

CHAPTER 1

The alarm clock was going off, a high-pitched grating pulse of sound echoing loudly off the walls. It had been going off for a while, but the shapeless form huddled under the covers made no move to silence it.

It was a small room, dirty and messy at the same time. There was an ashtray on every surface; the nightstand, the dresser, the mismatched speakers that cluttered every corner. Every ashtray was full, overflowing with cigarette butts and half-smoked joints. Posters and tapestries decorated the walls in a random rock theme that spanned the decades. The white walls were yellowed with age and smoke, cobwebs wisping where they met the ceiling.

Against one wall was an electric guitar on an upright stand, the only thing in the room that didn't look like junk, a dark blue Fender Stratocaster. A black cord trailed from its snug housing in the body of the guitar to a knee-high amplifier sitting nearby. Another ashtray sat on the amp, a dusting of ashes all around it. A small television was housed in a beat up oak entertainment center whose remaining shelves were dominated by long tangles of guitar pedals and extension cords, open empty compact disc cases and a haphazard teetering stack of old vinyl.

A steady rhythmic pounding joined the blare of the alarm clock, and a voice shouted muffled through the wall. The thin sheetrock shook with the force of the pounding.

The covers stirred, an arm reached out from beneath them and silenced the alarm. Mason threw the covers off and rolled out of bed, his feet clumsily finding the floor. He sat on the edge of the mattress for a long moment, elbows on his knees and his face buried in his hands. Heaving a sigh, he peeked a look at the digital face of the alarm clock. He cursed.

Then he was a flurry of action, dressing himself frantically in jeans and sweatshirt. One moment sitting still in boxers and a stained tank top, his mussed longish hair askew in every direction; the next he was up and moving, opening and closing dresser drawers and tripping through piles of soiled clothes on the floor. Two doorways cut the wall opposite the entrance into thirds, one a doorless passage into his small excuse for a kitchen and

the other a door open to the cramped bathroom. Dashing in and out of the open door, he emerged first with his hair wet and flattened to his head, then with a toothbrush sticking from his mouth, then with a hand towel he held cautiously to his dripping face. He crinkled his nose in distaste and threw it to the floor. Wiping droplets of water from his skin with the sleeve of his sweatshirt, Mason worked his feet into his sneakers and bent to tie the darkened laces.

On his way out the door, he stopped at an ashtray and pulled two half-smoked joints from the ugly collection of twisted stained tan speckled filters. A smashed cigarette butt fell from the ashtray to roll onto the speaker and from there to the stiff carpet below. Mason didn't bother to pick it up. He put one joint in his pocket and one between his lips and walked out the front door.

CHAPTER 2

Paul pushed his way through the swinging steeled glass into the coffee shop. The jangle of the bell hanging over the door announced his arrival, and he stopped a moment just inside the entrance to gaze about the room. A wave of aroma greeted him, the warm welcome smell of fresh brewed coffee tickling his nostrils pleasantly.

The place was huge, especially considering how many customers frequented the spot. Longer than it was wide, the single room was wide enough yet for four tables, the coffee bar and aisles between all of them. A paneled wooden island on a sea of hardwood floor, the coffee bar was long and narrow, twin counters mirroring each other with matted work space between. Two people behind the bar would have trouble passing without touching, but the length of it would let three or four people move about freely. Stools were placed along the length of the bar for customers, steel and vinyl and old and currently unoccupied. The island was closed at one end by a cash register facing the entrance and a swinging waist-high door at the opposite end. A slab of counter on hinges served as horizontal barrier above the thin swinging door. Sturdy wooden tables were placed almost randomly about the open hardwood floor. There were less than twenty, though the space could have easily held twice that. Only three were occupied, less than half a dozen customers in the whole place.

Paul approached the register as the girl behind the counter turned to see who had come in. She smiled, a pretty sweet smile under pretty honeyed blonde hair and pretty bright blue eyes.

“Good morning, Paul,” she said. “White mocha?”

“Morning, Jessica,” Paul smiled back. “Yes, please.”

“Brenna’s here,” Jessica inclined her head toward a table in the back while she rung up his order. “Anything to eat?”

“Yeah, a blueberry muffin,” Paul answered, digging his wallet out of his back pocket. He dropped a dollar bill in the tip jar that sat next to the register and handed her a twenty. She counted out his change and reached across the counter.

As their hands touched, Paul heard an explosion. Loud and muffled at

the same time, it was followed by a thin, shrill scream. He jerked his hand back, looking around the shop bewildered. No one stirred or looked up; no one did anything. His eyes met hers, his heart pounding.

“You okay?” Jessica asked him. She was still holding out his change, but her look had become one of concern.

Paul looked around again. “You didn’t hear that?” he asked her quietly.

“Hear what?” She cocked her head to listen.

“Nothing.” Paul shook his head. “I must be hearing things. Thanks, Jess.” He took his change and walked the length of the bar. It wasn’t until he was almost at Brenna’s table that he noticed the big man huddled over another table in the corner furthest from the entrance.

“Morning, Roche.” Paul called to him.

Surrounded by books and ledgers sprawled haphazardly across the table, the man seemed oblivious to his environment. A big round head sat atop his mountainous shoulders, bald and topped with a battered black fedora. A blue pocket tee tried to contain the bulk of his torso, and a pack of cigarettes strained the pocket on his left breast even further. He made a notation in the ledger before him, cursed, erased it, and glanced up.

“Paul,” he nodded, then looked back down at the page before him.

Brenna had her laptop on the table and a tablet of hand-written notes beside it. They both sat neatly square with the edge of the tabletop, a cup of coffee just within reach on one side and an untouched slice of lemon poundcake on the other. She stopped typing as he approached and looked up at him.

Her hair was black and straight, parted down the middle to brush against her shoulders equally on both sides. The dark of her hair was in stark contrast to her smooth and milky white skin, and her face was a study in perfection. High cheekbones, full red lips and a small button of a nose all took a backseat to the beauty of her eyes, though. So brown they were almost black, Brenna’s eyes seemed to swirl with depth and beauty and sensuality. She had a way of looking up at him without raising her head that he found adorably breathtaking. A little horizontal line appeared across her forehead, and her big dark eyes got bigger and somehow more beautiful. It was how she was looking at him now. A slow smile started on her lips as their eyes met, and Paul leaned over to cover it with his own smile. She tasted of coffee and mint and lipstick.

“Good morning, gorgeous,” Paul sat next to her as she snapped shut the laptop. She took a moment to close the notebook and set it perfectly square on top of the computer, then slid them both to the center of the table.

When she was done, she turned sideways in her chair toward Paul and put her hand on his knee and her full attention on him. He saw the agate oval that hung always at her throat from a delicate silver chain, hovering over the modest cut of her light blouse.

“Good morning, my love.” Her voice was soft and low, and her eyes lingered on his. “Are we still on for tonight?”

Paul nodded while Jessica approached the table with his order. “Absolutely,” he told Brenna, then looked up at Jessica while she placed the coffee and muffin on the table. “Thanks, Jess.”

He sipped his coffee and turned again to Brenna. “Where’s your brother?”

She rolled her eyes and frowned a little. “He didn’t come home last night.” When she saw Paul’s frown, she squeezed his knee gently. “Don’t worry, he’ll be here. Where’s Kris?”

“Running late. As usual.” A plain round clock hung on the wall above Roche, and Paul turned to glance at it. He reached across the table and slid Brenna’s breakfast and fork in front of her. “Better eat while you have time,” he said, and took a giant bite of his muffin. Crumbs littered the table while he reached to snatch a paper napkin from the small stack by her plate.

Her fingers, slim and delicate, moved from Paul’s knee to pick up her fork. She cut a small perfect square from the corner of the cake and slid the fork underneath it gingerly. She chewed slowly and deliberately as she spread a paper napkin over her right knee. She swallowed, had a sip of coffee, and turned her gaze on Paul again.

“What time tonight?” she asked.

Paul shrugged. “I should be home about six or six thirty. I can be at your place by seven.” He took another sip of his white mocha. It was cooling down, so he took a long drink.

“Okay,” she nodded. She glanced at the clock, and her fingers strayed unconsciously to the amulet at her throat. “I should probably get going.” Brenna was never late. For anything. Ever.

The door opened then, the bell clanging noisily as two young men entered arguing.

Tall, with dark hair cut short and styled to careless perfection, one man moved his hands excitedly as he spoke. “It’s called a pre-emptive strike,” he was saying loudly. “The best defense is a good offense.”

His companion was shorter, with a slight build and more subtle gestures. He was shaking his head slowly. Blue jeans and tee shirt and a light jacket all hung loose on his frame, and his hands were stuffed into

the pockets of his jacket. Light brown hair covered his head in disheveled clumps, constantly threatening to fall into his eyes.

“How can you be the one defending yourself if you are the asshole that strikes first?” He was still shaking his head. “How can you know what would happen if you didn’t attack if you always open with an attack?”

“It’s the nature of the beast,” the dark-haired one answered with finality. “These savages will move in at the first sign of weakness.” His smile came as easily as the other’s frown, and he seemed to be clearly enjoying the banter.

His companion appeared visibly uncomfortable, on the other hand. “We’re not talking about war, we’re talking about women,” he said icily. He pulled his hands from his pockets and pushed a lump of hair from his forehead, quickly sweeping the room with a shy stare. Sharp gray eyes took it all in and came to rest on the girl standing behind the register. His eyes widened a little, a shy smile lit his face for a moment; then he looked away and stuffed his hands back in his pockets.

“Good morning, Jessica,” he said, staring at the floor. He pronounced her name carefully, like it was a sacred thing.

“Hey, Kris,” she replied, glancing away from the taller man behind him for a moment and then back. With a voice lower and slower she said, “Good morning, Matt.”

“Hey, Jess,” Matt answered as he stepped between Kris and the counter. “Two cups of your finest house brew, please. My companion will surely need cream and sugar; he can only swallow life and coffee masked by false sweetness.”

“I customize my coffee to my taste,” Kris said defiantly. He threw a scornful look at Matt and a softer one at Jessica before returning his eyes to the floor. “I don’t just drink any dark and bitter brew someone else serves up for me.”

A bark of laughter, and Matt called out to the man at the back of the room. “Hey Roach, Kris thinks your coffee is dark and bitter.”

“*Roche!*” The man called out without looking up, correcting the intentional mispronunciation with deliberate rudeness. He made a mark in the journal before him, closed it, and stood up. Glaring balefully at Matt, he grumbled, “He was talking about life, not coffee, jackass.” Roche turned to Kris. “Good morning, young man,” he said, almost smiling. “Still casting your pearls before swine?”

It was Kris’ turn to laugh. By the time he returned the greeting, Roche had turned and gone through the door at the back wall that said ‘OFFICE’ on a black and white plastic plaque affixed firmly at eye level. It slammed shut behind him.

Kris walked to their table, doffing his jacket and hanging it on his chair as he sat, while Matt got their coffee and followed him over.

“Hey, guys,” Matt said casually as he sat lightly on a chair across from Brenna, setting his companion’s cup on the table as he took the adjacent seat.

“You’re late,” Brenna said. Her voice was forgiving and reproachful at the same time.

“The day doesn’t start until I start the day,” Matt grinned. “I’m always on time, little sister.”

“Drink your coffee,” she said, ignoring him. “Don’t make Paul late for work.”

He ignored her for a moment too, reaching across the table to seize the rest of her lemon pound cake. Picking it up with his fingers, he bit off half of what was left in one huge bite and raised an eyebrow at her across the table. He gulped loudly, took a long pull off his coffee, gasped at the heat, gulped again and asked, “You weren’t going to eat that, were you?”

Brenna rolled her eyes and stood up. “I’ve got to go,” she announced. She looked hard at Matt. “I believe we all do.”

Matt gazed up at his sister, and Paul was struck anew at how alike they could look sometimes. The very expression that was adorable to him on Brenna he thought made Matt appear a helpless silly puppy dog. Matt’s long string of lovers surely thought it the other way around.

They made for the door all at once, cutting the number of customers in the coffee shop by half in one fell swoop. When they reached the door, Paul opened it and stood back, holding it open for the rest of them. Brenna reached out and brushed her fingers lightly across his abdomen, passing by first. Matt made as if to punch him in the gut as he walked by, his good-natured feint ending inches from Paul’s stomach. As Kris passed, he mumbled thanks to Paul and stole one last glance at Jessica over his shoulder as she waved goodbye to the group. A smile played on the corners of his mouth as his eyes met Paul’s...

...And when their eyes met, Paul heard it again: a loud thunderous crash, followed by a blood-curdling scream. It was louder this time, and he blanched, letting go of the door. It swung shut, barely missing Kris as he stepped hastily outside. Hanging there above the swinging steel and glass, the little brass bell bumped and rolled over the top of the door, clanging noisily. It clanged again as Kris opened the door and poked his head in, a concerned look on his face.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” Kris said, stepping inside again. “Are you okay, man?”

Jessica had come up behind him, looking just as concerned. "Paul? Are you alright?" She touched his shoulder lightly.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Paul forced a smile. "You guys didn't hear that?"

"Hear what?" Jessica and Kris asked together.

"Nothing." Paul shook his head, as if to clear it, and reached for the door again. The brass bell danced across the swing of steel, its last frayed thread giving way a little bit, but not breaking. It clanged again as the door swung shut behind them; then it hung silent and still, just a little lower than it had before.

Gathered outside, Brenna couldn't decide who to fuss over. She turned to Matt, but her eyes kept coming back to Paul. Taking Paul's hand, she spoke stern to her brother. "You should take him home; let him call in to work for both of you."

Paul was shaking his head. "I'm fine, sweetie." Encircling his arm around her slim waist, he pulled her close. "Besides, it's his first day, if I do get him a job. He can't call in on his first day."

Dark pools of love looked up at him, but her eyes turned to black ice when she looked at Matt. "He'll find a way to screw it up anyway."

Paul nuzzled Brenna's hair, in part to breathe in the smell of her and in part to hide his smile. Looking over the top of her head, he noticed a man standing across the street watching them. His garb oddly both out of season and out of place, he stared at Paul intently with neither guile nor candor. The man wore a leather cowboy hat and matching leather overcoat hanging from broad shoulders nearly to the ground. Leather boots poked out from under the long duster.

His whole outfit seemed cut from the same bolt of thick leather. Surely striking when new, the ensemble now hung limp, battered and worn. A deep oiled brown on the armpits, the overcoat was faded to a dry blond in many places. Clumsy stitches held the coat together in three different places with three different colors. At its hem, the trench coat looked scorched, and the boots had the same beaten and battered and burnt color. Banded in what looked like dull red snakeskin, the leather cowboy hat was perhaps the most abused part of his whole outfit. Misshapen by a dent, it looked like a part of the brim had been sliced off clean. A pair of holes the size of marbles punctuated the planned hollows of the hat, a few inches forward from the unnatural grapefruit-sized concavity. Apparently there were matching holes on the other side, as Paul could see daylight through them when the man turned his head slightly. He could also see little black rings around the holes, like scorch marks.

Paul was overwhelmed by an otherworldly feeling as he looked at the strange man, and he swooned a bit as he brought himself back into his world of Matt and Kris. And Brenna. He breathed her in deep, glad she hadn't noticed him waver a moment earlier. Paul focused on their words as she argued with her brother.

"It's like you think I can't do anything right," Matt was complaining. The only time he was not the picture of strength and confidence was around his sister. All it took was a critical word from Brenna, and the man became a boy again.

"No, you're good at lots of things," Brenna responded blithely. "Short and shallow relationships, making promises you don't keep, pissing away money." Her body was stiff and rigid against Paul, only increasing the discomfort he always felt when the siblings went at it. Later, he knew, he could look forward to each of them seeking a private moment with him to complain at length about the other. He would validate both of them, feeling they were each wrong in their way but never saying so. She knew her weaknesses and her limits; it was his happy job to let her blow off steam without fear of criticism. And her brother...well, lecturing Matt was as useless and obvious as telling a tree it is made of wood.

Paul pulled Brenna close to him. "Sweetie," he said. He was going to say, "We have to get going", but the door opened behind them, swinging inward to the coffee shop.

After announcing countless arrivals and departures, hanging as silent sentinel in between, the brass bell clanged once as it climbed over the top of the door one last time. Rolling, it clanged again and then again and dropped to the length of the one last thread holding it suspended. The thread snapped soundlessly, and the bell fell just as silently through open space. It clanged again as it hit the floor and half-rolled, half-skittered between the four friends and to the edge of the sidewalk. One more roll and it would have been in the street. Instead, it sat at the curb; silent, still and unnoticed.

CHAPTER 3

Mason drove with one hand on the wheel and the other constantly busy with some other vitally important task. Crossing Third Avenue, his right hand flipped through the pages of a thick case full of compact discs. Bloodshot eyes dancing between the road before him and the choices on the seat beside him, pages turned past Led Zeppelin and Pink Floyd, Sheryl Crow and Jewel, Megadeth, Bob Dylan, Katy Perry, even a Garth Brooks CD. He turned rapidly until he had gone past two pages full of AC/DC discs. Turning back a page, stealing a quick glance at the road, he slid a disc from its plastic sleeve and smoothly into the player on the dash. As the first strains of *Hell's Bells* filled the car, a slight smile softened Mason's face for a moment.

The passenger seat was for more than just music. A pack of Camel Lights lay next to a powder blue Bic lighter right where he had tossed them when he got in the car. The half-burnt roach in his mouth became smoky breakfast as orange flame leapt from the lighter. The windshield was lost behind a cloud of white-blue smoke for a moment while he dropped the lighter onto the seat next to him again, grasped the wheel with his right hand and worked the window crank with his left.

Smoke swirled out the thumb's width opening, and the windshield cleared to reveal a green light on Seventh and a clear road ahead. There weren't even any pedestrians on the sidewalk.

Mason swung down the visor and met his own eyes in the mirror inset for a long moment, hazel on white shot with red. The joint left his mouth for the first time since he had left the apartment, as he flipped the visor back into place and gently stubbed the smoking tip into the ashtray.

There were pedestrians at Eighth Avenue, two slim asian girls in shorts and tank tops and running shoes. They pumped their legs up and down, waiting for the signal and chatting while their sneakers tattooed a light rhythm on the sidewalk. Mason rolled to a smooth stop as the signal changed and watched bobbing ponytails and small dancing breasts cross in front of his car. One girl, young and pretty and all in shades of blue, glanced over in the last moment before they cleared his car. By then, Mason had turned away to look in the center console for some eye drops.

By the time the light turned to his favor, Mason had carefully squirted a few drops in each eye, wiped a little remainder and a bit of sleep from each eye, and relit the joint.

Brian Johnson was singing the first few bars of *Back in Black* as Mason slipped his foot off the brake pedal and mashed the accelerator. The vehicle lurched forward, trailing cannabis smoke and guitar riffs and picking up speed.

CHAPTER 4

With her left foot in the coffee shop and her right in the street, Jessica propped the door open behind her with one hand. The other held Kris' jacket, folded neatly to hang evenly from either side of her hand as she proffered it to him. Her smile was pretty and shy, and her bright blue eyes widened as she spoke.

"You forgot your..." Jessica took in the faces of the other three in a glance and must have sensed that she was intruding on a tense moment, "...jacket," she finished quietly, looking back at Kris as he took it from her.

"Thanks, Jess." Kris had his own shy smile for her; and after reclaiming the jacket, he stepped back two quick steps and then a third, slower. As he placed his right foot, toe to heel, his instep came down on the little brass bell that lay there on the sidewalk. He pitched backward suddenly and when he shifted his other foot it came down on the edge of the curb, throwing him even further off balance. The expression on his face was a combination of momentary panic riddled with embarrassment as he looked to Jessica. They all stepped forward to help, instinctively; Paul, Brenna and Matt all moving at the same time. All a moment too late.

Jessica began to start forward with the others, eyes on Kris as he tilted precariously backwards in a slow motion, unstoppable fall. Her gaze went through him suddenly then, eyes widening as they went out of focus while her mouth hinged open to scream. Then came the sound of an explosion, a rapid report that ripped through the morning chill with a suddenness and a loudness that turned all their heads to the sound. All but Kris, who was busy falling awkwardly backward into the street and into the path of the blue van hurtling cock-eyed toward him on a blown out front tire. Behind the windshield the driver sat slumped over the steering wheel, lifeless, as the vehicle canted toward the curb and the helplessly falling young man.

A shrill scream split the air, and Paul had a moment to wonder if the blown tire or Jessica's scream had come first. He watched Kris windmill his arms as one foot held onto the edge of the curb, and Paul found himself thinking, absurdly, *this isn't happening*. Then he watched his friend fall

backwards into the street; and before Kris could land or take another step, the van caught him up in its grill and launched him bodily out in front of it.

A rag doll in jeans and tee shirt, Kris flew sideways through the air. Blood streaked the right side of his face, and his lower left leg stretched forward at an unnatural angle. His limp body turned slowly, almost gracefully, until the slow spin brought his head into the path of a street mailbox. Tall and wide and blue and bolted to the ground, the metal box let out a dull thud as it ended Kris' macabre flight. But for that and a small smear of blood down its side, the unyielding blue box was unaffected by the encounter.

Then the van took it, metal meeting metal in a nasty shriek of sound that would leave them both changed forever. Its side struck the mailbox at the same odd angle it had caught Kris, the rear end swinging slowly with the impact to keep the objects locked together in a long screeching kiss as the front tires straddled Kris lying unmoving on the street in their passing. The blown tire made an unnatural rhythmic thumping sound as it rolled inches from his bloodied face. A hot exhaust pipe loomed suddenly, though his eyes were not open to see it, but his twisted leg was caught then by a rear tire. It spun him so he thumped first onto the street, around to strike the broad undercarriage of the vehicle, then again against the hard asphalt. His body was spit out behind the wild charge of the metallic beast to land unceremoniously in a twisted tangled bloody heap on the pavement.

Impossibly, he moaned.

Paul dashed into the street to help his friend. He knelt beside him, reaching out gingerly, afraid to touch him. Movement caught his vision peripherally, but it didn't register. All that mattered was Kris, his friend, his best friend, his bloody battered broken best friend. Trying to find a pulse, trying to find wrist or neck without shifting or moving his body and possibly hurting him more, Paul was clenching his jaw and blinking back tears; but his hands were gentle as they flew over his friend's inert huddled form.

It wasn't until the second scream started that he realized the first had ended. This time it was Brenna who saw it coming first, and started screaming. There was a long unreal moment before Paul added it up in his mind, the movement from the corner of his eye and Brenna screaming. She was not screaming from grief or shock at what had just happened to Kris. Hers was a scream of anguish, the same as Jessica's had been, seeing what was about to happen.

Paul looked up, suddenly acutely aware of his surroundings. Everything seemed to be happening so fast, too quickly to react, while at the same time

the seconds felt like they were ticking by in exaggerated slow motion to his mind. When he looked up, his back was to his friends and he faced the street opposite the side they stood on. The last thing he saw before the car took him was the man in the strange leather ensemble, striding toward him brusquely and seeming to pay no mind to the oncoming vehicle.

He had a thick book in one hand, bound in the same bolt of brown leather as the man himself, and his other hand was worrying at something that seemed affixed to the front cover. Finally, it came loose and he held it in his hand tight, closing his fist around it. One hand stuffed the leather bound book into a wide pocket on the side of his flowing duster. The other held out the object to Paul insistently as the man halted before him. Standing up and reaching out at the same time, Paul's hand clasped the proffered object, round and flat and glinting gold. As his fingers closed around it, the front bumper of a forest green Chevy Malibu caught him by the shin and tossed him into the air. There came another forever moment then; and as he spun slowly in empty space he somehow saw everything happening all around him in that moment.

A strange bright orb of light formed around the man with the leather hat. His form blurred, then drowned in the light, which shrunk to a pinpoint and disappeared. A ripple started at the vanishing and spread outward rapidly like a wave, turning the air to a warped version of itself as it spread, like the air rippling above a scorching fire. It passed through Paul and he felt a calm come over him, the ridiculous feeling that everything was going to be okay.

Churning the air, the ripple of energy passed through Kris next, and his crumpled form seemed to shift in a relaxing sigh as it settled lower on the pavement.

Matt and Brenna were both advancing on Paul, in slow motion, and the curve of the ripple caught them both at the same time. They each seemed to wink out of existence for a split second as the wave passed through them, and when they winked back into existence they were no longer coming toward him. Matt was on his knees, kneeling with his hands in his lap as he stared slack-faced and unseeing at the pavement. Brenna stood rigid and still, no longer screaming. One hand covered the other and that hand clasped the gemstone at her throat. Though she looked right at him, Paul got the sense she wasn't seeing him at all.

He saw the ripple take Jessica last. She was thrown back violently by it, and as he watched she bounced off the wall of the coffee shop and slid slowly to the sidewalk, unconscious.

The moment somehow lasted long enough for Paul to wonder if he was going crazy or just pleasantly hallucinating away his final seconds before his face flattened against the windshield in a spatter of blood. Suddenly forever ended with a dull squishing thud, and his world went black.