



Indra and Armando
Miami, November 1985

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ISBN: 1468199242

ISBN-13: 9781468199246

CLOSET FULL OF COKE

**A DIARY OF A
TEENAGE DRUG QUEEN**

INDRA SENA

Imagine if the mistakes you made as a teenager threatened you the rest of your life? I made mortal enemies in my short career as a drug lord and I've lived a certain way because of that. But as a lover of stories, I felt this story demanded telling. And although twenty-five years has softened the pain, it has not erased the well of memories.

In truth, I'd rather not speak of it at all, and in life I almost never do. Everything told here happened. This is a memoir. Events happened in the order presented and while I was the age listed on the diary entries. Much has been left out for focus, flow, and brevity. Time was slightly condensed. I've changed the names of people and towns. I've also left out as many innocent bystanders as possible because this is a book about criminals.

After years spent writing this book I still have no idea why I made the choices I did as a teenager, or why I seemed to possess so much criminal finesse. I deeply regret those choices and that I harmed so many people in my wake.

Books saved my life both as a child and an adult. That's also why I wrote this book. Glimpsing into a hidden subculture can be entertaining. It is also cautionary: a tale of playing with danger, and the inevitable consequences.

It is one of the oldest stories on earth. Drug dealers and criminals refer to it often themselves by simply saying: if you gonna play, you gotta pay.

PART ONE

One

January 1984

Age 15

Mesc: A misnomer for tiny, hallucinogenic, purple pills. Mesc is short for the word mescaline, a reference to peyote cactus. The pills do not contain peyote. They are made from low-potency LSD and fillers.

Buy: A wholesale purchase of drugs by a drug dealer.

“You looking for something?”

I was standing on the porch of my dealer’s house, anxiously ringing the doorbell. I turned around to see a thirtysomething Latino man standing behind me. I hadn’t heard him come up the porch steps. He was sleek, and his dark eyes were captivating. His remarkably handsome face was framed by glossy black hair brushed neatly back. He appeared regal in a full-length gray wool

coat topped with a flowing black scarf, and shiny black leather shoes.

“I’m here to see Jamal.” I pushed my hands deep into the pockets of my black leather jacket.

“No one is home.” He spoke slowly in heavily accented English. “You are looking for something, *si*? I can help you.” The cadence of his voice had a slight hypnotic effect on me.

He kept his dark eyes locked on me. I turned and walked across the decaying porch planks of the sprawling Victorian house to peer into the kitchen window. It did seem unusually quiet.

I was there to make a buy. I’d been hitchhiking to this house for two years, since I was thirteen, buying mesc to sell to my suburban classmates. The Lincoln brothers—all six of them—lived, turned tricks, and dealt drugs here. I often sat in the shadows of the living room silently watching the freak show; businessmen in smart suits arriving to pay for sex with black men wearing full drag, teenage girl streetwalkers in miniskirts buying pills, and hollow-eyed junkies sweating and panting for heroin.

When I came to make a buy, I would sit on the red velvet couch smoking Marlboros while the oldest, Jamal, counted out dozens of tiny purple pills on the coffee table.

“Here you go, girlfriend,” he’d say while tossing me a miniature plastic bag containing the pills, “now you gots to pay your daddy.” Then he’d flash a wide, disarming grin while flipping the blue feather boa he often wore over his shoulder.

I’d take wads of bills out of my purse that were mostly singles

(the lunch money my classmates paid me with) and hand them to him.

When I'd stand and announce that I was leaving, he'd jump up and give me a juicy kiss goodbye. He always flirted with me, but not in a serious way. It was more like he was teasing me.

He'd say something like, "Girl, you so fine. We should hang out together some night."

I knew he was joking, but I still had a crush on him. He was tall and stately, and he looked like an athlete with his muscular physique. I thought he was gorgeous.

Living as an unsupervised teenager, I stumbled into drug dealing. At first, I bought my drugs from high school seniors I partied with, and then re-sold them to my peers in middle school for a profit. But then I met Jamal at a liquor store near his house where I went to buy cheap wine with fake ID. He was charming. We formed an instant bond, and when he took me to his house full of lava lamps, colored beaded curtains, and velvet furniture, I thought it was the coolest place I'd ever seen. I began hitchhiking there regularly to buy all of my drugs from him.

The Lincoln brothers' house was always full of people, mostly hookers and junkies. I found them intriguing, especially the girl hookers who were my age. I became friends with two of them. They called themselves Spicy and BJ, and they were always forking their hard-earned cash over to their boyfriends—wanna be pimps with needle bruises covering their scrawny arms.

Spicy and BJ told me countless stories of sex for profit. Sex

with toothless old men, or with men so fat they had to climb on top of them by stepping on a folding chair. And sex with shoe-fetishists who masturbated while the girls pranced around rank hotel rooms in high heels. They were always bumming cigarettes off me, and asking men for spare change as we walked down the street together.

I couldn't quite understand their choice to hook. As a dealer, there was no sex with sleazy men for a twenty-dollar bill, and no pimp to take that bill away. I lived like royalty. Everyone wanted to be my friend. I was phoned constantly, sought out between classes by kids camping in front of my locker, saved the best seat on the school bus, and stalked by the Jonesers; those ghosts who think of nothing but getting high.

When I focused on something, I tended to excel. I thought about being a lawyer, or a teacher, but I was afraid I would never fit into the normal world. When I spoke of college, my mother, Joan, sarcastically called me a dreamer. She suggested I clean houses instead.

The stranger extended a gloved hand towards me. "Come with me," he said, and flashed a movie star smile. "I'm Armando."

I took his hand and walked down the porch steps holding it, teetering slightly on the stiletto heels of my black suede boots. When we reached the pavement, I jerked my hand away.

"Where are you taking me?"

"For a ride."

Taking a deep breath, I stared blankly at him. “No, I’m sorry, I can’t. I don’t know you.”

“Ah, but I know you. I saw you leaving here once, and I asked Jamal about you. You are the *gringa* who comes from the country to buy mesc.” He placed his hand on my arm, and I knew I was going with him.

“Come with me to pick some up and I will give you the best deal,” he said.

I followed him along the sidewalk. I thought he was the most charming man I’d ever met. I flirted with him, smiling and twisting a long dark curl with my finger while we walked.

I suspected Armando was Jamal’s supplier. Going over your dealer’s head to his dealer is considered a loathsome crime of loyalty. I loved Jamal, but my ambition had long outweighed my loyalty; I had gone over my dealer’s head before. Besides, I didn’t go looking for Jamal’s supplier. I just got lucky.

Armando stopped walking. He stepped off the curb and opened the driver side door of a brown El Camino, and then pulled the beige front seat forward. He motioned for me to get in. A typical Hispanic car, I thought. The Virgin Mary statue glued to the dashboard completed the stereotype.

Sliding into the backseat, I noticed a girl up front holding a baby. Her shiny black hair, pulled tightly back with an elastic band, fell to her waist. She looked about my age.

“This is Lourdes, she does not speak too much English.”

“*Hola, mucho gusto.*” I fumbled to speak the tiny bit of Spanish

I knew.

She replied in rapid-fire Spanish.

I interrupted her. “*Un poquito.*”

“The little you speak is good,” Armando said. “I’ll teach you. Do not learn from her, she is Puerto Rican. She butchers my language.”

“Is that your baby?”

“Yes. José. He is one year.”

Armando started the car, and then jerked it quickly away from the curb forcing us all to lurch. The unexpected slide across the seat sent me slamming into the door. As we drove, Lourdes clutched her baby to her chest. I held onto the headrest in front of me.

He soon careened onto the interstate and floored the gas, weaving in and out of narrow lanes, passing cars on both sides without signaling, and honking his horn in frustration. He yelled and cursed in Spanish while angrily tailgating every car in his path.

I had never seen anyone drive like this before. A man I once talked to in a bar told me people in other countries drive really crazy. He was from Egypt, and he said there were no traffic lights there. Maybe Armando had only just come to America?

“Where are we going?” I hoped talking to him would distract him, maybe slow him down. It only made things worse as he looked over his shoulder to talk to me without braking.

“114th Street.”

“You mean the city?”

“No, Manhattan.”

“That is the city, and it’s over two hours away! Why are we going there?”

“To get mesc. That’s what you want, sí?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t plan on being away for hours.”

I had hitchhiked to Jamal’s straight from school. My sister Seely, who was only thirteen, was home alone with no one to watch her. Our mother had been sleeping at her new boyfriend’s house almost every night. We had friends who came over to drink and drug with us daily, so she probably had company, but I didn’t want to disappear on her for hours.

“I’m gonna give it to you cheap, *muchacha*.

Half the price you pay the Lincoln brothers. I’m getting you a hundred hits for seventy dollars.”

I was thrilled. I immediately began calculating the increased profits in my head. But dealers, like poker players, must always hide their true feelings. I remained stoic. He glanced at my expressionless face in the rearview mirror. I glared at him. “If you don’t fucking kill us, *cabron*. You drive like a crazy man, slow down.” I looked over his shoulder at the speedometer. It was punched to eighty-five. “Slow the fuck down or let me outta this car!”

Armando laughed. “Okay, *chica*, I’ll try, but you are mine now.”

His gentle bullying annoyed me. I would never be his—or anyone’s, especially not for a crummy handful of drugs, not even

for a million dollars.

I sat back and rummaged through my purse. It contained a small notebook where I kept my drug books and wrote poems, and a small silk bag with pearl-colored rosaries my grandmother had given me. I also carried two makeup cases. One was a black case housing cherry red lipstick, black eyeliner, powder, and a battery powered lighted mirror, and the other was a pink case that functioned as a stash bag with marijuana, rolling papers, and small glass joint holder inside.

“Can I smoke pot?” I asked.

“Sure, it is okay. Just relax.” Armando switched on a Spanish pop station and blasted the tinny music.

I rolled a perfect joint. I placed it in the cigarette holder and lit it, deeply inhaling the thick smoke. No one wanted any so I smoked alone, occasionally leaning forward to survey the speedometer.

When we reached the city, it was night.

“Armando, where are we?”

“Spanish Harlem.”

He parallel parked along the curb, and then jumped out of the car telling us to lock the doors. I felt nervous as I watched him walk to the corner, turn, and vanish.

I had heard of Harlem, as in the Harlem Globetrotters. Other than that, it meant nothing to me. At home, I hung out in what was called “Spanish Town.” Spanish Harlem looked a lot like it with its painted brick townhouses, and tiny stores lining the streets with

signs advertising *Lotería* and *Licor de malta* along with flashing red and yellow lights circling the windows.

Lourdes and I struggled to converse, then politely gave up. I wished I spoke Spanish so I could ask her about Puerto Rico. Instead, I passed the time by watching the people walking by. There were girls swathed in rabbit fur with high, tight ponytails and huge gold hoop earrings, and young men in parkas walking in small groups talking animatedly. Occasionally I'd see a solitary figure walking briskly, seemingly coaxed by the cold wind.

I was drawn to Latin culture: the exotic sounding Spanish words spoken so rapidly, the spicy food, the garish décor, and the candles with the Saints on them. When I was twelve, I liked a boy named Manny Rodriguez. I gave him my number and he called me while I was out. My mother answered the phone and while taking a message, she asked his name.

“Don't you know you can't date spicks?” She began yelling as soon as I came through the front door.

“Why not?” I asked.

“Cause, you go wich your own kind. You can't date any boys unless they're the same as you.”

I went out with Manny anyway. I liked brown skin, melodic accents, and jet-black hair.

Armando finally returned with small bags full of steaming hot food. “These are *empanadas*, we eat them in Colombia all the time. You have never tasted anything so good.” We ate the hot yellow

pastries filled with spiced beef out of grease-stained paper bags.

I said that I needed to call my sister. Armando nodded and then drove slowly down the street, pulling over when he spotted a phone booth. He offered me some change. I jumped out of the car clutching a handful of dimes and was soon pushing dirty buttons with my black leather gloves.

“Seely? Were you asleep?” She sounded groggy.

“Nah, I’m just fucked up.” She then burst into laughter. “Where the fuck are you, you never came home after school?”

“I had to leave town, I’ll be back around eleven. Are you okay? Did ma call?”

“I’m alright, just hangin’ out with Jack. Ma never called tonight.”

“Cool.” I was relieved she was with Jack, her boyfriend for almost a year.

“Where are you, sissy?” Seely always called me by the same nickname our father called his sister.

“I’m doing business ... working, ya know. I’ll tell you later.”

Seely was my biggest fan. She often bragged at school about being my sister. I felt responsible for her and even though I was often mean to her, she was the only person I trusted with my secrets.

When I got back into the car, Armando asked me where I lived.

“Farmingville.”

“Where’s that?”

“About ten miles from Southbridge.”

“Oh, sí. No *hay problema*, I will drive you home. *Aquí.*” He tossed me a tiny packet containing more mesc than I had ever seen. I pulled the money out of my wallet and gave it to him.

“You gotta pen, muchacha?”

I pulled out a pen along with my trusty notebook.

“Here is my number. From now on you call me, sí?”

“Sí.”

The ride home was quiet. Lourdes rarely spoke, though occasionally she murmured to Armando in Spanish, and he answered almost as softly. I understood nothing they said, but it sounded like music.

Armando looked at me often in the rearview mirror. Sometimes, I met his gaze and held it for a moment. His raven eyes made my heart race. Maybe I saw my future in them, a future more glamorous than I’d ever dreamed, and more horrible than I’d ever feared.

Two

February 1984

Age 15

Seely and I exchanged fearful glances as we sat down at the kitchen table. Joan sat across from us, biting her nails and frowning. Her brown eyes looked vacant.

“I’m moving in with Harry, and I can’t take youse there. He don’t like kids; he never had ‘em. Youse live here for a few months until we decide where you go. Your father said youse can go live there.” She looked down, smoothing the red-checked vinyl tablecloth with worn hands.

“We have never lived with Daddy before, and we’ve already been to four schools. Plus, you know Leona hates us.” I said.

Leona was my father’s third wife. They had been married sixteen months, and she was pregnant with their second child. She chain-smoked two packs of Newports a day, and her bleached-

blonde hair, premature wrinkles, and tanning cream tinted skin made her look closer to forty than twenty-nine.

“I fucking tell you, look at me, I’m a fucking nut,” she would say with a laugh. “I’ve got two fucking cigarettes lit, one in each goddamn hand!”

Leona’s kitchen was a place where Catholic alcoholics gathered around the table to trash their neighbors. Zack, my father, liked to sit there while stoned and debate them. They were Leona’s friends, mostly unmarried women with multiple kids. They spent endless hours debating issues like who really killed Jesus, and whether there was a conspiracy that made welfare unfairly distributed. Listening to them made my head hurt. I would fantasize of strangling Leona, who was always the loudest.

Joan, on the other hand, was a simple-minded yeller. She took her work and money stress out on Seely and me, throwing raging fits over a spilled glass of milk, or slapping me hard for reading too much. On the plus side, she ignored the fact that I was dating a twenty-three year old man with a full beard, and she let me use my fake ID to drink in bars with her.

No way did I want to leave Joan’s house—a mix of random violence and unchecked freedom—to live at Leona’s. I preferred the harpy I knew.

We sat in tense silence. I focused on watching the snow falling outside the kitchen window. I finally looked over at Seely. Her sky-blue eyes were clouded with tears. She looked so young and small.

“Move out after we graduate high school, Joan,” I said. My jaw was tight with rage. I’d have to switch schools if Joan moved to another district, and I was tired of being the new girl. If Joan made this move, I would never finish high school.

“I can’t live my life for youse two. I’m very old and this could be my last chance for love. You’ll understand when you’re my age.” Her raven hair fell in waves around her smooth-skinned face. She was thirty-three.

I lost it and screamed, “You’re so selfish. You’re not a mother!”

Joan rose from her chair. She was a large woman who outweighed me by at least a hundred pounds. She leaned across the table and slapped my face hard. The cool sting, along with her handprint on my cheek, lasted for hours.

She got up and began to bustle about, preparing for her evening departure. She started washing dishes as if nothing had happened. “Kids, youse can finish the school year.” Her tone was conciliatory, as if finishing a school year was a kindness being offered.

Seely was still silent, though she looked at me with questioning eyes.

I started crying, and then began yelling at Joan from my seat at the table. “How can you do this to us? You’re so fucked up. I hate you, you selfish bitch!”

Joan turned around from the sink and looked at me with fury. I jumped up and ran toward my bedroom. Joan chased me, trying to grab my long hair, but I beat her to my room and locked the door.

I slid down onto the floor of my room, curled into a ball, and sobbed.

Renegades raised me. My father Zack grew pot in our tomato garden and stored it in a towering red Snap-on toolbox. He sold it to his many friends as they “stopped by.” Joan cleaned houses and offices while helping herself to the cleaning products she found there. Windex, Palmolive dish liquid, Comet, as well as paper towels and toilet paper were put in a trash bag and disguised as garbage. Instead of being dropped in the can on the way out, the bags full of goodies were put in her car and brought home.

My parents railed against the government and authority. The IRS wanted to steal your money, the cops were pigs, and the landlord was a son of a bitch. Joan dodged bill collectors by training me to lie to them on the phone and tell them she wasn’t home. Her house cleaning money was unreported cash, none of which had to be given to “those bastards,” while Zack was nicknamed The Weasel for his crafty way of mooching loans of cash from a friend’s wallet while simultaneously smoking all the weed he had just sold the guy.

A construction worker and mechanic by trade, Zack also took almost any odd job. I helped him carry washing machines and refrigerators up multiple flights of stairs, handed him wrenches and pliers while he rebuilt car engines, went with him on visits to his friends where cash and goods were exchanged, and drove his large van perfectly long before I was old enough to have a driver’s

license.

I was obsessed with solving the money dilemma that plagued our family. When I was eleven, I answered a classified ad in the back of a comic book and started selling flower seeds door-to-door. I quickly learned the pleasure of having money. By the time I was thirteen, I was continually creating schemes to get money. I shoplifted, mostly candy, and sold my stolen booty to classmates. But the money was paltry. I needed to make more.

I dreamed of phone service without interruption, an apartment without the constant, nagging fear of eviction, and a car without rust holes on the floor you could see the road through. I also wanted freedom, the kind my parents, with all the marriages and babies, always lamented they didn't have—freedom from burdens, from responsibilities, and from bill collectors.

The day after Joan's announcement, I hitchhiked after school to Spanish Town, my beloved section of Southbridge. I called Armando from a corner phone booth, and he told me to meet him at a bar. I walked five blocks to a tiny glass storefront with blackened windows and music blaring from inside. It was dark. Armando sat at the bar watching soccer. I sat down on the stool next to him. He asked what I wanted. I said I didn't know. I usually drank vodka straight from the bottle. In bars I drank rum and coke, but I really didn't like either.

"Strawberry Hill is my favorite wine," I said. It was fruity, sweet, and ninety-nine cents a bottle at the *Liquor y Bebidas Tienda*.

He spoke in Spanish to the bartender, who I watched add frozen strawberries to a small blender. Next, using both hands, he tipped two bottles of clear liquor over the berries. He added a squeeze of lime before blending the ingredients into a kind of spiked Slurpee. He placed the icy pink drink in front of me and I sipped it through a straw.

“It is a daiquiri,” said Armando.

“*Gracias*. Listen, my mother wants to move and leave Seely and me. I don’t know what to do.”

“My mother left too, when I was a young boy.”

“Who raised you?”

“Nobody.” He tugged on the gold Saint Christopher medallion he always wore.

“Did you go to school?”

“No. I farmed until I was sixteen. Then I joined the Colombian Navy.”

“Really? Did you learn how to fight at sea?”

“No, no,” he laughed, “I cleaned a lot, the work was ... no good. Then I ran off at a port in Florida.”

“And then you came to New York?”

“Sí.”

“What did you do then?”

Armando turned and spoke in Spanish to the bartender. He placed two shot glasses full of clear liquid in front of us.

“What’s this?”

“Peach Schnapps, you’ll like it. *Salud!*”

“Salud! What are we toasting?”

“Freedom. Yours. Mine. No one needs a mama, you must believe that.”

We tossed the shots back. The burn of the liquor was familiar, but the aftertaste was sweet peach. The blasting juke box played Latin pop, the kind I heard everywhere around here—pulsing in darkened bars, blasting from open windows of brick row houses, drifting out of car windows, and playing in tiny corner stores on cheap radios.

The men staring at the silenced television screamed out occasionally during soccer plays. I finished my daiquiri in silence while Armando watched the game. I tapped on his arm, and he broke out of a seeming trance.

“I gotta go.” I jumped off of my barstool and pulled my purse over my shoulder.

“Sí. Do not worry, chica. It will all be *fácil* ... means, um, good. *Bueno*.” He hugged me tightly for a second and then gave me a small push towards the door.

Lightheaded from the drinks, I stumbled. Armando chuckled but when I turned around to protest, he was back to staring at the television.

When I opened the door of the bar, it was dark outside. Dark for hitchhiking, I thought. But once I walked to the main road, I had a ride in minutes.

Three

March 1984

Age 15

Rush (isobutyl nitrite): a pale yellow flammable liquid that is inhaled illicitly and named for the ensuing “head rush” felt after inhaling.

Front: Drugs given to a dealer by a supplier without exchanging money with a verbal agreement that they will be paid for after they are sold.

I stuck my thumb out while walking backwards on the roadside shoulder hitching a ride to Southbridge. I was missing a morning geometry test, but I had other priorities. My supplies of mesc and speed were depleted.

A fat, balding man stopped his car and asked where I was going. “Corner of Morgan and Main.”

“Get in, girlie.”

I jumped into his Buick’s front seat. “I’m going to work.”

He offered me a cigarette while eyeing my blue angora sweater. It was fancy; I had shoplifted it from a swanky department store.

“What, are you a secretary or something?”

“Yeah, I am.”

“Well, maybe you should get yourself a sugar daddy. A girl pretty as you shouldn’t need to hitchhike.”

I ignored his lame proposition and we both smoked in silence. I asked him to let me out the moment we hit Southbridge, even though it meant walking an extra ten blocks. He pinched my ass as I got out of his car, but I didn’t even look back. Typical.

Armando opened the door of his house shirtless, wiping sleep from his eyes.

“Muchacha, why so early?”

I followed him inside and sat on the couch. “I needed to see you before school, *lo siento*.”

“No problema, what do you need?”

I asked him for a hundred hits of mesc and fifty hits of speed. Speed was slang for the pink and white caffeine pills I also sold.

“*Mira*, let me give you extra, say, double.”

“But I don’t have enough cash for that. Why did you call me Mira?”

He smiled. “*Mira*, means, um, look. The extra stuff, it’s on the front.”

It was a gesture of trust.

“Really? I’ll even up soon, I promise. I gotta run though, practically everyone in my school is waiting for me. Gracias!”

“*De nada,*” he said.

I kissed his cheek and taking my drugs, I dashed out the door.

I was so excited. After only two months of weekly visits, Armando was now fronting to me. I could now extend that credit to other dealers. I would make way more profit selling to another a dealer as opposed to a user. It was a step up the dealer’s ladder.

I walked four blocks back to the main road after I left Armando’s and stuck my thumb out. A young man pulled over in a silver Peugeot.

“Where you going?” He spoke so softly it was hard to hear him.

“King High.”

He didn’t speak the entire ride. I was creeped out by his silence and relieved when he finally dropped me at my school thirty minutes later. I raced into the cafeteria ready for lunchtime sales. I went to my regular table, located in the farthest corner of the atrium. Protected from unseen approaches on two sides by walls, kids sat there with me by invitation only.

“Where’ve you been?” Chrissy asked as I sat down next to her.

Chrissy was tall and lean, like a boy, with huge green eyes. She introduced me to stealing cars and shoplifting when we were thirteen, and we’d been inseparable ever since. We both were largely unsupervised and both criminally bent. Though once indoctrinated, I was clearly the most corrupt.

“I had to see my guy. I’m totally stocked.”

“I asked the Colero sisters to do lookout.”

“Cool, I’ll hook them up.”

The Colero sisters were the toughest girls in school and they were always eager to assist me. I reached over and handed them a few hits of mesc and a joint. They sat at the end of the table as guards. If anyone walked towards us, they drummed Led Zeppelin songs by slapping the hard top of the table. This was our cue to be cool and hide whatever we were doing.

Chrissy and I sat in the middle of the table like royalty holding court. A succession of people took turns sitting across from us. They were mostly guys, druggies with Pink Floyd T-shirts who were into tripping, though the occasional girl sat down asking for speed pills for her diet.

The money I made dealing bought us pizza, vodka, Rush, beer, pot, and cigarettes. We also hung out in bars using fake IDs, over-tipping, drinking rum and cokes, and playing Pac-Man for hours.

“We will now observe a moment of silence for Angela,” said the principal on a mild spring afternoon, sounding somber on the classroom loudspeaker. My classmate Angela, a beautiful girl with huge doll eyes and blonde ringlets, had vanished while hitchhiking almost two weeks ago. Today, we were told, her dead body was found in the nearby woods.

After the announcement, I cut out of class and walked to the corner store a block from my school. Every local paper headline screamed something lurid about Angela. “Cheerleader Raped and

Murdered.” “Girl’s Tortured Body Found.” “Police Say Missing Girl Was Strangled.” I bought three papers and sat reading them on the sidewalk in front of the store. All I could think about was poor Angela alone with no one to help her, out in the woods with only trees to witness her struggle.

Chrissy found me hunched over the newspapers.

“Why are you crying?” she asked.

“Angela, she—”

“You didn’t even know her. Plus, you hate cheerleaders. She was a fucking cheerleader!”

“But I did know her, we were in chorus together. She was really nice, and what happened to her ... it’s just so horrible.”

“Fuck those bitches, let’s go get high.”

We went to the small store next to the deli run by a Pakistani man who spoke little English. It was a head shop with bongos, pipes, roach clips, posters, black lights, incense and small glass vials of Rush. I tossed a crumpled ten-dollar bill on the counter and pointed to the Rush. Chrissy and I went behind the store with the small brown bottle. We took turns quickly twisting open the black lid and inhaling the rich chemical smell before slamming the lid back down.

Later that night, at Sam’s Bar and Grill, we were eating pizza and drinking beer with Chrissy’s boyfriend Jeff, and Paul, a man from our neighborhood who we ran into at the pool table. I had admired him from afar for years. He looked like Peter Frampton with his long rock star blonde locks and bangs.

“We’re going to play another game,” Chrissy said as she got up and headed towards the pool table with Jeff. “Are you guys coming?”

“I’m gonna smoke first,” I said.

Paul didn’t respond. He remained seated across the table from me, silently looking at me. I was nervously playing with my fork.

“So, beautiful, what grade are you in?”

“Tenth.”

“Do you want another beer?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Paul scooped up our beer glasses and walked across the room, placing them on the bar for refills. I was smitten. It didn’t matter to me that he was twenty-five, in fact, I preferred men to boys my age.

Since I was fourteen, I’d been fooling around with men in their twenties. There was the older brother of a classmate, a neighbor, and a guy who worked at a gas station who I met when I refueled a temporarily stolen car. I never had sex with them, but we spent hours petting in their cars. They’d secretly pick me up around the corner from my house and we’d drive to secluded cornfields. It was like a visit to an opium den. I would lie in a dreamy state of carnal pleasure for hours while they kissed and stroked my naked body. The feeling was better than any drug I knew. I would stumble home late at night, stoned on teenage hormones, pot, and cheap wine.

Paul sat down next to me after fetching our beer, looking at me with flashing eyes and a mischievous smile.

“What? Is something wrong?” I asked.

“Oh no, there’s nothing wrong. I just never noticed before how pretty you are. I love your eyes.”

I smiled and took a sip of my Budweiser. “I need a cigarette, I’m going out back to smoke.”

“I’ll go with you, if you want,” he said as if on cue since I was trying to get him to follow me. I could have lit up right there at the table, but I wanted to be alone with him.

Outside Paul lit my Marlboro. When I dropped my hand and blew out smoke, he leaned over and kissed me.

We walked away from the bar holding hands, heading for a trail that cut through the woods and led back to our housing development. Halfway down the trail Paul stopped, put his arms around my waist, and pulled me close. Then he began kissing me passionately.

He stopped at one point and said, “Damn, lady, who taught you to kiss like that?”

“I don’t know.” I didn’t mention the other men I’d been with.

“Well, you’re the best kisser I’ve ever met.”

We made out for what felt like hours, then we started to get cold. It was late. Paul said we should head home so we continued down the trail arm in arm towards my house.

At my door, I invited him in. “My mother is at her boyfriend’s,

it's cool.”

“No, princess, I have to leave you here. Believe me, I want to come in, I just can't.”

“Okay.” I had no idea why he couldn't come in, but I didn't ask.

Paul kissed me on my front step, then scurried off calling out, “Good-night, Miss Luscious.”

Miss Luscious? I wasn't sure what it meant, but I smiled at his pet name.

The next day I called Armando instead of going to school.

“Mira, can you come pick me up at my house?”

“*Por qué?* Why?”

I told him about Angela, about how she died and how scared it made me to hitchhike. I told him I never wanted to hitch a ride again.

“I need to go have a few drinks at Hector's, I just don't want to be at school today.”

Speaking softly he offered his condolences, and then offered to give me a ride anywhere, anytime.

“I will come get you now and go with you. We're *amigos, correcto?* I'm not going to let anything happen to you.”

Four

May 1984

Age 15

Seely and I were living alone for a few months with no problems. If our mother showed up unexpectedly, we snuck our few guests out the window. She was never there more than an hour and when she left, the party returned.

But then we got the idea to have a huge, blowout party. We spent the better part of a month planning it.

During the bash, the phone was accidentally left off the hook. Joan tried to call for hours and couldn't get through. She showed up and began screaming for everyone to get the fuck out of her house. Kids raced out of doors and jumped out of ground floor windows. I shoved Chrissy and the others I was smoking pot with in my bedroom into my closet. Joan burst into my room, chasing and slapping me. I scurried around trying to dodge the blows.

“Pack your bags, you’re coming with me!”

When she left my room, I opened my closet door to talk to my friends. “You guys just stay here until after we’re gone, it’ll be cool.”

Chrissy glanced at a red welt on my arm. “Yeah, and I’m gonna rob your cunt mother’s house on the way out.”

Joan took Seely and me to Harry’s. She assigned us each a room then left to return to the bar she’d been at with him. Late that night they came home and began to brawl on the front lawn, which soon brought the state troopers. Seely came to my bedroom door sniffing and scared. I let her sleep in my bed.

The next day I clandestinely called Chrissy. “Chris, you gotta help me keep things going. I gotta keep my business going, no matter what.”

“No problem,” she said. “I got a list of orders for you, I’ll come tonight.”

“Cool, but come to my window in back of the house. I don’t want you getting caught here. This scumbag my mother’s with will call the cops.”

Chrissy came while Joan and Harry were at the bar, so we smoked a joint at the window and hung out awhile.

“What are you gonna do, girlfriend?”

“Here, take these and sell them.” I passed her a plastic bag full of mesc. “Bring back the cash as soon as you can, I need money. I’m gonna run away.”

Later that evening, I told Seely we had to run away and she

agreed. The next night I came to her bedroom with a small duffle bag. My mother and Harry were passed out drunk.

“Where are we going, Sissy?”

“Anywhere we want,” I answered, dangling Harry’s car keys in my hand. We climbed out her window and slipped into his car.

“Shit, I can’t drive a stick.” I pounded my fist on the dashboard in frustration. “Motherfucker!”

“I can,” Seely said.

We switched seats, and she put the car in neutral so it rolled silently down the steep driveway. At the bottom, she started it up and took off, stepping on the clutch and shifting gears.

“How the fuck do you know how to drive a stick?”

“Daddy showed me.”

We drank vodka from a bottle I had stolen from Harry’s house while we smoked a joint and blasted a Beastie Boys tape. Seely drove us around uneventfully for about an hour, and then a police car pulled up behind us at a traffic light. It was past three in the morning. I panicked, but Seely confidently shifted gears preparing to take off. The car abruptly stalled. Two more failed attempts followed. I was sure the cop would turn his lights on any second, but suddenly the engine engaged, and we zipped off. Seely and I laughed.

Sometime around dawn, Seely started insisting we return the car. “We’ll go to jail. You know that dick will press charges.”

“Yeah, I guess so. But maybe we should just drive it into the river and leave it there.”

“Sissy, no, we’ll be in worse trouble. If we put it back, he won’t even know it was gone.”

We returned the car near dawn and then walked eight blocks to a diner. I called a friend of mine named James, who lived with his friend Tom. They were both high school dropouts. James said we could spend the day at their place while Tom’s parents were at work. We were totally exhausted, but we managed to walk another ten blocks from the diner to their house. I smoked some pot with them, and we all passed out for a few hours.

In the afternoon the four of us sprawled on the living room floor smoking a joint while listening to Bowie sing about Ziggy’s inevitable demise. The phone sitting on the end table rang, and Tom pulled on the long, twisty cord until the receiver landed on his chest.

“Hello? What? Well ... yeah ... yeah ... hold on.”

He handed the phone to Seely.

It turned out to be Zack. He had apparently been making calls all morning and had gotten Tom’s number from some rat. I was shocked at my father’s resourcefulness. I grabbed the phone from Seely and hung it up. He called back. I commanded everyone to let it ring. Seely started crying, saying we were being mean to Zack. I finally let her answer and the stupid girl agreed to let him come and get her.

I screamed at her for telling him where we were, and I yelled at Tom for admitting we were there.

No one spoke. I ran around the room gathering my stuff into my bag. Grabbing my shoes, I sat on the arm of the couch and pulled them on.

I glared at Seely and the boys. “Are you all fucking retarded?”

“Where else are we gonna go, sis?” Seely’s voice quivered with tears. “We have to go with Daddy.”

“Well I’m not going with anyone. I’m gonna get an apartment, my own apartment, where no one can tell me what to do. Armando will help me, he said he would.”

“I can’t go, sissy, I can’t. I’m sorry, I’m afraid.”

“Of what?”

“I don’t know, but I have a bad feeling and I want to go with Daddy.”

Seely seemed to be decades younger than me, and it sort of made sense because my father always said I was born forty.

The phone rang again. Tom answered, and then thrust the phone towards me. “It’s your father.”

I took the phone, hung it up, and unplugged it from the jack.

I hugged Seely goodbye and left before Zack arrived. I had James drop me off a few blocks from Armando’s apartment and begged him to lie about where he’d left me. I had to stay in hiding until I was sixteen, when it was legal for me to live on my own. And that would be in less than two months.

Lourdes answered the door sporting two black eyes. I was taken aback, but said nothing. She served Armando and me iced tea in

silence and then disappeared. I sat down on the cramped living room floor and let the draft from the window fan hit me. The living room was drab. The tan sectional was weathered, and its square bulk took up almost the entire room. There were no photos and no knick-knacks, just plain white walls.

I told Armando everything that had happened.

“Okay, you call my landlord, *sí*? He has twenty buildings or more. Tell him I sent you. Oh, and you say you are married.”

“Married?”

“*Sí*. He won’t ask you questions.”

“Why should I tell him that?”

“*Por qué te lo dije.*”

“What?”

“Oh, sorry, um ... because I tell you to.”

When I think of pimps, I think of the TV show *Baretta*. Huge feathered hat, long white fur coat, glittery eyewear, you know, Rooster. Armando was a different kind of pimp. He was luminous and he easily won admiration from both males and females. Contradictions seemed to work in his favor. He was charming yet caustic, vulnerable yet tough. Then, there were those limpid eyes. But Armando wouldn’t waste his time pimping a girl for sex; there was little money in that. My brain was the organ he planned to profit from.

On a narrow one-way street in the heart of Spanish Town, I found an apartment. It was up two winding flights of stairs in an

old Victorian house. The bedroom, living room and kitchen all had the same pale yellow linoleum on the floor. Tall windows made it sunny and bright. Rent was two hundred dollars per month, all utilities included. I handed the landlord cash. He didn't ask me a single question.

Armando came over a few days after I moved in and offered me a blue Chevy Nova he got for seventy-five dollars. I offered him money, but he tossed me the keys and said, "*No te preocupes*, no worries."

I got new customers, mostly Puerto Rican guys from my hood. My apartment became a local hangout. Occasionally Armando stopped by but he wouldn't stay if I had visitors. He would simply send a brief, withering glance around the room and then leave.

As soon as my phone was hooked up, I called Seely at my father's house.

"Leona is an evil bitch," she said. "I hate it here."

"I told you."

"I know, but what am I gonna do?"

"Put our father on the phone."

Zack got on and I fought with him about how Seely was being treated. He countered with arguments of how impossible Seely was to live with, how she was hyperactive and driving him nuts. Then he started talking about how I was wrecking my life, so I hung up on him.

Five

July 1984

Age 16

One hot afternoon, I was housecleaning when my doorbell rang. I pushed a button that released the lock on the front door downstairs, and then opened my kitchen door. Armando bounded up the stairs and came through my door grinning.

“I love seeing you domestic. Look at you—you are a housewife. Me, I love that. You could be my *criada*.”

I was wearing a short lemon yellow terrycloth dress over matching shorts and holding a mop in one hand. With no makeup on and my hair high up in a ponytail, I did look pretty domestic.

“I’m no housewife, *maricón!*”

Laughing at my chutzpah, he sat down on the couch while glancing at the gold watch shining on his dark wrist. I knew so little about him. He didn’t reveal much, and he hated questions.

Sometimes I wondered if Armando was even his name. His dressy button-up white shirt, gray linen pants and polished leather shoes made him look out of place compared to my typical visitors' garb: sneakers, jeans, and T-shirts with band names like Judas Priest on them.

"Chica, you and me are about to get really rich."

"We are?"

"Sí."

"You mean by getting more customers?"

"No. I've met some people, from my country. They can get us *cocaína*."

"Cocaine? You're crazy. I've never even met anyone who does that. It's like some Hollywood thing that stars do. I've never even seen it."

"Yeah, *mi hija*, it is the next big thing. *Vas a ver*, you'll see. Think about it. How much *dinero* do you want? I plan to be rich. Us together, we would make millions."

"Millions?" I didn't believe him. Who were we gonna sell coke to?

Six

September 1984

Age 16

Shotgun: A pot smoking practice in which one person inhales a hit of pot, and then exhales the smoke into another person's mouth as that person inhales.

It was the third week of the new school year. Mrs. Reilley, my English teacher, was lecturing the class on Ethan Frome. English was my favorite subject, and books were my favorite pastime. The last few weeks in her class had been thrilling.

In the middle of the lecture Mr. Lewis, my guidance counselor, knocked on the classroom door. He apologized to my teacher for interrupting and then he summoned me, telling me to bring my books. Following him through the empty halls, I plied him with questions.

"We'll talk in my office," he said, while he limped along the

corridor. A stroke had left him dragging one foot slightly behind the other. He stopped at my locker.

“Why are we here?”

“Empty your locker.”

“But why?”

“You’re being expelled.”

With textbooks stuffed into my book bag and gym clothes draped over my arm, I sat across from Mr. Lewis at his desk, first protesting, then crying, and finally pleading.

“Look, you don’t live in this district anymore, and neither does your mother,” he said.

“How do you know?”

“Another mother called to make a complaint.”

“What did she say?”

“She said it was unfair. If her kids can’t come to this school because they live in Southbridge, then why should you? You have to go to Southbridge High.”

“But this is already my fourth school. Please, give me an exception. I can’t start over again. Just let me finish high school here.”

Then he said something that stopped my tears, and my protests, for good.

“We know about you ... about what you do, and I just can’t help you. The principal wants you gone.”

I slunk out of his office, and then out of King High forever.

I called Zack as soon as I got home. “Daddy? I got expelled today and I think it might be a sign for me to leave school and go full-time as a dealer.”

“Are you out of your fucking mind? What will you do without an education?”

“You don’t have one and I’ll make more money than you ever did, and I won’t leave my kids and be broke all the time!”

I knew he’d be upset. I had only called to hurt him anyway, because I was mad at him over Seely. Last week, his wife had accused her of stealing money from her wallet. Zack sided with Leona, who I knew was lying, because Seely told me everything. Zack yelled at Seely, hitting and then grounding her. In response, Seely ran away and stupidly went to Joan’s. She ended up in a detention home, where I could only call her at certain hours. It was like jail. She was only fourteen, and you had to be sixteen to live without a guardian in New York State.

I flipped on General Hospital and rolled a joint. My phone rang a few times, but I ignored it.

Around midnight, my favorite new customer knocked on my living room window. Enrique, a swarthy Puerto Rican man, always came and left by way of the black iron fire escape. I slid open the tall window and he climbed inside, kissing my hand as he stepped off of the sill.

We sat down on the couch together. It was our first time alone, and I was nervous. Neither of us had ever hid our attraction for the

other.

“Rique, you ever do coke?” I said.

“*Qué?*” He packed a pipe with weed, then lit it and passed it to me.

“You know, cocaína.”

“Shit no. I sniffed heroin a few times, and that stuff fucked me up. *Por qué?*”

I shrugged. “Just wondering. People say it’s the next big thing.”

“Chica, will you give me a shotgun?”

As I blew the smoke into his mouth, we started kissing, but a few minutes later, I pulled away from him.

“We have to stop now.”

“*Por qué, chica?*”

“You just need to go now.”

“Because of him? That *viejo* that watches over you?”

“No, come on. It’s just that ... I don’t know. I should work tonight.”

“Fine, *no hay problema.*” He slipped out the window, barely saying goodbye.

I wanted to be with him, but I was afraid of Armando dropping in. He said getting romantically involved with customers was a bad business practice, so I promised I wouldn’t mess around with my customers. Occasionally, I fooled around with boys from school, but that was after they snuck me into their bedrooms. There was no way Armando could find out about them.

That was another rush I loved—doing things forbidden to me by

a man who thought he controlled me—but no way did I want to get caught.

Seven

October 1984

Age 16

CO: Short for correction officer, which is another name for a prison guard.

After my expulsion from school, I mainly stayed in Southbridge. I even got all of my groceries at the bodega. While shopping, I met Jane, a white girl from my block. She was sixteen and living with a thirty-year old black man. Her entire family had disowned her. I invited her over to hang out and go to the mall with me.

In Macy's, Jane shoplifted a pair of shoes by putting on a new pair at the display and leaving her old ones behind. I didn't even know she'd done it until we were leaving the store and the in-house detective confronted us. We ignored him and walked

towards my car. We would have made it, but a police patrol car making the rounds came by just at that moment. The cop jumped out of his car and in minutes determined that Jane possessed stolen shoes.

I denied involvement and argued nonstop with the young police officer, refusing to hand my pocketbook over. Finally, he tore my purse from me and forced my hands behind my back. First he put me in handcuffs, and then he put me into the back of his squad car. After cuffing Jane he put her in back with me. He jumped in the front, and as he drove he called on his radio to tell the station he was bringing in suspects.

“So, miss, what’s inside your purse that you don’t want me to find?” The cop had turned around to talk to me while we waited at a traffic light.

“Nothing.”

He turned back towards the traffic.

“Girl, tell him,” whispered Jane, and when she did, he looked back again at us and smiled.

“Listen to your friend. I can help you.”

I had ten hits of purple mesc in a mint candy tin. Luckily, most of my stash was at home. I decided to play “dumb girl.”

“Well, I don’t know what it is exactly. This guy that stands on my corner sometimes, he gave it to me. He said it makes you laugh.”

“You don’t know? And you were going to take them?”

“I guess, maybe. I don’t know.”

“Are you nuts? Is he a drug dealer?”

“I don’t know. I don’t really know him.”

“Where does he live?”

“I’ve only seen him on the corner, he stands there sometimes.”

I marveled at my ability to craft lies so well on my feet. Joan had trained me to lie and to evade questions when talking to bill collectors, but now I was under arrest and being grilled by a policeman, not lying on the phone to a lady from the electric company. I hadn’t read a handbook on being a master criminal, but somehow I knew exactly what to do. I knew how to talk, seeming to cooperate, and give no information. This knowledge seemed otherworldly to me, as if ghosts of criminals past were whispering it into my ear.

At the police station, we were turned over to officers who asked us our addresses, snapped our mug shots, and took our fingers and rolled them onto an ink pad, then onto a sheet of paper, creating a perfect map of each tip.

We were escorted to a police car. Two officers told us we were going to see the judge. No one said a word about the drugs I had on me. My arresting officer must have thrown them out or kept them because I was never charged with possessing them, but they disappeared from my purse, tin and all.

“What’d you do, raid a playground?” The grumpy, white-haired judge asked the cops. We were in his chamber, which was an office attached to his house. He then complained we interrupted his dinner. In small towns like the one the mall was in, the single

judge was always on call.

“Well, what do you girls have to say for yourselves?” He looked sternly at Jane and me.

I started explaining that there was a mix up. He waved his hand in the air signaling me to shut up.

“Both of you are charged with shoplifting. Neither of you lives at home with your parents. I think some time in jail will straighten you out.” He then declared that we be brought to jail without bail.

Normally for a small crime like shoplifting, you are simply released with a date set for your hearing.

“Without bail?” I started to tremble. “Please, your honor, my mother threw me out and—”

“Well maybe now you’ll learn to be good, won’t you?”

“But we’re not murderers!”

“One more word little girl, and I’ll add contempt of court on top of this petty theft charge.”

We were handcuffed again, and placed back in the police car. While the officers drove us to the county jail, they teased us about how the girls there were rough, and how we’d probably come out lezzies. Jane and I were silent. I focused on how I might get out of my handcuffs, Houdini-style. My wrist bones are very small, but no amount of twisting would free my hands.

At the jail, the cops handed us over to two uniformed men. Without speaking to us, each one extended a single hand and tightly gripped our upper arm. They then pulled us along a long, brightly lit corridor. We soon learned that they were COs, and they

would now be our keepers. We shuffled past a group of them sitting in a small room and they laughed at us.

“Stupid kids,” one said.

They stopped in front of an empty cell. One of them took out his keys, which were attached by a metal cord to his belt. He unlocked and then opened the door of bars.

“Okay girls, time to go into the holding tank.” We both hesitated, and one of them gave me a shove. I stumbled into the cell, and Jane followed. They locked us in and walked away. After silently glancing at each other, we sat down on metal benches attached to the wall. We didn’t talk, but we both hung our heads and sniveled. An hour later two female guards came and opened the cell door.

“Come on ladies!”

We shuffled towards them and they escorted us across the hall to a tiny room with no windows. They ordered us to take off all of our clothes.

Jane and I stood there naked and freezing. They put on latex gloves and ordered us to squat. They searched our ears and hair, running their fingers along our scalps, and then cavity searched us, confirming there was no contraband hidden up our cooches.

“Put all of your possessions, clothes, and shoes into these bags.” They held open black plastic bags. “You’ll get it all back when you leave. You’ll wear prison-issued sweat suits until you get approved clothes brought in. You’ll be given a list of what is allowed and what is contraband.” They gave us grey sweat suits and slip-on

white canvas shoes. “Now, put these on, we going to put you on the tier.”

“What they get you for?” A Puerto Rican woman with a huge mane of frizzy hair asked us as we entered a rectangular cage.

“Shoplifting.”

A group of women had formed around us. They all laughed.

“I’m Janina,” said the woman with the hair. She came close and started to stroke my hair. “*Tan linda*, so shiny. My chulo would love you.”

“Is Chulo your boyfriend?” I asked.

All the women laughed again and one said, “Chulo means pimp, gringa!”

The prisoners in jail were not scary at all. They were actually very friendly. Almost all of them were prostitutes.

On the other hand, the COs were terrifying. They barked orders at us and called us stupid if we asked questions. They purposely slammed the iron cage doors when opening and closing them, even in the middle of the night. The racket of the crashing metal was nerve-racking.

At night, all the prisoners were locked alone in tiny individual cells. I lay on my narrow wall mounted metal bed, watching roaches crawling along the crayon yellow walls, thinking about the young cop who arrested me. Where were the drugs he found? I thought about Armando and wondered if he knew where I was. I thought about all the crimes I’d committed and how I was now in

jail for almost nothing.

The weekend passed quickly. Jane and I sat around gossiping with the girls. Some were sick from coming off heroin. They'd occasionally run to their cell and throw up, moaning and cursing, swearing they'd stay clean when they got out. I decided that when I got out I wasn't shoplifting anymore, or hanging out with Jane.

On Monday, child advocacy lawyers came to see Jane and me. They asked us to sign papers, and then promised to have us out by morning.

Tuesday morning, we were released. Jane left an hour before me. I told her to take the bus back and I'd see her later. When it was my turn to leave, I was led through the series of locking gates, given my clothes back, and lastly, handed my purse and shoes. When they opened the final gate to release me, Zack was standing there in his denim jacket and work boots, his long hair in a single braid. He looked furious.

I walked past him, ignoring him. He chased after me, plying me with arguments on why I now had to come and live with him.

"Why, so I can end up in a detention home like Seely? Fuck you!"

"Hey, I'm still your father!"

"Your wife told lies about Seely and now she's locked up with strangers."

"Seely took money from Leona's purse, Leona wouldn't lie about that. And she ran away while I was at work, it wasn't my fault."

“You’re a lousy father, and your wife is a lying bitch. Seely doesn’t steal, I do.” I sat down on the curb outside the jail, not sure what my next move was.

“Please, just talk to me, I’ll drive you home.”

I agreed and got into Zack’s carpeted van. As he drove he yelled at me about how irresponsible I was, how I’d left school, and how I was going nowhere. Then, he turned onto the highway.

“You’re going in the wrong direction.”

“No, I’m taking you home with me.”

“You’d better have handcuffs, and a door that locks from the outside, and never let me go to school because the second I am out of your sight, I’m gone. You can’t hold me.”

Zack pulled off the road and got a couple of cans of beer from the cooler in the back of his van. He handed me one. He drove me to my apartment, drinking beer the whole ride. He looked so upset I felt guilty. I had always adored my father. I grew up a daddy’s girl, but this marriage, and the way he treated Seely—I just couldn’t stand it.

Zack double-parked his van in front of my apartment. I jumped out. He was pretty drunk by now. He opened the window while I stood on my front porch looking for my key.

He called out, “Please change your mind, honey. I can help you.”

I didn’t look back at him. I used both hands to push the heavy wooden Victorian door open. I went into the hall, and then let the door go so it slammed shut hard, just like those prison gates.

Eight

November 1984

Age 16

Five Percenter: The Five-Percent Nation of Islam, or the Five Percenters, was founded in Harlem in 1964 by Clarence 13X. Five Percenters rename themselves. Each man views himself as a God.

Cut: An innocuous white powder that looks identical to cocaine. Cut is mixed with cocaine to increase the weight and thus the profit on a batch. Most dealers use Mannitol, an artificial sweetener sold in large brown bottles both in health food stores and head shops.

After my arrest and imprisonment, Armando took me to Las Casa, the most fancy restaurant in Southbridge. He lectured me while sipping a small glass of amber Scotch, saying that successful

dealers shouldn't take drugs or be nabbed for stupid infractions like petty theft.

"Dealers should be, ah ... *dignificado*, you know, always cool."

"It was Jane's fault, I didn't do anything."

"You must learn to pick better friends. Don't be *estúpida!*"

"I'm sorry, okay?" I stirred my icy daiquiri with a straw.

"Sorry is no good, no *basta*. First, you must stop tripping. No *más*. Just smoke the marijuana I gave you. It is *especial*, from God."

We laughed because God was a Five Percenter we bought pot from. He was a timid young black man with shiny Jheri curls. God had three "wives" in three apartments, and they all wore black scarves over their hair. They mostly hid in the kitchen when strangers came. He played all religious saying he was a God from outer space and complaining about "the devil's drink." But he sold heroin, ludes, pot, and hash without compunction.

The waitress came with our filet mignon and lobster tails. Armando asked her for two more drinks and a bottle of wine.

I put my hand on Armando's. "Mira, I give you my *promesa* I will quit shoplifting and taking *las drogas*."

"Chica, *su español es bueno*," he said.

"Gracias, but I still only know a few words and I barely *comprendo*."

"Ah, but you will soon. If I take you to Colombia, you will speak perfect in one month."

The waitress returned with our drinks, and she poured our wine

in glasses.

“Salud,” he said, and we clinked our glasses.

Armando seemed satisfied with my promise, and we ate in silence for a while.

He broke the quiet by saying, “So, *muñeca*, will Enrique be your *amante*?”

“*Amante*? Please translate.”

“I know about you and Enrique.”

“*Qué*? How? Mira, I only kissed him.”

“I told him never to kiss you again.”

“Why would you do that?” Imagining their conversation made me feel ill.

“He’s no man. I am a *caballero* and I will have you.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

I was nervous. I wanted to ask him about Lourdes, and about the time she had two black eyes, but I was scared.

“Why do you want a boy?”

“Um, maybe because I’m a girl. Why are we having this conversation?” I still couldn’t believe he knew I kissed Enrique.

“Because I want you to be my *compañera*. You know, my left-hand.”

“You mean right-hand.”

“Whatever you say, *mi hija*. We will be rich and eat here every night. But you cannot mess around with customers, especially *muchachos*. They will want to be the boss of you and I need you for my business. You are *muy inteligente* and you are *blanca*.”

“Blanca . . . that means white?”

“Sí, who do you think is gonna buy all the coke?”

A few weeks later, Armando and I were going to the city. He was taking me with him on a coke buy. My jeans, sweater, boots—and lace gloves like Madonna’s—were all black. I wore my usual heavy makeup; bright red lipstick, thick black eyeliner, and light blue sparkling eye shadow.

I heard a car honking. I looked out the window and saw Armando standing outside a dark Lincoln Town Car. I grabbed my black leather purse and jacket and ran down the stairs.

I got into my first chauffeured car. The driver gave me a glass of white wine with a cocktail napkin. During the ride, since the driver was there, Armando and I chatted idly.

Hours later we landed in the Bronx. Armando told the driver to pull over. The driver turned the car off, got out and opened our door. Then he got back in the car and started reading a newspaper.

I held Armando’s arm while we walked down the sidewalk. He was carrying a leather briefcase. We passed store windows decorated with fake gold jewelry and tall colored candles bearing pictures of Christian saints.

“Who’s the driver?” I asked.

“Just some car company I called.”

“Why are we using a chauffer? He might see something.”

“Nah, besides all I have is a briefcase. He will also love us when he gets his tip.” Armando was a notorious over-tipper, and it did

seem to buy him loyalty and special treatment everywhere we went.

“But what if we get pulled over?”

“Mi hija, nobody pulls over Town Cars.”

We stopped at a huge redbrick apartment building. We had passed so many, it seemed to me the entire Bronx was made up of them. There had to be hundreds of apartments in each. I imagined all those different lives going on inside of one giant building.

Once we were inside the dealer’s apartment, it was dark. We stood in a vestibule lit from the glow of a television in the next room. Young Latin men searched my purse and coat and even gave me a light patting down. They looked in Armando’s briefcase. It was filled with money.

We were escorted through a living room full of armed men watching television. Some stood leaning against the wall, their guns hanging from straps on their shoulders, like purses. I looked at the floor, following Armando like a puppy.

Our escorts left us in a gaudy bedroom with gold drapes, a wall of mirrored closet doors, and a red chenille covered bed. I spied a machine gun standing upright in the corner.

“*Mi amigo, me alegre verte.*” A short, chubby man in his fifties shook Armando’s hand jovially.

“*Sí, tú también.*”

They both looked at me and smiled. Armando introduced me to Benito. He shook my hand then gestured for Armando and me to sit on the huge bed.

Benito spoke no English. He was slovenly and wore loose fitting clothes and a beige cap over sparse hair, he was nothing like the lean, tailor dressed, well-coiffed Armando.

He went over and pulled open the mirror-covered doors. “*Cocaína! Es bueno, no es?*” It was a closet full of coke.

There were dozens of narrow shelves. On each were stacked plastic wrapped bricks, sealed with tan packing tape. I started counting and multiplying, trying to value the treasure I was looking at. I had never even seen a hundred-dollar gram of coke. Now, I was looking at more than a million dollars worth.

I thought I was the coolest girl I knew. I was a fearless, tough, daring, rule-breaking bitch. That’s why I was about to leave a life of petty theft and dealing pills to become a supplier of the next big thing. I admired myself in the mirrors of the closet, my sixteen-year-old image repeated on each folding door.

Benito pulled three bricks off the shelves and tossed them on the bed next to us. They had codes written on them in black marker. He pulled out a razor blade and sliced small triangles on each, then pulled back layers of plastic wrapping. Next, he handed Armando a dollhouse sized gold spoon. Armando dug into the crystal white powder, filled the spoon, and held it out to me.

“Me? But you said I ...”

“*Tranquilo,*” he said softly, “sniff this and tell me how it is.”

I had never sniffed anything before. But in a movie, I saw a man snort coke through a tiny straw in one nostril while he held the other nostril closed with his thumb. So, I imitated him. The

stinging powder went straight up my nose.

“*Cómo es?*” they said almost in unison.

“Good. Buena.” My heart began to beat faster. This was far stronger than Rush. I started grinning and both men laughed. Armando took a spoonful from the next brick and passed it to me. What was he thinking? I had never done coke before and he was treating me like a tester. Benito asked which one we wanted. Armando looked at me sternly, so I randomly pointed to one.

Armando opened his briefcase and the men bantered for a few minutes. Benito then called a slender young man into the room. He sat down on the bed opposite me and flashed a quick, shy smile.

Handing me the briefcase Armando said, “Give Benito’s boy thirty thousand dollars.”

It was all twenties. I had never seen that much money before, but I’d handled plenty of cash over the past three years. And the coke-high made me feel sharp. I smoothed each bill with a tug, imitating tellers at the bank. I made piles containing a thousand dollars each.

The young man recounted my piles while Benito and Armando drank Scotch from highballs and chatted in Spanish. It takes a long time to count out thirty grand.

“Why did you make me your tester?” I asked Armando as we walked back towards the Town Car.

“I needed one. I couldn’t bring anyone but you, you are my *compañera*.”

“But I had no idea what I was picking. Plus, now I’m fucked-up.”

“They’re all the same.”

“You don’t know what you’re doing.”

“Ah, I know *mucho*. You will be surprised.” He put his arm around me and squeezed my shoulder.

“But that was a ton of coke! And where’d you get the money?”

“It is not a ton, it is only a kilo. The dinero is mine. I made it on the pills.”

“But why did you buy a kilo? That’s so much, and we don’t even have customers for the stuff.”

I didn’t like coke. It made my heart pound so hard my chest ached. There was also an acid nasal drip that burned my throat, and a nasty aftertaste in my mouth.

“The Upholders want some, and so does God,” said Armando.

“You’re going to sell to bikers? How do you know The Upholders?”

“I know everybody. And you are going to sell to bikers, chica. They will love you.”

I didn’t like bikers. The ones I met as a kid were scary racists.

On the ride home, we made a quick stop to get empanadas and once again ate the spicy beef pastries Armando so loved.

We reached Southbridge late. Armando had the driver leave us on a corner. We walked to his house, slipping in quietly because Lourdes was asleep. Armando extended his hand to me. I took it and he led me through the kitchen to a back bedroom.

Cardboard was duct taped over the window, completely covering it. There was a small bed and a coffee table. I sat on the bed. Armando left then returned with two glasses of scotch and shut the door.

“Salud! Why not roll a joint? You have not smoked all night.”

He began arranging things on the table: the brick of coke, razor blades, plastic sandwich bags, a calculator, and an electronic scale the size of a dinner plate.

I lit the pot and inhaled deeply, then sipped the caramel-colored liquor.

“Chica, we are gonna make a lot of money with this stuff. *Primero*, we have to break it up.”

He pulled on the tape covering the hole Hector made. He dug into the brick with his nail and offered me a pinkie finger with a tiny pile of powder on it.

“Wait, you said no more drugs just a couple of weeks ago. Do you want me hooked on coke before we even sell any?”

“No, no. If you mess with this stuff, I’ll punch you right in the mouth. But tonight is *especial*. We are celebrating. *Además, hay que conocer el producto.*”

“In English, please,” I said.

“Sí, sí. *Perdóneme*, I’m sorry. I said that you must know what the stuff is like to sell it.”

“And you?”

He sniffed the little pile off his pinkie. Then he did it again and offered me some.

“Remember, only this once. Junkies don’t make good dealers,” he said.

Armando sliced through the plastic on the brick with the razor until he could pull off the casing. He carved a chunk off the block of pressed white powder and placing it on the scale, added chunks until there was an even ounce. The pieces were then scraped off the scale with a razor into a sandwich bag. Holding the bag at an angle and shaking it, he coaxed the cocaine into the corner of the baggie. He twisted the extra plastic and tied it into a tight knot then tore the excess plastic off. The coke looked as if it had been shrink-wrapped.

We cut and weighed and knotted and pulled, creating one-ounce balls of coke. Some packets only weighed 3.5 grams, an eighth of an ounce. These were called eight balls. We made them to sell to people who wanted to test the coke before buying. We threw the balls into a paper bag. Armando took a glass vial out and scraped coke into it, filling it full of powder. He handed me the vial and a velvet cloth I unrolled to find a tiny gold metal spoon and straw. Each was held with elastic, and there was an empty spot for the vial.

“It’s a kit,” he said. “Use it to get people high, you know, friends, people who want to try it.”

Arriving home at dawn, I got into bed with my purse. The room darkening shade made it impossible to tell it was day. I turned on a bedside lamp and took out my faux makeup case. Inside were two eight balls, four ounces, and my black velvet kit. How the hell

would I sell this? I put the case back in my purse, pushed it under my bed, and fell asleep.

My doorbell woke me up a few hours later. By the time I got out of bed, it was shrilling like a fire alarm; someone was holding a finger continuously on the button. I opened the window and hung my head out.

“*Pendejo!* Are you crazy?” I was sure it was one of my punk neighborhood customers jonesing for something.

“No.” It was the unmistakable voice of Armando. “Chica, let me in.”

I buzzed him in and raced to find clothes. I opened the door in red sweatpants and a small white tank top with a glossy strawberry ironed on.

“You look so cute, like a little girl.”

“What now?”

“Now, you eat breakfast.” I opened the bag he handed me and pulled out a white sugarcoated doughnut. I took bites out of it while Armando explained that we were going to meet people today.

“Take a shower, look great, and I’ll be back to get you in an hour. Bring your kit and the stuff.”

First place he drove me was the Lincoln Brother’s. I had not seen those queens since the day I met Armando on their porch almost a year ago. I figured they were mad at me for going over their heads to their supplier.

“They’re gonna hate me.”

“They love you. Let’s go.”

I reluctantly opened the El Camino’s door and got out. As we walked, my spiked heel stuck in a crack. I struggled to free myself, and Armando knelt down and pulled on my boot. I lost my balance and leaned hard on his shoulder. He looked up at me with a smile. He was so handsome, so alluring. For a moment, I thought about falling into his arms. Then, we were walking up those fated porch steps.

“*Cómo están ustedes?*” Armando smiled and heartily shook hands with Jamal and then Jaleel. “Look who I brought.”

Both brothers hugged me. Jamal said, “Where you been, girl?”

“I’m sorry Jam, I know, I suck. I’ve just been so fucking busy.”

“It’s cool baby girl, but we all miss you hangin’ around the place.”

Jamal and me stood arm in arm. Armando asked for privacy and Jamal led us into an empty room. We all stood in a huddle.

“Mira, you have to try this shit. Pure. *Totalmente puro*,” Armando said to Jamal.

I gave sniffs to the brothers from the tiny spoon until Jaleel left the room and returned with a razor blade and mirror. I dumped some coke on the mirror and he formed the powder into lines with the razor. They sniffed them with the straw.

“Man, that is some good shit. Serious,” Jamal said.

“Do you want some?” Armando asked.

“How much?”

“Fifteen-hundred. It is totally pure, uncut. You can add cut and still

get a hundred a gram. You pay her. And when you want more, you call her.”

Jamal left and returned with the cash. I handed him one of the ounces.

“Thanks babygirl.” He kissed me full on the lips as always. I was so relieved we were cool; I really loved Jamal. I had spent many hours at this house smoking pot and watching *The Little Rascals* while waiting for my order.

“She’s working for me now, so careful.” Armando poked a finger playfully in Jamal’s chest.

“I see, yes, I see.” Jamal grinned.

“You don’t see nothing, bitch.” I gave Jamal a slight shove. Armando asked to use a phone, and we all followed him back toward the kitchen.

“So, he’s your man now? What happened to that cute blonde white boy you brought sometimes, the one with those tight jeans?”

“That was, like, two years ago. He’s history ... and Armando’s not my man.”

“Okay girlfriend. Whatever you say.”

We laughed. Jamal slapped my ass affectionately.

Armando finished his call and we said our goodbyes. Jamal hugged me tightly.

“Come over anytime, baby. And I’ll definitely call you,” he said.

Armando and I returned to his car just as dusk hit.

“Muchacha, we just made almost six-hundred dollars!”

We were both excited. Maybe this cocaine thing would work out after all.

We drove across town to *gringo* land, where The Upholders were housed in a degenerate Victorian. A rusty iron fence lined the garbage filled yard. We tiptoed past the broken beer bottles and empty motor oil cans. I held onto Armando. We entered the kitchen and Armando introduced me to Quinn, the leader.

“Is this your wife?” Quinn asked Armando.

“No, she works for me.”

“Have a chair, little girl.” I smiled and sat down next to a fish tank where toothy piranhas swam. There were a few hookers hanging about. We gave a friendly nod to each other. “Chicks, get lost,” said Quinn, and the girls wandered into the adjacent living room.

Armando, still standing, told Quinn about the coke. I pulled the kit out of my bag, unrolling the black velvet with trembling hands, and removed the vial. Quinn swiped it out of my hand.

“Gimme the spoon, girl, come on,” he said, holding out his hand.

I gave him the spoon and looked around while he took snorts. I’d never been to a biker den, but I had read a really scary book about Hells Angels.

The walls were plastered with stickers of skull and crossbones. Confederate flags hung here and there. It was dark. The windows were completely boarded over. The kitchen opened to a large room where bikers sprawled on dirty couches while watching porn. They

wore white T-shirts, faded jeans, and leather vests with patches.

Quinn smirked and slammed a hand down on the table. “Gimme an ounce, little girl!”

I pulled an ounce out and tossed it on the table.

“How much?”

“Fifteen.”

“Expensive.”

“It is the best, my friend, straight from Colombia with no cut,” said Armando. “If you like it I have a steady supply. You will deal with her.”

“I deal with the girlie? Is that right?”

“Mira, uh ... look, she is my girlfriend, *comprendo?*”

“Yeah, that’s cool, man.” He pulled out a roll of bills in an elastic band and dropped it on the table. “Here, girlfriend, I’ll take two.”

I tossed another ounce on the table then quickly counted the money and put it in my purse.

“Here’s my number.” I handed him a notebook page with my phone number written on it. Quinn ripped open the ounce and shined a flashlight on it. “This looks amazing, lots of crystal. I’ll call ya.”

“You’re a fucking cabrón!” I yelled at Armando on the ride home. “And you drive like shit. Chill out, so we don’t get pulled over.”

“Come on, muchacha, I’ll take you to dinner.”

“Fuck your dinner. Those bikers are assholes. You’re going to get me raped.”

“That’s why I said you were my girlfriend.”

“Yeah, that’ll help.”

“They respect business. They won’t hurt you because they will want a lot more of that coke. They’re gonna need us. Come on, *chiquita*, we just made over a thousand.”

We went to dinner at La Casa to celebrate.

I got home around midnight. I sat at the kitchen table chain smoking Marlboros. Bikers always made me think of my father. He always rode me around on his motorcycle, even when I was so small I had to sit in front of him so he could hold me onto the seat. I decided to call him at work the next day and asked him to come to dinner.

When my father arrived, I gave him a bowl of homemade chili. We didn’t talk about our fight last month or the fact we’d barely spoke in almost a year.

“Just so you know, sweetie, you can always come home with me,” he said.

“Just stop. I’m never, ever, coming to your hell house.”

“Well, I’ll visit again soon, if that’s okay?”

“Yeah, daddy, definitely. Listen, before you go, do you want to try some coke?”

I laid lines out on my kitchen table with a razor and handed him

the straw.

My father's face remained solemn. He simply took the metal straw from me, his slanted eyes oblique.

"You're selling this now?" He snorted the line, "how much?"