; and he took an offensive position: fists up, eyes focused, and legs ready to kick their heads in. He loved killing people; and he wasn't scared of anything.

"Look, if he charges, just sprint even harder," Jim explained quickly as he ran. "There's no way mayonnaise for breakfast can beat us there!" Jim yelled as if he was yelling to someone across a crowded room. Jen heard this and ran like she had Johnny Law on her tail.

"He's right, lay the hammer down!" Fred said coughing furiously, as he ran like he hadn't since his first bike was stolen in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade (by a Jeremy Bobbuddy up the street). He remembered chasing that Bobbuddy, and *almost catching him*.

“Where you off too now?” uttered Margy, his hands clutching and re-clutching. “Hmm, something’s not right here. There’s no way they could be that brave. The TOWER! Oh no RUTRO,” Margy spoke in a voice so simple it made you uncomfortable; as he realized what they were doing. He started charging towards the group-running like he was about to fall down with every step-and preparing his adrenaline surge.

Jim and Jen were the first to see this; and they both felt the identical terror pumping through their veins. Jen eyed Margy, and she knew he was not going to let them live. She also surmised they would have to kill him before long (to survive).

“Hey, everyone break for the stairs, I got a plan,” Jim cried. Then Jim ran up to the front of the tower; and he stopped abruptly at the bottom of the black marble steps.

“What plan?” Jen asked as she looked back for help, but there was none (an amateur boxing match was entertaining all the tourists inside the Spacestop).

“Jen, I can get this guy,” Jim’s voice sounded like he was trying to convince himself he could. “Just head upstairs, I’ll be fine,” Jim insisted as he reached back and brought out a single shot gun-it used an armor piercing bullet-from his back pocket. He showed it to Jen; and she shook her head.

“NO, hey everyone helps or no one does,” Jen said sternly as she looked around for weapons. “Fred, Jack, Scott, we’re fighting,” Jen demanded as she looked at each of them, and then Margy. She wondered if she was making the wrong decision by not saving herself, but she couldn’t leave Jim to die.

Fred, Jack, and Scott all stopped in their tracks, and came back down the stairs.

“O.k., then let’s start fighting,” gaped Fred at Margy, his eyes started to fog up and his hands were sweaty (as he didn’t want to get beaten up). Fred looked at Margy and he felt sheer terror overtake him.

“Let’s have some fun,” Jim said boldly as he raised his fists; and then he lifted his leg to get ready to kick Margy with a most unfriendly blow. Jen smiled at this; and raised her fists and got ready mentally.

“Hey, are you people lost?!” Margy yelled over to them like they were friends; and he acted like he was going to slow down just before he got to them, but he sprinted right at Jim at the last second. Jim kicked him hard in the knee; and gave him an uppercut to the chin. Margy fell on top of Jim and Jen; and Jack started punching him in the back of the head. Margy was dazed, feeling sick, and grasping his leg as if it was broken.

“Jim, he’s crushing me!” Jen cried her arms already tired from the weight.

Jim heard this and he did the only thing he could. He kneed Margy hard in the stomach, again and again and again. It doubled Margy over in pain; and they were able to push him off of Jen and Jim (Margy’s body making a loud, rude, thud when it hit the ground). Fred leapt on top of Margy; and punched him hard in the face, but Margy grabbed Fred around the wrist, and tossed him hard to the ground.

“Where am I?” asked Margy as he rubbed his hands hard together. “Is it din da din yet?” Margy asked drunkenly as he blinked his eyes to right his vision.

Jen ran over and kicked Margy hard in the throat; while Jim held down his right arm and Jack his left.

“Boy we’re playing with real glue now,” Jim yelled punching as he did and watching Margy gasp for air. Jim’s voice resonated throughout the walkway. Fred got up, and ran over and punched Margy hard in the back of the head. Jack saw this, and put Margy in a choke hold, but Margy lost it and shot forward at Cheetah speed. This shed them like autumn leaves from a jacket.

“NO, no, no I won’t die-” Margy said angrily before he passed out and did a faceplant on the walkway.

“Yeah, he sure is a dead body friend now,” Jim said happily. “I think if there’s a,” said Jim as he looked around and saw no one close enough to have seen what happened and then he continued, “chance we could get caught. We have to hide this guy before someone comes. Just, help me carry him into the tower. By the time they find him, we’ll be long gone.”

“Nice, yeah mom your son’s a murderer,” Fred spoke like he had bored people many times before with his dry humor. “Just thought you should know that year of junior college, PAID OFF,” Fred said sarcastically. “What, am I going to rot in jail? Yes, of course I am, miss you,” Fred said as he grabbed Margy’s arm; and they slowly lifted him off the ground. They dragged him over to the tower steps- everyone shocked at how heavy he was- and saw the task before them.

They all looked up the steps; and they knew there was no way they were lifting Margy up those stairs.

“Great, first plan a bust,” Jim grunted, his mind getting filled more and more with feelings of anger. “We could, no wait, what if we shove him *under* the stairs? Because that way it’d buy us a little time to run for it,” said Jim hopefully as he was getting very annoyed by the whole situation.

Jen felt a smile creep across her face and asked, “Are we really doing this? Isn’t this like for criminals or something?”

“Yeah, Jim, what if we just tell them what happened?” Scott asked as he kicked Margy in the side. “I mean he tried to kill us, right?” Scott asked as he looked around for anyone who might be coming their way. He saw an elderly couple coming from the same direction they had just come from and he added, “Oh great. Here comes certain prison time, look.”

Everyone looked and saw the couple; and their collective hearts sank.

“We have a little time,” Jack reassured his eyes on the elderly couple. “Let’s just put him under the steps and run, alright,” Jack insisted as he looked at everyone. They all grabbed a part of Margy, and

quickly dragged him under the steps. Then they saw the old couple kissing-and rubbing old body parts-and they ran in the opposite direction.

“If this works, you can thank Jack,” Jim spoke with a voice that had the weight of the world lifted from it. “Man, how close are we to going to hard labor prison? I mean, they could, and will find our fingerprints on that idiot,” Jim explained as he ran along pacing himself to get to the intersection up ahead. He knew there they could take a pod back to the main Spacestop, and *blend in*.

Then they heard a woman scream-the worst thing you could ever hear-and they looked back. It was the old woman being punched by Margy. He had somehow survived the beating, and was in an all-out rage mode.

“This isn’t happening,” said Jen as she tried to convince herself; while she watched Margy beating up the old couple. She saw he had murder in his eyes.

“It is and we’re running,” Jim replied as he pulled on Fred and Jack’s shirts. Jen and Scott were already running away and looking for a place to hide, if need be.

“Hold on, hold on!” Margy yelled hollowly with his hands up. “I just want to thank you,” Margy bellowed as he started to discard the elderly couple’s bodies. He smiled and then nodded softly to himself, because he knew he was going to get some sweeter than honey revenge.

Up ahead, they could see a trio of young Latino men from Kansas riding towards them on anti-gravity motorcycles. Jim debated taking the bikes from them, but he had a better idea.

“Hey, what are you all running from?” Jeff Brack asked anxiously as he rode up to Jen and Scott. Jeff was all of 5 foot 6 inches tall and 154 pounds of-wrestling team-muscle. He had chiseled looks, but he also had a scar running from the center of his forehead down through his right eye socket. He had on a silver cardigan sweater reading GAP MEN, and blue leather pants.

Jen ran up to Jeff and started to say something when Jim interjected, "We're out getting a decent workout. Yeah, there's a one man play back there. Man, it was AWESOME! You guys should check it out. I'd even watch your bikes if you want," Jim said coyly implying a question as he tried to catch his breath. He put his arm around Jen; and looked Jeff in the eye with total sincerity.

Jeff and his friends Martin and Marty, sat there on their bikes eyeing Margy, and saw him running towards them.

"Hey, why is he running down here?" asked Martin defiantly. "Looks scary," Martin said as he rocked back and forth on his bike and glared at Margy. Martin knew people would take advantage of them- seeing as they had tried a few times on the trip already-if they thought they could pull it off.

Jim looked back and laughed. "Oh THAT, it's part of the act," Jim said hollowly as he smiled convincingly. "See, he's gonna try and act all tough. And when you stick up to him, he wilts like an old flower. I mean, it's so fun you can't believe it. It's up to you though, you can forget it and miss out," Jim paused and looked at Margy and then Martin and continued, "Or, you can go over there on foot and have the time of your lives. I know what we chose," Jim said hollowly as he smiled and kissed Jen on the cheek.

Jeff saw that Martin had started to turn around and head back, and he stopped him with his hand.

"What are you touching me for?" Martin asked defiantly his upper lip snarled and his eyes stern.

"I'm not missing out on this," Jeff growled as he waved his middle finger in Martin's face slowly. "Look, watch our bikes and we won't be but a few minutes. Come on, Martin, we're having fun on this vacation," ordered Jeff sternly as he yanked on Martin's shirt; and then he pulled him off the side of his bike.

"We'll be right here when you're ready," Jim said warmly as he hopped up on Jeff's bike. "My name's Jim by the way, in case you were wondering," said Jim coyly as he took the keys from Jeff and he



slapped high fives with him. Jeff stiffed Jim with his name, but he, Martin, and Marty started to jog towards Margy yelling obscenities at him (and that was all the thanks Jim needed).

“Did that just happen?” Fred asked in disbelief as he looked wide eyed at Martin screaming at Margy.

Jim cackled like a bar room drunk and said happily, “It did, and we’re alive. That’s more than I can say for those fuckers. Hop on, we gotta get out of this area quick,” said Jim as he revved the motor.

Jen watched Marty as she looked back at them. And she felt terrible and said sadly, “Jim, you didn’t have to lay it on so thick. Those men are dead for sure.”

“No, you’re mistaken,” Jim explained his hands checking the controls. “If I hadn’t done that we’d be dead,” Jim said plainly as he swerved to the left. “There’s no way we could have outrun that killing machine. And, we don’t even know where we’re going. He would have had the jump on us the whole time,” Jim said sternly as he felt Jen wrap her arms around his waist. Jim glanced back at Jeff getting punched in the face by Margy, and knew he was right to do it (regardless if he actually was).

They drove towards the intersection and turned to have a straight shot back to the main Spacestop. Jack was watching Margy take out the 3 young men; and he could tell they didn’t have as much time as they thought they would.

“Jim?” asked Jack.

“Yeah?” replied Jim.

“What’s to stop him from going back the way we came, and beating us there?” Jack asked his voice soft and nervous. “I mean its way shorter, and these bikes are slow.” Jack tried to keep up with Jim and Fred’s bikes, but his bike was low on fuel and starting to sputter.

Jim felt a chill go down his back as he said this. He looked at the walkway Margy had to use, and the distance he had to travel, and he knew then they might not make it without killing Margy first.

“Yeah, he’s heading back that way now, look,” Fred said as he watched Margy throw the last of the 3 men’s bodies through the plasma. Then he saw Margy turn and run back the way they had originally come from.

Jim saw this, and he knew it was too dangerous to be late to the Spacestop. He looked around for a better plan, but he saw none and said begrudgingly, “It’s speed for now, and we’ll fight if we have to. Jack, Scott, are you guys gonna be able to keep up?”

Jack checked his fuel gauge and saw it below empty and running on fumes. “NOPE, we’re outta fuel as of now,” Jack said as he let go of the-now worthless-steering wheel.

Jim heard this and he instinctively spun around. This as Fred did the same, and pulled up beside Jack and Scott. Fred motioned-like John Wayne in Rooster Cogburn-with his hand for them to move it. “Climb up, quick!” barked Fred.

“I’ll try, but my foot is caught,” Jack said as he tried to free his foot. “Come on, let go of my shoe,” Jack begged as he fought to release his brown leather boot. He felt sheer terror as his eyes turned into pool balls watching the leather tear slowly.

“Ditch the shoe, we’re going!” Jim cried as he ran over and ripped Jack’s boot off-and Jack along with it-to the side of Jim’s bike. Jack looked at Jim stunned; and put his hand on Jim’s shoulder.

“Hurry, he’s running full speed now,” Jen said, her hands grabbing the steering wheel clumsily; and Jim and Jack hopped on back.

Then they lifted and raced away; the bikes were going slower due to the increased weight. Margy was looking over at them and smiling menacingly, as he knew *he had them now*. Margy was already thinking about the money he’d get for their clothes in the pawn shop.

“Come on, make it interesting,” Margy said as he burped and kicked over a red man shaped ashtray. He was really going to enjoy this-like he always did killing tourists-and it would mean beer money *for days*.

Jim looked back, his face was pale, and he saw there were people gathering around the dead bodies. It made his heart nearly skip a beat (he still worried they’d get the blame for the murders, damn it he thought).

“Can we please catch a break, just one?” Jim asked angrily as he tried to think his way out of this situation. Jack felt in the leather pocket on his right side of the bike that there was something jutting out. He tried to unzip it, but it was stuck on something.

“Come on now, open,” Jack begged. “There, what have we got here?” Jack mumbled as he pulled out a sawed off shotgun and 30 shells in the magazine stock. He showed it to Jim and Jim’s eyes lit up and a sigh of relief followed.

“Whoa,” Jim muttered.

“That’s right, Jim, we got this guy now,” Jack said his hands checking the trigger and stock. “Hey, Jen, go a bit slower, I have a better idea,” Jack said as he trained the gun on Margy. Jack debated shooting him right then and there (what was one more murder at this point).

Jen slowed her bike and now they were all crawling along like patient snails.

“Where’d you get the heat?” Jen asked as she looked at Jack taking aim at Margy.

“Had it my back pocket,” Jack replied his hand steady. “Stop both bikes, I need to be steady,” Jack said as he tried to sight in on Margy. He felt the bike come to a stop. Jack aimed right at the torso of Margy, some 46 meters away. Margy continued running and then glanced over at the 2 bikes; and he was perplexed and befuddled by what he saw.

“What you doin’ stoppin’?” asked Margy as if his voice had a dying mouse in his voice box. “Why stop there, not a very smart mova? Margy stop too, and wait you out,” Margy said as he slowed to a walk.

And then Margy walked up to the plasma, and waved to everyone. Jack shot him in the shoulder a second later, jerking him to the ground like a large hand from behind.

“Now that is why I went hunting with the old man, times like these,” Jack said triumphantly as he kissed the barrel of the gun. “Wow, well he’s hit, but I only got his arm. Let’s move forward another 50 feet or so and I’ll try again,” Jack said as he eyed Margy and grinned like he’d won the prized pie at the fair. Jack knew he was taking this bully out in no uncertain terms.

Jim fumbled with the saddle pocket on the left hand side. He found a wad of drugs and money, and said nervously, “Oh great, this is bad news.”

Jen looked back and saw a brick of a substance called Klarin, and she squinted at it.

“What that is, Jim?” asked Fred as he watched Jim sweating like junior high basketball practice. “You know we have already won our *first* 50 years in prison. Look, we need to chuck that through the plasma. If we don’t, and they catch us with it, they’ll either kill us, o.k.” Fred continued as he had a large lump in his throat, “Or they’ll lock us up forever. Forget about that idiot over there, let’s take care of this first,” Fred insisted to the point of almost shouting (hoping to hell they would catch a break). He hopped off his bike, looked back, and quickly started checking his own saddles. He reached into one, and pulled out a high powered pistol, and *another brick of Klarin*. Damn it, he thought.

Jen looked around, first looking at the opposite walkways, and she saw there was no one coming. Jen said calmly, “Just chuck it.”

“What do you mean?” Jim asked bewildered with this request-more so that he hadn’t thought of it himself-as he looked at the *prison bringing Klarin* in his hands, then sighed like a flat tire.

“Just put it in the dumpster,” Jen spoke as if it was too simple to fail. “And then when they find it. We’ll be long gone. There’s no way they’ll ever believe us, so there’s no point turning it in. Just chuck it, Nuts,” Jen said as she checked the other saddles. Jen found a pair of black sunglasses, and a red bottle of creamy onion soup. She smelled the soup-it was fresh and ready to eat-and worried she might get poisoned by it if she consumed it.

“Ya know, she’s dead on right,” Scott said. “Let me see it, just hand it here?” Scott asked as he walked over to Jim; and then grabbed the brick of Klarin. He looked back-just a second for balance-and saw no one-thankfully. Then he walked over to the black robot shaped trashcan, smashed it into the bottom of it. Fred did the same with his and chuckled (he wished they could have tried it for fun’s sake).

“Whatever works, get me off this Spacestop,” Jim said as he watched Margy. “Jack, you’re still sighting on that guy right?” Jim asked as he put his hands on top of his head, breathed out twice hard, and closed his eyes like he was diving in chlorine filled water. Jim knew this was going from bad to worse, and he was mostly to blame. He wanted to just get on the ship, *and leave*.

“Yeah, but he’s sitting up now, odd,” Jack replied slowly and without nervousness. “I wonder if we should shoot him, or just run for it? Because right now it’s only assault, not murder,” Jack said as he lowered his gun; and then grabbed the steering wheel with both hands. Jen slid in between him and Jim; and they started heading for the station.

“Margy in pain, Margy hurt,” Margy cried as he felt his bloody shoulder. “Owwwee, my arm hurt, and my head hurt from arm hurt. Can’t just shoot the brother of a lawman,” Margy said as he wiped his face with his blood soaked hand. “Margy rat you out, and you know pain,” Margy spoke in a voice most 5<sup>th</sup> grade bullies used when they were at home. Mom my room’s clean, where’s my PIE! He stood up and held his bleeding shoulder.

“Hey, he’s moving again,” Jen muttered.

“Yeah, but we can outrun him,” Jack said as he rubbed his left pant leg (his skin was drying out due to the Spacestop’s lack of good air conditioning). “Someone keep an eye out for our landing stall. We need to go straight there and hide. I would, but I gotta watch this. Won’t die like I want to guy is annoying me, just saying,” Jack said jokingly as he watched Margy stumble towards the station.

They rode the last 10 meters to the station; and drove onto a crowded artery named Last Again Way (named after a notorious poker player named Last Way; who was killed and buried in the pavement after *cheating the house*). Jack eyed the people there-somehow thinking they knew what he had done. He felt his whole body sweating and his back ached like moving day. The bevy of people there were mostly drunk; and they were looking for a goodtime. It was an unsavory crowd, as it was filled with drug mules and sellers. Fred looked around, and he prayed the fuel didn’t run out in this part of town. He looked at one woman injecting something into her arm, and cringed.

Jim noticed this and asked sarcastically, “You wanna stop, Fred? Maybe we should grab a bite?”

“NO WAY, are we stopping!” Fred cried as he stomped his foot hard. “I won’t set foot on this Spacestop again. Jack, Jen, stop laughing, you’re annoying Jim,” Fred said as he tried to avert his eyes from every person they passed. Then he saw a pair of Space Cops wading through the crowd, and heading their way.

The Space Cops were physically large-at 7 feet tall at the shortest-and bulbous like pineapples. They had light yellow and blue spotted skin-common the further out in space you got-and horse heads. They had on dark red uniforms and were carrying: large, red, glowing guns called Peppers.

“Oh great, the fuzz,” Jim muttered nervously sparing Jen a thought of dread; as he looked at the cops and prayed they would let them pass. Jim felt his whole body sweating; and it was like it was 100 degrees out and muggy. He felt pissed at how hot it was; and he was in desperate need of a drink (but he didn’t dare stop now. No way).

“HI, officers, nice day huh?” asked Jen brightly as she smiled-using her one year of being a cheerleader experience to sell it-and waved to the cops. The two cops froze in their tracks; and looked back at her with dead eyes. Jen forced herself to continue smiling, as she knew their lives depended on it.

Then they heard someone scream from over their shoulders. Everyone’s head jerked back to take a look. A red haired, thin and gangly frog looking woman was covered in blood. She had just been stabbed; and she was wilting slowly to the ground. Jim eyed the woman in horror, he knew it would bring more cops and that was *bad for business*.

“We’re so dead,” Fred spoke in a loud voice before he even knew he was speaking.

“Fred, relax, we’ve got our diversion,” Jim whispered as he looked around like he was there to buy a shirt or hat.

The cops looked sternly at Jim; and then they brushed past him on their way to the red haired woman.

“Out of the way,” Loopa Reed growled-he the larger of the 2 cops-as he pushed an old man hard into the wall breaking his nose, and scowled venomously at him.

“Whoa, did you see that?” Jim asked not wanting an answer. “Man these fuckin cops are bad news,” Jim muttered as he watched the cops moving people out of the way like they were matchsticks.

Fred tapped Jim on the shoulder; and Jim looked right at him blankly, and Fred said,” Who cares, let’s get going.”

“He’s right, oh so right. Jim, he’s right,” Jen agreed as she licked Jim’s ear and felt his crotch. Jim grimaced halfheartedly and wiped the saliva off of his ear.

“Fine, we’ll just get murdered some other time,” Jim snorted, his hands slowly steering through the watery crowd (they were packed so tightly it looked like waves to Jim). “GREAT, my death will be slow

and painful. I LOVE IT,” Jim said sarcastically as he gently punched his seat; and then started driving faster through the crowd.

Meanwhile Beth and Gloria had ditched Icabod. And they were shopping for fun enhancers-as they called them-that were *drugs of course*.

“Hey bottleneck, you got any weed?” Beth asked bluntly. “Huh, you speaka da English?” asked Beth sternly as she shook a shop owner by the ear. His name was Louid, and he was much smaller than her; and he gave her very little fight at all. Then Gloria looked out and saw Margy go barreling past the shop. He threw people out of the way, kicked the old, and punched anyone and everyone.

“Beth?” Gloria asked.

“You hidin’ da drugs?” asked Beth sharply as she shook Louid.

“Beth, I have to get going,” Gloria said her hands looking in her purse for a nonexistent napkin.

Beth looked at Gloria, her eyes unforgiving as grim death, and continued shaking Louid’s ear back and forth. Then Beth said,” What are you talking about, I need weed. I won’t go sober on that ship, anymore, Gloria. Now help me get what I want, or I’ll punch you right in the eye,” Beth demanded angrily as she glared at Gloria. Beth pulled Louid’s head hard down onto the white marble countertop (that had carved names from all the centuries it had been there like Gopool and Musk Fadle).

Gloria peeked outside, and saw Margy bashing people out of his way and yelling. Gloria halfway hoped he would smack Beth a good hard one (to knock some sense into her).

“Alright, alright I got da weed,” confessed Louid as he wiped the blood from his cheek. “Just, let me, UP,” Louid begged nervously as he flailed his arms; and he got his head banged on the countertop again and again. Beth chuckled and nearly fell over laughing at his weakness and lack of talent.



“There, now you’re speaking my language huh?” Beth spoke as if he was an unwanted pet in her garden. “Bet you thought you were smart, eh? Nope you little worm, women are smart, men take out the garbage,” said Beth snidely. “Now get me all the drugs you have, and HURRY!” Beth growled as she glared at Loud, then a sly smile crept across her face. She knew she could kick his ass any day of the week, and he knew it too.

Loud ran back into his storage room. Moments later, he reappeared with a black wooden keepsake box and put it on the counter that read DON’T EAT MY POISON. He ran over and pulled down the shades, and locked the front door. Beth smirked at this, as she knew then her star power was too much for the likes of this worm.

“Here, I have everything you want and, I have Klarin,” Loud spoke as if his voice was being stretched out on every word. “See, the powder here, it makes you happy. Do you like being happy?” Loud asked as he pulled out a long silver spoon. Loud took some Klarin, sniffed it, and offered it to Beth.

“Well then, life’s a party, if you are one,” Beth said as she examined the Klarin. “I’ll try your wares you insolent fool. Give it here,” Beth said as she reached over and grabbed Loud’s thin wrist. Then she inhaled some of the Klarin, and let out an ear piercing scream and shouted,” That be some the stuff momma made special! Gloria, stop ruining the party and have some, NOW,” Beth said sharply.

Gloria looked around anxiously, and then sighed, as she tentatively walked over to Beth. She watched Loud prepare the spoonful with eyes for prospecting. Gloria knew drugs were bad, and they could take over your life with ease. She blinked her eyes hard, and then inhaled the powder with one large snort.

“Wow, I’m floating,” Gloria said as she tiptoed around the room. Beth chuckled and clapped for Gloria. Beth knew she was a bit of a prude, but she also knew that meant SHE’D NEVER STRAY.

“Would you like some to take with you?” Loud asked more nervous now (he hoped they’d actually *pay him for his wares*).

“Yeah, I’ll give you 50 gold coins, and we’ll take whatever we want,” Beth ordered, her hands scooping up the drugs bags and joints inside. “Here, count them if you’re a total jerk, or take my word for it. Gloria, stop acting like an idiot, and carry this box back to the ship,” Beth barked as she stood there watching Gloria kiss the cheap t-shirts and hats (in her hallucination they were good looking women).

Beth then left the store; with Gloria carrying the *medicine* and they headed for the ship. Up ahead of them a mile or so, Jen and the group were lost in a maze of same looking streets and back alleys. They had gotten lost in the underbelly, and saw no way out.

“How are we doing on gas?” Jen asked nervously as she saw a man lying dead in the alley (with hungry cats walking all over him). The streets were narrow, and the bricks dark purple in color. There was steam shooting out of most windows-as it was where they did most of the hard labor. There were people fighting every so often, but not so much that you’d notice.

“I don’t know...it looks like we took a wrong turn in hell,” Jim said as he watched a women cough up blood into a sleeping man’s lap. “I think we should go back, like right now. If we don’t, we’re gonna die in this hell hole. Fred, are you with me?” Jim asked, as he really hated making mistakes like this (it reminded him of the time he traded a meatball sub for a fake Babe Ruth baseball card).

Fred watched a man get tossed into a concrete slab, breaking his back, and he cringed and asked vacantly,” What, Jim, what did you say?”

“Leave, should we is what I said,” Jim replied as he swatted away a small swarm of flies. “Come on, Fred Nuts, we need you to stop being so Fred-like,” Jim said jokingly, as he rode out around an abandoned car with the driver dead in the front seat.

Jen looked around for an exit-she knew she had forgotten from which way they had originally come from (the streets looked almost identical in every direction).

“Jim, which way is back?” Jen asked anxiously as she started to feel sick for no reason.

Jim looked back-his mind playing tricks on him now-and knew then he didn't have any idea which way they had come from. He stopped the bike, and looked a full 360 degrees around.

"Jim, maybe we should ask someone?" Scott asked as he felt the back of his neck and it was covered in brown sweat (the paint on the buildings was rusted and falling down like a mist). Scott started to think about Margy, and he worried this was a trap. Then he thought back about how everyone moved out of the way when they neared the entrance to Geto Ghetto. He knew they had done that to mess with the tourists (or possibly rob and kill them).

"Yeah, you go ahead," Jim replied stoutly as he forced a halfhearted smile. "It's probably better if *you* do it anyway, because I don't want to," Jim explained as he patted Jen on the arm to help her with her nervousness (and him with his).

"Yeah, let's just go back, screw it," Scott was looking for even a hint of light from the parking garage. "I guess, we'll just drive around in here forever," Scott said condescendingly as he tried not to cry (but he was frightened they'd die there).

Jim looked at Jack getting off the bike with nervous eyes. Jack calmly walked over to a grey skinned man who wearing a dust covered black-made from blankets-pair of pants and socks, named Roho.

"Hi there, do you know how to get to the stalls for the ahh...ships?" Jack asked as he stood there with his arms behind his back. Then a calm and settled look came over Jack's face inexplicably.

"Yeah," Roho answered then he spit a huge wad of snot on the wall.

Jack stood there acting like he hadn't just seen that, but secretly he wanted to run away from this *hobo*.

"So, yeah, I guess then ahh... maybe you could point me in the right direction? I'd pay you."

"How much?" asked Roho quickly, and the smell of money just made him thirsty.

Jack pulled out his wad of cash and peeled off 300 dollars. And he asked hopefully, "How's this?"

Roho looked at the money, and then spit hard near to Jack's feet. Roho pointed down a dark alley where several men wearing torn clothes were hanging out. Jack looked at the men; and he knew it was a boldfaced lie.

"You sure, I did give you 300 dollars?"

"Yeah, no I mean, it's actually ahh, ahh, ahh this way," Roho said hollowly as he pointed down 5 different roads and alleys, before blatantly guessing it was to the left. Jack knew a guess when he heard one, and this was a guess.

"Aahh, gee, sounded like you were guessing. Is there another way, maybe?" Jack asked as he was about to punch Roho in the face for lying.

Roho smiled, and started to laugh to himself like he had a wad of gum stuck in his throat.

"Wait, now wait, I just have to jog my memory," Roho said hollowly as he tried to sober up by burping. "Aahh, ahh, ahh...it might, I mean it has to be. Aahh, ahh ahh that ONE," guessed Roho. "That one right there I swears it!" said Roho sharply as he glared at Jack. "Now run along I got things to drink, beat it," Roho snapped as he pushed Jack away from him, using the back of his filthy-not lost on Jack-hand to Jack's cheek.

Jack really wanted to pound Roho, but he knew it was the right direction (and there was no time).

"Let's go, Jack, we don't have time to be talking to bums," Jim said, his face showing a long missing grin. "Just forget it, we'll find a way out," Jim spoke loudly as he wanted to show the people standing around, *he was powerful*. He knew that if he did, that would keep them at bay.

Jack looked at Roho-still burping-and then turned and hopped on the bike. He looked over at Jim and said happily, "I got a way home. Right down there, trust me."

“Works for me, eh, Jim Nuts,” said Jen happily with her hands on Jim’s hips. “Come on, get to the driving and running out of gas part, please,” Jen begged sarcastically as she had seen about enough of this crappy city for one day. Jim smiled, kissed her arm, and floored it down the road Roho had said. They went past seedy bar after seedy bar, and everyone was nervous, but invigorated.

“I tell you what, Jim, this road does have a light at the end,” Scott said as he could see the docking bay for all the ships rising up over the dirty buildings at the end of the road.

“What do you see?” Jim asked before he could look up and see the docking bay. He felt a rush go through him like he hadn’t felt since he was 10 years old and got a new bicycle (for his 12<sup>th</sup> birthday).

“Hey, I’m just awesome,” said Jack as he pumped his fist. “You can praise me now, don’t skimp,” Jack bragged as he pushed out his chest; and reached over like he wanted everyone to slap his hand.

Jim grinned, and gently slapped Jack’s hand, and said jokingly, “You got lucky, but at least we’re not dead. Jen, remember, don’t tell anyone what happened. I’m telling you this, because you’re the biggest gabber in the group, not that I noticed,” Jim said as he put his head back on Jen’s shoulder. And he could feel the air whiz past his ears.

Jen rubbed his red rosy cheeks; and then kissed him on the lips. Jim turned to look at her after this, and she said happily, “You didn’t kill me today, you earned it.”

“I’ll have to remember that one,” Jim said as he looked at Jen, but he had forgotten to steer the motorcycle. And he rode right over Roho’s brother, Doho. Doho was made into a human speed bump, but he wasn’t killed. Jim saw this and nearly fell off the side of the bike (hitting his ankle on a trashcan). He felt terror run through him as he looked around for those *dreaded cops*.

“It’s O.k., Jim, no one saw it,” Jack said reassuringly as he looked back and saw what he thought was a wild animal running down the street. Then Jack looked more closely, tried to make out the figure in the fog, and his eyes opened wide and he cried, “It’s HIM! That killing machine!” shouted Jack.

Everyone looked back and saw Margy running full out; he had a steel lock and metal rod in his hands. He had gotten their whereabouts from Roho, who was his uncle (twice removed).

“Oh man, and we’re almost out of fuel,” Jim’s voice frail and helpless. “Holy cow, we are so screwed right now.” Jim could feel how heavy the words were as they came out of his mouth. He looked around, and saw nothing but people who would rob them standing around. He knew they were on their own; and *they had to act fast.*

“We’re close to the stalls, what if we run for it?” Fred asked, he could see they didn’t have far to go to get to the ship.

“Yeah, let’s ditch the bikes and run,” Jack agreed.

Jen looked at Jack, and then at Jim, and Jim nodded yes. They stopped the bikes and grabbed what they could, and all out ran for it. Jen had liked running when she was younger-won the Caribou mile run once by coming from behind-but she didn’t have the same endurance as she once did. This made her wonder if she could make it.

“We’re close,” Scott exclaimed and then continued. “Everyone keep up this pace and we’ll make it!” Scott ran with the form of a farmer’s son, with his arms flailing. He kept looking back and saw they were a good distance from Margy now. Thank god, he thought.

“You run one step and I run two. Looky, looky, I kill you,” sang Margy. “Come on, just run out of gas already,” Margy begged as he ran like he was on fire (he had a massive air capacity and runner’s legs from a rough childhood IN THE MINES). He knew they would get tired before him, because of all the drugs he was on (those muscle builders as he called them).

They finally got out of Geto, and saw the ship was boarding, but no one was hurrying on. That told Jen they had plenty of time to get there. But *what then* she wondered.

“Jim?” Jen asked.

“Yeah?” answered Jim.

“What are we going to do when we get to the ship?” Jen asked as she kept her arms pumping like her old gym teacher-Mr. “WRESTLING CHAMP” Smith-had told her to.

Jim looked around and then asked, “What do you mean?”

“I mean, that guy can run onto the ship, there’s not a lot of security to stop him.”

“You’re right,” Jim looked around for the ship’s security, and saw none. “We could end up having to kill him. I hate to say it, but it is invariably true. Man, this is going to take some serious luck. Jack, you ready to lay down the law?” asked Jim slyly as he howled like a dying wolf; and he ran sideways towards the boarding area (just to show off).

Jack grinned and nodded yes, and said happily, “Always, Jim, always.”

“What about poor old Fred, you know I’m ready too. I’m pure badass, born and breed,” Fred said as he jogged along; making *damn sure* not to trip on anything. There were large trays of half eaten food lying about (as the crew had been eating outside for a change).

Jen smiled when she set foot on the walkway leading into the ship. Then Jen looked back quickly. She saw no signs of Margy anywhere, and that set her mind at ease.

“I think he gave up, I see no murderer chasing,” said Jen happily as she jumped backwards onto the Fresha. “I HAVE been right before,” Jen said playfully as she hugged Jim with her left arm; and he carried her backwards up the last of the walkway.

They made their way inside; and headed right for the kitchen area. They were all hungry and needed something to ease their worries (namely alcohol).

Beth and Gloria waltzed up the walkway and onto the ship. And they looked as happy as they felt.

“Gloria, I do believe I have conquered another world,” Beth bragged her shoulders back. “Please, let me have your great compliments and all your praise?” Beth begged as she kissed Gloria on the lips.

“Way to go, Beth,” Gloria said sarcastically as she smiled. “Woo hoo!” said Gloria sarcastically as she pumped her fist, and she waltzed onto the ship.

Beth heard this and thought Gloria was becoming *a real bitch*. Beth slapped her on the shoulder and asked sternly, “What was that again? Are we a scene stealer now?”

Gloria looked down and winced in pain. She looked at Beth, paused, and stuck out her tongue. Then Beth slapped her good and hard across the mouth. Gloria said angrily, “You slap me again I’m gonna break your neck. Careful, Beth, I got nothing to lose.”

Beth looked at her suspiciously-she knew it must be the drugs talking. She decided to let the effrontery go and simply say nothing. They entered the ship and walked silently to their suite.

The ship took off with everyone in good spirits (especially Jen). She was tired of running for her life; and she hoped to never see Margy again.



## Chapter 5

### Veraclare

The ship made its way through the large asteroid belt-called the Hull Buster-that surrounded Veraclare. Veraclare was where the holograms of famous celebrities lived and continued their incredible artistic work. Many of the celebrities wished they could go there and see it firsthand, but they knew there were too many *drama crazy* fans there to go. It was dark red on one side; and it was dark green on the other.

It had a vast desert there-The Endless Dry Gulp-that formed after the first civilization ruined the world, and died off. They had been there millions of years earlier; and every so often one of their odd looking skulls or skeletons would pop up in weird places (a church bathroom).

The green section was as lush as you could want, with vast manmade streams and huge trees. The trees were called Olarts-from the word Olartic meaning round and bent-and they reached for the sky; only to reach back for the ground at the top. You could literally walk onto the top of one tree from the grass surrounding it.

“We’re someplace, is this really it?” Jen asked as her eyes drank in cup after cup of Veraclare. “I do hope so, with all the money we paid and the almost *dying* thing and all,” Jen joked as she watched the ship pierce the atmosphere; and suddenly there were lights everywhere you dared look. It looked as though there was a movie premier-on the largest scale imaginable-happening all over Veraclare.

“Wow, is that it?” Jim asked in disbelief, his hands barely able to stay still (he knew times like these were worth all the hard work in the world). “It really is impressive. I guess if you have ah, all these celebrities, they would want the best. Man, look at all the different lights and ships flying all over. I guess this must be it, or it’s human sacrifice time for Fred,” Jim said sarcastically as he looked at a large floating casino (it was shooting multi-colored 3 dimensional beams into the sky and had the words BIG TEX KNOWS HOLD EM, SO GRAB A HOT DOG STICK ALREADY.. He wondered if they’d find their way there at some point.

“Its way better than I thought,” Scott had his hands on his calves as he stretched out. “Look, they have actors on anti-gravity cars streaming through the sky,” Scott said as he eyed several hundred different celebrity impersonators, flying around and doing classic scenes from the full movie lexicon.

Jen saw this and prayed she would see the Ben lookalike; but she couldn’t see one as hard as she looked. Then they heard a classic theme song from the movie Let’s Rob a Bum-newish movie that followed lowlifes as they robbed the homeless (and mostly got beaten up by them). It sounded like a trio of guitars intermingling with a classic piano. It soared through the air, and they all smiled at this (having loved the movie).

“Huh, now I feel truly at home,” Jack continued after catching his breath. “I got *my beer*, pop culture, and *my beer again*,” Jack said jokingly as he sipped his beer (he had dreamed of this moment, but it was better than he had dreamed it to be). Jack looked down at the different layers of the main city of Romer; as it passed by the outside of the ship. Jack really wanted to act some scenes with Ben Train above anyone else. Even though, he also wanted to do a scene from a Marylyn Monroe movie (just to size her up).

“Beer, your man boobs, nervous laughter you’re good to go,” Fred said sarcastically as he kept looking down. They all laughed at this; as Jack looked at Fred like he was nuts.

“Fred, laying the smack down,” Jim put his arm around Fred and grinned. “I didn’t know you had it in ya, good work. I wasn’t going to mention, Jack’s MAN boobs, but I’m glad you did,” Jim said as he rubbed Fred’s head; and he mentally got ready to unleash his technique on Ben Train’s character. He knew he could do more than just hold his own (especially in the market scene). And he was dying to show it.

“Fred, you’re acting like a cool guy, why are you lying to us?” Jack asked as he saw a 500 foot James Dean hologram trouncing the hordes of people (most of which were laughing like little naughty children). “Maybe you should take off Jen’s underpants and sing LIKE YOU MEAN IT?!” Jack asked as he stood there with his hands in his pockets looking at Fred.

Fred squirmed at this-he did this as a reflex to keep people at bay-and worried his own joke wasn’t as good as he had thought. Then Fred offered Jack his hand and said warmly, “Truce?”

“Truce,” Jack said as he took Fred’s hand.

“Hey, enough of this truce stuff, let’s start thinking about where we wanna go first,” Jim said as he leaned back from the window; and he started to take a few deep breaths (he knew the moment was coming).

“They said we could go wherever we want,” Jen said as she watched scores of people going through the holographic Oscar’s awards ceremony (all of them winning of course and giving their speeches tears and all). “And, they said we’re staying for a week, so it’s go time. I just want 10, or 20 hours with Ben. I truly believe if I act with him he’ll crush Beth. And I’m always right, even when I’m wrong,” Jen said as she ran her hands through her hair sideways. Then she hopped up and down as she held Fred’s arm. She was happy and excited *to finally see it all*.

“Yeah, and we will, no rush,” Jim said calmly as he looked briefly at Jen; before seeing a cruise ship filled with tourists go flying past (it looked like a red version of the Titanic, only larger). “I say today we

go and just scope out Ben, ya know. And then tonight, or tomorrow morning we go for it. Think about it, there's probably a line. Right, there's gotta be," Jim explained as he worked on his diction and controlled breathing. Jim walked back from the window casually; and then jumped up and down a few times. He was giddy with anticipation, as he knew he was going to nail it. And then Fred looked and saw the hotel they were going to be staying at-the Regatta Prime-rise out of an active (but controlled) volcano.

The Regatta Prime tallied up some 1 and a quarter miles into the sky. It looked like a jigsaw puzzle-jutting out in odd directions-that was spiraling out from the center on the ground floor. There were lush gardens all around the outside of the hotel; as well as swimming pools where the water was held up over the ground below with anti-gravity. If the thing shut off, you fell like a pop star's career after a murder conviction.

"I love it here, I just love it," Scott said his tone making everyone chuckle a bit, as he seemed a tad overanxious. "Jim, I think you're right. We go over there first, because you probably have to take a number. And if we do-we'll at the latest-be able to go there tomorrow morning. Which, if you think about it would work out well. Seeing as we'd be rested and ready. But what about food, do we eat now?" asked Scott as he couldn't contain his glee. He looked around the Regatta Prime-his eyes on every person situated on their decks-and they flew down through the circular center. Scott knew he was finally home.

The ship took a left hand turn, sputtered, and then slid into a parking slot. The ship skidded off the ground unexpectedly; sending everyone flying to the floor in a tangled heap.

"What the crumb lunch is that?" Jen asked in disbelief, her body lying flat on the floor. Then she picked herself up, looked at everyone, and helped Jim off an empty beer can (it was sitting on the floor from the night before).

"I'll tell ya what that was, a drunk ship captain," Jim spoke his voice less funny but agitated. "And not only drunk, probably asleep at the wheel," Jim joked only halfway kidding; as he rubbed his back where

the beer can had poked into his skin, and made an impression. Jim wanted to punch the ship's captain good and hard, but he'd wait until they got back to do it.

"I don't know what happened, but the ship is smoking, look there!" Jack said, as he pointed to a plume of smoke coming from beneath the ship.

"Then let's get out of here," said Scott quickly as he looked for his bags. "Grab your shit, and let's roll!" Scott said excitedly as he watched the smoke triple by the second.

No one told Scott he was right, they just got up, and ran over to where their luggage was. They grabbed everything-including their cash-and raced off the ship. When they got off they saw most of the other passengers-through the thick smoke-already off and running away from the ship.

"I think it might blow, let's motor!" Jack cried as he dragged his luggage through the-gold encrusted with white marble floors-landing area. They came to the first of the blue carpets (as the staff called them due to their regal hue and how much they hated vacuuming them). They called them that as well, because each one signified a billion people having stayed at the hotel in the past 200 years.

Jim looked back and saw Captain Icabod Soft being dragged off the ship, gasping for air, as several firefighting-dark red and in the shape of a bowling pins-robots entered the ship.

"Man, the stuff you see when your eyes are shut," Jim muttered to himself, but Jen heard it and squeezed his right bicep.

"I love that line, and you delivered it as good as you could," Jen replied happily as she smiled up at Jim. "I mean come on, that's Ben's line, Jim," Jen said as she gazed up at Jim; and they ran into the great gathering hall together.

They looked up and saw 600 diamond chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, with shards of light shining through them all. There were anti-gravity elevators all along the wall; disguised as famous paintings. When you walked up to one, the painting dissolved into an entrance.

“It looks like we’re not dead,” Jack remarked.

Scott set down his bags, slowly looked up, and stopped dead in his tracks. There in front of him was the hologram for Marlon Brando-from the movie *The Godfather*-having a drink. He looked at the hologram of Marlon; and he felt every inch of his nerve disappear. He had never seen an actor that commanded so much space before. Jim looked up as he set down his bags; and casually walked over to Brando.

“I see, you’re a new one, sucks being you,” Brando spoke with a disdain for Jim. “Go ahead, lay it on me!” Marlon drank his wine *like he picked the grapes himself*.

Jim looked around, waited just a moment, and then riffled through the 5 sequels to the *Godfather* (all of which they had made after Marlon’s death using his hologram and lifeforce). So many lines he wanted to say, but he didn’t want to blow it.

“Is it really death for them all, or can we bury them first?” Jim asked philosophically as he tried to control his breathing.

Brando looked at him with dead eyes. Then Marlon tossed the glass of wine over Jim’s head, startling him.

“You can take their place!” Marlon said coldly as he fingered a gun in his pocket. “I have no problem with that. Just turn that stupid head...and I’ll put flowers in your hair,” Marlon was a little bemused by Jim’s ego; as he walked up to Jim and pulled out a small brown pistol (with a leather grip reading **THE BEST OF US WERE ALWAYS DEAD**). Jim recalled the right reaction, and continued getting physically and emotionally smaller. Jen watched in awe; as Jim took over his part of the scene.

“This is so awesome, Fred,” Jen said excitedly her hands on Fred’s shoulder as she rested her head there. “I love this,” said Jen as she smiled a little and watched Marlon trying to turn Jim’s head around (to kill him of course). Jim had a new wrinkle. He decided he wouldn’t just casually turn around at all. Instead, he was going to *fight Don Corleone to the last*.

“Take your flowers, and shove them UP YOUR ASS!” Jim shouted as he pushed Marlon. “I’m not scared of you, you’re old hat. Nothing, but an old fart bag,” wisecracked Jim with a smug smile. “I’m embarrassed to talk to you criminal man,” Jim said snidely as he pushed Marlon back again (this time Marlon catching himself). Then Jim tried to knock the gun out of his hand, but Marlon hid it away behind his back.

Marlon waved the gun in front of Jim several times, barely showing emotion, with Jim batting at it every time unsuccessfully. Marlon laughed and said sternly,” You know the gun don’t hurt ya, it’s the lack of air that kills ya like Sunday service. I knew you’d be a hornet in my shoe, but not the right one. Tell God I’m doing just fine, depending,” Marlon didn’t have to act this one *he owned it*, as he smirked with a rabid dog’s lip; and looked up at Jim from a lowered left shoulder.

“Depending on what?” Jim growled his eyes never leaving Marlon.

Then Marlon shot Jim 5 times. Jim shook and fell to the ground, and Marlon said snidely,” How good you are at catching a bullet, CRATE BARON. Worthless tie salesman, I buy my OWN TIES NOW!” snapped Marlon sharply as he kicked Jim viciously in the head; and he took the bullet casings from the pistol and let them all fall on Jim’s head.

The crowd that had formed-it was roughly 50 people-started cheering and giving Jim and Marlon a round of thunderous applause. Jen watched Jim lay there motionless-Jim had holographic blood and wounds-and she thought he looked sexy. She knelt down, chuckled, and slapped Jim gently on the cheek.

Jim let a slit open in his left eye; and he shook his head no and then whispered, "Not yet, I'm loving this!"

Jen stood up, brushed off her hands, and walked back from Jim as she tried not to laugh (she couldn't help it though). Fred looked at Jim laying there motionless-not even his chest was moving up and down due to a technique Jim had mastered-and Jim looked like he was actually dead and gone. Fred couldn't help marveling at this. Fred wondered how he had pulled that death off firstly; and secondly where he got the balls to go off script with *fucking Brando*.

"Man, woman, child, they know only breathing," Marlon confessed as he dropped the gun onto Jim's chest. "Me, I know why they don't," Marlon stepped on Jim's back and walked off into the large dining hall. Once he entered the dining hall, a man in a yellow suit named Ed Foxx came up to him-he obviously wanted to bask in Marlon's glory-and Marlon pushed him away as he laughed and said sternly, "steal somebody else's scene."

They *finally* got Jim up, and congratulated him on holding his own with Marlon. They entered the elevators, started silently smiling to themselves, and went up to their suites (Jim got everyone upgraded so they could all be close together and hang. The money didn't matter).

In Jim's suite, everyone was sitting on the floating white swan shaped couch, with Jim taking a shower. They were watching acting tips from the hotel management on the hotel channel of the TV (Prime Talent Airways). It showed a young red haired actor going up against Leonardo Dicaprio in the film *The Great Gatsby*. Everyone could see he was obviously nervous as the poor neighbors. Then Leo crushed him with a few well put moments. Jen watched this and said in disbelief, "These fake actors aren't even good in this crap. Yeah, just let him walk all over you, good strategy, Pal."

"I love that movie, but I hate these acting tips," Jack responded with his eyes shut. "I mean I hate to say it, but Jim had the right idea. Just go for it, and see what happens. I'm dying to get someone GOOD in a scene," Jack was already playing out emotional responses in his mind for later. "Actually, someone



great, that's why I came anyway," Jack said his eyes darting around the room. "I'm wondering if we should stop watching this, because it might ruin our acting reality threads, ya know?" Jack asked as he ate a small meatball sub-the size of a cheeseburger at McDonald's-and crossed his legs on the edge of the couch.

Jen saw the red haired man get thrown out the window by Leo, and she laughed and said happily," Yeeaahh! This is way bad. I'm embarrassed now, and I just need to forget I ever saw this. They should have different levels they teach you."

"What do you mean?" Fred asked while he sat back and stretched out his arms over his head.

"Ya know, like have some of the best ones on one channel," Jen continued her hands doing most the talking (intentionally to prepare her gifts). "Then some medium level actors like Val Kilmer on another channel. And then this loser on the last one," Jen said as she stretched out her neck. "It would be better, and better is good we know this. I've had kinda good, not as good as better," said Jen as she was intentionally babbling to calm everyone's nerves. "Even best, I don't mind so much, but suck I do. And now that we're talking about suck, Fred, go suck a pie out of the fridge for me, please?" asked Jen warmly as she smiled at Fred and wrapped her legs around him.

They could hear Jim singing-Something in the way she moves by the Beatles but with his own lyrics-and it sounded *pretty damn good*.

"Jim's really whaling in there," Scott remarked as he tried to really listen. "Hey, are we allowed to raid Jim's mini-bar?" Scott asked hopefully as he eyed the large blue fridge next to the kitchen.

"Feel free!" Jim bellowed as he hit the rinse button on his shower; causing a single rush of water to wash him clean. "Just save me 10 or 20," Jim said loudly as he continued getting ready; and he was smiling at himself in the mirror.

Scott stepped down from the couch, exhaled, and walked quickly over to the fridge. He opened it and saw several dozen 16 ounce beers (in every shape and size you could want). He reached in and grabbed the lion shaped Golden Victims beer. Then he examined it and thought it was really cool looking.

“How is it?” Jen asked out of the corner of her mouth.

Scott jumped up onto the couch and said, “I’m not sure yet, give me 4 sips, just 4. Then, oh then I’ll know. And when I know, I’ll sing to strangers, and get arrested. Please keep my adoring fans in the basement, Officer, they can’t help it,” Scott said as he opened the head of the beer. Then a trio of puffs of flavor shot out around his face. He felt drunk just breathing the fumes; and felt nervous to even take a drink.

“What’s the hold up, Scott?” Fred asked as he put his feet up on the headboard. “You’re a drinker right?” asked Fred as he watched Scott; who was eyeing the golden beer inside nervously.

“What?” Scott asked as he watched the beer swish like a milkshake. “I mean YEAH, of course I am. I grew up in a family of home brewers. I go way back with beer. Well, here goes glory be thy name,” Scott said coyly as he half hoped Jim would come out and take the beer from him. He knew it was a lot stronger than what he was used to. He only hoped he wouldn’t embarrass himself at this point. He grabbed the lion tightly around the neck; and he took a good long sip. Then he started dry heaving and coughing loudly (he wished he had thrown the beer, *let alone drink it*).

“Who’s the lightweight?” Jim asked as he primped his red silk shirt.

“It’s Scott, Jim, he’s a 1 beer and I’m horny guy,” Jen said jokingly, as she put her hand on Scott’s stomach to keep him from convulsing.

“I knew it, can’t hold his beer,” Jim put on some cologne and smiled into the mirror one last time. “Hey, we’ll head down to the stages in like, 10 minutes,” Jim said loudly as he put on his black Armani socks, and then slipped on his Adidas running shoes. Jim looked great, and felt great. He knew he had

kicked ass against Brando. And he knew he would continue to kick ass with the other actors. Once you'd climbed Mt. Brando there was only Ben Train left, he thought.

"Yeah, what you said," Jen replied as she did her toenails. "Scott, if you're gonna puke, maybe you should just do it? I mean, are you gonna puke mid-scene?"

Scott coughed, hopped off the couch, and raced into the kitchen. He looked in one sink; and it had 3 large racks of ribs already thawing-for the party later-inside. He started to panic when he saw the other sink was all the way at the other end of the kitchen. He ran over there, holding his mouth shut and his stomach tightly. He got to the sink and vomited loudly.

"Scott, how could you?" Jack rubbed his shoulder and grimaced. "He really doesn't like beer does he?" asked Jack.

"No, I think he's a total beer lightweight," Jen agreed as she rubbed below her eyes (to get rid of the puffiness) "That said, smell this beer," Jen added as she held the Golden Victim's beer to Jack's nose; and Jack leaned in and smelled the-near rubbing alcohol proof-beer and recoiled.

"Oh god, that's like hard alcohol," Jack said as he felt the punch in the face Golden Victim's was. "Don't tell him, but he got suckered with that one," Jack whispered directly into Jen's ear, and Fred listened in.

Scott emerged from the kitchen with a towel over his face. He was still flush and red around the cheeks (thankfully he had cleaned his face and hands before coming back in).

"Scott, hey you wanna throw back 6 or 7 beers before we go?" Jim asked sarcastically, as he had heard him throwing up. Jim came out of the bathroom, and Scott gave him the middle finger, causing Jim to laugh.

“I don’t wanna talk about it,” Scott snorted as he sat down and tried to get his bearings. Jen and Fred chuckled under their breaths.

“Hey, let’s talk about something different,” Jim suggested as he sat down and put on his black leather Nike-Rock the Rim-sneakers. “Who thinks Scott here, is a lightweight? Who thinks he’d upchuck macaroni and cheese if it were too hot? Who thinks he’d get drunk on the word beer?” Jim asked sarcastically as he jumped up onto the couch, looked around like he was going to vomit, and sat down beside Scott and Jen.

Fred burst out laughing, along with Jen and Jack. As they knew this was too funny not to.

“Real funny, go ahead and get it all out,” Scott said indignantly as he tried to keep from vomiting.

Jim chuckled and said, “O.K., let’s forget Scott’s embarrassment for now. Who’s up for going down to the stages?”

“I am,” Scott answered quickly, because even though he didn’t like the beer he WAS now rip roaring drunk, and *loving it*.

“Yes, I say yes too,” Jack agreed.

“Me too, but only if we leave sometime,” Jen agreed as she rolled off the couch sideways onto the carpet.

“Jen, that’s exactly when we’re leavin’, sometime, like now,” said Jim as he checked his shave in the mirror. “How’s that for sometime, huh, sometime?” Jim asked sarcastically as he stood up, jumped and touched the ceiling, and took one final look in the floating water mirror. The mirror was made of a liquid found on Veraclare called Rague; and it typically floated 4 feet above the ground and was not transparent, but reflective.

“Jim, you read my mind, and I was reading Dickens,” Jen said as she slowly stood up and did her junior high-cheerleading dance. “Hey, Scott, why hasn’t Fred piped up as of yet? Where’s my Fred pipe?” Jen asked as she watched Fred silently grinning.

Fred stood up, waited for someone to laugh, and stretched out his arms. Then he jumped up and hit the ceiling-he couldn’t let Jim one up him-and he screamed like a dying Banshee. Fred replied, “Let’s party with the smarties.”

“Done and done, whoever sees an actor they like first, gets dibs on the first scene,” Jack said as he pulled his denim shirt sleeves up (he wanted the other actors to know he was powerful, and his huge forearms did just that). “Although, we’ll let Jen have first dibs on Ben, because she punches hard,” Jack said as he set down his food. They made their way to the elevators. What a day.

They went down to the ground floor; and the doors opened out into a massive 10 lane main street. There were hundreds of thousands of stages, acting troupes, and movie sets littered on, and around the street. There were even vast outdoor sets ready for any scene (providing you had the balls to act them). The crowds were mostly actors, but not just any actors, they were the best. It had become a sacred pilgrimage for anyone who thought they were truly talented.

There were also seven hundred thousand musicians in the pits to the left, and in front of each stage. And they enjoyed playing the classic theme songs to perfection, as well as going on random riffs if the actors *made it happen*. There were storefronts behind the stages; that had different floors going up like a set of steps. The buildings were 8 stories high; with recreational partying spots on the roof of each step (that were always full of people and stocked with beer and Klarin).

“Wow, it’s bigger than I imagined,” said Jen in disbelief as the idea of this being the greatest spot there was sunk in. She walked along watching scenes starting and ending in every direction. She watched an old man playing Ben Hur-who was an actual descendent of Charlton Heston himself-who was a dead ringer for Charlton. Jen could tell he was not as gifted, but she liked that he was trying nonetheless.

Then Jim saw the film Avatar off to his right. And they had several dozen people playing the Navi (not hard to spot in their makeup). And they were doing the actual language from the movie. Jim looked and saw many of the women-playing the Navi-were bare ass naked under their skimpy clothes and makeup. Wow, I could live here forever, Jim thought.

“I ahh, see naked people,” Jim looked around and then continued, “I see them often, and right in front of my eyes. Hey, let’s keep looking until we find the more serious drama. I say that because, these are like more *gimmicky* than anything,” Jim said as he started to warm up his voice using his higher register to speak.

Jack saw the movie Easy Rider being acting out up ahead. And he wondered if they were staying true to the original material.

“Hey, can we check out that easy rider set first?” Jack wondered aloud as he slowed to a crawl. “I’m enjoying this one actor here,” Jack spoke with a calm soothing tone, as he pulled on Jen’s arm to follow him. Jen pulled Fred and Jim in the same direction-fearing they would get bad spots to watch if she didn’t-and smiled brighter than a new sun. Scott saw this and followed them over.

“Hey man, is that marijuana?” Robbie Jones-son of a late 60’s gaffer and Hollywood lifer- asked as he sucked on a holographic joint. “I heard that stuff kills, man. Can I smoke some of the stuff, man?”

Robbie asked awkwardly as he played the Jack Nicholson character (with very little acting on the stoned part). Everyone laughed, and Robbie thought he had *nailed it*, but they were laughing at him, not with.

“He’s not even saying the same lines, man,” Jim pointed out as he flipped Robbie the bird. “This sucks, let’s keep going,” Jim growled, as he had to look away from Robbie for fear of catching his poor technique (they all knew the story of a famous actor named Breti Ped. Who had done just that and been run out of Hollywood, talentless).

Jen was watching him, and chuckling to herself; as she thought this to be the worst acting she'd ever seen.

"They are blowing it, oh my god," Jen whispered happily as she fought back laughter. She watched them pass a cigar as the joint a second later (Jim laughed into his palm to avoid being a bad audience member). Then when they lit it, Robbie dropped it onto his pants accidentally. It caused his cheap canvas pants to catch fire. And Robbie shot up and off the set, and ran away screaming.

"Now that's staying in character," Jack said as he stretched out his core. "Ya know I might just take this scene somewhere else. Hang out here for a minute," Jack said as he picked up the glasses Robbie had dropped. Then Jack ran into his spot before a blonde haired man-Old Jack Times-could.

"Here we go," Jim said as he watched Jack dissolve into the Nicholson character.

"I don't smoka da weeda," Jack said drunkenly as he smoked a holographic joint. "I prefer the crack-a-lack. Can you two buzzards give me a ride to go fuck yourselves? Because you guys are losers," Jack snorted, as he moved away from the written dialogue. The crowd roared, and the other actors completely froze up. They were not prepared for improvisation (and Jack knew it). The thin man-playing Fonda's character-was named Dustin Goldneck; and he rocketed to his feet and kicked dirt at Jack.

"No, we don't drive you and your head, anywhere," Dustin said coldly as venom seeped from his red stained eyes. "We're the ones who do the driving, NOT YOU! Maybe you should drive your head off a steep cliff," Dustin said nervously, as he stood there unsure what to do or say.

Jack looked at him-not sure if he was even a real actor-and then at a smiling Jim, with eyes wide and ready. Jim laughed and said sarcastically," He's blowing you away, Jack. You need to up your game," Jim said sarcastically as he stood there smiling with his hands up over his head (doing a summer stock jazz hands).

“No thanks, I would love to hang out with you,” Jack added as he stood like he was the thin branch in the strong wind. “So I won’t, and we’ll never speak in human words again. Maybe that cliff, maybe *that cliff*, is mine someday. If so...I don’t NEED to climb it, because I’ve climbed it before. Find the holes men, find the holes in hypocrisy and know everything worth a damn,” said Jack firmly as he rung his hands out, his head shaking, and a tear rolling down his cheek.

Suddenly everyone that had been laughing-Jim included-was drawn in by his performance. Jack could feel the ebb and flow of the crowd. He was praying Dustin would be able to keep up with him (someone had to).

“I died on that same cliff myself, too many DAMN times,” confessed Dustin as his eyes started feeling wet. “I’m sorry, friend, I mistook you for the keeper of other people’s *lies*. Now I know, if I die, a part of me will live in you. It’s that, and that alone, that binds us all together,” Dustin paused and then continued, “I’ll drive ya anywhere you wanna go, but I can’t wait forever.” Dustin sat down on the rock; and rubbed his right elbow (like nothing had happened).

The crowd started to clap (everyone was truly blown away at the fragility Jack and Dustin had just shown) and they keep it up for 5 minutes. Jack sat there staying in character, but also realizing he had just been a part of something special.

“That was awesome, Jack, why didn’t you stay a bit longer?” Jen asked as she walked arm and arm with Jack down the street. This, as the crowd was still cheering for him on the Easy Rider set (Jack didn’t mind).

“It’s one thing to peak, it’s another to wait beyond your peak,” Jack said confidently as he smiled as warm as Sunday apple pie. “For that set, and that material, there was nothing left to say.”

Jim listened intently to Jack; and he could see now he was truly gifted. Jim started to feel an incredible urge to get his own applause (acting was a competition if you were any good). He looked



around at the sets for Star Wars, 1984, and Blade Runner, but he was still looking. He didn't want to use up what he had, unless it was *perfect*.

Then Jen saw Pride and Prejudice; and she debated taking a run at a British accent (but she had Ben on her mind). They walked over to the Scarface set, and it was bloody (and vomit-inducing). There were dead bodies lying around, people drunk and high and fake bullets were being fired at everyone (by a young Canadian actor named Michael Foundtree). He looked a bit like Pacino, but he was a half foot taller. He screamed out his line, "SAY HELLO TO MY LITTLE FRIEND!" Then he tripped on the blood and fell on his gun. The other actors riddled him with fake bullets; and holographic blood was heaped on him in splashes of red.

"Come on now, really?" Fred considered this set seriously. "I missed out on playing *that role*. I wonder when they're gonna fire this scene up again?" asked Fred. "Wait here for a second," Fred said as he looked around for the director. Then he saw a man sitting behind a tree in a director's chair; and he hurried over to him.

"Fred going for Scarface, I would have thought Pee-Wee's big adventure," Jim joked as he watched Fred. "Just saying, no I'm sure he can act," Jim said as he started to chuckle at Foundtree getting kicked, and continually shot by the holographic gang members. Michael was trying not to laugh, but it had been going on way too long for him not to.

"Jim?" asked Jen softly.

"Yeah what?" asked Jim nonchalantly.

"Fred's actually very good, wait and see," Jen continued, "I'm telling ya, wait and see." Jen was happy for Fred (he'd earned it). And then she rested her head on Jim's chest.

"It's true, you'll really be surprised," Scott replied as he sucked on a Dr. Pepper pop. "Fred's a badass, won an acting award last year in a summer stock play. Watch and learn," said Scott slyly as he

pulled out a cigarette and pinned it behind his ear. Scott was looking down the road at Rebel Without a Cause (still wanting to go to the Griffith Observatory). He knew that would be one sweet scene to jump in and stay in for awhile.

“Really, Fred a badass?” asked Jim in disbelief with his eyes squinting like noonday sun. “Man, well you never can tell, I mean right? So, he probably won’t embarrass us all to lives of SHAME. Although, he might be that nice to us,” Jim wisecracked. “Fred’s a giver, just ask *Fred*,” Jim said sarcastically as he kept taking peeks down the street-there was some sort of large commotion down around the corner-where the road went to the left and to a row of large stages. He was wondering what was drawing the big crowds around the corner.

“Here he comes,” Jen said as she saw Fred walking over with an “I just got laid” smile on his face.

“Well?” Scott asked.

“Scott, I can get this role in an hour, but I want you in it,” Fred continued, “Would you like to be the assassin, and I’ll be Tony?”

“Fred, the assassin sucks!” Scott said indignantly as his jaw dropped quicker than power lines in a Northeaster. “What if we rotate scenes? Like I’ll start off as Tony, and then you take the death scene at the end?” Scott asked as he put his hands in his pockets and grimaced. Scott wanted the same role as Fred, bad. And Scott thought he could make him cave.

“No way, that sucks,” Fred rebuffed with his worst *stink face* making an appearance. “I want Tony, and you owe me a favor anyway. Just, whatever other role you take, I’ll play the stiff. How’s that?” asked Fred.

“Fine, I’ll do it, because I know you love this role,” Scott agreed.

“YES!” Fred spoke with a high pitched almost crow sounding voice. “I need this, Jim, like bad. You wait ‘til you see me, I mean total commitment. I don’t hold back, and I play the scene, Jim,” Fred said excitedly, as he patted Jim on the left shoulder and then acted like he was eating his head.

“Yeah, I know all about it, Fred,” Jim said his mind feeling invigorated to act something, *anything*. “That said do you mind if the rest of us play gang members? Because I would love to shoot you dead, and watch you suffer. No, nothing personal, it’d just be fun,” Jim said as he tried not to laugh, but he couldn’t help himself.

Jen chuckled, moved her left leg like she was part ballroom dancer, and then grabbed Fred by the arms and asked, “Yeah, Fred, we want in, will you let us? I promise to upstage you.”

“Yeah, of course, but don’t upstage the talent,” Fred said as he cracked his knuckles and surveyed the crowd for hecklers. “I can’t have you going too far off script, Jen,” said Fred as he made a face like a wounded 9 year old-minus the blood and dirt stains-and looked intently at Jen. Fred worried Jim would have to steal the scene. And Fred was really hoping Jim wouldn’t act with him (not yet, not until he proved himself).

“Fred, you’re so Jim Nuts right now,” Jen joked with a hollow smile reminiscent of bad movies from the seventies. “Fine, we’ll let you take the glory, but I want to go look around for awhile. So why don’t you hang here, and we’ll be back, hmm?” asked Jen happily as she karate chopped Fred in the stomach softly. Fred smiled, looked around cautiously-as he didn’t want to lose his friends in the crowd-and covered his stomach with his hands.

“Great, but don’t be late.”

Then they all walked off down the street; and they checked out each new movie set as they did. They went past several movies in production on the large stages (typically it was considered great cache to

make movies on Veraclare). They were using sets from 2001: A Space Odyssey—simply changing the color scheme and camera angle— and One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest.

“Hey, hey look!” Jim’s voice excited and youthful all at once. “I almost forgot they have a vast section of holograms using the actual real actor’s brainwaves, and scans. Oh man, look its Forrest Gump. Wow, Tom Hanks really looked like a goober in that one,” Jim said as he walked up to the entryway to HOLOGRAPHIC HEAVEN, as it read on a gold arch above the street. They stood there looking in at the bevy of famous actors walking the streets (their bellies in knots and their minds on fire). Then Jen looked up and saw a large gold sign.

“If you’re disrespectful to the actors, we thank you from the bottom of our hearts,” Jen said happily as she pointed to the sign. “Oh that is too good, Jim, let’s cross the threshold,” Jen said playfully as she dipped her foot into the holographic side. And as she did, her clothes on that side morphed into holographic white cotton pants, and pink lacy socks.

“That’s interesting, it must be that anti-gravity technology I heard of,” Jim muttered as his took in a deep-chest filling-breath. “They create pockets of gravity at certain points. Then they use holograms to add flare to the clothing. Well I’m game,” Jim said as he stepped through the archway. Then Jim’s clothes changed to an Amish farmer’s work clothes.

Scott and Jack stepped through just after Jen; and they all ended up in multi-colored clothing (mostly made of denim and old cut up shirts). Jen suddenly had on a shirt reading I’M WITH THE BAND; I’M THE LEAD GUITAR PLAYER. Scott also had on a red crushed velvet hat with a cotton lining. Jack had on a black denim short sleeved shirt, and red leather work boots.

“They must really enjoy doing this,” surmised Jack as he smiled. “I know I sure am,” Jack said sarcastically as he walked along with certain *pep in his step*. Then he saw Mel Gibson in Braveheart. And he knew he wanted to share some air with that buzzard.

“Where are you going?” Scott asked as he watched Jack half jogging over to Braveheart.

Jack spun around and said jokingly, “TO FREEDOM!”

“That’s AWESOME, man he really has a flare for things,” Jim said as he waded through the crowd. “I need to take this all in. There’s literally Robert Redford-from the Natural-throwing pitches to *the Wammer*, 3 feet from me. Holy shit, this is blowing my mind,” said Jim in disbelief as he watched Robert Redford throw his second pitch and then say “Watch your mouth, mister” causing Jim to laugh.

“Hey, Hayseed, I bet you can’t strike out Jim Nuts here in 3 pitches,” Jen said jokingly as she walked towards the short man playing the Wammer (he was named Ed Holden). Ed looked over angrily; and then tossed Jim the bat, and waved him over.

“Jen, I haven’t seen this movie in years firstly,” Jim said hollowly as he had seen it right before he left. “And secondly I haven’t swung a bat in several *years*. Usually embarrassment follows such things.”

“Jim Nuts, just swing it, you’ll be fine,” Jen reassured as she rubbed his lower back. “Let’s go, JIM NUTS! Come on, everyone cheer him on!” Jen yelled as she clapped her hands and pushed Jim towards the grass. This was where Robert Redford stood. Jim knew it. And when he looked up Robert was glaring back at him.

“Jim, you can do it, REMEMBER THE ALAMO!” Scott said loudly as he clapped like a sea lion. Jim took the bat and started taking practice swings. And suddenly he felt at ease, better now with this wood in his hands, and he snapped into character.

“You gonna throw that shit or what?!” Jim demanded as he slammed the tip of the bat hard into the ground, and then spit in his hands.

“Watch it!” Robert snapped. “I don’t take to that language,” Robert Redford said indignantly as he walked around the patch of grass he was throwing from. Jim stuck out his tongue, grabbed his balls, and

then his gut and the crowd laughed. Robert went into his long windup. And he tossed it just past Jim's belly (perfect strike).

"Whoa, I wasn't ready yet, hayseed," Jim cried as he spit in Robert's direction. "Maybe we play this above the board, huh?" Jim snorted as he tucked his shirt into his overalls and spit again (this time at the crowd).

"I warned you, Mister, and when I show you what for you'll wish for daylight," Robert said sharply as David Duvall came over and whispered in his ear "Blow it past him, nothing else." Jim cackled and swung the bat the wrong direction a few times (for spite).

"I'm warning you, Hay for brains, you hit me with that ball, and there's gonna be the wrong kind of trouble over here," Jim said as he hit the makeshift plate—a red plastic dish pushed deep into the ground reading OLD BETH'S TASTY PIES—3 times with the tip of his bat. "I've been known for my pugilist ways, all over, *Hayseed*," Jim said snidely as he grinned and watched Robert—completely committed to playing the Roy Hobbs character—warming up and he wished his dad was there to see this. Jim's dad Carl loved the Natural; and would have given anything to see just this one scene.

"No sir, he'll bring the hospital bill right to your door, Sir. I'd be careful," Robert Duvall replied as he got out of way and laughed like an old man finding a young heart. Jim watched this happening and he suddenly realized the pitch Robert had just thrown, was not very fast at all. He suddenly felt the urge to crush it (his mind filling with high school baseball memories against Caribou high, where he hit a homer for the first time).

Then Robert went into his long windup; and threw the pitch right down the pipe. Jim hit it right out of the hayfield and into the movie *Unforgiven*. It clipped Clint Eastwood's right ear, and he glared back—directly at Jim—not knowing what had happened.

“Oh, that’s gone like wind in a teacup,” Jim said as he pumped his fist in a circle. “Come tell the big daddy, what suppa gonna be,” Jim said sarcastically as he ran the nonexistent bases. This while Robert looked around in shock, and then threw his glove at Jim’s head. Jim ducked it, and felt a tinge of anger starting to brew. Jim would not stand for any violence on his person (Roy Hobbs or not).

“What’s your beef with me, huh?” Robert barked as he paced back and forth. “Ya know baseball ain’t played like that, meant to be pure. You beat me, fine, then you win,” Robert said as he looked at his hand. “All that other stuff I don’t have to take,” Robert snapped sternly as he walked towards Jim pointing his finger at his face.

Jen saw this and she was in heaven; as she couldn’t believe how amazing this place was. Then she saw Jim start for Robert. And she started to laugh, but then abruptly stopped and remembered Ben Train. She needed to *find him today*, and give him what she thought *he needed*. She hoped he would enjoy acting with her, because she in some way wished it would heal him.

“Yeah, yeah shut your yap,” Jim snorted as he got ready to throw down with Robert. “I’ve pounded losers like Roy Hobbs many times. You want some of the skunk?” Jim asked sternly as he threw the bat over Robert’s head; and he kept heading towards him. Robert sprinted at Jim and they started all out brawling. Suddenly Jim realized the anti-gravity gave Robert’s holographic body the *same feeling as the real one*. And at the very least he knew the punches hurt the same.

“Jim, flip him over,” Scott said as he moved closer to the fight.

“What, oh yeah,” Jim answered awkwardly as he grabbed Robert around the waist, and flipped him hard onto the ground. Robert writhed in pain, and Jim punched him hard in the head a few times (just for spite). Then Jim said in disbelief, “I can’t believe I’m beating up Roy Hobbs, this is INCREDIBLE!”

Jen laughed, sighed, and bent over at the waist; but as she did she felt a pair of eyes on her. She looked back and saw a man wearing all black-including round black sunglasses-and he looked right at

her. His name was Pothacary Blim, but everyone called him just Blim. Blim glared at her and then started working his way over to her.

“JIM!” Jen cried as she moved away from the crowd of onlookers (and away from Blim).

Then Jim looked up and asked, “What, I’m kinda busy?”

“Some guy’s coming after me!” Jen said nervously as she ran-with Scott doing the same-past Robert Duvall and over to Jim.

They looked up, and Blim had broken free of the crowd and was heading right for them. Jim looked at Blim and he was reminded of the Cherry Picker gang in Boston (they wore the same dress as Blim). Jim threw Robert Redford aside-like a bag of garbage-and stood up.

“What the fuck do you want?” Jim asked angrily as he glared at Blim; and he got his fists ready to fight him if he had to.

“Just her, I have a special gift for her,” Blim said hollowly as he smiled a smile repo men call *genuine*. “Please, don’t be an idiot. I could kill you if I wanted to. And I don’t need to be burying bodies. Come now, hurry up,” Blim insisted sternly with a voice that sounded like he had been through throat surgery (2 packs a day for 30 years). The echo his voice produced put everyone who heard him *on edge*.

Jim carefully watched his hands; and saw he was carrying a pistol in his pocket.

Scott stepped forward and said defiantly, “Not gonna happen, beat it!”

Blim grinned, shuffled his feet, and grabbed Scott around the wrist; slamming him hard on the ground. Then Blim said calmly, “I’ll kill you all if I have to. But she won’t be working with Ben Train anytime soo-”



“Hey, you’re Beth’s goon aren’t ya?” Jen interrupted as she kept her body sideways towards Blim (made her harder to shoot). “Jim, you gotta kick some ass,” Jen said urgently as she moved directly in behind Jim.

“I got ya, so you’re feeling tough?” Jim asked snidely his hands bouncing side to side like a well oiled metronome. “You look like a Cherry picker to me. I’m ready for ya, Pal, COME ON!” Jim said coldly as he watched the body of Blim and not any part in particular (he knew he needed to see his strike coming). He had a feeling Blim knew some form of karate, *but so did Jim*.

“You’ll all die here, and for nothing,” Blim responded as he took off his coat and showed his muscle bound physique. He took an aggressive karate pose; and worked from side to side as he neared Jim and Jen (he couldn’t just shoot Jen or he might hit someone else in the crowd by accident).

Jim waited patiently-hardly showing any emotion-and then saw Blim step awkwardly on a bent Washington quarter (the coin had fallen out of Robert Redford’s pocket during the scuffle). Jim seized his opportunity and punched him hard in the chest. Blim fell back, and Jim leapt on top of him; like a wild eagle to a warm feast of flesh.

“Get him, JIM!” Jen shouted as she tried to help out Jim-but Jim didn’t need any help-as he *ground and pounded Blim*. Blim tried to get Jim into a submission hold, but Jim headbutted him under the chin causing Blim to lose his grip.

“Hey, Jen, we need to help Jim,” Scott said frantically as he started to work his way around to the back of Blim’s head.

Jen laughed and said happily,” No we don’t.”

Then Jim landed a good right hand to the mouth of Blim; and it knocked him out cold.

“Yeah, you take a little sleep,” Jim said snidely as he looked down on Blim. “Might give you some manners, Jerk-off,” Jim said coldly with his hand on Blim’s newly bloody ear. Then Jim stood up and screamed. The crowd cheered, and Robert Redford offered Jim his hand to shake. Jim took it and they shook hands.

“I see I figured you wrong, Mister, you know hardship,” Robert said warmly as he tapped Jim on the shoulder with his ball cap. “That sort of thing makes friends out of enemies, all over. Hope I see ya again someday,” Robert said as he looked Jim in the eye. Then he tapped Jim on the stomach with the back of his hand; and walked off with Robert Duvall throwing him his leather pocketbook (even the money inside was authentic for the time period).

“Whoa, so yummy tummy, Jim, I’m impressed,” Jen spoke in a little girl’s voice as she rubbed her stomach.

“Jen, I’m having the time of my life,” Jim confessed as he looked around in a haze. “I can’t believe I don’t live here for god sakes. Well, let’s keep looking around I need some ah...I kicked his ass food,” Jim said happily as he walked through the cheering crowd and out to the main strip.

Then they heard Jack’s voice-roaring over the masses-as he walked up to the set; and he was smiling and wearing the Braveheart blue makeup. Jack smiled and said jokingly, “I am William Wallace, goat lover and man who does not bath. Who will follow me to BAT-ULL, and more?”

“Ah ha haa, good delivery,” said Jim as he clapped for Jack. “How was your scene?” Jim asked as he rubbed his shoulder and looked around in awe of it all.

“Incredible, I played one of Mel Gibson’s friends,” Jack replied happily as he kicked a can into the garbage vents on the side of the road (they went down into a recycling center below the city, with sorters working there all day and all night. It was huge business). “Remember that Irish guy, who said it was his island?”

“That guy?” asked Jen in disbelief.

“Yes, that guy and it was so much fun,” Jack said as he looked back for his next scene cue. “I shaded him a little crazier and the crowd loved it. I got 3 standing O’s, and then I just got sick of bowing and left. So, have you tried anything yet?” Jack asked as he strutted along like he was much taller and stronger than he actually was.

Jim grinned at this, and looked at Jen and Scott. Scott nodded and then said hollowly, “No, hell no, we’re still looking around.”

“O.k., well we better find something quick, they’re filling up fast,” Jack spoke as if he could do no wrong. “This guy here told me there’s an acting troop from Denver that just arrived. And if that weren’t enough, they’re gonna flood the streets in an hour or so. Just saying,” Jack said as he looked over at Jim. And Jack could tell Jim was locked in thought.

Jim eyed the biggest stage of them all; it was a few hundred yards down the street. He knew it had to be one of the bigger movies, but he didn’t know which one (even judging by the odd sets).

“Yeah, you’re right, I need to be acting,” Jim tried to cough, but his throat was too dry. “Because if I’m not, what’s the point right?” asked Jim as he kept his eyes on the big stage. And then he saw a man walk out. He watched this man thinking he had a cool walk and way to him. Then Jim realized it was Ben Train, and his heart nearly stopped. He stood where he was, trying not to stare, and hoping to stay calm.

“Jim, are you alright?” Jen asked her mind also on acting more than anything she was doing at the moment. “You look sick and not alright,” Jen rubbed Jim’s back and his shoulders.

Jim pointed with his hand and then dry heaved.

“What is he pointing at..,” Jack asked before seeing Ben Train up ahead (and now he felt instant panic). He knew who the best actor was along with EVERYBODY ELSE. And he thought he would be carefree seeing him, but he was as far from that *as you could get*.

Jen looked at Jim intently. Then she looked up and saw down the hill to the stage where some man was flipping out. She started to smile and then muttered, “Ben?”

“BEN?” Scott asked in disbelief. “Holy cow, it is him. Let’s hurry down there,” Scott said excitedly as he watched the crowd marveling at Ben’s talent. Jen started to run and she didn’t even know why. She sprinted away from Jim and Scott; and she headed right for the stage. She got around the corner of the stage; and ducked a man’s elbow as he stretched out.

“Excuse me, I didn’t mean to breathe near you,” Jen said ruefully as she moved away from the man that had almost hit her. She wormed her way through the crowd. Then she came face to face with Ben Train (not even 2 feet from her).

“Chum, how’s a little ice cream to fill that belly?” Ben asked warmly as he made his hand appear to be holding an ice cream cone. “That belly still got my car keys in it?” asked Ben sarcastically as he was handed the two strawberry ice cream cones by the YES, IT’S FROZEN ice cream parlor employee. He spun around and Chum was running over to him, and smiling.

“Thank you, thanks, and thank you sooo much more,” Chum said happily as he took the cone and started biting off big chunks of ice cream and molasses. Chum was cuter in person than Jen remembered, but he made her happy just to see him.

“Chum, oh god it’s actually Chum, AHH this is awesome,” Jen said excitedly as she eyed Chum.

Ben put his hand on Chum’s head, carefully, and they walked along through the warm sunshine. Jim looked at Jen up ahead, and he had to smile. He knew how much Ben and Chum meant to her, because they meant *everything to him*.

“Chum?” Ben asked.

“Yes, ice cream giver?” Chum asked jokingly as he grinned mischievously. Then Chum patted Ben on the leg with the side of his hand.

Ben looked down at him, and smiled as he messed up his hair. Then Ben saw Chum’s ice cream falling off his cone; and he tried to stop it, but it was too late. The ice cream hit the ground and Chum froze in his steps. Ben slapped him and said angrily, “Damn it, Chum! I go to all this trouble and you waste it, wasted now! Why should I even let you eat you’re so stupid?”

Chum teared up, and he tried rubbing his cheek in a circle to help with the pain, but it wasn’t working. He knew if he cried he would get slapped again. He looked down and away from Ben and then said softly, “I sorry, it slipped.”

“Slipped my ass, you DROPPED IT!” Ben cried as he lifted his hand again to slap him. “Well I’ll tell ya what, it’s not going to waste,” said Ben as he glared at Chum. “Reach down there and grab a handful. Go ahead, hurry,” Ben said sternly as he glared at Chum, and then pointed to the ice cream. Ben was at his wits end with Chum (due to his clumsy nature).

“Do I really have to?” Chum asked sadly as he fought back tears.

“YES!” Ben answered. “Let’s go, Chum, you’re not wasting my money this time. NOW,” Ben said angrily as he grabbed Chum around the shirt collar-the collar ripping as he did (which was not in the original script)-and pushed Chum’s head towards the ice cream.

Jen watched this and sobbed for poor Chum. It reminded her of her own upbringing in so many ways. She thought of the time her dad made her eat all the cereal she had thrown into the trash, because he thought it was TERRIBLE TO WASTE FOOD. She held her hand over her mouth and muttered, “Please, Chum, pick it up.”

“O.k., I’ll pick it up, Daddy,” Chum said sadly as he bent down and eyed the-now covered in ANTS-ice cream. He looked down at it, and he could feel Ben’s anger just over his shoulder. He reached down and grabbed a big handful of ants and ice cream. And then he looked at Ben and asked nervously, “Now what, Daddy?”

“Eat it!” Ben snapped. “Eat it all, Chum, ants and all. You won’t be the clumsy screw up kid anymore. You’re too much like that idiot mother of yours,” Ben watched Chum intently, as he tried to wipe some of the ants off with his hand, but Ben cleared his throat loudly when he did. “Well there will be no more of this. From here on in you’re going to take care of your things. EAT IT,” demanded Ben as he gave Chum a hard pinch on the shoulder.

Chum rubbed his shoulder, coughed twice, and then he opened his mouth as wide as he could and slowly moved towards the ice cream. He took a large bite, and started to chew the ice cream and ants. He even thought it didn’t taste that bad, kind of crunchy. Then Chum chewed a mouthful of *more ants than ice cream*, and grimaced.

“Oh god, this is the scene where he eats the ants,” Jim came out of his daydreaming mind. “I always hated that scene. Look at Chum, the good kid that gets kicked around. I can relate to that,” Jim confessed as he watched Chum eating the ice cream and ants; with Ben standing over him grinning proudly.

“There ya go, some delicious ice cream,” Ben said as he picked up Chum’s chin to look at him. “Most boys never taste ANY ice cream. You’re a lucky boy, Chum. How is it, crunchy?” Ben asked as he smiled and messed up Chum’s hair. This caused Chum to straighten his own hair out a second later (he liked it parted to the side and not touched).

Chum ate the last of it, and was about to wipe his hand on his pants when Ben tapped him on the cheek. Chum looked around for something to wipe it on. And then he saw a potbelly piglet in a pen nearby. He walked over-with Ben watching-and wiped his hands off on the belly of the piglet.

“Oh god, I didn’t know how painful this scene was for Chum,” Jen said sadly as she tried to not cry. “I feel bad for him,” Jen said tearfully as she rested her head on Jim’s shoulder; but she kept watching Ben and Chum. Chum walked back over to Ben, paused as he looked around, and then showed him his semi-clean hands.

“See I made them all better now,” Chum said as he flew his hands around in front of his face. “They are clean like green and spleen. I love clean hands, they don’t get the germs all over the house, like we talked about,” Chum said as he walked beside Ben through the county fairgrounds.

“Now, Chum, they’re not as clean as you think,” Ben explained. “That piggy could have been hanging around the crumby people. And those crumbs, well they bath in dirt and use mud as deodorant. Now, Chum, maybe there’s a hand washing in your future, what do you think?” Ben joked as he grinned down at a laughing Chum.

Chum nodded his head yes, and continued giggling loudly. It sounded like a hyena-almost unreal vibrations-and it made people look over and wonder what was wrong with him. Jen saw it and started to smile through her tears. Chum acted like he was going to rub his hands on Ben, and Ben gave him a hip bump. Chum said jokingly,” But dirt has feelings too, Daddy, just eat some.”

“No, Chum, I will not be dining on dirt, nor it on me,” Ben said as he parted Chum’s hair back the way he wanted it. “Why don’t we go see about the horse riding portion? I thought you might like to ride a horse,” said Ben as he walked along with Chum; as Chum had his little arm around the back of Ben’s legs.

“WOOO, that was awesome!” Jim yelled excitedly as the whole crowd erupted into applause. Then without notice, the holographic scene changed from the county fair, to the backyard of Beth’s house.

The backyard had a small pool with a green tarp over it and the words I FILLED THIS POOL WITH ME written on it. There were golden statues of Beth along the sides of the pool (among other egotistical

things). Beth was sunning herself near the edge of her hilltop property. There were also 10 deck chairs and a waiter handy. Chum sat there in his deck chair and made very little noise. He was worried Beth would make him run up and down the stairs again. He hated those stairs; and he didn't think he should have to sit all day quiet and still either.

"Mother?" asked Chum hopefully.

Then just before the hologram of Beth-taken from her brainwave analysis after the Oscars-could speak, the real Beth stepped into the scene and took her hologram's place. She said sternly, "What is it you, you blithering idiot?"

Chum grimaced, and he felt bad for even thinking of asking anything. He looked around and then said softly, "I think you look great, Mother. And I was just wondering if I could go inside, and drink some more broccoli drink? I really *love* the flavor."

"That's the real Beth, I can't believe it," Scott said in disbelief as he leaned in close to Jim; and they watched Beth spit a wad of snot over the cliff. Jim nodded yes, and he started to smile with glee because he knew what was coming next.

"Won't you shut up already, won't you?!" Beth cried as she squirted suntan lotion at Chum. "You don't want to be a chubby nobody, like your BUM FATHER, do you?" asked Beth sharply as she flipped her body over; and started exercising her chin muscles.

"But Daddy works, he's a scientist, Mother," Chum replied as he ducked the suntan lotion she was shooting at his face. "I thought Scientists made big monies?"

"Chum, that man is a bad influence on you," Beth said condescendingly as she tossed a half eaten banana at Chum, hitting his leg. "I don't know why you don't stay here for good, with your dear old mum? Wouldn't you like that?" Beth asked coyly as she wrapped her arms around her legs and smiled like a beauty queen at Chum.



“I thought I had to call you Mother?”

Beth bristled at this and flicked him off. Then she got up and walked right over to him; and kicked him in the side and said angrily, “Shut up! You won’t talk sass with me you brat. I’ve done things in my life, and quite frankly a scientist is just a job for people with NO talent. Not like me and you, Chum, we’re above them all.”

“Yes, yes I know we have the talent,” Chum answered as he looked down at his hands. “I just don’t want to miss Daddy all time. If I did it would be tears, and more tears. Maybe you could get back together?” Chum asked softly as he continued looking down at his hands.

Beth bristled again and kicked Chum hard in the arm. This caused him to fall out of his chair. Then she stood there breathing heavy and she said angrily, “Chum, that man is beyond scum! He cheated on your mother, treated me like NOBODY! Now fucking stop SAYING THAT!” shouted Beth as she kicked Chum again but in the ass this time.

Chum scampered behind the other chairs; and tried to keep from getting kicked again.

“Man, this kid has the worst parents ever,” Scott muttered as he watched Chum moving the brown deck chair reading BETH’S ASS FITS HERE, to keep Beth from punching him.

Jim heard this, and he realized Scott didn’t know it was based on a real couple and their son. Jim looked at Jen-wanting to be the bearer of this tidbit-and she shook her head no. That told Jim not to mention it to Scott.

“I don’t know, I had the same shit,” Jim said as he rubbed his left arm. “Didn’t have a rich mother, but I got beaten up for no reason more than any damn kid should. This is true to life. Kids who get abused develop into people who can take more pain than most. That invariably leads to them, later in life not wanting lots of people around them. Ya know, it’s not where you’re born, but who pulled you into this

world from the outside, that counts,” Jim said sadly as he thought about his sister beating him senseless (a few times too many for his liking).

Jen looked at Jim, and she had heard enough and asked,” Jim?”

“Yeah what?” asked Jim as he looked at Ben.

“This,” Jen replied then she planted a kiss on Jim; and he grabbed hold of her with all he had. They kissed for several seconds, and then Jen said happily,” that’s just a warm-up.”

Jim flashed a mischievous grin and swayed his head a from side to side a few times. And then Jim said sarcastically,” Well, I must say I’m warm already, like gooey smores warm too. And if you want to spend some time with me, the offer’s on the table, Gorgeous.”

“I love smores, handsome Jim, and I accept,” Jen said brightly as her eyes looked warmer than they ever had. “But we need to do what we came here to do. It matters, Jim, it matters that I act with Ben. I’m sorry, but I can’t leave yet, he needs my help,” Jen said as she watched Chum throw a red rubber lifejacket at Beth. Then Chum sprinted past her into the house yelling like an Indian warrior. Jen laughed at this, and everyone cheered.

Beth ran into the house and asked angrily,” Where the hell is he, MARIA? I know you’re thick as thieves.”

“I don’t know, it happen so fast,” Maria said hollowly as she looked around nervously; and she played with her bottle of Maine maple syrup.

“You bitch!” Beth snorted her eyes red with anger. “How dare you lie right to my face,” Beth said indignantly. “Well, you might get fired for this one, Maria, fired but good. I don’t have to take it, there are hundreds of Maria’s all over Hollywood,” Beth paused to wipe the sweat from her face and continued, “Maybe I’ll pull out the rolodex and find me someone who isn’t IMCOMPETENT?! Yes, that’s what I’ll

do. Now, where is he?” Beth asked coyly as she looked around the posh living room for Chum. She could feel the sweet slap of his cheek to her hand already. She saw a shoe sticking out from under one of the red velvet chairs. She ran over and dove on the shoe, but it was a trick by Chum.

“I don’t know where he is, Beth, no clue,” Maria said hollowly as she saw Chum sticking his head out of the cereal cabinet behind her. She pushed the door back shut with her foot, and grinned for a moment when Beth looked over.

“Well FIND HIM!” screamed Beth as she tossed a black cushion from her yoga mat at Maria (but it missed hitting her). “I’m not paying you minimum wage for nothing. God, I’ve got a READING TODAY, Maria. Now I may end up losing the lead, and go broke on Sunset. Oh, why doesn’t anyone love me?” Beth asked coyly as she looked around for Chum (she knew Maria was weak and could easily give in if she pressed her). She could see a sock hanging out of a closet up the hall, making her eyes light up. She glared at Maria; and Maria was intentionally trying to look nervous.

“Keep looking, Bitch, he ain’t in there,” Jim said snidely as he laughed to himself. “Why don’t you try the back room, or the fucking stable you horse head?” Jim asked sarcastically as Jen had her arm around his back and his arms were folded in front.

The crowd laughed at this; and Scott saw several people filming the performance in holographic definition. He wondered why he hadn’t thought of a way to tape his own performance. He looked around and saw many people filming: with phones, implants, and even cheap sunglasses. And then he smiled and asked, “Is it me, or are all these people filming this?”

“Scott...yes they are,” Jim said as he looked around at all the novice directors. “I think if we’re smart, we’ll do the same. Here, take my phone and catch some magic,” Jim said warmly as he pulled out his phone and handed his-red and black stripped hand shaped with the word COMMANDO burned onto the wood-phone to Scott.

Scott looked at the phone, yawned, and then aimed it at Chum; just as he snuck out of the cereal cabinet and ran outside. Everyone cheered at this, as Beth neared the sock hanging out of the closet.

“Way to go, Chum!” Jen cheered. “Run like your head hurts,” Jen said happily as she smiled and watched Chum run outside; and then he headed for the door to the street. He ran over and grabbed his bike; and then made his way out of the visible scene.

Beth walked up to the sock and said angrily, “You’re so dead, Chumly, DEAD. Come here,” Beth said coldly as she pulled open the closet; and she kicked the mop and bucket thinking it was Chum. The dirty water got on her *new makeup job*; and she panicked and ran screaming to her makeup chair. Then the scene dissolved; and they saw the beginnings of the premier scene for the fictional movie Filthy Famous. It was a film the character Beth was playing in Shadow Thief that she was supposed to be starring in.

There were anti-gravity limousines flying into the premier from every direction (many of the rooftops were covered in lavish parties). The stars would each land and literally ooze out the car doors onto the red carpet. The row of photographers constantly flashed their camera implants (even if no one was there). They couldn’t run the risk of missing the big shot; and missing out on a huge payday.

Jen folded her arms, burped into her sleeve, and started doing a kicking motion with her right foot (a few inches into the scene). She really wanted in this scene, but she decided to just wait for a minute to catch her bearings.

“You’re going in aren’t ya, Jen?” Jim asked but he already knew the answer.

“Yes I am,” Jen declared proudly as she walked over to the hologram of starlet Beckany Hort- originally played by a cross dresser in the film version-and assumed her clothing and role. The crowd watched this eagerly and clapped, as many of them were too nervous to walk into any scene with Beth.

Beth came out of her limousine with Chum being dragged by the arm behind her.

“Oh god this is gonna be good,” Jim said as he shook out his hands and jumped up and down a few times. “Of the whole movie, this scene is one of my top three. Watch, I bet Jen nails it. Let’s go, Jen!” Jim yelled as he clapped his hands hard together, and let out a couple loud yells.

“I think you’re right, look at her,” Jack added as he watched Jen intently. He had been hanging out behind them patiently waiting for Jen to go for it all (he knew she had magic).

“Aren’t I marvelous?” Jen asked as her lips kissed the air in front of her. “You can say yes,” Jen said playfully in a husky voice as she worked the red carpet. The photographers took picture after picture of her (in her nearly *sheer red lace dress*). She smiled and looked at each person with no fear to speak of (she was ready).

“Oh that damn BITCH, Beckany is here,” Beth snapped as she continued posing for the cameras. “Chum, I want you to go punch that woman in the gut. Now, you owe me this one, Chum, don’t ya?” Beth pushed hard on Chum’s back. Chum looked around for someone to help him, but there was no one.

“Maybe she’s the wrong person?” Chum looked around nervously for a place to hide. “Did you think of that?” asked Chum hopefully as he grimaced.

“Stop being so obtuse, Chumly,” Beth growled as she nudged him with the toe of her high heels. “Just go and really sock her one. I’m not asking, Chum, HURRY!” Beth said angrily as she tried to keep composed, but she wanted to slap Chum good and hard on the mouth.

Chum looked at Jen, and he knew he was doing wrong, but he headed her way anyway. He walked out behind a few big stars; and then under the lifted leg of a beautiful brunette that had crashed the party—a Sophia Lauren copycat. He looked up and saw Jen smiling and looking amazing. And he felt truly terrible about having to hit her. Chum looked back and saw Beth glaring at him. His heart sank and he started to sweat all over

“Nice lady?”

“OH, hi there, Little One, what do you need?” Jen asked warmly as she bent down and fixed Chum’s crooked shirt collar.

“Well, see my old mum wants me to gut punch you,” Chum said nervously as his eyes seemed to bulge out with every word. “I don’t want to do it, but have to. Can I punch your tummy?” Chum asked sadly as he grimaced and tried not to cry.

Jen looked and saw Beth watching them. That damn Beth, she thought. And she smiled as she bent down and said warmly, “Yes, you go right ahead.”

“I’m sorry,” Chum said apologetically as he punched Jen in the gut. Jen acted as if it really hurt (it felt like someone nudging you at the super market). And Beth laughed, waved to Jen, and smiled like she’d won another Oscar.

“Owe, you really popped me one,” Jen said as she rubbed her stomach. “Well, tell Beth, she can’t act the scene. She’ll know what that means, bye little boy,” Jen said as she patted Chum on the back. And Chum ran through the crowd of stars-and mostly wannabes-smiling as he did. Jen watched this and then turned and smiled for the photographers (she owned this moment).

“Hey, mother, I did it, I punched her!” Chum said excitedly as he went to hug Beth’s leg, but she used her hand to stop him. “Can I have a morsel of food now?” asked Chum hopefully, as he hadn’t eaten all day.

“Chum, come now, food is for winners,” Beth said as she waved to several of the bigger name directors. “You lost your spelling bee yesterday, remember? I can’t reward incompetence. You’re bum father might do that, but he doesn’t see the flashing lights like we do, Chum. We’re different, we’re blessed,” Beth said dismissively as she smiled for the cameras; and she hugged Chum for the first time in months. She knew little children really played big in the rags (that’s why she brought him in the first place).

“Hey, Beth, you suck!” Jim said loudly, standing only inches from her and smiling. Beth looked down slowly. And then she promptly moved away from Jim and more towards Jen.

“Hello there, Ice Queen,” Ben said snidely as he held back a smile. Ben knew just the sight of him, at HER MOVIE PREMIER, would incense Beth beyond belief.

She looked over in horror and yelled, “GET OUT OF HERE, you loser! No handouts here, Sunny Jim.”

“I’m prosperous, Beth, you know that,” Ben replied, and he knew by not using Beth’s character name at all, it would *drive her crazy*. Jen knew this as well, and she made her way over to Ben and Beth.

“Daddy, I been punching people, but good,” said Chum proudly as he offered his flexed right arm to Ben. “You should have seen me, wallop. I won’t wallop you, you’re safe,” Chum assured as he hugged Ben’s leg, and then looked up at him.

Ben grinned and fixed Chum’s hair to the right, *instead of the left*. He did this to bother Beth (who only liked it to the left). Then he asked warmly, “Good job, Chum, are you ready to leave now?”

“What?!” asked Beth indignantly as she looked at Ben aghast. “He’s staying jerk-off, this is my moment! Now go suck up some lunch in the park,” Beth said coldly as she pushed Ben back from Chum with both hands. Chum looked at both parents, and then he made his way back towards the adoring fans.

“Really, Beth?” asked Ben.

“HI there, Dr. Train, how are you today?” Jen asked deliberately, as she tried to steady Ben against Beth by using his real last name.

Ben smirked and looked at Beth, and then Jen. He nodded to Jen and said warmly, “I feel much better now. Do you know a good place we can lock up this loon here, this Beth?” Ben asked snidely his hands

acting like they were going to touch Beth's dress. "She's on her last legs," Ben said as he chuckled at Jen, and then looked defiantly at Beth.

"An aging actor IS STILL AN ACTOR, you idiot!" Beth barked her hand raised ready to slap Ben. "Like I've got time for sidewalk kissers like you," Beth said sharply, never showing a bad angle to the cameras. "Chumly, Chum, CHUM! Where has he gotten too?" Beth asked, she was startled as she looked around; and she continued to smile for the photographers. Ben looked and saw Chum hiding behind a statue of an alien (a red skinned dragon headed alien at that). Chum smiled, and waved to him, and Ben didn't react.

"Did you lose my son, Beth, is that it?" accused Ben hollowly.

"Look, don't be dramatic, it doesn't suit you," Beth replied dismissively as she pulled out a diamond broach; and then clipped it over the neck portion of her dress (like nothing was more important). "He'll turn up, he's Chum. Look, I have a big favor to ask. Could you find him, and watch him for me?" Beth asked in a voice softer than any she had ever used. "I swear I'll let you have him the whole week if you do," Beth said hollowly as she made herself seem humble, but she really didn't want to be a mother during HER BIG PREMIER. She prayed Ben would just take him for the night, and she could dance away her worries.

"I don't know, seems like a hassle."

"Come now, Ben, please, I'll owe you one?"

"I don't know I might never find him now that you've lost him."

"Do you have to torture me?" Beth asked in her softest of voices. "Just be his father for once, find him. Chum needs you, and I need you to understand. Will you help?"



“Yeah, yeah I will, but don’t show up in the papers drunk and HIGH tomorrow, Beth” Ben said sternly as he glared at Beth; and she recoiled from him. “Chum’s sick of being teased at school ya know.”

“How dare you?” Beth cried as she was pretending to be taken aback. “I’ve been sober 6 years now, you know this!”

“Beth, you’re high right now,” Ben answered as he pulled out a small bottle of Brandy (the mere sight of which had Beth dying for a drink). “Your pupils are dilated and your heart rate is slowed. Go lie to someone else for a change, I’m being a *father tonight*,” Ben said as he turned and walked over to where Chum was hiding.

Beth stood there only momentarily looking at Ben, then she was back *to being the star*. She posed and danced her way into the movie theater.

“Hey, Daddy, can we ditch mum, and go ice creaming?” Chum asked as he grabbed Ben’s hand; and Ben took one last look for Beth, and she was gone.

“Yeah, of course, Chum, all you can eat,” Ben helped Chum and Jen-her eyes drinking in the last gasps of the red carpet-into his waiting convertible Jaguar. Off they drove, and Chum looked back to see all the paparazzi still swarming around the movie premier (he made a square with his hands like he was shooting a movie).

“Jen’s available, I’m telling ya she’s good,” Jim insisted as he grinned. “The question is now, what is she going to do in this last scene?” Jim asked as he looked around at the crowd, and saw many people staring at Jen. Jim could tell Jen was a star if anyone ever had been.

“What do you mean, Jim?” Scott asked his mind still thinking about the last scene.

“Scott, there’s only one scene left, right,” Jim continued after pausing to look at an Anne Hathaway virtual clone. “It’s the faceoff between Ben and Beth,” Jim suggested, as he and Scott moved close as a

cat to a bird, nearer to the stage. “There aren’t any other actors in the scene. “But Jen’s still out there, wanting to act it,” Jim said as he rubbed his forehead. “She has to know what’s going on, but why is she staying?” asked Jim as he looked at Jen perplexed. What is Jen planning he wondered.

Jen saw the hologram for Beth starting to appear between her and Beth, *and she ran for it*. This caught Beth off guard, and she froze. Jen ran to the spot and assumed the clothes of Beth; and literally stole the role from Beth before she knew what was happening.

“Damn you, you insolent CHILD!” cried Beth. “That’s my *role*; I made it REAL, BITCH! Get out of my shot!” Beth screamed angrily as she stomped over to Jen. Beth was infuriated, and wanted some sweet as honey retribution, and fast.

“No, go to hell, Bitch!” Jen snapped as she looked at Beth with “I hope you die eyes”. “You’ll just have to repeat the scene after Ben and *I am finished*,” exclaimed Jen coldly. “You try me, and I’ll crack that head like an egg. Remember, I got nothing to lose,” Jen pointed out her fist clenched and ready; and then she flexed her arm and put her fist up in Beth’s face.

“Well, you’ll blow it, talentless rubes always do,” said Beth dismissively as she pulled out a cigarette holder. “Fine, you want Hollywood, say hello to *Hollywood boulevard*. That’s where the worthless find their only talents. We’ll watch you with baited laughter,” Beth said as she started to walk away, and then took one last look at Jen. Beth for some reason felt a twinge of fear when she locked eyes with Jen. It made her forget her accomplishments; and she hated her for it.

Ben walked in with Chum, just as the set turned into a dusty driveway outside a hillside convenience store. The sun was setting, and luxury cars would speed by in the background every so often.

“Hi, Mum, I mean, Mother, I missed you,” Chum said as he stood there beside Ben (some 20 feet away from Jen playing the Beth role).

“HI, Chumly, why aren’t you coming over to your dearest mother?” Jen asked as she stood there smoking a long cigarette-the smoke was real except for the nicotine-and shifting her weight from foot to foot. Jen was showing Ben he didn’t have to commit to the same interpretation of the scene (every time he did it).

Ben peered at Jen, unsure what was happening, and then looked down suddenly. He was seeing the scene differently. My oh my, what is this, he thought. Then he said sharply, “I have an idea, Beth, one you’ll like.”

“Huh, well I can’t pry it out of your head,” Jen said, her hand bouncing off her hip with a cigarette in tow. “What is it?”

“I’m going to leave the final decision of who gets Chum here, to Chum.”

“What are you saying, Ben?” Jen asked as she blew some smoke out of the side of her mouth. Jen stood there, still now, and looking away from Ben.

“I’m going to let Chum, stand between us both,” Ben explained as he mopped the sweat off his forehead with his shirt sleeve. “The same distance from each of us, and he’s going to pick the parent he wants to go with *for good*. If you agree, we’ll be out of each other’s hair forever. If you disagree, I’m going to punch you hard in the mouth you BITCH,” Ben spoke with a newfound confidence in his voice (Beth noticed this from off-set). “Because, Beth, I’ve had it with you and your elitist ways. You’re ruining Chum and everyone knows it. Now, once and for all Chum’s fate will be decided. Chum?” asked Ben sadly as he bent down to look Chum in the eye.

“Yes, Daddy?” asked Chum as he put his hands on Ben’s stomach.

“This is it, it’s yours to decide my boy,” Ben said as he tucked in Chum’s shirt; only to have Chum giggle and untuck it himself. “I love you either way, and I always will,” Ben said with dignity.

“I love you too, Daddy, much, much, and more much,” Chum said honestly with a hint of a smile. “But what do I do now, I ask ah?” asked Chum timidly as he looked at Ben and then Jen.

Jen glared at Ben, and smiled lovingly at Chum. Ben saw this, and he suddenly had a better hold on what Beth had been doing to him *all these years*. He stepped back from Chum; and put his hand over his mouth.

“Take 7 big steps towards me, Chum, and then we’ll start,” Jen said sternly as she waved goodbye to Ben (that had been Beth’s original take on the scene from the theatrical release of the movie, but it was later changed in the DVD). “Fine, Ben, it’s fine with me,” said Jen warmly as she threw her cigarette over a small bush and into a drainage pipe.

“This is rubbish, she’s a hack,” Beth could barely stand still, her legs moving from one uncomfortable position to another. “Terrible delivery, so crude and juvenile,” snapped Beth with the same infuriating nose up and shoulders back (she loved putting people in their place). “I’ve never played this scene that low rent and cheap beer, in my *glorious* life. I don’t think she’s...she’s really,” Beth said blankly as she snuggled with Gloria just out of the scene. Beth was getting worried; she could see the way Jen was playing the part and *it meant trouble for her*. She hoped to rattle Ben with a new delivery, but she worried it would fall flat.

“She’s steals her lunch and she knows it, Beth,” said Gloria. “Let’s just wait and then you’ll destroy her,” Gloria kissed Beth on the lips and around the face, but Beth kept her eyes squarely on Ben.

“Of course, there’s no substance here,” Beth dismissed coyly, as she was worried it could all fall apart in front of this now *ever larger crowd*.

“Am I far enough here?” asked Chum in a lilting tone.

“Yes, Chum, you’re fine,” nothing rattled in Ben’s voice now. “Go ahead and you start, Beth, bitches first,” Ben said snidely as he showed no emotion, just stood there confidently.

Jen looked at Ben, and then Chum, and smiled and said, "Boy, Chum, you're gonna miss your favorite show Mr. Bumly; I'd hate to see you miss that, let's go, Chum, say goodbye already," Jen said nonchalantly as he turned and offered Chum her hand. Jen was going off script, she figured out a good way through for Ben, and she knew it would work (*it had to*).

Ben looked at her and started to smile and said, "Chum, you and I both know she's not going to let you watch Mr. Bumly. She's gonna make you do sit-ups. And you're gonna have to watch her put on her makeup," Ben replied with an answering nod. "Please, Chum, why don't we leave that bitch behind? She hates you, Chum, she hates us both. Chum, are you hungry yet? I've got those ice cream bars you like in the fridge," Ben said softly, as it took every bit of his wherewithal to not yell at Jen. He kept his focus on Chum, and did not waver.

"But you hit Chum!" Chum said tearfully as he rubbed his arm (there was a bruise there the size of a golf ball). "You beat me up, all time. I want to NOT be hit," Chum said skeptically as his lower lip quivered; he cried like rain down a pane of glass during a thunder storm, and he faced neither one of them now.

Jen saw this and said calmly, "That's right, Chum, your bum father beats you up, I wouldn't do that. Let's go home already, Chum, RIGHT, NOW!"

Chum looked at Jen and shook his head from side to side, no. Chum shouted tearfully, "YOU HIT CHUM TOO! Why hit Chum?" he demanded impetuously as he hit his own leg. "I don't hurt anybody, I am just a kid. Leave poor Chum alone, one time for true," Chum continued. "My back hurts from your slaps, and my face hurts from your hits! I can't...I can't take it anymore," he cried. "Please don't hit me anymore, please don't. I'll be good, I swear...I swear I will," Chum said tearfully. "One time, one day without a hit, just one," begged Chum tearfully as he broke down, and his hands were shaking. He looked at Jen, and then right at Ben, and he started to fidget with his hands.

“I’ll never hit you again as long as I live, Chum, I swear...I swear it,” insisted Ben. “I’m sorry, I should not have done that, I’m sorry, Chum. Don’t we have good times, Chum?” asked Ben tearfully as he crouched down and got on eye level with Chum. Beth saw this and she wanted to punch Chum right in the head. Beth knew that kid was giving the scene away.

“Yes, we have had good ice cream eats. Good bike rides, and good walk on sand. I...don’t...know.”

Jen stepped to the side and caught Chum’s attention, and said warmly,” Chum, you can’t believe him, he’s an alcoholic. You know he’s just gonna drink, drink, and die, right, Chum?” Jen asked sheepishly. “Remember how funny it was that day he beat you up? You know it’s true. Chum, now god DAMN IT!” shouted Jen. “I’m not waiting for you any longer. GET over here NOW! We’re going home,” Jen demanded sharply as she glared at Ben, and it all crystallized for Ben right then and there (the way through).

In the Gifted Love hospital ward-where Ben Train lay in his self induced coma-he was watching this happen via hologram in his mind and controlling it at the same time-and his hands started to shake. He had blue goggles on that emitted red light as he acted and lived the entirety of each scene. His legs were up on a pair of pillows, with yellow and red tubes in his chest and hands. He saw there was an answer, but he didn’t know just yet how to get there. His longtime wife Julie Train was asleep in the chair next to his bed, as Ben’s body shook violently. He looked old and grizzled, with a long beard and thin body, but *the mind was sharp*. On the walls were his award night pictures: showing the Golden Globes, The Screen Actors Guild best actor awards-of which he had won 3 each-and his loss at the Oscars with the words I’D LIKE TO THANK ANYONE BUT THE ACADEMY scrawled on it in red ink.

Meanwhile Beth was eyeing Jen, and looking for the motivation to outwit this new Ben. She watched her every move, and she prayed Chum would go to Jen.

“NO, Mum, I can’t eat vegemabls all time,” Chum explained indignantly with a fierce look in his eyes. “I want, GOOD, FOOD. I’m sorry, but I have to go away from you for now, bye, Mum,” Chum said warmly as he waved to Jen.

“CHUM!!” Jen yelled sharply, and she made her body diminished by lowering her head and shoulders (old studio trick she’d heard about). “Get over here or there’s no Mr. Bumly! Chum, Chum?” she paused. “Is there any justice for the gifted? Aren’t I ready to love you, Chum? Won’t you tell me your stories, please, Chum?” pleaded Jen sadly, as she watched Chum walk over to Ben and take his hand.

Ben didn’t look back, and he and Chum walked over to his car and got in quickly. By then Beth had seen quite enough and she shouted, “BULL-SHIT! That would never happen if it were *my* scene, bitch! Let’s ROLL IT AGAIN! Get back her, Ben, you’ve won nothing!” Beth yelled angrily as she took a few steps out to where Chum was standing. She bent down like she was adjusting her shoes, and put a silver coin down nearer to where she’d be (it was a silver dollar she got for her first acting role from her mother Jean).

“You’re really going down, Beth, it’s embarrassing,” Jen said happily as she walked over to Jim, Jack, and Scott. Beth cringed at this; and she started to stare down Jen.

“Good fucking scene, Jen, you nailed it,” Scott exclaimed as he patted Jen on the back.

“Thank you, I’m just the best there is, that’s all,” she answered. “What’d you think, *Jim Nuts*?”

“I think you did amazing,” Jim assured. “And I think my name is Jim, not JIM-nuts. Maybe you could remember that, for good and longer. Jack, what do you think the chances are Ben gets Chum again, once and for all I mean?” Jim inquired smoothly as he rubbed his chin.

“I’d bet on him, all I’ll ever have and win,” Jack answered.

“I got a good feeling, this could finally be the day he breaks her in two,” Jen interrupted in a gratified manner. “God let Ben have the courage, please let him have it,” Jen begged nervously as she put her hands together like she was praying (they were above her head and her eyes were closed). She begged for god to help Ben, and a few seconds later she opened her eyes and grimaced.

“Yeah, he deserves it,” informed Jack. “This could be the greatest day for the art of acting, since ever there was. Man, look at the crowd that’s forming. Everyone here is talking about the same thing we are. Yeah, Jim, this is the one, and that’s all he needs,” Jack replied confidently as he watched Ben and Chum slowly walk back to their places. Ben had a certain air about him and everyone could see it.

“Well then, Beth, you’ve got your comeuppance coming,” Ben said snidely with fake enthusiasm “How’s the crowd taste today?” Ben asked coolly.

“You should know, Ben, it’s all you’ve ever eaten, FOR YEARS,” snapped Beth angrily. “Ha, I’ll crush you and everyone will know your talent was little and *fading, all the while*. Ben, ha hah, let’s put on a show! Chum, take your place, it’s breathing greatness time,” Beth insisted snidely as she strode back to her mark, smiled to the crowd, and slowly turned to face Chum.

Then the set morphed back into the one in the hills. Ben took his place, and put his hand on his stomach to calm his nerves. For some reason he wasn’t as crippled by fear as he had been *low those many years*. He knew her game now, but he still didn’t know if she’d go off script.

Chum walked over to Beth and said politely, “Hi, Mum, I mean Mother, I missed you.”

“Don’t we miss us all, Chumly,” Beth replied with an unyielding strength in her voice. “Well I guess we should go home, Chum, Mr. Bumly’s on,” Beth ordered, she went off script to even the playing field. Ben saw this, and he had to squelch his own anger. He knew she could trick him if he wasn’t committed *to everything*.

“Beth, I’ve got an idea,” he said carelessly.



“Pray tell?”

“I can’t go on with this arrangement, and I know you hate it too,” insisted Ben. “I’ve decided that I’ll let Chum, once and for all, decide who he wants to be with. Chum, you go ahead and stand in the middle of us,” Ben paused. “Then we’ll each ask you to come with us. And you go where your heart is, Son.”

“O.k. Daddy, I’ll do my bestest,” said Chum innocently as he turned and skipped over to the middle area between them both. He looked at Beth and saw her gently gesturing with her hand for Chum to come to her. Then Chum turned and saw Ben sitting on the ground nodding contently.

“Chum, that father of yours is a big time *nobody!*” Beth snorted as she laughed to herself. “He drinks all the time, and he beats you up like a toy doll. He’s a waste, Chum, he’ll ruin your life,” said Beth as she rubbed her left wrist. “And you gotta ask the question...do you want the big stage, or the audience? Because that’s all people are anymore, and you’re better than that,” Beth said urgently, as she eyed Chum with a Leopard’s eyes; and she gently moved her hand like she had something in it.

“I don’t like your smelly clothes, and your food tastes like clothes,” Chum said tearfully as he swung his hand around like a windmill punch. “I want to watch TV, more than 20 minutes a day! I deserve my own room, not sleeping on the chair. I HATE THAT CHAIR, I HATE IT!” Chum started punching his own leg, and looking blankly at Beth, with homemade rain in his eyes.

“Chum, there’s a warm bed and some macaroni at my place,” Ben insisted hopefully. “And, Chum, there always will be. You can be anyone you want, it’s your life. And, Chum...oh god, I’m going to quit drinking and hitting you,” Ben felt the river of tears inching down his face (he was killing it again and he knew it). “I know I screwed up, I know it...I’m not perfect. I can’t believe what I did to you, I won’t do it again. You can watch TV all day long, Chum, its fine. Won’t you come home?” Ben asked tearfully as he put his hands on his knees-like he was ready to hug Chum-and slid his foot out of the way to make it easier for Chum to hug him.

“*Drivel*, worthless and weak,” objected Beth immediately. “How can you listen to this boob, Chum? He’s 2 weeks from homeless at any given time. He’ll have you living in a box, with smelly people all around you,” Beth spoke with a condescending tone she saved for this very moment. “You don’t want to be a bum do you? Come now, Chum, there might be a new video game thing, back at home, huh,” Beth said without remorse, as she knew that in the scene she could say anything true or not, and he had to act it correctly (everything was true in a scene, and she knew that from her acting lessons with Stella).

“Mum, you slapped my head, my back, and my neck,” Chum hit the back of his head and neck 5 times fast. “I can’t...I can’t take the pain anymore,” cried Chum violently. “It makes me sad, and lonely. I don’t want to live that way, at, all.”

“Chum, you know I can turn it around, please just give me one more chance,” Ben begged his eyes never leaving Chum (even though Beth was trying to break his concentration with spastic movements). “You know she’ll tell you anything you wanna hear, you know it. There’s one chance here, Chum, one chance for us to be happy. I can’t be happy without you. And I can’t ever hurt you again. I swear to god, please forgive me, Chum, please,” pleaded Ben tearfully as he reached out for Chum and sobbed.

Chum looked at Ben, and then heard Beth make a farting sound (by blowing on her armpit). Chum looked over at her and she said snidely, “That’s bad ratings cable if ever I heard it. You suck, you can’t fool us, Ben, we know. Come now, Chum, when you leave him, you leave second class behind, FOREVER,” Beth had a certain unflappable smirk that never left. “Oh, is that a silver coin on the ground there, Chum? Why don’t you pick it up and bring that over to mum, o.k.?” Beth asked hollowly as she pointed with her finger; and she got as humble as she ever had in her facial expressions.

“Is it silver, wow I’m rich!” Chum exclaimed as he bent down to pick it up. “I ah, need to thinka for a second. Do I go over, or do I NOT, go over? My head is tired and hurts,” mumbled Chum as he started to walk towards Beth rubbing his forehead.

“CHUM!” Ben said urgently, as he used the same spastic hand movement Beth had to catch Chum’s attention. “I put that coin there for you as a gift. Go ahead and bring that over to me and I’ll show you it’s secret. You wanna see that don’t you?” asked Ben coyly, and he looked wide eyed at Chum in one last ditch effort.

Beth laughed and bent down at the waste.

“O.k., Mum, I want to go with...”

“WAIT!” Beth interrupted violently. “Just hold on, Chum, I’ll buy you a new mini racing car, hmm. And I’ll buy you a new red helmet, just the one you wanted. Now can we go home and play the video, ahh game thing?”

“Chum, just look at me one last time,” Ben demanded shortly as he started to stand up onto his knees; and he put his arms out like wings and breathed in the dying sun.

“What?” Chum asked as he grinned ever so slightly. “Do you have a racing car too?”

“Yes, yes I do,” Ben insisted hollowly. “I have money saved up for your college fund too. I’ve decided to let you blow it all on food and toys. Chum, I just can’t watch you sad for one more second. How ‘bout it, Chum, your dinner’s ready?” asked Ben warmly, nodding determinedly as he eyed Chum and cried.

Beth froze at this, and her thoughts started to race. She had nothing for the first time *in years*.

“O ma K, that means o.k.” Chum answered happily as he smiled at Ben. “Mum, I won’t be eating your spinach sandwiches ever again, bye to ya,” said Chum innocently as he ran over to Ben and hugged him as tight as soda pop to the can.

“Chumly, don’t go...down that...wait!” Beth was hyperventilating (she hadn’t lost anything in decades). “Just...oh god, I can’t believe I choked it like an extra, please, Chum,” begged Beth sadly.

“How could THIS HAPPEN!” Beth screamed angrily as she flailed her arms. She looked to Gloria for support, and she had left to avoid messing up Beth’s performance (and she saw the writing on the wall).

“I love you daddy,” Chum said as he smiled like a sunrise and waved his little finger at Ben.

“I always loved you, Chum, always,” Ben spoke with a truck load of emotions bombarding him (*he beat the old hag, finally*). “Holy cow, I’m ALIVE AGAIN!” Ben said boisterously as he hugged and kissed Chum-and without a worry-carried him over to his car. They got in, and drove off with the credits filling the scene; and Beth in the dark half, off to the side, alone.

Jen was crying along with everyone else-she had never felt so good about something in her entire life-and she pointed up to the sky, and smiled through her tears. Jen said triumphantly,” Now he’s free, Jim, he MADE IT! Ahhhhh, I’m so happy!”

“Holy cow, Ben just laid something down so powerful I can’t believe it,” exclaimed Jim. “I wonder what in the hell is going to happen to him next, ya know? Will he actually come out of that coma?” Jim paused and pinched his own arm and then continued. ”Because, if he did, the world would go NUTS,” said Jim in disbelief. “I mean, he’s the best, and everyone knows it. And if they didn’t know it, they’re going to if he wakes up,” said Jim without reservation or a hint of doubt in his voice, as he clapped his hands hard above his head and smiled.

Meanwhile in Ben Train’s room-at Gifted Love hospital-his body was bouncing up and down on the bed higher and higher still. It woke up Julie up and she shouted violently,” DOCTOR! WE NEED A DOCTOR, HELP!!”

Ben’s eyes started to creek open like an old rusty door hinge; and he sucked in several chest filling large breaths.

Then inexplicably, the breathing apparatus broke free of his body and he shouted with a dry tired voice,” I MAAAADDEE ITTTTT!! I WON! Eat it bitch! Woo, am I happy!” Ben said excitedly as he

ripped out all of his tubes, and the IV's from his arms and stomach. He had blood dripping out of his stomach, but then thankfully in came a team of 5 doctors, ready to assist (his money bought him around the clock care).

“Doctor Holmes, he woke up and I don't know if he's sick or dying,” Julie cried.

“Julie, I'm alive and I KICK ASS!” exclaimed Ben happily as he slapped the bed with his hands. “Come on, line 'em up for old Ben. I'm gonna crack some skulls. Ooooh, that was one dream I don't care to share. Doc, patch me up, I got miracles to make,” Ben demanded as he sat there smiling from ear to ear.

The doctors patched Ben up; and he shaved off his long beard, and he went instead for the mustache only look this time (he hadn't been able to grow a real one when he entered the coma). He went through 4 months of intense physical therapy, restoring his strength. His hair was as thick as concrete, and had to be cut just a certain way (he knew they cast you all on appearance, and the rest on talent). He had some gray streaks, but it was dignified and dashing. He put on a black suit, red shades, and an orange tie with a gold clip and the word CHUM engraved on it. Then he slid into some Gucci shoes, and did a quick spin.

“Julie, you should have married someone else,” insisted Ben. “How could you wait all this time?” Ben asked warmly, as he was confounded by her dedication to him. He walked out the front doors of the hospital with his arm around Julie. They walked a bit further, and a limousine was waiting there for them, as well as the entire hospital staff, lining the walkway to his car. They cheered and clapped for him as loud as anyone ever had (he had forgotten that sound, but not the feeling of applause).

“Are you kidding, I married the best, there's no one else after that,” Julie replied as she kissed his ear. “Man, Ben, you're gonna make me cry. I love you so much, I missed you.” She sighed, nodded, and then kissed his fingers.

“I felt you, sometimes in that room,” admitted Ben. “I know it’s weird, but that’s what kept me going, Julie. It was you and you alone,” Ben proclaimed. “I’ll love you ‘til the day I drop, or I start doing buddy pictures with pooches. When that day comes, put a cork in me, I will have lost it. Well then, you first, My Dear,” said Ben honestly. He turned to the staff and spoke. ”I want to thank you all for everything, really. You’re all invited to my next movie premier. Just show the heck up, and they’ll let you the heck in, bye everyone. God I love the sunshine,” professed Ben honestly as he felt the sun on his face, then closed his eyes, and smiled at the glorious sun. The doctors and staff kept cheering, and he was handed his trademark red and black fedora with the inscription JUST IN TIME BEN, sewn onto the brim. He inspected it, and then slid it on like it had never been off.

Jim and everyone in the group had spent a month on Veraclare-as the Fresha was repaired-and they were now home and living in Hollywood. Jen had gotten an agent; and Jim was acting in a TV show, alongside a former Oscar winner Richard Strombelt. Jack had thrown himself into writing; and he was shopping around his first screenplay MISSED OPORTUNITY TO FAIL. Fred was enjoying the sun and working as a gaffer. Scott was doing construction and auditioning when he could (which meant he was always tired). They all lived in the same building, with Jen and Jim sharing a 3 bedroom suite.

“It’s fine, whatever, whatever stupid thing you’re going to say,” Jim joked. “Just open that dumb head and speak. Nobody cares, Old Man, not even the undertaker,” said Jim snidely as he stood in a burned out frame of a house, on the Warner Brothers lot. He was acting a scene: where Richard was playing his drunk gambling father, and Jim his pious son, while the grimness of L.A. surrounded them. Richard was drinking a bottle of colored water made to look like scotch. He had actually poured some vodka in to take the edge off (and no one knew but Jim).

“My burnout son doesn’t like me, I’m in heaven,” said Richard happily as he took a long sip, and then rocked back and forth on the box he was sitting on.

“Cut!” Ray said loudly as he grabbed his balls and shook them. “Take 5 and the talent take whatever you want. Just incredible, Richard, we’re done for the day,” Ray’s voice groped unsuccessfully for the dominant male tone. Then Ray put his arm around Richard and kissed his cheek.

“I thought we had 3 more scenes?” Richard asked his voice sounding annoyed. “It’s only breakfast, Ray, I need to be working,” insisted Richard in disbelief, he truly hated short days because it wasted his time.

“We had problems with the other sets,” Ray said sadly as he threw up his hands. “One fell down, and it ripped a hole in the other two,” explained Ray in a stark emotionless way. “So you’re off for 2 days, and then we’ll grab some sky, uh? You’re the Best, Richard. Jim, man you are on a roll! Just keep walking all over the talent here, and you’ll be fine,” said Ray excitedly as he kept adjusting his sunglasses.

“Ya know, Ray, I might just have to take your direction, and do just that,” Jim said jokingly as he lifted his arm and flexed his right bicep. “Hate to do it to ya, Richard, but hey, times change, Old Man. You could die anytime, just saying,” said Jim sarcastically as he smiled like Chester Cheetah from ear to ear; and he messed up Richard’s hair. Richard batted away Jim’s hand playfully and chuckled, as he knew Jim’s sense of humor by now. Ray laughed briefly, and walked off like no one had said anything at all. Jim watched him go; and he knew that was a man of power. Jim wanted to wield that power someday, someday soon.

“Old man my ass,” Richard barked as he drank the last of the liquor. “You young wangs don’t get it, we already know everything. Your schemes, and ploys, laughable, a complete joke,” Richard said confidently. “When I’m dead, I’m going to use you as a pillow, Young Shaver.”

“No, no, no, I’ll be long gone, Old Man,” Jim shot back. “You’ll be food, and I’ll be banging your girlfriend. Hey, you had to know it was coming.” Jim leaned forward and eyed Jen walking up to him.

“Hey, Jen, what are you doing here?” asked Jim brightly as he could see Jen more clearly now, skipping now towards him (in an outfit that made her look like a near dead hooker).

Jen had a miniskirt on with a hole in the back showing her pink panties. Her legs were covered in sparkles, and her hair was puffed up like a Twinkie.

“Jim?”

“What?”

“Please tell me they’re letting you out early this afternoon?” Jen asked as she fussed with her hair. “I can’t wait all day.”

“They are, they’re letting us out right now,” answered Richard for Jim. “Enjoy your day, Jim, I gotta go,” Richard said warmly, as he took Jim’s moment for himself, and stood up and stretched out his back.

“Yeah, you got it, Richard,” Jim said as he pulled out his wallet (careful not to let anyone see it as it wasn’t the right time period for the scenes he was shooting).

“Really, they let you out at the same moment I get off,” Jen said in disbelief. “Oh, that is some sweet timing. Hey I heard there might be a movie with Ben in it, at Studio B,” Jen punctuated the last two words with 2 kicks to Jim’s chair. Jen lovingly looked at Jim; and kissed Jim in between his laughing breaths.

“You’re kidding, we should go over there.”

“Let’s go right now.” Jen reached into her pocket, and produced her red pass for all of the vehicles on the lot. “We’ll take one of these golf carts. I don’t think anyone will care, they’re rich,” insisted Jen jokingly as she sat down in a golf cart, and Jim sat down beside her and barked a laugh.



Trundling past several extras covered in manure and oil-that were walking towards them like bored 8<sup>th</sup> graders entering English class-Jim looked away and burst out laughing, as he knew they only did that scene in the movie to torture the extras.

“Jen, did you see those extras?”

“Jim, they are *working actors*, and they deserve all the manure they get,” Jen said sarcastically; she put her head to Jim’s chest, and weaved the golf cart back and forth. “I know they wrote that to mess with them. Who needs a whole gaggle of extras covered in shit?”

“Me, me I do, I need them,” Jim answered sarcastically as he hit the roof of the cart. “What, that’s the only way to get any good as an actor. You pay your dues, and make minimum wage, what? Then when you’re fifty they spit you out the backend of the porn industry. It’s a glamorous life, I mean look how happy they are,” said Jim sarcastically as they saw a pair of extras covered in manure vomiting into a trash can.

Jen swerved left to avoid making eye contact with the extras. They glided down a long road lined with movie sets and old costumes (it looked like the new Sci-Fi movie *Cranium Loot*). They approached a small crowd of actors clamoring around a movie shoot.

“Wait ah minute, what set is this?” Jen asked as her eyes scanned the crowd for famous people.

“I don’t know, you used real words and I couldn’t understand you,” Jim said sarcastically as he leaned forward like an eager beggar; and he stole a cameraman’s lunch bag off a chair behind him. The cameraman was oblivious to the theft, and kept fussing with his jacket, like it was a home for the entire ant population.

“Jim Nuts, that man’s going to starve now.” Jen slowed the car and stuck her tongue out at a pair of directors as they passed. “How can ya watch a man like that die? I swear, if you don’t share that food with me, I’ll RAT you out. Try me, Jim, just try,” Jen said sarcastically in her best Georgia peach accent;

as she watched Jim pull out two cheeseburgers and some curly fries from the bag (that he had confiscated by order of the king, as Jim was related *loosely* to an Irish king that ruled some large farms, a good 500 years prior).

“Man, I’d give you some, but you’re on a diet,” Jim ate the cheeseburger like it was caviar (he loved anything with meat and cheese). “Actually here, I love *ruining diets*,” said Jim sarcastically, then he handed Jen a cheeseburger, and devoured his own.

“Thank you, I guess,” she said with perceptible reluctant sarcasm.

They drove up to the left of the crowd; and walked out around the set of a darkened street. They looked through a window; and saw Ben Train standing in the middle of the road, with his arms out like wings of an eagle. There was a large silver jaguar facing him that was revving its engine, with the passenger door ajar and dangling like a loose spider web.

“Come and try, try me now while I’m breathing free air,” said Ben coldly as he gently waved his arms. “You LOSERS, you’re NOTHING!” thundered Ben as he stood there with his fists at his sides, sweat racing down his face like lemmings to the sea. “What, is your car dying and you can’t find a way to off me, hmmm? Well, then it’s off I go,” Ben’s voice was cold with rancor embedded in his every word. He smiled and then started to go right, and the car lurked forward 8 feet like a swift uppercut would.

“Oh, this is awesome.” Jim stood there watching with the interest of a boy getting his first bicycle.

“It is awesome, Jim, but what is this movie about?”

“I don’t know, we’ll find out though,” answered Jim politely; as he snuck another bite of his cheeseburger, and watched Ben turn to face the car. They had 3 cameras going, and they had worked out all the angles before they started shooting. They planned on shooting the whole shot in one take.

“You’re dead, River, you don’t flow here anymore,” Corine said, her voice was cold but the rancor was gone from it. “Grab onto something, you’re about to die,” said Corine using a husky voice as she sat in the driver’s seat of the car. Ben squinted, and he could see the car racing at him, it hit him and flipped his body high in the air. Ben landed on his feet, and ran a few steps up a nearby house’s front staircase.

“Help, Help someone!” Ben cried as he kept his eyes focused on the car. “Someone anyone, HELP!!” screamed Ben as he saw the front door-of a Victorian white house-was locked and the windows boarded. He looked back and the car was barreling down on him, crossing the front yard heading right for the front steps. His eyes looked left, and he started to run down the front stairs, when a single shot rang out. The bullet clipped his neck, and he fell to the ground in a heap.

Out of the car came an actress known as Flowda Ridehoney (she was written in as Corine as a favor). She was short and blonde haired, with a set of good and paid for-large lips. She walked over to Ben and bent down over him and asked, “Was it worth it? Was it worth all this, River, all these lies?” she asked savagely. “If they knew you, those *friends of yours*,” said Corine as she smiled. “They’d be shoveling the last of the dirt on *your grave*.”

“No, I was never here to begin with,” Ben answered quickly as he started to rise. “It was you, you’re the one in the pictures, *I’m the one taking them*,” Ben replied as he grinned and batted away her hands on his chest. “I’ll never die, as long as your ugly, smelly, face hates my guts. And that won’t be forever ha hah ha,” Ben said snidely; his words seemed to cut into Flowda, he held his hand to his neck and blood oozed out around his fingers.

Flowda smiled, stood up, and shot Ben once in the forehead; and a burst of fake blood shot like lightning out the back of his head. Ben lay there contorted and smiling ever so slightly, as the camera moved up and away from him.

“Cut!” Lance barked his Marlboro Light cigarette burned down his skin. “Not bad, I hear a sequel, Ben,” Lance Depty said sarcastically as he hopped up out of his director’s chair, went to take a drag of his cigarette and saw none left, then he threw it and breezed over to Ben and Flowda.

“Can I die in the next one, he’s having too much fun?” asked Flowda sarcastically as she pushed on Ben’s head with the tip of her shoe. Ben lay there like he was really dead, and they had to laugh.

Jim watched him slowly ooze out of character and dissolve into his normal self. Jim asked, “Wow, how does he do THAT?”

“It’s a technique, Jim, it’s called wiping up water,” Jen’s words seemed to push Jim’s shoulders down and forward. “I read about it, you don’t jar yourself out of character. You supposed to just start a slow peeling back of layers,” Jen explained. “You need to read more, maybe one book,” said Jen sarcastically; she smiled at Jim, while her eyes caught Ben springing up and hugging Flowda.

“Great, great job, Flowda,” Ben insisted with his eyes lost in Flowda’s. “I’m serious, you’ll get the call,” said Ben honestly as he rubbed Flowda’s back. To get the call meant an Oscar nomination; and Flowda felt a shot of nervousness at Ben simply *saying that*.

“I would love it, oh, that would be fulfilling,” Flowda said coyly as she had dreamed about it every day of her life. “What was it like when you went?” inquired Flowda in a husky-old Hollywood-screen voice.

“Terrible, I hated every second,” answered Ben sarcastically as he danced back a few steps. “That said you would have a grand time. They love people who mingle and kiss the butt shiny. I just don’t have the time for all that, it was fun though,” Ben said as he leaned back and pressed up under his own chin hard.

“What are you doing, Ben?” Lance asked as he heard Ben’s neck crack; and Ben smiled at this like he’d been asked where he hid his treasure map.

“Just a bit of violent yoga, firms the neckline,” replied Ben slyly. “So then, I heard those vandals wrecked the outer lot sets. I hope they didn’t get ours, Lance,” Ben said slyly implying a question, and looked at Flowda with wide eyes.

Lance grinned, looked around, and then grimaced. Flowda said angrily, “OH god damn it no!” Flowda looked up and flicked off the sky and asked sadly, “They wrecked our sets, Lance? I can’t believe these horrible people in this world.”

“I’m sorry, they did a number on this shoot, but we have options.”

“Lance, options...they are?” Ben asked inquisitively like he’d heard someone talking about a chest of diamonds they’d found.

Lance looked at his watch, started to say something then stopped, and pointed with his thumb towards the front gates of Warner Bros.

“Oh god, that’s horrific!” cried Ben sharply as he slapped his leg. “I’m here to work, Lance, I can vacation when I’m dead. Look, set up some of the exteriors shots for this afternoon. Come on, you work your magic and we’ll make a dent in this futile enterprise. Life, Lance, life,” demanded Ben sternly as he put his arm around Lance; and then he walked him over to the edge of the set.

Lance let out a sigh only a punctured tire could, and then threw up his hands, and saw everyone waiting on his every word-and that word was too telling, and he knew it. Lance said solemnly, “Can’t do it. They aren’t ready and I’m not rushing the scene,” explained Lance firmly as he lifted up his leg with his hand; and acted like he was going to kick Ben. “Go play golf or something? Don’t you have any hobbies?”

“Comas I like, Gov’na,” Ben spoke using a cockney accent. “No look, you know what down time sends me off doing, gulp, snort, and I’m out. I need to act today, set up a TV cameo or something.

Maybe a bit part in another movie?" asked Ben hopefully. "Hobbies are for idiots without talent, I am neither," demanded Ben as he grabbed Lance by both shoulders, and bent down to look him in the eye.

Lance looked away-wishing he had something to tell Ben, anything-and he shrugged his shoulders. He said doubtfully, "Can't be done. They wrecked everything, everyone's screwed," insisted Lance as he played with Ben's hair. "Trust me, sitting at home listening to Roman tell me how we don't travel enough all day, is no picnic. Flowda, we'll see about tomorrow. Keep your cell phone implant on."

"So then, that's it, Ben?" Flowda asked in disbelief. "We could go scare off some runaways?" Flowda asked jokingly as she played with her hair; like it was new thread and she was sowing a sweater. "Ya know, tell them the city is throwing vagrants in jail, it would be fun," she said with a soothing gruffness, as she pulled off her stockings, and then undid her hair extensions.

Ben looked around, kicked a small can of coke sitting on the ground hard into the wall. He dreamed of the perfect note, knowing today it would elude him *once again*. He looked up and saw Jen walking out from behind the set, and he remembered her and said brightly, "Beth, you old bag of shit! Oh, I have wanted to talk to you for a long time. Are you an actress?"

"Yes I am, Ben, and I really wanna talk to you," Jen replied in her best sultry voice as she swayed her hips from side to side, sending the crew into (I hope she talks to me) fantasy mode. "I heard about your predicament, because we were eavesdropping. So sue me, but don't take my money," Jen whispered as she flashed her best smile for Ben, causing him to grin. He knew all too well that look, and he knew the problem complications of the *love kind* could be.

"Yeah hey, I'm Jim Kay, I love your work," said Jim brightly as he shook Ben's hand.

"Nice to meet you, Jim," said Ben.

"What, aren't I nice to meet?" Jen demanded as she turned her head-like a chicken smelling feed-away from Ben.

Ben looked around, and pursed his lips, then chuckled. He waved for them to follow him, as he saw some extras about to ask him for an autograph (he couldn't be Ben Train the public persona when he was even *thinking* about work). He thought of the plague those people had been in his life. He remembered the time one chased him for 10 blocks; and when he caught him he stole his wallet and blued his eye. He thought how great life would be if only talented people lived in the movies.

"OH extras, yeah we don't want that hassle," remarked Jim, as he looked back and saw the extras get deflated when Ben walked off; and he knew that was why Ben wanted to go somewhere else to talk.

"I only know you as Beth, which would be telling if it were your real name," Ben said jokingly with his hands in his pockets like he was hiding money. It was a technique to subconsciously stick it to people he would walk past. "It would also be the last time we ever spoke though, seriously," Ben said honestly, then he walked them into the science fiction special effects studio called "The Hive Mind" Ben was careful to shut the door behind him-you had to in this day and age, thieves and all-to keep the autograph hounds at bay.

"It's not Beth, its Bethany, but you can call me Beth," Jen answered sarcastically as she laughed mid-sentence. "Actually, Ben, it's Jen, I know, so close to perfection. Maybe you'd let me borrow your b sometimes, please?" Jen pleaded sarcastically and she tried not to smile too hard at Ben (knowing he was married to Julie). She did wish to be a friend to him though; a friend like she herself had been lucky to have.

"It's yours!" he said presently with a hint of whimsy in his voice. "You only have to buy me lunch and a new wardrobe. Just think about it. Look, I need to waste *a little time today*, while my wife is out of town. Can you stomach me for a few hours?" Ben wondered nervously, and he really didn't know what to do with himself when he wasn't acting. He spun like a top in a hurricane without a character to play and inhabit.

"Yes, of course we can!" Jen said enthusiastically.

“I’m down for that, ya know there’s this living movie card game,” interjected Jim. “It uses different theatrical forms of distraction, to put people on tilt. I mean, that’s where I was going anyway, maybe you’d be interested?” Jim asked calmly as he rubbed his neck and tried not to seem too eager. Jim had a feeling they could take more money than Uncle Sam if they went there (actors bluffed more than most people to show off their acting chops, and he knew it).

“Yeah, that’s something, but I need to act today,” He winced. “I’ve spent far too long not acting, my blood is boiling for scenes,” said Ben as he adjusted his belt. “Is there anywhere we can catch a camera and a few hour’s worth of scenes?”

Jim went blank as he really wanted to play poker. Jen took a few steps away from them, and tried to remember this thing she’d seen on the news-that white goatee wearing Newsperson Story True was talking about it she remembered.

“I can’t think of one, sorry, I just ah,” Jim said dejected and deflated as he rubbed the back of his neck and grimaced. He was still hoping for poker.

“Damn, I need a sce…”

“I got one!” Jen interrupted triumphantly. “There’s an open audition for Living Grape. It’s Paramount, so bring your own lunch, but they are having very elaborate screen tests. That would be some fine acting, and I would love a test anyway.” Jen gave Jim a couple soft karate chops to the shoulder; and she eyed Ben working it all out in his mind.

Ben went silent, breathing slightly faster, and then started to bob his head.

“What’s it gonna be?” asked Jim keenly as he saw Ben racing through emotions. Ben had no idea they were reading for that. It was one of the finest pieces of fiction ever written. He knew that would get him over the hill *for good*. And he always loved that book he thought, *what luck*.



“Yes, I...I can do that. Why don't we leave, now?” Ben demanded excitedly as he replayed the novel in his head.

Jim and Jen chuckled, and watched him still rapt in thought.

“Alright, we'll take you and your slow motion machine,” Jen said sarcastically as she tapped Jim on the tip of his nose; and she looked at Ben with a grin of satisfaction. “Let's hit it!” cried Jen excitedly as she pulled on Ben's shirt. He spun around and gave her a simple nod, but he was thinking *kill zone* on this one.

They walked over to Jen's limousine; it was the one the studio had given her to get around in. They went across town to Paramount: and saw a gaggle of floating cars, screaming fans on floating couches, and people waiting to get in *who weren't ever getting in*.

“Miss, we could be awhile,” asserted Ed Forte. “Do you want to wait?” asked Ed who was the limo driver, as he flew the anti-gravity car in between several smaller-not exactly foreign-extra's cars.

“Yes, I do want to wait, unless you can call someone?” she asked anxiously.

“I don't have any connections here, Miss, I apologize.”

“Don't worry about it.”

“I can get us in, I can do it,” exclaimed Ben. “Let me make a call. Boy if Larry isn't ready to help me, god help him,” Ben said with a bewildered look flushing his face red; as he thought about Larry, and his implant called his home phone.

Jim bore holes through the line of cars being pushed back by the much larger grey ships. He thought who had the sway in town to just push people out of the way, and why aren't I them?

“Larry, its Ben,” said Ben brightly.

“Ben, I saw you pull up, Jen’s someone we’ve been looking at,” he said politely. “I take it you’re here for the audition?” Larry Steinik asked as he sat inside a white tower in the center of the Paramount lot. He watched Ben, and wondered if he was really ready to act again.

“Yeah, Larry, can I get 15 minutes?” he inquired looking down at the red carpeted floor of the limo, where it said, “NO smoking, unless you own a STUDIO!” and was followed by a fist punching in a man’s face.

“Just drive in, Ben, I’ll give you 30,” replied Larry warmly, as he watched the ships clear the way for Jen’s Limo, and *an old friend*.

“What’d I tell you, I snap my fingers and things happen,” Jim said sarcastically with his eyes looking out the window. “I got the best seats there are, at Burger King, McDonald’s, and the Laundromat. And oh, they won’t even *make* a sub until I’ve eaten. This is high class now, Ben, high,” said Jim sarcastically while he fist bumped Ben and he smiled in a gregarious way.

Ben looked at Jim, and he saw he was not faking his friendliness. Ben knew that would catch up with him eventually, but he’d have fun in the meantime. They always did, he thought.

They flew up over the masses, and shot upward towards a steel door, that was shaped like the Hoover dam. It covered a massive half mile tall gorge of white rock and busts of all the stars along the top. They flew in, and behind them a powerful air-jet kept the rest of the rabble, out, always out.

“Ya know, to just get the treatment, the great kind once. You never forget it, and you always hope it’s there again,” Ben explained as he fussed over his hair, while looking in the mirror in the front seat. “I only wish Julie was here to see it. Man, she’d be crying by now. The times I’ve had with her, priceless. It takes a village of hope to light the sky,” Ben said convinced, with his eyes looking out the window at several thousand people doing scenes on mini stages; and knowing the grand Roman Cathedral was here,

now. The actors he saw were warming up for their auditions; and this brought a smile to Ben's face (he remembered *those days*).

They flew into a large manmade cave and the car stopped abruptly.

"Well, we're here, the place where one right move and you're famous," Jim said. "The time for big moves and right directions taken, is now baby," said Jim confidently as he strode out into the cave, and he was instantly handed a drink by an unpaid intern.

Ben smiled when he was handed his, and quickly took a drink.

"I love free drinks, why pay, why ever pay?" Jen wondered sarcastically as she took a drink off of hers.

"I can't find the moment...there it is," Ben said rapidly, and he adjusted the lifts in his shoes to make him taller (with just a click of his heel). "Be sharp and ready, this movie is bigger than anyone. Just some handholding, and a good sprint through the old times," reassured Ben hoping to calm his own nerves in the process. "Jim, don't kid around with Larry, or he'll bury what's left of you in a hole," Ben said in a growly I'm-not-sure-what I'm doing-either voice. He snatched an extras mirror out of her hand and checked his hair. Ben smiled, and then sneakily dropped the mirror in a dumpster, and walked off.

"O.k." said Jim hollowly as he hid the fact he was not happy about being told *to do anything*. He walked along keeping his eyes on the scenery, and his temper cool. He knew though, that not everyone would catch their break today. Jim made sure Ben was in his mind's eye for the moment (but not for good).

They walked under the head of Pip the Lemon Square Dragon. When they did, there was a puff of lemon scented air shot down on them. Ben paid it little mind, and kept his walking pace accelerated.

“O.k. then, scripts don’t write people, actors do,” explained Ben half hoping to convince everyone (including himself) of this fact. “Be on your toes,” said Ben warmly as he stood there outside Larry’s office checking his lapel for lint. Then he spun around and gracefully opened the door and said sarcastically, “Is it too early to end my career?”

Larry smiled at this: studying the tallness of Ben, and the confidence in his chest, and right dancing hand, he saw to it that he met Ben just before he could sit down in one of the green leather chairs.

“It’s always time to start, how are you, Ben?” Larry asked coyly as he thought about Ben in the coma. “I heard it was terrifying and like a cell of screams,” remarked Larry without flinching, as he held Ben’s hand; and looked him in the eye like a lion eyeing a forgotten piece of meat.

“Worse, much worse,” answered Ben sadly as he tried to keep the coma out of his present thoughts. He could perceive Larry sizing up his mental state. “That’s all behind me now, Larry, I’m ready to work. Can you give me the angle on my character? Anything, rules are made to be broken right?”

“Yes, yes they are, but not this time,” Larry beamed as he looked at Jen and Jim. “This is the all world script the whole town wants, Ben. If you were 10 years younger, you’d already have it. As it is, the whole town thinks you’re going to blow it your first role out,” he said as he fussed with some papers on his desk. “Although I heard you were doing quite well over there at Warner Brothers. We’ll see, at least I can get you 30, no more,” explained Larry as he sat down and motioned for Jim and Jen to sit down as well.

Ben nodded politely, but he was very angry at his loss of stature. He knew in Hollywood lip service *was your career*.

Ben straightened. “Look, I’m there.”

Ben’s politeness, eagerness, and obvious spinning wheels argued caution for Larry. Larry satisfied his lust for manipulation with a stern eagle-eye glance at Ben. He asked, “Really, you’re acting at a high

level, but this, be, the Highest. No one gets cast unless they win the fucking Oscar in the audition. That's the only advice I can give you, don't save anything. Now, if you don't mind, I'd love to see you act," insisted Larry coyly hoping to catch Ben off guard.

"Let's go!"

Jim grinned at this, Jen smiled, and they both watched Ben stay perfectly calm. Larry knew if Ben was on his game, it was a big addition for the movie (as winning the lottery would be to your bank account).

"Seems the old hound has some rabbit left in his teeth," Larry clicked his teeth together. "Get up!" Larry demanded as he smiled and pulled out a long cigarette holder. Ben got up, and Larry walked over and looked him up and down. He chuckled like a child and said flatly, "I'd sleep with you. Let's go hunting," said Larry slyly as he put his arm around Ben; and they walked out a small door behind his desk. Jim and Jen watched this and didn't know if that meant them too. Larry motioned with his hand through a window for them to come as well. It was like the king of England granting you title, half the country, and your own army to boot.

"Nice!" Jim muttered as he pumped his fist. "We need this, Jen, we need to see it," Jim whispered nervously as he tried to calm his nerves. Jim looked at the pictures on the walls; and it was a list of everyone that had nailed every great role you could imagine, a literal cast from the centuries for the greatest film ever, life. He wanted on that wall, and he wanted it worse than a starving child would a bowl of rice.

"I know, but he needs it more," insisted Jen. "Jim, lay something down, that's all. You've got great things in you, let them out for once," Jen said softly as she kissed Jim on the cheek; then she ran out of things to say, thought about nailing it herself, then she ran away from him.

Jim let out a sigh, and chased after her like a late passenger for the midnight train to Georgia.

When they got outside, they saw Larry and Ben hanging around and waiting for them on a spiral outdoor elevator. It would spiral around in circles as it went ever downward (it used a series of thick red cables to lift and drop it). The elevator looked like an attacking puma and had couches inside *for talent only*.

“Well then, are we going?” Larry asked coyly as he wanted to size up Jen and Jim.

Jim felt confidence bathing his body. He thought about the reflex he needed to win the role and nothing but.

Jen ran full out the last couple steps, stopping abruptly, and sitting down. She said, “Yes, yup.”

Jim darted over to the elevator and sat down facing Larry. Jim replied smoothly, “Wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“Good then, we’re going!” said Larry sharply as he pressed in the accelerator, and they quickly spun downward at incredible speed.

Jim held on with both hands, and he knew they could wipe it at any moment. He felt like the first man to go bravely to the bottom of the ocean. Memory of success soothed his every movement (he still had his confidence). He had a feeling it would change everything, and he was ready.

Ben pressed in the gas on the elevator, and they went even faster now, but they were descending a bit too fast into the ground. Beneath Paramount there were hundreds of miles of caves and hidden studios. They did this to prevent the IRS from knowing their true wealth.

“This is really great,” exclaimed Jim tangentially as he smiled, but then a bat hit him right in the mouth, giving him a bloody lip. Jim shouted angrily, “WHAT the FUCK?!”

Ben and Larry laughed like high school kids watching a friend trip on the stairs, as they knew enough to duck the bats.

“Careful now, don’t lose your cool,” insisted Larry hollowly. “It happens, Jim, I’ve been hit many times. We make sacrifices to live where they live, o.k.?” Larry said reassuringly earning a stern glance from Jim, in spite of this he offered Jim his hand.

Jim looked at Larry-feeling 50 sets of smiling eyes on him-and shook his hand. ” Yes, yes I’m sorry for my outburst. It won’t happen again,” answered Jim hollowly as he was rip-roaring pissed, and wanted to punch someone worse than the heavyweight champ. Jim could see Larry was pretending to buy it, and he knew if that was the case, *it was fine by him*.

Larry smiled and put his hand on Ben’s thigh, and Ben didn’t react. Larry knew Ben was ready for anything, and that meant a performance of note. Larry asked fretfully,” Oh dreadful, are those fat actors in my studio?”

“Yes, they are quite portly,” replied Ben, as he could see several overweight-forever hopeful this was their big chance-extras that had snuck in; and he knew they were hoping to catch their big break. They were clustered together hiding behind a set for the later auditions; and looking like nervous women in nothing but naked on the beach.

“Yeah, donut for breakfast, donut for lunch, no wait it’s dinner again, I can’t decide,” Jim said sarcastically as he pushed out his own stomach and rubbed it in a circle. “They fuckin eat the whole craft service truck, and they burp up mayonnaise,” said Jim sarcastically as he was still licking his wounds. Ben and Larry found this quite funny and they laughed as loud as their accomplishments in life would afford.

Larry looked at Jim- he wondered where this sensitive side of Jim was all along-and he loved Jim’s sarcastic side, and tried to see him in a role.

“Look, Larry, right there, those young directors are stealing film,” Ben pointed out the front of the elevator and he saw 2 up and coming directors stealing rolls of film-like baskets of bread-under each of their arms. Their names were Harry Fred and Bat Givingtee; and they were both very fit and tall.

“What are you doing there?!” demanded Larry. “Put that down you idiots! SECURITY!” Larry shouted as he stepped off the elevator; he found himself walking towards Harry and Ben, pointing his hand like a gun. Larry was incensed by this theft; and would get every dollar of his film back one way or another, or Harry and Bat would end up dead.

“Screw you, we’re taking it, and that’s it, Old Man!” Harry snapped. “Get outta here before I punch your ticket to die,” said Harry coldly as he handed the film to Bat, and quickly motioned for him to run for it.

Jim saw this, and he was really hoping this kid would get as fresh as summer grass. Jim jumped up and ran past Larry and cold-cocked Harry in the eye. The punch sent him reeling into an old west set. Jim kicked him hard in the back, sending him through the set and into a spittoon-the spittoon was filled with horse spit and baked brown beans-and Jim said coldly,” You messed up this time, Pal! Your little head is gonna get cracked! Where ya running too, big talker, I’m right here?!” demanded Jim angrily as he spit on them.

Larry watched this with his hands making a square, as Jim’s eyes never left Harry, Larry noted. He framed Jim, and saw he had quite a look of brilliance when he was angry. Ben moved over to the left of the set to watch Harry get his ass kicked (loving every second of it too). They were bottom feeder directors, Ben knew that, he was not new to the dinner-they drugged and drank their chances away, always fighting the system and success-and he knew they undoubtedly worsened their own chances because of an uncanny fear of success, of happiness, of finally having no one to blame, but acting like they’d done nothing to bring failure and raging waters their way, and they were the ones Ben thought of



*often* when he thought about giving up. Today, Ben didn't have time for bruises, which is why he didn't speak up (Even though he really wanted to pound Harry and Bat for their lack of originality).

"Careful, Jim, you could kill him!" Jen cried anxiously as she ran up beside Ben.

"Oh no, don't worry about that," Larry assured, his mind was seeking blood for payment. "We'll just cement them into the walls, its fine, Jim, kick his ass," said Larry verily with baited breath. He kept quickly framing Jim with his hands; however he could see Jim certainly would fill up the seats as an action hero.

The violent spark Jim felt-so large and all encompassing-hit home. Jim gave Harry a hard military style knee in the gut; and grabbed him by the hair and tossed him into a fake glass window like he was a bucket of dirty tap water. Harry tried to stand up, but his wrist was broken. He looked around and everything looked blurry. He asked, "Can I go home now, please?"

"You are home, enjoy the scenery," Ben growled, as he started to think he could use Jim's anger in his audition. He watched Jim carefully-like a tiger stalking warm prey-and he saw a real vicious heart in his eyes. Jim glared at Harry with cold dead eyes; and what was left of his inner debate to break his neck was rapidly finishing up, *neck to be snapped, soon.*

"Jim, just be a little less..." Jen said hopefully as she interlocked her fingers. Jen prayed Jim wouldn't kill him, mostly because her heart couldn't take the utter grimness death brought to us all, like waiting customers of death.

Jim snapped out of it when she said this-not wanting to do anything violent with a clear mind-and Jim looked over at her and coughed into his armpit. Jim hated being a jerk in front of Ben (seeing as he really didn't want to go jeopardizing their friendship) but now he was so jacked up he regretted stopping.

"Jim, security's here, you've done excellent," Larry said lightly, again intently watching his reaction. Big heaving chest and faraway eyes; he was well in control of his emotions, but murder was definitely

lurking inside. “I need to talk to you, but why don’t you have a fruit smoothie first? You still seem angry, Jim, you’ve gotta learn how to tame it,” he added coyly as he walked up to Jim and gently put his arm on his back like a rolled up sweater.

“Yeah, I could go for that smoothie, right now,” Jim replied breathlessly and working to calm his anger (and failing). “That guy, that idiot, he enraged me. If Jen there...hadn’t said anything, I probably would have pounded his head in. As crazy as that sounds,” said Jim breathlessly as his face reddened a bit, and his hands felt like they were on fire, as he cocked his head slightly.

“Good then, let’s have a smoothie!” Larry said brightly as he beamed.

Larry showed them the way through the caves; making their way past several large elaborate sets for the movie *Living Grape* (and several changing rooms made to look like cowboys 20 feet high). It looked as if you were walking through an old western town, with caves as the backdrop.

They heard a large group of clamoring actors and actresses-very much like seagulls descending on a loaf of unwatched bread-in the distance (where several dozen people were cheering them on). Jim and Jen wondered what it was, but Ben and Larry already knew.

“What is that I wonder?”

“Jen, you’ll soon find out,” Larry said with a smile. “Drink, why waste a smoothie I say,” Larry said coyly as he sipped his strawberry smoothie, but his mind was swirling around corrupting Jim, *and soon*.

“Yeah, why indeed,” Jim said as he took the lid off of his smoothie and downed it in one drink. He knew they were watching, and that was the point of being there he thought. Jim took a long breath and said happily, “that really hit the spot.”

“Happy to hear it, Jim, very happy,” replied Larry as he put his arm around Jim and rested his head on his shoulder. Larry thought Jim was very attractive; however Jim-knowing already to not drink anything he left alone for even a second-didn’t find men attractive at all, but he played the game regardless.

Drinking the last of their smoothies and walking down the left wall of a yellow cave; they saw lights every 15 feet creating almost a fog tunnel. When they neared the end of the cave, they saw a glass dome with people sitting around and lying on top of it. The mahogany doors leading into the dome had the sign DON’T LEAVE IT AT HOME burned into the dark wood.

“Again,” Ben whispered as he fussed with his hair.

“Yes, always worth the trip, Ben.”

“Yes, Larry, always,” Ben replied softly as he looked around and saw the usual faces. He looked for Beth and thankfully didn’t see her anywhere; that alone relieved him of all worry.

When they walked up to the doors, they swung inward before they could even touch them (operating on breath control sensors). There they saw a massive half mile set, with the auditions for Living Grape being run at each of 300 locations (simultaneously). Each different scene had snake like lines-of the best and brightest-for each role with people milling about. The music of an old blues band called the Self Made Men echoed throughout the expanse; and everything was alive like a new strawberry after the winter thaw.

“Wow, Larry, this is intense,” Jim’s voice like a plate being dropped, sharp and jarring. “I love it! This is my kind of audition.”

“Yes, Jim, you survive here, you’re cast for the rest of your life,” Ben said as he hid his nerves and used his-800 dollars an hour to learn-breathing techniques. Ben looked and saw some old friends; and then he saw a bright light shining out of a cave. His eyes were transfixed on this, as he remembered a similar light, enveloping him sometimes when he was in the coma. He felt nervous seeing this just then;

however the light was revealed to be a small car driving several actresses home (dressed in small pieces of loin cloth).

“Ben, your script,” Jen said as she handed Ben his lines. Ben looked down at the script, and his old reflexes turned on. He read it quickly, and then read through it again, one paragraph at a time. Once he knew the gist, and the purpose of every word, *he had it cold*.

“Jim Nuts, is that you?” Fred asked in disbelief, as he was working as a gaffer in Jim’s scene.

“Fred?” Jim asked in disbelief as his eyes lit up. “What are you doing here?”

“Workin’ gotta pay some bills,” Fred said as he smiled from under a black military gas mask. “Are you in this scene?”

“Yeah why?” asked Jim quickly.

“Because this is the most outrageous thing *I have ever seen*,” insisted Fred as his voice relayed fear to Jim as he intended it to. “You need to go BIG. They’ve been doing it all day. Don’t talk soft, the director hates that. And OH, I need to un-tuck your shirt,” Fred said as he grabbed Jim’s shirt and pulled it out of his pants; like he was shucking corn back home. “The director got pissed an hour ago at someone who was too clean, and too dressed up,” Fred explained with his voice echoing off the wall they were standing by; but he made sure to look around for Laron the director-knowing he’d flip out if he caught him giving Jim tips-and thankfully he wasn’t close by.

“Good advice, what’s the director’s name?” Jim asked as he looked around and saw several actors doing similar takes on Henry Gista, Jim’s character.

“Laron, don’t look him in the eye for long,” Fred whispered like he knew the winning lotto numbers. “Remember that rhyme, he’ll slap you, I’m serious. Jim, I gotta go, nice seein’ ya, Buddy,” said Fred quickly as he hurried back into position, and flipped his hat back.

Jim keenly watched this, and he started to visualize the character as if he was a loud mouth. He couldn't see it at first-living in his head sat too many stereotypes of bullies-but then he got it in a flash. He looked around and saw another actor looking right at him, a man named Gil Puto. Jim didn't look away but tapped his index finger to his chin-as he had done as a child when he was nervous-and wondered if Gil had been listening to their conversation.

"It's already cast ya know, no point," Gil said hollowly as he wiped his wet hands-that were from a soda he had borrowed permanently from Laron's *private cooler*-and walked over to Jim.

"Nah, I don't believe you," Jim answered coldly. "It will be though, so you can go back to your Hyundai and Starbucks," said Jim jokingly as he looked away from Gil like he smelled bad. Jim started walking slowly away from Gil, as Gil hurriedly walked towards him.

"No, I'M cast in the role," Gil squawked hollowly, as he wasn't cast and hadn't even read for it (he was moving Jim from the audition line very carefully).

"No, you're HIGH or crazy, either way you're wrong."

Gil looked at Jim walking off like he'd won; hoping to get Jim to walk too far away when his name was called, which would cost him the role, and give Gil the part. It suddenly dawned on Jim what was happening. He spun around with fire in his eyes; and shoved Gil hard into a row of green plastic chairs.

"Oops, sorry I didn't see you there," Jim said hollowly with a cocky grin. "You should be more careful," said Jim coyly as he knew what the score was. Jim calmly walked back to the line of actors-like he was THE MAN-but said nothing to them but pure silence.

"You're ready, Jim, let's show the world," Larry said as he put his hands on Jim's arms and smiled at him.

Jen watched this eagerly, as she was praying Jim would nail his scene.

“Jim, just take one thread from the beginning to the word cut,” said Jen. “It works, focus on it,” Jen muttered warmly-concealing her nervousness-as she waved to Jim and heard his name called.

Jim looked at Jen, gritting his teeth, and grinned mischievously. He walked through the horde of actors-some good, most acting famous and working at Denny’s-and came to a stop on his mark, in front of an old grey haired actor. The actor’s name was Michael Doldy (and he loved making people squirm).

The set was of a small diner-on the outskirts of town-and it was called Mabel’s. 5 extras were sitting in the back-acting like they were going to get famous-and Jim knew this and said nothing. He stood there awaiting Laron’s direction like a gladiator waiting for the lions.

“Bore me already, act!” Laron demanded sharply, as he was sick of all the bad reads that he had been watching all day. He motioned with the back of his hand-like a new Caesar-and Jim took a step to the side. Jim grabbed a cup full of non-alcoholic beer from an extra, and hurled it at Michael.

“What the?!” cried Michael as he looked at his soaked and newly stained shirt. “Who dares do this? Show yourself!” Michael growled angrily, as he spun around wiping the beer off his leather vest and pants.

“Shut up you fat fart stealer!” Jim replied coldly as he slowly walked towards Michael. “There’s someone here needs to know your burial song,” said Jim as he threw a chair at Michael, kicked the table clean through, and got ever closer to a now terrified Michael Doldy. Jim stood there with his hand on an imaginary gun, and his eyes ripping through Michael’s confidence building techniques and memories (like they were air).

“A pig farmer, a swine diner,” Michael snorted as he wiped the beer on his forehead back into his hair. “Come on, someone left there barn boy here, take him home already. Please, someone save his wretched life,” Michael pleaded coyly as he moved his hand to the whip at his side.

Jim watched this and knew it was a real whip (and could do *real damage*). Jim pulled out his prop gun, spit out the side of his mouth, and walked right up to Michael cackling as he did.

“You whip me with that, I’ll kill your ass!” exclaimed Jim snidely, laughing like the light was out in his personal lighthouse above the ears. “Put it down, Fucker, all the way down. DROP IT!!” shouted Jim angrily as he punched Michael in the stomach. Michael doubled over, and tossed the whip to the side like he’d been caught stealing money.

“Please, someone, your goat has wandered into my hands,” Michael shot back. “Won’t you release me from this?” Michael asked as he was now on one knee; and he coughed a few times like a lifetime cigarette smoker would do most days.

Laron knew that was the end of this shot; however, he did not say cut, and so they continued acting.

“Come now, pig farmer to pig, let’s make it even!” Jim thundered as he slammed his fist into the wall. “Huh, one shot to your head then you shoot me? It’s so easy and fair, that the WHOLE BAR knows it. Get up, and BRING IT!” Jim shouted as he stood over Michael unaware he was in danger of pounding Michael’s head in (he was too angry to even know what it was he was capable of in that moment).

Michael’s hands started shaking and he offered Jim his forearm; however, Michael was scared of Jim like a person feeding a lion without a cage (the arm was a sign of weakness and Jim knew it). Jim took the gun and put the barrel to Michael’s head. He went to pull the trigger, but he saw there was a live round in the chamber, and stopped.

“Why are you stopping?!” asked Laron, his irritability had risen now, becoming outright anger. “Shoot him,” Laron barked sharply, he rose up out of his director’s chair and strode right up to Jim. Laron was sizable, with large powerful arms like a wrestling champion (without the curved ears) and large muscular thighs.

“Look, it’s got real bullets in the gun,” Jim explained. “I’m not going to prison, for a role,” Jim said as he passed the heavy gun to Laron.

“It would only be manslaughter, 5 years tops,” Laron said, eyes open and keenly watching Jim. “Michael, here, would not have minded, right?” asked Laron as he inspected the gun like it was some sort of ancient Egyptian artifact. Laron knew hayseed-and he concluded Jim thankfully was not one-when he saw one.

“Uhh, yes I would have,” Michael said reluctantly as he averted his gaze from Laron’s staring eyes. “I came to act, not get shot,” explained Michael nervously as he sat there on the floor holding his gut.

Jim watched this happen; and he kept to himself. He knew this movie was turning people crazy; and he worried it would devour them all-like a large tidal wave-if they all cowered to the producers...or so he had thought. Jim kept his mind on the many people to manipulate around the set-just let off some steam by insulting some jerk he thought. And like most actors his emotions were at the will of his good fortune of finding misfortune.

“Tisk, tisk, whatever, Jim, you’ve got the roll,” Laron said as he hugged Jim from the side. “Jim, you and I are simpatico, ain’t love grand. Michael, your role is being recast, sorries,” Laron said sleekly as he eyed the gun; then he smiled and set it down on the counter.

Jim pumped his fist one time for every time he kicked ass that day (5 in total). He looked around for a place to sit for a minute; and he spied a red chair off to the side. His mind was on stardust and big paydays; however, he knew this role would make or break him (they all knew).

Jen meanwhile was nearing the end of her read as the wholesome Bes Goodpenny. She stood there with a knife in her hand-and her husband tied to the bed-staying completely in character.

“Honey, all your whorin’, has made a man out of me,” Jen admitted her voice softly persuasive. “I guess, since I’m of the man nature now. I can KILL, like a man. Because, that pair of women you slept



with in OUR BED, they changed me,” confessed Jen as she tossed the blade she was carrying from hand to hand. “I ‘mit it, they changed me and Jesus.” “Why don’t you say nothing?” asked Jen. “Aren’t we still together?” Jen asked as she started to spit when she spoke. “Oh, you’ve got that rag in your mouth, of course that’s it. Here’s for 15 years of marriage, and sweet divorce,” Jen crowed as she made her way over to the other actor. She proceeded to violently stab the dummy torso of the actor: therefore he screamed like he was dying well beyond her blows (overacting got you stand in work).

“Good, very good,” Laron said with an air of superiority. “I like how devious you are, Jen, best read of the day. Alright, you can stop killing Nick now. If you want,” said Laron jokingly to his assistant director Jeremy Doulkool and grinned; but he knew enough to continue watching Jen (who was laughing at her final stabs to the head).

“Do I have to?”

“Yes, you can’t kill Nick,” Jeremy warned using a voice that said: I am not attracted to you physically, emotionally, or in any other way *nor will I ever be*. “I’ve tried, he doesn’t die as well as you’d think,” confessed Jeremy. “He tends to run, and call the police. It’s old news, moving on,” Jeremy said sarcastically as he stood up; then he walked over and put his hands on Jen’s shoulders.

Jen giggled and stuck her tongue out the side of her mouth (like a dog begging for a treat). And she asked sarcastically, “Do I get to kill ma too?”

“No, not in this one, you’ll have to kill a random stranger,” replied Jeremy dryly as he stripped off Jen’s boots and clothes (seeing, as they were needed for future scenes). “I know, tough being a homicidal actor, but that’s the gift you have. I truly believed you as a vindictive bitch that could *kill* people. And for that, you have earned a place in my heart. Now run along, I am contractually obligated to read 10 more people,” Jeremy snapped sarcastically as he showed Jen the way out of the shot; thusly, and then into the lounge area to the left (several plates full of caviar were there for *the talent*).

Jim saw this and he wondered if the actors were supposed to mingle or not; Jim thought that actors should have their space for dissecting, not hilarity.

Ben was entering his scene with: a pot of honesty, some bread, and his eyes on Byron lying down next to the fireplace.

“O.k. Byron, we’ve got good food, and that is good,” Ben said with a casual voice that disarmed Byron. “All good people require this mortal thing. And your father is no different. Here ya go,” Ben said in a deeper voice than normal. He sat down next to Byron Indian style-quickly thinking about winning the director’s eye by playing with Byron-and he started to put honey on the bread.

“I killed him,” shot back Byron emotionless as the dead.

“What, killed who?” inquired Ben as he continued spreading the honey. “Not Tommy Simpson up the road? Byron, you didn’t,” Ben asked hollowly not caring either way; and he set down the bread and looked at Byron with elementary school playtime eyes.

“Luther, the son of Kane, dead!” husked Byron as he punched Ben in the thigh. “Sorry, I know you too were friends, but friends with niggers, is friends with Satan. I can’t have my pa and preacher going to hell, and I won’t. That’s it, I shot him dead as Sunday,” insisted Byron coldly as he started to cry. He looked into the flames disappearing into the flickering light; and he went to punch Ben’s leg again, but Ben moved before he could.

“Byron, they’ll kill you for this,” Ben said, making it certain he was not going along with this. “How could you have done that? My friend, my dear friend dead,” said Ben tearfully. “Look, you can’t live here anymore. If you stay, they’ll kill us all,” Ben demanded as he rocked back onto his hands. “Your sisters and ma deserve a good life. Get up, and get the HELL OUTTA HERE,” insisted Ben as he stood up like a lightning bolt; and he kicked the bread into the flames (their pet poodle Romtop, tried to drag the bread out of the flames without burning its nose).

Byron sat up and glared at Ben. He had ten years of hatred pumping through his eyes-mostly using sense memories of an abusive father to draw upon-and Ben stood there quietly and took it (the scene was his).

“How...how can you DITCH ME!” Byron accused as he spit at Ben. “I killed him for you. It’s not my damn fault he was Kane, not mine. I...I just thought it would be good,” explained Byron tearfully as he broke down, and then looked up at a stolid Ben.

Ben looked around and saw hatred in his breaths; and a rifle on the mantle. He calmly picked it up and shot Byron in the face in one continuous motion. Byron fell hard to the floor-like a sack of silver dollars being dropped from a high perch-and the whole crew froze. Ben set the gun back on the mantle. And he started calmly dragging Byron’s body out of the room, and off the set.

The entirety of the crew started applauding with rabid excitement. Laron had been watching secretly on his video sunglasses. He sprung up out of the director’s chair; and skipped over to where Ben was.

“Ben Train, can still act,” Laron said in disbelief.

“Always,” Ben said flatly as he brushed off the dust from his clothes.

“Oh god, we’ve got a movie now,” Laron said with a tone intermingled with double meanings. “Ben, you’re cast, damn it, who would have guessed it,” said Laron as he hugged Ben; then took his face into his hands and gave it a gentle shake. Ben knew that maneuver all too well; he knew it meant success if you felt it but once.

“Sometimes the old wind meets the new day, Laron,” Ben joked as he used depressing sense memories so he wouldn’t laugh like a first time actor. “I won’t blow this, you can forget that shit,” Ben said honestly while his mind played a movie in his head. He stood there trying not to smile or cry, and he succeeded. He was feeling a rollercoaster of emotions, *but he didn’t want to get off*.

Jim looked in on Ben; and saw the whole crew still applauding. Jim muttered, "Somebody got cast." Jim knelt down, and grabbed a handful of dirt, and let it ooze through his fingers. "Man, a movie with Ben Train, this is unbelievable."

"What's unbelievable?" Jen asked as she knelt down beside Jim.

"OH hey, Jen, ahh...Ben, just got cast."

"You're kidding me, Jim Nuts, just now?"

"Yeah, look over there," Jim said, as a mischievous smile walked across his face like an elephant in the Serengeti. "He must have kicked complete ass. Wow, I wish I could have seen it, ya know," Jim admitted as he looked at the dirt. Jim looked up and calmly watched Ben pretend to pull out a long white cigarette-at least he wanted you to think it was-however it was nothing but a handful of air to make the kids laugh. Ben sucked on the air; and it looked as if he was really smoking.

"Holy cow, he's back," Jen's hand against her lips. "I knew it!" said Jen excitedly, jumping up and down and holding onto Jim's shoulders. Jim grinned and started to chuckle; because he could tell then they were going on the ride of a lifetime.

"Did you get cast, Jen?"

"I don't know yet," Jen answered as she grabbed the back of her neck with both hands. "They still have more people to see. Did you, Jim?"

"Yeah, they said I got the part," Jim replied with a tone of voice weaker than normal. "So, if you could get off your tail feather and ah...get cast, we could all work together. So go do some disgusting sexual favors, it doesn't work but it's funny," Jim said sarcastically, standing there squeezing his script tightly. He knew now he'd get his shot at a real movie with the best there ever was.

"Alright, I'll be alright, Mr. Crude, yes I will."

“Jen, Laron has decided to cast you,” Jeremy snapped as he tapped her on the shoulder. “You need to be available all day tomorrow for a fitting. And we checked with Paramount, they had another fire and the entirety of their sets were destroyed, sorries,” Jeremy said as he gave Jen the fitting number to think about when she called. “So basically they’re not lending you to us, we bought your ass. Jim, your sets are burned too,” said Jeremy as he patted Jim on the back.

“You’re kidding, who did it?”

“Some gang of kids,” Jeremy replied with a sense of joy in his voice. “Apparently they were hoping to burn down the whole studio, but we caught them. Now they’re enjoying the cement life, if you know what I mean. Bye, Jen, Jim, we’re hoping for big things from you both,” Jeremy said warmly as he walked off with a certain-I won the lottery-bounce in his step.

“Damn, I bet Richard is pissed,” Jim said in disbelief as he thought about how lucky he had just gotten. “Well, hey, fate either helps you or hurts everybody. I guess we’re just supposed to do this movie. It makes me nervous to think that ah...that the gang of thieves could get in here and do the same thing. That would really suck,” admitted Jim sadly as he grimaced and hit his leg with the script.

“Jim Nuts, who cares we’re in the picture!” Jen gushed as she draped her arms around Jim’s neck. “Let’s go talk to Ben and berate him for awhile. Race ya,” Jen said playfully as she gestured for Jim to follow her; and then hit Jim in the balls and ran away. Jim went after her like a fox to a rabbit; and they could see Ben sitting alone drinking a glass of water.

“Ben, I saw it man, you kicked ass.”

“Thanks, Jim, it was fine day for acting,” said Ben smoothly as he sipped his water. “Did you get in the picture?”

“Yeah, both of us got in,” Jen interjected as she flexed his muscles like a bodybuilder. “We’re gonna make your life a living hell,” said Jen sarcastically as she sat down beside Ben on a wooden crate marked NOT CHEAP

Ben looked forward and then said, “I waited for this, long time I waited. I’ve acted big drama, but not like this. This is better, more resolute,” Ben continued as his hand went in and out of his pocket a few times. “I would cheer and yell, but I’ve lost 3 Oscars doing that very thing. If you want some advice, show up every day and be serious. Jokes are fine at the end of the day, but don’t let them mingle with the work.”

“That’s good advice, we’ll do just that,” Jim said as he stood there surveying the cave to keep the right mental frame of mind in case the director was looking his way (and he was). He knew how to play big poker with little money. He saw this as nothing more than step one with many steps yet to come his way. Jim felt honored to act with Ben, but he also knew from what he’d read, he was a *scene stealer*. Jim had different ideas about *who was getting the acclaim*.

## Chapter 6

### LIVING GRAPE

Living Grape was completely cast; and shooting started on time. A few months went by, and the cast marveled at Jim's, Jen's, and Ben's performances. It was as if they had written the movie themselves. Laron felt this one would bear him the fruit of Oscar, but he didn't dare admit it to himself.

They all sat beside one another on a wooden picnic table; as they waited for the midday sun direction. The outdoor boom town set went for 2 miles; and had several bars and banks along the way. There were several extras hanging out across the street trying to stare Ben down, but he paid them no mind. He was thinking about the scene the 3 of them were about to act. He knew all too well Jim was exceeding his talent, and this scared Ben to death.

“Jim?”

“Yeah, Ben,” Jim answered as he yawned and mopped up the sweat on the back of his neck, as he had his black cowboy hat sitting on his lap precariously.

“What are your feelings on this next scene?”

“I don't know, I'm just going to play it as it stands,” Jim said hollowly as he tried not to laugh and give it away that he had plans (*big plans indeed*). “If we get lucky, all three of us will end up bruised or

dead,” Jim said coyly as he looked down the dusty dirt main street; this while he kept Ben at bay by not looking at him. Jim knew what he was doing-warming up the old faucet to get Jim’s ideas flowing-and he wasn’t going to be giving him any helpful hints

“Hey, where are all the losers?!” Jen yelled jokingly as she waved to the extras.

Ben and Jim laughed and flicked off the extras. The extras cheered-some of whom trying to befriend Jen-and one of them mooned Jim. Jim looked at them with suspicion, puzzlement, and cockiness.

“That’s 3<sup>rd</sup> lead ass at best!” Jim howled as he acted like he was going to fall off the picnic table. “Better luck next life!” Jim yelled jokingly as he smiled like a cheetah, and sat back in his seat.

Ben sat silently: saying nothing, doing very little, or thinking of anything at all to say. Ben knew this next scene would make or break them all.

“Ben?”

“Yes hi there, Laron.”

“We’re ready to go, it’s you and Jen here by the water,” Laron explained with his hands moving like they had a spastic tick to them. “And, Jim, you’re at the end of the street. Jim, when the clock strikes noon, then you find Ben and Jen, alright?” Laron asked as he checked the sight lines on the street. He rubbed Jim’s shoulder-one he had been rubbing every day-and took him down the street to his mark. They had tapped a white x in the dirt, right where Jim was to stand.

“Alright then, it’s you and me, Gorgeous,” Ben said like he was acting the scene for real just then. “What say we break the rules today?” Ben asked smoothly with a smirk on his face; and he kept watching Jim setting up out of the corner of his eye. Ben’s training-10 years with Ruth Roisteinberg-meant he knew that training would serve him well today.



Jen pulled back her dress and showed her underpants. She made certain-as she wanted all eyes on her-to keep her dress stuck in one of her garter belts to throw everyone off. She turned to Ben and said nothing; but gave him the feeling she was going to, as she was manipulating the scene *foxy good*. Ben looked at her-and used all he could summon inside-and said nothing to her of note.

“O.k. Jim, if it’s alright with you,” Laron said as he looked into Jim’s eyes like they were having sex. “I’d like you to destroy Ben and Jen. Just walk over their performances, like an Oscar winner would. Don’t, don’t say anything. We just have a different pecking order now, understand?” Laron asked-with a tone he saved for stars and stars alone-as he looked into Jim’s eyes with a seriousness that told it all to Jim.

“I got it, and I will,” Jim answered firmly as he nodded his head and shook his arms out. “Time for a little mischief,” Jim said coldly as he walked over to his mark (just off the side of the patio of Tompkin’s bank) and Jim sat there eyeing Jen and Ben. He had a strong feeling that he was about to make some enemies, but it was what he had to do, and he was still JUST DOING IT.

“Jen, lovely, it’s only dying,” Ben said.

Jen acted like she was choking and contorted her face. She walked out one more step into the street; and faced the townspeople like they were nothings.

“Alright, sound, and action!” thundered Laron as he threw up his hand like a whip.

“You’re idiots TO ME!” Jen screamed crazily as she spit out the sides of her mouth. “Nothing more than god’s lost chewing gum. I’ve killed your sheriff, and I kicked his head in to do it! Come ON, all of you TRY ME!” thundered Jen angrily as she kicked up the dirt; and she pulled out a long pistol from the back of her dress (it had a red handle and silver gun barrel reading MOMMA STOLE THE COWS DADDY).

Ben saw his mark, and leapt off the barrel he was sitting on; and raced over to Jen. He put his poison covered fingers into her mouth; and then slapped the inside of her throat. This caused her to swallow the poison-which was the way all good cowboys died back then (by blueberry cool-aid)-and she started to convulse.

“It’s alright now!” Ben insisted as he stood there looking-with eyes so wide they damn near fell out of his head-at the onlookers. “She is filled with SATAN’S DEMONS! I will have to rid her of these failings! If any of us are to live, her soul must become pure again. I will kill her, and ensure she makes it to HEAVEN. Please, someone hand me a pistol and end this poor child’s misery? Please, for God’s sake,” pleaded Ben hollowly as he held both sides of Jen’s face. She tried to fight him off, but the poison had taken hold and she started to foam at the mouth (they used baking soda and flower to create the effect).

The barber named Mr. Luther Grimsly-wearing a grey suit and a red cowboy hat-handed Ben a-black handle black barrel-revolver and said firmly,” We don’t want any god damn Satan, in our town. Do what you must, Preacher.”

“Of course you don’t,” Ben said with a voice as soft as bed sheets. “I will take on this BURden, and make the woman whole, once more. Here, for the love of purity,” Ben said hollowly as he fought with Jen to get the revolver to her head. Ben exhaled and shot her twice in the side of the head; and she fell hard onto his brown leather boots.

“Good goings, Preacher, you saved us today!” Luther cheered as he walked over to Ben and quickly took the revolver back.

“Of course, and you are all welcome,” Ben said hollowly as he wiped the sweat from his brow with his sleeve. “And you’re welcome at my church, anytime,” said Ben as he motioned with his hand like a circus conductor.

Jim walked out into the street and faced Ben; he did this with his hands at his side and his guns shiny new.

“Not just yet, not just yet,” Jim growled, as his eyes burned through Ben like a hot poker through a dry sock. “Seems you done away with my wife, Preacher, no?” asked Jim coldly as he flexed his whole body. “Nope I says that will not STAND!” Jim said defiantly to him as he kicked up some dirt onto his left boot. “I will crack open that evil skull of yours, and we’ll see if we can find some god. Come on now, make a move at me,” Jim begged coldly as the townspeople got out of the street as fast as they could. A small boy-with brown curly hair-ran across the street in front of Ben quite suddenly; and ran into the Drink’s Are on You bar and whorehouse.

“There’s no need for SIN, here,” Ben responded with the utter warmth of his voice even stirring up the extras (however he paid only mind to Jim and Jim alone). “We are brothers, family, why should we destroy our community love? Please, Brother, don’t think ill of me for doing the Lord’s work,” Ben pleaded softly, while he reached into his pocket-without his eyes leaving Jim- and covered his fingers with the purple poison powder.

Jim lurked forward tapping the barrel of his guns together. The sound was deafening; as he walked ever closer to a contorted Ben-saying nothing, but death-nonetheless. He walked the last 7 feet-like a hammer hitting nails-and his hands were sweating dirt.

Jim grinned and asked hollowly,” Did she try and kill ya, Preacher?”

“Yes, of course she did, she had the VAPORS!”

“Did she ask for me in dying?”

“No, no she only asked for mercy, and I gave it.”

“Mercy is a knife without a handle,” shot back Jim emotionless and angry; with both his hands shaking out the care he did not feel. “Someone always gets cut. Preacher, I want to ask you one final question. The way you answer this, will decide if I blow your fuckin head off,” Jim said with a voice devoid of caring that only the undertaker knew well. He looked Ben up and down; with hatred in his eyes saved for murderers and dying hayfields alone.

“Yes, I have the answers to all your questions, Dear Brother,” Ben replied hollowly as he offered Jim his hand. “Please, Brother, ask me anything,” Ben pleaded with his legs tiptoeing towards Jim like they were walking on glass; while his hand-covered in poison-was extended out to Jim.

Jim did not even conjure up the thought of receiving him. He instead picked out Ben’s head with his gun; Ben’s face was white as morning toast from a broken toaster. Jim asked,” Did god abandon her, in her time of need?”

“What?”

“I will ask again, but not a third time,” responded Jim flatly as he failed to move an inch. “Did god abandon HER, in HER TIME OF NEED?”

Ben motioned with his hands up to the sky like it was beginning to rain; and he smiled like he’d won a new car and a haircut.

“She was lifted to a better place, a far greater place indeed,” Ben exclaimed hollowly with his arms catching planets that had just stopped falling. “God was here with her, and I channeled him through me,” Ben bawled with steel tears and heavy glances racing in unison down to Jim’s eyes. He smiled with his hand jutting into his pocket-as he knew poison made lifelong friends of anyone-and got just a step away from Jim.

“Then you’re god?”

“Yes, in many ways.”

“Then all grievances stop with you?” Jim wondered with a voice as cold as January. Ben lurked forward with his poison soaked hand to jam it into Jim’s mouth; but Jim simply smiled-and squeezed out some revenge served to Ben’s eye for free, one time only-and shot him dead as summer hockey.

The unaffiliated townspeople came outside and encircled Ben’s contorted (though not exactly done bleeding, hole as it was and all) body. Soon they started singing God takes his time as fast as he can (an old railroad hymn) and Jim simply kept on walking down Main Street like it was only going *his way*. The young boy-from before-chased after Jim and grabbed his hand suddenly. Jim bristled, and aimed his gun at the boy; it was taking Jim’s entire wherewithal to stop himself from shooting the young boy.

“Sir, you forgot her necklace,” Chester Helm-the small boy played by Walter Sing a soap commercial star-says unaware he is in any danger (like many people playing tag with a firearm find out) as he waves the gold necklace in front of Jim’s face. “Here ya go!” Chester said brightly.

Jim looked at the necklace momentarily-thinking of Jen-but turns and keeps on walking without taking the necklace.

“Good, good, o.k. we are still rolling on Jim 5<sup>th</sup> camera!” Laron demanded as he leapt from his director’s chair; he did this like he was jumping from an airplane without a chute. “Follow him to the end of the street. This will roll over the credits. JIM, shed me some tears if you would,” Laron yelled loudly as he watched the camera capture Jim’s improvisation.

Jim cried with his eyes looking off into the distance (for some distant star not yet found). Jim slowed and said solemnly, “I had my dream.”

“CUT!!” Laron shouted as if he had won the Powerball. “Great ending, Jim!” shouted Laron joyously. “Everyone let him hear it!” Laron yelled surprisingly as he rode up the street on a golf cart. Jim simply

kept walking; and then fell to his knees, then his back, and then flopped on the ground. He knew then he finally got to really act with the lights on in the theater. What a feeling!

Ben stood up; hugged Jen as hard as a jail cell-because he knew they all had something special there in that take-then he kissed her once on the lips.

“Ben, outstanding work,” Jen said honestly as she gave Ben a hug (more commonly seen only by grandmothers at Christmas) and smiled. She ran her finger down his nose-with a hint of flirting going on-and he beamed at this.

“It happened, what we all wanted happened,” Ben confessed as his eyes looked at the smiling faces of the extras. “I know this business; there won’t be another movie in your career this good. Won’t happen, but who cares, those are *our lines now*,” said Ben firmly as he peeled off his itchy clothes-smelling worse than the drunk tank-and wiped the fake blood from his face.

Jen eyed Ben keenly-as she knew then he was right-and she felt a certain prick of nervousness in her throat.

“Scoundrels!” snarled Jim at Ben and Jen as he rode over on the back of Laron’s golf cart. Jim laughed hard-like he’d farted in church-and stepped off the cart.

“NO way, you’re high,” Jen insisted as she ran over to Jim: hugged him hard, grabbed his pooper, and kissed him smack on the lips.

“I’m only high if the world is sober,” Jim answered sarcastically as he helped Jen pick him off the cart by leaning forward. “So I’m high, and hoping to get higher. Ben, you really blew it man, embarrassingly bad. No, I’m just kidding, it was atrocious,” Jim said sarcastically-meaning it if Ben wanted him too-as he chuckled and got kissed all over the face by Jen.

“This releases in August, you know what that means don’t ya?” Ben asked hollowly; hoping to throw Jim for a loop and cost him the Oscar.

“I know, but I’m not gonna say it,” Jen admitted cautiously as she danced over to Ben. “I’m not ruining my karma. Jim, do you want your karma ruined?” asked Jen as she felt all over Jim’s crotch like a late for prison suit maker.

“NO, WAY,” Jim snapped as he made the “you’re out at first” sign. “I’m not even saying those words until someone tells me I should. God, it’s not far off, what 8 months or something?” asked Jim hollowly as he knew just when it was; but he needed Ben thinking about it openly to get him to choke. “God, there’s still time to do that gorilla talking baby, bank heist movie. And don’t we all want to see that one?” Jim asked as he finally got Ben to laugh out loud. Ben could see Jim evolving as his confidence grew-and his arrogance-and it made him nervous.

“Jim, that is so true,” Ben said coyly as he pointed to the deep blue sky. He knew what he was doing, knew it all too well. “And you forgot the buddy picture with a talking snail, huh? You’ll win something for that one. Jim, can we get outta here? I need to pass out, and then sleep for a week,” Ben said with a fleeting smile; however Jen watched the extras spontaneously shout out uncontrollably, as they gave the 3 of them a standing ovation.

Ben looked over cautiously; and it caught him by surprise. He wouldn’t let his mind think of Oscar, not this time, he told himself.

They left Paramount studios on a high; and went to their separate homes. Jim slept for 2 days (and Jen for 3) as the feeling of sleep felt real once more. Jen awoke after the 3<sup>rd</sup> day; and saw on the news there was a forest fire in the hills. She instantly thought of Ben’s house and called him up. Her thoughts were of Ben being besieged by a horrible tragedy, after coming *so close*.

“Ben, are you o.k.?” Jen cried in a trembling voice.

“Yes, for now anyway,” he told Jen. “It seems the fire is on the other side of our ridge. The police tell me I can stay, but it’s iffy. I don’t know ah...what exactly to do,” confessed Ben sadly, his mind unable to focus, but thinking he might die today. “Julie wants to stay, because she can’t bear us losing all our memories. But I ah...I don’t want to die over some trophies and pictures. So, I don’t know,” Ben admitted anxiously as he lit up a cigar and took a drag; as he was more nervous than Jen had ever heard him be.

“I’ll tell you what, load all the things you can into your limo and run,” Jen insisted as she started walking around in circles. “There’s no point staying where you could die. Trust me, you’ll thank me later.”

“Yeah, yes, yes we’ll do just that, hold on a second,” Ben said mildly as he looked around the room; then Jen could hear him yelling in the background. “We’re going, Julie, just start filling the limo! Yes we’re gonna make it, just hurry.” Ben spoke reassuringly, “O.k. then, we’ll take care of it. I’ll be at the Beverly Hills hotel if you need me. Just ask for Herman Crackapple, that’s my code name. Jen, I gotta go, bye for now,” Ben said quickly as he pressed in on his implant (this hung up the phone). And he scrambled to get all their possessions together. He felt like the last turkey in the barn come Thanksgiving.

Jim listened keenly to Jen talking; and he quickly raced upstairs from their gym in the basement. He walked over and put his hand on Jen’s head-thinking he had to be a caring person even if he wasn’t scared-and the gesture shocked her out of her feelings of dread for Ben. Jen turned to him impatiently, crying. Jim asked, “What’s up?”

“Oh, I’m very worried about Ben; there are fires in the hills,” Jen said as emotionally, she felt like wet paper. “I know this thing happens all the time, but I worry, that wife of his will do something stupid. What does he see in her, that blabbermouth?” Jen raised her voice as she sat Indian style; karate chopping Jim gently on the back with the side of her hand.



“Sex, more sex, and slave labor,” Jim said as he tried not to grin. “That woman: can dig a ditch, make a teepee from dirt, and sing ‘til their one cow Rufus comes home. These are things all wives need, and men covet. Quite frankly, I could go for a good ditch digger myself. Ya know ah, you could go and dig me one, please, Kind Lady?”

Jen looked at Jim wide eyed-as if he had stolen her kitten-and with her mouth agape (she tried not to show any happy teeth for Jim just then).

“No, you dig your own ditch, Mister,” Jen said. “Hey, we should call Fred, Scott, and Jack-a-lack. I’ll do it,” Jen said as she used her mind to think of Fred’s number; and a moment later her implant called him.

“Yeah, gaffer Fred here,” Fred answered drunkenly as he sat eating a cold cheeseburger.

“Fred, we need to know if you’re alright, well are you?” Jen asked using a garrulous tone; that spilled out of her in times of stress. “Are you o.k.?”

“In my pad, eating a pretty good cheeseburger,” Fred replied as he tried to keep his eyes open. “Why do you ask?” Fred asked drunkenly, and he sat back and coughed until his back hurt like a bricklayer’s.

“Good, it’s just the hills are burning again, I was worried.” Jen knew she had to calm down-as she knew she’d end up playing the crying game if she didn’t-and this left her no choice, but to buck-up. “I’m going to invite you up here to our apartment, so we can all hang out. Are you up for it?” Jen hoped as she watched Jim doing pushups on the floor; he had his shirt off and his muscles were rippling like late November football practice.

“Yeah, can do, give me like 20 minutes,” Fred said as he pulled on his pants. He had to cover his pale, thin and boney legs that he owed to his Canadian hockey playing father; his stay at home mum gave him his humility-and not so average height. “BYsy!” Fred said sounding lackadaisical, and regretting his goodbye the second it came out his mouth. He looked at his cheeseburger; then tossed it hard into the

ship made of Budweiser cans on the window sill. Fred threw on some dirty socks and a hoodie; and hurried went up the stairs to Jen's apartment.

Jen laughed at his pathetic-junior high girl's cheer squad-goodbye, so hard, she fell off the bed. She composed herself after a minute; and called Jack and Scott; they were fine and far from in any danger just 2 floors down from her. She invited them over-still laughing though at Fred in between her words-and they all raced their butts up to her place.

Ben and Julie had finished loading up the limo: and looked back to see their house starting to burn. Ben took one last look as they drove away, and he was reminded of several orgies he had held there in his younger years. He wondered if anyone had ever had as much fun as he did back then.

"Ben, I need to know if we have insurance?" asked Julie, she was calculating the insurance money already.

Ben grinned, then shrugged his shoulders and said coyly," Yes and no." Ben bounced on the heels of his designer Gucci shoes and laughed. "Yes if it matters to you, and no if it don't. Just kidding, YES we have insurance, and we are fine. Julie, remember the parties, not the fire. Do me that favor," said Ben as he reached over and put his arm around Julie. Julie melted into his embrace like butter in a hot pan.

"I will," responded Julie sadly as she waved goodbye to the house. "And those lovely drapes," Julie spoke with her voice tinny but clear. They rode out the front gate; and saw flames on either side of the street. The paint on the limo was being cooked right off of it like new cheese-Ben wondered if they'd be cooked alive- and the metal was melting. The driver swerved to miss a falling tree (lit up like a stack of newspapers in a bonfire).

"Holy shit!" cried Ben as his thoughts started to race. "Get us out of here!" growled Ben angrily, as he saw flames not even 3 feet from his window. He knew then he might die a horrific death and never win *the big one, Oscar.*

“I’m trying, Sir!” yelled the driver frantically as he swerved out around the flaming debris. “They’re everywhere!” he shouted nervously, as he tried to swerve in and around the balls of flames-that were coming from Mr. Barker’s 200 year old English rose garden-and raining down on the street like the winter’s heaviest (buy a shovel) snowstorm

Instantly the windows started to melt, then suddenly they all burst. The inside of the limo was so hot, it felt like they were being pressed face first onto a barbecue pit in some *extra’s backyard*.

”NOT NOW GOD, NOT NOW!!!” screamed Julie.

Ben shielded her from the bursts of flames (there was one every second, and he hoped it would be enough) that shot in the windows every so often. He sat there like old butter and wet bread, knowing full well they had a 50/50 chance of living.

“All quiet now, please stay quiet,” Ben demanded as his eyes darted from side to side like a puppet at the circus. “We’re fine, the road is clearing out up ahead. Just hold tight, Julie, we’ve seen worse,” Ben said as he hugged Julie; and he could feel the back of his jacket starting to get *red hot*. He rolled over and put out the flames-on the stainless steel General Electric fridge-and then clutched Julie.

“I don’t want to die, too early for that, Ben,” Julie said tearfully as her eyes welled up with fear; and she felt like she was looking through a waterfall. “I dunno. Please let us through, please let us almighty god,” Julie begged tearfully as she clutched Ben’s forearm so tight it left a red tattoo.

They could see a man in flames; and he came running out of his driveway just ahead. He turned-with eyes only ambulance drivers have to see-and sprinted towards the limo. He poked his flaming head in the window and Ben saw it was Larry.

“Larry?” Ben’s asked in a shrill voice, giving Julie a panic attack. “Oh god, STOP!!!” shrieked Ben as he put out the flames on Larry’s face and hair (he did this with his jacket by batting it down and out).

Larry said, "We did it," and fell backwards onto the pavement like a mannequin being pushed by a rambunctious teen.

"Help him, Ben, quick!" Julie pleaded as she wiped away her tears; and she looked out the window at a pair of women in flames (and they would surely be calling the funeral home from heaven for coffin advice before long)

Ben jumped out and spied some Harikrishnas; they were dancing around fire kissed branches and cars. He looked at one hoping for emotion; but he saw nothing *but stoned* coming off of him. He bent down and looked Larry in the eye, and saw his friend staring back momentarily, but then seizing up a second later. He knew enough to know leaves are always dead, and so was Larry. He heard a loud thunderous ripping of branches above him; and he could see a large branch of the Sycamore tree hanging over the limo (and about to snap). He knew those flames would kill Julie dead; therefore he quickly jumped back into the limo.

"Get us outta HERE!" Ben shouted with venom in his voice. "Damn it, Julie, he's dead," Ben said angrily, as he slapped his hands hard together a single time. The limo sped away-Ben sobbing into his hands, and wishing for help from anywhere it would come from-and the tree fell right where they had been a moment ago.

From the intense heat around them and the endless high end debris floating through the air (Literally handbags that cost more than the average person's paycheck) Ben felt like he had no more luck left to use. They raced around the winding hills-like someone who could pay the fucking ticket would-and saw mansion after mansion in flames. People were carrying Emmys and Oscars, as they fled their mansions. Ben had to double take: at the who's who of famous people he saw running for it. He didn't help them, as it was not the thing to do for strangers in Hollywood. He simply sat and watched some of them die; mostly from falling trees and intense heat so hot they were dead before they knew it. And he watched all

this through the hole where the rearview window had been. It looked like a bad movie, and he hated being the star.

“If we live I love you, if we don’t I always did,” Julie insisted as she checked her purse.

Ben looked over at Julie after saying this; and he started to cry without the tears. He knew he was lucky to have her at his side, but until now he didn’t know how lucky.

“I know, Gorgeous, I always did,” Ben caressed her arm and kissed her about the face. “Damn, if this isn’t the worst of days, then I *can*, wait for tomorrow. Ya know time never stops chasing the standing. You can run, but it will catch you sure as hell if you don’t,” Ben said philosophically as he started to weep; and he thought of losing his dear friend Larry. He wished they had left sooner; and maybe (though it was frowned upon) not been so hardheaded. He looked out the window and saw now they were nearing the last of the flames rising in a gyre. He breathed a sigh of relief; that quickly faded into deeper thoughts. He was alive, he thought, thank god.

Julie, Fred, Scott, Jack, and Jim were watching the flames from their rooftop on beanbag chairs marked FREE IF YOU TAKE THEM. They watched as all the fire crews would go into the flames and the people came barreling out (most of which in flames). Many of their cars were discarded; this happened when their garages caught fire unexpectedly. They all knew it was every man and women for themselves, but they regretted being assholes to everyone, just a little. The new HOLLYWOOD AND STARLAND sign was engulfed in a torrent of flames. Out the sides of it wannabes fell helplessly out with their clothing in flames. They weren’t famous yet, but *they still knew they were big time* (even as they burned to death). If you can’t rejoice when all around you there are worries-and carcasses most foul-then you just aren’t enjoying this festival of life enough, thought Jim.

“Is this really happening?” Jim asked unsure he was even awake. “Because I am *blown* away right now,” said Jim as he watched a famous male actor come running out of the fire-more than scale actor in

fact-and past the ravaged hills; and he was wearing nothing and carrying 2 Oscars. Jim looked right at him; and he didn't even notice Jim at all.

"What the heck, why isn't there some sort of firehouse or firefighters already up there?" Fred wondered as he swallowed hard (the bile of fear). How dumb are they?" Fred asked, unaware just how dumb and corrupt city hall officials often are in L.A. He drank the last of his warm Coors light; and stood there shifting his weight from foot to foot unknowingly.

"Yeah, that idea of the firehouse is WAY smart, Fred," Jim said in disbelief, as he watched a man in flames run smack into a gold Rolls Royce.

"Seems like the kind of thing you'd think of first, not when everything's *burning*," Jen said as she rubbed her sweaty forearm with the back of her hand. "I don't know," Jen said, as she stood there wearing just a swimsuit under a purple paisley design bathrobe. She looked like she was modeling it to Jack's eyes though. Jack had missed the amazing way Jen thought when she was around.

"Jen, you gave me what, but you're not giving me that," Fred said sarcastically as he acted like he had a reptilian tongue; he did this by trying to lick a large mosquito flying around Jen's neck. "Come on now."

Jen looked at him cross-eyed. This is surely not Fred's favorite look. "Fred, the *that* is one the way, and it will be furious so *that* ya know. And when THAT, is enough, they'll be more that, and moose that. Then you'll get hit in the head with that. And say what was that?" joked Jen as she stepped on Fred's toe and grabbed the tip of his tongue. "And then some more that'll come, and you wish for less that. HUH, there's that," Jen said sarcastically as she gave Fred a few playful shoves with her shoulder (like a lineman for the Patriots would do if they had a decent contract).

"Great, that's mo THAT, than I had in mind," Fred said sarcastically, as he spazzed out and threw his beer can into the chair in front of him.

Fred smirked: grabbed another beer, jumped in the air, and then took a long drink. He tossed-what was left of his beer (almost all) off the roof-and it was kicked by a famous actress running down the street in black workout clothes. Her name was Natasha Gulp: and like all good looking women in Hollywood, all men knew her first for her perfect ass. She stopped and glared up at Fred; knowing she'd get even with him someday that prick.

“Well, let's go find the right flames to cheer for,” Jim said as he stretched out his middle finger to some tourists below. “See, the flames burning that red house, I'm not cheering for them, I have standards. But oh BUT, the one on that left fellow's yellow hair. That baby, can burn all night. I hate that prick from the gym,” Jim said sarcastically ignoring the man's cries. He grinned instead, and watched several swarms of birds flying out of the Malay/Blue-jays/Ravens/Peacocks/and a few Robins. They looked to be exotic and he knew the elite were free to save them, because he was busy (doing nothing).

“Oh yes, I just realized something,” Jack looking around with the nervous eyes of a criminal.

“What would that be, Jack?” asked Jim as he waved to the dead in the streets.

“The whole thing could burn,” Jack moaned as he was hyperventilating. “The hills, the city, the landmarks, all of it!” said Jack breathlessly as he hit his chest. “Then they'd have to build it all again, but it wouldn't have the history. I don't know, maybe some places are just meant to be dead,” Jack said philosophically as he rubbed his chin. “Think about it, all the murders and deceptions that have happened here. Right here, where we're standing, people have been murdered, raped, and destroyed. You'd have to think there'd be a settling up at some point. Why not here, why not now?” asked Jack as his voice betrayed him and went faint. He watched the flames and continued smoking a cigar with quick bursts of nervousness surging through his smoke.

Jim watched Jack intently as he smoked his cigar. He knew Jack was almost wishing for something like this to happen. Jen was thinking this too, but she didn't know why he would be so jaded (even

though she shared his viewpoint). Jen spun around and saw a litany of ambulances and police cars flooding past their apartment. She followed the cars racing along with her eyes; and their-serious as a heart attack- driving methods; as they ran over cats and nearly people as well.

They were seated there the bulk of the day, their way of self punishing themselves for making light of the situation. When the final hours of the next night found them sleeping on the roof; Jim awoke and saw a burglar climbing up the side of the building. He stood up and hurried over to the edge of the roof. He looked into the eyes of the Latino man, and saw his anger. Jim pulled his leg back and kicked him hard in the face. The game winning goal sent him end over end down to the pavement below. His head split open like a Halloween pumpkin as it smashed on the street. Jim looked around and thankfully no one had seen. He snuck back to his chair and pretended to be asleep; as he saw Fred starting to wake up (and he panicked).

Fred looked around and then dosed off again like Thanksgiving turkey, and Jim had gotten away with it.



## Chapter 7

### Waking up alive

Six months shot past them like a hornet passing your ear; and everyone was getting nervous. They all knew the Oscar nominations were tomorrow; and it was all anyone could talk about-*or lie about the fact they weren't talking about it* -all day long. Ben and Jim had both won: Golden Globes, Screen Actor's Guild awards, and every other award there was. Jen had won only the Screen Actor's Guild award for best actress (she said that was the only *real award*) and she was happy. The sun was hotter than new tar under your bare toes; and they were all heading to Laron's for a party.

Ben and Julie had moved in with Laron; Ben's need to live a certain life often made it hard to live with people; meaning they were eager to move out. Of all the mansions-that aren't made of plastic and have Barbie living in them-Laron's was posh and untouched by the flames. Even his front yard was untouched due to the lack of vegetation (and the tall concrete walls surrounding it *helped too*). It stood there some 8 stories high; jutting out like a fat kid's head at lunch. The night was beginning to sneak into everyone's pants, and the house was filled with all sorts of colorful people (not necessarily clean though). Laron didn't mind anyone who could gab; regardless of how much money they had in their pockets (he just wanted *his hand in those very pockets*).

“So...I guess we should accept we’ll never win anything,” Jim used a garrulous tone to see if anyone would buy it. “I mean awards, the ones you win, they’re for other people, not us, Jen,” Jim put on his best sad face, but Jen wasn’t buying it. “People like us do our best acting at the bottom end of the porn industry. Hell, that’s where we’re headed, and I don’t like it!” Jim said sarcastically as he strutted around bumping into every chair in the room (even though he was not drunk or high) and then tripped himself on a sock. “What, oh this is funny to you. Great, I’ll be knee deep in knees, Baby, and you’ll be spending my loot. Still laughing huh, well aren’t you a bad friend. Couldn’t you at least consider prostitution?” Jim went on sarcastically as he sat down in the upstairs den (with one leg draped over the armrest of a 14<sup>th</sup> century antique chair). Jen was laughing her head off; and wondering how Jim could be calm and cool as the Marlboro man with the nominations looming.

“Because she’s already won,” Ben said as he rose to his feet and finished his glass of Cognac. “Hey, Jim, how’s the waiting treatin’ ya?” Ben asked as he breezed into the room, and went right for the Cognac.

Jim grinned at this, and got up and walked over to get his own glass of Cognac. Jim didn’t feel so bad about taking a glass since Ben was already drinking it. Jen took note and gave Jim the “Don’t get drunk and arrested look” *he knew that one so very well.*

“I could be better,” Jim replied, as he grinned like he’d stolen your last piece of cake. “My neck hurts from fidgeting. My mind just wants to joke the whole time, when I know I should be serious. It hurts, it really does,” Jim rubbed his neck and pinned his eyes on the ceiling. “I’ll tell ya though, this has been the tornado of odd days. Oh, I forgot to tell you. I talked to this director named Hemly Askcott. And Hemly wants me and Jen to be in his new epic. I could pass your name along if you’re available,” Jim said as he watched Ben pour his a cup of cognac, Jim knowing Ben was dying for a role like that. Why wouldn’t he, it was the script that would bring home Oscar glory, *and everyone knew it.*

Ben looked at Jim and saw he was serious about helping him-and it was some kind of role to be offered. Ben handed Jim his green goblet of Cognac and asked, "Really?" Ben decided to be coy and throw a nonchalant look to Jim. "Yeah I guess, I mean I would indeed, and it would be worth your while. Look what we just did with this last picture together, ya know. We could do it all again, Jim, one more hayride. Yes I say, please tell him I'm interested. If he asks, *very interested* o.k.?" Ben asked slightly anxious, using his breathing techniques to stave off the jitters. Jim looked around like he hadn't heard him, but he just wanted to torture him a bit.

"O.k., I'll take care of it," answered Jim with his goblet under his nose. "Jen here didn't believe me when I offered her the hooker role. But she believes me now, don't ya?"

"Yes I do, and it's stellar, Ben, you'll love this one," Jen said as she bent over backwards and did a handstand to get out of her chair. She walked over to the Cognac and poured herself a glass (a healthy glass at that).

"Good, very good then we'll be back in the free macaroni," Ben said optimistically with his eyes preoccupied with the TV; it was showing the racetrack results from the day before-and he thought he might have won some scratch (but he didn't know anything about the ponies).

"And chives," Jim said. "No, if they didn't pay me for acting, I'd be the richest poor guy ever. I might even collect cans, and STEAL nickels. Hey, I was destined to be rich," Jim said sarcastically as he sipped his Cognac; and he watched the hallway as people walked past naked as a jail shower. He started to feel the weight of the day (and the debauchery yet to come) with his eyes wide open.

"I mentioned the macaroni, what are you getting real money?" Ben asked sarcastically as he leaned in close to Jim and Jim mouthed the words "hundreds, 2 or 3" "Wow, they've been scamming me all this time, how could they?" protested Ben as he loosened up and forgot the nomination for a moment (close to 2).

Jim and Jen laughed like study hall at this; and then they heard the familiar sound of Laron entering the house with his usual flare. "Who's fucking on my CARPET?!" yelled Laron as he kicked a nude-red haired on top and black down bottom-women off his couch. "OH, I did invite you didn't I. Where's my Cognac?!" growled Laron as he pushed a tan skinned young actor out of the kitchen.

Jim, Jen, and Ben could hear this; and they downed their glasses of Cognac and hurried to the back end of the room. Each picked up a book-from the 5 story Indian village shaped bookcases-and then reclined on the red silk covered couches.

"Isn't Moby Dick spectacular," remarked Jen as she counted the droplets of blood on the wallpaper-unaware they were in fact that (and her count was 27). "I could read it all day," Jen said sarcastically with a Cheshire cat smile; she had the book Pride and Prejudice in her hands unbeknownst to Jim or Ben.

Ben glanced at his book; and he saw it was sex positions involving 10 people at once. He raised his left eyebrow like a suspicious cop, and continued reading. Jim laid back and hid his face under the opened version of Les Miserables. Jim knew he needed to catch some sleep-and a few moments to himself- and drink some Cognac to clear out the history of the moment that he couldn't escape.

"Oh god, the people I hang out with, ATROCIOUS," Laron snorted sharply as he entered the room holding a Poodle (colored purple and named Sacky). His eyes darted to where the Cognac was supposed to be; and he felt his collar getting sweaty when he saw it had been moved. "Where's my COGNAC?! Oh, there it is, there's my baby. 500 year old Cognac, the finest," Laron muttered with his hands caressing the bottle-as he often did *in his or anyone else's home*-and then he drank directly from it (another habit formed by sheer laziness). Ben saw this and grimaced-to drink after Laron was to drink from a toilet, but filthier-as he knew Laron wasn't the *safest or cleanest of people*.

"Is that you, Laron?" Ben asked coyly with his eyes pretending to be engrossed in the written word.

Laron nearly choked on the Cognac when he heard this; he was like a drunkard eating week old moldy bread and drinking stale milk by accident. Laron set down the bottle of Cognac, and waved to Ben. ” Yes it is, Ben, how’s being the best treating you?”

“Fine question, you are wise,” Ben agreed cheerily. “Well, better than humping brick and sailing a canoe. So, the usual, oh is that Cognac?”

“Yes, but I can’t spare a spec,” Laron said hollowly as he had 3 more bottles downstairs (he was just too lazy to go get them). “If anyone had DRANK any of this, I would have been RAGING Laron. We both know raging Laron, and we don’t care to see him again. God, delicious Cognac, and may there always be some,” said Laron then he took another drink (from the bottle again). “And, may I always own it. Where’s everyone else?” Laron asked as he took several pulls from the bottle of Cognac-with burps suitable for anywhere people aren’t. Laron could feel his party buzz coming on, and that meant *horny*.

“Aahh Jim and Jen are sampling your book collection,” Ben barely looked over as he sold the scene from all angles. “See, Jim liked that book so much, he fell asleep inside it. And Jen looks to be engrossed in some fine fiction,” Ben said as a murderous black bear smirk crept across his face. He spun his finger in a circle-seeing as Laron would think it meant something and try to solve it, but it really didn’t mean anything-giving Jim and Jen some precious time to get ready.

Laron walked over and spied Jim sleeping; and it made him feel *a whole lot better*. He had a thing for award winners at his parties; he knew he’d be laughed out of town if they didn’t show up.

“Good, good then, are they staying?” Laron asked.

“Yes, Laron, I’ll be here all night,” Jen answered as she sat forward and pretended to hold a sneeze in. “Jim here will be eating your tofu as well. Great seeing you again,” said Jen, and she stood up and discretely pushed her Cognac glass under the couch, *with her foot*. Then she walked-smiling brightly and showing no fear-over to Laron.

“Thank you, Jen. Is Jim asleep?”

“Yeah, he’s been going right out since yesterday,” Jen confessed, as she stood there with her arms behind her back; and her neck was cocked like a chicken. “So he has to be pretty tired by now, thus slumbers. Hey, I heard there’s supposed to be a band here tonight. Hmm, did I hear right?” asked Jen as she hugged Laron with her right arm. Jen was hoping to see this hip new band called Hey Pop, because she loved their hit single, Glue is love.

“Well, I shouldn’t say, but you are an award winning actress,” Laron beguiled her with a childlike giggle. “I’ve got the band Hey Pop coming at one. Don’t tell anyone, I don’t want the bad party people in here to ruin our time. Now, about Jim there, is he up for some drinks? Maybe a movie or something else?” asked Laron coyly as his eyes undressed Jim’s crotch; and hoped for a night alone with Jim.

“I really don’t know, he said he’s been changing his views on the world,” Jen said hollowly as she felt her own left hip; but she looked for a place to go and laugh after she was done talking. “You might have a chance, Laron, but I’m not sure. I’ll ask him when he wakes up. Which, should be, right about, now,” said Jen as she started swinging her fist back and forth at Jim’s crotch. “HEY, JIM NUTS, ARE YOU HORNY?!” yelled Jen as she slid on top of Jim and kissed his forehead like a squirrel kissing a sunflower seed (as they often do before they eat them).

He was annoyed by this and let his angry eyes do the talking-they told Laron he was a rough ride and he liked that-and Jim nodded once.

“Not at the moment, but maybe later,” Jim considered. “I need to lay here for awhile, my head is spinning like junior high prom,” said Jim as he yawned. “Oh, where are Jack and Scott? They said find them at eleven, and its 11:10 now,” Jim spoke as if he had found a new reason to breathe. He slid back onto the bed like a tired woodchuck on his dam; and hoped Jen would go look for Jack and Scott for him-even though he didn’t want to be left alone with Laron.

Jen straightened up on the edge of the couch. She rolled her eyes at Jim and asked, "Really? You want me to go looking for them?"

"You're right, I brought it up," Jim said. "Alright fine, I'm up and I'm ready to go in search of Jack and Scott. Oh hey, Laron, how's it going?"

"Great, Jim, you look amazing!" Laron replied quickly, his smile looked like he'd just had some chocolate cake-with cake all through his teeth and some frosting on his lower lip like a middle school tyke- and he had pink ribbons in his hair (that made Jim nervous and think about all the sexual acts Laron had done routinely, *that would make Jim hurl to do or see*).

"Thanks, it's nice of you to say," Jim agreed as he forced a smile. "Well, I sure could go for a nice glass of wine, Laron, and more than a whole whale to eat. Is there some booze anywhere close?" Jim asked coyly as he set his book on the table and lifted himself up like a champion powerlifter (from the hips first).

"Yes, just a second." Laron blushed as he hurried over and poured a glass of Cognac. He checked his pocket for a good knockout drug, *but there were none*-this infuriated him beyond belief-and he walked over to Jim and sat down beside him. Laron handed him the glass. Laron smiled, "There you go, Talent."

"Thank you, now to go find the knuckleheads," Jim answered as he took a small sip-knowing there were floaters in the Cognac he didn't want to drink-and he looked around like a bored bounty hunter in the cold. "And I bet they're in some remote corner of the house. Which means a good long hike," Jim said sadly. "Laron, this is great Cognac by the way. Great girth and meaty quality to it; tastes perfect for me right now," said Jim hollowly as he drank the Cognac carefully. He had his suspicions Laron was thinking about some sort of tryst; and Jim REALLY wanted no part of that. He stood there looking at Ben, as Ben leaved through a book near the doorway (*How to keep a lover without CHAINS*, was the title).

“My, the worm is fat and squiggly wiggly now,” Jen said slyly as she stared at Jim’s crotch. “I think that means something, I don’t know,” Jen got up and waltzed through the room like a ballerina of a bygone era.

Jim smirked, and as he did Laron quickly stood up like a firework into a Fourth of July sky.

“Going somewhere, Jim?” Laron inquired coyly-knowing he needed to bed Jim down before he was whoring himself all over town; and he lifted his hair into Jim’s peripheral vision.

“Yeah I gotta take a shit,” Jim declared flatly. “And then I’m going to find some friends. Thanks for the Cognac, I’ll see you a bit later,” Jim said with his legs walking casually over to Ben and Jen.

Ben chuckled into his book; and he made sure Laron couldn’t see him. Ben knew this story *all too well*-everyday in Hollywood it happened hundreds of times-and he wasn’t going to be surprised when something happened between them.

“YES!” Laron said enthusiastically as he clapped his hands together 5 times. “Later, I’ll be waiting,” Laron said and he waved with just the fingers on his right hand (and smiled like Hell’s last doorman).

Jim looked at him perplexed; and then waved once with his left hand.

“Jim, don’t drink anymore of Laron’s wine,” insisted Ben as they walked down the hallway. They saw a pair of naked men run past covered in glitter (Jim knew he could have missed that memory and been happy with his life) then a 500 pound white woman wearing *only heels and nothing else*, came meandering out of one of the rooms like a dying elephant and she made a “Can I bum a smoke” gesture and Jim shook his head no.

“That was odd, why shouldn’t I drink his liquor?”

“You’ll wake up a changed man, that’s all I can say,” Ben said. But he wondered. Was this the beginning of Jim’s downward spiral (as naiveté was seen as weakness and soon corrupted in L.A)? “Just



stick to beer, but not his. Oh, the press found their way in, here we go, Jim. You either win it or lose it right now. Hello, Heath, Mitchell party, how are you?" asked Ben smoothly as he walked up to a pair of reporters-sharing a smile he saved for real life-who were from the Hollywood Insider and the L.A. Times entertainment division.

Jim saw this and made sure his chest was flexed-to show strength and fine breeding-and his jaw line at an angle for pictures (and he wanted many of those taken or what's the point). Jim walked casually over to them. He said coyly," Oh hey, great seeing you guys. What sort of mischief are you into now, Heath?" Jim went on. "Come on, there's always something."

"Ben, and lovely, Jim, great seeing you both," Heath said as he grabbed both of Ben's wrists and caressed them. "So, Ben, what would it mean for you to win the Oscar? Taking into careful consideration it's the last mountain that needs climbing," Heath said coyly-knowing he could ruin Ben if he said the wrong thing during the interview, and half hoping for just that-as he held his wrist implant recorder to Ben's mouth.

"You don't win something like that, it becomes you," Ben fired back effortlessly with a debonair smile. "It's not an award anymore, it's the *only* award. I'll tell ya what though," Ben leaned in close," as long as the extras are talking me up, o.k. I must be doing something right. Hey, don't forget to ask Jim here the same question," Ben said as he watched Jim refuse to squirm-showing he had a superior talent-and tapped Jim hard on the shoulder.

"Jim, ah...same question."

"Heath, if it were all bad, your whole life," Jim said with his hands accentuating every word and move of his head. "Ya know, nothing but wrong turns, bad breaks, and endless depression," Jim continued, "One night, *one certain night*, would make up for all of that and then some," Jim paused only briefly and said, "Seeing as this is my first movie; that people responded to it in an enormous way. My feeling is, and has been, I can't be mad at losing, or coming close regardless," Jim said as he pulled out his wallet

and his old driver's license (it showed him with a full head of long curly blonde hair and a red goatee, smiling like an extra) and Heath inspected it. "See, that guy is the reason I can't ask for anything; because no one deserves to ever feel that they've deserved their good fortune in this town. Still though, I think Ben here is gonna win it, WOO! Go Ben!" Jim said coyly as he pumped his fists and put his arm around Ben, and gave him a good hard shake. Jim knew the play Ben was trying; and he also knew turnabout was fair play-*or he could forget about the Oscar.*

"Well we can only hope," Mitchell shot back as he fussed with his red frame Armani sunglasses with blood red tint. "Ben, what are you wearing?" Mitchell wondered, as his long pointy nose got as close to Ben as you could (without poking his eye out).

Jim stood there grinning mischievously-sometimes you just don't care and you fly by the seat of someone ELSE'S PANTS-and he was acting like he was really eager to hear Ben's reply. He knew it's not what *you think* that matters; it's what *they think you're thinking that matters.*

Ben nodded. Then said hollowly," Twenty years of good times, and many more I hope. When luck finds you as a friend, all's you'll ever wear from then on in, is memories," said Ben as he shook his head and looked down. "I've had my share of silken cloth, enough to know it suits a man like me. Jim, is that cotton or polyester? It looks outstanding!" said Ben coyly with his right hand feeling his forehead; and he laughed with Heath and Mitchell.

Jim acted oblivious to what he had been asked; like a polar bear to the snow. "It's called ALL MAN, and it's all I ever wear *all the time,*" Jim explained. "And when that dirty, *less man,* and *more still* come my way. Hey, we all know the struggle, of the polyester sect. They smell funny, like cheap cologne at the rice and filthy beggar market. So for them, I'm going to the Oscars-if nominated-in nothing but hope and dreams," Jim said jokingly, and he tried not to laugh, but with Mitchell and Heath laughing as hard as they did, it made it very difficult.

Jen watched all this going down, and she sidestepped them using a secret staircase in a black painted closet reading DON'T TOUCH MY AIR BITCH. She walked down a poorly lit deep molasses colored staircase; and past several cases filled with young men's clothing. She found another closet behind a spinning wooden door; and it appeared to be concealed with old brooms and women's clothing. She opened the door-not sure if she should in the first place-and saw Scott and Jack standing there drinking champagne (out of *Laron's private stock*).

"Oh hey, Jen, there's bubbles in my beer," Scott said as he did a quick slumping over motion onto one leg-he was wearing Laron's silk red robe and duck slippers-and somehow found his balance enough to keep from falling.

"Scott, if he catches you, he will have you buried in pig shit," Jen said in disbelief, as she bolted past Fred and Scott to make sure they were safe. "Not air, but the actual shit you can bath in, that shit. And that tends to hurt the neck, like bad, bad neck. I'm trying to warn you, Scott, don't get caught," Jen said sarcastically as she poured her own glass; and then she draped her arms around the necks of Scott and Jack; like a brown bear would its crying cub.

Scott said sarcastically: "I told you, Jack." And he threw the last sip of his drink in the trash.

Jack chuckled at this and tossed back-as if he had been drinking apple juice-another glass of champagne. Jack had a feeling if he got drunk enough-like first year at the frat house drunk (pledging and all)-he could dazzle someone famous.

"This is a weird room, why are there boxes of champagne and wine everywhere?" Jen wondered aloud as she led them through the small storeroom filled with: pies, cakes, and giant bottles of Dom Perignon. There were posters of all of Laron's hit movies; and they were making love to each other all over the walls and doors leading in.

“His decorator is half bear cub, and all skunk,” Jack said as he pushed a red hat off a hat rack; causing the whole pile of hats to fall to the floor. “You can’t decorate if you’re a skunk, there are rules about that,” Jack said sarcastically. He watched Jen peeking out the main doorway in-leading him to believe they were all too drunk not to get caught. She saw there was a grand dining hall with a hundred foot dark red maple table. It had inscriptions all over it like” Monroe was a choirgirl compared to me” and another reading” I only know how to blow it if I get bored kicking ass.” Laron’s houseguests brought a certain flare to everything they did. The table smelled of sex and pot; and was covered in place settings-most in the higher tax bracket-that had silver dishes at each. And there were seven cabinets around the length of the table shaped like asses.

“Yes, and those rules I break daily,” Scott responded with a coughing made up sea captain voice.

“Liar, you do not, Scott,” snapped Jen sarcastically as she bumped her head into Scott’s back. “No one dares break those rules. Hmm, let’s have a seat,” Jen offered simply, as she drank her champagne and eyed a TV on the wall. She wondered if they could watch the Oscar nominations from that room. She felt her heart beginning to race-she wanted to win the Oscar worst than anything-and her head was spinning.

“Nope, I refuse to sit unless you can smell my finger,” Scott demanded drunkenly as he fell hard into a chair face first. “I was hoping Jack would if you’d ask him, Jen.”

“The answer is no,” Jack grunted.

“Jack, come on I’d do it for you,” Scott said as his eyes looked around the ceiling-not sure what he was looking at, but curious-and saw odd bits of wood poking out due to dead bodies Laron had hidden there over the years. “Man, the hypocrisy in this world. It’s like people do the opposite of what they say or something,” Scott said as he used his feet to balance his chair on one leg.

Jen looked around in the cabinets for a TV remote control-half hoping to find some chocolate bars. She saw a small drawer on the side of a brown cabinet, and it was partially open. She reached down and opened it-not sure if it was filled with drugs *or worse, loose underwear*-and she found a pink remote control with Laron's face emblazoned on the side of it.

"Find something?" Jack asked.

"I found something, and I think it will work as well," Jen said happily as she inspected the remote; and she found it had several buttons she had never heard of like "Window of love" and "Passageway to heaven" "Let's see," Jen said as she aimed the remote at the TV and hit the power button. The TV turned on, and they could see a no holds barred orgy in the upstairs living room. It looked as if Hugh Hefner had sent over each month's playmate and playpal.

"No, it found you," Jack said brightly as he moved closer to the TV. He thought they were seeing the deceitful side of L.A. He knew they could get into trouble for even that small offense. "Jen, maybe we shouldn't be watching this?" Jack cautioned.

Jen looked at the remote-she was bargaining out a way to just look and get away with it; however, she couldn't resist trying another channel so she hit the Passageway to Heaven button.

"Seriously, Jen, turn it off and put it away," Scott demanded sharply. "We don't need the hassle of getting caught," Scott said nervously, and he got up quickly and checked the right door to see if anyone was coming. He saw a woman passed out-like Prom night-on the couch in the downstairs living room. He looked back at Jen; and she smiled mischievously at him.

"Maybe we should just see what Jim's up to?" Jen asked as she smiled (not the smile everyone knew her for, more nervous and small). "I'm sure he's not being a jerk to anyone right now," Jen hoped her lack of confidence in that moment would guide her to safety-like it invariably always did-and she started changing the channels like lottery balls. She saw Laron trying on dresses and punching a little person in

the head repeatedly-with that little person's head locked in a metal brace (unable to move even slightly, and in one of the upstairs bedrooms; with what looked like blood around Laron's mouth).

She knew then if someone were to walk in on them they'd be beaten up or killed (as sure as a rich man's got gold on his wrist). She hurriedly changed the channel; and when she did she saw several servants preparing a feast in a round purple room; and the room had a black and gold trimmed coffin shaped table in the center with the words "Nice take, I believed you were actually blowing it in that one" carved into the wood. There were 5 dead bodies lying on it that were being carved up by the guests. She had never seen that level of evil before-few had and lived to talk about it-and it struck her that they would do the same to her if they caught them. She looked at Scott and knew *this could happen to someone like them.*

"Man, what's he got planned for tonight?" Scott smiled glassily and cleared his throat twice fast.

"Who, Scott?" asked Jen, her now happy smile was fettered by fear and impossible anguish.

"Laron, he must be having a separate party for his closest friends," answered Scott with a frog in his throat that threatened his upper intestine, pause. "I mean, we were told there would just be snacks-snacks means it's not a *crazy party*. And not to use the left part of the house," said Scott as he looked around the room. "That looks like the left part, because the lights from the driveway are shining in through the window. Huh, try another channel, Jen?" Scott asked with his eyes up and on the TV-with his fear of death not impeding his desire to see someone else's naked life-and he waited patiently and set down his drink; and then he moved closer to the TV.

"I don't know, this could be real bad," Jen said calm, cool, and nearly collected, but her sweaty hands told a different story; feeling like summer water sprinklers had exploded in the palms of them. "What if we just leave this room, and really head back home? We don't have to stay here. No one would know if we left, right?"

“You’re right, Jen, but how do we get out without being seen?” Scott asked nervously his mind starting his hands to twitching; this before he even realized they were all in over their heads (and the agony of *fucking up bad* filled his mind)

“Walk,” said Jen flatly as she looked at the TV and saw flesh being thrown around the room.

“Walk where?” Jack asked bluntly.

“Walk right out the front door,” Jen explained. “Look, if everyone’s partying, then no one’s lingering near the front doors. Could you check to see if there’s anyone hanging out down there?” Jen asked as he perked up; now that her big time plan would keep them alive, things were good she thought. Jack jogged over to see if anyone was coming. It made him think of a Van Halen cover band concert he went to when he was 18; where he had to run for the front of the stage (and not get *trampled in the process*). His heart was sprinting downhill, and he felt a nervousness he hadn’t experienced since 3<sup>rd</sup> grade.

“Yeah that’s a good idea,” Scott agreed.

Jen hit the button again by accident; and she saw 3 men beating a black man-who was chained to a rusty cage-in a torch lit room filled with blood covered people (including Laron). All three of them looked at this-much like you’d look at an accident on the highway-and their bodies froze. Then they heard someone coming from the kitchen; and it felt like the Earth had reversed its orbit.

“SHUT IT OFF!!!” Jack barked sharply, as he looked around for a place to escape. He looked in the adjacent living room-praying for a redo of this night-and saw no one.

Jen slapped the power button; and they ran-like the running of the bulls-into the living room. There they saw only a coat closet and some 13<sup>th</sup> century antique furniture; and they quickly went inside and closed the door behind them (with a surgeon’s careful hands). Just as they did, a security guard for Laron named Roland Notch entered the dining room. Roland was 6 foot 6 inches of mountain tall; and weighed all of-too many snacks-400 pounds. He had on a black leather jacket with the face of Michael Jackson on

the front (during the Thriller years) and a Berretta on his hip. Roland instantly noticed the half full glasses, and he knew there were wolves in the henhouse. He felt one of them for warmth; and he could tell someone had just been in there.

“Where ya hidin’?” asked Roland loudly as he picked up the table-like it was your gym bag-and looked under it “Where you be?!” yelled Roland angrily as Jen, Jack, and Scott started to feel the moment-and their hands shook and they sweated through their clothes-while they hid in a closet.

“I saw we run for it,” Scott whispered, as he looked through a crack in the door and couldn’t see Roland yet (thankfully he thought, or he’d piss himself).

Jen looked around the closet-hoping for a gun or knife to use-and slowly ran her fingers through her hair; and then she pulled the skin on her face back. She felt for the back of the closet; and she saw it was deeper than she had originally had guessed (maybe there’s a way out, she thought).

“Hey, hey follow me,” Jen whispered as she pulled on Jack and Scott’s shirts. Scott was about to turn around when he saw Roland; and when he saw him he froze like summer lemonade. Scott knew then this-not unlike his great grandfather going to Vietnam-was fight or die time. He turned slowly to say something to Jen; when he saw Jack and Jen had disappeared into the back of the closet. He felt a loneliness that only people marooned on islands could comprehend. Where were they?

“Where you be?!” yelled Roland as he kicked a large leather chair out of his way. “Don’t you hide on me!” Roland yelled as he kicked the couch. “Where you be?!” asked Roland angrily as he checked behind the couch-one that had been soiled so many times even Laron wouldn’t sit on it-and got ever closer to the solitary closet.

Scott moved quickly through the rows of fur coats and paisley design jackets. He couldn’t see anything but blackness in front of him-leading to his heart speedometer burying the needle-and he started to panic. He walked forward as fast as he could-feeling as though he was about to fall off a mountain cliff



with every blind step-tripping on a fur coats and then making a loud thud when his knee hit the floor (so loud it was heard by all of Hollywood).

“Damn it!” Scott growled-like he’d punch anyone and everyone just then-and he felt his now hurt and bleeding knee (and made a face only caveman know for real). Scott crawled forward under another row of fur coats.

Roland heard that thud, but it took him a minute to figure out where it had come from. His eyes focused in on the coat closet now (a closet he had been banished to by Laron one night, for eating too many pieces of cake).

“I finds me you,” his commodious pants slipping down to the bottom of his butt; and then they are quickly pulled up. “I finds you, come out,” said Roland happily as his eyes grew wide. “Come on out now!” Roland yelled as he walked in an uncoordinated way over to the closet.

“OH shit, he had to hear me!” Scott said frantically using a voice he learned to avoid getting punched by strangers he’d insulted. “Come on, Jen, Jack, where are you?” Scott asked as he rose up-like a 12<sup>th</sup> round boxer having survived a knockout blow-and he ran through the seemingly endless closet (and coats that were worth more than his car). He knocked coats-any and every coat in sight not caring what they worth in Vegas-out of his way; and then he heard Roland open the closet door behind him (that creaking sound he would dread for the rest of his life). Scott lurked forward at this and tried to run, but the coats were tripping him up with every step.

“I hears that, I hears it,” Roland said greedily with a creepy smile. “Come on now, don’t make me run ya down,” Roland said coyly as he knew if he caught them down here-like many before-he was going to kill them (just as Laron had laid out in the house rules every Friday). He grabbed rack after rack of the fur coats; and he tossed them out of his way. Roland had 2 inches of headroom in the closet, but he felt cumbersome nonetheless.

Scott panicked, with his legs slipping endlessly; as he tried to move as fast as he could. He got to a point where he just started punching the coats out of his way. He flailed his arms like a junior high fistfight; and then felt no coats and saw nothing but blackness in front of him.

“Oh god, what now?” asked Scott nervously as he felt in the darkness-so black he couldn’t see anything, even himself-and tried to find a way to safety. “Where are you?” Scott asked frantically as he tried not to cough, but there was a pain in his throat from a small pizza he’d eaten earlier (it was repeating on him). He couldn’t take it and he loudly cleared his throat. Roland heard this CLEAR AS DAY; and Scott could hear him coming up from behind faster now, fast enough to catch him, Scott thought. He lurked forward and punched the wall; opening a secret doorway that led outside. Jen and Jack were standing there waiting for him at the bottom of some brass and white marble stairs (imported from France so Laron would have a story to tell). Scott said happily, “Oh thank god it’s you.”

“Where were you, Bonerhead?” Jen asked jokingly as she curtsied and smiled.

“Bonerhead” Scott didn’t like his new nickname one bit-seeing as he knew those things can stick more often than snow in winter-and he smirked at Jen. “Doesn’t matter, we gotta get going. That guy is in the closet!” Scott added quickly as he raced down the stairs and grabbed Jen and Jack by the forearms-Jen noticing the firmness of the grip and nearly taking offense-and he led them around some luxury cars. They all out sprinted for Jen’s car out front-which was through a series of large flower filled gardens. And each of the garden’s coy ponds sat in the middle under the moonlight. And all three of them started to *really run fast*.

Jen ran along beside Jack; and she kept looking back for Roland. She felt her breasts bouncing in an odd way; and she was about to say something funny about it when she heard the secret door to the closet thrown open, and she started running like an old west horse thief (*for her life*). She thanked god she had gotten her body into such great shape over the summer.

“I heard him,” Jen said her voice stronger now and biting Jack and Scott’s ears.

“I did too!” Jack said as he tried to keep his legs moving, but years of cigarette smoking were wearing him down fast.

“Keep moving, at least we’re closer to the front now,” Scott said mildly as he ran; but he really didn’t know if they were closer to the front seeing as it was as dark as tar out.

“I comin’ for ya!” Roland said as he giggled like a young kid. “I comin’ now! Are you out here, are’s ya?!” Roland asked loudly as he ran through the gardens as fast as he could, but he was not so surefooted. He kept stepping in the coy ponds-partly due to the wine he’d been drinking-and losing his balance momentarily.

“I just heard him, now what?” Scott asked as he worried they were running the wrong way.

“Hey, this isn’t Laron’s house,” Jen declared in disbelief as she eyed the large mansion shaped like a Lord of the Rings Hobbit (Frodo Baggins in fact). “Look, we’re heading towards his neighbor’s driveway. They must share a secret tunnel between the two. Oh man, we are so screwed,” Jen said sadly as she took a long-you’re getting shot today-breath.

“No we aren’t,” Jack insisted with his hair blowing around in the warm canyon breezes. “We’ll just ask his neighbor to hide us for a minute. Appeal to his tender sensibilities,” Jack replied-hoping he wasn’t talking completely out of his ass just then-and he ran around the front of a new lemon colored Lamborghini. He looked up and saw Nathan Link-a big name even among big names because of his vast wealth-standing there with a shotgun in his hands aimed directly at Jack.

“Nice plan, Jack, do we kill ourselves now?” Scott asked sarcastically as he put up his hands and stood there eyeing Nathan. Nathan looked at Scott-having never heard real small town humor up close-and he had a perplexed look on his face, but he thought they looked familiar for some reason.

“Scott, from the burger stand?” asked Nathan in disbelief as he moved closer to Scott. “What are you doing here?” Nathan asked as he lowered the shotgun and walked over to Scott.

“We were at the party at Laron’s, and got lost,” Scott said hollowly-as he tried to remember how he acted at work towards the customers, to grease the wheels better-and he stepped forward. “Wow, this is a nice place you’ve got here,” Scott remarked-still aware a large man was chasing them and probably going to kill him, but he didn’t want to be *rude*-and he stood there summing up Nathan’s mansion.

“Thank you, why are you all winded?”

“This security guard is after us and...he’s coming this way,” Jen replied as she heard Roland tearing through the trees. “Can we go inside please?” Jen asked nervously as she watched the trees in the garden sway with every big step Roland-who wore a size 23 shitkicker boot-took.

“Yes, this way please,” Nathan said, but he wasn’t surprised. He motioned-with his white gloved right hand-for them to walk right into a concrete wall. Jen spied this and thought him mad as Crazy glue breakfast. When Nathan got close; he pressed in a certain spot with his knee, and a secret door opened. They hurried inside and the door closed behind them with a soft whisper. This just as Roland stumbled out into the courtyard; falling face first onto Nathan’s Lamborghini (denting the hood).

“Damn runnin’ bunnies,” Roland blamed all life’s problems on those *crazy fucking rabbits*. He knew they were ruining his life every chance they got. “Man, I can’t play dumb, when Laron asks. Got to find them or...,” Roland trailed off as he put his hands on his knees and tried to catch his breath. He looked around and saw no trace of them anywhere (he knew those damn rah-bots were after him this night).

Meanwhile Jim was hanging out with some indie actors, in a late seventies style lounge. Ben was intrigued by Jim; and he was watching him from a good high vantage point-on a walkway above him. Ben had an inkling something was off about Jim; what was his character, he wondered to himself.

The room itself was shaped like a banana in length and height (Laron had learned discretion but no shame in any form; he knew the whole house was filled with phallic symbols and shapes). The room even had the words HE CAME TO CUM, WHAT ELSE dangling from the ceiling.

“So yeah, I grip this black bear by the nuts, and squeeze ‘em,” Jim said hollowly as he used his hands like a vice grip. “Then he tries to bat my head off, but I’m too quick for him. And I cold-cock him in the jaw,” said Jim hollowly as he smiled. “Then the full weight of his enormous body falls down on my head. I mean, if it weren’t for my lucky pocket knife, who knows what would have happened,” Jim lied like this more than he walked, and he walked a lot. He wanted them to think he was some sort of hillbilly mountain man; sprung fully formed from the Canadian wilderness.

“Then what?” asked Shade Giving intently, sitting across from Jim on a purple pillow and sweating from fear.

“What do you mean?”

“How did you find a way out?” Shade asked as he felt the sting of nervousness Jim wanted him too. “I mean, you’re here right?”

“Yes, I am here, I’m sure of it,” Jim responded as he started to pull up his sleeves and stretch out his arms (he knew that would scare them even more, and for that reason alone Jim proceeded with the charade). “I fuckin’ rammed my pocket knife UP into his sternum. Then I made a carved a hole in his gut; and quickly slid my whole body in,” Jim said hollowly as he acted like he was tearing bear flesh back and poking his head in. “Then I was sifting through the possum, and rat carcasses, trying to find the back of the bear, ya know. I had more gizzards and guts on me, than in a Mexican whorehouse. Then I started getting turned on by the situation, and I felt like I needed a woman. But there were none, none to speak of. So I started screaming, HEY I’M IN THIS BEAR’S GUT, HELP! Help, I’m in this stomach!” Jim shouted as he threw random punches nearly missing Shade’s head. “Then I heard a man yelling, I can get you out just duck. So duck I did and he unloaded a thirty OT six round, into the head of the bear, decapitating him. Then luckily, I was able to climb up through the neck and escape. Sure got lucky that day though,” Jim said as he refused to laugh or let on for any reason (he had a feeling they were going to

bleed him dry if he talked to them in any other way. And he was right; sycophants are in every apartment building in L.A.).

Ben was listening to this-unsure who the hell Jim was *when he spoke to him*, as he had never seen this side-and laughing to himself at how funny he could be. Jim looked down-like a homeless man spying a quarter and knowing they were freaked out-and he dove on a morsel of bread under Shade's chair.

"Let em have it, Jim," Ben said under his breath as he sipped his large goblet of champagne.

"Wow man, you've really lived a life," Shade said in awe as he sat his hips forward. "I wanna make your life easier, how 'bout I move in with ya and pay your rent in 4 months?" Shade asked coyly, as he knew he'd never pay one stolen nickel of rent; he simply saw Jim as a meal ticket.

Jim grimaced, and started moving his head around like a hungry horse. Jim stood up and then sat back down fast letting out a yell. "No, I don't live with humankind," Jim replied with eyes you saw in statues. "Pigs, and sheepeds, piglets mostly, and o-ccassionally serpentine," Jim said as he hit the armrest of his chair with his fist. "I would help ya, but gee, Mister, then we'd both be dead," Jim said as his eyes were looking forward at Shade; however he had a crazed look and his fists were ready to strike.

Shade sat there squirming like he'd had sex with a dead body-feeling like a complete scumbag for asking anything of this lunatic hillbilly-and got up quick and ran full speed out the room first: then hauled ass out of the house, lastly off the property and down the street.. The other actors started to look for a good exit too; as Jim breathed heavily and stared them down. And when they were all gone-as much as scum is ever really gone-Jim laughed his ass off. Ben saw this-now wondering where was *this Jim all along?* He was now intrigued at how effortless Jim did everything.

"Interesting," Ben said unsure what he had really just seen; this as his old friend Roger Corjack slid in beside him.

Roger was slight of build and height like a pee-wee soccer player in an area where no one played. He had grey hair and a thick white goatee that stunk of cinnamon and cheese (he had a nasty habit of dining on cinnamon pretzels dipped in nacho cheese only every day he was still breathing). He had on Green Horny pajamas-they showed the super hero doing some of his *other superpowers*, like 4 women at once and farm animals-and he had on white slippers. He was high society to Laron-that simply meant he didn't have to pay anyone rent for anything anymore-so he was always there.

"What's interesting?" Roger asked as he peeked over at Ben through the spaces between his own fingers on his right hand.

"Nothing, just a thing I thought I saw," Ben seeing his expression knew he didn't have to answer the question. "It was just a dream. Roger, you old hound sniffer, what's got you here on this occasion? Is it love, or love for one night?"

"Love for a month really," he shrugged. "Laron gets me, simply put, and I get him. I hear the nominations are only an hour away, nervous?" Roger asked as he looked down briefly, and then pinned his eyes on Ben.

Ben searched the floor for invisible diamonds for a few seconds. He leaned in and said, "Only when I think about it."

Roger acknowledged this and put his hand in his pocket. A moment later he produced a mini Oscar. "Here, if it helps, take it."

"No, no I couldn't, I made that mistake once before," refused Ben as he looked at the mini Oscar; then he looked up at Roger's smiling face. "No, tonight I'm just going to accept it one way or the other," Ben admitted like a true politician. He leaned forward, eyes widening, and pressing the railing with his hands-half hoping to change the subject and half looking for Jim-but he saw no sign of him now.

“Well, Ben, I think you might catch a break tonight,” Roger spoke in a warm inviting tone (the kind you use when you know the next card about to be dealt). “We’ll see, but I heard some things,” Roger admitted as he started stroking his goatee; with bits of cheese and cinnamon falling out while Ben acted oblivious to this (he knew that courtesy was as much a part of wining, as the script).

“What?” Ben asked timidly. “What did you hear?” his voice now firmer and inviting.

“OH, just Syndey Penstein telling Carl that you had ah, what’s the word?” Roger asked coyly as he reached around above his head; like he’d snatch the word out of the air. “Oh god, I can’t quite think of it, oh...yes,” Roger said jokingly, as he tried submerging his laughter for the moment; and he rocked back and forth like a zombie.

“Yes what, Roger?”

“Been nominated,” Roger said. “No joke, they cut you a break. Most of the people you angered are dead by now. Can’t screw you over like they once did,” said Roger. “Maybe...maybe this time you’ll write a speech?” Roger inferred as he put his left hand on Ben’s shoulder; and he looked him in the eye for a few seconds.

“I can’t look that far ahead,” Ben answered shell shocked and hearing bombs. “Holy cow, they cut me a break uh. I needed to hear that, well Julie will be ecstatic. She loves going to awards shows, the people and the food ya know. If I get the chance to give her something one day, it will be everything I have.”

“Been hard hasn’t it?”

“Yeah, yes it has, Roger, harder than I’ll admit,” Ben admitted sadly, as he tried to look Roger in the eyes, but he couldn’t for the fear of crying. “And everyone’s waiting to see if I’ll blow it, before the show. I don’t know if I care about that, maybe I’ve seen too many falls to care. But, if they let me, I’ll give ‘em a show,” Ben said as he spoke into Roger’s ear. Roger looked at him and said nothing, nodded.



They both knew it was still a slippery slope to win the Oscar. A slope they both looked forward to climbing.

Meanwhile Jen, Scott, Jack, and Nathan were watching Roland like an eagle watches a wounded moose; as he looked around outside-not exactly the most nimble of security guards-and walked through trees and hit wooden overhangs (they were laughing at this).

“That jackass is boring me now he’s so stupid,” Nathan said. “Can’t he give up already? Just turn back, Chubs, the trash cans are the other way,” Nathan said jokingly as he watched Roland looking beneath the cars like a thief would for the car keys. Nathan wanted desperately to scream at Roland, but he knew that would light a fire under Laron’s ass (he didn’t want Laron pissy that next time he saw him).

“He might be beyond idiot,” Jen said. “Ya know, an idiot savant,” wisecracked Jen as she winked at Nathan. “Those guys are smart, and they can lift stuff,” Jen said looking back into Nathan’s lavish mansion-more gold than most banks on everything in the room-and she stood straighter up to watch Roland trip on a large rock, and stumble into a bush below her.

They chuckled at this and Nathan felt his implant buzz. He pressed the implant in like a button on a keyboard. ” Laron, your idiot security guard is ruining my garden.”

“I can’t tell you I had anything to do with it, Nathan,” Laron said in kindly tone. “Do you know why he’s over there?”

“No idea, maybe he thinks I’ll pay better,” Nathan answered sarcastically, as he waved his hand so no one would laugh out loud.

“Oh you bitch, not nice,” shot back Laron as he tossed his glass of Cognac into the fireplace. “Tell him he’s wanted back here, and tell him to hurry. There’s some drunk guy, eating all my steaks, steaks, Nathan, pieces of cow. And tell him I need a back rub, bye, Bitch,” Laron said as he stood there peeling the curtain back; and looking down at Nathan’s large purple marble back porch. He really needed Roland

for the drunk taming-knowing all drunks end up punching people before long-as there was a homeless man who had snuck in named Roscoe that needed punching.

“Ah, give me a second,” Nathan said as he breezed past Scott, Jack, and Jen. He went down the stairs and opened a small slot in his wooden door. He poked his lips out and spoke in an accusatory tone, “Hey, you in my flowers. Laron wants you back at the house. Hurry he said, he needs a back rub.”

“He said it, he did?” questioned Roland as he pulled a small branch out of his pants. “Well I was doin’ somethin’, but if he needs me. I’ll be on my way, bye, Sir,” Roland said as he made a dour determination and climbed out of the bushes. He headed back through the gardens destroying more landscaping (Laron would pay for it Nathan knew this already).

“Thanks for not ratting us out, Nathan,” Scott said as he offered Nathan a handshake. Nathan examined his hand cautiously: and he gave it a single weak shake. Nathan smiled, and pressed the button for a secret entrance hidden behind a statue to open (it led into Laron’s front courtyard beside the well).

“Thank you, Nathan, we’ll be sure to remember this favor,” Jen said brightly as she put her arm around Nathan-his body shuttering at the thought of a woman touching him-and she smiled. Nathan looked at her suspiciously-thinking he’d fired her or stole her parking space before-and it dawned on him where he had seen her.

“Are you the actress from Living Grape?”

“Yes I am, Jen is my name,” Jen replied. “Did you like that movie?”

“Like it, well yes!” Nathan gushed with his whole face smiling now. “Boy, the people you meet in this town, ex-TRORD-ornary! Well then, I’m rooting for you, Jen, you could get a nomination. You never can tell,” Nathan said coyly as he knew already she had been nominated-he also knew full well she’d remember him saying that forever.

Jen looked at him wondering what he meant by that; seeing as she hadn't won very many awards leading up till now.

"Let's go, Jen," Jack interrupted, as he stood halfway in the secret passageway with his eyes on Jen (Jack didn't like Nathan's way of discounting him entirely the whole time they'd been there. He half hoped to blacken his eye).

Jen looked at Nathan and smiled like she'd been handed a fistful of money. She pointed at her hand-as she pretended to be holding an Oscar-and Nathan chuckled.

"Enjoy the evening Laron always throws the best parties," Nathan said as he swung his left hand out and in rhythmically as the secret door closed.

Jen ducked into the secret passageway. Instantly they were consumed by darkness suitable for bats and skunks alone. They could barely see a faint light at the end of the tunnel, but it looked so very far away.

"Man, someday I want someone to tell me that," Jack said glumly with his chest heaving from fear of the passageway. "Jack, you're going to get nominated for an Oscar. Now hand me that shit bucket," Jack said as he ducked his head down under the ceiling.

Jen and Scott laughed at this-Jen knowing that was every person's dream in town-and they lurked forward through the darkness. Soon, they started to hear people talking; and then they heard some loud fifties music. Scott found the choice of music odd, but he figured it was all odd if you looked at it the wrong way.

"Hey, see that guy standing next to my car," Jen whispered as she moved towards her Red mustang. "I wonder if we can get past him?" asked Jen.

“I don’t know, Jen, he doesn’t look to be going anywhere,” whispered Jack glumly as he eyed her car and the figure of a man beside it. “He reminds me of Jim for some reason. Look how’s he’s standing, that’s totally Jim,” Jack said thankfully as he slowly opened the round grass covered door to the courtyard. They hurried over to a red lipstick colored limousine; and tried to slowly work their way over to Jen’s car.

“Is anybody listening?!” Jen yelled. She used this as a means to an end hoping to scare Jim to death. Jim slowly spun around and nodded like a hungry horse. Jen brightened,” Oh hey, Jim.”

“Oh hey, Jack, where’s that skank Jen, and cool dude Scott?”

Jen grabbed Jim around the waist; and hoisted him off the hood of her car like a sack of potatoes. Jen answered,” I’m right here, the place I am, Jim. And when I find the place, it’s the place to be.”

“Nah, its minimum wage alley, or some cabbage farm,” Jim said soothingly with his eyes watching the upstairs window of Laron’s mansion. He could see something there-some sort of angry struggle from a bad movie-but he couldn’t quite make it out. “Not quite *the* place to be, but a place still to roam. I’ll give you that. You guys look sweaty and tired, what have you been doing?” Jim readjusted his seat on Jen’s car. He could feel Scott breathing heavy behind him and Jim spun around; he could see Scott was nervous and nearly hyperventilating.

“Oh I forgot, Jim, we have to get out of here,” Jen said and sighed. “I’ll explain why in the car, please hurry,” Jen begged as she spied someone halfway up the stairs; who was pulling the front door halfway open.

“Alright let’s roll,” he said clearing his throat and coughing but once. “I could go for some Mickey D’s anyway. Yeah that party wasn’t my style, too many smelly old guys for me. Oh, I did talk to Ben, and he’s going to celebrate with us tomorrow-if one of us gets nominated. Oh, so there’s that, and that is ah...pretty good,” Jim said as he hopped in the front seat and Jack and Scott in the back.

Jen fired up the engine; and headed right past the guards at the front gate. Just as she departed, Laron glided out the front door to watch them go. He already had an idea it was them that had watched his TV, *but now he was certain*. He also knew-by law of L.A. (which stated no stars were to be attacked in any way during an Oscar season) that she was currently untouchable-and he slowly simmered over this.

After grabbing some food they went back to the Chateau Marmont; where Jim-who felt like being a high roller-got them a bungalow. They lounged around for most of the night: drinking, smoking, and acting like the world was going to end. Soon they lost their will to party; and everyone fell fast asleep.

Jim awoke to his implant buzzing like it was going to explode. He batted it with his hand and squinted at the sun over the top of the purple drapes. "WHAT?!" asked Jim sharply.

"Jim, you're nominated for an academy award," Morshalt Green said cheerily (Jim's agent and friend in the business) as he got some head from his assistant Randy. "Wake the hell up, YOU IS SOMEBODY!"

Jim was more than awake now-his mind racing and his skin feeling warmer than usual-he fell out of bed and started screaming like a carnie at the fair(YOU GOTTA SPEND MONEY TO MAKE MONEY! SPEND MONEY TO MAKE MONEY! MONEY, MONEY, WIN MONEY) and Jim punched the ceiling clean through sending white plaster down onto the rug.

Jack woke up with a hangover-mostly behind the eyes-and asked," What's going on, Jim?"

"What?" Jim asked stunned there was anyone else in the room with him. "Oh yeah, I ah, I had a pretty good morning. I got nominated for an OS-car. So it's back into Porno for me. Ha hah ha I feel GREAT! When the worm finally gets eaten, it's only the new worm that lives. Jen, wake up you lazy GUS!" Jim yelled excitedly into Jen's sleeping ear.

Jen recoiled-like a snake before it strikes-glared up at Jim through blinking eyes. "What are you babbling about?" asked Jen her voice less than pleasant. "It's four thirty in the morning, Jim Nuts, go back to sleepy."

"NO, no you're not sleeping through this one," Jim said as he knelt down; and he hugged Jen like a bear would its cub. "Jen, I got nominated for an Oscar. You can't call me anything other than that, for a LONG TIME."

"Whoa, holy cow that's amazing," Jen said stunned as she rolled over with her lower lip quivering. "I wonder if Ben got his nod. You deserve it, Jim; you work harder than anyone I know. Does the internet work on your sunglasses?" Jen asked coyly-she knew it did, but didn't want to jinx herself-and she rolled out of bed rubbing her eyes.

"Yes it does, here see if they nominated you," Jim said cheerily as he jumped around the room.

"I wish, but so did dollar coins," Jen admitted as she attached it to her head. "Here, yahoo please? God I hope this isn't the worst day ever. Who got nominated for Oscars from Living Grape?" Jen asked matter-of-factly, sitting on the edge of the bed cross legged (as she often did).

Jim cawed like a crow; and he jumped around making sure to punch every wall he saw, right through. Jack and Scott joined him in this; and they flooded out in the hallway and started hitting every other door they saw. The whole hotel heard the colossal happening-not that their wine filled heads wanted to-and got out of their beds.

"Jen, have faith, even a bum gets a whole dollar sometime," Jim said as he ran past Jen cackling like a lunatic; and she slapped him on the butt so hard he winced, but kept on flipping out.

"Ben Train, I knew he would get his nod," Jen said glumly knowing Ben had done the best performance of them all. "Jim Kay, yeah expected that one. And Jen Blacktide, great I didn't get...what? What was that last one?" Jen asked in disbelief as her heart beat faster than a world class sprinter's; her

eyes widening and her legs standing up (without her even realizing they had). Her legs shaking, she got the confirmation she had been nominated when she heard her name read by the yahoo news associate. She stumbled towards the bathroom: eyes blurry, legs trembling now, and puked on the way in.

“What’s up?” Jack wondered as he poked his head back into their suite. “Is she sick or something?” Jack asked as he watched Jen stand up quickly-too quickly to keep her balance-and she fell onto the bathroom sink.

“I just got nominated, and I puked like a loser, tough” Jen told Jack as she tried to right the ship. “So guess what, I get to wear a dress, and be rude to non-dress wearing people. And that’s taffy, they don’t sell,” Jen said sarcastically, and she danced over and grabbed a towel from the rack: and proceeded to clean herself up as she sang (Good day sunshine, her favorite Beatles song to wake up to). Jack cleaned up the floor; while Jim and Scott continued punching the walls.

“Jen, I knew you would get it, I knew it,” Jim said hollowly with a cocky smile-but he didn’t think she’d get the nod, due to her lack of wins leading up to the Oscars. He just needed her to think he did-as he blew Jen kisses. “Talent, lives between the ears, but few people can get it out. Jen Blacktide, Oscar nominee can’t fake it. Hey let’s go ask people if they want our autographs. Don’t say no it’s so right,” Jim raised his voice to sound like a cartoon character in duress and that touched Jen’s funny bone. Then he bounced off the wall-literally bouncing off the plaster-onto Scott’s bed. Jim knew he deserved this sweet day-more than anyone else is the way he saw it-and *he was going to savor it*.

“No, that would be crazy talk,” Jen continued,” We’ll go ask horses if they know our smells. That, that’s what winners do,” Jen said sarcastically as she peeled off her top; and she danced quickly as she put on her sundress. Jen felt so good she couldn’t stop her slight smile all day. What a day what a great life.

## Chapter 8

It's why they make tinsel

The sun was cooking people-most tasted like chicken, but some the previous night's wine-on the streets of Hollywood the day before the Oscars ceremony. Ben, Jim, and Jen had been in the middle of press junkets every day, all the time, leading up 'til now. They knew the value of an award millions of people in their neighborhood alone wanted to win. As long as people wanted to hear you talk, talk is what you did, nothing *but talk*. If you showed any animosity or anger, your Oscar was just handed to someone else. Ben knew it all too well, he remembered his younger years.

There was an interview with ABC that he infamously remarked," I've won, and every dirt bag actor knows it. So they can hand it to me today, or tomorrow, but it's always mine, and mine alone." The academy-and all of Hollywood really-were offended by his cockiness and it cost him dearly (they handed that one to Adam Gerfetch *and he didn't seem to mind*).

Ben finds himself at this moment sitting across from Giane Grade-and she is a ball breaker extraordinaire (if ever there was one)-a blonde haired beautiful woman of 50. Ben looks at her-like you'd look at the principal giving you detention, not angry, but cautious-and tries to say warm friendly words in his mind to her.



“And we’re back, Ben, is it hard to be nominated in the same year as Beth?” Giane asked darkly. “It’s got to be terrible,” Giane said coyly as she smiled-with a smile that makes most disease free people feel sick-and she touched Ben’s knee. She knew all too well their history; and would love nothing more than to watch the great Ben Train blow it *right here*, and right after the bottle of wine they shared.

“No, not at all, Beth and I have a nice relationship now,” Ben said hollowly as he shuffled in his seat. “I saw her not long ago, and we talked for a long while. These things, these aches and walls we put up, they were worthless,” Ben said as he grinned-barely being able to believe his own lie, but knowing the stakes all the while-and he pulled out a gold cigarette case and set it on his knee. “She’s an amazingly talented person and a good friend now. To see us both back on top so to speak, it really is a joy for both of us,” Ben spoke as if he was best friends with Giane, *but they were far from it*. He looked at Giane with warm eyes. He knew Beth and he had not spoken as friends in decades, but by the time Giane found out, he’d be at the Oscars. He knew this because Beth was at a health and body retreat for the day without any implants or technology (a little *get out of my way* Oscar gift from Ben).

“Hmm, well does it make you sad to think of the things you said in the past?” Giane asked ratcheting up the pressure. “Like ah, I’ve won, and every dirt bag actor knows it. So they can hand it to me today or, ah...tomorrow. Remember that one?” Giane asked coyly as she grimaced-begging for him to take the bait and fail-and she reached over and grabbed both of Ben’s knees nearly knocking over his cigarette case (which is why he put it there, to throw her off). She knew all too well Ben hated to be touched by anyone he didn’t know well. She saw a different look in his eye this time, one that confused her.

“When I got that nomination, I was a young man full of reckless emotion,” Ben agreed. “I think back about that, and I wonder who that person was. To be given the keys to the car is one thing. To get in and drive, another altogether,” said Ben as he looked down and rubbed his temple with his index finger. “I wasted my opportunities, because I was afraid to succeed. Those days, I just...I just ache to remember them,” Ben admitted-with the best heavy heart he could act-and he welled up slightly. “I thank god for

the days I have now, and the work I'll do with them," Ben said with a quick set of 3 blinks-as he wanted to slap her hands off his knees with a baseball bat-and he sat back and put his hand in front of his face.

"That's beautiful, Ben, beautiful," Giane said hollowly as she sat back-knowing he was probably lying through his teeth-and then she sat forward and changed the page on her notes. "They tell me we have to go, I hope you do well. Men like you are hard to come by, say hi to Beth for me won't ya?"

"Of course, thank you for having me on," Ben replied coyly as he rose like a geyser-the quicker the better he thought-and gently grabbed both sides of Giane's face and kissed her.

Giane looked at him like she was getting felt up by a stranger in the subway (as the show went to commercial).

"Ben, you'd washed your hands today right?" Giane asked helplessly.

"Oh yeah, twice yesterday," Ben reassured her as he walked off with a brief wave over his shoulder.

Ben walked out of ABC studios quicker than a bank robber out of the bank vault. He signed some autographs on the way to the limo. He turned suddenly to look down the long street-a street he had defiled so many ways in the past-and knew he was having *the time of his life*.

He flew to L.A. on the tube train-not as much fun as you would think, the nausea and all-and made it in one hour. He hurried over to the tailor-a man known simply as Shavon by lovers and foes-and picked up his black tux. There would be no fashion statements tomorrow night, he thought. Not this time, not if he expected to keep his karma flowing in the right direction.

"Hi there, Julie, I see you're not eating," Ben noted.

"Watch it, Ben, you know my thighs need work," snapped Julie as she lifted up the ruffles on her dress. "I'm not going as the fattest woman there, I won't," Julie said sharply as she sucked in her

stomach-that was held together by more glue than most planes-and continued having her marble blue dress fitted in their living room.

“You look amazing, I shouldn’t have poked fun,” Ben added irrelevantly; however Julie was already past it. “I heard there’s a luncheon today, for the nominees. Thought maybe, we’d...”

“We’re going, help me get these damn pins out,” Julie interrupted as she motioned for Shavon-who was eyeing the pizza delivery boy and BUSY at the moment-to let her dress out.

They changed clothes and went over to Ivy-if you lived there that’s what you called it, but technically it was The Ivy-and walked in amongst the nominees. Jim and Jen were calmly talking with everyone; and this made Ben grin. He knew Jim had an extra gear he was hiding, but he didn’t realize Jen did too, (‘til that very moment as the look in her eyes gave it away).

“Jim, how’s your broken penis treating ya?” Ben asked decisively with bold eyes and a grin.

Jim looked over quickly; and he saw Ben grinning and Jim smiled at this. ” Not as good as my glass eye, but thanks for mentioning it,” Jim said sarcastically as he fussed with his left eye-it was real but could go lazy if he wanted-making Ben chuckle. “How’s your missing penis, any luck?” Jim asked as if Ben were humiliated by his joke.

“No, we can only hope,” Ben fired back smiling now more strangely and directly into Jim’s eyes (it looked like he’d caught him having sex or stealing to Jim). “Jen, are you really...going to laugh at ALL his jokes?” Ben retorted as he burst out laughing like a jackass-the kind of laugh you did when you realized someone was cheating at the poker table-and he bent over at the waist. He realized right then and there, they had been playing him the whole time; *he thought he was playing them*. They were far from hayseeds and he knew it now like a goose knows the shape of the axe.

Jim and Jen were laughing-they got the message from the kind of laugh Ben was doing, *they knew they were caught*.

“Ben, you haven’t been conning us this whole time have ya?” Jim asked sarcastically as his hands sat on his hips like he was waiting for *the truth*. “You’re not really some joke telling fool are ya? Because Jen and I are hayseeds, second bushel,” Jim said as he fought to stop himself from laughing-knowing he had no chance of doing that at this point-but he couldn’t. Jim knew then Ben had caught onto him and Jen-Ben knowing they knew he had solved their rouse-and they all started laughing like crazy people on the midnight bus.

“Jim, I knew you were second tier, dumpster 8, but not eating the fish eggs,” remarked Ben while his hands were messing up his own hair. “Hey, let’s grab a table, and we’ll act like the people we’ve been using. This way, hurry, before you start pretending to be ordinary again,” Ben insisted as he motioned for Jim and Jen to follow Julie and him through the crowd.

They breezed past Hollywood royalty: up and comers, wannabes, nobody’s all of which watching their every move. Everyone in that restaurant knew they (Ben, Jim, and Jen) were the best and stiffest competition in town. The room they stumbled into; was open air, cool temperature (no one wants to sweat on Oscar Sunday), and a bar of only the best; perched beyond a red table in the center. There were chairs for each nominee around a massive table; with place settings with Dragon shaped napkins and gold silverware. The band Toolsupport, were set up in the back playing hits of yesteryear on a clam shaped stage. The air was moist and the wait staff ready.

“Two bottles, and a nice appetizer,” Ben asked the waiter (who was surprised by his youthful tone). “Oh god, Julie, are you coming, Dear?” asked Ben as he coughed into his hand-fearing a single germ escaping could cost him dearly-and saw Julie chatting up a big time actor named Steele Klammer (Klammer played.the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> versions of Thor, made a lot of money too). Julie waved her hand and head no. ” Suit, yourself,” Ben said with a hint of sarcasm in his voice. “Jim, what sort of work did you do before you were an actor?”

“I was rich, I’m good at business, Ben, but no one wins awards for making money,” Jim confessed as he played with his gold fork. “Yeah you get the money, but nobody cares but the poor. I needed kicks, and I sought them out,” Jim paused and then continued, “Here’s a funny story, but true story. I set off, to see your hologram and to act with you on Veraclare. I left my 2 year girlfriend, at the Spaceport and have never seen her, again,” Jim said proudly as his chest seemed to lift and his eyes smile. “I left my business behind, and have since sold it. I know what prestige feels like, and it is worth *all the bad conversations with extras I have ever had*,” Jim joked as he sat back-he didn’t need more than this moment of triumph to give him happiness for a lifetime-and he was promptly poured a glass of Dom.

Ben heard this story and was transported back to his coma, but he was able to smirk it off.

“Ben, would you like to know what I left behind?” Jen asked while she tied her hair back and felt extremely emotional (she was like a young child saying I love you to her father for the first time).

“Yes, yes I would,” Ben replied. “And where did you meet, Jim here, WAIT, it was the ship wasn’t it?”

“Yes it was, I left this behind,” Jen answered with an eye full of tears. “JEN, the damn fries are cold!! GET THE COOKER GOING!” yelled Jen sarcastically as she cupped her hands like a football coach to make it really loud.

Ben and Jim cracked up and many people were taking notice. Jim looked and saw the lower level actors looking in on them, and flipped them the bird.

“So you were quite successful?” Ben retorted.

“Ben, oh I could strangle you,” Jen said playfully as she examined her salad. “Oh, and one other thing, I left daydreaming behind. I live life now, not wish I could. *That*, is more valuable than anything,” admitted Jen as she tapped her fork on the side of her salad bowl; and she looked down at her dress for a moment (one that Ben noticed).

“We all left that, or it left us,” Ben suggested as he thought about the chestnuts of the past. “You can live one day as a famous person and never grow old again. Or you can feel every second of every day as a failure, and never feel youth. A great man told me that once, he said, take whatever you can get. Until you can get what you want. That knowledge, that truth really, never more true than right now for me,” Ben said as he sipped his champagne; and then he looked up into the blue cloudless sky.

Jen and Jim looked up and saw anti-gravity limousines flying all over the place (they looked like drunk on cider crows flying at midnight). They appeared to be intersecting from their vantage point-making Jim a bit nervous they might crash into one another-but they were on different heights. Jim spied all this with one eye covered by his hand; and he knew no one had ever seen a sight like that where he came from.

“I see, so they let in the help,” Laron said sarcastically, as he strutted over to the table; and then he promptly sat down beside Jim.

“Yes, and it pays good,” responded Jim with an arm around Laron. “Hey, Laron, sorry about the party,” Jim said apologetically, as he rubbed Laron’s back (a heaven for Laron he didn’t believe he’d ever know *biblically*).

“No worries, it went well after you left,” Laron said in a warning voice-as he was not o.k. with what had gone down at the party. “We had a time, a great time. Jen, what ah...prompted you to leave so early last night? You left in such a blur is all,” Laron said coyly-knowing full well that the little bitch had seen more than she should have-and he looked through Jen and hoped she’d blow it in her answer.

Jen looked back confidently-seeing Laron as weak and no one to be feared (How little she knew)-and then jerked her head to one side.

“Nauseous, yeah felt sick is all.”

“I see, must have been the bonding, gets me every time,” Laron insisted hollowly and he looked down his nose at Jen (like the last cow at the slaughterhouse). Laron knew she was slighting him with these lies; and to him that was beyond horrific.

“Hey can we get a picture?!” Lee Ped asked-he was from the Hollywood Foreign Press, their head photographer-and he used his holographic camera to get them all in the floating frame.

They all posed, and Laron motioned with his hand for the picture to be taken, and it was. They all left after a few more drinks; summed up the day and headed home, *to get ready*.

Oscar Sunday came and everyone in town was up early and ready to shine. Jen and Jim were at the Beverly Hills Hotel sipping wine next to the pool; this while their hair was crimped and straightened.

“Jim?”

“Yeah what?” asked Jim as he lay flat on his back using 5 inch (3,500 dollar towels) to lift up his torso.

“I have some news to tell you.”

“O.k. shoot!” fired back Jim innocently.

“Jim, I’m pregnant,” Jen blurted out the words anxiously. She didn’t know what he’d say, but she hoped he’d always be with her.

Jim sat up with a glimmering of surprise encompassing him. ”Really?” asked Jim before he even knew what he was saying. “Oh that’s great! OH, I’m not gonna be an idiot bachelor all my life. You know what’s funny?”

“What?” Jen asked timidly.

“I bought this thing, it means something,” Jim said coyly as he fussed with his pockets. “And I was gonna, ask you tomorrow, but since this amazing thing *has happened*,” Jim muttered as he searched his pocket. “Well sir, I’m gonna ask you today,” Jim said nervously as his hands shook and he started to sweat on his upper lip; and he moved the hairstylist back from him, and got down on one knee.

Jen’s breathing gave her emotions away-her chest heaving and her eyes filled with raindrops of love-while Jim had tears in his eyes, as Jen played with her hands (like a fumbling football hero).

“Jim, is it real?” Jen asked tearfully, with her hands on Jim’s shoulders (the pool staff watching keenly).

“Yes, Jen, I’ve loved you since the first day we met,” Jim said honestly with his eyes blinking to stay ahead of the tears (appearances and all). “You’re kind, considerate, beautiful, and stunning. I don’t care if it hurts my career, or any of that shit. Jen, will you marry me? I’ll make a good husband,” Jim took a breath: hesitated, rubbed his neck, and swallowed hard. All this before Jen stopped him with the brush of her hand.

“YES!!” Jen cried with all those years of voice training producing a mighty sound (loud enough to echo to the far end of the hotel). “I will marry you stop blowing it! Just kiss me already,” Jen begged tearfully as she nervously tried to grab and kiss Jim (like many times before) but these were not those times, and she forgot what to do. Jen started thinking of her father-the times he had her kiss his cheek before every day of school-and then she just grabbed him and planted one hell of a whopper on him.

The other celebrities around the pool all pretended to be bored-yawning was the agreed upon lie-and then threw their wine into the pool in disgust.

“Mr. Kay, we need to get you back to the room,” Rathers Windon interjected (with a snooty eye and the words GOD SAVE THE QUEEN’S LAWYER embroidered on his white gloves). “There are still some final touches to undergo. And you need to get your armpits botoxed,” Rathers spoke firmly-



assuring that Jim took him deadly serious-and he hurried over to Jim and offered him a robe. Rathers was hired by Jim for the day-seeing as he hated small details, and to have to take care of *all that minutia* would make Jim normally *nervous*.

“Yeah, just a second, I’ve got an important person here,” Jim answered with a smile only a movie star could have; and he looked at Jen and kissed her.

They made their way back to their room; and started the process of putting on each individual piece of clothing. It was sunny like a hay field in the summer; and warm with no chance of rain at all. Jen couldn’t stop beaming, and Jim kept rubbing her stomach.

Ben was halfway across the city by now; just getting into his limo for one more ride around town. He thought about winning for just a minute, and then stopped himself. He wondered if Beth was going to ruin his party (*he had a feeling*).

“Gloria, I didn’t ask for your stupid OPINION!” Beth cried angrily as she pushed her hairdresser out of the way. “Now shut that talentless mouth! If you only knew the power it takes to tame, this animal. Well if you knew you’d be famous, simple huh? God, if they don’t put my picture on the front page of the post I’ll die. Tell my bodyguards to warm up the Rolls. I got spines to CRACK,” Beth demanded savagely, as she zipped up the top of her coat, along the lapel, slowly. The suit she had on was silver with small black spots every so often.

Beth strolled out to her veranda like a stallion out for a lap; and she spied a pathetic wannabe actor climbing towards the Hollywood sign. She wondered if she should shoot him; and save him the pain and suffering of failure. She eyed the red haired man as he fell back some 5 feet and hit his head. This made her cackle, as Gloria came out and wrapped her arms around Beth’s waist.

“Another bus fare to famous kid?” asked Gloria as she sucked on Beth’s ear and felt around her crotch.

“Yes, and they fall so hard it hurts me to watch,” Beth said with an air of evil in her voice. “What is he thinking? There’s no work up there, Loser! The work is in New York, everyone knows that! You come out here to get famous, you get death or prison. My look at him, he keeps falling, and then climbing. If I get that dimwitted, put out my fuse,” Beth insisted sadly as she kissed Gloria on the cheek. Beth turned and French kissed Gloria hard, nearly smearing her lipstick.

“Do we have time?” Gloria hoped.

“Gloria, any other day yes, not today, Sweetheart,” Beth said flatly. “Let’s go crush some dreams, and then we’ll wake them the hell up,” Beth said, licking Gloria’s mouth like she was fucking her.

Walking through Beth’s mansion they were met by her butler Lonny Frayed; he was holding the house door open for her. Then her pet watcher handed her Nutly (the white Chihuahua). She knelt down, and then got her left foot kissed (for good luck) by her limo driver. She took one last look down the street-seeing destiny in the palm trees-and smiled. She knew she was going to destroy them all, *and laugh*.

“Beth, when the thing happens, how do you want me to react?” Gloria asked, sitting beside Beth and stroking her hair.

“Just don’t run,” Beth demanded. “If anything, sit and say things like, how could this happen? Where is the security? That always works, and no one expects you to have a professional delivery anyway. Oh by the way, don’t mention this again. Not today, tonight, or any other day I’m alive,” Beth insisted sternly as she held Gloria’s forearm tight as a snare drum. “That way the honey stays firmly in the pot. Oh, you look marvelous today, just thought you should know,” Beth said-with all the sincerity of a horse thief-and she put her hand on Gloria’s leg; and pressed her lips hard against her cheek.

“Thank you, it means a lot,” Gloria replied honestly as she started to tear up (even though she was truly scared of what Beth would do to her someday, she still loved her).

“Whoa, don’t cry on my makeup,” Beth cried sharply as she slapped Beth away from her. “Please, places to be, Honey, places to be,” Beth said, as she recoiled from Gloria and checked her makeup in the mirror (that the butler was kindly holding up for her).

Meanwhile Jim and Jen were in their own limousine; and they were heading for the receiving line. Jim just had a feeling he or Jen would win (thinking it was more *him than her*). He really didn’t care at this point if Ben won; seeing as he knew Ben was just as cutthroat as anyone.

“Wow, look at all the limos,” Jim remarked with his eyes darting from each of the lavish limos (some made to look like mansions, others covered in gold and diamonds). “I could tell people I was here, but they’d have to see me here to believe it. Look, look at all the tourists and extras watching us. They think, and I read this, that they are going to end up in this limo someday. Which is true for five, out of like...ten thousand. The rest, hey I need someone to fetch me coffee,” Jim said as he sat back and opened his window a crack (so no one could look in, but they’d have to guess who was in there at the same time).

”They just need a break,” Jen said. “Every one of them could be great, but they need someone to tell them that. When the day comes you don’t, you’re ready to succeed. I miss home, even now I miss it,” Jen confessed as she rested her head on Jim’s chest.

Jim’s eyes fell down to her. He kissed her on the head and said warmly, “I miss it too, just not today.”

They were lined up into their reserved parking slot, and flew in. They were met by a gaggle of staff to get them anything they wanted. The long receiving line for photos was 15 feet away, but felt a lot closer.

“Jen?” asked Jim.

“Yeah, Jim Nuts?” replied Jen.

“I think we should name our baby Oscar,” Jim said sarcastically as he looked at Jen like he’d told her he was a secret F.B.I. agent. “Just think, then when he’s working at a fast food joint, he’ll have status,”

Jim joked as he tried to keep from smiling too much. “And he can maybe make it up to fry cook, that’s something,” Jim said as he raised his hand out the side door of the car (just enough to make the staff jumpy).

“No, we’ll name him Tom, just like Tom Thumb,” Jen said as she patted Jim on the belly. “That was my favorite book as a child, and it’s a good name. Tom, Jim, and Jen, perfect,” Jen said as she walked along the black marble floor hallway-with dozens of famous people eyeing them as they strode past-and Jen checked her hair in a mirror the staff was holding up for her.

Ben was already in the receiving line getting his picture taken (playing the game of course). He was smiling when he saw Giane from ABC; she was coming his way, but he didn’t have time to run.

“Oh hey, Giane, great seeing but I’m a bit late.”

“I just need ten minutes, Ben, just ten pre-Oscars,” Giane said hollowly as she smiled like a school girl. “Come now, there’s a wonderment of things we can talk about,” Giane said coyly-she hoped to rattle Ben pre-show and get him back for lying to her about Beth-and Ben smirked with his eyes small.

Ben kept walking and said quickly,” No, just don’t have the time. Hey come see me after the show, we’ll talk,” Ben said hollowly as he was leaving the second he won, *and he knew it*.

Giane went to say something, and then thought “what’s the point” and she stopped herself.

Ben breezed past the first few interviewers-not showing any weakness or he’d incur their nervous hello wrath-and stopped at Hanna Weight. She was 6 foot 5 and weighed 300 pounds of WATCH OUT OR I WILL HURT YOU. Her hair was black with grey streaks in it; and she was wearing a black suit. Everyone loved her for her softballs.

“Ben, am I talking to a winner?”

“I hope so, Hanna, but I just love being recognized for good work,” Ben answered nonchalantly as he adjusted his tie. “You look great, who did your outfit?” Ben asked coyly as he slid his hand down her lapel-as he knew that question always spiked interest among viewers-and smiled like he’d won a car.

“Only the best!” retorted Hanna with a strong smile.

“I have the same tailor, see you inside,” Ben said as he gave her a hug: and then he darted past what was left of the journalists and eyepoppers (the celebrity horde were always watching his every move; constantly looking at him out of the corner of their eyes). He knew this was what the older generation could do and get away with-often times sending decoys to the receiving line ahead of them-but he made sure to smile and say hi to everyone he saw (just in case Oscar was watching. Seeing as the votes didn’t get counted until they had seen who you were wearing that evening, regardless of what the popular belief was).

Ben walked into the staging area using peremptory commands-HI YOU LOOK GREAT, WE SHOULD WORK TOGETHER, HOW’S YOUR AGENT THESE DAYS (It was all bull)-as he walked into the Kodak theater and sang that sweet chin music for a few minutes. He was dying to get inside; so he snuck past a few up and comers, and looked quickly for his seat.

“Great, right on the aisle, and close,” Ben muttered as he made sure to look up and over the audience before even thinking of sitting down. “Alright,” Ben said as Julie walked in behind him through the *not talent entrance* (they used that for the craft service people and security. The name stemming from a young actor turned fry cook-named Luppi Sanchez-from the fifties. Who they said only made it to the Oscar’s because he knew his way around a tuna melt).

“Ben, how long should we wait to sit down, Darling?” Julie asked as she hugged Ben; and she watched him working the room with his eyes and brilliant smile.

“Not long, just waiting for someone else to be the first one,” Ben said as he smiled a perfect smile for the Oscar’s official cameraman. “There, that idiot over there just sat down, perfect. So how do you like it?”

“I love it, and I love you,” Julie spoke with a soothing tone. “Win me a paperweight.”

“We either won, or lost it already,” Ben confessed believing the process was pure. “The votes are cast. Hey Jim and Jen are sitting down several rows back. Sucks being new meat, enjoy the *I hope I don’t trip* marathon to the stage,” said Ben as he watched Jim shaking Hands with Laron; and Laron patting Jen on the shoulder with a certain degree of more strength than normal in his hand-Ben wondered if Laron was high again and going to get sloppy. Ben watched him carefully; and there was something to the way Laron patted Jen as well, it struck him odd.

Everyone filed in, with Beth and Gloria waiting until they were virtually last. The room dimmed and the host that night-Jacob Green from the show *Vegas is a sundial*-came out and danced through the nominee’s movies. Everyone watched with disdain; and they did their best fake laughs.

“Jen, this is bad, like so completely junior high funny,” Jim whispered into Jen’s ear, and they both chuckled.

“You’re not kidding,” corroborated Jen kindly. “I wonder if they try this material on dead people first?” asked Jen jokingly.

“Of course, best laugh track there is,” Jim replied using a Louisiana accent. “Now what, oh god the technical awards, ugh,” Jim said as he leaned back and tried to act interested; this while several technical awards were being given out. They finally got to, and through, the first acting award for best supporting actress. It went to Farion Houldeart-a French actress who played an old sea captain so well, people thought she was faking being a woman-and she was a strikingly beautiful blonde bombshell.

After awhile Jim's award arrived; and he wasn't even nervous about it. He had just sat there so long he didn't care on certain level if he won.

"Jim?"

"Yeah, Jen, what is it?"

"You deserve to win," Jen said softly as she held Jim's right hand. She knew enough not to kiss him in front of the cameras-seeing as it would seem low class and common-and take his moment away.

Then British funny man George Windsor started fumbling with the envelope (he was high and half in two bags). He acted like he couldn't get it open for the life of him. "You didn't have to use real tar to seal it. I mean, you paid me for an-SURRS! I may not get it open, but Rome was built in a day. Who's that?" George asked sarcastically as he tried to open it-while he blew kisses to an *already over the bit he was doing crowd*-by using his feet and hands.

"This guy's hilarious," Jim said as he checked his pockets for a chewable cigarette; and he watched George fall on his ass, and the envelope go flying high into the first row.

George went down to get it stumbling like he was drunk (which was only partially an act). George asked, "No you didn't win it, Anna, for real men only. Come now, give us a hand," George said intently as he stood on stage-nearly falling over to get at least one more laugh-and then opened the envelope. "The Oscar goes to...James Kay."

Jim heard what he said, but it didn't register with him at all. He started the courtesy clap before he looked at Jen and saw her excitement.

"JIM, YOU WON! God you're a cornball," Jen said excitedly as she held Jim's head in her hands like a soccer ball.

He looked at her blankly; and then kissed her hard on the lips, and walked quickly up to the stage.

Laron-who was in the back-was sitting calmly and gently clapping; as a man in a black suit walked up to him and said firmly,” The goose is in the oven, be ready soon.”

“Yes, and won’t it cook well,” Laron responded sternly as his eyes followed Jim up to the stage.

“I can’t believe it!” Jim yelled as he jumped in the air, stomping his feet as he landed. “Man, and it’s only my 300<sup>th</sup> try,” said Jim sarcastically as he set down his Oscar like a rare piece of China. He moved up to the microphone and paused for just a second. “Well I want to thank homeless man number 35, for the nice striptease this morning. No, I shouldn’t kid, it was 37, you’re awesome in your nude suit, Pal. I need to thank you, Jen, who I love and always will. I knew the second I saw her we’d be together forever, no question about it. Now I wish forever was a bit faster, and cleaner,” Jim said jokingly as he threw his shoulders back and clenched his fists. “No, just kidding, I’d like to thank the Academy. And in my second page of my five thousand, I’d like to say thank you. Thank you for all the great movies, the moments, and the endless rides home. HAVE A GREAT NIGHT!”

“YEAHHH!!” cheered Ben with his hands clapping faster than he thought he could. “Way to go, JIMMY!” Ben said excitedly as he straightened his collar and let out a long sigh; this while Jim got a standing ovation as he walked off the stage. ” One down, Julie, let’s hope for two more. Wow, he killed it!”

They gave out the director of the year award next; and the speech nearly bored the back row to death. Jen eyed the: white suit wearing, white haired, white bearded man heading for the podium carrying her envelope. She didn’t recognize him, but he looked familiar.

“Hi there, I am Frand Shields, I am the president of the motion picture association of America,” Frand said softly with his left hand shaking. “This next award will go to an old pro, Beth, how are you. Or, possibly a young newcomer like, Jen Blacktide hmm,” said Frand nervously. “Ready ladies?” asked Frand kindly as he motioned for the different clips from each of the nominee’s movies to run.



Beth sat there looking forward and gently smiling (she knew she'd won this year, for talent always does). She didn't like the setup one bit; she thought Frand a bit of a nincompoop comparing her to an ingénue, but she figured he'd be out on the street in an hour. She knew she'd like the night's ending regardless.

"Here we go, hold on tight," Jim declared as he held Jen's hand.

"I'm not going to flip out, it's too much fun," Jen said as she watched Frand look at the name in the envelope. He smiled and Jen blurted out fearlessly, "I just won the Oscar."

"The Oscar goes to...JENNY BLACKTIDE!"

"I knew it, oh my god," Jen spoke with a voice filled with undeniable joy. "Jim, don't let me pass out. Here goes...oh I love this town," Jen said as she lit in with a smile and kissed Jim. She stood up-like it was nobody's business impressing the elite-and lifted her dress up high enough so she could walk.

"Yes!" Ben said as he smiled from ear to ear; his eyes caught Jim's and they both made "I can't believe it either" faces. "There's two, Gorgeous, one to go," Ben said as he waved to Jen as she passed; and she reached over and squeezed his shoulder.

"So, thank you for the Oscar, it is as heavy as my pet rock," Jen said her smiling eyes earnest and wide. "I'm not complaining the Oscar's good too. No, I'm just uh, so I tried to dream yesterday. I tried to dream a better life than I've had this last year, or so. And I couldn't, nothing made me ache that way. So I say to you, keep us all aching for more, we'll only love you for it. I love you, Jim, and oh I thank the Academy," Jen said causing an explosion of applause and chuckles; and she turned and danced off the stage (Oscar firmly in hand).

"Wow, I wonder if Ben can do it," Jim muttered.

Jen went backstage; and she was being ushered to the reporters, but stopped them, because she needed some air.

“Can I please get some air?” Jen begged as she lifted her dress. “I’ll be right back I swear,” Jen said to the usher, and he looked at her like the boat had a hole in it.

“Yes, we can do whatever you want, you’re an Oscar winner,” Rafael said hollowly as he grinned; and showed her through the horde of people: to the back door, out of the kitchen, through the steak fridge, and into the alley.

Jen heard the door slam shut behind her; and she let out a scream for the ages. She hadn’t had a sports memory she could cling to, a boyfriend before Jim she loved, but now she had an even greater love, acting. She jumped up and down hitting the air with her free hand; then she bent down and touched the wet ground. “I am not a loser anymore.” She thought of that white haired man Gratus, saying those words she only now could remember and grasp at. She wondered if her lens would always be hers to hold. She lifted her left leg like a ballerina; and looked up into the sky, smiling like a lottery winner.

The door behind her opened slowly. And out came a man dressed as a cook named Saul Lead. He put a revolver to the back of her head and shot her twice. The first bullet made her straighten up like a stiff piece of paper out of the printer; and the second killed her dead. Her body fell like fall leaves with blood gushing from her wounds. Then Saul hurried down the alleyway; grabbing some new clothes left for him in the dumpster. Then he all out sprinted as fast as future jail time could incentivize someone to do. Jen lay there dead, as blood filled the alley like sheep to a field of green (stretching out to every corner) while *the rain came down in Hollywood*.

“I think I have some news for you, Laron,” Saul said as he adjusted his suit-in a voice thickened and was soar from cigarettes and cocaine abuse-and he gently touched Laron’s shoulder.

“Yes?”

“The goose is golden brown and dinner is served.”

“Good, but I’m not hungry thanks,” Laron replied as if he’d been offered dessert; and he knew Jen had been shot and killed by Saul (he paid him in bottles of whiskey and stolen clothing from Beverly Hills) but he thought she’d earned that award as well. He knew she’d never tell anyone his secrets; or look at him with *doe fucking eyes ever again*.

Jim sat there on the edge of his seat waiting to see Jen come back in-as did the rest of Hollywood who hoped to hear her talk to the press-but Jim also needed to see Ben win the best actor Oscar (he sat forward and took in a quick breath).

“Let’s go, Ben, three for three,” Jim said hopefully as he looked around for Ben; and he saw him stretching out his arms (this was as close to blowing it as Ben ever got). Jim had a good feeling something great was about to happen, because it was *their night*.

“Ben, be ready for your moment,” Julie said warmly as she held Ben’s hand tightly to her breast. “You’ve waited for this,” Julie said as the presenter came out.

Behind Jim-in the darkened doorway-a man walked in; it was Saul again. Saul’s hard features made everyone nervous who saw him; and what he was wearing-a long green suit and gold hat-told them he was nobody. He walked down the aisle past Beth; and Jim saw him out of the corner of his eye (what was that, he thought without looking).

“Who’s that guy I wonder?” Jim asked aloud as if to tell himself something. “Nice suit, Loser,” Jim said as he started to grin, but something about Saul stopped him.

“I think something great is about to happen,” Sil Slank-daughter of the head of NBC-effused quite eloquently with a smile that sold the world bird for breakfast. “The academy award goes to,” Sil said brightly as she fussed with the envelope. Everyone looked at Sil; her hair black as night on the ocean, and

having red full lips. She was wearing a red lace full length gown. She opened the envelope with her tongue sticking out slightly. ” OH my god! It actually happened! Ben Train!”

Ben leaned forward, and Julie wrapped her arms around him. Ben had finally crossed the last step at the top of the stairs, he'd won. He kissed Julie and rocked up to his feet. He shot forward and headed for the stairs. Behind him, Jim saw Saul pull out a revolver.

“What are you trying, Pal?” Jim asked angrily as he leapt out of his seat and ran down the aisle. Saul took a few steps (Jim's heart racing faster than falling, as he chased him down) and he braced for his shots at Ben.

“Not this year,” Saul muttered coldly, as Jim jumped on his back just as he was pulling the trigger. The shot hit Sil in the chest; and she fell backwards as a spurt of blood covered Ben and his Oscar.

“Help, I can't hold him!” Jim yelled frantically as everyone just froze.

Saul kicked Jim in the stomach; and shot him in the left shoulder and then thigh. When he turned to shoot Ben, he was already running for it, *with legs once fast now remembered*.

“Stop him!” Saul growled angrily as he tried to get a shot at Ben but had none. “Stop that fake banana!” shouted Saul as he fired at Ben while running up the stage steps. Ben hauled ass around the corner; and Beth made her way discretely out of the room.

“GO Ben go!” Ben said quickly as he was sprinting full out; however he slowed to duck into a short hallway. He ran past several people-most in absolute hysterics-and he ducked under a desk. The security guards in the hall met up with Saul-all of them having never fired a gun-and were shot once each in the head (with an ease of a seasoned assassin).

“Where is he?” Saul asked with a tone of desperation. “Where?” repeated Saul angrily, as he shook a hair stylist named Ped-who hadn't been near a fight since 4<sup>th</sup> grade-by the shoulders (making him cry a

large stream of embarrassment tears). Ped just looked at him in shock. Saul threw him into the wall and unwittingly ran past the room Ben was in.

Ben got up after seeing this-knowing his window for escape was small-and hurried out into the hallway (making sure he watched Saul run the wrong direction first). Ben made his way out to the front of the stage; and he saw security guards and police flooding into the rows of utter chaos. He ran over to Jim and knelt down beside him.

“Jim, hold on, Buddy, the paramedics are coming,” reassured Ben.

“Ben, what, what would you have said, in your...speech?” Jim asked painfully as he tried to hold onto consciousness (while blood curdled in his throat).

Ben looked at Jim and remembered-what inexplicably he had forgotten in the Malay-he had won the Oscar (hot damn he thought). He looked around-shaking his hand in the air like a circus conductor-and then put his hand on Jim’s stomach. ” Jim, I was going to thank Julie, the whole time. Then at the end I was going to stick it, to you and Jen. I thought you’d think it was funny if I did. We did it, Jim, we all made the show. Keep fighting, Jim, there’s life in you yet,” Ben pleaded as he held Jim’s bloody hand.

Jim howled like an eagle with its wings clipped off; the agony started to tense up all the muscles in his torso. He grabbed Ben’s hand and pulled him in close. Jim coughed three times and asked tearfully,” Where’s my Jenny?”

Ben looked at him dumbfounded; as he had forgotten about her completely until then. Ben rose up like a flagpole and looked around. Ben saw Julie’s crying eyes and he mouthed the word JEN. Julie shook her head no; and then she mouthed the words SHE’S DEAD. Ben didn’t need any further explanation.

“How is she, Ben, how’s she...doing?”

Ben looked around and wasn't comforted by what he saw: 4 policemen frisking 2 of Saul Lead's associates, while the other police officers were making damn sure no one left *their crime scene*. Ben put on a brave face for Jim. He bent down, kneeling now, with his eyes on Jim's. "She's fine, Jim, just fine. You make it through this and she'll be there for ya. Just breathe in and breathe out, Buddy. Long life ahead for both of you, that's the truth."

Jim smiled through the enormous pain; and he was lifted up onto a gurney by a pair of anti-gravity robot arms. They took Jim away, but as he was leaving the Kodak theater he asked softly, "My Oscar, Ben, where is it?"

The paramedic just held his hand tightly and took him out through the receiving line-faces aghast and crying-where a flying hospital was awaiting him on the street.

Ben looked back at the stage and felt like a hungry man with no money. He made his way up to the podium; and looked out over the near empty room. He lifted his hand and smiled; as the police and paramedics watched him like a puppeteer. The lights on the stage were turned off; and he stood there in a spotlight drinking in his stolen moment. He started crying-harder than if he'd lost-and he mouthed the words to his speech. Julie watched this and she smiled through her tears, clapping all the while. Ben lifted up his Oscar and mouthed the words, "I made it mom." Then he walked down to Julie and fell into her arms like he was dying.

## Chapter 9

All the best lies are true

Jim was in a coma for a solid 2 months before they had to amputate his left leg and arm. Ben went there every single day to sit with him and hold his hand. The room was small; and it only had: the gold bed Jim was lying in, a wall TV with cartoons on (The adventures of Spacehog) and Jim's, Jen's, and Ben's Oscars on the nightstand at the foot of the bed, and a round window facing the downtown L.A. area.

“Jim, I know it's hard where you are, I know that better than anyone,” Ben cried as he looked up at Jim's eyes, still no movement. “I will swear to you, if you can come out of it, THAT COMA. There's something more here for you, something big. Just open your eyes and we'll shoot the shit. Huh, a little jerk to jerk conversation, interested?” Ben asked tearfully with his mind searching for the answer from how he was broken from his OWN COMA, but finding nothing. “Come on now, Jim, they told me you can wake up any time you want! If you think you can, you will. Move back from the dreams, embrace the real ones instead, Jim,” Ben insisted tearfully as he held Jim's right hand; and he sat there watching Jim's eyes flutter. Ben knew Jim could die at any moment, if he gave up.

Ben got up slowly and kicked the edge of the bed (the gold bed jerking to the side due to Jim's uneven weight on the right side). And Ben walked over to the window and looked out into the early morning fog

(it danced in his memory from the first time he came to Hollywood, and saw it. He thought it was a harbinger of great things to come, but never this). He wished to god he could get Beth back for this-and he swore to himself and to Julie he would do just that-but he didn't like the idea of prison. He looked down and the sun started shinning up over the buildings like rising stocks of corn. He knew then some dreams were too heavy to hold.

He felt a hand on his leg-jogging a memory loose of getting felt up once as a boy-and he turned to scream; until he saw Jim groggy eyed and smiling at him. "I don't need any eggs, you bum," Jim effused sarcastically forcing his best glumly grin.

"JIM!" Ben cried as he rubbed his own back and then forehead. "Whoa, Man, I am happy you made it out. Thanks for joining the party you dick," Ben said enthusiastically as he hugged Jim (and never minded the tears he was getting on Jim's cheek).

Jim smiled-like he'd always smiled when he was on top-but suddenly he realized he was missing his left arm and leg. He turned to that side of the bed and felt around; and then panicked and screamed as loud as dying banshees. He screamed so loud they could hear him 3 floors down.

"WHAT HAPPENED?!!!" Jim screamed as he punched the bed. "What happened, GOD?! Aahh my life is over now, done, just done," Jim cried with every word getting fainter and fainter. He cried dry tears and felt around his left shoulder with his right hand.

Ben stood there with his thoughts racing, as he had no idea what to say to him (thinking he was blowing it again like he'd done many times as a child). He knew anything-and everything on Earth-he did would be a lie. Ben walked around the bed blinking hard and breathing harder. He put his shaky fear filled hand on Jim's chest and Jim's eyes tore a hole through his.

"Jim, I'll take care of you," Ben urged as he choked up. "Don't worry, robotic arms have touch sensitivity-" Ben said, but Jim grabbed a cup of apple juice off the table and tossed it over his head before



he could finish. “They can do the same things, and look lifelike. No one will EVER, laugh at you, or I’ll fucking kill them. No ONE, Jim, NO one at all!” Ben said sharply after a moment, as Jim punched the wall behind him (his punches broke clean through to the other side). “Now let it all out right here and now. No more sorry for yourself tomorrow. That day’s taken,” Ben demanded sternly as he tried to stop his own tears, but they wouldn’t stop for trying.

Jim hit the bed hard with his right hand; and moaned with a lion’s agony. His eyes caught the 3 Oscars at the foot of the bed, and he froze. Ben looked at him unsure-fearing Jim was about to go completely nuts-as well as wondering why he had stopped. Ben spun around and saw the Oscars and his body froze (her, it was Jen he was going to ask about, he knew it).

“Where is she, Ben, JEN, WHERE?”

Ben used his acting training to not let on she was dead-as he wasn’t going to for a second take away Jim’s only hope, because he knew it would kill Jim-and Ben thought of old triumphs and focused on the emotion. Ben said hollowly” She’s at a photo shoot, she can’t make it for awhile.”

“You’re lying!” Jim barked angrily as he punched Ben in the leg. “I know when someone’s lying to me, Ben. I grew up with scoundrels, every fucking word they say is a lie,” said Jim angrily as he pushed Ben hard. “Is she dead, did he shoot her?” Jim asked defiantly as he tossed his pillow at the window; then glared at Ben like he was going to kill him (and Ben knew he could even without the use of all his limbs).

Ben took a quick glance at Jim; and then the air went out of his lungs-he wasn’t going to lie to him like this, not this way-and he nodded yes. Jim tried to scream, but his vocals cords were too dry and flinched on him. He looked at his missing arm and leg-his thoughts of running down at Santa Monica beach with Jen, crushing him now-and he pointed Ben towards the door and threw a pillow at him.

“Jim, come on now,” begged Ben halfheartedly as he thought what if it were *me, then what*.

“JUST GET OUT!!” Jim screamed as he pushed Ben away from him. “I won’t be here when you come back. You owe me tha...” Jim demanded as his voice cracked on *that*, and his lip quivered (and Ben knew he was going to kill himself the second he left).

Ben stood there immobile for a few seconds. Then Jim slapped him hard on the arm-this time harder than before-and Ben looked at Jim like he was already gone. Ben shrugged his shoulders; and walked over and grabbed his Oscar. Ben looked back at Jim one last time, and walked out.

“Damn it!” Ben shouted angrily as he kicked a trash can; and then threw an empty gurney out of his way. He walked down the hall and heard the alarms go off in Jim’s room. After Jim had grabbed Jen’s Oscar off the end of the bed; he pulled the breathing tube and IV drip out of his body, *for good*. He swiftly went into cardiac arrest as nurses raced to his room; but before they could get there, he used the head of her Oscar to crush in his own throat-by thrusting it through with both hands (he knew there was no saving him then, and he died like he deserved to, on his own terms).

Ben walked down the hall angry beyond belief-he had more than tears to contend with-he knew then he had lost the only true friend he had in the world.

“Are you Ben Train?” Zach Kipo asked timidly-Zach who was a small red haired boy fresh off the bus with his mother Marlene-while Zach offered Ben a sheet of yellow paper (Zach’s report card that year 4 A’s and a B). Zach touched Ben’s hand, and at first he didn’t feel it, but then he looked down and said WHAT DID YOU SAY but didn’t hear his own words.

“What?”

“Are you Ben Train the actor?” Zach asked.

“Not today, Kid,” Ben snapped sharply, as he walked out of the waiting room; and then out into the final few feet of hospital. He saw a trash can to his right; and tossed his Oscar inside without breaking stride. He walked out: got in his limo, and said nothing to Julie then-*or ever again*-about Jim. Julie knew

not to ask, so she buried it away, but she knew Jim was dead the following day after reading the Hollywood Insider. She didn't ask where Ben was going the day of Jim's funeral, she already knew. Half the town came out; said nice things and put flowers on the casket (Ben paid for the funeral. Beth was not invited, but tried to crash it *anyway* before being removed).

Then Ben spent the next few months working like crazy. He was promoting a new film about a Swedish guitar player-Yars Vindleneck-who goes on to kill his bass player in the middle of a performance. He knew this was the sort of work that would get him praise, but he wanted *that podium and his moment*. He thought of winning the Oscar more than a little, which was all the time. And when he got the Oscar nod, he was overjoyed and elated.

Ben sat in a movie theater in Beverly Hills (Trident Cinema) hidden in the back row under a blue trench coat. It was Oscar Sunday; and he was hiding out until it was time to go (he'd gotten nominated without a second of griping from anyone which was rare). He watched the science fiction movie Grip of Easy; and drank beers he had smuggled in using secret pockets in his trench coat.

"God this movie is bad," Ben muttered as he lurked forward (he half expected the movie to skip to the end about then). "I can't take this shit, I'm outta here," Ben growled angrily as he watched a plastic looking alien smash into a moving wall. He got up and ducked out the backdoor, into the alley. He looked up, and saw Paul Jance smiling at him. "Paul," he said.

Paul was all of 5 foot 4 inches tall and wide at the shoulders like a running back (he detested all sports though, unless he was drunk or high). His hair was white with a streak of black down both sides (made you take a second look if you saw him drive by). He had on a tan fisherman's jacket; and denim shorts with the words I GAVE HER HALF, HALF MY GRAVESITE, WHAT? that was sewn down his left leg.

"Hey, Ben, funny meeting you here," Paul said coyly-knowing he was there the whole time, even telling the extras watching the movie to be quiet throughout-and he grinned and watched Ben walk over to him.

“The porno theater was closed today, Paul?”

“Not if you pay in joy juice,” Paul answered with a wink. “Hey aren’t you going to get ready for the Oscar’s tonight?” Paul asked with his shirt bothering him enough to pull it out and then tuck it back in. “I would if I were you, Ben.”

Ben looked down, his head moving like an elephant’s trunk. Paul walked over and put his hands on Ben’s shoulders, and Ben looked up.

“Yeah...I’ll be there to see it all again,” Ben confessed sadly as he kicked a small rock up against the tan mortar walls of the theater. “Crazy thing though I...,” Ben muttered as he tried to clear his mind of all the thoughts from last year.

“What is?”

“Walking down that aisle,” Ben admitted sadly looking at Paul now. “I watched a friend die there, and another died in the sewage of a hospital while I joked around. They were good people, Paul, better than any of us. You don’t think that bitch Beth will be there do you?” Ben asked as he strolled out of the alley with Paul beside him: Paul had his arm around his waist.

“I don’t know, but probably,” Paul replied with a wry smirk that lit up the world. “She did a hell of a job with that love story. I hate to say that-because she’s the biggest bastard there is-but she did. So don’t count on her missing it. Ya know you might want to play a couple holes of golf to calm your nerves?” Paul asked coyly, as he motioned to his driver to open the limousine door for them.

Ben walked up to the limo-and was about to get in-when Beth drove by flipping him the bird. She cackled and swerved in and out of several cars in the wrong lane (Ben wished one of them would take her out, but none did, *unfortunately*).

“Man, that heartless bitch,” Ben said darkly as his eyes went blank to what he was watching. “Taunting me on the day of the Oscars,” said Ben in disbelief. “Ya know there’s something different about her since it happened. I can’t put my finger on it, but something,” Ben said as he watched Beth driving away-seeing only the worst of her in his mind-as he glared at her. He got into the limo with Paul holding his head; and slid over to the window seat.

“Ah, yeah about that,” Paul said reluctantly.

Ben looked at him with suspicious angry eyes. ” What, Paul?” asked Ben.

Paul squirmed in his seat-unsure if it would be helping anything by telling him the truth-and then looked straight ahead as he saw the driver listening in. Paul leaned forward and closed the window between the front seat, and the back.

“You didn’t hear it from me, but I hear things,” Paul said as he smiled-a smile that meant he loved sticking it to Beth-and he put his arm around Ben. “I heard Beth paid someone to kill you, and Jim got in the way,” Paul said as he looked out the window. Ben sat there looking forward and thinking of bashing Beth’s head in.

“Oh my god, I never would have thought it,” Ben said in disbelief. “I mean, yes it makes perfect sense. That said, what about Jen, Paul?” Ben asked breaking into quick bursts of laughter and coughing; and he grabbed hold of Paul’s arm when he wouldn’t answer him.

Paul pulled out a cigar and lit it. He took two slow drags and offered it to Ben (who he knew didn’t smoke, but he liked corrupting people). ” It was Laron; he killed her because she found out about his secret pleasure chamber. He paid the same man to do it too. Ya know he’s got more than a few people down there in that chamber,” Paul said. “And he doesn’t fancy prison or some tart holding sway over his life. You deserved to know.”

Ben punched the roof of the limo hard twice; and then punched his own palm so hard it left a red dent. He was certain now what had to be done. He said flatly” I’m going to kill them, Paul, both of them.”

“I know, but why bother?” Paul asked, breaking into a spurt of wincing as he did. “Laron’s been good to us both, and he did get you that stage, lest we forget. Now if you wanna go high and mighty, I got some water needs walking on. Otherwise, you say and do nothing. And you get to live another day,” Paul continued as he sucked away on his cigar. ”And I get to keep a dear friend of mine *alive*.”

“I tell you what though, I won’t say anything about this,” Ben declared as he sat facing Paul; as he now had his finger pointing at him. “But if you hear Beth was shot, and Laron fell off a bridge,” Ben growled as he tapped Paul on the chest. ”Then maybe you forgive an old friend his payback.”

“Duly noted,” Paul answered with a voice without a hint of conviction, but all the give up in the world. “Well, then why don’t we go wrestle up some drugs? I’m too sober for all this shit,” Paul said as he rubbed his chest-knowing Ben and the things he was capable of-as he mouthed the word OWW and blinked his eyes a few times. He knew there was no point trying to dissuade Ben. And he secretly knew Beth and Laron had it coming to them (for a good long while now).

They drove across town; and they hooked up with a drug dealer operating out of a toy store. Once they had their *fuel*; they went over to Ben’s and gathered up his tux. Julie was already dressed-sensing the whole world would want to know what she was wearing (being Mrs. Ben Train and all)-and she was ready for the big night.

“Ben, when you win-and you’re GOING TO,” Julie insisted as she fussed with her train. “Will you please mention my mother? She would love it,” Julie said warmly, as she sat cross legged beside Ben on one side of the bed, and Paul on the other.

They took a different route to the ceremony; they hoped to utilize the back entrance. Ben had no desire to work the red carpet tonight. He knew there would be no softball questions waiting for him there;

and he really just wanted to avoid Beth. He also knew if they met, he would have a hard time hiding what he now knew about her.

“Ben, nice to see you,” Brent Pettyloop said brightly as he opened the back door; then he let the 3 of them in. Brent was the doorman; and he had a smile that only made you feel like smiling (he had large round white teeth and devious eyes).

“Nice to see you as well, Brent,” Ben replied as he felt his pocket for his pistol-he knew how chaotic things could get and he wasn’t taking any chances (along with the rest of the Hollywood elite, they weren’t *trusting luck this year*) as he looked and found his red Beretta. “I heard they were having a barbecue here,” Ben continued as he strolled past Brent keeping his eyes forward. ”Are we late?”

“No sir, the ribs are ripe and ready,” Brent exclaimed surprisingly with his smile leading the way. “Should I get you a glass of wine perhaps?” Brent asked as he ushered them through the kitchen. Ben considered. And as he did the cooks and waiters gave Ben a standing ovation.

“They know, Ben, everyone does,” Julie said proudly, as she smiled and rested her head on Ben’s shoulder.

“Thank you everyone, but I can barely hear you,” Ben said sarcastically as he flashed his brilliant-bought and paid for with talent-smile that warmed the room.

“Ben, they aren’t clapping for you, it’s my suit,” Paul joked as he rubbed the lapel of his suit. “Yes you’re a fine porno actor, but seriously, you’ll never make it in movies, Kid,” Paul said sarcastically as he snatched an oyster off a plate; and then he promptly ate it.

“There’s always condom commercials,” said Ben sarcastically. ” I got 5 years of acting lessons if they call. And they will, I know it.”

They were ushered out into the Lion lounge-named that for the number of orgies that had broken out there over the years-that was for previous winners only. The lounge was covered in red velvet furniture; as well as it had paintings from years gone by. There were several dozen people in the room drunk as a skunk and drinking warm cider. They looked at Ben-showing not even a hint of emotion-and smirked. This was due in large part, to the fact they had a hunch he was taking home his second (with half the best actor nominees still home debating even coming to the show at this late hour).

“Let’s grab a seat, ya know sit down,” Ben said as he pulled on Julie’s arm. “If I didn’t know better I’d swear, that was that SKANK Beth over there. Paul, if she comes over here. I’m going to punch her GOOD and HARD.”

“Ben, winners don’t attack other winners,” Paul explained-not even believing himself as he said it-and he tried to keep a straight face. “You have to maintain the standard,” Paul said covering his mouth and smile from Ben’s eyes. “Even if it is only for tonight,” Paul said.

“I can’t make any promises,” Ben declared as he took off his cufflinks (in case Beth got frisky he needed full extension of his fists). “She better WATCH IT or I’ll fuckin’ lose it,” Ben said coldly as he sat back; and Ben eyed Beth through the crowd.

“Why are you mad at her again?” Julie asked.

“Because I heard something, something I can’t talk about here,” Ben spoke as if he was getting ready to talk to someone else. “Trust me, you’ll know by the end of the night,” Ben said as he tried to suppress his anger (even though he could see Beth laughing it up and this enraged him even more).

“So I said, I won’t play trashy and ruin her performance,” Beth said incredulously as she cackled-making the skin on her *new neck* wrinkle in an odd way-as she threw her head back. “And he believed me, that idiot,” Beth said as she sipped her glass of wine and caressed Gloria’s back. The hangers on, were waiting on her every word with baited breath (and she knew it).



“Did they ever call you back for the Trident role?” Martha Sotle asked coyly with a smile-knowing they had, because she oversaw the casting-and she sat forward and rubbed Beth’s thigh.

Gloria looked at this and her blood started to boil; however Beth was quite enjoying it.

“Yes, but I can’t take boring roles, I won’t,” Beth insisted with a sultry look thrown over to Martha. “They say it’s not the roles you take that make you, it’s the ones you don’t,” Beth continued as she smiled at Martha. “It’s very true, and it is a hard lesson for the young ones to learn.”

“Like monogamy,” Gloria snapped as she glared at Beth.

“Oh that, that’s for dullards and brain waste,” Beth answered sharply without looking her way (as she knew Gloria was getting too big for her *designer britches*). “I believe in loving everyone, all the time, Gloria. You knew me when we met, don’t be coy. Anyway, there are far too many boring directors. They ask the same questions, can you be stronger, angrier, cry more. I mean, where’s the faith?” Beth asked coyly-knowing she was reeling Martha in-and she reached over and rubbed the back of Martha’s head.

Gloria stood there fuming; and then threw her drink at the wall and yelled, “You’re so full of it, Beth! Everything you are is a *lie!*”

Beth grinned, and then slapped Gloria hard across the mouth. ” You’re nothing but trash, and I don’t like the mess,” Beth said dismissively as she ran her finger down Martha’s thigh. “Run along, Gloria, the bus stop is still open if you hurry.”

Gloria started to cry; and she raised her hand to slap Beth, but she stopped herself. Beth showed her Cheshire cat smile; and then she looked at Martha with bedroom eyes.

“Beth, drop dead you Skank!” Gloria cried angrily as she turned and walked off. Gloria saw Ben looking right at her-unsure what he would think if he knew Beth had tried to kill him-and she smiled at

the possibility of telling him. She knew Ben and Beth would be having words-and possibly come to blows later-and that was revenge enough.

“Skank, she’s one to talk!” Beth bellowed, and they all broke out laughing again. “She smells of the gutter and a manure upbringing. When you’re a star, envy is your everyday coffee cup. You get it everywhere, and you are bothered by none of it. Martha, I sure could use a date for the evening,” Beth said in a sultry voice. ” Should it matter how we met, I say no.”

“I agree, let’s take a walk and get some air,” Martha said then she French kissed Beth for several seconds.

“Oh god, Ben, she’s certainly sealing her fate now,” Paul exclaimed.

“Why do you say that?”

“Gloria is related to the director of Beth’s next film,” Paul explained. “She’ll never get that now, and it will ruin her. Once you’re too old to look young, they put you out to pasture,” Paul said as he sucked on his cigar-aware Gloria’s father would ruin Beth in every possible way-and he watched Beth and Martha coming their way.

“And they stop feeding you if you ask for bread,” Ben answered as he stretched out his right hand (praying Beth would get fresh). “It will be more fun to NOT, get angry with her now,” Ben said as he reclined; carefully watching Beth coming his way through the cracks in the people. ” Why waste the dirt?”

“Yes, Martha, it is hard dealing with all the adoration and money,” Beth admitted as they ambled along arm and arm. “I mean most people can’t keep 5 dollars in their pockets,” Beth spoke using the same platitudes she had to lure Gloria to her. “It’s embarrassing.”

*Yes, Ben thought. The walk with a high and mighty gate. I'm better than you get out of my way walk.*

Ben had laughed at it the first time he met Beth. He watched how high as a kite she was-and as low as a peasant-in her contrived series of steps.

“Ya know, Paul, I can see all the years of mutual death for each other, in her eyes right now,” Ben remarked contently. “She hates me, more than any other person in the world. Even more than that hack director that made her *do a hetero love scene*. My god what a bastard she is,” Ben said as he clasped his fingers together; and he clapped to get Beth’s attention.

“So I said, I won’t act a shot until I get my caviar,” Beth said as she licked Martha’s lips and that all familiar cackle rose over the noise of the room. “And he caves like they always do, and we went onto make some money on that one. I’m always right, what are you looking at, Martha?” Beth asked in disbelief that anyone would want to do anything other than listen to her talk.

“Beth, it’s that horrible man Ben Train.”

“No, this is for talent back here I-“ Beth eyeing Paul’s and Ben’s content smiling faces “They wouldn’t, oh god, YOU. What the titty bar let out early, Benjamin?” asked Beth as she loosely offered Ben her hand. “I’d thought you for the marrying kind, with those women, dancers, what have you.”

“Bethany, I’m glad to see you doing so well,” Ben replied. “Ya know it pains me to not be working with you. We could...do this war picture I’m in together? If you want,” Ben said hollowly with Paul smiling from ear to ear. Ben knew there was no picture, but he wanted her to think there was-at least the rest of the night-for fun and destruction purposes.

“Ben, I’m a star, that means I’m available for quality,” Beth gushed. “You go ahead and contact my people, and we’ll hash this out. Yes, it would be fun to rekindle the old acting flame. And it is very becoming of you to *turn*, the other cheek,” Beth said hollowly as she just wanted the role to destroy him again. “I’ll see you after the show, I hope you win, IT...ya know. And all that crap,” Beth said hollowly

as she grabbed Martha's butt-knowing she wanted anyone BUT him to win-and she smiled her *getting the job smile*.

Ben smiled at this; and he pretended to laugh to himself, but he was really hoping she'd leave so he could laugh in a more boisterous fashion. "Yes, I hope you take home some hardware...stuff," Ben said. "Ya know, if you can be bothered," Ben said hollowly as he looked into the *hungry for work eyes* of Beth-those same eyes he had been tortured by for years-and he found a heaven he didn't know was lurking there.

Beth coughed and acted like her voice was getting horse; and then she turned nervously and walked away. Paul cackled at this-once she was safely out of earshot-and asked sarcastically, "Can I direct this one, Ben? Come now, I need the work."

"No, I wouldn't want to besmirch you're good name on a fictional movie," Ben said as he rose up-knowing the night was off to a great start-and he motioned with his hand for Paul and Julie to do the same. "We might need to grab our seats. I'm assuming the working class heroes are already in there."

"They are, and it will be a glorious night, Ben," Paul said honestly as he pulled out a lucky gold coin-the same coin his dying father had given him on his deathbed-and he slid it into Ben's coat jacket pocket (with Ben none the wiser). "Just wait and see."

They walked through a secret passageway; that had naked pictures of *all the Oscar winners*-going back the whole way-on either side of it. Ben walked with a purpose-he had in the back of his mind death for Beth clunking around like so many loose screws-with his legs charging forward to destiny. They grabbed their seats, and Ben intentionally said very little to anyone. He still blamed them for the loss of Jim and Jen (and they accepted this blame). And as he sat there he knew someday there would be a reckoning.

“Let’s find some stars, they’ve emptied the sky for GOOD!” said Hamton Fisher brightly as he started his opening song and dance routine. He was the host for the night; and was despised for his rapier wit and crude sensibilities. The Oscars loved him for his good looks and charm (appealing to the kids was not a bad thing to have going for you either).

The show went on for awhile-no one minding the campy feel to it-and then a dance troop called The Ray Riders filled the aisles. This startled Ben-his mind remembering Jim and that horrible assassin Saul Lead-and he reached into his pockets. He found the coin Paul had put there; and looked over at Paul-who was as good at lying as a blind man playing poker-and they both grinned. The Ray Riders were dressed in 1950’s dress; and they had on large purple coats and red pants.

“Boy, Ben, they really go all out these days,” Paul remarked.

“They always did, they just needed a reason to take it farther,” Ben muttered. “For some reason, these performers strike me as odd,” Ben said nervously as he eyed the dancers (finding their routine contrived and unsatisfactory). “Yeah, there’s something not right here.”

“Don’t worry, they’re in the union, it’s cool,” Paul responded as he sucked on his cigar. “And they come cheap I hear.”

The Ray Riders threw off their coats; revealing they had large red paint filled squirt guns underneath. They opened fire on the audience; covering the top 1 percent of actors in the world in streams of red paint.

“We gotta move,” Ben said quickly as he shot up and shielded Julie from the paint. He, Paul, and Julie raced to the back of the stage area; as security started beating the *SHIT* out of the troublemakers. They started to throw the guns into the crowd-realizing their rouse would mean a beating-and they attempted to escape.

“What the devil, Martha?” Beth cried. “Don’t they have jobs?”

Martha looked at the dancers and knew they weren't from Hollywood. Their faces were too hard and leathery to be anything but the underbelly of some dusty Midwest town.

"I think they're protesters," Martha uttered with her eyes scanning the room for police. "They don't seem to be our sort of vetted professionals," Martha said as the protesters were dragged bloody and screaming from the Kodak Theater. Martha pulled Beth's hair back-to avoid the paint spray-and said, "No, they are definitely the criminal type."

"Yes, they seem too Marlboro and Lottery ticket for my liking," Beth said with her lips curled. "Enough already, let's have our fancy cake. The rabble are only good for stepping on, if you ask me," said Beth dismissively as she lifted her nose up (refusing to look at the protesters). "Even that is losing its luster."

"We're fine now, Ben, they took care of it," Paul assured. "Let's sit down and grab some history," Paul said as he put his arm around Ben, and walked Ben and Julie back to their seats. Ben looked back as a female protester got kicked in the face by a police officer (breaking her nose for the second time tonight). His eyes met hers, and he felt a love for her just then and only then.

The best supporting actor awards were handed out with nepotism winning the day. Howard Stoneman's son winning for Best Supporting Actor, and Ed Cohey-the famous Austrian actor-had his daughter Page win as well. They did the same predictable *trying to be funny, but failing speeches*. Everyone clapped and got ready for the best actress award.

"Martha, oh let Oscar call me friend," Beth whispered. "I've earned it, more than anyone, and that's something," she looked forward and closed her eyes as she adjusted her clothes. "It's what they look for. Legends are legends for a reason. The committee knows that, they know."

"The Oscar goes to," Hamton said smoothly as he opened the letter." Beth! NO I mean Sicilia Schiavone!"

Beth boiled with anger, and the cameras caught her glaring at Hamton. She pushed the camera out of her face; and kicked the seat in front of her and yelled, "BY GOD you'll never toy with me again Sunny Jim!" And Beth punched the seat filler in the face as he went to take her seat. "You're all losers, every one of you, nothing! You were lucky to suck your way to the top, and that's IT!" Beth barked with her mascara running. "How dare you, this isn't the end. Remember who owns the scene, that's right kiddies, it's me. Good night and GET FUCKED!" Beth said angrily, head down, as she brushed off Martha's hand from her forearm. The whole room broke out laughing; and Sicilia Schiavone moved quickly up to the microphone.

"Well, I wish I had known horrific career ending rants were allowed, because I would have rehearsed," Sicilia said sarcastically as she kissed her Oscar causing thunderous hilarity (while Beth looked back at her disdainfully). "Is that Beth, on her way to the soup kitchen? My, I almost thought she had won the worst winner in history award, but that's for *working actresses*," Sicilia said snidely as the whole crowd laughed boisterously. They all hated Beth, and every one of them was in on the rouse-and a janitor-except for Ben. They wanted to surprise Ben to help him through his troubles.

"Oh god, Paul, this is awesome," Ben said happily with laughter dancing in his words. And he watched Beth fighting it out with an usher in the back. Ben looked back and felt a certain *exhilaration like none he ever had before*. He watched her unraveling and the joyful noise was deafening.

"Watch it, loser, you watch it now!" Beth shrieked as she wrestled a black haired usher named Ten Goulrod. Ten was just as tall as her, and just as strong; and he fought her like she was a man. Beth meanwhile saw him as nothing, and tried to rip his eyes out.

"Beth, stop please!" Martha pleaded frantically, as the other security guards walked slowly towards Beth and Ten. "He's not worth it."

“Miss, the buffet line is outside, and down the street,” Ten chided. “They don’t allow people like you in here,” Ten continued as he got Beth in a headlock and punched her in the eye. “We don’t accept gas cards as currency, please, leave.”

“You horrible wretch!” grunted Beth like a wild mongoose. “You’ll die for this, you’ll die,” Beth declared coldly as she scratched Ten across his cheek. Ten slammed her head into the armrest of her chair (appreciating just how funny this must look to everyone as well). Beth looked up and the seat filler was smiling at her from her seat. “You can’t do this to TALENT, GIFT! Someone, anyone hand me your pistol, quickly.”

Ben heard this along with everyone else. The clapping and roar of laughter filled the Kodak Theater (and the sidewalk outside). Ben blessed his cufflink; and closed his eyes for a few seconds as he thought of his moment soon to come. They all knew Beth was the one that had made an attempt on Ben’s life; and they knew she had to pay for it too.

“I would like to thank the academy, but someone is getting beat up,” Sicilia said as she grinned and admired her Oscar. ” Well, I guess *someone* might remember my speech now.”

The entire audience clapped; and Ben stood up to watch Beth getting dragged out of the theater kicking and screaming. Ben watched the last of Beth-her left hand trying to hold onto the door-leave the room and he sat back down with a quick slap of his leg. He was elated already, and to win the Oscar again would bring him to a new level of enjoyment he couldn’t fathom.

“Paul, that’s was well worth the suit,” Ben said as he grabbed Paul’s forearm and gently shook it. Ben added jokingly,” And the poor penmanship on my seat card, thank you.”

Paul gently looked down at Ben’s knee and could see it shaking; he looked up at Ben and pointed to the stage. Ben looked up and saw Hamton getting ready to announce Best Lead Actor (and his heart



nearly stopped). He told himself not to get nervous, (but until you've actually sat there you really don't know how nervous you'll be).

"O.k. then," Ben said.

"Alright, another boring Oscar's," Hamton joked as he opened the envelope. He stepped back and jumped in the air like a kangaroo (one that was young and agile of course). Everyone watched him intently; all but the supreme talent of Ben Train knowing what name was on that envelope.

"Come on, let me hear it," Ben begged as he clutched Julie's hand, and Paul's wrist.

"BEN, FUCKING, TRAIN!" Hamton yelled excitedly and the room erupted like old faithful.

Ben's head instantly dropped down-he felt like he was having a living dream-and he kissed Julie on the lips. He slowly got up as Julie embraced him; thinking about that first commercial he did at age 3. That dove hand soap commercial, that slippery wet bar, he remembered it now.

"Ben, go take some, BACK!" Julie insisted, smiling at Ben like he was the only man in the world.

Ben stood there looking around; and then swept effortlessly up the stairs like a gust of wind. He was handed his 2<sup>nd</sup> Oscar by Hamton (Hamton crying through his happiness for Ben). "You've taken her out, Ben, rejoice," said Hamton tearfully.

Ben laughed briefly, and looked down at his Oscar. My, what a beautiful thing to hold, he thought. He wondered just then how he ever ended up here after all those painful days. The audience sailed with waves of boisterous anticipation.

"Well then, I reserve the right to beat up any usher comes near," Ben said sarcastically as he fussed with his collar-knowing the significance of standing there TWICE-and his joke had the house roaring like a war siren. "And to pummel the host, once or twice," Ben felt completely composed. "Let us not forget, my uncalled for rants that will alienate us all forever are coming. And finally I call dibs on street corner

8, box nine, as I begin my new career as a homeless person. Goodnight ACADEMY!" Ben yelled triumphantly as his catlike eyes filled with tears of joy-as he remembered Jim and Jen and the loss of their amazing friendship-he was justifiably taken aback.

Paul and Julie headed for the backstage area, as Ben stood there center stage smiling like he was 6 years old again, and winning the Pop Warner Bros *actor's only* football game. He had never felt warmth so encompassing, as the blazing flames washed over his memories, just then.

Ben turned like a dancer and walked backstage; all the while trying to calm himself down but losing that war miserably. He turned the corner; and saw Paul and Julie standing in a large crowd of actors that were facing him. They shouted and cheered him like he was the President on Election Day.

"I know, I'm the greatest," Ben said with his legs moving like they were made of rubber. "You don't have to cheer me, it's assumed," Ben said as he walked over and hugged Julie. "Well the old man did one thing right in this life."

"You did them all, Handsome," Julie wiped the tear from his eye and kissed his cheek. "Let's go finish this off and go dancing," Julie said softly. "Wouldn't you love to cut a new rug?"

"Of course I will," Ben confirmed. "In fact I'll have the wine waiting for us when we get there."

"Nice win, Ben, you made it," Paul said smiling like a man after having his first child. "They can knock us down, but the world will always need merrymakers."

"Don't believe everything you read on bubblegum wrappers, Paul," Ben said as he rubbed Paul's shoulder with his Oscar.

Upon leaving the ceremony, they found themselves dancing and drinking the night away. When the last call came it was just Ben and Julie on the dance floor. The room was loud, and filled with drunk

hangers on and half-asleep sycophants. Ben looked at Julie like they'd just fallen in love. Ben admitted, "There was no one else but you, Julie."

"I know that," Julie said tearfully with her hands grabbing Ben's ass. "And I want to thank you for that, for the rest of my life," Julie confirmed as she danced Ben over to the exit.

"So it's what we always wanted now right?" Ben asked exchanging a wink with Julie. Ben thought about taking her around the globe and *seeing it all*.

"Ha hah, I wouldn't ask, but I was thinking about it," Julie confessed playfully as she rubbed his crotch.

"I've thought of nothing but," Ben said in a contemplative voice. "Let's grab our shit and fly out tonight," said Ben exuberantly with his hand caressing both her cheeks. "But, there's one last thing I've got to do first. Won't take but a morning," said Ben coyly.

They flew home in the limo and Ben made a few inquiries about the plan. He sat back in his rocking chair-feeling like he'd eaten all the pie in the world-and turned on the cameras in his crew's glasses.

Beth and Martha had been making love all night-Beth turning to angry sex to rejuvenate her ego as she needed to feel better anyway she could (after last night's debacle)-and they climaxed together.

"You are one hell of a lover, Martha," Beth said delicately. "One mountain of a friend too, I mean that."

"I love you, Beth, I always have since Shadow Thief," Martha confessed hesitantly as she kissed Beth around the face. "And I always will."

"You're the greatest, a talent most high!" Beth said enthusiastically as she jumped up and down holding Martha's shoulders. Beth loved newness and often sought out relationship destruction to serve

that end. She couldn't get herself bogged down in forever; or her career might suffer. She looked at Martha; and she gave her the same lying eyes she always had to new lovers.

"That is wonderful, simply wonderful," Martha insisted as she went to kiss Beth, but suddenly there was a loud knocking on the front door.

"Who the hell is bothering me this morning?" Beth demanded as she reached over and picked up a steel baseball bat with the words TIME IS BETTER WHEN IT'S OVER, painted on it.

"Be careful-"began Martha, but Beth interrupted her by loudly clearing her throat.

Beth undid the clanking locks, and opened the door gingerly. Her eyes looked up and down the Latino man at her door-she despised any immigrant telling her what for, seeing as she was born and raised here-and he was holding a red box marked present. "What is it you idiot?"

"Ah, it's Juan, and I have the script signor Ben Train had talked to you about," Juan said decisively, as he offered her the box like you would a piece of chocolate cake.

Beth looked at Juan with suspicious eyes; she didn't know what this was, but she was skeptical all the while.

"Fine then, let me have it," Beth snapped sharply as she fingered the sides of the cover like it was made of wood-hoping to show old Juan she could take him if need be-and she had to press hard to get it to open. She looked inside and saw a script titled Go Fuck Yourself Beth. "What is the meaning of this?" Beth asked angrily-half wanting to go toe to toe with old Juan-while the redness of her cheeks oozed out like red paint.

Juan smiled and said coldly," It's the role that will get you back on top."

"How so, Wetback?" asked Beth flatly.

“Because, it’s to die for,” Juan declared as he pulled a magnum 57 from his waistband-Beth’s mind crippled and terrified-and he aimed it at Beth. She froze for a second, and put her hands up instinctively.

“Please god no, NOT NOW!” Beth pleaded like a lightning crash of sound. Juan walked right up to her and put the cold steel barrel of the gun to her temple.

“There’s a fruit cup where you’re headed, so enjoy,” Juan using a cocky British accent and a smile that made Beth cringe. He shot Beth in the neck causing her to fall back onto a glass table (shattering it and cutting her back in several spots). A moment later he was in the house shooting the gasping Beth in the stomach 4 times.

“What was that noise, Beth?” Martha cried timidly as she walked into the living room.

Beth looked over with blood dripping down her chest-fearing the end-and it sent Martha into shock. Juan fired off 2 shots into the head and shoulder of Martha, killing her where she stood.

“Ladies, it’s a fine morning for a drive, how ‘bout it?” Juan urged snidely as he walked over to Beth and put the gun to her temple.

“Please, I’ll pay...YOU, WET-!”

“No thanks, they don’t accept *underwear* as currency in heaven,” Juan said then he shot Beth 5 times in the head killing her. He quickly moved out the front door; and waved in a crew of 10 men (who were wearing plastic suits). They carried in a plastic square of paper; and rolled Beth and Martha onto it. They quickly sealed the plastic; and threw it into a trailer truck outside that had a massive mobile incinerator in the back. The bodies were turned into ash and dust within minutes with intense flames.

They ripped up the carpets; and tore off any section of wallpaper that had blood on it. They took out any furniture that had blood on it; and replaced everything with a new equivalent (matching her décor perfectly). Juan touched his implant and let out a deep breath.

“Ben, it’s all clean in the parking garage,” Juan said with a youthful giddiness in his voice, as he used his temple implant to talk to Ben.

“Then it’s time to grab the car and go, thanks again, Juan,” Ben continued as he laughed, “Shame things didn’t go haywire, would have been nice, Juan. I’ll catch up with you later, My Friend, much later that is.”

“You got it, Ben!”

Laron sat inside his mansion with naked men sitting reluctantly around his table. He heard someone whistling outside and it irked him; like bird shit on your head at a ballgame.

“What is that DAMN whistling?” Laron demanded angrily. “I’ll sue his ass,” said Laron as he got up and went to the window. He looked down and a blonde haired man in a green sweat suit and blue hat, named Pete Rick, was kicking his driveway up using black cowboy boots. “Hey get the hell out of here! I’ll crack that head of yours if you want!” yelled Laron sharply as he glared at Pete.

Pete looked up and smiled a not at home smile. Laron looked at him-and wanted him dead like so many before-but Pete pulled out a revolver and shot Laron in the chest. Laron fell clumsily like a heavy sack of old bread into a raging river in the courtyard below. He died when he hit the ground; and Pete disappeared into the woods where a crotch rocket was waiting for him. Pete hopped on and sped away through Nathan’s garden (Nathan didn’t mind to say the least).

Ben heard about his revenge on Laron during his flight to Madagascar (and boy did he smile). Ben went onto to win the Oscar the next 5 years (called the Sympathy Parade Oscars). He knew it was because they all felt horrible for what had happened to him. He didn’t really mind, he liked the fact they had to lift him up to that stage all those many times (even if he didn’t attend the ceremony again).

At 124 years old, he and Julie made a pact if either died they would go as well.

“Julie darling, would you like some lemonade?” Ben inquired as he kissed her left hand.

Julie sat there with her mouth wide open-a sight Ben had seen many times before due to the medication she was on-and she had spit running down her chin. She was near death and barely aware where she was anymore.

“No, dear Ben, I won’t need a drop more,” Julie mumbled slowly as she searched for her words painfully. Julie asked, “Maybe a song, Ben, or a joke?”

“I heard a joke once, it went as such,” Ben said. “They asked a rich man once what would you give up, if you had to. And his reply was, talking to you,” Ben said jokingly, causing Julie to laugh hard-a sight he’d been missing for some time-and then she dropped dead on the spot. Ben looked at her and checked to see if she was breathing, and she was not.

Ben sat with her on their deck after she had passed away, for several hours. He thought of a thing his father had said to him when they were still on speaking terms,” It’s not the fear of death that defines us. It’s the day we no longer fear dying, that will define us all for eternity.”

THE END