

“Ray got to stop messing with these crazy ass people,” Spence whispered to himself, drumming the steering wheel with his thick fingers. He glanced into the rear-view mirror to see if his passenger had heard him. Ray should have known better. No matter how much money they got, crazy was still crazy and crazy’ll get you caught up in shit you can’t get out of.

The red light lasted just short of forever. The longer he sat still, the more nervous Spence became about the situation. He was done with the business, all of it, and he planned to tell Ray soon as he got away from the killer in the back seat and got his ass back to Tapoka.

Spence knew he didn’t like this job even before he met the dude. It started yesterday, back in Tapoka. Ray told him he had work for him. Run some new girl of his down to Miami and leave her there. “What we even going down there for?” Spence had asked him. “All the business in Orlando and I got to drive this one chick all the way down to Miami?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Ray said. Then he told Spence where to take her. The address was on Northwest 13th Avenue, no more than two blocks past the Liberty Square projects. Spence winced as soon as Ray said it. He had bad history in the Pork and Beans. Spence didn’t have too many enemies, but three of the worst lived right there. At least one would shoot him on sight, and he knew this because she had done it once already. And that’s the one that used to love him. Spence shook his head and wondered if his boss was trying to get him killed.

“Ray,” Spence had asked, “What we taking one girl down there to the ass end of Liberty City for? It don’t make sense.”

“I got a customer,” Ray said. When Spence asked him what kind of customer, Ray threw a strap of hundred-dollar bills in his face. The bills were all crisp, virgin money, and couldn’t have been a penny under ten thousand dollars. Ray asked if there were any more questions.

Frank

So Spence got the woman, and started on his way. She was a pretty young thing, but a mess. Barely conscious, she mumble and drooled her way through their introduction. He had to carry her from the house and lay her out in the back seat. Ray laughed at Spence when, for modesty's sake, he pulled the edge of the woozy girl's short yellow dress down enough to cover her matching underwear. "You know you want to look," he said.

Ray told Spence her name, but Spence forgot it immediately. Pretty Young Thing snored in the back seat of the Impala while the two men talked. Ray said she would probably be knocked out the whole time. Right there, Spence knew he should have fished the thick stack of bills out of his pocket, handed it over and taken his ass back home where he came from. By next week he could have a job with his uncle over in Tampa, loading trucks at the warehouse. The money wasn't much, and it tore up your back, but at least it didn't leave a bad taste in your mouth.

"Man, what are you scared for?" Ray asked. "You scared of money?" Spence just shook his head, turned the engine and pulled out of the driveway.

All the way down route 27, he kept looking over his shoulder at his sleeping passenger. The last thing he wanted was to find her puking all over the back seat. Or even worse, he feared that he would look back and find Pretty Young Thing seizing up or dead of an overdose on the highway. Try explaining that to a nosy state trooper.

Spence again weighed his career options. Killing his back every day for a touch over minimum wage, or driving down the road with a spaced-out whore in the back seat and a roll of hundreds so thick it barely fit in his pocket. He ran his hand over the tight bulge of hard cash in

his pocket, eased off the gas a little so that he was only just over the speed limit, and focused on covering the 160 miles to Miami. She never stirred.

Two and a half hours later, he pulled into the parking lot. This part of the street was mostly empty lots, boarded up buildings, just past the blocks of projects that looked more like prisons than homes. Spence passed the faded turquoise and coral buildings of the Pork and Beans with his head down and his hat low over his brow.

The place was a rundown one-story motel. If not for the neon sign and the one other car in the lot, it could have passed for an abandoned building. The place had at one time been orange. Now the paint was mostly a peeling grey color that reminded Spence of mold. He parked the car in front of room number twelve, just like Ray had told him to.

The key was right under the doormat, like Ray had said it would be. He opened the door. The room was sour, and smelled like the windows had never been opened since the day the place had been built. Everything inside the room was as dingy and faded as everything outside.

Spence tried shaking the girl's shoulder, but she did little more than stir for a second and go back to sleep. He was going to have to lug her into the room. She was light enough to carry but heavy enough to have his arms burning from the effort. It was only when he set her down on the bed that he noticed the clear plastic tarp covering the stained bedsheets. More plastic was on the floor, surrounding the bed.

Her head fell back off the edge of the bed, and her mouth hung open just for a second before she snapped her head back upright, fighting the fog of whatever dope she was on. Spence had never seen the girl before today. It was a shame. Pretty Young Thing was fine, even with the thin line of spit that trailed from the corner of her mouth, but he could tell she was young.

Maybe eighteen. Maybe. He guessed at her ancestry. Her face was a lighter shade of brown than his own, but her features, her nose, lips, the spacing of her eyes seemed different, exotic somehow. Her hair was long and shiny black. Maybe Hispanic or Asian, and Black.

The way she curled up on the bed reminded Spence that she was closer to being a girl than a woman by a long shot. He didn't feel comfortable with it, but he didn't exactly feel guilty either. It was a shame, a young girl like that getting caught up in the business and thrown into the deep end right off the bat. But what business of his was it if some street chick decides she wants to be a whore? Everybody who knows Ray knows what he does. Girls don't go to work for him to be no secretary.

She stirred when Spence turned to leave, and he found himself shushing her like a parent willing a baby back to sleep, even patting her back lightly in unison with the sound. Suddenly embarrassed by the action, Spence jerked his hand back, and watched her for a minute. She moaned, rolled over to her other side, snorted softly. Then she was asleep again. If anything, he felt sorry for her. Poor thing couldn't have known all of what she was getting into. It's a crazy world full of crazy people.

Spence did like he had been told, didn't touch a thing, and locked the door before he left.

The dude was the next stop Ray had told Spence to make. Spence didn't know his name. What you need that for? Ray had said. Pick him up at the Four Seasons Downtown. You'll know him when you see him.

Ray was right. Dude was money. The cut of his suit was sharp, probably cost more than the Chevy that they were riding in. It wasn't flashy or bright, but precise. Brand new and tailor made. Spence felt a little embarrassed for the second time, this time because he was sure that his

charge would have expected a Rolls or maybe a Maybach to take him to his little hood rendezvous. Rich people were crazy too, half the time.

Spence thought about the plastic sheets and laughed. It all came together now. Dude was one of those real kinky old money Orlando millionaires. Probably was Walt Disney's great-great grandson or something. Spence guessed he was into that real nasty stuff Ray had told him about. The big money types were always the freakiest. Hey, who was he to judge? Rich man wanna go to some ghetto dump and be some chick's personal port-a-potty, what business was it of his? And pay a boatload to do it? If Spence was getting ten thousand Ray had to be getting fifty at least. It was a crazy world, alright. Working in this line of business you saw it all.

Dude didn't say much. Spence said the code words that Ray told him to tell the guy, and Dude said the rest back to him. Conversation over. Spence watched him through the rear-view mirror. Even with the expensive sunglasses on, Spence could feel his passenger staring at him. Spence didn't speak for ten minutes, until they were stopped at a light. He looked back in the mirror again. Dude was still staring at him. He was holding a black leather bag in his lap like it held the crown jewels or something. Spence wondered what was in there.

That was his problem; always had been. Greedy. Ten thousand dollars sitting in his pocket and he was scheming on what might be in the bag. "I dropped your company off at the room, Boss Man. She fine, too." He started to make a sound like a farmer calling hogs to the pen. But then Dude took off the sunglasses and the sound died in Spence's throat so quickly he had to cough.

Spence had always heard that the eyes were the window to the soul. As far as he knew, that was right. You just watch people, make them look at you, and you know what you are

working with. You look a punk in the eyes and he ain't got to say a word to you. You know he's scared and you know you've got him right there. A killer was the same way. You look a killer, a stone-cold killer, in the eyes and you know it -right there- that you best not fuck with him. The killer in the back seat didn't say a word. Neither did Spence.

Spence had never killed anybody with his own hands. It was not his thing. He had been there when stuff happened; once he helped Ray bury a bad situation in a spot deep in the woods nobody would ever find. Even that left him doubled over next to a tree, heaving his dinner into the dirt while Ray laughed at him. But taking people's lives himself, was something he just could not do. Maybe if they were trying to kill him first. Maybe.

But Ray had some people that could. Real killers. Spence had seen them at work. Every one of them got a look, when they got into it, something in their eyes that shook him. The windows to their souls kind of glazed over and went to a cold place that Spence would just as soon never go. He couldn't understand anybody that could laugh and joke with their hands caked with another man's blood.

The eyes reflected at Spence in the rear-view mirror had that same murderous glint.

Plastic sheets. Even on the floor. Spence tried to swallow the dry lump in his throat and he knew right then that nobody was going to see Pretty Young Thing ever again. The lump stayed lodged there and tickled until he had to clear his throat loudly.

And that was also when he knew that he was retiring from the game. This kind of hustle, and all the dirt that came with it, was no good for him. A lifetime busting his back in the warehouse had to be better than this. A backache, he could manage. Crazy could get you killed.

At the next stoplight, Spence considered just opening the door and running. Forget all this mess and go back home. But he knew that if Dude didn't put a bullet in his head, Ray would. Tapoka was a small place, and if he couldn't go back to Tapoka, where else was he gonna go? Tampa wasn't far enough to get away from Ray. Who did he know anywhere else? So, he drummed his fingers nervously on the steering wheel, and kept driving.

At the motel, Spence parked the car in front of the room and wordlessly handed the key back to his passenger. He hoped that Dude didn't notice that his hands were shaking. The rich stranger in the grey suit that probably cost more than all the money in his pocket got out of the car without saying a word. He walked to the driver side window and bent down into the open space. He put his face in so close that Spence could smell his cologne. He leaned back as far as he could into the headrest. Dude stared silently at Spence and Spence tried to look anywhere else. Then he smiled faintly, and spoke in a voice only slightly louder than a whisper:

“What's your name?”

Spence told him.

“Spence, then. Don't come in the room unless I tell you to. I'll be back out in one hour exactly. If there is trouble, take care of it. Understand?”

Spence didn't say anything but nodded his head that he was listening.

The stranger smiled again. “What's with the sour look, Spence? You don't like making money? You like what Ray gave you, wait until you take me back to the hotel. I appreciate good service.”

“What you gonna do to her?” The words came out as a whisper and Spence knew he should have stayed quiet. That was his other problem. Always being nosy. Greedy and nosy, since childhood. He had always been told both habits could get him killed.

Dude never stopped that half smile. “You are paid to sit your ass in this car and mind your business. Your business is out here. Besides,” Dude said, standing and tucking the dark leather case under his arm. “I can promise you, I know what I’m doing. I’m an artist when it comes to women.”

Spence watched him button his jacket and then walk to the motel room door. Dude looked around cautiously, and then unlocked it. He opened it just enough to go in, and then quickly shut the door behind him.

At first Spence had the radio off, but somehow the five minutes that he sat in silence made him anxious. He kept waiting for something to happen, like a kid squeezing an over-inflated balloon. When he couldn’t stand waiting for the pop any longer, he fumbled with the keys, turning the ignition to play the radio without the engine running.

Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad, he thought. Maybe the guy was just a freak after all. He bragged about being an artist with the ladies. Why did so many of Ray’s customers do that? Brag that they could do this, do that, make a woman beg for them. If they were so talented, then why were they paying for what everyone else gets for free? Spence shrugged and tried to focus on the song playing on the radio.

He had tuned into the station mid-song, and it took a minute for him to make out which song it was. He tried to catch the rhythm of the song, a fast bass-heavy cut that stopped and stuttered in its cadence. Then, in the split-second spaces between beats he thought he heard a

squeaking sound; rhythmic. Then a thudding started, over and over. A steady thudding that could only have been the bass, the bass that had the windows shaking and caused the streetlights to dance in the rearview mirror. It was just the radio, right? Spence asked himself. He was damn sure not going to turn the radio down to find out. Hell, no. Not his business. What was going on in that room was not his fault. He didn't tell Pretty Young Thing to fall into this line of work. Any blame would be sorted out between Jesus, Ray and Dude on the other side of that motel door. Ray drummed his fingertips so hard on the steering wheel that they hurt.

The balloon pop that he was waiting for came just as the last bars of the song ended. In that small silence, the two seconds between the end of the song and a car rims commercial, there was a scream. A man screaming. A heartbeat later something inside the room was flung into the motel door so hard that the door heave outward for a second. The hinges and doorframe held, but the door was slightly askew. Spence could hear noise, things breaking inside the room. The motel door jerked open, and Dude stuck his head out. It was splattered with blood.

“Spence! Come get this bitch!”

Everything but the money in his pocket said to turn the key, hit the gas and get out. But Spence did as he was told, heaved himself out of the car and reached the motel door in three steps. Inside the room, Dude quickly slammed the door behind him. He wasn't in the suit anymore. Now he was in some sort of overalls, white, like a painter would wear. From the waist-up, he was smeared.

She was on the bed.

Spence backed up into the closed door behind him. The body was poured over in what for a second he honestly thought was paint, red paint, so thick that it looked black where it

pooled on the clear plastic sheets over the bed. There were small rivulets that ran from the largest puddles, just under her elbow and her neck. The trickles of blood ran over the ledge of the bed, dribbling into smaller pools on the plastic-covered floor. The little yellow dress and the matching underwear were gone. For some reason Spence looked for the dress. He found it balled up in the bed, soaked in blood, next to her head. Both were lying next to her hip.

“What, what, what...” Spence stammered.

“Not her! The bathroom!” barked the Dude. He waved, clutching a dumbbell in his hand. It was dark red, dripping. “Get the woman in the bathroom!” He shoved Spence toward the closed door across the room. The metal dumbbell left a bloody print on Spence’s shirt. He moved, but his feet were numb in his shoes and he could not feel the ground. All that blood, it had to be paint, right? Some kind of prank, like on T.V., where they get all scared and then the host comes out of the closet, laughs, points at the hidden camera. The edges of the room were getting dark, and Spence’s head seemed to feel about twice the regular size.

Her head just sat there on the bed, next to the balled-up dress like it was just another piece of dirty laundry.

Spence opened the bathroom door half expecting a television cameraman to greet him. The tiny bathroom was empty, save for the toilet and a filthy bathtub. A small window that was too small for anybody to fit through was over the tub. The glass was shattered.

Weakly, Spence turned back to the slaughter behind him. “Nobody in here, Boss.” He leaned sideways onto the doorframe to the bathroom. “Ain’t nobody in there,” he repeated. He slumped into the door frame. His chest felt tight, and breathing was hard labor that sent sweat pouring down his face. Darkness edged in closer in his field of vision, and Spence thought that

Frank

he was going to pass out. He put his hands down on his knees, trying to steady himself. By this time, the only vision he had left was a little pinhole of murky light, and he focused on the only thing that he could see, the threadbare space of carpet between his two feet.

His hearing, however, was sharp. Spence could hear each jagged breath that he took, the quick staccato thundering of his heartbeat. Dude was talking into a phone. Spence squinted and made out Pretty Young Thing's face looking at him from the bed. Spence closed his eyes and prayed. Where was the camera? This wasn't funny anymore. The Dude sounded nervous.

"Ray, this is Frank," he said into the cellphone. "We have a problem. A big one."

Frank. The Dude's name is Frank, Spence thought.

"The girl from Atlanta just busted in on me here. Came out of nowhere while I was working." He waited impatiently for Ray to say something. "Don't you think I know that? Look, if it's not her its somebody looks just like her. Bitch tried to stab me with my own tools. I hit her over the head and she ran to the bathroom." Another pause. "No, she's not in the bathroom. No way she got out that little window. I don't know what the fuck is going on here, Ray."

Spence kept his eyes closed. His knees were starting to buckle a little, and he focused all of the strength he had left into staying on his feet. He failed, and slid along the doorframe down to the floor, sitting with his legs spread, one sneaker just touching the edge of the plastic sheet. He may have passed out for a second but he wasn't sure. A deep throbbing had begun to spread across his chest, and he had lost track of Frank's conversation. There was a sort of humming in his ears, and when it cleared, he heard Dude, the rich guy that had worn the fancy suit whose real name was Frank, still talking on the phone.

Frank

“Yeah, Ray, your boy is in here but he doesn’t look so good. I’m going to have to take care of that, too.” Another pause.

Spence hadn’t realized that he himself had started talking. He had thought the questions were in his head. “Why you go an’ do that? What she do to you? Why you go and do that?” He repeated the words, louder and louder, until he couldn’t hear Frank talking anymore, nor hear his own raging heartbeat.

Spence didn’t hear Frank walk over to him and kneel down between his legs while he sat sprawled on the floor. Spence opened his eyes only because he felt the presence of the killer standing over him. He asked a final time, “Why you go and do that?”

Spence felt a burning sting slash quickly across his throat, a sudden warmth that emanated from his neck. The pinhole of light vanished entirely and the heat radiating from his neck filled the room until Spence was enveloped, floating in a warm darkness.

What she do to you, Frank? Spence thought, and then thought no more.