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## S E E D S

“Stunning.”

Cape Johns is deceptively beautiful in the early morning. At least it is from the top of the tower. Disorderly steel industrial parks take on the appearance of dark, ornate palaces, shrouded by the glimmering screen of the river, guarded at the shore by towering four-legged freight cranes. If it's the right time of year, any number of silhouetted flocks might cross the golden skyline, and at no time does the roar of traffic below overtake the meditative silence of the tower's pinnacle. It's a panorama that most Capers and a lucky few out-of-state students are privy to, and one of these was Dominic Winters.

Something short of a morning ritual, Dom and his sketchbook would make their way to the top of Ferron Tower and transfer scenery directly to paper with nary a creative impulse in between. This period was Dom's most concerted effort *not* to create, his self-imposed decompression therapy, and it was gradually becoming the highlight of his existence.

Less than an hour separates the mirage of dawn from the harsh reality of daylight, when you have to travel a few miles inland to escape the oppressive noise, fumes and outright ugliness of the east end. The serenely beautiful campus is really the only visually agreeable area of Cape Johns, at the same time a symbol of pride and scorn to the blue-collar community surrounding it. Why the school coexists with the town at all has long been a hotly-debated topic among local historians, and how they coexist, no one quite knows.

Alex had a habit of rubbing his belly at the end of every meal, though there wasn't much of one to rub. From the looks of them, he and Dom might have been brothers—both similarly tall and lanky, both with dishevelled hair (albeit in different colors), and both of them nearly always clad in worn-out, paint-spattered clothes regardless of the occasion. Rarely was one seen without the other unless Karyn happened to be around.

He pushed what was left of his food aside, burped into his hand and said, “All artists are jealous of good ideas. Goes with the territory. It's the ‘why didn't I think of that’ syndrome.”

Dom wasn't encouraged. “Yeah, I know,” he said while fiddling with his receipt absent-mindedly, staring down at nothing with a stolid look on

his face. “I just feel like there’s a wall I can’t break, a conceptual threshold. Everything I create is wishy-washy.”

Alex cringed and opened his mouth to speak but decided that an objection would be transparent. He conceded the point by pursing his lips. “Alright. I guess if I didn’t know you so well I’d disagree. Most of us mortals would love to have your portfolio.” For Alex it didn’t really matter; he was a competent but complacent artist who was as happy doing contract work as rendering divine inspiration. Maybe more so, since it required less mental effort.

Dom could never be satisfied with that. Dom knew, partly because he had always been told so and partly because he simply felt it, that he had the potential to become the 21st century’s Pablo Picasso. If that feeling wasn’t accurate, then it was the cruelest joke fate could have played on any man who considered himself an artist.

He stared vacantly out the window. “I... put so much sweat into the search for a good idea, but I all I get is passable ones. In a way it’s not fair that my life has been uneventful—where am I supposed to get inspiration if nothing terrible ever happens?”

Alex gave him a sideways grin. “Yeah, poor you.” The diner was starting to fill up with undergrads. “Let’s get out of here before I start sobbing in front of the kiddies.” They dropped their payment (plus art-student-standard 10% tip) on the table and made their way to the door. As they walked back down the alleyway to the studio Alex said, “You know, I think the naming thing is blocking your third eye. Maybe if you would settle for ‘Untitled’ just once...”

“Oh, don’t start.”



Seventeen years earlier. Just two months remained in the Branciforte Elementary school year. Miss Theresa sat transfixed, a large sheet of newsprint in her hands, her head shaking slowly side to side. “This kid...” she said to herself. She couldn’t stop admiring the care he had taken with every stroke, the perfection (relatively speaking, of course—Dominic was only seven) of the lighting and shadow, and the baffling lack of corrections, as though he was the Mozart of the still life. “From God’s eyes to his little hands.” A soft knock on the door frame behind her, and there stood the prodigy.

“Oh, hi, Dominic,” she said while self-consciously setting aside his drawing. “Come on in. I was just looking at your work. It’s really good.”

“Thank you, Miss Theresa,” Dominic said in a monotone that suggested it wasn’t the first such compliment he had received.

“Dominic, why does it say, ‘Still Taking the Train’ at the bottom?”

A slightly surprised look crossed his face. “It’s the title,” he replied.

Theresa smiled. “Oh, I see.” She looked over the piece again and realized that two of the baskets might have looked to him like a locomotive engine. She wanted to probe further into the title’s meaning but didn’t really have time. “Um, Dominic...” She considered her words for a moment. “Are you happy in my class?”

“Yes.” A predictably default answer.

“Okay. Well, the reason I ask is that you... I think maybe you should be in Mrs. Hannigan’s class instead of mine.” No response. “I mean I *love* having you in my class, Dominic, but, well... you’re just more advanced than the rest of the students here. I don’t think you’re going to learn very much in my class.”

“Okay.” This was not the first such conversation Dominic had had. Miss Theresa’s class was already two levels above where he would normally be. He didn’t know who Mrs. Hannigan was, but he assumed there were bigger kids in her class.

So it was, all through Dom’s early life. As a toddler, he never ate the crayons, he just drew with them. Before his parents had even considered teaching him how to draw shapes and stick figures he was drawing clumsy outlines of abstract shapes *inside* things that he saw—the patterns in the dog’s darker fur, refractions that his mother’s crystal projected on the wall, the chiaroscuro of an orange. Things that art teachers normally have to fight to make “normal” people see, Dominic was rendering from the start.

His progressive, life-affirming parents encouraged his abilities as well as they possibly could. All of his schools, even his preschool, were chosen not for their academic credentials but for the strength and vision of their art faculty.

And predictably, Dom travelled up the ranks at a rapid pace. By the time he started middle school he had been allowed a couple of days a week to sit in with the advanced high school freshman class, and before his tenth grade year he had begun nightly classes at the local university and private critique sessions with a faculty member once a week.

“Impressive as always, kid.” Professor Von Geddre was staring at a colorful but unassuming landscape resting on a heavy wooden easel, chewing the gum that Dom had offered when he walked in. His eyes fell

in a squint to the lower right corner. “Dom, what’s that ‘Midnight in the Garden of Evil Knievel’ written at the bottom?”

Dom smirked and girded himself for a lecture. “The title, sir.”

Von Geddre smirked back and put a skeptical look on. “I assume you realize that objective renderings like this don’t usually have titles.”

“Yes sir, I know.”

“So why bother?”

They had been asking him this question since he first learned to spell. *All* of Dom’s work had titles, no matter how unoriginal, analytical, inconsequential or incomplete. As a child he had started doing it because all the great works he had been shown had titles and he assumed that it was against the rules not to include one. But by now it had stubbornly developed into a permanent fixture of his work, partly because they had tried to make him stop and he was so hard-headed, but also because...

“I guess I’d have trouble feeling like it was worth the effort if it didn’t have a title,” he said, looking at the drawing instead of the teacher. “I don’t think I could go on creating art if I thought the next piece wouldn’t have a unique identity.”

“Hm.” The professor thought this over. “I suspect that may be a clue to a deeper issue, but I’m afraid I’m not insightful enough at this hour to speculate about such things. Time will tell, I suppose.”

They discussed the rest of the piece for a half hour or so, but Von Geddre was starting to feel like he was no longer equipped to help Dom progress. He poured a fresh cup of coffee, dropped his gum in the trash and stared out the office window at the red evening sky. “Dom,” he said without turning. “Where... what do you want to be in ten years?”

Dom’s mouth stopped chewing. He realized that although it was a simple question that every kid had been asked countless times, he himself had never actually been asked. Everyone, including himself, had just taken it for granted that he would be a famous artist. He had never been asked to put it into words, and doing so seemed surprisingly difficult.

“I guess... well... I guess I’ll be an artist, right?” he said as if to verify that Von Geddre knew the correct answer and was just withholding it.

The professor shrugged. “I guess. Is that what you want, or what you think other people want?” And just to make sure the other option was available: “Or both?”

Dom looked as deep inside him as he could and saw only the obvious answer. “Both,” he said to the wall, then turned to the professor with a what-was-I-thinking face. “Of course. Both!”



Cape University Professor Evan Johns took a deep breath, removed his glasses and rubbed his reddened eyes. He and Dom were alone in the office adjacent to the painting studio. “I’m afraid I can only sympathize with your lack of experience, Dom. Most artists start with no inspiration other than the works of their creative idols, usually the greatest artists of history.” He was very tired, and not very receptive to a whining session. “They start with their merely good ideas and focus mainly on executing them well. The great ideas... they might come later or they might not. It’s admirable to shoot for greatness, but dangerous to get frustrated when it doesn’t happen.”

It was all true, but Johns knew he was wasting his breath. Dom tapped lightly at the arm of his chair with a balled fist. He was staring at the yellowing Rothko poster on the studio wall. “Sure.”

The professor hoped that silence might bring the conversation to a close but could sense that the issue would come up again if he didn’t try to kill it now, and he knew his explanation didn’t really apply in Dom’s case anyway. “It goes without saying that your work is excellent. I love the ideas you come up with. The diptych you showed us last month was beautiful. Work like that sells, Dom.” An annoyed frown crossed Dom’s face and the professor realized the statement was irrelevant. “I guess that’s not what you’re worried about, is it?”

Dom shook his head slowly. “Nope.”

“Selling art is a given—you care only about carving yourself a place in history. How lucky you are to have such a problem.” He knew he shouldn’t be goading Dom, but it was hard not to poke fun at such an arrogant kid, well-founded as Dom’s ego was. Quietly he said, “David wasn’t chiselled in a day.”

Dom leaned into his hand for a moment, then stood up a little too suddenly and walked quickly toward the door. He stopped there and turned. “Sorry, professor. I, um... I appreciate the advice.”

“Take it easy, Dom. I mean it. Relax.”

Dom threw a wave over his shoulder and walked out of the studio more in control of himself. Professor Walsh walked in from the outside door at the other end. “What’s new, Evan?”

“The usual.” Johns massaged the bridge of his nose. “Golden boy wants to know why he isn’t Rembrandt yet.”

Walsh pulled a mug out of a cabinet and poured a cup of coffee. “You did say he was the most gifted student you ever saw.”

“Oh, he is, Gary, by far. But he knows that’s the case without anyone telling him, and he’s about to explode because he isn’t living up to the expectations he and everyone else have set for him. It’s starting to get me worried. I don’t really care whether he finishes his projects, but he’s been closing himself off more and more.”

“Mm. Well hell, maybe that anger will inspire him.”

“Yeah, maybe. But it’s inspiring the wrong behavior right now.” The professor was twiddling a cigarette in his hand that he wasn’t allowed to smoke in the studio. “He’s always been capable of shooting holes in other people’s work, deftly pointing out things they should have corrected or thought of, but... lately he’s become belligerent about it, insulting. He’s taking his own frustrations out on everyone in the class...”

“Bullshit.” Dom said from the side of the room, where he was sitting on a stool well outside the circle. He was staring sideways at the painting on the wall with a disgusted look on his face, shaking his head slowly. “That’s bullshit, Dave—it’s a cop-out. There’s nothing wrong with using the same idea twice, but pretending that it’s two ideas... it’s bullshit.”

The professor sighed. This routine was not productive, and it was getting tiresome.

Dave Westen, normally difficult to perturb, was perturbed. “It’s not the same idea, you dick...”

“Who the hell cares?” Eddie Carrick piped up from the opposite side of the group. “This is just Sir Dominic’s usual artsier-than-thou soap box.”

“Eddie...” Professor Johns tried to interject.

“I mean heaven forbid any of us have our own opinions about our own work,” Eddie continued. “Hey, I think ol’ Dom should just re-write our textbooks so we’ll know what to think about everything!”

“Oh, shut the *fuck* up, Carrick,” Dom snapped. “Nobody gives a flying rat’s ass about your—”

“Oh, I think you should come *shut* me the fuck up, Winters...”

The professor jumped in. “Hey, that’s enough!”

“No, seriously,” Eddie said as he hopped up from his stool and walked in front of the class. “I’d like to take a little poll—who here wants to hear more of Dom’s feedback on our work?”

The professor was getting a headache. “Eddie...”

“Well? Anyone?” Most people were looking at the floor, but no one was raising their hand. “I’m not seeing any hands here.”

Dom was looking out the window, pretending not to care, but he knew what the vote count was. He looked over at Alex, who frowned and

shrugged back at him; what difference would it make for his best friend to raise his hand? Better to ignore the whole thing.

Dom wasn't thrilled with himself as it was. He wasn't thrilled with his life. He wasn't thrilled with his or anyone else's work, but to say that he wasn't thrilled with Eddie Carrick would be to say that the ocean isn't dry. Even back when Dom's criticism was helpful and interesting (which it really had been until recently), jealous Eddie would invariably mock, challenge, heckle or otherwise irritate Dom, and for the most part the class disliked Eddie for it, which made it all the more painful when they failed to take Dom's side in the "vote."

The professor was at his wit's end. "Alright LOOK," he said as he stood up and walked to the front, looking harshly at Eddie and pointing like a spear at the stool Eddie had come from. Eddie sat. "I've had it with this childish crap. Not ten minutes into critique and already you're yelling across the room. No more petty bickering in my studio, *period*." He looked over at Dom, still staring out the window, then back at Eddie, who was glaring sideways at Dom. He took a deep breath and said, "You know what, forget it. This isn't going to work right now. Go home we'll pick this up on Wednesday."

Everyone in the middle looked at each other in confusion but didn't move. Even Dom looked slowly over at the frustrated class, then stood up and walked toward the door. "No, don't worry about it—I'm going."

"What a martyr," Eddie mumbled as Dom walked past.

Dom froze just for a moment in the doorway, clenched both fists together, then released them and walked out.

Alex jabbed him in the arm. "Hey, jack-ass, did you hear what I said? You owe me a back-flop."

Dom was absentmindedly returning art supplies to his storage bin. "Hm? Oh, damn." For Alex's sake he feigned disappointment, but clearly wasn't interested. "Yeah, okay, I'll do it this weekend."

"Nah, dude, *today*. Karyn and I are hitting the Hole after lab and you're coming with us."

"Lex, I'm really not in the mood right—"

"That's why I insist." Alex pulled Dom's shoulder to the side to face him head-on. "You need something to take your mind off of this shit, Dom. And if I have to..." He grabbed and twisted Dom's arm up into his back.

Dom grunted. "Okay, fucktard. Enough."

Alex released, pushed him away and backed toward the studio door with a smirk on his face. “4 PM sharp or I’ll tell Karyn about the bed-wetting.”

Bell’s Quarry has been abandoned longer than Cape Johns has existed, a two hundred year old eyesore turned landmark. Not quite remarkable or accessible enough to draw tourists, it had been left to grow wild (and remarkably beautiful when compared to the rest of the Cape), marked only by the battered, gray historical site placard at the base of the trail leading to the quarry’s best photo op. It was a different trail that led Dom & Company almost weekly to one of the more hidden-away areas, a stair-stepped cliff blocked at all angles by weeds and wildflowers, overlooking a circular pool of seemingly untouched blue-green water. They called it The Hole.

Alex had actually discovered this oasis with a couple of classmates while he was still an undergrad, and it had quickly become the secret clubhouse of the art department’s upper echelon, of which Dom was the de facto leader. Alex lost a rather foolish bet to Dom not long after they had joined themselves at the hip, and a back-flop into the pond was the painful result. This masochistic act had been the penalty for many subsequent bets and was always attended by at least a few friendly art school hecklers. A couple of times they had even brought large white score cards that they lifted up in unison, which made the event all the more monumental for Alex and Dom, who through their competitive nature had changed it from a foolish punishment into a test of mettle, the measure of which was how spectacularly one could abuse one’s body. The first flop was from a mere ten feet up, but each jump had quickly given way to the next highest platform until both contestants became limited by the tallest perch available, roughly thirty feet over the water.

“Boy, does that water look c-c-c-cold,” Alex said with his arms folded across his chest in a fake shiver, throwing a sideways glance at Dom. “I sure am glad I don’t have to test it ass-first.”

Karyn laughed. “This my favorite part, the anticipation. Prolonging the inevitable SMACK,” she said as she slapped Dom with both hands hard on the back, “into the icy depths of Arctic Cape Johns.”

Dom was unfazed. “Hell, I’d be back-flopping this shit whether I owed you a flop or not. That water’s gonna be soft as a bunny rabbit.”

“As if,” Alex said. “Get to it, Mister Tough as Nails.”

Dom kicked off his flops and doffed his t-shirt, the absence of which emphasized the dried paint and plaster on his forearms. He climbed the precarious hand-holds that led to the precipice. The sun was blazing. He could feel sweat beading on his skin. The water really was going to feel

good, and in fact Dom felt great for the first time in weeks, far away from his art life, surrounded by his best friends at the least industrial spot in all of Cape Johns. He breathed deeply, taking it all in.

“Jump, dickhead!” Alex yelled.

Dom looked down at the water and dug his toes into the rocky edge. In a maneuver he had practiced almost a dozen times now, he squatted as low as he could, reached his hands high behind him (flicking a middle finger in Alex’s direction), leaned forward and jumped as high as he could into the air, arms stretching forward as though he was a super-hero. Dom always wished he could stretch this moment into slow-motion, the incomprehensibly short spot at the dive’s apex where he really was flying through the air, high above his ultimate destination. The entire process was an exhilarating joy—straightening out like a board, leaning slowly into the dive, letting the arms float outward of their own accord to form a cross with the slowly rotating body as the head comes up from the bottom to face the sun. The last leg of the journey downward, a combination of the serene beauty of the clear afternoon sky and the furious buffeting of wind through the hair and past the ears, would have been equally enjoyable were it not for the terrible apprehension of contact with the water.

This apprehension seemed to grow with each such jump because contact with the water was so excruciatingly shocking and painful enough that it made one completely forget the joy that preceded it. Only the soft comfort of the cool water underneath could soothe the bruised skin and immediate headache caused by the impact. Dom and Alex agreed that passing out at this point would be ideal, but the chaotic rush of water never allowed for that possibility. Although an outside viewer would never know it, screaming into the water after the impact was as inevitable as blinking during a sneeze.

Dom had outdone himself. His landing was picture-perfect, and the pop of his back striking the water was so loud that Karyn jumped in spite of herself. It was so spectacular, in fact, that everyone momentarily forgot that it was funny, involuntarily worried about Dom’s welfare. Adding to this concern was the delay before he emerged—Dom seemed to stay below the surface longer each time he made these jumps, usually because he had grown more and more accustomed to the shock and was determined not to let it get the best of him, but this time because he was further enjoying the distraction that the sensations of nature provided.

He finally surfaced, looked up at the cheering crowd and yelled at the top of his lungs, “WINTERS ELEVEN, QUARRY ZERO!”

The group was still laughing when Dom reached the platform again. A carelessly-rolled joint was handed to him. Though the collision was more painful than it had ever been, Dom felt great. The back-flop had further wrested him from the torment that had been mounting in his soul for weeks.

“Nice, very nice,” said Mike Edmond, a former roommate of Dom’s.

Karyn exhaled smoke and said, “Nice hell, that was the best one yet,” she said with raised eyebrows.

“Not the funniest, though,” Deirdre said from the top of the cliff. She had been on her high school’s diving team and was the only one among them who could actually make a work of art out of these jumps. “Alex’s mangled sideways flop was a fucking riot. I still can’t believe you’re not deaf in that ear.”

“Deaf-schmeaf, hearing is overrated,” Alex scoffed. “You just wait until I lose another bet and I do the next jump left-handed.”

“Hardy har har,” Dom said as he grabbed Alex from behind in a bear-lock. Alex was struggling to free himself when a new voice emanated from the trail. It was the voice of Eddie Carrick.

“Nice move, genius,” he said. “Who the hell taught you to dive, a crash test dummy?” He was joined by a couple of thoroughly pierced girls who Dom didn’t recognize, the three of them clearly dressed to make themselves at home in the water.

All of Dom’s troubles suddenly returned with a vengeance. It was infuriating enough that Eddie was here at all—he had been carefully left in the dark about the Hole—and the fact that he was so boldly prodding Dom about what he mistakenly thought was a botched dive was just icing on the cake.

No one in Dom’s camp was sure what to say, so shocked they were to see Eddie there on the cliff. Finally Karyn spoke up. “He did it on purpose, you moron.”

Eddie laughed as he replied, “Oh, I’m so sure. I know lots of people who like to enter the water sideways.” He dropped his towel and pulled one of his shoes off. Everyone else was still staring in disbelief. They had been using this spot exclusively for so long that they sincerely felt that it belonged to them.

Dom’s rage was growing with each passing moment. He hated every inch of Eddie Carrick and he could barely contain his fury enough to calmly say, “You are not welcome here.”

Eddie had been leaning over to reach his other shoe, but now he paused, straightened up slowly and said through narrowed eyes, “I don’t give a shit where I’m welcome, asswipe.”

Dom’s body was tensed all over. His arms were hanging at his sides and he was clenching and unclenching his fists. Eddie’s companions stopped making themselves comfortable and stared alternately at Dom and Eddie.

Alex also disliked Eddie, but not as much as Dom did, and besides that he was as non-confrontational as they come. Sensing that Dom was about to lose his cool, he attempted to intervene. “Eddie, just go find some other spot, alright?”

“Fuck you, Alex, it’s a free country,” Eddie replied without taking his eyes off Dom. He was cocky enough in school that he knew he couldn’t give in to Dom’s demands, but he also knew that Dom meant business and Eddie honestly did not want to fight—Dom had a distinct height advantage, lanky as he was. Dom sensed this and was all the more eager to free his anger on Eddie’s person. The punctured girls seemed uneasy about the whole situation and clearly wanted to move on.

“Hey, let’s go somewhere else,” one of them said quietly to Eddie.

“This is *not* Mount Saint Dominic, goddamn it!” Eddie yelled as he batted her outstretched hand away. “These assholes do not own the fucking quarry!”

Dom took a slow step forward, ready to leap like a cat at Eddie. “You’ve got one more chance, Carrick. Get out of my sight.”

Eddie paused, tensing himself, unable to think through the adrenaline that was coursing through him. Through clenched teeth he said, “Go... fuck... yourself.”

Dom had never thrown a real punch in his life, and from the lack of a reaction and the unmistakable crunch of bone in his nose it sounded like Eddie had never received one. It hurt both of them like hell, but the pain only fueled Dom’s rage. His next punch went through Eddie’s flailing arms and landed in the side of his throat. Coughing and moaning, he dove diagonally past Dom, toward the edge of the cliff. Dom was too blinded with anger to consider the danger and was moving too determinedly for Alex or Mike’s desperate attempts to stop him. He landed one more punch into Eddie’s stomach before Eddie rolled sideways off the cliff. Karyn and one of the unknown girls shrieked. Dom’s momentum landed him on the ground with his head looking over the edge. Alex and Mike fell in beside him and the three of them watched as Eddie, curled into a fetal position

with blood streaming down his face and neck, toppled end over end and landed like a rag doll in the water.

Deirdre cried, “Oh my god,” just before diving like a spear into the water to Eddie’s right. Alex quickly followed, aiming behind and to the left of Eddie. They could only just be seen converging on him through the rippling water before the three of them emerged, Alex and Deirdre kicking and paddling furiously for the bank.

“Is he breathing?!” Mike yelled down at them. Their lack of an answer and rushed movements indicated that he wasn’t, and Mike darted down the side path that led to the bottom while pulling a cell phone out of his pocket, mumbling, “shit, shit, shit...”

Karyn was watching the whole scene from the edge with bated breath. She was a strong person, brimming with kindness and character, but not the most reliable in emergent situations. She was trying to snap out of her shock as she looked over and realized that Dom had not moved since Eddie went over. “Dom?”

His mind was having a hard time registering what had just happened, and what was happening now. He couldn’t seem to bring himself to focus, the past sixty seconds were a total blank.

Karyn tried again. “Dom, are you okay? Dom?” She looked down at the commotion below. Alex and Deirdre had pulled him onto the bank and were trying to gently revive him, but his eyes were open and he seemed to be gathering his wits. Mike was talking on his phone beside them, pacing back and forth.

“Yes... yeah... NO, no, no, it’s not like attempted murder or anything—they just got in a fist fight.” Mike was doing his best to paint a rosy picture on the situation now that Eddie was evidently going to be okay. “No, he didn’t really... he didn’t really push him off the cliff, not on purpose. He was just angry and they were fighting and the other guy *fell* off the cliff.”

“Eddie? Can you hear me?” Deirdre was patting him gently on the cheek.

Eddie was staring skyward with his blood-tinged mouth hanging open. His nose was still bleeding, but not profusely. “Yeah,” he said quietly. “Yeah.”

“How do you feel, Eddie?” Alex said and held up three fingers. “How many fingers am I holding up?”

Eddie looked down at the hand and back at Alex. “Twenty-two,” he answered. Alex and Deirdre looked at each other skeptically and Eddie grinned. “Ask a stupid question...” He seemed to be turning back into Eddie again.

Alex pursed his lips and sat back on a rock. “I think he’ll be alright.”

Up at the top, Karyn was still trying to bring Dom back to earth. His face was hanging over the edge but didn’t appear to be focused on the scene below. “Dom, I think he’s okay. Dom.”

He was locked in place. Nothing was going in or out. Nothing was happening inside. He couldn’t seem to gather enough willpower to make himself move or speak. Karyn reached out and stroked his arm and continued to speak to him to no avail. After a couple of minutes she yelled down to the bottom, “Alex, I think something’s wrong with Dom!”

Eddie, who was now sitting up, was affronted. “Something’s wrong with Dom? The guy who just kicked Eddie off a cliff?”

“Shut up Eddie,” Alex said, then yelled to Karyn, “What do you mean?”

“Well,” she was unsure of her words. “He, ah... he’s just not... doing anything. He seems frozen.”

“Okay, we’ll come up.” He turned back to Eddie. “Alright, casualty, let’s see if you can stand.” He and Dierdre helped him to his feet. He was a little unstable, but strong enough to walk with their support. He seemed to lean a bit unnecessarily on Dierdre’s shoulder. She either didn’t notice or wasn’t bothered enough to object.

Alex and Karyn had finally managed to coerce Dom into an upright position by the time police and paramedics arrived, but he was still staring into nothingness and hadn’t spoken a word. The other two girls were gone—either they cared enough to go get help or they didn’t want to be around when the authorities came to find out what had happened. The medics insisted on checking Dom over before any attempt at questioning was made. Eddie insisted on not being checked over or questioned at all.

He seemed to be arguing with the officer in charge. “I know what happened, asshole.” He was fairly calm, but clearly getting pissed off. “I was there, remember?”

“Hey, don’t get *smart* with me, you little shit,” the officer snapped. “I’m trying to tell you what your options are here. This guy could have killed you and you’re just going to let him slide?”

“That’s what I said, now piss off.” Eddie walked over to his bag and started gathering his things together. The officer shook his head and indicated to the other two cops that they could leave. Since no charges were going to be filed he seemed content to give up on any further investigation. If the victim wouldn’t lay any blame, it wasn’t his problem.

Alex watched all of this while Karyn stroked Dom's non-fighting hand. Eddie looked over at Dom with a face of stone, then turned his glance at Alex for a few seconds before walking away.

The medic couldn't find anything physically wrong with Dom other than a couple of light bruises. "I think he'll be okay," he said to Karyn. "But we should take him in anyway and keep an eye on him until he snaps out of this."

"No," Dom said, still otherwise catatonic.

Everyone looked at him in surprise. "What?" Karyn said. "Dom, are you okay?" No answer. "Dom, we need to make sure you're okay."

"No," Dom said again as he pulled his feet beneath him and stood up. He paused for a moment as if to make sure standing was feasible, then started walking down the exit trail, ignoring his bag and clothes.

"Dom!" Karyn yelled after him and they all followed. Dom walked straight down the trail and around Alex's car, opened the door and sat down in the passenger seat, still staring straight ahead with his mouth slightly open.

Everyone looked at each other, not sure what to do. The medic caught up and said to Karyn, "Look, he's probably going to be okay—he's just suffering from a little bit of shock right now. I think he should probably come with us, but if he's alert enough to deny our help, there's nothing we can do." He pulled out his wallet and held a card out for Karyn. "I suggest you call the hospital after you get him home, make a doctor appointment, maybe setup a few therapy sessions."

Karyn took the card. She was resigned to her confusion, as were they all. "Okay, thanks." The other medic had packed up already and the two of them drove away.

Alex spoke up. "Okay. Well, I'll drive him home and stay with him for awhile, see if he snaps out of it. Dierdre, can you drop Mike off?"

Dierdre, who had never witnessed the Dom/Eddie rivalry firsthand, seemed less confused than annoyed. "Alex, what the hell was that all about? Was it really that big a deal that Eddie found out about the Hole?"

Alex was a little surprised by the question. He opened his mouth, paused, and looked over at Dom. "Well... Dierdre, you have to understand that Eddie is constantly badgering Dom just because he's jealous—"

"And that justifies pushing him off a *cliff*?" she spat back, hands on hips. Now that the situation had levelled off and she had time to consider Dom's actions she was starting to get pissed. "No, Alex, it doesn't fucking work that way. You don't..." She leaned over to yell through the car window at Dom. "YOU don't get to kill someone just because he's an asshole, Dom, I

don't care how much you fucking hate him." She stood back up and looked around at the rest. "Is no one going to back me up on this?"

The others seemed conflicted. They were all in Dom's painting class and knew all too well where Dom's rage came from, but Dierdre had a point. They looked confusedly at each other and then over at Dom, who now seemed even more vacantly distressed than he was before.

"Selfish bullshit," Dierdre said to herself as she turned and walked to her car without inviting Mike to get in with her. She drove away quickly.

They stood in silence for a few moments, then Karyn spoke up, "Okay, I'll drop Mike off and then join you at Dom's."

"Right," Alex said, and they all departed, still dazed.

*You don't get to kill someone just because he's an asshole, Dom. He couldn't push those words out of his mind. Over and over the awful scene played out in his head. Most of it was a blur; he had been so charged with adrenaline that the details were hard to pick out. The only aspect that was crystal clear was the final rage-induced charge that nearly made a violent murderer of Dominic Winters. What are you doing? His right foot had slipped in the sand, but the loss of balance was overcome by the adrenaline that was coursing through him. How could you do something like that? The air blowing past his ears was audible, so great was his momentum. Weren't you going to be world-famous? The last step was boosted by a root that happened to swell just below his left foot, shooting him forward. Weren't you on the edge of greatness? Or were you just going to burn with creative frustration until you destroyed something? Eddie was so covered with sweat that Dom got virtually no grip when he grabbed at the torso. You don't get to kill someone just because he's an asshole. The only unclear memory was the intent—Dom just wasn't sure what he had meant to do. You don't get to kill someone just because you can't quench your massive desire to be an artistic legend.*

"Dom, I'm going to pull in here and get some gas, okay?" Dom's stare remained unchanged, and Alex guessed that the stare would remain in place until he got back. He put \$7 into the tank (all he had on him) and went inside to pay. Although the line inside was unusually long for a Friday afternoon, Alex was inside for less than five minutes, so it was that much more surprising that Dom's seat was empty when Alex got back to the car.

"DOM!" He looked around in every direction he could guess that Dom might have wandered off, but saw nothing.

Dom's mental shock had faded enough to allow for a combination of rational thought and irrational depression. Still donning only trunks, sandals and a paint-spattered t-shirt, he had wandered onto one of the more blue-collar strips in town and into perhaps the most blue-collar of bars available.

*You're no better an artist than the asshole you nearly killed. You think you're a sleeping legend just because you have a knack for, what, arranging things? Rendering? Real artists ship. Real artists triumph. You've painted, sculpted and drawn your fingers to the bone for twenty years. If inspiration was going to strike it would have struck by now. You're not great and you never will be. You're just a selfish, arrogant hack.*

In front of Dom sat his sixth shot of the cheapest whiskey in the house. His eyes had seldom moved from the "L.H. ♥'s A.J." inscription on the wood in front of him. A cheesy country ballad played on the jukebox. Pool table cracks and the voices of random yokels checkered the air. A broken bottle and some shouting preceded a near-scuffle toward the back. Dom was oblivious to it all—haunting images and belligerent voices dominating his concentration—until an unnecessarily loud comment nearby yanked him back to reality.

"...Yeah boy, I wish I was better'n everybody else," said a charismatic voice five seats to Dom's left. The voice was facing the bartender, who didn't seem inclined to encourage the conversation. A second voice one more seat over was happy to.

"I tell you what," said a high-pitched Southern voice, "we simple folk sure are lucky them genius kids is around." The gristled 50-year-old was rolling a cigarette to replace the fading butt hanging from his lower lip. "I just don't know what I'd do if they wasn't here to tell us low-class shitheads what buildings not to tear down and where we can smoke our cancer sticks."

Dom was staring alternately at the inscription and the floor when he realized that it was his Birkenstocks that had given him away. No townie would be caught dead in a brand-name sandal of any kind. He didn't dare look over to see what he was up against or give them a cue to badger him further. That would be pointless anyway; any bar patron who had the balls to pick fights with strangers would know better than to pick one that they might lose. Dom was tall, but far from burly.

The bartender, a burly but sedate man with dark hair and a gray horseshoe moustache, had walked over casually to stand in front of Dom, staring at the basketball game playing on a blurry TV in the corner while

wiping out a couple of mugs. Quietly he said, “Son, I think it would be best if you’d move on.”

Dom looked slowly up at him, but the bartender kept his eyes on the tube. Dom pulled out his wallet, looked through his bills and realized he was short. “Um...”

The bartender reached over and yanked the wad out of Dom’s hand and tossed it in the tip jar, then turned back to the game. “Go.”

Dom stood up and walked toward the door as unassumedly as he could. On any other night he might have had a hard time walking in a straight line, but the adrenaline coursing through his veins steadied his steps.

“Whattsa matter, boy?” the first voice called after him. “You too good for us grunts? How about if I shine them fancy sandals? Maybe I’ll even throw in a blow-job, how ’bout that?” The last thing Dom heard was the second voice cackling with laughter.

It was a bit chilly outside for beach attire, the air and streets now becoming coated with the evening mist. Dom’s shock had mostly been replaced with alcohol by now, but his depression had done nothing but increase since Eddie’s feet left the cliff’s edge. He walked in a forlorn stupor in the direction of his apartment, having spent his cab fare on whiskey (not that cabs would bother with a neighborhood like this at such a late hour). Only the sound of Dom’s steps filled the air.

He probably wouldn’t have been any less helpless had he been alert and sober. A 2x4 to the back of the head may as well have been a lead pipe for the effect that it had on Dom’s skull. He was only dimly aware of falling to the wet ground, but his convulsing body ensured that he was aware of the beating he was being given.

It didn’t last long, just enough for him to learn whatever lesson he was supposed to be receiving. Intense pain coursed through his trunk. Dom’s consciousness fell at pace with his breathing. In the distance he could have sworn he heard Eddie’s voice.

Light. A bright, white light changed to flashing blue. “Hey. Buddy.” The sound of a car engine nearby. “HEY.” Footsteps, then a firm poke in his ribs. “You conscious?” Dom’s aching eyes opened slightly. He tasted blood in his mouth. “You need to get up, kid.”

Dom still wasn’t sure what was going on. He painfully lifted his head and craned his neck to look up at a burly cop holding a night stick. “Up,” the man repeated. It took all of Dom’s strength and endurance to force himself into a kneeling position. He coughed some of the blood out of his mouth and onto the sidewalk underneath him. His face and shirt were wet.

“What’s... going on?” he asked. He was trying to kick his brain into gear, but the searing pain and blinding lights weren’t helping.

“You are, get moving,” the officer spat back, then gave Dom another prod in the back. “There’s a shelter two blocks that way.” He pointed down the street in the direction opposite Dom’s original course.

Dom was starting to remember who he was, though he was still unclear why a policeman was telling him to go to a homeless shelter. “I don’t... I don’t need a shelter, my apartment is—”

“You have any ID?” the man interrupted. Dom was surprised to discover that he did in fact have a wallet (more evidence that he hadn’t been randomly mugged). He started to pull out his driver’s license before it dawned on him that his school ID would better represent him at that moment. He handed it to the cop, whose first response was, “Where did you get this?”

Dom didn’t understand the question. “What do you mean? At school.”

The officer shined his light into Dom’s face, then back at the ID. “What the hell are you doing out here, this late at night? What happened to your face?”

Dom didn’t have a short answer for this and didn’t care to recite the whole story, which would undoubtedly cause a barrage of time-wasting paperwork. “I just... I don’t know, I just ended up down here.”

A pause. “And?”

“Oh.” The bruises and blood. “I got into a... little scuffle with a friend of mine.”

“A friend did this?” The cop was annoyed with the situation—it would have made things so much easier if Dom was just a transient.

“Yeah. Look, it’s over and done with, no big deal. Can I just be on my way?” Dom was now lucid enough to have some idea of his rights.

The cop paused again and looked up and down the street. “I don’t want to see you down here again, Misterrr...” He looked down at the card. “Winters. This is a rough spot. People in this area don’t care for university students.” Those people apparently included this policeman.

It was almost over, so Dom regained an obedient tone. “I know. I won’t be back.”

The cop handed the ID back and said, “Go straight home and clean yourself up.”

Dom turned and winced as he took his first steps. He suspected that at least one rib was cracked. Pain and coldness kept his arms crossed over

his abdomen. Hunched over and limping, he made his way toward home. Either from necessity or boredom, the belligerent voices returned...

*Does it matter who did it? You deserved a beating, not for what you did to Eddie but for why. You didn't attack him, you attacked yourself, you attacked your own ineptitude. Maybe it isn't even your fault—maybe your parents coddled your talent too much, maybe there were just too many cooks.*

*It's too late to matter now.*

His wallet had made it into Alex's car, but Dom's keys had been dropped into his backpack when they left for the Hole, and that backpack was in Karyn's car. Dom did not live in a nice building, and to ask one of his neighbors to let him in at 3 AM would mean risking more abuse. He decided to climb the fire escape and wait for morning, which was an unusually difficult task in such a damaged state.

After several struggling minutes he finally hefted himself up onto the platform and waited for his breath and renewed pain to die down. Thanks to the climb he was warm again for the moment, but it occurred to him that sleeping outside in shorts and a t-shirt might leave him in much worse condition than he was already in. He wasn't sure he cared.

*Does it matter if you live through this? Is there anything left to live for? You don't know how to live a normal life, a life that isn't dominated by art, a life that doesn't lead to fame, to an entire chapter in the annals of art history. You've never been normal and you never will be.*

He lifted his eyes for a moment and looked around him. The dim blues and grays left by the moonlight created a futuristic, geometric vortex inside the corridor. Instinctively he considered the scene from an artistic viewpoint. He couldn't help it.

*You can't do it. You won't ever be able to turn that off. You'll never be able to forget that you failed to achieve those dreams that you set for yourself when you were a prodigious little brat.*

The cold was creeping in quickly. The difficult trek and subsequent climb had sustained him, but sitting still would not. He hadn't yet decided if he wanted to live through the night, but he was fairly certain he didn't want to die by pneumonia. It occurred to Dom that no one in this building would be surprised or concerned by a window breaking, but how to break it was a problem—he didn't have anything on him that could do it. The only object on the fire escape was a cheap plastic planter that had been left by the previous tenants, and which probably wouldn't leave a bruise if you smacked someone upside the head with it. There were several large rocks bordering the neighbor's garden on the ground below, but Dom wasn't sure

he could get those up onto the platform, and he cringed at the thought of climbing up again. He would have to do it bare-handed.

He gave the process some thought. While he knew that punching through glass was generally a stupid thing to do, he felt like he could rapidly strike the pane and yank his hand back without sustaining any serious cuts. Still, he decided that wrapping his hand in cloth would be wise, so with some difficulty he pulled off his tattered t-shirt.

The effort didn't go quite as well as expected—the larger shards that formed at the top dropped down into his fist before he pulled back, giving him a couple of ugly stings—but the window was gone. He looked around and listened for a few seconds, but as he suspected, no lights came on, no one in the vicinity tried to investigate. He flicked a few of the remaining shards out of the window frame and carefully climbed through. For a moment he stood still, surveying the room, considering the state of his life. Dom's apartment, which he had deliberately left bare and ragged, did nothing to improve his morale. *What do I do now?* The answering machine blinked in the corner, there were three messages. *Why bother?* Dom's face strained in anguish as a chilly sadness coursed through him. By now he was too wired and pain-riddled to sleep, and again the demons permeated his thoughts. *It's over. You are over.* Tears ran down his cheeks. His eyes glanced past the remnants of art projects in various states of completion—three old landscapes leaned against the wall, faded jeans covered a welded-steel bust sitting in the corner, drawings of all sorts lay bound in a makeshift cardboard folder on the table... *Wasted effort. Pointless wastes of energy, all of them.* He sank to the floor and wepted into his hands. Though he wasn't sure he could bring himself to make it happen, Dom wanted to die.

He considered his options. Not having seriously considered suicide before, Dom didn't know off-hand which methods were at his disposal. Never had any reason to own a gun. Didn't own a straight razor, and wasn't sure he could cut far enough into a wrist with any of his dull kitchen knives before he passed out from the pain. Was surprised to realize there was no rope or thick cord in the apartment. Didn't think there was anything lethal in the medicine cabinet. Some other poison, perhaps? There was bleach and detergent in the closet, but Dom decided that wasn't a smart choice—the pain would be excruciating and he couldn't be sure it would actually kill him.

His eyes continued to scan the room for a few moments, then he stopped and looked down. Of course. The glass. He remembered a scene in a movie where someone died quickly and silently from a quick dagger slice across the neck. That would do nicely. He picked up one of the longer shards,

grasped it firmly and slowly brought it up to his neck, still not certain of his will. His entire body was shaking. Sweat ran down his forehead, and blood was starting to well up at the base of his palm. His breathing was short, his mind was racing, and Dom was wishing he had Jack Kevorkian by his side, when a new thought came to him. An epiphany.



It was a brisk Monday morning, three weeks after “the incident.” Fall had settled in, and the Atlantic winds were doing their best to sweep the browning leaves of Edmund-Jones Park toward the eastern edge, where they piled against the stone base of an iron fence. The early fog and dew were fighting a losing battle with the wind and a determined sunrise. Uncountable flocks in myriad formations traveled south across a piercing yellow horizon. None of this was being recorded in the starched white pages of a Dom Winters sketch book.

Professor Johns sauntered into the studio with a notepad in one hand and a steaming mug of coffee in the other. A few of the students were touching up or hanging their pieces, but Alex and Karyn were standing in the corner talking, their paintings still standing against the wall (Karyn’s was unfinished). Johns walked over. “Hey guys. Where on earth is God’s gift to art? He’s starting to press his luck with these absences.” Eddie had been gone as long, but no one was overly concerned about that.

They both looked distressed, Karyn more than Alex. She looked out the window, lost in thought, while Alex answered, “Uh... well, he’s at his apartment.”

A pause ensued, as if Alex hoped that would be enough of an explanation, but Johns smiled and said, “And... what? Is he sick?”

Alex looked at Karyn and then back at Johns. “We... don’t know. He’s being really cryptic, not really acknowledging... anything. I’ve been to his place several times and all I can get is a couple of words out of him. He won’t open the door.”

Johns was no longer smiling. “Drugs?”

Alex took a deep breath and said, “Normally I’d say no way, but we just have no idea, Evan. No idea at all, except that depression is probably part of it. I assume you heard about the accident.”

“Of course,” Johns said, and looked down. “Everyone did. I assume that was a shock to Dom.”

Karyn finally chimed in. “You could say that. He was catatonic for about twenty minutes after it happened. I couldn’t get him...” She brushed a tear away. “I couldn’t get him to say anything until the medics tried to take him away. Even then he would just stare into space and talk to nobody in particular, like he was lobotomized or something.”

“And he’s been exactly like that ever since,” Alex said. “I haven’t been able to get a real conversation out of him, and... well, you know as much as we do at this point.”

Johns pursed his lips. “Right. Okay, we’re going over there—all of us. Either he needs our help or he owes us an explanation.”

Dom’s apartment building neatly fit the starving artist mold: all function and no form, not a redeeming trait other than the open spaces it afforded its occupants. Not as gruff-looking as Dom and therefore less intimidating, Alex never quite felt comfortable in this down-trodden neighborhood that was home to odd-job-seekers, beggars, addicts and the occasional thug. Johns was a native, however, and his casual stride made it clear to anyone watching that he felt as safe here as anywhere. Karyn stuck close to him. Alex kept his head down and led the way into the building.

Dom’s loft was at the back of the second floor. Two dingy brass deadbolts secured the heavy door, and the scratches and chips revealing multiple repaintings illustrated the need for them. Johns knocked firmly below the peep hole and they waited several seconds in silence.

He knocked again. “Dom? You there?” Another short wait, and then a third series of knocks. “Dom, it’s Evan. Please open the door.” Still no response. “Dom, we’re not going to leave. We want to know what’s going on.” Nothing.

“Maybe he actually went out,” Alex finally said.

Johns glanced sideways at him. “I don’t think you actually believe that.” He looked at Karyn, who shook her head slowly in agreement. “From what you guys told me, he’s making no effort to face the world voluntarily.”

Again he turned to the door and knocked, a bit more firmly, waited a few seconds and knocked again, then was about to knock a third time when they heard a faint clatter inside. “Come on, Dom,” Karyn yelled. “Open the damn door!” She looked a bit surprised after she said it. Frustration was getting to her.

Footsteps approached. The locks were quickly thrown open and the door swung a few inches inward to reveal a sweaty Dom, slightly out of breath and even more dishevelled than usual, with a healing black eye and

two other bruises besides. He stared at them for a few seconds and said without emotion, “What?”

Alex and Karyn were mostly taken aback, but Johns only showed concern. “How are you, Dom?” he asked quietly.

The answer was immediate and still emotionless: “Fine.” Quick glances again at the other two, then finally a bit of surprise mixed with irritation. “I’m *fine*.”

He started to close the door on them, but Johns quickly reached out and pushed it open again. “Whoa, whoa. Dom, come on. Do you really think we’d show up just to hear you say you’re fine and then leave? You don’t look fine at all. Tell us what’s going on with you.”

Dom stared evenly at Johns for several seconds. He seemed to be having difficulty caring about the current situation. “I’m working.”

John’s eyebrows raised slowly. “Working!” He squinted his eyes in a skeptical look. “Really?”

“Yeah. Really.” Still staring.

A long pause. Johns was trying, as he tended to do, to let his student snap out of his impolite silence and start communicating, but Dom was the most hard-headed of students, and he wasn’t budging. “Then... may we see what you’re working on?”

Dom’s face quickly snapped from cool neutrality to surprised indignation, as though he hadn’t even considered such a ridiculous option. Clearly his mind was still not fully engaged in the situation.

He stared like this a moment longer, then glanced at each of them in turn a couple of times, as though he were considering his options. Finally he raised his arm, limply pointed at Alex and said, “You,” as though they had never met. He stepped back and pulled the door open a few more inches. Alex threw a bewildered glance at the other two and stepped gingerly inside. The door shut firmly behind him and one of the locks snapped shut.

It’s the nature of artists not to care one whit about the neatness of their living space. If they were capable of keeping their rooms clean then they’d probably be just as happy in graphic design or architecture, where they would be more likely to get paid. Dom was nothing special in this vein, he was as messy as the next art geek, but the current state of his loft broke new ground in the world of slovenliness. The motif appeared to be “ode to the picked-at take-out dinner.” Chow mein containers, pizza boxes, burger wrappers, Coke cans and beer bottles had been crammed into every available corner after the overflowing garbage can had supported its last food remnant. The flies were so pleased.

Whatever surfaces weren't covered by that mess were used to support sketches, hundreds of them. Some of these were thrown to the floor, torn asunder where they met with walking paths. Some (assumedly these were sketches) were in wads near the garbage heap. Many were tacked up on top of one another, hanging from walls, each sketch more detailed and carefully rendered than the one before it. All of them depicted what looked to Alex like a chair that was bolstered with some sort of apparatus behind, underneath, above or around it. All of the more developed images featured a large spring.

Alex was so mesmerized by the food and sketch parade that he hadn't noticed a new array of heavy power tools sitting on the workbench in the back. "When did you get all of those?"

"Hm? Uh... a few days ago. Mail order." Dom was focused on the spring apparatus of one of the larger sketches.

Also thus far unnoticed, partly because it was covered in the same dingy gray canvas that all of Dom's furniture (to use the term loosely) was usually covered in, was a fairly large object in the middle of the room. It was evident from the shape that this was a real-life version of what had been so dilligently mastered on paper. Dom finally took his eyes off one of the sketches long enough to see that Alex had noticed the object. He walked over to it and reached his hand toward the cover but stopped short of pulling it off.

"Um..." His hand dropped back to his side. "So I guess I've been... kind of gone for awhile," he said, now more focused and able to carry on a normal conversation. Alex smiled slightly and nodded. Dom considered his words for a moment. "I... went down a dark road there, after the accident at the Hole. Things were... things were bad. In my mind. I just... between school, and art, and Eddie... I couldn't cope." He was staring at the canvas, almost mumbling. "Somebody kicked the shit out of me, outside a bar. I couldn't think straight. I was in a lot of pain. I, um... I couldn't cope."

Alex was listening intently. Not a sound could be heard between Dom's strained words. Dom seemed now to at least be focused on the story he was telling.

"Well, it's kind of hard to talk about." He reached out again and grabbed a handful of canvas. "Maybe this will fill in the blanks." The corner of his mouth twisted into a slight grin as he carefully pulled back the cover and dropped it on the floor.

Alex never had the mastery of mechanics that came easily to Dom, so it took a few minutes of staring at the oddly-shaped chair in front of him to connect the dots. Its wooden back was a wide, flat slab interrupted at the center by a large circular hole, and hanging diagonally downward from

either side were two flat planks that would seem to support nothing. But the heavy hinge joining the back and seat made it clear that these appendages would in fact support arms once the occupant leaned backward, where...

A pair of narrow, sharpened metal triangles had been welded together to form a single upward-pointing spike. A tall, coiled spring that enclosed the spike was anchored at its top to a horizontal board that resembled the chair back, the board offering a wide hole to the spike/spring apparatus, in just the same spot as the hole in the chair back. Alex mentally pushed the back of the chair down onto the horizontal board and realized what was supposed to happen next. His eyes widened and his jaw went slack.

Uneasily, he spoke. "Dom..." Eventually he took his eyes off of the chair to look at its creator, who was grinning and eyeing the object with a mix of lust and pride that matched Alex's fright and confusion.

"You know what it is, right?" Dom said without taking his eyes away from it.

Alex said quietly, "I know what it looks like, Dom."

"It *is* what it looks like," Dom said, his grin widening. He glanced up and did a double-take at the look on Alex's face and said, "Oh, I'm not going to *use* it!"

"You're not?"

The grin returned, this time mockingly, "No, no—it's just a piece, Alex!" Alex didn't look convinced. "Oh, well... sure, the..." His grin faded and he looked down. "...inspiration for it was real enough." He reached up and scratched his forehead. "I couldn't cope with it, you know? I didn't... I was..."

He was staring away, into space. "Well, that's..." He looked tired and distraught. "That's what it took, Alex. That's what it finally took. To find the inspiration."

Tears were welling in his eyes as he finally looked up and smiled slightly. "I found it, Lex. I found it."

## P E A K S

“Jesus Christ.”

Reactions around the room varied from disgust to amusement, but were dominated by uneasiness and fear. Dom could barely contain his giddiness. *The Conclusion* sat on a clean white slab at the center of its own large gallery space, separated from the crowd by black felt ropes.

“The thing that I love the most about this piece is that you don’t have to explain the concept to anyone, whether they’re in the art industry or not. Even if they can’t describe in words what the core concept is or why it works, it visibly affects them.” Dom radiated with an even mixture of excitement and arrogance. “If you sit on that bench and look at the expressions of people who walk in, you can tell that it disturbs most of them, and yet they can’t *not* look at it—the danger is too captivating.”

The reporter raised his eyebrows. “If I didn’t know any better I’d swear you’re feeding off of their fear.”

“Oh, not as such. I just enjoy the power of the reaction. That’s what art is all about—drawing emotion out of people, forcing them to feel something. This is not a Norman Rockwell sculpture, Chris. The chair is a dark, deadly thing, and only because it actually works.”

“You’ve tested it, then?”

Dom closed his eyes and shook his head in an arrogant you-silly-underling expression. “Never. It just isn’t necessary—the mechanism is too simple not to work. I feel like it would degrade the impact of the thing to actually test it. The fact that the hammer has never been thrown adds to the intrigue.”

Alex had been lingering nearby, but decided to wander outside for some fresh air. He had voluntarily accepted an unofficial position as Dom’s assistant, partly because he wanted to help Dom reach stardom as fluidly as possible, but also because the cliff incident and resulting events had left him with an uneasy feeling about Dom’s emotional stability.

Alex pulled out a cigarette and hung it on his lips, unlit. He had been doing a good job kicking the habit, but he still felt the need to go through the motions. He had some time to kill, so he bought a paper from the USA Today machine. There were two *Conclusion* mentions inside: a short second-page story about a mother-driven protest group in some Wisconsin suburb and an editorial cartoon in the opinion section wherein a disgruntled wife replaced her husband’s recliner with a *Conclusion*-style chair.

The chair was the current “big thing” in the public eye at that point and all sorts of media were referencing it in one way or another—point/counterpoint talk shows debated Dom’s ethics and purpose, bloggers and other web denizens analyzed the apparatus itself from every conceivable angle, investigative journalists gathered what data they could about Dom’s past (as well as the outbursts and episodes that preceded the chair’s unveiling by just a few months), and then of course there were the comedians...

“Ladies and gentleman, my next guest is a world-famous artist and the creator of the controversial ‘suicide chair.’ He recently graced the cover of Time Magazine. Please welcome Dominic Winters!”

Dominic walked out from the stage-left curtain in what had become his standard uniform: black slacks, black blazer, black button-up shirt with pastel buttons. With only some gel and a few adjustments, his hair had conveniently fallen into the unkempt style currently worn by the trendiest male celebs. He also wore his now standard chipper/confident grin and walk. One of the rare Letterman guests who topped the host in height, he accommodatingly bowed a bit as he shook Dave’s hand before sitting down.

“So Dom... you go by Dom, right?”

Dom nodded his head. “Yes, only my artwork calls me Dominic.”

“Right.” Dave chuckled. “You’re keeping really busy these days, I take it.”

Dom smiled. “Yeah, you might say that—my life has really turned on its head since the chair’s unveiling. I’m actually flying to San Francisco in an hour and have to be back here the following morning.”

“An hour you say, so... that must be the redeye,” Dave said as he flashed a patronizing grin at the afternoon audience. He got his laugh and turned back to his guest. “Man, that’s rough. So I’m guessing you don’t have much time to work on your art right now, do you?”

“None, my schedule is packed with this type of thing.” Dom had clearly gotten used to the publicity, but of course he had been dreaming about it since he was a teenager. “Some promotional work is expected in an artist’s life, but this thing has kind of gotten out of hand. I feel like I just wrote a best seller or something.”

Paul chimed in. “You sculpted one.”

Dave: “Yeah, in a way you sculpted a best seller.”

“Yep, that’s true.” Dom always preferred non-art-world interviews like these—he had never enjoyed the stilted verbiage used in art magazines and analytical books.

“And is this the sort of artwork that you normally create?”

“Well, not as such—certainly I’ve never created an... instrument of death before,” chuckles from the audience. “I’ve never really pinned myself down to a particular medium, but these days I create industrial sculptures more than anything else.”

“Uh-huh,” Dave said. “It’s really bothering some people, this chair—”

“Yeah, some people don’t like it, and I really knew that would be the case before I started building it.” Dom crossed his legs. “But I would be remiss not to work with a concept just because it was controversial.”

“I couldn’t agree more, that’s why we’re so cutting-edge here at the Late Show.” Dave threw his trademark grin/pause at the camera and waited for another laugh before turning back to Dom. “So tell me in your own words why this thing is such a big deal.”

Dom looked away into space and brought his fingertips together, as though he was about to drop some knowledge on America. “Well, I think that it’s shocking in its directness. Any number of artistic works could be used to commit suicide, but until now none have been created to... announce their purpose so boldly.” Dom turned back to Dave with a slight smile on his lips. “There’s nothing subtle about *The Conclusion*.”

Dave grinned back just before a photo of the piece was shown on the screen. “No, absolutely not. Now, how... and I realize this must be a touchy subject for you, but I’m compelled to ask. How did you come up with the idea for the piece, what was the inspiration?”

“Of course.” Dom pursed his lips for a moment, then delivered his standard half-true explanation. “Well, everyone has their ups and downs, you know—things can pile up on you in a way that can make life seem impossibly painful. I myself was in the middle of a down period when I happened to catch a segment on the news about Jack Kevorkian—”

Dave interjected, “And that cheered you right up I bet.” Dom and the audience chuckled.

“Yeah, he’s a ray of sunshine,” his smile tapered off and he continued. “I am a big supporter of what he’s done, of course, but I decided that I wanted to create something that would send you off—if you so choose—not in a gentle, painless fashion but a heavy, jarring one, a dramatic death that, in an intense sort of way, celebrates life by immediately activating everything in your body that gives you your life, just before taking it away. With *The Conclusion* I strove for boldest, simplest kind of death.”

Dave stared at Dom in silence for a few seconds, then turned to Paul. “Who the hell booked this guy?” Laughter all around.

Blistering sunshine rained down on the idyllic Sunset Strip. A light breeze tussled Robert Redford's golden locks in just the way you'd expect them to. The small talk and gratuitous *Conclusion* questions were over, and he had rolled almost without pause into a briefing on the latest NRDC efforts (the main purpose of this lunch meeting was to recruit Dom as a new spokesperson) but Dom was having trouble concentrating, chomping at the bit to ask about the Paul Newman glory days.

"The momentum is really in our favor right now with the Alaskan wildlife reserve," Redford said before sipping his decidedly un-trendy coffee with cream, "but we need to put the nail in the coffin, we need to make the GOP give it up forever." Dom was flipping through the glossy nature photos that Redford had handed him. "You're in a great position to help us do that right now—you've got a helluva spotlight on you, and a lot of respect from... well, not all of the country, but a lot of it."

Dom nodded. "Yeah. Well, I'm definitely interested in helping you out. What would you want me to start with?" In his peripheral vision he noticed something with bouncing blond pigtaails approaching rapidly from the other side of the street.

"There's a national SEAC conference coming up in early April..." Redford began, but Dom's attention was diverted to the approaching teenager, long enough to spot the pen and pad in her hands. He grinned and turned his attention to his soup. Redford's sentence trailed off just as the girl appeared and spoke up.

"I'm so sorry to bother you, but could I get your autograph?" A silent pause followed. Dom wiped his mouth with his napkin and accommodatingly glanced around at other tables, biding his time, before his eyes landed on Redford, who was staring back at Dom with the trademark pearly white grin, not signing his name. Dom then looked up at the girl, who was offering her book and pen not to the Sundance Kid, but to the famous sculptor.

Just ten months after the chair's unveiling, the Library of Congress issued a grant for a suite of official archival data on *The Conclusion* to be created. Veteran photographer Andrew Silver and author May Williams were contracted for the job, and a date was set for Dom to be interviewed and present to them any and all historical materials (mock-ups, sketches, notes, tools, and environments) that went into the conception and creation of the chair. Dom would meet them at the Fizi Gallery in Boston where the chair was on display, then proceed to his former digs near the art campus (which

had since been taken over by another grad student, but were in more or less the same condition that Dom had left them).

It was necessary before all of this took place for *The Conclusion* to undergo a detailed cleaning, a job which Dom refused to grant to anyone but himself. He arrived in his old t-shirt and jeans (which was indescribably refreshing after five weeks of starched suits) at the gallery early in the morning, four hours prior to the event, carrying a large duffel bag that contained a litany of brushes, sponges, polishers and solvents. He rounded the corner of the chair's space and smiled at his creation. "Good morning, beautiful!"

It was a labor of love, but it was a labor indeed, and Dom was glad that he had allotted so much time to the task. Polishing the object was more than a little bit akin to polishing his own ego, and a great deal of elbow grease went into making sure *The Conclusion* appeared to be fresh off the factory floor, gleaming where it ought to gleam and soaking up the light where it ought to be deathly black. It was so pristine that one would almost forget about the gruesome torment that it was forever ready to unleash.

Dom whistled while he worked. He was rubbing in steady backwards circles with a cotton diaper that had been dipped in a bowl of diluted Pledge when he brushed a hair too close to the hole at the top of the spring and heard a faint click. He would never be sure which sensation he experienced first—the thunderous, metallic bang that echoed through the gallery halls as the spike's restricting collar struck the chair base, or the searing sting in the side of his forearm where the barb ripped through his skin, just missing his ulna. *The Conclusion's* hammer had fired for the first time.

Dom screamed and collapsed backward in shock, momentarily transfixed by the still-vibrating, blood-streaked cone that jutted into the air in front of him. The raw, precise power of the mechanism, which had previously been just a daydream for Dom, had now made its presence felt in the most unmistakable terms. Pain hadn't yet caught up with fear when he surveyed the surrounding hallways and listened silently for footsteps. Apparently no one had been within earshot.

He regained himself, wrapped and tied the last clean diaper he had around his arm, then called Alex on his cell. "Lex. I, uh... had an accident. I need you to bring the compression rig and a first-aid kit to the gallery. *Now.*" Alex arrived twenty minutes later, and the pair spent the last hour feverishly erasing all evidence of what had happened and getting the artist cleaned and primed for his private show. No doubt this would someday make a juicy entry in the annals that Dom was preparing to help write, but no one was going to hear this story until the artist was ready to tell it.

## D E P T H S

“Not my problem, piss-ant.”

Lee Adkins' hands hurt. So did the muscles in his back and shoulders, but his hands were so badly marred that people usually assumed he suffered from a skin disease. He just had to deal with the pain and hope that nothing in the filthy dishwasher would make those assumptions correct. The restaurant manager couldn't care less—Lee would clean up the piles of dishes that Drew had abandoned or he would look for another job, and Lee was in no position to do that. Bussing and washing dishes was just about all he was qualified to do, and the scar running across his face and down his neck disqualified him even for that in some restaurants.

The scar was a daily reminder of his sometimes senile, often incarcerated, now dead uncle Troy, who had slashed at Lee in a fit of rage when Lee was just six years old, banging on a toy drum that Troy's girlfriend had given him for Christmas. Questionable as her choices in men were, she was one of the few people who had ever been kind to Lee, which only seemed to fuel Troy's anger. Troy had taken her life before making the decision to give up his own in a phenominally misguided battle with the local police several years ago.

Lee's mother was expecting him to be home before his brother's recital so that he could keep an eye on the dog, who had been inexplicably leaving messes. He would get a thrashing for not showing up, but less than the one he would get if he came home unemployed.

“Take Danny to the music building,” Lee's mother said from her plastic-covered lounge chair without looking at him. “He'll be done in an hour, so just stay and wait. Get milk on the way home.”

Lee stood still for several seconds looking in vain for some way of objecting, but knew that would be pointless. She was aware that he planned to go out for the evening and didn't care. Lee was the product of a marriage that had failed so miserably that his mother wanted to erase from her past everything related to it. Daniel was the product of another failed marriage, but because he had inherited a gift for music (his father's only redeeming trait) he was the primary focus of her life, and the best role Lee could ever aspire to was as an aid in Brandon's success. Brandon had originally taken a noncommittal attitude to this arrangement, but through the constant encouragement directed at him and the constant abuse directed at Lee, he

had gradually inherited a similar disdain for his less promising brother. Brandon knew that he could jab Lee at will without fear of recourse. No one cared.

All the other characters in Lee's life were the bit-parts played by his mother's routinely rotating boyfriends, most of which fit the ignorant, belligerent, white-trash drunk mold. And since they would face her most vehement wrath (read: knife point) if ever they laid a hand on the cherished Daniel, Lee became their figurative and literal punching bag.

Since Lee's mother was nearly always in front of the television, Lee seldom got a chance to watch it, but he had twice now overheard something on the news about a suicide chair, and this morning he had gotten a closer look at what all the commotion was about—it was on the covers of two of the news magazine at the stand beside the restaurant. It was apparently supposed to be a piece of art, though Lee didn't really understand what would make it so.

He hadn't really given the issue much thought—Lee didn't exactly keep up with current events and knew nothing about art—but something about that chair hovered in his mind like an annoying bug, as though it was somehow relevant to his miserable existence.

“It's cases like this that make me want to quit this job.” Social worker Ben Hamilton was finishing a cigarette on the bay-facing balcony of Juvenile Hall, talking to one of the officers who had brought Lee in three days ago. “The only thing this kid is good at is acting.” It was a blistering, overcast morning and the officer, who fit the stereotypical donut-inhaling, power-tripping asshole mold, looked like he wanted to finish his follow-up report and move on.

“All I know is he ain't good at vandalism,” the officer responded. “The ignoramus busts the piss out of that piano with a two by four, then just stands there staring at it until we get there and block his exit out the front window. Then he runs like a damn jackrabbit down the back hall, which was a dead end, of course.” He chuckled smugly.

Hamilton was rarely impressed with any cop's grasp of such cases and doubted that there would be any point in trying to educate this one. “Well, it's more complicated than that. But the bottom line is that he won't tell me a damned thing. I'll bet you a hundred bucks he's being abused at home, but he's done his best to convince me that he was huffing gas and just wanted to ‘fuck shit up’.” He dropped the smoldering butt into an already packed ashcan. “So my hands are tied. He'll have to be released tomorrow and put on parole.”

The officer stood in silence for a minute, feigning deep reflection, then shrugged. “Oh well. Can I go?”

Lee had fucked up royally. Petty theft was one thing, but that was some expensive hardware that he had decimated. He couldn't quite figure out why he had done it—it wasn't even Brandon's piano—and wouldn't be sure that he had done it at all if they hadn't caught him red-handed. All he did know was that hell that he had never known was waiting for him at home. The whole family would be participating this time for sure. Flashes of belts, bats, bottles, and fists ran through Lee's mind as he stepped out of Juvie and onto the cold, wet sidewalk.

He was scared, probably more so than the day he got his scar. He nearly lost his balance a couple of times as he walked, so dominating were the images in his mind. The only sound Lee could hear beyond the pounding of his own heart was the thumping of his boots against the concrete. It was only eight blocks to his building. He wished it was as many miles.

The fear built up in his throat as he rounded the last corner and looked up at his mother's lit window. No sound. No movement. But Lee knew she was there, sitting in front of that TV. Waiting. And so were the others.

He gasped and his breathing increased, then jumped back around the corner and pressed against the fence behind him. What the hell did he want to go home for? Why the fuck should he go home? Who would be that stupid, to walk into the beating of your life? Not a chance.

He ran without thinking for a few minutes, as fast as his legs and lungs would carry him, but was forced to stop and rest not far from the restaurant that no longer employed him. He leaned against the nearest wall, panting, but suddenly he felt very vulnerable, and jumped into a nearby alleyway, where he slumped against a garbage bin.

Lee considered his situation, trying to come up with a plan for running away, but the limited options at his disposal vanished immediately when he realized that the cops would almost certainly catch him—that scar was hard for anyone to miss. And then... back here again, back to all-consuming torment. Fear. Hatred. Hatred on both sides of the knife.

They came at him all at once, all of those competing emotions. Fear of his mother. Hatred of his mother, his brother, and just about everyone else he had ever known. Frustration with his dead-end life. Despair over a future of—assuming he lived through the punishment that awaited him—waiting hand and foot on Brandon while receiving unrelenting verbal and physical abuse from everyone involved. It was all hammering at his mind and sending an all-too-familiar torment down his spine, and Lee realized

he was moaning through a fountain of tears. For several minutes he cried into his hands.

Finally he was able to set the emotion aside enough to regain a bit of composure. A breathy whimper left his mouth as he leaned his head back against the bin and wiped tears out of his reddened eyes, which he then opened and allowed to focus. Then he fell silent. On the wall across from him was a torn and tattered poster, ten feet tall, containing an image that had recently become familiar, an image that at this moment finally took on a meaning that had been lingering in the back of his mind for weeks, waiting for the right objects to align in his consciousness. The chair.

It was a poster for that chair. The chair that everyone was talking about. The chair that was in an art gallery just a few miles from here. It was a suicide chair. And it was here in Cape Johns.

It's funny how a person who has been ignored his entire life can develop a sixth sense for how to do so intentionally. Making it past the admission desk without being noticed was no amazing feat, but spotting a safe hiding place just two rooms away from the most famous sculpture in the country was a task that only a neglected shrew like Lee would be up to. Breaking into a facility like this at night was far beyond his abilities, but he knew that remaining inside when the security systems went online was mostly a matter of being savvy. The shelter he chose was a utility closet just inside the doorway to the men's bathroom, and no one batted an eye when he opened it, stepped inside and closed the door.

An hour or so later the lights dimmed. Lee waited patiently until the shuffling of the cleaning crew died down (once someone even came inside to deposit a mop bucket, but there was plenty of room behind the door for Lee to remain concealed), then stood still for another half hour to make sure there was no other noise. He gently turned the latch of the door and pushed it a couple of inches outward, carefully scanning his available field of vision for bodies. He knew better than to make assumptions, and took great care to move slowly and check his surroundings quickly. No one was in the first room nor the next, though Lee wouldn't have noticed if there were, so awestruck was he by what lay before him.

The raw magnificence of the chair frightened him to the core. The black frame stood rigid in the air like a warrior at attention, arms hanging down in a stance of readiness. The coiled spring and conical spike gleamed like the chrome armaments he had seen in medieval war movies. If he hadn't already seen it in photographs Lee probably would have turned and run for his life. While the bulk of the piece might have been mistaken for a

shadow, so muted were its surfaces, the gleaming steel implements at its base seemed so potent and deadly that Lee was compelled to step lightly for fear of setting them off.

He was mesmerized. Lee had simply never been confronted by such a magnificent thing, and certainly had never been in the presence of any significant work of art. For several minutes he did nothing but trace a slow, wide circle around the chair, inspecting every inch for some kind of blemish or mistake.

Finally he came full circle to face the chair and stepped forward. He reached down and touched the smooth anodized surface of the seat and admired its perfection. He paused, trying to brush away his confusion and remember what he was doing there. He stood upright and looked away from the chair and to the empty doorways on either side of the room, gathering his wits. He thought of his mother and brother, and his eyes again fell to the chair. This kind of object was in his brother's future; someday soon Daniel would make it rich and be surrounded with fine things like this. And when that happened, his mother would, at the very least, see to it that Lee would never again share his family's walls. Daniel Adkins would be thrust into the limelight, his talent and musical vision adored by millions, and none of them would ever know that Lee Adkins was his only sibling. It was as sure as the next day's sunrise. That was why he was here. For the first time in his life, Lee was in control of his own destiny. He was here to go down on his own terms, and to throw a giant wrench into his mother's selfish, hateful plans.

Lee stared at the hole in the chair's back. The bottom edge caught the dim light like an amber moon crescent. He leaned forward enough to see through the hole the spike's imperceptibly sharp tip protruding through a gleaming ring that held the spring in place. He wanted very much to fold the chair back with his hands and see the bolt snap, to get a demonstration of this instrument of death before giving himself to it, but he knew that would be the end of his plan. Lee understood very little about machines, but any idiot could see that the bolt was not meant to snap back into place once it had fired. There was just one thing left to do.

He took a deep breath and turned to face the opposing wall. Through a row of windows just below the ceiling he saw a net of stars piercing the clear night sky. Slowly he bent his shaking legs. It was an effort to force them to do so, as though gravity was coaxing him back into the air. His butt made contact with the rigid seat and he shuddered.

The chair was high enough that he could only just sit in it with his toes still touching the floor. Again he looked up at the stars, then eased

backward against the trunk of the chair. Its heavy bulk required a bit of force but slid smoothly on its hinge once it was set in motion. Although he had noticed during his earlier inspection the legboard hanging from the end of the seat, it was still startling to feel it push his legs forward. It had not dawned on him that the chair was designed to leave its occupant laying straight as a board.

The mechanism was apparently designed to move gracefully no matter what; it resisted falling backward with gravity and required a steady push to maintain the reclining motion. Its movement was wholly remarkable—the minute hiss of the flexing hinges was the only perceptible sound besides the faint rustling of Lee’s clothes. He was ignoring the hanging armrests, his sweaty hands firmly gripping the sides of the seat. The further back he leaned, the faster his breathing became. He got about halfway down before he stopped and quickly jumped up in a panic, dropping his legs to either side of the legboard even though it was already falling slowly downward as the trunk raised to its upright position. He took a few slow, deep breaths, trying to regain himself. Sweat ran down his forehead.

Lee had not been raised in a religious environment. His mother was about as godless as they come, and Lee had never known his supposedly Christian father. Still, he felt this must be as good a time as any to make the last of a handful of prayers he had recited during his lifetime. “G-God...” he said before awkwardly bringing his hands together, alternately trying them pressed and clasped before settling on something in between. “I’m... I’m sorry for... what I’m doing, here. I... I just want them... it all... to stop, for the pain to stop. And to be... something. For people... to see me as somebody other than a, um... like, a dish washer or something. I hope... I, um... please have... please have mercy on me... on my soul.” His hands separated briefly before he brought them together for a final, “Amen.”

The prayer had taken his mind off of the task long enough to set him more at ease. He stared into the wall for a moment, then scooted back against the chair. Again he pressed and fell backward, but this time he allowed his arms to lay against the armrests. He could hear nothing this time, so loud was the pulsing of blood in his ears. The slow transition to the laying position was so smooth that he almost forgot what lay at the end. His tension grew as he straightened out—it seemed to be taking forever to reach the bottom. Perhaps he was unwittingly putting less pressure on the chair as he went down, prolonging the inevitable.

He thought for the briefest of moments that he could feel a delicate click just before the silence was split like lightning by an ear-splitting, metallic crack, and a searing combination of pains was quickly replaced by utter

torment. All that was Lee Adkins struggled silently against the intruding body, every muscle clenched in a vain effort to rise up and away from the bloody weapon that now protruded several inches out of his shattered sternum. For several seconds he thinly gasped into the silence while the portion of his mind that wasn't devoted to not dying attempted to make sense of the metal object sticking into the air. His eyes were bulging nearly out of their sockets, rapidly turning blood red. His arms, wire-taught with tendons rippling, reached inward against their own tension to grasp the object but were frozen several inches out. Tears ran down his temples, and blood from his nose.

The struggle ended abruptly as his oxygen-deprived nervous system issued its last command. The final remnant of air escaped his lungs in a gurgle as his arms dropped, one onto a rigid armrest and the other in between the second rest and the chair's trunk. His unconscious head fell to the metal surface with a quiet thud.

Dom sighed and looked up at Ferron Tower with a longing to climb up and start sketching. The sun would be peeking over the water's edge soon, just the right time to catch the interlaced patterns of the industrial piping across the bay. For all his fame and sudden success, he sorely missed those morning sessions. Spare time was a luxury not appearing in his foreseeable future. Even now he was in a rush to make a 7 AM flight.

He pulled up to the gallery's security gate in his new Saab just as the morning guard was sitting down with a fresh cup of coffee. "Morning, Leo!"

"Hey, mornin,' Mr. Winters," Leo answered while hitting the gate switch. "You here to polish that deathtrap of yours?"

Dom smiled. "Sure am."

Leo shook his head and said, "I can't believe you got time to polish that thing yourself, Mr. Winters."

"Gotta *make* time for it, Leo. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if somebody hurt themselves on it."

Leo grinned. "Hey, you don't have to tell me twice—I ain't going nowhere near that damned thing."

Dom laughed, waved and pulled into the garage. He parked in a staff space since he knew he would be finished and gone before most of the employees arrived anyway. He waved his security card past the scanner and entered the building, which from the looks of it was empty.

Dom grabbed a couple of diapers and a can of Pledge from his locker and walked toward the west wing, going over the day's schedule in his head:

touch down in Chicago at 8:40 and take a cab to the PBS affiliate (need to find out what the call letters are), brunch with AIC dean Edgar Davis before a noon flight to Dallas, check into the Hilton and wait for the Art Forum interviewer to call, maybe get in a nap before the evening gala next door...

That last phrase reverberated in his head as he swung through *The Conclusion's* doorway. He could hear the words "gala next door" repeating, but couldn't make himself remember what they meant because of the competing image that lay before him. "Gala," he muttered to himself one last time before his mind put away the gala question and switched instead to confusion over what wasn't right about the picture he saw. Like a person's life flashing before their eyes in their last moments, Dom's mind ran, during the next several seconds, through every conceivable option other than the truth. A joke? A hallucination? Some sort of ambitious graffiti? A similar, new addition to the museum? All ridiculous answers to any but the desperately hopeful or profoundly stunned, and Dom was both.

When reality set in, so did the shock. The heart beat furiously while the lungs did nothing. He didn't feel his knees hit the floor as he collapsed with his eyes transfixed on the blood-covered spike and the pale face of the victim, frozen in terror. The Pledge can fell with a clang to the wooden floorboards. A part of Dom's mind that was still unwilling to admit to the situation contemplated his previously untested sculpture's design flaws: there should have been holsters around the armrests and blinders to either side of the legboard, perhaps a thin gutter outlining the trunk section, to catch the dark red mess that now stained the metal coil and formed a puddle in the floor beneath. Though he instinctively tried to yell for help, all that surfaced was a breathless hiss. Still his mind fought against the image, tried despondently to erase the truth, when finally it got its wish as he passed out and toppled sideways into a fetal position.

Relative bliss was the brief ignorant period when he came to, wondering only for a moment why he was laying on a wooden floor with a pair of diapers in front of him, praying the image had been a bad dream. But the facts that lay buried in his subconscious could be repressed only so long, and he remembered with a wave of guilt what had happened. He couldn't bring himself to look at the body again. With fear and sadness running through his soul he turned away and placed his hands on the floor in front of him, shakily lifting himself onto his feet. With great effort he placed one foot in front of the other and walked out of the room.

Alex drove up to the cordoned-off museum an hour later. Susan Brown, one of the curators he had dealt with when Dom initially shopped for a space for the chair, called to fill him in after realizing that Dom wasn't going to. He waved her down from outside the tape and she motioned to the officers to let him in. She was finishing a cigarette outside the museum entrance, and for a few seconds they just stared at each other in silence.

Susan dropped and snuffed out her stub. "He's quiet, but I think he's okay. I guess."

Alex nodded and walked inside. There were only a few cops and museum staff members here, but in the distance he could see the fringe of the activity near the entrance to the west wing. No doubt the body had long since been removed, but the documentation and processing still had a ways to go. Dom sat in a folding chair near a wall outside the room, staring at the floor.

Alex walked up and stood beside him. He reached out and placed his hand on Dom's shoulder but said nothing. The two of them remained there for a few minutes in silence while dim voices and camera snaps emanated from the next room, then Alex walked over to what appeared to be the officer in charge and said, "Excuse me, Officer..."

"Thompson."

"Officer Thompson," he said and smiled meekly. "Do you know when Mr. Winters will be allowed to leave?"

"He's allowed to leave now—I told him so a little while ago." He was trying to be polite but was mostly focused on the report he was filling out. "Just needs to stay in town, in case we have any further questions."

"Okay. Thank you," Alex said and turned to Dom again. He walked over and knelt down beside him. "Dom." Dom didn't move. "We should leave, Dom. Let's go home. Come on." He stood and pulled gently on Dom's arm. Dom hesitated for a moment and then rose. Alex spotted a news van past the front entrance and opted for a side door.

He decided that Karyn's home would be better right now than Dom's. He walked around and opened Dom's door. "Come on, buddy."

Dom turned his head to the right, looked up and realized where he was. "Why are we here?"

Alex thought it over for a second. "I just think you'll be better off at Karyn's place right now, Dom. Come on."

Karyn had seen them from the window and was waiting with the door open. "Hey, sweetie," she said quietly while coaxing Dom toward the couch.