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# Smoked

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Extract

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# 1

Nine years had passed since a gang of laughing boys raped Lola Bell at the back of a weedy and trash-strewn vacant lot. Pulling a train, they called it.

Now it was about to happen again.

Back then, sixteen years old, five of them had grabbed her in the late afternoon as she cut through the lot on her way home from the dance lessons her grandmother had paid for. She knew three of them. Tall, brooding, hostile – Brothers of the Struggle, they thought of themselves, young Gangster Disciples. They'd lounge on the benches, their hoods pulled down low over their faces, drinking out of bottles covered in brown paper bags. They had hit on her before, made comments to her, appraised her as she left her building and walked to the bus stop.

'Hey, shorty, where ya walkin'?'

'Honey, I'm liking that big black ass.'

'C'mere, baby, wanna make some green?'

Stupid, always taking that short cut through that back lot, never thinking of the danger. She remembered how the late sun was sharp and savage in her eyes as they held her down and took turns riding

her. She remembered how the towering shadows of the Robert Taylor Houses grew longer as the time passed. She remembered the sound of cars speeding by on the Dan Ryan Freeway. She remembered the smell and taste of cheap wine on their breath. She remembered, after they left, lying there alone, the night coming on, rats starting to move in the bushes.

Now, twenty-five years old, she stood in a tiny orange bikini and high heels, in a small, bare office five stories above Congress Street, Portland's main drag. She cursed herself, her stupidity, that this could happen again. She had come here for a modeling 'try-out'. But now the man stood just behind her, holding her, twisting her arm against her back until tears nearly came. His other hand held a chunk of her hair, not quite pulling it, but tensed, ready to pull, controlling her like that.

Mr Blue Eyes, he called himself. He was tall and good-looking with a muscular body. He was clean-shaven and blond, and when she met him he was wearing a light blue Polo shirt by Ralph Lauren, and a pair of tan khaki slacks. His teeth, she had thought at the time – he didn't have model's teeth. That was what threw off his look. He had the snaggle teeth of a redneck.

'Hey, Shaggy,' he called across to his partner. 'You should see the tattoo she's got on her shoulder blade here. "Girls Kick Ass", it says, in a neat little curlicue. Well, ain't that cute?' He leaned close to her ear. 'You gonna kick my ass, honey?'

She could feel his erection against her back, pushing against the rubbery fabric of his Speedo shorts. They were standing on a plastic mat and behind them was a fake ocean scene. On either side of them were the bright lights and the black umbrella of a professional photographer. The lights were hot, and both she and Mr Blue Eyes had a fine sheen of sweat on their skin. She thought of the tattoo, the optimism it had represented for her, the dawning of a new day.

All lost now. All gone.

Across the office from them, maybe ten feet away, Mr Shaggy hunched behind a video camera on a tripod, viewing the action.

'Easy now,' he said. His words flowed like molasses, and his voice gave a taste of the Confederacy, as if he had come north as a ten-year-old boy and never quite assimilated. 'Let's just do this real easy. You're a beautiful girl, Lola. You got a future in this type of work, if you want one.'

Mr Shaggy was everything Mr Blue Eyes was not. A mountain man, husky, bordering on fat, with a bushy beard and long hair. He was a bear of a man in a black Harley-Davidson T-shirt. He had been stretched behind the desk when Lola walked into the nearly empty outer office, his feet up on a side table. He had conducted the interview.

Lola had liked Mr Shaggy. Despite his fearsome appearance, he had a disarming way about him, a gentle manner, one that had put her right at her ease. When she walked in, he had smiled, looked her up and down.

'Oh, yeah,' he said. 'Young lady, I think you're gonna do just fine.'

Mr Shaggy and Mr Blue Eyes. They were a perfect pair of con artists.

And Lola had walked right into their trap.

A week before, she had spotted a flyer tacked up on the public bulletin board in Monument Square: 'MODELS WANTED. Male and Female. Experience preferred, but not necessary. Fresh or exotic look, enthusiasm most important.'

Lola had done some modeling from time to time. A couple of years had passed since the last one, but she still kept her eyes open for opportunities. She didn't imagine anything would come of it, but decided to give it a try. A little extra money would come in handy. And with her long curls and brown skin, she figured she could pass for exotic, in any case. She pulled the flyer down and stuck it in her bag, glancing around as she did so. People sometimes got funny when you pulled down flyers.

That night, she called the number on the flyer. A brisk, businesslike woman's voice on the machine said to leave a message. Lola did. Two days passed and no one called her back. On the third day, a man called her in the evening. He told her the modeling agency was conducting interviews in Portland the very next evening for a catalog shoot. Could she make it? Friday night. She sure could.

He scheduled it for seven o'clock, gave her the address, said they would buzz her into the building. He told her to bring a head shot and a performance résumé, if she had these things. She said she did. He told her that would be great.

'No promises,' was the last thing he told her.

'None expected,' she said.

She tried not to get too excited after she hung up the phone. These things had ended in disappointment before. All the same, it might be something.

Now, her moist skin broke out in gooseflesh despite the heat from the lights.

'You cold, honey?' Mr Shaggy said. 'Need somebody to keep you warm?'

Her heart raced. Her breath came in rasps.

Mr Shaggy looked up from the camera. 'Mr Blue Eyes, will you remove those bottoms for Lola, please? If she's not gonna do it herself.'

Mr Blue Eyes brought extra pressure to bear on her arm. He let go of her hair and his hand strayed to the panty of her orange bikini. It was made of tight, grippy latex. He needed two hands to pull it down, but if he released her arm, then she'd be free.

'Come on, Lola, help me out,' he whispered into her ear. His breath smelled like those curiously strong mints, the ones that came in the little tin and used the spaceman in their ads. He smelled like he had eaten a whole handful of them.

'I promise I'll make this the best one you ever had.'

She had changed out of her street clothes and into this skimpy

bathing suit when Mr Shaggy suggested they take a few pictures, see what they had. She changed in a tiny bathroom. It looked like no one had used this office in months. When she came back out into the office, Mr Blue Eyes was already packed into his ice-blue Speedos. They barely contained him. He had thick neck muscles and a broad chest. His legs rippled with muscle and veins.

She had fanned herself with her hand, feigning a hot flash. 'Oh, my,' she had said. 'I didn't realize.'

'That's what I like,' Mr Shaggy had said. 'A girl with a sense of humor. OK, kiddies, let's shoot a little something, what do you say?'

Now he said, as he looked through the LCD screen that folded out from his camera, 'Yessir, like to break me open a little piece of that. Mmmmm-mmmm. That's what the doctor ordered.'

The things they said made it hard for her to think. The bright lights blinded her. She was in danger of freezing up. If she allowed her mind to lock, then they could do with her what they wanted. She had to get loose. Calm down, find the center, let everything go. Become soft rather than rigid.

She could scream. Yes, she could do that. What had she learned about screaming? Don't scream for help. Nobody responded to cries for help. If anything, cries for help scared people away. No. People responded to a different word. One that made them look out for their own self-interest.

Fire.

She took a deep breath, lungs gathering air for the effort. It had to be loud, it had to be piercing, it had to rip through the calm and the quiet of an after-hours building, it had to rip through the walls, out to Friday night drinkers and diners and moviegoers – people walking by five stories below on the street. It had to rip through the world.

Mr Blue Eyes clamped a hand over her mouth.

He whispered in her ear, 'If you scream, then we're gonna have to hurt you.'

It was too late to scream. It was too late to do anything. She carried no weapon. The only weapon she had was herself. In a ridiculous orange bikini and high-heeled shoes.

Empty hand, she thought. Empty hand.

'You know what?' Mr Shaggy said. 'Let's have you folks head over to the examination table there. I'll just let this camera run, and bring the second camera over there and join you both. That'll make things easier on everybody, hmmm?'

Mr Blue Eyes turned her to the right and shuffle-stepped her over to an empty desk sitting near the wall. The wall itself was lined with floor-to-ceiling mirrors, as if this place had once spent time as a dance studio. He bent her over the desk.

He pulled her head up by the hair. 'I want you to watch.'

In the mirror, she saw him hovering behind her. His smile floated above his muscular torso. He still held her arm behind her back, but he had relaxed the pressure just a little. She felt him, erect now, monstrous, against her. Her eyes stared back at her. Was this what all that training was for? Was this what all the long hours of hard work had come to? To be easily manhandled by two jerks? By two rapists? No. The answer was no. All her hard work was so nothing like this would ever happen again.

Mr Blue Eyes giggled. He had become almost, but not quite, gentle. He stroked her hair, his fingers ready to clench again at any false move.

Nearby, Mr Shaggy fussed with the lighting, moving the big umbrella closer, a round light shining up into its maw.

'Please don't do this,' Lola said.

'What's that? What did you say?'

'Please.'

'That's a good girl. That's what I like to hear.'

What was she waiting for? She still had one free hand. Do it now.

In the mirror, she watched him.

He gyrated his hips against her, like a dance floor showoff. The sight of it might have been comical in some other circumstance. 'You are gonna come your brains out tonight, darling. You are one sexy bitch. I can't wait to put it to you, you know? I mean, I just can't wait. Fact is, I think I love you.'

Then Mr Shaggy's big body appeared in front of her, blocking her view. His meaty hands undid his belt buckle.

'You got a boyfriend, Lola?' he said.

He lifted her chin between two thick fingers. Strapped to his other hand, he had another small camcorder, its LCD screen folded out and facing her, displaying her own face back to her. Her eyes were wide and frightened and confused.

'Sure you do, pretty little girl like you. See how pretty you are? I bet you got yourself a nice boyfriend.'

Lola thought of her boyfriend, Smoke Dugan. Silly old Smoke, who had offered to come with her on this interview. He was afraid for her because scams like this were all over the place. He wanted to protect her. Smoke, always a gentleman, well into late middle age, who walked with a limp and carried a thick wooden cane everywhere – his shillelagh, he sometimes called it. Dapper Smoke, who had gray and white hair and wore an Irish touring cap of wool tweed in cool weather. Smoke, with his big workman's hands and his cats and his cigars and his long afternoon naps. Smoke wanted to protect her from animals like these.

'I'm a big girl,' she had told him. 'I think I can handle it on my own.'

'That's all right,' Mr Shaggy said now. 'We're gonna give you right back to him when we're done. Of course, that's if you even want to go back.'

DO IT, her mind shouted.

Almost ready.

Almost . . .

'All right if I put something in your mouth right now? Come on, Lola. Open up and say AAAAH.'

'OK,' she said quietly. She heard her voice shaking. Her chin had begun to tremble in his hand. Her whole body started to shake. She felt like she could vomit.

'What's that?' Mr Shaggy said. 'Not sure I heard you correctly.'

'OK. I'll do whatever you want. Just tell him to stop twisting my arm. It hurts.'

The two men exchanged glances above her head.

'Well, young man. You heard the lady.'

'Do I believe her?' Mr Blue Eyes said.

Mr Shaggy shrugged. 'Come on, kid. We're on camera here. It's not a conversation we're filming.' He undid the button of his green workpants and pulled down his zipper. 'What's it gonna be, Lola?'

She felt the first sting of tears and let them come.

'Whatever you want.'

'I believe her. Let's get down to business.'

Mr Blue Eyes released her arm. The numb arm flopped around in front of her like a fish and she planted her palm on the desk, next to her other hand. He released her hair. She was free, bent over the desk, her chin in Mr Shaggy's hand. Still, she did not move.

Mr Blue Eyes stepped back and bent over, peeling down his Speedos.

*She had signed a waiver.*

That thought struck her now with strange force. Mr Shaggy had handed the waiver to her right before she went into the bathroom to change her clothes. He had spoken with offhand nonchalance.

'Let's get you to sign one of these releases. You never know. Might get something tonight we want to use.'

She signed without even reading it.

Oh, they were smooth. They had it down to a system. Get the

stupid girl to take off her clothes and put on a bikini. Flatter her some, tell her you'll pay her a hundred bucks an hour. Have her sign away her rights. Then rape her on camera.

Chances are good she never tells a soul.

If she does, you have it in black and white. Hey, maybe things got a little out of hand, but she *agreed* to it beforehand. It's all right here on paper.

Bastards. They had done this before. Of course they had.

'It's OK,' Mr Shaggy said. 'It's gonna be good. No need to cry.'

His voice came to her as if she were at the bottom of a deep well. He removed his shirt. He positioned himself in front of her, his big hairy stomach even with her face. Sometime today, he had sprayed his belly with cologne.

Now.

If she was going to stop this happening, it had to be RIGHT NOW.

'She looks tasty,' Mr Blue Eyes said somewhere behind her. His hands returned, roaming her body. He stood behind her, his erection poking between her thighs, rubbing against the fabric of her bikini bottom.

'Let's spread these legs a little,' he said.

She leaned down close to the desk, like someone doing a push-up. She turned her head to the side, cheek against the hard surface. From the corner of her eye, she saw Mr Blue Eyes, his attention consumed by what he was about to do.

'Uh, Lola?' Mr Shaggy said. 'We're playing both ends against the middle in this game. I'm gonna need some help up here.'

She placed her forehead against the desk. Her body tightened like a coiled spring.

'Lola?'

She thrust herself upward, legs planted, body pivoting at the waist. Ninety degrees to a vertical one-eighty in one second flat.

The back of her skull smashed into Mr Blue Eyes's face.

There was pain, but also the pleasure of feeling him cave in like a wet, rotten pumpkin. He grunted like a pig.

The impact reverberated like high-voltage electricity down her neck to the base of her spine, and across her small shoulders. Her whole body thrummed with the recoil.

For a long instant, the world went black.

Then white light streaked across her vision and Mr Shaggy stood across the desk from her, erection in one hand, camera in the other, eyes wide, mouth a great big O of surprise. She spun, bringing her right elbow up and around with the full force of her momentum. It connected, but not well, with the side of Mr Blue Eyes's head. He held his hands to his face. Blood flowed between his fingers.

She sidestepped from him.

A moment passed, the three of them standing in a triangle, each person's eyes darting between the other two end points.

Suddenly Mr Shaggy whooped and laughed. 'Damn. You let a little girl bloody you up like that? Shit. I've never seen anything like it.'

Lola backed away, kicking off the high heels.

Mr Blue Eyes stood nude, monster erection at half-mast now. He rubbed blood away from his face.

'Nose broken?' Mr Shaggy said.

'I don't know. I think maybe not. It sure hurts, though.'

Mr Blue Eyes looked at Lola. Then he did an odd thing. He smiled.

'I knew I shouldn't have let her go.'

'Look,' Lola said, 'let's make a deal. You let me leave, I don't call the cops.'

Mr Shaggy smiled too. 'Oh, that's funny. You're not going anywhere, Lola. We tried to do it the nice way. We *like* the nice way. Makes for better content. But we can do it the hard way too.'

Mr Blue Eyes grinned broadly, his face a swirled mask of blood. His teeth were jagged, like a row of shark's teeth. His eyes showed

a simplicity, nearly a brute stupidity. He was enjoying himself. He sauntered toward her.

'You know I used to be in the ring when I was a kid,' he said. 'Had fifteen fights. Never once did I get knocked out. Probably not gonna start now.'

Mr Shaggy moved toward her from the left, buttoning his pants. He was a hairy son of a bitch. He even had hair on his shoulders. 'You know,' he said, 'it's gonna be awfully hard to make it in modeling if you won't do nudity.' He was still filming with the hand-held.

She backed toward the tripod camera, watching them approach.

'This is the most exciting one yet. You know, we've had some get away, walk out before we ever got this far, but you're the first one who ever went this far and still showed this kind of spunk. Mostly, they just go limp.'

'Seem to enjoy themselves, some of them,' Mr Blue Eyes said.

And then Lola realized what was missing. She wasn't angry. Up until this moment they had scared her. Everything had flowed their way, their trap working perfectly. And she had gotten scared. But now she saw them clearly for the first time. They did this over and over, tricking young women who wanted to feel glamorous, wanted to feel good about themselves, wanted to be like the people they saw on TV. Wasn't that it? Yes, it was, and in a sense she saw herself for the first time too.

The exploitation, the degradation, the goddamn fucking lie of it all.

Somebody had to make them pay.

Well, if the past nine years hadn't been for a moment like this, then it had been for no moment at all. The high white buzz of adrenaline surged through her veins. Still shaking, still crying. That was OK.

A whistling sound seemed to shriek near her ears.

Mr Blue Eyes was almost upon her.

'Hey, take it easy now,' he said. 'Let's stop crying. Let's cut out all this nonsense and be friends again, OK?'

Her chin quivered.

He opened his strong arms to embrace her.

'Careful,' Mr Shaggy said.

'Oh, I'll be careful. I'll be gentle. We're gonna make Lola feel right at home.'

Lola planted her feet and rammed her forehead into Mr Blue Eyes's face. He was just as dumb as a stump, wasn't he? She drove it in hard, like she would hammer a nail into a log. The blow accelerated into the impact.

His nose felt sharp. This time she broke it. She heard a sound like a club pounding on a hollow gourd.

Mr Blue Eyes made a choking sound. Maybe it was a scream. He fell back.

She lunged forward. As she did, she delivered a punch to his throat with the edge of her right palm, the blade of it. The punch was part of the lunge, organic to it, not tacked on at the end. She had practiced just such a move thousands of times until it was seamless and flowed like water.

Mr Blue Eyes gagged and sputtered, his hands to his face. Blood soiled his chin and neck. His eyes seemed to peer at her from over the top of a bright red wall. She leaped into the air and delivered a front kick to his naked, helpless groin. He dropped to his knees, then fell to the carpet like the broken toy of a careless child.

Mr Shaggy was there, too late for his friend. He grabbed her from behind. She tried to use her head on him, but he sidestepped and her skull bounced harmlessly off the meat of his shoulder. He got both hands, strong hands, in her hair and spun her around. Roughly, he forced her to her knees before him.

He had put away the camera.

She stared up at him. He looked down at her. Their eyes locked.

She had two free hands, and he had none. With one hand, she reached up and grasped his testicles through his loose-fitting chino workpants. She got a good grip on him, measured the heft of him. She held him as she would hold a piece of fruit for inspection.

She smiled.

He shook his head. 'Don't.'

She squeezed and gave a savage twist.

He let go of her hair.

She sprang to her feet, phantom hands still yanking her hair, the pain there still bright. Shaggy was slightly bent, holding his balls with both hands.

She took one step and sidekicked him in the face with the ball of her foot.

He staggered away, lost his footing and fell over.

She glanced around for something to do next. The camera on the tripod caught her eye. She walked over and inspected it. It was a Canon XL1, a digital. It was still filming. She fumbled with the camera for a moment, then ejected the disk, a Mini-DV cassette. She flipped it onto the desk next to the hand-held camera. She ejected the Mini-DV from that one too.

Then she picked up the tripod, camera and all. She held it by the tripod legs like a baseball bat. It was heavier than it looked.

'Don't even think about breaking that,' Mr Shaggy said from the floor.

Now she was having fun.

'You know? I kind of liked you, Shaggy. I mean, like an hour ago, when I first met you.' She swung hard and smashed the camera against the wall. A piece of its hard plastic casing flew across the office. The force of the blow punched a hole in the painted sheet rock of the wall.

'Aw fuck,' Mr Shaggy said. 'Honey, I paid three grand for that.'

She swung again, punching another dent. The LCD screen broke off and hung by a wire. 'I guess you'll need a new one.'

He climbed heavily to his feet. She watched him.

He paused, staring down at Mr Blue Eyes, who writhed and squirmed on the floor, blood from his nose staining the carpet black. Mr Shaggy sighed from deep in his chest. He released a long exhalation. 'I think my friend is hurt.'

'Shaggy?'

He turned to look at her.

'Yeah?'

She swung the tripod and the shattered camera connected with his face.

'So are you.'

Alone now, Lola surveyed the wreckage.

She crouched between the two men piled on the floor. She was naked but for a bright orange bikini. No matter. Mr Blue Eyes had no clothes on at all and Mr Shaggy's belly hung out there like a giant hairy potato. She was still breathing hard, her hair was matted to her head and sweat dripped down her face. No matter. They were bleeding like twin volcanoes.

All those years of practice, women's self-defense, extreme self-defense, karate, grappling, several different styles, years of sparring, and she had never known if any of it would work in real life.

Worked? It had damn well rocked.

'Are we done here?' she said.

Neither of the men said a word.

'I guess that means yes.'

She climbed out of her crouch and glanced around the office. Nothing much to see.

'Listen, I want to thank you guys. That was the best time I've had in years.'

Later, fully dressed and back out on the street, she walked several

blocks before she started laughing. She came to a corner and threw the two Mini-DV cassettes in the gutter. She stepped on each of them, grinding them with her heel, then kicked them into the sewer. All the while, she giggled like a lunatic.

Two couples out for Friday night drinks passed her, glanced her way and kept going.

A moment later the tears began to flow and she could not stop weeping.

Smoke Dugan lay awake in absolute darkness, thinking about death.

Across the room, he heard the furtive rustlings as two of his cats wrestled. A glass of port wine from Portugal sat forgotten on the table at his elbow. She hadn't called yet and that was not like her. Somewhere in his mind, he knew this, but the problem was he knew other things as well. He lay in his basement apartment, watching the visions imprinted on his brain.

The visions were memories.

For more than a year, he had been free of the things. Then last week, something had happened that brought them all rushing back. He had been walking in the Old Port, enjoying the bright fall day. In fact, just moments earlier he had been out on the Maine State Pier watching four harbor seals frolic in the bay. He had read his morning paper out there on a bench, watching also as the Peaks Island Ferry came in and out. Now he was walking back through the sparse crowds. He was thinking he wanted to have a bite to eat, and he was deciding about the many restaurants available to him along the waterfront.

A man was following him.

Damned if it wasn't so. Smoke had first noticed him on the pier. He was a fortysomething tourist in a gray fleece jacket, jeans and LL Bean boots. He wore a Brooklyn Dodgers replica baseball cap and dark sunglasses. Sure, Smoke had seen him there, registered him with

his binoculars and his camera and his leather over-the-shoulder tourist duffel. He had registered him like he registered the Hispanic fishermen in their sleeveless T-shirts with their plastic bait-buckets, the floppy-haired teenagers with their skateboards, and the crusty old salts sitting on the benches, commenting and frowning about the state of the world. Smoke registered everything, scanned everything, and as long as everything stayed where it belonged and acted properly, everything was just fine.

But on the crowded sidewalk of Commercial Street, he felt rather than saw the tourist there behind him. That's when the antennae began to twitch. Was he really there? What was he doing?

Smoke bumped into a young woman passing with her girlfriend.

'Oh, my,' he said, turning to her. 'Oh, young lady, I am so sorry. Are you all right?'

He touched her shoulders and glanced to his left.

The man was there, following along, twenty feet back. He tinkered with something on his camera. Had he taken another photo just a few seconds ago? Smoke's grip tightened on his cane.

The young woman smiled. She was a pretty girl, blonde. Her friend had a ring through her nose like a bull in a field. 'I'm fine, really. It's my fault. I should have been paying attention.'

'No, I insist. It was definitely my fault.'

'Well, no harm done.' Both ladies laughed.

The man found something fascinating in a storefront window.

The young lovelies moved on. So did Smoke. He walked along, heavy midday traffic flowing to his right. Abruptly, he turned and stepped into the flow. A car screeched to a halt. The driver leaned on the horn as Smoke waved his cane. He hurried across the street, glancing behind him at the driver who still hurled epithets. The tourist watched him go.

Now, Smoke peered into the dark. He reached and took a sip of his wine.

It didn't prove anything.

Half the street had watched him. After all, he had made a suicidal plunge into heavy traffic. People must have thought he was senile.

Maybe the man really was a tourist. Maybe he wasn't. But Smoke couldn't stay here – couldn't stay anywhere – for ever. That's what he realized now. He had always known it, but this past year had been so good that he allowed himself to forget. The day would come when the man behind him wasn't a tourist.

Perhaps the time had come to explain himself to Lola. Tell her the whole story. Ask her to run away with him. There was nothing keeping either of them here.

Would she come? Would she even believe him?

She wouldn't. It was that simple. Lola grew up in bad circumstances, but she was a good girl. She wasn't tough. She wasn't cut out for the life Smoke had led. Few people were. Lola was comfortable with the idea that he was a kindly older man who had made a lot of money in engineering and now built toys for retarded children.

Even that. He laughed at the word. 'Retarded.' She hated it when he used it.

'Why can't you say "special"?' she said. 'Or even "developmentally disabled"?'

He didn't know why. He just couldn't. He loved the children, God knew, but he hated the way people danced around what things were, describing them with words that didn't explain anything. 'Hearing impaired' for deaf. 'Vision impaired' for blind.

Fuck it.

Since the tourist, Smoke had started setting the traps again. And the traps had brought the dead children back to him. He saw the dark ocean water with flames riding on the surface, the bodies floating like dolls, the sharks gathering in the deep. The adults, OK that was bad. But the children . . . He saw their big vacant eyes most of all, the life gone from them.

'Shit,' he said, and rolled over.

He was fully awake now, itching to call her. Every minute she didn't call was another minute they had gotten her. He would call her, but that didn't conform to the rules. The rules were she was a big girl, she had grown up in the Chicago housing projects long before she met him, and she could take care of herself. She would call when she got in.

'Some tough girl,' he said. 'Can't even say the word "retarded".'

The phone rang, too loud in the close darkness.

'Hello?'

'Smoke?' It was her.

He smiled. He put the sound of sleep in his voice.

'Yeah, babe. Thought you forgot.'

'Did I wake you?' she said.

'Not really. How'd the audition go?'

'It didn't . . . it didn't go well. I don't think I'm going to get the job. I don't think they liked me very much.'

'Well, that's OK. You'll get 'em next time.'

'Sure.'

'We having dinner tomorrow night?' he said. 'You, me and Pamela?'

'We sure are.'

He thought he heard her voice shake just a little bit.

'Hey,' he said. 'Is everything all right?'

'I'm just tired. It's been a long day. I'm on my way to bed.'

'Well, I love you,' he said.

There was a pause. Sometimes he feared he said it too much, put too much pressure on her. Damn. She was half his age.

'You don't have to say it,' he said.

'I love you too, silly.'

When they hung up, Smoke picked up his wine glass. Somewhere in the room, the cats still played.

Smoke saw the flames again. He saw the dead eyes of the children.

He pictured two massive hands, grasping in the dark. They were groping for him, trying to find him. Hands that would seize him and crush him.

Searching, searching.