

DROWN THE NIGHT

Chapter One

A novel by Ruff Santi

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ONE

The strange mixture of sweat and weed sneaks into your nose and gains your attention. You can't help, but feel the dense excitement linger in the air. The wave of a powerful bassline breaks against your chest. You want to jump higher, get closer. The flickering lights and the noise are fucking with your braincells, as you're dancing like a maniac. Fuzzy riffs intertwine with massive drums. It is the ultimate balance between beauty and reckless destruction.

Ninety minutes of brutal escalation have left the concert hall looking like a war zone. The crowd was young, exhausted and probably drugged out of their minds. The disordered movement of their silhouettes was forged into one giant black mass, which stood in heavy contrast to the glaring light show of the stage. A banner in the back displayed the name of the band. It was accordingly fucked up and only the informed could have guessed the deep blue letters standing against the dirty-old, orange background. It was a proclamation, the defined pledge of a wild bunch, to those, who would hear their call.

The band Drown The Night was in the last bars of their show and the enervation was clearly written into their faces. Mike, the frontman, delivered the performance of a lifetime and shredded his final solo in ultimate perfection. Sweat was consistently dropping down onto the fretboard of his guitar, only to be instantly swept away by his dashing left hand. He completed the last riff in full exertion and was suddenly relieved. The amplifiers pressed another burst of notes into the hall and then fell silent. The sound reverberated long, before slowly merging with the eccentric cheers of the crowd.

Mike handed his guitar to a roadie and fled the noise of the stage. He grabbed a bottle of whiskey on the way and took the stairs into the backstage area. His shaking hands lit a smoke, he leaned back against the wall and devoured the golden distillate. Aaron jogged down the stairs and dumped down right in front of him. Mike made him stop.

"Backstage meeting in thirty!"

Aaron nodded and went back upstairs. Mike staggered through the dimmed hallway and finished the whiskey. The bottle dropped down, slowly scrolled over the floor and dipped against the wall. Mike took a sudden turn into the restroom and instantly vomited into the sink. His brown, sweaty hair dangled in front of his young, but already consumed face. He threw up again. Saliva and chunks of partially digested pills dripped from the corner of his mouth. He drank from the tap and sat down on the floor. The shivering of his hands made it hard for him to get to the dope, he so desperately needed. Mike managed to take a hit out of his small vial and the mist in his head slowly faded. He got up and found his stale, green eyes staring back at him in the dirty mirror. It was about time, that he got what he wanted.

Mike witnessed a young girl running away in tears, just as he came around the corner to the VIP room. Dom was seemingly pissed by Aaron's ruthless behaviour and pushed him through the door, talking more to himself than to anyone else.

"Just ten minutes without terrorising someone. Do I ask too much? He? You're fucking unbelievable!"

Dom discovered Mike and went over. His arm set out to guide him.

"Mike, your performance was just marvellous today. Are you feeling good? Do you need anything?"

Mike shook his head and aimed for the sofa. He sat down and scanned his pockets for weed. Sharyl crossed the room and gave him a kiss. Her looks were absolutely captivating in her desperate attempt for Mike's attention. Her blond hair fell smoothly over her shoulder, as she tried to sit down next to him. She caressed his head. He moved her away. Careful, but distinctive. She finally resigned and went back to the buffet table across the room. Aaron already lingered next to her and pretended to be picky with the food. She discreetly increased the distance.

#1

James stuck his head through the door of the VIP area and took a look around.

"Where's Sam?"

No reaction. James entered the room, pulled up his baggy pants and closed the door behind him.

"This man is just unable to get anywhere on time, isn't he?"

Again, no reaction. James approached the buffet table and took a look at the food. Aaron stuffed a bagel into his mouth and started to rub his belly.

"He's probably hands full with the fucking hot redhead. You know ... the one, who stood right in front of the stage. Mate, you should've seen her, she had tits for days."

Aaron's hand ran further down into his pants. James was busy peeling his orange and casually looked over. He immediately threw the orange peel into Aaron's face, once he saw where his hand was at.

"Dude, what the fuck? Pull yourself together!"

Loud steps and shouting echoed through the walls from outside. Dom opened the door and peered through the gap. Suddenly he ripped the door open. Samuel jumped into the room and retrieved onto the floor. A huge, muscled guy was right behind him, sprinting straight at the door. The creature got followed by several security guards.

"Fuck, close the door man. CLOSE THE FUCKING DOOR!"

Dom managed to shut the door only split-second before the creature battered into it. After the first hit, there was a second, even harder one. The hinges vibrated under the impact. Apparently the security guards were happy to do their job.

Aaron broke out into laughter and almost suffocated on his bagel.

"The redhead, man. I fucking knew it!"

Samuel was in shock and curled on the floor. His shirt was torn and a cut in his face bled down on his collar. His otherwise benevolent, blue eyes were strangely dull.

"Fuck me!"

Aaron knelt down next to him.

"Was it worth it? Tell me! I bet it was worth it."

Samuel tried to catch his breath, he couldn't say a word.

#2

Dom checked the lock of the door and took stage in the middle of the room.

"Alright, now that we're all finally here ..."

His greedy fingers were searching for a cigarette.

"You know that I've done nothing, but busting my balls for you in the last couple of years. And I think ... no ... I know, that these efforts are about to pay off."

Dom beheld his cigarette.

"Killsmoke Records finally called today and offered us a very, very generous deal."

He fixed his tie.

"But there's a tiny condition. A small alternation to our existing arrangement."

Aaron was restless. His dirty fingernails scraped on the tag of the bottle in his hands.

"Stop blabbering, man!"

Dom sorted out his words.

"Okay, how can I possibly tell you ... ehm ... the label told me, that ... okay ... they ... they want to replace one of you. Otherwise, there will be no deal."

Aaron's bottle suddenly flew through the room. It barely missed Sharyl and crashed into the TV set next to her. Sharyl jumped back in shock and onto the catering table. Aaron walked up to Dom and fondled the collar of his suit. The look on his face was simply unnerving.

"Tell me! Who?"

Dom tried to remain calm, for he knew that Aaron was a very dangerous man.

"I won't tell you, at least not yet. I want you to decide first, whether or not you want to take the deal at all."

Aaron pushed Dom aside and stormed towards the door. Mike's blood pressure crushed down as he rose up from the sofa, suddenly blocking Aaron's way.

"Aaron, calm the fuck down. We don't do shit without each other, okay! Come on, let's talk this through!"

Dom dropped his cigarette onto the carpet and slowly made his exit. He turned the lock of the door.

"Just think about it, okay? I'll be upstairs."

Sharyl threw another desperate look at Mike, before

following Dom outside. Then she realised, she wouldn't be needed here anyway.

#3

James flipped his fingers into Mike's face. Mike opened his eyes and looked at him. All questions without answers.

"What?"

"What's he thinking?"

"Who?"

"The frontman! He's jumping around on stage. Performing, singing, pointing into the crowd. What's he thinking?"

"I don't know man!"

James started to pace through the room, sang into his bottle and pointed at his mates.

"He's thinking: I'm going to fuck you. And you. And you. And maybe you. Oh you're hot. I'm going to fuck you and you."

James giggled like a child, then he walked over to Samuel.

"Okay. Sam! Tell me about the guitarist. What's he thinking during the show, he? Imagine, he's shredding the most amazing solo ever. Just like that."

Before Samuel could reply, James jumped feet first onto the sofa and tormented his air guitar. He waved his arms and his fingers sped around.

"He's thinking: Deeeeduuuuudadeeeeduuuu deeeeee da di dudei deeeeeeeeeeeeeeng."

James jumped back on the floor and continued.

"Okay, now the drummer. Just like the frontman and the guitarist, he is giving everything. He moshes groovy beats into your ears, fast and loud..."

James pulled out his sunglasses and took a sip of his beer. He went lower and lower into his knees, pretending to play drums.

"... and when he gets to the groovy solo and really starts to rock out. He's thinking: Oh god, I'm sooo hungry. Man, I want some pizza. Or maybe a hamburger?. Yeah, hamburger sounds great."

Samuel and Aaron were shaking their heads. James, with a big grin on his face, looked at Aaron.

"So, Aaron. What exactly is the bassist thinking? He? As you know, he's even more concentrated than anyone else. His whole body moves to the beat and his fingers punch one tone after another into the strings. His face tells it all."

Their eyes met. Aaron remained quiet, waiting for an answer.

"He's thinking: One. Two. Three. Four. One. Two. Three. Four."

James and Samuel simultaneously burst out into tears of laughter. Hate flamed up in Aaron's eyes. It was just a matter of split-seconds, until James' head was caught in Aaron's headlock of death. Aaron caressed James' scalp with his fist.

"You're lucky, you know, that you're the only one, I

wouldn't kill for shit like this!"

James struggled in Aaron's muscled arms. Aaron let him fight a little longer and then pushed him back onto the sofa.

James fell over Mike and disrupted him in his thoughts. Mike got startled, straightened out his shirt and got up.

"Alright guys, enough with the bullshit. What's the move here? Sam? Come on, tell us what you think."

Samuel ran his fingers through his thick, blond hair.

"I don't know man. We've worked so fucking hard to get here. But selling out is not an option."

"So, we're supposed to wrap our shit back up and go home?"

James intervened.

"That's not what he meant. But what happens, if they want to replace me, he? Or Sam? Or even Aaron? I mean, he's an asshole. But still - we belong together."

Mike lit another smoke.

"Of course, but ..."

"But what, he? It's all about you anyway, right? Mr. 'I am the fucking greatest Rockstar of all times!'"

Aaron was fed up and moved through the room like a freight train. Mike was desperate.

"Come on. You know that I need you guys. But ... what if this is the one heavy career move? You either go big or you go down."

James shook his head.

"You won't lose your talent, Mike. Neither will we. There are other labels, you know?"

"Yeah, but they're not as big."

Samuel stepped up and grabbed Mike by the shoulder.

"So what, man? It's never been about the money. Nor the fame. You of all people know that."

James opened a couple of beers and handed them to his friends.

"We certainly can't let them dictate, who's a part of this band and who's not. We're not their fucking puppets."

Aaron approved.

"He's right. Next time, they want to change our music. We can't have that. Can we?"

"Of course not."

Mike raised his bottle and gathered his bandmates around him.

"Together or not at all!"

"TOGETHER OR NOT AT ALL!"

#4

Mike left the VIP room and stumbled through the hallway. He focused on his mission. Other artists walked past him and congratulated him to his great performance. The corridor narrowed

down more and more, the further he went. It seemed, as if everyone was collaboratively trying to hold him back and to block his way. Mike began to sweat. His legs went tired and soon enough, he began to slow down. He sat down on a cabinet by the wall and searched for his cigarettes. His eyes followed the fumes, after he lit the smoke. He discovered one of their old band posters on the wall. They all looked so young and excited. Almost innocent and full of hope. Mike closed his eyes and tried to relax. The void in his head was taking over. Suddenly someone stirred him. Mike opened his eyes back up. The blurred outline of a plump stranger slowly rendered into Dom's smiling face.

"Hey man, what are you doing here?"

"Nothing. Just thinking."

"Thinking! Yeah. Tough call, right?"

"Yeah!"

"Can I help?"

"If you must."

Dom offered Mike a cigarette. He declined.

"It's really not for me to decide, but, you know ... to me at least, it looks like a really good opportunity. For all of you."

"For all of us? And what about the one who gets fucked?"

"It's not like he's sentenced to death."

"I really don't want to betray anyone."

"Betrayal is such a strong word, you know. Sometimes, the weakest link of the chain must give way to a stronger one. That's just natural selection."

"Still, it doesn't feel right."

Dom demanded Mike's attention.

"Listen, Mike, it's your decision. I'll do as you say. If you want to do it. We'll do it. If not, then not. But bare in mind that deals like this aren't tossed around to everyone. This is a serious offer."

Mike understood. Dom continued.

"You'll be sleeping in better hotels, fly in private jets, get more cash. Not to mention the studio. Shit, you'd love their new studio."

"Don't tell me about it."

"It's just ... everything you've ever dreamed of."

Mike nodded.

"It really is. Isn't it?"

Mike went absent.

"Maybe it is time for a change, maybe ..."

A strange noise suddenly rang through the hallway and covered up his words. The sudden headache almost dragged Mike to the ground. Dom stirred him again.

"What did you say?"

"I said, maybe, it really is time to ..."

The ringing cut off Mike's words again. He was about to slip off the cabinet. He tried to grab Dom's arm, but missed. Mike began to fall, helplessly he watched Dom's outline blur into darkness. The noise in his head was unbearable.

The ringing of the alarm clock pulled Mike out of his dream. He squinted, tried to focus, but his eyes wouldn't let him. With tired hands he groped around. He felt the cold sweat on his bed sheets and smelt the familiar mustiness of his room. It took him a while to discover the origin of the noise on the floor. He had to stretch really far and almost fell out of his bed, then he got hold of the alarm clock. He shut it off and dumped back down on his cosy pillow. Suddenly the voice of his mother shouted from the kitchen below.

"Mikey! Get up. Breakfast is ready."

Mike pressed the pillow into his face and pretended to suffocate himself. The alarm went off again. Mike picked it up and threw it against the wall. The clock cracked open and dropped down onto the floor. Reluctant, Mike dragged his weary body out of bed.

Empty beer cans and cigarette-ash shaped the grander part of the picture. The rest of the room was littered with dirty clothes and CD cases. After walking in circles for a minute, Mike resigned in his search for a clean shirt and grabbed the next in reach. He pulled it over his head and stumbled down the stairs.

The wall on the side of the staircase was decorated with family pictures, covering almost the entire period of Mike's adolescence. His mother was very young and beautiful in the pictures at the top, but as the stairs descended and the men next to her were constantly changing, so did she. Soon enough, it seemed, as if not a single one of the men in the pictures either had the money, the strength or the will, to stay by her side.

Mike entered the kitchen and patted his brother's head. Chris was already sitting at the table and gobbled a huge pile of pancakes. Mike sat down next to him and started to eat. His mother, still dressed in her pyjamas, manoeuvred her giant ass through the kitchen and danced to one of those cookie-cutter pop songs on the radio. She threw another round of pancakes on the table.

"And don't you forget about your brothers big day. The ceremony is at four. I can pick you up from work, or where ever it is you bum around. And remember to dress nice, okay? You can't go there in one of those filthy shirts of yours. Everyone thinks that we're poor anyway."

Mike's mother turned towards to stove, but then quickly

turned back around to him.

"And don't you forget, it's for your brother, so don't you even think about not showing up."

Mike nodded, while swallowing another pancake. Still chewing, he got up, kissed his mom on the cheek and left the kitchen through the garden door.

#5

The sky was incredibly happy and the sun embraced the day with the benevolence of early spring. Mike snuck through the tall grass and weaseled to the old shed in the back of the garden. The carving in the wood of the door always reminded him of his father. And of the times, when he was still around to struggle through his good intentions. Mike made sure, that no one saw him in front of the shed and carefully opened the door. The mangle-mangle of useless gardening tools and neglected lifestyle products made it virtually impossible for anyone else to cross the interior. Mike jumped through in between the rusty lawnmower, the shovels and the abandoned fitness tools. It took him only seconds to complete his risky dance and to touch down in front of a moldering shelf unit. He opened the cabinet door and smiled at his most important, hidden treasure. The ornaments on the neck of the aged acoustic guitar clearly stood out in the twilight of the room. Mike's fingertips carefully ran over the carving. An instant sense of belonging warmed his chest.

Mike strolled along the empty dirt road, which connected the suburb colony of Cuffling Smokes with the small city centre. He hummed a blues song and had his guitar firmly strapped over his shoulder, whilst his left and right hand fingers were busy playing the song, which was running through his head.

The small music store was already in sight and Mike finished his smoke before he entered. An old woman was standing behind the counter and organised a set of guitar strings. Her hair was light grey, with a touch of hippie wisdom.

"Mike. We said 9 o'clock sharp. Remember?"

"Yes, I know. I'm sorry Mrs. Darlene."

"You better be! There are customers in the back waiting for you. Would you please?"

"Sure."

Mike went around the counter and stored his guitar. He took his time.

"Now!"

"Yes ma'am."

Mike got startled and scurried off.

"And pull your pants up. You look like those gangsters on television."

A mother and her young boy were casting about the guitars on display. Mike approached them friendly.

"Hey there, how can I help?"

The mother caressed her son's fuzzy head. He stuck to her leg.

"Hi, we are looking for a guitar."

"Do we wanna play acoustic or electric?"

The woman looked completely helpless and peered down to her son. He just smiled back shy.

"Anything for starters, I guess."

"Okay, well, acoustic might be a little harder to learn at the beginning, but it's far more rewarding once you get a grip on it. Plus, it's probably a cheaper start. So, that's what I'd recommend."

Mike led mother and son through the store and picked a guitar. He perfectly tuned it by ear within seconds and played a smooth lick. The boy was intrigued and came closer. Mike handed him the guitar.

"Do you have a teacher?"

The boy shook his head.

"Alright then, just give me a second."

Mike ran off to the back and grabbed another guitar, he tuned it on his way back and sat down across the boy.

"Just put your left hand fingers here."

Mike helped the boy to form an open A chord, then showed him how to play the strings. The boy understood and started to hit the chord.

"See. You're a natural. Now, just continue."

The boy played the chord over and over again. Mike accompanied him and added some flavor with a bluesy riff. The mother just stood there, deeply moved, and watched the scene in awe.

#6

Samuel entered the music shop and greeted the owner. Mrs. Darlene was more than intrigued by his presence. Samuels good looks and his charm instantly brightened up the room.

"Good day to you, Mrs. Darlene. How are things?"

"Fine, Samy. How are you?"

"Can't complain."

"Are you still dating that foxy girl of yours? ... What's her name again?"

"Sharyl!"

"Sharyl, that's right. So you're still together?"

"I'm afraid so, Mrs. Darlene."

"What a shame."

Samuel smiled back at her.

"You'll be the first to know when things turn sideways, as

usual. ... Where's Mike?"

"He must be in the storage, unboxing packages."

Samuel went through the back of the shop. His fingers caressed all of the expensive guitars on his way. When he entered the storage, he saw Mike unpacking a huge load of brand new amplifiers. He was busting his balls surprisingly hard. Samuel snuck up from behind.

"Hey man."

"Hey, what's up?"

Mike turned around and presented a brand new orange amp.

"Got some money to spend?"

Samuel reflected for a second.

"Nah. Not really."

"Just look at this fucking beauty. I'd sell my brother for this. I swear!"

"Yeah, but unfortunately he's only worth half of it, at best. Come on, let's have a smoke."

#7

Mike and Samuel exited the store to the parking lot. Samuel pulled out a big joint and lit it instantly. Mike took him aside and lowered his voice.

"Are you fuckin' serious?"

"What?"

Samuel needed a second to understand.

"You worry about her? ... She's cool man. She'd probably join us, trust me."

Mike shook his head.

"It's not your fucking job now, is it?"

"Whatever! How's the freak show coming along, by the way?"

Mike snatched the spliff out of Samuel's hand and took a hit.

"Can't really tell at this point. These crazy people are just getting weirder and weirder. You should take a look at their outfits, man. They're dressed up so fucking ridiculous. And my brother has to rehearse these strange phrases all the time, I guess for the ceremony or something. Over and over, he's walking through the house and mumbles. I'm really not sure what my mom is going for with these people."

"Eternal welfare, maybe? But you're still going, right? It's not your brother's fault that Kira is in desperate need of a saviour."

"I don't really know. It feels like I would be actively taking part in his downfall. In the end, he probably thinks that I'm supporting this shit."

#8

Dom was sitting at a slot machine in the local gambling

joint and played his favourite game. It was called 'The Blind Passenger' and revolved around a fella named Stu, who took the train without a ticket and was desperately trying to hide from the conductor. The player needed to make the whole ride without getting caught, in order to transfer to the next train and to the next level. If you made it through more than five trains without loosing a life, the multiplier would spit out lots of cash. But the game was tough and the conductor got faster and faster with every level. Dom was already one of the top five players, but he was eager to lead. His chances weren't bad, as he hit the keys like a madman. He made Stu pace through the rows, with the conductor hot on his heels. The burning sweat was slowly dripping into his eyes. He swept his face with his shoulder, trying not to let go of the keys. A ring sound announced the coming up of the next train station. Dom had to stall the conductor just for a few more seconds now and he would win the high score. Stu entered the last waggon of the train. It was barely filled with passengers and his chances to hide diminished with every passing second. One of the passengers was carrying boxes and Dom remembered a special trick. Through a fast combination of up and down keys, Dom would be able to make Stu stagger through the hallway and to run into a passenger. Hopefully, the passenger would drop his boxes and thus creating a barrier for the conductor. But timing was critical with this move. Stu would need to slow down a lot, in order to stagger and to perfectly run into the passenger. Dom was nervous, he quickly lit a smoke with his left hand only and checked the distance between Stu and the conductor. Then he made his move. He hit the keys and Stu slowed down. The conductor was coming closer and closer with every second. The warning lights of Stu's radar were turning yellow, then orange. Stu started to sway, the passenger with the boxes was close in front of him. For a second, it seemed like Stu was going too slow and that he would miss. But then the passenger stopped and turned. Stu ran into him. The boxes dropped out of the passengers hand. Stu passed by and made it to the last exit door. The conductor got stalled and, just in time, the train arrived in the station. Suddenly, the slot machine started to blink and to beep. Everyone around Dom was turning their heads towards him. Cash was spilling out of the machine, like water out of a fountain. Apparently Dom had made it further in this game, then anyone ever before.

#9

Samuel and Mike entered the parking lot of their trusted liquor store. It was one of the oldest shops in town and probably the one with the longest history of almost shut downs. If you took a look around and considered the clientele of the shop, you would wonder how it could actually still exist in contest with the larger supermarkets. But at a closer look, it seemed obvious,

that selling booze to the under aged kids of the up and coming neighbourhoods close by, was more than lucrative. Although Mike and Samuel weren't as lucky as the rich kids around them, their loyalty to the only shop in town, which had always allowed for them to indulge in adolescent self medication, was yet unbroken.

Mike stopped in front of the entry and held his fist into Samuel's way. Samuel understood and immediately turned in. One, two, three. Rock vs. paper. Samuel resigned and stepped into the store. Mike lit a smoke and browsed around. There wasn't much to see on a Thursday afternoon, except for the casual retiree, who was strolling around aimlessly. When Mike turned back to the shop-window, a small, understated poster caught his eye.

International Rock Band Contest - looking for Stars & Newcomers.

Best band or solo artist is offered a record deal and worldwide touring opportunities. More information on www.IRBC.rock

Mike studied the poster intensively. His eyes were flying over it, again and again. While the information wasn't going to become any more detailed, Mike was searching for a catch. Suddenly, the clicking of high-heels pulled him out of his thoughts. Two pretty girls stepped out of an old, perfectly reconditioned VW Bus, which just parked next to the entrance on the parking space for the disabled. The baby blue colour at the bottom and the clean, white finish at the top, awarded the bus with a stylish, timeless feel. Although the vehicle didn't seem to be entirely original, Mike instantly felt a strong connection to it's design. The driver opened the door and jumped out. He quickly turned around and took a prideful look at his astonishing vehicle and the girls, who seemingly came along with it. Mike had a hard time covering his envy. The girls must have deciphered the look on his face.

"Look at this wannabe rock star."

"I bet he can't even play that thing."

The self-made strap on Mike's guitar and his dirty, old jeans and shirt, clearly spoke for themselves. Sadly not in his best interest. Mike tried to hide his anger.

"I can show you what my fingers are capable of if you want. You might really enjoy it."

The girls giggled and passed by. The owner of the bus stepped up to Mike and looked at the poster, then back at him.

"You don't really think that your cheap guitar stands a chance there, do you? I'd be actually surprised, if you'd be able to come up with the attendance fee in the first place."

The stranger hid his accent pretty well and laughed out loud

when he was finished. His hand immediately smoothed out his prominent moustache. Although he appeared to be far older, Mike headed against him.

"What do you know? Fuck off!"

The stranger laughed even more and escorted his girls into the store. Samuel just left through the exit with a six pack in his hand and crossed them at the door. The girls discretely turned their heads for Samuel's charming smile. He was unnecessarily excited.

"Oh man, that's Damien, isn't he?"

"What? How do you know this fucker?"

"Sharyl and I went to his show last week. Man, I'm telling you, I've never seen a better guitarist live on stage. And he's got it all worked out with the chicks, too, you know. Just brilliant."

Samuel clung to his mental picture for a second. Mike dragged him along the parking lot.

A sudden burst of heat cooked up inside Mike's guts. He was really trying to keep it together, but when he passed by the VW bus, the anger in his head just clicked. Mike kicked against the shiny rear bumper, which suddenly dropped down with a screaming loud creak.

"Ar yeu fockin'inseune?"

The voice of an angry Frenchman echoed through the empty parking space. Damien ran out of the store and sprinted surprisingly fast. Mike suddenly felt a tickling sense in his neck and turned around. Bam, five finger death punch to the nose. Mike went down. Samuel, in shock, took a bottle of beer and threw it into Damien's face. The impact was huge and much harder than expected. Blood splashed onto the parking lot and the two girls were screaming on the top of their lungs. One of them bent down to check on Damien. She rolled him over and when she saw his face, vomited all over him. Damien's nose was not just broken, it was shattered. The owner of the shop came running out onto the parking lot and demanded for the cops. Samuel picked up Mike and they ran away, as fast as they possibly could.

#10

Mike cooled his face with a bottle of beer, while Samuel and him strolled along the small road, which led to the estate of James' parents. His fingers checked his swollen nose. Mike took the last sip of the bottle and threw it onto the front lawn. The main door opened instantly and James appeared in the door frame. He cursed, as he tiptoed over the well-tended, green grass and collected the bottle.

"How many times do I have to tell you to stop that shit? He?"

"Don't you have some slaves or servants, who clean up for

you?"

"Fuck you!"

James approached Mike and took a look at his face.

"What happened to you?"

"Nothing! Where's Aaron?"

"Not here yet."

Mike shook his head.

"Unreliable fuck!"

#11

James opened the door to the old whiskey cellar and shifted the light switch. The sound of a dozen flickering light bulbs hummed up and the darkness gave way to a huge rehearsal room. James' massive drum set throned in the centre of the room, while the two guitar stacks and the bass combo were placed in a semi circle around it. There was an obvious contrast between the care and the money, which went into James' instrument and the equipment of the other three band members. You could also guess by the distribution of the trash in the room, that James was the only one, who straightened up once in a while.

Mike took the last couple of stairs and dropped down on an old mattress on the floor. With a sudden yell, he was thrown to the ground. Aaron turned up underneath the mattress and jumped Mike. They were starting to wrestle and screamed like viking warriors. Mike quickly gave up and demanded for a time out. Aaron was obviously far stronger than him.

"You fuckhead. Shit. My back, man!"

"Come on, don't be such a pussy."

Aron attempted to go back at Mike again, but James blocked his way.

"Aaron, what the fuck?"

"What?"

"You broke into my house? Are you fucking out of your mind?"

"Broke in ... to ... no! I wouldn't call it breaking in. I just slept over, you know. Just like old times. But you should probably get a bigger window, it's quite tight."

James was pissed, but figured to let it go. Mike was back on his feet and directed James to the fridge.

"Chill, alright! Let's have some beer. I've got hot news for you."

Mike dumped down on the mattress and threw his weed onto the ground. He just started to talk, without caring if anyone was actually listening.

"Guess what I've found out today?! There's a band contest at a small festival near Birmingham at the end of the summer. And I just know, who's going to win this shit!"

James went by and passed him a beer.

"Ehm, not us?"

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

"I don't think we're ready yet!"

"Not ready yet! Listen to yourself. Do you wanna be stuck in this fucking hole for the rest of your life? That's the opportunity, man. Our fucking opportunity!"

"Yeah, but I don't think we have enough songs."

"We've got more material than you know of. There are probably nine to ten songs in my head, right now. And you'll have enough time to learn them on the road."

"On the road? ... Where?"

"To success, James. Seriously, is anyone even listening to me? The website said, we need to account for at least three international gigs for the contest. And I've already talked to Dom on the way here. He said, that he could manage to set the gigs up really quick, which means, that we're ready to leave on Sunday morning. Isn't that great?"

"Okay, even if I was stupid enough, to go on a tour with you ... who's going to pay for it?"

Mike just replied with a knowing smile.

"No! Fuck no! Forget it. Do I look like a fucking ATM to you?"

Aaron sat down next to James and laid his arm around him.

"Come on, James. Your parents are fancy rich."

"Are you kidding me? Really! Maybe my parents got cash, but I, I don't even own a fucking car."

Samuel linked in to the conversation, while casually shredding scales on the sofa.

"Okay. Count me in! But I think, we all should pay for the tour. What do we need anyway, he? Some weed, some beer. Maybe a little extra for the hangover?"

Mike suddenly jumped up.

"Yeah! I've got it. Let's throw a goodbye party. Everyone who's coming can put some money into a jar and we're fucking set. Everybody wins! What a coincidence, that James' parents are leaving for a short holiday this weekend, right?"

"What? How do you know that?"

"I just know, Jimmy James. Just try to come up with as much cash as you can, alright? Dom and I'll take care of the rest."

#12

It was almost dark, when Sharyl finished up at the bookstore. She had to look twice to make sure that it was really Dom, who was coming out of the shady gambling joint across the street. He seemed exceptionally happy and almost danced along the pavement. A behaviour, which was unknown to her, when it came to the otherwise so serious and bleak Dom.

Another man left the casino shortly after him and followed in secret. When Sharyl couldn't identify the stranger in the

dark, she decided to trail them from the other side of the road. Their features only lid up shortly, when they passed one of the yellow street lights. Dom sped up and suddenly turned into a smaller side path. The stalker took his chance. He snuck up from behind and pushed Dom into the back. Dom swivelled around, struggled with his balance and instantly received a punch into the face. Sharyl almost screamed. Her hands covered her mouth and she hid around the corner. The stranger hit Dom once more and threw him into the dirt. With his foot on Dom's throat, he shouted at him.

"You really think you can leave? Just like that? Give it to me!"

"What do you want, man?"

The man kicked Dom into the side.

"The money. Give me the money."

Dom didn't move at all. The stranger punched him into the face and searched his jacket. He found an envelope and slid it into the back pocket of his jeans. The man's accent clearly stood out, but Sharyl had a hard time putting a finger on it. When the stranger knelt down next to Dom's head, he whispered.

"What did I tell you last time, eh? If you wanna play with the big boys, you gotta pay like the big boys."

The stalker stood up and attempted to leave. Then he turned around again.

"Car keys?"

"What?"

A couple of kicks into the stomach made Dom obey. He checked his pants and presented a set of keys. The stranger sorted out the car key and dropped the rest back on Dom's chest.

"Next time, you should be more willing!"

The stranger left business as usual. Sharyl intended to get over to Dom, but when she was finally ready to plug up the courage, he was already gone. She turned around scared and ran straight back home.

#13

Aaron stepped out of the main door of the small butcher shop and passed by the front window. He entered the apartment building next door and ascended the stairs. The smell of rotten wood reminded him of his miserable life and with every step, his wish to finally leave intensified. He slid the key into the lock and realised, that the door was already open. He quietly weaseled in.

The living room of the small flat was as cleaned up, as it was cosy. The broken table in front of the TV set, littered with empty whiskey bottles, crumpled cigarettes and dirty plates, firmly displayed the lack of devotion for this home. Faint light hit the room and made the floating dust shimmer magically. The TV set stood out of the misery, like a holy shrine in the middle of

a dark forest. Aaron passed the room and followed the narrow hall to the main bedroom. When he wanted to enter, a smoker's cough made him turn around.

"The fuck ya doin' here?"

Aaron was surprisingly sheepish in the presence of the old, but well-built man standing in the hallway. The alcohol in his breath effortlessly crossed the distance to Aaron's face and made him gobble.

"I just ..."

"I told you to finish up. Didn't I?"

"Yes, sir. I just wanted to ask for some extra money. Just a little bit and I'll be out of your hair."

The man laughed and started to cough. His desperate struggle for air almost brought him to his knees. Aaron was consumed by the magnificent picture of his deadbeat father.

"What did I tell you about money, son?"

The old man leaned forward, expecting an answer.

"You, you gotta work for it."

"That's right! You gotta work for it, boy. Now, go on and work."

Aaron wanted to give in, but couldn't.

"I'm not going to be a fucking butcher for the rest of my life, you know!"

Aaron's father slowly hobbled towards him. His old knees were shaking. His breath was heavy. The man stood in front of Aaron and caught his breath for another second. Suddenly he smacked the back of his hand into Aaron's face. Aaron didn't see it coming.

"You're gonna work with flesh and blood. Just like me. Just like my father. For the rest of your days."

The man walked past Aaron and then stopped without turning around.

"If you want money, there's twenty bucks in the kitchen. Go get me some beer. You can keep the change."

Aaron's feeling of insignificance stayed with him, long after his father had disappeared into the master bed room. He remained in the hallway and clenched his fist.

#14

A police car went by behind them, just after Mike and James disappeared into the bushes of the public city park. They took a hidden trail to a bench and stopped. James checked his watch.

"Man, he should already be here."

"Be patient, he'll be here soon enough!"

The specific spot of the bench enabled them to watch the street and the buildings across the road, without actually being seen. It took five more agitated minutes, then Mike tapped on James' shoulder. James handed over the cash and Mike went off.

James watched a small, narrow guy with huge hair stroll along the pavement on the other side. His curly, backcombed headdress wasn't exactly inconspicuous, but you could've easily mistaken him for a girl, which probably made it for a good cover after all. The guy retreated into the entrance of a building and opened a mailbox. He stored a huge back of weed inside it and closed it again. Then he went over to another mailbox and left it open. Mike stepped out of the bushes and onto the road. He slowly approached the entrance.

"What's up?"

The guy minded his business. Mike placed the money in the open mailbox, went over to the other one and tucked the weed into his jacket. Without any further ado, they both went their ways.

Mike arrived at the bench and James pulled him down. The cops were driving by on the other side of the road again. The guy just walked past the cops. He didn't look very much concerned.

"Shit. What now?"

"Stay. Alright. Just do nothing."

The car slowed down and the cops took a look at the park. Mike and James crouched down without moving. When Mike stuck out his neck, the cops were already gone. James was sweating like a beaver.

"That was so fucking close, man."

"Whatever. Come on let's go."

"Let's have a smoke first, okay?"

"Not now."

"What?"

"We have to stop by my brother's ceremony first."

James reached for the weed. Mike protected it.

"I said no!"

"Dude, I paid for it."

"Relax, okay. You'll get your smoke on soon enough."

Mike just went off and left James standing there. He shook his head and followed.

#15

The building with the green stripes on the shining white walls, was a lot taller than the other ones around it. The sign on the heavy gate said: 'Path To Strength' and warned every passerby, that the uninvited trespassing would be punished immediately. A number of young boys and girls, dressed in fancy robes, were standing inside the massive palisade, which protected the building from the outside world. James followed Mike along the fencing. They stopped at the gate and observed the yard.

"Mike, we're a little under dressed, don't you think?"

"Who gives a fuck. I just need to talk to my brother. But you can stay here, if you want."

Before James could react to him, Mike went ahead. A security

guard, equipped with gun and bat, picked up his trail.

"Hey, you. This place is only for members."

Mike ignored the security guard and jumped in between a group of people a couple of steps ahead and merged with the crowd. The security guard was right behind him. James watched the scene first, then chose to find cover behind a tree.

The inside of the building didn't really give a better impression of what was to expect from this mysterious cult. There were no benches, seats or chairs whatsoever inside the hall. The floor was mostly tiled and the interior appeared more functional, than varnished. The decorated carpet in front of a prominent altar, seemed to be the only valuable artifact. Mike passed by another group of fanatics and saw Chris standing in a row with a bunch of other kids. Mike came up and pulled him to the side.

"Hey Chris!"

"Mikey, you've made it."

"Hey, yeah ehm just not for too long."

Mike took a look around and pulled his brother further into the shadows of a huge pillar.

"Listen, I'm leaving for a couple of weeks, okay? So ... you'll be boss in the mean time. Do you understand?"

"Where are you going?"

"I'll tell you soon enough. Just keep it a secret, okay? And pretend to Mom, that you've seen me around! She's not supposed to know!"

Chris nodded, unsure of the full bearing. Mike reached into his pocket and pulled out a little necklace. It was a used guitar pick on a cord.

"Here, this is something my dad gave me years ago. It's supposed to bring you luck. Be sure to keep it safe. Mom is not supposed to find this, okay? It only works, if no one knows about it."

"Okay Mikey. Thank you."

The voice of a man reached Mike's ear. The security guard spoke into his radio and made his way through the crowded temple. Mike took another good look at his brother and gave him a hug.

"Gotta go, Chris. Stay safe."

Mike padded his brother's head once more and then disappeared back into the crowd. Little Chris beheld the necklace.

"Chris, there you are!"

Chris lifted his head. His mother knelt down to him. His small hand enfolded the necklace and slipped it into the pocket under his robe.

"Have you seen Mike?"

"He was just here."

"Really? I'm so happy that he came. Where is he?"

#16

Samuel walked up to the unimposing family home and stalled, just before his finger touched the door bell. He checked his looks in the reflection of the door window and straightened out a streak of his golden blond hair. He took another good look at his teeth and hit the door bell. The elegant bright jeans and the striped, azure blue shirt made him look like a beach boy on leave. The door slowly opened. Sharyl's kind smile appeared and welcomed him.

"Hey honey."

She gave him a kiss and led him into the kitchen. Samuel sat down on the other side of the counter and watched her taking care of the food. She stirred the pot on the stove.

"I hope they like chili con carne?"

"They'll eat anything, believe me."

"If you say so."

Samuel reached over the counter and caressed her cheek.

"And you're sure, that you don't wanna join us? It'll be fun."

"Do you really think, that that's such a good idea? Me and five of you in a rental van?"

"Come on, it won't be that bad."

"You don't want me there, believe me."

"They're your friends too, you know."

"My friends? I wouldn't call them exactly that. We know each other. But we're not really friends."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just, that they're your friends. That's all. Not that it's a bad thing. And I think, you just won't need me there, on your little vacation."

"It's not a vacation. It's business!"

Samuel jumped up from the bar stool and walked around the counter. Directly facing her.

"Sometimes, I really think that you're jealous."

"Jealous? Of what exactly?"

"I don't know. Maybe, because your 'singer/songwriter' thing doesn't seem to lead anywhere. And, you know, you see us, how we're making a tour now and everything."

Samuel extended his argument with his hands. Sharyl laughed it off and focused on the food.

"You should really take a good look at the people you're hanging around with."

"What?"

"This manager of yours ... what's his name?"

"Dom?"

"Yeah. Him!"

"What about him?"

"He's kinda shady."

Samuel was about to contradict her, but then the food on the stove cooked over. Sharyl burned her fingers in an attempt to move the pot. She pulled back her hand in a rush and threw the pot down to the floor. Samuel's stepping back wasn't fast enough. The red sauce spilled all over his bright, elegant jeans.

"Shit! Now take a look at what you've done!"

"What I've done?"

Samuel desperately tried to clean his pants.

"No one cares about your stupid food."

Sharyl just flipped. She pushed Samuel towards the door and threw a couple of sandwiches at him.

"Just get the fuck out, okay?"

Samuel retreated through the front door. Sharyl shut the door right behind him and leaned against the frame. She slowly slid down to the floor.

#17

The bong went around like sweets and sugar. Mike and James were slouched on the sofa in James' living room. The TV suffered through another episode of inconsequential telenovela screen time, while the real time endlessly dragged along. When the doorbell rang, nobody moved. After a while, Mike slowly lifted his fingers from the remote, writhed to get his feet onto the ground and finally got up.

"Never mind, I'll take care of the door."

He scuffled over the fluffy carpet and wavered into the grand, empty hallway of the house. The walls drew streaks in a blur of countless renaissance paintings. The mirrors tried to sidetrack him in myriad reflections. His focus shifted, went absent even. The pattern of the floor has never before pulled him in so deeply. And when it stopped, he swung the main door open. A crowd of almost twenty people was standing outside, apparently expecting a whole other mood. Mike directed them to keep quiet and made them follow his manic walk. The crowd understood. Bottles clinked, steps echoed. Silent sighs admired the expensive ceiling and the deliberate interior design.

James peeked through his tired eyelids when he heard Mike winding down on the sofa again.

"Who was it?"

"Some guy."

"Ah, okay."

James leaned back again. The crowd crept inside the living room and hid behind the sofa. When James found back into his cosy state of relaxation, they all jumped up and over the sofa.

"Surprise!!!"

"What the fuck?"

James fell down the couch and hit the floor. A couple of strangers lifted him back up. Mike started the sound system and cranked up the volume.

"Let's fucking party!"

#18

Dom entered the front yard of a car rental and made his way through a jam of parked cars. The lights of the office were still on and Dom's hopes went up. When he saw a woman rushing through the service station, he knew, that he could make up for his mistake. Dom proudly aimed for the automated doors, but they wouldn't open. He started to knock against the window. The women inside rushed by again. Dom knocked even harder, while his eyes followed her trail.

"Hey. Hello."

After a couple of minutes, the woman appeared in the showroom again, but ignored him furthermore. Dom continued to call for attention. He wouldn't give up, until she finally pointed at the service window on the long side of the building. Dom smiled and came up to her. When she stuck her head out of the window, her unpleasant look suggested a strong will to help.

"Go away, we're closed."

"Come on, it's urgent! Please?"

"What do you want?"

"I'm really sorry to bother you so late, but my wife had a little mishap with the keys of a van I rented here yesterday. She accidentally left them in her purse, when she went off to visit her dad in the hospital. And now I can't seem to get into the van, but the gifts and the cake for our sons birthday are still locked inside. Do you have a spare key? Please? You would really save my sons special day."

Her calculating gaze was not entirely uplifting, but then she smiled.

"Okay, even if I was stupid enough to fall for your bullshit story, there is no way I can get to the keys."

"Come on. I'll give you a hundred bucks. Plus maybe fifty for your excellent customer service?"

"Not that I wouldn't enjoy ripping you off, but the keys are secured via time lock. New safety policy, I'm afraid! I can't open the safe prior to Monday morning. So ... just fuck off, okay!"

The woman left Dom at the counter and turned off the lights. Dom hauled off with his fists, but then just turned around and went on his way.

#19

The loud snore of his father was the sign Aaron had waited for. He was sitting on the couch in the living room and

meditated. Only the muted TV set shed light on his sweaty bold head. Aaron opened his eyes and slowly got up from the couch. He went absolutely silent, as he crept through the hallway. After slowly entering the bedroom, he took his time and watched his father dwell in his alcohol induced coma. The unshaved face. The dirty pores of his skin. The smell of booze. Aaron was disgusted. He went closer and closer. Then he shouted straight into his father's face.

"WITH FLESH AND BLOOD!"

Aaron's hands rushed into his father's throat and effortlessly crushed the voice box. The old man awoke. Panicked. Grasped for air. The blurred picture of his favourite son was mirrored in his eyes. Aaron pushed him down. Smiled. The old man fought back, just like the bastard that he was.

Suddenly, the scene fell silent. Aaron slid down next to the bed and closed his eyes. The tattooed, dead hand of his father drooped off the edge of the bed and touched his face. Aaron got spooked and jumped up. He took the pillow and pressed it on his father's face. Just to make sure.

#20

The party was already out of control, when Dom arrived at James' house. He made his way through a horde of drunk strangers. The one more fucked up than the next. After passing by a guy, who was secretly vomiting into a vase, which was still filled with flowers, Dom felt, he was slowly getting used to it. Then he saw Mike killing shots at the kitchen table and tried to get his attention.

"Hey! Mike! There you are."

Mike responded without turning towards him.

"How's the plan coming along?"

"Good. Excellent, ... there's just one thing."

"Okay, what's that?"

Mike filled another round of shots and toasted with a stranger.

"There's no van. The fucking bitch at the rental accidentally gave our ride to someone else."

"No shit?"

"No shit! And she said, she can't give me another one before Monday."

"Monday is too late. Why don't you try another rental?"

"It's Saturday night, they're all closed!"

Dom was about to light a smoke, but Mike snatched the cigarette out of the grip of his lips.

"Fuck, we really need to leave first thing tomorrow."

Dom pulled out another smoke and tried again. This time, Mike went for the lighter.

"So, what are we gonna ..."

Mike lit his smoke and made Dom hold his tongue.

"Just wait a second, I'll be right back."

Dom dropped his head and checked his pockets for another lighter. He wasn't lucky. A cute, dark-haired girl passed by him. Dom gazed at her. When she came closer, he offered her a cigarette.

"Do you have a lighter?"

"Sure, my love."

The girl smiled and fingered a tiny lighter out of her bra. Dom was intrigued.

"What's your name?"

The girl wanted to answer, but Mike went in between them and grabbed Dom's arm.

"Come on. Let's go."

#21

Samuel and James were competing in a drinking game at the table in the living room. James was about to refill the glasses, when he saw Sharyl entering the room. He started to shout and waved his arms.

"Heeey, Sharyyyyl. Come here!"

Samuel grabbed his left arm and made him stop.

"Shut up, okay!"

"What? Why?"

"We're not exactly on our best terms right now."

Samuel's intervention came too late. Sharyl was already dandering over. James was about to refill the glasses, but Samuel quickly stole the whiskey out of his hand and hid it behind his back.

"Hey James."

"Hey, Sharyl"

"Sam!"

"Sharyl!"

"What are you guys doing?"

"Nothing?"

James attempted to pull the bottle of whiskey back up onto the table from Samuel's back. He fought back for a second, but then just let go of it.

"We're playing a game. Wanna join?"

Sharyl took a closer look at the children's game.

"Is that ... Looping Lui?"

"Do you know it?"

"I was six the last time I played. And we played it without booze of course, but I certainly know how to win."

#22

Mike and Dom were sneaking through the empty streets of Cuffling Smokes. Their dark shadows glided along the pavement and made halt at the next street corner. Mike turned around and

pulled Dom deeper into the darkness.

"Okay, the building in question is right behind the corner. You go across the street and approach the house from the other side. Just make sure, that there's nobody watching. We'll meet up in front of the gate, assuming the air is clear."

"Check!"

Dom left across the street and observed the building from the other side. It was a small serial home, but with a big yard in front of it. The yard was closed off by a huge gate with strong stone walls to each side. Dom checked the first and second floor for activity. There were no lights in the windows, no sounds, no cars, no pedestrians on the streets. He approached the gate and took another look around before his feet stepped on the bottom bar. Dom attempted to peak over it, the tip of his nose barely made it over the railing, as his weak arms pulled himself up. Then he saw, what Mike was talking about on the way. The light of the moon, added to the yellow street lights, gave the bus inside the yard a spooky feel. Dom was sure, that he had seen it before, but to be honest, who wasn't driving a VW bus these days. Dom's eyes roamed around the rest of the yard. He was almost sure, that this job was going to be easy, but then he saw the silhouettes of two muscled monsters standing out in the twilight. In shock, his feet lost their grip on the bar and he slid down the gate. Mike's hand on his back kept him from tumbling and made him spook at the same time.

"Did you know about the dogs?"

"Open your hands."

Mike handed Dom a couple of juicy sausages, then he checked his pockets and presented two sets of pills. Dom took a closer look at the pills.

"What are these for?"

"These are supposed to make them sleep. And these are supposed to wake me up."

Mike considered the pills in his hands.

"Left, right, left, right. Okay, these are for the dogs."

Mike handed Dom a set of pills and swallowed the other ones. Dom stuffed the sausages and threw them over the gate. It took a while for the dogs to take the bait. After each of the watch dogs finally fetched their good night snack, Mike gave further instructions.

"I'll climb the wall from the back and unlock the bus. Wait for my sign and then open the gate, okay?"

Dom nodded and Mike weaseled off into the darkness.

#23

Aaron entered the living room with a heavy TV set on his shoulder and searched for his friends. He discovered James sitting at the living room table. He went over and dropped the TV

set right in front of his face. James got startled.

"What's that?"

"My old TV set."

"So?"

"I thought maybe we could try to sell it. Get some money for the tour."

James examined the TV set.

"It looks really expensive, man."

"Yeah, you know, I bought it with a discount."

"Hmmm, 4k resolution ... smart tv ... 48 inch ... wireless ... yeah, just give me a second!"

James ran off and disappeared into the back. Aaron sat down on the table and gazed around. His eyes got stuck at Sharyl and Samuel, who were making out rather x-rated on the couch across the room. His mind wandered off watching them. James returned and jumped on the table in front of Aaron. The music suddenly stopped and James shouted into a microphone.

"Hey guys! May I have your attention please?"

James quietly directed Aaron to stand up and to present the TV set. The crowd turned around in expectation.

"First of all, thank you so much for coming here tonight. We really have a blast with all of you guys. And since we're leaving tomorrow for our first International band tour, we have a special offer for you!"

James bowed down to Aaron and whispered into his ear.

"Hold it a little bit higher ... I said higher ... more ... okay!"

Back into the microphone.

"Maybe you have already noticed the donation box in the kitchen. The money is supposed to support us in our quest for everlasting fame. And in order to spice things up a little bit, we offer this ultimate, high-end, 4K TV set here, to the one person with the largest donation to our cause. How does that sound?"

The crowd cheered and screamed and James enjoyed being in the spotlight for a change. But then Aaron pulled him back down to earth.

"Listen! How about we just pretend to give it away and instead, sell it to someone totally else?"

James was shocked by Aaron's proposal.

"What? We can't do that! They're our friends!"

"Oh come on. You barely know them. Tell me the name of this dude right there!"

A scraggy guy with a black metal shirt passed by. His long hair got stuck in his cup of beer. He didn't really seem to care. James intense look portrayed his utter nescience.

"See! You're clueless."

Aaron pulled James closer to him.

"I know just the guy, he owns a second hand store. He'll make a good price."

"How much do you think we can get?"

"I don't know! Probably about 300 bucks?!"

#24

Dom checked his watch for the third time and slowly started to worry. After making sure that the road was still clear, he decided to open the gate. He cautiously stepped into the yard. His muted voice called for Mike.

"Hey. Mike! What's up?"

Nothing but silence. There was neither a sign of him, nor of the dogs. Dom went around in circles. When he turned back, two angry dogs snarled at him. Dom wanted to retreat towards the gate, but he was already too far inside the yard. When the dogs drew nearer, Dom closed his eyes. His hands covered his crotch. The suppressed roars grew louder. The dogs were baring their teeth. Dom started to pray and waited for the pain. Sharp claws scraped into the dirt and suddenly, the dogs leashed off. Their tiny feet swept over the dirt and through the yard. Dom watched a scary set of grinding teeth closing in. He froze. His world fell silent, until he realised, that the dogs just ran past him and out of the gate. Dom sighed. He gathered his courage and went around the bus. There he saw Mike, laying in the grass beneath the wall. All limbs stretched out. He must have slipped off the wall. Mike's unconscious face was covered with slobber. Maybe the dogs weren't that dangerous after all. Dom grabbed his friend and dragged him to the bus. He checked the door. It was open.

Dom lifted Mike on the passengers seat and carefully released the hand break. With a loud squeaky noise, the bus began to set in motion and rolled out of the yard. In a safe distance from the house, Dom hardwired the bus and started the motor. The old engine awoke with a cough and the bus slowly made it's way down the street. When the tail lights slowly disappeared into the darkness, a relieved moan echoed through the night.

Dom took a couple of side roads before he parked the bus in a dark spot. He dialled James' number on the phone and waited. When James picked up, awfully loud music yelled into his ear. Dom could barely hear a word.

"Just ... I'm ... second ... now?"

The noise suddenly stopped. James voice went clear.

"What's up?"

"Hey, I've got a question. Imagine Mike would accidentally swallow some pills and would pass out. What would I do?"

"Hmmm. Depends on the pills!"

"Just tell me what I'm supposed to do with him okay? I don't

know what kind of shit he's on again."

"Just calm down! Were the pills round or cylindrical?"

"Round, I guess."

"Okay, where is he right now?"

"Next to me on the passenger seat."

"Check the chest pocket of his jacket."

Dom's nervous, sweaty fingers had a hard time opening the button of Mike's chest pocket. His fingertips slipped off, again and again. Then finally, the button made it through the tight buttonhole. Dom's fingers went inside the pocket and retrieved a small plastic bag with white contents. James voice screamed through the speaker of Dom's cell phone.

"Did you find something?"

"Is that coke?"

"Now, just smack his face a couple of times, until he opens his eyes and then put the bag under his nose. He'll know what to do."

Dom had to lift the seatbelt, in order to get closer to Mike. Hesitantly, he slapped his face. Mike didn't respond at first, but then slowly opened his eyes. Dom held the baggy under Mike's nose and waited. Suddenly, Mike vacuumed the powder right through both nostrils at the same time. In the blink of an eye, he straightened up.

"I guess ... we're on our way back now. Get everybody to come outside."

#25

Aaron lingered in the hallway and inspected a couple of girls, who were playing tabletop football. When his phone rang, he answered without letting them out of his sight.

"You here?"

"At the door."

"I'll get you!"

Aaron took another look at the girls and sped down the hall afterwards. He opened the door and invited his friend inside. The man with the dark sweater and the sunglasses followed Aaron through the hallway without saying a word. When they arrived in the living room, Aaron unavailingly searched for James. He directed his friend to stay put and barged through the room. When he arrived on the other side, he turned and headed for the kitchen. No James. Back to the living room. No James. Aaron went for the bathroom. The door was locked. He hammered against the wood.

"James? You here?"

No answer. Aaron turned around and scanned the hallway. Suddenly the door calmly opened behind him and James appeared.

"We're ready!"

James and Aaron made their way back into the living room.

James went off to pick up the microphone. Aaron went to his friend and pulled him into the middle of the room. Then he seized his sunglasses. His friend wasn't amused, but went along nonetheless. James jumped on the table.

"Hey. Listen up guys. After taking our time to carefully sort through your donations. We have finally found a winner."

The crowd was as hot as a quattro staggione on a Wednesday morning, but James continued with his charade anyway. He fingered a small note out of his back pocket and read it out loud.

"And the winner with the most generous donation is: Tony. Thank you very much, Tony. Let's give Tony a big applause."

The people in the living room couldn't care less. James glanced at Aaron. He obviously didn't care either.

"Okay. You can still continue to donate of course, if you want. We're happy for any help. Any help at a..."

Aaron pulled James down from the table, just to spare him any further embarrassment. Aaron's friend, with the new name Tony, couldn't wait to fetch back his sunglasses and disappeared into the back pretty fast. When he returned, he carried the TV set and made his way into the hallway, never to be seen again. James requested Aaron to come over.

"Did you get the money?"

"Sure."

Aaron handed James the money. He started to count it out loud.

"20, 40, 90, 110, 160, 210, 260. 260! Dude, we're 40 bucks short."

"Whatever. The TV was stolen anyway."

"What? You told me it was yours."

"Of course I told you that. Otherwise you would've fucked me up with another one of your moral lessons. Just be happy about the cash, okay?"

#26

The peak of the party was already over by the time James, Aaron, Samuel and Sharyl gathered outside on the stairs in front of James' parents estate. A couple of drunk strangers stumbled by, pleased to have finally found a way out of the complex maze of hallways and ancient maiden rooms. The silent roar of a distant engine, made it's way into James' ears. He suddenly jumped up.

"Guys! They're coming!"

The snarling sound was repeatedly interrupted by misfire. The noise grew louder and a horn honked in unison to the bangs. A stylish embodiment of the seventies burst out of the dark and around the corner onto the forecourt. Mike was surfing on the roof of the old bus and screamed like a maniac. Aaron and the others rose to the spectacle. When Dom hit the breaks and the bus

suddenly stopped, the momentum pushed Mike over the roof. He slid down the windshield and effortlessly jumped down to the ground. The huge smile on his face illustrated the essence of his victory.

#27

A strong sense of pain pulled Damien out of his bed and into the kitchen. His medication was slowly wearing off and he was about to experience the full aftermath of his injured face. He reached for the cabinet door and had to look twice, when he discovered the empty space in his backyard. He turned around and grabbed his phone. There was only one person he knew, who was able to help him in such instances. He dialled and waited for an answer.

"Oui?"

"Roel, c'est Damien. J'ai un problème!"