

8/7/06

The first draft of Brick was written on a Mac SE on the poo colored carpeted floor of a cramped Santa Monica apartment during a summer of post collegiate unemployment in 1996. Although it was always intended to be a screenplay, it was first put to paper in prose as a glorified treatment which I enjoy calling a novella. The reasons for this circuitous writing process were twofold: first I was very intentionally cribbing from the novels of Dashiell Hammett, and thought that doing a prose pass imitating as best I could his style of writing would help shape the thing as a whole. Second, I did not own a professional screenwriting program, and had to format the whole damn thing using tabs in Word, so the less I goofed around with it in screenplay format the better.

The novella and screenplay are here for the curious. Both are untouched and unrevised, presented warts and all. The novella includes some new original illustrations by the immensely talented Naeim Khavari.

I have annotated the script with a few footnotes, which I hope prove more interesting than distracting.

Thanks are owed to Focus Features for not flinching at the words “free on the internet.” Also to everyone who has emailed me and posted on the Brick forums asking for the script, I can’t think of a cooler compliment than that, and I’m sorry it took so long.

Lastly, massive thanks to Naeim for the great illustrations, and for also not flinching at those four dreaded but beautiful words:

Free on the internet.

-Rian

Brick

the treatment/novella type thing

by

Rian Johnson

Illustrations by Naeim Khavari



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1.

The shallow stream ran past San Clemente High School and into a narrow ravine, trickling at last into a large, gaping drainage tunnel carved into the side of the freeway. It was nearly six thirty in the morning. An icy mist clung close to the ground, and the sky was wet gray slate. I sat hunched over beside the tunnel, my arms dangling like empty sleeves, my eyes set stupidly on the rolling water. I had been there ten minutes, not moving, and I didn't feel the cold.

Bobbing face down in the shallow water was a girl about my age, 18. Fairly pretty, very dead. My eyes had somehow settled on her thin arm, with its gaudy plastic bracelets, pale blue fingernails and short blonde hairs standing on end, all softly batting against her body like a docked boat.

My eyes were cold as my brain lumpishly tried to turn over, but I couldn't look away from the arm. I saw it in my head as it must have looked two days ago, very much alive, slipping a folded note through the slats in my locker.



TWO DAYS PREVIOUS

I opened my locker and the note fell to my feet. It was folded over sloppily into a triangle. I gently flattened it out, revealing scrawled pencil. "TWELVE THIRTY PICO + ALEXANDER". The locker cage emptied out around me and the first bell rang as I turned the note over in my dry fingers. Then I got my books and went to first period.

Lunch break found me on the corner of Pico and Alexander, about a block and a half north of the school. A wide empty street lined with shaggy trees. A payphone jutted incongruously from the cracked sidewalk, and I was less than startled when at 12:42 it began to ring.

I picked it up, and held the receiver to my ear in silence for a moment. A very small, thin voice said "Brendan?"

"Emily?"

"Yeah." Her voice was pinched with what could only be called meekness. "How's things?"

I answered slowly, deliberately. "Status quo."

"Yeah?"

"Uh huh."

"That's good." Her voice thinned out to a whisper, then a high, strained breath. She was crying.

"What's going on, Em?"

Strange noises were all I got back while she tried to stop crying and talk. She broke it with a cough. "It's good to see you, Brendan." That was an honest slip, and my eyes scanned the surrounding area for another phone she might be at. She was crying again. "It's been some time."

"About a month."

"Yeah. I didn't even know your locker. I had to ask Brain." Noises.

"Em, why don't we meet somewhere?"

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"I screwed up real bad. I really screwed up."

"Screwed up how?"

She was blubbering then, fast and incoherent, broken by half sobs and what I had thought was meekness but now seemed like fear. "I did what she said with the brick, I didn't know it was bad, but the pin's on it now for poor Frisco and they're playing it all on me-"

"Slow down now, what?"

"You gotta help me Brendan I think tug - Oh!" That last word was a sharp breath, and the line clicked dead just as a jet black Mustang glided by. I dropped the receiver and stepped out of the booth, spinning. There, another payphone up the hill -- empty. The black Mustang was a ways down the street. A man's hand dangled out the driver's window, and dropped a cigarette butt. It turned the corner and was gone.

I found the still warm cigarette stub. I didn't know from brands, but it was printed with a pale blue arrow near the top of the filter. In the distance the fifth period bell rang.



The Brain was a short kid with rusty yellow hair which reddened near his ears and glasses the size of Volkswagen headlights. I caught him in the hallway just before sixth period.

"What's the rumps?"

"You gave Emily my locker number?"

"Yeah, a few days ago. Was I wrong?"

"What?"

"To give it?"

"No."

"It's been so long, I don't know you two's stats."

"You seen her since?"

"No."

"How'd she ask for it?"

He shrugged. "She asked."

"She seem alright?"

"To me, yeah. You seen her?"

I chewed my lip. "No."

"I thought maybe she wanted to patch things up. You should try and see her."

"I'd like to. Keep your specs on, find me if she shows."

"Sure."

Sixth period broke and the masses were filing into school buses when I stepped into the school theater, also its cafeteria, a huge chunk of brown building. Inside the cavernous space was dark, illuminated only by the lit stage at its far end where the theater clan was rehearsing (a cynic might say 'raping') Into the Woods. There were no chairs. Drama geeks were scattered here and there in front of the stage.

I crept up behind a thin blonde girl with high cheekbones. She held a freshman boy's head in her lap, petting it like a dog.

When she turned and saw me her face was shadowed in darkness, but her words came carved in the shape of a mocking smile. "Hello, Brendan."

"Kara." I slung off my backpack and sat behind her on the floor.

"Come to see the show?" She kissed the freshman's forehead softly, purring.

"No, I didn't." I nudged the boy with my toe. "Lapdog, blow." The boy sat up, dewy eyed, and looked at Kara like a spooked puppy.

"Stay down." She pushed his head back in place, and chided in a sing-song "Don't be mean."

"I'm all friendly." To the dog: "Watch your head, kid, that thing bites."

He got up quicker, eyes hot, but looked at Kara. "Stay." Her fingers wove into his hair and put him down again. She nuzzled his ear with her nose.

"I need words."

"I'm listening."

"About Emily Kostish."

She stopped nuzzling a little too quickly, and whispered to the dog "Get me my purse from the dressing room." He got up and went. "Hurry!" she sang, and the sap broke into a trot. When she looked back at me she was smiling.

"Still picking your teeth with freshmen?"

"You were a freshman once." She slid her finger up my arm.

"Way once, sister." I growled, brushing her finger away. "You know the crowds. Who's Emily been eating with?"

"No one. Awol. I figured maybe she'd crawled back to you. You two were really in a pod there awhile, huh? Awhile back, I guess..."

"Who's the last crowd you saw her with?"

"Let's think... she was with you, but then I guess she ran out... that's harsh... then she was trying to get in with the big crowd, Laura and the Ivy bound cheerleading elite. You know Laura Dannon?"

"By sight."

"That didn't work. So she skipped around, trying to push in here and there, moving down the food chain, picking up bad habits. Last I saw her she was with Dode."

"Dode?"

"Dode, the carrows rat. Hit hard at the proverbial bottom. You really loved her, huh? Ouch, huh. She leaving you for that, ending up with Dode, taking them breaks over you. Must really hurt." Her sharp little teeth gleamed.

I tossed her a bored glance like I was tossing a bone and left. Her lapdog was back, panting "I couldn't find your purse."

She watched me go. "My what?"

Carrows family restaurant was a block off campus. It backed up against the weedy, overgrown edge of the ravine, a perfect little nest for a pack of rats. Five or six emaciated stoners slumped against the rear wall. Their black beady eyes followed me in sync. I picked the nearest one.

"Dode?"

"Nah, bra." Nothing else. The others stared back at me blankly. Alright, I moved to the next one.

"Dode?"

He shook his head hard. "Uh uh."

My methodical investigation was broken by a lanky kid with stringy hair two stoners down. "You looking for Dode?" I answered by walking up to him, nearly toe to toe. His head pushed down, he stammered "I aint seen him."

"Mug like that, I'd dodge mirrors too. Look up." His head jerked up, bringing his eyes with it. They were soft, thin and red. "Been binging, Dode? Hard days?"

A rat hissed "Scram, flatfoot. We're Jerr's friends here."

"Shut up," I barked back, "or you'll get what Jerr got." One of them spat. I turned to Dode. "You ate with Emily Kostish. Where's she eat now?"

"Damned if I know."

I grabbed his shirt. "Damned if you don't."

A bigger rat stood up. "Back off."

I didn't let go. "Throw one at me if you want, hash head. I've got all five senses and I slept last night, that puts me six up on the lot of you."

The big rat didn't sit down, but he didn't throw one either. "Just easy-"

I shoved Dode into the wall, anything but easy, and cocked my head at the big rat. He put his hands in his pockets, muttering something. Back to Dode. "Where's Emily eating?"

"I don't know where she's at, man, I aint seen her, I don't know who said I's seeing her but I aint, you got fed a bad dope there, you aughta be jackin up whoever fed you dat steada jackin poor Dode here-"

I dropped him. He scampered back against the wall, nodding at his fellow rats. "And I aint saying nothin more, bra, dat's dat."

The big rat sat down. "Nothing more here, bra. Now scram back to your cop friends."

I shrugged, already walking off. "I know when I'm beat."

Not thirty seconds after I was out of sight Dode took off like a rabbit, walking feverishly away from the school. I tailed him on foot past the freeway drain tunnel and into the dense weave of suburban streets between campus and the beach. When he stopped in front of a curbed Accord I had the high ground, shielded in a clump of bush fifty feet off.

Emily got out of the car and they embraced. They had quick words, with Dode doing most of the talking, Emily nodding along. Dode gave her a slip of paper, and she tucked it in her address book and pocketed it in her jacket. Then they embraced again, and Dode walked back towards campus. I stumbled through the hedges towards Emily, but she drove off fast.

I tailed Dode back to school. He went straight back to campus and disappeared into the big brown clump of theater. I stood outside for a moment, working my lip between my teeth. Dusk was already thick. I turned and walked home slowly, chewing all the way.





The next morning was crisp. Dode showed for his start-up hit behind Carrows then hoofed towards school, nervous, watching his back for me. I took the blood out of his face by popping out of Carrows as he passed and strolling casually beside him, two coffees in hand.

He shook his head and whined "Shat man, lay off my heels."

"Easy, Dode. I'm in a make-friends kind of mood." I held out the coffee.

He scowled. "Dangle."

"C'mon. It'll put a dab of white in your eyes."

He scowled again, but took it. "You weren't all luvy yesterday."

I shrugged it off. "My ratting Jerr was known, so you had to stonewall me to save face. My only play was to rattle you, see if I could scare you into making a careless play."

He barked laughter. "I held my ground, though, huh? So what's plan B, get all buddy?" He wheezed with amusement. "We gonna go for beers, me and you? Shoot the chick shat? Maybe a bike ride, would ya like that?" More wheezing. "Thanks for the mud, shamus. Dangle."

He tried to walk past me. In one motion I took his coffee cup and kicked his legs out from under him. When he was comfortably splayed flat on the sidewalk I handed him the cup back. "Tell Emily I want to see her. Tell her if she still wants my help or not that's her business, but I want to hear it straight from her."

"I don't know no Emily, where she's at-"

"Yeah, just tell her. She knows where I eat lunch." And I left him lying with his coffee.

I eat lunch in the back of the school on a small concrete wall beside a cement drain. It was isolated and dead quiet. I ate fast, my eyes up. I had finished my food and was reading a library copy of Lord of the Flies when a speck showed in the distance, down the paved utility road which bordered the campus.

The speck walked towards me slowly, then stumbled. I ran towards it, and got there in time to catch Emily and hold her on her feet. Immediately she put her arms around my neck and held on tight. I picked her up and carried her into the shade, and we sat for a moment in silence.

She looked bad. Too much makeup, not enough sleep. She sniffled, catching her breath, then spoke to her shoes. "I'm sorry about yesterday."

"Sorry about what?"

"Getting you worried, on the phone. I must have sounded pretty crazy."

"You sounded scared. You were asking for help, that's not crazy."

"No." She whet her lips and tapped her shoes together lightly. "It was dumb, I got paranoid over a really stupid thing, I was high, I went crazy for a little bit, but now you have to forget about it. I'm totally okay."

"You look it." She turned her weak eyes on me and I folded instantly. "Sorry."

"Brendan, I know you're mad at all these people, cause you think I went away from you and went to them. But you've got to start seeing it as my decision, stop being angry because where I want to be at's different from where you wanna be at."

My face didn't stop being angry just then. "Who fed you that line, Em?"

She looked back at her shoes. "And stop picking on Dode. He's a good guy."

"The Carrows rat?"

"He's a good friend."

"So what am I?"

"Yeah, what are you?" Her anger was choked and strained. "Eating back here, not liking anybody, how are you judging anyone? I loved you alot but I couldn't stand it, I had to get with people. I couldn't heckle life with you, I had to see what was what." There was a moment. She tapped her clogs. One had a hole worn through it. She stopped, and her face contorted, squeezing, as if every muscle in it was working to push tears out of her eyes. "I'm sorry Brendan" she choked, and buried her face in my shoulder, sobbing.

My throat was lumped up, and I had a tough time saying anything. "You were the only one I gave a damn about here. I've gone to hell since you left Em, I can't feel- I don't know. You were the good part of my life, now I can't remember what it was like. I'm not saying this right."

Muffled in my shoulder she sobbed "I love you."

"Yeah." I said.

She pulled back. Her face was a mess, but I'm sure mine wasn't porcelain either. She sniffed. "I've got to go. I'm going to come back tomorrow."

Her hand touched my neck. I tried to keep my voice straight. "You're coming back?"

"Yeah." She took my glasses off, then she kissed me and tried to walk away, but I caught her hand. I put my glasses back on.

"I can't let you leave without knowing what's going on. The brick and the pin."

She made a protesting noise with her nose, still runny from crying. "I told you,"

"You told me it was nothing and I know it's not that."

"It's not, but it's okay. I took something I wasn't supposed to, but it's alright. I gave it back, and I'm clearing it all up. Tomorrow it'll be all over. I'll be here." She tried to walk away again. I didn't let go of her hand. "Brendan, if you love me you've got to trust me. Let me go till tomorrow. Okay?"

"Okay." I pulled her back into a quick embrace, slipping her address book out of her jacket pocket. I watched her walk away quickly, then she turned the corner and was gone.



Through fifth period, English, I dissected the address book. Meaningless names and numbers, mostly. The slip of paper Dode had given her was the corner of a loose-leaf sheet. Blocky letters at the top read "11:30", and beneath that was a symbol:



In the background the teacher droned about the pig head's mouth in Lord of the Flies. There was nothing else in the address book.

The Brain tapped the corner of paper thoughtfully. "Hm."

We were sitting in the shade of the band building in front of school. Students criss crossed the wide lawn before us, lining up to wait for the busses. Brain's forehead wrinkled above his specs. He asked deliberately "Do you know anything else about this?"

I shook my head. "I told you everything."

"You aint got much. Why'd you let Dode fly when he came back to the theater?"

I shrugged dismissively. "It's their turf, I couldn't hear them without being seen, and that would only biff their play. Best to know it's there, let it ride and see what comes of it." Bored. I touched the paper. "But anyway."

"Hm. Well, if this is what I think it is, it didn't come straight from Dode. Not unless Dode's playing out of his league." He rubbed the paper. "I can only give you my best guess."

"Brain, I'm spent, I'd hock a lung for your foggiest notion. Let's have it."

"When the upper crust does shady deeds they do them in different spots around town. I know under the pier's one, down by the bike trails in the state park's another. There's alot of them. The pitch is they've got little symbols for each one, and that's how they tell each other the place, so word won't get around. So this might be that."

"But Dode wouldn't know it?"

"This is upper crust. Dode's pie pan grease."

"What other places do you know?"

"I've heard every secluded place in the burgh. It could be anywhere. Or this could be something completely different."

I studied the symbol. "Call anything up?"

"How many places in town start with 'A'? Or if it's a shape, or just a random symbol. I could make intelligent guesses till timber marries tu, but doesn't really matter - she probably went there last night. She said she cleared whatever it was up, right?"

"Why would she still have the paper?"

He shrugged. "Anyway, even if you figured it out, what good could you do? She's smart, she knows the play and she's gunning to square things. She'll tell you the tale tomorrow."

I looked up at the busses pulling into the parking lot. Gathered around a convertible Rabbit was a small cluster. Among them was a strongly built jock with a shock of blonde hair, and a lithe girl with long brown hair, sitting on the hood. I nodded slightly towards them.

"Laura Dannon there on the Rabbit?"

Brain twisted his head. "Yeah. Brad Bramish there with her. Cream on the upper crust."

Brad grinned too wide a grin. I said softly "He's a sap."

"Ever met him?"

"No."

Brain shrugged. "I won't argue. That's my bus." He handed the paper back to me. "Catch me up when you lick this thing, or when Emily gives you the story. I'm curious."

"Yeah." He trotted off. In the distance Brad and Laura laughed, and he kissed her. Her hair blew in the wind.



They were doing the Rapunzel scene in the theater. I nudged one of the Drama geeks with my toe. "Kara."

"She's out sick."

"All today?"

"No, I saw her fifth."

A "Shhhh!" came from the surrounding darkness, and I left.

The back of Carrows was empty. I didn't like that. I spent about ten minutes checking the cigarette stubs on the ground - no blue arrows. I walked home slower than yesterday.

That night I sat at my computer, tapping away at Tetris and starrng off into space. My mom's voice said "Good night" and the light turned off in the hall.

At ten thirty I was in bed. The slip of paper was propped up on my nightstand. I starred at it, my brain turning this way and that. The symbol grew larger, burning my eyes, and for a moment I was falling away into darkness. I heard rushing water, saw vague shadows, water over concrete, then I was under the water, screaming. I plunged upward and before I could catch my breath a woman with no face kissed me, her long hair plunging around me then pulling away. The last strands had just gone when I woke with a jerk.

My hair was wet with sweat, my breathing ragged. I caught my breath. The paper on my nightstand took my gaze and smoothed my breathing. I put my glasses on, dazed, and took a pencil from the floor. With smooth strokes I shaded the symbol so it looked like this:



I put the pencil down. The clock said 3:46. I laid back uneasily on my pillow. Everything was calm and silent. The worry didn't leave my eyes as I removed my glasses and clicked off the light.

The morning was cold. I left my house in the gray shade of an overcast pre-dawn. When I came near the ravine I slowed. The gentle sound of water didn't soothe me. I slowly, robotically picked my way through the overgrown weeds, down a path, and to the mouth of the drainage tunnel.

I stopped breathing and squatted on the embankment. My arms hung limp. My eyes were sluggish and strained, with too much going on behind them. My lungs emptied all at once, choppily. Emily lay face down in the water. Some dark red foam clung to the sand around her. She was bluish white. I looked at her arm.

For about ten minutes you might have counted two corpses in the ravine. I didn't move a muscle. My eyes were the first thing to shift, breaking off from the body and drifting stupidly into space. I followed them, walking mechanically up the embankment towards school.

After I was gone a lanky figure crawled from the bushes and out of sight. I wouldn't find this out for a while, and when I did it would spare me no grief.

I don't remember walking to school, but when I got there the campus was cold and nearly empty. I drifted across the barren lawns and into the library. The light inside was warm, sheltering the few souls peppered here and there at wood-colored tables. The Brain was there. He looked up, almost startled. "Hey, Brendan."

I fell into a chair.

Brain looked me over. "You're up early."

"I couldn't sleep."

He nodded, lifting his book. "Find Emily?"

I breathed out softly.

Brain went back to watching me closely. "You alright?"

"Yeah. What, are you here for zero?"

"Nah, I gotta take the early bus, cause the others don't run by my street."

"Bad break."

"Eh. Time to read's nice."

A stretch of silence passed between us while I methodically removed my glasses and cleaned them on my shirt. When I put them back on my mindset was sharper. I straightened up. My eyes fixed on his. "Brain, I want to find out who put Emily in the spot she's in."

"You're going to ask her at lunch, right?"

I shrugged, "Even if she shows, which I'm thinking she won't, she's not in a position to give me the whole story."

"Physical danger?"

"Yeah."

"Hm. Cops couldn't do anything until after she got hurt."

I shifted. "Bulls would gum the works for me anyway. They'd stomp their clodhoppers around, flash their dusty standards at the wide-eyes and probably find some yegg to pin,

probably even the right one. But they'd trample the real tracks and scare the real players back into their holes, and I want the whole story with this. No cops, at least for a bit."

"There's nothing to call them for yet." His face made that a question.

I looked hard at him. "You okay to op for me on this?"

"You're not giving me the straight."

"No, and you won't get much else till the whole thing's shut."

"You don't exactly butter a guy up, do you?"

"I need you on this, but that's the way it's got to be."

He thought for half a second. "Yeah, alright. What's first?"

"I don't know. What was Em's locker number?"

"239."

"Your mom have a cell?"

"In her car."

"Borrow it for a few days, get me the number." I stood. "Wait for my word, and cover for me first period. I'm going to be a little late."

I walked back across the soccer field, slowly, my eyes on my feet. Halfway across I stopped and stuck my eyes on the wet grass as my brain spun slowly behind my suddenly lumpish, stupid face. I looked up. The wind whistled. I pushed my glasses up the bridge of my nose and went on walking.

When I got to the ravine I waited on the edge for a few minutes, making sure it was deserted. Then I went down to the water. Quickly, without delicacy, I lifted Emily's body and pulled her back into the drainage tunnel. About fifty feet back I laid her against the wall. It was pitch black. I jumped when I saw two beady eyes peering at me in the darkness. A gull in her nest. I left without looking back at the body.



2.

Twenty minutes later locker 239 was busted open and I was sitting behind the Math building flipping through a stack of notebooks and loose papers. There were two photographs which had been taped to the inside of the locker door. One was of me and Emily hugging. The other was taken at a party. It was Emily and Kara leaning together, beers in hand, smiling. Another girl was to Emily's side, her arm around her neck, but the picture cut her off at the elbow.

The rest of the papers were just class notes, with the exception of a bright yellow card. A pair of eyes peering over a sequined mask was photocopied onto it, with "Party Wednesday Don't Miss It" at the top and "Call Laura for Details" at the bottom. "Halloween in January!" was printed on the back of the card, and a phone number was scribbled beneath it.

I met Brain in a hallway at lunch. He slipped me a piece of paper. "There's the cell number."

"Keep it on vibrate."

He patted his jacket pocket. "Yeah."

"Better stop meeting me in the open too. I'm going to start getting visible, and I need you on the underneath. I'll call."

"What's first?"

I ignored that. "I'm going to throw a few words at you, tell me if they catch. Brick."

"No."

"Or bad brick."

"No."

"Tug."

"Tug... that might be a drink."

"Drink?"

"Vodka and milk or something, or maybe not."

"Poor Frisco."

"Frisco. Frisco Farr was a sophomore last year, I think. Real trash, maybe hit a class a week. Didn't know him then, and haven't seen him around."

"Pin."

"Pin... the Pin?"

"The pin, yeah."



"The pin's kind of a local spook story. You know the Kingpin?"

"I've heard it."

"Same thing. Supposed to be old, like 26, lives in town."

"Jake runner, right?"

"Big time... maybe. Ask any dope rat where their junk sprang they'll say they scraped it from that who scored it from this who bought it off so, and after four or five connections the list'll always end with the Pin. But I'll becha you got every rat in town together and said 'show your hands' if any of them've actually seen the Pin, you'd get a crowd of full pockets."

"You think the Pin's just a tale to take whatever heat?"

Brain shrugged. "But what's first?"

"I'm gonna start kicking down doors and asking for a show of hands."

The first door I kicked led to the backstage of the theater. It was dark, a dress rehearsal was on. I pushed through forest scenery and past beady eyes of drama geeks sitting in shadows as a cracked rendition of "Into the Woods" came from the other side of the backdrop. I eventually made it to another door, and out into sunlight.

Kara was leaning on a railing by the loading dock in back of the theater, smoking a cigarette. Billowy evergreen bushes flanked her, and she didn't see me until I put my weight on the rail beside her. She was annoyed. "Hey Brendan. Here for the show?"

"No."

"Would you go then, honey, cause I've got this headache."

"Kara, I'm going to start shaking things up. Give me the story now and you might miss the bite."

"The story about what?"

"Alright." I turned and started walking away.

"The story about what?"

"I don't want to play games if you've got a headache. Get me if you want to spill it, but I can't guarantee safe passage after tonight." I was at the door.

"I don't know what-"

"Tell the Pin I'll be at the party tonight, and I need words." When I was covered by the darkness in the theater I turned to see her expression just before the door shut. It wouldn't have gotten her a quick loan at the bank.

I swung around behind the Brain as he came out of fifth period. "Tail Kara when you get out of sixth. She's got rehearsal till eight but she'll blow early. She goes home, drop her, else wait for my call." When he turned to ask details I was gone.

I walked home quickly, not slowing as I passed the drain tunnel. In my room I flipped over the party invitation and dialed the number. An older woman said "Hello?"

I hesitated. "Hello, ma'm, this is Tom, I'm a friend from school. Could I speak to..." I just barely trailed off, and she bit.

"Oh, hi, Tom. No, Kara hasn't got home from rehearsal. Can I-"

I hung up, and tapped the number with a pencil. "Hm." I took a telephone directory from beneath my desk, and a moment later was ringing another number. This time a young woman's voice answered. "Hello?"

"Is this Laura?"

"Yes it is."

I turned the invite over in my hands. "I'm calling for details."

"For what?"

"Details about the party."

"Who is this?"

"I don't think we've met."

"Well, then I don't think you're invited to my party. It's a rather exclusive gathering."

"I can imagine." She started to speak but I cut her off. "In future conversations I can suggest several excellent spreadsheet programs and daily organizers to aide your tracking of these rather exclusive invites, or perhaps a private CPA whose services may be rather pricey but a small penny to pay for assurance that your hobnob hole's gene pool isn't inseminated by lesser stock and diluted to a watery paste," she tried again but I kept going "rather like the near beer in those thirty dollar kegs they're loading into your kitchen."

"I'm hanging up-"

"But this is all academic at present moment, for, discretion of your invite sending aside, I have procured a certain someone's invitation, and would like details."

There was a beat of silence at the other end. "You think you're cute, whoever you are."

"Wait'll you get a load of my felt fedora and spats."

"Who are you? Or I'll hang up."

"You don't know me- I'll save you some time."

"I know everyone and I've got all the time in the world."

"Nonsense, your beer is getting cold. Ask whose invitation I've got."

Lightly, "What you said."

"Thought you'd never ask. Emily Kostish."

A longer beat of silence. "Oh yeah? You a friend?"

"Yeah, a real close friend. Confidant might be an exclusive word for it."

"Emily knows where the party's at."

"Emily's not coming, she doesn't know I'm coming, and I'm having doubts myself if you keep toying with me."

"Hold on a minute. Is Emily there?"

"I'm hanging up."

A shorter longer beat of silence. "15 Bush street, up in Stockton Cove. Buzz 42 at the gate. Nine o'clock. But who -"

I hung up.

At 8:30 I paused Tetris, showered and changed clothes.

At 9:30 I ditched my bike at the Stockton Cove gate, used the call box as a handhold to hop the fence and hoofed it up to a very nice two story house labeled "15". Shiny cars lined the curb. I paused behind one of them, took a short breath, then strode up to the front door and came in as if I didn't mind who saw me come in.

The living room was small and clean, with a two story ceiling and a railed staircase at one end. Fifteen or twenty clean people, some in costumes, were milling about in small cliques. I

pulled a couple of odd stares, but no one stopped me, so I went to the keg in the corner and drew half a cup as a prop. A thin guy leaning on the keg nodded and said too nicely "Hey Brendan."

"Tom."

"Who you here with?"

"That guy leaning on the banister."

He looked. "What guy?"

"Give me a second." I left him, planted myself against the banister and pretended to nurse my beer while I scoped the room. Brad Bramish, the jock with Laura in the parking lot, sat slouched on the couch. The crowd was dense around him. He held a cup and spoke much too loudly to a guy at his elbow.

"If coach wants to play me I'll play, but I can't put my best game in if I've got to worry about whether I'm going to be in there. Halftime last game, coach is pissed I ran it on a pass play, out on the field he says to me 'you gotta think about the team and you gotta' you know and 'if you run that ball again you're out', and I said to him you gotta let me play! I'm out there, let me play, and he's saying 'no you're out' and I kept saying 'Let me play! Let me play! Let me play!', just right in his face-

The guy laughed and nodded vigorously. "He was!"

"Just 'Let me play! Let me play! Let me play!' 'No you gotta' 'No, let me play! Let me play! Let me play!'"

Brad hunched forward and kept yelling that until his face swelled purple. Tom stepped in front of him, blocking my line of sight. I ran my eyes around the rest of the room, and caught Laura leaning against a divan. She wore a red silk kimono. Her sharp eyes were studying mine. I wagged my eyebrows back at her, and she looked away. I looked back towards Brad and cut off his 'Let me play!' by shouting "Tom!"

Brad fell silent. Most of the room followed suit. Tom turned around. I smiled good naturedly. "Move aside a step, will you? I'm trying to follow Brad's story, and it's difficult when I can't see his face."

I had the whole room looking at me now. Tom mumbled a "Sure" and stepped aside. Brad was starring at me stupidly. I flashed a dopey grin and winked, tipping my glass. He stumbled on with his story - "He doesn't give me a play to make, what can I do, you know?" then fell silent. The guy at his elbow started babbling.

I looked at Brad. He was looking at me. I pointedly looked from him to Laura. She was looking at me too, her eyes slightly amused. I cocked an eyebrow. The slightest hint of a smile took a corner of her mouth, and she wagged her eyebrows once at me. I glanced back at Brad. He was looking at Laura now, not amused at all. I looked back at Laura, Laura looked over at Brad, Brad looked back at me, and I looked back at Brad. The guy at his elbow chattered on.

Brad called at me. "Hey. What are you doing here?"

"Drinking."

"Uh huh." He glared at me.

"Alright, you got me. I'm a scout for the Gophers."

"Oh yeah." Not amused.

"Of all things, yeah. Been watching your game for a month, but that story just now clenched it. You've got heart, kid. How soon can you move to Minneapolis?"

A few snickers, but not from anywhere near Brad. Those around him looked on with interest. His voice was flat with anger. "Yeah?"

"Cold winters, but they've got a great public transit system."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Oh yeah?"

I leaned back. "There's a thesaurus on the shelf behind you. 'Yeah's under 'Y'. Go ahead, I'll wait."

"Who invited you?"

I felt Laura's eyes on the side of my face, but I kept my stare steady on Brad. "I kind of invited myself."



"I think you better leave then."

"No, I'm having too good of a time."

"Just the same."

I smiled slightly, and very deliberately crossed my legs. Brad's face got very tense. He glanced around at his group. They were looking back at him, all interested but none too angry. "Maybe you want to go outside."

"With you?"

Brad said 'who else' by lifting his arms.

"Sure." I said it as if he'd asked me to the movies. I got up and walked out, he followed me and the rest of the house started trailing after us.

I walked out into the middle of the front lawn and turned to face Brad. I took off my jacket while he hung back, mumbling "You know what's good for you you'll just beat it. Beating a small frye won't win me anything, and it's not going to do you any good-" Laura's face appeared in the front window and I cut Brad off by putting my fist in his face. He grunted but didn't lose ground. I threw my short stocky frame into his larger one and began tenderizing his midsection with jabs. He swung his arm around and tagged me in the ribs, then smacked the palm of his hand into my face, shoving me back onto the wet grass.

He came at me with his big fists clenched. I started to get up, then thought better of it, tucked my legs in and kicked him full force with both feet in the shins. He tumbled, and I came up fast, connecting hard with the point of his chin. He got his balance, and before I could throw another he threw one himself, then another, both into my stomach. I kicked his shin where I had kicked it before. Brad roared and hit me very hard in the face. I reeled back, then threw my weight forward, putting it all into a solid hook straight in his nose. There was the sickening sound of egg shells being crushed, and Brad fell straight back like a board.

He stayed down, holding his face. I staggered back, breathing hard, and looked up at the small crowd. Some stared at me, others at Brad, but nobody seemed about to do anything. I ran a sleeve over my face and walked unsteadily back into the house, pushing past the last few people coming out. "Hey, is there a fight?" one of them asked. I said "Yeah." and stumbled inside.

The living room was deserted except for Laura, sitting on the couch by the window. I walked through the room and out the other end without looking at her.

I fumbled down a dark hallway and poked around in several directions until I came into a dim den and found what I was looking for, a small wet bar. Clumsily I put ice in a glass and cracked the ice by pouring liquor on it. Someone entered the room behind me as I raised the glass to my lips. Laura's voice came from the darkness. "Whiskey?"

I paused, the glass touching my mouth. "Jameson." I downed half of it.

"I like a man who knows what he's drinking."

I licked my lips. "That's a pretty sick thing to be attracted to."

"You put Brad through the gears, didn't you?" She leaned against a leather chair. I turned to face her.

"It'll be awhile before he can see over his nose."

"Any reason why?"

"No." We sat in silence. She studied my face. Hers was lit with the soft broken light of the bar, such that her features seemed liquid.

"You need ice?" she asked. I gently shook my glass so the cubes clinked. "For your face." she added. I took another sip, silent. She stood up, said "Quit your yappin and fix me one." and strolled out a sliding glass door. I grinned and turned back to the bar, cutting mine to the top with water and filling another to the top with straight whiskey.



I joined her on the patio with two drinks in hand, gave her one, and stood beside her facing the view. San Clemente's twinkling suburban lights stretched out in the valley beneath us. Laura sipped her drink. "I'll never get through all this."

"Uh huh."

She sipped more. "So why are you here tonight?"

"I don't know. Emily gave me her invite, and the theme seemed enticing. Dressing up in January and all."

"You haven't seen Emily in a month."

"Really? Well gee, you've got me pegged, I better come clean. I'm here to see the Pin."

She smirked. "Really? Well gol, you're obviously on the in, I better get nervous and spill the whole evil plot."

"Pull yourself together. Sip your drink slowly." She did. "I saw Emily yesterday. And again this morning."

"Really? How is she?"

"She's safe."

"What has she told you?"

"I think I'll just let you guess at that for awhile."

"Yikes, I'm getting all nervous again. Listen, you're scratching the wrong door. I didn't know Emily well enough to know any details of what she was in, I just got wind of the downfall, and I didn't get any details of that, except that it was bad. So now that we're showing some cards..."

"If you haven't got a finger in Em's troubles, why'd her name get me into your rather exclusive party?"

"Cause I don't know, but it sounded like you did, and a girl's got a right to be curious. Now I'm not so sure."

"Well I'll put your mind to rest. I don't know a damn thing, but I want to, and I'm going to. Em's not talking, and she doesn't know the whole story anyway. There's my hand. You can spill what you know about the bad guys to me or what you know about me to the bad guys, your call."

"Which would you prefer?"

"I'll make out either way."

She studied me, her face serious, then asked almost to herself "What's your play in this?" I went to take another drink. A voice called Laura's name from the glass door. It was another girl. Laura flashed me a look then went to her. They had quick, quiet words and the girl left. Laura came back to me and said hurriedly "Will you wait here for me?"

"Sure."

"You'll stay right here and wait - I'll be five minutes."

"Yes."

The moment she was gone I ran around the side of the house, stopping at the corner to peek around front. Brad was gone, and a few stragglers were talking on the lawn. Laura came out the front door and swiftly cut over the grass to the sidewalk, going on down the street. I rolled over the small brick wall and into the neighbor's lawn. Hunched behind a hedge I could see a black mustang idling half a block away. A lean kid with a close shaven head stood beside it, arms crossed. Laura trotted up to him. I risked pushing past the hedge and down the sidewalk, using the cars as cover.

The kid wore baggy jeans and big black engineer boots. I couldn't see the details of his face. He seemed angry, while Laura spoke quickly, trying to appease him. He grunted something and, looking unsatisfied at best, got back in his car and peeled off.

I watched Laura look after the car, then turn and look up at the house. She walked towards it slowly. When she was gone I stood and walked back towards the gate and my bike, leaving Laura to find an empty patio with two half full drinks framing the twinkling suburban lights.

The next morning was brisk. I slumped against the campus payphone, licking my bruised lip. I wore dark glasses. Brain was talking through the phone. "You didn't call."

"Sorry. Kara went home though, didn't she?"

"Yeah, but she stopped at a payphone and made two calls that she didn't want on her phone bill."

"Get the numbers?"

"No. Sorry."

"S'alright. What period is it?"

"Third. You at home?"

"No, but I just got here. Are me and Brad front page news?"

"All around town. You really do that?"

"Yeah."

"Want to tell me why?" The slightest perceivable pause. "Never mind."

"Any other news?"

"Some. Laura Dannon came to me looking for you."

A very perceivable pause, but when I spoke it was as if I expected this. "She did, huh?"

"Second period, nearly shook me upside down. Can't say I didn't enjoy it, but why'd she come to me?"

"She's tapping Kara, and Kara knows you know me."

"Yeah, well. She's some piece of work. If I had known where you were I might have told her."

"That's the spirit. Look, you know a kid around the burgh, lanky, short shaved head, big boots, turns a black mustang?"

"I told you before I don't know the car. Those types are a nickel a pound, but nobody I know that you don't."

"Well, keep your specs on for any others - I need to find that kid."

"Okay."

I hung up the receiver and turned from it sluggishly. A lanky kid with a short shaved head and big boots punched me in the face. I hit the pavement, and my glasses clattered off. He was over me in a split second, kicking me in the thighs and stomach and beating my face and body with short, heavy blows. I saw now that he had a shiny scar shaped like a long, thin V running down the right side of his face. During the brief thrashing he grunted, but didn't speak. When he finished he walked off with several other blurry figures, and I heard a car peel out and roar off.

I didn't move for awhile. The class bell rang hazily high above my head, and blurry legs began criss crossing around me, each one smearing the world a bit more until it was so out of focus I couldn't see a thing, and then I was asleep.



The first thing my eyes focused on when I woke was a split section of a human lung. I muttered "damn" under my breath.

The school nurse waddled into the small, cramped room as I leaned up on one elbow. The cot creaked beneath my weight. "Well there you are, Brendan. Glad to see you've joined the land of the living, though not half as glad as you probably are I'd wager." She spoke as if she was performing a line reading, badly. "How does that noggin feel, or can you feel it at all, and if you can I'm sorry you can, but surely not half as sorry are you probably are in feeling it am I right?"

"I'm fine."

"You should be in time, but you're going to need rest. Now I've called your mom to pick you up, and I'm sure you're wary of spending the rest of the afternoon sitting on your keister watching the television set but I'm afraid that's the way it's going to have to be!" She grinned wide and mechanically.

"Could I have some aspirin?"

"Yes, I can see how you'd like some, and you're fully justified in asking for it. I'll just go and get it for you then. Back in a sec." She went. I slid painfully off the cot and picked the telephone receiver off the wall. I dialed.

"Mom? Hey, don't worry about picking me up. I'm fine, this guy tried to hit me, and he just bruised my cheek. I'll tell you about it tonight, but I've got a ride home. Yeah, it's alright. After fourth period. Okay. Bye."

I was back on the cot when the nurse came in with my pills. I took them, then slid down off the cot and said "I'll go wait out by the gym for mom."

"Not so fast buster brown though I'm sure you'd like to and I can't blame you for it. Gary Trueman would like a word with you in his office."

I sat in the tiny office in a small chair across from a man in his early thirties behind a wood colored desk and name plate, "Gary Trueman, Assistant Vice Principal".

"You didn't know this boy?"

"Never seen him."

"And he just hit you?"

"Like I said, he asked for my lunch money first." Trueman trained a good natured dubious eye on me. "Good thing I brown bagged it."

"Alright, tough break. I'm going to stop asking you about this now, I just want to talk to you." I didn't react. "You've helped us out before."

"No." I cut him off. "I gave you Jerr to see him eaten, not to see you fed."

"Fine, and very well put."

"Accelerated English, Mrs. Kasprzyk."

"Tough teacher?"

"Tough but fair."

"Right, good, keep at it. Anyway then, we know you're clean, and you've, despite your motives, you've been an asset to us. I think you're a good kid."

"Ditto."

"Thanks. So when I let this slide, it's going to be under that pretense, a pretense which is not infallible, which can only be tested so many times before you go from an asset to a pain in the keister. We clear?"

I pushed my glasses up the bridge of my nose. "There's probably going to be a few more incidents."

He was interested. "Oh yeah?"

"Enough to pop your pretense, so let's redefine it now. I'm getting close to another dealer. A bigger one. I don't know who yet, but when I deliver him it'll make the big city rags for you, easy. I don't know how much sliding you might have to let me do, but it might get pretty hot."

"The Veep won't go for anything I can't reasonably hide from him."

"If I get caught like that it's curtains anyway - I couldn't have brass cutting me favors in public. I'm just saying now so you don't come kicking in my homeroom door once trouble starts."

Trueman bit a thumbnail. "Okay. I won't figure you in for anything you aren't caught at. I'll ride it a little while, as long as it doesn't get too rough. But I'm laying the rules right here - anything comes up with your fingerprints on it, I can't help you. Also, if I get to the end of this and it gets hot and you don't deliver, I'll have to pin the row of split lips on somebody and I'll have you. There better be some meat at the end of this like you say, or at least a fall guy, or you're it."

"Fair enough." I stood to leave. "Oh say, you know anything about a Junior, Frisco Farr?"

"The name's not familiar. I could look it up."

"If you would. A class schedule would be great, but don't go poking at him. And I've got one more favor to ask."

Gary Trueman threw me out of the administration building by the elbow, shouting "Get the hell off my campus, punk!" after me. I recovered with a scowl, glanced around, and limped off.

I spent the next twenty minutes casually walking through the school, passing every open classroom door. Eventually I passed the right one, and when I was less than fifty feet past it Laura came shuffling out after me. I glared back at her.

"You're quite a pill." she muttered at me.

"Uh huh." I agreed.

"Want to tell me why you took a powder last night?"

"I didn't think you'd miss the gent who split your beau's beak."

"You left to see if you had me hooked, so here I am. Pin a 'sap' sign on me I'll wear it thin, but stand still and talk."

I stood still. She looked up and down the hall, then brought her face close to mine and spoke quickly. "I'm on the in, top level of the tower and I know everyone, but I don't know all what goes on. I knew Em when she tried to get with me and Brad, and I liked her. She had brains. But she wasn't us and it didn't work, so she split, but she took some souvenirs, some dirty habits she wasn't strong enough to control and a connection to the Pin to keep em going. With me?"

"So far."

"So a few months go by and the next I hear the Pin's got a bleeding tooth over some situation with some certain junk which Em was partial to, and the downfall's coming on Em's head."

"You think Em scraped the junk off the Pin?"

"I don't know, but whether she scraped or copped or just ran her tab round the world and into her own back, it must have been grand for the steam the Pin put out."

"Why didn't you just ask the Pin when you saw him last night?"

She grinned. "You're going off half smart, or just fishing? I'll bite anyway. That was the Pin's muscle, Tugger. You learned why this morning."

I sucked a bruised lip. "Tugger, huh?"

"He's nuts, and they say his dad's got a gun."

"I like him. He's the first player in this mess who hasn't talked my ear off."

"I'll clam up whenever you like." She tried a half smug look.

I grinned, "Fine." and walked away.

"Hold it." I kept walking. "I don't get you. I'm where you wanna know about and you're giving me the cold heel!"

"I'll get where I'm going just fine."

"I want to help you."

"Go away." I walked on a few steps. There was silence behind me. I stopped and turned wearily. She looked genuinely hurt. "Look, I can't trust you. You ought to be smart enough to know that. I didn't shake the party up to get your attention, and I'm not heeling you to hook you. Your connections could help me, but the bad baggage they bring could make it zero sum gain or even hurt me, so I'm better off coming at it clean."

"I wouldn't have to lead you in by the hand -"

"I can't trust you. Brad was a sap, you weren't, you were with him and so you were playing him, so you're a player. With you behind me I'd have to tie one eye up watching both your hands, and I can't spare it."

"You're not Brad."

"No, I'm not." I turned and walked away, and she didn't follow me.

On the way home I checked behind Carrows. Empty. About halfway home my luck picked up. A black mustang was parked near the street in a Ralphs parking lot.

I walked around it slowly. It looked as if it had just been waxed. I cupped my hands against the windshield and peered inside. Clean and empty. I pulled the door handle, which was locked. Something was coming towards me across the lot. I froze, head cocked slightly, my hand still on the handle. It was Tugger, chugging towards me as if he had something on his mind. I let the handle go and casually leaned back on the door, carefully removing my glasses and slipping them in my pocket.

Tug hit me like a train and threw me across the pavement. He turned back towards the car and took out his keys. I got up and came back towards him, my face stiff. He popped me once squarely in the mouth, and I fell to my knees. While he unlocked the door I stood up woozily. Grunting, he spun around and grabbed my jacket, pushing me back while he slapped me hard in the face, back and forth, three times. When he let go I dropped like a stone, catching myself on my hands and knees. I heard the car door slam as I blindly stumbled up and towards it. My hands touched the car and Tug came into focus, his face a blend of annoyed wonderment. The engine roared to life and the car peeled away from me. I nearly fell over again, but with a few staggering sidesteps managed to stay upright.

The mustang drove about a hundred yards out into the parking lot, spun around and stopped, facing me. Its motor purred deeply. I began to limp towards it doggedly, my head up and eyes fixed.

A crackling roar and short squeal of tires spat the mustang forward. It came straight at me, rumbling like a tank. I stopped walking and stood very still, my eyes steady. The gap between us closed in no time at all. The car must have been going fifty when it reached me. It sped past me not six inches to my left, brushing the edge of my jacket. Brakes squealed behind

me. I turned and loped towards the mustang, idling about fifty feet away. When I got to the window Tug starred at me blankly. I swallowed with difficulty. "I want to see the Pin."

Tug nodded slightly. "Yeah, I guess you do."

The trunk of Tug's mustang was pitch black. I tumbled back and forth as the car took corners like candy. I found a jack rod, and with a fair amount of jostling was able to snap the trunk lock. I held the trunk open about three inches, just enough to see which street signs flashed by. Music began to play from the car's cab -- "Sweet Baby James" by James Taylor.

We stopped behind a tan Cadillac at a house which had an elaborate wooden mail box carved as an eagle's head. This was all I saw before I closed the trunk and let Tug come around and pull me out. He pressed his palm over my eyes and dragged me indoors and down steep stairs, dropping me at the bottom.

I was in a very dim, narrow hallway with cheap imitation wood paneling on the walls. Tug walked on ahead and into another room. All I could see inside was Tug's shadow on the blistered plastic wall leaning over and speaking to another man's shadow. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness I also became aware of shapes around me, a number of boys, most dressed like Tugger, watching me from dim doorways.

Tug stuck his head out of the door and said "Alright." Arms grabbed me from the darkness, and I was pulled into the room at the end of the hall.

It was a mess. Clothes were strewn about, empty bottles were grouped in tufts here and there, bits of paper, notes, letters and books balanced in precarious piles. The overall impression though was not of jumbled chaos, but of a nest, comfortably woven and very worn in. A lopsided bed flanked one wall, and a small desk faced another. A slim figure with thin, wispy hair sat with his elbow propped on the desk, writing under a green bookkeeper's lamp. I was shoved into the center of the room. Tug and his clones slumped onto the bed and against the walls. I stood, my shoulders lopsided, facing the thin man's back. At length he sighed, put down his pen and swiveled his chair to face me.

He was mid to late twenties. His features were sallow, his eyes tired. He wore clothes which were so richly black it was difficult to make out specific items -- he was just one inky black mass from the neck down and eyebrows up. We watched each other for a few moments. I cleared my throat with a cough. "You the Pin?"

"Yeah." Another moment of silence. His eyes did not break from mine. "So now I'm very, very curious what you're going to say next."

"Maybe I'll just sit and bleed at you."

The Pin shifted in his seat, bored. "Helled if you're gonna go breaking my best clients' noses and expect me to play sandbag. Anyway you've been sniffing me out before then, sniffing for me like a vampire bat for a horse with a nick on its ear he can suck on. They do that." I blinked. "So now you got Tugger to bring you here, which he never does, and you got me listening, so I'm curious what you've got to say that better be really, really good."

"Call Ms. Dannon in from the hall first; she oughta hear this."

The Pin seemed amused. "No dice, soldier. Would have been a neat trick, though."

I shrugged, then spoke slowly. "I was going to make up some bit of information or set up some phony deal, anything so you'd let me walk. Then I was going to go to the vice principal and spill him the street address of the biggest dope port in San Clemente."

The Pin's eyes shot to Tugger, who didn't exactly jump in his seat. "He knows zippo."

I kept my eyes on the Pin. "1250 Vista Blanca, the ink blotter at the desk in the den in the basement of the house with the tacky mailbox." The world turned on its side as Tug pushed my head into the carpet. He held me by the back of my neck, spluttering "You gonna do what now?!"

The Pin walked towards us. I saw dimly that one of his shoes was twice the size of the other. He was saying "No good, soldier." The cronies around the room began to cackle with laughter. Tug's face was a mask of rage. He was choking me. My eyes swelled. "Alright, let up." the Pin said, but Tug didn't, and everything began to grow softer. Just as sound and sight began to blend together a new voice pierced the din.

"Tug, stop." It was a woman. Tug's face broke a moment, then clenched up again. He took his hand from my throat. I let my head loll to the side and saw Laura Dannon standing in the dark doorway. Then I saw Tug's knuckles, but just for a moment. The Pin's liquid black body seemed to spill out all around me, and for the second time that day I went to sleep in spite of myself.

I woke in a dark room. I was on the floor. On a mattress. On a mattress, on the floor in a dark room. I touched my head gently, but not gently enough. Tugger was sitting about five feet away, watching me like a hungry dog. I looked back at him through thick, glazed eyes.

"Where are my glasses?" I'm sure my voice wasn't very steady. Tug didn't seem to mind. He grinned slightly. "Hell with ya then. Which wall's the door in?" Still amused, he pointed. I rose painfully and shuffled in that direction, my hand groping for a doorknob. Tug shot up and shoved me down onto the mattress. He folded his arms, standing over me like some guardian statue. I winked at him, stood and lurched towards the door again. He took my shirt in his fist and drove me back into the wall, but froze when a door latch clicked. I was dropped back onto the mattress, and when I looked up Tug was sitting just as he had been before.

The sounds of a door being opened and closed came from the darkness. Tug kept his eyes on me. I heard footsteps, but still could not see the room's new occupant. Suddenly Tug vanished into thin air -- the room's blackness just seemed to swallow him. The next voice I heard was thin and whispery. "Sorry about this kid, but what the hell with that what you said before." It was the Pin. His disembodied face appeared a few feet above where Tug had been. "Where you were at, with all of us and the Tug a fist away, you've got to use your nut. Allay the situation. So yeah, you're not scared of me, I got it, but I'm also thinking you're a little nuts now, so you've got that trade off with your standing. But nuts isn't all bad, so maybe it was a good play. I don't know." He was standing in front of Tug. His black clothes and black hat blended perfectly with the dark room, so that his face seemed to bob about in space.

I stifled a cough.

"So," he continued, "Laura talked me down. Let's get you back with the living."



I chewed the cornflakes slowly. I sat in the kitchen on the first floor of the Pin's house, or rather the Pin's mother's house. She was a soft old lady in a pastel cotton dress, currently bent over the fridge mumbling "I thought we had orange juice, Brendan, I'm terribly sorry. How about Tang, or that's more like soda isn't it, or not soda but it hasn't got any juice in it, it can't be very, what's the word, very fortifying."

"Water's fine, ma'm, thanks."

"Now just a moment, we have apple juice here, if you'd like that, or milk, though you've got that in your cornflakes, I don't know if drinking it as well might be too much."

"Apple juice sounds terrific."

"It's country style."

"That's perfect."

She shut the fridge. Tug and Pin sat behind her, looking comfortably bored. She waddled over to the cabinets murmuring "I'll even give it to you in a country glass, how'd that be?"

The kitchen was just like the old lady, warm and soft. The Pin's appearance in this setting was striking; he resembled a sharp black hole against the soft, yellowing decor. He was eating oatmeal cookies with delicate, small bites. The old lady set a glass hand painted with a wilderness scene in front of me, then said "Boys?"

"I'm fine, Mrs. M." said Tugger.

"Thanks, mom." said the Pin and kissed her on the cheek.

She shuffled out of the room, muttering "Okay, well I'm going to go, um, do something in the other room now..." and left the three of us staring at each other.

"So hows bout we take another snap at hearing your tale?" said the Pin.

"I don't know. It starts out the same as before, and this floor ain't carpeted."

"We're cooled off."

"Yeah well, your muscle seemed plenty cool putting his fist in my head. I want him out."

The two shifted. The Pin grinned thinly. "Looky, soldier-"

"The ape blows or I clam."

Tug stood violently. "So clam! What've you got I can't beat out of you back in the basement?"

The Pin and I were perfectly still, watching each other. He spoke. "Give us a few minutes, Tug." Tug turned to him, but the Pin kept his eyes with mine. "I'll call you if whatever." Neither of us saw Tug's reaction, but he slammed the basement door hard when he left. The Pin went back to gnawing his cookie. "So?"

I put down my spoon. "About a year ago I bulled a Carrows rat named Jerr Madison. Know him?"

"Knew him till you bulled him."

"Yeah, well. He bit my ankle, I kicked. No regrets, except it got the VPs thinking they had me on a rope. When I made it clear I wasn't playing their hound dog, well they didn't like it. They keep calling me in, badgering me."

"Gee that's tough."

"I don't like being told whose side I'm on. So now they think I'm on your trail, I know their movements and I'm feeding them yours."

"I gotcha."

"You haven't got me yet."

"What, you wanna talk price?"

"Considering the benefits my services could yield, I don't think that's unreasonable."

"And what are your services exactly, just so I can be specific on the invoice?"

I shrugged. "Whatever serves your interests."

He stood. "Fair enough. I'll have my boys check your tale, and seeing how it stretches we'll either rub or hire you. You'll know which in a day or two." I stood but didn't follow as he opened the basement door and began descending the steep stairs. "We're done." he called.

The moment his dark form was lost in the basement's murk Laura came up out of it. She took my hand. "I'll drive you home."

Her sporty little convertible zig zagged the tangled beachside streets.

"Just drop me at school." She pulled a hard corner. "How long was I out?" I asked.

"Half an hour. It took all of it for me to cool the Pin down."

"Thanks." I said it flatly, but not without sincerity. We drove on in silence.

She stopped the car in the school parking lot and I hopped out. I studied her face for a moment. The engine idled softly. She smiled. "You trust me now?"

"Less than when I didn't trust you before. If you can tell me your angle in this, maybe I can."

"Come here." I leaned on the side of the car. Our faces were close. She spoke softly. "I don't have an angle. I usually do. I don't now, when I'm laying my neck farther than ever, I don't have a play. I don't know why. I want to help you. I see you trying to figure things out to help Emily get out of trouble, and I don't know anyone who would do that for me." She turned her face away from me, in that delicate state just before a woman starts to cry.

I straightened up, my face grave. "Now you are dangerous."

Throwing the car in gear, she peeled out and left me standing alone in the fading evening light.

I pushed past the forest scenery and into the womans' dressing room. It was hazy and cramped. Everything blended into the color of flesh. No walls were visible; it was all billowy piles of costumes and stacks of props. Kara sat at the mirror. I slumped into a chair.

"Brendan Brendan Brendan!" she sang, putting on eyeliner.

"Where's Dode flopped?"

She made a distasteful, silly face.

"I know you two are cozed up, so you'll tell me or you won't."

"Oooh, getting feisty." She giggled. "Last time we talked you were giving me a last chance."

"It worked. You went to Laura, didn't you? Told her my tale."

"All part of your plan?"

"Turned out to be."

"I feel so cheap and used."

"Gol, I must seem a real cad. Sometimes I just hate myself."

She grinned dreamily. "Whatever happened to us, Brendan?"

"Where's Dode flopped?"

She turned around to face me. "We were a pair and a half for a few months, weren't we? Sometimes I miss having someone I can talk to. You every miss having someone?" She was looking at me intently. "I guess you must."

My face was a mask. "I need to hear Dode's tale about Emily. It's important."

She played with her dress strap.

I stood, coughing. "Laura's working with me now, and I'll have the Pin and Tug in my corner soon. The sooner I get the truth from Dode or the truth about Dode from you, the safer you'll both be." Silence. "No? Pass it on to Dode, anyway. Maybe he'll have the sense to get out from under you before he gets hurt." I moved towards the door.

"You didn't, did you?" She wasn't looking at me, but was grinning slyly.

I left.

"So what happens now?" Brain asked over the phone.

"Now we wait for the Pin's answer. Unless there's something I missed, it'll be yes. Then I get under his skin and see what's what." I sat at my desk in my bedroom. It was late evening. "You stick to Kara, keep your specs peeled for Dode and stay away from Laura."

He was quiet a moment. "I think she's with us, Brendan."

"I'll let you know when she is." My voice was a bit sharper than it should have been.

"Okay."

I replaced the receiver and went to bed.



The next morning I opened my locker and a note fell out. It was folded into a star. I smoothed it out. "TWELVE THIRTY PICO + ALEXANDER". I stood frozen looking at it while the locker cage emptied around me. I pulled the other note from my pocket and compared them. Different handwriting. The class bell rang. The locker cage was deserted except for me, and silent except for heavy footfalls which drew my attention from the notes. It wasn't deserted after all. A big kid with a lumpish face walked towards me. He wore a black trench coat over his bulbous shoulders, and his black hair came down over his eyes like a sheepdog's.

"You the Pin's?" I asked. He didn't answer, but kept coming towards me. "So what's his answer?" He kept coming. My body tensed, and I tightened my hand into a fist.

When he was five feet away I heard a metallic click, and a long slender switchblade gleamed in his right paw. My fist and body slackened and I jumped backwards as he swiped the knife at my torso. Before he had wound up for another slash I was running.

The wind rushed in my ears as I ran across the campus square. The lug was close behind me. I dodged over a bench, through a hedge and into the covered hallways on the west side of campus. Our footfalls clapped on the cement, mine quick and sharp, his heavy and thick. I flew around corners, skidded and doubled back, losing sight of him. I stopped, heart pounding, with hallways to either side of me. His footfalls echoed from wherever they were coming from such that they seemed to be on either side. Making a choice, I dashed down the left hallway. Wrong choice. The lug loomed over me, his knife hand flashing. My jacket's shoulder tore open, and the white filling inside turned red. I stumbled back blindly, got my footing and got out of reach just as the knife swung back again.

He chased me down a long straight hallway, footsteps clattering wildly. I huffed and puffed and sprinted the last half of it, getting about forty feet of a lead on him before rounding the corner.

I ran about ten paces down the hall then slid into a sitting position. The lug's footfalls were coming down the long hallway. I kicked my shoes off. His steps quickened and got very loud, very near. I was up, running towards the corner I had just come around, towards the lug, but I was running silently now. He was not. His clanging steps crashed like cymbals in my ears as we both came around the same corner in opposite directions at full speed. I slid like a baseball player, driving my legs into his. They tangled, and the lug pitched forward with frightening momentum. He hit the hall's metal handrail with his arms and head, a hollow gong reverberated and he fell like a puppet with its strings cut.

After I had caught my breath I put my shoes on and quickly searched him. A wallet with about a couple twenties and his student ID, three hash pipes, ten or fifteen joints, a baggie of weed, and a large brownie in another baggie. I left it all on him and staggered off.

"Burns," I breathed heavily into the payphone, "Chuck Burns. Big lug with hair like a sheepdog."

"I know him," the Brain was saying "I just can't pin him to any crowd. He's definitely not muscle for anyone. He taps the Carrows crowd but doesn't hang with them. If you've got a guess I could check it out-"

"The Pin. If he's with the Pin everything's kablooie and I gotta blow the burgh."

"I'll check it out."

A tan Cadillac was floating across the school parking lot towards me.

"Never mind. If I don't call you back by three I'm 86'd, call the bulls." I hung up and began walking at a normal pace along the sidewalk.

The Cady slid up beside me, and I stopped walking. The door swung open and a voice from the darkness within said "Get in." With no perceivable hesitation, I did.

I sat in the back seat beside the Pin. The windows were tinted and the car was very dark. The seats were pink vinyl. We began to drive.

The Pin was silent, not looking at me. I followed suit. Finally I said "So?"

"So." he repeated. "Tangles." A stocky kid in the front seat turned around to look me in the eye. My body tensed up but my eyes remained calm. The kid reached into his jacket. I didn't flinch. For a moment he stayed like that, hand in his pocket, eyes set thickly on mine. My face was placid.

He pulled out a slip of paper, a check, and handed it to me. "That's what you'll get every week for your services." said the Pin. "Less of course there's a specific job involved, in where you get sliced in with my crew." Tangles turned back around. I put the check in my pocket. "Square?" the Pin asked.

"Yeah."

We drove on in silence. "First off I gotta lay something out. You're coming into a certain situation, and I'm bringing you in sort of because of it." He breathed. "I didn't tell Tugger to hit you for the Brad Bramish thing. Laura and I, I decided I oughta hear what you were gunning for before I made an enemy. Tug just did it, though. He was hot, and he just hit you. He's been doing that."

"Yeah?"

"He's got my best interests, I know, he's loyal, he just gets hot."

"Muscle you can't control's no good at that."

"You're working for me, not Tug, that's all."

"Alright."

Silence. He held his hat in his hands, fingering the rim. "We're doing a thing down at the Hole tonight. Know it?"

"South of T Street, yeah."

"It's sort of a welcome you in thing. Eight o'clock."

The car stopped. I climbed out onto the exact spot of sidewalk they had picked me up on. I checked my watch.

At 12:32 the phone on the corner of Pico and Alexander rang. I put the receiver to my ear.

"I know what you did." The voice was warbly and very low. "I saw what you did." It was being filtered by something.

"So?"

"Anyone I tell, it would ruin you some way. And I'm going to tell someone."

"Are you making an offer?"

"Maybe. Or maybe I'll just do you in."

"Hire another hash head to blade me?"

"Don't need no blades, shamus. I just gotta squawk."

"What do you want?"

"Just to see you sweat." Click.

I replaced the receiver and stood still for a moment. Then I put a coin in and dialed another number. The Brain answered. "Brendan?"

"Yeah."

"You alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. So keep digging on the Burns lug, and hunt around for Dode too. He set up whatever Emily walked into, it's getting more and more urgent we talk."

"Alright. Trueman was looking for you."

"Trueman and the VP?"

"No, just Trueman. Third period, he came around."

"Asked for me?"

"No, but looked."

"That's not good. Alright, keep me posted."

I hung up and went into a bad coughing fit. Soft rain began to patter against the phone booth.



By eight that night the rain had thinned into a marine mist. I trotted down a narrow sandy path and out onto the beach. A bonfire blazed a few hundred yards away. Stuffing my hands in my pockets I trudged towards it, but was only halfway there when I came upon two boys. One was rattling off a story full steam, shadowboxing for emphasis. It was Tugger.

"...takes me for a schmoe that I'm gonna back off, so I take the first guy with a belt below the belt, which, since I'm outnumbered, so the second and third guys pin me but I flip one over onto the other one, peg this one into the ground with his buddy, then I just kick hell for leather and I figure one left, the gig's duck soup, but no this guy whips around and what's he got a pole with a thing on the end you put paint rollers on, but there aint a paint roller, so it's just this metal thing he whips and I just you know fall back and kick his legs out then rub him up, but I get walking away and whoa, it's raining or what, no it's blood, I got sliced on the face. Here. So that's what that is. No big deal."

"Shuck, man." said the other in admiration, shaking his head.

Tug lit a joint. The warm glow gleamed off the triangular scar on his face. He saw me. "Hey. Up there." He stalked off down the beach, wagging a thumb towards the bonfire.

"Shat, man. Shat-toe! That's some tough pike there." The faceless boy wagged his head harder.

"Yeah." I agreed. This delighted and agitated the boy to no end.

"Things says his dad's got a gun."

"Yeah, and a belt." I trudged towards off towards the fire.

The bonfire was built up quite high, the flames licking four and five feet into the air. A boom box blared thrash music which sounded like sheet metal being stamped. Tugger and several boys dressed like him spazzed to the music and took turns jumping through the fire.

The Pin sat with a distant look trained on the fire. He muttered something to a boy beside him.

I sat on the other side of the fire, picking my teeth with a toothpick. The boy appeared over my shoulder and spoke close to my ear. "You get enough chicken?"

"Yeah."

"Was it good, you get enough to drink?"

"Yeah." The boy gave a big thumbs-up sign to the Pin, who nodded.

"He wants words." The boy said, and disappeared.

"So I'm going to start you on the dope circles, cleaning up the Turkish dues, pulling in the strags." I sat in the cold sand. The Pin sat in front of me, facing the breakers.

"Small fries." I said.

"Yeah, well. Just to see how you handle. Anyway there isn't much else doing. I'm tailing out this big deal, but that's almost done."

"Oh yeah? What was it?"

"Big time. Biggest I ever done, and there was a snag in it, but it's almost done now."

"What was it?"

"It's over." A loud wave broke, creating a thick white line on the black ocean.

"Almost, you said."

"It's over enough. You're gonna make me curious, being so curious."

"If I'm playing out of your basket I've got to know the lay."

"Yeah, well the lay is it happened before you did, so you know bunk." He said that definitively. Silence. "You don't want to know." His voice was softer. "Knowing's really... complex. There's too much stuff sometimes, too many angles. Sometimes you wanna, just, really, you know, just go, be gone. And like you can see the stuff piling on, catching up, and it's just a slow train coming when it'll hit you, and whatever. Life, man. This world, it's all just nothing."

I turned my head. Tugger was coming down the train tracks which ran the length of the beach.

The Pin didn't notice him. "You read Tolkien?" He asked.

"What?"

"Tolkien, the Hobbit books?"

"Yeah."

"His descriptions of things are really good."

"Oh yeah?"

"He makes you want to be there."

The waves crashed. Behind us, with no warning at all, a train shot by. Tug stood with his hands jammed in his pockets, flashing lights and gleaming metal streaking and squealing behind him.

I was awoken at five thirty the next morning by a ringing telephone beside my bed. I put it to my ear.

"Don't go to class." It was the Brain.

"What?"

"Fifth period Trueman *and* the VP come in asking for you."

"Agh."

"Loudly. Did they call your mom?"

"Probably. I got home late."

"Get out of there too, then. Meet me behind the library. I've got some stuff."

The morning was gray and cold. The Brain and I sat side by side against a long brick wall. He handed me a photocopy of a news clipping. "SAN CLEMENTE YOUTH HOSPITALIZED"

"Frisco Farr was found on a sidewalk outside Pinkerton's Deli three weeks ago. He was in a coma, his stomach contained a sausage sandwich, a horse dose of Heroin and traces of Choloric Tricemate, a poisonous chemical found in laundry detergent. Frisco's still under and nobody's talking, so nothing's come of it."

"OD?"

"No, the chem the junk must have been cut with put him down."

"Huh. Bad junk. Bad brick... could that form of Heroin be called 'Brick'?"

"No -- it was a concentrated powder, its street handle's 'whip' or 'rock' or 'brock'." He fished in his pockets. "Here. From Laura."

He pushed a note into my hands. "I gotta get voicemail." I muttered, opening it. It read "Meet me at the southeast corner of the school at 9:30." I crumpled it into a ball. "No. Tell her I'll be at the Pin's at one. Any luck with the lug?"

"Not a one. He could have been working for anyone."

"Keep looking. Was that what Trueman and the VP came to tag me for?"

"No." He set a local newspaper in front of me. The headline read "SAN CLEMENTE GIRL MISSING". Emily's picture was below it. There was an uncomfortable silence between us.

"This isn't good."

The Brain just looked at me. Maybe he was angry or disgusted, I couldn't tell. I didn't look back at him. I took his cell phone and dialed a number. "Mr. Trueman, please."

I stood, fanning the three notes in my hand. The handwriting for each of them was distinct.

"This is Trueman." said the phone.

"What the hell are you doing asking for me in class?"

"What the hell are you doing out of class?"

"What?"

"The VP and I needed to ask you a few questions about Emily Kostich, who you might have heard is missing. It's a very serious thing. The police are involved. The VP and I knew

you two were close, so the VP and I came to ask you questions, but you were truant. If you don't have a valid excuse-

I hung up.

"What?" asked the Brain.

"I've been cut loose. I'm not safe here. We shouldn't have met in the open. Alright, lay low, but ask on the underneath for Dode. That's all that matters now, find Dode, but do it on the underneath, get it?"

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. Just find Dode."

The bird of prey mailbox eyed me suspiciously as I rapped on the Pin's front door. Nothing. With a little pressure the flimsy screen door swung open.

The kitchen was empty. My feet did various things to the warped, sticky linoleum, making too much noise. I gently opened a narrow door (which nonetheless creaked horribly) and descended the steep, narrow stairs into the dark basement.

Fumbling, I found a switch and made light in the hallway. Everything was deathly still and quiet. Barely breathing, I went into the Pin's den. Empty. Slowly first, then with greater confidence I rifled through the Pin's desk. I found papers and trinkets, all meaningless. I felt beneath the desk -- there was space between its underside and the bottom of its top drawer. I pulled the drawer out and stuck my hand into the space. When I pulled it out it held a stack of hundred dollar bills about two inches thick. I reached in again. Another. Another. And another. I thumbed the bills. Pure C notes, all the way down.

I froze. Something had creaked in the hallway. Silently I put the stacks of bills back and replaced the drawer, my eyes on the doorway. I crept towards it on the balls of my feet.

The hallway was empty. I went towards the stairs, then stopped for a moment, listening. Silence. Biting my lip, I turned and crept into the darkened door at the other end of the hall.

It was dark except for sunlit curtains on a tiny window high on one wall. I pulled the curtains aside, and a shaft of sunlight hit the bare concrete floor, spilling just enough light to reveal a figure standing a few feet in front of me. I jumped back, and he jumped back in turn. It was a framed mirror, leaning against the wall with other broken furniture and junk. The vast majority of the room was still dark. I walked the heavy mirror away from the wall and into the shaft of light, reflecting it around the room like a flashlight. More junk, a mattress, bean bag chairs, more junk, and then a strangely bare corner with a single white lump in it.

Propping the mirror against something I went and kneeled at the white thing. It was a brick of white powder, about five by ten inches. There was white chalky residue around it -- there were others there before. I stood, looking down at it.

Behind me, my image in the mirror moved. Except I hadn't moved. It was someone else, in the room, behind me. I spun on my heel and caught a hand in the throat. Tugger threw me back into a beanbag chair. I topped over backwards, righting myself just in time to get pinned against the wall. Tug pulled a small handgun from somewhere and pressed it against my cheek. The shafts of light criss crossed behind his bald head. "What with the poking, genius?! Maybe you're poking for your bull friends!"

"Don't be a sap. I can't even face up at school, the VP's so hot for me."

"Yeah well. Maybe you're looking to make good."

"I'm looking to find this big game the Pin's played, not to gum it, but just so when its tail jams in my back I'll know who to bill for the embalming."

"You oughta ask him what you wanna know."

"I did. He didn't tell me." Tug loosened his grip slightly. I still gasped the words like a dry fish. "When a gee I'm paid to side with won't give me the straight that makes me nervous. Makes me angry."

Tug drew back a bit. "Yeah, well. That's understandable."

Tug set orange juice in a country glass in front of me. We were in the kitchen. He paced. I sat, sipping.

"There was ten of them. I don't know where he picked them, he didn't tell me."

"Huh." I said sympathetically, stifling a cough.

"So we got ten kils of brock, there aint enough marks in the whole burgh to eat that. So he unloads eight of em up north, Anaheim, Newport, even up to LA. I don't know who."

"Didn't tell you."

"Yeah. So that's the last brick in there. We gotta break it into doses, sell em off round the high, maybe some by Shorecliffs."

"What about the ninth brick?"

"Ah yeah. There were problems with that."

"Yeah?"

"It, uh..." He stopped. His face was dull. The scar on his face reddened slightly. He was thinking harder than he was used to. Then he pulled his head up as if coming out of a trance and spoke quickly. "It disappeared. Someone skimmed it. We started raising hell with all the likely suspects, and whatayaknow, it came back. But it came back bad. One of ours took a dose off the top, and it laid him out."

"Frisco."

"Yeah, poor Frisco. You heard about that."

"Sad loss."

"So they say. I say a sap on his back's just a flat sap."

"So what was the downfall?"

He shrugged. "Nothing, yet. We've got our eyes out for whatever, we'll track down the rat. Just takes time."

"I heard something fell with Emily Kostich."

"Emily who?"

"Kostich."

"Don't know her."

"Huh." A quiet pause.

"Has the Pin talked about her?"

"Not to me."

"Yeah, he might know something. Ask him. Tell me what he says, cause if you heard something, you know, I wanna check."

"Sure."

The screen door swung open, and the Pin walked in. If he was surprised he didn't show it. "Pow wowing?"

"Just shooting the shat." I said.

"Yeah, just shooting it."

"Good." said the Pin. He walked to the table, his big foot clunking on the linoleum. He looked me over. "You alright, soldier?" I moved a hand dismissively, sniffing. "So, Tug, I got a call. Someone who says they know something about Emily."

"Emily?"

"Emily Kostich. Where she's at now. Says we'd want to know. Wants to meet."

"Yeah?" Tug was uncomfortable.

"So we'll meet him. Four o'clock. Brendan, you know Emily, didn't you?"

Tugger looked at me. "A while back." I said.

"You've heard she's missing?"

"Yeah, I heard that."

"So maybe you want to come along too."

"What has Emily got to do with you?"

He looked me in the eye. Then he looked at Tugger. "Show, maybe we'll all find out." He gave a slip of paper to Tugger. "Four o'clock."

Tug glanced at the slip, then slid it across the table to me.



A horn honked outside. I looked up from the paper and said in a dry voice "That's my ride."

"Four o'clock." the Pin called after me as I left.

I fell into Laura's car. "A payphone, anywhere." I said roughly.

"What-"

I threw the car into drive, and we jerked forward.

"The mobile customer you have called is away from the phone-"

I hung up violently. Laura's car idled on the curb. I walked towards it shakily, but was only halfway there when a coughing fit hit me. I hacked and spluttered, dropping to my knees on the sidewalk. I felt Laura's arms around me, except it wasn't Laura, it was Emily. I flipped over backwards into darkness, Emily kissing my mouth. She pulled away and I felt dampness on my cheek. I shot up violently.

I was in the back seat of Laura's car. The top was up. She held my head in her lap, dabbing my face with a wet napkin.

"What time is it?" I barked, but my voice was warbly.

"Lie down, Brendan-"

"What time-"

"You've got a fever, you've got to go to the hospital or"

"What time is it?"

"Three forty. You've got to rest, you're feverish."

I broke away from her grasp and threw myself out of the car. We were in the school parking lot. I lost my balance and fell to my knees, coughing. Laura came out beside me, yelling "Get in the car, I'm taking you home."

"Shut up!" I yelled at her till she did. My head was spinning. "Okay, you've got to, what you've got to do is drive around to the Carrows lot. I'll be up on the, the blacktop, the basketball field. So you've got to go by you or me to get down there. If you see anyone but the Pin or Tugger or their crew go down into the ravine, honk four times, long short long short. But don't be seen."

"Get back in the car."

"Do it! Will you do it? This is where you help me, this is it. I need you to do this." I was holding her shoulders. She nodded.

"Alright."

The wind blew cold and bitter over the pebbly black pavement. I stood crookedly in the center of the basketball field, a flat plane of asphalt about the size of a football field with a dozen or so basketball courts faintly outlined on its surface. The baskets stood at straight attention, lined up down the field's length like pavilions.

The black field was barren. I waited. My legs were weak. Then, a speck. Coming towards me, across the field. I slumped towards it. Closer. Still a dark dot. Closer. Then my face snapped into recognition, and I stopped walking. The figure stopped about twenty feet away.

I shook my head. "What are you doing, Dode?"

He grinned. He held a newspaper in his hand. "You gonna stop me?"

"What do you think you're doing, Dode?"

"I saw you. I saw what you did."

"What'd you see?"

"I saw you."

"What'd you see me?"

"You were with her, dead, and you took the body."

"Yeah, I did. That's all you saw? What about before?"

"Before what?"

"Did you see who killed her before I got there?"

His face was ashen. "You killed her."

"I found the body, Dode."

"You, I thought you didn't, but we figured out, I got the news on ya, cause you hid the body, why wouldn't-"

"Who's 'we'?"

"Shut up! You're always talking, always this and that smartso, you're gonna shut up now!"

"I didn't kill her, Dode."

"You're not gonna talk this!"

"Dode, I know you're thinking of Em, I know you tried to help her-"

"Shut up! You're gonna shut your" sight and sound faded for a moment like a radio under a tunnel, then came back "put it over real nice-"

"-so I'm telling you now you're in over your head, you don't want to put your hand in this..."

"Shut it!" He shook the paper at me. "She's dead, you-"

"Why was she scared, Dode? She came to me, who was she scared of? I think I know why, I just gotta know who!"

He threw the paper. He was wide eyed. "You're trying to confuse me."

"Dode."

The papers began to blow in the wind. "I'm gonna bury you, smart guy." He walked stiffly towards the ravine. I put a hand on his shoulder, but shrank back in a coughing spasm. He grabbed my wrist and hit me in the face. I hit the pavement.

Emily flew in front of me like an angel, glowing. Then she got dimmer, her wings spluttering out, and she became her picture in the newspaper article. I crumpled it off of my face.

The black field was empty. I was lying in a fetal position, newspaper clinging to my chest and feet.

My head felt like a balloon of warm blood. I was just barely able to get to my feet. My legs ached. My sight was blurry. My chest burned. I began to walk as fast as I could. I coughed and spluttered. The wind blew against me, and the black field seemed impossibly long. I kept limping forward, towards the ravine.



I slid down the embankment and landed on my feet on the streambed.

Four or five flunkies dressed like Tugger were scattered about. Tugger was there, leaning against a rock. The Pin stood with his hands in his pockets. Dode was on my right, his eyes darting back and forth. Everyone was looking at me.

The longest silence passed. I cleared my throat. "What've I missed?"

More silence. Tug was looking at Dode. The Pin was looking at his big foot, scraping the rock he stood on with its sole.

"Dode here," said the Pin, "says Emily Kostich is dead."

Nobody reacted to that, so I tried not to. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. He says he knows who did it. He says he knows where the body's at." Silence. "And he says he wants more money than I think the information's worth."

"That so, Dode?" I asked, trying to keep my voice steady. I looked at the Pin. "So walk. What's the info have to do with you anyways?"

"Plenty." said Dode.

"Plenty, he says." said the Pin.

"What, does he want cash up front? He's a pot skulled reef worm with more hop in his head than blood. Why pay for dirt you can't believe?"

"You'll believe this." said Dode.

"Shut up. Why're we getting our shoes wet for this horse feathers?"

"You'll believe it," said Dode, "cause its someone close to you. Real close."

"If you pay this clown outta the coffer you pay me I quit."

"Real close." said Dode.

The Pin's jaw was set tight. Tugger held a stick in his hand, snapping bits off the end of it. His hands were tensed up.

"I'm leaving. Let him milk ya if you want to." I stepped away.

"Stay." said the Pin. Then to Dode: "It's still too much."

"No it's not. You won't complain when you hear it."

Tugger's face was an angry mask. He twisted the stick in his hands. His scar was the color of liver.

"So maybe you should." I murmured, my eyes on Tug.

"It's too much." said the Pin.

"It's not," said Dode, raving now, confident, gesturing wildly, "cause it's real important to you, cause the person who killed her's real close, and cause he's got a lot to lose, and he knows if I don't bury him by spilling to you I spill to the bulls and bury him for real, and he's really really scared-"

Tug sprung like a cat. He struck Dode twice in the face, grabbed his hair and drove his nose down into his knee.

"Tug it's alright!" I yelled, stumbling towards them, but Tug had Dode on the ground, kicking him in the stomach and chest.

"Tug, stop." said the Pin in a commanding voice.

He did. Dode raised his head. I saw the gun before anyone else, saw it coming out of Tug's jacket. I yelled something and tried to run forward, but my foot slipped and I fell into the shallow water.

Tug leveled the gun at Dode's head and fired one shot. The back of Dode's skull came off. The rapport reverberated through the black tunnel behind them, and birds flew out. Dode remained hunched upright a moment, then fell limp into the water.

Silence for a moment. The Pin's face was frozen in a stupid, lifeless expression. Tugger turned to him, gun in hand.

"Tug..." said the Pin thickly.

Tugger raised the gun and fired at the Pin. Dirt kicked up beside him, and he scrambled back. I crawled towards Tug, yelling for him to stop. He fired twice more, both misses, and the Pin was away, up over the hill.

Tug lowered the gun. Sirens were sounding in the distance. Every muscle, every inch of my body failed me. With a vague sense of finality I collapsed into the shallows and knew no more.



3.

I woke without visions or dreams or much fanfare at all. I just popped into the waking world in a dark room with a ceiling fan. A Tug clone beside my bed sat up. "He's up!" he called.

Cups and bottles littered the bedside table, the only other furniture in the room. "What time?" I asked groggily.

"Five, well, it's tomorrow, though. You been asleep the last day."

"Are we in jail?" I was still slurred.

Tug walked in. "Hey man." I didn't reply. I rubbed my temples. "We got real worried. Laura, she kept giving you water, saying we gotta take you to a whatever, hospital, but I couldn't, you know."

"What's the stats?" I grumbled.

"Everyone's just laying low. You're here with us, at my folks place. They're gone. The bulls got Dode fore the tide took his body."

"Tide?" I asked.

"Yeah, strong tide, would've taken the body, like out to sea. It can do that. But the fuzz got there first."

I nodded.

"So everyone's assuming it's war, but no one's said it yet. Everyone's lying low."

"War?"

"Yeah. You're with us."

"The hell I am." I swung my legs over the bed. Tug starred me down. "Alright," I said "I'm with you."

He turned to leave. "So just lie low. Sleep some more. Laura, she said you should sleep."

He was gone. I smiled at the clone he left behind. He smiled back. I stepped into my shoes and hobbled out of the room.

The living room had about ten more Tug clones, all cleaning guns. I nodded to them. "Hey." They nodded back, not paying much attention to me as I went out the front door.

I leaned against the payphone for support. The San Clemente streets were dark and deserted.

"Brendan?" the phone said.

"Yeah."

"Are you - what, man, have you heard about Dode-"

"I was there."

"You-"

"Where were you yesterday? I called."

"Kasprzyk took my phone, turned it off. I just now got it back."

"Alright, listen-"

"Are you okay?"

"I'm good, just listen. Okay, first, is my name in the papers with the story?"

"No."

"Alright. Is it just Dode in the papers?"

"Yeah. What do you mean?"

"Listen, I'm going to be calling you tonight, probably late. Sleep with your phone on.

Could you get a car if you needed to?"

"If it's late enough I could take my mom's-"

"You might have to. I'll call."

"Alright."

I kicked open the dressing room door. Kara was on her throne in front of the mirror. A boy sat on the floor by her side. She gasped.

"Brendan. Did you hear about Dode?"

"You scheming little tramp!" The boy realized he should be angry, and stood. "You set that poor kid up, you hid him, you got info from Laura and held Dode like a card till you could play him. For money!" I threw a chair.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You'd bury me at the same time, but it was mostly for the money. Dode thought I did it, he like Em, that was enough for him, but he stuck to the money cause you had your claws in him, cause he couldn't come away from the deal without it and make you happy. You fed him to the wolves, angel."

Her face was placid. "Sit down, you're a mess. Russ, go get my shoes from the wardrobe locker, would you sweetie?" He went, trying to look mean at me. When we were alone we watched each other like caged rats. She stood, capping her lipstick. "Yeah I did, yeah I did, yeah I did." She raised her eyebrows at me. "Who are you going to tell? You could have had me once, and then I'd have played on your side, but you were mean. So now I'm playing against you. I haven't got Dode - terrible loss - but I've still got a card up my sleeve. I've got you."

"You haven't got-"

"I still know what Dode was selling, or have you forgotten? But I'd play it smart. A

quick call from a payphone to copland and you're through." She came very close to me. Her robe fell open slightly. "Five thousand. Cash. I know you can get it from the Pin, but even if you can't I want it by first period tomorrow, or I play my hand and bury you." She walked to the costume rack, flipped through the dresses and let her robe fall. "Now get out.

In two steps I was behind her. I grabbed her shoulder. She spun around and squealed, eyes wide.

Out in the backstage area drama geeks were reading and talking in groups. They all stopped when the door to the dressing room burst open and Kara was thrown out, stark naked. "What are you doing!" She screamed. She stumbled back and grabbed some scenery, holding to it her chest.

"Showing your ace." I pushed past her and quickly walked out the stage door.



The mailbox seemed to splay its talons with extra menace as I walked up the Pin's darkened lawn. A voice from the screen door said "Far enough."

I stopped, facing the dark house.

"Everyone's paying social calls." said the whispery voice. The Pin.

"Laura here?" I guessed.

Silence. "So?"

"So what are the stats?"

"The stats are war, soon as the press heat dies. And if you're with him, you're with him."

"Tug got hot. He panicked."

"Tug's been after my operation from the get go."

"No. He's been anxious cause he thought if you found out he killed Emily you'd turn him over."

"He was right."

"Yeah, well."

"I told him to get the straight, no roughing, I wasn't even there."

"Alright. So he's a hot head. So you don't want him on your side, at least let's have a pow wow fore we start digging trenches. Maybe we can all walk away amiable enemies. What would it take?"

"I don't know. We'd have to square everything between us. He owes me some money."

"Alright, but we can talk."

"Yeah, alright."

"Four o'clock."

"Tomorrow?"

"Tonight. Let's clear it all before it boils up again."

"Alright. Four tonight. You'll be here?"

"Yeah." I turned away.

"Wait!" called Laura's voice. She came out of the house with her purse. "I'll drive you back."

The streetlights flashed by. Laura's car purred, cutting through the twisty streets. I pressed my finger to my lips, silent.

"What's going to happen?" asked Laura. I coughed, but didn't answer. "Do you feel better?" I just stared at the flashing lights.

"I don't know." My voice was weak.

I stumbled into Tugger's living room, and was greeted by Tug's hands on my throat, lifting me against the wall.

"For a smart guy you aint too smart. I said lay low."

Laura came up behind him. "Tug." He dropped me. She knelt beside me, feeling my forehead.

"She was at the Pin's." I told Tug.

He nodded. "Yeah, she's our go between."

"Uh huh. So here's the sit. You and the Pin are going to pow wow, four o'clock tonight, his place. Take all the muscle you want, you won't need it. He wants to talk straight, and you're going to work with him for whatever he needs, cause you don't want war."

"Hell I don't."

"The Pin's sitting on the brick profits, remember? You'd be postal to hit him now. Make peace and wait for your chance."

Laura turned to Tug with anxious eyes. "He's right, Tug. Smooth it out."

"Besides," I said between two coughs, "he's got you on the Dode thing. War'll mean you vs. him and every bull in the burgh."

Tugger turned away. "Yeah, well we'll talk."

Laura looked at me. "You're going?"

"Yeah."

She nodded. I stood and stumbled into the bedroom.

I lay on my back, cleaning my glasses on my shirt. Sweat stood on my forehead, and I shivered slightly. The ceiling fan above me spun dizzily, and now the room was spinning and it was holding still, and then it was spinning again. I clamped my eyes shut. A door creaked. I opened them.

Laura was across the room, her back to the door.

"Go away." I croaked.

She looked at me softly, then floated towards me. Her hair fell around my face and neck. I shrunk back from her. She put her pale hand on my forehead. I started to say 'go away' again, but my lips just barely formed the 'g'.

"What?" she murmured. "Were you going to say something? I thought you were." Her fingers slid down my temples, over my cheek. She pulled my glasses off. "Something really biting? Really smart? Telling me you don't need me?" I tried to speak, but couldn't. My throat was all lumped up. Her damn hands were all over my face. "You don't need me, you don't trust me, need anyone, were you going to say that?"

I broke. I started shaking in sobs, straining. It felt like my throat was trying to choke its way into my mouth. I shivered and cried like a baby. Laura stroked my face with her slender hands, murmured softly. The fan spun above us.



An hour later we were in that same position. I stared at the ceiling blankly. She rested her head against my shoulder, smoking a cigarette.

"Don't go tonight."

I blinked. "I've got to make sure it plays out smooth."

"It'll play however it plays without you there."

"I've got to make sure."

"Why?"

"Cause if there's war, I'm in it too."

"Well let's just, I mean why not just run away. Go somewhere. I've got a car." I gave her a wry look. "I've got an aunt in New Orleans, she wouldn't care." I grinned. "Yeah, it's a stupid thing, but think about it, why not? What, school? C'mon. Family?"

"Alright, stop." Her smoke drifted into the fan.

"I wasn't serious, but we could go for awhile. Just till everything clears."

I watched her smoke curling upwards in silence. She stubbed it out in an ash tray on the table and curled up against my chest. My eyes followed the smoke. Everything was silent except for the fan. I stretched an arm across to the table, and with a nonchalant laziness spun the ash tray around with my finger.

Through one lens of my glasses which lay on the table I could see the cigarette magnified. Smoke still curled from its knarled head, just above the filter with a pale blue arrow.

Laura's arm stretched over my chest. I looked down at it, then up at the fan, spinning.

At three fifteen I stepped into my shoes and crept out the bedroom door, leaving Laura asleep on the bed.

The living room was a swarm of silent activity. About fifteen Tug clones were all either polishing weapons or tucking them into their clothes. There were a few guns. I went to Tug.

"Tell your boys no knuckle business."

"They're just ready."

"Your folks left a car here?"

"Yeah."

"Take it and Laura's." I tossed him the keys. "I'll go first in yours."

"The hell-"

"I'll take the scenic route to draw off any tailers. They'll think it's you, they might even radio back that you're alone. Get it?"

"Mr. Smarts." He tossed me his keys.

"Alright. I started for the door. "Got a cigarette?"

"No. I don't smoke."

"You smoked on the beach."

"I don't smoke cigarettes."

I was at the door. "Give me fifteen minutes, then go."

I crossed the lawn, slid into Tug's black mustang and guttered off into the night.

San Clemente's suburban lights twinkled beneath me. I was at a payphone up on Beacon Hill, overlooking the valley. Tug's mustang was on the curb. It took several rings before the Brain picked up and said "Yeah."

"Alright, I warned you. Can you get the car?"

"Yeah."

"Go to 2014 Clancy, off Pico west of La Grange. Park outside and wait. Laura's inside. She hasn't got a car, but if she blows on foot or gets a pick, tail her. Alright?" Silence.

"Alright?"

"Okay."

"I'll call you when it gets light." Silence. "Thanks, Brain."

He hung up.

I parked in the Pin's driveway, limped up to the front door and knocked. A punk let me in and led me into the kitchen. More punks were gathered around the table, looking angry. The Pin's mom was pouring them milk. One of the punks glanced at me, then pointed down.

I went down the steep stairs into the basement. The hallway had a few more punks and Tug clones glaring at each other, and eyes gleamed from the darkened doorways. I stepped into the Pin's den.

The Pin sat at his desk, legs straight, his big foot crossed over his normal one. Tugger was in a chair in the center of the room. Two punks flanked the Pin, two Tug clones flanked Tug. I sauntered between them and leaned against a wall.

"Talk." I said.

The Pin spoke evenly. "I want full assurance that any heat from Emily and Dode is gonna be on just you. I don't even want my name pulled in the shindig. Second, you owe me six Cs, no rush, but I want your shake that it'll come home in not too much time."

Tug's eyes were intense. His scar reddened. "That's square." I said. Tug looked at me. "You did them after all. Lay low it'll blow over. Stick on this, one of you'll dish it to bury the other and you'll both get the rap. As to the six, did you borrow it?"

"Yeah."

"Then you owe it. Shouldn't need a shake on that."

Tug looked at the Pin. "Alright to both." he said.

"Good." I muttered. "Let's seal it up and blow for keeps."

"Third thing." said the Pin. "The last brick."

Tug and I looked at him. "It's yours." I said.

"That aint the point. I'm gonna start selling it. How do I know it aint bad?"

"Why would it be?" I asked.

"Why was the last one? Cause someone got greedy. Tug here's had the means to swipe half and cut it bad for a long time. Now we're splits my loss of trust's retroactive."

"Did you, Tug?" I asked plainly.

"No."

"Alright, so let's shake and blow."

"Not good enough." the Pin snapped.

Tug shot to his feet, kicking his chair away.

"What would be good enough?" I asked, tensed but not shifting my position.

"I wanna see him dose it. Just to prove it. Then we're square."

"Hell for that!" said Tug, looming closer to the Pin. "I didn't touch your junk, that's it."

"I wanna see it."

"To hell!"

"Your not wanting to dose it's telling me something right here."

"Yeah, it better be! It's telling that I'm out from your thumb, that I aint playing lapdog to no gothed up cripple no more!"

The four muscle punks tensed up. The Pin uncrossed his legs. I stepped forward.

"I'll dose it." I said.

They both looked at me. "What?" the Pin narrowed his eyes.

"If it'll shut you two apes up I'll take the dose, and if I don't die we're all right as rain, and if I do die you two have your war, so long as you keep it off my grave. Deal?"

Silence. The Pin said "Fine with me. I just wanna see it's straight. Tangles, get the brick."

"Johnny, go with him." I said. The punk and the Tug clone left.

Tug just looked at me. Then he tossed his hands up and turned away.

We all waited for Tangles to get back with the brick.

The sound of something breaking came from the other side of the wall. Everyone's head perked up. More breaking, then scuffling, then shouts. The commotion grew louder. The remaining Tug clone and punk looked at their bosses, then ran out the door. Tug started to follow them but I held him back with a raised arm.

The noise was tremendous now, a full brawl. The thin ceiling shuddered and groaned above us with footfalls and bodies hitting the ground.

Then, from not too far away, a gunshot.

The Pin was out of his chair, stepping towards the door. "No!" I said, slamming it shut.

We waited for a few tense seconds. The ruckus did not abate. Another shot sounded.

The door flew open and Tangles fell through, collapsing on the rug. He held his chest, which was red.

The Pin bent over him. Tangles was gasping, saying "The brick, it's gone. The brick's gone." Then he stopped.

The Pin stood, his eyes blazing at Tug. "Make peace, huh? Talk it out? Get your boys in my den soes you could snag it under my nose?"

"Alright." said Tug. His scar was fiery red.

I got between them. "No, that's not-"

"Was it bad, Tug? Snag it so I don't know, or sell it off to flat the war odds?"

"Pin, think about it-" I shouted.

"Alright, I did all that!" Screamed Tug, blew by me like a train and slammed the Pin into the ground with his fist. He punctuated his words with blows. "I cut the brick, I stole the money, I faked a peace, I snagged your junk, I did it all!" He pulled the gun out of his jacket at pushed it into the Pin's face.

I shouted something and threw myself on Tug's arm, wrenching it sideways. The gun clunked onto the carpet. The Pin flipped Tug over and for a moment I was between them, hit and torn, kicking and grunting to free my arms. We rolled over the gun and Tug had it again. I grabbed his wrist. It fired up into the ceiling, and plaster sprayed.

I screamed and began thrashing wildly, kicking and squirming out from under the two raging animals. My jacket was pinned between them. In a flurry of insane movement I shed my bloodied jacket and popped out of the fight like a cork.

The Pin was on top. He had pinned Tug's gun hand to the ground, and was straining to keep it there.

I leapt to my feet, wound up and kicked Tug in the wrist with all my strength. There was a horrible crunching sound, and Tug roared. I took the gun from his limp hand.

"Do him!" the Pin shouted at me, still struggling to keep Tug down. I backed off a few steps. "Do him now!"

With a burst of strength Tug flipped the Pin over sideways and began beating his face mercilessly. I stumbled backwards, out into the hallway.

The mob's fighting was still audible, but it must have been in the rooms and upstairs. The hallway was empty.

My eyes were glued on the doorway to the Pin's den. I could hear them going at it. Wild shadows splayed across the plastic wood walls. The Pin was shouting "Brendan!" over and over.

From another darkened doorway came a flash of light, and the wall beside me splintered. I spun on my heel and fired three shots into the darkness, which became still. I turned the gun back on the Pin's doorway.

Suddenly the shadows reeled, glass broke, and with a brief spray of sparks the Pin's room went dark. They had broken the lamp.

The now darkened doorway loomed before me, and inky black hole. Horrible sounds came from it, blows, breaking bone, screams. The Pin screamed my name over and over, calling for my help. Pleading. I stepped back.

Time seemed to stick for a moment. Everything slowed down.

I dropped the gun. It hit the carpeted with a dull thud.

I kicked it down the hall and into the Pin's doorway, and in the same motion spun around and ran.



I ran down the hall, into the room in which I had found the brick. I stumbled, running, kicking through dark shapes, fighting forms, running and stumbling and clawing through the darkness like a man possessed.

I came out of the window and out onto the front lawn before I slipped on the wet grass and hit the ground hard.

In that moment of stillness two sharp gunshots came from the house.

I stood slowly. Everything seemed very still. Crickets chirped. The house was dark. Neighbors' lights were coming on.

Shoving my hands in my pockets I stumbled back onto the sidewalk. I noticed a light from Tug's mustang. The trunk had drifted halfway open.

Inside, tangled in black plastic, was a lifeless arm wearing gaudy plastic bracelets and pale blue fingernail polish.

I shut the trunk firmly and walked off into the night. Moments later the police cars arrived, lighting the dark streets bright as day with their flashing lights.

The morning was cold and clammy. I slumped against the payphone in front of school.

"Hey. Where are you?"

"Library. Where are you?"

"Did she blow last night?"

"No. Stayed there till six thirty, then walked to school."

"You didn't give her a ride, did you?"

"No."

"But she came straight to school from Tug's?"

"Yeah."

"She there now?"

"Yeah. Not with me, but here."

"Alright. Tell her I wanna meet up on the basketball field in half an hour, then go home and get some sleep."

"Alright."

I hung up.

For the next twenty minutes I sat against the side of the gym, writing on a sheet of loose-leaf. Then I circled around behind the admin building and slipped the paper under the back door.



The wind blew cold and hard over the blacktop field. I stood crookedly, hands in my pockets. I was cold without my jacket.

A speck on the horizon turned into Laura, coming towards me. I took jagged breaths, waiting.

She came right up and put her arms around me. A warm embrace. I put my hands on her shoulders and tentatively pulled back.

"Did you see it all? With Tug and the Pin?" she asked softly.

"No. I took your advice and didn't go."

"No?"

"What happened?"

She was looking at me strangely. "The papers say six dead, three around the house, one girl in the trunk of Tug's car, and the Pin and Tug."

"Yeah?" My face was frozen in an ambiguous frown.

"Tug went down by the bulls. Tried to shoot his way out when they got there. They tied him to Dode, too. Same gun. And the girl."

"Huh."

"Well good thing you weren't there."

"Yeah." The wind blew between us.

"You think the girl was Emily?"

"Probably."

She embraced me again, and didn't let go. "You loved her."

"Yeah I did." My eyes were far away.

"You did all this cause you loved her. And now it's finished." The wind whistled. She said "I love you."

"No." I breathed. She pulled back so she could see my face.

"What?"

"No, it's not finished." My face was a mask. "Tug pulled the trigger on Em and he got the fall, but the bulls coulda found that out without me." She pulled back more. "I set out to know who put her in the spot, who put her in front of the gun. That was you, angel."

She was drifting back further. "What are you talking about?"

"It was you. What, you want the whole tale? You want me to tell it to you?"

"Tell it to me." She looked bewildered.

"From the top then. You had your fingers in Brad Bramish for appearances and to keep him buying from the Pin, who you were hooked with. Emily came to you and Brad, you saw her for what she was, an insecure little girl trying to get in. She goes on the backburner. Meanwhile maybe you're getting bored, maybe just greedy, so when the Pin scores big with the

bricks you take your shot. You hook one, take half, and cut it back to size, but you cut it bad. Maybe accidentally, maybe to down the Pin's operation, doesn't matter. You put it back, but poor Frisco doses off it and lands in a coma." My voice was getting stronger. "So now the Pin's fuming, maybe he's jealous of Brad, so he comes to Brad's crowd looking for blood, or at least a scape. You know trouble. There's going to be a war over this. And there's Emily. She trusts you. She wants in. It's duck soup."

"No." she murmured.

"You frame her for the bad brick, then you cut her loose. You turn on your heel and bite her in the throat. Last week on the payphone, Pico and Alexander, she saw something she was scared of. Tug's car driving by? She wouldn't know Tug's car. Tug driving? No, Tug doesn't smoke. It was the Pin driving, but she wouldn't know the Pin either, not face to face. No, she was across the street, angel. She saw the passenger side. She saw you. She saw you and ran like she saw some devil."

Her face was very still, quivering. "Brendan, why are you-"

"And she took the hit. Dode hid her away, but the Pin was on to her, tracked her down, told her to meet him, that they would make good. Gave her a time, and a place. And sent Tug. Just to get the straight. But maybe you had talked Tug up, or maybe he just blew a fuse, but he hit her. She took the hit for you. You let her take it."

She started to sob, her voice hysterical. "Stop it!"

"That's the tale."

"Stop it!"

"You're going to tell me it's not?"

"It's not!"

"Look at me."

She crumpled against me, her eyes stuck straight into mine. "You know me. I've only helped you. How can you - It isn't true!" She sobbed through a tensed, straight face.

I held her stare, but my eyes were still distant. "I hope it isn't. I want you to have been on my side all along, not just trying to get me under your thumb like Brad and the Pin and Tug."

"No-"

"But I think you knew that meeting was going to blow up. I think that was your final play." A gull shrieked in the distance. "But I hope I'm wrong. I hope everything I wrote in the note I dropped at Gary Trueman's office this morning is wrong. About your and Brad's involvement in the Pin's runnings. I hope you didn't steal the brick last night. In your purse."

"I didn't." she breathed.

"That's good. That means you didn't let me walk into a slaughterhouse. You didn't lead Tug and the Pin and their crews to the slaughter. And when Trueman reads the note, takes my cue and searches your locker, he won't find a damn thing."

I saw it in her eyes. Between us, we both saw the locker being pried open, and from its dark insides a chalky white brick of powder falling out, spinning through the air, and shattering on the locker cage floor.

Then there was only silence between us. She looked as if she had been punched in the face. "Brendan..." she murmured, "don't..."

"It's done." I said gently.

Her face did strange things. Subtle contortions. "I loved you."

I looked away. "Yeah, I think you did."

She looked me in the eye again, but I kept starring off into space. She just barely breathed "Why?"

"You know why."

She was still for a beat, watching my eyes. I didn't look at her. Then slowly, steadily, she straightened up. Her figure took back some dignity. She stepped towards me deliberately. Closer. Right up against me. She brought her head to mine, put her lips to my ear, breathed warm breath, and said two words. The first was "Mother", the second was low, guttural and lost to the whistling wind.

She turned and walked briskly away.

I watched her go across the dark, barren field of asphalt.

I heard metal jangle. The Brain was hopping the chain link fence near the edge of the field. He came alongside me. I kept watching Laura. "You get your straight?" I asked.

"Yeah. Sorry, I just knew you'd never spill it all to me."

"S'alright."

"Yeah well. Chuck Burns came to. The knife guy. Spilled it all to the bulls, guess Brad Bramish hired him. On his own, just a grudge thing."

I nodded slightly. "Fits. You did good, Brain. Go sleep."

"Yeah, you too." He started to go, but didn't. "What'd she whisper to you?"

"She called me a dirty word."

He chuckled. "Alright, you don't have to tell me." He left.

I stood there awhile, watching Laura until she got to the other side of the field and walked off behind the twisted chain linked fence. A bird flew overhead.

I stood a bit longer. After awhile the first period bell rang, and I walked back towards campus.



Brick

the shooting script

by

Rian Johnson

SUPER MAIN TITLES

over a grimy concrete wall creeping by. We emerge from...

EXT. RUNOFF TUNNEL - EARLY MORNING

A gaping hole in the concrete side of a freeway. On the embankment beside the hole BRENDAN FRYE squats, shoulders hunched. His dark eyes behind thin glasses watch the shallow stream of water which flows into the tunnel.

THE WATER

not more than six inches deep. Just beneath the surface a young woman's pale blue arm in gaudy bracelets bats against the edge of her body like a docked boat. A pebble plinks into the water beside it.¹

TITLE CARD OVER BLACK: "2 DAYS PREVIOUS"

INT. LOCKER CAGE - DAY

A single locker. That same arm, bracelets and all, slips a note through the slats, then leaves quickly.

As the cage empties a lone figure slumps to the locker. Opens it. The note falls to his feet.

The figure is Brendan. He unfolds the note (folded in a triangle) -- "12:30 PICO & ALEXANDER".

A STREET SIGN

Pico and Alexander.²

A WRIST WATCH

12:43. Brendan looks up from the watch.

EXT. STREET CORNER - DAY

He sits on the curb of a wide suburban street, eats lunch from a brown bag and watches a phone booth on the corner. He shows no surprise when it begins to ring. Brendan goes to the phone and puts the receiver to his ear. Silence for a moment, then a thin female voice from the phone.

¹ Originally Dode was later revealed to have been hiding above the tunnel.

² The street names were changed in production to match existing streets (we couldn't afford to create custom street signs.)

VOICE
(over phone)
Brendan?

BRENDAN
Emily?

EMILY
(weakly)
Yeah. How's things?

BRENDAN
(slow, deliberate)
Status quo.

EMILY
Yeah?

BRENDAN
Uh huh.

EMILY
That's good.

Her voice thins to a high, strained breath. She is crying.

BRENDAN
What's going on, Em?

EMILY
(through strained crying)
It's good to see you, Brendan.

Brendan's eyes glance around the surrounding street. Emily is crying again.

EMILY (CONT'D) (cont'd)
It's been some time.

BRENDAN
Two months.

EMILY
Yeah. I didn't even know your locker. I had to ask Brain.

More crying noises.

BRENDAN
Em, why don't we meet somewhere?

EMILY
I can't.

BRENDAN
Why not?

EMILY
I screwed up real bad. I really screwed
up.

BRENDAN
Screwed up how?

EMILY
(blubbering, fast and
incoherent)
I did what she said with the brick, I
didn't know it was bad, but the pin's on
it now for poor Frisco and they're
playing it all on me-

BRENDAN
Slow down now, what?

EMILY
You gotta help me Brendan I think tug-
Oh!

With a sharp breath the line clicks dead just as a black
mustang roars by. Brendan drops the receiver and spins out
of the booth.

There, another pay phone up the hill -- empty.

Brendan turns to the black mustang, far down the street. A
man's hand drops a cigarette butt from the driver side
window.¹

The mustang turns the corner, gone.

Brendan walks after it, finds the cigarette butt on the
street. Still smoking.

A pale blue arrow is printed on the filter.

In the distance the class bell rings.

EXT. SCHOOL HALLWAY - DAY

The high school is open air - the hallways are alleyways
between buildings. A short kid with eyeglasses the size of

¹ Because of the orientation of the street, this was all flipped when we shot it, and the
hand came from the passenger window. The dialogue in the ending field scene was
changed to match, causing mass confusion for about half an hour on set.

Volkswagen headlights sits against the wall. Brendan enters, leans on the wall beside him.

BRENDAN

Brain.

THE BRAIN

Hey Brendan. It's been awhile. Where you been eating?

BRENDAN

Back of school.

THE BRAIN

Huh. Yeah, no one's seen you. What's it been, a couple months?

BRENDAN

Yeah, it's been awhile. You gave Emily my locker number?

THE BRAIN

A few days ago. Was I wrong?

BRENDAN

What?

THE BRAIN

To give it?

BRENDAN

No.

THE BRAIN

It's been so long, I don't know you two's stats.

BRENDAN

It has been awhile. Who's she been eating with?

THE BRAIN

(uncomfortable)

I dunno. It's hard to keep track.

BRENDAN

Is it?

THE BRAIN

(shrugs)

Can be.

The Brain avoids Brendan's gaze.

BRENDAN

Uh huh.

A beat.

THE BRAIN

She hasn't been doing too good.

BRENDAN

Yeah well. I'm not looking for a patch up. Em's life is her own. But she asked for my help.

THE BRAIN

Help with what?

BRENDAN

I don't know. I don't even care, it's not my business. I just want to know she's ok, so I've got to find her. That's all this is.

THE BRAIN

Well. I know she was poking in with the Ivy-bound cheerleading elite. Laura Dannon's crowd.

Across the parking lot a beautiful girl with dark long hair kisses an football player.

BRENDAN

Laura Dannon there with the Rabbit?

THE BRAIN

Yeah. Brad Bramish with her. Cream on the upper crust.

Brad laughs heartily.

BRENDAN

(softly)

He's a sap.

THE BRAIN

Know him?

BRENDAN

By sight.

THE BRAIN

I won't argue then. Anyway Em tagged after them for a bit, but it didn't work. So she picked her way down the

food chain. Last I seen she was with whasshername, that drama vamp. Small time dealer, augh, the evil one, the one you dated-

BRENDAN

Kara.

THE BRAIN

That's my bus.

BRENDAN

You know her locker number?

THE BRAIN

Kara's?

BRENDAN

Em's.

THE BRAIN

239.

BRENDAN

Thanks Brain. Keep your specs on, find me if she shows.

THE BRAIN

Sure.

The Brain trots off. In the distance Brad and Laura laugh, and he kisses her. Her hair blows in the wind.

EXT. LOCKER CAGE - DAY

Empty. Locker 239 is open, its door swinging gently in the wind.

EXT. BACK OF GYM - DAY

Brendan sits against the massive building, flipping through loose papers. He finds two photographs, one of Emily hugging him, the other of Emily with a beautiful sharp-eyed girl at a party, drinks in hand.

Sorting more papers, he finds a red card with a sequined mask on the front. The bottom edge has been torn off.

EXT. PARKING LOT - DAY

Sixth period has broke. Masses of students pile into busses.

EXT. SCHOOL THEATER - DAY

A huge chunk of brown building. Brendan strides towards it.

INT. SCHOOL THEATER - CONTINUOUS

Drama people sit on the floor facing the stage. Brendan steps behind one, the sharp-eyed girl from the picture. She holds a freshman boy's head in her lap. Pets it like a dog.

She looks back at Brendan, her face in shadow.

GIRL
(through a mocking smile)
Hello, Brendan.

BRENDAN
Kara.

KARA
Come to see the show?

Kisses the freshman's forehead, purring.

BRENDAN
No, I didn't.
(nudges the freshman with his
toe)
Lapdog, blow.

The freshman sits up, looks to Kara like a spooked puppy.

KARA
(to the lapdog)
Stay.
(to Brendan)
Don't be mean.

BRENDAN
I'm all friendly.
(to the lapdog)
Watch your head, kid - that thing bites.

The dog pops up again. Kara pulls him down and nuzzles his ear.

BRENDAN (CONT'D) (cont'd)
I need words.

KARA
I'm listening.

BRENDAN
About Emily Kostich.

She stops nuzzling a little too quickly.

KARA
(to the dog)
Get me my purse.
(he goes)
Hurry!

He breaks into a trot. Kara smiles at Brendan.

BRENDAN
Still picking your teeth with freshmen?

KARA
You were a freshman once.

She slides her fingers up his arm. He growls and pushes them away.

BRENDAN
Way once, sister. You and Em were tight for a bit. Who's she eating with now?

KARA
Eating with?

BRENDAN
Eating with. Lunch. Who.

KARA
You're a cutie.

BRENDAN
You gonna tell me?

KARA
Guess you're up from the underneath then. The whole Jerr thing blown over. Lucky strikes, you and your partner get bulled, you come up clean. But I guess you were always the brains of the outfit.¹

¹ One of many instances of an allusion to the Jerr backstory, most of which were trimmed back in the editing process for clarity. The author has threatened to write it as a stand alone short story, but probably never will, so in a nutshell: when Brendan and Emily were still an item she started hanging out with Jerr, a small time dealer. Brendan didn't approve, so he partnered up with Jerr then ratted him out to Trueman. Emily found out, and that led to their breakup on the field, which we see in a flashback.

BRENDAN
Where's Emily?

KARA
Sometimes I wonder why I dumped you.

BRENDAN
(standing to go)
God.

KARA
I don't know where she's at, Brendan.

BRENDAN
I know you do, so why don't you want me
to find her?

KARA
Maybe I'm looking out for you.

BRENDAN
(going)
Well I appreciate that.

KARA
Brendan... you looking to get back into
things? I could use you.

He is gone. Behind Kara, the play goes on.

INT. BACKSTAGE OF THEATER - CONTINUOUS

The play is seen in shadow-play through the backdrop.

Brendan slips in through an exit door, crosses the backstage
area and enters the dressing rooms.

INT. DRESSING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Cramped and empty. Pictures of Kara with friends are stuck
in the mirror. Brendan roughly searches drawers, bags,
pockets... nothing. He stops. A red edge behind one of the
photos - the same red card with a mask on it, but whole.
Across the bottom in small print: "Halloween in January -
Call for DETAILS - 555-2394"

INT. BRENDAN'S ROOM - NIGHT

Brendan pulls a phone across his desk and dials the number
on the flyer.

WOMAN'S VOICE
(over phone)
Hello?

Brendan hesitates.

BRENDAN
Hello, ma'am, this is Tom, I'm a friend
from school. Could I speak to...

He trails off.

WOMAN'S VOICE
(over phone)
Oh, hi Tom. Laura's here, hold on.

LAURA'S VOICE
(over phone)
Yes?

BRENDAN
I'm calling for details.

LAURA'S VOICE
For what?

BRENDAN
Details about the party.

LAURA'S VOICE
Who is this?

BRENDAN
I don't think we've met.

LAURA'S VOICE
Well then I don't think you're invited
to my party. It's a rather exclusive
gathering.

BRENDAN
I can imagine.
(she starts to speak, he cuts
her off)
You should really work on your invite
management. That might be a personal
'room for improvement' area in your
life. But discretion of your invite
sending aside, I have procured a certain
someone's invitation, and would like
details.

A beat of silence.

LAURA'S VOICE

You think you're cute, whoever you are.

BRENDAN

Wait'll you get a load of my felt fedora
and spats.

LAURA'S VOICE

Who are you? Or I'll hang up.

BRENDAN

You don't know me - I'll save you some
time.

LAURA'S VOICE

I know everyone and I've got all the
time in the world.

BRENDAN

Folly of youth. Ask whose invitation
I've got.

LAURA'S VOICE

(slightly)
What you said.

BRENDAN

Emily Kostich.

A beat.

LAURA'S VOICE

15 Bush street, up in Stockton Cove.
Buzz 42 at the gate. Nine o'clock. But
who-

Brendan hangs up. He folds his hands under his chin and
stares at the phone, perfectly still. The clock on his desk
says 4:53.

DISSOLVE TO:

7:37

Brendan at his desk, tapping away at Tetris.

DISSOLVE TO:

8:30

The desk is empty, Tetris paused. A shower runs behind an
ajar door in the background.

EXT. STOCKTON COVE GATE - NIGHT

An imposing private community gate. Brendan coasts up on his bike and ditches it in the bushes. He checks the call box directory: "42 -- DANNON"

Using the call box as a hand hold he hops the gate and walks briskly up the street.

EXT. STOCKTON COVE STREET - NIGHT

Shiny cars line the curb. Party noises come from an upscale two story house. Brendan takes a short breath, then strides up to the front door.

INT. LIVING ROOM

Large and clean, with a two story ceiling and a railed staircase at one end. Fifteen or twenty clean people, some in costumes, mill about in cliques. Brendan comes in as if he doesn't mind who sees him coming in. He gets a couple odd stares, but no one stops him.

With non obtrusive confidence he cuts through the crowd to the beer keg in back and draws half a cup.

INT. PARLOUR - SAME

Richly adorned, crowded, lit with bright pools of light. Brendan drifts in and stands in the back, deep in shadow.

The music comes from a baby grand piano set against one wall. Laura Dannon leans against it. She wears a red kimono, and is striking against the velvet black piano. Laura's kid sister, 11 years old with glasses, sits at the piano playing "All I do is Dream of You".

Laura sings, lovely and soft but with strength.¹

Brendan watches from the back, his face obscured in shadow, but his eyes gleam. Through the darkened window behind him a match flares up, and someone standing outside lights a cigarette.

Laura finishes the song. The room applauds, and she ruffles her kid sister's hair.

Brendan ducks out, and into

¹ By the time we got around to production this had changed to "Someone to Watch Over Me," but the publishing rights proved too expensive (i.e. not free.) We chose the Gilbert & Sullivan song, which besides being lovely was also in the public domain (i.e. free.)

INT. LIVING ROOM - SAME

Brad Bramish, the jock who was kissing Laura in the parking lot, sits slouched on the couch in a dense crowd. He holds a cup and speaks much too loudly to a guy named Biff at his elbow.

BRAD

If the coach wants to play me I'll play, but I can't put my best game in if I've got to worry about whether I'm going to be in there. Halftime last game, coach is pissed I ran it on a pass play, out on the field he says to me 'you gotta think about the team and you gotta' you know and 'if you run that ball again you're out', and I said to him you gotta let me play! I'm out there, let me play, and he's saying 'no you're out' and I kept saying 'Let me play! Let me play! Let me play!', just right in his face-

BIFF

He was!

BRAD

Just 'Let me play! Let me play! Let me play!' 'No you gotta' 'No, let me play! Let me play! Let me play!'

Brad hunches forward, his face swollen purple, yelling that over and over. Tom steps in front of Brendan, blocking his line of sight.

Brendan scans the rest of the room. His eyes catch on Laura, leaning against a divan. Her bright, sharp eyes cut through the room, straight into Brendan.

He wags his eyebrows at her.

She looks away quickly. Brendan turns back to Brad, still shouting 'let me play'. Tom stands between them.

BRENDAN

Tom!

Brad falls silent. Most of the room follows suit. Tom turns around. Brendan smiles good naturedly.

BRENDAN (cont'd)

Could you step aside, please? I'm trying to follow Brad's story, and it's difficult when I can't see his face.

The room watches Brendan. Tom mumbles something and steps aside. Brad stares at Brendan stupidly. Brendan flashes a dopey grin and tips his glass.

BRAD
(stumbles)
He doesn't give me a play to make, what
can I do, you know?

He falls into awkward silence. Biff starts babbling.

Brendan looks at Brad, who is staring back at him.

Brendan then slowly drags his gaze over to Laura, staring at him too, her eyes slightly amused. Brendan cocks an eyebrow. The slightest hint of a smile takes the corner of her mouth, and she wags her eyebrows once at him.

Brendan glances back at Brad, looking at Laura now, not amused at all.

Brendan stands to go. Biff chatters on. Brad cuts him off.

BRAD (cont'd)
Hey. Hey! What are you doing here?

BRENDAN
Leaving.

BRAD
Oh yeah?

BRENDAN
Uh huh. Unless your anecdote's got a 2nd
act.

BRAD
Why don't you leave?

BRENDAN
(leaving)
That's what I was doing.

INT. DARK ROOM

With a lit wet bar at one end. Brendan goes to the bar, puts ice in a glass and cracks it with liquor.

LAURA
(O.S.)
Whiskey?

Brendan pauses, glass touching his lips.

BRENDAN

Jameson.

He downs half of it.

LAURA

I like a man who knows what he's drinking.

BRENDAN

That's a pretty sick thing to be attracted to.

LAURA

Brad's not a good guy to get on the wrong side of.

BRENDAN

Uh huh.

They stare at each other in silence. She studies his face. The broken light of the bar makes her features seem liquid.

LAURA

Fearless flyer. Quit your yappin and fix me one.

and slips out a sliding glass door.

He fills another glass with whiskey and cuts his with water.

EXT. BACK PATIO - NIGHT

Brendan joins Laura, hands her a drink. Suburban lights fill the valley below. Laura sips her drink.

LAURA

I'll never get through all this.

BRENDAN

Uh huh.

She sips more.

LAURA

I knew your old partner Jerr since grade school. Tough break. How long were you two joined up before your operation got the sting?

BRENDAN

A few months. Could have helped himself out by turning me in, but he took the heat. He was a good guy. Solid.

LAURA

Was he?

BRENDAN

You knew him.

LAURA

Yeah I did. So why are you here tonight?

BRENDAN

I'm looking for Emily.

LAURA

She wasn't invited.

BRENDAN

She had an invitation.

LAURA

Well like you said, I've got to work on that. Em's been AWOL for a good month, nobody's seen her.

BRENDAN

I saw her yesterday.

LAURA

Nearly nobody's seen her. So what did she tell you?

BRENDAN

(winces)

Score 0 for finesse.

LAURA

Listen, you're scratching at the wrong door. I wasn't with Emily enough to know details of what she was in, I just got wind of the downfall, and I didn't get any details of that, except that it was bad. So now that we're showing some cards...

BRENDAN

If you haven't got a finger in Em's troubles, why'd her name get me into your rather exclusive party?

LAURA

Keep up with me now. I don't know, but it sounded like you did, and a body's got a right to be curious. Now I'm not so sure.

BRENDAN

Well I'll put that body to bed. I don't know a damn thing about whatever troubles, and that works for me. I just want to find her.

A long beat. Laura studies Brendan's face, then seems to come to a decision.

LAURA

Coffee and pie.

The words hang in the air a moment. A look of recognition from Brendan.

BRENDAN

Coffee and pie oh my?

LAURA

And you didn't hear it from me.

He sips his drink. A voice calls from the glass door. Another girl. Laura flashes Brendan a look and goes to her. They have quick, quiet words and the girl leaves. Laura turns back to Brendan.

LAURA (CONT'D) (cont'd)

Will you wait here for me?

BRENDAN

Sure.

LAURA

You'll stay right here and wait -- I'll be five minutes.

BRENDAN

Yes.

The moment she leaves Brendan runs across the lawn and hops the fence, into the neighbor's yard.

EXT. SIDE OF HOUSE

Brendan runs to the edge of the neighboring house and peeks around. Laura comes out the front door, cuts across the lawn and sidewalk and trots out into the street. Brendan

begins to follow, but a noise from behind the fence stops him - a match being struck.

Brendan creeps towards the fence and peers through a splintered hole.

BRENDAN'S POV - THROUGH THE FENCE

A brightly lit window in the side of Brad's house, and through the window the party.

A dark figure wearing a long coat and broad rimmed hat, all inky black. The figure smokes a cigarette and watches the party, absently stroking his cheek.

Brendan steps back - SNAP! A twig.

The figure freezes. Then, making no noise at all, it spins to face Brendan, a towering black form against the window.

The glowing cigarette falls to the grass.

A metallic glint, and a clicking sound not unlike a gun.

Brendan throws himself backwards onto the grass. A beat.

Through the hole the black of the figure's cloak whips away.

Brendan hesitates, then hops the fence.

EXT. SIDE OF BRAD'S HOUSE - SAME

Brendan lands on his feet. No black figure to be found.

The cigarette still smolders on the ground. Hand rolled, plain paper.

Brendan gazes through the window, catching his breath. Then he breaks the trance and creeps towards the street.

EXT. FRONT LAWN - NIGHT

Peeking around the house, Brendan sees Laura cut across the lawn and trot into the street. Using parked cars as cover, Brendan follows.

EXT. STREET

Between cars, Brendan sees a lanky kid in baggy jeans and engineer boots with a clean shaven head leaning against a black Mustang. Laura goes to him and speaks quickly.

The dark figure in the hat emerges from the shadows. Laura says something to him. Grunting something angrily, he gets in the car with the bald kid and peels off.

Laura turns and slowly walks towards the house.

When she is gone Brendan stands, throws a look back at the house and walks off down the street, towards the guard gate.

EXT. BACK PATIO

The two drinks, where Brendan left them. Laura takes hers and drains it. The suburban lights twinkle like stars.

EXT. CARROWS PARKING LOT - DAY

The sun rises over Carrows family restaurant, a squat structure backed against the weedy edge of the runoff tunnel ravine.

A banner from 1973 in the window - "Coffee and Pie oh my!"

A pack of six pale stoners slump against the rear dumpster. Their beady eyes follow Brendan in sync as he approaches.

He goes to the nearest one.

BRENDAN
Where's Dode?

STONER 1
Dunno, bra.

Silence and blank stares. Brendan calmly moves to the next stoner.

BRENDAN
Dode?

STONER 2
Uh uh.

Brendan moves to the next one.

A thin head pokes from around the dumpster.

DODE
Hey Brendan. Maybe you shouldn't be here.

Brendan steps around the dumpster. Dode slumps against the wall, thin and delicate in dusty black. Slivery eyes, pale lips, muffled intelligence.

BRENDAN

Kara told me you know where Em's at.

DODE

Uh huh. And why are you looking for Em?

BRENDAN

She asked for my help.

DODE

Uh huh. Listen man, I've got plenty on my plate without dealing with some jilted ex.

BRENDAN

It's not about that.

DODE

Whatever it's about, act smarter than you look and drop it.

BRENDAN

Where is she?

DODE

She's with me, and right now that's the best place for her. Leave the low life to the low lifers and dangle.

BRENDAN

You're on the bright side of dim, Dode, but if I thought you had this half-handled I'd be eating lunch. Where's she at?

DODE

Better get while it's good.

Brendan doesn't.

DODE (cont'd)

Heel it now, dig?

The 5 big stoners appear behind Brendan, threatening. Dode turns his head away to light a joint.

Brendan's fist slams into his face, sending the joint spinning. Brendan slams Dode's frail frame against the dumpster.

The 5 stoners stand in the exact same position, deer in the headlights. One makes a half hearted motion to intervene.

BIG STONER

Back off.

BRENDAN

Throw one at me if you want, hash head.
I've got all five senses and I slept
last night, that puts me six up on the
lot of you.

BIG STONER

Just easy-

Brendan slams Dode into the wall.

BRENDAN

(to Dode)
Where's Em?

DODE

(deliberate)
She's with me. She was tight when she
called you, man. Came to and freaked.
She told me to shake you if you came by.
Said you'd only make things worse.

Brendan covers how shaken he is by this statement fairly well. He drops Dode.

STONER 1 (O.S.)

Put him down, man!

DODE

Deal with whatever this ain't about and
drop it.

BIG STONER

(to Brendan)
Nothing more here, bra.

BRENDAN

Tell Emily I want to see her. Tell her
if she still wants my help or not that's
her business, but I want to hear it
straight from her.

DODE

She don't -

Brendan walks away.

BRENDAN

Today. She knows where I eat lunch.

When Brendan is a safe distance away the biggest stoner shouts with conviction

BIG STONER
And stay out, punk!

EXT. SIDEWALK - CONTINUOUS

Brendan hides behind a tall clump of bushes.

A moment later Dode hustles away from Carrows. Brendan follows.

EXT. STREET - EARLY MORNING

The sun is rising as Brendan tails Dode through the twisty suburban streets.

Brendan takes cover as Dode stops by a white hatchback.

A girl gets out of the car and embraces Dode. Her wrist is adorned with the same cheap plastic bracelets as the dead girl's arm. Dode speaks quickly to her, she nods and speaks back. He hands her a slip of paper, which she tucks into a brightly colored address book and slips in her jacket pocket. They embrace again, Dode walks off and the girl gets in her car.

Brendan stumbles after the car, but it is quickly gone. He watches it go, then follows Dode back towards school.

EXT. SCHOOL THEATER - MORNING

Dode slumps into the front door of the brown building. Brendan watches him from a distance, eyes thoughtful. After a beat he turns and walks off into the thickening crowds of students.

FADE OUT:

FADE UP

EXT. BACK OF SCHOOL - MIDDAY

Brendan eats lunch alone on a concrete wall beside a long, empty utility road behind the school.

LATER

Reclining on the wall, reading "Lord of the Flies". He raises his eyes, and sits up suddenly.

Off in the distance on the utility road a tiny figure approaches, stumbling. Brendan jumps and hits the ground running towards the figure.

Meet the girl with cheap bracelets, the girl Dode spoke to, the dead girl, Emily. He catches her just as she stumbles and falls and carries her into the shade of a covered hallway.

EXT. SCHOOL HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Emily and Brendan sit in silence. She is very pretty, but she looks bad. Too much makeup, not enough sleep. She sniffles, speaks to her shoes.

EMILY

I must have sounded pretty crazy on the phone. Yesterday.

She taps her shoes together lightly, eyes fixed on them.

EMILY (cont'd)

It was dumb, I got paranoid over a really stupid thing. I was high, I went crazy for a little bit, but now you have to forget about it. Please. That's how you can help me now, forget about it.

She turns her weak eyes to Brendan for the first time. His stare is unwavering, searching. She pushes on.

EMILY (cont'd)

Brendan, I know you're mad at all these people, cause you think I went away from you and went to them. But you've got to start seeing it as my decision, stop being angry because where I want to be at's different from where you wanna be at.

BRENDAN

(angry)

Who fed you that line, Em?

She looks back at her shoes.

EMILY

And stop picking on Dode. He's a good guy.

BRENDAN

The Carrows rat?

EMILY
He's a good friend.

BRENDAN
So what am I?

EMILY
(strained anger)
Yeah, what are you? Eating back here,
not liking anybody, how are you judging
anyone? I loved you alot but I couldn't
stand it, I had to get with people. I
couldn't heckle life with you, I had to
see what was what.

A beat. She taps her clogs. One has a hole worn through the sole. Her face contorts, seizes up, and she is sobbing.

EMILY (cont'd)
I'm sorry Brendan.

She buries her face in his shoulder. He has a hard time speaking.

BRENDAN
You've got to come back to me, Em.

EMILY
No. No. Never. I'm sorry. Never. I can't
love on your terms, Brendan. I can't do
that, I'm not like you.

BRENDAN
You're in a spot, I can get you out of
it. Come back to me, and whatever heat
follows you I'll deal with.

EMILY
No. You're not hearing me, no. I don't
want to be put away and protected. No.

EMILY (cont'd)
No.

BRENDAN
Tell me about the trouble, the brick and
the pin -

EMILY
You gonna fix things like you did with
Jerr? No. I came to say goodbye, for
good. Whatever you have to do to let me
go, do it. I'm gonna let you go, I've

decided that. Make sure that, you've got to, promise you won't torture yourself, that you'll let me go.

She embraces him, enveloping him in her jacket. His face is a frozen mask.

EMILY (cont'd)

Let me go.

As she pulls away he mechanically slips an address book from her jacket pocket.

He watches her as she walks away.

INT. CLASSROOM

Brendan sits in the back, flipping through the address book. The teacher drones on about the significance of the pig's head in "Lord of the Flies".¹

THE ADDRESS BOOK

Illegible scribbles, names, numbers, nothing that stops his search - then the note Dode gave her, a corner of loose-leaf paper which looks like this:



Brendan studies the paper intently.

EXT. SCHOOL HALLWAY - DAY

The Brain studies the paper. Busses pull into the parking lot behind them. Brendan is distant, lost in thought.

THE BRAIN

Hm. Do you know anything else about this?

¹ Our one and only scene in a classroom was moved to Brendan's lunch spot to save us a location change. The degree to which the lack of classroom time in the film has been commented on has always bemused the author, who cannot for the life of him remember a single interesting thing that happened in a classroom in high school.

BRENDAN
(shakes his head)

Mm.

THE BRAIN
Slim pickings. Why'd you let Dode fly
when he came back to whose-her-name, at
the theater?

BRENDAN
(shrugs dismissively)
Kara. It's their turf, I couldn't hear
them without being seen, and that would
only biff their play. Best to know it's
there, let it ride and see what comes of
it.

(touches the paper)
But anyway.

THE BRAIN
Hm. Well, if this is what I think it is,
it didn't come straight from Dode, less
he's playing out of his league.

(beat)
I can only give you my best guess.

BRENDAN
Yeah.

THE BRAIN
When the upper crust does shady deeds
they do them in different spots around
town. I know under the pier's one, down
by the bike trails in the state park's
another. There's alot of them. The pitch
is they've got little symbols for each
one, and that's how they tell each other
the place, so word won't get around. So
this might be that.

BRENDAN
But Dode wouldn't know it?

THE BRAIN
This is upper crust. Dode's pie pan
grease.

Brendan studies the symbol.

BRENDAN
Call anything up?

THE BRAIN

How many places start with 'A'? Or if it's a shape, or just a random symbol. Anyway, even if you figured it out, what good could you do? She's smart, she knows the play, she's gunning to square things.

BRENDAN

Yeah.

THE BRAIN

You said her business was none of yours, so she's alright, forget it now. Go home, sleep.

INT. BRENDAN'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Sparsely furnished. Brendan plays Tetris on his computer, staring off into space. His mom's voice calls "Good night" and the hallway light turns off.

LATER

10:30 by the clock radio on Brendan's nightstand. The slip of paper rests beside it. Brendan lies in bed, staring at the symbol on the paper. His eyes tense.

THE SYMBOL

Growing larger, burning with a searing intensity, then folding into darkness. Water rushes overhead, over concrete, concrete with a hole in it -- the runoff tunnel, just for an instant, then back underwater, screaming. Brendan choking, screaming, plunging upwards. A woman with no face falls from the darkness and kisses him, her long hair sweeping around him then pulling away. As the last strands slide off his face he wakes up with a start.

The clock says 3:46. Brendan drips with sweat, breathing raggedly. He takes the paper and a pencil from the nightstand and shades the symbol to look like this:



FLASH CUT - The runoff tunnel, lining up perfectly with the now shaded symbol.

BACK TO BRENDAN

His eyes turn uneasy as he removes his glasses and clicks off the light.

EXT. BRENDAN'S HOUSE - DAWN

Brendan walks off into the hazy pre-dawn light.

EXT. EDGE OF RAVINE

Brendan stops at a high wall of weeds, listening to the low gurgle of moving water. Slowly, robotically he pushes through.

EMILY'S BODY

Face down, bobbing gently in shallow water. Bluish white. Red foam clings to her.

EXT. RUNOFF TUNNEL

Silently, as if lowered by a string Brendan sinks down, squatting in the mud. His lungs empty in one choppy breath. He pulls his glasses off sluggishly.

EMILY'S ARM

Lifeless, pale.

BRENDAN'S FACE

A contorted, frozen mask, eyes wet.

EMILY'S HAIR

Stringy, flowing gently in the water.

BRENDAN'S EYES

Dazed, drifting... then suddenly snapping to attention.

A noise. From the tunnel.

Brendan freezes. The inky blackness of the tunnel mouth opens like a vacuum... silent, but then -

The scrape of a shoe against concrete, then echoing footsteps running away.

Brendan springs like a cat, sprinting into the tunnel.

INT. TUNNEL

Nearly pitch black. 2 sets of running footfalls. Brendan is chasing, running full speed into the blackness, heart pounding - we almost don't notice that Brendan's are now the only footfalls.

Brendan notices. He stops. Silence in the darkness, except for Brendan's breath... and someone near...

SLAM! Brendan takes a fist in the cheek and goes down. An inky black figure steps from the shadows and kicks him in the stomach. Brendan curls on the ground, the figure over him.

FIGURE
(low whisper)
Your little Em.

The figure runs off. Brendan raises his head painfully - the figure is silhouetted briefly against the distant bright end of the tunnel, then is gone.

EXT. RUNOFF TUNNEL - EARLY MORNING

Emily's body is still there. Brendan crawls out of the tunnel and collapses in the shallow water, beside the body. He rests his head on his arm, eyes on Em's hair.

EXT. CAMPUS - EARLY MORNING

Cold and barren, nearly empty. Brendan limps across the barren lawns.

EXT. PHONE BOOTHS

A line of phone booths on campus. Brendan nearly collapses against one. He dials, still in a stupor.

VOICE ON PHONE
Saint Clement police.

Brendan stares into space, eyes burning

VOICE ON PHONE (cont'd)
Saint Clement police, hello? Hello?

Brendan hangs up.

EXT. LIBRARY - CONTINUOUS

Early morning mist below a squat brick building.

INT. LIBRARY

Warmly lit, sheltering the few souls scattered here and there at tables. The Brain sits at one of them reading an impossibly large book. He watches curiously as Brendan approaches him.

THE BRAIN
Hey, Brendan.

Brendan falls into a chair. The Brain looks him over.

THE BRAIN (cont'd)
You're up early.

BRENDAN
(thick, distant)
I couldn't sleep.

THE BRAIN
(nods, back to his book)
Find Emily?

Brendan breathes out softly.

THE BRAIN (cont'd)
You alright?

BRENDAN
Yeah. What, are you here for zero?

THE BRAIN
Nah, I gotta take the early bus, cause the others don't run by my street.

BRENDAN
Bad break.

THE BRAIN
Eh. Time to read's nice. So what's the word with Em?

BRENDAN
She's gone.

THE BRAIN
Can't raise her?

BRENDAN
No, I can't.

THE BRAIN
So what now?

BRENDAN

Now. I don't know. I guess it's... I don't know.

Brendan takes a long moment. He stares down at his glasses, wet with condensation.

BRENDAN (cont'd)

Brain, I can't let her go. I was set to but I can't. I don't think I can.

THE BRAIN

You think you can help her?

BRENDAN

No.

THE BRAIN

You think you can get the straight, maybe break some deserving teeth?

BRENDAN

Yeah. I think I could.

THE BRAIN

Well.

Brendan rubs his forehead.

BRENDAN

Kara tried to rope me. She came right out and asked. She was scared. Tell me to walk from this, Brain. Tell me to drop it.

THE BRAIN

Walk from it. Drop it.

(grins)

You're thick as what-all, Brendan.

BRENDAN

Yes I am.

Brendan cleans his glasses. He looks Brain in the eye, and his mannerisms come back into focus.

BRENDAN (cont'd)

I'd need you to Op. Like on Jerr, but that was cake to this. And unlike Jerr, there's not much chance we'll come out clean. Twenty four seven on this one. You okay to op for me again?

The Brain barely smiles.

THE BRAIN

What first, tip the bulls?

Brendan puts on his glasses, stands to go.

BRENDAN

No, bulls would gum it. They'd flash their dusty standards at the wide-eyes and probably find some yegg to pin, probably even the right one. But they'd trample the real tracks and scare the real players back into their holes, and if we're doing this I want the whole story. No cops, not for a bit.

THE BRAIN

So what first?

BRENDAN

I don't know. Your mom still have the cell?

THE BRAIN

In her car.

BRENDAN

Borrow it for a few days, get me the number.

(stands to go)

Wait for my word, and cover for me first period. I'm going to be a little late.

EXT. BASKETBALL FIELD - DAY

A vast field of asphalt segmented by a dozen basketball courts outlined in cracked paint.¹ Brendan trudges across it, his steps heavy. He stops and stands very still, staring at the ground for a beat then raising his eyes to

THE HORIZON

Flat, gray, pin straight. Brendan's voice starts speaking rapidly, confident and clear.

¹ This describes the location at my school that the "showdown" scenes were originally written for. Between when I wrote the script and when we shot it, however, the school expanded and built portable classrooms on the basketball field, and so we reluctantly moved these scenes to the football field.

BRENDAN (O.S.)

Yeah it was personal. Jerr spooked some decent gees and ran around some what was straight with him, but I'm nobody's bull runner. This wasn't a business sit. But yeah. I bulled him. Got in tight, partnered up and sent him over.

PAN AROUND to reveal BRENDAN. He looks different, edgier, more alive, wearing different clothes and a thin goatee¹. He keeps talking directly at us.

BRENDAN (cont'd)

I'd bull the lot of them, Em, I'd burn down the whole party if they tried to play you again. Jerr and whoever's next. I want to keep you safe.

An ARM swings into frame, wearing cheap plastic bracelets and pale blue fingernail polish. It slaps Brendan hard in the face. He catches it. Emily wrenches her arm away and stumbles backwards onto the pavement.

Brendan grabs her sleeve. She twists away. He grabs her shoulder, grabs her waist, she resists, and suddenly they are struggling with violent pent up intensity until with a shout she breaks away and falls to the ground.

A beat. Gulls cry in the distance.

EMILY

You can't keep me safe, Brendan. I'm in a bigger world now, and you can't hide me from it, and you can't beat it. Not if I don't want you to.

Brendan's face looks lumpish, while Emily's is strong. She stands and walks off into the distance across the barren field.

BRENDAN'S FACE

Watching her go. It is back to present day, pale, clean shaven, sullen. His eyes are cold with resolve.

EXT. RUNOFF TUNNEL - EARLY MORNING

Brendan sloshes down into the water. Without delicacy he lifts Emily's body and pulls her back into the tunnel.

INT. RUNOFF TUNNEL

¹ Which Joe would not even consider, thank god.

Pitch back. Brendan lays the body down. Two beady eyes peer at him from the darkness - he freezes. The eyes hop forward - a gull. The two watch each other for a moment, then the gull squawks and flutters out the bright mouth of the tunnel. Brendan follows it without looking back at the body.¹

EXT. CROWDED HALLWAY - DAY

Brendan and the Brain lean against a wall. The Brain slips him a piece of paper.

THE BRAIN

There's the cell number.

BRENDAN

Keep it on vibrate.

THE BRAIN

(pats his jacket pocket)

Yeah.

BRENDAN

Better stop meeting me in the open too. I'm going to start getting visible, and I need you on the underneath. I'll call.

THE BRAIN

Trueman asked for you. Wants words in his office.

BRENDAN

I bet. Keep him off me - stonewall him, he won't bite, just keep him away from me.

THE BRAIN

I'll try. So what's first?

BRENDAN

Make Em's troubles mine. I'm going to throw a few words at you, tell me if they catch. Brick.

THE BRAIN

No.

¹ A very early draft held on the tunnel after Brendan left, and revealed a dark figure (Dode) creeping away from the top of the tunnel, causing the pebble described on page 1 to plink into the water.

BRENDAN
Or bad brick.

THE BRAIN
No.

BRENDAN
Tug.

THE BRAIN
Tug... that might be a drink.

BRENDAN
Drink?

THE BRAIN
Vodka and milk or something, or maybe
not.

BRENDAN
Poor Frisco.

THE BRAIN
Frisco. Frisco Farr¹ was a sophomore
last year, I think. Real trash, maybe
hit a class a week. Didn't know him
then, and haven't seen him around.

BRENDAN
Pin.

THE BRAIN
Pin... the Pin?

BRENDAN
The Pin, yeah.

THE BRAIN
The Pin's kind of a local spook story.
You know the Kingpin?

BRENDAN
I've heard it.

THE BRAIN
Same thing. Supposed to be old, like 26,
lives in town.

¹ All apologies to Frisco Farr, who the author did actually go to school with, and who was neither a druggie nor 'real trash', but was a great guy who simply had a very cool sounding name. He is now (the author was horrified to learn) practicing law.

BRENDAN
 Jake¹ runner, right?

THE BRAIN
 Big time... maybe. Ask any dope rat
 where their junk sprang they'll say they
 scraped it from that who scored it from
 this who bought it off so, and after
 four or five connections the list'll
 always end with the Pin. But I'll becha
 you got every rat in town together and
 said 'show your hands' if any of them've
 actually seen the Pin, you'd get a crowd
 of full pockets.

BRENDAN
 You think the Pin's just a tale to take
 whatever heat?

THE BRAIN
 (shrugs. Beat)
 But what's first?

BRENDAN
 A show of hands.

INT. BACKSTAGE OF THEATER

Brendan strides past forest scenery and drama geeks, through
 another door and into sunlight.

EXT. BACK OF THEATER - DAY

Kara smokes a cigarette. Brendan leans beside her.

KARA
 (annoyed)
 Hey Brendan. Here for the show?

BRENDAN
 No.

KARA
 Would you go then, honey, cause I've got
 this headache.

BRENDAN
 Try smoking like a chimney, I've heard
 that helps.

¹ In an admittedly paltry concession to clarity, this was changed to 'Dope runner' in post production.

Brendan grabs the pack of cigarettes.

BRENDAN (cont'd)
Isn't this Dode's brand?

Kara snaps her head towards him, a flash of anger. She catches herself and smiles coolly.

KARA
You don't know Dode's brand.

BRENDAN
Oh I do now.

Angry again, Kara snatches the pack from him.

BRENDAN (cont'd)
I'm going to start shaking things up.
Give me the story and you might miss the bite.

KARA
The story about what?

BRENDAN
Alright.

He turns and walks away.

KARA
The story about what?

BRENDAN
I don't want to play games if you've got a headache. Get me if you want to spill it, but I can't guarantee safe passage after tonight.

KARA
I don't know what-

At the stage door, not slowing.

BRENDAN
Tell the Pin that Brad was my calling card, and I need words.

KARA
Brad Bramish?

Through the door and into the theater.

INT. BACKSTAGE OF THEATER - CONTINUOUS

He spins to see Kara's face just before the door closes.
She's worried.

EXT. CROWDED SCHOOL HALLWAY - DAY

The Brain walks out of a classroom and Brendan swings behind him.

BRENDAN

(fast and low)

Tail Kara through lunch. She's got rehearsal but she'll blow early. She goes home, drop her, else wait for my call.

The Brain turns and Brendan's gone.

EXT. PARKING LOT - LUNCH

Brendan wanders through the thick lunchtime crowd towards a cluster of 3 or 4 flashy luxury cars set aside at the far end of the lot.

Brad Bramish sits slouched in the front seat of his convertible, front door open. A small crowd hangs about Brad, his crony Biff at his elbow.

BRAD

That's all I'm saying, is put me in the game and I'll do what needs to be done, but they don't put me in, what needs doing don't get done and don't come crying to me, man. Get off my grill man, you didn't put me in, don't come to me if you didn't let me play.

BIFF

They didn't!

Brendan scans the rest of the cars. His eyes catch on Laura Dannon sitting in another convertible, off to the side. Her bright eyes cut through the crowd, straight into Brendan.

He wags his eyebrows at her. She looks away. Brendan walks into Brad's direct line of view and obviously leans against one of the cars.

BRAD

Hey! What are you doing here?

BRENDAN
Listening.

BRAD
Uh huh.

BRENDAN
Alright, you got me. I'm a scout for the
Gophers.

BRAD
(not amused)
Oh yeah?

BRENDAN
Of all things, yeah. Been watching your
game for a month, but that story just
now clenched it. You've got heart, kid.
How soon can you move to Minneapolis?

A few snickers around the crowd, but nowhere near Brad.

BRAD
(flat with anger)
Yeah?

BRENDAN
Cold winters, but they've got a great
public transit system.

BRAD
Yeah?

BRENDAN
Yeah.

BRAD
Oh yeah?

BRENDAN
There's a thesaurus in the library.
'Yeah's under 'Y'. Go ahead, I'll wait.

BRAD
Who invited you?

BRENDAN
To the parking lot? Well gee I kind of
invited myself.

BRAD
I think you'd better leave then.

BRENDAN
No, I'm having too good a time.

BRAD
Just the same.

Brendan smiles slightly, and very deliberately crosses his legs. Brad's face tenses.

BRAD (cont'd)
Maybe you want to go someplace more private.

BRENDAN
With you?

Brad says 'who else?' by lifting his arms.

BRENDAN (cont'd)
(as if he's been asked to the movies)
Sure.

Brendan stands and walks off. Brad follows and the rest of the crowd trails after him.

He leads them behind a parked VW van and turns to face Brad. People gather around in a wide circle.

Brendan pulls his jacket off as Brad hangs back, mumbling.

BRAD
You know what's good for you you'll just beat it. Beating a small frye won't win me anything and it's not going to do you any good-

Laura pulls up in her convertible, behind Brad, watching.

In the next moment Brendan cuts Brad off by putting his fist in his face.

Brad grunts but doesn't lose ground. Brendan throws his short stocky frame into Brad's larger one and tenderizes his midsection with jabs.

Brad tags Brendan in the ribs, then smacks the palm of his hand into Brendan's face, shoving him back onto the pavement.

He comes at Brendan with his big fists clenched.

Brendan kicks Brad full force in the shins.

Brad tumbles, and Brendan comes up fast, connecting hard with the point of Brad's chin. Brad gets his balance fast, and before Brendan can throw another he throws one himself, then another, both into Brendan's stomach. Brendan pulls back and kicks Brad's shin where he had kicked it before. Brad roars and hits Brendan very hard in the face.

Brendan bounces back like a rubber ball and throws his weight into a square punch right into Brad's nose.

The sound of eggs breaking, and Brad falls backwards like a board.

He stays down, holding his face.

Brendan staggers back, breathing hard, and looks up at the small crowd. Some stare at Brendan, some at Brad, but nobody seems about to do anything. Brendan runs his sleeve over his face and walks unsteadily off, pushing past the last few people rushing over.

STRAGGLER

Hey, is there a fight?

BRENDAN

Yeah.

He throws a last look at Laura, who meets his gaze and drives off.

EXT. SCHOOL PARKING LOT SIDEWALK - CONTINUOUS

Brendan walks away from the lot, towards the school. Laura pulls up beside him in her car.

LAURA

Hey.

Brendan ignores her and b-lines for the school. Laura brakes hard, parking by the curb.

EXT. SCHOOL HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Brendan limps down the hallway. Laura appears behind him, trotting to catch up.

LAURA

You're quite a pill.

BRENDAN

Uh huh.

LAURA
Where are you going?

BRENDAN
Home.

LAURA
Why did you take a powder the other night?

BRENDAN
Same reason I'm taking one now.

LAURA
Hold it.
(he keeps walking)
I don't get you. That's a chilly heel to be giving a girl who's where you want to know about.

BRENDAN
I'll get where I'm going just fine.

LAURA
I want to help you.

BRENDAN
Go away.

Silence behind him. He stops, turns wearily. She looks genuinely hurt.

BRENDAN (CONT'D) (cont'd)
Look, I can't trust you. You ought to be smart enough to know that. I didn't shake the party up to get your attention, and I'm not heeling you to hook you. Your connections could help me, but the bad baggage they bring could make it zero sum game or even hurt me, so I'm better off coming at it clean.

LAURA
I wouldn't have to lead you in by the hand-

BRENDAN
I can't trust you. Brad was a sap, you weren't, you were with him and so you were playing him, so you're a player. With you behind me I'd have to tie one eye up watching both your hands, and I can't spare it.

LAURA
You're not Brad.

BRENDAN
No, I'm not.

He turns and walks away. She doesn't follow.

EXT. SCHOOL PAYPHONE - AFTERNOON

Brendan slumps against it, receiver to his ear, licking a bruised lip. He wears dark glasses.

THE BRAIN
(on the phone)
You didn't call.

BRENDAN
Sorry. Kara went home though, didn't she?

THE BRAIN
Yeah, but she stopped at a payphone and made two calls that she didn't want on her phone bill.

BRENDAN
Get the numbers?

THE BRAIN
No. Sorry.

BRENDAN
S'alright. Are me and Brad front page news?

THE BRAIN
All the buzz. You really do that?

BRENDAN
Yeah.

THE BRAIN
Why? Is Brad the Pin?

BRENDAN
Brad's a sap. I downed him on his field and his crew didn't bite. So now I know he's a sap and anyone who acts like he isn't is profiting by it. That's not why I roughed him, though.

BRAIN

For kicks?

BRENDAN

Economics. Brad's the school's biggest
jake buyer, so if this Pin is behind all
the selling, I just got his attention.
Anyway, now's just shaking things out.
Look, you know a kid around the burgh,
lanky, short, shaved head, turns a black
tang?

THE BRAIN

I told you before I don't know the car.
Those types are a nickel a pound, but
nobody I know that you don't. And
Trueman again-

BRENDAN

Keep him off. And keep your specs on - I
need to find that kid.

THE BRAIN

Okay.

Brendan hangs up and turns sluggishly.

A lanky kid with a short shaved head and engineer boots
punches him in the face.

Brendan hits the pavement. The lanky kid is over him in a
split second, beating his face and body with short, heavy
blows.

Flashes of the lanky kid - a shiny scar shaped like a thin
triangle runs down the side of his face.

After a brief silent thrashing the kid walks off with
several other blurry figures. A car peels out and roars off
O.S.

Brendan lies still. The class bell rings, very distant. Legs
criss cross before his eyes, each blurring the world a bit
more until it is completely smeared.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

INT. OFFICE

Brendan sits with an ice pack against his head in a tiny
office. A man in his early thirties behind a wood colored

desk and name plate, "GARY TRUEMAN, ASSISTANT VICE PRINCIPAL" plays with a pencil.

TRUEMAN
You didn't know this boy?

BRENDAN
No sir, never seen him.

TRUEMAN
And he just hit you?

BRENDAN
Like I said, he asked for my lunch money first. Good thing I brown bagged it.

Trueman trains a good natured dubious eye on Brendan.

TRUEMAN
Alright Brendan. I've been looking to talk to you.

Brendan doesn't react.

TRUEMAN (cont'd)
You've helped this office out before.

BRENDAN
No. I gave you Jerr to see him eaten, not to see you fed.

TRUEMAN
Fine, and well put.

BRENDAN
Accelerated English, Mrs. Kasprzyk.

TRUEMAN
Tough teacher?

BRENDAN
Tough but fair.

TRUEMAN
Mm. Anyway then, we know you're clean, and you've, despite your motives, you've been an asset to us. I think you're a good kid.

BRENDAN
Uh huh.

TRUEMAN

I want to run a couple names by you.

Brendan stands to go.

TRUEMAN (cont'd)

We're not done here.

BRENDAN

(angry)

I was done here three months ago. I told you then I'd give you Jerr and that was that, I'm not your inside line and I'm not your boy.

TRUEMAN

That's not a very helpful-

BRENDAN

(anger builds)

You know what I'm in if the wrong yeg saw me pulled in here?

TRUEMAN

What are you in?

BRENDAN

No. And no more of these informal chats - if you've got a discipline issue with me write me up or suspend me and I'll see you at the parent conference.

TRUEMAN

Hold it, I could - hold it - could write you up for talking back to a VP. For looking at me in a threatening way. I'd exercise a little more tact, Mr. Frye. You can't pull a play like that unless I need you for something. So do I?

BRENDAN

Maybe.

TRUEMAN

So maybe you're gonna need me too.

BRENDAN

Maybe. Alright, I need you off my back completely for a few weeks. There might be some heat soon.

TRUEMAN

(interested)

If it's something I can't cover, I won't go to bat for you.

BRENDAN

If I get caught like that it's curtains anyway - I couldn't have brass cutting me favors in public. I'm just saying now so you don't come kicking in my homeroom door once trouble starts.

Trueman bites a thumbnail.

TRUEMAN

Okay, here's what I can do. I won't pin you for anything you aren't caught at. I'll ride it a little while, as long as it doesn't get too rough. But if anything comes up with your fingerprints on it, I can't help you. Also, if I get to the end of whatever this is and it gets hot and you don't deliver, The Veep will need someone to hand over, police-wise. And I'll have you. There better be some meat at the end of this like you say, or at least a fall guy, or you're it.

BRENDAN

Sure I am. Got one more favor to ask.

EXT. ADMINISTRATION BUILDING - AFTERNOON

Gary Trueman throws Brendan out.

TRUEMAN

Get the hell off my campus, punk!

Brendan glances around, and limps off.

EXT. CARROWS PARKING LOT - AFTERNOON

No stoners, no Dode. Brendan breathes uneasily.

EXT. PAYPHONE BY CARROWS - AFTERNOON

Brendan leans against it.

THE BRAIN

No, Dode's MIA all around.

BRENDAN

I'm 9 of 10 that Kara's got him, but who knows where. I shook but she's not spilling.

THE BRAIN

No more job offers? So she's got a play.

BRENDAN

And I know enough about Kara to let that worry me. Alright, keep your specs on for him. Any other news?

THE BRAIN

Some. Laura Dannon came to me looking for you.

BRENDAN

(considers this)
She did, huh?

THE BRAIN

Fourth period, nearly shook me upside down. Can't say I didn't enjoy it, but why'd she come to me?

BRENDAN

She's tapping Kara, and Kara knows you know me.

THE BRAIN

Yeah, well. She's some piece of work. If I had known where you were I might have told her.

BRENDAN

That's the spirit. Ask around for Dode, tail Kara again at lunch. I got knives in my eyes, I'm going home sick. I'll call you tonight.

EXT. SIDEWALK - LATE AFTERNOON

Bordering a supermarket. Brendan trudges along. Suddenly he stops. Parked in the supermarket parking lot is a black mustang.

EXT. PARKING LOT - LATE AFTERNOON

The sun hangs low. Brendan approaches the car and walks around it slowly. He peers inside. A tuft of paper pokes out from under the seat. He pulls the door handle, locked.

Brendan picks up a broken chunk of concrete from the ground, waddles over to the car and holds the chunk above his head, ready to drop it through the window.

He stops. His eyes catch something in the distance.

The lanky shaved-head kid, whose name is Tugger. Coming towards him fast.

Brendan stands there for a moment, then lets the chunk fall to the ground. He casually leans against the car, removes his glasses, puts them in a hard case and puts the hard case in his pocket.

Tugger hits him like a train and throws him across the pavement. Tug turns back to the car and takes out his keys.

Brendan gets up and comes towards Tug, his face stiff. Tug turns and pops him once squarely in the mouth. Brendan falls to his knees.

While Tug unlocks the door Brendan stands up woozily. Grunting, Tug spins and grabs Brendan's jacket, pushing him back while he slaps him hard in the face, back and forth, three times. When Tug lets go Brendan drops like a stone, catching himself on his hands and knees. The car door slams.

The mustang drives about a hundred yards out into the parking lot, spins around and stops, facing Brendan. Its motor purrs deeply. Brendan begins to limp towards it doggedly, head up, eyes fixed.

A crackling roar and short squeal of tires spit the mustang forward. It comes straight at Brendan, rumbling like a tank.

Brendan stops walking and stands very still, eyes steady. The gap between him and the car closes in no time at all.

It speeds past him not six inches to his left, brushing the edge of his jacket. Brakes squeal behind him. Brendan turns and lopes towards the mustang, idling about fifty feet away.

He stops at the window. Tugger eyes him curiously, with some respect.

BRENDAN

I want to see the Pin.

TUGGER

(nods slightly)

Yeah, I guess you do.

EXT. STREETS

Twisty and narrow. The black mustang flies through them at impossible speeds, roaring past like a bullet.

DARKNESS

Loud engine noise, jostling, grunting. Then a metallic jangle, some scraping, and a CLINK!

EXT. REAR OF FAST MOVING MUSTANG - LATE AFTERNOON

The trunk pops open, revealing Brendan holding a jack rod.

INT. MOVING MUSTANG - CONTINUOUS

Tug is putting a tape in the deck, eyes down. Behind him the trunk pops open, then pulls down out of sight just as he looks back up.

INT. TRUNK OF MOVING MUSTANG

Brendan holds the trunk about three inches open, just enough to see which street signs pass by. Loud music plays from the car -- "Sweet Baby James" by James Taylor.¹

The car zooms on.

BRENDAN'S POV

Through the ajar trunk. The mustang slides to a stop beside an elaborate wooden mailbox carved as an eagle's head. Brendan closes the trunk.

EXT. FRONT OF HOUSE - LATE AFTERNOON

A small one story house, slightly run down. Tugger opens the trunk and drags Brendan out, covering his eyes with a palm, slams the trunk and goes inside.

When they are gone the broken trunk drifts open.

INT. BASEMENT HALLWAY

A very dim narrow hall with a steep stairway at one end, dark doors down the length of it and a lit door at the other end. Tugger drags Brendan down the stairway, drops him and goes into the lit room.

¹ Unfortunately Mr. Taylor flatly refused, which, given the context, was probably wise.

Brendan lifts his head painfully. Surrounding him in the darkened doorways are dozens of boys, some dressed like Tugger, others dressed in black.

Tug pokes his head out.

TUGGER

Alright.

Arms pop out of the darkness and drag Brendan towards the lit room.

INT. KINGPIN'S DEN

A small room, amazingly messy. Clothes strewn about, groves of empty bottles, precarious piles of books. The overall impression though is not of jumbled chaos, but of a nest, comfortably woven and very worn in.

A slim figure with wispy hair sits facing the wall at a small desk, writing under a green bookkeeper's lamp.

Brendan is shoved into the center of the room. Tug and his clones slump against the surrounding walls. Brendan watches the thin figure's back. For a beat the only noise is the scratching of the thin man's pencil. Then he sighs and swivels around.

Mid to late twenties. Sallow features, tired eyes. His clothes are so richly black it is difficult to make out specific items -- he is just one inky black mass from the neck down and eyebrows up.

BRENDAN

You the Pin?

PIN

Yeah.

(beat of silence)

So now I'm very very curious what you're going to say next.

BRENDAN

Maybe I'll just sit and bleed at you.

The Pin shifts in his seat, bored.

PIN

Helled if you're gonna go breaking my best clients' noses and expect me to play sandbag. Anyway you've been sniffing me out before then, sniffing for me like a vampire bat for a horse

with a nick on its ear he can suck on.
They do that.

(Brendan blinks)

So now you got Tugger to bring you here,
which he never does, and you got me
listening, so I'm curious what you've
got to say that better be really, really
good.

BRENDAN

Call Ms. Dannon in from the hall first;
she oughta hear this.

PIN

(amused)

No dice, soldier. Would have been a neat
trick, though.

BRENDAN

(shrugs, then slowly)

I was going to make up some bit of
information or set up some phony deal,
anything so you'd let me walk. Then I
was going to go to the vice principal
and spill him the street address of the
biggest dope port in the burgh.

The Pin's eyes shoot to Tugger, who doesn't flinch.

TUGGER

He knows zippo.

BRENDAN

1250 Vista Blanca, the ink blotter at
the desk in the den in the basement of
the house with the tacky mailbox.

The world turns on its side as Tugger pushes Brendan's head
down into the carpet.

TUGGER

You gonna do what now?!

The Pin walks towards them. One of his shoes is twice the
size of the other.

PIN

No good, soldier.

The cronies around the room begin cackling. Tug's face is a
mask of rage. Brendan can't breath. His face swells.

PIN (cont'd)
 Alright, let up.

But Tug doesn't let up. Brendan's world grows hazy, the cackling laughter reverberates, then a clean voice pierces the din.

LAURA
 (OS)
 Tug, stop.

Tug's face breaks for a moment, and he lets go. Brendan's head lolls to the side. Laura stands in the dark doorway.

Brendan sees Tug's knuckles and a flash of white for a split moment as Tug hits him in the face. The Pin's black body spills out across the frame, leaving us in black.

FADE UP

SMALL DARK ROOM

Brendan wakes up curled on a mattress on the floor. A bare light bulb hangs from the ceiling. Tugger sits five feet away, watching him like a hungry dog. Brendan stares back at him through thick, glazed eyes.

BRENDAN
 Where are my glasses?
 (Tugger grins)
 Hell with ya then. Which wall's the door
 in?

Tug points, amused. Brendan heaves himself up, and Tug shoves him back down.

Brendan winks at him, stands and lurches towards the door again.

Tugger grabs his shirt and slams him into the wall, but freezes when he hears a door latch click. Sneering, he drops Brendan back onto the mattress and sits against the opposite wall.

Sounds of a door opening and closing come from the darkness. Light footsteps clack on the cement floor. Suddenly Tug vanishes -- the room's darkness just seems to swallow him.

The thin whispery voice of the Pin speaks softly.

PIN
 Sorry about this kid, but what the hell
 with what you said before.

His disembodied face appears a few feet about where Tug had sat.

PIN (cont'd)

Where you were at, with all of us and the Tug a fist away, you've got to use your nut. Allay the situation, So yeah, you're not scared of me, I got it, but I'm also thinking you're a little nuts now, so you've got that trade off with your standing. But nuts isn't all bad, so maybe it was a good play. I don't know.

He is standing in front of Tug. His black clothes and broad rimmed black hat blend perfectly with the dark room, such that his face seems to bob about in space. Brendan stifles a cough.

PIN (cont'd)

So, Laura talked me down. Let's get you upstairs, back with the living.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Brendan sits at a breakfast table eating cornflakes. The kitchen is on the first floor of the Pin's house, or rather the Pin's mother's house. She is a soft old lady in a pastel cotton dress, currently bent over the fridge mumbling.

MOTHER

I thought we had orange juice, Brendan, I'm sorry. How about Tang, or that's more like soda isn't it, or not soda but it hasn't got any juice in it, it can't be very fortifying.

BRENDAN

Water's fine, ma'am, thanks.

MOTHER

Now just a moment, we have apple juice here, if you'd like that, or milk, though you've got that in your cornflakes, I don't know if drinking it as well might be too much.

BRENDAN

Apple juice sounds terrific.

MOTHER

It's country style.

BRENDAN
That's perfect.

She shuts the fridge. Tugger and the Pin sit behind her, looking comfortably bored. The Pin, a sharp black hole against the soft yellow kitchen, eats oatmeal cookies with small delicate bites.

MOTHER
I'll even give it to you in a country glass, how'd that be? Boys?

TUGGER
I'm fine, Mrs. M.

PIN
Thanks, mom.

The Pin kisses her on the cheek.

MOTHER
Okay, well I'm going to go, um, do something in the other room now...

She shuffles out.

PIN
(to Brendan)
So hows bout we take another snap at hearing your tale?

BRENDAN
I don't know. It starts out same as before, and this floor ain't carpeted.

PIN
We're cooled off.

BRENDAN
Yeah well, your muscle seemed plenty cool putting his fist in my head. I want him out.

The Pin grins thinly, uncomfortable.

PIN
Looky, soldier-

BRENDAN
The ape blows or I clam.

TUGGER
 (stands violently)
 So clam! What've you got I can't beat
 out of you back in the basement?

The Pin and Brendan are perfectly still, watching each other.

PIN
 Give us a few minutes, Tug.

Tug turns to him, but Pin keeps his eyes on Brendan.

PIN (cont'd)
 I'll call you if whatever.

Beat. Tug stomps off, slamming the narrow door hard behind him. The Pin goes back to gnawing his cookie.

PIN (cont'd)
 So?

Brendan sets down his spoon.

BRENDAN
 About a year ago I had a small time
 dealing partnership with Jerr Madison.
 Know him?

PIN
 Till he took the fall for you.

BRENDAN
 Yeah well. I didn't ask him to, but he
 was a straight player. I got out clean -
 almost. Nothing on my official record,
 but the VPs play it like I owe them one.
 When I made it clear I wasn't playing
 their hound dog, well they didn't like
 it. They keep calling me in, badgering
 me.

PIN
 Gee that's tough.

BRENDAN
 I don't like being told whose side I'm
 on. So now they think I'm on your trail,
 I'm in a nice spot to know their
 movements and feed them yours.

PIN
 I gotcha.

BRENDAN
You haven't got me yet.

PIN
What, price?

BRENDAN
Considering the benefits my services
could yield, I don't think that's
unreasonable.

PIN
And what are your services exactly, just
so I can be specific on the invoice?

BRENDAN
(shrugs)
Whatever serves your interests.

The Pin stands.

PIN
Fair enough. I'll have my boys check
your tale, and seeing how it stretches
we'll either rub or hire you. You'll
know which by end of the day tomorrow.

Brendan stands but doesn't follow as the Pin opens the
narrow door Tugger went through and descends the dark stairs
behind.

PIN (cont'd)
We're done.

The moment the Pin vanishes into the basement's murk Laura
comes up out of it. She takes Brendan's hand.

LAURA
I'll drive you back.

INT. LAURA'S CONVERTIBLE MOVING - SUNSET

They zig zag though the twisty suburban streets. Brendan
stares sullenly into space.

BRENDAN
Just drop me at school.
(they take a hard turn)
How long was I out?

LAURA
Half an hour. It took all of it for me
to cool the Pin down.

BRENDAN
 (flatly, but sincerely)
 Thanks.

They drive on in silence.

EXT. SCHOOL PARKING LOT - DUSK

Laura's convertible stops, and Brendan climbs out painfully.
 He studies her face for a moment.

LAURA
 You trust me now?

BRENDAN
 Less than when I didn't trust you
 before. If you can tell me your angle in
 this, maybe I can.

LAURA
 Come here.¹

Brendan leans on the car, his face close to hers.

LAURA (CONT'D) (cont'd)
 I'm on the in, top level of the tower
 and I know everyone, but I don't know
 all what goes on. I knew Em when she
 tried to get with me and Brad, and I
 liked her. She was smart. But she wasn't
 us, and it didn't work. When she left
 she took some souvenirs, dirty habits
 she wasn't strong enough to control and
 a connection to the Pin to keep them
 going. With me?

BRENDAN
 So far.

LAURA
 A few months go by, and the next I hear
 the Pin's raging over a situation with
 some certain junk Em was partial to, and
 the downfall's coming on Em's head.

BRENDAN
 You think Em scraped the junk off the
 Pin?

¹ Not to weasel in a plug, but the original version of this scene (shot as written) is on the deleted scenes section of the DVD. Available at fine retailers everywhere.

LAURA

I don't know, but whether she scraped or copped or just ran her tab around the world and into her own back, it must have been grand. I've never seen the Pin so hot.

BRENDAN

This all helps but it's not what I asked. What's your angle in all this?

LAURA

I don't know. I'm usually pretty sharp, but... maybe I see what you're doing for Emily, trying to help her. And I don't know anyone who would do that for me.

BRENDAN

Now you are dangerous.

Throwing the car in gear, she peels out and leaves him standing alone in the fading evening light.

INT. BACKSTAGE

Brendan pushes through the gloom, past forest scenery, deeper and deeper until he comes to a door.

INT. WOMAN'S DRESSING ROOM

Hazy and cramped. Everything blends into the color of flesh. No walls are visible; it is all billowy piles of costumes. Brendan pushes in. Kara sits at the mirror, putting on eyeliner.

KARA

(sing song)

Brendan Brendan Brendan!

BRENDAN

Where's Dode flopped?

(she makes a face)

I know you two are cozed up, so you'll tell me or you won't.

KARA

Oooh, getting feisty.

(giggles)

Last time we talked you were giving ultimate-tims.

BRENDAN

It worked. You went to Laura, didn't you? Told her my tale.

KARA

All part of your plan?

BRENDAN

Turned out to be.

KARA

I feel so cheap and used.

BRENDAN

Gol, I must seem a real cad. Sometimes I just hate myself.

Kara grins dreamily.

KARA

Whatever happened to us, Brendan?

BRENDAN

Where's Dode flopped?

She turns to face him.

KARA

We were a pair and a half for a few months, weren't we? Sometimes I miss having someone I can talk to. You ever miss having someone? I guess you must.

Brendan's face is a mask.

BRENDAN

I need to hear Dode's tale about Emily. It's important.

KARA

(darkly)

You better be sure you wanna know whatcha wanna know.

Brendan stands, coughing.

BRENDAN

Uh huh. Laura's working with me now, and I'll have the Pin and Tug in my corner soon. The sooner I get the truth from Dode or the truth about Dode from you, the safer you'll both be. No? Pass it on to Dode anyway. Maybe he'll have the

sense to get out from under you before he gets hurt.

KARA

You didn't, did you?

Brendan leaves without looking back.

INT. BRENDAN'S ROOM - NIGHT

Brendan's at his desk, on the phone.

THE BRAIN

(on the phone)

So what happens now?

BRENDAN

Now we wait for the Pin's answer. Unless his crew spotted VP Truman's social call this morning, it'll be yes. I'd give us 70/30. If we're in I get under his skin and see what's what. You stick to Kara, keep your specs peeled for Dode and stay away from Laura.

The Brain is quiet for a beat.

THE BRAIN

I think she's with us, Brendan.

BRENDAN

(too sharp)

I'll let you know when she is.

A beat of silence.

THE BRAIN

Okay.

Brendan gently replaces the receiver and sits for a moment in silence.

EXT. LOCKER CAGE - MORNING

The class bell rings, and the cage quickly empties. Brendan limps in, opens his locker. A note falls to his feet. It is folded into a star. He pulls it open. "TWELVE THIRTY PICO & ALEXANDER".

He fishes the old note out and compares them - different handwriting.

The locker cage is now empty and silent, except for the steady sound of heavy footfalls. Brendan looks up from the notes.

A lug with a lumpish face is coming towards him. He wears a black trenchcoat over bulbous shoulders, and his black hair comes down over his eyes like a sheepdog's.

BRENDAN

You the Pin's?

No answer. The lug keeps coming.

BRENDAN (cont'd)

So what's his answer?

Closer, not slowing. Brendan tightens his hand into a fist. Then CLICK! and a long slender switchblade gleams in the lug's right paw.

Brendan jumps back as the lug swipes the blade at his torso. Before the lug winds up for another slash Brendan is running.

EXT. CAMPUS SQUARE - DAY

Brendan runs through the empty campus square, the lug follows.

EXT. SCHOOL HALLWAY - DAY

Wind rushing, sweating, the lug very close. Their footsteps clatter on the cement. Brendan swings around a corner, doubles back and stops with his back to a wall - he's lost sight of him.

Brendan sweats, listening. The lug's footsteps echo through the hallways, coming from all directions at once. Then it seems clear - he's down the hall on Brendan's right.

Brendan dashes left. Wrong. The lug looms over him, his knife hand flashing. Brendan's jacket shoulder tears open, and the white filling inside turns red. He stumbles back blindly, gets his footing and scrambles out of reach.

Brendan sprints away, down the hall, gaining about thirty feet on the lug before turning the corner.

Brendan drops to a sitting position.

THE LUG AROUND THE CORNER

Running fast.

BRENDAN

Kicks his shoes off and clambers to his feet. The lug's footsteps are impossibly loud.

THE LUG

Just about to round the corner.

BRENDAN

On his socked feet running silently back towards the corner. The lug's footsteps crash like symbols as they both come around the same corner in opposite directions at full speed.

Brendan slides like a baseball player, tangling his legs into the lug's. The lug pitches forward with frightening momentum. He hits the hall's metal handrail with his arms and head. A hollow gong reverberates through the hallway, and the lug falls like a puppet with his strings cut.

A wallet with a couple of twenties and a student ID (CHUCK BURNS), three hash pipes, fifteen joints, a baggie of weed and a large brownie in another baggie.

Brendan leaves it all on him and staggers off.

EXT. CAMPUS PAYPHONE - DAY

Brendan breathes heavily into the phone.

BRENDAN

Chuck Burns, big lug with hair like a sheepdog.

THE BRAIN

(on the phone)

Yeah I know him, I just can't pin him to any crowd. He's definitely not muscle for anyone. He taps the Carrows crowd but doesn't hang with them. If you've got a guess I could check it out-

BRENDAN

The Pin. If he's with the Pin everything's kablooie and I gotta blow the burgh.

THE BRAIN

I'll check it. I'm in third now-

Brendan spots the Pin's Cady pulling into the parking lot.

BRENDAN
Never mind. If I don't call by three
call in the bulls.

Brendan hangs up and begins walking at a normal pace along the sidewalk.

The cady pulls up beside him, and he stops walking. The door swings open and a voice comes from inside.

VOICE
Get in.

With no perceivable hesitation, he does.

INT. CADILAC - DAY

Brendan sits beside the Pin. The windows are tinted and the car is very dark. The seats are pink vinyl. The car lurches forward.

Brendan and the Pin are silent for a beat, not looking at each other.

BRENDAN
So?

PIN
So. Tangles.

A stocky kid in the front seat turns, and reaches into his jacket. For a moment he stays like that, hand in his jacket, eyes on Brendan. Brendan's face is placid.

Tangles pulls out an envelope and drops it in Brendan's lap.

PIN (cont'd)
That's what you'll get every week for
your services. Less of course there's a
specific job involved, in where you get
sliced in with my crew. Square?

BRENDAN
Yeah.

Silence. The Pin holds his hat in his hands, fingering the rim.

PIN
We're doing a thing down at the Hole
tonight. Know it?

BRENDAN
South of T Street, yeah.

PIN
It's sort of a welcome you in thing.
Eight o'clock.

The car stops.

EXT. CAMPUS PAYPHONE - DAY

Brendan climbs out of the car on the exact spot they picked him up. The Cady drives off. Brendan checks his watch.

BRENDAN'S WATCH

12:32. A phone begins to ring.

EXT. PICO & ALEXANDER - DAY

Brendan looks up from his watch and answers the payphone, holding the receiver to his ear in silence.

VOICE
(on the phone)
I know what you did. I saw what you
did.¹

The voice is low and garbled, filtered through something.

BRENDAN
So?

VOICE
Anyone I tell, it would ruin you some
way. And I'm going to tell someone.

BRENDAN
Are you making an offer?

VOICE
Maybe. Or maybe I'll just do you in.

BRENDAN
Hire another hash head to blade me?

¹ Originally the source of this call was supposed to be a mystery, but during post production we decided it was one layer too many, and identified the caller as Dode. Brendan's first line was overdubbed in post to say 'Dode?' instead of "So?"

VOICE

Don't need no blades, shamus. I just gotta squawk.

BRENDAN

What do you want?

VOICE

Just to see you sweat.

CLICK. Brendan replaces the receiver and stands still for a moment. Then he inserts a coin and dials.

THE BRAIN

(on the phone)

Brendan?

BRENDAN

Yeah.

THE BRAIN

You alright?

BRENDAN

Yeah, I'm fine. Keep digging on the Burns lug, but the main thing is to find Dode. He set up whatever Emily walked into, it's getting more and more urgent we talk.

THE BRAIN

Alright. Trueman was looking for you.

BRENDAN

Trueman and the VP?

THE BRAIN

No, just Trueman.

BRENDAN

Asked for me?

THE BRAIN

No, but looked.

BRENDAN

That's not good. Alright, keep me posted.

Brendan hangs up.

EXT. BEACH - NIGHT¹

A bonfire burns about a hundred feet off. Figures jump through the blaze to thrash music. The Pin and Brendan wander towards us on the dark beach.

PIN

So I'm going to start you on the dope circles, cleaning up the Turkish dues, pulling in the strags.

BRENDAN

Small fries.

PIN

Yeah, well. Just to see how you handle. Anyway there isn't much else doing. I'm tailing out this big deal, but that's almost done.

BRENDAN

Oh yeah? What was it?

PIN

Big time. Biggest I ever done, and there was a snag in it, but it's almost done now.

BRENDAN

What was it?

PIN

It's over.

BRENDAN

Almost, you said.

PIN

It's over enough. You're gonna make me curious, being so curious.

They sit in the sand, facing the breakers.

PIN (cont'd)

I gotta lay something out. You're coming into a certain situation, and I'm bringing you in sort of because of it.

¹ If ever you want to witness a look of pure horror, shoot a micro budget feature film and tell your cinematographer that there will be an extended scene on a beach at night. Turns out it's difficult to light up a beach without very large and expensive equipment. Who knew. Shooting at sunset proved a fortunate and less horror inducing solution.

(beat)

I didn't tell Tugger to hit you for the Brad Bramish thing. Laura and I, I decided I oughta hear what you were gunning for before I made an enemy. Tug just did it, though. He was hot, and he just hit you. He's been doing that.

BRENDAN

Yeah?

PIN

He's got my best interests, I know, he's loyal, he just gets hot.

BRENDAN

Muscle you can't control's no good at that.

PIN

You're working for me, not Tug, that's all.

BRENDAN

Alright.

A moment of silence. The breakers crash.

PIN

Things can get, you know, it's tough sometimes. Twisted, complicated, watching all the, I don't know. Everyone's got their thing.

(silence)

You read Tolkien?

BRENDAN

What?

PIN

Tolkien, the Hobbit books?

BRENDAN

Yeah.

PIN

His descriptions of things are really good.

BRENDAN

Oh yeah?

PIN

He makes you want to be there.

The waves crash. Behind them, with no warning at all, a train shoots by. Tug stands with his hands jammed in his pockets, flashing lights and gleaming metal streaking and squealing behind him.

INT. BRENDAN'S ROOM - EARLY MORNING

The clock radio blinks 5:34. The phone is ringing. Brendan half wakes and puts it to his ear.

THE BRAIN

(on the phone)

Don't go to class.

BRENDAN

What?

THE BRAIN

Fifth period Trueman and the VP come in asking for you.

BRENDAN

Agh.

THE BRAIN

Did they call your mom?

BRENDAN

Probably. I got home late.

THE BRAIN

Get out of there too, then. Meet me behind the library. I've got some stuff.

EXT. BACK OF LIBRARY - EARLY MORNING

A cold gray morning. The Brain hands Brendan a photocopy of a newspaper clipping, "LOCAL YOUTH HOSPITALIZED"

THE BRAIN

Frisco Farr was found on a sidewalk outside Pinkerton's Deli three weeks ago. He was in a coma, his stomach contained a sausage sandwich, a horse dose of Heroin and traces of Choleric Tricemate, a poisonous chemical found in laundry detergent. Frisco's still under

and nobody's talking, so nothing's come of it.

BRENDAN

OD?

THE BRAIN

No, the chem the junk must have been cut with put him down.

BRENDAN

Huh. Bad junk. Bad brick... could that form of Heroin be called 'Brick'?

THE BRAIN

No -- it was a concentrated powder, its street handle's 'whip' or 'rock' or 'brock'.

(fishes a note from his pocket)

Here. From Laura.

BRENDAN

I told you to stay clear of Laura.

THE BRAIN

You tell her to stay clear of me?

He gives the note to Brendan, who unfolds it roughly.

BRENDAN

(mutters)

I gotta get voicemail.

The note reads "Meet me at the southeast corner of the school at 9:30." Brendan crumples it into a ball.

BRENDAN (cont'd)

No. Tell her I'll be at the Pin's at one. Any luck with the lug?

THE BRAIN

No.

The Brain lays out a local newspaper with Emily's picture - "LOCAL GIRL MISSING". Uncomfortable silence.

BRENDAN

This isn't good.

The Brain looks hard at him. Brendan stares off into space for a beat, then takes the Brain's cell phone and dials.

BRENDAN (cont'd)
(into phone)
Mr. Trueman please.

Brendan compares the two notes from his pocket with Laura's
- distinct handwriting on each.

TRUEMAN
(on the phone)
This is Trueman.

BRENDAN
What the hell are you doing asking for
me in class?

TRUEMAN
What the hell are you doing out of
class?

BRENDAN
What?

TRUEMAN
(very deliberate)
The VP and I needed to ask you a few
questions about Emily Kostich, who you
might have heard is missing. It's a very
serious thing. The police are involved.
The VP and I knew you two were close, so
the VP and I came to ask you questions,
but you were truant. If you don't have a
valid excuse-

Brendan hangs up.

THE BRAIN
What?

BRENDAN
I've been cut loose. I'm not safe here.
We shouldn't have met in the open.
Alright, lay low, but ask on the
underneath for Dode. That's all that
matters now, find Dode, but do it on the
underneath, got it?

THE BRAIN
What are you going to do?

BRENDAN
I'd like to have played it safe, but
there's no time. The Pin's not letting

anything drop, so I gotta push things a bit.

THE BRAIN

How?

BRENDAN

I don't know. Just find Dode.

EXT. THE PIN'S HOUSE - DAY

The bird of prey mailbox looms ominously. Brendan knocks on the front door. No answer. He presses lightly on the screen door, and it gives.

INT. KITCHEN - SAME

Empty. Brendan crosses the warped linoleum and gently opens the narrow basement door. He descends into inky gloom.

INT. BASEMENT HALLWAY - SAME

Deathly still and silent. Barely breathing, Brendan goes to the lit doorway at the end of the hall.

INT. PIN'S DEN - SAME

Empty. Brendan floats through the room like a ghost, to the Pin's desk.

Slowly, then with greater confidence he rifles through it - papers and trinkets, meaningless.

He reaches beneath the desk, knocking it gently with his knuckles. Quickly he removes the top drawer and reaches down into the desk frame.

Brendan draws out a stack of hundred dollar bills two inches thick. He pulls out another. Another. Another. Thumbing the stacks -- pure hundreds.

Something creaks in the hallway.

Brendan freezes. Silently he replaces the money and drawer, his eyes on the doorway. He creeps towards the door on the balls of his feet.

INT. BASEMENT HALLWAY - SAME

Still empty. Brendan creeps towards the stairs, passing other doorways, all open but for one. He stops for a moment, listening - silence.

INT. STORAGE ROOM - SAME

Brendan enters the room - pitch black but for a small high window. Brendan pulls the curtains aside. A beam of sunlight spills just enough light to reveal a figure in the dark. Brendan jumps back, and his reflection in the large mirror jumps as well.

A white bird nesting in the window flutters into the dark room.

Brendan walks the large mirror into the beam of light, reflecting it around the room like a flashlight. More junk, a mattress, then a strangely bare corner with a single white lump in it. The white bird stands behind the lump, its dark eyes caught in the bare light.

The bird flies out the window.

Brendan goes to the white lump, a small brick of white powder. White chalky residue patterns the floor -- there were other bricks there before.

Behind Brendan, in the mirror, something moves. Someone else, in the room.

Tugger. He throws Brendan across the room, then heaves him into a wall.

TUGGER

What with the poking, genius?! Maybe you're poking for your bull friends!

BRENDAN

Don't be a sap. I can't even face up at school, the VP's so hot for me.

TUGGER

Yeah well. Maybe you're looking to make good.

BRENDAN

I'm looking to find this big game the Pin's played, not to gum it, but just so when its tail jams in my back I'll know who to bill for the embalming.

TUGGER

You oughta ask him what you wanna know.

BRENDAN

I did. He didn't tell me.

Tug loosens his grip. Brendan gasps for air.

BRENDAN (cont'd)

When a gee I'm paid to side with won't
give me the straight that makes me
nervous. Makes me angry.

Tug draws back a bit.

TUGGER

Yeah, well. That's understandable.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Tug sets a country glass of orange juice in front of
Brendan. He paces.

TUGGER

There was ten of them. I don't know
where he picked them, he didn't tell me.

BRENDAN

(sympathetic)
Huh.

TUGGER

So we get ten kils of brock, there aint
enough marks in the whole burgh to eat
that. So he unloads eight of em up way
north, even up to the docks. I don't
know who.

BRENDAN

Didn't tell you.

TUGGER

Yeah. That was eight. So that's the
tenth in there. We gotta break it into
doses, sell em off round the high, maybe
some by Shorecliffs.

BRENDAN

What about the ninth brick?

TUGGER

Ah yeah. There were problems with that.

BRENDAN

Yeah?

TUGGER

It, uh...

He stops, thinking harder than he's used to. His scar reddens slightly, then he jerks out of his trance.

TUGGER (cont'd)

(quickly)

It disappeared. Someone skimmed it. We started raising hell with all the likely suspects, and whatayaknow, it came back. But it came back bad. One of ours took a dose off the top, and it laid him out.

BRENDAN

Frisco.

TUGGER

Yeah, poor Frisco. You heard about that. We'll track down the rat. Just takes time.

BRENDAN

I heard something fell with Emily Kostich.

TUGGER

Emily who?

BRENDAN

Kostich.

TUGGER

Don't know her.

BRENDAN

Huh.

A quiet pause. Tug's scar reddens a bit more.

TUGGER

Has the Pin talked about her?

BRENDAN

Not to me.

TUGGER

Yeah, he might know something. Ask him. Tell me what he says, cause if you heard something, you know, I wanna check.

BRENDAN

Sure.

The screen door swings open -- enter the Pin. If he's surprised he doesn't show it.

PIN
Pow wowing?

BRENDAN
Just shooting the shat.

TUGGER
Yeah, just shooting it.

PIN
Good.

His big foot clunks on the linoleum. He eyes a very sick looking Brendan.

PIN (cont'd)
You alright, soldier?

Brendan moves a hand dismissively, sniffing.

PIN (cont'd)
So, Tug, I got a call. Someone who says they know something about Emily.

TUGGER
Emily?

PIN
Emily Kostich. Where she's at now. Says we'd want to know. Wants to meet.

TUGGER
(uncomfortable)
Yeah?

PIN
So we'll meet him. Four o'clock.
(to Brendan)
Emily was Tug's girl for awhile. You know Emily, didn't you?

BRENDAN
A while back.

PIN
You've heard she's missing?

BRENDAN
Yeah, I heard that.

PIN
So maybe you want to come along too.

BRENDAN
What has Emily got to do with you?

PIN
(looks at Tugger)
Show, maybe we'll find out.

He gives a slip of paper to Tugger.

PIN (cont'd)
Four o'clock.

Tugger glances at the slip, then slides it to Brendan. It has the symbol drawn in pencil:



A horn honks outside.

BRENDAN
That's my ride.

The Pin calls after him as he leaves.

PIN
Four o'clock.

EXT. FRONT OF PIN'S HOUSE - SAME

Brendan falls into Laura's idling car.

BRENDAN
(roughly)
A payphone, anywhere.

LAURA
What-

Brendan throws the car into drive, and they jerk forward.

EXT. STREET CORNER - DAY

PAYPHONE
The mobile customer you have called is
away from the phone-

Brendan slams the phone down violently and walks back towards the car. His legs quiver, and a coughing fit hits.

Hacking and spluttering he falls to his knees. Laura's arms wrap around him, except it isn't Laura, it's Emily. Brendan spins backwards into

DARKNESS

Emily kissing his mouth, her hair around him, but it isn't her hair, it's Laura's. Brendan shoots upwards

INT. LAURA'S CAR STATIONARY - DAY

and sits up with a jolt. Laid out in the back seat, Laura dabbing his head with a wet napkin.

BRENDAN
(barks shakily)
What time is it?

LAURA
Lie down, Brendan-

BRENDAN
What time-

LAURA
You've got a fever, you've got to go to the hospital or-

BRENDAN
What time is it?

LAURA
Three forty. You've got to rest, you're feverish.

He throws himself out of the car.

EXT. SCHOOL PARKING LOT - SAME

Brendan falls to his knees, coughing. Laura follows.

LAURA
Get back in the car, I'm taking you home, you're sick, you need-

BRENDAN
Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!

He keeps yelling that until she does. His head spins.

BRENDAN (cont'd)
Okay, you've got to, what you've got to do is drive around to the Carrows lot.

I'll be up on the, the blacktop, the basketball field. So you've got to go by you or me to get down there. If you see anyone but the Pin or Tugger or their crew go down into the ravine, honk four times, long short long short. But don't be seen.

LAURA

Get back in the car.

BRENDAN

Do it! Will you do it? I need you to do this. I need you, here. Please.

He holds her shoulders. A beat, then her face registers resignation.

EXT. BASKETBALL FIELD - DAY

A flat plane of pebbly asphalt with a dozen basketball courts faintly outlined across its surface. Brendan stands crooked, watching the barren horizon. The wind blows bitterly, and the sky is dark.

Then, a speck. Coming towards Brendan, across the field. Brendan slumps towards it. Closer. Still a dark dot. Closer.

Brendan's face snaps into recognition.

BRENDAN

What are you doing, Dode?

Dode grins. He holds a newspaper.

DODE

You gonna stop me?

BRENDAN

What do you think you're doing, Dode?

DODE

I saw you. I saw what you did.

BRENDAN

What'd you see?

DODE

I saw you.

BRENDAN

What'd you see me?

DODE

You were with her, dead, and you took the body.

BRENDAN

Yeah, I did. That's all you saw? What about before?

DODE

Before what?

BRENDAN

Did you see who killed her before I got there?

DODE

(face ashen)
You killed her.

BRENDAN

I found the body, Dode.

DODE

You, I thought you didn't, but we figured out, I got the news on ya, cause you hid the body, why wouldn't-

BRENDAN

Who's 'we'?

DODE

Shut up! You're always talking, always this and that smartso, you're gonna shut up now!

BRENDAN

I didn't kill her, Dode.

DODE

You're not going to talk this!

BRENDAN

Dode, I know you're thinking of Em, I know you tried to help her-

DODE

Shut up! You're gonna shut your

Brendan staggers, the world blurs out for a moment, then snaps back.

DODE (cont'd)

put it over real nice-

BRENDAN

-so I'm telling you now you're in over
your head, you don't want to put your
hand in this-

Dode shakes the newspaper at him.

DODE

Shut up! She's dead, you-

BRENDAN

Why was she scared, Dode? She came to
me, who was she scared of? I think I
know why, I just gotta know who!

Dode throws the paper, which scatters in the wind.

DODE

You're trying to confuse me.

BRENDAN

Dode.

DODE

You couldn't stand it. Your little Em.
She was gonna keep it, it was mine, and
you couldn't stand that.

BRENDAN

What was yours?

DODE

I had you pegged.

BRENDAN

What was yours?

DODE

I loved her. And I woulda loved the kid.
I'm gonna bury you.

Brendan's face is empty. Dode walks stiffly away. Brendan
puts a hand on his shoulder, but shrinks back in a coughing
spasm. Dode grabs Brendan's wrist and hits him in the face.

Brendan hits the pavement.

EXT. HEAVEN - DAY

Bright clouds, sharp light. Emily flies towards us, glowing, then dimmer, her wings splutter out, the clouds turn gray, and we are looking at Emily's picture in the newspaper article.

EXT. BASKETBALL FIELD - DAY

Brendan pulls the newspaper off his face, lying in a fetal position. Dode is nowhere to be seen.

Slowly, painfully, Brendan hoists himself up. He coughs and splutters, barely able to keep his footing.

He limps across the field. Every step is agony. The wind blows against him. The black field seems impossibly long, still he keeps limping forward, towards the ravine.

EXT. RUNOFF TUNNEL - DAY

Brendan slides down the embankment, landing on his feet.

Gathered around the drain tunnel entrance are Tugger, the Pin, five of Tugger's flunkies and Dode in the middle. Everyone looks at Brendan.

A long silence. Brendan clears his throat.

BRENDAN

What'd I miss?

More silence.

PIN

Dode here says Emily Kostich is dead.

Nobody reacts to that. Brendan's face is placid.

BRENDAN

Oh yeah?

PIN

Yeah. He says he knows who did it. He says he knows where the body's at.

(beat of silence)

And he says he wants more money than I think the information's worth.

BRENDAN

That so, Dode?

(to the Pin)

So walk. What's the info have to do with you anyways?

DODE

Plenty.

PIN

Plenty, he says.

BRENDAN

Uh huh. And he wants cash on the nail. He's a pot skulled reef worm with more hop in his head than blood. Why pay for dirt you can't believe?

DODE

You'll believe this.

BRENDAN

(shrugs)

Maybe you will.

DODE

You'll believe it, cause it's someone close to you. Real close.

The Pin looks up at Brendan, whose face is loose and nonchalant.

BRENDAN

Maybe it's hot, but it's Dode, you can't trust it.

DODE

Real close.

Tugger's eyes are locked on Dode, his scar the color of raw liver. Brendan laughs and turns away.

BRENDAN

I'm getting my shoes wet for this. Let him milk you if you want.

PIN

(to Brendan)

Stay.

(to Dode)

It's still too much.

DODE

No it's not. You won't complain when you hear it.

Tugger twists a stick in his hands. Brendan watches him, curious.

BRENDAN
(murmurs)
So maybe you should.

DODE
You had her against the wall with the
brick -

PIN
I know my business. It's still too much.

DODE
(with growing confidence)
It's not, cause that's not why she was
killed, and it's real important to you,
cause the person who killed her's real
close, and cause he's got a lot to lose,
and he knows if I don't bury him by
spilling to you I spill to the bulls and
bury him for real, and he's really
really scared - she had a kid in her and
he couldn't stand -

Tugger springs like a cat. He grabs Dode's hair and knees his face.

Brendan stumbles towards them.

BRENDAN
Tug, it's alright!

Tug has Dode on the ground, kicking his stomach and chest.

PIN
Tug, stop.

Tug backs off. Dode raises his head.

Tug pulls the gun from his jacket.

Brendan yells, slips and falls into the shallow water.

Tug levels the gun at Dode's head and fires one shot. The back of Dode's skull comes off.

The rapport reverberates through the black tunnel behind them, and birds fly out. Dode remains upright for a moment, then falls limp into the water.

The Pin's face is stupid, lifeless. Tug turns to him, gun in hand.

PIN (cont'd)
 (thickly)
 Tug...

Tugger fires - dirt kicks up, and the Pin scrambles back. Brendan crawls towards Tug, yelling for him to stop.

Tug fires twice more, both misses, and the Pin is away.

Distant sirens.

Brendan's vision blurs. He stumbles and falls into the shallow water.

FADE OUT

FADE IN:

A CEILING FAN

Spinning gently. Brendan's eyes open, watch it sleepily, then sharpen.

INT. TUGGER'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Brendan sits up in the bed. Tugger sits in a chair bedside, smoking. Brendan watches him for a long moment in the room's dim light.

TUGGER
 She sprung it on me, just. That's a hell of a thing to spring on a guy. I don't remember much. Laura talked me down after, said whatever, she knew her, said it wasn't true, but I still think sometimes. I think bout it being true. Bout it being mine. And maybe I did it cause I thought it was true. A hell of a thing.

Brendan stares at him through cold, empty eyes.

TUGGER (cont'd)
 You up? You weren't doing too good there for awhile. Laura said take you, you know, hospital, but I couldn't.

BRENDAN
 What's the stats?

TUGGER

Everyone's just laying low. You're here with us, at my folks place. They're gone. The bulls got Dode fore the tide took his body.

BRENDAN

Tide?

TUGGER

Yeah, strong tide, would've taken the body, like out to sea. It can do that. But the fuzz got there first.

Brendan nods.

TUGGER (cont'd)

So everyone's assuming it's war, but no one's said it yet. Everyone's lying low.

BRENDAN

War?

TUGGER

You're with us.

BRENDAN

The hell I am.

Brendan swings his legs over the bed. Tug steps in front of him, staring him down.

BRENDAN (cont'd)

Alright, I'm with you.

TUGGER

So just lie low. Sleep some more. Laura, she said you should sleep.

Tugger exits. Brendan runs his fingers through his hair, steps into his shoes and hobbles out of the room.

INT. TUGGER'S LIVING ROOM - SAME

About ten more kids dressed like Tug are cleaning guns. Brendan nods to them.

BRENDAN

Hey.

They nod back, not paying much attention as he goes out the front door.

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

On a lamplit street corner Brendan leans against a payphone.

THE BRAIN
(on phone)
Brendan?

BRENDAN
Yeah.

THE BRAIN
Are you - what, man, have you heard
about Dode-

BRENDAN
I was there.

THE BRAIN
You-

BRENDAN
Where were you yesterday? I called.

THE BRAIN
Kasprzyk took my phone, turned it off. I
just now got it back.

BRENDAN
Alright, listen-

THE BRAIN
Are you okay?

BRENDAN
Just listen. Is my name in the papers
with the story?

THE BRAIN
No.

BRENDAN
Alright. Is it just Dode in the papers?

THE BRAIN
Yeah. What do you mean?

BRENDAN

Listen, I'm going to be calling you tonight, probably late. Sleep with your phone on. Could you get a car if you needed to?

THE BRAIN

If it's late enough I could take my mom's-

BRENDAN

Be ready then. I'll call.

THE BRAIN

Alright.

INT. DRESSING ROOM - NIGHT

Brendan kicks in the door. Kara sits in front of the mirror in a soft pink robe, a boy on the floor beside her. She gasps.

KARA

Brendan. Did you hear about Dode?

BRENDAN

You scheming tramp. You set that poor kid up, you hid him, fed him your tale. You got info from Laura and held Dode like a card till you could play him. For money!

Brendan throws a chair. The boy stands.

KARA

I don't know what you're talking about.

BRENDAN

You'd bury me at the same time, but it was mostly for the money. You got Dode thinking Em had his kid, thinking I did it, and that was enough for him, but he stuck to the money cause you had your claws in him, cause he couldn't come away from the deal without it and make you happy.

KARA

Sit down, you're a mess. Russ, go get my shoes from the wardrobe locker, would you sweetie?

He goes, trying to look mean at Brendan. Brendan and Kara watch each other like caged rats.

KARA (cont'd)

Still wish you knew what you wanted to know? If it's any consolation, it probably wasn't Dode's kid. It might have been Tug's, but frankly I wouldn't bet a horse - it was a crowded field there at the end.

Brendan grabs a clock and throws it. Kara's mirror shatters, revealing a grimy dark wall behind.

KARA (cont'd)

Meany. You want my tale, Brendan? I still know what Dode was selling, but I'd play it smart. A quick call from a payphone to copland, they drag the tunnel and you're through.

She comes very close to him. Her robe falls open slightly.

KARA (cont'd)

Five thousand. Cash. I know you can get it from the Pin, but even if you can't I want it by first period tomorrow, or I play my hand and bury you.

She turns away, lets her robe fall.¹

KARA (cont'd)

Now get out.

Brendan's eyes burn. He lunges at her.

EXT. BACKSTAGE - SAME

Drama geeks sit in groups. The dressing room door flies open and Kara flies out, stark naked. Brendan flies out after her.

KARA

What are you doing?

BRENDAN

Showing your ace.

Brendan storms out.

¹ Also on the DVD. Fine retailers everywhere.

EXT. PIN'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Brendan walks past the bird of prey mailbox. A voice from the screen door -

VOICE
Far enough.

The Pin.

PIN
Everyone's paying social calls.

BRENDAN
Laura here?

Beat of silence.

PIN
So?

BRENDAN
So what are the stats?

PIN
The stats are war, soon as the press heat dies. And if you're with him, you're with him.

BRENDAN
Tug got hot. He panicked.

PIN
Tug's been after my digs from the get go.

BRENDAN
No. He's been anxious cause he thought if you found out he killed Emily you'd turn him over.

PIN
He was right.

BRENDAN
Yeah, well.

PIN
I told him to get the straight, no roughing. I wasn't even there.

BRENDAN

Alright. So he's a hot head. So you don't want him on your side, at least let's have a pow wow fore we start digging trenches. Maybe we can all walk away amiable enemies. What would it take?

PIN

I don't know. We'd have to square everything between us. He owes me some money.

BRENDAN

Alright, but we can talk.

PIN

Yeah, alright.

BRENDAN

Four o'clock.

PIN

Tomorrow?

BRENDAN

Tonight. Let's clear it all before it boils up again.

PIN

Four tonight. You'll be here?

BRENDAN

Yeah.

Brendan turns away.

LAURA (OS)

Wait!

She comes out of the house with her purse.

LAURA (cont'd)

I'll drive you back.

INT. LAURA'S CAR - MOVING - NIGHT

Laura drives, Brendan stares at the passing lights.

LAURA

What's going to happen?

Brendan coughs.

LAURA (cont'd)
Do you feel better?

BRENDAN
(weak)
I don't know.

INT. TUGGER'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Brendan stumbles in. Tug's hands grab him roughly.

TUGGER
For a smart guy you aint too smart. I
said lay low.

Laura enters.

LAURA
Tug.

He drops Brendan. Laura kneels beside Brendan, feeling his forehead.

BRENDAN
She was at the Pin's.

TUGGER
Yeah, she's our go-between.

BRENDAN
Uh huh. So here's the sit. You and the
Pin are going to pow wow, four o'clock
tonight, his place. Take all the muscle
you want, you won't need it. He wants to
talk straight, and you're going to work
with him for whatever he needs, cause
you don't want war.

TUGGER
Hell I don't.

BRENDAN
The Pin's sitting on the brick profits -
hitting him now would be post. Make
peace and wait for your chance.

LAURA
He's right, Tug. Smooth it out.

BRENDAN
(between coughs)
Besides, he's got you on the Dode thing.
War'll mean you vs. him and every bull
in the burgh.

Tugger turns away, thinking.

TUGGER
Yeah, we'll talk.

LAURA
(to Brendan)
You going?

BRENDAN
Yeah.

She nods. Brendan stumbles into the bedroom.

INT. TUGGER'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Brendan lies on his back. Sweat stands on his forehead.

THE FAN

Spinning dizzily from Brendan's POV. Then the fan is still
and the room is spinning, then the fan, then the room.
Brendan clamps his eyes shut. A door creaks open.

BRENDAN
(croaks)
Go away.

Laura floats across the room to him. Her hair falls around
him. Brendan shrinks back. She puts a pale hand on his
clammy forehead. Brendan tries to speak, but cannot.

Her fingers slide over his face. She pulls off his glasses.

Her hands all over his face. Brendan's throat contorts in a
hard swallow. His eyes are wet.

Her hair, her hands all warm and gentle, touching him.

LAURA
I'm sorry Brendan.

Brendan breaks. In silent sobs first, then shivering with an
almighty release he cries like a baby in her arms.

THE FAN

Spinning above them.

Laura lights a cigarette. They lie beside each other.

LAURA
Don't go tonight.

BRENDAN
I've got to make sure it plays out
smooth.

LAURA
It'll play however it plays without you
there.

BRENDAN
I've got to make sure.

LAURA
Why?

BRENDAN
Cause if there's war, I'm in it too.

LAURA
Well let's just, I mean why not just run
away. Go somewhere. I've got a car.
(Brendan gives a wry look)
I've got an aunt in New Orleans, she
wouldn't care.
(Brendan grins)
Yeah, it's a stupid thing, but think
about it, why not? What, school? C'mon.
Family?

BRENDAN
Alright, stop.

Her smoke drifts into the fan.

LAURA
I wasn't serious, but we could go for
awhile. Just until everything clears.

Brendan watches the smoke. She stubs the butt out in an ash
tray on the table and curls against his chest.

Stretching his arm across the table, he nonchalantly spins
the ash tray around with his finger.

His glasses lay on the table. Through the left lens the
cigarette is magnified. Pale blue arrow on the filter.

Laura's arm stretches across his chest. He looks at it, then up at the fan, spinning.

LATER

Brendan slips out of bed. A glowing clock radio reads "3:16".

INT. TUGGER'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

A swarm of silent activity. Tug's flunkies prepare various weapons. Brendan goes to Tug.

BRENDAN
Tell your boys no knuckle business.

TUGGER
They're just ready.

BRENDAN
Your folks left a car here?

TUGGER
Yeah.

BRENDAN
Take it and Laura's.
(Brendan tosses Tug the keys)
I'll go first in yours.

TUGGER
The hell-

BRENDAN
I'll take the scenic route to draw off any tailers. They'll think it's you, they might even radio back that you're alone. Get it?

TUGGER
Mr. Smarts.

He tosses Brendan his keys.

BRENDAN
Alright. Got a cigarette?

TUGGER
No. I don't smoke.

BRENDAN
I've seen you smoke.

TUGGER
I don't smoke cigarettes.

BRENDAN
Give me fifteen minutes, then go.

EXT. TUGGER'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Brendan slides into the black mustang and gutters off into the night.

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

Overlooking a twinkling valley of suburban lights. Brendan talks at a payphone beside the curbed mustang.

THE BRAIN
(on phone)
Yeah.

BRENDAN
Alright, I warned you. Can you get the car?

THE BRAIN
Yeah.

BRENDAN
Go to 2014 Clancy, off Pico west of La Grange. Park outside and wait. Laura's inside. She hasn't got a car, but if she blows on foot or gets a pick, tail her. Alright?
(silence)
Alright?

THE BRAIN
Okay.

BRENDAN
I'll call you when it gets light.
(silence)
Thanks, Brain.

CLICK, Brain hangs up.

EXT. FRONT OF PIN'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Brendan pulls the mustang into the driveway, limps up to the front door and knocks. One of the Pin's boys lets him in.

INT. KITCHEN - SAME

Crowded with tense looking punks, half dressed like the Pin and half like Tugger. The Pin's mom is shuffling about, pouring them milk.

INT. BASEMENT HALLWAY - SAME

Several more punks from both camps crowd the hall, and more lean in the darkened doorways. Brendan passes through quickly.

INT. PIN'S DEN - SAME

The Pin at his desk, flanked by two of his boys. Tug sits in the center of the room, two of his punks beside him. Brendan saunters between them and leans against the dresser.

BRENDAN

Talk.

PIN

I want full assurance that any heat from Emily and Dode is gonna be on just you. I don't even want my name pulled in the shindig. Second, you owe me six Cs, no rush, but I want your shake that it'll come home in not too much time.

Tug's eyes burn, his scar reddens.

BRENDAN

(to Tug)

That's square. You did them after all. Lay low it'll blow over. Stick on this, one of you'll dish it to bury the other and you'll both get the rap. As to the six, did you borrow it?

TUGGER

Yeah.

BRENDAN

Then you owe it. Shouldn't need a shake on that.

Tug looks at the Pin.

TUGGER

Alright to both.

BRENDAN

Good. Let's seal it up and blow for keeps.

PIN

Third thing. The last brick.

Brendan looks up sharply, taken off guard.

BRENDAN

It's yours.

PIN

That aint the point. I'm gonna start selling it. How do I know it aint bad?

BRENDAN

Why would it be?

PIN

Why was the last one? Cause someone got greedy. Tug here's had the means to swipe half and cut it bad for a long time. Now we're splits my loss of trust's retroactive.

BRENDAN

Did you, Tug?

TUGGER

(eyes hot on the Pin)

No.

BRENDAN

Alright, so let's shake and blow.

PIN

Not good enough.

Tug shoots to his feet, kicking away his chair.

BRENDAN

What would be good enough?

PIN

I wanna see him dose it. Just to prove it. Then we're square.

TUGGER

Hell for that! I didn't touch your junk, that's it.

PIN
I wanna see it.

TUGGER
To hell!

PIN
Your not wanting to dose it's telling me something right here.

TUGGER
Yeah, it better be! It's telling that I'm out from your thumb, that I aint playing lapdog to no gothed up cripple no more!

Everyone in the room is on their feet. Brendan steps forward.

BRENDAN
I'll dose it.

All eyes to him, unbelieving.

PIN
What?

BRENDAN
If it'll shut you two apes up I'll take the dose, and if I don't die we're all right as rain, and if I do die you two have your war, so long as you keep it off my grave. Deal?

PIN
Fine. Tangles.

BRENDAN
Johnny, go with him.

They go.

Tug just stares at Brendan, then tosses his hands up slightly and turns away.

They all wait.

CRASH! from the next room. Everyone freezes. More breaking, then scuffling and shouting.

The two punks look at their bosses, then run out. Tug starts to follow, but Brendan holds him back.

The noise through the wall grows tremendous, a full brawl. The ceiling pounds and shudders with footfalls and bodies hitting the ground.

Then, from not too far away, a gunshot.

The Pin stands and goes towards the door, but Brendan shouts

BRENDAN (cont'd)

No!

and slams it shut. A few tense seconds.

Another gunshot. Footfalls, then Tangles falls through the door, his chest red. The Pin bends over him.

TANGLES

(gasping)

The brick, it's gone. The brick's gone.

Tangles stops gasping.

The Pin stands, eyes blazing at Tug.

PIN

Make peace, huh? Talk it out? Get your boys in my den soes you could snag it under my nose?

Tug's scar is fiery red. He coils his body, snarling.

TUGGER

Alright!

BRENDAN

No, that's not-

PIN

Was it bad, Tug? Snag it so I don't know, or sell it off to flat the war odds?

BRENDAN

(shouts)

Pin, think about it-

TUGGER

Alright, I did all that!

Tug blows past Brendan like a train and slams the Pin into the ground with his fist. He punctuates his words with hard straight blows into the Pin's face.

TUGGER (cont'd)
I cut the brick, I stole the money, I
faked a peace, I snagged your junk, I
did it all!

He pulls the gun.

Brendan shouts and throws himself on Tug's arm, wrenching it sideways. The gun clunks onto the carpet.

The Pin flips Tug over and for a moment Brendan is caught between them, hit and torn, rolling over the gun. Tug grabs it, Brendan grabs his wrist and the gun goes off, firing into the ceiling. Plaster sprays.

Brendan screams, thrashing wildly, and manages to slip out of his bloodied jacket and out from between the two.

The Pin is on top, pinning Tug's gun hand to the carpet, straining to keep it there.

Brendan leaps to his feet, staggers, then winds up and kicks Tug in the wrist with all his strength.

A terrible crunching popping sound. Tug roars. Brendan takes the gun from his limp hand.

PIN
Do him!

Brendan backs off a few steps. The Pin strains to keep Tug down.

PIN (cont'd)
Do him now!

Brendan stumbles back. Tug roars, flips the Pin over and beats his face mercilessly.

Brendan stumbles out into the hall.

INT. BASEMENT HALLWAY - SAME

Empty. From the darkened doorways and the thin ceiling relentless sounds of fighting.

Brendan walks backwards as if in a trance, eyes glued to the Pin's door. Inside wild shadows splay across the walls, and the Pin shouts Brendan's name.

Light flashes from another darkened doorway and the wall beside Brendan splinters. Brendan spins on his heel and fires three shots into the darkness, which falls silent.

He turns the gun back on the Pin's doorway.

With a spray of sparks the doorway turns dark. They broke the lamp.

The dark doorway looms up before Brendan, inky black. Horrible sounds come from it, blows, breaking bone, screams. The Pin screams Brendan's name over and over, calling for help. Pleading. Brendan steps back.

Time slows down. Brendan drops the gun.

It thunks on the carpet.

In one motion Brendan kicks the gun down the hall into the Pin's doorway, turns and runs into the room where he found the brick.

INT. STORAGE ROOM

Dark. Brendan runs through, clawing past dark fighting shapes, running like a man possessed. He breaks through the darkness and heaves himself up through the small window.

EXT. FRONT OF PIN'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Brendan scrambles out, slips on the grass and hits the ground hard.

Two sharp gunshots come from the house.

Everything is suddenly still. Brendan stands slowly.

He notices a light from the Mustang - the trunk has drifted open.

Inside, a pale blue arm lies tangled in black plastic. Blue fingernails. Cheap plastic bracelets.

Brendan shuts the trunk solidly, then walks off down the street and vanishes into the inky night.

A moment later police cars pull up, sirens blaring, lights turning the dark streets bright as day.

FADE OUT

FADE IN:

EXT. SCHOOL PAYPHONE - EARLY MORNING

The morning is cold and clammy. Brendan slumps against the payphone.

BRENDAN
Hey. Where are you?

THE BRAIN
(on phone)
Library. Where are you?

BRENDAN
Did she blow last night?

THE BRAIN
No. Stayed there till six thirty, then
walked to school.

BRENDAN
You didn't give her a ride, did you?

THE BRAIN
No.

BRENDAN
But she came straight to school from
Tug's?

THE BRAIN
Yeah.

BRENDAN
She there now?

THE BRAIN
Yeah. Not with me, but here.

BRENDAN
Alright. Tell her I wanna meet up on the
basketball field in half an hour, then
go home and get some sleep.

THE BRAIN
Alright.

Brendan hangs up, then pauses, lost in thought.

EXT. SIDE OF GYM - LATER

Brendan sits against the massive gym building, writing on a
piece of looseleaf paper.

EXT. ADMINISTRATION BUILDING - LATER

Brendan slips the paper under a door stenciled "VP Offices".

EXT. BASKETBALL FIELD - LATER

Cold, barren. Wind whistles softly and jangles the metal mesh basketball nets like windchimes.

Brendan stands crookedly, hands in pockets, eyes trained on the cold black horizon. A speck appears. Brendan waits for it, bracing himself against the wind.

Laura. She puts her arms around him, a warm embrace. Brendan draws back.

LAURA

(softly)

Did you see it all? With Tug and the Pin?

Brendan looks at her a moment.

BRENDAN

No. I took your advice and didn't go.

LAURA

(confused)

No?

BRENDAN

What happened?

Laura looks at him strangely, a little uneasy.

LAURA

The papers say six dead, three around the house, one girl in the trunk of Tug's car, and the Pin and Tug.

Brendan's face is frozen in an ambiguous frown.

BRENDAN

Yeah?

LAURA

Tug tried to shoot his way out when the police got there. They tied him to Dode, too. Same gun. And the girl.

BRENDAN

Huh.

LAURA

Well good thing you weren't there.

BRENDAN

Yeah.

Laura's face softens a bit.

LAURA

You think the girl was Emily?

BRENDAN

Probably.

Laura embraces him again, and doesn't let go.

LAURA

You loved her.

BRENDAN

(distant)

Yeah I did.

LAURA

You did all this cause you loved her.
And now it's finished.

(tightens her embrace)

I love you.

BRENDAN

No.

Laura pulls back, looks at his face. It is a mask.

LAURA

What?

BRENDAN

No, it's not finished. Tug pulled the
trigger on Em and he got the fall, but
the bulls coulda found that out without
me.

Laura pulls back more.

BRENDAN (cont'd)

I set out to know who put her in the
spot, who put her in front of the gun.
That was you, angel.

LAURA

(drifting back further)

What are you talking about?

BRENDAN

It was you. What, you want the whole tale? You want me to tell it to you?

LAURA

(bewildered)

Tell it to me.

BRENDAN

Alright, from the top. You had your fingers in Brad Bramish for appearances and to keep him buying from the Pin, who you were hooked with. Emily came to you and Brad, you saw her for what she was, an insecure little girl trying to get in. She goes on the backburner. Meanwhile maybe you're getting bored, maybe just greedy, so when the Pin scores big with the bricks you take your shot. You hook one, take half, and cut it back to size, but you cut it bad. Maybe accidentally, maybe to down the Pin's operation, doesn't matter. You put it back, but poor Frisco doses off it and lands in a coma.

(voice strengthening)

So now the Pin's fuming, maybe he's jealous of Brad, so he comes to Brad's crowd looking for blood, or at least a scape. You know trouble. There's going to be a war over this. And there's Emily. She trusts you. She wants in. It's duck soup.

LAURA

(murmurs)

No.

BRENDAN

You frame her for the bad brick, then you cut her loose. You turn on your heel and bite her in the throat. Last week on the payphone, Pico and Alexander, she saw something she was scared of. Tug's car driving by, the Pin driving, but she wouldn't have seen the Pin. No, she was across the street, angel. She saw the passenger side. She saw you. She saw you and ran like she saw some devil.

Laura's face is very still, quivering.

LAURA

Brendan, why are you-

BRENDAN

And she took the hit. Dode hid her away, but the Pin was on to her, tracked her down, told her to meet him, that they would make good. Gave her a time, and a place. And sent Tug. Just to get the straight. But maybe you had talked Tug up, or maybe he just blew a fuse, but Em sprung it on him that she had her kid, and he did what anyone could count on Tug doing - he hit her. She took the hit for you. You let her take it.

LAURA

Stop it!

BRENDAN

That's the tale.

LAURA

Stop it!

BRENDAN

You're going to tell me it's not?

LAURA

It's not!

BRENDAN

Look at me.

She crumples against him, looking him straight in the eye.

LAURA

You know me. I've only helped you. How can you - It isn't true!

She sobs through a tensed, straight face. Brendan holds her stare, but his eyes are distant.

BRENDAN

I hope it isn't. I want you to have been on my side all along, not just trying to get me under your thumb like Brad and the Pin and Tug.

LAURA

No-

BRENDAN

But I think you knew that meeting was going to blow up. I think that was your final play. But I hope I'm wrong. I hope everything I wrote in the note I dropped at Gary Trueman's office this morning is wrong. About your and Brad's involvement in the Pin's runnings. I hope you didn't steal the brick last night. In your purse.

LAURA

(breathes)

I didn't.

BRENDAN

That's good. That means you didn't let me walk into a slaughterhouse. You didn't lead Tug and the Pin and their crews to the slaughter. And when Trueman reads the note, takes my cue and searches your locker, he won't find a damn thing.

Something changes in Laura's eyes.

EXT. LOCKER CAGE - INSERT

Trueman and several other men force Laura's locker open. From its dark interior the chalky white brick falls out, spins through the air, and shatters silently on the locker cage floor.

EXT. BASKETBALL FIELD - SAME

A moment of silence between them. The basketball nets jangle.

Laura steps back. She looks as if she has been punched in the face.

LAURA

(murmurs)

Brendan... don't...

BRENDAN

(gently)

It's done.

Her face does strange things, subtle contortions.

She watches his eyes. He doesn't look at her. Her voice shakes.

LAURA

Done. Well. That's most of it. 9 out of 10. I told Em to tell Tug it was his. Told her it would soften him up. She said she wished she could keep it, but she didn't love the father. I was going to drive her down the next day, we'd found a doctor. Most wouldn't. She was starting to show. 3 months. You know whose kid that makes it, or have you known all along?

Slowly, steadily, she straightens up. Her figure takes back some dignity. She steps towards him deliberately. Closer. Right up against him.

She brings her head to his, puts her lips to his ear, breathes warm breath, and says two words. The first is

LAURA (cont'd)

Mother-

the second is low, guttural and lost to the whistling wind.

She turns and walks briskly away.

Brendan watches her go across the dark, barren field of asphalt.

Metal jangles. Brendan turns to see the Brain hopping a chain link fence. Brendan turns his eyes back on Laura.

BRENDAN

You get your straight?

THE BRAIN

Yeah. I wouldn't have-

BRENDAN

S'alright.

THE BRAIN

Yeah, well. Chuck Burns came to. The knife guy. Spilled it all to the bulls, guess Brad Bramish hired him. On his own, just a grudge thing.

BRENDAN

(nods slightly)
Fits. You did good, Brain. Go sleep.

THE BRAIN

Yeah, you too.

The Brain starts to walk away, but turns back.

THE BRAIN (cont'd)
What'd she whisper to you?

BRENDAN
She called me a dirty word.

THE BRAIN
Alright, you don't have to tell me.
Thick.

BRENDAN
As what-all.

Brendan stands alone on the asphalt field, watching Laura until she reaches the end of the field and walks off behind a twisted chain linked fence.

The first period bell rings, and Brendan walks back towards campus.

FADE OUT.