

God's Guitar

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The Angel of Rock appeared precisely at 7:14 A.M. on the second Sunday of November, and stood patiently beside Matt Torrence's bed, his scuffed leather jacket hanging open, the tips of his billowy wings brushing the floor. Matt opened a blurry eye, willing to believe the strange creature with the neon blue eyes was a by-product of too much beer and too little sleep.

"You'll find the guitar at Bruce's Pawn on Arizona Street." The angel's voice was sweet as a Strat with the tone rolled off.

"Who are you?"

The angel plucked a crumpled soft-pack of Camels out of his pocket and knocked one loose, pulling the cigarette free with his mouth. It flared, the tip cherry-red as he took a long drag, letting the smoke roll out his nostrils in wispy curls, and the scent was of incense, sandalwood and Turkish tobacco. Matt sat up a little higher, his mouth dry as cathedral dust, and tried again.

"Who are you?"

"You'll find the guitar," the angel repeated, "on Arizona Street."

He took a last drag off the Camel and snubbed it out against the night-stand. Butterflies rushed skyward where ashes might have been. The angel blew a smoke ring and stepped through it, fading out with just a trace of reverb. Matt lay in bed a long time, listening to the traffic and the church bells, wondering where in the hell he had dropped his mind.

His kidneys drove him where no angel could, across the apartment to the bathroom, pretending the visitation had been nothing more than an odd dream. Relieved, he wandered into the living room and flopped to the sofa, fumbling for the remote amid the scattered text-books, food wrappers and loose papers. Norman Kroft, his roommate, was thankfully asleep, snores muffled by the radio playing in the other, smaller bedroom. Matt finally located the remote beneath an empty CD case, a crack running diagonally across it, held together only by the faded red sticker proudly displaying the words, 'Bruce's Pawn, Butte's Best.' He snorted at the coincidence and clicked the television on.

"Oh, wonderful."

"If you need it," the unseen speaker announced, "Bruce's Pawn has it." The camera swept past long rows of hunting rifles and snowboards, slipping past a dozen guitars hanging from the wall. Matt quickly flipped channels. A commercial popped on, already in progress.

"If you need it..."

He shut the television off and sat for a very long time staring at the blank screen. He barely felt the telephone in his hand. It rang twice before a very sleepy, very female voice answered.

"Is Lonnie there?" he asked, suddenly sheepish for whatever he might be disturbing.

"S for you," the girl mumbled. A moment later a man's voice picked up.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Lon. Matt here. I was wondering if you wanted to hit a couple pawn shops today?"

"Why?"

"I don't know." Matt paused, feeling very foolish. "I was thinking about maybe buying a guitar. Maybe. Figured you'd be the person to take along if I did."

"Who's coming?"

Matt glanced at Norman's door. "Just me." He waited a second longer. "Promise."

"All right. Pick me up around eleven, okay? Not ten. Eleven."

"Sure. See you in a bit." Matt hung up the phone, the scent of sandalwood and tobacco drifting in the morning air.

The car wouldn't start.

Battery dying, Matt surrendered and squirmed out of his battered Sentra and trudged back inside. He frowned, trying to place the ancient tune slowly demolishing his stereo. Norman nodded at the CD player.

"Cream, 'Sunshine of Your Love.' Great, isn't it?" He seemed on the verge of genuflecting. "It's from Disraeli Gears."

"Oh," Matt said, not wanting to pursue the topic. He checked his wristwatch, already hating himself. "How'd you like to give me a ride uptown?"

"Where to?"

"Well," Matt chewed on his lower lip, feeling like a traitor. "I'm supposed to pick up Lonnie Schmidt at eleven. We're going pawn-shopping."

"Okay." Norman popped the cd out of the tray and laid it gently in its paisley case. "What are you pawning?"

"Nothing." Matt's gaze drifting toward the flat-top Guild propped lovingly against the bookcase outside Norman's door. "I was thinking of getting a guitar."

"Cool!" Norman threw his coat on, an enormous blue parka, the quilted sides puffy as fresh marshmallows. "We can jam."

"Sure."

Norman had his coat on before Matt could change his mind, practically pushing him out the door into the brittle autumn wind. He glared at his traitorous Sentra, Norman's ancient Chevy truck purring to life without a hitch, tires crunching as they pulled onto the street. It was a short drive uptown, and far sooner than Matt might have wished, they pulled up beside a one-story house shadowed by a gnarled cottonwood. Norman started to get out, but Matt stopped him.

"I'll get Lonnie."

He stuffed his hands in his pocket and walked up the broken sidewalk. A pretty blond in a long gray

coat let him in, smiling. At least, Matt thought sourly, Lonnie should be in a good mood about something. A tall man in his early twenties, tousled brown-black hair hanging just above his collar, stuck his head out of the kitchen.

"Hey, Matthew. I'll just be a second, okay?"

"No hurry." The glorious aroma of hot bacon hung in the air as Matt shuffled into the kitchen, his stomach rumbling, reminding him how long it had been since breakfast was anything more enticing than Mountain Dew and Pop-Tarts. On the refrigerator hung a cardboard sign, cheerful blue and red lettering proclaiming 'Albertson's Food Store, employee of the Month.' A Marshal amp with a torn vinyl case stood beside it.

"I'm running a little late, this morning," Lonnie said, elbow deep in suds. "I didn't go out to breakfast after the job last night."

"So I gathered." The girl's perfume mingled with the scent of bacon and dishwater. "Good crowd?"

"Kind of dead." Lonnie dried his hands. He had thick, crushing fingers, a workman's hands, not a musician's, but he was a wizard nonetheless, the sort of guitar player who could squeeze the strings until they screamed then turn around and coax notes from them gentle as a kitten searching for the tit. He threw on his faded Levi jacket. "Okay. Let's go."

His smile vanished at the first glimpse of Norman's pick-up idling in his driveway. Matt shrugged sheepishly.

"My car wouldn't start."

"Great." He glared at Matt "I knew things were going too fucking good today."

Matt prudently kept his mouth shut and slid in, his head brushing the cab. Lonnie crawled in after him and slammed the door.

The windows were filthy behind the steel bars, a layer of dust graying the crowded shelves while hand-printed price tags fluttered in the forced-air breeze. Bruce's Pawn felt rusty, as if the gears of commerce had finely ground to a halt behind its creaking door. Stale cigarets, stale coffee, stale lives. A glowering man behind the counter glanced over his newspaper, grunted something that might have been a greeting, then forgot them. Lonnie blazed trail toward the far wall where a dozen guitars hung from pegs, a barricade of amplifiers and speaker cases standing sentinel beneath. Norman veered away, drawn irresistibly to the used cd bin.

"Eight pays ten he finds something awful," Lonnie muttered. "So, what kind of ax are you looking for?"

"Well," Matt admitted, "I'm really not sure. What's best?"

"Depends." Lonnie ran his fingers over the strings of a tobacco sunburst acoustic, the notes flat. "Can't they tune these sons a bitches?"

Perhaps Matt had expected trumpets from above, or a heavenly light to part the roof beams and spill over the guitar he was destined to find, but if a sign from above waited for him, he was obviously missing it. He took down a jet black electric missing the high E string. Lonnie shook his head.

"You don't want that one. It's got a bad neck. See?" He took it from Matt and hit the strings,

pulling back on the neck, the notes rising uncomfortably. "How serious are you about learning? No sense spending three hundred bucks on something you won't play. But, you don't want to piss away good money for a piece of crap that you'll outgrow in a couple months, either." He paused. "What made you decide to buy a guitar in the first place? You always told me you hated music."

"I never said I hated it." Matt shrugged, hating to reveal his real reason. "Maybe I want some of those babes you always seem to wind up with."

"Yeah, like that's going to happen." Lonnie hung the guitar back on its peg, and moved down the line. He grabbed a bright red Strat copy. "Try this one. Ibanez builds knock-offs, but they're good ones." He played a fast riff, bending the last note with a flourish, then passed it into Matt's outstretched hands.

It felt as cold and dead as the first one, nothing but wood and sweat-grimed metal. If Matt had expected magic, he was disappointed. He fumbled with the guitar as he put it back on the wall, banging it harder against its neighbors than he intended. The fat man behind the counter lowered his paper, menace in his glare. Embarrassed, Matt grabbed the instruments, stopping their pendulum swing. His left hand brushed a pale, hideous pink guitar, the body curved into a deep cut-out where it met the neck. An electric ripple ran up his arm. From far away he thought he heard an angel cough.

"What about this one?"

"A Les Paul?" Lonnie shrugged. "Gibson's are nice. Damned nice. This one's pretty beat up, though." He fingered the price tag. "And, he's asking way too much for it. I mean, look at the paint job? Somebody's gone to a lot of trouble to hide the original color, and that usually means it's been damaged. I'd give it a pass."

"Oh." Matt started to put the battered Gibson back on the wall. The guitar seemed to grow heavier, an unendurable weight forcing him to miss the pegs. He tried again and failed. Hating to look weak as well as untalented, he pretended to study the control knobs. Around the edge of the broad, uncovered pick-ups faint traces of the original color remained, a bright sunburst lurking beneath the pink veneer. Norman sauntered closer, a pair of cassette tapes in hand. They fell to the floor, forgotten, the moment he saw the guitar.

"Jesus H... do you know what that looks like?"

"Yeah," Lonnie said. "It looks just like a piece of crap." He took the Gibson and hung it on the wall. Norman immediately took it down, his hands shaking.

"Buy this one."

"I don't know..."

"I do." Lonnie tried to take the guitar but Norman stopped him.

"Trust me on this, okay?" Norman stared in wonder at the Gibson, stroking it reverently. Tiny drops of sweat rolled down his face as he played the opening lick of 'Wonderful Tonight.'

"Don't do that," Lonnie said. "You don't know how."

Matt took the guitar from his roommate. The neck settled comfortably into his hand, vibrant and warm. Something about the ugly Gibson spoke to him, a rightness tickling his nerves. It faded as he caught a glimpse of the price tag.

"Shit, I don't have that much." Sadly, Matt lifted the guitar toward the pegs. Norman blocked his

hand.

"Trust me," he repeated.

Lonnie rolled his eyes and looked away, disgusted. Norman edged closer, his eyes practically glowing. Feeling like a fool, Matt stumbled toward the counter. The fat man dropped the paper and raised an eyebrow. Matt set the Les Paul on the counter and cleared his throat, his chest suddenly tight. "Would you take three-fifty for this?"

The pawn-broker leaned closer. "Nope. Five hundred."

"Oh come on." Lonnie quietly pushed Matt aside. "Hell, it's not worth three-seventy-five."

The broker shrugged. "Five hundred."

Norman crowded up to the counter. "It's stolen you know?"

"Get the hell out of my store."

"Look..." Matt pried Norman's white knuckles of the counter and pushed him back. He took a deep breath. "How about four hundred?" The fat man scratched under his chin, looked at the guitar, then back at Matt. Finally, he nodded. Matt grabbed his wallet and started counting out the assorted bills inside. He turned toward Norman. "You got twenty bucks?"

Norman shook his head. Lonnie scowled. "Oh, for Christ's sake." He slapped a twenty on top of the pile. The pawn broker swept up the money, counted it, then slid the guitar toward them. Matt grabbed it by the neck and started toward the door, but Lonnie stopped him. "Hey? Isn't there a case?"

"Not for four hundred there ain't," the fat man said.

The door banged shut behind them, sunlight pouring down on the horrible pink Gibson. Lonnie laughed sourly. "What a pair of newbies."

Matt grabbed his roommate by the sleeve. "Mind telling me what the hell is so important about this guitar?" Norman nodded vigorously, grinning.

"That's a 1960 Sunburst. I think it was stolen."

"Oh, wonderful." Lonnie said. "Nice work, Matthew. You just blew your rent on a hot guitar."

"It was stolen," Norman continued, ignoring the outburst, "from Eric Clapton."

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The computer squealed onto the Internet, Norman's face pallid blue in the monitor glare. Matt set an unopened beer in front of Lonnie, currently trying to tune the pink Les Paul, then slumped onto the couch, his own beer cold in his hand, icy as the realization that he probably couldn't afford to drink another one until sometime next semester. Or the semester after that.

"How bad did I get screwed?"

"Not horribly. It's had some rough treatment, but it's not bad." Lonnie played a few bars of slow blues. "Not bad at all."

"It's worth a fortune," Norman muttered, his face pressed against the screen.

"This," Lonnie tapped the fretboard, "is not a '60' Sunburst."

"The serial number says it is. And it's got Patent Applied For pick-ups."

"Big deal. Show me a Gibson that doesn't."

"I mean real ones." Norman clicked the mouse, the printer struggling sullenly to life. He snatched the paper out of the tray. "And look... The serial number isn't accounted for."

"Gee." Lonnie shrugged, unimpressed. "What were there, like fifty thousand of 'em made that year?"

"Less than seventeen hundred." Norman rushed to his neatly stacked collection of cd's and plucked one from near the bottom of the pile. "Scrape off the pink paint, and this is just like the Mayall sunburst."

Matt sat, beer in hand, lost in the unfamiliar language. "Somebody mind telling me what the hell you two are talking about?"

"Eric Clapton," Lonnie passed the cd across, "played a Cherry Sunburst Les Paul when he was with John Mayall's Bluesbreakers. It got swiped just after he joined Cream." He pointed at Norman. "Numb nuts over there thinks this is the missing ax."

The room wanted to spin. Matt dug his heels against the couch to stop it. "What... what do I do if this really is Eric Clapton's guitar."

"It isn't," Lonnie said. "But if it was, stick it on e-bay and start counting your money."

"Are you insane?" Norman's voice pitched higher. "That would be like... like selling the Holy Grail."

"What else are you going to do with it?" Lonnie said. "You can't prove it's the guitar. And even if you could, can you trace how it got here? Sell the damned thing to the next poor sucker, I say."

The beer in Matt's can had somehow vanished. He stood up, leaving his two friends arguing in the living room, and stumbled to the kitchen in search of another. The refrigerator door popped open, the cold scent of bologna past its prime rushing out, the final beer awaiting its fate beneath the flickering light. Matt grabbed it and popped the tab, then turned around.

"She needs to go home." The Angel took the beer from Matt's hand and drank, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. The Angel finished the can and crushed it into rose petals that drifted to the floor.

"I..." Matt stammered.

"She needs to go home," the Angel said softly, fading into the cheap yellow wallpaper. He smiled as went, his words lingering. "Take her home."

Matt stumbled back into the living room. Lonnie and Norman were still bickering, passing the pink Gibson back and forth between them. Lonnie shook the instrument for emphasis, his face growing redder.

"I don't give a rat's ass what Guitar Player magazine says. You can't prove it's Clapton's."

"Maybe, maybe not." Norman was just as adamant. "But I know one person who could, and he's in concert Tuesday night in Denver."

"You have his tour dates memorized?"

"Only the close ones."

"You're pathetic." Lonnie glanced up at Matt. "Jesus, man, you look like hell. You feeling all right?"

"She needs to go home," Matt said.

"Who needs to go home?" Lonnie stared at the Les Paul. "The guitar?"

Matt nodded. "It needs to go home." Gently, he took the battered Gibson. "Anybody know where Eric Clapton lives?"

"As a matter of fact," Norman's face lit up. "Day after tomorrow, he lives in Denver."

Flames raged in the dreamtime, pyrotechnic flashes of light and laser bursting in time to Ginger Baker's thunder from on high. Matt woke in a cold sweat, the clock beside his bed declaring the stroke of midnight, the walls rattling from the stereo blaring in Norman's room. He pulled on a pair of sweats and trudged through the darkness into the living room. Light poured out from under Norman's door. Matt rapped against it.

"Mind turning it down?"

"What?"

"I said... oh hell, never mind." He pushed the door open. Norman sat on the edge of his sagging mattress, a pair of headphones squeezing his temples white, the Les Paul perched on his knee. He saw Matt and blanched.

"Oh shit..." He quickly shut the stereo off then handed the guitar to Matt. "Sorry. I should have asked if I could play it."

"That's okay." Matt plucked the strings, the notes chaotic and not in the least musical. He handed it back to Norman. "Play all you want. Just turn the music down, okay? I've got classes in the morning."

"No problem." Norman dubbed his toe against the matted carpet. "Does that mean you're not going to Denver?"

"I don't know." Matt ran a hand through his hair. He needed a haircut. If he could afford one. "That's almost a thousand miles, and I don't know if my car is up to it. I don't know if I am either."

"But, this is the chance of a lifetime. You could be a part of rock and roll history."

"I'd rather pass my chemistry mid-terms." Matt looked around the cramped bedroom, open pipes and conduits running overhead, the single light nothing more than a porcelain fixture without the grace of either dome or shade. A poster dominated the wall behind the bed, a montage of Eric Clapton in concert, the words 'Clapton is God' across the top. "What is it with you and that guy?"

"I don't know. Something in his music just speaks to me. It's so pure, so intense." Norman fumbled for words. "Look, when I was twelve my parents got divorced. Really screwed me up for a while. My older brother had a copy of 'Derek and the Dominoes.' God, that's a great album. Eric Clapton, Duane Allman. Ever hear a song called 'Bell Bottom Blues?'"

Matt shook his head.

"It's beautiful. Best song on the whole damn record. I used to play it over and over for hours. Guess it kind of pulled me through." He played a clumsy lick then set the guitar down. "Lonnie's right. There isn't any way in hell to prove this is Clapton's guitar, but, I know it is. Don't ask me why, I just feel it. It's like this is my chance to give something back. Sounds crazy, doesn't it?"

"A little." Matt started back to his room, then stopped. A cool breeze brushed his face, the distant sound of wings fluttering. He turned around. "Look, if you kick in for gas I'll go to Denver."

"Yeah?" Norman's face brightened. "Hey, we can take my truck, if you want."

"We'll talk about it in the morning. I'm going to bed."

He left the Les Paul with Norman, then, against his better judgement, grabbed the telephone and punched in Lonnie's number.

"Hey, Lon. It's Matt. Did I wake you up?"

"Oh shit no. Who the hell sleeps at twelve thirty at night."

"Sorry. I just wanted to tell you we're taking the guitar to Denver. Want to go?"

"I have to work all week," Lonnie finally said.

"So take a couple sick days? I promise, it won't cost you thing."

"Like it didn't cost me twenty bucks at the pawn shop?" Lonnie coughed, the noise loud in the receiver. "Look, I can't. They're breaking in a new assistant manager and need me to show him the ropes."

"Let somebody else worry about it. How often do you get a chance to meet Eric Clapton?"

"You're as crazy as your roommate."

"Does that mean you're going?"

"Good night, Matthew."

Matt grinned, the phone still pressed against his ear. "So, are you going?"

"Call me in the me morning." Lonnie hung up. Matt thumbed the phone off, crawled back to bed and fell asleep, blissfully dreamless.

Snow fell in the night, dusting the barrow pits, hiding the collected trash of a hundred thousand faceless drivers. Matt drove slowly as they topped the pass, the Chevy pick-up sliding under a cement overpass. A faded green sign announced they had just crossed the Continental Divide. He let the truck accelerate gently as they drifted down the other side, swinging in and out of tractor-trailers and mini-vans, the steering wheel unfamiliar in his hands. His Sentra had refused to start, and with daylight burning, had resigned himself to a long trip in the crowded pick-up. Lonnie Schmidt leaned against the passenger door, scowling, while Norman sat in the middle, bobbing his head in time with the music.

"Jesus," Lonnie said, "Don't you have anything that isn't Eric Clapton?"

"Uh, I've got some Jimi Hendrix and Jeff Beck's Greatest Hits."

"You know, there have been some guitar players since the fucking Yardbirds broke up."

"Name one as good as Clapton."

"Two words. Van Halen. No, wait, here's two more. Steve Vai. No, here's another..."

Matt grinned, tuning out the argument. The road leveled, mountains giving way to sage-brush hills, snow-capped peaks ringing the broad valley. Trucks passed them, hauling hay, hauling cattle, hauling crates and boxes and barrels, the lifeblood of the nation pouring down the snow-shrouded interstate. Matt checked the rearview mirror, craning his head to check the cargo. Lonnie had taken pity on him and stuffed the Les Paul inside a scuffed canvas gig-bag, refusing to let the guitar ride up front. It nestled between a beat up duffel bag and the spare tire, a fortune, if Norman could be trusted, covered in road-salt and slush from every passing vehicle. Matt clinked the turn indicator on at the next off-ramp.

"Anybody else have to piss? My teeth are floating."

They swung into a small truck-stop. Matt shut off the engine and stepped out. Norman followed, zipped his coat higher, and took up a position next to the cinder block building. "I'll stand guard until you guys get back." He nodded at the guitar hidden in the back of the truck.

Lonnie rolled his eyes. Matt shrugged and headed for the broad glass doors. He stepped aside for a girl in a dingy purple coat, her hands stuffed deep inside the pockets. An electric tingle ran up Matt's arm as they brushed. The girl turned and stared at him, her eyes wide. She was painfully thin, chestnut hair tucked under a knitted cap as ratty as her coat. Lonnie shoved Matt past the startled teenager.

"Forget it man. She's jailbait."

"Right." Matt tried to put her out of his mind, but her dark eyes followed him as he wandered toward the Men's Room. A bearded man in a brown canvas coat stood at the urinal. Matt hurried inside the nearest stall, not able to wait. He heard the trucker leave. Finished, he stepped toward the sink. His jaw dropped when he looked in the mirror.

"She's in trouble." The Angel lit a Camel and took a long, satisfying drag. "She needs to go home."

Matt blinked. The Angel was gone, incense-laced smoke curling toward the ceiling fan. Lonnie stepped into the bathroom, sniffing the air. "What kind of air-freshener are they using? Smells like a fucking yoga class in here."

"Yeah." Matt hurried outside, shivering. The girl stood near the soda fountains, staring at the slowly rotating rack of hotdogs. The bearded man from the men's room squeezed past her, managing to press his hand against her ass in passing. He whispering something in her ear. She smiled, but looked away. He wandered toward the counter, the girl, reluctantly, in tow.

"Here." Lonnie pressed a Styrofoam cup into Matt's hand, steam sifting out the tab in the plastic lid. Matt wrapped his fingers around the coffee cup, his eyes glued to the truck driver.

"Notice anything strange about that guy?"

"The one in the Carhart?" Lonnie took a cautious sip from his own cup. "What about him?"

"I don't know," Matt said. "That girl with him look okay to you?"

"As good as a meth head gets." Lonnie's eyebrows bunched together. "She did look a little young for the business, I'll admit."

"Business?" Matt stared. "She's a hooker?"

"Duh."

The bearded man pointed out the window at a bright blue Peterbuilt, then sauntered out the door. The girl loitered near the door, paper cup in hand. The angel's words rumbling in his mind, Matt saw his opening and walked over, utterly unsure what to do.

"Hi," Matt stammered.

"Hi." Her voice was high and pretty. Without thinking, Matt said the first thing that popped into his mind.

"I saw that guy put something in your cup."

"What?"

"That guy dropped something in your cup when you weren't looking." Matt felt his face redden, the lie already tangled in complications. "Uh, might have been like a powder or something. I don't know what it was..." He shrugged. "Just thought I should tell you."

The girl stared at her cup, then out the window. Without another word she walked away. Matt sighed, hoping the angel was listening. "Well, I tried."

He left the building, the cold cutting through his Levi jacket. Lonnie was already outside, arguing with Norman. Matt took a long, slow sip from his cup. The bitter liquid warmed him as the Peterbuilt swung past, black smoke churning out chrome stacks. Matt watched it go, the bearded man from the men's room behind the wheel. He tried to see the girl but couldn't. Feeling like a fool, he walked around the truck.

"You guys ready?"

"I've got to piss." Norman hurried into the store.

"How do you keep from killing that guy?" Lonnie asked.

"It's not easy." Matt watched the truck pull onto the blacktop, gears grinding as it gathered speed. He turned around. The girl in the purple coat stood outside the door, her knit cap pulled low, arms wrapped around her thin body. "Hang on a minute."

She backed up at his approach, her eyes wary, the building blocking any retreat. Matt tried to look unthreatening. "You need a lift?"

She stared suspiciously at the battered pick-up. "How many of you are there?"

"Three," Matt admitted.

"Going to be a little crowded, isn't it?"

"Yeah, I guess so. Sorry."

The door opened and Norman barged past, a bag of pork rinds crackling in his grip. He barely noticed the girl. "You ready? It's a long way to Denver you know." Matt shrugged and followed him to the truck, fumbling in his pocket for the keys. He set his coffee on the dashboard, steam fogging the windshield above it as a familiar figure stepped closer.

The girl tapped on the glass. "You guys are going to Denver?" She was shaking, her lips bright red

against her pale skin. Matt rolled the window down.

"You guys are going to Denver?" she asked again, teeth chattering.

"Yeah," Matt said.

"Mind if I catch that ride?"

"Sure, if you don't mind sitting on a lap."

"I don't mind." She hurried around the front of the truck, shuffling foot to foot, waiting for the door to open, and settled against Lonnie. She fanned her fingers above the defroster vents. "Thanks. Fuck, it's cold." She smiled. "My name's Denise."

Matt backed away, Lonnie grunting as they trundled over the pot-holes, Denise's elbows jabbing him. Norman, perched in the middle, ripped the bag open with his teeth and smiled at the girl. "Pork rind?" The girl took one and bit down, crunching in time with the bass guitar blazing out the speakers.

Snow swirled in their wake as they headed east.

The road followed the river, the Yellowstone low, gravel banks and uprooted cottonwoods lining the banks. Limestone bluffs gave way to eroded hillsides as they crossed into Wyoming, long curtains of white hiding the Powder River Mountains. Matt drove, Lonnie and Norman argued, the girl dozed, her head against the door, snoring softly as the miles drifted past. Ahead, just visible around a long, sweeping curve, red and blue lights flashed, a wrecker flanked by patrol cars blocking the right lane. He slowed to a stop as a State Trooper waved them down.

"We'll just be a minute folks," the trooper said, bending low for a better look inside the cab. "You know you're supposed to have seat-belts on, right?"

"Yeah," Matt said, fumbling to find the belt-ends stuffed under the cushions. "Sorry."

The trooper waved them around the wreck, Matt's stomach dropping at the sight of the mangled semi trailer. Long sheets of twisted aluminum flapped in the wind, snow already covering the ruined boxes littering the ground. He coasted past the tractor, the once gleaming blue cab twisted past recognition, the chrome stacks snapped off. Broken bits of glass and plastic covered the road, a small red oval lying along the margin, 'Peterbilt' still legible. Beside it lay a body shrouded in a green blanket, dark blood pooling beneath. He had no doubt it was the bearded man from the truck-stop. Denise gaped as they drove past, her face deathly white. Matt cleared the accident and sped up, anxious to put miles between them, certain he heard an angel whisper over his shoulder, 'I told you so.'

Highway song. Asphalt kisses rubber. Miles roll away, roll away while the sun traces westward, a bright spot in the snake gray clouds as morning bled into afternoon, dusk not far on the horizon. Matt leaned against the passenger door, eyes shut, trying to sleep before his next turn at the wheel. The girl, for her part, had not shut up since they passed the accident hours earlier, chattering incessantly, barely taking time to breathe before launching into another improbable subject.

"I've got a sister in Denver," she said for at least the tenth time. "She's got a job lined up for me. Like a receptionist or something, I'm not sure. But it beats McDonald's, right?"

His eyes drifted shut, her sweet voice blending into the endless stream of classic rock, trapped in a world

forever spinning through abandoned airwaves. Matt slipped across the lonely border between awake and dead-ass exhausted, dreaming a Pentatonic dream in the key of A. Somewhere in the far distance he heard a man singing. Sang about the crossroads, and the devils waiting there.

Matt moaned softly, enjoying the floating, drifting motion. The song drifted across him, thick as the red dust that hung in the air. A flatbox guitar added counterpoint, and the notes slid serpentine beneath the bottleneck. It was a song of wanting and despair. A song of deals gone bad and hell holding the ticket.

Wyoming prairie shifted to Mississippi delta, hot as a potter's kiln, swirling with the ghosts of share-croppers and Model A's. The roads ran straight and true and vanished in the heat waves. Matt stood in the middle of the crossroad, feet chained, the shackles around his wrists chafing him to the bone. A figure walked through the haze, whistling off-key, a heavy Carhart jacket slung over his left shoulder. The bearded man stopped in front of Matt, grinning like a fool while sticky flies buzzed around his eyes. He laughed, his breath road-kill sour.

"They never tell you the price if you fail, do they kid?"

Matt bolted awake, shivering, cold air blowing through the gap in the weather-seal. The girl was still talking, the stereo still playing, snow still swirling across the interstate, ghostly snakes slithering towards the drifts on the shoulder. He sat up and punched the eject button. "Can't we listen to something besides Clapton for a while?"

"Yeah," the girl who called herself Denise chimed in. "What is it with you guys and all this old crap?"

Lonnie nearly choked laughing. Norman sputtered, torn between his devotion to the blues and his growing attraction to the girl whose ass was currently pressed warm against his thigh. Matt rubbed the sleep from his eyes, squinting into the gathering whiteness. "Where are we?"

"About twenty miles out of Caspar." Lonnie slowed down for a herd of antelope dashing across the blacktop. "You want my opinion, we should stop for the night."

"But, we're not even halfway," Norman protested.

"So what? The concert isn't until tomorrow night." Another trio of antelope darted across the highway. Lonnie tapped the brakes, the rear tires sliding. "Let's get a room and wait for the storm to blow out. These roads suck."

"No way." Norman's voice rose, sounding as if he might break into tears. "I can't afford a room."

Matt stared at the road ahead, the dead trucker's warning rumbling in the background. He felt the girl stiffen each time they mentioned stopping, no doubt wary about traveling with three strange men. Off to their left the lights of a distant ranch burned star-bright above the undulating ground blizzard. Matt made his decision.

"I'll pay for the room. Let's spend the night in Caspar."

The storm thickened as Lonnie pulled into a parking lot and shut off the truck, the engine back-firing. Denise sat in the truck, arms wrapped around herself while Matt jogged toward the office, head bent against the wind, Norman dogging in his tracks. The lobby was warm and dry, a blast-furnace compared to the November blizzard outside. He stomped the snow off his tennis shoes and walked to the desk. A mousy woman in a cheerful green vest looked up.

"You have any rooms left?"

"A few." She pulled an invoice up and started filling in the blanks. "How many of you are there?"

Before Matt could lie, Norman blurted, "Four of us."

"Okay." The girl spun the invoice around. "That will be ninety-six dollars."

Sick to his stomach, Matt counted out the last of his money, barely scraping enough to cover the charge. The woman behind the counter raised her eyebrows, but started counting. "I'll need a credit card number, too."

"I..."

Lonnie stepped inside, stomped his feet and pulled a visa card out of his wallet. "Put it on this."

"Thanks." Matt swept the cash off the counter and handed it to Lonnie. "I maxed my card out at the cash machine this morning."

"So I noticed." Lonnie stuffed the bills in his pocket then signed the invoice. Snow covered the sad luggage in the back of the truck by the time they found a parking spot, the guitar a pitiful lump of white. Cold, tired and hungry, they walked up the narrow stairs to the second floor hallway. Matt turned around, waiting for Denise. She stood at the bottom of the stairs, uncertainty in every movement.

"Look, I don't know what you're expecting, but I promise, nothing's going to happen, okay?"

She shrugged. "Maybe I'll just take off and see if I can get another ride."

"Suit yourself." He glanced out the glass door at the snow piling up against the rows of parked vehicles. "I don't think you're going to have much luck though." He waited, but she said nothing. Frustrated, he turned around. "If you change your mind, look us up."

Out the corner of his eye he saw her hesitate, glance once more at the storm, then start up the stairs behind him.

The ghost of pizza past hung in the air, the television tuned to an unremarkable football game. Matt sat on the edge of the bed nearest the door, bored, the guitar behind him. Lonnie stood up and stretched.

"Anybody up for a beer?"

"Sure." Matt grinned. "As long as you're buying. I'm broke."

Norman hesitated, staring covetously at Denise. "I think I'll pass."

She glanced at Matt, imploring him to do something. He grabbed Norman by the collar and herded him toward the door. "Come on. I don't trust you around my guitar."

The lobby was nearly empty, a handful of people clustered around the television, bored with the game. In the corner, a husband and wife duo was tuning up, programming their drum machine, waiting for a lull in the game before starting their first set. Lonnie stared at them.

"I can't believe they have music on a Monday night."

"Hey, not everyplace is as dead as Butte." Matt nodded at the band stand. "You going to sit in with them?"

"Thanks, but no thanks."

"Why not?" Norman said. "I was thinking about asking them if I could sit in for a while, myself."

"I don't think the world's quite ready for that." Lonnie drained his beer, his eyes drifting again toward the tiny dance floor. The pair was playing an Eagles cover, the amps barely audible above the television, not caring if anyone listened. Matt grinned as Lonnie's fingers played the solo note for note on his empty bottle. He pushed away from the table.

"Where are you going?" Lonnie asked.

"To get the guitar before you explode. I'll be back in a minute." He left the lobby, taking his time getting back to the room. He stopped beside a picture window, the fresh snow green-gold in the streetlight glare, the last lazy flakes sifting down. It was peaceful, a scene from a snowglobe. He smiled, happy for the first time in days, satisfied that he was, for once, doing the right thing. His footsteps echoed as trudged up the stairs and found the room. The door popped open, the hinges sighing over the cheap beige carpet.

"What the hell?"

Denise spun around, coat and hat on, Lonnie's credit card in her palm. Quickly, she stuffed the card inside her pocket.

"You stinking little thief."

"I didn't take anything." She tried to brush past him, but he caught her arm and spun her around. She gasped, but he didn't loosen his grip.

"Let go of me or I'll scream."

"Go ahead. I'll knock you on your ass. If you're going to get the cops I'll give them a damn good reason." He shook with rage, angry at letting himself be tricked so easily. He wanted to hit her, wanted an excuse to do something awful. "This is how you pay somebody back for saving your life?"

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"You saw that truck. If you'd stayed with that guy you'd be as dead as he is right now."

"Is that how you see it?" Denise's eyes narrowed. "That makes up for lying about him spiking my pop, right? I don't know what kind of games you weirdos are playing, but I don't want any part of them. I'm out of here."

"Not before you dump your pockets."

"Fine!" Denise emptied her coat pockets, throwing the credit card and the assorted change she had stolen on top of the nearest bed, then stormed out the door. Matt waited a few seconds, letting himself calm down. As mad as he was, he hated to see her run away again. He opened the door and stepped into the hallway, but the girl in the dirty purple coat was long, long gone.

Morning broke crystal bright, sharpened by knife-edged shadows cutting across the still white snow. Matt nursed his third cup of strong, black coffee, waiting for his head to clear. What had seemed so simple yesterday had become hopelessly tangled, the girl's departure casting a sour spell over everything.

Finally ready, they set out, stopping for fuel at a gas station on the edge of town.

A familiar figure stood outside by the payphone, hands stuffed deep in her pocket, puffs of breath hiding her face.

"She's like a stray cat," Lonnie muttered. "You just can't get rid of her." He stepped out of the truck. Matt shut the engine off, leaving Norman to fill the tank, and walked toward her.

"Hi."

"Hi." Denise looked away.

"Thought you'd left last night?"

She shrugged, her boots stained by snow and road salt. "Thought I'd hang out here for a while."

He looked over his shoulder, making sure no one was within earshot. "I never said anything to the others, if that's what you were wondering."

"Thanks." Her lips trembled, slurring her speech.

"You still want that ride to Denver?"

She nodded and followed him back to the truck and climbed inside, no one saying a word about where she might have spent the night.

High prairie bled to grain fields, bled to suburbs, Wyoming gone, Colorado a reality. Ahead, the Denver skyline rose like watchtowers against the hazy blue sky, a mythical kingdom filled with cars hurtling breakneck in an unending parade of rubber and steel. Matt fought to keep up, knuckles white around the wheel. It had been ages since he had driven in real traffic and he had forgotten how much he hated it.

"Anybody know where the hell we're going?"

"The Filmore Theater," Norman said with authority.

"Nice." Matt swerved to avoid a blue sedan. "And where exactly is the Filmore Theater?"

Norman's face fell. "I don't know."

"Maybe," Lonnie said, "we should call Denise's sister and ask directions." If she caught the sarcasm in his voice, she said nothing, her face pressed to the window, hypnotized by the city's swirl and buzz. Matt dodged across lanes toward the nearest exit.

"This is crazy. I'm going to get some directions." A dingy convenience store waited in the shadow of the off-ramp. Matt opened the door, a gray-black chunk of ice breaking off the wheel-well, splattering against the oily rivulets running over the parking lot. Stepping through the slush, he headed toward the door, Norman and Lonnie following. Matt turned around, checking on Denise. "Keep an eye on the truck, okay?"

She nodded.

The bored attendant had no more idea where the Fillmore was than they did. Annoyed, he gave them a poorly printed street map and turned back to the television, leaving them to sort out a route to the

concert. Matt wandered to the restroom, discovered it was locked, and went back outside, desperately needing to take a leak. He glanced at the truck, satisfied that Denise hadn't bolted, then walked around the corner of the flat-roofed building.

The snow was melting, slushy puddles shimmering in the breeze. Matt relieved himself behind an overfilled dumpster, and started back toward the truck, turning the corner in time to see a man in a gray sweatshirt grab the guitar.

"Why didn't you stop him!"

"Stop who?" Denise looked up, startled. Matt charged across the slick asphalt, gaining ground, the man in the sweatshirt hampered by the guitar. He turned around, saw Matt and ran harder, water splaying out as he crossed the street. Matt's right foot shot out from under him, dumping him face first in a ripe puddle.

"Shit!"

Soaking wet, he watched the man in the gray hood run away. Without warning, a lanky blur speed past him, Norman's skinny legs driving hard. Matt stared in utter amazement as Norman overtook the thief and grabbed him by the collar. Together, they careened into a lamppost, fell to the ground and rolled in the wet, dirty snow. By the time Lonnie and Matt arrived, the fight was over, the would-be thief vanishing into an alley. A trickle of blood seeped from the corner of Norman's lip. Beside him lay the gig-bag, the Les Paul nestled safely within.

Lonnie handed him a wad of Kleenex. "Remind me never to steal your guitar."

"Come on," Matt helped him to his feet. "Sooner we get out of this place, the better."

No one disagreed.

They wandered blind, precious time slipping away, the map in Lonnie's hand all but worthless. Pedestrians gawked, sullen people all, feet mired in the melting snow, their faces gray as the leafless trees. Matt drove on, wet and dejected, hating a universe that dropped a man like him in a city like this without so much as a star to steer by. Suddenly, Norman poked him in the shoulder and pointed left.

"There it is."

An ornate building stood across the street, an enormous billboard proudly displaying the magical letters 'Fillmore Theater.' They pulled around back, anxious to find a parking place, a crowd already gathered. A mud encrusted semi blocked the alley, tired roadies dragging heavy black cases through the open the stage doors as the sun vanished behind the uneven rows of buildings, twilight choking the last color from a cold gray world.

"So, this is it."

"Yep." Norman stared at the semi, eyes glazed, his glasses bent from the fight. No pilgrim had ever stared with such piety. "This is it."

"Come on." Lonnie opened his door. "Let's get this over with."

The guitar felt impossibly heavy in Matt's hand, the weight of years clinging to it. If it had burst into unearthly flame and told him to cast off his tennis shoes he wouldn't have been surprised. Across the lot

they walked, four abreast, three men, a guitar and a half-grown girl, stragglers all, the journey come to an end. The roadies barely glanced at them, the chain of equipment slowing, the truck nearly empty, the thick double doors swinging shut. Matt took a deep breath and crossed the threshold.

"Hold on, buddy."

A tall man, broad shouldered and lean with a neatly trimmed beard put his hand on Matt's shoulder. An ominous bulge rested under the left armpit of his tour jacket, a plastic ID badge dangling over his pocket. Death swam in his eyes, an elemental power potent as the wind and twice as cold. "Nobody through this door."

"But," Norman stammered, "we have Eric Clapton's guitar."

The angel of death seemed unmoved. "You want to see E.C., buy a ticket." He tried to close the door, but Norman held his ground, too crushed to realize the danger he faced.

Struggling to stay calm, Matt unzipped the case, exposing the neck and the hideous pink paint-job. "He's not lying. We think this guitar was stolen from Mr. Clapton."

"Yeah? Send a letter to his manager." The security man tried again to close the door, but Norman jammed his foot inside. "Look, asshole, I'm trying real hard to be polite. No admittance, understand?"

"There a problem?" Another man appeared at the door, dapper in a gray silk suit and charcoal black shirt. He stared out at the guitar.

"No, sir. These people were just leaving."

"Look," Matt said, desperate to grab the man's attention. "I don't care if we go inside or not. But, I think we have one of Eric Clapton's guitars and thought he might want it back."

"When was it stolen?"

"It's the cherry sunburst he used with Mayall." Lonnie pulled Norman away from the door, then carefully took the guitar and let the bag fall open. "At least we think it might be." He offered it to the man in the suit.

"Hang on a minute." The man gave the guitar back to Lonnie and walked into the shadows while the security man blocked the entrance. A flock of pigeons fluttered overhead, turned and sped away, feathers drifting in the icy breeze. After a few minutes, the man in the suit returned. "Where did you get it?"

"A pawn shop in Montana."

The security man coughed, the corner of his grim lips curling up. The man in the suit nodded at the pink Les Paul. "Mind if I let one of the guitar techs have a look?"

"Go ahead." Matt passed the guitar back into his hands, the doors finally swinging shut. Norman seemed on the verge of fainting.

"What if he doesn't come back?"

"Get a life," Lonnie muttered. He turned his collar against the biting wind.

They huddled self-consciously near the door, the long line of concert goers moving, the gates open at last. Now and again the walls would shake, a fast drum roll or a sinewy blues lick, the sound-check

thundering within. Lonnie stared at the bricks, his eyes far-away, a look of undeniable longing on his face. Matt nodded at the impenetrable wall.

"That should be you in there."

"Yeah, right."

"I'm serious." Matt moved closer. "You're wasting yourself back home."

"Easy for you to say." Lonnie kicked a snow clod away. It broke into a dozen grit stained pieces. "Trust me, it's harder than it looks to break in."

"Maybe. But I know one thing for damn sure... it's impossible if you don't try."

A sharp, metallic click ended the conversation as the stage doors swung open. Cigarette smoke and the heavenly aroma of hot food drifted out. The angel of death stood inside, the man in silk beside him. He nodded at Matt. "Eric's guitar guy said it might be the one." He scratched his nose, stalling. "Tell you what. I'm going to let one of you come backstage and talk to Eric." Again he paused. "Just one of you, understand?"

Nothing moved but the traffic and the split-splat of snow melting off the roof. Norman swallowed, the disappointment bitter. He stepped back from the door and smiled at his roommate. "It's your guitar."

Matt took a step forward, an electric tingle running over his body as he started through the door. He stopped in mid-step and turned around. "You go, Norm. You know more about this shit than I do."

"Are you sure?"

"Go."

"And don't leave us standing out here all night, huh?" Lonnie grinned. "It's colder than a witch's tit." The doors swung shut. Lonnie blew on his hands to warm them. "I'll give even odds he pisses his pants."

The door opened again, the man in the gray silk suit framed in smoke and shadow.

"Eric wants to know how much you're asking?"

Matt glanced at Lonnie, but he only shrugged. Denise slid behind him, hiding. He shut his eyes, visions of riches exploding in his mind, throwing him skyward. Just as quickly, he came back to the cold, sodden ground. "Four hundred, I guess. That's what I gave for it."

The man stared at him, head tipped down, deep gray eyes piercing to the bone. "You know what the guitar is worth?"

"Yeah." Matt said before he changed his mind. "I have a pretty good idea. We didn't come here to make a buck, if that's what you're thinking."

The man shook his head, pulled out a gleaming black wallet and counted four crisp bills into Matt's hand. He paused and counted out three more. "Call it a finder's fee, okay?" He started to close the door. "You guys might as well go. Your friend's going to hang out until after the show."

The door closed, leaving them alone in the alley.

"Now what?" Denise asked, her teeth chattering.

"Don't know about you guys, but I'm hungry." Matt pulled the first hundred off the top and gave it to Lonnie. "I still owe you twenty from the other day, okay?"

"You're crazy. You realize that, don't you?" Lonnie tucked the bill in his pocket. "I still think we should have put it up on eBay." They crawled into the truck, waited a few minutes for the heater to kick in, then drove off, looking for food and light and the thousand things that make life worth living.

The diner was quiet, the waitress slow, the burgers several degrees past wonderful. They lingered at the table, killing time until the concert would let out.. Lonnie studied a local ad-paper, folded open to 'Musicians Wanted.' He caught Matt watching him and flipped the flimsy newsprint shut.

"Got you thinking about it, didn't I?"

"Yeah, and thanks for nothing." Lonnie reached for his coffee and discovered it was empty. "Just what I want to do. Quit a good job and move down here to starve to death." He flipped the paper back open and circled several ads with a felt-tip pen. "I'm getting as crazy as you are."

Still grinning, Matt pushed away from the table and threaded toward the counter. He waited for the cashier. Absently, he reached toward a bowl of mints. A strong hand grabbed his wrist and pinned it to the counter.

"You're not there yet."

Matt spun around, recognizing the angel's voice, but he was alone at the counter. The hair along the back of his neck rose, the flesh around his wrist dented by fingertips that never were. His gaze drifted toward the table, Lonnie bent over his paper, Denise across from him, looking lost as she nursed her third Coke, a frightened teenager trying to bullshit her way through a world gone cold. Her hair was combed but greasy, the same blue blouse she had worn since they found her the day before still on her back. She could have been somebody's little sister. Too late, he realized, she probably was. Matt paid for the burgers then walked back to the table. "You okay here for a while?"

Lonnie glanced up, confused. "Sure. What's up?"

"I'll give Denise a ride to her sister's place." Matt watched her. Her face paled, but she said nothing as she followed him into the night. She sat, hands folded in her lap as they pulled into traffic. Matt drove left, vaguely recalling his destination as they had searched for the theater. A long, high set of doors beckoned ahead, the bays inside brightly lit. A flock of blue and silver buses rumbled inside the cavernous building. He parked across from the depot and shut off the engine.

"Time for the truth. Where are you from?"

"Why do you care?"

"Because I'm sending you back there."

Resolution far beyond her years roiled in her dark eyes. "No, you're not."

Matt recoiled, shocked by her grim determination. Whatever horrors had driven her away from home still waited for her if she went back. "Fine. So you don't go home. But, I'm not leaving you here. Not like this." He grasped for a resolution. "You said you have a sister. Is that bullshit, too?"

"No." Denise stared at the floorboard, her voice once again soft and small. "I have a sister."

"Where?."

"She lives in Cedar Rapids."

"Good enough." He opened the door and stepped out. Diesel fumes drifted hellfire strong as he took her by the wrist. "Let's go."

"Just give me the money and I'll buy my own ticket."

"Yeah, right." Together, they marched across the slushy street into the depot. Matt spotted a row of payphones, and dragged Denise toward them. "What's her number?"

"You're going to call her?"

"Damn straight I am." Resigned, she picked up a pencil stub lying under the dented phone and scrawled a number on the wall. Matt fed a string of quarters into the hungry phone and dialed, the buttons beeping off-key in the receiver. "What's her name?"

"Ginger. Ginger Alvarez," Denise said sullenly. "Promise."

Someone answered on the fourth ring. "Hello?"

"Hi. Is this Ginger Alvarez?"

"Yes."

"My name is Matthew Torrence, and I'm calling from Denver, Colorado. Do you have a sister named Denise?"

"Yes..." The woman was slow in answering, obviously suspicious. Matt took a deep breath and pressed on.

"Is she missing?"

"Oh, God. What's wrong? Please don't tell me she's dead."

"No," Matt said quickly, trying to reassure the woman. "She's right next to me, and she wants to go home. Is that okay? Can she come stay with you a while?"

"Oh, Jesus, yes." She sounded like she was crying. "Please tell her yes. Can I talk to her?" Matt handed the phone to Denise and backed away, giving her as much privacy as he dared. Denise was crying too by the time she put the phone back in his hand. Quickly, before the two minutes expired, Matt pressed the receiver to his ear.

"So, you'll be there to pick her up if I put her on a bus tonight?"

"Yes, oh God, yes. Thank you." The connection went dead, the quarters spent. Matt hung the phone up and started toward the ticket window. The man took his money, passed him a ticket and some change, and pointed at a bus three stalls down.

"Better hurry," he said. "It leaves in five minutes."

"Thanks." Ticket in one hand, Denise in the other, he led her to the idling bus. Blank, empty faces stared down from the dirty windows as they waited to board. He handed the ticket up to the driver, then turned to Denise. "The rest is up to you." He pressed two tens into her hand. "Should be enough to eat on until

Iowa."

She stared up at him, the anger and resentment gone. "Why are you doing this?"

"To be honest, I haven't got a clue."

Matt waited until the Greyhound pulled out, then wandered back outside, hands stuffed in his pockets. The night was unusually quiet, not a single car in sight, nothing but the wind as it whistled down the long, empty street. He looked up, amazed to see stars shining brightly despite the city's glare. Far overhead a flight of wild geese passed southbound, honking mournfully on their endless journey. He turned around, not at all surprised to see a familiar figure leaned against a lamppost, wings brushing the dirty sidewalk. A Camel smouldered between his fingers.

"So, now what?" Matt asked.

The angel shrugged. "Now you go home."

"That's it?"

"What did you expect?" The angel took a long last drag off the butt and flicked it away. "A gold star for doing the right thing?"

Matt laughed softly and shook his head. When he turned back to the street lamp, the angel was gone. A silver Caddy with blacked out windows, rap music blaring, sped past. Slush sprayed his legs. Still laughing, Matt walked to Norman's truck, crawled in and turned the key.

It was going to be a long ride home.