

Chapter Four

Codeine . . . bourbon . . .

Tallulah Bankhead's last words

Christian got high until he was nearly senseless and fitfully paranoid, then fell asleep, long after midnight. The paranoia demanded he hide the chunk of tar heroin, seven hundred dollars worth, bought with the idea that it would last at least ten days.

He woke up, late afternoon, craving. He remembered robbing and tricking Janet; he remembered buying heroin downtown from street dealers who tried to trick him; he remembered the next day, when Ginna kicked him out of her place for nodding out while they were kissing; but, he couldn't remember where he hid the dope. The blackouts were so common now, he didn't consider them or wonder what might have happened—he just pushed on, as if his entire life was all one piece.

Calmly, because only calmness can find lost narcotics, Christian tossed the studio from end to end. Cushions and throw pillows lay everywhere like exhausted tumbleweeds. Upended on the scarred hardwood floor sat a gray mock velour couch surrounded by a layer of books, CDs, magazines, shoes, broken guitar strings and musical accoutrements

spread helter-skelter from the bathroom all the way to the open front door, spilling into the hall. Christian's clothes, pockets turned out, made a large pile covering his stereo in the corner. A hundred dollar bill hidden months before turned up in the vegetable crisper of the fridge. Money didn't necessarily solve anything; calamities were always possible if not the rule. Bunco artists, dry spells, bad deals and unexplained phenomena conspire to make money useless. Besides, his habit was liable to inhale a hundred dollars in one sitting. Nonetheless, about to call the connection, he discovered the balky C note had again lost itself in the studio's debris.

Old John, the landlord, appeared in the open doorway.

"Why is your godforsaken garbage contaminating my hallway?"

"I lost something."

Old John came into the studio apartment. "I'll put the curse of seven blind bastards on ya if this isn't straightened up." He turned in a complete circle scanning the studio for furniture and valuables that might end up as his.

"Look, this is my house. I live here. You can't put curses on me in my own home. I'll have your rent by the end of the day."

Old John cocked his head and looked slyly at Christian, then turned one last time to slowly take in the whole place. Pulling out an absurdly fat worn wallet from his front pants packet, John muttered, "Now who's senile, young criminal? First I thought you was a lollygaggin' guttersnipe. Now I know what you are."

Old John yanked a slip of paper from the sickly wallet. "Here's a receipt for the rent money you slipped under my door at some ungodly hour late last night when sane individuals are sleepin'."

"I paid?"

“Yer a professional idiot.”

“Yeah, I need . . . to, umm . . . please get your scrawny rude body out of my apartment. Now.”

“I know what you are,” Old John said as he went into the hall and kicked a couple harmonicas back into the studio.

“Good day,” Christian said as he slammed the door.

Clearing a spot, he lay on the floor and tried to relax. Ideas of wandering off into Hollywood to search for a naïf to scam reeked of potential failure. Time, the enemy, wouldn't allow things to move along gracefully. His neighbor, Tree, who had a history of extra dope and odd neediness, might help.

They'd met months earlier at a Hollywood Hills party. The host, a producer (what he produced no one knew), hadn't a clue as to what kind of people he'd let into his home. After a late concert at the Whiskey, several women followed the producer's cocaine home. One of the bands followed the women, and the whole affair snowballed into a shindig. The traditional style party with wine drinking, pot smoking and genteel cocaine sniffing was held in the vast living room. Two contentious DJs bickered over the cutting edge experimental CD player; women slow-danced with each other; and everyone talked at once while ingesting pharmaceuticals foreign and domestic. Whatever the host produced, he must have been successful because the house was a lavish, tri-level, plush-carpeted marvel with all the politely obscene modern art and unreasonable furniture that a crack team of androgynous interior designers could cram into it. Upstairs in the bedrooms, more decadent activities were pursued. Christian had long ago lost interest in such parties but still contrived to attend a few rich ones each month in order to stalk dilettantes and dabblers

who had money, drugs and jewels. Hollywood and Beverly Hills spawned the choicest soirees held by the unwary who wanted excitement and so invited local musicians and criminals. Once the partiers were drunk or sedated, Christian would reconnoiter the house and gather whatever looked pawnable or narcotic.

While rifling through the mysterious producer's medicine chest, Christian heard a bluesy trumpet refrain coming from the hall. He closed the medicine chest and opened the door. Tree, standing in the hallway, lowered his trumpet. "Find anything?"

"Excuse me?" Christian said with professional innocence.

"There ain't nothin', I already looked."

"What are you talking about?"

"Check this out," Tree said, pulling a generous lump of black tar heroin from his pocket. "I found this in the glove compartment of a Beemer out front."

"Huh" Christian, rattled by the trumpeter, was intrigued by the tar. "What makes you think I'd be interested?"

"I've seen you around. I'm Tree. We live on the same street. I know all about you." He pocketed the heroin and put out his hand to shake.

"Really . . ." Christian said, hesitantly taking the hand, hating that someone knew something about him. He would have walked away in a huff except for the dope.

Tree grinned. "Yep, I hear you partake of the poppy."

"Yeah, well . . ." Unwilling to commit to anything Christian was likewise not ready to rule anything out.

"Let's get high. I got a brand new rig." Tree produced a syringe.

"I don't use needles, as I don't care to see my own blood."

"Well, la de da. How you gonna do it?"

“Be right back.”

Christian hurried up the hall, down the stairs, through the living room, stepping over groggy party goers, into the palatial kitchen where two drunks were trying to tilt the last dregs out of an industrial beer keg that threatened to crush them both.

“Do you know where the aluminum foil is?” Christian asked the struggling alcoholics.

“Beer?” answered one.

There would be no help from that quarter Christian realized and began pulling out one drawer after another revealing fancy spoons, graters, candles, linen, arcane utensils and all the other bric-a-brac that clogs up prosperous households. Christian’s kitchen at home contained a few candy bars, one bent spoon and a year’s supply of tin foil.

Frustrated, he opened the refrigerator and tore off a piece of foil that was wrapped around an old burrito.

Tree came into the kitchen shaking his head. “Do you want to get high or what?”

“Yeah.” Christian raised his eyebrows and nodded at the beer aficionados slumped against the keg, gathering strength for another assault.

“Yo, dudes,” Tree said. “There’s a full keg in the backyard.”

The drunks nimbly disappeared as if they were athletes instead of luses.

“Let’s do this. You sure you don’t want to use my point?”

“I told you, I smoke it. How do you know me?”

“Word is out, on the street. I heard you sell nice guitars . . . some cats I know think they’re hot.”

“Please. They don’t know me. People talk shit.”

“Yeah, whatever. I also know a couple of boneheads who did dope deals with you. Both times, you and the money, got busted or something. Good trick.”

“What? Who the hell are you?” Christian felt smothered.

“Tree. I’m Tree.”

“I got your name. I mean who, what . . .” Disconcerted, Christian decided to smoke whatever dope was offered, then shed the trumpeter.

“I’m a musician, just like you.”

“Huh.” Christian thought this patently improbable since not even he seemed like himself. He would have fled at once, but for the dope, and this alone proved he couldn’t trust himself. Granted, Tree had demonstrated a certain facility on the trumpet, and Christian was given to forming liaisons based on hazy, dreamlike aesthetic impulses. However, repeated offers to shoot up made Tree unsavory. “So . . . what?” Christian asked.

“All right, we’ll split this dope. But first . . . “

“Oh, God.”

“Listen. Seeing as how you’re a person who occasionally does things outside the law, I was thinking we could hit a lick together. Two heads are always better, and I could use a partner.” Tree smiled as engagingly as he could, which was considerable, but wasted on Christian.

“I can’t talk unless I’m high!” Christian, used to suffering fools, felt chagrined that this particular one was privy to shenanigans and episodes he assumed no one had untangled. The idea of a crime partner suggested planning on a scale he didn’t care for. Besides, Christian did what he did alone. An exception barely proved the shadowy rule.

One night as Christian busked for money in front of Graumann’s Chinese Theatre on Hollywood Boulevard, he met Rosie, a drunk and Dickensian 21-year-old Irish accordion

player. Not a word passed between them as she sidled up and threw her concertina appropriately into his New Orleans blues, thereby winning some of Christian's heart. When the police arrived and proposed that they evacuate the sport for violating various noise and panhandling ordinances, Rosie further stirred his admiration by soundly cursing the cops in her thick accent. "Fook ya, left, right and center, ya insufferable bahstards." Delicate features were elevated to high beauty by her foul mouth, erotic overbite, jet black hair and wee shred of Irish modesty.

Rosie cut to the crux of Christian's never ending dilemma. "Come on now ya git, if you need money."

In his curious innocence he followed her, never thinking anyone as base as he. They took a long rambling walk down Cahuenga Boulevard while she played her accordion, cursed incomprehensibly at pedestrians, and indulged herself with a dreamy monologue on a number of subjects; and eventually arrived on Melrose Avenue with its vintage boutiques, art galleries, newsstands and haberdasheries, all closed. Bemused, Christian surveyed the deserted street, then turned to Rosie. "I'm having a truly good time, and enjoy your company, but didn't you say something about money?"

"Don't be common. Here we have it." She stood in front of a CD store, threw her arms out as if it were a miracle.

"They're closed." Christian noted glumly.

"Fortes fortuna juvat," Rosie obscurely proclaimed, swinging her accordion roundhouse, smashing the plate glass window. "Give a shout if ya see the coppers." She handed Christian the accordion, kicked a few shards of glass out of her way and then climbed over the window sill into the store.

Frozen with wonder at her audacity, he couldn't imagine how such a harebrained act could produce money. From her small backpack Rosie pulled a green trash bag and began filling it with CDs, carefully picking up entire sections, leisurely yet deliberately shopping. Christian, a poor lookout, watched her rather than the street. As the shock wore off he became agitated.

"What in the hell?!"

"Ready!" Rosie cried gaily, climbing out of the store. "There's the lad." She smiled sweetly and patted her hair. "Get us a taxi."

"Why . . . who are you?" He often wondered who people were.

"Ya silly prat. I'm the girl going to the 24 hour used CD store in Santa Monica to sell this shite. I've a tidy sum here."

Rosie, as good as her word and full of tricks, drank whiskey like a pirate and from Christian's example plunged into heroin smoking as if it were the thing to do. They undertook a month long crime spree stealing antique books, jewelry, folk art and anything else the local pawnshops deemed negotiable. Rosie had a sixth sense and vast experience in this area.

They slept together (had a go Rosie said) once. Christian appreciated the baffling Irish sex, but she took him that first night, in her van/domicile, with typical Hollywood promiscuity that lacked the romance he favored. He was fond of the cash she generated whenever it was short. Ginna Kay and Rosie were never to meet. Nevertheless, one evening Ginna came across Christian and Rosie busking on the corner of Sunset and Vine. He banged his cheap acoustic guitar, doggedly stamped his foot and growled out his best long-suffering voice, while Rosie, transported as she was prone to be by all primal acts,

swirled and jiggled and pumped her accordion like a madwoman. Ginna caught Christian's eye.

"She's just a musician," he said, the one word explanation for all manner of rude behavior.

In between songs, Ginna said calmly to Rosie, "I'm the girlfriend," before putting a dollar in his guitar case, and going home. She didn't worry about what Christian did on his own, and tried to hold onto the philosophy that he couldn't hurt her, only himself.

"What's her point?" Rosie asked, dismissing the concept of boyfriends.

They played on the streets daily, and carried out larcenous missions whenever Rosie took a notion. Christian's role in their exploits continued to be as an unskilled lookout. He tried to interest Rosie in one of his chaotic schemes, but she would have none of it. Whereas he wasn't partial to blatant stealing that might lead to confrontation or solid accusation, she didn't approve of any course of action that took longer than one minute. They acted as if this was reasonable until the day of her arrest.

Waiting outside of Nordstrom's Department Store, Christian watched two burly store detectives usher Rosie out of the store and into a police car. "Wait for me!" she cried, as the police pulled away. He waited an hour, on the corner, then gave up as money had to be made and life must go on. Her arrest and rumored deportation led Christian to reinstitute his policy of working alone. The affair also served to illustrate that only in the code of confusion lay safety from consequences.

Christian's only intention in going to Tree's apartment was to borrow a little dope—then on to one of his singular escapades. Though Tree played trumpet well, Christian had no respect for his philosophy or conduct. Like most Hollywood musicians Tree was a

prostitute willing to sacrifice his muse for a price, a disgusting practice frowned on by those whose music was insanely, purposely noncommercial, and therefore unsellable. Tree's music of choice, bop jazz, was obscure in the current climate, so he played in Top 40 and mariachi bands. Christian's exposure to punk rock ethics back in Santa Fe made such things unimaginable.

He rang the bell, then banged on the front door trying to be heard over the loud dissonant jazz pouring out the window. Tree pushed the door open, joint in hand, trumpet under arm, allowing the ferocious New York jazz to blare over the neighborhood like reveille for heroin addicts.

"Christian! Baby! Just the cat I wanted to see. Let me turn down the tunes." Tree went back into his pad with Christian on his heels.

With the music gone, the studio apartment descended into an abused, pot-scented silence. Dozens of shelves containing thousands of CDs and old vinyl records lined the living room walls. Trumpets, clarinets, saxophones, violins and a dozen little-known percussion instruments, all stolen in a late night raid on Hollywood High, hung from hooks in the ceiling. An upside down typewriter was nailed enigmatically in the center. The studio, unfurnished besides a low coffee table and a dozen luxurious Persian rugs, reeked of drugs and quirk.

Christian gravitated to the music collection, freshly astonished by the sheer volume of variety. It contained every musical genre from every country on Earth, back to the dawn of recording. The great American bluesmen shared space with Sri Lankan Dobro players and obscure klezmer outfits. Beethoven, Bach, Bowie and the Beatles were there in force. Frank Sinatra, Brazilian Hoodoo music, Bob Dylan's entire catalog, Norwegian clog dancing music, Spike Jones, Polynesian tonal acrobats, Hollywood and Bollywood's finest

musicals and every important punk rock record ever released were all together, neatly filed. Christian never wanted to possess anything, but was impressed that such a treasury existed. Regretfully, he pulled himself away.

“You got any dope?” Christian asked.

“You got nothin’?”

“You know I’ll get it back to you. Just had one of those stoner setbacks, lost my dope in the pad somewhere. Unavoidable.”

“Yeah, sure. The dope’s in that glass bowl on the table. The foil’s on the counter in the kitchen.” Tree turned the stereo back up, took a deep breath and blew into the trumpet, accompanying the music with his own agitated riffs.

Christian located the foil, rolled up a dollar bill, plopped down in front of the coffee table and opened the bowl to reveal two grams of tar. He intended to smoke until Tree stopped him. “Do you have a lighter?” He noticed another bowl filled with matches. “Never mind Never you mind Never mind.” Setting the bowl on the foil so that a piece hung over the edge of the table, he painstakingly smeared a tiny gob of tar on it, lit a match, applied flame to the bottom of the foil and through the dollar bill inhaled an aromatic cloud that seeped into his head. The second and third hits spread throughout his limbic system, flowed down his spinal chord and out into the world. Anxiety melted away into rumor; all pain, mental and physical simply disappeared. Bodily functions and organs geared down gracefully as his blood pressure lowered. He drew in mouthfuls and lungfuls and grew serene. The music spilling out of the stereo took on a delicacy not evident earlier. Tree’s trumpeting threw off sparks of inspiration, Christian felt increasingly distinguished. “This is good shit.”

“I’ve got a stellar connection.”

“I’m broke, bad, for the moment, but later tonight or maybe tomorrow I’ll score and get you back. Once I’m rolling, I’m a genius.”

Tree set down his trumpet and turned off the stereo. “Dude, we can hit a lick tonight and come out on the other side with a thousand each. In cash. It’s set up righteous. All you have to do is drive and watch the street.”

“Where are we going to get a car?”

“I’ll borrow one. Think of all that money. In cash.”

The idea of two thousand dollars wafted through Christian’s stoned mind. “Yeah . . . two thousand dollars.” A narcotic haze obscured his edicts and policies regarding solitary crookedness. “Let’s hear it.”

“First, you have to recognize,” Tree rubbed his hands together, “that I am an accomplished robber who never hurt anybody.”

“So you tell it.”

“Now, there’s a shoe store that has a sale every weekend, in an alley off Vine. A girl I know used to work there – Amber. Do you know her? Big black hair. Gorgeous!”

“No.”

“She hangs out at the Skelton Club, dances like a snake?”

“I don’t know her.”

“She has a sister named Solar. They used to get Mohawks back in the day, dyed blue. Amber! Tarantula tattoo on her neck. She’s beautiful!”

“Dude, I don’t know who she is!”

“Amber! One blue eye, one grey eye. She used to fuck Shadow, the guitar player in the Little Kings.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Yeah, right,” Tree said, gathering his wits. “Well, Amber told me there’s thousands in the till after a sale. A lot of times they don’t take it to the bank until the middle of the week. So, I go on in, get the money; it takes ten seconds.”

“What? They’re going to give you the money?”

“I have a gun,” Tree said matter-of-factly.

“A gun! Are you fucking nuts?!”

“I’m a heroin addict. What’s wrong with you?”

Every element of the plan was now revealed to Christian as a box of bad dreams. “I don’t like guns. I won’t use a gun. I never met one single person in my life that I would trust with a gun.”

“I’m just saying . . . “

“I appreciate the dope, but you are fucking retarded.”

“Man, that’s harsh.” Tree picked up his trumpet and hugged it.

“Think about it. Anybody anywhere near a gun could get killed at any time. And you have one. What if some thug – gangster motherfucker – comes up from behind, socks you in the head, takes your gun and shoots you in the face. Where does that leave you? Do the math. And a stoner like you doesn’t even need someone else to kill him. I’m sure that if I was ever so foolish as to have a gun, it would just be a matter of time before I blew my own cock off. Don’t tell me you’ve never dropped your gun.”

“I’m careful,” Tree said sheepishly. “Some girl stole my bullets anyway.”

“Oh my god, you’re an idiot. Why am I here?”

“Every dog likes another dog.” Tree, diligently dishonest regardless of his other failings, recognized that while Christian behaved like a criminal, he never thought of himself as one.

“I don’t know why you persist in thinking that I’d do these things,” said Christian.

“You’re smoking heroin.”

“Technically it’s your heroin,” Christian said, then judiciously lit and inhaled another smear of tar.

“Fine. What do I have to say? You need money. I need money. Heaven forbid that somethin’ illegal should happen even though we both know you’re a one-man bunco operation. If you have any great ideas, I’d like to hear ‘em. And stop smoking my dope!”

“I don’t . . . “ Christian blew out a stream of smoke, about to continue denying everything, when a narcotic rush clouded his judgment. The idea of a lackey willing to take foolish chances suggested things. He stared at Tree.

“No guns,” Christian said.

“All right, whatever. But how?”

“Something whimsical.” Christian was without equal in this area.

“Cash, it’s gotta be cash.”

“Cash, yes . . . “ Christian mused. Having someone unorthodox to factor in made the possible scenarios infinitely tangled. Scams were always enhanced by left field variables and thrived on complication.

“Maybe we should do the rest of the dope.” Christian thought Tree would be better anesthetized.

“Good plan so far.” Tree took the remaining dope into the bathroom where he could inject it without disparaging comments. He did his business and returned to the living room where Christian stared at him meaningfully.

“No second thoughts. Don’t start tripping.” Christian studied the ceiling. “There’s this motel right next to the Greyhound station.”

“That’s across the street from the police station!” Tree shouted.

Christian held up his hands. “Part of the plan.”

“Oh, for the love of Satchmo!”

“I told you, don’t trip, don’t talk, just listen. Now, you go into the motel, pretend you need to rent a room, ask questions until the clerk gets a phone call. You’re innocent and normal. Then she’ll give you money.”

“She what?”

“Shush. You leave with the money, meet me across the street . . . where we hide the money in a trash can . . . then go into the police station to report a stolen bicycle.” Christian smiled triumphantly.

Tree stood, breathless and dismayed. “You, we . . . a bicycle?”

“Look, do you want to do it or not?”

“Go into a police station?” Tree was constitutionally afraid of policemen, detectives, security guards, and even wary of mailmen.

“I know what I’m doing.”

“Why would the clerk give me money?”

“I’m going to call the motel and say I’m a sniper across the street.”

“You said no guns.”

“There won’t be, but she won’t know that.”

“Oh,” Tree said softly. The plan was really just a variation of his usual, since his gun had no bullets. “And the police station?”

“They’ll never look for us in there.”

Tree sat silently playing with his lip, then, in defense, started to nod out.

“Snap out of it,” Christian said. “We leave at midnight.”

Uncharacteristically silent, Tree and Christian walked along Whitley Street independently brooding. The longer they walked and the silence went on, the less inspired either was toward the scheme. “Boy, this is crazy,” Tree said with forced bravado.

“You asked for crazy,” Christian said, heartened by the assessment.

Both grew quiet as they approached the police station, stopped and stared at the motel across the street.

“There it is. Go in and wait for the call. Remember, you’re an innocent traveler seeking shelter.”

Tree, hesitantly, repeatedly looking back over his shoulder at Christian, crossed the street, entered the small motel lobby and stopped up short at the sight of a large black woman behind the front desk mocking a potential customer on the phone. Adele, as her nametag proclaimed, glared at Tree and motioned him towards a beige, plastic-covered couch squatting in the corner. Only inches from the couch sat a square miniature table supporting a single, stale cinnamon roll. The surrounding walls were covered with racks full of cheap, colorful pamphlets extolling the virtues of Los Angeles and its adjacent ghettos. Tree considered the elderly pastry for a moment, settled back in the more comfortable than it looked couch, and nodded out.

From across the street Christian saw the clerk through the tinted window, but no one else. He hoped Tree hadn’t, in a fit of method acting, rented a room and gone to it through an unseen back door. Christian paced a wide circle around the phone booth, went in, dropped his change on the filthy urine-scented floor, bent to pick it up and bumped his head

on the bottom of the cast iron phone. Cursing, he gathered up the change, thrust it into the slot and punched out the motel's number—only to get a busy signal.

He stalked around and around the phone booth and made five more frustrating attempts to call the motel. It finally rang.

“Hollywood's Swinging Motel. Please hold.”

“No!” Christian shouted, but generic tango music came on the line. It angered him more than the head injury, but he realized a bad temper might help. Panting, he reviewed the situation. Somehow, he'd become the very soul of bad judgment. The phone booth, full of debris and stench, seemed tilted. Double-crossing drug dealers, his forte, didn't feel like this. Christian knew his hustle should have never been taken out of Hollywood's drug saturated underground.

Adele came on the line. “How can I help you?”

“Listen lady, I'm a sniper. Right across the street. Follow my instructions and no one gets hurt.”

“Right, and I'm a helicopter pilot. Do you want a room or what?”

“I'm not kidding. Do you think I'm kidding? Because I'm not. Get a bag and put all your money in it or I'm going to start taking pot shots.”

“I tell you what, you sniper asshole, either come in here like a normal robber or you can kiss my black ass.”

Adele had experience with robbers. The Hollywood's Swinging Motel had been hit half a dozen times over the last three years. The last time: a nervous methamphetamine addict stumbled through the lobby door, shakily placed a cheap pistol inches from Adele's face and demanded money. It made her furious. “Point that thing to one side and I'll give you what you want.” The jittery bandit gratefully complied thinking things were going his

way until Adele reached over the counter and knocked him out cold with one blow from her enormous fist. Then she came around the desk and thoughtfully kicked him a few times. The police arrived, took the inept robber into custody, and sternly told Adele not to do it again. Her boss instituted a new policy that directed motel employees to turn over the cash rather than risk driving up the insurance by getting shot. Despite this, Adele balked; Christian's threats were confusing; the effect he was after, but not the reaction.

“Look lady, obviously you don't care about yourself, but how's it going to look if I shoot one of your customers or clients or patrons or whatever the hell you call them.”

“Guests, we call them guests.”

“Do what I tell you!” Christian yelled, but his anger and heart for the caper were diminishing.

Adele snorted and peered out the window trying to see if anyone was really across the street. “Let's suppose I put the money in a bag. I'm not leaving the desk unattended; I have a guest. You'll have to come in here.” She wanted to lure him into the lobby where a video camera had been installed after the last robbery.

“Put the money in a bag. All of it! Give it to your guest.”

“There's only one guest in the lobby, and he's asleep.”

“Oh, for Christ's sake . . .” Christian, at a loss, set the phone down. It was hard not to admire Tree's supremely scatterbrained conduct. It definitely made him look the innocent and could be seen as appropriate to the code of confusion.

Christian gripped the phone with both hands like a microphone in order to scream into the mouthpiece, but he just panted heavily. Angry at Adele and himself, he wiped at the greasy stale sweat covering his face. One more wisecrack from Adele would make him give up. He leaned against the side of the booth, raised the phone and put all the command he

had left in his voice. "Put all the money in a bag. All of it. Wake up your guest. Send him across the street with the bag. Do it *now*, or I'll shoot out a window as a demonstration. I'm tired of fooling with you lady."

"Whatever. Hold on." Bored with the situation, Adele also nursed a grudge against her boss and his policy of submission regarding stickups. The sniper couldn't be persuaded to come within her reach so she decided to punish the motel owner by forking over *all* the money. Following the robber's instructions, per her boss's instructions, would demonstrate that the policy of giving in to miscreants was faulty.

Adele found a large brown paper shopping bag, emptied the till into it, then opened the hidden safe under the counter and added its contents, filling the bag. She strolled around the counter over to the couch and shook Tree awake.

He sat up smartly. "Do you have cable?"

"Excuse me sir, this is a robbery," Adele said professionally.

"Wha . . ." Aghast, Tree leapt to his feet.

"I'm sorry," Adele said coldly as she handed Tree the brown bag full of money.

"Apparently there's a chickenshit sniper aiming at us right now. He wants you to take this here bag across the street."

Relieved that he wasn't being robbed, and reminded by Adele of the hoax's details, Tree thought he should ask a couple of questions. "How much is a room?"

"Take the bag across the street; we'll discuss rates later."

"I think I'm going to check out some motels that don't have snipers."

"Go!" Adele yelled at her unwilling (as far as she knew) bagman, forgetting that she was speaking to a potential guest.

Still barely awake, Tree looked at the bag of money then stared at Adele, wondering if it might all be a dream. "All right," he said and shambled out the door and across the street.

Christian was nowhere in sight. Bewildered, Tree reeled into the middle of the road and looked carefully in all directions. "Christian!" he cried, clutching the paper bag to his chest.

"Over here," a voice hissed from the bushes against the police station wall. Christian parted the bushes and peered out. "How much?"

"I don't know. A lot. Let's get out of here," Tree said, hopping from foot to foot, waiting for the direction to run.

"No, we're going into the police station."

"God no," Tree sighed.

"Give me the money. I'm going to walk down the block because I'm sure that crazy bitch is watching, then cut around through the parking lot into the side entrance of the station. I know what I'm doing."

Tree stared at the ground for a moment, then clutched the money to his chest. It did seem like Christian might know what he was doing. Quickly handing over the bag before he could think, Tree hurried up the steps into the station.

Riley, the desk Sergeant, shouted at three hookers. Grateful for the distraction, Tree sat on a bench. One of the hookers burst into tears and ran out of the station followed by her friends who cast dark looks back at the Sergeant. Tree, tempted to follow them for a variety of reasons, sat frozen.

Sergeant Riley fixed his gaze on Tree. “What now? Did you get robbed by a John too?”

“No . . . I . . . “ The plan, such as it was, didn’t cover this eventuality. Unhinged by the proximity of incarceration, Tree latched onto what little he understood of the plan. “I want to report a stolen bicycle.”

Grimacing disgustedly, Riley slid four densely worded pages over the counter. “Fill out this form.”

Tree, without pencil or pen and afraid to ask for one, sat back down to study the form. Reporting a stolen bicycle looked more complicated than emigrating to another country.

The phone on Riley’s desk rang and he answered it. “Adele? Slow down. What? For the love of God! You didn’t . . . good. I’ll get someone right over there.” He disconnected and made a call. “Ruby, get on the radio; we need all available units and SWAT at Hollywood’s Swinging Motel. Yep, right across the street. Adele, robbery, sniper, and I don’t know what all.”

Tree couldn’t breathe. The fictional sniper had unexpected substance, enough to summon a SWAT team. Every rational molecule in his body begged to flee, but fear sapped his energy to the point where he couldn’t straighten out his legs to stand up.

A dozen policemen, bearing shotguns and automatic weapons, swarmed from the back of the station, about to boil out the door and over to the motel. Riley stopped them.

“Hold up! Hold up! There’s a sniper. We’re waiting for SWAT.”

“A sniper?” Officer Chester Burnett asked. “In the motel?”

“Hell, I’m not sure. I’ll call Adele back.”

“Adele? Not good,” said Burnett.

While the police milled around waiting to sort out exactly what perpetration had occurred, Christian, the author of their confusion, nonchalantly strolled in. Tree closed his eyes and took a deep breath as Christian sat down next to him.

“Don’t nod out again,” Christian said.

“I couldn’t nod out for all the opium in China.”

“Well, you just looked like you were asleep.”

“You’re getting on my nerves.”

“Man, how in the fucking hell do you rob places all the time?”

“Shh,” Tree hissed, placing his hand over Christian’s mouth. “Keep your voice down. I don’t call people up that I’m going to rob and have a conversation with ‘em. And I never had anything to do with a SWAT team.”

Christian jerked his head away from Tree’s hand. “SWAT!”

“Quiet. Yeah. They’re probably out there right now. I’d say we’re surrounded, except that we’re in here with a hundred cops.”

“We’re cool”

“I guess.”

Abruptly, all the policemen in the waiting area rushed headlong out the front door, anxious to apprehend any perp so obnoxious as to set up a sniper stand on their block. Last to the door was Officer Chester Burnett.

“You look familiar,” Burnett said, studying Christian.

“Not me.” Christian puffed out his cheeks preposterously.

“Burnett, get out there,” Sergeant Riley commanded, and Chester obeyed.

Tree sighed, “Fuckin’ shit, you look familiar.”

“This is the last place they’ll look for us.”

“Us? You’re the . . . whatever you are.”

Two plainclothes cops came into the station from the street. Detectives Overbury and Kent wore expensive suits and a predatory air. They stood in the far corner of the waiting room extrapolating. Theories were mulled, notes taken, gut feelings felt, various methods of ferreting out facts were entertained and suspects suspected. Overbury flicked open his cell phone, made a few calls, then conferred with his partner.

“Fuck me,” Tree panted softly. “Check out those cats. They’re detecting like crazy. Look at those suits.”

“It was your idea,” Christian whispered.

“What?”

“ . . . to do something with me. But you’re right, we’ve got to get out of here.”

Detective Kent approached the front desk. “Hey, Riley, you got an empty interrogation room back there? We have a suspect—that broad that works at the motel. Her story stinks. I don’t think there was a sniper at all.”

Christian winced at the quality of the detective’s hunch. It might have been pure guesswork, and so far they were focusing on the wrong person, but it was just a matter of time.

“When do you need the room?” Riley asked.

“The owner of the motel is on his way down to watch the place so we can bring her over here. We need a machine too. They had video in the lobby.”

Tree jumped to his feet. “A video!”

“Stay calm – you were asleep,” Christian said, pulling Tree back to the bench just as the eight-man SWAT team, decked out in full regalia, entered the station. SWAT Commander Loveless narrowed his eyes at the sight of Christian and Tree, instinctively

recognizing perps. Loveless confabbed with the detectives and offered to strip-search every civilian within a ten-block radius.

“Ok, this is too much,” Christian said. “I’ll make a call.”

Ashen and unable to draw a good breath, Tree lowered his head and closed his eyes. After inhaling slowly several times, he glanced up, astonished to see Christian talking to the detectives who looked every inch the well-dressed killers. Afraid of his exposure during the caper, he hurried over. Seeing the detectives up close was disconcerting. Their eyes latched onto Tree like electric eels. Overbury smirked without moving his face, while Detective Kent quizzically tilted his head, raised his eyebrows and showed his teeth. Tree nervously shuffled his feet.

“Hey, Christian, uh, what’s up?”

Christian glared. “Not much *Charlie*. I was asking the detectives what’s happening outside. There’s robbers and snipers out there maybe. I’m going to call my wife, *Consuela*, to pick us up so we don’t get in the way of the investigation, *Charlie*.”

“I told you there’s no one out there,” Detective Kent said.

“Better safe than sorry. C’mon Charlie.” Christian pulled Tree over to the pay phones.

“Sorry I said your name,” Tree whispered, “but I am freaking out.”

“Get a grip.”

Christian punched in the number; the phone rang once. “Hello,” Ginna said tiredly.

“Christian, is that you?”

“Ginna, it’s me. I need . . . “

“It’s one o’clock; I’m asleep.”

“I’m sorry, really sorry, but I have a situation, and you are the only one.”

"I don't have any cash."

"Honey, that's not why I'm calling. That sort of hurt my heart."

"What then," Gina said tersely.

"I'm down the street. There was a robbery."

"Oh my God! Are you hurt?"

"No, but there's a SWAT team . . ."

"A SWAT team!"

"Please, let me finish. I merely need a ride."

"Damn it." Ginna let out a long, audible exasperated breath. "All right. I don't need to get out of the van do I? I just want to put on a jacket and come get you."

"That will be fine. I'll meet you around back."

"Around back of where exactly?"

"The Hollywood Police Station," Christian said quickly.

"Jesus Christ, you are certifiable. This is impossible. I can't believe it. I feel like an idiot. We need to talk."

"Now?"

"No. I'll be there in three minutes." Ginna hung up with a clang.

Christian turned to Tree. "It's all good. We're out of here."

"Thank you God!" Tree said as they started for the side door.

"Hey!" Sergeant Riley called. "Bicycle boy! Did you fill out that form?"

Tree stumbled and stopped. "Crap."

Christian boldly looked Riley in the eye. "Officer, I left the bicycle's paperwork and serial number at home. We're going to retrieve it."

"I thought it was his bike," Riley said, gesturing at Tree, who flinched.

“I’m his lawyer.” Christian turned to Tree. “As your counsel I advise you not to say anything.”

“Why does a guy, who had his bicycle stolen, need a lawyer?”

“I really do,” said Tree.

“Get the fuck out of here,” Sergeant Riley said disinterestedly.

Pulling Tree away from the front desk, Christian saluted the detectives, who were still examining the motel crime from all angles, and walked out the side door to the parking lot. Ginna arrived shortly, grim and sleepy in her bathrobe.

Christian hopped into the front passenger seat. “Pull the van over by the last police car at the end of the lot. Tree, get in back.”

“What in the hell is going on?” Ginna asked as she steered the van towards the back of the lot.

“Nothing,” Christian said.

The van pulled up behind the last police car and Christian bolted, pulled the brown paper bag out from under the police car, jumped back in the van and handed the bag to Tree.

“I thought you hid the bag in the bushes.”

“What’s it matter? You were freaking out and . . . “

“I’m freaking out,” said Ginna. “Who is this?”

“Ginna, Tree. Tree, Ginna. Let’s get out of here.”

Tree collapsed onto the floor of the van. “Dear God.”

Ginna snorted, “Welcome to the dark side.”

“I thought I was already there, but this . . . “

“I assume the police don’t want you guys since you came out of the station. I just can’t imagine. What were you doing? Where are you going?”

Tree sat up. “I need . . . “

Christian put a hand out, quieting Tree. “We’re going to his house. It’s a couple of buildings down from ours. The front apartment.”

“Oh, the trumpet player,” Ginna said.

Tree lay back down, clutching the bag. “Some of the neighbors don’t like it.”

“I should have known you were a musician.”

“Yeah.” Tree couldn’t say much about that. The evening proved every cliché about the epic irresponsibility of musicians, him most especially. Although they’d escaped intact, safety felt delicate and temporary. Only heroin could chase away the bad adrenaline, toxic anxiety and fear of incriminating videos.

“Everything will end up fine,” Christian said.

“How do you figure?” Tree asked.

“The Narcotic Field.”

“Christian, you are so full of shit,” Ginna said.

“Nevertheless, darling, it’s been proved by my extensive study in the field that while under the influence of narcotics, I am in an advanced state of existence. You can’t believe that normal reality applies to me.”

“You are not normal.”

“We just walked out of a police station and it’s the field around me that allowed it.”

“What is he talking about?” Tree asked Ginna knowing that Christian didn’t answer questions with answers.

“He’s got this Narcotic Field Theory.”

“Where did you hear about it?”

“I read about it.”

“He made it up,” Ginna said. “I think parts of it rhyme. You should hear the Code of Confusion.”

“You can’t explain the Code.” Christian laughed as if at cats trying to do math.

“I understand the Code of Confusion,” Tree said.

“Of course you do,” Ginna said.

“. . . but this Narcotic Field . . . “

“Simply stated: when you have heroin in your system, you are in a buffer zone, exempt from physics and penal codes . . . ”

“God damn it Christian, I don’t want to hear this shit.”

“. . . safe from emotional women . . . “

“All right, here you are,” Ginna said, pulling up in front of Tree’s building. “Christian, could you please come by tomorrow? We need to talk. And don’t call me again tonight.” She gunned the engine as Christian was still getting out and peeled off before he could close the door.

Still hugging the bag with both arms, Tree watched the van turn in a couple buildings down. “Is that your girlfriend?”

“I don’t know. Yeah, I guess. Let’s get inside.”

In the apartment, Tree headed straight for his music. Clutching the bag tightly against his chest made it difficult, but he finally managed to put on a particularly morose Billie Holiday record.

Christian peered into the little glass heroin bowl. “All gone,” he said wistfully. Tree stood in front of the stereo, eyes shut, swaying, head resting against the bag. Christian

studied the music collection for a moment and made another pensive examination of the heroin bowl. He approached Tree and gently tugged on the bag. Tree resisted, he wouldn't easily relinquish the money after having risked his sanity for it; then released it with a mournful grunt.

Christian dumped the bag out on the coffee table. "Holy fucking cow! This couldn't have been in the till." He held up handfuls of bundles. "Where did it come from?"

"I don't know. I was in there for like, two minutes, when that pushy black lady gave it to me."

"Dude, you were in there about half an hour. You, nodded out. I called the motel six times. Then I argued with that crazy black woman. She went nuts about three yards from you before she got the money."

"You know what? I don't want to talk about it anymore. Count it. I'll call this sweetheart I know who'll bring over some dope if I turn her on."

Fifteen minutes later Jasmine arrived with her connection/pimp and two other hookers, Tammy and Eunice, all just off work patrolling Santa Monica Boulevard. Hawk, the pimp, sold Tree three ounces of heroin for two thousand dollars. Christian secreted one ounce in his sock; Tree cached another and one went into the glass bowl for everyone's consumption. They all got trashed using a variety of methods: smoking, shooting and snorting the versatile tar. Only Hawk declined according to his custom and pimp credo, but he did smoke a chain of cone shaped joints while marveling over the extensive funk division of Tree's collection. Christian smoked the tar, becoming mute eventually, then danced with Jasmine until she grabbed his hand and stuck it under her skirt so he could feel how wet and turned on she was by free dope. He stumbled away and collapsed on the floor to watch Tammy and Eunice shoot up and make out with each other. Jasmine

disappeared into the bedroom with Tree who adored horny junkie prostitutes. The others left at dawn as Christian went into a dark, bottomless nod.

About noon Christian woke to Tree softly playing trumpet. The brown paper bag, which at its peak held nearly \$14,000, now looked to contain about 15 dollars in quarters and a handful of twenties. The dope bowl held nothing. Christian reached down to feel his sock, relieved to find the ounce still there. Tree looked over Christian's shoulder into the empty bowl. "Huh," he said astutely.

"Dude, where's Jasmine?" Christian asked.

"Took off. While I was asleep. I think she took some records. It doesn't make any sense."

That Tree entertained any doubts about junkie hooker inclinations was evidence of a nearly pathological state of denial. In the last year various women he'd brought home with tender intentions stole money, drugs, instruments, and odd incidentals like bullets. The sex and what he perceived as potential romance swept away all other considerations.

"That's not all," said Christian. "Did you stash any money? Almost all of it's gone."

"Oh no." Tree's heart lurched, surprised as ever.

"It's all right," Christian said, understanding Tree's delusional romanticism in a small way. "Easy come! Easy go! He patted Tree on the back.

"Easy come! Jesus Christ! . . . well . . . yeah. It's a drag all the way around. I kinda thought Jasmine and I had a little thing."

"Please. Do the math. She stole the dope, most of our money, and she's a complete whore."

"Still . . ."