

CHAPTER 7

WHEN EVERYTHING'S EVERYTHING

I had the strangest dream of being pinned down naked with yellow ribbons along the altar in IU's Beck Chapel. The chapel was packed with news media. Cool, rushing water was running through the aisles and drenching me. Carla and Auntie Gretchen were pacing at the podium with mikes as if they were some gangsta girl group. King Love was presiding with his bike horn and wand at a front pew. Cameras snapped everywhere.

Professor Krementz burst through the chapel on a magnificent Clydesdale that had a gold chain with a spinning tire rim hanging from it. Water splashed like dramatic geysers with every clump of the steed's hooves. When he reached me, I cringed, fearing he'd trample my naked body. No such luck.

Carla raised some golden goblet. The next thing I knew, the horse started nodding its head up like horses do. The voice of Mister Ed seemed to emanate from it. He kept saying 'wassup nigga' to me every time he lifted his head. Suddenly everyone splashed through the water and fell atop of my body. Lube was passed and folk began feeding diamonds in every orifice of my being. I woke up squeezing my dickhead to kill the sensation of a doctor sticking a Q-Tip up my urethra. Never eat Chinese in Tallahassee. I went into work early that Monday with diamonds still on my mind. I went straight to the Archives, where Ms. Betty greeted me. Just as Cleveland stated, there was a trail, starting April 5th of 2002. This had to have been a while after he and Lo had met. Enough time for them to get know each other and feed off their individual strengths:

SECTION: State and Regional

LENGTH: 129 words

HEADLINE: Local jeweler loses \$240,00 in theft

DATELINE: Columbia, S.C.

BODY:

Cumberland Jewelers was the latest victim of a rash of jewelry thefts plaguing the southeast. The thieves broke in during the night and disarmed the alarm system by way of the electricity, cut the phone lines and drilled through a safe holding over \$240,000 in jewels. "Thank God everything in there's insured," said owner Paul Lugabria. "Security will definitely be stepped up in a hurry." Berget-studded tennis bracelets and wedding bands, and diamonds were among the valuables stolen. "The surgical way they did it's impressive," says Chief Lloyd Carr. "You'd think an employee was in on it, but everybody here checks out." Cumberland Jewelers was just celebrating 17 years at the location last Tuesday.

"Chief Carr assures me that they'll get to the bottom of this," said Lugabria, who has no plans of leaving the area.

Then there was another hit in that same area:

SECTION: State and Regional

LENGTH: 212 words

HEADLINE: Myrtle Beach jewelry store loses \$26,000 in merchandise

DATELINE: Myrtle Beach, S.C.

BODY:

A group of thieves stole \$26,000 worth of diamond rings from a jewelry store by distracting the store staff. The owners of Jewels of Myrtle Beach, Ltd., Tina and Donovan Whitman, said two black men distracted them Wednesday afternoon while one or more accomplices went behind a counter, opened a jewelry case filled with several consignment pieces, items that fronted to them by other jewelers as well as a marquise-cut diamond.

One of the thieves found a key behind the counter to open the case, and grabbed the merchandise, Whitman said. It took over three weeks for the Whitmans to notice that jewelry was missing. After scanning a printout of inventory, they realized what had been taken. "We were talking about going so far as armed guards, but Myrtle Beach is so quiet even with tourism. You couldn't have paid me to believe we weren't secure enough." Organized jewel theft rings are believed to be operating throughout the United States, particularly in the southeast regions where security isn't as intensified as in more metropolitan areas. But Myrtle Beach Police Chief Wes Fressner said it was unclear if the robbery is part of an organized theft ring. He said he plans to consult with FBI authorities on similar robberies reported in the region.

Harris had somehow found out what I was looking up. He contacted Investigator Buddy and claimed I needed his help. It was bullshit. Harris was bitching up. Word had got out in the newsroom that I was sniffing around the Millers case. Harris was using Buddy to watch me to see what I would dig up. I wasn't getting much on either murder per

se, but whatever it was I was getting was interesting me. I tried to avoid the call, but Buddy fucking came to my house! He brought an expandable deep brown file and kept it in his hand as he and scratched at his belly with the other. I could hear his loud breathing out of his nose, that annoying hiss big white people tend to make, coming over my head.

I looked out the window and saw his squad car in the yard behind my Camry. Little boys on bikes began to slow down as they passed the house. This would get back to Lo and everyone. I'd be fucked. I felt like a belt was coming over my neck and stringing me up. I burst out into a sweat. I spread everything out on the dinner table.

Buddy looked at the two hits in South Carolina. "We're already on it. Yep, that's during the same time as the snatch and grab in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina." Buddy knew about the one in Montana as well:

SECTION: State and Regional

LENGTH: 167 words

HEADLINE: Theft leaves jeweler with over \$220,00 in losses

DATELINE: Helena, MT.

BODY:

Steinfeld Jewelers and Sons is without over \$220,000 in diamonds, some of which they had just received within the past few weeks. The thief or thieves broke into the store during the night, disabling the alarm system, electricity, the phone lines and drilling through a safe holding the jewelry.

Chief Samuel Lozario is convinced that this is not the work of amateurs. "The method of entry used is in line with the rise in jewelry thefts in the southeast. They went after a specific group of jewelry, like the others. It has spread to the Midwest."

"I had heard about the ones in South Carolina and Florida," co-owner Elliot Steinfeld stated. "Naturally, I was hoping it all would be contained in that area." Steinfeld said that all the stolen merchandise was insured. Chief Lozario insures that it is only a matter of time. "Burglars who rob specific pieces are working for a specific clientele. The word is really getting out about this. It's only a matter of time."

Buddy opened his file, backed up and checked a few papers. "Now Orlando, this one here happened in Montana." He put several papers on the table. "Notice the matching M.O. Look at what our computers can do... Credit Agency reports that a stolen VISA/Mastercharge Discovery was used online in Florida State's Library to book four tickets from Tallahassee Municipal Airport to Helena Regional Airport (Montana). On April 25, 2002. Another stolen VISA/Mastercharge from Tallahassee was used for a Toyota Camry and Ford Mustang from airport's Hertz Rental. Records show both rented for 3 days (less than 2 hours) and odometer clocks 28-35 miles each. Established radius corresponds with jewelry heist occurring the time period."

Buddy sat on the living room sofa. It grunted under his weight. "Outworks Security Services, that's the one that services those stores that were hit."

"All of them?" I asked with crack in my voice.

"Yep. So you say your friend hangs out in the Strozier

library?"

I gave Buddy a bullshit lead. Said it was a homeless guy from the Shelter off of Macomb and Tennessee. I said he was an ex-techie support guy with a dotcom company, that he got let go and dumped by his lady and went down the drain from a drug problem. Luckily, there was such a person. He was not an ex-techie though, but a crackhead carnie that traveled in and out of town with the southeastern carnivals. I remember having read about him in a Tallahassee Democrat Online article when school was in. It was summer and there was no way the guy'd be in town. I knew the wild goose chase would buy me some time.

I went by Cleveland's and told him what happened. After all, he told me to look it all up. Cleveland seemed not to be bothered by it. "Don't worry. They don't have anything on us, or me for that matter. They've questioned me about Millers and that was that."

"We're talking about the fuckin' diamonds now!"

Cleveland stuck his flabby chest out. "Just trust me from here on about what I say I have done in life." He tilted his head like some gloating coach. "You feel me?"

I smiled. Now Cleveland was talking cooler than I? I didn't have time for this shit.

Cleveland patted me on the back. "You could've washed your hands of the whole thing and not have warned me though. You didn't though. You are a king among men."

Robert Crawford was the last member of the immediate players of the Gemini Effect. I caught him over at Lo's a few days later on the afternoon of November 23rd. They were

smoking two dime bags of weed in the living room and watching ESPN. A huge, wooden bowl of miniature Twix, Snickers, Hershey's kisses and other candies left over from Halloween sat at the ready for the night.

I indulged in the weed and the candy. I had been through a rough couple of days with men from both sides of the Gemini Effect, as well as some outside of it, all determined to get the upper hand with me. We all sat on the same couch, Robert and I sat at both ends and Lo in the middle.

Robert was a clumsy shade tree car mechanic on disability. He used to play football at FAMU, but suffered career-ending knee injury running through the banner and into a smoke machine at the beginning of a game. Thank God he laughed when he explained this, because I was howling! A career-ending injury during pre-game shit. Robert's hands kept a blackish hue from being under car hoods. I could see him being as ornery as Chris described him the day they were all playing cards at Lo's party. His beady eyes hid under a low brow so secretively, he looked like an angry blind man. His scowl somewhat lessened as he smoked weed to take the pain out of worn discs in his spine from a car accident. Both he and Lo sat deep into the sofa. Puff, puff give. Robert began to nod in and out of sleep on the couch, humming to himself. Lo started up about Cleveland in the meantime.

"Priscilla say you writin' books and shit."

I agreed.

"I thought you were just a reporter."

I took another hit. "I'm a writer, first and last. Whatever fits in that category, I'll get a piece of."

Lo snorted. "Yeah, well Juicy steal credit cards. You know that, right? Taking people receipts from trash cans and doin' some shit on his computer. Bet he ain't told you 'bout when he was workin' at Wendy's. I got him that job after he got fired from Subway for stealin' food and rubbin' his dick all in people cold cuts. . . The manager a girl my big brother used to mess with way back. I set Juicy on the straight and narrow and what he do? Man, Juicy the liked to gained thirty more pounds just from Wendy's . . . makin' triple cheeses nobody ordered and slippin' in the back freezer wit' em. Nigga'd be in there suckin' down Frosty shakes 'til he come out clutchin' the sides of his face from brain freeze. Told me he wasn't even hungry most of the time. Got caught, quit on the spot and walked to my house with the runs. Now why do that when that raggedy car of his was in need of a head gasket job? Them shits cost.. . but he quittin' shit like he got it like that. I guess he do, since he everybody landlord."

The nicotine-seasoned growl in Lo's voice wasn't there. He sounded more like a guy recounting the hijinx of an old friend moreso than a disgusted former friend of someone. "Man, I guess he just wanted to see what life like for real niggas. No what? I know that's what it was."

Robert wasn't as kind. "I still don't like his ass. Juicy ain't got no heart. He ain'ta man. A man don't cringe under tables because two people disagree 'bout su'm. A man don't call AAA to fix no flat, 'specially when the lug nuts ain't stripped and a man damn sho'll don't drink no damn Zima drink. He liable to try anything, but 'cause he know white folks and got smarts he can just step off and leave us."

I did a double take. "Leave? What do you mean?"

"Somehow he got it in his fool head to move outta Frenchtown."

A pang of guilt sharpened my senses. I took another toke. "No, Juicy - Cleveland's committed to Frenchtown. You know he'd rather you cal him Cle---"

"I don't give a shit, man!"

Robert began to rock back ad forth. "Juicy committed to the fairy tale black town he tryin' to create in his fool ass head, the one where everybody kissin' his ass and tellin' him how wonderful he is. Damn drugs and all that, it's people like him that know all them business tricks, people like him leavin' that make Frenchtown messed up. See, you got it together. You goin' to school and comin' back and liftin' shit up. He just want Frenchtown fixed so his property'll stay up and in his name. Blackness don't mean shit to him. Ain' t love in it. He just wanna be the king of shit."

Lo revealed that Cleveland was 'used to his mammy makin' all his decisions.' Lo said Cleveland told everybody he passed that night what happened, about the Frosties he was stealing, like he had just won the lottery. Homeless people hanging by the lake still thought he was crazy. Wendy's owed him a last check, but he still hadn't returned the uniform.

I laughed until spurts of piss warmed my boxers. It woke up Robert, who was drooling on the arm of Lo's sofa. I pulled out his record. "Robert Crawford, let's see here...native of Midway, Florida. . . Thirty-one years old, oldest guy in the crew. Prior public indecency charge."

"Fuh pissin' on a flower bed, man. I was pissin' on the side of St. John's Episcopal Church, off Monroe and Call Street, the white church, downtown."

"In broad daylight?"

"On some flowers! I was walkin' home from the courthouse and - none of them fancy businesses would let me in. Not even the church so-called godly people! Talkin' 'bout they don't have public restrooms. Dat in dat report, too?"

Lo elbowed me. "He gotta bad back, man. Gone and ask him whatever. He probably need to lay the hell down. And don't be askin' dumb shit about no jewelry."

I asked him where to get XTC from. The King Love type.

Robert sat straight up. "How you reckon I know that?"

Lo elbowed Robert. "Nigga, quit trippin'. It's cool. 'Cause see, there was this asshole that was botherin' us. But it's cool now." Lo turned to me. "So you inna dat kinda shit?"

I was lost. "Yeah... but what's cool? What do you mean?"

Robert grabbed a handful of candy. "You ain't heard? Bertrand dead as hell."

Wayne Gerard Bertrand had been found dead the night before in the La Quinta hotel. Apparent drug overdose, possibly foul play. I hadn't read the newspaper. Lo was more than happy to inform me. "That fool Bertrand kinda caught me with some shit. I was kinda getting' blackmailed he said he'd have it so I'd never be able to have my boy back."

"He caught you for what?"

Robert and Lo looked at each other. Lo shook his head. "Come on, man. You that slow?"

"Man we was hitting up outta town jewelry stores," Robert confessed. "Juicy'd find, how he say it, 'vendors in fairly low-crime areas.' They be in buildings that ain't got no cellular backup callin' system. I don't know what

all that mean; he the egg-head that could tell you. I cut them telephone wires, them the electricity. You just take the meter from the meter box. The battery wires to the alarms' DC systems get cut, too, then you in.

"All them stores be in them slow, touristy spots with a kinda elderly population. Them stores all gat low-end, cheap central alarm systems. I forget the company. Juicy be doin' him some computer hacking. We get in and hit 'em for specific shit, not just snatchin' shit. Strictly diamonds. Ice. We took it out to a fence in Panama City. He recut and customize for big time rap stars."

"You ever felt bad about it?"

Robert slapped his thigh. "Shoot! Bertrand was part of the problem! I even talkin' 'bout him fornicating wit' these lil' hot ass girls neitha. Bertrand set up one of his boys so good they done made the cemetery the pickup spot of everything in town. Peter Arden is his name. He be frontin' as a sexton digging graves. That bitch pushin' big drugs - includin' yo' X."

My mouth began to water again. I kept reminding myself that Arden had to be busted.

"Ain't nothin' sacred. You might as well set up shop in one of these churches that's on every corner but ain't doing nuthin' but having a million collections a service. We just had an eight year-old from over here bring a dime bag of marijuana to his elementary school and sprinkle it on folk lasagna at lunch, talking about it's 'oregano' he want his friends to try. It may be funny to you because you might expect that type of thing from yo' people, but this where I agree with Juicy, sof' as he may be; Somethin' like that proof somethin' done gone wrong in Frenchtown."

Lo cut in and handed me more candy. "Now I know you

that I know that my family know bout some crime. I got great uncles that ran numbers and pot liquor back in the day in Frenchtown, grown men who understood what it meant. That cracka Arden is pushing this crap on kids on bicycles, kids with lil' brothers that are snatching their stuff and going to grade school tryin' to be like them. Most of Arden's sellers'll get busted and be back out because they're minors. Everybody's afraid to say anything to them because the kids are so into thuggin' that they'll throw bricks in your windows and ride off or shoot you like they did that ol' man that complained about them over in Ebony Gardens last year. If that ain't enough, the parents so far gone they back up their kids on it." Lo lifted up his bowl of candy. "Yeah, I rob and shit, but I give a lot to kids to keep them from that shit, just like my brother did."

"The money we gettin'," Robert interjected, "we planned to help get Lo outta gettin' played by that cracka. We wanted a lil' something for ourselves, too." Robert squirmed in his seat. "A few of the finer things. A damn operation my back maybe."

All this was easy to see. It sure as hell wasn't fair that the city just let it happen. Cleveland, my parents and countless other had petitioned, made calls to return Frenchtown to the place it used to be. I had seen the pictures. Every yard was clean and cut.

Now, just on Juicy's street en route to Lo's. I'd have to pass Midway Sam's place. He was famous for spitting snuff on children walking by while he shot squirrels out his trees with his Daisy for lunch meat. Standing out there barefoot in his boxers - every time. The cats wouldn't even cross over into that yard. The bum kept a dishwasher, or

some kind of appliance out on the curb every day of the week. Can't be that much shit in that house. He's gettin' paid prob'ly to let people dump other folk's evicted shit on his curb. Damn if rats and everything else is collecting in them and making the block an eyesore. That's some individuality that needed to go.

There was that migrant worker Enrique always walking up and down the street with blackened fingernails and rotting teeth. He don't live near here, but he's around lookin' to score so much that dogs don't even bark at him anymore. The one with the shakin' hands and that drawn-in face. Always desperate for a couple of dollars, yet, unlike any self-respecting addict, refused to cut people's grass to get it. People'd call to get him off the block enough, at least to get him some help. The cops never could. Enrique was not a unique personality, he was a man with a sickness. Everybody was too comfortable as it was. The city, the people. Somebody had to be getting paid to look the other way. If Enrique was doing it in Southwood, I bet the city would have handled it.

Try to get away from it over by Lo's, maybe to the park off Copeland with the fake lake that smells so bad in the spring and summer college kids who park by there for classes walk by covering their noses. The smell matched the sights; Nothing but incoherent homeless people drinking, bottles left everywhere. Or playing checkers by themselves on the benches and cussing themselves out for losing. Or laid out in the grass like it's a free concert - even in the rain. Their dirty-ass kids strapped down next to 'em in strollers and blinking off into space. Decent folk jogging the lake for they health broke out in a full sprint to keep from being bothered for pocket change. A fucking wasteland

of potential.

All this money was being sent to give Iraq Pepsi machines and shopping malls in exchange for oil, but nobody could get some progress in the streets? How could non-Americans get that kind of backing when we were right there staring America in the mouth?

It would have made sense to call the cops on this Peter Arden guy at the cemetery.

It would have made sense to have that as a resounding ending to the complicated story of the struggle of the black identity and how that struggle is affected in the face of the forced integration of gentrification. It all would have been ideal, had I not seen the FOR SALE sign in Cleveland's front yard. His modest Volvo was not in the yard. My chest heaved.

I pulled to the side of the road. I dialed up Carla. Payback was in effect. I couldn't even tell her what had happened. She started in immediately on me.

"What's up with you telling your parents about us? I feel totally used here."

I looked over at Cleveland's home. I imagined it run down, boarded up, with crackhead motherfuckers in the backyard lighting up by the toolshed. Or worse, I imagined it immaculate with two-faced whites as residents. "Why are you rushing all of this Carla? I told this isn't - this is Minneapolis or Bloomington. There aren't waves of frizzly-haired, mixed babies running around in packs here in Target and Wal-Mart like it is out there. Things that aren't common take time."

"You always complain about how slow it is. I just figured you'd want to help change, like everybody needs to catch up to your thinking. You have show them. You need to get out of the middle of the street and pick a lane --"

I reclined my seat. "You can't change some people. Shit, some people I don't even want to get in my shit.

"It's easy to make me the villain, the problem. The awful white temptress. It's so easy isn't it? God forbid you might have something to do with all this. The choice of me, the want of a relationship with me. You wanna talk integration? You approached totally me, Orlando, remember?

"Like, God forbid you own up to that. I mean, like really own up to it. Now I'm the evil white girl that can't dance that sucked you in. I'm the one that came out of nowhere and destroyed your black peace, right?

"You weren't doing that well in the first place, Orlando. If I had ignored your whining and left you alone, you would have still been squabbling with your 'soul sistas' who were with you in the hall. The ones that wouldn't give you the time of day because you weren't a ball player, rapper or some corporate dickhead like that. And by the way, you're not as hip and cool as you think you are. You're not Will Smith by a long shot."

I shook my head in horror. Will Smith? This bitch was way off.

"It's not that I wanted some macho black guy, you just happened to be black. I just wanted a guy whose fucking grateful, gratitude has no color! I'm too privileged to speak in your circles, too much of an antagonist to take your plight to heart? You try helping someone whose too lazy to help themselves, yet too proud to appreciate assistance! You came to me for acceptance, you came to me

for a chance! I even pushed you away with all I had and you wanted my company even more. Now you've gotten it and want to complain. You are a child in search of someone to blame for your hang-ups Orlando! You're such a silly, typical little thing.

Carla began to cry. I did too. "I deserve more from you, to make you more tolerant to the world. I see how you play with and smell my hair when we're in bed. I thought it was love. I see how you stare in awe when I talk to cable managers on the phone, you think the world opens up for me because I'm white. The problems that I do have in the world get no compassion from you. You think you'll blow it if we break up because I'm white and it can help you find a mechanic for your car, a bank account when yours is empty, friends in high places. A way out. Unless you're rollin' on X, you're just too wrapped up in just that part.

"I have a black girlfriend and she's saying that you're using me. Some of what she says is just way off, but still, I understand now why black girls are so harsh and thoughtless with you. My heart just isn't inclined to such ugliness. That attitude thing is so middle school. I love like a woman, not a trash-talking, scared little girl. That is why you are really going to blow it if we break up."

Carla hung up the phone. I lay in the seat and listened to the wind manhandle brown leaves from branches. I called Chris. He was at the Vinyl Fever record store and asked what I was doing. I told him I wasn't stupid; He wanted a ride instead of the bus.

I didn't even know where he wanted to go. "I comin'" I said.

I could hear him smiling at the other end. "On the real, you alright."

Chris couldn't believe I was asking for X. He shook his head. "And that King Love shit, too? You wanna fuck with the meaning of life, huh?"

I just stared at him. I couldn't talk.

Chris' expression flattened. "Heard about Cleveland movin', huh? He told me he told you about the other shit, too... Yeah, we started off hittin' a couple of spots where Lo's friends were working after a while. Lo set all that up."

Chris looked over at me. He figured the crime shit would snap me out of it.

"Lo did a church for audio equipment when I told him I wanted to be a producer. We did some songs for commercials and left \$600 of the profit in the church mailbox. Then we did restaurants mostly, where breakin' dishes and swipin' a few bills out of the register didn't satisfy enough. Then, Lo got to knowing some bullshit owners. You know, leave a door open and what not. But he was always hoping for somethin' like that with a jewelry store. It never happened though, not like that.

"We eventually did a few high end cribs in Southwood. You know, stuff insurance would pay back. Mostly still just shit to see if we could do it. When we did, we kinda didn't know what to do with what we took. Our fence wasn't 'bout to take no collection of World War II guns or some Fresco oil painting of some white family that ain't famous from a carload of sweaty brothers, neither was Folmar Gun & Pawn. Cleveland kind of figured out what to do with it by sellin' on Ebay.

"Money came and Lo did not like everybody waitin' for Cleveland to hand out the cash. It was bad enough he was his landlord, so Lo really started settin' up things with

the fence. In the meantime, we all were in our living rooms sword-fighting the air with new golf clubs... still on Rent-a-center couches, a brand new TV, drinkin' Kool-Aid out of peanut butter and jelly jars with other mismatch shit.

Chris got quiet. I needed the noise to keep from whipping the car into incoming traffic. "For instance?"

"Oh, shit like an antique vase from the Japanese dynasty on a table propped up with cinder blocks or ostrich cowboy boots in the closet that weren't even our size..."

I pulled into the new plaza on Ocala and Tennessee. I parked. "What the hell happened, Chris?! Lo was Ikey's best man when Ikey married Stephanie! Cleveland helped you guys with your taxes and Lo get DeAndre back! Robert was a fix it man for any of y'all that needed anything done! Priscilla babysat DeAndre for Lo! You all had a self-contained unit! I mean, you all even showed up for Ikey's funeral on speakin' terms! Weddings and funerals the only time niggas can be about business and get along now or what?!"

Chris shook his head. "We ain't have no choice. We didn't have nobody else to rely on."

"And it's come to this?! How'd things get so fuckin' bad between Lo and Cleveland?!"

"Cleveland gets lushed out and starts runnin' off at the mouth. Lo swears that's what he lacks as a man, but when Cleveland gives it to him, Lo ain't pleased with it. Cleveland clowned him for not bein' able to read one night when we were plannin' some shit and things went wild from then on."

I rubbed my eyes. "Priscilla told me about when Robert approached her in the house or something."

"Shit, that's a perfect example: Priscilla can be a lil' flaw - especially when that missin' Hope girl came up. One time, just like she said, we were all on Cleveland's porch and he was real out of it. We was having conversations and he was completely missin' 'his cue to put complaints in 'em, the way he usually does. Matter fact, that was when he started talkin' about Hope. Before I go on, you gotta remember that him and Robert got off on the wrong foot from the beginning."

"I know this."

"Anyway, he had been talkin' to Priscilla 'bout how the girl's missing and was probably somewhere in the neighborhood. She apparently said somethin' to the effect that he was actin' like a bitch about the whole thing. That the police are s'posed to be on it. He went on 'bout they ain't got it right yet. She said he was sounding like an old woman with too much time on his hands.

"Cleveland was rockin' back and forth on that couch with his face resting in his hands: 'Don't see how when I say something ain't right, it's always bitchin' and when she do it, it's supposed to be the gospel.' I told him it was because he was talkin' 'bout another girl, a fine ass hell one at that. Cleveland said some mess about the Hope girl bein' out there in the streets with no kind of support system and that Priscilla was just a tenant in his house anyway. Lo told Cleveland it's the way he say shit, in addition to what he be talkin' 'bout, that set Priscilla off."

"Lo and Priscilla are awfully tight."

"Yeah, too tight for Cleveland. Cleveland wasn't hearin' it. I always figured him and Priscilla was gone hook up more than that laundry mat thing. Why I had to open

my mouth and say it... Cleveland started up in a way that let me know he had a lil' somethin' to drink earlier. He got to talkin' loud about how Priscilla doesn't know what a real man is. That he's sick every move he makes being judged black or white. Then he got to pacin' again, tryin' on a new walk."

"So he was getting more assertive in the group."

"You got to recognize Juicy ain't raised that high voice or nothin' like this before. Somethin' had changed in him. Overnight. Way too fast to go over smooth. Lo was massagin' his temples or somethin' when he asked why Cleveland gotta say the word "support" though. 'Yeah,' I said. Don't ask me why I chimed in.

"Why did you?" I asked. "You're supposed to be his friend. You're supposed to keep his spirits up."

"Shit, prob'ly 'cause they had all did a job and I was invited in on it. It was Robert, Lo and Juicy, that's it."

"Two people that hate the other with a passion. Do you know where the job was?"

"Naw, but it was Mid-August prob'ly. Like I couldn't use extra change. . . I had found out about it through Priscilla earlier that day. I figured Cleveland woulda let me in on it. So I kinda laughed when Lo was goin' off. Lo said that 'support' word verbage cats that eat yogurt use.

"Robert got into it. 'You like yogurt, Juicy?' He hadn't said much, but you knew he was goin' for somethin' now. 'You eat yogurt? Don't lie.' Cleveland ignored him. 'Y'all need to focus more on what the hell I mean instead of how supposedly gay you think my words are.'

"I wanted to tell Robert to chill, right then, but he didn't do anything major yet, and being that quick on quietin' arguments make you look weak. So I just closed my

eyes when he stood up. I knew he was going to come at Juicy with some mess. 'A real nigga eat ice cream. I'm finna check yo' icebox right now.'

"Cleveland tried to play tough, talkin' 'bout 'Stay outta my house, boy.' I had to open my eyes wit' that one! Everybody was kinda shocked! Robert got to talkin' dumb: 'What? Nigga I'll piss on yo' livin' room flo'!'"

"I can see him sayin' that."

"Cleveland was like, 'Fuck you, Robert. I ain't playin'.' I'm tellin' you, if you ever heard it come out of Juicy mouth like it did then, you'd just scratch yo' head. Anyhow, Robert walked on in the house. Cleveland sat down hard on the couch and remained in his chair. His arms folded again. I guess that lil' moment sapped the testosterone out him, 'cause we were all lookin' at him like, 'well shit nigga, now what?'

"A muffled slap of some sort came from the back of the house. Priscilla's voice started laughin' then protestin', not a real one at all. You could hear clutterin' footsteps comin' to the door getting' louder 'til Robert was eventually shoved back out onto the porch, his hands up to cover the back of his head. He tripped over the weather strip when he came out the do'. Dishwashing suds was on his back. Cleveland actually laughed under his breath.

"Robert regained his balance, grinnin' standin' over Cleveland and scratchin' his nuts. Cleveland looked away from him, off to the side of the house. Robert moved to block his view, talkin' wild: 'Spanked that ass, right where it hang out the back uh them shorts. Dat fat was just suckin' all on a nigga fingertips like cool Jello. Got her fryin' me a bologna samich next, right after she do hern.'

"Then the fool go pull out a Popsicle from his pocket.

Cleveland looked over to the other side of the house and mumbled under his breath. Everybody except Cleveland was staring at Robert in disgust. Robert lookin' back at us, like he ain't gotta clue: 'What? She ain't his no way. That's what he say.' Didn't nobody say nothin' - to help out either one of 'em. I mean it was so quiet, I heard the train cross town. Robert swung his hands like he was about to hop off the porch, then changed his mind and went down the stairs. 'Fuck this gay nigga. Better off dead anyhow like we thought. I'm dippin'. He walked out the yard and didn't look back. He told Lo to get up and walk him a piece of the way down the road. Lo did it."

Chris needed to be dropped off in Joe Louis apartments. I didn't ask why. We got on Alabama Street and turned into Joe Louis. Chris began to hum what was probably a song he was making up, then he began to recite something:

*Nappy dreds, menacing gold teeth sit under colorful winter
stocking caps*

with festive tassles and balls at the ends

*babysitting brown paper bag-littered corners in need of
company*

'We buy pecans' and 'God Bless America' signs in

Mom & Pop Bar-BQ and shoe repairs,

and hole-in-the-wall clubs off Alabama Street

Hard-faced, full-hipped girls with hair brushed up wild

*like the lingering meat of an eaten mango, double rubber
bands*

on their fingers to ready as ponytails bands, stop

at the sign of any unfamiliar car of shining armor

Front doors of homes sway open for air and the need to know

Anything happening in the street - immediately

Especially the bad

*To them it is how it should be,
slum sublime. Slum sublime.*

I didn't have to ask whose it was, but I did anyway. "That's Cleveland's stuff, right?"

Chris gave the so-so sign with his hand. "Him and Lo. They worked on that one together."

I gave Chris \$50 and told him to call me when everything was everything. He shook my hand and walked off towards one of the HUD houses. I kept driving. I didn't want to go home. I didn't want to go to Indiana. I didn't know where to be and how to be when I got there. I had checked the Leroy Collins Library several days prior for background on Cleveland's working there. The man I needed to see the last time wasn't in. I found myself driving by it. I doubled back.

I felt a hunch that Hope Robinson had to still be in town somewhere for Cleveland to still be so caught up on her. There was a free internet room in the library where the homeless, washing themselves in the bathrooms, could check their e-mail after. Perhaps this was a missing link. I hit pay dirt. The man I needed to see was in.

Cecyl Bechet was the bifocaled Leroy Collins library manager. The white man was in his sixties and apparently worked too long in the field because he seemed unable to not talk in a whisper. Age had sunken the front of his scrawny neck into looking like a close up of hairless scrotum. Looking at him when he'd swallow put a ticklish sensation that brought my knees together in defense. His breath gave the impression his mother never told him to brush his tongue with the toothbrush as well as his teeth.

All that was mean to say but, fuck it, he was jacked up, I was tired. That's the way it was.

We were over by the computers everyone used to go online. He was checking the log and grimacing. That had to be good for me. I was correct, the girl was dumb enough to sign in with her own name. "As you can see, this Hope Robinson comes at irregular hours. I'm glad you alerted me to the bogus address and number she used to register with us." He leaned in closer to me. I held my breath. "Would you like to get a copy of her signature?" I nodded no and backed up.

"So you think this woman's a ladyfriend of Cleveland's? That's interesting. He was so regimented, I wondered of anything could break through his routine. I haven't seen him in over a year now."

Bechet began to describe how Cleveland was on the job. "The rash, or whatever it is on Cleveland's neck, is understandable. Still, I never bought that Cleveland was shy per se. He just seemed stifled, afraid to trust people, white or black, being nice to him. He worked circulation, primarily opting to return books moreso than interact with patrons. He was notorious for whipping through reshelving until he got to the African American section. It got to a point that, as long as the desk wasn't overwhelmed, that we just let him breeze through reshelving the other books. We knew he'd wind up in the African-American section. He'd wear his walkman and sit against a bookshelf with the back of his neck carefully hidden behind a row of books, reading to intently his mouth would silently recite the words. Whatever books he was drawn to from other areas, he took there to read.

We walked upstairs. Bechet waved to some vegetarian-looking hippy types carrying potential checkouts in a cloth sack. "Cleveland would read a book like it had some missing part of him he had to find. It was almost funny to me when you told me about the murder you're accusing him of; he was so immersed in whatever he read, he could easily be walked up on. He usually hung around hours passed his shift, always seemed to hate to go home. You'd have to tap him on the shoulder to pull off his earphones so he'd know that there was a call for him over the intercom. He'd just sigh and leave, knowing his mother was on the other end looking for him.

"As I said before, he didn't seem anti-white or partial to anyone. Just very guarded. He was a stickler for acquisitions to get more updated computer applications. Oh, he was intense about jazz selections, too. Strickly classics, very unusual for somebody in their early twenties. He'd stick his chest out when we asked for his opinion on the best albums of whichever artist. Immediately afterwards, he'd realize his sudden pride and become twice as introverted from embarrassment. A 'thank you, Cleveland' or compliment would do it every time.

We got to the African American section. Bechet exhaled heavily. "We did have to forbid him from rechecking books on Malcolm X, the Confessions of Nat Turner, Richard Wright; no patrons could ever get them because he'd turn them in and walk back out with them. There's supposed to be a feature in our system that keeps people from doing that, but Cleveland was a whiz at helping patrons with research and knew more about the system than Administration & Operations, one of the reasons his idiosyncrasies were tolerated. We soon got a programming specialist on board and

suddenly, Cleveland's asocial tendencies, pouting for pay raises and constant trails of Lil' Debbies and Skittles packs, weren't worth tolerating.

Bechet took me to the circulation desk and began typing at a computer. "Criticism usually made him seem calmer, like it was the only honest thing he could expect anyone to say to him. Around the time of his quitting, the criticism was too much with his mother passing, of which he never shared with us. For that reason, no one could really make the connection to the accelerating food bingeing and sudden temper. In fact, the blow up that he had with the Support Services manager came as a complete surprise. It was obvious he was slurring his words. He was leaning over the desk as if he wanted to kiss the woman, pointing at her with every word, like Ms. Willows. I'm sure it was drinking."

Bechet squinted at the monitor. "He slammed down some book on the desk to return called "Things Fall Apart" and was babbling about already returning a book we had him recorded as not having returned, "The Psychology of the Criminal Mind." Yes, it's still outstanding. That one, "The Bell Curve" and "Modus Operandi." It says so here.

Bechet also gave me a copy of a poem Cleveland submitted to the library when it sponsored a poetry contest. The subject, as luck would have it, was Tallahassee itself:

Tallahassee. Sleepy capitol of pot-holed roads and restless hearts

*Pulling tongues to writhe like shedding cottonmouths
in search of a reputation to rub against,
we cool in the heat with much ado about nothing.*

*Politics. Football. Flash floods and Jesus.
College town. A white one and a black one, one in
between.
Practicin' in Border's or Barnes & Nobles by the
capital,
sippin' lattes and reading more than they'll ever
remember,
lives set along a road canopied with native customer
service
and cheap credit hours
legitimate, clean reasons for haunting these humid
hills
not speakin' to me though, rude ass up Nawth ways,
I do not know where I am to go or be in it all,
just that I will write about it, should the world
discard me on sight,
like this stubborn, clannish town and its visitors
In return, I have something impossible to prove before
I cross the Leon county line
With you,
For keeps*

Investigator Buddy had called and reamed me about the bullshit lead. I apologized profusely and just said that I was at the Moon and heard someone bragging about diamonds and that I wanted to be in the mix of a big crime case so much that I exaggerated on what I heard. Buddy reluctantly accepted my excuse and briefed me on the Bertrand death.

Buddy confirmed that there had been a woman in the room. Forensics was inconclusive on what part that female may have played in what happened. Then Buddy went into

Bertrand's drug problems. Cocaine, heroin, X. Lying to his family and himself.

It made me break out in a sweat. I was in TPD headquarters with the head private investigator with X in my back pocket! And why, because I was so paranoid, I was afraid someone would steal it from the car. What's worse, I saw something in one of the crime scene photos that squeezed the air out me. I thanked him for the update, wiped my face and left.

They may not have the land, but they got the deed to yo' spirits! Every las' one of yo' souls in peril. Ah, y'all don't hear me today! I'm tellin' ya yo' soul runnin' on empty: "Ye shall keep my statutes. Thou shalt not let thy cattle gender with a diverse kind: thou shalt not sow thy field with mingled seed: neither shall a garment mingled of linen and woollen come upon thee." Leviticus 19.

How dare you poison the land with the acid of your selfishness? You run from The Word with words of the streets, the classroom, the bright lights. The true Word is built in the grass underneath your feet!

Concrete it down if you want to with intellect, arrogance and self-serving dogma. . . the earth will shift, the weight of man and his invention will prove too great. A crack will split that concrete and the rose of love will crack through. Amen.

Will you be ready? Are you ready? In doing battle with the snake, have you become a child of the serpent? What you work on works on you: "Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor

effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God."
Corinthians 1, chapter 6.

None of you are deserving of the land and its goodness! Too educated in this and that to give the Lord His praise if you want to. The imagination of your evil heart undoes your claims to the land at every turn!

The synthetic version of King Love remained under my pillow for two days before I felt weak. I went to sleep with and woke up to headaches, as if someone were screaming at me in my sleep. Thanksgiving was decent. Ma and Dad were cool, but sensed something going awry in me. We all went to Lake Ella and fed ducks like we used to every Sunday evening when I was in middle school.

I looked toward Monroe Street, by the parking area Marva Peck claimed a pregnant, seventeen year-old Helen Willows would sit in her ugly Plymouth Fury stirring rat poison in a cup of Dairy Queen vanilla soft serve while contemplating whether or not to kill herself. She had befriended, to the disgust of daddy Moses, the white family who had taken over the Willows two-story vernacular house on Georgia street. He had heard they offered to sponsor an abortion for her. She declined their generosity; *why kill just the child. It was my doing. If I go too, it'll be even.*

But no, she'd decide against suicide solely because it would most likely give daddy Moses a sense of satisfaction and, after all, black people didn't do cowardly things like

that. No, she wouldn't kill herself and prove what happens when young black minds mingled with the madness of whites too closely.

Instead she'd fall asleep wearin' some pink and dirty Hang Ten satin jacket she called herself hidin' her belly from the townsfolk with. All to get away from Mr. and Mrs. Willows. They were about to send her to family upstate until she had the child.

An out of wedlock baby changed her quick! She carried the guilt of that hard and heavy. Mr. Willows had had plans for his only girl. Both and Mrs. Willows had been saving since her eighth birthday for the material for the dress she'd wear when they just knew she'd be Ms. May Day. And that didn't happen until she was eleven! Yes, goodness did the Willows have grand plans.

That's when Helen's hands started staying ashy. She couldn't keep lotion on them for washing her hands constantly. I remembered seeing her at some civic event Ma made me go to. That was about the only skin you ever saw on Ms. Willows besides her neck, ankles and face - if you could get through all that foundation. And all them suit coats she wore and what not would just made you wanna fall out looking at her in the summer time. Cleveland overdressed like that. I figured it was just a thing of a family that spent so much time caring for clothes. I wondered, what would become of me? What grand mistake would I make?

Lovers holding hands were giving me the nervous shakes. I bent down on wobbly knees to pet a duck, any fucking duck, just be alright with the world and know that it wasn't true; I didn't need X to be real with myself and others. No ducks were with it.

I went home and grabbed a Zephyrhills water bottle. I went into my room and locked the door. I sat on the bed with one of the pills in my hand. I closed my eyes and asked God what to do. The cell phone rang. After nightmares of the crime scene photos and eight attempts at calling her, Priscilla had finally responded.

The splintered, paint-chipped door to apartment B3 opened quickly. It was part of one of the shittiest apartment buildings I had ever seen. Priscilla eyes were glassy and ringed with sleeplessness. Strands of hair shot wild out of her yellow scrunchie. Her black Charlie Parker T-shirt, surely Cleveland's, hung from her neck like a Flashdance shirt made to hang off the shoulder. The brown pajama bottoms she wore fell over her feet and threatened to trip her.

Priscilla's curtains were closed. The setting sun glowed through the thick green and brown curtains and made the room smell even more like musty armpits. She sat me at the foot of the bed and paced by the closed curtain. Her nose was red from crying.

"You cain't write nunna what ahmma say, hear? 'Member I gat diplomatic immunity. You said so yo'self."

"Okay."

Priscilla started wringing her hands. "Some shit went down. They gone be lookin' for me! They done found who killed Bertrand?"

"That was ruled a suicide or something like that."

Priscilla pointed a trembling finger at my forehead. "You better find the fuck out! For real!" She muttered something about Juicy and things now being even. "You see what done happened wit' Hope! I can't live like that!"

"Can't live like---" My sense of gravity began to sink. Again, the pieces were flying together. I was almost giddy from the shock. "Priscilla, I believe you're a good-hearted person. Somebody that means well. Because of that I feel that someone as giving as you can care for someone so that you're liable to do the impossible for them. I believe that you're holding back on some of the details of all this. I believe if you told me everything that I can help you. I believe that I can help everybody else out there in this crazy world understand you as well. I asked you before about Bertrand. You were quick to get away from that and looking at the circumstances, your reasons made sense, but there was just somethin' there with the way you said it..."

Priscilla fell back onto the back onto the bed. I looked back at her. Balls of Tussy deodorant were under her arms. She covered her eyes with her hands. "Juicy bought diamonds earrings for that bitch. I know he got 'em for her!"

I assumed it was a sore spot with Priscilla having keloids on her ears and pawning the bracelet he had given her. "Priscilla..."

"I saw her come out the house with 'em! Don't no maid wear shit like that for work!"

"Cleveland tends to play it safe, sometimes. Maybe he just stole them."

"That's even worse! Anybody can buy shit, to go and steal it, that's so deep." She began to weep. I wished I

had brought some King Love with me for her.

"I, I know 'bout Bertrand. He used to sit at the bus stop where I used to get off to work at the laundry mat, before I got my truck. He got my shifts down pat. I'd get off the bus and he'd pull up in front of me while I'm tryin' to cross the street askin' if I needed a ride? I'm like, 'damn, I just got off the bus... what I need a ride for?' But you know, bein' a man of the law and all that... Plus I heard he be settin' people up. There was a girl that worked at Whataburger that did her clothes there and said he liked to piss on girls and stuff. She was light-skinned and pretty, too. I didn't ask how she knew all that. So he'd catch to me and I'd be like, 'no thanks, Bertrand.' He was like, 'call me Wayne. I want you to call me Wayne.

"Bertrand would come into the laundry mat like it was his house and give me that oily ass 'it's only a matter of time' look. Then he'd go to the Whataburger girl if she was there or just leave. He had eyebrows that make you wanna pull out your brush and just be his mamma, even had hair between 'em. With that dusty brown hair that looked like it never shined a day in his life. He did wear the best cologne I have ever smelled in my life though. Like half a burning log in a fireplace and half bubble bath. Bertrand was the main reason I made sure the front door was locked at the laundry mat when Juicy and me had sex. Bertrand would come in when the lot was empty with that spoiled brat look. He would've come right in... I didn't want Juicy hurt."

Priscilla dried her face and sat up.

"Lo wound up tellin' me that Bertrand was eventually aggravatin' them all anyway. He had caught Lo and searched his car. Diamonds was in the trunk... Juicy always told him to get the stuff to the fence soon as they got back from

jobs, but Lo like to show off some damn much. Bertrand wanted in but Lo was bullshittin', puttin' him off... Bertrand took to ridin' up to the house talkin' 'bout one of them 'fit the description' of some bullshit. He was even doin' it when he was under investigation. That's when he'd come through in regular clothes and that black car.

"When I heard it was Bertrand that was messin' with everything, I almost - well, yeah, I felt bad. Lo had set it up for me and Juicy to get together, came in after Juicy left and told me how Juicy really felt - that I should give him a chance when he came back to get his clothes. Even let me know about when his battle axe mamma passed and how I could slip in and start living with him. When things got rough Lo would swear Juicy needed me, not even somebody like me, but me."

I scooted over to her and held her hand in mine. "As you know, Bertrand overdosed on heroin in the LaQuinta hotel across town."

Priscilla snatched her hand away. "Please don't fuckin' start that. I don't play with the dead!"

"Bertrand's mouth was open wide with traces of Ivory soap around his lips and chin, someone else's blood and an Altoid in his saliva, as well as and a female's juices. That was almost missed, see because it was along the teeth and all."

"You can't make me talk 'bout that nasty shit. I ain't doin' it."

"I saw the photos. The bed was all tussled up and his pants were undone. Yeah, ol' Bertrand was a freak. Loved yella girls and dope. But you see, lookin' at the evidence in the room there shows someone else was in there. Those prints probably match with yours. Ever been arrested?"

Priscilla grimaced and fell back into the bed. "No!"

"Cool, if you've never been arrested; your prints would be in the data bank. I totally understand that Bertrand wasn't the type to back off easily when it came to young women like yourself. Hell, look what kinda mess Hope's in. The fact that Bertrand and you knew each other... that Bertrand was in trouble and was harassing Lo and suddenly the Internal Affairs office was busted into..." I caught up to the words I was saying. That giddy feeling was coming again.

Priscilla turned to me. "What? You ain't know Bertrand was in the pocket of that Peter Arden, whose running a front at the cemetery to sell drugs... who Cleveland---"

"Hey, it's okay... We want to help."

"You wanna know why I like Cleveland's fat ass, don't you? Juicy seemed so safe. Unhurtful."

"Security."

"I learned a lot from him. I learn a lot. He'd come in the laundry mat with the paper folded under his arm, with the crumbs of something on his chin. Like a big baby in a grown man's clothes. He'd speak and read me my horoscope. He'd tell me how I could take classes at TCC and filled the Cosmo questionnaire's out with me in the magazines. I pushed him to, but he still did it. He listened, you could even when we disagreed. I loved it that he could be pushed. Most just wanna push into you.

"I said somethin' to him 'bout him not really bein' black and manly. I was just trying to show him why he had a hard time with people. He just stayed off by the vending machines pouting after that. Wouldn't even look me in the eye. I didn't handle it well, but I damn sure wasn't goin' to beg..." She scratched her braless breast. "This is

bullshit! I was with Juicy to have better in my life, not be with a record!"

"There may be a chance. Go on."

"After they started doing jobs together, Lo told me Officer Bertrand wanted Lo to kill Juicy because Juicy started askin' questions as to why money the fence paid was comin' up short. Lo had started to pay Bertrand and didn't tell nobody but Robert. Bertrand started pressurin' them to do more jobs, keep the money comin'. He even stepped to Juicy and got pissed that Juicy wouldn't sell his properties to him. Juicy started petitioning for more patrolling of the area. Juicy knew people at the City Council by way of his mother working there. He has this alarm clock that goes off in the middle of the day, where he goes and calls commissioners and everyone about Bertrand's intimidation and the drugs. I never seen a black man be like that before."

I stared off into the ceiling. Spider webs were in most of the corners. "You ever tell him this?"

Priscilla just laughed. "He already hated me by then... Bertrand was taking off of drug busts and basically runnin' the show in Frenchtown. Everybody knew that. Dealers who paid him got calls minutes before there would be raids or anything like that. I think he may have had somethin' to do with Lo's brother's death. Arden sells all kinds of stuff."

"Arden gives it to them boys who ride up and down the blocks to sell it. Arden sells it to the big city kids that go to FSU, frats and sororities, people that like to dance at them raves all night, people that want to be closer to each other. X do that, too. Lo was considerin' taking care of Juicy because Bertrand said that he could

have it that DeAndre would never be with him. Lo and Juicy had already fallen out, so it was just like that. Lo told me about Bertrand havin' them hit that police office. He told me why that night I called and asked if him if he'd let Robert and Juicy fight. He hung up and came to the porch and told me that he was supposed to get his files and kill Juicy there to plant it all on Juicy."

"Which is why Chris wasn't in on it. And Ikey?"

"Ikey was too iffy with things. Lo couldn't take the chance of bein' on the wrong end of Ikey with this kinda thing."

"Lo didn't have the heart to kill him, but Bertrand was still on him. Lo then set it up for them to come to the house and try to provoke some fight that would get it done."

"The whole thing with Robert comin' into the house and harassing you."

"Yeah. I felt the gun in Robert's pants when he brushed up against me."

That's when I knew Priscilla had contacted Bertrand. Bertrand was always around, ridin' by the house like the day I caught him. . . He'd knock on the door sometimes when Juicy's car wasn't in. Priscilla would hide in the back room. You just walked by Philadelphia Baptist and he'd be in the squad car. Same old spot.

She wanted to see if she could talk him out of it all. He was in a black car, staring into space at three in the afternoon, needing a shave.

"I had quit the laundry mat by then. My hair cut was different, but he remembered me. He didn't seem all there, his eyes kept trailing off over my shoulder. He had me meet him there."

"At La Quinta."

"Yeah. I went. He was there in the same clothes, facing me when I came in, sittin' on the bed with his shoes off. It looked like he'd been livin' there. Suitcases were up against the walls. A full rack of clothes in the closet, his uniform pressed and the only thing clean there. Newspapers, warm beer and a radio was on the dresser. He was still looking out of it, staring off into the clothes curtain. I told him what I had to say. I told him if he'd leave Juicy alone, he'd never have any more trouble. He said he'd think it over while he made love to me, but he said it like his whole face was numb. He took off his shirt. I was right about the hair on his back. I went over to the dresser and stood in front of it and just waited. His cologne had faded. He was close enough for me to tell he hadn't taken a shower in a while. He didn't smell like the mall anymore. He unbuckled his pants and pulled down his boxers like he was sleep walking.

"He came up behind me and held me, tight. He was feeling on my chest 'til my nipples get hard. He was smelling my hair, my skin. He worked his way to kissing my lips with lil' birdy pecks from my ear to my mouth. I popped open my bag and was about to give him an Altoid, 'cause that's what I like. You figure, he white; white boys love goin' down. I mean, that's all I was plannin' on him doin'. He set my Altoids to the side and tried to tongue me, I bent down, hiked up my skirt and pulled the cotton part to the side. I rested my hands on my knees, because too much shit was on the dresser. I stayed like that so he wouldn't kiss me again."

"All this for Juicy?"

"For all - for everything. Juicy had all this talk

about how blacks owned Frenchtown. He took us all to see his grandfather, though he wouldn't speak to any of us. He took us to see all these old blacks who told the same thing. That we could have for ourselves and do for ourselves again. I'm from Wakulla. Don't know my daddy and - you know the drill. I'm sick of running. I found a home with these niggas and I was ready to defend it.

Priscilla scratched again. "Bertrand couldn't get it up though. He was gettin' pissed, clapping me into him. He caught me rollin' my eyes when he looked in the mirror. I turned around and held him close. My face was in his hairy chest. I stayed there to keep him from tonguing me. I moved over to the Altoid box, got one. He took it and put it in his mouth.

"Bertrand stopped pulling and squirming and eventually cried quietly in my hair 'til it felt like I was holdin' him up. I noticed his ring. I was like, 'Bertrand, why you livin' in here? You undercover or somethin'?' I wasn't into readin' the paper and hadn't heard the whole thing yet. He didn't answer at first, then told me to call him Wayne."

"Buddy said his wife kicked him out. Him being investigated and Lo not killin' Cleveland in the office break-in didn't help either." I got behind Priscilla and began massaging her shoulders. A muffled howl escaped from her mouth at the minimal amount of pressure I applied. Her shoulders felt like bone and cartilage were eating away at the muscle. I kept going.

"Yeah. He just kept sniffing and holding me. I could feel his face changing an expression through my hair. He chewed the Altoid up like he had sore gums. His dick almost got hard right when the hottest tear I ever felt dropped

into my scalp. I couldn't do it. I just wanted to tease him into leaving them alone."

"The essence of teasing is to prolong attention something, not to walk away."

Priscilla mumbled to herself and patted one of my hands. Her head fell back into me. Suddenly, our eyes met. Hers blazing up at me, mine down at her. I could feel the humid, pockets of desperation making the moment electric. She did, too. She straightened her hair and patted my hand thank you. I cleared my throat and backed away.

"Umm, like I was saying, Bertrand had me sit on the bed and hear the train run through town. I sat way at the edge of the bed and brushed my hair. He was against the headboard. 'You ever do X?' he says. I then understood his spacey look, why he says make love instead of fuck. I told him, no.

"Bertrand got real blunt. 'Do this with me. We do each other and everything else will be the way you want.' I turned around and looked at him with his acne scars, wedding band and how long his ears really were. He asked if I ever did a threesome. I got up and get myself together.

"'I cain't do this,' I said. 'Please don't hurt them boys.' I left quick before he could do shit! I swear that's it, so how that make me in the wrong?"

I looked in the cloudy dresser mirror, at her, over my shoulder. "It's about evidence, Priscilla. The crime scene photos. You left, but the Altoid's tin box didn't."