

Critical Praise for Matthew Stokoe

High Life

“Stokoe’s in-your-face prose and raw, unnerving scenes give way go a skillfully plotted tale that will keep readers glued to the page.”

Publishers Weekly

“One of the most unstinting, imaginative, brutal and original contemporary novels ever written about the punishments that come with the prioritization of fame...”

Dennis Cooper

“All of the classic ingredients of Californian noir are here, but Stokoe takes things further than most... This is a compelling and gripping novel.”

Black Star Reviews

“...an unholy hybrid of Raymond Chandler's best work and Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*.”

Henry Flesh, Lambda Literary Award-winning author of *Massage*

Empty Mile

“Beautifully written and deeply gripping, *Empty Mile* is a great read. I’m already looking forward to the next one from Matthew Stokoe.”

Michael Connelly, author of *The Gods of Guilt*

“... heartbreakingly powerful contemporary noir...” “Stokoe stays true to a bleak vision of the world as he enmeshes his characters in the kinds of tragic setups reminiscent of a Thomas Hardy novel.”

Publishers Weekly (starred review)

“The tension builds unbearably in this magnificent ‘Sierras Noir’ novel. Stokoe writes damaged people worthy of James M. Cain and Jim Thompson. His star-crossed lovers and broken families will steal your heart, even as Stokoe drives the knife home.”

Denise Hamilton, author of the *Eve Diamond Series*

“This book has everything a good crime novel should: a suspenseful story with violence at its core, characters driven by lust, love and guilt, propelled with prose that’s poetic and profound.”

Carole E. Barrowman, *Milwaukee Wisconsin Journal Sentinel*

Colony of Whores

Matthew Stokoe

CHAPTER 1

The sky above the city looked like someone had tipped kerosene over it and set it on fire. In the Santa Monica Mountains, up around the Encino Reservoir, the forest had been burning for three days straight and the northern end of the Los Angeles basin now lay under a light gauze of smoke. During the day the light had a flat, metallic quality, but at night, as the sun lowered, the sky above the Pacific was mauve and gold and burnt-rose and charcoal, and crowds gathered on the pier and along the beaches to marvel at it.

Fifty m.p.h. Olympic Boulevard. Tim twisted the Vespa into third gear and crossed into Santa Monica. Inside his helmet, a radio news broadcast: more American casualties in Afghanistan, a fatal gas explosion in Culver City, the Californian deficit, predictions of economic ruin....

Tatters of a daily hangover.

Four years ago, after his last screenplay had gone nowhere, he'd thrown in his writing towel and started drinking a bottle of wine a night.

The shops and the lights and the cars slid past.

Everywhere about him people were lit in the fireside glow of sunset.

But as he breathed in smoke and wove through traffic, the only thing he saw was Jocelyn. Surrounded by a group of men.

A nine-level car park on the corner of Wilshire Boulevard and South Barrington Avenue. Decommissioned in 2008, but still standing because budget cuts by Santa Monica City Council had delayed its demolition indefinitely. Gray concrete, talentless graffiti, entrance barriers torn from housings.... Nothing Special. Nothing more than another helping of L.A. decay.

Tim had been there once before. A week ago.

When he'd pulled up outside the coffee shop where Jocelyn worked.

When she was already disappearing down the street in the passenger seat of a blue Toyota Prius.

Jocelyn.

Year-and-a-half girlfriend.

Kind of.

They'd met at a weekend screenwriting seminar Tim had signed up for in a half-assed attempt to slap his writing career back into consciousness. By lunch the first day they'd abandoned the course and, rather than continuing to debate the positioning of second-act turning points, were sweating into her mattress instead.

You didn't have to be Einstein to surmise she wasn't quite right in the head. But Tim was still staggering under the weight of Rebecca's death, and moving in with Jocelyn offered at least the illusion that there were other things in life besides grief.

The first six months hadn't been too bad, considering their differences – she, an ex-meth addict, running on Diet Coke and a coruscating mix of rage and self-delusion; he, withdrawn, sedated with wine, a recluse in the making.

The next six, though, had been an ever-accelerating careen down the far slope of their relationship after it became impossible for Tim to ignore the fact that his partner was as gripped by sexual compulsion as she was by her need for over-caffeinated cola.

The casual comments about trying group sex that had started early in their cohabitation became repetitive. There were absences, regular and prolonged, that she did not bother to explain. There were phone calls she took in another room.

He'd moved out, into the flat Rebecca had left him. But he'd continued seeing Jocelyn part-time; the tincture of ennui that then clouded his blood simply made it easier to suffer her infidelities than to end things properly. And, too, she was one of his very few social contacts, a fact which, despite her flaws, made her a valuable commodity in his circumscribed life.

But she was losing value now.

Rapidly.

Absent from the cafe again. Same day of the week. Same time. Hadn't been too hard to figure where she might be.

Tim bounced over the fractured concrete of the car park's entrance ramp and began the spiral climb upwards. There was no lighting on any of the floors, but the faint evening glow lingering outside and the beam of his headlamp were enough to reveal the desolation which had settled on the building during four years of abandonment.

On the lower levels: mounds of trash and landfill, illegally dumped by private sanitation companies. Higher up, above the smell of rotting garbage: small clusters of mattresses and cardboard cartons, shopping carts drawn into loose crescents to form illusory, wagon-train protection. Homeless people, some in families, looked up briefly from the weak light of lanterns and cooking stoves as Tim passed.

On the eighth floor, empty of both garbage and people, he parked the Vespa and took off his helmet. A hollow silence. Breath in his ears. Steeling himself. Knowing what he'd find on the level above.

He walked quietly up the final ramp, hid behind a pillar, watching.

At the center of the floor: six cars grouped haphazardly, two with their headlights on, most with their doors open. People inside the cars and around them, moving against the light, caught briefly as they drifted from one place to another, one partner to another. The British had given it a name. *Dogging*. Fucking strangers in secluded public places.

In the back of a Camry the torsos of two men were visible in silhouette, pumping at something between them. Three other men stood grouped around the front of an old Taurus, shirts open, pants rucked at their ankles. Splayed diagonally across a corner of the hood, head hanging backwards over a fender, Jocelyn lurched as they went at her.

She was naked, her skinny body made skinnier still by her arching back. Her face was hidden but her forehead and short red hair were visible between the legs of one of the men.

Beyond the cars, where the light thinned to a mesh of shadow, a blond woman stood behind the open door of a blue Prius, hand between her legs, watching Jocelyn. Same as she had when Tim had followed them there the week before.

When the men were finished with her, Jocelyn picked up her clothes and walked naked to the Prius. Headlights caught a liquid sheen on her face and breasts, down the insides of her pale thighs.

The blond woman stepped forward into the light and met her with an expression of frightened wonder on her face, as though Jocelyn had returned from some dangerous

journey which the woman herself longed to undertake but did not have the courage for. She ran her hands over Jocelyn's body, then reached into the car for a towel.

When Jocelyn was dried and dressed she vamped a little and held her hand out. The blond woman took some sheets of paper from the glove compartment and gave them to her. There was just enough light for Tim to see that they were yellow.

Tim on a bench in a small park. The day gone and dark. Thin traffic on Wilshire. A string of movie billboards in front of a construction site, bouncing hard, mercury light across the boulevard. The smell of grease from a fast-food joint and the hot dustiness of day-long baked concrete masking any scent of grass or leaf that might have survived in this sad simulacrum of nature.

Tim had hoped for birdsong, a small reminder that some slender thread still connected the city to a wider world where human passions were not so thoroughly twisted.

But there was none of that either.

He stared numbly out at the road.

Across Wilshire, a girl on a red-and-white Triumph Thruxton swerved to the curb and dismounted. Tim watched her. She wore a one-piece black leather catsuit and SWAT boots, and when she pulled her full-face helmet off he saw that her hair was a short chop of dull blond.

She stood for a moment, looking up at one of the movie billboards – a lurid advertisement for a big-budget action flick with a lot of explosions. She checked the street both ways, then took something from a pannier at the back of her bike.

She held it out, away from her – a bottle with a rag stuffed into its neck. And then the rag was alight, a bright flare fringed with oily smoke, and there was a grin on the girl's face, stretched and crazy as she turned and swung her arm up and over and launched the bottle at the billboard.

The first thought through Tim's head was a tiredly eye-rolling “Jesus, this fucking town....” But then the bottle broke and the billboard was a sheet of flame and Tim, who thought he cared about nothing anymore, muttered in wonder, “That chick just set a billboard on fire....”

The Thruxton roared and Tim looked back at the road and saw the girl tearing toward the first cross street inland. Her taillight flashed as she approached the corner then went dull as she made a low, fast, sweeping turn. And then all that was left of her was the dwindling note of her machine.

Tim watched the billboard burn, watched as the backing board disintegrated to reveal its supporting framework of girders, and thought that in the beauty of its destruction, in the insane outrageousness of the act, there was an echo of what he had hoped to find in the park's missing birdsong.

CHAPTER 2

Jocelyn's flat was stark. In an attempt to unclutter the inside of her head she had denuded the place of anything that did not fulfill a necessary purpose. No knick-knacks, no flowers, no picture frames.

Lying on her bed, Tim listened to the shower run in the bathroom.

He'd given her enough time to get back to her apartment, then dropped by and casually asked where she'd been. She'd shrugged, said, "Nowhere," and avoided any further conversation by closing the bathroom door.

She came back into the bedroom now, pulled on a T-shirt, drank half a can of Diet Coke and paced the room, smoking, rarely looking at him.

She said: "You should do *The Artist's Way*."

"I'm not blocked."

"You haven't written anything since before we met".

"Still had two scripts made."

"Digital video. Both of them sub one-mil."

"Better than nothing at all."

"You should see what I'm writing now."

Tim snorted. Jocelyn churned out screenplays in a cigarette- and caffeine-fueled fury, four or five a year, but they were all uniformly shit. Like him, she had shelves of how-to books, had been to workshops with Robert McKee, studied Syd Field on YouTube, but her story ideas were pedestrian and her understanding of structure was nonexistent. She had, so far, failed to attract interest from even the lowest of the lower-rung agents.

When she'd finished her cigarette she took a sheaf of typed pages from a desk in the corner of the room and held them out to him.

"I thought maybe you could polish the dialogue. Don't change anything else. It'd be cool if I could get it back by next week."

Jocelyn left the room. Tim stared at the ceiling, then out of a window that showed black sky and the tops of palms under-lit by streetlight.

There were twenty-five pages. He sat with his back against the wall and read them, more to delay returning to the loneliness of his dead sister's flat than out of any real interest. He knew what he'd find – characters that were undeveloped, a nonsensical through-line, a plot full of holes.... And shitty dialogue.

Only he didn't. What he found was slightly more than the first act of a finely observed and elegantly structured drama. It was marred by Jocelyn's trademark junior-school prose and the dialogue was on the nose more often than not, but the skeleton of the script – the progression and balance of scenes, the turning points punching their way through the narrative, the manipulation of sympathy – was masterfully accomplished.

The story, or at least what he had of it, was a portrait of three aspiring filmmakers struggling to establish themselves in the business. Starting out with lofty ideals, artistic integrity and an arthouse sensibility, they are quickly seduced by Hollywood, eventually abandoning character-driven indie moviemaking to focus instead on a break-through mainstream action film.

Once the film has been made, though, they face career disaster when one of the heads of a film distribution company that purchases the rights to their action film wants to

shelve it indefinitely. They respond by murdering him, knowing that his business partner will release the film.

Out in the living room, Jocelyn was vacuuming and reciting a personal affirmation mantra. Tim knew it was some bullshit about freeing creativity and achieving success; he'd heard it a thousand times. It occurred to him now, though, that if she finished this screenplay and the rest of it was as good as this sample, there was a better than even chance she'd get her wish.

He put down the last page, wondering how Jocelyn, until now such an abject failure at the craft of writing for film, could suddenly produce work of such quality.

He got off the bed and went into the living room. He waved the pages at her.

"This is good."

"It's going to make me a rock star."

"You got a treatment of the rest?"

She tapped her head.

"In here."

"Really? You started this and you don't have a treatment or a step-outline?"

"Trying a different process."

"What happens in the second act?"

"Haven't decided."

"This guy, Tad Beaumont, the head of the production company—"

"Jesus, what about him?"

"He's going to have some sort of personal crisis, right? Because he's given up his ideals, not to mention become a murderer?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe? Don't you think it's kind of imperative to his arc?"

Jocelyn looked levelly at him.

"You know, Tim, showing me how clever you are isn't the same thing as actually writing something."

She went into the bedroom and closed the door behind her.

Tim suppressed an urge to call her a cunt, to scream that he knew all about her cheating. He looked pointlessly about the room and felt its emptiness creep into him like damp, figured his time there was pretty much at an end. He folded the script pages into his jacket pocket and started to leave.

In the small entrance alcove the leather document case Jocelyn pretentiously used as a handbag hung from a peg by the front door. Sticking from it: the upper edges of five folded sheets of yellow note paper.

Tim checked over his shoulder, the bedroom door was still closed. He pulled the pages out, saw that they were a step-outline for part of a screenplay.

Screenwriters used step-outlines as maps to guide themselves through the construction of first-draft screenplays. Step-outlines did not lay out the internal structure of each shot or contain dialogue as such, and any two screenwriters, working from the same step-outline would produce screenplays which differed in tone and approach. But the story, the characters, the progression of the plot and the final outcome of each screenplay would be essentially the same.

The pages Tim held outlined the rise of a group of filmmakers through the Hollywood ranks after the release of a violent action movie they had produced –

obviously the next section of the story for the screenplay he'd read in the bedroom. They were written in ballpoint in handwriting that wasn't Jocelyn's.

Tim replaced the papers and left the apartment.

CHAPTER 3

Gone ten p.m. Traffic on Wilshire Boulevard less than light. The yellow 1967 Camaro easy to tail. Denning hung back a few car-lengths, but he wasn't really worried about being spotted. The driver of the Camaro had no reason to suspect he was being followed and his passenger, Denning's twenty-eight-year-old daughter, Peta, would keep her mouth shut even if she saw Daddy's fifteen-year-old white Crown Victoria in her boss's rear-view mirror.

Denning's windows were closed. Air conditioner off. He was only vaguely conscious of the sweat that ran from his receding hairline and down his cheeks. Peta had been working for Kid Haldane for four months and it was plain to Denning that she was falling for him – the first rent in the web of dark interdependence she and Denning had woven in the ten years since Clara disappeared.

Peta was an attractive woman and the affair was long overdue. But the thought of her climbing into this man's bed, and the changes it would bring to his own life, made Denning want to cry out.

Santa Monica. Westwood Village. Denning had paid little attention to where he was on this route through the western end of Los Angeles. He'd given even less thought to what Haldane's destination might be. So, now, when the Camaro turned into an open parking lot about a quarter-mile past Beverly Hills, it took an effort of will to understand what he was seeing.

He drove on for another hundred yards, his stomach icing with disbelief, then U-turned and drove back, parked on the street a few yards shy of the entrance to the lot, killed his engine and lights.

A long, gray, two-story building bordered the lot at its far end. There was no lighting and the lot was only dimly illuminated by the spill from the boulevard. Two cars – the Camaro and a Maserati. All the other slots empty.

Peta and Kid stood at a service entrance set into the side of the building. Kid pressed a button and put his hand on the door. A moment later it opened and the two of them went through it.

Denning sat rigid in his seat and stared at the building. One part of the wall was covered with a billboard advertising an action movie, the rest of it displayed a giant, illuminated logo – three initials: GHQ.

G...H...Q....

Three letters that had been branded into Denning's brain eight years ago. Now filling him like a toxic wave, sending him tumbling back through the years, back to when the cold winds of disgrace snuffed out what was left of his life.

By 2004 GHQ had capitalized on the runaway success, just twenty-four months earlier, of *Maximum Kill*, its first major release, and had bagged two of that summer's top weekend openings. Any mutterings that *Maximum Kill* had been a fluke for a production company previously known only for a single arthouse flick were forever quieted, and Michael Starck and his two co-owners, the twins Jeffery and Ally Bannister, stepped firmly into the ranks of A-list independent producers.

Denning was working as a features writer for the Hollywood Reporter at the time and caught the assignment to write five thousand words on the company and its

spectacular rise. Portrait pieces like this were ten-a-penny in the Hollywood press, and he figured he'd do his career a lot more good if he dumped the usual formula of potted bios and cinema-centric chronologies in favor of something a little more sensationalist.

So, Denning went looking around the edges of the company, searching for connections, relationships, involvements.... Searching for anything, however tenuously related, that might titillate his readers.

He found two things: Big Glass and Delores Fuentes.

In early 2002, the worldwide distribution rights to *Maximum Kill*, essentially a violent, eighteen-million-dollar car chase which Michael Starck had himself directed, were bought at the Toronto Film Festival by a new but pushy distribution company called Big Glass. Big Glass was owned and run by two partners: Theo Portman and Scott Bartlemann. Three months before the scheduled North American theatrical release of *Maximum Kill*, Scott Bartlemann was murdered.

The kill was an easy close for the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, because along with Scott Bartlemann's body they found that of his maid, her head blown off by an apparently self-inflicted shotgun blast. In the absence of any information to the contrary, the case was labeled murder/suicide and quickly disappeared from the front page.

That was it. That was the extent of the connection between GHQ and the Bartlemann murder – Scott Bartlemann had been one of the principals of the company distributing their film. Nothing more. But Denning saw that the murder could be used, however spuriously, to draw extra eyes to his planned story.

Hoping for some background color, he'd interviewed a few low-level Big Glass employees. There wasn't much they could tell him, given that they were on the outside looking in, so to speak, and not privy to any of the more juicy details the police might have stumbled across during their investigation. Denning did, however, learn three things: that *Maximum Kill* had been written by Danny Bartlemann, Scott Bartlemann's son and only child; that Danny and Scott had been estranged since Scott walked out on the family when Danny was eleven; and that, at the time of his death, Scott Bartlemann had been planning to delay the release of *Maximum Kill* for up to two years for commercial reasons.

On hearing this last snippet, Denning caught the scent of a Pulitzer nom; a chance to break a case the cops couldn't properly solve: *Son Kills Father Over Delayed Movie Release!* Sadly for Denning, the fragrance of journalistic fame faded into the balmy L.A. air when police case files revealed that Danny had an iron-clad alibi. At the time of Scott's death, he'd been in a Santa Barbara hospital undergoing a minor operation on one of his kidneys – a procedure necessitated by urinary tract complications resulting from a skiing injury he'd sustained in his youth.

Robbed of his chance to count Woodward and Bernstein among his peers, Denning moved on to take a closer look at GHQ itself.

Requests for interviews with its principals, who had been made aware of his earlier visits to the Big Glass office, were turned down – Michael Starck, and Jeffery and Ally Bannister all citing work commitments. This lack of personal contact put a serious hole in Denning's research, but by that time he had other things on his mind. He'd become obsessed with Delores Fuentes.

No examination of GHQ at that point in their development would have been complete without some mention of their most glittering star. She was, if the PR pieces were to be believed, a true Mexican spitfire. Sensual, beautiful, volatile and talented.

So talented, in fact, that she'd taken female lead in both films produced by GHQ after *Maximum Kill*. A feat all the more astounding to Denning because he could find no previous acting history for her – no drama school attendance, no bit parts or commercials, no previous roles. It was as though she had fallen to earth in Hollywood a fully formed star.

In addition to the acres of column inches devoted to Delores' merits as a female version of Bruce Willis in his *Die Hard* period, she'd also hit film industry headlines when it was learned she was signed to a ten-year exclusive contract with GHQ. Long-term exclusive contracts had gone out in the 1950s, but in interviews at the time Delores was quoted as saying that GHQ had made her a star and she saw no reason to ever work for anyone else.

All of this was interesting stuff, but not worth more than a paragraph or two in an article, the primary focus of which was a film production company. Thing was, Denning was still grieving the loss of Clara. And Delores had a body remarkably similar to that of Denning's disappeared wife.

The rational part of his brain knew that this similarity meant nothing, that it did not bestow one iota of who Clara had been upon the posturing female movie star. But there was another part of him, unfortunately, that didn't think quite as clearly.

From stalking her at various hip eateries to going through her garbage, Denning ran the gamut of cracked investigative practice, battering his head against the walls of privacy which either she or GHQ had thrown up around those portions of her life that did not immediately pertain to her current incarnation as movie star.

That wasn't to say there was nothing to be learned about her. There were press releases, of course – shallow descriptions of her previous life in Mexico, her attendance at a GHQ casting call because she had been dared by her girlfriends, the flash-grenade detonation of her success....

But none of these satisfied Denning's desire to *know* Delores, none of these carried the fleshy taste of who she really was.

Finally, after weeks of pestering everyone from the press girl at GHQ, to Delores' personal manager, to Delores herself when he was able to accost her in public, Denning secured an interview with her. Far from serving to establish a special rapport between Denning and his subject, though, this interview went bad from the start.

When he realized that Delores – sitting across a coffee table from him in her Bel Air mansion, displaying curves, skin texture and cadences of flesh that had once, in another woman, been so familiar to him – not only felt no physical attraction for him, but was obviously engaged in a game of subterfuge when it came to her past, Denning reacted badly.

He bored at her relentlessly with questions about her upbringing, her training as an actress, the obstacles she must surely have encountered on the road to success....

But Delores, made of sterner stuff than the average Tinsel Town floozy, blocked him at every turn. And Denning came away with nothing more than he'd already learned from her press releases.

Whether it was something to do with his intrusive probing of her background, or whether it was linked to his concurrent research of the Bartlemann murder, Denning never found out. But a week after the interview, GHQ destroyed his career, disgraced him in front of his peers, and sentenced him to a marginal existence of odd jobs and occasional prescription painkiller abuse.

Now, sitting in his car, sweltering in the GHQ parking lot, Denning could still smell the cool air of the Hollywood Reporter offices, could still see the dim room, its venetian blinds torqued against a carefree sun, where his editor and the security manager had sat him down and played him some footage on one of the early plasma screens. And he could still see the tinted glass of the limo's window sliding up as the two detectives arrested him on the sidewalk and walked him to their car, could still see the face of Michael Starck watching him as it disappeared behind a sheet of dark reflections.

CHAPTER 4

An unsubtle military palette – olive carpets, khaki walls, sections painted in Desert Storm camouflage. Posters for action movies that had smashed the box office. Displays of military hardware from various productions. GHQ. General Head Quarters. Michael Starck's mission statement: Conquer Hollywood.

This late at night, the place was empty. Peta followed Kid upstairs and along corridors. She was only there to carry his bag, to play her assistant's role, but it was hard not to be excited at being inside a real, bona fide Hollywood dream mill. Even more so when your boss was falling in love with you and the future looked set to hold a whole lot more Hollywood magic.

At the back of the building there was a private reception area for those lucky enough to get face time with Michael Starck. Beyond this, a short corridor lined with assault rifle replicas, and then a set of double doors that gave onto Starck's office.

Kid Haldane asked for his bag, a leather shoulder sack, and she held it open while he took out a small container of film – circular, yellow plastic, like home movies years ago. He put it in his hip pocket, winked at her, told her to wait in the reception area, then went down the corridor and pushed open the doors.

Michael Starck sat behind a desk that looked like a small fortress. More weaponry on the wall behind him. Down one side of the room, a collection of vintage projectors on wheeled stands.

Michael lifted a screenplay from his desk, looked levelly over it at Kid, then dropped it.

“*Antepenultimate.*”

The twang of his Australian accent was noticeable, even though he'd lived in the States for thirty years.

Kid nodded.

“The one before the one before last.”

“Yeah. Sesquipedalian.... You know what that means?”

“Uh—”

“You're familiar with our catalogue.”

“I've seen everything GHQ's done. I love that stuff, but—”

“The longest word in any of our titles has four syllables. *Antepenultimate* has six. Sesquipedalian is a word meaning a long word, or a word with many syllables. But its root is Latin – *sesquipedalis*, meaning a foot and a half in length. Not to put too fine a point on it, Kid, but that's about the size of the financial dick this film would shove up my arse.”

“It's a title, who gives a shit? We'll change it.”

“It's two hours of introverted drivel about a guy whose daddy didn't love him.”

“It's a Danny Bartlemann script. The first thing he's written in ten years. Yeah, it needs some tightening, but don't you feel it? Doesn't it lift you?”

“Oh, please.... Look, this kind of thing is fine for Sundance. And that girl of yours wants to use it as a calling card? It's fine for that too – a closely observed, intensely wrought excursion into the lives of real people. Yeah, yeah, yeah. But you want three million dollars.”

“*Only* three million dollars.”

“It's not a lot of money for a film, nobody's disputing that. But it's a fuck-load of money to lose, even for a company like GHQ.”

“You won't bankroll it yourself, you'll use private equity funding. And the risk to GHQ will be minimal after foreign sales. Even domestically you'll recoup, what? A million when you sell it to Big Glass?”

“Big Glass won't touch it.”

“Are you kidding? Big Glass? The company Danny's father used to own?”

“*Part* own.”

“Okay. But you're telling me they won't distribute it? What about old times' sake?”

Michael laughed and shook his head.

“Do you have the slightest fucking grasp on reality? *Antepenultimate* is too small. Big Glass is run by Theo Portman, has been since Scott Bartlemann's death. Theo lives to make money. *I* live to make money. The return on domestic distribution for a three-mil film isn't going to top three-fifty. It's just not worth doing. But that's not all. Someone, somewhere is going to lose money if the film tanks. And that's someone, somewhere we can't go to again to finance the films we *want* to make.”

“But it won't tank. You saw what Chick did with *Loggers*. We broke even, for Christ's sake. Everyone got their money back. She won Best First Feature with it.”

“At Atlanta.”

“It's still an award. How long have we known each other? Twenty years? We were on our knees together in that fucking desert, man.”

Michael shook his head in disgust. “*Loggers* had a budget of four-hundred K, and more than half of that came from the MPAA's New Director Fund. I'm one of the producers contracted to disburse those funds. I pushed them your way and made up the difference by selling a couple of the cars we used in *Turner's Highway*. GHQ didn't even carry *Loggers* on its books. And that, Kid, is as much as old times' sake gets you.”

“Michael, come on. Filmmaker to filmmaker—”

“You've done one film. 'Filmmaker's' a bit of a stretch. And your director, ditto. She's done her student films and *Loggers*. Period.”

Kid took a breath and thought about the film in his back pocket. He took another shot.

“Doesn't the quality of the movie mean anything?”

“It's not a movie, it's a script.”

“Okay, script. Danny Bartlemann – he wrote *Maximum Kill*, for Christ's sake. That film put you and GHQ on the map. Don't you think there's a possibility a script by the same writer might turn a few bucks?”

“*Maximum Kill* was a flat-out, road-burning action movie with an outstanding body count and a shit-load of sex. It was an anomaly. Danny wrote it as a joke. Before that, he wrote another flick about Daddy: *The Seminal Day*. Lionsgate took a bath on it. *Antepenultimate* is just *The Seminal Day – Part Two*.”

“What about *Chrysanthemum*?”

Michael's face turned stony.

“What about it?”

“The first feature GHQ made, before *Maximum Kill*. Your directorial debut. I'd venture to say it was somewhat sesquipedalian. And it was arthouse to its roots. I know, I've seen it.”

“You've answered your own question, then.”

Michael was a large man. He had a thick head of dark hair, a red face, and a prominent belly. He didn't give a shit about current Hollywood body-aesthetics, he was too successful. The only exercise he took was riding his horse. He kept a private stash of weapons at his house and there were rumors he'd once blown up a cow with a bazooka while filming in Thailand.

His mouth was set tight now and Kid figured the meeting was about to get called to a close. Kid stood up, took the yellow film case from his pocket and walked over to the row of projectors. He selected one and wheeled it out in front of an empty stretch of wall. Michael watched him darkly.

“This is *my* office, Kid.”

Kid opened the case, took out a spool of film about four inches across.

“I saw you had one of these when I dropped off the script. Super 8. Retro cool....”

He located a wall socket, plugged the projector in, then laced the film through the gate and onto the take-up spool. He flicked a switch and the bulb came to life, throwing a blurred square of light against the wall. Kid twisted the lens until the edges of the square were sharp. He turned to Michael.

“I've had this film two years. I could have used it anytime I wanted and just asked for a handout. But I didn't. I want you to remember that, Michael. I'm not trying to fuck you. And I'm not going to do this more than once. But you're going to finance my film.”

He set the film running.

Michael watched the image flicker on the wall of his office and felt a loose stirring in his bowels. And for the thousandth time cursed Delores and her cunt screenwriter.

When the film was done, as the take-up spool spun and the tail of the film ticked against the projector's tension arm, they came to terms.

Michael said: “A budget of three million, it'll have to go through the company.”

“Fine by me.”

“Anything over a million needs sign-off by Jeffery and Ally too. Company bylaws. And I can tell you, they won't want to make this.”

“I'll take care of Jeffery and Ally. You just make sure you tell them you're signing off.”

“You have something on them, as well?”

“I've known them a long time. Jeffery's a freak. I was a porn star. Draw your own conclusions. Ally will do whatever Jeffery wants.”

“I want the film.”

“I could have copied it.”

“I'm sure you have. But Super 8 is reversal stock, it captures a positive image, so there's no negative. To make a good quality copy you'd have to use a transfer facility. Not something you'd risk, I think. Some tech recognizes me, takes a copy for himself, it'd be on YouTube before I could wipe my arse. Then it's worthless to you. That leaves some homemade video cam thing – shitty quality, less authenticity, easier to challenge. In any case, you can't expect me not to ask for a show of good faith if, as you say, you don't intend to use it again.”

This wasn't anything Kid hadn't expected.

“How long will the money take?”

“Not long. A week or two. I'll send Business Affairs a memo when I hear from Jeffery and Ally. After that, you sign the papers and give me the film, Business Affairs transfers the funds into a production account.”

“Or you transfer the funds and *then* I give you the film.”

Michael looked at him without speaking for several seconds and then said: “No. If you can't do this for me, Kid, we need to have a different conversation.”

Kid hesitated for a moment, then nodded.

“Okay.”

He rewound the film and put it back in its case. At the door he stopped and turned to Michael.

“You renege on the deal, a shitty video copy could still cause you a lot of grief. And if I should wind up in a dumpster and my lawyer sends that shitty video copy to the police along with an outline of the deal we've just made, I think it'd go a long way to shoving a foot and a half of *legal* dick up your ass.”

In the reception area, Peta dropped the film back into Kid's bag and slung it over her shoulder. Kid was in a good mood and wanted to have drinks in a bar across the street. On the ground floor, as they headed out of the GHQ building, they passed the door to a restroom. Peta told Kid to go on ahead, asked him for the key to his car so she could pick up her jacket on the way.

When she was finished in the toilet, Peta walked out into the parking lot, unlocked the Camaro and got her jacket. She looked inside the bag, saw only the film, a pad, some pens, a couple of blisters of OxyContin and a protein bar. Figuring Kid wouldn't need any of that stuff in the bar, and knowing nothing of the film's contents or importance, she dropped the bag into the driver's-side footwell.

CHAPTER 5

Denning had his window down. The heat and the anxiety of wondering what his daughter was doing in the GHQ building, of trying to divine what horror this insane intersection would give birth to, had tightened about his chest until he figured he'd better have some air.

But air hadn't made any difference at all.

Peta was now in a bar with her boss and the evening's conclusion was obvious. Denning's head lurched with images of tangled sheets, his daughter's spread legs.... He wanted to scream at the sky. He wanted his chest to blow apart and end his misery. But his ribs stayed knitted together and his heart kept pumping and his fucking brain, this brain that was so battered and worn, disobeyed him and kept on making sense of everything he saw.

Breath in...heart thudding, blood a surf in his ears, the Crown Vic's door open behind him. Breath out...his damp, dark suit clinging to him, pulling at his legs, Denning not feeling it, hearing sounds that weren't there, sounds he'd made two seconds before, only now catching up with him, so that he felt propelled by some motive wave, blown forward by something he'd decided long before.

Breath in...at the Camaro, the world slamming into place, long lines of light becoming objects again. Breath out...nausea, sweat, heat, a headache pushing at his forehead, sensation returning to fingers and hands and feet.

And the feel of the cylindrical rubberized grip in his palm, thumbing the bright steel stud, the pleasing jolt as the extendable baton shot to full-length, four segments of black steel. The weight, the heft, the sudden empowerment. The lozenge-shaped head arcing through the parking lot air. Denning a monster to himself – lips drawn, teeth at full clench, eyes stretched and watering. Around him, a boiling concoction of lights and objects, a spinning wall that set him beyond this pared fragment of Los Angeles. The sound of Wilshire a distant crepitation, as though somewhere there was a beach and somewhere beyond its dunes sea-grass rustled under an uneven wind.

A shatter of fragments, glassy; for a moment, for a heartbeat, for a breath, pausing in their trajectory to snatch light and hold it, bitter and hard, then collapsing in a dimming shower across the Camaro's seats and the tarmac of the lot.

And Denning, circling, smashing window after window, and then, with no more windows left to break, unzipping and pissing past the jagged glass of the driver's-side window. Shaking off, seeing Kid's bag and lifting it out, figuring whatever was in it Kid would miss.

Heading coastward. Denning spent now, his rage replaced by an overwhelming sense of his own impotence. He glanced at himself in the rear-view mirror. Dark, receding hair cut close, heavy moustache. He'd been told he looked like Burt Reynolds, before Burt started wearing a rug. But tonight there was nothing of that good ole boy handsomeness, nothing of that rugged capability. Tonight he looked drained. Tonight he looked like a man who could not understand even the smallest part of what went on in the world.

He pulled into a small court of stores and bought a bottle of Wild Turkey. Back in the car his eyes fell on Kid's leather bag. He opened it, saw the usual detritus – snacks, pens, a notepad full of scribbled reminders. And a couple of things a little more

interesting – a circular yellow container that held a roll of narrow film with sprocket holes down one side, and two blisters of 40mg OxyContin.

Denning recognized the type of film. Snatches of his own childhood had been recorded on similar stock. He figured this spool was probably something mundane to do with Kid's movie business, that he'd check a few frames when he got somewhere where the light was better.

The OxyContin was a major bonus. In his early twenties Denning had been prescribed the painkiller for an injured shoulder – the result of repetitive impacts received during college football – and his body had never forgotten the delicious insulation the small pills provided. Denning would never have shot smack or burned meth, but ten years ago, after Clara disappeared, he'd scored his first illicit dispensation of OxyContin on a street corner in Watts. Since then, he'd indulged in week-long binges several times a year.

Denning swallowed one of the pills, chased it with a mouthful of bourbon, aware it wasn't a good mix, then pulled out onto Santa Monica Boulevard and rolled toward the ocean.

In the bar, Kid and Peta sipped jalapeño margaritas and snacked on blow-torched Tasmanian scallops.

Kid was in his mid-forties. He was the Marlborough man with a ten-inch cock; a gauntly lined, suntanned and sun-blonded porn star fuck-up playing the L.A. game – bury the past, incinerate an old life in the transformative fires of movieland, turn himself into something new.

At least he was trying.

And Peta was a necessary ingredient. Someone to love at last. Someone he *could* love.

They kissed over their drinks and he begged her to come home with him, but she said she wasn't ready yet. Strange, in Kid's experience, for a twenty-eight-year-old woman in the film industry.

They had known each other for four months, had been flirting for two of those. And now there were embraces behind closed doors at the office. The groundwork was done, for both of them. And yet she had not made that final move, had not set a match to the touchpaper of their relationship.

He had suspected an existing lover, but she had sworn that she had none. He had asked to visit her at home, but she had refused with some excuse about privacy and personal space and that her father wouldn't like it. He had asked about her life, her history, had gotten next to nothing.

New ground for Kid, the celluloid cocksman.

They talked about *Antepenultimate*, about the excitement of making a movie. Kid said his meeting with Michael Starck had gone well, that things were on track. He avoided specifics, steered her away from the topic of finance.

Walking back to the parking lot they held hands, the carbon dusted air of Wilshire falling about them, warm and pleasantly acrid, Kid letting himself believe that he really could become someone different.

It was only when he saw the Camaro, with its windows smashed and piss on the seats, that he realized Peta was not carrying his bag. When he asked, Peta, feeling like she wanted to throw up, told him she'd left it in the car.

Kid was quiet for a while, looking at the wreck of his classic automobile. Then he took his jacket off, bundled it up and used it to sweep out glass and soak up the puddles in the seams of the seats.

He climbed behind the wheel. Peta slid in beside him.

Kid stared through the space where the windshield had been, his fists balled on the rim of the steering wheel, the muscles at the corners of his jaw bunching. Peta put her hand on his arm and said: "There wasn't really anything in it except that film."

Kid looked at her for a long moment, and then he smiled and rubbed her thigh and started the Camaro. They drove down to Santa Monica, the wind in their faces, so Peta could get her car from out front of the office.