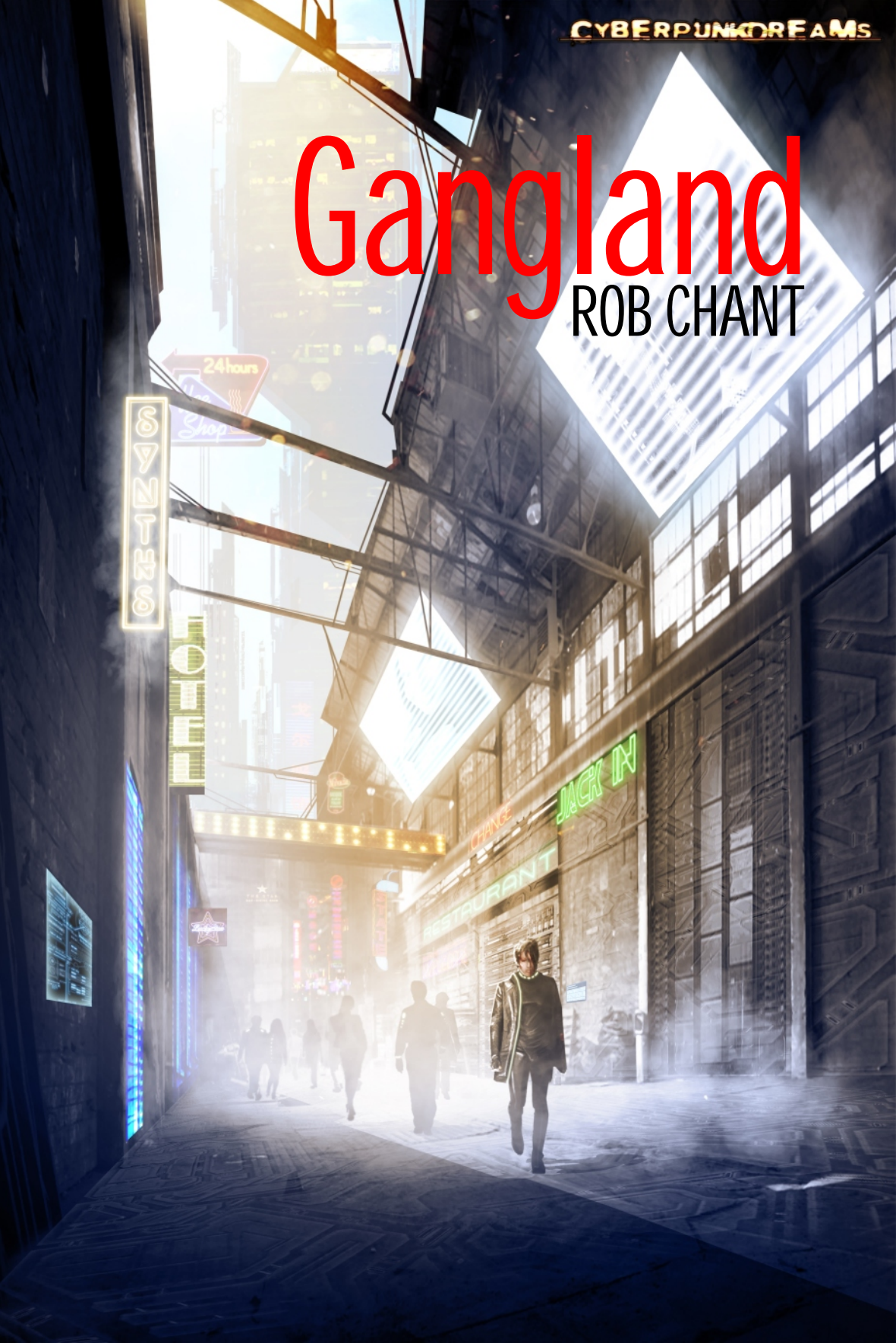


CYBERPUNK DREAMS

Gangland

ROB CHANT



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Thanks to Gabi Everett, Sam Dickinson & Sharon James for beta reading and moral support.

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Gangland

cyberpunkdreams

The body was lying face down in the street. The head was a mess; I think some was missing, already taken by feral dogs. A hand was badly chewed too. I'd chased off a mutt when I'd arrived, ready to knife it if it went for me.

I rattled off a couple of shots, wide angle. There was a big spray of blood, behind and in front of where the body was lying. They'd gone at him with an axe, apparently. The blood was already coagulating in the heat, bits of skull and brain material stuck in it. That was good. That was very good. Brains always sold well. I moved in closer for some detailed work. The guy's face was a crumpled mess, from what little of it I could see. One of his eyes was hanging out of a smashed socket. I moved around for some more angles, shooting everything that I could.

I had to work quickly. I was first on the scene, but you never knew how quickly word would get around. This killing had happened out in the open, on the streets. But it was one of those weird, quiet streets where no one seems to want to go. I was alone for now, but these pictures would only be worth something if they got to my editor before anyone else's. Never mind that I was better than the rest – first to the post was the only thing that really mattered.

I had half a dozen bike couriers on speed dial. I'd called one on my way over; she'd be here soon. I walked back over to my own bike, pulling the memory card out of my camera and sliding it into my phone. The pictures finished copying just as the courier arrived. She was typical of her kind: small and very, very lean. All muscle. Her bike was probably worth more than most cars. I'd heard that a common trick was coating them in a custom contact poison to which only the owner was immune. I didn't know for sure if that was true, but I could believe it in this town. Didn't seem wise to try to find out.

I handed her the memory card and pretty much the last of my money. Just enough left for a cheap espresso. I'd need one shortly. I'd always managed to be professional at the scene, at least so far. I could hold off the revulsion for a time, but the shakes would hit sooner or later. I guess I should have been glad I wasn't getting too used to seeing blood and brains splattered across the street.

I stood astride my bike, sipping my coffee. It was hot enough to disguise the taste, which was a blessing. Well, I complained, but I'm not sure I've ever really had anything better. Everyone just said it was bad, but who was I to know? My hands were starting to shake. With any luck, that would be the worst of it this time. Sometimes it was bad enough to make me stick my fingers down my throat, just to get the vomiting over with. I'd seen worse. A lot worse. The guy hadn't been tortured for a start, which always makes things easier. Although harder in the long run, on the money front. Like brains, torture always sells well.

I'd long ago given up on the idea of a big break. I say long ago, but I hadn't even been in Cinci that long. It still felt like an age. Today's pictures weren't even close to being big. They were good though; they'd keep me alive for another couple of days. I'd got the tip off a Tower Group guy I knew, Fabbé. He said one of their drone patrols had spotted the murder and that he'd called me straight away. He knew the worth of a hot tip like that. I'd hoped he'd want money, but he'd wanted something else. Again. I'd agreed; it's not like I really had a choice.

I'd met Fabbé in a bar. I'd been drunk and desperate. I'd had a loan shark after me, ready for blood, but that's not why I'd done it. I'd just wanted to get laid, and Fabbé was there. By the time I'd gone down on him in an alley around the back I'd been too drunk to notice that he hadn't done anything for me in return.

But apparently I'd managed to give him my number. He'd called me the next day, with a tip. *Payment*. I hadn't even realised at the time that he was a cop. I'd tried to tell him that that wasn't why I'd done it, but he'd insisted, awkwardly, like he felt that he owed me. And so I'd ended up selling myself, doing the one thing I'd always told myself I'd never do. Death before that, but it turns out that when death is close, you'll do anything to survive. Just one more day, and try to ignore the cost.

I threw the empty coffee cup into the gutter and slid my ass back onto the bike. The street was wet; either a broken pipe somewhere, or someone had been trying to keep the dust down. I had nowhere to go, but I was too wired to stand still. I reflexively checked my bag and my

camera; both still there. Olly, my editor, would call soon, then Fabbé, when he got off shift.

I really wasn't looking forward to the latter. I tried to tell myself that it wasn't so bad, that once I'd done it once doing it again didn't mean anything more. That at least he was a fairly fit, attractive guy. That was why I'd started talking to him in the first place, after all. I almost gagged on my own hypocrisy. Maybe it was my own fault that I'd let him turn it into a transaction, but I just couldn't afford to turn down a decent tip. Literally couldn't afford it. *Rob a bank, next time*, I told myself.

But there weren't any banks in Cinci. The streets were filthy. Crap everywhere, piled up, spilling out of the alleys. Occasionally someone would get a crew together and clean some of it up. Graffiti and fly-posters everywhere. And towering above, a giant, animated and bulletproof billboard for Xara One's latest show.

High tech advertising mixed in with the total squalor. It was one of the many things about Cinci I could never get used to. I'd grown up in Louisville, which was hard – broken down, but relatively clean and nothing corporate at all. Looking back, I guess that's just because almost no one even lived there anymore. Not enough people to create a lot of trash. No one to advertise to. Whereas Cinci was all people. Nothing but.



My phone rang about half an hour later. It was Olly. The pictures would have arrived with him sooner, but he'd have pored over them and then

let me sweat a little. I was glad of the wait. I'd planned on just cruising round the streets, but I'd ended up pumping hard, wearing myself out. My thighs were burning as I hopped off the saddle, and my hair was sweaty. I ran my hand over it. I'd finally taken the plunge and buzzed it short a couple of days ago. Shampoo was yet another thing I couldn't really afford.

"This is great stuff, Ms Stone, great stuff," he said as soon as I answered. "Real boner material. I'll pay top rate for it... but I'll double that if you can find out anything about this guy. Name, at least. What he did to deserve it."

"Ugh... I mean, sure, I guess."

"Great. Soon as poss."

He rang off, and I stared at my phone, nonplussed. Top rate by itself was a bonus, but why double it? Olly never asked for more information. He'd usually just print the pictures; maybe make up some wild bullshit if he didn't have any facts to hand. More likely not even that; it's not as if anyone really cared. It was just the blood and bodies that the readers wanted. The death.

My gorge rose in my throat again. I hated Olly. Really hated him. He stood for everything I loathed about this town, and I loathed a lot. I loathed the violence and the raw exploitation that went with it. But I really hated him for making me a hypocrite. Because it was him that had made me a part of this filthy business too.

Most of the bodies I shot were sex workers, hanging from light poles with their guts torn open. That was the number one punishment around here, for almost anything relating to the trade. Invariably young girls. And the blood rags were almost as bad as the pimps. Maybe worse.

It boiled down to the pimps trying to outdo each other with their brutality, vying with each other to see who could get the biggest splash in the papers. The most fucked up corpse. The most tortured young body. And so the rags drove the violence as much as they did, and Olly had made me an integral part of that machine.

So, yeah, I hated him with a passion. It was easier to turn my hate

towards people like Olly than to direct it at myself. Easier to pretend I hadn't walked in with my eyes open.

I met Sammie in Frank's Bar, a couple of hours later. It was hard to meet someone like Sammie straight away. Two hours was me really begging.

I'd known him right from my first days in Cinci. He was the guy who got me in. It had been expensive, the result of years of scraping money together any way I could. Well, almost any way. But I didn't hate him for taking pretty much everything I had. It had been an even deal, and he was a nice guy. He'd helped me out more than he needed to. He was hot, too. Thick muscles and an easy grin. But it didn't seem to matter how much I batted my eyelashes at him, he just wasn't interested. And who was I kidding, anyway? Tall, scrawny girl from out of town, wet behind the ears, nothing special to look at? Now with added crewcut. Hardly an attractive proposition.

He sat me down at a corner table. He was drinking a Ward 8, just like always. His ceramic hand clicked gently against the glass as he picked it up. He got me another coffee. He didn't have to, but even so, I got the sense that I was running out of favours fast.

I showed him one of the photos. "Know who this is?"

He had black, spiky hair and sexy dark eyes. He flicked them up at me. "Yeah."

"You knew he was dead already." I thought it wasn't a question.

"No, but let's say it's not a surprise. And to answer your next questions, yes, but you don't want to know."

"Do you know who was he? Who killed him?"

"Like I said."

"Ah, c'mon, Sammie. I need this."

He looked at me steadily for a few moments. I gulped my coffee, trying to hide how uncomfortable his gaze made me feel. I winced, scalding my tongue and trying to hide it. He waited until I set the cup down again, then took my hand in his. In his meat hand. It was covered in a thick, dark tattoo; the rest of the sleeve went most of the way up his arm.

"Look, Sal, I like you, so I'll tell you this for free. There are some

bodies worth chasing, and there some that you should definitely leave well alone. This is one of the latter. Believe me. You've maybe helped me out, showing me this. So I owe you one. But let's leave it at that, yeah? I don't know why you're interested, but walk away."

"Sammie, please, I—" He squeezed my hand hard enough to make me gasp.

"Sally, *listen* to me," he hissed, eyes turning brutally hard. I didn't know someone's anger could flare up so quickly. "I know what you're doing to get by, okay? To get your tips." I flushed red, I couldn't help myself. I wanted to tell him that wasn't how it was, but the look in his eyes shut me up. "And let me tell you, you are nowhere *near* rock bottom. Nowhere near. You think you're tough, cause you're outta Louisville? But Cinci's a whole different kettle of fish, ain't it? *Ain't it?*"

I tried to pull my hand free, but he wasn't letting go. I nodded reluctantly. He was right, but I didn't want to admit it. I thought he was going to break my hand. Cinci was chewing me up. Chewing me up fast. It was taking all my energy and more of myself than I wanted to give just to stay alive.

He let go and ran his hand over his face. Tried to give me one of those trademark smiles, but it didn't come off. Maybe the body I'd shown him had shaken him up more than I'd thought. Or maybe I was just wearing him thin. That was more likely.

"Look, Sal, I'm sorry," he sighed. "I know Louisville is tough, and I don't mean to disrespect that. But it's a different kind of surviving. I know you know that. Cinci's all about the people, the connections, all about... ah, fuck it." He ran his hand over his face again. "You'll do your own thing, whatever I try to tell you. That's what I like about you. I just hope it doesn't get you killed."

He knocked back the last of his cocktail and threw the heavy glass back onto the table. A harsh *clack*, like a gunshot; it made me jump. He pinned me with another heavy gaze for just a moment longer before getting up and leaving. He didn't look back.

I got my phone out and put it down in front of me. I knew he was right; absolutely right. Cinci was a different kind of surviving. All about

the people and cliques and the unwritten rules that went with them and between them. The contact list on my phone was a case in point. A couple of dozen names at most. Sammie's probably had hundreds.

So, one body was more dangerous than the next. That figured. It was obvious why a dead prostitute would be no big deal, but I had no idea why this killing in particular had him rattled. Just another dead guy, lying in the street. People took credit for their work around here, and this had been done in broad daylight. But Sammie was worried about it, and I knew I should take him at his word. Get Olly to give me the cash for the photos and tell him sorry, couldn't find anything else. No big deal.

But I couldn't. Sammie was right about that too. It wasn't just the money; that wouldn't even last all that long, doubled or not. And it wasn't just that I'd drunk way too much coffee and couldn't sit still. It was how I was wired. I'd been given a bait, and I couldn't rest until I went after it. I'd worry at it, picking at it like a scab. I doubted I'd be able to get what Olly wanted in any case. He'd said that even just a name would do, but I didn't fancy my chances of even being able to get that far. Not at the rate I was going. But I had to try. Maybe proving Sammie wrong had just a little bit to do with it too.

My bike was still where I'd left it, thank fuck. It was a cheap piece of shit, but I had two heavy locks on it anyway. It'd get stolen soon enough, even so. It was my third, so far, and I didn't think I could afford to buy another. That contact poison the courier's used, that would be nice, but there was no way they were giving it out, even if it was real.

I'd sat in Frank's for a few minutes longer, mainly not wanting to follow too closely behind Sammie. For all that the place was chilled and half empty at that time of day, I always felt like an imposter. Like I was taking up space. It was a players' joint and unlike Sammie, I was anything but.

There were only really a couple more people on my list I could call. The couriers were no good – they were a tribe unto themselves. None of them would tell me anything, even if they knew anything. And they were good at not knowing. That was kind of their job.

Sammie was the only real fixer that I knew. The only real player. That's why I'd called him first. I'd had high hopes, when I'd first arrived in Cinci, of working my way up the ranks. Of being someone. Tough girl, in from the badlands. That's why I'd done my research and found someone like Sammie to bring me in. Figured he'd have the contacts for me. Make some introductions.



And he had, to be fair. He'd told me about the couriers, and how that whole thing worked. Sorted me out with a place to stay, and I met Olly through him too. If it hadn't been for all that, I'd have died on Cinci's streets by now. No way I'd have gone back to Louisville. And no way I'd spent all that money just to end up working some dead-end job either.

But all his help still hadn't left me with much. Maybe he'd given me pearls, and I just didn't know how to appreciate them. That was more likely, but I was determined to learn. Learn or die trying.

Being a tog for the blood rags was just the start, I told myself. Something I had to do to keep myself alive until I met enough people. Enough of the right people. Until I got some decent contacts, got some better work, made my way up the chain. I wasn't looking for a lucky

break; that's what I told myself. I was looking to work hard, to get somewhere with my own skill and talent.

Talent, yeah, right. My stomach actually heaved; I had to squeeze my hand over my mouth. I'd do anything to take back what I'd done with Fabbé, nice guy or not. But instead I was going to have to do it again. And again. I felt trapped, and I wasn't even sure it was anyone's fault. Just how things had turned out, right? But it helped if I could hate someone for it. Anyone but myself.

I turned back to my phone, trying to push those thoughts aside. Scrolled past my landlord and my neighbour and the local pizza guy. I snagged on a guy called Leon. He was a dealer; Sammie had introduced us in person, briefly. It was standard practice in Cinci, it seemed, to get hooked up with a dealer before you even found a place to sleep.

But I'd not contacted him since, seeing as I never did dope. Being honest, I couldn't have afforded it even if I'd wanted to. Still, he'd know something. Maybe. I hit call before I could change my mind. Kinda hoping he wouldn't pick up, but it took him just a couple of rings. Probably kept his phone in his hand all the time.

"Yo."

"Hey there, this is Sally Stone... Sammie introduced us, couple of months back. You remember me? Photographer?" I sounded uncomfortable even to myself.

"Yeah, sure, I remember. What can I do you for?"

"Look, I was just wondering... I'm still new in town, you know? I could really do with some help."

"You buying or not?"

"Ugh, -"

"Information costs."

"Yeah, okay, I figured. I can pay..."

"Whatever. I ain't unreasonable, and sure, like you said, you're new around here. You buy drugs, it's money. Otherwise, we'll see. You know Murphy's?" A vision flashed through my head of me going down for this guy as well. No way I was going to let that happen.

"Uh, sure, yeah."

"I'll meet you outside. Half an hour."

He rang off. I looked at my phone. It wasn't even midday, but the slums were already like an oven and stinking to match. I wheeled my bike down the street, glancing up and down from my phone. Murphy's. It was another players' place, but unlike Frank's Bar, it advertised itself as such. Couldn't even get inside if you didn't have a name and the rep to go with it. I kicked myself for not having gotten to know Leon better. Pearls before swine, indeed. Sammie had handed me a great contact, and I'd ignored it because I thought he was "just" a dealer.

And of course, I'd just told him that I knew where Murphy's was. I knew roughly. Kinda. I was feeling dizzy, and my palms and pits were starting to sweat. That wasn't the heat; I was used to that. Louisville got hotter than Cincinnati ever did. No, it was stress, and the fact that I hadn't really eaten for a couple of days. Plus I'd drank too much coffee. I felt like the street was beginning to slip sideways, like my feet were taking me round in a circle.

I'd gone out to do a simple job early this morning. Fabbé's call had woken me up; I usually rose early, but I'd been sleeping in late. I was just too tired. I remembered trying to masturbate in the heat of the night before, lying on my front, but his face had kept coming into mind, making my stomach churn. Just like it did at the sound of his voice when he'd called.

He'd given me the tip and the location. I usually get a spike of adrenaline when I get given something to do, but it hadn't come for some reason. I'd rubbed at my eyes, squinting at the light coming through my one tiny window and not really believing the time.

"So, ugh, how much do you want?" I'd asked, gummed up and croaky. Straight to the point. Nothing was free in this town.

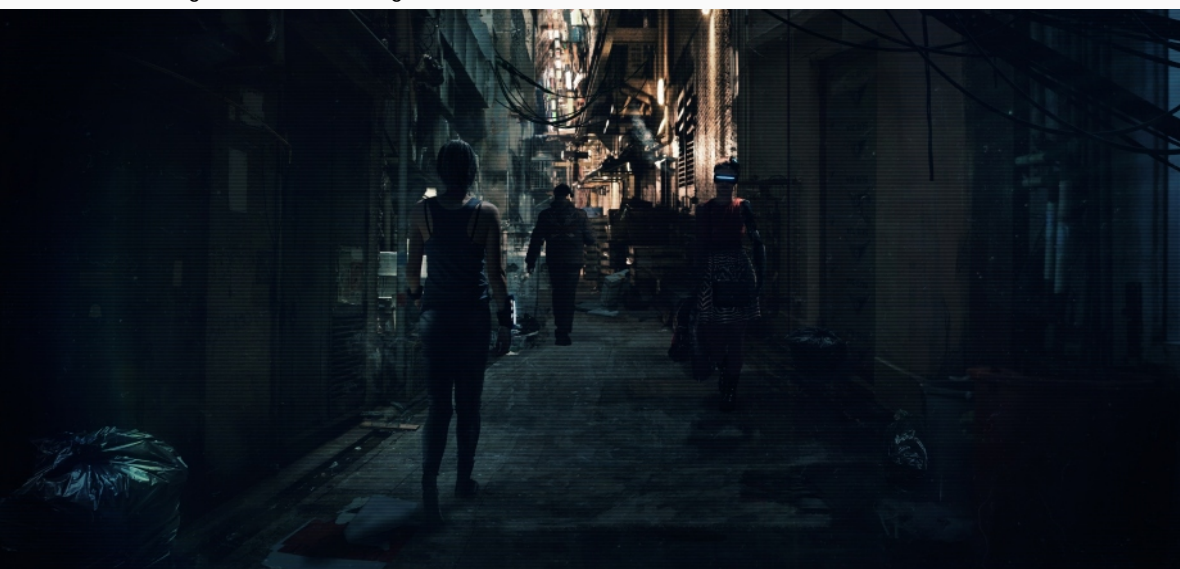
"Um... I was hoping we could just, y'know, meet up again? I, um... that okay with you?"

"Urgh, sure, I guess."

I'd hung up and rolled out of bed, not really thinking about it. Not letting myself. Thinking about it now, he'd sounded embarrassed about asking, like he assumed I'd say no. Fuck, he was just a young guy. I'd done

it for him a few times now, and it had been the same each time. He'd been hesitant and not creepy at all. Like he couldn't believe his luck more than anything else. But like a stupid bitch, once more I'd just agreed without really thinking about it. Hate myself later, that had become my policy.

I'd slept in my shorts and tee. I'd pulled on my jeans and sneakers, filled up my water bottle and grabbed my bag and camera. That was it. My bike took up most of the space in my room and getting it in and out of the building was a real pain in the ass, but there was no way I was leaving it outside overnight. That's how I'd lost the first one.



So, sure, the day had started easily enough. The usual hustle. I'd woken up properly as I'd pedaled through the streets. Photograph a dead guy, sell the pictures. That would cover a day or two's rent, maybe. Another body by the end of the day, if I was lucky. Just hanging out in between, desperately trying to find something to do. Riding until my thighs shook and my ass didn't want to go anywhere near the saddle again. Get drunk in the evening, if I'd managed to scrape together enough money. Try to find an excuse to see Sammie. That's what my days were.

Until Olly had thrown that spanner into the works. *Just a name, if nothing else.* I stopped and wiped at the moisture on my forehead. Ran

my hand over my buzzcut, prickly and sweaty under my palm. I squeezed my eyes shut and opened them wide again. The street was busy. One girl standing there with her bike, being sketchy and weird, was hardly worth a second glance.

I wanted to slap myself. All I had to do was walk away, take Olly's money and tell him *sorry, couldn't find anything else*. He'd just shrug and say *whatever*. I was just a tog, after all, not a journo. But this thing was a scab and I just had to keep picking at it. I couldn't help how I was wired.

I pulled up outside Murphy's with a squeal of brakes. I really was sweating now. Just a little late, I figured. Cinci's not the kind of place where you can stop and ask directions. I'd got lost a couple of times and pedaling faster just takes you in the wrong direction faster, more often than not. My legs were wobbly as I hopped off the bike.

Leon was waiting for me, leaning up against a light pole outside the bar. The entrance was just a narrow door, inside the opening of a relatively clean alleyway. There was no way he was going to invite me in; no free drink for me. Which was maybe just as well. I was beginning to realise that I desperately needed to pee.

"Sally," he said, glancing at his watch. Ostentatious to have a watch as well as a phone, but I took the point. He threw a glowing butt away and stepped closer. The guy smoked cigarettes, not joints. I remembered that about him now. "What's on your mind?"

"Erm..." I took a step back from him and stumbled over my bike. Fuck. I wasn't usually so much of a clutz. He pursed his lips, hard face and black shades giving pretty much zero away. I wasn't scared of him; I just had a sudden urge not to let anyone get close enough to smell me.

"You finished?" he asked, but he was smiling a little now. "Nice haircut, by the way."

I grimaced, my cheeks flushing on top of everything else.

"No, I mean it. Suits you. Just don't go any shorter, or people'll think you're trying to pretend you're a Jag."

"Ugh, yeah. Thanks. I hadn't thought of that."

"So?" he asked again, pulling off his shades. The silence had started to drag out.

"Oh, sure. Do you know this guy?" I asked him, fumbling my phone out of my bag and showing it to him. He took it off me and studied the pictures long and hard. Much longer than he needed to. It suddenly occurred to me that this could be his best friend I'd just randomly stuck under his nose. How was I to know? Fuck, I really was beginning to lose it.

"Yeah," he said eventually, handing me my phone back. "What's this about?"

I wiped at my brow with my forearm again, and he glanced at my breasts moving under my tee. I was just glad he didn't know how sweaty they felt. Breasts are great if you want to get a guy interested and a fucking pain all the rest of the time.

"My editor just asked me to find out who he was, that's all." Honesty's usually the best course, if in doubt. It keeps things simpler. Fewer lies to remember. Leon just looked at me skeptically.

"Since when do the rags care about anything other than the pictures?"

"I dunno," I shrugged, and he glanced at my breasts again. "I thought it was weird too. But that's all."

"Yeah, okay. If you're talking to me, you've already spoken to Sammie, most likely. Am I right? Well, I'll tell you the same thing he did: leave this alone."

I almost stamped my foot in frustration. I might have done it if my legs hadn't felt so weak. I'd been expecting him to say just that, and of course he'd figure that I was only coming to him because I'd seen Sammie already and been left empty handed. I should have known that. But apart from anything else, I really just wanted to know what all the fuss was about. Why was this one body such a big deal?

Keep it cool, I told myself. I took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. Reached out and touched his arm without really thinking about it.

"Sammie, I—"

"I ain't Sammie."

"—shit."

"Look, Sally," he sighed, theatrically. "Get something to eat. Get

some rest. You're running on fumes and coffee, and that ain't good."

I wanted to protest that I'd got more than enough sleep and then I realised how bad my breath must smell. At least sweaty woman can be appealing to some guys. Stale coffee breath sure ain't under any circumstances. I almost put my hand over my mouth, but forced myself not to.

"Leon, look, I really need—"

"To get killed? Fuck, Sally. At least you do actually remember my name. You're not going to leave this alone, are you?"

I just shook my head, keeping my mouth closed.

He sighed again. "Look, you're new in town, but just because someone's established doesn't necessarily mean that things always get easier. You catch my drift?"

I nodded. Everything costs.

"So, I wouldn't touch this if things weren't a little tight at my end right now, but... if you're determined to get yourself wiped out, I may as well get paid along the way."

"I don't have any money," I blurted out. "But I can—"

"Don't go there, Sally. I know what you've been doing, but you ain't that kinda girl. And besides, you start offering yourself around too much and sooner or later a pimp'll come and find you, and that's where all your choices in life end. Get me?"

"I wasn't going to—" Goddamn, I'd gone with one cop because I'd been drunk, and now everyone thought I was giving it out on purpose.

"Oh, sure, you were going to say you'll write me an IOU? Whatever. You shown these pictures to anyone else but Sammie?"

"Only my editor."

He rubbed at his eye, still holding his shades. Slid them back on. "You've really got no idea what this is worth, do you?"

"I—"

"I don't mean the pictures. I mean the information."

I swallowed my pride. "No, I don't. I really don't."

"Okay. Information like this can be worth a lot. Sammie's probably already moved on it. Maybe I can still get some value too; but then again,

maybe not. So, here's what we'll do. If you get a tip like this again, sure, go and take your photos, but I want to be the first to know. The *first*. Got that? I don't mean dead hookers or shit like that, but anything else. Oh, and when you're a world-famous photographer, you can come back to Cinci and take my picture. Deal?"

"Um, okay, I guess." I was sure he was joking about the last bit, but still.

"Okay. And you didn't hear anything from me. Clear?"

"Clear." Shit, I wasn't *that* naive.

"Good. The guy's name is – was – Ken Hong. Snakehead, pretty senior. A public execution like this sends a strong message. Get it now?"

"Erm... no? Snakehead? What's that?"

Leon flung up his arms. "Oh, shit. You really are in trouble now."

"Okay," I said, trying to keep my voice calm. I felt like crying. I realised I was exhausted, barely staying upright.

"Okay... okay," he shushed me, holding his palms down. "Just don't start, y'know, a scene. The snakeheads are heavy. Real heavy."

"Like the snuff people?"

"God, no. I wish. Snuff's so mainstream it may as well be legal. The snakehead gangs are people smugglers."

"Like the smugglers Sammie paid to get me into Cinci? They didn't seem so bad."

"No, no, nothing like those guys. Although they can be pretty ruthless too, by the way. But no, the snakeheads are totally different. They used to be Chinese gangs, basically triads, but they come from all over now. Central Asia, Eastern Europe. They smuggle people out of those places and into places like Ohio. A little the other way too."

I frowned. "I don't get it... I mean, that sounds pretty tame compared to a lot of stuff I see here every day."

"Sure, I get what you mean. Doesn't sound so bad compared to slicing a working girl's belly open just because she looked at you wrong, does it? And when was the last time you saw a pimp getting hauled off by Tower, eh?" He turned and spat into the dusty gutter. No water on the street here. "But you got to remember, just because we don't have

much in the way of law here in Ohio doesn't mean it's the same in other parts of the world. You get caught people smuggling in mainland China and it's summary execution. In Russia, you go to a gulag and never come back. You beginning to get it now?"

"Yeah, I guess. A little." I was beginning to feel shivery, despite the heat.

"Yeah, I can see that you do." He pulled another cigarette out of his pack, then put it back again. "Crime is... the more risk you take, the more brutal you have to be. Get it? Like, what I do, dealing dope, it used to be high risk, back in the day. You could do serious jail time, or worse, so it was a nasty business. Violent, you know? You had to scare people into not snitching on you. These days... sure, I have to protect my rep, but I can't remember the last time I really had to fuck someone up."

"Okay... so, the snakehead guys, they've got a lot to lose, so..."

"So they do bad things, so people stayed scared. But that's not all."

"Not all?"

"You know," he shrugged. "The people they bring over, they've often been scraping the money together for years, given up everything..." That, at least, sounded familiar.

"And they lose everything?" I asked.

"You're catching on, yeah. They come here looking for a better life, and get turned into slaves, more than likely."

"Oh. Like, sex work?"

He shook his head. "Not so much. Well, a little, maybe. Imagine you're a rich guy with a fetish for amputees or unpleasant body mods... but a pretty young girl's actually more likely just to get her organs harvested instead. The main stuff's mostly sweatshops, maybe ones where they force elective prosthetics on you. Or..." He must have finally read the look on my face. He didn't have to try to drive the point home any further. "I really don't like those guys, Sally. Trust me on that. It ain't right. Sometimes, someone escapes. Ends up with the Jags, maybe, where they can't be touched."

I swallowed, very hard, my mouth dry. I was feeling dizzy. Really dizzy. I pulled my water out of my bag and took a mouthful. Lukewarm,

and it made me feel even more sick.

"You getting the picture now?" He pulled off his shades so he could look me in the eye. He'd stopped glancing at my breasts.

"Yeah, I get it." *I am so far out of my depth.* "And the pimps, they're bad..."

"To keep their girls in line, yeah, and to scare off the competition. Or to get paid."

"What do you mean?"

He paused. "Aw, c'mon. Don't say you've never been tempted to ask a guy to gut one of his girls, just so you can get an exclusive? Your boss never asked you to? No? Never? – Ah, shit, I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

I suddenly realised that he was holding me up with both arms. His hands were strong, like Sammie's. My water bottle was glugging its contents into the gutter, and things had just gone very, very blurry. My knees felt like jelly.

"I'm okay. I'm okay." I shrugged him off, not unkindly, and spat onto the paving. My mouth had gone from dry to suddenly full of saliva. "I ain't gonna be sick," I muttered to myself. "I ain't." I went to pick up my water, but Leon already had it. He handed it to me and I took a long pull. He was holding my arm again, and I was glad of it.

He looked at me until I returned his gaze. "Look, Sally, I ain't going to tell you to sort yourself out or any bullshit like that. I've seen you around town a few times since Sammie introduced us, so I know you ain't usually like this. Just a bad couple of days, right? Go home, get something to eat, forget about all this. And for fuck's sake, take a shower."

I smiled weakly. "Sure, I must smell pretty bad, right? Just one thing... why did they do him? They busted his head open with an axe. And... who?"

Leon gave another of those sighs. "You ain't gonna tell any of what I've told you to anyone, are you? Not your editor, not anyone?" It wasn't really a question.

"God, no. Not anyone." I wrapped my arms around my belly. I'd already made that decision, and I really meant it. Fuck the money. I

didn't want to get tangled up in anything like this.

"Okay. The snakehead gangs don't have names, not like the triads. They're just known by the people who head them up. Ken Hong worked for Lucky Shen. One of the worst. Seriously. They don't have fixed punishments, or anything like that. It's death if you're lucky, torture if you're not. The way they did it was just a message, that's all. As to why, I'm not totally sure. Word was that Hong was maybe selling info to Five Lucky Winds, but why he'd do that, I just don't know.

"So, you happy now?"

I tried to smile. "No, but thanks. I needed to, y'know, know. Our deal – I won't forget it."

I turned to go, reflexively checking my camera and my bag. Leon caught my arm again, hard, like he meant it. I turned back to him. Fuck, but I needed to pee.

"Sally, I... you probably don't need to hear it, but I'm going to say it anyway. You're the kind of girl that guys just tend to like. You know that, right? That's why Sammie's gone out of his way for you. It's why I've gone out of my way for you. It's not your looks. There's just something about you. Fuck, I've got half a boner for you even with the state that you're in right now. Let me guess: your whole life, you've found it real easy to be buddies with guys, but you've never been able to keep a female friend, no matter how hard you've tried. Am I right?"

I just stared at him, mute, dizzy, confused. But he was right.

"Look, I'm sorry, I don't mean it to sound harsh. But it's just how it is, right? It's not something you do on purpose. It's just something about you. I know because you're not the first girl like that I've met." He grimaced a little when he said that. Tried to hide it, but I could see the pain. "The reason I'm saying this is just because, and I know you know this, but sometime, probably sooner rather than later at the rate you're going, you're gonna meet a guy who just doesn't give a fuck, where the magic just doesn't work. The kind of guy who'll crush you like a bug and barely even notice you're there. And I don't want that to happen to you. I really don't. Sammie neither. I guess what I'm saying is... just be careful, okay?"

I stared at him some more, then nodded slowly, gulping down my pride. He was right. My life had absolutely been that way. I could complain about my bad luck and the things I'd been forced to do, but... my landlord had given me a better price than he had to. So did Sammie, when he got me into Cinci. The pizza guy gave me extra toppings, every time. I'd always get served at a bar first, as long as the barkeep was male. But that courier girl had snatched my money off me like I was diseased. Barely looked at me. It wasn't magic, or luck, or even charm. Not even a pretty face, because I barely even had one of those. I just had the right pheromones, or something like that... but Leon still hasn't let go of my arm.

"Anything else?" I asked. It came out harsh.

"Yeah," he said. "I know Fabbé, a little."

"Oh." Everyone seemed to know everyone in this town. Everyone apart from me.

"Yeah."

"He told you about..."

"Yeah. But he wasn't bragging or anything."

"Oh, and you told..."

"Sammie, yeah."

"Oh..." I was getting very dizzy again.

"You've never stood a chance with Sammie. Look, I'm sorry. Yeah, it's obvious, how you look at him and stuff... he likes you, but you're just not his type. Simple as that. But Fabbé, he really likes you. As in, *really* likes you."

I glared at him. "Bullshit. He barely knows me."

"Whatever. Maybe it was love at first sight? Probably. I know the feeling. But the point I'm making is, it's plain as day that you hate what you've done. What you're doing. And he hates that he keeps getting it from you, only, what guy could resist just one more time, right? What I'm saying is, if you two, you know, actually hooked up properly, you could both feel a whole lot better about yourselves."

"Ugh. But I thought... he's a cop, right?"

Leon just shook his head. "You're right, some of them are bad

apples. Real cunts, some of them. But Fabbé's alright. Maybe just because he hasn't been one of them for long enough. And remember, there's a big difference between just knowing a guy and being a snitch. Get me?"

"Yeah, I guess. I'll... think about it."

"Good. Call me if you need anything else, okay?"

I nodded and he walked back into Murphy's. The doorway was just a black hole when it was open; no lights or voices or music. I'd have been deadily curious to know what went on in there, any other day, but right then I just wanted to go home.

Only I didn't go home. I didn't trust myself to ride, so I wheeled my bike down the street. I was waiting to hear from Olly, so I could pick up my money, and Fabbé, for, you know. Neither of them knew where I lived, or at least I didn't think they did. What did I know? Going home only to have to come out again would be worse than just staying out, wandering the streets.

Fabbé. That had begun to make a little more sense now. How he'd been with me when we met that second time, almost embarrassed, and definitely feeling guilty afterwards. I hadn't seen it at the time. I'd been too absorbed in my own self-loathing to notice. Too absorbed with how revolting I felt. He'd left quickly, not looking me in the eye, and I'd taken that as just another sign that he was using me.

But from what Leon said, maybe he thought our *arrangement* was the only way to keep seeing me. Maybe he really was in love, and just didn't know what to do about it. Naive enough to think that it was all okay. I'd not given him any sign of how it made me feel; I'd been careful not to. Real careful. I had to stay strong. Had to keep pretending, anyway.

And shit, he was a nice guy. It was just... he wasn't my type, for all that I'd pulled him that first time around. Just like I evidently wasn't Sammie's. Fabbé was a little younger than I was, I reckoned, and I always went for much older men. Guys with thick, meaty bodies and thick, meaty experience. Guys who'd lived a lot of life. Guys like

Sammie... I bet he had a strong, muscular back. I loved that kind of thing.

It had driven my dad nuts, needless to say, back in Louisville. He'd always said the same thing, over and over, that older guys only ever slept with younger girls for just one reason. And I'd always told him to fuck off, that this time was different. And then I'd end up crying in his arms when I got dumped yet again.

My bladder was starting to send spikes of pain into my belly. Trouble was, there weren't any public restrooms in Cinci. No banks, no toilets, no lots of things. Not in this part, anyway. It was all slum, just favela, shanty, cinderblock buildings and lean-tos all mixed together. It'd be garish neon by night, but during the day it was just dust and crap and *people*. And it was never wise to dive into a bar you didn't know, especially if you didn't have any money to buy a drink. Literally no money, that's all I had left. Literally none, in all the world.

I ducked into the next service alley I walked past. Most of them were safe, if it was day and you didn't venture too deep. The air was a little cooler. I settled back against the wall and pulled down my jeans and shorts. I was no stranger to peeing in alleys; that was normal back in Louisville. Normal in Cinci too, by the smell of it.

I let out a long, hard stream, splashing against the piled up garbage. "Ah, fuck, that's better," I breathed. I finished the last of my water, now that I felt like I could. It never was any fun, dying of thirst and being desperate to pee at the same time. Something moved in the trash. Probably a rat. I resisted the urge to try to catch it. I didn't need to eat rats to survive in Cinci. At least that was something.

I grimaced as I pulled my shorts back on. I'd been wearing them for days; my only other pair was even dirtier. I'd discovered laundrettes when I'd first moved here, and that had been great for a while. Then I'd realised how much they were costing me. I never had been much for washing my clothes in the sink.

I'm not sure what possessed me to talk to the Jag girl. But it was kind of a speciality of mine, walking up to random groups of strangers. That's how I'd met Fabbé, although I'd been at least partly drunk then, and in a

bar. That had been my excuse.

I was feeling better, since emptying my bladder and taking a moment, although I still wasn't feeling totally right. Tired, far too tired given the amount of sleep I'd had. Spaced out and bent out of shape. I felt like I was walking through a dream, like nothing was real. Maybe that was why I'd walked up to her.



The Jags and Modes were just about the only parts of Cinci's street life that I did know something about, and that was only because they were so visible. People talked about them openly. There was almost always a group of one or the other of them on every corner, night and day. The Jags just happened to be the first posse I ran into, lounging around the street like they owned it.

I'd been curious about them for a while. Both groups had a reputation for stupid levels of violence and sadism, but only directed

against their opposite numbers, apparently. They were meant to be safe, if all you wanted to do was buy dope or spikes. I didn't want either, but I'd already figured out that not talking to enough people had been my big mistake.

"Sexy sweaty stinky girl," she said to me when I walked up to her. Tall and pale and bald, she was, looking like a classic cult member. She was sweating pints herself. "Nice camera. Original?"

"Erm, yes. I mean, I think. I found it out in the badlands. Fixed it myself." I started tucking it behind my back, out of sight.

"Jags don't steal from people like you," she grinned at me. She flipped open a wicked sharp pocket knife and cut into the pad of her thumb. I just gaped as she sucked on the blood. "What do you need?"

"Ugh, someone told me... I mean, I was curious, some of you, some people who join the Jags, they come from the snakeheads, right? I mean, they escape, and come to you?"

Her grin just got wider and wider and wider, splitting her face in half, like the Cheshire Cat. She had the most perfectly white, even teeth I'd ever seen. I was afraid her head was going to fall in half. I was far too tired to be having a conversation like this.

"Sexy girl," she grinned. "You should join us. Free drugs and the dirtiest sex you could ever want. No one messes with us. Or you could go around asking about the snakeheads and end up as a bloated, mutilated corpse, face down in the Ohio. It'd be a shame to waste that body, but it's up to you."

I nodded. I'd been warned and I'd opened my stupid mouth anyway. Too tired. At least the Jags stuck to themselves; she'd be unlikely to tell anyone else that I'd been asking. I just turned and walked away.

I got about three steps and she was on me, hard and fast like a cat. My bike clattered to the ground. She held me tight, her knife digging into the soft flesh under my jaw. She dragged it back a little, until it was at my throat. Blood, sliding down my sweaty skin. The blade was so sharp I couldn't even feel it cut me.

"You don't turn your back on me," she hissed in my ear, her voice about two octaves lower. She wrapped her other hand around my belly

and held me ferociously tight. I was very glad I'd already peed.

"And you don't ask about people like the snakeheads." I made a strangled sound and she tipped me over with one smooth movement, her hand on the back of my head. I went sprawling over my bike and landed face first in a pile of wet, stinking trash. It took everything I had not to start whimpering like a little girl.

She was standing over me when I rolled back over, holding out her hand. I put my fingers to my throat. It only felt like a scratch. The knife was nowhere in sight. She just stood there, hand out, gazing down at me while I sprawled in the gutter. I noticed she had my camera in her other hand.

She jiggled it gently. A drop of blood fell from it, from her thumb. "Didn't want to get it broken," she said. "Take my hand." I didn't feel like I had a lot of choice. I expected her to flip me over again, but she just hauled me to my feet and handed my camera back.

"You know, I really could fall in love with a girl like you," she murmured. "But you have to be cruel to be kind, sometimes." She smiled as she turned away. Not the manic grin from before, but a smile of epic sadness and beauty. I felt like I'd just been given the hardest, most important lesson of my life. Or maybe I was just far too tired and hungry. I started crying, either way.



I finally decided to make my way home. It took a while, wheeling my bike in the heat, trying not to hit my shins against the pedals. Fabbé hadn't called yet, and I was glad of that. Leon was probably right though; he was okay, and I couldn't see a better way out of where I'd trapped myself. But on the other hand, my gorge was rising in my throat, just

thinking about him. Even if it was no one's fault, even if I'd gotten the wrong end of the stick, it still *felt* like he'd forced me to do stuff for a few simple bits of information. Information he could just have given me for free, if he liked me... but then, that just isn't how this town worked. Maybe he'd got it all twisted up. Maybe I had. Gah, I just didn't know.

What was beginning to worry me more was that Olly hadn't called. But, then again, he was probably just waiting for me to call back. With a name. I'd already decided not to give him one. I left a message after he didn't answer a couple of times.

"Hey, Olly, it's me. Sally. I asked around a bit, but I couldn't find anything about that guy. I'm sorry. I'm just a tog, you know. Erm, I hope you still like the pictures anyway." I almost gagged when I'd said that. Pictures of a murdered guy, brains everywhere, face a crumpled ruin. Sure he'd like them. "Let me know when I can come by and pick up the cash."

It really was unlike him, not to answer the phone. I'm not sure I'd ever gotten his voicemail before. It gave me another definite stab of worry. What a shitty day.

My feet were aching and swollen by the time I got back. I wanted nothing more than to pull off my sweaty sneakers and fall on my bed. I pictured myself lying face down, sinking into the thin mattress, sinking into oblivion. I didn't have any money for food; no money at all. I'd have to wait until I got paid. But I was exhausted enough to sleep anyway.

I walked past the Green Dragon on the way into my tenement, the security guy scowling at me. I hadn't believed that place when I'd first seen it, all neon and plastic and shiny, like a capsule dropped from space. Which it was, pretty much, only it was from China, not space. I'd shopped in there at first, and then realised how expensive it was. Like launderettes. More things I couldn't afford.

But the bottom of my tenement was all food stalls and the like anyway. Grunged up and dirty, but smelling so good, and much cheaper to boot. My stomach rumbled and hungry saliva filled my mouth. I didn't want to stop, wouldn't have even if I had any money. I knew I stank, of garbage juice as well as everything else, thanks to that crazy Jag. And I

felt dirty. Metaphorically dirty. I felt like everyone could see inside of me.

I kept my head down and made for the stairwell. Tried to ignore it when someone called my name, but it was old Mrs Lu. It was hard to put off old Mrs Lu. I turned to face her.

"Sally! Sally." She didn't say anything about how I looked or smelled, but she didn't fuss over me like usual either. "People, at your room earlier. Looking for you."

"Oh." My stomach dropped out of me. "What kind of people?"

"Hard people. You know. But they all gone now. Left. I checked your door. Not opened."

"Ugh, okay. Thanks, Mrs Lu."

"You be careful, Sally." She turned away. Greasy steam followed me as I dragged my bike up the stairs. I was beginning to wish that people would stop telling me that.

The doors in the tenement were flimsy pieces of shit, so it'd have been obvious if it had been forced. It hadn't. The lock looked okay too, but I was no expert. It could have been picked and then locked again for all I knew. I shrugged and set my bike against the wall. Mrs Lu said that they'd all gone, and besides, where else was I going to go? I just wanted my bed. That was all. And wantons. The smell of cooking filled up the whole place. I really hoped Olly came through with my cash soon.

I fumbled in my bag for the key and opened the door. The stench hit me like a slap in the face. Like a kick in the stomach. A smell I'd become very, very familiar with over the last few months.

Fabbé was sitting at my kitchen table, in one of the scuffed plastic chairs, his head tilted back. He still had his uniform on. It looked like his hands were tied behind his back. I didn't think to myself anything stupid, like how did he know where I lived or how had he gotten in here. The bottom was dropping out of my world too fast for that. He was sitting in a pool of his own blood, flies buzzing around him. I'd seen a lot of nasty shit, working for the blood rags, but I'd never actually seen a throat cut from ear to ear before. Not until now.

I did the only thing I could. I picked up my camera.