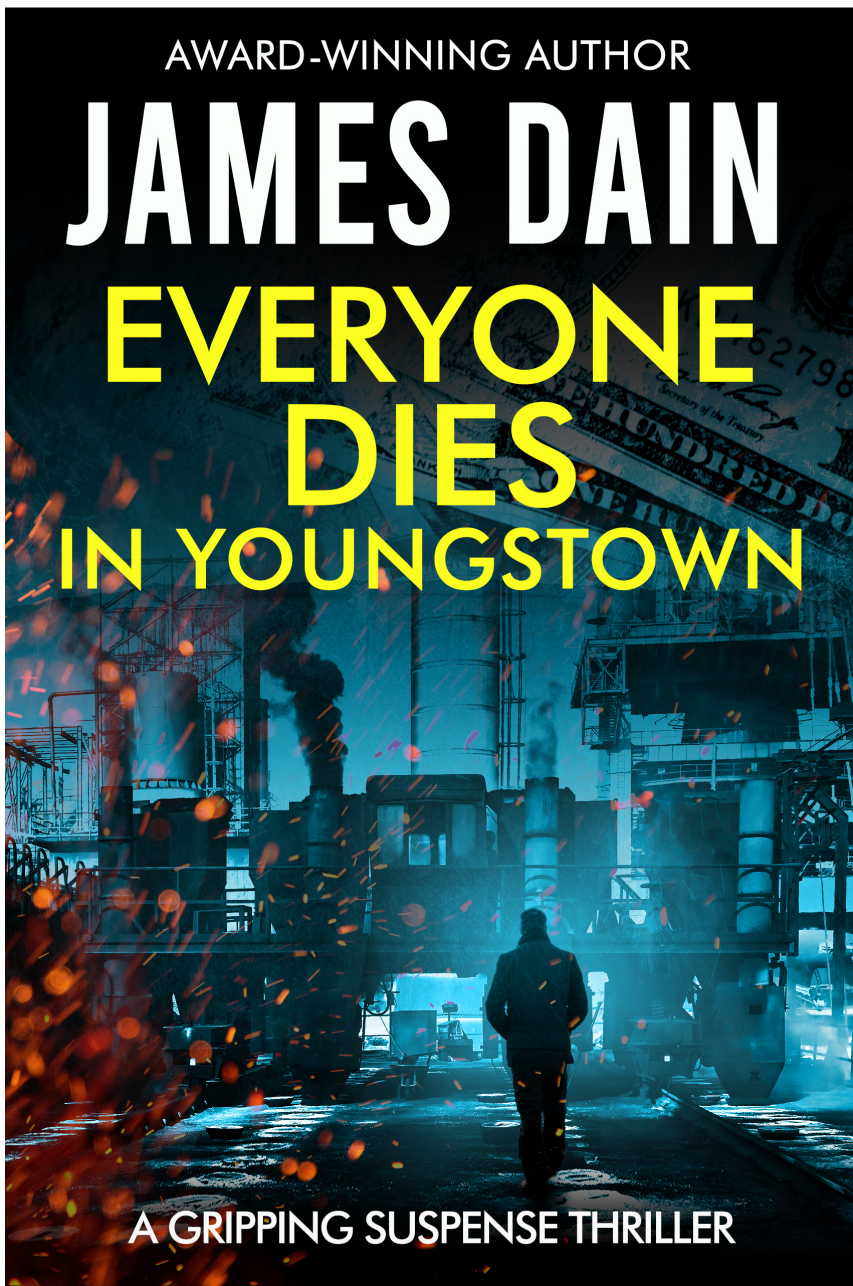


AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

JAMES DAIN

**EVERYONE
DIES
IN YOUNGSTOWN**

A GRIPPING SUSPENSE THRILLER



Everyone Dies in Youngstown - Your Free Sample

A Gripping Suspense Thriller

James Dain



Brown & King

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A Note on the Style

I strive to capture the authentic rhythms of certain kinds of American speech as-it-is-actually spoken.

That might mean long meandering sentences, pronouns considered incorrect, odd spellings and contractions and numerous other errors that make English teachers wince.

Readers: I hope you enjoy it.

Teachers: I share your pain.

Civilization will not attain to its perfection until the last stone from the last church falls on the last priest.

– Emile Zola

Chapter One

The Product

The supplier in Newark was late with the coke and MJ Shea had been awake over 30 hours by the time he got to northeastern Pennsylvania. He didn't like to stop when carrying product and seldom used coke himself, but when he started falling asleep at the wheel in mid-afternoon, he pulled over at a Super 8 in Bloomsburg for a few hours of rest.

He paid cash for the room using the same fake I.D. he had used to rent the car, a 1986 Chevrolet Celebrity with no flash and little power. He parked the car outside the motel window and dropped his overnight bag, with its three keys of coke and a 9 mm Browning, on the mattress. Then he flopped on the bed himself and clicked on the boob tube.

On the TV, President Reagan was meeting Gorbachev and Jimmy Cagney had died. MJ cared nothing for politics but liked Cagney's cool toughness, which reminded him of his old man.

Soon sleepy, he put the overnight bag under the covers with him and the gun under his pillow while he slept. Having covered all the angles, he slept soundly and woke at 7 p.m., feeling groggy but better. After loading his stuff in the small Chevy, he headed for the Interstate entrance.

Bloomsburg was an old farm town injected with a bit of life by the construction of Interstate 80. The sun was setting, lighting orange fire under the clouds to the west. On this Monday night at the end of March, there was little traffic along the motel-and-restaurant strip leading to the nearby Interstate.

250 more miles to Youngstown. He should have the coke to Waylay by 1 a.m. His take for the run would be the usual three grand.

As he passed a flood-lit Howard Johnson's, a local cop car pulled out from the parking lot and followed along behind him. MJ felt a moment of anxiety, but then relaxed. He

always checked his vehicles carefully for little stuff that might attract a cop's attention--shit like broken tail lights--and he always drove the speed limit. The overnight bag with the coke was in the trunk and his gun in his waistband, hidden under his untucked shirt.

He rode along nonchalantly with both hands on the wheel, observing the cop in his rear view. The officer, in a grey hat, appeared to be sipping coffee and didn't seem too interested in MJ.

A green sign indicated the entrance to I-80 a block ahead, and MJ pulled into the right lane in anticipation of turning.

Even as he did so, he realized that he had failed to signal his turn. The cop car's flashers and siren came alive as it swerved into MJ's lane and came right up on his tail.

Fucking shit, thought MJ, jolting upright. *How could I do that?* The Interstate entrance was just ahead and MJ had a split second to decide whether to make a run for it or play innocent. But what were the chances of outrunning the police in this piece-of-shit car? Besides, he knew from past experiences that if he just played polite and stupid, he could easily talk his way out of a simple moving violation.

He pulled over, but left the engine running.

"Good evening, officer," MJ said as the cop came up to the window, wielding a huge black flashlight which he shone in MJ's face. MJ wanted to rip the light out of the guy's hands and shove it up his stupid ass, but merely said, "Did I do something wrong?"

"Don't you know you're supposed to signal before changing lanes?" the cop said, finally shining the light away. He was a meaty, balding guy with a big brown hickey someone had planted above his collar on the left side of his neck.

"Oh, I'm real sorry officer, I thought I signaled," said MJ.

"You could have caused an accident," the officer said.

Accident my ass, thought MJ, who figured this was the cop's scam for writing up tickets on out-of-towners.

The patrolman continued: "Let me see your license and registration."

Reluctantly, hoping the cop was as dumb as he looked, MJ passed the documents over. The Avis registration was legit, but his driver's license was a fake in the name of "Melvyn Purdue" that his brother-in-law Lee had ordered up from some mob friends. While the cop examined it, MJ tried to distract him by saying, "I'm real sorry to disturb your nice town. I know you police have a hard time, what with catching all the criminals and stuff."

The cop, who had apparently been expecting an argument, looked up from the license. "We keep busy," he said.

MJ kept talking: "My uncle was a police officer and I know he sure worked hard. He taught me always to respect the law."

"Where was that?" said the cop, glancing at the city on the license. "Cleveland?"

"Yeah, Cleveland. My Uncle Jack. He was on the vice squad. Say, officer, do you think you could let me off with a warning?"

"I don't know," the cop said. "Changing lanes without signaling, that could have been dangerous."

Yeah, right. "Please, sir. I've got a wife and three kids and can't afford no ticket."

"Three kids, huh?" said the cop. He looked at MJ and grinned. "Boy, you must have started early, and kept on going."

MJ forced himself to laugh. "Yeah, three kids is a lot for 25. You a dad?"

"Yeah, I've got two. But they live with my ex."

"So what do you say?" pressed MJ. "A warning?"

The cop thought a moment, then handed back the license and registration. "All right, I guess we can let this one go. But drive careful, Mr. Purdue."

"Melvyn. You can call me Melvyn," MJ said with a little wave, thinking what a sucker the cop was.

It was this smart-ass gesture that got MJ into trouble, for when he gave the wave, he accidentally dropped the paperwork in his lap.

The cop leaned in (friendly now, the not-from-his-ex-wife hickey huge on his neck) to shine his flashlight into MJ's lap to help find the papers--and jumped back, startled, when he caught sight of the Browning poking out of MJ's pants where the shirt had pulled back.

"Whoa!" the cop yelled, drawing his weapon. "Put your hands on the steering wheel where I can see them! Now!"

Shit, thought MJ, his mind racing, thinking that the three bricks in the trunk meant 40 years in prison if he were caught.

He was going to have to make a run for it.

He made a big show of raising his hands to the wheel, then quickly dropped the car in gear and floored the accelerator.

The underpowered Chevy didn't exactly peel out, but it did lurch forward fast enough to startle the officer, whose cop hat flipped to the ground as his head snapped back.

MJ kept his foot mashed on the pedal as he sped toward the turn-off for the Interstate.

A ragged hole magically appeared in the windshield to MJ's right and a glance in his rear view confirmed that the cop was in a wide-legged stance--actually shooting at him. What a yokel, shooting at him for nothing, wasn't that illegal?

MJ barreled through the red light and swerved in front of a slow-moving dump truck onto the Interstate ramp, continuing to accelerate up the ramp. In the mirror, he saw the cop frantically running to his cruiser and grabbing the hand mike through the open window--probably to call in even more cops.

The Celebrity was doing 80 now, but that seemed to be its top speed on the long highway upgrade MJ found himself on. The cop, in his more powerful vehicle, would be on him in a minute.

MJ knew he would never make it to the next exit. He wove in and out of the night time traffic, looking for an escape route. A sign flashed past, something about low-clearance, and then he found himself approaching an overpass spanning the road ahead--big steel beams solidly set on angled buttresses of concrete.

As he neared the pass, MJ realized the buttresses would make a perfect screen to hide behind.

He flashed under the bridge and swerved onto the shoulder beyond, jamming on the brakes. The little car fishtailed as MJ struggled to keep it out of the ditch.

Then he threw the car into reverse and backed up as fast as he had ever backed up before, banging the Chevy's bumper hard into the stone-and-concrete buttress of the overpass.

He turned off the car lights and slid down into his seat. It was the kind of setup the police liked to use for speed traps. He was sure that the bridge abutment would hide his car and the pursuing cop would blow on by--assuming the guy was not checking his rear view mirror.

Just then, a huge tanker trunk went rumbling past--and beyond it, in the far lane, a patrol car zoomed ahead with lights flashing and siren sounding--the hickey-necked cop from Bloomsburg.

MJ watched the car speed up the grade until it disappeared around a curve, then MJ re-joined the highway and followed along cautiously, taking care to blend with the traffic.

Here the highway was split with a grassy median down the center, and MJ moved into the left-most lane. When he found a place where the grass strip leveled out, he slowed and pulled onto the left shoulder, then crossed the strip and joined traffic in the other direction.

Wedging himself between two slow-moving trucks, he passed the exit for Bloomsburg, then traveled several miles further to get off at the next exit, U.S. 11, heading south.

When he was absolutely sure no one was following him, he pulled over next to a farm field and lit a cigarette, pissed to find his hands were shaking. To calm down, he turned on the radio and tuned through the dial searching for some music until he found a static-y Harrisburg station playing Karen Carpenter, "Close to You."

He sat listening for a minute, keeping an eye on the rear-view mirror, then snubbed his cigarette and turned the radio off.

"Close to You." That was Cassie's favorite song. She had put it on a mix tape she made for him, right before they had broken up.

He checked the map, looking for routes to Youngstown that would keep him off major highways.

Chapter Two

Lonely Pennsylvania Night

All the way across Pennsylvania, MJ couldn't stop thinking about Cassie, even though she wasn't talking to him and he hadn't seen her for a year.

She was smart, beautiful and ambitious--studying to be a nurse with the nuns at the Sacred Heart School of Nursing--and totally unlike any girl MJ had ever dated or even known. They had only slept together once, and only gone together for six short weeks. But it was the best six weeks of MJ's life, until Cassie found out that his "business" was not selling construction equipment, but running cocaine.

After that she wouldn't have anything to do with him, cutting him off and leaving a hole in his heart like a wound that wouldn't heal. MJ had always gotten over chicks before, easy, but every time he thought of Cassie his mind started churning with I-should-have-done-this and I-should-have-said-that. He didn't understand her. Even though she had grown up on the streets of Manila and had only made it to the U.S. by the skin of her teeth, she talked about returning to the Philippines to work in some government do-good program. And she had already hooked up with some lame-ass project that was feeding sandwiches to the homeless in downtown Youngstown.

Most girls he could figure out, but not Cassie. All he knew was, she didn't want *him*--"a no-account drug dealer" she called him, even though he didn't really deal and was saving up like he told her, to escape Youngstown.

His heart ached.

Shit.

He had told himself a thousand times that there were other girls, that the longing he felt when he thought of Cassie would eventually fade.

But now, in the lonely Pennsylvania night, with "Close to You" ringing in his ears, there was no use denying it.

He was in love with her.

Stupid and crazy, maybe, but he couldn't help it.

"Damn," he shouted to the empty car. He had to get her back.

He would have to swallow his pride and crawl to her, somehow try to patch things up.

But first there was the delivery, which was giving MJ a major headache. Waylay was already pissed at the delay in New Jersey, and now, taking the back roads, MJ was really going to be late. Bad things could happen if Waylay thought MJ was dicking him around, so he decided to call Promo and explain the situation. "Promo" Reule was MJ's main point of contact with Waylay's operation-- one of the inner circle that managed the actual distribution of the coke Waylay was bringing in.

He found a phone booth outside a closed gas station in Elderton and dropped in the five quarters the recording demanded.

"Hello?"

MJ recognized the voice as Promo's, but had to be careful in case the line was tapped. "It's me," he said.

"What's up?"

"I had a problem with a cop. I had to get off the Interstate."

"Is the pizza okay?"

"Yeah, but I'm going to be even later than I said. Maybe 3, 4 in the morning."

After a pause, Promo said, "He ain't going to like that. We got a guy here."

The "guy" would be a distributor, anxious for his cut. "I'll be there as fast as I can," MJ said. "But I have to be careful."

"I'll tell him," said Promo, and hung up.

MJ still had some quarters left from his roll, so he decided to call his sister, who worried herself sick about him when he was on a run.

"Hello, Peg," he said, when she picked up.

"There you are, you bastard, I've been paging you for hours."

"Oh. Sorry sis. I had the damn thing turned off. Is everything okay?"

"No it's not okay. When is anything ever okay around this crappy joint? I've been so busy."

“Yeah? Doing what?” said MJ. Regardless of when he talked to her, Peggy always complained about feeling frazzled and overwhelmed. And maybe she had cause, since she was caring for their mother Anne, who had Alzheimer’s, as well as her two kids from her marriage with Lee. She and Lee were still married but had separated the previous summer. Since then, Peggy and MJ’s younger brother Danny lived with her off-and-on, but that was another story in itself.

“What do you mean, doing what? I’ve been shopping, fixing dinner, scrubbing dishes--by hand since the dishwasher is still broke. The kids have been screaming all night and Queen Anne peed the bed again. So now I’m still doing laundry at, what?, midnight.”

“Well get some rest, sis, go to bed.”

“Yeah, go to bed, that’s exactly what I’m going to do, as soon as I finish this load. Oh, and it’s been raining for hours and there’s a wet spot on my kitchen ceiling.”

Peggy lived in the house they had grown up in, and there were always problems she wanted help with. “I’m still on the road,” MJ said. “I won’t be back ‘til morning.”

“Well what am I supposed to do? Every time I look the spot’s bigger. That’s why I wanted you to come over.”

“How bad is it?”

“What do you mean, how bad is it? How am I supposed to know that?”

“How big? One inch? Three feet?”

“Oh, maybe a foot.”

“That doesn’t sound serious. I’ll come by in the morning,” MJ said. “If it starts to drip, have Danny take a look.”

“Right, like what the hell would Danny do? He’s not even here.”

“What do you mean?”

“He left in a huff three days ago and I haven’t seen him since.”

Danny was a problem. He had started doing crack a few years earlier and had been going downhill ever since.

“Did you look for him?”

“Ha. Like I have time to go chasing Danny. He could be anywhere.”

“Damn,” MJ said. “I’m supposed to take him to rehab tomorrow, remember?” A bed had finally opened up at St. Elizabeth’s Hospital and Danny had promised to go in if MJ took him.

“Well all I know is, he’s not here,” Peggy said.

MJ was thinking that after he delivered the shipment, he would have to go hunt down his brother and bundle him off to rehab before some other crackhead got the open bed.

“You still there?” Peggy asked.

“Yeah, I’m here.”

“I’m going to sleep. I’ll page you if the ceiling gets worse.”

“Yeah, sure,” he said. His sister’s ceiling was the least of his worries right now. “And definitely page me if Danny shows up.”

Just then a recorded operator demanded that he deposit another \$1.00 for the next three minutes, so he hung up.

Chapter Three

Crack in the Smile

1. CRACK IN THE SMILE

Wearily, he climbed back into the car and headed west, feeling overwhelmed. The last time Danny had disappeared he turned up at Central State Hospital in Anchorage, Kentucky--suicidal and psychotic from coke withdrawal. MJ would have to find him, fast. On top of that, he'd have to go see Cassie in person, since she'd just hang up on him if he tried calling. His sister's ceiling was small potatoes and could wait, but nonetheless he'd also have to show up at the house, if only to keep Peggy from flying off the handle. And he still had three hours driving on the back roads of Pennsylvania before he could get the coke off his hands. It was a lot of things to be worrying about, but for now, the coke had to be his priority, unless he wanted Waylay on his ass as well.

And he sure as hell didn't want that. Waylay killed guys that fucked around with him.

Big Man Donuts was a 30s adobe-style storefront located between a motel and a bird feed store just south of Youngstown, in the suburban sprawl of Boardman, Ohio. Boardman was the home of the first Arby's, now closed, and the first strip mall, also now closed, but it still had plenty of residents left over in the surrounding cheap tract houses and enough hungry shift workers to allay any suspicions about a 24-hour donut shop. In fact, MJ had heard that after Waylay had fixed up the place to make it look respectable, he was pissed with the shop's success, since he had bought it strictly as a front for his drug business and didn't like all the people around.

On this rainy Tuesday night at 3 a.m. there were still two cars out front and a pickup truck in the side lot, but MJ pulled past the customers to the back of the building and parked in the shadows of the alley by a dumpster. Relieved to have arrived with no more problems, he sat in the car a minute, smoking a cigarette and scoping out the surroundings. Waylay's operations were the target of multiple state and local investigations and MJ wanted to make sure there were no cops around to screw up his delivery. At this point, he wanted nothing more than to hand over the bricks to Promo and get what he was owed.

The office for the shop was in the back corner, and MJ could already feel eyes on him as he opened the trunk and took out his duffel bag, the cold drizzle running down his neck. The back door opened before he even finished reaching for the knob.

"Yo, MJ," said the guy inside, who MJ recognized as Wonder, a stash house guard.

"What's up?" MJ said, a little surprised to see him since Wonder and Promo didn't get along. They called him "Wonder" after Stevie Wonder, because he was black and wore sunglasses day and night--even now, in the dim hallway.

Wonder stepped back to let MJ inside. He was a huge man, looking extra menacing tonight with what looked like a Walther semi-auto dangling from a shoulder holster. "Up against the wall," he said. "I've got to frisk you."

That was also unusual, but MJ's weapon was in the car. He put the bag at his feet and leaned against the wall. "What gives?" he said.

"Just business," said Wonder, finishing his pat down and reaching for the bag.

MJ stomped on it with his foot. "That goes to Promo."

"I got to check it."

"Check it my ass. How long have you known me?"

"Open it," said Wonder, in a tone that let MJ know he wasn't screwing around.

Reluctantly, MJ unzipped the bag, holding it as Wonder rummaged through it with his big hands, finding the bricks but pushing them aside, looking for weapons.

"Okay?" said MJ when he had had enough.

"Okay," said Wonder. "Go on in."

MJ walked the few feet to the office door and pushed it open, intent on complaining to Promo about the treatment Wonder had given him.

But sitting at the little desk was not Promo, but Waylay May himself, with a beefy-looking bald guy MJ didn't recognize leaning against a file cabinet. Wonder came in behind and closed the door.

“It’s about time,” Waylay said, looking up from his Chinese food. He was in his mid-30s, his black hair slicked back with pomade, and a form-fitting purple shirt over his thin frame.

“I ran into a little problem,” said MJ.

Waylay grunted and nodded at the overnight bag. “Let’s see what you got.”

MJ was suddenly nervous. He had never actually met Waylay before, only seen him at the Pig Iron, and he wondered where Promo was. He also didn’t like the setup--the tiny locked room, the bald-but-brawny stranger and Wonder with his sunglasses and gun.

Something was wrong, and MJ felt like he was on trial for some unidentified screwup. He hadn’t done anything, but then again he knew of guys who’d been whacked because someone *thought* they screwed up. He’d have to be very careful to make sure Waylay realized that--whatever had happened--it wasn’t from MJ’s side.

Suppressing his nervousness, MJ put the overnight bag on the desk, unzipped it, and put the three kilos on the tabletop. The bricks were white and wrapped in clear plastic and duct tape. “Like I told Promo, I ran into some trouble,” he said. “This jerkwater cop was tailing me, and I had to ditch him. That’s why I’m late.”

Waylay ignored him and turned to the bald guy, who MJ now saw wasn’t really bald, but had shaved his head like Mr. Clean. “Check it, Angel,” Waylay told him.

The bald guy ambled forward, flicked open a switchblade, and punched a hole in one of the bricks, pulling out some coke on the knife tip and dumping it on the table. “It’s been cut alright,” he said. “Just look at the shit. It’s fucking grey.”

Angel took a pinch with his fingers and tasted it, then used his blade to lay out a line, which he hoovered up with a rolled bill.

He stood up sharply and threw his bald head back, staring at the ceiling, then looked at Waylay with a goofy expression on his face. “Not bad, but cut,” he said, loudly and sloppily. “Just like I told you.”

He laid out another line, then snorted it, closing his right nostril with his forefinger. After the hit, he sucked air twice, then started gesticulating wildly. “It’s good but not what we agreed. I paid for primo, and this ain’t primo.”

“Okay, we get the message. You can wait outside.”

“I told you. Didn’t I tell you?”

Angel bent one more time toward the table, but at a signal from Waylay, Wonder grabbed his upper arm and escorted him out.

The door closed with a bang when Wonder re-entered, and Waylay leaned back and scrutinized MJ through steepled hands.

“You don’t think I had anything to do with that, do you?” said MJ. “Because I never touched that dope. Those bricks are exactly what the Fahey brothers gave me.”

“Tell me again why you were so late.”

“The Faheys, they dicked me around for an entire afternoon, said there was a delay at the airport, so it was rush hour by the time I got out of Newark, and then there was an accident on the parkway. Then like I told Promo, I got pulled over by a cop and had to take back roads.”

“Did you make any stops?”

“Just a couple hours at a motel near Bloomsburg. I was falling asleep at the wheel and had to get some rest. That’s where the cop stopped me. He put a bullet through my windshield if you don’t believe me.”

“Go look,” Waylay told Wonder.

When Wonder was gone, Waylay said. “No other stops? Like maybe in Pittsburgh?”

“Pittsburgh? Why would I stop in Pittsburgh?”

“Just answer the question.”

“Hell no I didn’t stop in Pittsburgh. I drove around Pittsburgh, not through it.”

“Did you sample any of the product along the way?” asked Waylay.

“I’m not into that shit,” said MJ. It was true. He seldom used coke anymore. The high wasn’t worth the let-down, and he didn’t like what it did to his brother.

As if reading his mind, Waylay said, “What about Danny? When was the last time you saw him?”

“What’s he got to do with it?” said MJ, annoyed. Then, remembering who he was talking to, he said, “I don’t know where Danny is. I ain’t seen him for like a week, maybe last Sunday at my sister’s house.”

“So the bricks are exactly like you got them? You haven’t touched them?”

“No,” said MJ, emphatically.

Waylay leaned back into his chair, sizing MJ up.

“Come on, Waylay, you know I’ve always played straight with you. If that coke’s been cut, it was cut when the Faheys gave it to me.”

Just then, Wonder returned. “There’s a bullet hole in the front and rear windshield, and another in the rear quarter-panel.”

Waylay looked at MJ through narrowed eyes, then sighed and opened the desk drawer. *Holy shit, he's going for a gun*, thought MJ, feeling every muscle in his body tighten as he prepared to run.

Waylay picked up on that. "Relax," he said, pulling from the drawer a brown envelope stuffed with bills. "Here you go, MJ," said Waylay. "Good work."

MJ forced himself to breath normally, trying to calm his heart and look cool. "Thanks," he said. He couldn't read Waylay's face, but it was clear to MJ that he had passed some important test. He picked up the envelope, glanced at the stack of 100s and slipped it into his pocket, knowing better than to count it in front of Waylay.

"Take a week or two off," Waylay said. "I won't need you for a while."

"Okay," said MJ.

"Everything will be all right," Waylay said. "Just chill with your family and keep your nose clean."

"Always," MJ said, wondering what the hell he was talking about.

"Send Angel back in," he told Wonder. "And get this man some donuts on the way out."

An hour and three sprinkle donuts later, MJ drove away from the Youngstown-Warren Regional Airport. The Avis guy got seriously worked up about the bullet holes, but in the end there was nothing he could do: Melvyn Purdue had taken full comprehensive to cover just such problems. So, after a fist full of paperwork, MJ picked up his van and headed downtown in search of his brother Danny.

Normally after a successful job, MJ felt relieved and happy, but tonight, despite the \$3,000 now in his pants pocket, he was just depressed. The deserted road, the yellow streetlights, the rain drizzling down--the city had never looked uglier.

MJ had grown up in Youngstown but hated it. The whole place had been going downhill on a fast shit slide ever since "Black Monday" nearly a decade before, when Youngstown Steel & Tube laid off 5,000 men in a single afternoon. The company--a hundred-year fixture of "Steeltown USA"--was a bankrupt, abandoned hulk within two years, followed quickly down the drain by U.S. Steel, Republic Steel and Youngstown Cement, along with all the little companies that had supplied the thousand odd products,

from chemical solvents to paperclips, that kept the big industries going. Ultimately, 50,000 people lost their jobs and the mass exodus began.

Overnight, Youngstown went from a busy, prosperous city to a toilet bowl of unemployment, foreclosure and bankruptcy. MJ's dad was in the first wave of workers that got canned. As a 16 year old, MJ remembered that time well: his Dad sitting around the living room for months on unemployment while his Mom berated him bitterly for not doing more to find work.

Then one night his father complained of chest pains and was dead before the ambulance could get him to the hospital.

The Shea family didn't do too good after that. His mother, always a clean freak, redoubled her efforts with Lemon Pledge. The house became spotless, but within a year of the funeral, her grip on reality began to slip, as she first began repeating stories and then started forgetting where--and finally who--she was. Peggy got married and predictably separated, having popped out two kids and successfully signed-up for public assistance. Danny boosted his first car (a two-door Eldorado that belonged to Dr. Sherman), sold pot, then coke and finally became a crackhead, tweaking around Youngstown for his next hit, his guitar slung over his shoulder like some Mexican mariachi man from an old tv Western.

And MJ after high school had a pill gig going, then started running dope from the East Coast--a "no-account drug dealer."

Screw Cassie, calling him that. What she didn't understand was that there was nothing left for a man to do in Youngstown. The factories were gone, school was for smart people, and the only jobs, if you could find one, were chump jobs paying chump change. It was like God had smiled on Youngstown for so long, his face had cracked and he shriveled up and died, leaving the residents to fend for themselves. That was why you had to be a hard ass to survive in this town.

In any case, his family was in Youngstown, and like Mom always said, family is all you got. MJ was the only one making good money, so he had to help his sister and brother out--pay the taxes on the family house and the bills for Danny's treatment.

Oh shit, MJ thought, Danny's treatment. Who knew how much that was going to cost this time? And screw Danny, too, for messing up his life and the lives of everyone around him. Danny was the reason why Waylay still didn't entirely trust him.

A few years earlier MJ, trying to help his brother out, had gotten him a gig with Promo--cutting and packaging coke and waiting on customers at the stash house on

Chaney. But that was around the time Danny's partying was getting out-of-hand, and he apparently helped himself to some of Waylay's product.

The next time Danny showed up at the stash house, a couple of Waylay's enforcers dragged him out to a parking lot behind Schwebel's Bakery and beat the crap out of him, breaking a few of his ribs and detaching one of his retinas. It was MJ who Promo had called to haul Danny's busted-up ass to the hospital--both as a favor to MJ and a warning. But Danny's bad behavior had somehow worn off on MJ, and it was months before Promo threw him any more jobs.

Danny. The last time Danny had been to rehab he had been kicked out after three days for smoking pot, and MJ wasn't optimistic that he would do any better this time. Still, his brother had promised to try it again and MJ had to get him there. This morning, April Fool's Day, MJ had a pretty good idea where to find him. He'd be with the rest of the fools in the crack house on Walnut that used to be Christ the King.

MJ headed there.

Chapter Four

Steeltown USA

MJ Shea moved silently through the nave of the church, searching for Danny among the unconscious bodies sprawled in and around the remains of the pews.

There were a pair of passed-out black girls under a plastic tarp, a white guy MJ's age wrapped in newspapers, two dudes who looked like brothers lying end-to-end on a broken pew and a dark form curled in a fetal position in the shadows of the smashed remains of the organ.

With dawn, rain was again pouring down outside and the room was cold and damp. The windows had been boarded when the church closed, but wind and crack-addict-ingenuity had loosened the plywood and busted the windows, letting in a hint of wan light, and just enough rain to leave cold puddles on the floor.

MJ stepped over an inert body and climbed over a pile of fallen plaster, heading for the organ in case the form was Danny. It wasn't. The church had only been closed three years, but already it looked like every other abandoned building in Youngstown--falling walls, dangling plumbing, ripped-wiring--with added drug-den touches like scattered crack vials, McDonald's wrappers, plastic lighters, piss jars, cigarette butts, foil, candles, beer cans and a package of cornstarch for burn.

"Hey, MJ," came a voice from behind. Startled, MJ whirled, but it was only Carnival Jane, an emaciated runt of a girl, maybe 17, the youngest sister of Cherise Longman from the Rayen School.

"Carnival," MJ said. "Don't sneak up on me like that."

"I wasn't sneaking," she said. "I was trying to sleep over there and I saw you come in." She pointed to a makeshift bed made of crushed cardboard and torn fragments of carpets. "Got anything for me?"

"Better ask Danny," MJ said sourly.

She looked at MJ, irritated, then her first idea of the day hit her and she looked around, her eyes suddenly brighter. "Where is he?"

"That's what I was gonna ask you."

"He's not with you?"

"Does it look like he's with me? When's the last time you saw him?"

She furrowed her brow and stared at him, but her crack-addled brain was already losing the thread of the conversation.

"Danny?" he reminded her. "Have you seen Danny?"

"Oh, yeah, Danny. I seen him."

"You did? Where?"

A sly look crossed her face. "Got any gravel?"

"You're too young for gravel. Does Cherise know you're here?"

"Cherise don't care," she said in disgust. "She's the one kicked me out."

That didn't surprise MJ since Peggy had kicked Danny out a half-dozen times.

MJ sighed. "I might have something for you," he said. "If you can tell me where my brother is."

"We was together over at Harrison. He was playing his guitar."

"When was this? Last night?"

"What is today? Sunday?"

"Tuesday."

She looked confused. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. When were you with Danny at the field?"

"That was last night," she said. "No, wait, that was... Sunday, I think. Under the bleachers where he played that song."

Worthless. It was a shame too because if she wasn't so messed up she would have been a good looking chick. She had nice tight little titties but her hair was in knots and her teeth already starting to turn crack-addict yellow.

"Whatcha got for me, MJ?" she asked. "Gravel?"

"Go away," MJ said, surveying the room to see if there were any bodies he missed.

She grabbed him by his arm. "You said you'd give me something."

"If you knew where Danny was."

"But I told you, he was here."

"Here?"

"Well, there, in that there room," she said, pointing to a door off the altar.

"When was this?"

"Last night. We came in when the storm started."

MJ climbed a few steps to the level of the altar and made his way for the door. Inside was a smaller room, black as night, with no window.

"Right there," said Carnival, pointing into the shadows. "We did a pipe together."

MJ's eyes adjusted as he slowly stepped into the room. More vials, more foil, more cigarette butts but no Danny or anyone else.

He could have been here. Or maybe not. MJ didn't know whether Carnival had actually seen him or if she was just handing him a line of crackhead bullshit. "You sure he was here?"

"I told you, yeah, last night. We was together."

"What time?"

"Um, uh, I don't know. Midnight? One?"

"Where did he go?"

"Some stupid place. I can't remember."

"Come on, Carnival. Try to think."

"I can't remember. I went out for a crap and when I came back, he was gone."

She sounded real but how the hell did he know? "You're not kidding me?" MJ said.

"No, I swear, he was here. Last night. I swear on a stack of bibles."

MJ snorted, but decided she was probably telling the truth. Wherever Danny was, he wasn't here.

"Come on, MJ, you promised," whined the girl.

Her whining set him on edge but he was done here. He had some pot and a few tweeners of coke under the floormat, left over from Rhonda's party. Maybe he'd do a joint with Carnival. She'd be pretty if she cleaned up.

"Come on," he said. "My van's in the alley. Let's see what I got."

Her eyes lit up in excitement. "Danny," she said. "He always says good things about you, MJ."

Still worried about his brother, MJ led Carnival back over the bodies and through the side door of the church toward his van. With crack rolling over the city like some monster flood of the Mahoning River, beds were limited at St. Elizabeth's, and six more weeks would be wasted if he didn't get Danny into rehab today.

The alley was deserted. Carnival followed him like an eager puppy to the van, which was parked next to a mound of garbage and broken furniture.

MJ paused with the key in the lock. "Was Danny dealing? Did he have a lot of shit on him last night?"

"No. What we smoked, that was the last of his stuff." Her eyes flicked back and forth between MJ's face and the van door, waiting for the surprise inside.

He reached under the floor mat for one of the tweeners, but held it in his hand instead of giving it to her.

"You sure you can't remember where he was going?"

"He went to meet somebody."

"Who?"

"I don't know!" said the girl, wanting her reward.

The rain made her matted hair stick together into greasy strands. In the morning light, her eyes looked hollow and MJ suddenly wanted to be rid of her.

"Here," he said. "Don't snort it all at once." He was joking her because he knew she would go back into the church to turn the coke into smokable crack.

The bag disappeared into her pocket in a quick fluid motion. "Thanks," she said. "Can I get another for later?"

"No," said MJ, climbing into the van.

She grabbed the door. "Come on, MJ. I can pay you tonight."

He should have known better than to give samples to a crackhead. "I said no. Now let go my door handle unless you want to lose your arm."

MJ put the van into gear and started off down the alley, Run-D.M.C. blaring from a tape in the cassette player. In his rear view mirror, Carnival receded, looking wet and alone. It made him wonder if Danny was standing somewhere in the rain with the same forlorn look.

He stopped the van and honked the horn. Carnival came running up, her fine tits showing against her wet shirt.

"You have some place to go, get cleaned up and out of the rain?"

She looked disappointed. "Yeah, I got a place."

It sounded like she was lying. "Do you need a ride?"

"I don't mind the rain," she said. "Can I get another bag?"

He should have known. "Go the fuck home," MJ said. "Cherise will be wanting you."

Exhausted by all the drama, MJ rolled up the window and pulled away. Carnival's head was totally screwed up but she had given him an idea. Danny got his product from a guy named Skeevy Jones, over on the South Side. If Danny was out of crack like Carnival said, he was probably heading to Skeevy's right now.

MJ turned the van onto Rayen. He'd hang out until Skeevy opened for business, then trick Danny into the van and whisk him to St. Elizabeth's.

At the old library, he turned south on Wick and headed toward the Market Street bridge, which would take him across the river towards the South Side. The rain kept falling from the grey sky, and the trees along the route--full-grown maples that were planted 50 years back, when Youngstown had a future--shed sodden green leaves onto the black pavement.

MJ cursed as he approached the bridge. Traffic was snarled at the foot of the ramp, and beyond, blurry in the falling rain, tow trucks and ambulances were scattered across the bridge deck. A cop in a yellow safety vest waved traffic along a waning string of flares into a single lane.

On the bridge, a big Pepsi truck had skidded across the divider and smacked a little Pontiac head on, crumpling the car's front end and shoving it against the far railing almost into the river.

The truck driver, uninjured, was standing with some cops, but the occupant of the Sunbird wasn't so lucky. Firemen were still blasting water on the flames which engulfed the vehicle. As he drove by, MJ caught a glimpse of the dead driver's blackened face. It looked like a potato charred in a campfire.

MJ mentally shrugged and turned his attention back to the traffic. There were all kinds of fucked up ways to die in Youngstown, so what difference did it make? Everyone was going to die. That's why life didn't mean crap. Grab what you can, while you can--that was his philosophy.

The only thing, thought MJ, if I was the guy in the Pontiac, I'd damn well want to take the bastard in the truck out with me. MJ tried to imagine how the car driver could have made that happen--maybe speeding up and smashing the truck even harder, or shooting the trucker at the last second before the vehicles collided. It just wasn't fair that the truck driver was hanging around with a cigarette in his mouth while the car driver--probably some old schmo left over from the last round of layoffs--was burnt-up dead.

Then MJ caught himself and laughed. *Just wasn't fair*--what a fucking joke. That was something Cassie would say. Of course it wasn't fair, only an idiot would think that life

should be fair. That was another thing about Cassie that he didn't understand. She hated the nuns and thought Catholics were full of shit, but still believed in God. How stupid was that? When MJ told her the only God he believed in was himself, she just shook her head.

Finally off the bridge, MJ took a side street to get out of the traffic and headed toward Skeevy's corner. He was tired of screwing around. Danny and his stupid guitar were going into St. Elizabeth's as soon as he saw him.

But MJ only got another block before his beeper went off. He looked at the number on the display: Peggy. Danny must have showed up. He'd have to find a phone and call her, find out what was going on.

MJ pulled into a gas station lot and found the pay phone by the air machine. It was an outdoor phone in a box on a post and MJ didn't have an umbrella.

Peggy picked up on the first ring. "MJ," she said as soon as she heard his voice. "You've got to get over here right away."

He knew it. Danny pulled crap like this all the time--going off on his own and then coming back, high and causing trouble.

"What's he doing now?"

"Who?"

"Danny. Isn't that why you paged me?"

"Hell no," she said. "I paged you because the kitchen ceiling's caving in and I've got water everywhere."

MJ couldn't believe it. Peggy was always getting hysterical over nothing, and he had other things to do. "Where's it dripping?" he asked.

"Dripping?" Peggy screamed. "I didn't say it was dripping. You never listen to me. A pipe burst. Water's coming out the ceiling like a fire hose and it's ruining the table, the floor, *every fucking thing.*"

"Peggy, I've got to find Danny. Just turn the valve off in the basement."

"It don't work. *Nothing works in this house!*" she screamed. "It's falling *apart!* I swear, if you don't get over here right away, I'm walking out and letting the whole damned kitchen float out the door!"

"Okay, okay," he said. When his sister started with the screams and the threats, he knew she'd make him miserable for weeks if he didn't help. It was early yet. He could run by and turn the valve off, and still catch Danny at Skeevy's. "I'm on my way now."

"Hurry," his sister said. And hung up.

MJ had to laugh. Peggy was a pain in the ass but that's what made her Peggy. If it wasn't for her, their mom would be in a nursing home and Danny permanently on the streets.

Twenty minutes later MJ was back at the house on Carlton, the familiar two-story wood frame rectangle where he grew up. Since the mill closings, Smoky Hollow wasn't what it used to be. When MJ was little, it had been a dowdy-but-respectable neighborhood of white clapboard homes on narrow lots, where men walked to the mill to work while the kids played on the brick street. Now, half the houses had for-sale signs leaning out front, and the other half were either owned by the bank outright or burnt to the foundations by Italian lightning, the local nickname for insurance arson.

Peggy talked frequently about doing some Italian lightning of her own, but everyone knew she was bullshitting since the house was her life. The home on Carlton had been bought by their parents in 1944 and was fully paid for, if showing its age. The white paint was gray and peeling and the roof shingles were mottled with makeshift patches. The block retaining wall out front had missing cinder blocks where roots from an old maple tree had pushed them out. Tall weeds choked the lawn, and the sidewalk was a soup of muddy puddles from the rain.

Still, it was a house, free to live in except for property taxes and insurance. MJ dutifully paid property taxes at the assessor's office twice a year since Peggy was taking care of their senile mother. Peggy herself took care of the insurance, unwilling to trust anyone else with what she saw as an indispensable safeguard.

He pulled into the drive behind Peggy's dented '78 Mercury Zephyr and climbed the stairs to the entry, steeling himself to deal with his sister, who tended towards hysteria whenever it came to problems affecting the house.

The front door was open and the hallway was sopping wet--literally awash with water. The house stank, as usual, of cats. His mother, sitting in the recliner in the living room, looked up from *Captain Penny* and then back at the tv screen, sunken in her Alzheimer's daydream.

"Hi Mom," said MJ, out of habit since there was seldom any sign of recognition in his mother's face.

But Shannon and Lee Jr., lying together on the sofa, perked up as he entered. They were five and six now, getting big. "Uncle Mike," they cried, running over and grabbing his legs.

"Hey, kids, not today, okay?"

"There's water," said Lee Jr., pointing to the wet towels and a rag throw-rug crumpled in the hall at the kitchen entrance.

"I can see there's water," said MJ, plopping the kids back on the sofa. Their clothes were dirty and damp, and Shannon had a scratch across her forehead--mercuriochromed but not bandaged in Peggy's usual half-ass way.

MJ made his way through the hallway puddles to the kitchen and saw immediately that his sister hadn't been exaggerating the damage. A four-foot section of the ceiling above the breakfast bar had come down where the pipe in the upstairs bathroom had burst, and water sprayed in multiple streams through the broken lathe down over the blue Formica of the breakfast bar. Plaster and chunks of horsehair insulation littered the countertop, and two of the wood cabinet doors were for some reason torn off their hinges.

Peggy was dumping a bucket of water into the sink, a cigarette dangling from the corner of her mouth. Her reddish-brown hair was soaked and her glasses were sliding down her wet face. "Could you have got here any slower?" she said as MJ appeared in the doorway.

"For Christ's sake, Peggy, I told you to turn off the valve."

"And I told you it's stuck. You think I'm an idiot?"

MJ shook his head in annoyance and headed for the basement, tripping over a bucket along the way. He tugged the pull cord on the overhead light bulb. The shut-off valve was in the far corner of the basement, behind the furnace, where the water main came in from the street.

He tried to turn the rusted wheel handle but it was locked in place.

"See? I told you," said Peggy, who had followed him down; the two kids, attracted by the excitement, took places on the stairs. "It don't turn."

"It's just corroded," said MJ.

"Everything's corroded," said Peggy, wrapping her arms around her chest. "The whole house is corroded. We got pipes bursting, no pressure in the shower, and I got to reach into the toilet tank to make it flush."

MJ ignored her bitching and went to his old man's workbench, basically untouched since his Dad's death almost a decade earlier. The tools were organized and neat, lined up like in a store (unlike MJ's tools, which were thrown together in a metal box). The yellow,

dented can of Liquid Wrench was still on the shelf with the old cans of paint and jars of odd nails, and the red pipe wrench hung by its handle in the slot above the anvil.

At the shut-off valve, he squirted some penetrating oil onto the stem, banged it a few times with the wrench, then adjusted the teeth around the valve handle and turned. The valve resisted momentarily, then freed. He twisted it, *righty-tighty* like his Dad had taught him, to shut off the flow of water.

"There," he said. "It will stop now."

"Oh, like I'm the water meter man? I'm supposed to know how to fix a valve?"

"Peggy, I didn't say that."

She turned in a huff and marched up the steps, the kids following. MJ was irritated. While he couldn't blame Peggy for feeling frustrated, she had no cause to criticize him after he dropped everything to come to solve her plumbing problem. Next time she could call a plumber.

He put the tools back where he had found them and checked his watch. It was almost 9:30, but he might still be able to catch Danny at Skeyvy's if he hurried.

Chapter Five

What Happened to Danny

Upstairs in the kitchen, the leak had stopped, though water still dripped from the sodden ceiling. The floor was a mess of ruined pantry items, broken crockery and soggy *Vindicator* newspapers. Peggy was mopping the floor with a ragged mop head, stabbing it into puddles, sobbing and carrying on a conversation with the mop end:

"You guys never listen to me. You treat me like your maid and your cook. You act like this house just takes care of itself--you and Lee and, and Danny. And it doesn't!"

"Peggy..."

"And then there's Queen Anne sitting in there, waiting for her meals and her medicines and her enemas! And Lee, when we separated he promised he'd lend a hand, at least with the kids, but how often do I see him? If I don't get some help around here I swear I'm going to go insane!"

"Peggy, I have to go find Danny."

"Danny, don't talk about Danny, he's another one, burning down my microwave with his crack fire. I should have kicked him out a long time ago, everyone would have been a lot happier."

"We have to get him admitted to St. Elizabeth's today, remember? Otherwise we're going to have to wait another six weeks."

"And what am I supposed to do in the meantime, with no water in the house? I can't use the toilet, or wash dishes, or even get the kids a glass of water."

"You're going to have to call a plumber, Peg." He peeled two \$100 bills from the wad he got from Waylay. "Here. If it's more than this, let me know."

Just then, the doorbell rang. Peggy, already stressed from the dripping ceiling, anxiously peered out the kitchen window.

“Who is it?” MJ asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Just a black car.”

Since the mill shutdowns, the neighborhood was plagued with out-of-work geezers trying to sell brushes, awnings, encyclopedias and siding.

The doorbell rang again, but Peggy didn’t move.

“Aren’t you going to get it?” asked MJ.

She pulled herself away from the window and smoothed her dress. “Stay here, okay?”

“I’ve got to go.”

“No. I might need you. Can’t you wait one more fucking minute?”

The salesman must really be giving her shit. He followed her into the hallway and hung back while she cracked the door. The guy outside wore thick black glasses but otherwise was your typical salesman type--wrinkled suit, white shirt, red tie. Over the blare of the tv, MJ couldn’t hear what the man was saying, but Peggy was holding her own and he didn’t seem to be any threat. MJ headed for the back door to make his escape.

“MJ!” came his sister’s voice sharply, and he turned to find the door wide open and Peggy sinking to her knees on the hardwood floor, one hand on the wall to support herself.

The guy with the glasses bent down to help her but MJ screamed, “Don’t touch her!” and shoved him out of the way.

His sister was kneeling on all fours on the floor now, her head hanging down. She was breathing in great heaves, like an exhausted runner.

MJ knelt beside her. “What’s wrong, sis?” MJ said, kneeling down beside her, thinking she was having a heart attack. The kids, on the couch, were frozen in fear.

When she finally raised her head, he saw that she was crying. “Danny,” she gasped. “Danny’s dead.”

“What?” MJ said, believing he had mis-heard.

“He’s dead, he’s dead!” she moaned.

MJ looked up sharply at the man in the door, realizing with a shock that he wasn’t a salesman in a ruffled suit but some sort of cop.

“Is it true?” he asked.

The cop with the glasses nodded--just the slightest gesture--but MJ felt like he had been punched in the gut. His head swam and, if he hadn’t been holding up his sister, he might have passed out himself.

Peggy felt him wobbling. "Oh, Mike," she said, looking at him in anguish before burying her head on his shoulder to sob.

He held her, wanting to say it would be okay but knowing in his heart it wouldn't. Danny dead. Nothing would fix that.

The kids came over and also threw their arms around Peggy, prompting a new outburst of crying.

"What's wrong, Uncle Mike?" asked Lee Jr.

MJ helped Peggy to her feet. "Take the kids upstairs," he told her.

"I, uh, have to ask you guys a few questions," said the man with the glasses.

"Peggy--upstairs," MJ commanded.

She gave him a look of gratitude and climbed the steps, stifling sobs and dragging the kids with her.

He turned to the guy in the doorway, an ember of anger burning in his gut. "Who the hell are you?"

The man pulled out a badge. "Detective Felton with the YPD."

The cop looked vaguely familiar but MJ couldn't place him.

"You're Michael Shea, right?" the cop said. "I remember you. You spat on my partner at your brother's arraignment."

MJ remembered now. He was the guy that worked with Proferes, the slime who came to arrest Danny on possession charges when he was in the hospital. After the charges were dismissed at the arraignment, MJ had launched a hocker onto Proferes' nice shiny shoes to let him know what he thought.

"What happened to Danny?" MJ demanded.

The cop threw a look at MJ's mom, who was watching them anxiously but without comprehension from the couch in front of the tv.

MJ was pretty sure she didn't understand what was going on, but he sighed and motioned Felton to the landing outside. The rain had lessened to a fine sprinkle. He left the door ajar and turned to the cop. "I'll tell her later. Now what happened?"

"I'm not going to sugar-coat it. Your brother was murdered. Shot in the back of the head, then dumped in some weeds off Rayen."

MJ leaned his shoulder against the wall to steady himself, feeling the ember of anger flare up. "Which one of you cops killed him?" he said.

"Get serious," said Felton. "This was drugs."

Drugs. Of course. Stupid dumbass Danny, trying to get a score. The only question was...

"Who did it?"

"We're working on it," said Felton. "That's why I'm here. When was the last time you saw your brother?"

"Me? Sunday, I think. He was supposed to go into rehab."

"What about Margaret?"

Only a cop would call Peggy "Margaret."

"I don't know," MJ said. "Last week sometime."

"He lived with her?"

"Off and on."

"I'm going to need to talk to her."

"When she settles down, okay? Now I got my own questions, like, what are you guys doing to find out who did this?"

"Like I said, we're investigating."

"You said he was shot on Rayen. That's a busy street. Someone must have seen it go down."

"No, his body was on a side street, Watt. Pretty deserted but we're canvassing the area."

"You're *canvassing* the area. What the hell does that mean?"

"It's not like on tv. These things take time. Unless you know who did it."

"Would I be standing here if I knew who did it?" MJ said.

"Calm down," Felton said.

"It's my fucking brother, calm down! Whoever did it, they're going to pay. You saw my sister."

"I know you're upset but let's do this the right way. Would your brother want you to go to prison getting justice for him?"

MJ took a deep breath. "Where is he now?" he finally said. "The morgue?"

Felton hesitated. "He hasn't been transported yet," he said.

MJ felt the anger flare up anew. "You mean he's still lying out in the fucking street?"

"Like I said, we're investigating. The body will be transported as soon as we've finished. You can meet us later at the coroner's to identify him."

"I can identify him right now," MJ said. "Watt and Rayen, you said?"

"We don't allow that."

"That's my brother," MJ said. "I don't give a crap what you allow."

He clicked the front door shut and pushed passed Felton to the sidewalk, leaving the cop alone on the porch. If Danny was dead on the street, MJ wanted to see with his own eyes.

A few minutes later, MJ was turning onto Rayen, driving too fast and unable to shake his head clear of the anger he was feeling. The rain had filtered down to a cold mist that drifted from an indistinct sky, making everything wet and grey.

On the one hand, it was hardly a surprise that Danny had gotten himself clipped. As a confirmed crackhead he was in all kinds of scrapes, from burglaries to shoot-outs to accidents like the fire in Peggy's kitchen. He was on the street at all hours of the day and night, had been beaten and robbed more than once, and he hung around with other crackheads who thought and acted just like he did. He had even almost killed himself once with some bad dope, ending up unconscious in the hospital for three days. He *would* have been dead that time if Peggy hadn't come home to find him lying on the floor of the upstairs bathroom.

On the other hand, what the hell? Murdered a mile from the house on the day he was supposed to go into rehab? Danny had a lot of problems but he was smart. It wouldn't be easy to trap him. He was a beautiful human being. He could play anything on his guitar, from flamenco to Van Halen to soulful songs he wrote himself and which chicks dug enough to sleep with him when he turned it on. MJ had seen him in action, on the nights Danny would play at The Elbow Room, a fancy bar downtown by the courthouse.

Danny dead didn't make any sense. Whoever did it had to get what was coming to them, and quick.

MJ would have to be careful with the cops but he had to find out what they knew.

As he approached the bend where the street turned toward the river, MJ saw a cop car and an ambulance behind a line of orange cones which blocked off a small street on the left. MJ slowed and passed the scene, scoping it out more-or-less from habit. Then, around the bend, he made a U-turn and came back to park against the curb behind the yellow police tape strung between a traffic cone and a tree.

Watt Street was little more than a strip of asphalt running parallel up through some scrubby trees to merge with Rayen. A couple of fireman in lime green vests stood near the open back of the ambulance, chatting as if they were at a fish fry. The dickhead cop Proferes was there, Felton's partner. He wore a grey suit covered by a tan rain coat and was talking with a uniformed cop nearby, pointing to some trash in the street.

The trash, MJ realized, was Danny's Cincinnati Reds baseball cap--upside down and crushed. Nearby, toward the edge of Rayen on the wet pavement, was a smashed beer can, with a numbered marker beside it like the kind they gave you at Frisch's Big Boy. Now MJ noticed other markers--near a cigarette butt, beside a trashed umbrella, at a scorched tire mark on the wet road..

And to his right, on the weedy verge of the wood, lay a shape under a yellow plastic tarp. MJ stared at it uncomprehendingly for a moment, until he saw the bloody hand protruding into the weeds at the near end.

"Danny," MJ said, aloud to himself, somehow still not really believing his brother was dead but knowing in his gut that all the evidence he would ever need was right there, under that tarp.

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