

## **THIEVES' MARKET**

by

Andrew Valentine

### **1.**

“Yo yo yo, check it out, baby!” the panhandler said, gesturing to the goods displayed on the afghan before him. With his cracked lips, blood-shot eyes and missing teeth, he matched the quality of the wares on his blanket. “Slick Jimmy got some quality shit here for you, honey.” He snapped his fingers for emphasis, flashing a connect-the-dots pattern on his forearms. Nervous energy rocked him from foot to foot and caused his hands to snap and clap. “See? Check it out.” Snap. “I’m one Wal-Mart motherfucker.” Clap.

April had patronized street vendors before. The combat boots she wore now that added height to her 5’10” frame and weight to her 130 lbs were street-bought. So was the band she used to pull her black hair away from her high forehead so it would hang straight down her back. But judging from this guy’s stuff -- a stack of Asian porn with wrinkled pages; two sunglasses; an electric pencil sharpener; some sort of mechanical device that could have been an engine part – she had to ask, Who would want any of this garbage?

“You don’t like this shit here? Okay.” He was unflappable. “Slick Jimmy can see a fine lady such as yourself like quality shit. Right?” Double snap. “Right.” Clap. “So check out this right here, baby.”

Slick Jimmy hoisted a duffel sack from between his feet. She could see inside it, but it was filled with unidentifiable contents. More engine parts?

Across the street from them was the metal cube on Astor Place Triangle, big as a minivan balanced on the corner of one bumper. A couple of drunken frat boys were pushing each edge, making slow progress in their attempt to spin it like a giant dreidel. Funny; in all her years in this neighborhood, she never knew that thing spun.

When she turned back to Slick Jimmy, he was holding something that caught her attention. It was a forest-green leather notebook that somehow reminded her of something she couldn't quite place, something just below the surface of recognition.

A curlicue symbol was embossed the lower right corner of the book. April leaned in closer, mindful of keeping her distance from Jimmy, and squinted at it. The size of a quarter, it contained ripples etched into the leather that looked like they were wriggling, like certain rain forest worms she read about that burrowed under the skin. Of course, nothing moved on the book. The street lamp overhead must have been playing tricks on her.

"Look, look, take a look," Slick Jimmy insisted. "I just stole it. Just for you."

At least he was honest. She took it from him.

Flipping it open, April saw it contained hand-written sheet music. She recognized the ornate script G-clef in the left hand of each set of lines, but that was the extent of her musical knowledge.

"I don't read music," she confessed and handed the book back to Jimmy.

"Music? What music?"

"Sheet music." Wasn't that obvious? "I never got past Every Good Boy Does Fine."

Slick Jimmy gave her a blank look. Apparently he never had music lessons, or at least none including mnemonic devices like that. April felt the need to explain.

"Look," she said and pointed to the first E-note she could find. "That's the E. Every. Then that's the G. Good. Every Good. Then B for Boy. Get it? We skip a line to get to the next letter." He was still expressionless. "To help you read music."

"I don't know what you're pointing to, lady," Slick Jimmy said. He dropped his street-sales act altogether and genuinely looked perplexed. "What lines you talking about?"

"These. See?" April plainly pointed to the E and G.

Slick Jimmy looked at her sideways. After a moment, he smiled, getting back into character. "That's what's great about these here blank books. You can see whatever you want to see in them. So, you want--"

"Wait a minute." Now April was annoyed. "This isn't a blank book. These are ledger lines. That's music. Can't you see that?"

"If you're buying that book, I'll see whatever you want me to see." He winked at her. "Gots to pay my rent. Ha!"

"Okay, I'll buy the book either way. But be honest with me. Can you do that?"

"Baby, have I ever lied to you before?" asked the junkie she just met.

"Do you see this music or not?"

"The book's twelve dollars."

"I just said I don't read sheet music."

"Okay, ten. But that's as low as Slick Jimmy can go."

"Didn't you just say you stole it?" she asked.

"Stop playing with me, girl. How much you want for it?"

How had she gotten into this? She didn't want the book at all. She just wanted Slick Jimmy to be honest with her, to know that this street-seller with a clear weakness for heroin was only conning her to buy the book. She needed to know for sure. A few dollars was worth it.

"Six," she said at last. "I'll give you six dollars for the book."

"Good, good, good." A snap and a clap punctuated agreement. He snatched her money from her hands as soon as it was out of her purse. "No."

"No, what?"

"No, I don't see nothing on them pages."

"You don't see these notes?"

"No! I don't see no fucking notes. It's a blank book, damn it, a blank fucking book."

Now that the transaction was complete, Slick Jimmy had no need for her.

"Thank you," she said quietly, closed the book and walked on down the street to meet Jenny.

## 2.

"So Paul's not doing so well, huh?" Jenny said, ignoring the green leather book in her hands.

April shrugged without commitment. The discussion was too intimate for this place. The bar was too loud, especially with blistering rock thunder grinding from the stage band across the room. April had been dreading this moment but knew it was the reason for Jenny's invite to Scrap Metal. She agreed because she wanted to put Jenny's worries to rest. She certainly didn't come out because she wanted to see this group -- an all-girl trio called Witch's Teat.

"Actually, Paul's doing real well. Financially," she said. It wasn't a lie *per se*, but was an evasive tactic that Jenny was sure to see through. April surprised herself by realizing she wasn't ready to talk about her brother just yet.

"April." Jenny said her name as a rebuke, but it had a note of sympathy in it. "You know what I mean."

Yeah, she knew. She also knew that the question about Paul wasn't really about Paul.

"You didn't tell me what you see in the book." It was a lame attempt to throw Jenny off her scent.

"I see someone trying to change the subject."

If she wasn't so tired, she would have smiled. There was something really likable about Jenny, April's physical opposite: short, blonde, perky. Jenny had a face like a child-angel. April was all hard plains and high cheekbones. Tall and severe, she towered over Jenny by more than a foot. Like her brother Paul, April towered over most people. When she first met Jenny back in school, Jenny said that she herself should have been named April and that April should have been named something – anything – else. *Morticia* would have been good. She heard that before but Jenny was the first person to make it sound funny.

On stage the singer/guitarist screamed like a woman in labor:

*"This is the sound of evil!"*

Churning out fierce riffs and power chords, she performed bare-chested with only her guitar strap and leather jeans to clothe her. The singer's right nipple was pierced with an up-side-down pentagram on a loop that sometimes flashed stage light and made April blink. She wondered if the other nipple was irritated by the leather strap. Maybe after so many performances it had become thick and callused.

Although playing topless in a hard-core band went back to the early days of the punk scene, this chick had something else to show off besides her breasts -- her back. She was inked from waist to neck with a single tattoo of a pyramid of skulls that reached an apex between her shoulder blades. *Behold the "Spire of Souls,"* according to the flier about the band.

"Look girl, you have to get over it," Jenny said, calling her back to their conversation. April detected a hint of desperation in Jenny's voice. Her friend never had been any good at concealing her emotions. That was one of the things April liked about Jenny -- she was guileless. She couldn't be full of crap if she tried. "Just because he sold his soul doesn't mean he sold yours, too."

April felt like sack of laundry. She was tired and limp, and was running out of energy to talk about this much more.

On stage, the guitarist sang: *"I'll fill you with nothing / Though you think it's something / You'll give your life and find no joy / I'll take your joy and find no joy / This is the sound of evil!"*

The singer-guitarist turned her back to the audience while she said something to the drummer, and April got a good look at the tattoo.

The *Spire* was composed of shivering, naked and emaciated people. Their faces were contorted in agony, some huddled together in fear while others cowered in terror. It could have been a trick of stage light, but the picture was so detailed that when April was up by the stage earlier in the night, she actually made out the sinews pulled taut, the musculature about to tear, the blood pulsing through those tiny veins. If she followed the natural path of her imagination, she'd swear the constant buzz between songs wasn't the hiss of the amps but the sound of all those people writhing on that tattoo – bones popping and the damned weeping, forever depicted on the guitarist's back.

"That's some bad-ass skin art!" Jenny shouted, catching April's gaze.

She nodded, not able to raise her voice to the decibel level needed for a reply. Still looking at the band, April caught a flimsy memory of Paul mentioning Witch's Teat. Did they perform together once?

April leaned against the bar and sighed. She was so tired. So tired. Suddenly she had barely enough energy to remain standing.

"What's wrong," Jenny asked. "You look exhausted."

"Yeah, it hits me now and then." She didn't want to divulge the extent of her lethargy.

"You're depressed, April. Ever since Paul gave up guitar and took this job--"

"Credit card marketing." She couldn't say it with enough contempt. "God. Cutting down trees and creating debt. Why doesn't he just club baby sea lions to death?"

"That's his choice, April. You have to remember you're not him."

"I hear you," April said without conviction.

"Look, you guys are fraternal twins, not Siamese. You're not attached at the hip."

"Maybe we're attached at the soul." Twins were usually closer than regular siblings, but in their family, Paul and April needed each other like life-rafts. How do you tell your best friend that you're depressed because your soul-mate sold his soul? Answer: you didn't. It was stupid and melodramatic. Besides, Jenny was right. Paul was his own man, he made his own choices.

At least that's what April had been telling her mirror for months. She just couldn't believe her brother would shut off the wellspring that was his music. After his eleventh birthday, she'd never seen him without that Fender in his hands. He needed it as a shield, she supposed, as emotional armor from their drunken dad and screaming mother. Paul's music was a great defense, too -- so good, in fact, it had shielded her, also. When Paul played that thing, only the two of them existed in the whole world. It was natural that he would do it for real, for a living.

Yet, years of struggle followed that decision.

Paul once reveled in the role of the tortured artist. He was gaunt and haunted, only at peace when his thickened fingers were on those strings. He was something else these days. April supposed thirteen years was a long time to devote to a mistress who didn't love him back, and when the opportunity arose to trade in torment for cash, Paul leapt. Sold his amps, picks and strings, foot pedals and chords, and everything else that went with it. She didn't know what he did with the Fender.

For all his sacrifices, he didn't seem any happier. Richer, yes. So now he had money instead of music and had traded a cold sore for a tumor. At least that's how she saw it. Maybe Paul saw it differently. She didn't know. She hadn't talked to the guy in weeks, reducing her small circle to Jenny and mom. Ever since cirrhosis of the liver finally took dear ol' dad and ended everyone else's misery, mom wasn't easy to talk to, either. So that left Jenny.

April puffed up her cheeks, let air out in a slow hiss. Whenever she was out and started thinking about this, she knew it was time to leave. She rose, and Jenny caught her arm.

"Hey, if you're taking off, at least give me an excuse," Jenny said. "Like you gotta run home to read your blank book." She handed the leather book back to April.

"So it's blank, huh?"

"Yeah. Was I supposed to see something in it?"

April smiled. "Call you tomorrow."

### 3.

Myrtle Beardsley held the silver pic in the air, high over her head, catching the spotlight with it and reflecting it back to the crowd. The final power chord in this musical rant rolled out through the amps, mingling with static and hiss as it did. It sounded vaguely like the instrument had been trying to hack up something stuck in its long throat.

Back when she was a kid, Myrtle brought her guitar and amp into school under the guise of trying out for a talent show but really to impress some girls and say "fuck you" to some boys. After she finished her set, Mr. Madri had a snide remark for her.

*--Why does the guitar sound like it's got laryngitis?--*

These days she would have given him an appropriate response, something caustic and vulgar.

*--It's got a sore throat from sucking my dick.--*

But in sophomore year of high school, she wouldn't say anything at all. Her standard response was to shrug her shoulders and offer an angry, sullen look. When Madri got the look from her this particular time, he gave her a smile to say he was only teasing. He was always trying to be big buds with the kids – not all of them, mind you, just the "cool" ones, the future frat boys and the future sorority sluts, the ones who wouldn't be able to tell you if they got raped last night at the kegger or just got fucked while passed out. Myrtle had a lot to say back then but was suffering from her own form of laryngitis.

And her lozenge was music, mad-as-hell music.

These days she was over her laryngitis. Yeah, the guitar still sounded sore from sucking her dick, and the rougher, dirtier, and tougher it sounded, the better it sounded, too. But it wasn't just her personal rebellion vibrating on these six strings, it was an anthem that reverberated on them. In every note she mis-sang, in every rivulet of sweat coursing down her throat and breasts, in every stomp and glare, and each and every middle finger thrust up into the spotlight, she was shouting out the rebel song for the faceless mob before her.

Or at least they thought it was a rebel song. She knew it was the sound of evil. She even said so in one of her ditties. Myrtle dropped her arm and spat.

"None of you fuckers move!" she shouted as if she had an AK 47 slung over her shoulder instead of a second-hand Fender. Predictably, the crowd went wild. "We're taking a break and then we'll be back to dick with your minds some more."

The fans cheered and slapped the walls, pounded the bar with their beers, and stomped on the floor with their Doc Martins. What a bunch of jerks. Myrtle smiled despite herself. She made it a rule not to smile on stage so she hopped off the ledge. A mob quickly encircled her.

“Yo, Sick Bitch!”

There was no mistaking that rumble of a voice, like diesel engine that wasn't working so well. The rush from her performance vanished suddenly as she turned to face the thing she dreaded most.

With three hundred pounds weighing down his six-foot frame, the man in front of her was the largest guy in the room, bigger than the bouncer at the door and tougher than the heifer serving drinks behind the bar. His bald head shined like river-polished stone. It reflected light the same way her silver guitar pic did, while his black eyes didn't reflect anything. They were as deep and soulless as an elevator shaft. To anyone unlucky enough to see him, the guy's purpose on the planet was crystal clear: to instill fear. He was the bogey-man, the creature under the bed, the ax-murderer in the closet, and this time he went by the name Ben. Gentle Ben.

In its collective unconscious, the mob that crowded her slowly withdrew, giving the two a wide berth.

Suddenly, Myrtle's adolescent laryngitis came back. She felt her face contort into that sullen glare of her youth. Ben was no Mr. Madri – in fact, through Ben she'd taken care of Madri just after graduation – and right now she would have given just about anything to face down her former English teacher instead of this monolith of a man. If he was a man, that was.

“Ben,” she squeaked.

“You really have some vocal range, Bitch,” said Ben. The thunder in his voice didn't sound so much like a broken engine any more. Now it held the sound of deep, inconsolable pain. But the pain in his voice wasn't his own. It belonged to all those on whom he had inflicted some sort of agony. Myrtle knew he was capable of many forms.

“Thanks, Ben. Don't know if that's really a compliment.”

Of course it wasn't. She had about as much vocal range as her Harley had wheels. She could shout herself hoarse or she could whisper like a broken fan belt and that was the extent of her vocal range.

“Nice turn out,” he said. Again she didn't know if he was serious or not. Although the crowd was the largest yet, it wasn't exactly Madison Square Garden. She thought she'd be playing to a crowd that size by now. Wasn't Ben supposed to do something about that? As if he read her thoughts, he said, “You got promise. Mostly unfulfilled, but promise.”

He rubbed his big, anti-Buddha belly and Myrtle thought there was a threat in it. Sure, she might just be getting paranoid, but with Ben it never hurt to treat everything as a possible threat.

Besides, the size of his belly alone was unsettling. She thought there could actually be people somewhere in there, slowly being digested. It was their pain that colored his rumble of a voice. A dopey thing to think, she supposed, but there was that night over at The Swill on Avenue A. The giant had caught

her elbow and turned her to face his enormous stomach. That's when her imagination tripped her up -- she actually thought she saw something throbbing beneath his rolls of fat, like an animal crawling around inside him. And it was desperate to get out.

*Little gut of horrors.*

What did he mean by "unfulfilled promise," anyway? That pissed her off, but not enough to confront him. Myrtle supposed she really did have some range, if she could curse out a crowd of hundreds but whimper in front of this one guy.

Ben began chewing something tough, something he sucked up from way down deep in his gullet. Somehow Myrtle knew that if she could figure out what it was that he was gnawing on, it would be more repulsive than she let herself imagine. With Ben, imagination wasn't half as bad as reality.

"You got something for me?" he asked.

"It's outside." Myrtle gave a nod to the back exit.

Ben raised a paw for her to lead the way. She thought his hand looked naked without a baseball bat in it, although she'd never seen him use one. He never needed to get physical with people. Somehow, everyone just plain knew.

She unstrapped the guitar, handing it to a roadie, who in turn handed back a black leather halter top. Myrtle didn't want to be topless out back, of all places.

"Right this way," she said.

Behind the club, the alleyway was cool and dark and a little damp, perfect for the little creatures that scurried about almost unseen. High stacks of foul smelling trash stood against the brick walls and leaked black puddles of putrescence. She couldn't spot anything moving about directly, but kept catching scurrying movements from the corners of her eyes.

Ben surveyed the scene and contorted his face into a hideous shape which must have been a smile. Was there meaning in that grin of his? Maybe Myrtle was over-analyzing this guy's every move, but he was dangerous and quixotic. You never knew what he would do next, so it paid to keep a close eye on him.

Maybe he smiled because he got the best of the thing he was chewing? Couldn't be that. Something small bulged from the side of his cheek. She couldn't guess what it was, but it sent a shiver of disgust and fear up the spine of souls on her back. *Uggh...*

Standing in the center of this filth, he looked like relaxed. The guy was completely at home in places like this while chewing on things like that.

"So how you been, Ben?" A weak show of bravado on her part. He raised an eyebrow at her.

Parked in the rear was Myrtle's Hog, which a buddy of hers was slowly chopping and personalizing for her. Ben walked over to it, caressed it like a lover, gliding his hand over the chrome fuel tank. It reflected his sausage fingers in the light from a street lamp. He turned to her with a look of approval on his face. The look slowly turned into a questioning gaze.

"It's in the saddle bag," Myrtle said.

Ben stepped away from the bike and gestured for her to dig through her stuff. She strolled over to the bike, concentrating on appearing casual, but fairly certain she didn't pull it off.

The bags were empty.

"What the--?"

She looked up, at Ben, at the alley, at the street down the way. Couldn't be, just couldn't be. Not this. Just to make sure, she rifled through her empty sacks again and came up empty.

"You like wearing that tattoo, Sick Bitch?" Ben asked with another awful smile. This one was full of malice, a humorless grin that claimed ownership over her. She was nothing to him, an experiment, a dalliance, a kitchen match that was beginning to burn down too close to his fingers. Easy enough to snuff out. "Cause if you don't like wearing it, I know a good way to take it off."

A cold blanket of fear fell over her. He was the only one who had ever made her tremble, especially these days. He'd given her so much, such strength and ability. Such promise! And it was easy enough for him to take away.

"You, you can't," she said. "Not yet, not when I've got so much to give you first."

The big man thrust his bear-like paw toward her to shake. From the gleam in his eyes, he didn't seem to think Myrtle would actually take it. There was less humor in his smile now than before, if that was possible. His signature grin was screwed up in that ironic twist beneath his goatee. His black eyes almost dared her to accept his handshake.

"Are you going to leave me hanging, Sick Bitch? Not polite."

"Ben, you gotta cut me some slack."

"What do I gotta do?"

"You're right. I'm sorry," she said. "You don't gotta do nothing, but I'd appreciate some leeway here. I'm good for it. I've been one of your best dealers."

"Don't kid yourself, Bitch. You're a bottom feeder."

"That's bullshit, Ben. You said if I made some deals for you, we'd be bigger than the Beatles. But think: once we get that big, we can work even bigger deals for you."

"Yeah, in theory. But you gotta break your bones first, not bust my balls. I don't give people the power I'm giving you because most people fuck it up." He paused. His black eyes scanned her in an instant, judging her. Myrtle fought the urge to fidget. "You gonna prove me wrong or you gonna shake my hand?"

"Prove you wrong."

"Uh-huh." It was a dismissive grunt. Ben didn't believe her, but he dropped his hand for now.

While continuing to gaze at her in that way that made her itch all over, he spat out the large wad. It burst against the concrete with a wet splat. The glob appeared to struggle to upright itself and Myrtle thought she even heard the thing utter a low moan. It was small and pink, like a hairless baby rat. It wasn't that. Myrtle suspected that whatever it was, it wasn't far from a rat, but it wasn't that. The ... thing ... was almost dead now.

She averted her eyes, anxious to get on his good side again. "You know we have more fans than ever."

"You're not going to get anywhere unless you start acting like one of mine," said Ben. "Make me happy and I'll make you happy. Losing this shit isn't making me happy, Bitch."

She had to say something in her defense and she couldn't lie. He could see through lies, he was the fucking prince of lies. "We're getting the word out and it's spreading."

Ben looked at her with a crooked smile.

"You're working at it, I'll give you that," he said. "Sloppy work, but at least it's an effort." He bit his lower lip in thought, sucking up some foul liquid that remained from the pink glob he'd spat out. "First and only break," he continued. "Finish your set then get to work. You got until six this morning to find me my shit." He paused, then added: "Or you're going to end up shaking my hand."

Ben rotated his massive frame as if turning to leave, and as soon as Myrtle allowed herself to feel a sense of relief at his going, Ben stopped in his tracks. He rubbed a hand over his bald head that shined even in the dim light out here and looked at her sideways.

"One more thing, Bitch," he said.

There was always one more thing.

"You owe me what the bookies call vig. Know what that is? Fifteen per cent on the principal. Understand?"

Yeah, she understood.

"You owe me vig, Sick Bitch. Now you say it."

"I owe you vig, Ben."

"Nice." He turned, and faster than she thought anyone carrying around that much bulk could move, he was gone.

*Finish your set and get to work*, he'd said. Hell, she'd get to work right now. Myrtle put her hand on the studded leather of the saddlebag and felt around the inside. Once she figured out who the thief was, the dumb fuck was going to pay her back and then some. Pay her Ben's vig.

She closed her eyes and concentrated, feeling the signature heat remaining in the bag. In addition to her band's growing popularity, Ben had given her Talents like this. Searching, searching. Ah, there it was: some grime, some sweat, and a little bit of the crook's aura. From these remnants she pieced together the identity of the thief.

An addict.

Of course, it had to have been an addict. Who else would venture into this alley and stick his hand into the saddlebag of a bad-ass bike except someone who pickled his brain?

Ben would get his vig, all right. She almost felt sorry for the dumb fuck who swiped the contents of her bag.

## 4.

The rapping at the door startled April. It wasn't the hour. She was used to Jenny or certain neighbors appearing unbidden in the wee hours. It was the rhythm of the knocking, so familiar and so unexpected. Tap, tap, tap. Tap. Like the opening notes of Beethoven's Fifth. There was only one person she knew who knocked like that, and through the spy-hole on her front door, she saw it was him.

"Hi Paul," she said, opening the door only a sliver, as if it was the Jehovah's Witnesses who had come calling instead of her twin brother.

Man, had he changed, even since the last time she'd seen him. His once-lanky form was now fleshy. It hung off him like a bad-fitting suit. Although he wasn't quite fat, he was on his way. The black hair that he used to wear long was now closely cropped and neat. Very corporate. His sharp features had softened with his new weight. It actually made him look younger.

"What brings you 'round?"

"Let me in?"

She considered it. Or more accurately, considered not letting him in. Paul had hurt April and she didn't want him to hurt her again.

"Can we talk? Can I come in?" he asked again.

She unlatched the chain lock and pulled the door back. It was involuntary. She'd swear the door moved of its own volition.

Paul plopped down at the kitchen table and April handed him a cold one, which he didn't drink until she also handed him a glass. *The new and improved Paul rears his ugly head.* While his face may have gotten boyish, his attitude was more *old man-ish*.

"So you slumming or you here for a reason?" April asked.

"I got a strange feeling tonight, like you were up to something that involved me."

"The world doesn't revolve around you, Paul."

"That's not what I meant."

She knew that wasn't what he meant, but he exposed himself and she wanted to strike. Needed to strike. "In fact, ever since you gave up the guitar a lot less of me has revolved around you."

"Sorry you didn't have your own identity before. Welcome to independence." Apparently Paul had his own venom to spit.

"You had a gift, Paul. The way you played could touch my heart."

"Don't start with that."

"Just tell me why. Why did you give it up?"

"We been though this a hundred times already."

"Then tell me again."

He shook his head in silence. April could see in his face there was a hurricane of words trying to get out. And he was fighting to control the mad rush. "It touched your heart? Well, it was breaking mine!" He stopped himself short, as if he was about to let out too much. "Look, I was in Hell anyway. Why not just chuck it." He thought for a moment and then smiled a little. She could see

the charm he was just beginning to nurture. He was never charming before, and she didn't like this experiment into frivolity. But his grin deepened with confidence, full-charm ahead: "What's the difference between a municipal bond and a musician?"

"A joke? You come over here to tell me a joke?"

"There's a point to it," he said, a little annoyed. She was gratified by how quickly his smile disappeared. "What's the difference?"

She sighed and rolled her eyes. "I don't know, Paul. What is the difference between a municipal bond and a musician?"

"A municipal bond matures and makes money."

Neither laughed. Instead they glared at each other without speaking. It was like their childhood staring contests, only angrier. His eyes were impenetrable. A chill hung about him that frosted over the windows to his soul. She was the first to look away, and it was then that she noticed the tattoo.

"What's that?" she asked, pointing to the artwork on the center of his chest, where the top button of his shirt would have hid it if he wore it closed. Strange place to get inked, she thought. Paul looked down at the partially covered tattoo and drew his button-down shirt over it. "Too late, Paul. Can't hide it from me."

He sighed and released his collar, allowing her to examine it. April leaned across the table. Instantly she gasped.

A circle about the size of a quarter with waves etched inside marred his skin. This wasn't a tattoo at all. He had been branded. Had Paul let someone do that to him? How could she not have known about it?

Without realizing it, April's face contorted into a horrified grimace. Paul quickly snatched his shirt together and jumped to his feet. Before he did, however, April was certain the waves in the circle moved, undulating like maggots.

"Forget it, don't look at it!" he shouted.

"What did you do to yourself!?"

"Don't lecture me, April. Tell me what you were doing tonight and then I'll get the hell out of here."

The look of horror on her face gave way to exasperation. It had been a night full of oddities, not the least of which was Paul's new scar. But April was spent, willing to rationalize away the wiggling she'd seen as the fabrications of an overtaxed mind.

"I want you to look at something," she said. Reaching behind her into her duffel sack hanging over her chair, she fished around for the "blank" book she bought off Slick Jimmy earlier. She handed it to Paul. When he wouldn't take it, she dropped it on the table between them and let it rest there. She studied him carefully, then tried again.

"Take a look," she insisted, the way Slick Jimmy had. She slowly flipped open the cover and Paul turned away. Next she turned a page, all the while searching Paul's reaction. "See these notes? Jenny didn't. Neither did the guy I got it from, but I see 'em plain as day. Of course, I never had a knack for music.

You had all the talent there, Paul." She couldn't resist the dig. "Still, there's something about this book."

Still standing, Paul leaned forward, dropped his head down, pressed his hands to the back of the chair. The knuckles in both his fists were bloodless white.

"Think you could play any of this on your guitar?" April herself didn't know if she were provoking him or asking an innocent question. There was no doubt which Paul thought she was doing.

"April! Stop it! Why do you have to goad me?"

"You're throwing your life away -- and mine with it!"

"You self-centered--!"

"What? Say it."

But Paul wouldn't. He wouldn't look up at her either. She closed the book, still peering at her brother.

"Do you have any idea what that is?" His voice was calmer now.

"No," she told him honestly. "What is it?"

"How did you get that?"

"Some guy on the street. Said he stole it from someone. What is this book, Paul? Why does it mean something to us?"

Paul's lips moved in a low whisper, too low for April to hear clearly. She thought she heard him say, "*sick bitch...*"

She dropped her jaw in shock. "What did you just call me?"

"Huh?" Maybe it was her tone that pulled him out of his thoughts. He looked at her. "Did you say it was stolen?"

There was something about his voice that was different than it had been all night, than it had been for months. It sounded something like hope.

"Yes," April said, unable to keep the enthusiasm out of her own voice.

"Want to look at it?"

He did, she knew he did, but he was unsure what to do next. She smiled despite herself. When he took his eyes from hers and darted them down to the book, he screamed.

"Christ!"

He slapped his hands to his eyes. Too late. April watched him wobble for a moment as all the color drained out of his cheeks. She leapt to her feet and caught him just as he collapsed.

## 5.

It was time to take a trip to the La-La Land.

Slick Jimmy looked around at the piles of clothing beneath him: lady's housecoats; men's sweaters; children's play clothes that were clean but stained. An array of socks, everything from white tubes to gold-toe business, filled one corner and a ball of out-of-fashion ties was rolled up in another. Jimmy didn't think the Goodwill people would mind his arrangement.

This little iron box wasn't much of a home, but it was his. It was the perfect refuge from the world swirling out on Seventh Street. And no one else knew about it. In here, he was safe to go to the La-La Land.

He sat in the clothing drop with a flashlight between his legs. One of those out-of-date ties was wrapped tightly around his left bicep, and he slapped his forearm with his right hand. A pulsing vein rose to the surface of his skin, all right. In a moment he'd be just where he was born to be.

Then he heard footfalls outside the box. Goddamn it. He clicked off the torch and waited in the dark for whoever it was to keep on walking. But the footfalls stopped right outside. From the crunchy sounds on the pavement, Slick Jimmy could tell the person was kneeling down at the little door where the Goodwill people took out the clothes. There was scratching at the seam, like fingers trying to swing open the door.

"Yo, get out of here, mother fucker!" he shouted. "I'm in this one!"

A pause. No sound. Fuckers must have limped off. Shit. Slick Jimmy wiped his nose on his wrist.

Then he noticed it. Something wasn't right in the silence. He listened closely. It was too silent. No cars; no music on the street; no people yammering on their way to and from bars. It was like the whole dumpster was wrapped up in a big blanket that he couldn't hear out of.

And then, with all his effort concentrated on listening, he heard something he didn't like. It was a low buzz, like a distant hornet's nest. Maybe it was the sound of hundreds of small voices sobbing.

He looked down at his forearm. He hadn't put the needle in yet. Besides, this was nothing like the La-la Land.

The door yawned open, flooding the container with streetlight. He saw a black form crouching down, looking in. Although he couldn't see for sure, he knew. It was her and he felt his eyes go wide in terror.

"I been looking for you," she said.

*Sick Bitch.*

She climbed into the dumpster, crowding him. He jumped over to the other side, landing on the socks and ties. She turned around to close the door behind her, and when she turned her back to him, he saw what he didn't want to see. Her halter top revealed her bareback, and even in the dim light, he saw those screaming heads and twisting bodies.

Slick Jimmy climbed to his feet, pulling himself up to the drop slot, to freedom, but she caught his pant leg. She easily pulled him back down. He crumbled up into a cowering position against the steel corner of the box as if she'd kicked him in the groin. Gingerly, almost seductively, she leaned over him and placed her forefinger on his lower, trembling lip. Her touch was cold and her finger was callused, maybe from the guitar.

When he noticed that her nails were bitten down to the nub he thought that she must have been nervous about something herself. You never wanted Sick Bitch nervous and looking for you. A fresh set of shivers went through his body.

"Chill, Jimmy," she said. "I've come to take what's mine."

"I ain't got that shit no more. Sold it by the Cube."

She smiled. There wasn't any humor in it; no devilish joy, either. It was a deadpan smile. Slick Jimmy saw something shift beneath it, like her game-plan had just changed.

"Then I'll have to take something else," she said. "Hey Jimmy, do you even know what an asshole you are? I mean, can that even register on your radar?"

Jimmy gave her a sick smile. He didn't know how to respond.

"You fucked me real good when you took that book," she continued, "and now I owe the Man big. Got to pay vig 'cause of you, you dumb fuck. So now you're going to give me something else and I need it now."

"Shit, take whatever you want!"

Could he buy her off with something here in the box? Maybe this wouldn't go down the way he feared. After a quick scan, he saw he didn't have much. He'd just give her his smack. Score some more another way. Slick Jimmy handed her his works, but the bored look on her face told him, *No, not that*. He ran the back of his hand over his chapped lips.

"Well fuck. What do you want?"

"Just what's already mine," she said again and reached behind her neck to unfasten the halter top. The leather sheath fell to her hips, exposing her full breasts to him. The left nipple was pierced with an upside-down star on a loop. At any other point in his life, he would have relished a moment like this. But that nipple ring sapped the thrill, put terror in its place.

"You," she said. "I want you."

When Myrtle crawled back out of the container door, the low rumbling buzz that her band mates complained about was loud enough for her to hear. It wasn't much louder, just enough to remind her that it was there, louder by a single voice. Myrtle was good at ignoring it for another reason, too. If she listened closely, she'd hear in that buzz the sound of agony. The new voice was just as bloated with pain and suffering as all those around it.

If she thought about it much, she supposed, she could go crazy.

The bottom of her back itched, too. It felt something like warm seltzer fizzling and she swiped at the skin exposed by the halter top. She missed her mark, but didn't bother for a second try. Rubbing it or scratching it wouldn't make the sensation go away.

Anyone who looked closely at the tattoo would find another soul in torment inked there on the bottom. And no matter how hard anyone searched the streets where he had been such a fixture, they'd never see Slick Jimmy again.

## 6.

April had seen some odd things since buying this book from the panhandler earlier, but nothing prepared her for this.

Paul lay unconscious on her kitchen linoleum, an overturned glass of beer spreading out amorphously around him. He was too heavy, so she had had to ease him down, the way mom did with dad too many times.

"Paul! Paul!" She shook him urgently. No response. She decided to ease blood flow throughout his body. Again just like mom. Unbuckled his belt. Unbuttoned his slacks. Removed his shoes. Pulled off his socks. Loosened his sleeves at the wrists. It was only when April opened his collar and exposed his brand again that her deliberate ministrations came to a sudden halt.

She recoiled, unable to think at all. It wasn't the sight of the brand that made her mouth quiver. April had gotten used to the sight of it, if not the idea that he would let someone jab him with a red-hot poker. It was what the brand had become.

"My God," she muttered without realizing it. "My God my God my God."

Paul's mutilation was no longer a wriggling mass of what had looked like sub-dermal worms. Now it looked like an eyelid -- an eyelid that flipped open when April swept his collar aside. It stared without blinking.

And it was looking directly at her.

She scrambled back away from it, away from her brother, and slipped in the yellow puddle that had lost its fizz. "My God my God my God my God..." With her back flat against the cabinet under the sink, she stared back at the thing.

"Come on, April," she said, somehow managing to break her chant. "Snap out of it. Snap out of it."

She couldn't be seeing what she was seeing. She blinked hard, putting as much effort into it as she could. With any luck, when she opened her eyes again she'd see she was just losing her mind.

But it was still there.

The brand had only been as big as a quarter, so the size of this... eye... must have been an optical illusion. Maybe because it had no earthly business being where it was, it looked tremendous. It was a big and black eye, bovine or horse-like. April read once that the biggest eye in the world belonged to the giant squid, a sea monster that no one had ever seen alive. That's what this was, the eye of a monster that no none should ever have seen.

But worse than looking at it was being looked at by it. The pupil contracted, scrutinizing her and April shivered. It couldn't be called bovine, she thought, because there was undeniable intelligence in it.

With a courage she didn't think she possessed, or maybe it was just disgust, she lunged forward and clapped her hand on Paul's chest. There was a wet slap where her palm struck her mark, and she felt the eye blink shut. When she pulled her hand away, the eye was gone. The circular brand had returned, but April was certain that whatever had been looking at her had seen enough.

"Hey open up in there!" a woman shouted.

She was just outside April's apartment door. April put down the phone -- she had been about to call Jenny -- and looked out the spy hole, instead.

The guitarist from Witch's Teat leaned up against the doorway, wearing a black leather halter-top, black leather jeans and had her six-string slung over her back so that the strap spread her breasts apart. She really abused them, April thought. The biker-chick singer wore a determined frown, like someone took her rent money and she had come collecting.

"Yeah?" April asked through the door.

"You got something of mine in there and I want it back."

Her direct style caught April off guard, but only for a moment.

"Yeah? What?" Somehow she was afraid the guitarist wanted Paul. But that was ridiculous. April had a sense that this chick and Paul knew each other distantly, but she couldn't possibly have come looking for him. "What's yours?"

The tough girl sighed, blowing a stray string of hair off her forehead with her lower lip. "Do you know who I am?"

"I've seen you play. Tonight in fact, over at Scrap Metal."

"That's right. Name's Sick Bitch."

"Your parent's have a strange sense of humor." April narrowed her eyes, studying the woman. She could tell this was a position Sick Bitch wasn't used to, trying to get something from someone who had no intention — or reason — to give her whatever it was she wanted. "So what do you want... Bitch?"

"You bought a book off a guy in the street, and I need it back."

At least she didn't need to collect rent money from her unconscious brother. "How do you know that?"

"I'll pay you back the six bucks. Can I have my book back?"

If she played this right, April could get some valuable information like this. "Why do you want it? It's a blank book. There's nothing in it."

"Yeah, well if it's blank to you, it can't be too important to you either. So open the door and give it back."

"I don't think it is your book, Bitch. I think it belongs to my brother."

"I don't give a shit what you think, April. That book is mine and I want it back. Now open the fucking door or I'll bust it down."

"How do you know my name?"

"How do I know you got my book?" Sick Bitch asked rhetorically. "Look, go ask Paul who the book belongs to, and he'll say 'Sick Bitch, the book belongs to Sick Bitch.' Go ask him."

"You know I can't." Somehow, this chick knew an awful lot. "I don't know how you know any of this, but you know I can't ask Paul anything."

"It's tough for him to answer when he's sprawled out on the floor, huh?"

She was deliberately playing *Guess What I Know* with April, so she didn't take the bait.

"I bought it from Slick Jimmy," April admitted instead. "If you have a problem with that, take it up with him."

"I already took care of Slick Jimmy. He's one of mine," Sick Bitch said.

"What's that mean...?"

"Look April," Sick Bitch's tone was different now. It sounded like she was trying to make peace. "I really need that book back. It's important to me and means jack shit to you, so how about it?"

"That argument would work if the book meant jack shit to me," April said. "But you're wrong. It means a whole hell of a lot to me."

"How? You don't even know what it is!"

No, she knew. Somehow, somewhere deep down in the basement of April's brain, she knew. In the deep places that people don't really talk about, people know quite a bit about things they don't really understand. She knew she needed to hold onto the book, she just didn't know why. Yet. All April had to do was shine some light into her brain's cellar, and it would become clear. This whole night she had been looking for the light switch, and now it was in reach. Maybe she even brushed it once or twice already.

But Sick Bitch wasn't going to let her search any more. The biker-chick singer had lost her patience. Through the peephole, April saw her raise her knee to her chest. Sick Bitch positioned her steel-toed MC boot like a battering ram and punched out with all of the strength in her quads.

Fantastically, the doorframe shattered.

Splinters exploded across the room and April followed their trajectory. She hit the ground with a bone-quaking thud and slid through the puddle of warm beer. Paul, still unconscious, lay on the floor beside her. She didn't see him so much as felt his presence. Through dazed eyes she saw the metal door was unhinged, resting drunkenly against the wall perpendicular to it.

Sick Bitch filled the doorway, looking a lot bigger than she had when seen through the spy hole. Then she spoke in a voice a slice louder than a whisper.

"I'm done playing with you, woman. Give me back my fucking book."

She lumbered in toward April in those heavy boots, reminding her of Lon Chaney's Frankenstein. If her pace was meant to scare the hell out of her, it worked. April suddenly realized how dangerous this sick bitch really was. It wasn't just the act of some suburban girl with too much angst and not enough release. Those boots looked like her weapon of choice at the moment. They were bone-crushers, anvils, cement blocks strapped to Sick Bitch's feet, and except for deliberate effect, they didn't seem to slow her down at all.

"You can't have it!" April cried desperately. "It's mine! I bought it fair and square."

Making her way across the short hall to the kitchen, Sick Bitch rebutted. "It was stolen when you bought it. The book is mine and I want it back."

Suddenly, April found the light switch in her head. The book should be Paul's. He needed it, was miserable because of it, lost without it. He had a sickness in his soul and as his soul mate, April was sick too. Maybe this book --- whatever it was -- had something to do with it. Maybe it was the answer!

"It's not yours. It's Paul's. I gave it to him."

"You had no right to do that," Sick Bitch said unperturbed. Now she stood over April with true menace. With her body slightly turned toward the kitchen table, she looked down at April and briefly scanned the room. Instantly she spotted the book, April was sure. She could see a slight change in Sick Bitch's features when her eyes happened upon it.

Before she reached out for it, April shot up her hand, grabbing her waist and regaining Sick Bitch's attention. She slapped April aside without effort. It didn't matter, distracting her was all that April cared about right now.

"So if it's Paul's," April said, desperately clawing at a logical argument to make that might somehow appease this demonic creature before her. "If it's Paul's, you have to ask him for it."

Sick Bitch laughed, cackled. Like she sang earlier, it was the sound of evil.

"Hey, idiot. Paul's one of mine, too. Why do you think I had his book?"

Trying to regain Sick Bitch's attention may have been a bad idea.

Standing over April, the satanic singer raised her knee to her chest again. Her heavy boot hung in the air over April's head. There was something wet and pink on the bottom of it, like Sick Bitch had crushed a baby rat beneath her boot. April gagged and turned away.

Then suddenly, a second light went off in the cellar of her mind.

"If Slick Jimmy is one of yours and I bought it from him, then technically I bought it from you!"

The boot hung over her face, wavered for a moment, then slowly lowered beside April's head. Sick Bitch peered at April, measuring her. "He wasn't operating under my authority."

"That doesn't matter," April said, thinking quickly. "As a designated agent of yours, by definition, his actions are yours. If you don't like the deals he makes on your behalf, then you need to take that up with him. I made a deal with him – and by extension, with you – in good faith."

"Do you even know what this book is?"

"I'm beginning to figure it out..."

"There's this guy, Ben," Sick Bitch began. "He said if I make some deals for him, he's gonna promote my band. So I made a deal with your brother. We were playing together about six months ago and he said that his music was actually painful for him. He was sick of starving, sick of the torment. He wanted to give it all up and make money doing it. Ben had some connections and I hooked your brother up. This book is the contract."

"You write all your contracts in sheet music?"

"Don't be a wise-ass, April. I'm speaking in metaphors. You know what I'm really saying. The essence of Paul's self is music, so it has to be written like that. If he was all about money, you'd see the contract on banknotes or dollar bills."

"Paul quit playing months ago. Why you coming around now?"

"It takes a few months to put everything in place." Sick Bitch rubbed her eyes. She was being patient and April didn't think the rock star saw patience as a virtue. "So you see why I can't let you keep it." She returned to her 'let's-be-friends' voice. She even outstretched her hand for April to take. Instead, April hoisted herself up on her own, thank you very much.

Face-to-face with Sick Bitch, she saw that she stood a good six inches taller than the biker-chick singer. But April couldn't mistake that for physical advantage. There was something about the other woman's eyes, those deep,

black, soul-stealing eyes, that told her not to try anything stupid like a sucker-punch. And if those eyes didn't convince her, a quick glance to what used to be her front door sucked the wind out of attempting a physical assault.

"I need this book back or I'm in deep shit, April. I mean really, serious shit."

"I wish I could help you out," April said, and surprised herself because for a moment she really meant it. Paul's slumped form, however, brought her back to her senses. "But without this book it looks like my brother's in some real serious shit of his own. And then, so am I."

"Maybe we can work something out. What if I get my hands on another one of these... blank... books and write your name in it. And in exchange, you can keep Paul's."

"Interesting," April said, surprising herself with her willingness to negotiate rather than run screaming from the room. On some level, she understood the game. She had to stay and talk it out or her brother, and maybe she herself, would be lost forever. "When Paul signed his name in this one, it messed me up. So if I sign my name in your book, it'll mess Paul up."

"A conundrum between soul mates," Sick Bitch allowed.

"Also, I already have Paul's book. So what do we have to talk about? Besides, how can you even read it?" April asked.

"I'm a musician. I read sheet music," Sick Bitch responded dryly. "I made a deal with Paul."

"Then why can I read it?"

"Not too bright, are you April?" she asked. "'Cause you're just half of a soul. The other half is Paul. You're soul-mates, to use a lame-ass Deepak Chopra term. And the book is mine."

"I bought it fair and square."

"You bought stolen merchandise." Sick Bitch was growing tired of this conversation, April could see it. Violence was rising behind her studied calm. "The way that artwork the Germans stole during World War II has to go back to its rightful owners is the way that this book has to go back to me."

"Okay, but the way that Paul sold you his soul included my soul, and that can't be part of the deal, so my soul has to go back to me."

"But your souls are inseparable. That would void the sale."

"Agreed," April said.

"You're forgetting that Paul made a deal with me. Who do you think you are to break his contacts?"

"Think of it as a hostile take-over."

Sick Bitch raised an eye-brow, impressed with April's gall. A nasty grin came on her face, revealing her teeth. There was poorly concealed threat in it, and then the threat vanished. Actual violence took its place.

Sick Bitch thrust out her hand over April's face. Her claw-like grip tightened on her temples. April cried out in shock and pain, her hands automatically went to Sick Bitch's wrist in a vain attempt to free herself. The biker-chick singer was too strong. April's six inch advantage proved to be groundless as the leather-clad woman drove her to her knees.

Through tears in her eyes, April saw Sick Bitch reach behind her own head with her free hand. She plucked a silver pick from the top fret of her guitar. It caught some of the kitchen light as she did it.

"Think of *this* as a hostile take-over," she said, pressing the shiny object to the side of April's head.

"Let go!" she cried, but couldn't struggle out of Sick Bitch's talons. She shook her head and writhed, to no avail. The silver pick was cold against her burning temple and she was sure Sick Bitch was drawing blood. "You can't just take my soul!" April shouted. But the pick pressed deeper. April tore at Sick Bitch's hands, but they were stony, unyielding. "That's not the way you operate, you know that!"

"I don't have to take your soul since yours came with Paul's," she said, "so I'm taking your life instead."

As if those were the words needed to conjure him, an immense mountain of a man suddenly appeared behind Sick Bitch. April saw him before she did and gasped. A hot, red river streamed down the side of her face; her brain felt it was being squeezed out of the imploding bones of her skull; but it was the sight of this ... man ... that truly frightened her. She'd never seen him before, but had a distant feeling of somehow being able to recognize him.

As soon as Sick Bitch felt him behind her, she released her hold on April. For her part, April threw her hands to her face in an instinctive gesture of self-protection. Sick Bitch didn't have that option.

"Ben!" she said. "It's not six a.m. yet!"

"Actually," he said with a quick glance at his wrist-watch, "it is. But I'm here for a different reason." He reached over, took the pick from her hand and ran it across his tongue. He licked the red fluid off it, licked it clean. April stifled a gag. "You can't do what you're doing, Bitch."

"What do you mean?"

"The chick on the floor is right. We only take after we've negotiated. And they have to negotiate of their own free will."

"They're soul mates. Paul gave himself to me. That makes April one of mine, too. A package deal."

"Not really," he said. "Just like you won the book even if she bought it in good faith, she never sold you the contents of it. So you can't call her one of yours." He folded his immense arms. "You own the book, but you can't do nothin' with what's inside."

"But Ben!"

"I do a good business. One of the reasons is 'cause I don't fuck around like this," he said. "She beat you, Bitch. April Lawrence beat you and it's over. Time for you to go back to school."

He stepped back from her and outstretched his arm, as if offering to shake her hand. Sick Bitch had a look of complete horror on her face. April couldn't mistake it for anything else. "Now you're going to take my hand."

Sick Bitch backed away in terror. "No. NO!"

For his part, Ben just looked at her, smiled and nodded, yes. Yes you are, he said without saying.

"Ben I won't do it. I can't do it! Witch's Teat is working too hard, we've got great things lined up--" Words spilled out of Sick Bitch's mouth without pause, without emphasis. There was no argument in them, no logic, only desperation.

"Myrtle Beardsley, you will take my hand. Now."

Maybe hearing her real name was all that was needed to cork the flood of words. Whatever was the reason, Sick Bitch suddenly became silent.

She dropped her chin to her chest. April saw a sullen, angry look come over her downcast face. It seemed to suit her. She raised her right hand and allowed Big Ben to grasp it. He ushered her past him and quickly turned back to April.

"April Lawrence." He said her name with a formality that didn't match his physical appearance. "That book is mine."

"Possession is nine-tenths of the law," she said.

Ben laughed. It was a sound she never wanted to hear again. "Then I want to buy it back. They're hard to come by."

"You can have it as a blank book, but not with anything written on the pages."

Ben's laugh became an impressed smile. "What's your price?"

"Since Paul's got his soul back, the price of the book is his happiness."

"He'll never be rich!"

"He won't give a shit if he's happy."

Again Ben smiled.

April decided to push it. "And I want Sick Bitch's guitar."

There was a long pause between them, during which April made an effort to look Ben in the eye. It wasn't easy. Each of his could have been the monster eye she'd seen on Paul's chest -- and suddenly, it was clear to April that Paul's brand was part of the deal. It was what made him "one of theirs."

"I've got my eye on you," Ben said and after a pause, added: "Done." He lifted the book off the table. April saw that all those ink-strokes had instantly vanished from the pages. "The Fender's yours."

Sick Bitch didn't make a sound.

## 7.

"Why do you always stop in front of these junk dealers?" Jenny asked. She and April perused a blanket laid down on the pavement, setting off a street-sale of filched trash.

"You never know what you're going to find," April said.

Jenny tugged her arm and April allowed herself to be pulled away. Paul was playing later tonight and neither of them wanted to be late for that. April suspected a romance was forming between her friend and her brother, although neither was ready to admit it yet.

She smiled inwardly. Ever since Paul started playing again -- that second hand Fender made a complete circle, ending up with its original owner -- things were right in the world. Paul wasn't making money. Now he was making music.

Suddenly they stopped short a few yards down. It was Jenny who stopped them this time. They stood in front of a street vendor who sold tribal instruments and carved masks. Jenny never liked to slow down for these guys, so she must have had a good reason to stop now. A moment later, April saw the good reason.

"Does that look familiar to you?" Jenny asked. She was pointing to the centerpiece of his wares, a large shaman drum about as big as a trash can. Etched on the skin of it was some bad-ass tattoo art. It looked like a pyramid of people screaming in torment. A spire of souls.

"Don't recognize it," April lied. She blinked twice to see if it would vanish. It stayed just where it was. "Come on." It was her turn to tug Jenny's arm, which she did with more force than she intended. "I don't want to miss Paul's first set."

**The end.**