

The Seven-Spot was the local hangout spot for Jeffrey Tombs and his good friend Steven Wright, and on a Saturday, right around the time that the clubs were due to send women and men unlucky in love home, these two men stood outside of this famous store, munching on nachos and hotdogs.

“I thought it was going to be colder tonight,” Jeffrey said, and took a bite of his hotdog. “I really did. I must say I’m glad, because I really don’t want to be home right now.”

“Why not?” Steven had nacho cheese on his face. It seemed that whenever Steven ordered nachos (nachos for Steve consisted of an open bag of Doritos opened up and drenched with nacho cheese from the cheese dispenser) he always had cheese on his face.

“There are roaches the size of rats running around, right now.”

“I don’t see how you have such a big roach problem man. Colorado isn’t even a big city for roaches. What you consider big for roaches is probably nothing down in the South.”

Jeffrey shrugged. “Perhaps. Still, if I can help it I want to stay out until the sun shows up in the sky. At least until there’s a little light. The roaches will practically attack me if I go home now.” The thought of roaches alone made Jeffrey literally shudder, and this was something he had to resist doing in front of Steven so he wouldn’t look like a punk.

“I have family that lives in the South,” Steven said. “I’ve visited, and trust me when I say I’ve seen far worse out there than you’ll ever see here.”

“How do you know? You’ve never really gotten a chance to see the roach situation at my apartment.”

Steven shook his head, munching away on his nachos. He swallowed. “Trust me, I can say with absolute certainty you’ve never seen the type of shit that I’ve seen in the roach infested homes. The fact that I’ve been in your place and each time can stay there for a couple hours or more without seeing a single roach tells me that you don’t have a real issue.” Steven shoved his hand in his bag of cheesy mess and pulled out another cheese soaked Dorito and shoved it into his mouth. “I have family out in Texas that have houses that are infested.”

Jeffrey said nothing, and took another giant bite of his chili dog. The parking lot was empty, four solo pumps blanketed in a cool white glow from the standalone roof’s recessed lights. Behind this small

rectangle of light was nothing but a quiet street that ran parallel to the pumps and the station. Beyond that, darkness.

“Man, I’m going to end up taking a nasty shit tonight,” Steven said.

“Yeah, good to know,” Jeffrey replied, and took another giant bite of his hotdog.

“You know, we really should be at the club.”

Jeffrey shook his head. “Nah, just a way for us to waste time and blow all our money. The clubs are going to be getting out soon and a lot of those girls are going to be headed here. So we’ll get a chance to mack without all the loud music and the competition.”

“Yeah, but still. Next week I say we hit up the club, take a week off from doing this. Think of what we’re missing out on right now, dude.”

“We’ve seen it. We’re just blowing money to get rejected by girls, when we can get rejected by them for free.”

Steven smiled. “That’s funny. It’s starting to get cold out here though, man. I don’t know if I really want to wait for the girls to come tonight.”

“So you’re going to leave?”

“Not yet, but soon. As soon as I finish these chips.” He continued to munch away, and for the next few minutes Jeffrey and Steven were silent.

*My bed*, Jeffrey thought, finishing his chili dog. *My bed won’t have roaches*. But he’d still have to make it into his room.

“Look, just stay here for another twenty minutes,” Jeffrey said. “The girls are going to come soon. I want to get a few lines in, come on.”

“Well, if we pick up any girls we’re going to your place, not mine. We did my place last time so they wouldn’t see any bugs.” Last time had been three months ago. Successful pickups didn’t happen often with the two of them.

“Yeah, well, we’d have to do that again. Obviously, the roach problem hasn’t been solved yet. But, I’ll put some Borax and sugar down, solve it by next week if we can use your place tonight.”

Steven wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and looked at Jeffrey with one eyebrow raised.

“Really? That’s the deal you’re going to make with me? That you’re going to solve *your* roach issue to use *my* place. Yeah, that makes perfect sense, man.”

The hum of an engine rose in the distance and a few seconds later a nondescript black sedan pulled into the parking lot, its high beams on.

“All right,” Jeffrey muttered. “Let’s see what we got here. Steven, if they’re white let me do the talking. White girls don’t go for white dick any more.”

“Ha ha. You’re so funny I fake laughed right there to show you how fuckin’ funny you are.”

Jeffrey chuckled. They watched as the car pulled up to one of the gas pumps and the doors opened up. A white man wearing a blue, backwards-facing baseball cap, and three white girls in skirts stepped out of the car.

“You got the cheese off your face man,” Jeffrey said quickly. “Make sure that you get the cheese off your face.”

“Shut up, man. The cheese is off my face.”

“All right, I’m going to handle all the talking.”

Steven shoved him with one hand. “No, you’re not man. Shut up.”

“Come on, you just need to trust me.”

“Yeah, very funny. The red-head is mine. You can have the blondes.”

“Yeah, but one of them is with the white dude, has got to be.”

Steven tossed his nachos into the trashcan and used the napkins he held to wipe his hands.

“All right,” he said, tossing the napkins in the trashcan as the group approached the entrance. “Let’s do this.”

The man was the first one to walk up to the entrance. Jeffrey and Steven watched him closely, to see if he did anything to indicate which girl he might be with, if any. There was no indication. He simply opened the door and walked inside, and two of the girls walked inside with him. Jeffrey and Steven failed to say anything to the first two girls that stepped into the store, Steven apparently losing his nerve right along with Jeffrey. The girl that didn’t go in, however, happened to be the red-head. The skirt she wore was white, the shirt that went along with it, red. She stood a few feet to the right of them, swaying a little as she put a cigarette to her lips, pulled a lighter out of her little purse and lit it. Jeffrey and Steven stared.

Jeffrey nudged Steven. Steven looked at him, then the girl, as indecisive as Jeffrey thought he might be. Jeffrey was the reason they had been able to take two girls to Steven's place three months ago—amazingly he had convinced the girls to drive them—and Jeffrey could remember it as if it were yesterday. His heart had been trying to ram out of his chest that night, just like it was doing now. From the looks of it Steven wasn't going to make a move, so either Jeffrey would have to or nothing would happen.

"*All right,*" Jeffrey whispered into Steven's ear. "I'm going to say something to her. If she decides to do something with me you can't get pissed about it."

Steven whispered back, "See, if you can get us both some action."

Jeffrey frowned. "Seriously? You want to double-team her?"

Steven simply shrugged, said nothing else. Another car pulled into the parking lot then, this one a black SUV. The SUV pulled up to a parking slot in front of the door instead of a gas pump, and then the doors opened up, and out stepped two black men from the front seats, and four black women from the back. All of the girls were pretty, all of them looked a few years older than Jeffrey and Steven, and they all walked in a way that seemed to suggest that men like Jeffrey and Steven, men who had no car, and who were one year below drinking age, could never have them.

"We could've talked to these girls in the club," Steven whispered in his ear. "We would've had a better chance."

"No, we wouldn't have. We can't get into the twenty-one and up places."

"For fifty bucks we could've gotten those fake ID's from my cousin and everything would be all good right now. But, no, you didn't want to do that."

"Hi," one of the black girls heading into the store suddenly said to the two of them. Jeffrey and Steven smiled.

"Hey," Jeffrey said, and the girl looked at her friends and giggled before stepping through the automatic sliding glass doors.

"She was fucking with us," Steven said.

"You think so?"

"Yeah, unquestionably fucking with us."

“Yep,” the red-head girl suddenly chimed in, and took a drag of her cigarette. She breathed out a long plume of smoke and glanced over her shoulder at the girls. “Black bitches be like that.”

Steven and Jeffrey exchanged a look. Jeffrey didn’t know what to make of her comment, or whether she was the appropriate person to be making it.

“You like girls,” Steven said suddenly.

A smile spread helplessly on Jeffrey’s face and he made it disappear at once.

“Yes,” she said, looking at them. “Love black bitches. Almost as much as I love niggas.”

Steven twitched noticeably. “Okay, wait,” Steven said, shaking his head. “I mean, come on. That’s not cool. You got my friend right here, and you’re going to say that shit.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” said the red-head, and her lipstick laden lips spread in a smile. “I’m not talking about him. I mean those hood niggas, big motherfuckers that don’t take no shit.”

“So, I just look weak to you, is that it?” Jeffrey said. “Gotta be more stereotypical, huh?”

“Honestly,” said Steven. “I wouldn’t get caught dead using that word when those girls come back out. I don’t think that would end very good for you.”

She chuckled. “Oh, stop. It’s just a word. Don’t be so sensitive.”

“What, do I have to be a dude that uses slang all the time and sags his pants to get your attention, is that it? You just want to be with the gangstas, huh? Motherfuckers that sell drugs.”

The girl took another drag of her cigarette and breathed out more smoke. “There’s not a problem with that, is there? I mean, don’t you have a preference. You look like the kind of guy that likes a nice black bitch.”

“You...you shouldn’t say it like that,” Steven said uneasily, watching the girls in the store. “Why don’t you just call them girls?”

“Oh, please. You know how many black girls I’ve fucked, how many I’ve made come. They don’t like the talk but when I get them in my room and can make them come so hard, almost to the point of tears, they have nothing to say.”

“That’s assuming you can get past the face dragged across the parking lot stage of the pickup,” Steven said.

She chuckled. “Relax. I wouldn’t say this shit in earshot of any unknowns. I know better.”

“Good to know,” Steven said. “Because it looks like everyone’s coming out.”

The two groups came outside, and the red-head followed her group to the car at the pumps. The black men and women remained in front of the store, all of them lighting up mini-cigars and cigarettes.

“Dude, we should’ve tried harder with that red-head,” Steven said. “Such a disappointment. She sounds like a freak. A semi-racist too.”

“I don’t think simply using those words makes someone a racist,” Jeffrey said. “And that’s coming from a black man.”

“Well, maybe you’re not black.” Steven chuckled.

“Oh, suck a dick.”

“I’m just playing.”

A few seconds passed in silence then Steven suddenly laughed out loud and Jeffrey wondered if he was still laughing at the comment he had made or of Jeffrey’s reaction to it.

“Really,” Jeffrey said. “It’s that funny, huh?”

“No, it’s clown. Across the street. Look!” He pointed. When he did Jeffrey wasn’t the only one to look, the men and women standing in front of the store with them, smoking their cigars and cigarettes, looked as well. Steven laughed again, but Jeffrey found nothing funny about what he saw. A clown with puffy blue hair and a white uniform had stepped into the parking lot from the parallel street. His eyes were painted into a frown, not as friendly as Ronald McDonald’s. In fact, it was reminiscent of the evil prank-playing clowns with viral videos on the internet. But unlike those clowns, this one had nothing in its hands, this one wasn’t running at them with a chainsaw or making laughing sounds or anything. This one didn’t even seem to notice them.

“Must’ve just got out of some party,” Steven said, and chuckled again.

“What, this is entertaining to you,” Jeffrey asked. “An evil looking clown at the gas station at two thirty?”

“Oh, look a clown!” the red-head shouted, looking out from the rear window of the black car.

The clown bypassed everyone and stepped into the store, the sound of his giant yellow pant legs heard swishing against each other. He was tall, easily six three. The top of his fluffy blue-hair skirted the top frame of the entrance on his way in.

“Let’s go to McDonald’s,” one of the black girls standing outside said. “I don’t know about the rest of you but I’m suddenly in the mood for a burger.”

“That didn’t look like the Ronald McDonald clown to me,” one of the black men said. He had a black baseball cap on and wore a silver necklace over a black shirt.

“Oh, what do you know,” Steven said to Jeffrey. “It looks like Ms. Racist and crew are having car trouble. I can hear them trying to start the engine.

“Well, damn,” Jeffrey said. “That has to suck.”

But he didn’t care very much about the black car not being able to start, he was concerned about the clown that had just strolled past them. He didn’t know if it was something that warranted being worried about, but he found it odd that a clown would walk so casually into the gas station at this time. The most obvious question: where had he come from?

*A party, his mind spoke up. Where the hell do you think he came from?*

The white man that had been driving the girls popped the hood, stepped back out of the car, and walked around to the front of the vehicle. He lifted the hood and began to scan the engine, his brow furrowed as if it was something he could figure out. Maybe he could, but Jeffrey had his doubts.

“Well, at least he has some girls to spend his time with,” Steven said.

“Yeah, those girls aren’t going to want to spend time with him for long if his car doesn’t even work,” Jeffrey said.

“It’s probably something minor.”

One of the black girls bent down and put out the cigar she held and then placed what remained of it inside her purse.

“I’m ready to go,” she said looking at the man with the black shirt.

The man in the black shirt looked to the man standing to the other side of him. This man wore a red V-neck shirt with no chain. The man in the black shirt muttered something to him. The one in the red shirt nodded and tossed what remained of his cigar into the parking lot.

“Okay,” the man in the red shirt said. “Let’s go.”

The glass doors to the gas station slid open and out stepped the mysterious clown. Suddenly, he looked more alert, seeming to notice everyone outside the gas station for the first time. First his eyes touched

on Steven and Jeffrey, then the individuals from the SUV, and lastly, the few out by the pumps, at the black car. Steven and Jeffrey watched him, Steven with the same amused smile on his face. Jeffrey, however, didn't smile. Something told him that smiling was the last thing that he should do. The clown strolled over to the black SUV, bent down by the front driver's side wheel, and did something just out of view of Steven and Jeffrey. It only took a second for Jeffrey to figure out what it was. Once he heard the hiss of the tire he knew some type of wicked hell was about to break loose.

*"What the fuck you doing, motherfucker!"* the man in the red shirt shouted, and he and the man in the black shirt advanced on the clown.

What happened next sent chill cold enough to turn water into ice up Jeffrey's spine. In a childlike, mocking voice, the clown answered,

*"Beebo just wants to play with you. Beebo just wants to—"*

The black man in the red shirt abruptly threw a punch at the clown and with a movement that was swift and unnaturally adept, the clown brought the knife that he had been holding upward in an arch. There was a scream, and the hand the man had used to try to punch the clown flew up in the air, detached, twirling, and sending streamers of blood everywhere.

"Shit!" one of the black girls screamed.

The white man that had been looking at his engine ran over at once, and this amazed Jeffrey, because running toward the clown had been the last thing he intended to do. The man in the red shirt stumbled back, away from the clown, screaming. The man in the black shirt pulled him back toward the sidewalk.

*"Nothing wrong with Beebo wanting to play, hoo-hoo! Nothing—"*

The clown, who had been approaching the man he had just cut, was kicked from behind then by the white man and fell onto a knee. He mumbled something then turned swiftly, swinging the knife at the white man's chest in a sideways arc. Blood splashed. One of the girls inside the black car screamed,

*"Nooooo! Charlie!"*

As the black group rushed into the gas station with their injured friend, Charlie stumbled back toward the center of the parking lot, his chest open and bleeding onto the white shirt he wore. He had two



hands pressed to his chest, as if suffering a heart attack. His face was red, his eyes bulged, and his lips trembled as if a live current ran through them.

*"Hoo-hoo!"* the clown chortled, brought the knife back like a man about to throw an uppercut, and lunged forward. The white man was lifted briefly from the ground with the force. Charlie grunted, blinked, then lifted his head skyward and screamed, his mouth full of blood, and when the clown yanked the knife out of him—apparently a kitchen knife from the looks of it—Charlie went to his knees. Jeffrey began to back up toward the glass doors to the store, his bladder feeling oddly full right now.

The white girls had gotten out of the car, one of them with a baseball bat and another with a cell phone to her ear. They wanted to approach their soon to be dead friend, but were afraid, and Jeffrey couldn't blame them.

"Yeah," Steven said. "This might be an appropriate time for me to go home." He turned and headed toward the parallel street, not even bothering to ask what Jeffrey planned to do. The clown's head cocked suddenly in Steven's direction, his hearing apparently as keen as his ability with the knife.

*"WHY THE FUCK DON'T YOU WANT TO PLAY WITH BEEBO!"* the clown suddenly roared, the soft, playful sound of his voice as horribly altered as a kitten tossed in a microwave for thirty seconds. He charged at Steven then, who was slightly overweight and every bit as slow as one would expect him to be. Jeffrey ran after his friend, for the moment forgetting his own safety, but by the time he managed to even make it a few feet, Beebo the clown had cleared four times the distance. He grabbed a lock of Steven's hair, yanked him back hard into a sitting position, and slid the glimmering steel of his blade across Steven's throat. The flow of blood was immediate and messy, but he didn't stop there. Beebo the clown continued to cut as Steven gasped and gurgled. Then with one strong pull and an audible rip, the clown tore off his head off and launched it at Jeffrey. It hit Jeffrey in the chest, ironically knocking him back into a sitting position as well. Amazingly, the freshly reduced Steven was still in a seated position, his decapitated body yet to fall back to the ground. Blood flowed from his open neck like a fountain, and his head lay off three feet away, staring at Jeffrey as if amazed that Jeffrey wouldn't just play with Beebo.

*"YOU MOTHERFUCKER!"* Jeffrey screamed, his fear temporarily replaced with rage. That rage, however, was short lived. When Beebo looked up at him, his painted lids perpetually fixed into a frown, this emotion turned into terror. Beebo charged at him, brandishing his trusty blade, and Jeffrey scrambled to his

feet and turned and ran toward the glass doors, bellowing. The clown suddenly changed course and moved back to where he had killed Charlie. The girls were kneeling over his body, crying, one of them screaming into her cellphone, apparently at the police. Standing behind the glass doors now, his heart beating a million times a second, Jeffrey realized that the girl with the cell-phone was the same red-head that he and Steven had spoken to earlier.

“*Get back into your fucking car!*” he screamed through the doors and slammed on them with his fists. “*What are you doing!*”

“No, get them in here so I can lock the doors!” a male voice shouted.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Jeffrey told the man without even turning to look at him.

The girls kneeling over Charlie noticed the clown (fucking idiots, Jeffrey thought) and leapt up and tried to run the other way. The clown cocked his arm back and threw the kitchen knife at the girl in the center, connecting with the center of her back and knocking her to the ground. He strolled slowly over to her, as her friends ran toward the parallel street. Beebo began to do a little dance. This little dance turned into a full on tap number and he turned and faced the glass doors of the gas station, as if looking directly at Jeffrey. When he finished the number with two last definitive taps, he extended his arms, with a broad smile on his face, as if to say, ‘*ta daaa!*’. At that point, Jeffrey knew there was no question: Beebo the clown was looking directly at him.

“I have to bolt the door,” the same voice from earlier said, and Jeffrey looked over his shoulder. A skinny white man with a beard and glasses had been helping the group tend to the man that had just lost his hand. The handless man lay on the floor, with napkins over the wound. “Just turning them off isn’t going to be good enough.”

Jeffrey noticed that the tag on the man’s shirt read Billy. Billy ran over to the door, extending the keys from the banana clip on his pants and using a silver one to latch the double-doors. That’s when Jeffrey noticed how much he had missed in the short time that he had been watching Billy move around. The girl that the clown had managed to hit in the back with the knife, now lay motionless in the center of the parking lot, what looked like a number of red spots—apparently more stab wounds—visible on the back of her shirt.

“There’s a special place in hell for a clown like that,” Billy said, turning away from the door.

“No different than the hell there would be for a *man* like that,” Jeffrey said.

Jeffrey could only stare. Apparently the other girls had gotten away. They were nowhere in sight. For that matter, neither was Beebo the clown. Three dead bodies and a hand lay in the parking lot, but the girls were gone. From where Jeffrey stood he could see that they hadn't gone back into their car, which he thought had been a dumb decision.

"Do you see the clown," one of the black girls asked. Jeffrey looked over his shoulder, noticed that she was right behind him, several napkins in her hands.

Jeffrey shook his head. "No. He's gone. At least for now. I don't see those girls though. I think he's going after them."

"I'm shaking," she said, holding her hands up for him to see. She was right, her hands were, in fact, shaking. "I...I don't even know...that's just...the shit's just crazy, right?"

"If it makes you feel any better at least you still have your friend. If you look outside you could see my friend sitting out there with his head missing." He sighed, looked back toward the window.

"Fuck, dude," she said. She walked up beside him.

"Have you guys called the cops?"

The girl nodded. "Yeah, we called the cops. I don't know how long it's going to take them to get here. You would think that talk of a murderous clown would send them running."

Jeffrey nodded, rubbed his hands together. "Yeah, they'll be here soon. I'm sure they will. We just need to give it a little time. What's your name?"

"Ava." She was the same girl that had put the unfinished cigar back into her purse earlier.

"I'm Jeffrey." He extended his hand to her and she reached out with the hand not holding the napkins to shake it. She smelled so good and under ordinary circumstances in a one-on-one situation like this he might've asked for her number. But right now he could've cared less. Asking for this girl's name had been something he'd done unconsciously.

"How's your friend doing," Jeffrey said, looking over his shoulder. He could make out the man's legs, but the rest of him was blocked by the girls and the clerk that knelt by him.

"He passed out," Ava said. "He's breathing though." She looked at Jeffrey and surprised him with a small smile. "Probably better to be passed out, don't you think?"

"Yeah. I wonder if anyone in here has a gun."

“I don’t think it matters. Soon enough we’ll have a bunch of people in here with guns.” Then she muttered, folding her arms: “Whenever the fuck they get here, that is.”

Ava was wearing lip-gloss and she had a letterman jacket on. She wasn’t in high school though, Jeffrey guessed, and with a closer look Jeffrey could tell that the letterman jacket she wore was custom. He could see her name in bold white lettering on the back, these letters bordered with a sparkling pink. She had style. Her hair was dark and shoulder length, with light brown streaks running through it.

*Are you kidding, Jeffrey thought. Right now out of all times, you’re going to think about sex? Seriously?*

It was nice to have a girl as pretty as Ava standing next to him though. It made it easier to bear the fact that his friend was sitting headless out in the cold, dark, parking lot.

“I hate clowns,” Ava said, and gave a nervous little giggle. “I’ve always hated clowns, since I was very little. And what do you know, I end up at the one gas station that happens to have a murderous clown come to visit.”

“Yeah, clowns suck. Who’s idea was the ‘clown’ anyway?”

“Well, it has to be popular some places, or you wouldn’t see them everywhere.”

“If you ask me, I think it was Stephen King’s IT that messed it up for everybody. I read that book a few years back, and ever since, I’ve never been the same.”

Ava smiled. “I read that book a decade ago. Wow, you remind me of how old I’m getting.”

*“Where the fuck are you guys!”* one of Ava’s female friends yelled and Jeffrey looked over his shoulder to notice her on a pink cell phone, evidently talking to the police. *“We’ve been waiting here for close to twenty minutes!”*

“I think the nigga’s gone,” the man in the black shirt said. “I say we get in the car and get the fuck out of here. We can drive it on the flat for a few blocks.” He was looking toward the window with an expression of yearning.

“Yeah, and where’s a few blocks going to get us,” the girl on the pink cell phone shouted at him. “We’d still be in the motherfucking boonies!”

“Well, I ain’t about to just wait here, and wait for some cops who ain’t coming! Shit, with the way things are in this country lately we’ll all end up getting shot anyway!”

“It’s better to have the cops here than to not have them here, Able,” the friend shouted, then bellowed into the mouthpiece, “*We don’t know where this motherfucker is, could you all please hurry the fuck up! No ambulance here, no cops! You got my friend bleeding here! This is some bullshit!*”

“That dude might be right,” Jeffrey said. “I wouldn’t just want to wait here for that psycho clown to pop back up.”

Ava shook her head, her arms still folded. “No, if he was going to come back he would’ve shown up by now. The clown knows that the cops are on the way. Has to. Any person in their right mind would want to get the hell away from here in his position.”

Jeffrey looked at her, his eyebrows raised.

“What?”

“The person in that clown costume represents anything but a person in their right mind.”

Ava seemed to consider this, then nodded. “Yeah, you know what, I might have to agree with you there.” She chuckled.

“So, anyway, who are all these people to you?”

“I only know Bethany, the one screaming at everyone. The others are nothing more than acquaintances to me.”

“Well, at least you have your friend.”

“Yeah.” Ava reached out and rubbed his back. “It will be okay. Soon you’ll be home and will be able to put all of this behind you.”

Jeffrey’s eyes suddenly stung with tears and he reached up to rub at them with a shaky hand. He hadn’t thought he was going to cry, but something about Ava’s hand on his back had brought the tears out.

“Yeah, I can go home with one less friend.” It was horrible, crying in front of a girl as beautiful as this when he rarely had conversations with this grade of female. But she did something then that surprised him and brought with it an amazing degree of comfort. She hugged him and kissed him on the cheek. The kiss was soft, wet. He could feel the residue of lip gloss left on the flesh she had kissed and didn’t think he’d ever rub it off.

“It’s okay,” she said, holding him. “Be strong, okay?”

*“Ava, tell that nigga he can cry later! There’s people here still trying to live!”*

“Shut up, Beth!”

“I’m good,” Jeffrey said, pushing gently away from her. God, what he would’ve given to trade Bethany’s life for Steven’s. “I’m fine. I’m—”

“*He’s back!*” Billy abruptly screamed. “*This fucking son of a bitch is back!*”

Everyone looked toward the double glass doors and saw the clown approaching from the parallel street, at first little more than an outline. When he stepped into the light thrown by the roof over the pumps Jeffrey could see that his uniform was completely covered in blood. Blood dripped from his chin, blood dripped from his gloved hands. A moment later he partially faded into the dark as he stepped in the dark section between the front of the store and the pumps, then a few moments later his form was once again alight, when he came into the glow of the convenience store lights.

Bethany screamed and the sound made Jeffrey grimace. It hurt his ears, was like a much higher-pitched version of a balloon letting out air.

Ava took a step back. Jeffrey took a step forward.

“What the hell are you doing,” she hissed, and reached out and grabbed his hand. But Jeffrey yanked it away from her and took another step toward the entrance, then put his hands up on the glass. Beebo the clown was looking at him.

“You killed my friend,” Jeffrey said as the clown came closer. Jeffrey slammed his fists on the window. “YOU KILLED MY FRIEND!”

“That’s it,” Billy said. “I’ve had enough of this. Sir, whatever the hell your name is, I’m going to need you to step away from the door.” Jeffrey stepped to the side and back a couple of steps as Billy approached. It wasn’t until Billy stepped in front of him that Jeffrey noticed he was holding a single-barreled shotgun with the wood stock pressed against his right shoulder. “This is a case of self-defense if I ever saw one.”

Billy pressed the barrel of the weapon against the doors. Beebo the clown stopped, one foot up on the sidewalk that ran along the front of the establishment.

“Is this what you want!” Billy screamed, the hands that held the shotgun trembling. “Huh, you sick fuck! *This what you want!*”

Beebo the clown only looked at him, his painted mouth smiling, his painted eyes still slanted in a frown. The lips of the individual behind the face paint seemed unperturbed however. Indifferent, if anything.

*And isn't indifference the scariest thing of all,* Jeffrey thought. He forced the thought out of his mind. His mouth felt like sandpaper, his lips dry like the Sahara. Jeffrey didn't even think he could blink. But his hands were quivering. Yeah, they were quivering quite badly.

Beebo the clown lifted his oversized black boot off the sidewalk and placed it back down in the parking lot.

*"Yeah, you take your loony ass the FUCK away from here!"* Billy shouted. "Or I'll blow that stupid wig off the top of your fucked up, painted head! I'll—"

Beebo's right arm jerked suddenly upward and the front end of a double barreled shotgun popped abruptly out of his uniform sleeve. Beebo pulled the trigger and the blast went off like a bomb. The front window exploded inward, sending shards of glass everywhere. Billy fell back to the floor, and his gun went off, sending a wild shot up into the ceiling and debris down to the floor. The girls screamed, Able leapt over the counter, and Jeffrey grabbed Ava's hand and pulled her toward the aisles.

"You motherfucker," Billy said, his face and arms bleeding from the explosion of glass. He scooted backward, struggling to reload his weapon. He spit out pieces of bloody glass, blinked hard against what seemed to be powdery glass residue that had gotten into his eyes. Beebo the clown stepped into the building, his comically large boots crunching glass, and his attention fixed firmly on Billy.

*God, he's like a giant,* Jeffrey thought, hunkered down at the back of the middle aisle with Ava.

*"Those girls who ran from me,"* Beebo said in his childlike voice. *"I caught up to them and made them play my game. The funnest game."*

"No one's playing your game you sick motherfucker. No one—"

Beebo didn't give the courtesy of letting him finish, and aimed his double-barreled shotgun—quite new, from the looks of it—at Billy's head then pulled the trigger. Billy's head blew apart like a hammer to a water balloon, and the smell of gunpowder hit the air like a poison bomb. Blood splashed Beebo the clown's pant legs, and the smell of gunpowder tickled the edges of Jeffrey's nostrils. Beebo, once again, began to do a little dance, right over Billy's body. Billy's mouth was joyfully open, his firearm held in two hands, and his chuckles as loud and childlike as ever.

*“Hoo-hoo-hoo! Hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo!”*

For the next minute and a half Beebo performed his dance, tap-dancing on the glass all around Billy’s body. If it wasn’t for the gun, the blood, the time of day, and an infinite amount of other factors, his dance would’ve been considered quite good. This asshole could make money on the party-circuit with enough determination. Of course, as things turned out, that just wasn’t in the cards. Beebo suddenly grew angry and started to roar, cocked the pump on his firearm, aimed it at Billy’s kneecap, and blew it off. Then he chuckled aloud again, as unreliably happy as ever.

Jeffrey considered how clowns, just by virtue of their uniform and makeup, have always looked like they had lost a few marbles, but he couldn’t believe that he was witnessing one that had truly done just that. Lost his marbles. Had gone absolutely crazy. Or what was a more clownish word? *Bonkers*. Beebo the clown had gone absolutely bonkers.

“Shumba, shumba, shumba, do!” Beebo chanted, cocked the pump on his double-barreled shotgun and began to look around the store. It was when Jeffrey noticed that the man who had lost his hand to this clown had been left in front of the counter while Able and the three other girls had hidden throughout the store. Jeffrey knew that Able was crouched behind the counter. Bethany and the other two girls must’ve been hidden in the bathrooms which were on the other side of the store. Fortunately for the girls, Beebo the clown wasn’t looking in that direction. His eyes were centered on the man lying on the floor in front of the counter, a man that looked as if he was still out.

*Out?* a voice in Jeffrey’s head joked. *Yeah, okay. His hand has been cut off and he’s been lying there bleeding for the last twenty minutes. He’s dead.*

Beebo the clown approached him, his double-barreled shotgun aimed at his midsection. He reached out with his oversized sneaker and kicked twice at his side.

*Don’t move,* Jeffrey thought, his ankles becoming sore with the time he had remained hunkered down with Ava.

*“Play with me,”* Beebo muttered, in a strange, sad voice.

Of course, this injured man, who still remained nameless to Jeffrey, didn’t do a thing. Only remained unconscious or dead on the floor. Then Beebo brought his weapon up slightly, depressed the trigger, and blew a smoky whole in the man’s midsection. Now this man being dead was all but a certainty.



“Shumba, shumba, shumba dooooo!” Beebo crooned, dancing over his body. He aimed his firearm again and erased half of the man’s face with another pull of the trigger, and Ava, who was just behind Jeffrey and clenching his shoulder, let out a whimper. There was a split second when Jeffrey was certain that this sound spelled the end for the both of them, but Beebo, the bipolar clown, proceeded to dance in what was certainly a temporary harmony. He tapped his feet, spun in circles with his arms outstretched and the gun swinging as if he was about to throw a discus.

“*We need to make a run for it,*” Ava whispered in his ear. He could feel her hand shaking, could hear the tears in her voice.

“*There’s nothing that we can do right now,*” Jeffrey told her. “We’re going to have to wait.”

Beebo suddenly turned and headed toward the bathrooms. His back was finally to them, which might mean their chance to get out of here. The soles of his gigantic shoes left pieces of broken glass on the floor as he headed to the corridor leading to the bathrooms. Three potential victims in the direction he was heading, and three potential victims behind him. One of these victims—Able—leapt up over the counter and made a run for it.

“*Goddammit,*” Ava hissed, and Jeffrey felt her jerk, as if she had considered standing up and screaming at him to get back here and had thought better of it. Beebo the clown wheeled around and charged after him, his double-barreled shotgun clenched in both hands. Able made it out the front of the store and into the parking lot. Beebo ran out of the store, stopped on the porch, and aimed his weapon. He waited a few seconds before pulling the trigger. It was a direct hit. Able was thrown forward with the force of the shot and fell hard onto the parking lot gravel, dead.

Ava let out a small sob.

“Who has the keys to the car,” Jeffrey whispered.

“Damon.”

“So the one who...”

Ava nodded. “Yeah, the one by the counter.”

Jeffrey nodded. Whispered, “When we get the chance we have to get those keys, get into the car, and drive out of the lot. I don’t care how good this clown thinks he is, an SUV going at full speed, even with a flat, will be too fast for him to catch up to.”

“Why haven’t the cops come?”

“I don’t know. But you were right. Making a run for it is what we have to do.”

“Okay,” she said, and Jeffrey watched as she wiped at her eyes with the back of her hands. Some of her makeup had smeared, but Jeffrey thought she looked just as pretty.

Beebo didn’t do a dance over Able’s body this time. Instead, he did an about face and marched right back into the store, the weapon held in two hands and aimed, as if on assignment from the government. He moved straight toward the bathrooms and Jeffrey’s eyes touched on the corpse of Damon and then the SUV outside.

“We have to help them,” Ava said. “We can’t just let that asshole go into the bathroom and murder them.”

Jeffrey nodded. Of course, he didn’t care what happened to the other girls, especially Ava’s bitch of a friend Bethany. Bethany sure as hell wasn’t worth his life.

“I’ll be the distraction,” Ava said. “Why don’t I run for it, and while he chases me you grab the keys from Damon’s pocket and start the car.”

Jeffrey shook his head furiously, rubbed his palm down over his face. “No, we can’t do that. If Able wasn’t fast enough to outrun him, you won’t be either.”

“Okay-okay. Well, he’s about to get into the bathrooms so we have to do something now. We have to—”

There was a thump and when Jeffrey looked at Beebo, who now stood clear on the other side of the store, he was in the bathroom corridor, kicking at the door to one of the bathrooms.

*They have locks*, Jeffrey thought. It was something that he hadn’t even considered. That would certainly buy him and Ava some time.

*“If you come out I will make you balloons!”* Beebo shouted in his soft voice. *“All you have to do is come out and play with me!”*

“Okay, I’ll lead him away from the store,” Jeffrey whispered. “Right now I could probably get a hell of a head start, and if I can get far enough he’ll be forced to run out of the parking lot.” Jeffrey sighed, considering. “Just get your friends into the SUV and get out of here.”

Ava looked at him, her eyes wet and her lips trembling. “You would do that for us?”

Jeffrey smiled. "I'm doing it for *you*. And I have no intention of dying." *And he didn't*. "He won't catch up to me. Somehow, someday, I'm going to make it. You have to do your part, get your friends into the SUV and drive away. Keep calling the cops—which I'm sure Bethany is doing now—and tell them what happened."

Ava nodded quickly, wiped tears as they trickled down her dark face. Jeffrey put his hands on her shoulders.

"It's going to be okay." He couldn't believe he was going to be risking his life for a girl he barely knew. Still, seeing Ava now and the expression of gratitude on her face gave him no doubt. It was the right thing. He leaned in and kissed her and she kissed him back.

"All right," Jeffrey said, his eyes fixed firmly on hers. "On three we'll go. One...two—"

Jeffrey's head erupted with a sound like dynamite, and his blood drenched Ava's face, chest, and hair. She realized, faintly, that the sound of dynamite had actually been Beebo the clown pulling the trigger on his gun. He still stood inside the corridor on the other side of the store, but his attention was no longer on the bathroom door, and instead on Ava. His weapon was aimed, the barrels smoking from the freshly fired shot.

Ava screamed and ran hunched over into the next aisle, which was out of Beebo's immediate view.

*"Your friend plays games like a bitch,"* Beebo teased, then chuckled.

If Ava had had it her way she would've remained at home and snuggled up under a blanket on her living room couch, watching *Orange Is The New Black*. But Bethany, her longtime friend, wouldn't allow it.

*My God*, Ava thought, hunkered down in the next aisle over. *Why hadn't I noticed that he had stopped kicking the door? Why? Why? Why?*

She heard Beebo the clown approaching. Could imagine him smiling. Could imagine his towering figure. Soon she heard the sound of the glass crunching on the floor. He was back in the middle of the store, back where he had tap danced over Billy's body. He took another step, his feet crunched more glass.

*"My games go deep,"* Beebo taunted. *"So deep they put your brain to sleep."* He chuckled.

Ava heard more glass break and from the direction of the sound Ava knew Beebo was standing just at the mouth of one of the aisles to her right. He was playing a game right now, he had to be. He saw the direction that she had run to, knew that she wasn't hunkered down in one of the aisles on that side.

*"These shotgun shells go deep,"* Beebo continued to joke. *"So deep they put you beneath six feet."* He chuckled. Ava mustered all the will she had to keep from whimpering. Her lips trembled, tears streamed from her eyes, and her makeup was a mess. All that time spent trying to look good for *this* shit. Is this the way that God played his games? Similar to Beebo the clown.

Ava remained motionless, waiting for the right time to make a run for the exit. She didn't know exactly when that would be or what sign she was looking for, but it was going to come, and soon. That was for certain. She tried to listen for the sound of him breathing, listened for the sound of his pant legs sliding together, but heard nothing.

*At any moment I'm going to be dead,* she thought. *I'll just be hunkered down in the aisle like this and everything will go black.*

That's what it must've been like for Jeffrey. He was looking at her face and everything had just gone black. At least it was quick though. It must've been. Because he sure wasn't alive after those bullets hit.

*"Come on asshole,"* Ava whimpered, a trickle of mucus running from one nostril. *"What are you waiting for? What are—"*

"FREEZE!"

For five seconds there was complete, utter silence.

*"Beebo the clown doesn't like this game,"* responded the very disappointed, soft voice of Beebo.

*The cops,* Ava thought, and began to sob.

"PUT THE WEAPON DOWN!"

*"Beebo the clown doesn't play by those rules."*

"I WILL PUT YOUR ASS DOWN CLOWN! PUT DOWN YOUR FUCKING WEAPON!"

Ava scooted back toward the wall to get as far away from the potential fire fight as possible.

*"BEEBO SAYS FUCK YOU!"* the clown roared in a voice that was once again, horribly altered and deep.

There was a single shotgun blast—presumably from Beebo’s weapon—then fifteen to twenty immediate gunshots that followed. Ava heard Beebo’s body fall and land with a thud, heard his shotgun hit the floor. What followed was the strong stench of gun smoke and further silence. Then Ava let it all come out.

“*My God,*” Ava sobbed, squeezing her eyes shut as an onrush of tears began to force their way out. “*My God, My God.*”

*You don’t have time to cry, Ava thought. You have to get out of here! You have to get out! What if Beebo isn’t really dead?*

She rose up from the floor, both hands up.

“Hel—”

A single shot rang out and a bullet pierced the center of Ava’s forehead, sending a wide splash of blood out the back of her skull. Ava leaned to the side, her eyes half-lidded, and fell to the floor, dead.

*“Oh, no Jimmy, what the fuck have you done? What the fuck have you done?”*

Jimmy’s partner Mathew looked outside at their cop car, its flashing lights, and looked beyond to the pumps and to the parallel street. He turned and strolled into the aisle, toward the back wall that the girl must’ve been crouched against. He moved slowly.

*“What have you done,”* he said for the third time.

He stepped out at the other end, now a foot away from the young girl. He sighed, used his palm to wipe sweat off his forehead.

“All right,” Mathew said. “We have to move fast. Backup will arrive soon.” He turned and walked back through the aisle and over to the clown. “Now, your bullet is in that girl’s head. It needs to be dealt with.” He holstered his own gun, stepped over to the dead clown, bent down, and picked up his firearm. He strolled over to the girl that his partner had shot, worked the pump on the double-barreled shotgun, aimed it at her forehead, and pulled the trigger.

“Oh fuck,” Jimmy said, his eyes squeezed shut, his head facing the broken window.

“It’s the only way,” Mathew said. “Just go on and keep your eyes shut. I’m going to do another one.” He worked the pump on the shotgun again and depressed the trigger a second time. After, there was essentially nothing left of the girl’s face. He looked up then, looking around the area where the girl had been killed. After three minutes he found what he was looking for, reached into the drywall, and pulled out a spent shell. “Okay, we’re good. Just need to find something to wipe this gun down w—”

“Matt! The restrooms!”

Mathew turned, the shotgun aimed, and saw three black girls standing in the corridor on the other side of the store. Apparently, they had been hiding in the girls’ bathroom. They had their hands up, their faces tear-streaked. One of the girls held a pink cell phone. Mathew wondered if she was the one that had called the police.

“DON’T MOVE!” Mathew screamed, stepping forward. He pulled the pump on the firearm.

“You shot her,” the girl with the cell phone said, her lips trembling. “With the clown’s weapon you shot her.”

Mathew continued forward.

“Why did you shoot h—”

Mathew pulled the trigger on the shotgun, and the top of the black girl’s head vanished in a wide splash of blood and bone. She fell back, landing dead on the floor, her two friends wet with her blood. The two remaining girls began to scream and he silenced them next. When he was finished the three girls lay almost side by side as if they had chosen to lie down together.

“Get me something to wipe this down, now!” Mathew shouted at his partner, his eyes wide, the vein in the center of his forehead standing out in stark relief. “Come on! Come on!”

“Y-y-yeah,” Jimmy stammered and ran over to a roll of napkins near the soda dispenser. He ran over to his partner and handed the napkins over, and Mathew worked furiously at cleaning his prints off the shotgun.

“Everything’s going to be okay,” he assured Jimmy, went over to the clown and put the double-barreled shotgun carefully back in the hand the clown had been holding the gun with. “Okay, this is exactly what we walked into. We didn’t see any of the killings happen, Jimmy. Okay?”

Jimmy nodded quickly, his face sweaty. “Yeah, yeah. Okay.”

“Good,” Mathew said. “Just be calm. This will all be over soon.”

“We have to clear the other rooms,” Jimmy said. “We saw the girls but what if there’s someone else hiding?”

“Then let’s get on that. You check the bathrooms and I’ll check the door behind the register.” Mathew checked the door behind the counter, found the equipment for the single camera in the store and took out the tape. After, he broke it up with his hands, ran into the bathrooms Jimmy had just cleared and flushed it. He rejoined Jimmy at the front of the store.

One minute later two more cop cars with flashing lights pulled into the parking lot. The store was cleared, the evidence gone (hopefully) and Mathew and Jimmy had their story set.

“It’s simple,” Mathew reminded Jimmy, as they stood facing the broken, double-doored entrance to the business. “This is what we found. Nothing less, nothing more. Got it.”

Jimmy gave another nervous nod. “Yes. All courtesy of the psycho clown.”

There were cops walking out in the parking lot now, their guns pulled, and their attention fixed on the bodies outside. A white and black cop approached the store, stepped through the broken entrance, and looked around. The black cop whistled, his eyes scanning the mess.

“Where’s the shooter,” this cop asked, after about fifteen seconds had passed.

“Right there,” Jimmy said, tilting his head back in the direction of the clown.

The cop raised his eyebrows. “Right where?”

Jimmy and Mathew looked over their shoulders then, and their mouths fell open. The clown with the green hair and bloody white uniform, the clown that had committed all these murders—well, started them anyway—was gone. All that was left in his wake was the shotgun that he had used to murder so many people, that Mathew had used to murder so many people.

“I...I...” Jimmy started, but wasn’t able to find his words.

*And I wonder,* Mathew thought, his insides turning cold. *Whose fingerprints will be found on that gun?*

The clown had been wearing gloves, hadn’t he? Suddenly Mathew wasn’t so confident that he had cleaned the weapon thoroughly enough. He had been rushing, after all.

*You’re okay though,* Mathew thought. *You’re good. You’ll be fine. You and your partner.*

But life, as the shootout with the clown and the ensuing situation proved, could be tricky.

*Yeah, Mathew thought, as cold as ever. Tricky indeed.*