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Opening Extract from...

Broken Monsters

Written by Lauren Beukes

Published by HarperCollins

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BROKEN MONSTERS

LAUREN BEUKES



HarperCollins*Publishers*

HarperCollins*Publishers*
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

First published by HarperCollins*Publishers* 2014

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A catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library

ISBN: 9780007464593

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Set in Sabon

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SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 9

Bambi

The body. The-body-the-body-the-body, she thinks. Words lose their meaning when you repeat them. So do bodies, even in all their variations. Dead is dead. It's only the hows and whys that vary. Tick them off: Exposure. Gunshot. Stabbing. Bludgeoning with a blunt instrument, sharp instrument, no instrument at all when bare knuckles will do. Wham, bam, thank you, ma'am. It's Murder Bingo! But even violence has its creative limits.

Gabriella wishes someone had told that to the sick fuck who did this. Because this one is *Yoo-neeq*. Which happens to be the name of a sex worker she let off with a warning last weekend. It's most of what the DPD does these days. Hands out empty warnings in The. Most. Violent. City. In. America. *Duh-duh-duh*. She can just hear her daughter's voice – the dramatic horror-movie chords Layla would use to punctuate the words. All the appellations Detroit carries. Dragging its hefty symbolism behind it like tin cans behind a car marked 'Just Married'. Does anyone even do that any more, she wonders, tin cans and shaving cream? Did anyone ever? Or was it something they made up, like diamonds

are forever, and Santa Claus in Coca-Cola red, and mothers and daughters bonding over fat-free frozen yogurts. She's found that the best conversations she has with Layla are the ones in her head.

'Detective?' the uniform says. Because she's just standing there staring down at the kid in the deep shadow of the tunnel, her hands jammed in the pockets of her jacket. She left her damn gloves in the car and her fingers are numb from the chill wind sneaking in off the river. Winter baring its teeth even though it's only gone November. 'Are you—'

'Yeah, okay,' she cuts him off, reading the name on his badge. 'I'm thinking about the adhesive, Officer Jones.' Because mere superglue wouldn't do it. Holding the pieces together while the body was moved. This isn't where the kid died. There's not enough blood on the scene. And there's no sign of his missing half.

Black. No surprise in this city. Ten years old, she'd guess. Maybe older if you factored in malnourishment and development issues. Say somewhere between ten and sixteen. Naked. As much of him as there is to be naked. It's entirely possible the rest of him is wearing pants, with his wallet in the back pocket and a cell phone that won't have any minutes, but which will make calling his momma a hell of a lot easier.

Wherever the rest of him is.

He's lying on his side, his legs pulled up, eyes closed, face serene. The recovery position. Only he's never going to recover and those aren't his legs. Skinny as a beanpole. Beautiful skin, even if it's gone yellow from blood loss. Pre-adolescent, she decides. No sign of acne. No scratches or bruises either, or any indications that he put up a fight or had anything bad happen to him at all. Above the waist.

Below the waist is a different story. Oh boy. That's a whole other section of the book store. There's a dark gash, right above where his hips should be, where he has been somehow…*attached* to the lower half of a deer, hooves and all. The white flick of the tail sticks up like a jaunty little flag. The brown fur is bristled with dried blood. The flesh appears melted together at the seam.

Officer Jones is hanging back. The smell is terrible. She's guessing the intestines are severed, on both sets of bodies, leaking shit and blood into the conjoined cavities. Plus there's the gamey reek of the deer's scent glands. She pities the ME having to open up this mess. Better than the paperwork, though. Or dealing with the goddamn media. Or, worse, the mayor's office.

'Here,' she offers, fishing a small red tub of lipgloss out of her pocket. Something she bought at the drugstore on a whim to appease Layla. A candy-flavored cosmetic – that's sure to bridge the gap between them. 'It's not menthol, but it's something.'

'Thanks,' he says, grateful, which marks him out as an FNG. Fucking New Guy. He dips his finger in and smears the greasy balm under his nose; cherry-flavored snot. With sparkles in it, Gabi notices for the first time, but does not point out. Small pleasures.

'Don't get any on the scene,' she warns him.

'No. No, I won't.'

'And don't even think about taking any pictures on your phone to show your buddies.' She looks around at the tunnel with the graffiti that grows on bare walls in this city like plaque, the weight of the pre-dawn darkness, the lack of traffic. 'We're going to contain this.'

They do not remotely contain it.

Last Night a DJ Saved My Life

Jonno is yanked from sleep's deepest tar pits by an elbow to the jaw. He comes up flailing and disoriented, only to find himself fighting bed sheets. The girl from last night – Jen Q – rolls over, her arms flung above her head, revealing the sleeve of tattooed birds that runs up her chest and over her shoulder. She's oblivious to having nearly concussed him. Her eyelids are flickering in REM, caught up in a dream that makes her breath jagged, similar to the panting delight he elicited from her earlier when she was riding him, his hands on her hips. When she came, she flung her head back, flicking her mane of braids. His bad luck to catch one in the eye, which called an abrupt halt to the proceedings as he teared up, blinking in pain.

'Easy…' he says, rubbing her back to bring her out of it. He can feel the dark corona of a hangover hovering around his head waiting to slam down. But not quite yet. Perversely, the pain from the elbow jab seems to be keeping it at bay.

'Mmmgghff,' she says, not properly awake. But he's broken through the skin of her nightmare. He runs his palm down the curve of her waist, under the sheets. His cock stirs.

That's twice in one night she's hurt him. It's entirely

possible she'll break his heart next. It was the way she kept saying afterwards, 'Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry,' but couldn't hold back the giggles, collapsing onto his chest, crying with laughter while his eye streamed.

'That's not exactly a gesture of solidarity,' he complained at the time, but the soft weight of her felt sweet, her whole body shaking with laughter.

'Do you want to fuck again?' he whispers into her ear now.

'T'morrow,' she mumbles, but parts her legs to accommodate his hand anyway. 'S'nice. Keep doing that.'

She sighs and rolls over, so that he can move in behind her. He pushes his hard-on up against her ass, his fingers sliding over her clit until he realizes that her breathing has deepened because she's gone back to sleep. Great.

He flops onto his back and looks around the room, but there's not much in the way of clues. 1 x wooden ceiling fan. 1 x Scandi modern cupboard. Reedy blinds over the window. Their clothes all over the floor. No books, which is troubling if he intends to fall in love with her. Did he tell her that he's a writer?

He wonders what the Q stands for. An actual last name or a DJ add-on? Jen X would have been too cutesy, he supposes. Not her style, based on what he has to go on. Which is, to summarize this in one of the easily digestible lists he churns out in lieu of making a respectable living:

1) The set she played last night at the so-called secret party, for which a hundred people showed in a studio in Eastern Market under a T-shirt shop. He can't remember the music she was playing, but it was that time of the night when everything merges into doof-doof bass.

2) The way she danced, her braids twisted up on her head, to prevent exactly the kind of injury she had inflicted

on him. The first thing he noticed. She moved like she was happy. And she smiled when he caught her eye. He liked that. Not too cool to smile.

3) The way she plucked the cigarette impatiently from his mouth when they were outside, still strangers, bound only by the camaraderie of being smokers, having to stand out in the cold with the fuzzy promise of emphysema in the distant future. They'd been talking about Motown and techno. That Rodriguez documentary. The bankruptcy. All the easy conversational set-pieces. He thought she was going to take a drag, and instead she kissed him.

4) Making out in her car. There are snapshots in his memory, Instagrams really, because they're blurry round the edges: following her down a hedged-in alley round the side of a house to a detached cottage, kissing her neck while she messed around with the keys, the smell of her skin making him crazy, swearing, laughing, her sharp 'shhhh' as the door fell open and they tumbled inside.

5) The shapes of furniture in the darkness as she led him straight through to the bedroom. Both of them drunk. Or him, definitely. He could tell by the way the room went all tilt-a-whirl for a moment. Kissing, tugging off clothes. The way she felt inside.

Shit. Did they use a condom? The thought makes his stomach flop, but not for the reasons it would have a year ago.

She gives one little rabbit snore, and he ducks as she flings out her arm again. No good. He can tell by the clarity of his thoughts that he's not going back to sleep. He has become an expert on his own insomnia. Usually it's fear that jerks him awake in the middle of the night, heart racing. He leans over the side of the bed, fishing for his phone in his jacket pocket. Four forty-eight. That's later

than his average, which is usually around two in the morning. He should get laid more often. *No shit, Sherlock*.

Jonno does not check his inbox, even though the number above the little envelope insists that he has new messages. New voicemail too, according to the digit attached to the cartoon speech bubble. It used to be that the only icons that could inspire such terrible dread were plague signs. A black X over the door.

He opens the browser instead and looks up Jen Q. Only a couple of pages of search results, usually limited to a listing at a festival or a gig guide. A tiny profile on some music review site. But she's social media-ed to the eyeballs. All the usual suspects and even a MySpace page, which means she's probably a little older than he thought. He clicks through her selfies, inspirational quotes, self-promos. 'Xcited 2b playing Coal Club 2nite. $5 cover!' It's all surface shit, posing for the world. He knows the feeling.

His hangover is settling in. He's going to need something to keep it at bay.

He throws back the covers and swings his legs over the edge of the bed, waiting for the swirl of nausea to pass. Jen doesn't stir. She has raccoon eyes from her mascara. Cate would never have gone to bed without taking off her makeup.

It's freezing out here. He tucks the cover up over the birds on her shoulder, pulls his jacket on over his nakedness, and staggers in what he hopes is the direction of the bathroom to find something for the vice around his head.

He should write something. Anything. Take three steps in Detroit and you're falling over a story. But they've all been done by the native sons. Fuck you and your Pulitzer, Charlie LeDuff, he thinks, patting down the wall to find the light switch.

He flinches against the halogen and the reflection in the medicine cabinet – it's not even merciless, it's plain mean. He examines his face. The puffiness will go away once he catches up on his sleep. George Clooney rules: crow's feet on a man are sexy, and the patches of white in his six-day scruff of beard are a badge of experience. Jesus. Thirty-seven years old and sleeping with DJs.

Not bad going, he grins at himself. Ignoring his inner troll, which snipes, *Yeah, but she's no Cate, is she?*

You don't know that, he thinks. She could be. She could be really smart and deep and funny. I could follow her round the world, a new gig in a new city every night, write in hotel rooms.

Yeah, 'cos that's working out so well for you right now.

'Lost?' Jen says, leaning on the door, wearing a hideous blue flannel dressing gown. Looking a little puffy herself – which is charming in its own way. She is idly rubbing at her collar bone, exposing a glimpse of smooth skin.

'Oh hey. I was looking for an Advil. Or something.'

'You try the medicine cabinet?' Amused, she leans past him to pop it open on a clutter of cosmetics and medicine bottles, a packet of tampons that makes him avert his eyes like he's twelve all over again, and, alarmingly, several needles still sealed in plastic. She reaches for a bottle and drops two aspirin into his hand. 'You can use the glass by the sink. It's clean. You coming back to bed?'

'Yeah.' He slugs the pills down, following her back into the bedroom.

She shrugs the horrible robe from her shoulders like a wrestler and climbs back into bed. 'I saw your look. Don't worry about it. I've got what my grandma used to call "the sugars".'

'Uh?'

'The needles. I'm diabetic. They're back-up in case I run out of pens. What, you thought you'd hooked up with some junkie?'

'It crossed my mind for a millisecond.'

'Aren't you glad we used protection?'

'Did we?' He shoves away the pop of disappointment. 'I'm a little fuzzy. Not that it matters. Seeing as you're not, you know, um.' He is aware of how idiotic he must look, with his jacket zipped up and his cock hanging out. *Smooth operator.*

'You don't remember?' But she's smiling, the covers tucked up under her chin. 'You're hurting my feelings.'

'You might have to remind me.'

'Get in here,' she says, lifting the blanket, tilting her head at the pack of Durex on the bedside table. He's the kind of guy who can take a hint.

'What were you dreaming about?' he whispers into the perfect curved shell of her ear as he enters her.

'Does it matter?' she arches her back up against him, and right now it really doesn't.

'C'mon, wake up. You gotta go.'

'Mmmmf?' Jonno manages as she shoves him out of bed. He is confused for a moment, then he remembers where the hell he is. *Hot DJ girl. You had your cock inside her. Nice work if you can get it, boychick.*

'But it's still dark,' he protests through the sleep glaze, even as he's pulling on his socks. He stands on one of their used condoms. Squelchy even through his sock.

'Hustle. I mean it.'

'Did they start the zombie apocalypse already?' He tugs

on his shirt and realizes it's backwards. He yanks it off and starts again. She is sitting cross-legged on the bed, naked, watching him and smiling.

'You're a funny guy, Tommy.'

'Jonno.' It stings much more than it should.

Her hands fly to her mouth. 'Oh jeez. Sorry.' She starts giggling again. 'Oh, that's terrible. I'm so embarrassed.' She tips forward, burying her head on her knees. She can't stop laughing. 'Sorry.'

'The least you can do is buy me breakfast,' he says in his best indignant voice. He pulls on his jeans and buttons his fly. At least he can't screw that up.

'All right. But only if you get out of here, right now.'

He lowers his voice. '*Is* it zombies? Because if that's the case, I think we should be improvising weapons.'

'Worse than that, doofus. It's my dad.'

'Wait.' His brain is scrabbling like a dog with a small bladder at the door. He looks around again. Definitely not a teen pad. And that's a woman's body, right there. The fullness and softness and the smile lines. She sees the panic on his face and laughs harder, leaning on him, her hand on his stomach. He automatically sucks it in. *She's already seen you naked, genius.*

'You thought…'

'Zombies I can deal with.'

'I'm twenty-nine, you idiot.'

'Well thank God for that.' And that's not true, he thinks. The profile he read last night said she was thirty-three.

'I'm living at home. For now.'

'And your dad thinks you don't have sex?'

'Not under his roof. Well, on his property.'

'Ah.'

'Yeah.'

'I should probably get going then.'

'You probably should.' She is grinning madly. She nods her head at the door. 'Same way you came in.'

'But you're still buying me breakfast.'

'Not today. I've got family stuff.'

'Tomorrow, then.'

She relents. 'There's a coffee place in Corktown. I'll see you there at ten.'

'That's not very specific.'

'You'll find it.'

'I'll get a cab home, then. And see you tomorrow.' He is trying not to sound desperate.

'Okay.' She's beaming.

'All right.' He stands there a moment longer.

'You should go.'

'It seems like a very bad idea to leave you.'

'But you should anyway.'

'Okay. You know it's cute that you don't swear.'

'Go! For Pete's sake!'

He leans down and pulls her into a deep kiss. 'Okay.' He stalks down the corridor with great stealth and purpose, not looking back, reeking of eau de pussy. It's no use.

'Um,' he says, poking his head round her bedroom door. She is lying with one arm cast above her head, her eyes closed, head tilted back, and her hand between her legs. 'I'm really sorry to interrupt—?'

She sits up, not the slightest bit embarrassed. 'Would you get out of here?'

'I would. I just…' he shrugs helplessly. 'I don't know where we are. It was dark when we came in. If you could give me a suburb at least?'

Under the Table

TK wakes up under a table in a strange house. His feet are sticking out the end in his worn black boots. He pulled a pillow off the couch for his head, used one of the drapes for a blanket. Man has to improvise. When he was eleven, he could drink most grown men under the table, but this is not the case today. Twenty-three years living clean, and he's got the AA medals to prove it, even if they're in a cardboard box with the rest of his stuff up in Flint with his sister.

The dawn light is a drowsy gray through the table cloth. Like a shroud. No wonder he was dreaming about being buried alive. Staring up at the dark grain of the wood makes it feel like he's lying in a coffin – the luxury model you gotta fork out extra for, with the creamy exterior and the gold-plate handles and the silk-lined space inside. Not the kind he buried his momma in. But that's morbid thinking, and the day is bright and all laid out ahead of him and he's got a whole house to go through.

A different man would have slept in one of the beds upstairs, but the family took the big mattress with them

and it wouldn't feel right to sleep in one of the little kids' rooms. Besides, it's one of his special talents. He's got a knack for sleeping anywhere, anytime. Worked it up in the assembly line making screws, where if you were smart and motivated and very sneaky, you could take on the work of two men for an hour or two, while the other guy caught some shut-eye, and then switch it up. Bosses didn't like it, but long as the work got done, what did they care? He finds he sleeps better if it's really noisy. Conditioning, they call it. Drills and bolts and the whine of heavy machinery? That's pure lullaby to him. The birds twittering outside to greet the sunrise don't make the cut.

Something crashes in the kitchen. He bolts upright, smashing his head on the underside of the table. Damn. Shouldn't have got complacent, even with the door locked behind him and a kind-of permission.

He tried to do it real polite. He stood on the corner across the way, while the family packed the car, loading everything into a station wagon and a U-Haul trailer. They strapped the mattress to the roof and a table to the mattress, upside down with its legs in the air like a dead bug. The kids went into the house and came out again, carrying boxes in relay, while the afternoon shadows stretched out. The wife kept glaring at him, like the foreclosed notice in a plastic folder taped to the door was somehow his fault. The kids, too. Shifty glances at him and then back at their folks, except for the toddler of course, who wanted to play in the boxes. Real cute little boy, getting underfoot like one of those wind-up toys that keeps going.

TK tried to be nonchalant about it. Taking his time to roll a cigarette and smoke it. He didn't mean to make them

freak out. But he couldn't walk away and leave it to chance, either. Someone else might happen along. And sure, that seems unlikely in this neighborhood where theirs is the last house standing among overgrown lots and burned-out wrecks, and he only chanced on them because it's what he does; wander the city looking for luck. TK is no stranger to terrible coincidence. Ask his momma, and her twin sister who got her killed.

'Leave it alone,' the husband muttered, pulling on the ropes to make sure everything was tight as. But it was boiling up inside her, the whole time he waited, trying to make it seem like he wasn't.

'No,' she said, handing the toddler off to her man and striding toward TK across the yellow grass, her little fists balled up like she was a pro-footballer instead of five-foot nothing. The husband started after her, then realized she'd immobilized him by handing him the baby.

TK dropped the cigarette and ground it out. No manners in breathing your poison in someone else's face. Nor in littering, nor wasting tobacco, even the cheap stuff. He picked up the stump and pocketed it. When he stood up again, she was in his face, hands on her hips, spitting outrage. Not really at him, but sometimes people need a stand-in. He'd seen it often enough, at the shelter, at meetings. He could be that for her.

'Can't you even wait till we're out of here, you…vulture!' Her voice cracked as she said it, but the insult bounced right off him. He doesn't know much about vultures outside of what he's seen on TV, hop-hopping to get at some dead carcass. If he'd had a choice, he'd have told her he's more like one of the city's stray dogs. Because they're shameless opportunists and you can cuss them out much as you like,

they've learned not to take it personally. The lone animals anyway. It's when they pack together that you got a problem. Only takes one mean dog to wind up all the others into biting teeth and snarls. But he's a solo mutt and he knows how to wag his tail a little.

'I'm sorry to see you go, ma'am,' TK said, calm, looking her in the eye. 'Used to be that it was only the nice *white* families moving out of Detroit.'

He'd knocked the indignation right out of her sails. Good manners will do that; turn a situation around. You got to treat people like people. Something his momma taught him, along with how to use a gun, and what the minimum going rate for a whore was.

'Yes, well,' she said, angrily brushing at her eyes, 'tell that to the bank.'

'You don't worry about your things, ma'am. I'll make sure everything finds a good place and a purpose.'

'Thank you. I guess.' She sounded bitter. She shouted across at her husband, who was about to lock up, 'Leave it! It doesn't matter anyhow. Right?' She looked at TK for confirmation, of more things than he suspected he was able to give. But he tried anyway.

'Yes, ma'am,' he said, solemn. 'Good luck.'

'Ha!' she said. 'You're the one who's staying.'

'All right?' the husband called over.

The car doors slammed, but they left the house open for the dusk to go creeping in – along with any shameless opportunists who happened to be hanging around.

TK waited until the U-Haul lights had disappeared round the corner before heading in and locking the door behind him. Flicked the light switch, but the electricity was already cut off and he took the executive decision, one he regrets

now, with the noises coming from the kitchen, to wait till morning to see what was left.

Something shatters. Glass or crockery. Which makes TK think it's not a looter. He doesn't like to use that word. That implies theft, and he's never stolen a thing in his life, not even when he was a kid and all fucked up. He's in asset reclamation and redistribution. Also career consultation, IT support, peer counseling, recycling and, when he really has to, mopping up at the party store on Franklin. Which might seem like a strange place for a recovering alcoholic to work, but it keeps him honest, and he never accepts money from underage kids looking for someone to buy them a six-pack of Coors the way some homeless do. Or as he prefers to think of it: domestically challenged.

The noises in the kitchen sound clumsy. Scuffling. Maybe a drunk. Or something else. He crawls out from under the table, feeling for the pepper spray he carries with him. Expired, but you can't always believe what you read on the side of the box. He has a blade hidden in his walking stick, a jerry-rigged thing he made himself, but pepper spray has always served him better, especially against feral dogs, long as you're upwind and not backed into a dead end, which he has been in the past, but only once. Thomas Michael Keen learns his lessons quick.

He moves quietly toward the kitchen, flicking the safety off the spray nozzle, holding it up, facing the intruder. He peeks round the kitchen door. The kitchen is in a state. Cupboards hanging open. Food spilled all over the floor. No way the woman who told him off on her lawn would leave her house like this.

A furry bandit face pokes out from behind one of the

cupboard doors, its mouth matted with bright blood. TK swears. And then the raccoon goes back to licking at the strawberry jelly on the floor, among the shattered remains of the jar that once contained it.

'Go on! Shoo! Get outta here!'

The raccoon raises its head and looks at him. He runs at it, waving his arms and yelling. 'Scoot your furry butt!'

It bristles, and then thinks better of it and dashes for the cat flap. With a swish of cold air and a thwack of plastic, it's out into the dawn, running for its life. And they both have a story to tell.

Briefly, TK considers crawling back under the table and going back to sleep until the sun's up proper, but he's shot full of adrenaline from the damn critter.

Hoping against the obvious that it's gas not electric, he checks the stove, so he can make a cup of coffee. Unfortunately, it's electric – probably came installed with the house. Worth fifty bucks if he can disconnect it and figure a way to cart it to the junk store. He's already cataloging in his head.

But a man's got to have his caffeine fix, so he spoons in a mouthful of instant coffee mixed with brown sugar and washes it down with water. The faucet sputters and chugs ominously. The city'll have turned that off too. House like this with three kids probably has a good-size cylinder, though, enough for him to have a wash and a shave and still be able to flush the toilet after he's done the necessary. You got to live on the streets to appreciate the sheer decadence of that white porcelain flushing commode.

He was a landlord once upon a time, when he was thirteen and the most together of all the dopeheads. He moved into a deserted building, pulled down the boards, put up

curtains, cut the grass, paid a nice Chinese lady a cut to come by once a week to take in the rent money, 'cos who was going to give it to a kid? He got an old electrician to teach him the basics of stealing power from the circuit box without frying himself like an egg, and every time the neighbors went out, they'd fill buckets with water from the garden hose. It worked fine as long as his tenants kept up appearances, looked after the place, but you can't trust a bunch of dopeheads not to fuck up a good thing. Eventually, they'd started partying on the front lawn, and the neighbors caught on and called the cops, and they'd had to abandon their abandominium.

He was going to start up someplace else, but then his momma got herself killed, bled to death in his arms, and he got taken off the streets by the justice system. Ten years straight, and then on and off. Prison's like booze, it's a tough habit to break. He used to drown the memories with whatever he could get his hands on, which would get him in trouble all over again. Now he's learned to block it out in his head, like windows boarded up with plywood.

TK digs in the kitchen cupboards until he finds a bunch of black plastic trash bags, and then heads upstairs to go through every room with care. They've packed in a rush, leaving clothes on hangers, others tossed on the floor. He folds everything up and puts it in the bags. A pile for him, one to send to Florrie, leftovers for Ramón to pick through, and the rest they'll take down to the church.

He tries on a checked flannel shirt, but the arms are too short. Same with the suit jacket. That's the trouble with being a big guy. But the red pair of kicks he finds in a box at the back of the closet fit him just fine. Nothing wrong with them either, practically brand-new, apart from the

black oil smear over the right toe. He tucks them under his arm and piles up the old broken toys and baby wipes, a half-full tub of nappy-rash cream (everything's half-full when you're in asset reclamation), and dumps it in a bag.

All he needs is to strike it lucky. Find the *one* house with a suitcase full of money. He could probably buy this place off the bank for what, ten large? Maybe less in this neighborhood. Fix it up, move his sister in, fill it up with his friends, legitimate this time.

They say possessions tie you down, but maybe not tightly enough, if you look at this town. The sum total of his stuff fits into a shoe box. Photos, a map of Africa, a pair of reading glasses, his AA medals, and an old sixty-minute cassette tape with his family talking on it, made before his little brother died. Cassettes wear out eventually. He knows he should get it digitized. He knows a bit about computers, he's a self-taught man, but Reverend Alan's promised to send him on a real course, and that's the first thing he's gonna ask them to show him how to do. Photographs, voices – those things are what you pull close when you're missing connections to people, not fancy sneakers and big-screen TVs.

The sudden hammering on the door downstairs nearly makes him crap his pants, and he hasn't even had a chance to use the facilities yet. Maybe the family had a change of heart and called the cops on him. The cops are not kind to stray dogs, even loner ones with more bark than bite.

He could probably make out the back. He's already calculating which bags are worth taking with him when he hears Ramón's voice over the knocking: 'Yo, let a brother in, it's cold out!'

He opens the door on his friend, who looks especially squirrelly today, hunched over a battered shopping cart,

glancing up and down the street. His face transforms from skittish mistrust to a huge grin when he sees TK, and he waves the free Tracker phone Obama gives away to people like them so they can apply for jobs. Good for making plans to raid a house too, although Ramón insists on sending elaborately neutral texts in case it does what it says on the box, and the government *is* tracking them.

'Hey, Papi, got your message. Took me a little while to find a cart. Damn Whole Foods chains 'em up.'

'That's the problem with gentrification right there, brother. The power's out, but I found some lunch meat and cheese in the icebox if you want a bite.'

Ramón peers into the interior of the house, fiddling with the rosary beads he keeps in his pocket. His eyes dart around, finally settling on TK and the red Chuck Taylors under his arm. They're hard to miss. 'Nice shoes,' he says.

'I think they're my color. It brings out my eyes.'

Ramón looks confused.

'They're bloodshot,' TK explains.

'Right.' He snorts out a laugh, but the envy leaks through anyway.

'You know I'd give you the shirt off my back, Ramón,' TK tries again, 'but the shoes on my feet…'

'Probably wouldn't fit me anyhow.' He shuffles on the step. Which only emphasizes his soles flapping as they pull away from the bottoms of his black lace-ups.

TK sighs. Sucker. 'I never did like red shoes.' Which is not true, but hell, Ramón's face brightens like a lightbulb turned on inside it. 'Now get your ass inside already. You're letting all the cold in,' he says, helping his friend wrangle the shopping cart up the porch stairs.