

REPO CHICK

DEBT COLLECTOR OF THE
DAMNED

J.J. ALO

Copyright © 2026 by J.J. Alo

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

CHAPTER 1

TEASER

DARKNESS.

I jerk awake in the fetal position, the guttural rasp of cool air igniting my lungs and swelling them with the stale scent of must and putrefied alloy. I blink, then blink again. Nothing but bone-chilling darkness. For a moment, waking in such total and complete sensory depravity, I have to consider the fact that I'm blind.

I lash out on instinct, arms and legs connecting with the suffocatingly near walls. I'm unable to stretch my limbs beyond the confines of this square sarcophagus. As I reach overhead, icy metal kisses my fingertips, giving slightly when I push up. Like I'm locked in a fridge. I frantically thump upward with my palms, but a succession of gurgling coughs stops me in my tracks, a warm trickle of froth oozing down my chin.

Cold. So fucking cold.

I gently lift my pounding head, weight bearing down worse than any hangover or migraine, to view the void of my current surroundings. Pain pierces my guts, the usual sign that my cycle is making its usual, unsolicited monthly visit. Except my period ended last Tuesday... I think.

With a trembling hand, I reach into my front pocket, relieved at the familiar feel of cold metal on my fingertips. Sliding the Zippo out, I snap open the lid with an index and middle finger and strike the wheel, igniting the lighter. The surrounding blackness dances back, revealing ribbed metal six inches above and a felt fabric floor below. Structural. At least I have sight.

The retched cough expels another wave of pain, chest tearing and burning my esophagus like corrosive acid. More liquid. I gag and wrench, feeling a thick, tacky wetness under my cheek. The dull, pervasive ache in my head sharpens, pulsing relentlessly, and a wave of nausea hits; if not for the sheer panic igniting my bones, I would already be passed the hell out.

The flame's unsteady light dances before my watering eyes, yet I recognize this tomb even through the blur. Christ. The irony.

I'm inside a car trunk.

Un-fucking-believable. Well, no... this isn't the first time. Or second. Oh, who am I kidding? I practically lived in these things—my brother, Derek, and I, God rest his soul. Growing up at a car dealership made friendly games like hide-and-seek a highly competitive pastime, especially with two hundred cars on the lot.

Advice on opening it? Use a key. Fortunately... fuck, I hope it's still here... I place the Zippo on the floor and twist my left arm around. Pain sears again from my heaving chest as I reach into my back right pocket.

Yes! I grin ear to ear as I slide out my switchblade—a old gift from Dad, a Vietnam Veteran; need I say more?

It snaps open. The steel reflects a warm, amber shimmer with the jittery dance of the Zippo's flame. Beyond it, I can't see shit. God, I hope this works. The keen blade pierces the molding with ease, and after several arduous minutes of jimmying, the latch releases. I nudge the trunk open, wincing as it squeaks back on dry hinges. A rush of cold, sweet air rushes in, dewy, as if from recent rain. An earthy scent quickly follows, reminiscent of metallic decay.

Sitting up, I'm partially blinded by a floodlight and cover my eyes, glancing away at the illuminated mountains of crushed automotive sandwiches, brambles of twisted steel protruding from their somber shadows. Blinking, I see that the light stands atop a metal-plated building, the expanse of which is painted with the colors of an Italian flag, muted by age.

Wait. I know this place.

Calamari's Auto Salvage. Back in the whaling city?

Gently, I slide one leg over the side, then the other, pushing myself out with shaky arms. My strength gives, and I tumble from the trunk onto the cold, wet earth. Tits up, I stare at the starlit sky, expelling a breath of sheer relief.

I'M ALIVE!

When I finally regain some facilities, I pull myself into a shuddering stand, glancing down to take stock. Morosely, I gape over my white suede slouchy boots—freshly caked in mud.

For *real!*? I *just* got them at Merry Go Round, UGH.

I brush the clean part of my hand across my sticky mouth and face, crusting my fingers with dark red ooze.

Blood!?

A gasp of alarm unleashes a painful, hacking fit, bringing a deep-seated heaviness up from my chest. The spins come something fierce, and a vomiting of dark viscous fluid heaves me over. That's when, following the long red dribble clinging from my bottom lip, I see it. A gaping hole the size of a clementine, surrounded by pea-sized punctures. Mixed with the mud covering me, tracts of dried blood, dark and thick, cake down my tank top surrounding the hole, splotching my jean jacket.

Oh. Christ.

Am... am I... no no no no no no.

I touch my throbbing forehead with a trembling hand, finding it tacky to the touch. Gently, I sweep my fingers back until I feel the crack—the jagged edge of something hard and round. I don't need to look at my fingers to know.

My skull bone is protruding through my hairline.

Oh shit oh shit oh shit. But how? How could I be...

Turning back to glance into the trunk, I spy a rusty crowbar. I pull it out and turn it over, red flakes clinging to my pale, filthy fingers. Except it's not all rust, I realize. The crowbar is covered in dried blood; however, it *was* just recently under my head.

I drop it, and the heavy tool clanks off the bumper, thudding to the ground. Spinning vertigo overwhelms me, but before I can succumb to the nausea, I stumble around to a busted

hanging side mirror, turning the shattered plate-glass face up.
What stares back isn't me.

My stomach churns, filling with icy steel.

My eyes. Frosted. These pretty blues, clouded like a... like a...

I force my gaze away, attention snagging on my pallid breast and the tattered, bruised, bluish-purple skin at its edges. I gape down at the open wound.

Shot!

Had to be, and with what I could only guess was a twelve-gauge. Ugh, and in the fucking tit—seriously!? These goddamn things cost me *six grand*. Easily replaceable just a few years ago before things went south.

The clear silicone sack pokes through gnarled flesh, torn and leaky.

My still spinning head sends me against the wreck, jelly legs giving way and dumping me to the mud. If my skirt wasn't filthy before, it certainly is now. I clench the cold earth with my fists, my flesh erupting with goosebumps.

Can't be dead. Can't be. No way! I'm conscious, I'm-I'm sitting here, eyes open and breathing the air! Just to prove it to myself, I take a long, deep breath. The cool air would be comforting, grounding, even, if not for the increase in gel and blood dripping down the gaping wound in my chest.

I let my head fall back, unwilling to look at myself any longer. And at that moment, gaping up at the night, I realize I can't recall the last twenty-four hours of my life. In fact, most of the week feels fuzzy. The least of my damn worries, I suppose.

Maybe Heather or Lizzy knows something. My mind flickers with a faint recollection of Lizzy and the disorienting pulses of a discotheque strobe. Aw, hell, that could be from any night. It happens at least twice a week.

I glance back at the wreck, unable to believe that I'm... well, not quite dead, but certainly left for it. And that of all places to discard a body, some inconsiderate asshole had the audacity to dump me in the trunk of a 1970 baby blue Mercury Zephyr. Barf.

I need medical attention.

I need to find a payphone.

More than anything, I need... Mom.

What I *need* is to get up and get the hell out of here, but my legs fail me. Reaching back, I grab the silver handle, attempting to haul myself up, and I'm struck. A heavy acceleration—a g-force beyond my control, like being shoved by invisible hands—pins me to the car, stealing my breath with a sharp, guttural gasp.

The junkyard pulls away before my gaping eyes as I'm sucked into a harrowing vortex of deafening wind and flashing strobes, Space Mountain's dark loops in reverse, my stomach somersaulting over and over again.

WHOA, WHOA, WHOAAAAAaaaaaaa!

Something shifts, like a rug pulled from beneath my feet, and I'm sent falling.

The trip lasts mere seconds, and I find myself, somehow, in a seat behind the wheel of a car. A very familiar car. I don't know

why, but I'm driving through a busy four-lane intersection in broad daylight. Hot. The blazing sun pounds through the windshield, its blinding white light obscuring my view. Elton John and Kiki Dee's "Don't Go Breaking My Heart" pumps from the blown speakers. Deafening.

Why!?

And where the hell am I!? Hands firmly on the wheel in mid-turn, my eyes glance around... but they're not mine, and I'm not in control. There's an ashtray full of cigarette butts, a brown purse on the passenger seat. The light blue side mirror... out the window. It's busted. Am I in the... no, can't be... the *Zephyr*? Wait a minute—wait, what the f—

Before my mind can make heads or tails of where I am—hell, *when* I am—a brassy horn screams in my ear, grabbing my attention. A garbage truck blows the light, tearing toward my driver's side door. My mouth opens to scream, but it's too late. And before I feel the full weight of the blow, along with my imminent demise, I'm sucked away, into the vortex.

With a shrill, undignified gasp, I find myself back, still pinned to the *Zephyr*. My head spins in darkness, my fist glued to the handle as I slowly struggle to verify the junkyard's surrounding presence and confirm my swift return to reality.

That. Was. Crazy. What *was* that!?

My jaw practically unhinges. I carefully pull myself to a stand, staring at the car, and reach out with trembling fingers before stopping short.

No. Better not.

Instead, I brush back tangles of curly locks and let out a long, shaky exhale. I don't know where in fuck-all that brought me, but I'm back! I think. A giddy, almost hysterical laugh bubbles up as the impossible realization dawns: I just saw that car's very last breath.

Here Lies 1970 Mercury Zephyr, Collison; side-swiped.

A brisk wind rustles through the scrapyard, carrying with it a long, thin murmur slipping through twisted steel. Breath, shaping into almost-syllables.

Whispers.

Just like that, I'm brought crashing back to reality.

"Huh-hello?" I call, wrapping my arms around myself.

The chatter picks up, barely audible, a mumbo-jumbo of run-on sentences bending around corners. A prickling chill crawls up the back of my neck, making my hair stand on end.

Time to leave.

Much like my short-term memory, time eludes me—but based on the sky and my surroundings, it's late as hell. Late enough to know Calamari's been closed for some time. I skim the grounds, my exposed legs shivering in the brisk, damp air. I'm guessing this damn denim skirt was a sound judgement call this afternoon; not so much now. On the unpredictable New England coast, a breezy November night can carry the same sharp chill as a crisp February day.

A chorus of insects stirs through the automotive cemetery as I navigate the confusing and narrow labyrinth of crushed cars, each one harboring its own somber story of the demise

which brought it here. Rows of rusted metal, half-dead engines like broken hearts. Much like the dead, I wished each offered a stone memorial—some indication of life passed. A busted handle gleams in my peripherals, reflecting some distant streetlight.

I hesitate, but curiosity gets the better of me. My eyes close, and my hand brushes against the chrome handle.

The first rollercoaster ride is always a shocking experience. You either love it or hate it; there's no in-between. Like when I was nine, riding the old wooden Cyclone at Riverside Park in Agawam, Massachusetts. The rush of adrenaline left me breathless and disoriented, senses heightened. All my worst fears come to light, culminating in a ninety-second spiraling ride.

You can experience the ride in two ways: fight it with everything, bracing the lap bar, tightening your muscles, eyes closed breathlessly awaiting the end. Or let go—let gravity do its thing.

Of course, if you're a rush junkie like me, you go again. However, the second ride differs slightly. You're better prepared, expectations slightly managed.

Grasping the metal handle, I let myself go, whisked away for a moment in time. *Here Lies 1965 Cadillac Eldorado, Mob War. Head-on Collision.* Yikes.

Further up, another decaying metallic husk. I can already tell, but I wanna see it anyway. *Here lies 1971 Ford Pinto, Rear Accident. Explosion.* Yeah. Saw that one coming.

Holy shit...

I don't understand what this is, but I think I *LOVE IT!* A tiny smirk touches my lips. God, I love cars. I love buying

them. Certainly, love selling them. But the rush... whatever this weird little parlor trick into the past is almost tops all, and it's dangerously close; but at the end of the day, there's really no greater rush than from ripping them.

As I slink through the yard, my new boot soles squishing and sinking into gooey sludge, a morbid thought strikes me: my own stone memorial.

Here Lies Kimmie Harley Raven. 1961-1986. Loving daughter.

Of course, if Mom had her way, it would read Kimberly, though no one's called me that since the third grade. No, Dad got his way instead, branding my middle name after his beloved Harleys. Kept a shop full of 'em, a veteran biker for life. Until the accident.

I shake my head. No: *Here Lies Kimmie Harley Raven. Bad Ass Bitch.*

Oh, a girl could wish. And it's a true enough epitaph.

Given the evidence—my line of work, the Zephyr, and the gaping hole in my chest—I've made far more enemies than I have friends.

AFTER AN EXHAUSTING STROLL through Calamari's Scary Auto Death Maze, I finally find myself at the chained gate barring my exit. Barbed wire lines the top. Figures. Why anyone would try to break *into* a junkyard is beyond me. I suppose

catalytic converters are a hot ticket item; hocking palladium and platinum can prove valuable.

I start climbing, mind wandering faster than my scrawny arms can carry me. Perhaps when the family business collapses, I can consider a career in precious metal thievery. I bet it pays more than repo-ing. Then I'll move to Villa Villekulla, like Pippi Longstocking, and live a life with no rules and endless freedom.

According to Mom, I already do that.

I almost laugh, registering all these strange, rambling thoughts. My brain is funny like that.

I use my jean jacket to shield my grimy legs from the jagged barbs as I straddle the top of the fence and cross over. My descent is less graceful. Somewhere between the tacky gunk encrusting my fingers, my sludgy boots, and the damp chain links, I lose my grip and basically fall the remaining five feet.

I never said I was very graceful.

Managing to land on both feet without rolling an ankle (a miracle), I grab the fence to keep myself from fully doubling over.

A plop on the sidewalk draws my attention down.

Oh Christ.

My implant. My implant *fell* out.

If I had anything left internally, I think I'd have retched it up next to the deflated sack. I don't see how things can get worse tonight. Today. What day is it?

I reach down to pick up the squishy sack. The fall clearly busted the silicone, and cold saline oozes down my grubby fin-

gers as it drains further. Irritably, I shove the sack into my jacket pocket as if i can be put back in, and glance around my new surroundings.

Bank Street, New London.

If anything compares to Calamari's in squalor and pestilence, it's Bank Street. Deplorable lost souls wander, stumbling along this boulevard of broken dreams. Once a thriving maritime port, it now serves as a breeding ground for the homeless, prostitutes, crackheads, and drug dealers.

And *they're* the ones I feel safe with.

It's the muggers and rapists that are my concern. The rampant homicide rate serves as a primary deterrent to visitors; however, I hear the bar scene is bitchin'.

I wouldn't walk these streets in daylight, much less dare cross them after dark. It's no place for a lone female when those sodium arc streetlights flicker to life. Especially because my ginger locks always seem to attract attention. And here I am. Come to think of it, I'd rather be back in the junkyard—but no way am I climbing that fence again. I need to find a phone. More importantly, I need to avoid social interaction.

No ruckus from Mr. Lucky's across the street. All appears tranquil. I think it's Tuesday, maybe, though it would still be this quiet late enough on a weekend. City noise ordinances prevent live music past eleven pm with bars adhering to a strict 1:00 AM close time. Connecticut Blue Laws. Apparently, not much has changed since their induction in 1650. The loophole,

however, is the “dry” underground late-night rave, where the sale of booze is illegal, but it’s BYOB.

Out front, beside the alley, a cluster of unsavory characters loiter. I pray to God they don’t see me, though the sharp scent of their cigarette smoke stokes my desire for one. Beyond the alley lies the Shoreline East Rail, which runs along the edge of the Thames River. I can only imagine the shady deals that go down in the shadows.

With my jacket on and buttoned, arms folded in a feeble attempt for warmth, I creep down the chipped sidewalk in the opposite direction. A biting breeze off the river rustles the trees; their screaming, brittle leaves break the serenity. Under the hazy spot of flickering streetlamp, I see it... a payphone!

I’ll call home collect!

With a deep breath of relief, I yank back the receiver from Ma Bell and hit ZERO for the operator.

Nothing. A lot of nothing.

“Oh come on come on come on!”

The *clack* of my finger repeatedly striking the switch hook echoes as I try to get a dial tone.

Dead.

The receiver slides from my frustrated grip and dangles solemnly from its metal cord. The reality is even if Mom did answer, she’d likely be half asleep and too blitzed to comprehend my situation. With Dad in the sanitarium and the dealership sinking, she’s been slowly drowning herself in tequila for the past year. I suppose so have I.

Guess I'm on my own.

I've no idea where I'm headed, but I know I need a ride. Thankfully, these situations come easy. I walk along the desolate street for several blocks, peering at empty storefronts, glancing over my shoulder. A bus stop bench holds a sleeping soul gripping tight to a blanket of old newspapers. Oddly, not one car in sight. Not a single person to ask for help—not that I'd want to in this neighborhood. The unsavory would likely assume rob me blind and finish the job already started.

Crossing another payphone leaves me with mild hope only to find the cord had been torn from the base. Awesome.

Eventually, I approach a side street on my left where I know public parking stretches behind. A quick turn confirms my isolation, and I proceed down the short walk, biting my lip at the prospect of an empty lot. Taking a deep breath, I focus on the thought of getting back to Old Saybrook, still a solid twenty miles down the I95. There's a twenty-four-hour emergency clinic, not too far from the family dealership.

I must've really blanked out, because I didn't notice the footfalls creeping from behind.

Please, God, no...

I pick up the pace. As does my potential stalker. My brain screams at me to run, but I can't—not in these goddamn boots. No, sir-e-bob. I'd only roll my ankles. The amber streetlight on the corner looms ahead, and I can see the entrance to the lot. What if I don't make it?

To my immediate right, a furniture store, and another local dive, Cue Balls. Both long closed, though the bar's neon lights flicker, teasing a honky-tonk time. Dim lighting emanates from apartment windows above—a sign of potential life, though I doubt screaming will warrant attention. An eerie old multi-family house materializes in the shadows on my left, set behind an overgrowth of tall hedges and erratic brambles too dark to navigate. Yeah, not cutting through there.

Exposed, with nowhere to hide.

“You lost, sweetheart?” The voice oozes from behind, sweet and mawkish.

Shit shit shit.

The lot opens, fully illuminated, as I cross over. You'd have to have balls of steel to attack someone in this fluorescent light, because there's no chance of no one noticing. Probably. Murdered and left for dead on Bank is not where I—oh... right. Been there, done that.

“What cha got in those pockets, honey,” the voice drips. A hand grips my shoulder and spins me around, revealing a sal-low-faced man with long, disheveled hair.

I've got a knife, Mr. Creeper. Too late for that option. Instead, I snarl “BOO!”

His smug face contorts into a grimace of shock. He seems (naturally and with no surprise) focused on my tits. Or, more likely, the gaping, mutilated pit where one formerly lived. Slack-jawed, he gives me a fish-eye up and down as he stumbles

back—a stark contrast to the usual lewd appraisals I get from men.

If I'm being honest, it's an insult I'm not quite ready to be subjected to.

"Hey," I snap, "my eyes are up here!"

My furious gaze meets his petrified glower. I allow him a second or two to process my mutilated figure before I lunge forward, electric blue nails protracted like claws (I love this color on me).

His shrill wail can rival my own, as well as that of any terrified teenage girl. Tripping over his scuffed shoes, he tries to mad-dash spiral around me, only to fall face-first onto the sidewalk. Within seconds, he gains partial footing, sliding on the wet sidewalk as he bolts into the void of Bank Street. Spritely, for an old creeper.

Not the first time I've watched a man run that fast from me. Last time, some loose-tongued gearhead rear-ended my '71 'Cuda, my pride and joy, and in a fit of requited rage, I introduced his windshield to my Pete Rose Louisville Slugger. Happens to be the same situation which landed me in jail and subsequently in court-mandated therapy, or *anger management* to the layman.

Cops don't like me. Not since my DUI. And certainly not since I'd become a repo rep a year ago.

Then it hits me. The shotgun blast to the chest will most definitely warrant a call to the police from a hospital. They'll ask all sorts of piercing questions I don't have any answers to,

then blame it on my line of work and find evidence pointing to the like. I recall the last thing the judge said to me after my misdemeanor, and it was something along the lines of throwing me in jail if he saw me again.

Not everything I do in the repo biz is exactly legal.

I wander around the spotty amber pools of streetlight, taking in the near-empty lot. A handful of newish sedans cross my wary eye, but ripping one of those comes with risks. For one, someone would likely report them immediately, given the few cars on the road at that hour. Unbeknownst to most, the Connecticut shoreline is sparsely populated, especially in fall. That's not to mention the car alarms. Sure, I could dismantle one; however, I need to avoid drawing any attention to myself in downtown New London.

Then I spot her at the end of the second block. A 1975 Dodge Ram pickup in a hideous, oddly familiar canary yellow. No fear of alarm there, perfect. And being a pickup, it likely has a tool chest. C'mon, they *all* do. That would be key.

I unscrew the metal antenna from the hood, then hunt around the side of the road till I find a thin tree branch, about the size of a cue stick. Should do the trick. My blade carves away at the edge, honing it to a delicate, sharp tip. With precision and a little elbow grease, I slide it between the upper door and frame, jarring just enough to slip in the metal antenna. The tip nestles under the knob-like plunger-style lock on the upper door frame, bending somewhat under the stem as it springs up. With the sweetest click I've ever heard, the door unlocks.

YES! Almost jumping for joy, I grab the handle—only to feel myself fall away, utterly unprepared, with one final cry of “*OH SHHbbhiit!*”

It’s a quick flash.

Me—the truck owner—exits the pickup in broad daylight, here, and walks through the busy parking lot opposite my path to an apartment building over Cue Balls. A man, I presume, by the blonde, hairy forearm and huge Seiko watch I’m currently checking. It’s noon. Although I am this individual, who I cannot see, something otherworldly exists between me, tonight, and this time earlier in the day—a connection, a finger on the pulse, so to speak. Or in this case, the door handle. The door handle. Focusing my attention, I force myself to release my grip.

Just like that, I’m back!

“Holy shit,” I sigh, “this is going to get old, quick.”

I slip in and, much to my delight, find a small metal toolbox on the passenger seat floor. Inside, a hammer and flathead screwdriver gleam brightly under the cabin lamp. Don’t do this at home, kids. I stick the flathead into the ignition switch and tap on the back with the hammer, breaking the lock pins and removing the cylinder. From there, Easy Street. Using the flathead as a key, I turn the car over, and voilà! The truck skitters to life.

A sigh escapes me, head back against the rest. My hand finds its way to my sore neck in a gentle massage, pausing at the spot directly under my jaw hinge. A couple of seconds go by. What

I feel for, interestingly enough, isn't there. Pressing two fingers deep into my throat on one side than the other.

NO PULSE!

A chilling fear grips my gut, like ice water.

It—it can't be...

No no no no it's not my time—not my goddamn time! Not with everything going on at the dealership, and the fact we're on the verge of losing it. Not with the fate of Dad's medical care looming in the balance. The loss of a husband, another child—this would kill my mother. This could literally be the end of everything, and I can't remember a goddamn thing!

Looking down at the congealed, gaping hole in my chest, it finally makes sense, and yet, no sense at all. What I irrationally feared the moment I rose from the trunk just can't be. But somehow is.

I'm fucking dead.

I WANT DAD.

Thankfully he's close by.

Unfortunately, I can't see him.

Two miles down the street in the neighboring town of Waterford, I come to a halt in front of the wrought-iron gates. Beyond looms Seaside Sanitarium. Visiting hours start at nine am—clearly a long way off—but I could really use a smiling face right about now. Even though that beam of bewildered delight doesn't recognize his own daughter. I don't even know what

I would say to him, present condition notwithstanding. I've reached an impasse, a loss for words, which is why I stopped coming here long ago. Yes, I'm a shitty daughter, I know this, and the thought of Dad's residence here burdens me on many levels.

But right now, I need him more than ever.

Glancing down at this banged-up bod, the hospital is evidently out of the question. One place left to go.

Sighing, I reverse the car and pull back onto the road, watching the gates slowly vanish from my rear-view mirrors. The desolate trip back seems faster than usual, even though I drive cautiously a mile or two under the limit. Good thing, too. I feel like I just hit a wall; sleep couldn't come soon enough. Creedence Clearwater Revival dribbles from blown speakers—a cassette tape stuck in the Pioneer head unit. Not my cup of tea, but I suppose there are worse things that can assault the ear.

The peppy bayou sound of "Up Around the Bend" keeps my eyelids from shutting me out. Barely. With the hum of the sparsely lighted Baldwin Bridge echoing through the cabin, I picture these bald tires gliding over the wet steel grate, sending me reeling over the edge.

I crack the window, inviting in the crisp, salty air in the hope of refreshing my mind. The undulating dark waters reflect a bodacious white moon drifting above the mouth of the Connecticut River. Its wicked steel-blue glow penetrates the murky sky, stretching Long Island Sound's horizon.

The pickup flusters and hitches as I downshift, gears grinding, taking the narrow, curving exit after the bridge onto Chester Bowles Highway (Route 9 if you're a local). The rattles morph into full-on bucks when I immediately roll down the first exit ramp onto Essex Road. This truck desperately needs a tune-up. I just pray the transmission doesn't drop. Fuck it if it did. I'm close. A mile up, I swing left onto Route 154 and take it all the way down to Harbor Auto Mall.

Raven's Nest Auto Barn (yeah, a mouthful—I know) gleams inscrutably behind a haze of flickering sodium arcs highlighting the dull strip. "*Find Your Nest. Drive Your Best!*" Dad's cringe-worthy slogan in gaudy red decal defaces the front window. Ahh... home at last. Well, sort of. Home is Chesterville. Much closer to New London than the office. But I'm not strolling inside this late with Mom potentially lurking.

I'll never be able to explain any of this.

I'm still at a complete loss for the time, having a raging chronometer crisis, but the Creedence Clearwater Revival cassette jammed in the stereo forever reads TAPE instead of displaying the hour. Oh well. I'm here. I pull the truck around back to the service bay, get out, and punch the code into the keypad, opening the slow-dragging door. I drive inside, drop the shifter into neutral, and groan as the engine immediately stalls. Piece of shit.

For a moment, I shut my eyes, head back against the rest, and fill my lungs with a deep, wheezy breath. Blood oozes down the back of my throbbing head, cold and ropy. My stomach churns

at the feeling, eyes burning, but I fight my tears. It takes a lot to summon them, and they'll do nothing to help me understand what's going on and why.

Someone wanted me dead, but this evening's events have eluded me. I'm certain the crack in my skull has something to do with that.

Leaning over, I pop open the glove box, hoping for napkins. None, of course. Just a pack of Marlboro Reds and a registration. Fuck it. They weren't *my* brand, but what the hell? My Zippo strikes nothing but sparks. Dead, or close to it. Much like the operator, evidently. Now I really want this cigarette. Much to my delight, I find a matchbook set inside the ashtray.

Groovy. The cigarette lights with a sizzling flame, and I pull in heavenly smoke... then, grotesquely, watch it waft from my chest hole as I exhale. I shake my head, incredulous. That's *so* fucked.

Recalling my out-of-body vision of the truck owner strolling toward Cue Balls, I take a glance at the registration. Seems the clunker belonged to a Curtis Reynolds, the soon-to-be sad soul. I imagine he's some pathetic geezer who'll wake up at the ass crack of dawn to an empty spot (followed by incoherent shouting of racist comments and a phone call to the police). I mean... only dirty old men smoke Cowboy Killers.

Whatever. I did him a favor.

We at Raven's Nest Auto Barn do *all* sorts of favors. Many of which are for financial institutions. Selling cars is easy. But if

you fail to pay, we're the shoreline go-to to come collect. You'll see. Find your nest. Drive your best.

For now, I need to clean myself up. Try to remember what's happened.

And make the fucker(s) who killed me, pay.