

(Prolouge)

Ah, Prague. Again. Wisp blown and snow covered, I'm standing at the first barricade right as the curve gives way to center town. Those barricades – the same used by Soviets to hold back the message of the people. What message? What people? I left the message, left the people and my brightness on the streets of Cincinnati, and fled. Not in the I have to get out of here immediately kind of fleeing, but in the separation anxiety induced fleeing that takes over a person once the race is run, the finish line in sight and the clock shows something more than the target finish time. I took my time leaving those hills – said goodbye to each of the neighborhoods, had all my favorite dishes one last time, revisited those stellar parks and summit views each individually, because it felt like the right thing to do. I hoped to remember that I'll never forget the sparks, the magic that city gave me. The one thing I never did was say goodbye. Sure I told folks I'd see them later, but I never gave myself the chance to really say goodbye – to sisters and friends and the makeshift family I've build over the years because I was too consumed with keeping the ride clean, the rims sparkling and my heart armored against any intruder. I guess I was too scared that if I stood to give that collective speech, I'd end up staying, or would at least listen to someone pleading with me not to leave. So I scrambled away in the middle of a leisure and seductive May afternoon, with scarcely a goodbye to anyone who mattered. Five years later, I'm wondering if it was the right move at all. Even if the mode of the move was wrong, the goodbye couldn't have been more apropos. I drove up 71, knowing that coming back would be a chore initially, but that eventually, I'd find myself missing the seedy streets, the tags I recognize, even running into randoms in the middle of the market. But that afternoon,

there was nothing more than the darkness I felt, the darkness I thought I was escaping, and in the end, the darkness I drove into straightaway.

Chapter I

Wind blows from the left, making the snow fall into her ear and the crevice of her collar bone. Even with the thickest winter jacket the PX had to offer, she was still shivering. In these conditions, in this weather, she's the only one standing, staring into oblivion on the street corner. The locals, smart enough to know when to seek the solitude of the indoors, had long ago left her solo.

What the hell am I doing here in Praha of all places? She is bitter, confused and cold. The connect she was supposed to meet is late – fifteen minutes late. In her business, late doesn't do well with the outcome of deals. She wonders where the connect could be. She wonders how much longer she's going to stand in the numbing weather, reliving warm sunny moments of the tri state area? Remembering only makes things worse, but sometimes she can't help but want to wallow in that false shine of the memories. Seems like a more reliable account to relive than those other moments, where she truly, deeply lost herself.

Her ears were ringing and along the snow covered wind came a scent something like the hotels in Las Vegas – lavender and vanilla mixed with cigarettes and booze. It was good to be back where things made sense. Jules wondered just how long she was going to be involved in all of this ... the whole array of back alley business, never happened but really happened events, the muffled shots and enormous paydays. Trying to explain to someone

who wasn't involved in these moments is like trying to make sense of a government conspiracy. All of the pieces don't add up and it seems like there's some information missing. There's always some information missing, that's the code, the way, the absoluteness about this profession that no one ever bothers to tell you about when you sign on. Then again, there really never was a job application or an interview. No one ever sets out to sign on to something like this – it ends up happening over an eventual series of events, never fully understood, but always remembered in pieces. Just like the Wall Street guys, things have to happen, people have to be stairs, and there's always a walkway somewhere along the way ... what better way to make things happen than to come into the situation like a fireman, the rescue, the savior? It's at those kinds of moments that folks forever forget there might be a dollar to be made, a connection to be had and an opportunity to be seized. Everything is always reasonable, given the logic behind the situation, and given the chance for the beat to match the motive.

Is it possible to begin in the beginning? Or has she, like always, stepped right into the middle of a game played by people she doesn't understand with rules she doesn't know? Briefly, she wonders if this dark taste in her mouth is truth, or if she's just too frozen to understand anything else. Her mind drifts back to those backward days ... she imperceptibly shakes her head to herself and knows this is only going to bring on more discomfort, more unpleasantness ... but she has a slight feeling that unraveling the complexities of yesterday may in fact explain why she's freezing herself to death on this corner. Ah, Prague. Again.

“You’re a Cincinnati character.”

That’s the last thing Kenzie said to her. It was early March, one of those fortunate Cincinnati days when the weather felt like cooperating, and the sun was out full force. Unlike the humid, heavy days of summer, spring in the hills of the Nati were pleasant, enjoyable and the kind of days that made a person want to get out, no matter where they were. Luckily, Cincinnati had a plethora of parks, and it seemed like there was always something going on outside. The pair was sitting at Owl’s Nest park, right where O’Byranville juts up against the ghetto, just blocks away from where Landon sped to his death on a rainy morning years before. Owl’s Nest had long been the place to come when there was nothing else to do – knowing the ghetto was behind them, and that the yuppies were in front of them make everyone in the group feel like the subject of a UGK song ... somber, mellow, in control and at ease all at the same time. Countless hours has been spent, sitting on the short concrete steps, leaning on the railings, exploring the hill behind the makeshift gazebo; all of the moments surmounting to the idea that there really was some point to the everything. Owl’s Nest was a center, a shrine of sorts, in the same way Eden Park, French Park and the Serpentine Wall offered a release.

The two were passing back and forth a bottle of Chimay Red, reliving the early days when the crew was the crew and everyone knew where they stood. Looking over the days which had transgressed to years, it seemed impossible to believe that so much time had passed. Maybe when a person is so involved in the moment, it’s hard to see the days passing by. Like a television with the volume muted, Jules had difficulty pinpointing the actual concepts which changed her world, knowing only that something had happened at some point which led her to whatever moment she was living. On an inner level, she knew that something

was wrong with that equation, that there were certainly folks walking around who could recall every moment of every everything, but she wasn't one of them. Maybe when the fog cleared and she was finally able to take a breath would she be able to decipher the exact moments. But by then, who would want to?

"A character huh? Not a legend, or a force to be reckoned with Kenzie? You're reducing me to some sort of dime store pulp novel character?" She slurred the last word, character, and giggled to herself, chewing over the word.

"Well yea, you're a character. And a legend. And a force to be reckoned with. We all know that Jules. I guess character suits you best because no one can ever figure out just what you're thinking. What's going on in that pea head of yours?"

Jules stared at Kenzie, sizing up the frame that was lounging comfortably on the cement balcony at the parks' shelter. Not sure if Kenzie really meant the words, or if, like most things in Cincinnati, they'd just tumbled out, laid themselves on the street to be discovered.

"I guess we can only hope for the best Kenzie. Let's head to O'Bryans."

"There? Again? I was just there yesterday!" Kenzie clearly was in no mood for the seedy, sticky floor and surely didn't want to run into any of the others.

"Yes. There. Again." Jules' words are clear. Definitive. Character like.

"I wasn't there yesterday. And besides, I want to see if Whodie's in there." She let the last sentence trail off, knowing that every time she said Whodie's name, the incident came back to her. It was impossible not to remember the event which landed him in the chair. She couldn't help but whimsically recall the other moments, when he was mobile, when he would show up on a dime, and wonder where those times had gone.

Whodie wasn't one of Jules's most favorite people, but he had the right connections to get the job done. Randomly, he would show up at the Mt Auburn apartment, hollering something about being hungry, needing a meal and slyly warming up to Jules. He was a swindler, a talker, a person always in the middle of everything. There were countless moments that members of the circle were involved with random, obscure moments, all tracing back to Whodie. Once, when Jules was a teenager, she and a group of compatriots were shooting guns and letting off fireworks in the middle of Duck Creek on the east side. Whodie was supposed to meet them, but as youngsters are wont to do, Jules and the group started travelling deeper into the creek. Guns blazing, the creek alive with the sparkle of colored fireworks, the group was having a great time. In the distance, a person in a white shirt appeared, jogging toward the group. Immediately, everyone thought that the police were on to them, and started running. The person in white started running as well, and a chase ensued. Bottles smashed, fireworks were flung and pistols stashed along the way. Finally, someone got up the gall to holler out his name, Whodie. The figure stopped running and hollered back. Turned out all along, the entire group was running from Whodie, while he thought someone was running behind him. Jules tripped that night, and ended up with a scar on her right arm, near her elbow. Every time she looked at the scar, she was reminded of the fact that no matter what the situation, no one ever really knows who another person might be, and it was always best to stay running.

A botched robbery turned sour a few years back and left Whodie in a wheelchair. Though no one, not even the guys who were with him would confirm it, the story was that Whodie was trying to run into the apartment of someone on campus, thinking it would be an easy score. What he didn't know was that there was another group who had already fingered

the spot as being simple, and felt like Whodie stepped on their ground. Apparently, only one shot was fired, but one shot was all it took to paralyze him for life. It was hard to see the once imposing person reduced to the confines of a chair – even at O’Byrans, he had trouble reaching up to the bar. There was talk right after Whodie was shot that the whole thing was a set up, but no one ever could confirm it. Now, he was just part of the Cincinnati legend, a small portion of the crew who used to know what was really going on inside the seven hills, but was now reduced to needing someone to put him on the toilet. Right after the accident, as those around him tended to call it, there was a great community outpouring of support. Barbeques were held, people pledged their allegiance and support, and picture boards were made. Eventually, the enthusiasm waned, and the rest of the group essentially forgot about Whodie ... maybe not forgot, but certainly put his situation out of their minds, knowing there was little that they could do for him without Whodie doing it for himself. Like the rest of everything, Whodie’s influence over the years has waned, but he’d be the first to tell you he wasn’t out of the game just yet.

The walk from Owl’s Nest to the bar was short, not even long enough for Kenzie to light and enjoy a smoke. It always seemed weird that Owl’s Nest jutted against one of the worst ghettos in the city, but turning one hundred and eighty degrees offered a panorama of old Jewish money. Once home to immigrant Irish workers who tried to escape the life at the docks, O’Byranville was now one of the more affluent areas in the city. Quaint boutiques, bakeries, wineries and of course, the requisite head shop all lined the picturesque part of Madison Avenue. Travelling toward downtown would offer a completely different

panorama, which is why most people from the city tend to stay in their own areas and rarely venture out.

Jules ran her fingers through her hair, trying to loosen any renegade strands. It was a nervous gesture she's adapted after she stopped chewing her nails, and it never quite did the trick to calm her nerves. She knew that the conversation she was going to have would reach the ears of everyone in the city, and that from this hour forward, her path would be entirely different. She was having difficulty forming the words in her mind – it seemed impossible that she was actually going to say them out loud. It was time for a regime change, and everyone knew it. No one seemed to have enough gall to come out and voice the words for everyone to hear, and Jules was tired of it. She knew the business, knew the connections and knew that she could do a better job running things than anyone else. Even more convincing, she was overqualified for the job. A life of watching those around her rise like geysers and fall like autumn leaves had given Jules the edge she knew no one else had.

Kenzie was one of those people who could walk into a room, self assured and aware, but not really appearing as though there was any sort of turmoil existing under the skin. Average height and average build, he was able to blend in without being noticed, and when he left a group of people, they only ever had a vague recollection of what he looked like. Soft spoken, plastic rimmed hipster glasses and an affinity for chino's and boat shoes, Kenzie seemed so far removed from the entire circle that sometimes it was hard to understand why he was there. But over the past decade, his loyalty was unfailing, his dedication complete and once Kenzie got to know a person, friends for life took on a whole new meaning. It was hard not to like him.

Jules and Kenzie had been linked as partners and friends for as long as anyone could remember – at the same time she appeared on the scene, he was right there with her, following like a faithful sidekick, but calling the shots like a leader just the same. Some thought that Jules and Kenzie were together together, but those were just vile rumors sent about to unravel the empire the two were building. Jules liked keeping everyone guessing. She figured as long as they were chatting up her relationship status, they were too busy to pay attention to the moves she was making behind the scenes. While she achieved legendary status in her own right, Kenzie appeared as something of a demigod to the youngsters coming up beneath him. Not only was he self made and self contained, but he managed to pull off an air of effortless substance that everyone tried, and few succeeded, to replicate.

Because of this, the pair was electric. There was something innate about the way Jules trusted Kenzie. It wasn't as though the two had known each other their entire lives. In this business, the length of time one knows another person can determine just whether or not anything can happen. Having known Kenzie for only ten years seemed short, relatively, but Jules' felt implicit in her trust for him. But trust will only get a person so far in this world and in the next. It seemed simple to assume that the two of them would carry everything on to the next phase of this life. But at times, that simple assurity seemed infant like and immature. Was there even anything worthwhile left? All the good ones had long gone away – it was up to her to make things right again.

But the duo was also responsible for some of the largest moves Cincinnati had ever seen. Not only did they dabble in the import export kinds of exchange, but they were also rumored to have some Eastern European connections, which made them all the more

mysterious. The Eastern Bloc was no place for children, or those who couldn't afford to make something work. Word was, if the two of them had something going on across the pond, then maybe management should take another look at this midlevel team and reevaluate.

The short walk from Owl's Nest to the bar brought back memories of a now nonexistent past. Jules tried everything she could to reestablish herself after she returned from across the pond. It wasn't as though no one knew she went, or why she had gone, but no one was for sure about the details. For the last year, she threw herself into her work, forgetting the subtle remembrances of a life better left to yesterday.

Rolling clouds began to form overhead and she knew Cincinnati was in for a proper spring storm. It's said about Ohio that if you don't like the weather, wait five minutes and it will change. If only it was that easy with the memories of everyone around her. But memories were like fingernail polish – easy to create and slow to chip away. No matter, she was in a better place, a concrete future seemingly in her grasp and secure with what she needed to do.

After losing her only stronghold on the market, Jules tried vigorously to change her image. She attended the functions, took the shots and smiled for the camera. When asked how she was doing, since everyone knew that she had loved and lost, she smiled blandly and never let anyone in. It was easier that way, and safer too. The one condolence was knowing that somewhere in these hills, be it in a holler or in a mountain, there was that one missing piece, the person who could complete the cycle and bring her back to where she needed to be. Granted, even Jules knew that it might be impossible to ever see that person again, but

she held onto hope the way a serious coffee drinker holds onto the dregs of a cup – with both pleasure and disgust.

The clouds gave way to excessive rain instantly. Kenzie grabbed her arm and the pair sprinted the last few yards to the bar. As they approach O'Bryons, Jules felt something like apprehension building behind her sternum. She knew that Whodie wasn't going to be in the bar, and she knew that whoever was waiting for her was someone she didn't care to see. A swift side glance to Kenzie conveyed everything she was feeling, and she knew he knew too. Fight or flight. Does a caged animal want to sing, or does she want to disappear into the catacombs of the ghetto, fading into oblivion? Her heart was palpating in her neck, mouth suddenly devoid of all saliva and her ears were ringing. Taking a deep breath, she tried form a barricade for her emotions as she ducked under the Irish flag and pulled open the mahogany door.

Even though the sky had so quickly turned from bright to dismal, the inside of the bar seemed bleak in comparison. Peanut shells covered the floor in some mockery for cleanliness, and there was a faint whiff of stale beer and chicken wing sauce. She hadn't been in here for over a year, but it still felt like home. O'Bryons used to be the essential meeting point – the start and end to every voyage any of them had ever taken. Ever since Whodie got locked in his chair, everything had changed.

"J, what's good?!" Whodie's voice called across the barroom. Now confined to a wheelchair, his once arrogant and evasive personality was now reduced to a pleading, incessant need to see and be seen. Jules rationalized that it had to be damn near impossible for him to understand any of what was left of this life – he could barely see over a countertop anywhere, and was constantly looking up to everyone. His voice took on a pleading note

ever since the botched robbery, though his eyes never gave up the spirit which possessed him to amass such an empire.

“Hey Whodie, how’s it going? You see this rain out there? Damn, it’s coming down.” Kenzie didn’t let Jules speak first, which went against all their rules. Jules shot him a look, which he didn’t notice.

“I’m going to head upstairs for a sec, I’ll be right back.” Kenzie disappeared up the rickety stairs, leaving Jules silently fuming. Who breaks code like that and then just walks away? What was really going on in this world? Her silent wonders consumed her thoughts momentarily and her face became muddied.

“Ya’ll want something to drink?” Hollie was tending bar – she’d been there since anyone could remember, and the years showed in her face.

“I’ll take a Miller Lite, Hollie. Thanks.” Jules’ voice sounded weak and defeated, but she didn’t know why.

“How you been? Guess who’s here? I got a special surprise for you.” Whodie sounded optimistic and conniving. His questions came at Jules like a drunk driver, careless.

“Who’s here?” Jules asked as she took a long swig from her bottle of beer.

Rather than saying her name, Whodie nodded his head in the direction of the back room. Jules’ eyes followed his, wondering who might be so mysterious that even Whodie would be excited to see her reaction. Mind racing, she thought of all the potentials – enemies, friends, family and former loves all came to mind. There were a million people she could care less to see right now, and hoped that Whodie only knew a fraction of the list.

In the darkened corner of the bar, sitting hunched over her mixed cocktail was the one woman who knew how to make things change. She was the one who left when everyone

should have stayed, the ultimate on the Hill and the precipice of all Jules wanted to be. Jules hadn't seen her since that final night, years back, in that final spring when Robin decided she'd had enough and decided to leave.

Chapter II, years back

The Gaslight district of Clifton is where all the old timers lived – the ones with money, made the right way, who squirreled away their successes at the university and thought they were in the know if they shopped at overpriced hippie boutiques. Not exactly avant garde, more like second string to the realness which could be found down the Hill, but movement none the less. Jules spent the last true spring of her childhood living in one of the mid century bi-level dream houses, wandering the pillared streets and trying to stay away from the trite shops.

It was there in that brick and mortar where she lost herself –not just a lifetime of her possessions, books, writings and collected memories, but where she truly and finally understood that there is nothing in this life as sweet as the sound of the first owl heard in evening time.

Because of the abrupt swift change, Jules forever felt that something was missing. She lost a piece of her voice the afternoon everything crumbled. Riding the Crosstown from Pleasant Ridge, her stomach in knots, she knew something wasn't the way it was supposed to be. Having just left the picture perfect domestic tranquility of Swift's house, her legs laboriously trudged down Howell Avenue, hoping what she felt inside wasn't what was

really going on. After half a decade of living and doing as she pleased, somehow that particular afternoon's sunlight felt wrong on her shoulders. It wasn't so much that Jules was afraid of change – rather, she welcomed it at her own pace and knew that eventually the seedy days would come to a halt, that there would never be those evenings when storms were rolling in as she sat rolling, oblivious to the filth around her.

The blinking lights caught her eye as she came up over the hill. Wanting to stop, but knowing she couldn't, Jules resisted the urge to run to the house. Two uniforms were walking down the three cement steps and stopped as she approached. They were leading away the rock of her foundation, the woman of her dreams, and the expectation of the future. Looking abashed and somber, but somehow still drunk, stood Robin, Jules' mother. Milky eyes from too many years of not taking herself bore into Jules shadowed glasses. Robin's frame looked weak, contrite and less than strong as the police started to lead her away. Jules didn't have an opportunity to talk, to scream, to say one single word. Even more upsetting was that Robin didn't make any attempt on her part, as though the arrest was the eventual and ultimate sacrifice. Jules knew better.

The ultimate and final sacrifice would be to not be in this predicament in the first place, to have stepped back from the nonsense and become a mother. Rather, Robin had taken the easy way out, refusing to believe that anything would ever happen to her. For Robin, it was just as well that she started the day and ended the night with a bottle of a cheap red wine clutched to her hand, all the while slurring and slopping and making a fool of herself and the family. Jules always knew that this would never last, but she never expected it to happen so soon. Robin slowly shuffled away, with neither of the police even offering a word to Jules. Since neither of the pair offered any words to Jules, she knew that there was

something not all the way legit with the entire scene. Maybe the old bag finally slipped up and forgot to pay someone, or maybe the boys downtown were finally tiring of the family business. Either way, Jules knew she needed to act, and act quickly. But instead of moving, her feet felt planted to the concrete, immobilized by what she'd just seen. The cruiser door closed softly and it sped away. It was only as Jules watched the brake lights disappear down the hill that she realized there was someone sitting on the porch swing.

Expecting to see a detective, or some other law enforcement swoon, Jules was surprised to see Kenzie. She had no idea how long he had been sitting there or if he knew any more about what just happened. In the instant their eyes locked, Jules realized that this was one of those in-the-movies-kinds-of-moments where she would choose the action to define her path. The image of the brake lights were burned in her eyes, and she saw red when she closed them. Swirly memories of her life with Robin passed over her like water in a creek. It was either take that road, walk the beat of the always blues singer, or gather her dreams and make her own path. Kenzie stared at her, not understanding what was happening inside her mind. To anyone else who had just witnessed her mother being arrested, with no other parents in the picture, Jules' immobility would seem insane. But Kenzie knew her well enough to know that there was something else in her eyes besides defeat. A siren blared in the distance and Jules involuntarily wondered if they were coming back for her. Impossible, she dismissed the thoughts and turned her attention to the present moment. The sun that was such a short while ago burning strangely on her shoulders was being covered by fat clouds. Another siren blared, this time the tornado warning siren, and in that instant, her mind was made.

“I’ll be right back.” Jules spoke to Kenzie, her voice thick like gravel.

Kenzie nodded imperceptibly and turned his head as Jules rushed into the house.

Jules had only lived in Howell Street for a few months, nowhere near long enough to develop any kind of attachment for the structure. To her, it was and would forever remain an interrupted place, like a root overgrown on a running trail, to be seen, jumped over and forgotten. It had been decorated when plush carpet and foil wallpaper were all the rage, when storm windows still went up every winter and came down in the spring. As Jules rushed into the house, she noticed for the first time that the storm windows had never been taken down. Maybe it was just too early in the season, but Jules perceived that fact as an omen to keep her own stormy armor forever close. The wooden stairs, worn and shallow, creaked in the middle as she raced up them toward her room. She faintly heard Kenzie’s voice, but couldn’t make out what he was saying to her. No matter, she only needed to take a few things from the room that was hers but really wasn’t, and they could be on their way.

Robin must’ve had some inkling that the brass were coming for her –Jules’ bed had been stripped of bedcovers, and everything she’d been allowed to bring to the new house was sitting placidly in boxes at the door. Cursing Robin’s preparedness, Jules knew she would waste valuable time rooting through the boxes for what she needed.

Her passport seemed essential in the moment, and that was Jules’ first priority. She was midway through one of the boxes when Kenzie appeared in the doorway.

“Jules, it’s getting ready to piss outside. I only have my bike out back, so we need to hurry.”

Kenzie sounded compassionate, but still managed to convey some level of control. He knew that if left to her own, Jules would spend hours rummaging through the boxes, afraid

to let go of any one thing. Who could blame her? Poor girl had been shuffled around from place to place for a few years, never being able to put down roots anywhere, all a result of Robin's business. Glimpses of memory for Jules consisted of the items she managed to pick up along the way, and Kenzie knew it would be hard for her to choose what to take. But only having the Buelle with him made transport difficult. Who knew how long it would be before the badges showed up; Kenzie had to make sure that they were both long gone before anything like that happened.

"Ok J, what do you need from here? Not what do you want to take, but seriously, what do you need?"

Jules paused her rummaging and looked at Kenzie.

"I need my clothes, and I need to find my passport, and I need to take all these books, and these notebooks. O, and I need to take all of these pictures, and my computer, and I want to take that vase over there. And while we're here, I should get my jewelry and –"

Kenzie cut her off, mid rant. He knew the emotion of the moment was getting to her.

"Jules, honey, you don't need any of that okay? Find your passport, get your jewelry, and your computer. We'll replace everything else along the way."

"Kenzie," Jules' voice becoming hysterical as the reality of the moment set in, "I can't leave everything behind. Not again. I have to take all of this."

"We don't have time or room to take all of this. Look, here's your jewelry box, take that. I'll look for your passport in these boxes, and you get your computer. Pick one book I guess too. That way you won't feel like you've left everything behind."

"Easy for you to say Kenzie. You've never had to do this." Jules sighed as she started gazing at her books. The only people who never left her – those characters in her books. How

could she choose just one? Eyes scanning, darting over the spines and flicking back the tears of the absoluteness of the moment, Jules tried to breathe. She looked at Kenzie and saw he had found her passport and was wrapping up the charging cord for her computer.

“Pick a book yet J? We really need to get going. You hear that thunder?”

Jules looked again frantically at her shelves. Her eyes finally landed on “The Alchemist.”

Just reading the title gave her a piece of peace that she hadn’t felt since seeing the flashing red and blue.

“Ok, I got it Kenzie. We can get out of here.” Jules picked up the mahogany jewelry box with jade inlay her father had given her when she was a little girl.

“Will this fit in the compartment of the bike? I really don’t want to leave it Kenzie.”

Kenzie saw the pain in her eye and knew that there was no getting around it.

“Yea Jules, that’s fine. We’ll make it fit. So you have everything?”

The two sped away on Kenzie’s Firebolt Buell. Jules’ arms were wrapped tightly around Kenzie’s waist and every so often he could feel her silently sob. Hoping she wasn’t crying, Kenzie tried to get away from Clifton as fast as possible. The two roared down Ludlow Avenue, passed all the rich kids who wanted to pretend like they were so impoverished, the pseudo artsy theater and trademark coffee shop, Sitwells. As they approached Northside, Jules felt the first drops of rain. Clutching Kenzie tighter, she silently wished them to go faster, away from the storm and away from her life. She knew that nothing was ever going to be the same, and her mind whirled with all that she was leaving behind. Years later, she would look back on the drive away from Clifton and realize it was probably the one thing that saved her life.

Kenzie lived with his sometimes girlfriend, sometimes not, CJ, in an expensive new build in North Avondale. Not to be confused with Avondale, the ghetto, North Avondale housed some of Cincinnati's most affluent Jewish families. Not only was there new money, but there was old money as well, making the community richly vibrant in an effortless kind of way. CJ's house was at the top of a hill overlooking the ghetto. Four stories, with a pool and sun room, the house stood as a majestic end to a winding road. She inherited the home from a sickly great aunt who had no children, and CJ took full advantage of her zip code. Jules liked CJ, the way a woman likes her gynecologist – with reserve and a certain amount of innate trust. She knew that fundamentally, CJ and Kenzie were a good match, but Jules couldn't see the future for the two. In infant like descriptions, Kenzie was rugged and CJ was soft. It made sense the two got along, as opposites, as they say, always attract. Jules could appreciate a strong woman, one who knew her one and listened to her heart. CJ might be one of those women, but so far, Jules had never had the opportunity to find out. The Firebolt pulled up the drive just as the sky opened up, pelting Jules with dime sized drops as she rushed to get her things inside. Not that she had much, but what she did have was all to her name. Rushing into the garage, Jules bumped into CJ's 300 Benz, scuffing the bumper in the process. Kenzie saw what happened and chuckled.

"She won't notice that J, don't worry."

"As if that's all I have to worry about Kenzie." Jules' voice was tense and dark. Kenzie's eyes darkened at the rebuff.

"Sorry Kenz, I didn't mean that. It's just... it's just been a long day."

Kenzie twirled around, his arm on the wooden railing that led into the mudroom. Midstep, he looked like a frozen human, devoid of emotion and thought.

“It’s fine, Jules. I know it’s been rough. Come inside, let’s get you sitting down for a minute.”

Jules paddled beyond Kenzie into the mudroom. They both took off their shoes, just like the Japanese, and walked into the kitchen. CJ’s house was a hodgepodge of decoration from the knock off designer home goods store and flea market rescues. The effect was homey, comforting, and just enough of a touch of novo riche to make Jules feel at home.

Jules’ plopped down onto the leather sofa, giant bear blanket slowly sliding around her. CJ was sitting in an easy chair next to the fire, looking comfortable and relaxed. Kenzie had called her before they left Clifton, and she knew that Jules was going to be a mess.

Not yet 25, Jules hadn’t developed a taste for expensive wines and fine bubbles. To her, drinking was Miller Light and a shot of cheap liquor, or weak well mixed drinks. It wasn’t that she hadn’t tried other drinks, or that she hadn’t had the opportunity to test out the expensive waters, just that there was no desire for Jules to understand the difference between a Boudreaux and a Beaujolais. When CJ handed her a seven and seven, Jules dubiously took a sip. Surprisingly, the Seagrams didn’t make her cringe, and the soda made the flavor balanced and even. Smiling at CJ, Jules took another drink, this time longer, letting the rum burn into her throat and stomach. The scorching feeling in her belly made Jules realize that she hadn’t eaten since the morning, and suddenly her hunger was fiery and boiling.

“CJ, thanks. I needed that.”

Jules tipped her glass noncommittally toward CJ. CJ responded in turn, nodding her head toward the younger woman. Never one to keep her opinions to herself, CJ was quick to reprimand Jules.

“You look like shit girl. Drink up. Have you eaten?”

Jules smiles, infant like and appreciative that someone was able to intone what she needed.

“Starving CJ. Famished. You got anything to eat?”

“Nope, but we can order in. A new Indian place opened over on Spring Grove, we can order from there. You like Indian right J?” CJs eyes looked inquisitive, playful, but at the same time decisive and judgmental. It was one of the fundamental reasons why Jules and CJ had never formed a final bond – there was some underlying feeling of aggression, of territory needed and terrain wanted.

“Indian, huh? Love it. Want me to call?” Kenzie broke the stare between Jules and CJ.

“Sure Kenz, go ahead and call. What do you want Jules?” CJ sounded vaguely relieved that the staring match didn’t go any further.

“I’ll take some veg korma super spicy and a garlic nan, Kenzie. Thanks. CJ, you got any more of this?” Jules tinkled her glass, showing that it was empty.

“Damn girl, slow down. It’s not even eight o’clock yet!”

“God-damnit I hate what they have done to his place, fucking Euro.” Yuri spoke to himself. He has developed this habit over the years of independence. Insanity some would say, but perfect sense to him, as he acknowledged that others were not around and

if they were they never understood his context. Thinking and walking “Where the fuck is this drop point. I see the bar, fountain, tourist, and more tourists. Why are they so blatant? On mission, I should slow down drinking.” The walk from the cab across the square was confidence in check. Old habits die hard, as you never stop being a soldier.

The wet cobble stone challenged his half drunken approach as he scanned the crowd and windows looking for threats. Pushing through the buzzing crowds and avoiding photographers; church bells always illuminate this background. Layered only by the latest form of progress that calls itself this generation, it boiled in Yuri. A car slowly lurked for parking the square, the sound of its stereo blasting rap music annoyed him and reminded him of home and how much he hated it there. “Another reason to be here” he murmured to himself as he progressed.

Through the crowd and towards the bar; “In and out, too easy” Yuri thought. Behind him the music stopped and Yuri let go a sigh of relief. Then unexpectedly and as loud of the apocalypse, a voice of broken and heavily accented English broke the monotony “Yuri, my friend! How good it is to see you, come my car! We have much discuss!” Head down at the ground, as he knew he was safe here, cursing. Head up and turned around, an arm raised for acknowledgement with a fake smile. The gauntlet of the crowd is but a passage to figuring out this change of plans.

In there is some time to think, with a slow walk. Past in mind, “Damn it all to hell.

Why can't I get Cincinnati off my brain? You know that wasn't her you saw earlier, those people don't come here. Did she wave? I have changed so much since then, I hardly recognize myself." His mind off mission and he was in given a bear hug and nearly placed inside the car, it was a blur. "My friend, how are you?" Yuri stared out the window, "Great, always great my friend. Do you have any vodka?" A bottle was handed back by a girl old enough to be a girlfriend in this world, but not old enough to be called a woman. "You must be tired from your travels; I know you are as busy as I. Drink up and relax, things are changing here and we have a long drive to Munich." The rap music was turned back up to blaring; Yuri looked at the bottle and decided it was time to drink to sleep.

"Yuri, wake up you bastard!" He was being tapped from the front seat by his excited driver. "I swear to Christ I will fuck you to death in front of your woman if you keep the shit up, Viktor." Unphazed by the comment, he kept tapping. "This is important, you bitch. We are the border. How much do you bribe these people?" Yuri, bewildered and clearly drunk smacked him in the back of the head. "You illiterate fuck! The cold war is over and the borders are open! Just drive across you jack-ass!" Viktor, growing upset "No, I always stop the exchange and buy a pass when I change money." Yuri laughing "How fucking simple are you? You have been hustled! How much are they charging you?" Laughing hysterically "How much Viktor?" "This is not important, Yuri" "Oh no, you better tell me, or I will tell Munich how stupid you are." "500 Euro, ok." Yuri, now hysterically laughing. "OK, give me 400 Euro and I will put you on my pass." Both laughing. "I told you that rap music will rot your brain. I am going back to

drinking to drown out that noise.” “Fuck you, this is from your country.” “Bah, what country” Yuri went back to staring out the window. Vodka as close as a prom date.

Yuri staring through the window at the hills of the German and Czech Republic border. He was growing uncomfortable in thought “This music, damn this. This is the music for people who live lies. They live through the false accomplishments of others or feel the need to convey a lifestyle. What happened to the soundtrack of life. Music is of the soul, it is but the background to what you are doing. Damn, what is it that I am doing now?”

Yuri reached for his bottle and toasted to the rearview mirror “To a life of innocence and love!” He took a long drink. Victor turned down the music. “What did you say?” Yuri replied “Nothing, it doesn’t exist.”

Wrapped in thought and drink the haze of reality passed I time and he began to reminisce. “How in the hell did I end up in this place.” Europe was an off and on home for Yuri since 2000. He joined the Army as soon as he could, escaping Cincinnati and the life that was destined for him. He believed that if he could just get away from the influence, that he could live a good life and be a good man. But, fate has a funny way of sticking to you. He soon realized he could escape himself, even with the sea separating him. He would take leave and go to work on the same projects he left behind. Now improving operations with this military training; he was only becoming more of a monster.

Deployments soon followed with the terrorist attacks that happened shortly after he enlisted. Sending him to places a kid from his upbringing often only dreams of, if they even learn of these places. North America, Europe, Africa, the Middle East all well explored before 25 years of age. The bar for life was raised for excitement, as the desire for a glamorous life decreased. Events of these places shaped a demand for action, a need for answers, and the ability to enjoy your life despite the circumstance. He held everyone to this as par for course. After all, life is as simplistic and challenging as a good game of golf.

The antidote for irony of the situation came on the drive. As this was his fault entirely; he walked out of his element. This soldier, this man, this criminal stepped out of bounds. As a young paratrooper sent to Germany, he had a reputation as an excellent and intelligent soldier that landed him a pretentious position that is typically held by a minimum three more stripes and 10 years of his own experience. His desire to do whatever it took to win and cut throat tactics only added to the reputation that preceded him. Over the next few years an element of senior internal criminality flirted with him and provided him with comfort afforded with his compliance.

Things got real. Not only did Yuri get out of control, but so did his handlers and Yuri was to blame. His upstart reputation and constant questioning of how things were done was a thorn in many people's side. Yuri always wanted easier ways to do things that made more money. The problem was that he was right, and a great criminal. The problem is that the others were not and never knew when to shut up, or not get caught. This was his downfall

as it often is, and his problem with rap music. More people wanting the lifestyle than the capacity to actually do what needs to be done, and there is was again, what he left. Once again it is in his face, as always.

The promotion to Euro-trash weapons from soldier came in this light, in Iraq. As a whiskey smuggler and distributor, this was not his strong suit. Hustling, he was never a hustler before this. Always protection, planner or event maker. This was new and this past experience saved his ass and got him the promotion. He got the whiskey through a variety of contacts he established through illegal deals, operations, and trading done across the city of Ar-Ramadi. We held no stipulations in where we went, who we dealt with, or what we did. We spoke in dollars and strong shots that were not afraid of a fight. This sometimes sickened Yuri, as it was so cut and dry you would have thought it was the end of the world.

Yuri had responsibilities as his counterparts did not. But that would change in that, they would see to that. After all, if you lay with dogs, you will get fleas. Yuri wrote the standard operating procedures for training, managed the ammunition, co-ordinate for air support and transport, approved then conducted all firing ranges for the task force, then acted as the gunner for senior officers of the task force. He did this; then spent his rest buying, selling, and conducting illegal missions with adjacent agencies off the base. It takes a lot to make Him happy, but he still wasn't. He had a fiancé waiting on him, yet he took one of the few female medics on the camp as his lover. She would later try to kill

him with a grenade in a murder-suicide attempt as he dejected her when she was going back to America.

He should have seen it coming; the night before he was running in whiskey from downtown. This night shook him as he did not read the intelligence summary that morning. He was sneaking back in through the Third Country National yard and three Soviet made T-72 tank mounted with search lights and Duska machine guns were sweeping the area. It was the first time his heart has pounded so hard since he invaded this country three years prior. Armed with a nine millimeter pistol and a M4 carbine assault rifle he laid in the dirt for them to pass. Staying true to his agenda on the way back to headquarters he stopped at his anonymously placed shipping container, secured his whiskey, and then reported his finding. Immediately laughed at as these were just given to the new Iraqi army from Bulgaria, and then scolded for not have his radio. He laughed his way out and went to sleep. On the day they whiskey bust came down the tubes they were all swift to blame Yuri. They went to great lengths to capture and convict him. They conscripted his counterparts, those jealous of him, and those closest to him. The only thing that saved him was his conviction to deny it all, and the money he made to hire a civilian attorney. This was the demonstrated will he proved to his boss, and to the local nationals that were his boss in the old country that I could be trusted and brought in.

After stuffing herself to the gills with the korma and nan bread, Jules slowly started to unravel. Not only had the day been monumental in the most profane kind of way, but the week had been hell to boot. There were rumors amongst the crowd that big changes were coming up, and Jules didn't like the sound of that. She had been around long enough to know that big changes meant either someone sung some kind of song to someone, or someone was getting forcibly removed. Either way, it spelled some kind of mistrust that Jules wasn't prepared to handle, and frankly, couldn't be bothered to decipher.

"So Jules," CJ began, noncommittally, with a touch of disdain in her voice, "What happened today with your moms?"

A Cincinnati native, CJ had the annoying habit of adding an extra 's' to words that shouldn't be made plural. Yous instead of you. Moms instead of mom. Krogers instead of Kroger. Every time Jules heard the local euphemisms, she cringed, and wanted to shove a grammar book down someone's throat. There was no excuse for the inaccurate use of the words. Jules had even completed a degree in linguistics, hoping to unravel and completely understand her native tongue. Hearing the inaccuracies of the language was an affront to her education, her knowledge, and most importantly, to common sense. Even though she wanted to snap, Jules kept her voice even as she replied to CJ.

"My mom," Jules began, stressing the singular usage of the word, "was taken in by the uniforms. I have no idea what for, but it can't be good. I'm sure at some point, someone will call me with some kind of news. But really CJ, it's been a really long week, and Robin is the least of my worries. I just want to enjoy this cocktail and try to relax."

Jules was tense, and CJ could tell. Rebuttal on the tip of her tongue, CJ stole a glance to Kenzie, and decided it wasn't worth the fight that would happen later on. Instead, she fell

back, letting the younger woman seem like the victor. There was a distinct look of annoyance in CJ's eye, and Jules knew it all had to do with Kenzie.

Even though Kenzie and Jules had known each other for as long as the earth revolved the sun, which really was only a little over ten years, there were so many in their social circle who couldn't understand their connection, friendship and unwavering loyalty. Over the years, as gossips are wont to do, rumors flew about what the two were doing behind closed doors. Of course, all of it was false, and at times Jules and Kenzie actually laughed about their perplexing relationship. CJ, however, was never so sure. There was some sparkle she would see from time to time in Kenzie's eye whenever he spoke of Jules, and that made her on edge.

"Right, gotcha. No problem, Jules. Want me to get you another drink?"

Jules looked at the clock which hung over the nonworking fireplace. It was seven, which meant that most likely, Dusha was somewhere on the east side, bored with nothing to do. Suddenly, the posh North Avondale house was too small for her, and she felt like she needed to go run a good long while. Running was out of the question in this neighborhood, even if it was North Avondale, because everything surrounding it was falling to pieces. Deveroes stores and liquor on the corner, there was no escaping the fact that the omnipotent quest for the American dream was being lost on the streets. No matter, Jules knew that she shouldn't go for a run – most likely, she'd end up ten miles from anywhere with no idea what else to do.

Jules carried her plate to the open kitchen and set it in the sink. Her eyes lingered on the KitchenAid stand mixer, a gift CJ received last Christmas from Kenzie. The mixer was overpriced and ridiculous, but represented to Jules a kind of fulfillment, an achievement for

her dream. Not that she didn't have the two hundred to go spend on a mixer, but she felt like she didn't deserve it yet, hadn't earned that right in the picturesque Americana kitchens. After all, she was just another scuffed faced girl from the west side, melanoma (and her heritage) showing over the bridge of her nose and her cheekbones whenever she was in the sun, so what did she know about stand mixers and petit fours? To Jules, there was something tangible about success – awards and recognition meant nothing if she didn't feel it for herself. In all her years, she hadn't once felt like she'd actually achieved anything, which is why the stand mixer had to wait.

"I'm stepping out for a sec yall." Jules spoke to both of them, but to no one in particular. In simple Cincinnati fashion, it was simple to ignore and acknowledge at the same time. It was exactly what any local did while walking in Over the Rhine, or along the campus routes in Clifton, in Price Hill, Evanston, Avondale. There was a natural need to see what's there, but to keep walking past, blinking furiously, because eventually, the image, the voice and the sound will blend from memory and become a chain of interlinked events.

CJ barely nodded her head to Jules, and Kenzie didn't respond at all. The Reds were on the tube, playing the Florida Marlins. An avid baseball fan, Jules was sure Kenzie had some kind of wager on the game. Hilarious if one considered how anti establishment Kenzie was about everything else, but for some reason, baseball didn't fall into that spectrum. He could tell you everything about everything, much of which Jules never even heard.

Stepping on the patio, Jules took a deep breath. The rain had stopped, leaving everything a moist sticky wet, akin only to valley dwellers. Fog was rolling up from Vine Street, and the city looked peaceful. Even though the patio chair was wet, Jules sat down anyway, rationalizing that wet clothes were the least of her worries. She lit a cigarette and inhaled

deeply. Supposed to be quitting, Jules only smoked when the situation permitted, and in dire restraints. Today seemed like one of those times. There was something to be said about losing a mother in the middle of rainstorm.

The smoke of her Camel hung in the air, humid and thick with Cincinnati overtones. One would assume that she would call her boyfriend in this kind of situation, but Jules wanted nothing to do with his gravelly voice at the moment. She needed to talk to a sister, someone who knew her ins and outs the way a shopper knew the inside of a Target store.

“Dusha, it’s me.” Jules pronounced her friend’s name the proper Russian way, with a long ‘u’ instead of a short one. The name meant soul in the mother tongue, and Jules always thought that the name couldn’t be more apt.

Dusha and Jules met in junior high school art class, taught by an in the closet teacher who was known for his impeccable taste in ties and designer slacks. Seated four to a table, the two immediately took a liking to each other, and their friendship blossomed from there.

Dusha wasn’t in with everything the same way Jules was, but both respected each other for their respective careers and choices. Having a history as long as the Vatican made the pair kindred, and made the secrets they shared even more valuable.

“J! What’s going on sister? How’s your night so far?”

“Hey girl. Not so good. What are you up to?” Jules’ voice was flat and noncommittal.

“Shit, not much, sitting here on the porch with a few people. Why don’t you come through? We have some beer and Tim was just getting ready to spark the grill.”

“That sounds nice Dusha. I’m at CJ’s house right now. “

“CJs?” Dusha’s voice sounded panicked for a split second. “Why are you at her house?”

“Long story girl, but can you come pick me up?”

“J, I would, but seriously, I’ve had like three drinks already and I can’t risk my tenure getting picked up by the jakes. I can send someone over there to get you. Is that okay?”

Jules tried not to let on to the disappointment she felt. Knowing that Dusha was there for her would’ve made the night worth something. Having someone else come get her seemed weak, less than stellar, like Adriaticos pizza on an off night.

“Sure, sure, that’s fine. Who all is there?”

Jules heard Dusha stutter in her silence. Silence could only mean one thing – someone was there who shouldn’t be, and Jules couldn’t figure out who.

“Dusha dushe, who’s there?”

In Russian, Dusha dushe meant soul to soul. Jules hoped that by saying that phrase, Dusha would feel some innate tie in telling her who was there.

“Well Jules, you might not be so happy about it, but there’s the usual crew...” Dusha paused, knowing the name she gave wasn’t going to be received lightly.

“Sparrow is here.”

Dead silence on the phone.

Sparrow? Jules thought racked up a million questions the way an Aruban jackpot rolls over zeros on a slot machine.

“Are you sure Sparrow is there? I thought he was in Prague or something?”

“Girl.” Dusha paused for dramatic effect. “ I think I know Sparrow when I see him. Hasn’t changed a bit in all these years. I’m sure he’d be happy to see you.”

Jules stopped breathing, stopped thinking and failed to understand what Dusha was saying to her. It couldn’t be possible that Sparrow was back in the confines of the tristate area. He

would've called, written, send a postcard, something to let her know he was back. Hell, she should've been the one to pick him up at the airport if he really was back in town.

"Right, well if you're sure that it's THE Sparrow, and he's really back home, send him to come see me. I'm sure Kenzie would like to see him again."

"Really, you sure about that? Last I heard, Kenzie and Sparrow had some kind of issues. I heard it had something to do with the shop and all that money."

"Dusha, you have no idea what you're talking about right now. Look, I've had a fucking day okay? Just send someone to get me out of North Asshole Avondale and we'll talk when I get to the Ville."

Jules was audibly upset. Dusha took the cue and responded in turn.

"Right, J, I got it. Calm down. Sparrow will be there soon."

Jules stubbed out her cigarette and wished for home. Not the home which had so recently been torn apart by uniform thugs, but the real home, the one she left on the hill. There was nothing like the domestic tranquility in that cramped, small space. Close enough to the river to hear the barges, but far enough away to avoid the mosquitoes and rats. In her younger years, she wondered just what was on the barges she heard, and why they made such a racket. As a child, she rationalized that it was elephants making all that noise. Now as an adult, she had to believe that it was really just dreams forgotten. Dreams lost to the every day, the moments left behind in shadows and dust, full of ideas and belief which seem so important in the moment, but once blinked, seem so far away. In all her years, it felt like she was living a dream forgotten, misunderstood and left shattered and broken. Similar to a clarinet reed, she knew that if not taken care of the right way, life would splinter into a million little fragments,, and from those fragments, no sound could ever come.

Lifting herself from the chair, her clothes stuck to the metal frame. Sighing, she realized how tired she was after such a day. It was hard to believe she began the day in the domesticity of Pleasant Ridge, in the family home of Swift. Walking inside, she saw CJ and Kenzie wrapped in the bear skinned blanket on the couch.

“Hey J, how you doing?” Kenzie looked at her, voice and face full of concern and compassion.

“Good, Kenz, I’m good. Sparrow is coming to pick me up in a few and I’m going to –” Kenzie cut her off mid sentence.

“Sparrow? Here? Picking you up?”

Kenzie couldn’t even make complete sentences of his thoughts, stunned as he was by what Jules said.

“Right, so what I just said is that Sparrow, the Sparrow, the infamous and ever changing chameleon like Sparrow is coming to pick me up here. In like ten minutes.”

Jules tried to steel her voice, but the vivid emotion on Kenzie’s made her uncomfortable.

There was a long history between Kenzie and Sparrow, and it was as difficult to dissect as any physics problem. Fundamentally, there it boiled down to wrong place at the wrong time, and the disconnect always made everything uneasy for Jules.

Years back, when Kenzie was just starting and Sparrow was considering retirement, there was an event which changed the exactness of any kind of crew or group that Jules had ever known. Kenzie was one who was quick to understand a situation in a light of the feather kind of way, and Sparrow was the complete opposite. Sparrow wanted everything done with military precision, and that made things in the world of the Nasti difficult to

comprehend. During those few months, it seems like everything was changed, but nothing was becoming any different. Rather, lines were being drawn in the sand, and from those lines, reinforcements and coalitions were formed. Jules always wondered just would have happened if Sparrow and Kenzie had been on the same team during that time – would the outcome have changed? Or were things so inevitable that either way the knitting was spun, it would end up being the same hole filled scarf?

Jules stepped out of CJs house to smoke and wait on her ride. The sky was clear, and the faint glimmer of a fingernail moon hung in the distance. Cincinnati summers can be thick with humidity the way the air in a room full of her peers can be uncomfortable, and Jules felt the sweat trickle down her back. It was going to be a long night, and it had already been a long day. Her head swam with the liquor and all that seemed reasonable was a hot shower and a comfortable bed. Reality snapping her back to the present, Jules realized for the second time in her life she was homeless. There really was no where she could call home, much less lay her head comfortably without the thought of potential peril. All the same, there seemed to be something definite and concrete with the days' events. If nothing else, it allowed Jules to realize that there would only ever be the path she created, whether from love or friendship. This thought empowered her the way a long distance run made her feel strong. After she finished her first half marathon, there was nothing that anyone could have said to make her feel like she hadn't accomplished something amazing, something that not every person in the world could achieve. Steeling her resolve, Jules knew that these moments required the same kind of determination. Just like when her knee began to fail, as it always did at mile marker eleven, this was the moment when she

needed to breathe deep and draw upon any of her gypsy roots, and make things strong. Breath even, and lids lowered, she waited for Sparrow.

Sparrow was one of those people who knew when there was something going on, and most likely, knew the ins and outs of the entire situation, but was so militarily inclined that he chose not to disclose any information. Moments of great importance could pass, and it would only be weeks or months later that Jules learned of his involvement. He had been gone for a long time, overseas dealing with whatever it was that he did, and Jules was surprised that he was back in the seven hills. Even more surprising was the fact that Dusha was so noncommittal about sending him to pick her up. Jules briefly wondered about Dusha's intentions, but had little time to dig any deeper. As soon as the thought crossed her mind, the headlights of a 750i Benz crested the hill toward CJs house. Jules took one last, long drag from her cigarette and flicked it into the street.

"Here goes nothing," she muttered to herself.

She knocked lightly on the door to let Kenzie know that she was leaving. She never knew whether or not he heard, and really didn't care. Most likely, he was so enraptured with CJ that Jules was the last thing on his mind.

The Mercedes pulled to a silent stop just before the slightly hilly drive which led to CJs garage. Sparrow didn't even seem to look out of the tinted windows, simply expected Jules to hop in the car. Resisting the urge to run for the door, Jules made sure to take her time. It had been what felt like ages since she'd seen him, and didn't want to appear too anxious, even though she wanted to seem friendly. There was so much history with Sparrow, and Jules knew that there was more in store for the future, so there was no sense in being uncouth when the situation didn't dictate such behavior. Slowly walking to the car, Jules

found herself reciting odd words in Russian – it was something she did when she was nervous, or felt out of place. Speaking the mother tongue made her feel like there was reason in the world, and helped to ground herself in the present. The moonstone around her neck helped just the same. It wasn't a shallow pendant, something bought from a travelling fair. Her one and only surprised her one day with a thick chunk of the amazing stone, and it never left her neck. It was her talisman, her reminder, and her comfort. Between the Russian and the moonstone, Jules felt comfortable enough to get into the car and see Sparrow.

The door opened soundlessly, and Jules was immediately greeted with the comfort of an old friend, someone with whom she had shared countless experiences and moments, and someone with whom a bond could never be broken. Still, all the bonds and memories and moments could never account for any dream lost or forgotten. There was no introduction, no hello needed, Sparrow simply began conversing as though the two of them had just spend the last nine hours in the car together.

“So I asked the guy, who the hell are you? And when he didn't answer, I said, well I'm Sparrow. And that's all you need to know.”

Jules let out a silent sigh. What was she supposed to say to something like that? It wasn't like Sparrow even needed a response. His eyes looked squinty and Jules knew that it was going to be one of those nights. Nestling back in the cushiness of the car seat, Jules wished (again) for home. A nonexistent, ever changing and morphing home; ultimately, she wanted somewhere to let out her breath, take her earrings off and just be. Too bad the life she chose was constant chaos, the immediateness of how late of a night this was sure to be

weighed on her.

“Who was the guy, Sparrow?”

He took his time in answering, and Jules felt the anticipation building.

“You don’t know him, J. Trust me.”

“I’ve been around as long as you, brother, so just come out with it. Who was the guy?”

Sparrow looked at her sideways, head turning Stewie Griffin style, and Jules knew that he was lying. It was the same gesture Sparrow used time and again, and over the years, Jules figured out it was his tell.

“Ok, so you might know him ... or might have known him at some point. But it’s no one you know now, and besides, the it doesn’t even matter. The point is that he didn’t know, or didn’t remember, me.”

“Right, so you start a conversation after how long about some random that you *think* I might not know? Doesn’t add up ‘Row. So that means it had to be someone close, or someone close enough that you don’t want me to know ... probably because you know on some level whoever it was impacts me in some way. Am I right?”

Jules raised her brow in anticipation, thinking that just maybe Sparrow would tell her who the mystery person might be. Anticipation does nothing for the face or peace of mind – just creates wrinkles on the skin and spider webs in the mind.

Discontent, and knowing Sparrow would say no more, Jules decided it was useless to continue the conversation at the present moment. It would be easier to get him to talk about it after a few rounds.

“Well, anyway, let me tell you about what happened to me.” Jules started twirling the hairband she wore around her neck into figure eights, buying time and trying to figure out how much to offer to Sparrow in this initial conversation. Revealing too little would ultimately come back to hurt her – Sparrow was bound to find out the whole truth at some point, and he had a memory as long as the yarn of an afghan. Revealing too much would make her seem weak, needy, and translucent. The hair band twisted faster and faster between her hands, snagging every once in a while on her nails, until it slipped out and fell soundlessly onto the car mat below her.

“You don’t have to Jules, the news is everywhere.”

Jules counted back to how many hours might’ve passed since the afternoon. Could everyone really know already? It had only been fix, six hours at most. How did the news travel so fast?

“Who told you Sparrow?”

The Mercedes was turning soundlessly from Dana onto Madison Avenue. Jules hadn’t realized they were so close to Madisonville. The bus stop by Withrow was full of kids waiting to catch the last 11 back downtown, back to their own homes, far away from the old money of Hyde Park and pretentious attitudes that surrounded the area. The high school never made any sense to Jules – it was gorgeously built at the turn of the century, boasted classical architecture and a clock tower, but housed some of the students that Cincinnati Public forgot about along the way. The contradiction between Akademiks jeans and Hyde Park yuppies made no sense, but that’s just the way everything works in Cincinnati – as though those who have refuse to see that fifty yards away are those who don’t ... and who most likely, never will. Cresting the hill of Madison Avenue, the smell of

Buskin's Bakery filled the car. Jules smiled to herself – the scent of danishes smelled like comfort to her.

“I tried to tell you when you got in the car. The guy, he didn't know who I was, but I made sure he knew by the end of everything.”

If Jules had been driving, she would have slammed on the breaks, regardless of the fact that the car was crossing the infamous Withrow tracks.

“Who is this guy 'Row? And how in the hell did he know what happened with Robin this afternoon?”

The light turned red and the Benz rolled to a stop. Breath in, breath out, Jules tried to steel herself. Obviously whatever Sparrow wasn't saying was something he should've been saying back in Avondale. Clearly, this was it. This was the reason that Sparrow came back from across the pond, the reason Dusha sent him to pick her up, the complete entirety of why she was in his car in the middle of Hyde Park.

“Pull over in the Plaza. Let's go get a drink and talk this out.”

“Sounds fine to me, J. We can head in to Animations.”

Jules, Dusha and Kenzie were leaning back in their chairs, bellies content and full following a meal at Biagio's. When it first opened on Ludlow, Jules was sure that Biagio's was just a front for some Italian scheme; but the longevity of the business and the authenticity of the owner, Biagio, made her return time and again. Nestled between a West African souvenir shop and a florist, Biagio's was the kind of place to go after the end of a long day, where the air was heavy with garlic and the food rich with taste. Jules had been coming to the restaurant for as long as it was open, and because of that, Biagio tended to treat her like a wayward daughter.

From time to time, like tonight, Jules used the place as a meeting point, where everyone could come together and exchange ideas. After what had just happened with Robin, her mother, and the unannounced appearance of Sparrow, Jules felt like the world was spinning into sepia tones, and she didn't like that every image she saw was blurry with color.

"What a couple of days, huh, J?" Kenzie was trying to seem light, but his voice held on to some dark overtones.

"Yes sir, sure has been. Can't believe just last week, we were all sitting around the Ville with nothing going on ... now Sparrow's back, Robin's in jail, and I have no ideas on what the next step should be." Jules knew the two sitting in front of her would call her bluff if she tried to appear anything but frazzled. Smiling to herself, she realized that this exact moment perfectly explains best friends, kindred people, who are able in peril and sunshine, to see the beauty in each person. She was lucky to have such a group of friends, and hoped that they knew it. Between Robin and Sparrow, Jules was sure she had been a bitch on more than one occasion. It was hard to have always been the one to whom everyone else

turned. But it was a role Jules relished playing, knowing that the more accessible she made herself, the more willing she was to do whatever necessary, the more endeared others would be to her. This kind of backwards logic was the only way she knew how to form the semblance of a family. All the years and all the moments she was available for whatever anyone needed culminated in having two of the best people she had ever met sitting in front of her. To Jules, all of the everything was worth it, knowing that there were people who could really make her smile on a dime.

“Jules, sweetheart,” Biagos’ thick Italian accent interrupted her mulling thoughts, “How was everything tonight, eh? Good, right?”

Biagio was maybe six feet tall, with a thick head of unruly, curly hair. He was going deaf in one ear, causing him to constantly lean to one side whenever he spoke to anyone. His belly was rounder than the tower of Pisa, and he looked every bit the part of a fat and happy cook. There was something innately true with Biagio, even though he looked like he should be a slimy Italian. Jules always felt home whenever she entered the restaurant. In recent light of the way things had been going, anywhere that felt comfortable was a good thing.

“Everything was great B, thanks.”

“O yea, Jules, what did you have? Skin and bones, you never eat. Kenzie, we need to fatten her up! How about a cannoli?”

Jules immediately looked green with the mere mention of sweets, and knew that Biagio wouldn’t leave her alone without her acceptance of a dessert.

“I try Biagio! But this girl, she never wants to eat. Bring some cannoli and a few cappuccino and maybe we can convince her to eat a bit.”

“Sure thing Kenzie, I’ll bring them right over.”

One of the beautiful things about success is saying you’re going to do something and then having the option to tell someone else to do it for you. Biagio called to one of his servers to bring the trio dessert. All three of them picked up on the swag that Biagio had, even if it was his own place. The server, hesitating and nervous, brought over the sweets before anyone had a chance to say anything else. Jules admired that sort of control of a situation. Knowing that there were those around Biagio who would do whatever he asked was a trait she appreciated, and in some hidden corner of her heart, aspired toward. It wasn’t so much the power as the realization that, finally, she had arrived.

Sipping her steaming cappuccino, Jules mulled over the last forty eight hours. There was no explaining what had really happened, and it would be impossible to explain to anyone outside of her circle just how everything had changed. She knew that she needed to contact him, the one and only, but hesitated, knowing that contacting him would take the effort of out of the everyday and make her more vulnerable than ever.