

THE COMPASS: A NOVEL

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October 1989

"YOU CAN CALL ME HAZE."

William ripped his headphones off when an outside sound penetrated the seal around his ears. The hairs on his body bristled instinctively, even before his brain interpreted the sound.

A woman was screaming. Not outside – downstairs.

Aftershock. That was the next thought his brain seized upon.

The last time a woman screamed like this in his house was exactly one week ago. In fact, it had been *three* women – his grandmother, mother, and sister – all screaming their heads off in the living room, where they watched the World Series. For a split second, he had been so pissed, assuming he missed a huge play – and there he was with his head stuck in the fridge, fishing around for another Coke.

But then the cabinet doors burst open and the dishes flew out, smashing into shards inches from his feet. The cereal boxes leaped from the top of the fridge and ricocheted off his head. Only when the shaking knocked him flat on his ass did his brain catch up to what was happening. It all transpired within milliseconds.

But now – today – there was no shaking, and Nonna had already taken Kelly to soccer practice. His parents were still at the processing plant, and Mike was at Uncle Bill's auto body shop.

That's when William heard the familiar raspy bark – the grating sound of Jimmy's voice when he was tweaking. And then he heard it again – a female voice, screaming.

Unmistakable peril.

His journal tumbled to the floor as he sprang out of bed. *Meddle* still spun on his turntable, but adrenaline propelled him downstairs.

He had no plan.

The screaming came from the in-law unit. He twisted the door-knob – Jimmy had forgotten to lock it. Which meant that Jimmy was going to be in bad shape.

William pushed the door open. The all-too-familiar acrid-sweet smell assailed his nostrils. Clearly Jimmy had been at it for a few days. Pipes, needles, cigarette butts, liquor bottles, vinegar, foil, spoons–

A teenage girl on the couch.

Her tank top was torn, her bra wrenched up, her blue-streaked hair matted with blood from a gash on her left temple. She looked only a few years older than William. She was giving Jimmy the fight of her life, but after all, Jimmy was six-foot-two of solid muscle, and she – well, she wasn't.

Jimmy wasn't making much sense; he never did when he got to this point. His speech had devolved into a chain of profanities strung together without other parts of speech to give them meaning. He enunciated poorly, except when he landed on the words that his unhinged mind thought were most venomous.

William had the presence of mind, finally, to realize he needed a weapon. He ran out to the patio and retrieved a baseball bat, then sprinted back to the in-law unit, where Jimmy had wrenched up the girl's skirt.

He was screaming at her to give it to him, and something about a cavity search. Some bunch of nonsense about shoving something up her cunt, or something being shoved up there.

William wouldn't kill him. He'd just knock him out of commission, just long enough for the girl to escape.

He sneaked up behind Jimmy and swung the baseball bat across his back. It landed with a feeble thud, but Jimmy flinched back just enough for the girl to punch his Adam's apple and get out from underneath him.

Wearing only one shoe and holding the shreds of her tank top together, she fled the in-law unit and burst out the front door, into the street.

That's when William knew, from the look on Jimmy's face, that he was going to die.

He dropped the baseball bat – later, he'd wonder why; maybe to run faster – and fled the same direction as the girl. Unfortunately, his legs were only half as long as Jimmy's, and he hadn't enjoyed the same head-start as the girl. On the sidewalk, Jimmy's arms banded around his torso.

William screamed for help. He saw the girl then; she had made it all the way to the stop sign at Taraval. At his plea, she turned to watch in horror as Jimmy dragged him back to the house.

William had a moment of detachment, just long enough to lock eyes with her. He had never seen her before, and for all he knew, she was just some random girl Jimmy had abducted off the street. But he realized, as if by Morse code signal to some receiver lodged in his brain – she would go get Mike. He was just five blocks down Taraval.

“Get inside, faggot!” Jimmy's spittle sprayed William's cheek. William screamed and flailed, but of course he stood no chance against his meth-addled older brother. Jimmy dragged him back inside, up the stairs, into William's bedroom.

He flung William to the floor and kicked-slammed the door behind them. William scuttled backwards into the corner like a crab.

Jimmy just stood there a minute, his chest heaving, his snarl framing his mottled teeth. His rage imparting a garish hue to the weeping sores on his sallow face.

Then he spied William's journal on the floor. It had fallen open to a page right in the middle.

“Ho-ly crap,” Jimmy said ominously. “Is that really what I think it is?”

Panicked, William crawled toward it, but flinched back when Jimmy's arm swooped to snatch it from the floor. William watched with growing dread as his brother flipped through the pages.

“I thought I told you never to let me catch you doing this fairy-ass shit again,” he said in a low tone, shaking the journal at William so he could hear its pages rattling.

Jimmy flipped through some more pages, sniggering at each one. Finally, in a mocking high-pitched voice, he began to read aloud

William's poems. When he was done with each page, he ripped it from the notebook, sneering as he tore it to shreds.

William felt his intestines, his very soul, being gouged out with a spoon, but he dared not twitch a muscle. Jimmy had done it before, two years earlier – laid waste to all the poems and songs William had composed since he was eight years old. This time, the entire process took less than fifteen minutes.

When the entire past two years of William's life lay in a snowy heap in front of him, Jimmy lingered a moment longer, still sneering. William felt a strange sense of calm then – of acceptance. This was it. Even if his body survived the day intact, he was still dead.

Jimmy swooped again and snatched William by the hair. But that small patch of hair came right out of William's scalp, so Jimmy gripped another, larger chunk and used it to hurl William onto the bed. In one swift movement, Jimmy pinned William to the mattress with a knee to the chest.

"I bet you'd love to suck a *real* man's cock, wouldn't you?" Jimmy rasped out. William watched in horror as Jimmy notched the tab of his zipper down, one tooth at a time. "Not one of those pencil dicks you're used to sucking off in the school bathroom. Something long, thick, and hard to choke on. You'd love that, wouldn't you, faggot?"

Fully unzipped now, Jimmy's fly tumbled open, and he reached into his boxers.

"What the fuck are you doing?!" screamed William.

With that, a switch flipped, and Jimmy woke from his fever dream. For a moment, he blinked down at William, as if confused.

And then he was furious again, re-zipping his pants with a vengeance. "I'm gonna curb-stomp your fairy ass."

He again seized William by the hair and used it to haul him from the bedroom to the living room.

Where they met Mike.

"Jimmy," said Mike, with forced calmness. "What are you doing?"

"I'm curb-stomping this little faggot! It's about time one of us did it."

Jimmy knocked Mike aside and dragged William down the stairs, out the front door, to the sidewalk.

Where they met the girl Jimmy tried to rape.

“Jimmy,” she pleaded. She had zipped Mike’s jacket over her torn tank top, and some man – maybe Uncle Bill – had lent her one of his ill-fitting shoes.

It was as if she were invisible now. As if Jimmy couldn’t even hear her. He flung William to the ground, by the curb.

“Jimmy!” she shrieked as Jimmy positioned William’s head against the curb. William fought back with everything he had, but he was a Lilliputian battling a Titan. The girl launched herself onto Jimmy’s back, the ill-fitting shoe tumbling from her foot.

“Stop it!” she screamed.

“Back off, Jimmy.”

William didn’t recognize the stern voice. Neither did Jimmy, and it stopped him in his tracks. Still holding William’s head against the curb, Jimmy turned his head to look, giving William a clear view of Mike. With a gun.

Jimmy actually laughed at him. “What are you gonna do with that thing?”

Mike aimed the gun squarely at Jimmy’s head. “Well, I’m certainly not going to let you kill our brother.”

He was so calm, and deadly serious. Almost formal. William had never once seen him like that. Maybe that’s why it silenced Jimmy for a moment – just long enough for a wary look to appear in Jimmy’s eyes.

“Stop playing,” he scoffed. “You don’t even know how to use that thing.”

“I do. As you know all too well.”

William had no idea what Mike was talking about, but Jimmy looked like he did. Then another sneer crept over his face, and with a final, spiteful shove that did no real damage, he released William’s head.

Slowly, Jimmy clambered to his feet. Mike kept the gun pointed at

him, and Jimmy, not daring to say anything more to Mike or William, turned instead to the girl.

“I wouldn’t take anything from your skanky-ass dyke-hole even if your dad paid me to.”

“When my dad is done with you, you’ll wish Mike had shot you,” she spat back.

And that was the first time Jimmy looked truly worried. Mike said, “Get your shit, Jimmy.”

“Yes. Get your shit, Jimmy,” she echoed derisively.

She stood ramrod straight the whole time they waited outside. But after Jimmy gathered his wallet and his paraphernalia and peeled away in his beat-up ‘68 Camaro, her knees began to wobble. Mike set the gun down and caught her around the elbows.

“Shit,” he said, gesturing to the blood in her hair and the gash on her forehead. Too shell-shocked to stand, William didn’t even try to – he remained seated on the curb.

The girl shrugged off Mike’s assistance and held her hand out to William. “Let’s take care of you.”

“What?”

She gestured, and only then did he feel it – the enormous abrasion on the left side of his face, where it had scraped along the curb. The stinging roared to life with a vengeance as the adrenaline simultaneously wore off.

William accepted the hand she offered, and they returned inside. While Mike scrambled to put the in-law unit in order, she tried to restore order to William’s face in the bathroom upstairs. He sat on the toilet lid as she dabbed his wounds with a washcloth and soap.

He watched her face while she worked. “Is your dad going to do something to him?”

She laughed a bit. “No, but Jimmy thinks he is. And that’s all that matters. Trust me, Jimmy will not come back here, ever again.”

Only then did William detect the foreign inflection in her voice. It reminded him of the Russians in the Richmond District. While she continued to doctor his wounds, he said, “Why didn’t you just call the cops?”

She soaked a cotton ball in hydrogen peroxide and dabbed his skinned cheek. He winced, but swallowed the hiss of pain. "You know your parents could get in a lot of trouble if the cops thought they were tolerating a meth den in their house," she replied. Pausing a moment, she lifted her eyes to his. "You don't believe me, that Jimmy won't bother you again."

William shook his head to clear it. "It's not just that. He tried to rape you, and..." He couldn't tell her what he thought Jimmy was about to do to him, in the bedroom. So he just said, "I'm afraid he's going to hurt someone else."

Her dark, heavy brows came together. She found a clean towel and blotted his wounds. Finally, she said simply, "Jimmy is not going to hurt anyone else."

"How do you know?" he demanded.

"Because he'll go to prison first."

It seemed like a feeble argument, but she looked weary, so he decided to drop the subject for now. She put a few dots of antibacterial ointment on some gauze. It finally occurred to him to ask, "What's your name?"

She taped the gauze over the skinned area on his cheek. "Serafima."

He rolled the name over and over in his mind. *Serafima*. "That's a cool name."

"Thanks." She brought the first aid supplies to the vanity and began doctoring her own wounds. "But you can call me Haze. That's what my friends call me."

September 1995, Part I

"ARE YOU EVER GOING TO LET IT OUT OF ITS CAGE?"

William had long ago programmed the alarm clock to play *I Got You Babe* at 6 A.M. so he could have the fun of smashing the snooze button every morning. Just like in *Groundhog Day*. But that morning, he

smashed the off button instead. His eyes never actually opened until long after the sun penetrated the blinds.

He glanced at the clock - half an hour until his first class.

He sat up and looked toward the bathroom, considering. He could definitely use a shower. And he had never bothered to change out of the clothes he wore yesterday. He turned toward the closet, in case that presented a less-daunting prospect than the shower.

Instead, he dropped *The Dark Side of the Moon* onto his turntable and lay down again.

It didn't occur to him to eat until that evening, when his mother descended to the in-law unit and knocked on his bedroom door. "Will, are you in here?"

"Yeah," he called back, and wondered why his voice frayed. Then he remembered – he hadn't spoken all day.

"You okay in there?"

"Yeah," he mumbled.

A pause. Then his mother said, "Dinner in thirty."

"Okay."

When he still didn't emerge thirty minutes later, she knocked again. "Will?"

"Uh?"

"Are you sick?"

"No."

"Okay... well, dinner's ready. Are you coming?"

He sighed in resignation. "Yeah, okay."

He got up, finally. Opened the door, and didn't miss the way she caught her jaw before it dropped.

"Are you sure you're not sick?" she ventured.

"I guess I'm just fighting something off."

"Well then, let me bring a plate down to you. No sense giving it to the rest of us."

"Yeah... all right."

He closed the door again, and climbed back into bed. A while later, he heard another tap on his door. Got up, and accepted the tray his mother held out.

"Pastina," she explained. "I had some in the freezer."

"Thanks, Mom."

"Leave the dirty dishes outside the door," his mom called as he closed the door again.

He stared at the bowl for a while. Lifted a spoonful; watched the golden broth and the stelline dribble back into the bowl. Set it outside his door again, untouched. Climbed back into bed.

He still wore the same sweats, and his teeth were fuzzy. He dozed fitfully, disturbed by vivid dreams that he couldn't quite remember. Copper strands of hair, whipping about wind-chapped cheeks. A silver mermaid pendant against freckled skin.

Nearly twenty-four hours later, he finally emerged from bed. His head spun; he knew he should probably eat. So he went upstairs and found his sister at the dining table in her soccer uniform.

Kelly took one look at him and bellowed, "*It's aliive!*"

He stared listlessly at the textbooks and notebook paper strewn on the table. "Stop the presses."

Kelly quirked an eyebrow. "Huh?"

"You're studying."

"I have to, or they'll kick me off the team." Giving him a quizzical once-over, she clicked her pen rapidly a few times in succession, then threw it on the table. "So what finally dragged *your* ass out of bed?"

"I'm on the schedule at work." Only then did it hit him - he hadn't been to class in two days.

His head spun again.

"Jesus, you look like shit," Kelly remarked. "Are you sick or something?"

"Yeah," he said flatly.

"Dude, fuck off. I have a game against Washington in two days."

"I mean, no. I just remembered that I missed an exam yesterday. And I need to eat."

"Fuck off anyway," she said mildly.

He went to the kitchen and made a salami and cheese sandwich. Somehow, even though he hadn't eaten in forty-eight hours, he still couldn't choke it down.

He stood in the shower, letting the water run over him until it turned cold. Brushed his teeth and put on some clean clothes; never mind whether they matched or needed ironing. No need to shave his face or tame his hair.

At work, Paul took one look at him and said, "You're not contagious, are you?"

William shook his head, and Paul said, "Good. You're on grill."

William watched him stride away. He couldn't help seizing onto that little flicker of hope – she hadn't told him yet. For his part, William wouldn't give Paul any ammunition against him. From now on, he'd attend to his grooming before work. She would hear only good things about him from her father.

It did make him feel better to get out of the house and cook for a few hours. He slept better that night, and the next morning, he felt well enough to go to class and plead his case for the make-up exam. But as he sat in the lecture hall, his mind drifted back to that day a little over a week ago. Her forgiveness, sweeping them up in successive spasms of what amounted, in the end, to little more than lust. The dying gasps of something he had assumed would last forever.

His pen idled over his notebook, and at the end of the class, he had nothing to show for his attendance.

The days when he had to work were better. But when he had a string of days off, he found himself sinking back into that sort of flu. And after he failed to emerge for dinner for the third day in a row, his mother knocked on his bedroom door.

"Can I come in a minute?"

He glanced back apprehensively into his room, but held the door open for her. Her eyes surveyed the rumpled bed sheets and appraised the empty soda cans and beer bottles on his bedside table. She wrinkled her nose at the stench, and found its source in the fetid clothes he wore and the rotting food atop his dresser.

She said, "Will, you might be fooling some people, but you're not fooling me."

He shoved his hands into the pockets of his sweatpants and avoided her gaze.

"The last time this happened was about three years ago," she persisted. "You know what happened three years ago?"

He sniffed, and took a sudden keen interest in the wobble of the ceiling fan.

"Three years ago," she prompted again. But he still refused to fill in the blank for her.

He lowered himself onto the edge of his bed. Stared listlessly at his fingernails. They could use a trim and a good scrubbing.

She folded her arms across her chest. "What happened this time, Will?"

"Mom, I know you want to help, but there's really nothing you can do."

"Maybe not. But if you think you can fight this one out in your head, I would just invite you to look around yourself right now."

When he still remained silent, she ventured, "If you're missing Julia that badly, why don't you just move down there? That's what you've wanted this whole time, isn't it?"

He winced. Gradually, her eyes widened.

"Oh. I'm sorry. You mean...?" She sat beside him on the edge of the bed. Drawing a shaky breath, she added, "It didn't even occur to me."

Her genuine shock rattled him all the more. That it wouldn't even occur to her only confirmed how deeply wrong the whole thing was.

She folded her hands in her lap, struggling, he could tell, to land on the right words.

"The last time this happened – three years ago – you went fishing with Frank for three weeks," she tried.

"That was during albacore tuna season."

"Well, Dungeness season starts up in a month or so."

"Mom, the point is, albacore season is in the summer. I'm in school right now. I can't take off for three weeks to go fishing."

His mother looked around his room again. "I get the impression you haven't been to class in a while, anyway."

His eyes strayed over to the bottom drawer of his dresser, where he hid his bong. Right about now, he could really use some more of

Mike's exceptional weed, but he had smoked the last of it the night before.

"You may as well get out of the house and do something," his mother persisted. "Even if it's not school."

"I *am* getting out of the house, Mom. I'm still working."

She raised an eyebrow. "At Dunphy's?"

"Yeah...?" he replied, a bit defensively.

"So you're working at her father's restaurant. And this will get your mind off her... how?"

He frowned. Crossed his arms over his chest.

"Quit Dunphy's, Will. Frank could use a good deckhand right about now. I think he recruited his current one off the short bus. You've got to get out of the house and distance yourself from anything that reminds you of her."

"Thanks, Mom," he said curtly.

Her jaw tightened, but after a moment's hesitation, she rose to her feet. "Leftover pasta in the fridge. I used the San Marzano sauce."

He felt a pang of guilt, and something else more poignant. A little over three years ago, his grandmother had somehow coaxed San Marzano tomatoes from the foggy microclimate and sandy soil of the Outer Sunset. She canned them, made sauce, then put a dozen or so containers in the deep freezer. He knew his mother had retrieved one of Nonna's containers in a last-ditch effort to tempt him.

But he only mumbled, "Thanks," and tried in vain to blot out the memory.

So instead, William picked up the phone beside his bed and called his brother's apartment. But of course Mike wasn't there, so he dialed MacGowan's next.

"MacGowan's." The music rampaging in the bar nearly overwhelmed the smoky female voice.

"Hey, um... this is Mike Quinn's brother. Is he there?"

A pause. "Jimmy?"

He flinched. "No. William."

"Well, that makes a lot more sense," she chuckled. "I didn't think they'd let Jimmy call from prison."

“Is he there?” William persisted. “Mike, I mean.”

“That's him screaming on stage in the background. Can't you tell?”

Increasingly agitated, William rubbed his eye and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Yeah, okay... well, can you do me a huge favor and ask him to call when he finishes?”

“No problem.”

But he lost patience after five minutes and dragged himself out of bed. Threw on some jeans and a thermal sweater, and over that, a plaid flannel shirt - what Mike derided as his “lumberjacket.” But he felt too malnourished to walk the few blocks to the bar, so he changed into the black motorcycle jacket, instead.

He cast a dubious look in the mirror at the scruff sprouting on his face and ran his hand through his hair until it stood on end. At the moment, it gave a whole new and very literal meaning to the term “dirty blond.” But there was nothing he was willing to do about that now.

He drove his motorcycle the few blocks to MacGowan's and flashed his fake ID at the entrance. Thankfully, the jukebox and the clamor of bar patrons had supplanted the jarring blare of his brother's heavy metal. He found Mike onstage with the other bandmates, stowing his guitar in its case. Rather than announcing himself, William jumped onstage and began wrapping up cords.

Not recognizing him, the other bandmates froze in shock. Finally, Mike spotted him and leaped to his feet, grinning.

“Hey, man! What the fuck?” He gestured to William's facial scruff. “Are you homeless now?”

“I tried to call you,” William grumbled.

“Yeah, I know. Cindy told me. I just tried to call back. Mom was worried about you, and now I see why.”

“I got impatient.”

The silver piercings in Mike's lip, eyebrows, and nose flashed in the stage lights. He had graduated from black faux-hawk to black-and-green liberty spikes, and with the new gauge piercings in his earlobes, he looked more aberrant than ever. He clapped a hand on William's arm, turned to his bandmates, and shouted, “Guys, this is

my kid brother, Will. I move out of the house, and he still follows me around like a little lost puppy-dog.”

“William,” corrected William, but no one heard him over Mike’s guffaws. Mike steered him straight to the drummer, whose bass drum proclaimed IRONSHAFT in an aggressive red font. Aside from Mike, he was the only band member who hadn’t stepped right out of a mid-eighties hair-metal video on MTV. In fact, with his sweater vest and close-cropped Caesar cut, he was downright preppy.

The drummer startled William by springing forward with a wide smile and a violent handshake. “Niall. Mike’s told me a lot about you.”

“He has?” William shot a suspicious look at Mike, who in turn slapped him on the back with his trademark cretinous laugh.

“Dude, we should all get a drink. Cindy says it’s on the house.”

“Not yet,” William said aside to Mike. “I need to talk to you first.”

“Sure, man. What’s up?”

“Out back.”

Mike scoffed. “Out back? What is this, a drug deal?”

William seized Mike’s arm, encased in brightly-colored snakes, skulls, roses, and naked ladies, and steered him offstage.

“Jesus, chill out!” protested Mike. “Can I at least get my jacket? It’s fucking freezing out there.”

William waited for him to slide into his silver-studded black leather jacket, then led him out the back door into the dimly-lit alley behind MacGowan’s. Out here, it reeked of urine and rotting trash from the dumpster.

“All right, man,” Mike said, shuffling back and forth and glancing around. “What’s up?”

In a low voice, William said, “Have you got any on you?”

“Shit. You know, I was just kidding when I asked if this was a drug deal.”

William fixed his brother with an earnest gaze.

“What – you mean *here*?”

“Yes, Mike. Here.”

“Well...” Blinking a couple of times, he finally admitted, “Yeah. What do you need?”

William pretended to consider a moment. "All of it?"

"Fuck."

"You think you can just smoke me out?"

"Fuck you. Are you serious?"

"My next paycheck is Friday."

Mike gaped a moment longer, then heaved a big sigh. He reached into an interior pocket of his jacket and pulled out the weed.

"You know, the only reason I had this on me right now is because Cindy is a good friend. We light up all the time back here."

"Uh-huh."

William had brought his own papers, so Mike took one and rolled a joint. After lighting it, Mike took a couple of puffs before passing it over, then watched William take a couple of deep, bracing hits. "You lighting up with Julia now?"

Hearing her name gutted William all over again. To hide it, he blew a huge cloud of smoke, and said nothing.

Mike's face fell. "Aw, man. No way. For real?"

William turned away. Took another hit.

"You mean you've been going through all that shit by yourself?" Mike sucked his teeth and said, "Fuck it, man. Love is a myth. A social construct invented to sell greeting cards."

William enveloped them both in another shroud of smoke. "The Nobel Prizes you could win with that intellect."

"Shut the fuck up." Grinning, Mike snatched the joint from William. "Well, listen, man. I'm getting a new band together with Niall, that Irish dude. Pub rock. We both want out of the heavy metal thing. I never liked it, even in the eighties."

While Mike took a puff, William asked, "What the hell is pub rock?"

"Kind of punk, kind of folk," Mike replied after the smoke cleared. "I'm singing lead and playing rhythm, but we need a lead guitar and a backup singer."

"No."

Mike sucked his teeth in chagrin. "Oh, come on; why not? Can you even imagine the sheer volume of poontang? With your looks and my

raw charisma, we each make one-half of a stud. Together, we're unstoppable."

While Mike took another hit, William asked, "Is that why Niall said he's heard so much about me?"

Mike held his hit, and grinned.

"You've already committed me, haven't you?" William shook his head in dismay, but he couldn't help smiling a bit. "Bastard."

Mike simultaneously exhaled and laughed, and wound up choking. When he finally recovered, he said, "See? I knew that would make you feel better. That, and a bit of dank nug."

William lifted an eyebrow. "Dank nug?"

Ignoring him, Mike extinguished the joint. "Now, come inside and drink with me and Niall."

"Not until you swear to never say 'dank nug' again."

Jackhammer-laughing, Mike merely seized William's arm and steered him back inside, where the other bandmates were still helping Niall load the drums into his van. So Mike led William to the bar while they waited.

Cindy turned out to be the top-heavy brunette bartender, flirting with forty, spilling out of a tightly-laced green corset. And apparently, middle age wasn't the only thing she flirted with. As she pushed William's Irish Car Bomb across the bar, she glanced up and did a double-take. Tilted her head, and flashed him a coquettish smile.

"Well, aren't you a big, tall boy."

He froze. Turned away, and knocked back his drink to hide his scorching face.

"You cannot possibly be Mike's brother," she persisted, in her throaty voice.

Thoroughly tongue-tied, he looked helplessly to Mike.

"My brother is a man of few words, as you see," Mike offered, with his shit-eating grin.

"He shouldn't need very many."

Wide-eyed, William glanced back at her in dismay, and she winked before turning to mix Mike's drink.

Mike leaned into William and said in a low voice, "Poon."

“Come on. She’s old enough to be our mom.”

“Dude, middle-aged women are the bomb. She’ll probably be so grateful, she’ll let you fuck her in the ass. Put in a good word for me and we can spit roast her.”

“Jesus; shut the hell up already,” hissed William, looking around to make sure Cindy hadn’t overheard. Before his brother could embarrass him further, he leaned in and said in a low voice, “The rest of it’s in your car?”

“Dude, get your own fucking supply and stop mooching off me.”

“I’m not mooching. I’m paying you for it. Friday.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t sign on to be some middleman.”

Cindy pushed Mike’s drink across the bar, and William studiously avoided her leer. After she bustled off to serve someone else, Mike added, “If I keep coming back at this rate, there’ll be questions.”

“Fine. Then who’s your plug man?”

Mike chugged his drink and slammed the empty glass down on the bar. “I’m gonna go make a phone call.”

William watched him disappear into the hallway leading to the restrooms and the pay phone. He seized a handful of nuts off the bar and was dodging Cindy’s thinly-veiled innuendos on that point when Niall startled him with a hand on his shoulder.

“Hey, what’s the craic?”

William blinked.

“Ah, come on now; you’re gonna have to do better than that if you wanna join Act the Maggot.”

“Act the Maggot?”

“It’ll require a bit of authenticity, you know. But don’t worry, I’ll bring you up to speed.”

William stared at him, flummoxed. Niall retrieved a pack of cigarettes from his back pocket and held it out to him. “Fag?”

William flinched as Jimmy’s pock-marked face and reedy snarl flashed right in front of him.

I’m curb-stomping this little faggot! It’s about time one of us did it.

Suddenly nauseous, sweaty, and out of air, William could only stammer out, “Wh-what?”

A resounding belly laugh yanked William back to the present. It was Niall's laughter; Niall's voice. Niall's good-humored face in front of him – not Jimmy's.

"I'm not comin' on to ya, man!" gasped Niall between spurts of laughter. "I'm offering you a cigarette. The Irish slang still slips out, even after a couple of years Stateside. I reckon it'll get me in trouble one of these days."

"Oh..." Niall had misinterpreted the cause of William's panic as much as William had misinterpreted Niall. Unable to locate his voice, William declined the offered cigarette with a shake of his head. Shrugging, Niall drew one from the pack with his teeth, which made William all the more glad he hadn't taken Niall up on his offer.

"Listen," Niall said after lighting up, "I've written a whole album of songs already, and Mike tells me you're a bit of a songwriter, yourself."

It dawned on William. "Act the Maggot is the name of the band?" The adrenaline was draining too slowly from his system. He prayed Niall couldn't hear that his voice still trembled as much as his limbs did.

"Yeah. Bollocks, right? It wasn't my idea, I swear; it was Mike's." The cigarette leaped in Niall's mouth as he talked.

"Act the Maggot... I don't get it."

"Well, yeah; it's like 'act the fool,' as you Yanks might say."

"Oh." William tugged at his fingers and knuckles to hide how badly his hands shook, but at least he could manage a smirk. "That does sound like something Mike would pick."

"I will say, it was better than his first idea – Craic Is Wack."

No one had been eavesdropping on their conversation, yet Niall's loud, infectious chortle spread to the other patrons at the bar, radiating outward in both directions from him. William caught it as well, and thankfully the laughter ushered the last of the panic from his veins. Before William knew what was happening, Niall slapped him on the back, hard, and shouted, "Bar wench!"

William's laughter caught in his throat as Cindy approached. She leaned over the bar, right in front of William, to refill the bowl of nuts

he had emptied. She lingered over the task, her ample assets on full display to him.

“Niall,” she said. “You’re cute, in a Lucky Charms sort of way. But the only reason you’re getting away with calling me ‘bar wench’ is because your friend here is cuter.”

Her face was round, but pretty; her skin remarkably well-preserved for someone who had spent a career enveloped in tobacco smoke. She wasn’t skinny, but she wasn’t exactly overweight, either. Definitely curvy, in strategic places.

She lifted her eyes then, and William’s snapped immediately to her face. But she had caught him red-handed, and her mouth twisted into a wry smile.

Thankfully, Niall rescued him. “Cindy, I’d like to buy my round.”

“You mean for you and Mad Max here? Or for you, Max, and Mike?”

“The whole pub, Cindy. The whole feckin’ pub.”

“Go home, Lucky.” But she pulled them both a pint of Murphy’s, with a third one for Mike when he got back from the phone.

Niall pushed a twenty dollar bill across the bar and said, “Have one for yourself later.”

In response, she lightly slipped her fingers around William’s wrist, and turned his watch face up. “I get off in thirty.”

“I’ll bet you do,” Niall replied on William’s behalf, and unleashed another one of his contagious laughs. Then, after roundly abusing the quality of stout in America and lamenting the absence of Beamish, Niall demolished his entire pint in one gulp. Wiping his mouth on his forearm, he turned to William and said, “Listen, I want to get this in before the other guys come back. They don’t know it’s the end of days for Ironshaft. Cindy put in a word with the manager here, and we’re in. Act the Maggot, every Friday night. It’s ours for the taking. All we have to do is tell them when we start. And get a lead guitar, since my own brother moved back to Ireland last week for a girl, the plonker. Which is where you come in.”

“Uh-huh. Where’s that?”

Niall took a drag from his cigarette. "Can you come in tomorrow for rehearsal? I have a studio lined up and everything."

William sipped his Murphy's. Licked the foam from his upper lip, considering.

"I don't know if this is the best time for me," he said. "I've fallen behind at school lately."

"Fair enough. It's just, we needed to get moving on this *yesterday*. Maybe you can just fill in a short while? Until we find someone permanent?"

At that moment, Mike returned from the pay phone and, finding his pint waiting for him, slid it down the bar to Niall. "Thanks, man, but it's all yours now. Will and I gotta bounce."

William, in mid-gulp with his own pint, choked a bit. "Now?"

"Yeah, dumbass. When your plug says now, you come *now*."

William's bar stool scraped backwards as he rose without further ado. He felt a hand on his arm, and Niall said, "Rehearsal tomorrow?"

William zipped his jacket, considering. "Yeah, okay."

Niall patted him. "Good man. Mike will tell you where it is." With a smirk, he added, "I'll make your apologies to Cindy."

Rolling his eyes, William followed Mike out to Jimmy's old 1968 Camaro that Mike had restored himself and painted bright yellow. As he somehow pretzeled his legs into the passenger seat, William asked, "Where are we going?"

"Mission District."

William tried not to show his alarm. "At this time of night?"

Mike patted him on the knee. "Don't worry your pretty little head, Sis."

"Should we take my bike, instead?"

"Are you kidding? Look dude, I know Julia's not here, but I'm not sitting behind you on that thing and wrapping my beautiful long legs around you."

It was insensitive at best; below the belt at worst. Either way, it silenced William; and though Mike had never had the best judgment, William was desperate for a fix. So as Mike's stereo blasted The Dead Kennedys out the windows, and his Camaro blasted testosterone

down Guerrero to 19th Street, William tried to shrink himself as far down in his seat as he could. Which, for him, was an exercise in futility.

Mike turned down a side street, and his car screeched to a halt in front of a faded turquoise house with peeling vermilion trim and bars on the windows. Mike flashed another one of his stupid grins and, whistling, led William up the steps to the front door. He knocked, and the door swung open.

William recognized the piercing hazel eyes of the woman on the other side, but for a few seconds, it wouldn't quite register.

"Haze?"

She blinked, apparently just as dumbfounded to find him there. "William? Is that really you?"

Turning back to Mike, he jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "Her?"

Grinning, Mike pushed past William and held his fist out to her. "What up, Haze?"

"You're not black, Mike." Haze stepped aside and waved them in.

"Mike," William began carefully. "Let me just make sure we're all on the same page. We're here for what we talked about at the pub, not tattoos – right?"

"Dude, are we at her studio?" Mike scoffed and looked toward Haze, as if to say, *can you believe this fool?*

But Haze did not look at William as if she thought he were a fool. Her restrained gaze put him at ease as he crossed the threshold into her foyer.

"Nowadays I only do this for a select few," Haze explained, closing and locking the door behind them. "Jimmy and Mike have been loyal customers for years."

"Of both enterprises, apparently," William observed.

"Jimmy and I have single-handedly kept her in business all these years," Mike quipped.

"In case you haven't noticed, there's a one-month wait list at the studio," she retorted. Fantastical creatures stampeded down her arms

from somewhere beneath the short sleeves of her black peasant top. The décolletage above its neckline hinted at more.

She had never once removed her eyes from William.

“Mike didn’t tell you it was me?” William ventured.

“No, he did. You just look... different.”

He felt the familiar heat rising to his face, along with his old insecurities around women. Every instinct in his body commanded him to look away, but he forced himself to hold her gaze.

She blinked first.

“Make yourselves comfortable,” she offered, gesturing toward the couch. She settled herself on the adjacent chair, at right angles to them. Her eyes swept past Mike’s grinning leer in favor of William again.

“Haze,” he said. “And all this time I thought it was because of your eyes. Or because you were in Hayes Valley.”

She returned his smile, circumspect. “After they tore the freeway down, the yuppies moved in. That’s why I’m in the Mission now.”

Her voice still bore traces of her Russian origins. A silver barbell septum piercing adorned her nose. She had deliberately streaked her long, shaggy dark hair and bangs with gray. She reached up with slender fingers to tuck a lock behind her ear, showcasing a scaffold piercing with an arrow-shaped earring.

She said, “How is your albatross?”

“I followed orders, and kept it out of the sun.”

Her features remained Russian-stoic. “Are you ever going to let it out of its cage?”

“Right! What the hell is that about, anyway?” Mike chimed in good-naturedly. “And by the way, I’m still pissed you didn’t let me ink you, Will. I mean, I drew the fucking thing.”

Haze had a pair of grooves between her full, dark brows, grooves etched prematurely by deep concentration. The grooves deepened slightly at Mike’s interjection.

“Don’t say ink,” she rebuked. “It’s disrespectful.”

Mike scoffed. “What are you talking about?”

“Tattoo is an ancient art form. In some cultures, it’s a spiritual practice.”

Mike held his hands up in mock surrender. “Hey, whatever you say.”

Shrugging off his insincerity, she turned back to William. “When are you going to let me put that crab on you?”

“Crab?”

“Yes. We talked about this. You’re a quintessential Cancer, and a crab fisherman. What could be more perfect?”

He smiled again. “Lately I’ve been thinking about a mermaid.”

She tipped her head quizzically. “A mermaid?”

“Dude,” Mike groaned.

William ignored him. “Can you do it?”

“Of course,” she said. “Where would you want it?”

He shrugged. “I’m not sure yet.”

“Any other pointers? What do you want it to look like?”

“Black and gray.”

“And topless,” Mike chimed in. “Come to think of it, this isn’t such a bad idea, after all.”

Haze ignored him, as William had. “Maybe have her sitting, like she’s on the rocks? Turned away, looking out to sea, so all you see is her lovely slender back. And maybe just a hint of side boob?”

William laughed a bit. She came to sit beside him and took up his left arm. Touched her fingertips to the inside of his forearm.

“I’ve been doing some reading lately about chakras. They say the left arm is the receiving arm. And the inside of the arm is controlled by the heart chakra. Seems like a good spot to put your mermaid.”

Her shrewdness left him speechless. The corners of her mouth turned up in a self-satisfied sort of way. She lowered his arm and returned to her own chair.

Abruptly, she said, “Don’t you get couch-lock from that shit?”

“Um... what?”

“I mean, that strain is all well and good for Mike – no offense, Mike – but I thought you’d like something a little less... mind-numbing.”

Sheepish, William replied, “Honestly, right now, I just want something to wind down with.”

Haze shrugged. “Whatever you say.” She rose again from her chair and ascended the staircase, leaving them alone in the living room.

Bemused, William looked to Mike, who nodded reassuringly. Sure enough, a minute later, the stairs creaked again beneath her footsteps.

She had already measured it out – only a half-eighth, by the looks of it – and held the baggie out to him.

“Actually, I was hoping for –” He stopped because Mike kicked him. Hard.

“Right on, Haze,” blurted Mike. “We’ll bounce now. Great seeing you.”

But Haze peered at William – rather earnestly, he thought. “Try it first. You can always come back for more.”

William knew then that she hadn’t given him what he asked for. He was a bit peeved, but he was also utterly inexperienced at buying weed from a dealer. What little weed he had smoked in the past, he had always just bought off of Mike. So he shut up, nodded, and handed over the cash.

Without further ceremony, he and Mike rose from the couch and allowed Haze to see them out. As soon as they were back in the car, Mike seized his arm. “Holy shit, dude, you have got it goin’ *on!*”

William raised an eyebrow. “What are you talking about?”

“Do you have any idea how many years both me and Jimmy have been trying to bang her? We thought she was a dyke, ‘cause, you know – Russian chick, living in the Mission, working as a tattoo artist. But I have *never* seen her look at a guy the way she looked at you just now.”

William waved his hand dismissively.

“Hey dumbass. You know how she only gave you a half-eighth?”

“Yeah; what was that about? I’ll go through that by tomorrow night if it’s any good, which – who knows, since it’s not what I asked for.”

“Dude. I can guarantee you it’ll be the best bud you’ve ever

smoked. That's why she gave it to you, and only a half-eighth – so you'd come back. As soon as possible.”

Mike's theory landed like a jolt of electricity, and William's eyes drifted unfocused as he considered whether his brother might actually be right.

Granted, loving Julia still felt as necessary to life as breathing. He still thought of her every minute of the day; still craved her, body and soul, like an addict craves their drug.

Still, for the first time since Julia had broken up with him, his traitorous nether regions stirred. Haze had been his first crush – the star of his earliest nocturnal fantasies. She had never been any great love, and he knew she never would; but at least the prospect of getting off with her made him feel something for the first time in weeks.

Mike perpetrated his cretinous laugh, tearing William from his thoughts. “Aren't you a sweet, innocent little thing. You've got to play that up for us, man. Score us some free weed.”

Dragging his attention back to his brother from more welcome thoughts, he retorted, “That strikes me as monumentally stupid.”

“Free weed. Strikes you as stupid.”

“Somehow, a female Russian tattoo artist, surrounded by Salvadoran gangbangers in the heart of the Mission, has access to the best weed in the city. Does that not strike you as odd?”

Mike clapped his hand on William's shoulder and shook him a bit. “Relax, bro! You think too much.”

“Somebody has to,” William grumbled, shrugging him off. But he was already thinking about those animal tattoos on Haze's arms, and the ones halfway concealed below the neckline of her shirt. Sort of tribal, but more delicate. He wouldn't mind getting a closer look at those.

