

PART I:

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Juicy was a filthy man. Not in a “I just spent four days hiking through the Appalachians, and the closest thing I’ve had to a shower was the dip in the creek” kind of way, but in the “I’ve spent the last four years of my life on the street, sleeping in alleys, eating thrown-out leftovers, drinking tall boy Budweisers—or on a good day a bottle of Canadian LTD Scotch whiskey (known as ‘last two dollar’), and defecating in abandoned buildings preferably but anywhere semi-private realistically, though I’m not overly concerned with making sure none of the shit is stuck to my leg” kind of way.

Juicy hadn’t always been a filthy man. He hadn’t always called the ’row his home. He was once Robert Harris: high school and trade school graduate; mechanic by day, bowling and dart league superstar by night; divorced yet devoted father of two boys, owner of a two-bedroom bungalow and nice pre-owned sedan, with many of his free hours spent in the backyard with Lulu.

Not quite Camelot, but a shining example of the American dream nonetheless.

When Robert smoked his first rock of crack cocaine, he knew he would only do it that one time. When he lost his job, he knew he’d get another one. When his ex-wife stopped letting Tony and Robert Jr. come around, he knew he’d make it up to them. When he lost the house, his remaining family and friends, and the last of his savings, he knew he’d always have Lulu. Lulu was his baby. Lulu was the love of his life.

Then Lulu was gone.

And when Robert, his transformation into Juicy nearly complete, had watched Lulu’s custom taillights disappear into the night, he knew that in her now vomit-stained, slept-in, pipe-burnt leather driver’s seat, his benefactor sat, smug in his superiority. Juicy had let the bubbling indignation pass and instead thumbed the seven hundred dollars he’d been paid for Robert’s 1967 jet black, fully restored Chevrolet Impala: Lulu.

The weekend Juicy had planned with his proceeds would be glorious. He would rent a room on the ’row—one of those hourly rate, “would be condemned if anyone of consequence ever cared” rooms. He’d get some Jack Daniel’s Black Label whiskey to drink, because Lulu had filled his pockets, and this weekend wasn’t one for LTD. He’d get a whore for company—a sexy one who would laugh at his jokes, make him feel important, *and* satiate his every carnal need. Most importantly, he’d get some rock. None of that stepped-on, 80-20 baking soda shit for Juicy. This weekend was all about that *snap*—the good shit, the real shit, the—get-you-so-high-God-Himself-has-to-look-up-to-see-you—type shit.

A short time later, Juicy was in his nirvana. As he laid bareback against the headboard, a blonde named Sandy—who in a former life had been Emily, who might pass for eighteen but wasn’t—bobbed between his legs. His eyes closed, lighter in one hand, straight pipe to his lips—he struck it and let the flame take him higher.

That snap made the telltale cracking sound, and the long, clear, slender tube was instantly milky white. He didn’t stop sucking until his lungs were full, and he let the smoke stay there.

He stripped every ounce of over-God high from it before exhaling in a mouth-numbing stream.

While Juicy was in a state of euphoric, crack-cocaine-induced sexual bliss, Sandy—the former Emily who might’ve passed for eighteen but wasn’t, past high school cheerleader and honor roll student—was working. Not in the way Juicy had thought, but in the way he would’ve expected had he not been an infant on the ’row.

When the door broke from its hinges, Juicy’s first real lesson in the street began.

“A’ight nigga, ’bout dat time.”

Juicy flinched, about to defend himself and, most importantly, his stash.

“Aw nah, son. My nigga, dis nigga need some act right,” the man said to two others who appeared through the open door.

“Crack-head-ass nigga on some dumb shit,” one of the other thugs agreed.

Juicy was a fast learner, and he’d seen the scene in panoramic clarity: the sudden pinch of teeth in the most sensitive area; the pistol pointed at him, seemingly bigger than the man who held it; the two men who now stood over him; and the realization that his weekend of Lulu’s proceeds was concluded in twenty-five minutes, an unfinished blowjob, and one long, glorious pull into that snap.

Sandy and her crew had taken everything: the rock, the cash, the drink, the smokes, even Juicy’s clothes, and for good measure, they beat him unconscious with the pistol.

Four years later and Juicy had never again come close to the promise of that weekend. His days and nights consisted of getting money—by *any* means—and going to buy some stepped-on, 80-20 baking soda shit. Rinse and repeat. It was pathetic, even by Juicy’s standards.

So when the offer came from the stranger he’d never seen before—a proposal no one who wasn’t a desperate, repugnant soul like Juicy would even listen to—he saw a golden beacon of salvation, steeped in that good shit, whores, and drink.

In service of that offer, Juicy now ran—or fast-limped because his right ankle was disfigured courtesy of the ’row—hounded by men who would kill him if they caught up. Despite his injury, Juicy easily kept in front of his pursuers. And even as they gave chase, the dealers knew it was probably fruitless. One truism on the ’row: you can’t catch a crack-head. The four men chasing Juicy were motivated by money, by revenge. Juicy was motivated by the rock, the sweet, cloying goodness of that snap. The snap won the race more times than not.

Juicy scaled the fence of the junkyard and fell ten feet to the ground. He kept moving, unconcerned with the nerve endings that ignited his wretched body in pain and the new gashes that painted his arms and legs red.

Other than a single light post in the center of the junkyard, the expansive mounds of discarded vehicles and construction equipment were shrouded in darkness. Outside a rather measly ring of light, every inch of the yard screamed *perfect hiding spot*. Slip into here and wait out your pursuers, and when they give up, make sweet love to that snap.

Tonight, Juicy inexplicably headed right for the light post. And he headed there against his better judgment, because that’s where the stranger had told him to go.

Under the light post, gripping the rock with both hands, Juicy watched the four men approach, sweating with anger and exertion in the cold night. He heard their curses and

threats, but his eyes searched only for the stranger.

Muthafucka said he'd be here. Don't do me like this. Don't do me dirty.

Juicy continued to probe the night until he was surrounded. His benefactor, the stranger with a promise only a crack-head as desperate and pathetic as Juicy would believe, had abandoned him.

He fingered the rock and started to beg. The dealer he'd punched a short time ago when he'd snatched the rock because of the promise, returned the favor. Juicy was greeted by four pairs of feet the instant his body hit the ground. With the merciless delight of children stomping upon ants, the feet pummeled him. He could feel his bones breaking under the torrent. Blood poured from his mouth and all those gashes, the ones he'd been so indifferent to, until he couldn't tell if more of his blood was *on* him or *in* him.

Juicy was just about to call it quits when the first of the feet stopped kicking and the man attached to them fell to the ground beside him, with less of a head than one would consider functional. Another quickly followed, just as headless. The remaining two took very different approaches to the situation that now befell them.

One ran into the shadows, shooting blindly, his pistol cocked to the side just the way the movies had shown him. Full of bluster and bravado, he was hell-bent on finding the one responsible. He dived into the vast field of twisted metal and debris. His search was not in vain. The void swallowed his curses and bluster in a single report.

The last one, the smart one in Juicy's estimation, ran the other way, away from the dark abyss that had stolen his friends' heads. But his reward was no less immediate, his death no less final.

Four perfect shots, four perfectly still bodies. Juicy, with blood seeping from wounds too numerous to count and bones too mangled for repair, managed to smile wide. He licked chapped lips, the numb taste of promise already dancing over his tongue. Never mind that he couldn't walk on his busted nubs, he would manage. At the sound of shoes on broken glass, bits of metal and dirt crunching under a slow gait, Juicy almost wept.

Fifteen hundred mufuckin' dollas.

That was the price of his beating and the heads of four drug dealers. Well worth the cost.

They shit was doo doo anyway.

He'd go downtown to Wash Ave., where all the rich white kids went, and get that good shit.

The stranger, clad in black, finally stood above him, and extended his arm down toward Juicy. Juicy reached his disfigured arm upward and grasped the gloved hand with gnarled, calloused fingers. He could almost feel Sandy's head bobbing.

Imma get that bitch. Imma fuck that bitch. Imma beat that bitch's ass. I might even kill that bitch.

His mind so enthralled with the prospect of reliving his first weekend on the 'row the *right* way, Juicy only slightly registered that he'd been turned around, and the man now gripped his throat from behind. The blade entered the left side of his abdomen. He struggled weakly against the stranger's grip. The scream he knew should be echoing through the darkened junkyard died in the viselike hold. Feeble smacks on the man's arm were the extent of his

defense.

The man's lips were so close that Juicy felt his hot breath on his ear. Rhythmic breaths. Calm breaths.

"Wicked," the man whispered.

In no hurry, the man guided the blade in an agonizingly slow arc across Juicy's stomach. In a former life, Robert Harris would've known that a version of *seppuku*, ritual Japanese disembowelment of a dishonored samurai, had befallen him.

In this life, Juicy the crack-head died smelling of his own shit, keenly aware of his predicament, but still wondering if the stranger was going to give him his *fifteen hundred mufuckin' dollas*.