

A Darker Shade of Fear - Part 1

New Beginnings...

The fog was heavy, swirling and vaporous, allowing only faint outlines of shapes to be seen. It was like it always had been – the same dream, over and over. In the dark fog, he could see movement of something, quick and threatening, but never quite coming at him directly. Even in his sleep, he was uneasy. This dream was too real, too ominous.

The shapes were low and mysterious. Occasionally, two faint and narrow differences in the coloration could be seen, as if a pair of eyes that were almost as dark as the murky fog were looking at him. Or coming at him.

In his sleep, he wasn't aware that his perspiration was making the sheets wet; that his fears were so real, so foreboding, that while his awake mind would dismiss the night visions as mere concoctions of fantasy borne of too much stress or pepperoni, in his dream it was real. And the result was always the same...

He stood as if unable to move. The form crept slowly around him, circling him as if stalking him. His nose could detect a faint but pungent odor; an odor that perhaps anger would have if it had a scent. That smell would make the hair on the back of his neck raise because he knew that anger was meant for him. He knew that this 'thing' stalking him was something real and present... and he knew it was getting closer. Closer. Closer... so close that if he dared move his frozen hand from his side, he could touch this 'anger' that was circling him.

Then, as if from a distance, he could hear another sound. Almost like when you 'think' you hear a siren far away but you're just not quite sure. But yes – there it is. And the sound was frightening; he never could really tell exactly what the sound was but it slowly came to the forefront of his audible senses. It was a high pitched sound, but terrifying. Or, as if the being making the sound was terrified itself.

So all he could do was stand still, not moving, only listening and smelling and sweating and growing more fearful with each thought. He even thought he felt the shape near his side, circling him and breathing upon his leg at times, was touching him; its low, sinister movement meant to only toy with his fear even more before the moment was right, weaving in and out of his senses but always there. When it would be time to do what it had come into his dreams to do... And the sound - it grew and grew and grew – it became so loud that it would eventually awaken him suddenly... Cause him to sit upright in his sweat-soaked sheets, his hair matted on his forehead, his fists clenching the damp fabric, his mouth moving... Only to find that the sound was the sound of his own terrified and lonely voice, screaming the same thing over and over and over... one word; one simple word that meant nothing to anyone else... except for him.

"Run!!!"

The city always seemed to come to life earlier than its inhabitants. But there was also a group of its dwellers that never seemed to sleep. They moved in and about the city as if they were part of the city's circulatory system – but not necessarily a good part. These people were secretive and hidden to most. They had a lifestyle that no one could understand – unless that person was also part of 'them'. These people had only one ultimate purpose in their being – to conquer another in a battle of sorts. To win. To defeat. To humiliate. This group of people lived for the smell of molten rubber and spent high-octane fuel. For the sounds of turbochargers and superchargers; of the click of trans-brakes being set; of the noise of wagers being placed in the darkness; of the cries of victory; or, of the rage of defeat. One person stood at the top of this heap of performance driven humanity. One person and only one person could say the taste of defeat was foreign. And only one person was feared as this one was – but for all the wrong reasons.

This entity grew up in the poorer west side of the sprawling metropolis. Days at school were only endless wastelands of a wasted youth. Living in a home where violence was more common than the television that portrayed it only created a seething loathing for respect. Seeing the father brutally beat the mother night after night in a drunken rage while standing helpless to stop it deadened the senses. One night, enough was enough... the sound of the father's .357 magnum going off in a hallway, it's jacketed hollow-point entering the father's back just to the right side of the spine and tearing a huge hole in his dark heart, killing him instantly but saving the woman's life, was the night this person changed.

The sound of the gun being dropped to the floor, the sight of the mother sobbing over the body of the man who would have killed her had he not been stopped, the sight of the dark, crimson blood flowing onto the dirty hardwood floor beneath a naked bulb hanging in that hallway... all these were forever etched in this person's mind. But life continued on; the shooting was found justified, the case dropped, and yet it never went away. Because what died that cold and rainy November night, never really died at all – it only morphed into something even more threatening and ominous...

‘What’ll it be, hon?’ the waitress quipped to the customer sitting in booth C-5. The smell of fresh bacon and eggs was heavy in the diner’s air, almost as heavy as the cheap perfume the waitress was wearing that morning. He looked up after folding the thin menu in his calloused hands and just smiled at first, seeing her smile back at him with her yellow smoker’s teeth, still chewing the gum that was probably hours old by now.

“Just give me the special – eggs over hard, ok? Oh – make that TWO specials but on the second one, scramble the eggs.” The waitress nodded, scrawled the order down on the green pad, turned on her heel and walked it over to the opening behind the counter where a stainless steel wheel with clips hung. She inserted the piece of paper in one of the clips, spun it toward the kitchen side of the opening and yelled in her best cheap-waitress-in-a-greasy-spoon voice ‘ORDER!’. Now, it was all over except for the eating...

Checking his watch again, he wondered where she could be? It was already nearly nine and she said she would meet him here at eight thirty. But, true to her style, she was late again.

He laughed to himself, realizing that he had no reason to doubt if she would come – she always had before, hadn’t she? And of course, just as he was wondering those same thoughts he had wondered so many times before, he heard the bells jangle as the door behind him swept open. He turned to look and sure enough, it was her, searching the crowd for him. Ironically, their eyes met at the same time and her brilliant smile broke through the smoky, bacon-scented air, and he waved her on over to his booth.

As she swept by him, she bent over and kissed him lightly on the cheek, apologizing for her being late (as always) and he could only do what he had always done before – just smile and nod ‘ok’, because it WAS ok.

This is just how Sally has always been and she probably wasn’t going to change now. Besides, where else in this city could a man hope to find a woman who: was as gorgeous and sexy; was as devoted as a wife; was as knowledgeable about cars; and who could tell the difference between a GN and a WE4 as well as a Firebird and Camaro? Dan knew a good thing when he saw it.

And Sally was definitely a good thing.

“Did you get it?” she asked.

Jokingly, he toyed with her. “Get what?”

She poked his arm with her finger. “You KNOW what! Did you get the promotion? Come on, Dan! I’m dying to know!”

She smiled again at him, knowing from the look on Dan’s face that he had gotten the promotion after all. All he could do is just smile and nod, still awe-struck by her beauty in the midst of the diner that was short on refinement but heavy on great food. That was Sally all right – she could make any place seem like the best place to be.

“Yeah” he finally said, “I got it. I start the new position next Monday. And, since that’s only 5 days away, how about we go out and celebrate this Friday?”

Sally jumped back up out of her seat and gave Dan a huge hug over the table, nearly knocking over the salt and pepper shakers and the shiny chrome napkin dispenser with her efforts.

“Of course, Honey! Let’s go out!” Sally giggled as she sat back down. “Did you already order?”

Dan smiled again and nodded. And so their day began.

Outside, no one noticed the Black Car go by slowly, almost as a shark glides through the water. Behind the deeply tinted glass sat the driver whose eyes had spotted Dan’s white Regal sitting in the parking lot alongside Bernie’s Diner. The driver knew Dan – knew him well in fact. Well, he really only knew what he had heard about Dan and the white car; a car that most of the performance addicts only referred to as Ghost.

But, the driver also knew Sally – in ways that Sally had long forgotten. Years had passed but the Driver of the Black Car had never forgotten Sally or what she had done. Something that, in that wickedly tormented mind, required a reckoning. Word had spread quickly on the street that someone the driver used to know was back in town. And word had also been passed around like whispers in the night, that Sally was this person because everyone knew what that meant to the Driver in the Black Car.

So now, the black car nearly stopped in the light mid-morning traffic, allowing the Driver to stare at the white Regal and the Impala SS parked right next to it, knowing that soon - not today, not tomorrow, but soon – their paths would cross once more.

And when that time occurred – it would be different.

The Black Car pulled away slowly, its shape catching Dan's eye. For reasons yet unknown to Dan, just the view of that car gave him a chill but he couldn't quite explain it...

"Whacha looking at Danny?" asked Sally, noticing Dan's stare over her shoulder behind her.

He didn't hear her. He didn't answer... all he could do was keep his eyes upon the Black Car.

She turned to look and only saw the rear deck of a black car with odd taillights disappear from view around the corner of the intersection.

"Something wrong, Dan?"

"You know... I just don't know Sally. That car I was watching go by slowly seemed to be looking for something. And for the strangest reason, I got this weird feeling that it was connected to me or to us." He shook it off almost as quickly as it came upon him, seeing the odd and worried look in Sally's gorgeous eyes.

"Nah, it's nothing. Let's eat... cause here comes our food."

Neither one noticed that the Black Car was going by once more, both of them enjoying the breakfast before them.

But maybe they should have...

A Darker Shade of Fear –Part 2

The car was gaining speed but his foot wasn't on the accelerator. The headlights cast long, white spears of light into the fog as the car sped wildly up the hill, nearly out of control – its driver trying desperately to slow the vehicle. 50... 60... 75... 90 mph and yet the car was still accelerating. The woman in the seat next to him screamed his name in anger, then, in fear as she realized that he had no control of the car.

Telephone poles whizzed by in blurs, nearly lost in the murky vapor, only gray glimpses could be seen. He stood on the brakes but to no avail. The top of the hill was now only a scant half-mile away and he could see the glare of approaching headlights, illuminating the mist as if some miniature white sunrise was approaching. The car swerved violently as he tried to shut off the ignition but the key only broke in his hand. Horrified at topping the hill at nearly 100 mph, the driver and his helpless, hysterical passenger could only hold on.

The hilltop was now nearly upon them. Suddenly, the approaching car topped the hill before them, half of its shape into their lane. Screaming and cursing, beads of sweat pouring from his forehead, the driver swerved valiantly in an attempt to miss the car now barely 50 feet in front of him...

Both drivers narrowly missed each other, a couple of hubcaps careening wildly off deeply, diving wheels, the squall of rubber on damp pavement actually sounding like more of a hiss as his car now topped the rise at nearly 105 mph.

The woman had her hands dug deeply into his right bicep, the nails sharp and painful, her grip wet with perspiration and terror, her voice stuck in her throat, as was his in a long, pitiful scream of fear.

Then, the crest was beneath them, as was the pavement. The road dropped sharply beneath them and they were airborne now, the motor revving and surging against the rev limiter, causing an eerie 'vroooooom-VROOM, vroooooom-VROOM' sound – then

It died.

Now, the only sound to be heard was silence, save for the wind passing over the plane with no wings.... Slowly, the nose of the car began to tilt downward, its headlights barely illuminating the road far below, and the driver along with his now silent partner in certain death, began their fall. In the corner of her eye, she saw a map float off the console – a map of Massachusetts that she could make out in the weird way it floated at her eye level. Had it not been for their seat belts, the driver and passenger would now be one with that map, floating, waiting for the impact about to come....

The falling car picked up speed now, the driver still holding a death grip on the wheel, the nose now plummeting straight in towards the tarmac. Closer... closer... the wind noise was now near deafening as it whistled a death dirge to their dying ears...

How he wished he had been a better husband. How she wished she had done what she knew she should have. Funny, isn't it? Funny how when you finally know that there is no turning back, that your miserable, flimsy life is about to end – its damned hilarious how you NOW know what you should have done...

Their screams now filled their throats. Even though they knew they were floating, in just a nano-second the car would impact with the pavement at nearly 90 mph – head-on – and their legs would be broken immediately from the inertia. Then, as the nose of the car crumpled on back into the passenger compartment, their bodies would be torn free of the seat belts, their bones breaking and faces smashing into the metal/glass/plastic that was scant inches away. They had time to think of how painful it was going to be... maybe only for a moment, but still... it was going to hurt.

Or? Maybe they wouldn't die immediately... maybe they would lay there with their broken bones and smashed faces, drowning in their own blood, still wishing they had done something a little different.

Falling. Crying for help.

Falling. Begging for another chance...

Falling. Knowing that the impact was imminent...

Screaming. Screaming. Screaming. Screaming and screaming and screaming and screaming...

He awoke sitting upright in his bed once more and screaming "RUN!!!".

Even though he was now awake, the icy fear was still holding his terrified soul in its cold hands - and he was now more afraid than ever before. Because just before he woke up; just before the car was to hit the pavement and the freefall would end his dream-life, he saw IT again. That strange creature that always stalks him in his other dreams, the vile, contemptuous angry spirit with a hot, moist, stench-filled breath... the one that might light touch his leg in the dream just to let him know ' I'm still heeeeeeere...' or maybe breathe a warm breath upon his hand just before he could jerk it away, not ever seeing it, only knowing it was there. Waiting. For him. But he knew that somehow, it wasn't what it seemed.

It never is...it is usually worse than it seems. This time would be no different.

The sun was warm on Carl's back as he leaned on the fender of his new Mach 1. Black and beautiful, he thought to himself. Having only bought the car a month ago with his money saved while in the Navy (and paying cash for it, thank you very much), it was the dream car he always wanted. The Shaker hood was functional; the shifter light and firm; the seats comfortable and soft; and the sound – oh, that superb V-8 sound – coming from the exhaust was finer music to his ears than any of Beethoven's symphonies. Even now, the car pulsed and throbbed, idling semi-quietly in the driveway of Carl's country home, just down the road from Joe's place. Carl took the quick route to home ownership – he bought the land and placed a quality modular home on it, spending almost as much on the garage as he did the house. But the garage was a motorhead's dream and almost as big as Joe's.

Just then, he heard a familiar rumble approaching from the East. The sound of car being ran through its gears and as he squinted his eyes, trying to shield them from the sun, he saw the light dance off the long, sloping nose of an F-Body – Joe's to be precise – that was now slowing down. He just grinned as Joe pulled the SS up behind the Mach 1, revved the stroked mouse a couple of times before letting it idle a moment or two, then shutting it down.

Carl noticed a slightly different sound this time than before. Joe saw that look on his face and answered the unspoken question.

"It's not the same motor you last saw in her. Look at this!"

Joe reached in through the open window and down by the kick panel on the driver's side to pop the hood. Walking back around to the front as Carl ambled on over, Joe released the safety catch and slowly raised the hood.

As the light of day caught the engine compartment, Carl's eyes saw some of the widest valve covers he had ever seen, with the name 'Donovan 572' boldly displayed in red print on the black paint. The twin throttle bodies were enormous, looking more like to lost thermos jugs attached to intake hoses that somehow miraculously snaked down the front/sides of the motor, disappearing somewhere below.

"Joe, you've got to be kidding! Talk about overkill! Isn't this the same kind of set up Moss had in his toy-box at GM?"

Joe's eyes twinkled.

"Well, it IS a little similar – but this is one step better."

Carl waited for Joe to elaborate, knowing that Joe was dying to tell someone something.

"The difference here Carl, is that this one has more snort."

Carl could only grin and shake his head as he peered beneath the hood at the elephant stomper, all the while thinking that this could indeed be a very wild ride. For some reason, the Modular 4.6 beneath the hood of his Mach 1 seemed like a go-kart mill more than a high performance motor when he looked at the ungodly valve cover width. "Well Joe, I guess you're right. Too much IS just about right...", to which Joe just smiled and nodded in agreement.

Across town, in a dank, fetid smelling building that served as a garage of sorts, the driver of the Black Car was sleeping, the car waiting quietly and patiently off to his side, the hum of an old Kenmore fridge interrupting the silence as it cycled on and off, trying to keep the few beers and stale pizza cool. The Driver slept fitfully but no more so than usual, tossing here and there trying to find a comfortable spot that didn't exist. Over on the other side of the room a naked woman with long, black hair slept on the couch, only her hips covered by an afghan her mom had made her before she headed to the Big City to be a model a lifetime ago. But this garage was her runway now although the applause was only in her mind...

They had met at the track one a couple of years back, just before 9-11. They had been inseparable since, having endured the emotional upheaval of those horrifying events. Over and over they had sat and watched the replay of those shiny silver planes crossing an ocean-blue sky, filled with people like us – ordinary, everyday people with lives to live and dreams to strive for –

and seeing those planes being steered straight into the sides of the World Trade Center Towers. Together they shuddered at the thought of those poor, helpless people who in their last moments saw the nose of the airliners heading straight at their floor, thinking surely to god that the plane would turn away.

But they didn't.

They saw the videos of the brave firefighters rushing to the scene, of the cops and EMS workers, the frightened citizens below... of the towers beginning to collapse in a huge, gray inverted mushroom cloud, knowing that thousands of innocent people were falling, tumbling, dying.

And they cried.

So now on this morning, as the dust speckles danced effortlessly in the sunbeams that were able to pierce the darkness within the garage, the two people slept. Dreams did not come this morning to them... at least not those kind of dreams. But on they slept...

"Good morning, Sally speaking. How may I help you?" she asked, cradling the phone on her shoulder as she shuffled some more of the never ending papers into a quasi-pile. She giggled and grinned, recognizing Dan's voice, doing his best male-escort impersonation in her ear.

"Dan, you shouldn't say those sorts of things! You never know who might be listening."

"Yes, I am the owner but still – the secretary might hear you!" "What?"

"What?!!! I'll be right there – THIS I have to see!"

Darkness - Part 3

An Uncomfortable Feeling...

The smell of race gas was heavy in the air; its rich, pungent smell wafting lazily about in the cool evening in and around the racers in the pits. The nights still were longer than the days so darkness came early... but it wouldn't be that way for much longer. May wasn't that far away and heck, as soon as May was here and gone, June would be there with the warmer days and shorter nights.

As he backed the Black car off of the trailer without starting it, a few people turned to stare at its lines. It was long and low; sleek and seductive in an unpleasant way to some. The tinted glass gave no clue to what was within the interior no more than the hood could warn wanna-be's how silly they *really* were for even trying to challenge the driver. No badges adorned the fenders. No decals of any kind were on the windows, only the driver's number in smeary, white shoe polish - #238-scarred the menacing looks. The headlights were like two soul-less eyes, gazing into the distance as if some hungry beast was waiting for its next hapless victim to appear at any time on the horizon.

Oh, they would appear all right. Like last Saturday when the driver was leaving the auto parts store next to the Clear Lake Mall. Some guy in a juiced and loose Viper spent two lights trying to taunt him to run a quick one. The Viper was healthy – 500+ cubes of heavily massaged V-10 that had started out as a Venom 650 but wasn't enough for its owner. Yet, when at the third light, the black car's passenger window surprisingly lowered enough for the dick in the Viper to look in – wishing he hadn't. All he could see was a shadowy figure laughing at him – then the window zipped back up.

Was that a near-glint of fading sunlight that just danced off a Roll cage tube, seen just as the window went closed?

The Viper's exhaust cackled and roared as its driver mashed the go-pedal waiting on the light. He was going to show this SOB what was *really* funny – the Viper's tail lights. But a funny thing happened. What was a fairly quiet black car somehow began to sound like a straight exhaust pro-stocker when shadow-man opened the remotely controlled dump tube.

“Baa-da-baa-baa-da-baa-da-da-Vroom-ba-da-baa-da-da...Vroom!”

Oddly, the once cool and cocky Viper driver wasn't so cool and cocky any more. He couldn't even hear his Barry Manilow CD anymore over the sound of the animal next to him. That black car was sick... very, very sick.

Then, the black car's rpms picked up and the car seemed to hunch up as the driver began to mash the accelerator only being held back by the trans-brake....

All the Viper dude could do was rev his massive V-10 with the exhaust note like a frustrated – but large winged – bumble bee.

God – when's the damn light gonna change? I wanna show this assclown wassup...

The green light for the cross traffic now flicked to yellow. It's light casting an amber glow onto the light cover directly beneath it. The Viper driver's eyes squinted... his left foot backed out ever so slightly on the brushed aluminum pedal attached to the clutch swing arm, the huge pressure plate now scant millimeters from full application against the flywheel now turning nearly 2800 rpms....

On the opposite corner, two people were talking and walking toward Neilson's, a jewelry store in the strip mall next to the Clear Lake complex. The man heard the sounds of an impending street race and turned to see who was going to get their head cut this early spring evening. He could easily see that the car in the far lane was a Viper – sort of a dark, smoky gray color, probably an ACR version or something like that he thought. But that black car in the near lane. What kind of car is THAT? Weird headlights on it... hmmm. The glass looked as black as the paint – and the paint looked wet and very, very deep.

The driver of the black car watched the yellow begin to change and reached forward to tap the stereo 'On' switch with his leather-gloved hand. Instantly, guitar riffs bellowed from the 8 speakers arrayed discretely about the interior of the car. The black leather seats – custom jobs – were meticulously cared for and actually helped the acoustics within the cabin. Acoustics that were perfect for music such as this – George Thoroughgood and the Destroyers...

Bad to the Bone. Yeah, this car was bad all right. A really, really BAD car...

His finger on the trans-brake release, as the yellow light began to die – his vision was that acute – he released the beast confined within the firewall, two fenders and a grill.

The dogs were loose now and Hell itself could not contain them.

The switch activated the solenoid that moved the notched brake apparatus within the built auto. As the pressure being held in check from the converter could now spin freely, the nearly 1100 pound/feet of torque tried to tear the input shaft loose – but couldn't. The hardened billet could take more than that and so the gears began to turn. The torque tried to twist the differential out of its mounts and failing that, began to torture the wide (315's) Drag Radials. But even they didn't give – much, grabbing and biting the tarmac, the twisting force now trying to lift the front end of the car. But – the suspension setup took the brunt of that, the nose only lifting slightly, as the car shot forward, pinning the driver firmly into the soft leather, his five-point feeling a little loose – but only for a second or so...

In less than four tenths of a second, the black car was already halfway through the light.

Just as the Viper's pressure plate was securely tight against the flywheel and beginning to motivate the snake – but the race was already over. The black car by now was *t-h-r-o-u-g-h* the intersection, two barely visible hazy black marks the only indication that something wicked this way came, it's odd tail-lights disappearing down the street in a horrific roar of Dante's Inferno.

The man on the corner stood mesmerized, his female friend wondering what all the noise was about. Her long black skirt waved in the gentle spring breeze as she tried to shade her eyes with her white-gloved hand. Her husband watched and saw the black car just own the Viper -and he thought he saw its driver with a shocked look on his open mouth face...

Damn! What the HELL was that? the viper victim had never, EVER been walked like that. And never by a car like the one he watched pulling away as if HE was parked. Then – had enough time to see the license plate, hoping to somehow identify the machine that just pulled his perfect automotive dreams out of his head and pissed all over them. He couldn't make it out at first but then he clearly saw ANNIL8R...

A chill slowly crept up his sweaty back... and he had to look away.

The Black Car's driver glared at his rear view mirror and saw the Viper shut down before it was even through the intersection, humiliated and laid to waste. A slight grin appeared on his face, the short stubble of his beard tickling the corners of his wryly-skewed lips reminding him the night was young. Still, he needed to change the oil once more so he turned down a side street as he reached down to shut off George, even before he got to the second verse. He needed to think and George was just too distracting – that whole CD always demanded that you stop whatever you were doing and listen... and he had no time for that tonight. He had work to do...

“What kind of car WAS that, honey?” she asked him. Dan didn't know for sure. “Well, I think it was some sort of a sedan. If I didn't know better, I would have said it was a big Ford... I'm just not sure. Those tail-lights are different.” He thought some more... somewhere in the recesses of his mind, electrical impulses bounced about, trying to cue up the memory of what was familiar. Then – it happened. “I KNEW it! That was the car I saw go by us over at the restaurant last week! Remember? We were having breakfast and I saw a big black car go by real slow. I think that one we just saw embarrass the Mopar owner is the same car.”

His voice trailed off... “What is it Dan? Is it new?” Dan could only look down the empty street and listen to the hum of the approaching night that was overshadowed by the Viper meekly turning down a different entrance near the mall.

“Dan? What's the matter?” Still he just wondered and thought. Somewhere, somehow, that car he saw came from his past. He didn't know why, but oddly, a chill crept up his back and he shivered.

“Dan?” She took his arm and walked in front of him. “Dan? You're scaring me baby...” He looked into her eyes and forced a smile. “Ah, it's nothing. Really... it's just a car...” ***** The black car's owner saw the furtive looks from the others at the track this evening

as he rubbed a towel over the paint, readying the car for a few test and tune runs. This track was far from his home town, away from prying local eyes. In the background, the roar of a blown 5 litre embarrassing another hapless Camaro with an equally loud exhaust broke the drone from the distance of a tractor and cultmulcher working some nearby farm land...

He didn't want anyone to really know what this car was and what it was capable of. He inhaled the cool air deeply as he stood up and smiled at his creation. It was good, very good he thought as he walked towards the trailer and tossed the towel onto the built – in work area. Striding back towards the car he thought some more...

No, no one should really know about this car just yet. And that Viper driver last week? He only saw a little bit of what this car could do.

No one should really know... Not just yet... that time was coming.

Soon...

A Darker Shade of Fear - Part 4

There is *always* Someone...

Dan sat comfortably in his chair, a cold Mick Light on the oak table to his left and a variety of car mags on his lap. The black car had him puzzled but he also knew that he wasn't as 'up' on the cars as he used to be years ago. Used to, he could identify nearly every car and model made down to the year and what drive train it might even have. But not so much anymore...

Ever since he had gotten heavy into Turbo Buicks, married Sally, and let life move forward knowing that cars aren't *always* the most important things in life, he let the details go by. Anyhow – what's cooler or more bad than an 'old V6, granny's car that can embarrass nearly every set of wheels out there if done and tuned right? At least, that was Dan's line of thinking and shared by most *anyone* who knew OR had the misfortune to see the tail lights of Dan's white Turbo Regal.

So, here he sat trying to find the car that he saw humiliate the Viper owner just yesterday when he heard the phone ring. He could hear Sally's voice in the kitchen...

"Hello? Yeah, he's here – wanna talk to him? I'll get him Carl, hang on... no, he's not busy, just reading some car magazines."

"What?"

"No, we saw this really bad black car the other just wipe up a Viper and it's been buggin' Dan ever since. Well, I'm curious too, but he's kind of obsessing I think..."

He heard her chuckle as she said the last line, her footsteps getting louder in the hall as she approached the den.

"Here he is.."

"Hello?"

"Oh, hi Carl – how's it hangin'?"

"Oh, nothing really - just trying to see what kind of car that was we saw the other day. Sally tell you about it?"

"Carl, I have never seen a Viper get so owned, so easily other than that one ACR I raced a while back with the white car. Of course, THAT Viper was stock cause I know the guy."

"Yeah, well this Viper was far from stock. I think someone said it belongs to some guy over on the southwest side who has a lot of bucks and several cool cars. Supposedly, it's a former Hennessey car that has had some more strokin' done to it and it sounded like it."

"Yeah, a Venom 650 or something like that."

"Well, I don't know what it had in it but this black car just walked it like it was sittin' still."

"Yeah, I know. You've seen the black car too?"

Dan's face darkened as he listened to Carl talk about having run into the mysterious car about three nights ago when he was riding around with Joe in his Donovan'd '97 SS. Seems that they met up at a stop light next to the Super Wal-Mart. Joe revved the huge Big Block, not as a challenge, just trying to keep it's humongous throat clear, and just as he did, this long black car with a deep rumble and faint whine pulled up next to them. Joe and Carl both looked over and as they did, the black car's lights went off, then back on, as if some coded message said "Let's dance".

They just kind of looked at each and nearly laughed, both of them thinking that whatever was in the long car next to them couldn't even come close to the stop light banditry the SS was capable of. Hell, if they didn't know better they thought the car might have been an old Ford or Mercury but they didn't really know because they never noticed it till it was next to them.

But when the light was beginning to change, they heard the car next to them sound like it was coming up in revs against a transbrake – somehow through an OPEN EXHAUST(???)

How in the hell did that happen?

It was over before it started.

The light was still yellowish in the cross lane when Joe mashed the pedal and dumped the clutch a nano second later when the revs crossed 3200 RPM's. The DR's hooked well and the nose of the SS left skyward just an inch or two as the suspension did its job.

Carl and Joe's heads were thrust backwards from the immense torque of the 572 –

But not so far as to not be able to see the rear lights of the black car next to them –

Before they were even under the light and half way through the intersection...

The other car was gone and all they could see in the darkness was two oddly shaped tail lights and license plate that read...

ANNIL8R

“Dan, I'm tellin' you – Joe was dead before he even got through the intersection! That car walked way like we were parked and it sounded like blown pro-stocker once he uncorked the exhaust – however he did that, I have no idea!”

Dan listened, his brow a little knitted as he listened to the kill story that we all never want to share. A loss...

“Well, what kind of car do you think it was Carl?”

“I don't know Dan. It's long and black with odd tail lights and a plate that reads A-NN-I-L-8-R... And that plate fits the description of THAT car, that is for sure.”

Most of the rest of the conversation wasn't much; just some small talk, because Dan's mind was already trying to figure it out.

With no luck...

A few nights later, Friday to be exact, Dan and Sally went over to the Cancun, a great new Mexican restaurant, for dinner and Sally suggested Dan drive the Regal. Dan wasn't too hopped up on the idea since it seemed like every time they had it out, street racing wasn't far behind them. The last time they were out in it, some college boy in an LS1 Ram Air Firebird (that sounded like it had a SC on it based on the whine), tried to get a kill on the white 'Granny car' but instead, got an education in Tail Light Identification. That's the thing about those TR's – you can't hardly tell a 10 second terror from a 14 second stocker without raising the hood.

It seems the Bird owner should have asked to see under the hood. Instead, all he got to see was the trunk – and the tail lights.

So, after a meal of fajitas and Enchiritos, Dan and Sally decide to head over to Woody's to get a malt before heading back. Dan had to work the next day so a late night was out of the question.

When they pulled in, already a great congregation of street iron was in attendance, including Joe and Carl in their cars – the Mach 1 and the SS. Both of them were sitting on the curb just watching the assortment of Fords, Chevies, and Mopars come and go. When they spotted the TR, they both eagerly motioned Dan to come park near them since there were two empty spots adjoining Joe's SS. Backing the TR in, a lot of eyes watched the neon lights glisten off its flanks and chrome, its subdued exhaust giving little away that underneath the hood were nearly 600 rwhp waiting to stretch their legs.

He let the Buick idle for a minute to cool and then shut it off.

Sally hopped out first and then Dan, both of them sidling over to exchange pleasantries with Joe and Carl when a weird hush seem to come over the din of excitement at Woody's Drive-In. A deep, baritone exhaust note could be heard slowing as if to enter the drive-in and as usual, the motor heads all turned to see who or what it was. This time, it wasn't anything normal. It wasn't anything even unusual or freaky.

It was ANNIL8R...

No one noticed that Simple Plan's "Addicted" was playing over the PA system anymore. No one noticed that their food might be getting cold sitting on the brushed aluminum trays that had "Woody's Drive-In" paper mats with a hugely grinning "Woody"

woodpecker's caricature grinning at the viewer beneath their food. No one noticed the breeze that WAS blowing had died down. All they seemed to see was the long, black car pull in and around to the speaker box for the drive through, which was to Dan's far left since they were parked near the exit of the eatery.

A dark window rolled down and those close enough could hear a voice order just one thing – "Large Coke" and that was it. No acknowledgement of the order or even waiting for the clerk to tell the driver how much; just order and drive up to the pickup window.

For the first time, Dan, Sally, Joe and Carl now had a chance to see what the car was. The profile screamed Ford, similar to a Crown Vic, something Late Model. But the tail lights didn't match up to what they knew a Crown Vic had. Anyways, who in the hell in their right mind would mod up a Crown Vic? A Highway Patrolman?

And, it had fog lights which was odd. It *definitely* was healthy, they all noted to themselves. 'Those rear tires have to be 315's at least', Dan observed to no one in particular. The wheels were black with chrome center caps and chrome lug nuts. Other than that, the car was all black. No chrome anywhere. No badges. No emblems.

Joe spoke first.

"I know what it is – I think. I just saw a story about this kind of car on Horsepower TV. It might be a modded Mercury Marauder..."

Since neither of the four (other than Joe's TV experience) had ever seen one of the new Marauders, they still weren't sure. Sally was next to Dan and put her arm around his back.

"Danny, is THIS the car we saw at the intersection last week?"

"I think it is... but I don't know if it's one of those Mercs or not" said Dan quietly. They watched the car pull up to the window and a black gloved hand hold out a couple of bills, pull in a drink and some change and disappear behind glass again. Slowly, the car started rolling their way again, coming towards them at first then centering itself preparing to exit right out of the lot.

"Let's go" said Dan quietly.

"Now? Why, we haven't even ordered yet" questioned Sally.

"I know baby. I just want to see that car a little closer and we'll come back."

Sally knew what was on Dan's mind now – and it wasn't anything to drink.

"Dan, please... you won't race him will you?"

"I don't know Sally. I don't plan on it, no."

Sally knew that that really meant "If he's up to it, you bet your ass I'll race him." Dan, being the typical car guy, loved a mechanical challenge and what better night than tonight to see what this 'BAD' car had than tonight?

Dan and Sally remounted the Regal, Joe and Carl jumped in Carl's Mach 1 – after Joe locked the doors and set the alarm on the SS -and then both cars pulled out just behind the black one heading out and away from traffic.

They followed ANNIL8R for a couple of miles, just staying back and shadowing it. Dan didn't even have the stereo on and Sally sat in silence, her own curiosity piqued by the car.

The last light on the four lane was about a half mile up so Dan swung over left of the black car. Having a mixture of race-gas in his tank, Dan wasn't worried about the 28 pounds of boost he might be calling upon and he knew the pseudo-DR's might protest a little to all the torque but they really were just slicks – the 'tread' was just a smoke screen for the occasional po-po who might pull him over.' Slicks with lines in them' was what Sally called them – and she was right.

As Dan and the black car pulled up to the light everyone noticed that the black cars exhaust got noticeably louder.

Hmmm, thought Dan. He DOES want to play! Great...

The light had changed to red as they were nearing the intersection so they had to wait for the cycle. Dan felt fairly good about this race in this location. It was late at night, no traffic other than Carl right behind them and the four lane continued out for

nearly another half mile with a quarter mile 'marker' known by all the local racers exactly a quarter mile down – the marker being a "This Lane Ends" with an arrow pointing down in the near lane to identify which one.

Dan and the driver both engaged transbrakes while Sally cinched up her five point. Dan had decided long ago to install identical race buckets and five points in the car since they both liked what was about to happen –race hard. They had already pulled their helmets from behind the seats and had strapped them down. The roll bar gave Sally a good place to grip on the launch and already her right hand was tightly clenched around the tube near above her right knee.

"Kill it Dan. Just go ahead and kill it..."

For all of Sally's femininity, for all her quiet and fun loving girlish ways, she loved to race. And she knew this was going to be a good one.

Dan just smiled intently, watching the light go yellow...

"He's already dead, honey..."

Carl and Joe sat in Dan's lane, both of them hearing the Stage II rev against the transbrake. Yet, almost as soon as the Buick hunched up as the torque tried to twist the flywheel loose, that sound was overwhelmed by a stroked 4.6 liter, twin turbo'd modular motor through unimpeded open exhaust trying to twist a bullet proof C4's input shaft in half. NOBODY but the driver of the black car knew what was beneath the hood. Even Dan didn't *really* think this opponent had all THAT much. Dan even thought that, well, since he had been the big dog in town for so long, everyone had to know it was foolish to run the White Car, right?

So, time to teach this guy too.

Blink

As the amber light was over-ridden by the green, both cars launched hard. Neither driver knew the sum of over 2000 horsepower was now unleashed on the street in anger; neither driver knew the other; neither driver knew the other one had a passenger; and, neither driver thought the opponent would win.

One of them was wrong.

As the driver of the black car loosed the hounds with the flick of the trans brake, the black car left the line as if shot from a cannon, its well built and tuned suspension locked the car down as if on rails, the DOHC motor was breathing heavily the twin turbo's force fed air, ramming in gaping mouthfuls of fuel from the huge injectors and firing the cylinders flawlessly.

It wasn't quite as easy as it was killing the other guy a while back but nearly so.

The leader looked in the mirror and saw the other car's headlights within 100 feet of the intersection, its driver stunned beyond stunned.

And so was Sally.

She loved the g-forces that the white car always wrought upon her, almost sensual in a way. But none of that pleasure was had this night...

She and Dan felt helpless as they watched the black car steadily and strongly pull away with what surely was a low 10 or even a high 9 second pass.

All they could see were the tail lights and the plate that ominously read

ANNIL8R

A Darker Shade of Fear -Part 5

Sometimes, things are never what they seem...

“Dan? Dan? What just happened?” asked Sally, still stunned by the loss to the Black Car.

Dan was quiet and contemplative, unsure himself, and not even really hearing Sally at all. To top it all off, he still wasn't exactly sure what it was that just beat him in the shortest time he had ever been beaten – at the launch. Dan's Buick was no slouch and was well respected among the car racing community, as was Dan himself. But this “ANNIL8R” car was something else – and it sounded like it was turbo'd but he couldn't tell for sure. What did strike him especially odd was how the exhaust got louder just sitting at the light waiting to go. Apparently, the driver had some sort of remotely adjustable dump tube (or would that be 'tubes' since the car had to be a V8 in Dan's opinion) and while Dan had heard of such an apparatus (the old GTO Judge from the late '60's or early '70's had it – but he couldn't remember precisely the year), he had not seen one on a car in this area. Either way, there was no question that this was not some ordinary car. Or for that matter, no ordinary driver...

If Dan only knew...

“What do think that guy in the Buick is saying now?” asked the passenger in ANNIL8R.

“Oh, if I know Dan, and trust me – I DO know Dan – he's puzzled like hell and can't believe he just lost. He won't take it sitting down either – he'll be back looking for us sooner or later and with something up his sleeve too. But what HE doesn't know is that I didn't even show him everything tonight. Just a little 'taste... yes... just a 'taste'!”

Both of them laughed out loud at the innuendo, the black car rolling on into the night before circling around the city and heading back in on Rt. 47. Not much traffic out that way, so it was easy to slip back into the warehouse via the remote control door opener.

As the door rose, an eerie neon glow crept out from beneath it to expand onto the hood of the Black Car, giving it a devilish, greenish glow that seemed as if it radiated deeply from within the paint. Pulling on into the wide bay, the driver let the motor idle a moment or two, listening to the faint whistle of the turbo's through the still-open exhaust. The gloved hand reached down and opened the console door, revealing a knob that looked like an old-style choke cable. Pushing the knob back downward towards the bottom of the console lengthened the cable, the steel actuator at the other end operating a scissors type pair of cables that pulled two 3.5” plates atop a Kevlar gasketed opening, closing the open dumps. Immediately, the car sounded like any other DOHC Mod motor with a twin Dynomax exhaust – quiet but intimidating. Even the whistle was subdued much more and barely noticeable. Just the way it was supposed to be.

The young female passenger jumped out of her side, her black skirt sliding up her thigh as she stepped from the door. The creamy skin caught the driver's eye and a grin followed quickly...

“You like?” she asked.

A simple nod affirmed the response.

“Well, come with me and we'll see what we can do about another 'kill' for you tonight”, she grinned, her blouse already unbuttoned revealing her ample cleavage as she headed towards the couch...

It was going to be one of 'those' nights thought the driver, peeling off the black driving gloves, holding the fine leather accessories close to smell them. Leather was something very special and the woman sitting on the couch -who was now wearing only a naughty smile and the tight, VERY short black leather skirt -had learned that long ago.

Their eyes were locked as the driver walked closer, the woman on the couch now revealing even more by parting her knees ever so slightly...

Yes indeed, it was going to be one of 'those' kind of nights...

The dream repeated itself often but usually with some slight changes... it might involve flying over a blind hill and the road going away with the driver in the car falling to what looked like certain death. Or, the driver may be in semi-darkness, hearing

something (someone?) stalking him, close enough to 'feel' something brush close but then disappear... or whispers. Whispers that sounded deep and foreboding, threatening and intending harm but never quite revealing the source.

It always, always centered around fear. The kind of fear that could grip your spine and freeze you motionless. The kind of fear that you can feel to the pit of your stomach, like when your spouse says 'We need to talk...'. The kind of fear that comes from a telephone ringing at 8 minutes after 3 am and you just know that the call is not good news.

He knew that fear – every night. Yet, he didn't really know what drove that fear. He hadn't told HER about his dreams, not wanting to really frighten her with the details. Sometimes, the dreams were similar but different; gory, bloody dreams but never really seeing the victim (victims?) or the killer. He could feel that that 'predator' was out there somewhere... just waiting for him to become hyper-fearful before it struck, letting him know that fear, unlike other emotions, is usually well founded and not something to ignore...

It was going to happen. Sooner or later, it was definitely going to happen...

The driver was awake before the woman who was now lying naked on the couch wrapped in the afghan. ANNIL8R's hood was up and the driver was busy with an adjustment to the wastegates on the twin Turbonetics T76's. ANNIL8R had a special mission later tonight and everything needed to be in good working order. Killing the white TR was easy – the next victim might prove a little more difficult...

The woman beneath the afghan heard the sounds of sockets ratcheting and began to stir.

"Don't you ever sleep?" she asked dreamily, stretching her sinuous arms upward and tilting her head back, her hair mussed up and looking even more beautiful than the night before.

"There's a time to sleep – and a time to work," said the driver. "Now, it is time to work..."

She got up off the divan and stood there still stretching.

"Well, I'm gonna grab a shower. Maybe we can do breakfast after?"

"Sure..." muttered the driver, the leather clad hands making the final adjustments.

She walked over to the car and stood looking over the driver's right shoulder, admiring the 4.6 DOHC masterpiece. The modular motor is indeed a beautiful creation, hand assembled and signed by the workers who did so. Twin overhead cams controlling the valves that allow the intake air and fuel charge to enter or expel the exhaust outward through the headers. Where before there was a supercharger, now a large polished plenum resided, its opening hiding from view the polished and gaping throttle body inside. Enormous ductwork allowed the intercooled air charge to route itself into the T/B while the exhaust did the work of spinning the impellers that sucked the air inward in the first place. All the internals were essentially bullet proof. An electric water pump kept things cool with the stock water pump being used as an idler, its impeller removed. Twin coil packs (one on each side) sent the spark down 10 mm wires and through the plugs, igniting the fuel/air mixture. The dyno confirmed what the eye wanted to believe – this motor made serious, serious power. Not just horsepower, but torque - mountains and mountains of torque. Horsepower sells car – but torque wins races, and this was a lesson the driver learned long ago.

Torque that could move a house off its foundation... or, that would change lives forever. Watching the woman smile and turn, heading into the shower a thought crossed the driver's mind – maybe she needed someone to wash her back?

Most definitely...

"Well, what are you going to do tonight?" asked his friend Bill. Steve and Bill could usually be found together when the weather was good – and usually up to no good themselves. Oh, nothing serious – just a lot of street racing. Steve owned the only GNX in the area and had bought it new. He had bought the car from a dealer in Ohio and had it hauled to his hometown, nearly 900 miles from the dealership, paying cash for his dream ticket. He had shopped around a long time before he saw the GNX, even looking seriously at a GN and a WE4 but not really sure if that was what he wanted. He had owned two GN's before, one an '86 (with the cool chrome strip above the grill) and an '84 hot-air, both cars essentially stock save for some bolt-on's.

Back then, the market for the Turbo Buick guys wasn't nearly as developed as it is now but still he had no problem with 95% of the 5.0 guys he ran with. The only ones that were any threat at all were the ones nearly unstreetable so he didn't sweat them.

But the 'X' was different. He had pulled the motor and tranny nearly 6 years ago (it had less than 16,000 miles on it) and stored it in his heated garage ever since in a dehumidified and temperature controlled room that was separate from the rest of the garage. Even that room was a story itself – it had a lot of high horsepower stuff in it, including an original 426 hemi from a wrecked '71 Challenger he bought from a buddy just to have the motor. Most every kind of high performance engine was in that room somewhere.

But what he put back *into* the 'X' was even neater – a fully built Stage II motor, most of the work done by Duttweiler's shop. Putting nearly a thousand horsepower to the rear wheels yet essentially completely streetable, it was one of Ken's greatest masterpieces. Utilizing a unique dual turbo setup, the 'X' was as easy to drive downtown or to a cruise in as any 11-second TR. However, if the 11 second TR *were* to line up at the track against the 'X', it would need at least a 2.5 second handicap – just to arrive at the finish line at the same time as the X.

"Let's let the X stretch its legs tonight, Bill... whaddaysay? We haven't had it out since the new tranny was put in down there at Rod's shop other than to drive around a bit. Let's go hunting tonight."

Bill grinned widely.

"Have you heard about that black car over there close to Minora?" asked Bill. "Let's head over there and see if we can find the guy."

Steve thought for a moment. That DID sound awful tempting come to think of it. He had just talked to Dan a couple of days ago when Dan told him about the trouncing this "ANNIL8R" had put on his TR, inviting Steve to come see for himself.

"Ok, I'm game. Let's head over there tonight. Maybe we can find the guy with that black car – a Mercury Dan said he thought it was – and see what's what."

Wiping off the filter wrench and placing it back on the pegboard, Bill chuckled. ANNIL8R? What kind of gay name is ANNIL8R, he thought to himself. Yeah, we'll see about that come tonight...

We'll just see about that, he chuckled. After tonight, the Merc guy (could it really be a Mercury? Who in God's name modded *MERCURY'S* these days? Sheesh! What is this world *coming too*?!) would need a new plate if THEY caught up with him – something like, say, uh -CORPSE.

Yeah, won't *THAT* be funny? CORPSE

Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha....

A Darker Shade of Fear -Part 6

Darkness covers a multitude of sins...

Actually, it wasn't so much as Steve and Bill finding ANNIL8R as it was ANNIL8R just waiting for them...

The driver inside the Black Car pulled out of the building and nudged the remote transmitter with a black gloved finger, watching the lighted bay disappear into darkness in the rear view mirror. Pulling out onto the street and heading out towards Westside Minora, the driver adjusted the glove on each hand, pulling the small strap across the back snug and enjoying the fit of the \$370 gloves quite well. Made from the finest leathers by St. Cruix Leathermakers in Southern Spain, these gloves were hard to find, but oh so worth the effort.

After crossing town via the quiet neighborhood streets, past the short cul de sacs and avenues, ANNIL8R pulled out onto the busy fourlane heading south. The driver had heard about a supposed wicked-fast GN (or was that a GNX Sarah mentioned?) whose owner was known to occasionally frequent Big Daddy's Drive-in ('Where Good Food and Fast Cars Always Come Together!') but hadn't been seen for a few months. Not really thinking that a chance would occur on this night and more just wanting a sandwich and a shake, the driver slowed as B/D's neon sign with the glowing finger pointing downward at the entrance neared.

Light crowd tonight, thought the driver, surveying the parking lot. *Of course, it IS only a little after 9 so maybe someone interesting may come this way.*

Ironically, just minutes after placing the order, an eerie whistle could be heard over the din of the falling night. The few people sitting curbside and benchracing seemed to turn their heads in unison as Steve's GNX pulled into the lot, the myriad of neon lights seeming to be coming from deep within the onyx black paint that still looked wet. The huge front mount was visible behind the grill, still in its original aluminum color. Steve had debated having it painted but decided other wise not wanting to add any insulating effect to the hugely efficient exchanger and besides, to most everyone else, it just looked damn cool.

The X pulled in and the rear wheels hadn't even cleared the entryway when both Bill and Steve said together "ANNIL8R...". It wasn't said in fear nor in anger; more in respect. On the ride over, Steve told Bill the details about how Dan had raced the Mercury days before and how the Mercury left the Buick sitting like it was in 'PARK'.

Steve didn't even pretend not to care – he pulled the X into the slot adjacent to the Marauder and let it idle. Both thought it odd that the windows were up on the Merc since it was a very, very warm night but hey, to each his own. Steve got out and walked right over to the driver's window of the other black car while every eye in the place now was watching what might transpire next.

Standing beside the door, Steve rapped a couple of times on the glass. Immediately the window dropped barely a half inch, and an odd sickly sweet odor drifted out of the opening – even more odd was that the smell (was it a perfume maybe?) seemed to jog some sort of old memory in Steve's brain but he just couldn't figure out what it was exactly. Anyhow, more interesting things were up for the night.

"I hear you're the baddest of the bad around here anymore" he said to the window. No light could be seen in the Merc, not even the Driver, but a shadow of a hand was seen holding a cup near what was most likely the console. *This much tint has GOT to be illegal!*, thought Steve.

No reply yet from inside the Merc.

"I said, I hear you're pretty fast. Is that true?" he baited again.

A quiet chuckle cold be heard from within. Was it TWO people?

Still, no reply.

"Ok, I tried the polite way and that didn't work. Let's be more direct – interested in a little action tonight? I'm challenging you to a race out near the airport on the abandoned access road. No money, no bets, just good, ol' fashioned heads-up racing, winner gets the bragging rights. Wanna play?"

Silence...

More silence...

A click was heard from within.

A crowd had begun to edge closer, having heard Steve's challenge but no reply – yet.

A sound like a key rotating in an ignition to the 'RUN' position followed the a loud mechanical whir of what had to be two fuel pumps building pressure. Then, more key noise as the cylinder was rotated to 'START'.

'Har-RUMPH!!!! Budda-budda-budda-budda-budda....' The car was running now.

'Va-RABBAAAA!...Va-RABBAAAA!..' the driver revved the motor then let it idle back down.

Steve stood silently, his arms crossed defiantly and not intimidated.

The window was still only cracked a little, then, it dropped down just a few inches but like a black hole in space, no light escaped nor was light revealed. *Darker than hell in there...* thought Steve.

Then, another noise...

It sounded like another mechanical sound as if a solenoid was activated and some sort of small metallic scraping could be ever-so-faintly heard. But only for a second – because the exhaust rumble that started out as a subdued but controlled roar, like that of a lion in the distance, became a loud, open exhaust reverberation. Nearly everyone within 50 feet of the car put their fingers near their ears – well, other than the true diehards who thought the cacophony attacking their inner ears was music for the true aficionados. Trying to peer into the dark car, Steve almost got poked in the eye when a gloved hand reached out with a piece of paper.

"FOLLOW ME – IF YOU CAN" was all it said.

Steve had no more than taken the small note in his hand when he heard the unmistakable 'CLUNK' of a shifter being moved into 'DRIVE'. Immediately, the Merc took on an even more aggressive attitude as the torque caused the car to rise slightly as the motor strained against the brakes. Like smoke, the car was there in the parking spot one second, the next – it was heading out the exit lane of Big Daddy's, Steve and Bill scrambling to get back into the X.

As were a lot of the others who were near enough to know that a *serious* street race was about to go down.

Luckily, the traffic was still light so keeping sight of ANNIL8R wasn't too hard. They were even fortunate enough to get up next to the big car at one light in particular but the driver wouldn't even budge. Both cars and a small convoy behind them snaked on out to the access road while out in the distance, the 10:10 freight train continued westward into the night.

'What do make of this bull****?' asked Bill. 'I mean, this guy has got balls the size of honeydews to write this crap – *FOLLOW ME IF YOU CAN????*' Bill was pissed. Steve was amused.

'Oh, don't make too much of it, Bill. He's just screwing with me, trying to get me all psyched up. We'll see who follows whom here in just a minute. When we get to the end first, it won't matter at all...'

ANNIL8R reached the road first and immediately pulled up to left lane. Steve snaked the X in beside it while Bill jumped out and got between the two cars holding his white Sox hat in his hand. No burnouts, no 'My car is better than yours' bravado... just two serious cars lined up side by side waiting.

The crowd barely had time to pull alongside the right lane on the shoulder to watch.

Bill's right hand went high in the air and immediately the deep rumbling of both warriors changed to an angry hiss and howl of maniacal demons with forged rods and pistons. Since both cars had transbrakes, the rpms were maxed out against them. Overhead, a full moon that had just moments before turned the landscape into some surreal nightglo-ish scene now was hidden ominously by a dark thunderhead approaching from the west. Bill thought he even saw a flash of lightning buried somewhere within the fast-approaching front, and the wind changed while simultaneously picking up, nearly blowing the cap from his hand.

Steve and the Driver both had cinched up their belts. Even the passenger in the Merc had pulled her belts snug, loving the anticipation of another ride in the car from hell.

Time seemed to stop for most. The moon was gone, the darkness complete save for the headlights of both cars flooding down the psuedo-track, a mercury light illuminating the 'Finish line' 1320 feet away, a line that somehow kept a coat of fresh paint on it during the summer months. The cars waited, both drivers intently watching Bill's hand...

Dan and Sally pulled into Big Daddy's just the clouds hid the moon out near the access road.

'Wonder where everyone is tonight?' said Dan as they circled through and up to the speaker box for the drive through service.

After placing their order and pulling up to the window, they waited.

'Dan! Have you heard?' asked the young man behind the "PICK UP YOUR ORDER HERE" window.

It was Justin, the kid who lived just two houses down from Dan and Sally and who had just gotten hired at B/D's for some college money.

'Hear what?' asked Dan, reaching out to take the drinks.

'Steve's got his GNX in town and him and Bill are out at the access road *RIGHT NOW* racing!!! Damn! I wish I didn't have to work – I would give up a week's pay just to see that race! Man – they just left. I'm surprised you didn't pass them!'

Sally's hand was on Dan's arm.

Dan felt sick inside. He knew how strong Steve's X was – was it enough? They would never make it in time to see the race but after looking over at Sally, he knew they needed to head out there anyhow.

'Thanks, Justin. I'll let you know how it goes.'

'Oh, I'll know soon enough. Mark's out there now and he's gonna call me on his cell when it starts. Don't you love modern technology? – oh, thanks for stopping at Big Daddy's!'

'Let's go' was all that needed to be said. And go they did...

Bill's hair was blowing wildly about now. A rumble of thunder could be heard, this one sounding like it was half the distance away from the other just a second ago. *How fast was that storm coming, anyhow,?* he wondered. Looking at the windshields of both cars and hearing that the motors sounded steady, his brain sent the signal down the nerves and neurons to his shoulder muscles.

The arm dropped, the hat fell to the tarmac

The race was on.

Steve actually got a slight jump on the Merc. Both cars planted their rear tires, nearly wrinkling the hides in doing so as both suspensions hooked perfectly. The X's nose lifted only slightly as the torque of the Stage II was now at full fury. The Big Mouth intakes sucked in the cool night air, snaking it in through support and piping into the gaping maw of the Turbo inlets, being compressed and sent violently towards the custom made, dual inlet frontmount where it criss-crossed across the fins, giving up heat to the cooler outside air flowing freely across them, causing the charged air to cool and become denser, packing more and more energy as it was thrust into the twin throttle bodies that exited into the enormous plenum and runners, flowing downward into each cylinder and exploding with the power of the fuel mixture. The twist on the crank was incredible with each piston's firing – the transmission's input shaft absorbing each pulse and sending it on through the Convertor and gears without so much as an overheat. The Heavy Duty universals and drive shaft that were encased in a bright red Driveshaft Safety Loop, tried to twist the differential from beneath the Buick – but to no avail. The differential – now buttressed and beefed up with heavier duty internals – took it all in stride and sent the torque to each axle flawlessly equal with only the slightest amount of initial tire spin. The X was built to run hard and lay waste to the other guy – not itself.

Over in the left lane, when the transbrake was released, essentially the same thing was happening. However, the DOHC motor that had years of technological advancement that gave it a much higher rev limit took its abuse equally well. Nose to nose, both cars left the line.

It would be much different 10.3 seconds later.

Dan and Sally pulled up to the access road from the other end opposite the starting point of the race, figuring they may pass the cars headed back to town. Seeing that two sets of headlight were coming violently their way, Dan pulled over to the side, realizing that while they might have missed the launch, the end was all that mattered anyhow.

It was easy to tell the two cars apart. From the front, the square headlights of the X were easy to make out, the cat-eye look of the Marauder was a little lower and besides, the fog lights were on as well, giving it an evil look.

And both of them were headed their way, now surely approaching 100 mph....

Inside the X, Steve felt the car shift slightly during the launch and then head rock solid straight ahead. The turbos were hissing angrily, compressing air in a staggering volume and forcing it into the motor.

BAM! The one-two shift nearly loosened Steve's eyeballs! *Rod definitely knows his stuff when it comes to Transmissions* he thought little more than 2 seconds into the race.

BAM! The two-three shift smacked his body HARD and his eyes never left the straight ahead. The three-four was rapidly coming up.

90-95-100-105-110... the driver watched the speedo racing upwards. The end was near. Where was that Buick?

95-100-105... Steve's peripheral vision watched the needle steadily climb. As always, he was focused. He couldn't tell you if there was even another car racing him – he only focused on the finish line, the sounds of the X, and the gauges. On the A-pillar, the boost gauge read a solid 27 psi of boost. Was it enough?

No.

Nor was it really even close...

As his eyes saw the needle hit 115, his peripheral vision saw the odd shaped tail lights of the Marauder come into semi-focus. The X was now at least half a car length behind the Merc and losing ground with barely fifty yards separating them from the finish.

DID THE MERC JUST LET OFF???? Steve was stunned! The other car had let off *BEFORE* he even crossed the line!

Dan and Sally sat stunned, watching the big Merc pull steadily ahead of the Buick, passing the finish line almost right in front of them, the X over a car and a half behind..., both of them noting the sound of the Merc's exhaust dropping slightly even before it crossed the line.

Bill could tell from a quarter mile away that the Merc had walked the X. So could everyone else. Even before the racers were slowed almost a half mile away, the spectators were leaving quietly.

But at the other end of the track, the Merc never even stopped. Steve saw its flashers come on after it passed beneath the mercury light and then it just seemed to speed up even more, disappearing into the night.

Who in the Hell was the guy in the Merc?

The passenger in the Marauder reached over and put her hand on the driver's thigh, squeezing it a little. 'You did good babe. What a freakin' rush! You killed him.'

The driver only smiled and nodded. Yeah, it felt good. Real good. Driving on for a while and allowing the Merc to slowly cool down by cruising the driver headed over to the Clearlake Mall Complex, pulled around to the west side of Sears and parked, letting the big car cool even more.

'You think he was surprised?' the driver asked. 'You KNOW it! How could he not be?' beamed Sarah. 'It's been a long time Sarah. It's been a real, long time. It feels good to be back...' Sarah nodded, watching the cars streaming out of Clearlake Mall, the 9:05 showing of

'2Fast and 2Furious' letting out, the ricer-mobiles scrambling like ants from an anthill. She spoke again.

'Yeah, I bet it does.' The driver leaned back against the door of the Merc, turning toward Sarah and sighing.

'You know, I never would have figured my coming back would be like *this*.' 'Why is that?' 'Well, the last time I saw Dan *or* Sally – before that race the other night – was in

divorce court a few years back. He couldn't even look me in the eye. I thought that was odd...'

'Why is *that* so odd? Maybe it was too hard for him to look at you, Megan. Maybe it was just too hard...'

A Darker Shade of Fear -Part 7

Something wicked this way comes...

Stretching as she stepped into the shower, Megan felt oddly tired yet wide awake having just got home from the most recent street encounter – the one with a GNX. As the warm, stinging water hit her skin her mind wandered about the night's events and she had to admit that she was quite surprised by how hard it was to beat the Buick. Stan had told her after he finished helping her dyno-tune the Merc that there really shouldn't be anyone on the street that would give her much competition but obviously he was wrong – the X was more than just a handful. It took everything the Marauder had to pull ahead at the end and that concerned her somewhat. Yet, the bigger thought running through her mind wasn't the race or how close it was; rather, it was how was she going to be able to get Dan to meet up with her again... somewhere she could talk with him and hopefully warn him about what was coming.

After all, she knew that he most likely wouldn't want to talk at all, especially after she crushed his fragile male ego a week ago on the street. And she knew that Sally definitely would be having none of it either, having long ago told Megan that she hated her more than anything or anyone. Yet, Dan didn't know she was back, nor did he have a clue that Megan was the mystery driver of the Marauder so her best hope was to lure him out somehow to another race and at a time when Sally wouldn't be with him. But how could she do that? Then, she realized it was really easier than she was making it... much easier...

As he had so many nights before, sleep did not come easily. The Dream was there again... this time, it was a cacophony of sensual stimuli; dark, swirling and vaporous fog, cool and heavy, blocking sight out just inches from your face; pungent, dank aromas, like that of a wooded bog, heavy with rotting vegetation; silence... heavy, omnipresent silence punctuated occasionally by a sound of something (someone?) breathing VERY close by but not seen, or, a random voice out in the fog, almost a murmur that couldn't be made out but sounding almost like someone moaning – or laughing?... then, a touch of something wet and low to the ground, as if IT just brushed against his leg to let him know IT was still there... waiting... waiting... for just the right time to do what IT had come to do... he couldn't get away from IT. He tried to run but only fell each time, getting smattered in the face by water or slapped by wet, heavy leaves of some odd jungle-like vegetation... trying to get up and get free... get free of the fog, the sounds, the smells... running... running... falling... getting up... running...all the while, IT was still there, trailing him, waiting... just waiting...

Stepping from the shower, she saw Sarah at the sink brushing her teeth. Sarah was the one person who had stood by Megan from day one of her 'new life' - meeting her shortly before Harry and Megan had called it quits -their disastrous affair that ended two marriages awash with paranoia and suspicion. After all, if your partner cheated on someone to be *with you*, how could you be sure he/she wasn't cheating *on you* to be with someone else? She and Harry never were the same after that day at the track when the revelation was revealed about the affair they were having. Ultimately, that paranoia drove Harry insane and caused him to lash out in an attempt to kill but ironically caused his own life to end. Funny, Megan thought as she dried her hair with the dark blue towel, she never really missed Harry after he stormed out that one night. Actually, it had been somewhat of a relief to see him go. Deep down inside, in a part of her that even she didn't look very often, she still loved Dan. But now, how could that ever work? She was with Sarah now, and it WAS working.

Slipping closely up behind Sarah and looking over Sarah's shoulder in the mirror, she saw her smile while finishing the work with the Sonic Toothbrush. Sarah was beautiful – inside and out –Sarah brought friendship to Megan's life first. Friendship that she needed badly... then, more came later. More than Megan had ever dreamed about, especially with another woman. But, it came easily and naturally and there she stood this night, standing behind her best friend in the world. Would Dan understand, she mused, reaching around Sarah's bare waist and pulling her close to her own bare skin? Did it *really* matter if he did or didn't anyhow? Just at that moment of soul-searching, Sarah reached up over her shoulder and touched Megan's cheek softly... giving her just what Megan needed tonight. Reassurance – and a little bit of reality.

Over in the bay, the Marauder sat silent for the night. Megan had noticed the boost was up a little and had made a mental note about it but hadn't noticed anything else amiss. Even the EGT gauge was right on as were the O2's and knock so it shouldn't be a problem, but still – she would have take a look at the programming of the last chip they had put in. Perhaps a little too much curve in it? What ever it was, Stan would find it.

But now the garage was a little more crowded, not only with Sarah's Accord but also with Megan's newest toy. Actually, it was an inheritance she got from her Uncle William. William was an oddball to many, having never married and not having any kids (that he knew of). Many suspected his lifestyle may have been of the 'alternative' kind but there never was any solid proof. After all, just because a guy doesn't marry does not mean he's gay, right? So, his family told themselves that for years but he question still lingered.

Yet, the answer never came. William died of a massive heart attack at the young age of 52, leaving his estate in its entirety to one person – Megan. Megan it seemed was his favorite niece. Well, actually his only niece but still, he left the entire fortune, car collection (the other 7 cars were in storage at another location), insurance monies, and properties to her alone, including the warehouse that she currently called home. No one in the area knew it and for that matter, very few even knew she was even IN the area. ‘Home’ was actually in Michigan, near Traverse City and on Lake Superior’s east shore. That was where she had met Sarah – on the beach one sunny August afternoon. Having forgotten her sunscreen, Sarah offered to share hers (SPF 40) and their inseparable friendship began which led them to where they were now. Standing together naked in a fashionably remodeled warehouse sharing room with two cars – a sick Marauder and the Orange ‘69 Charger next to it.

The Charger was a story in itself. William had found it through a friend of a friend, sitting covered in a barn beneath two ratty tarps that were held down by an assortment of junk, dirt, pigeon crap, and some scrap lumber. His buddy had been told that the old lady who owned the car had what she thought was a ‘Corvair’ for sale from her late husband, he had gone to look at it in hopes of it being one of the higher performance versions. But he could tell by the general outline beneath the tarps that this was definitely NO Corvair! Feeling along the B Pillar, he found the familiar recessed outline of the recessed metal. Down on the fender was the NASCAR style gas cap. And pulling up the first corner of flap he could, he saw a dirty orange fender opening that revealed some rally wheels with Firestone G series tires that had to be original – and very flat.

His heart quickened as he told William about the 440 – Six Pack hood scoop he could barely get to as well as shining the flashlight beneath the engine compartment to reveal what he was fairly certain was INDEED a big block Mopar that looked completely original. Having questioned the old lady, she only knew that her husband had bought it at Hildebrand Dodge in early 1970, drove it a couple of times before suffering a stroke that put him in a nursing home for over 20 years. He had died long ago and she was only now getting around to selling the place.

When Stefan pointed out that this car was worth much more than the \$3300 dollars she was asking for it, the sweet woman’s eyes moistened. She said that that was ok, she didn’t really need the money anyhow and that she was so taken with his honesty that he could still have the car for the same price. He just had to get it out of her barn by the next Saturday and of course, she couldn’t help him, what with her ‘arther-itis’ and all. So, he had called William who bought the car, cleaned it up (finding only 1320 miles on it – an ironic number he thought) and added it to his collection. And now, it was Megan’s – and she had a plan for this car...

‘So, Dan... how’s it hangin’?’

Dan stood up and looked around the raised hood of his Buick. It was Carl and someone he hadn’t seen for a while – Jenny. Carl and Jen had one of those on again/off again relationships and no one ever could understand why. They both were SUPER-nice people and seemed to get along swimmingly. They just never took the plunge.

‘Did I surprise you, Danny?’ asked Jen.

Wiping his hands with an orange shop towel and walking towards Jen to give her a hug, he laughed.

‘Jen, you couldn’t have surprised me more if I had woke up this morning with my hair sewn to the carpet! Nice to see you!’

They embraced and heard the door open from the house. It was Sally. ‘Jenny!!!’ she screamed, running now to get in on the hugs. ‘What brings you here?’

‘Well, you know Carl – he’s always talking cars and of course, Danny’s Buick came up first. He told me how you guys ran this big black car and LOST?’ the surprise not lost in her voice.

Dan shrugged and Sally just nodded her head in agreement. It was Dan who spoke next.

‘Well, you know how it is, Jen... there is *always* someone out there, sooner or later, that is a little faster than you. This ‘ANNIL8R’ car – and by the way, it’s one of those new Mercury Marauders but it is definitely NOT stock – is one that is faster than mine. Not many are, but this guy’s IS.’

Jenny’s face was somber as she listened. ‘What if I told you that that ‘ANNIL8R’ car is not just ‘some guy’s’ car?’

Dan frowned... ‘Why do you say that? Do you mean it’s a guy I know?’

Jenny’s face was very serious now, the smiles gone... ‘Oh, it’s much more than that, Danny – *much* more. Actually, I doubt that are going to believe one word of what I’m about to tell you....’

A Darker Shade of Fear - Part 8

What's left is not always right...

The sun rose behind clouds this morning, the city still struggling to awaken after a hard partying Saturday night for most of the population. Rain being forecast for this particular Sunday prompted most to get their yardwork and outside social events done the day before. Most chose to sleep late today, having spent a lot of energy the day before doing things from nothing to everything. Lots of oil was changed out, lots of spark plugs were pulled and replaced, and several grills were fired up and wafted the smell of polish sausage, steaks, chops or burgers over the neighborhoods of Minora. Volleyball games were played, families sat and visited and only the unfortunate who had to work the weekends (like the young people at all the restaurants and gas stations, or those struggling to make ends meet by working two or more jobs at Wal-Mart *and* Meijers) saw little of the sunny Saturday afternoon.

Megan, however, didn't see much of the sun at all. She and Sarah spent most of the afternoon beneath the hood of the Marauder with Tom, a mechanic at the local Ford/Mercury Dealer who had a serious crush on Sarah. Tom had met Sarah when Megan bought her car and never gave a thought to what many saw as a very 'close' relationship between the two girls. If he did, he never mentioned it to anyone, instead always falling over himself to get close to Sarah whenever she came to the service bay. Sarah thought he was cute but that was where it ended. Sort of like a dog chasing a car – had he even 'caught' Sarah (which was not going to happen, but he didn't know it), he wouldn't have known what to do with her. So instead, he was helping Megan change out the wastegate and controller on the passenger side Turbo and then install a new Liquid cooled, front-mount intercooler.

Megan was very proficient at watching the gauges in her cars and had noticed a problem with boost creep on the right turbo. After discussing it with Tom, they agreed that a changeout was needed. Thus the Saturday morning wrench session which went late into the evening -because of other complications that came up as they always with a 'Five-minute' project. And now, Sarah and Megan were sleeping in this morning.

Well, at least Sarah was. Megan was laying there awake, thinking...

About Dan.

She couldn't put her finger on it for some reason. Why this interest in Dan, anyway? After all, they had divorced a long time ago and she knew Dan was happy from what she had heard. Still, she couldn't stop thinking about him, and lately even when she was in Sarah's arms. To top it all off, she had started dreaming about him too. But not 'nice' dreams... not at all. Naughty, indecent dreams. Dreams of decadence and debasement. Even dreams that were bad and horrible. And that one dream... it was just downright creepy...

She shook her head trying to clear the fog... fog – that was it, wasn't it? Part of the bizarre dream about Dan had fog in it. A strange, heavy, dank-smelling fog that you could taste and smell without even breathing... like decaying vegetation or rotting flesh. And while in the dream she couldn't actually see Dan, she knew he was close. Yet oddly in the dream, it seemed like Dan was scared of her. Was it because he couldn't see her either? She heard his voice in the dream... she heard him asking "Who's there? Is anyone out there? I know you're there! Show yourself!!!. But all she could do was get close to him. And when she did, she felt something heavy and pressing... what was it that she felt? Was it... fear? Dan's fear?

Sarah stirred just then and turned toward Megan, her eyes heavy and dreamy yet open enough to see.

'What time is it?' she asked, her voice soft and sleepy sounding.

Megan glanced at the alarm clock to her right on the stand.

'A little after 10. I woke up a little bit ago but just laid here... it felt good to rest after all the work we did yesterday.'

Sarah smiled.

'Wasn't Tom cute?' she murmured. 'I just don't get why *he* can't get it through his head I'm not interested in him. At least not now?'

Megan didn't answer at first, the weird emotion of jealousy stirring deep within her. Maybe it was the way that Sarah had said 'At least not now?'

'Sarah, I think that's precisely why he keeps hanging on... you haven't made it clear you *aren't* interested. Today *or* tomorrow or whenever...' Her voice trailed off, hoping for reassurance from Sarah.

Sarah just grinned, her eyes closed once more.

'Well, it *is* fun to tease him. Did you see the way he kept looking at me but then looking away when I looked his way?'

Megan was frustrated now... 'You should just tell him straight up that you're not interested.'

Still, no reassurance. Now Megan was *really* an emotional turmoil... all those weird feelings about Dan and now this with Sarah. 'What the hell is wrong with me?' she thought to herself.

But then Sarah came through.

'Ah, Megan... you know that we are a team. Ain't no man gonna mess that up!'

Now the skies were sunny once more in Megan-land. She leaned over and kissed Sarah deeply while pulling her close, glad that Sarah was like her in another respect

– that it was best when you slept with nothing between your body and the sheets. Sarah's skin felt like velvet beneath her touch...

'Now *that's* my girl' was all she could say, kissing Sarah's lips while her free hand slid down deeper beneath the covers...

'What did you say??!!' asked Dan, his mind racing wildly while trying to hear once more, not even believing what Jen had just told him. Sally came up next to him, grasping his arm while standing at his side.

"Megan is back in town. And ANNIL8R is *her* car."

Sally's grip tightened on Dan's arm and she moved in closer to him. She felt a shudder in Dan's body.

"I thought she was living in Chicago or Minneapolis or something like that?" Dan half asked, half stated. Actually, he was part right on both counts since Megan has moved away a few years back and had pretty much dropped out of contact with other than just a few. Jen's sister-in-law was one of the few. Lisa and Megan had kept in touch via the internet and Megan had actually come back to town long before she even told Lisa.

She didn't want to spoil the surprise was the reason she gave.

"But Dan, there's even worse news too. Forget about Megan..."

She struggled to continue...

Jen had tears in her eyes and began looking at the ground nervously, blinking hard and trying so desperately hard not to cry. A tear rolled down her cheek and fell upon her white sneaker as she kept trying to speak...

She began to sob... "Joe is dead, Dan. He died in a bad wreck at the track last night. Actually, he lived till this morning but they said he had suffered too much brain damage... everything just stopped.' She was crying harder now and Carl was wiping his eyes too, his body trembling.

Dan felt like he wasn't there; like maybe he was watching some sad TV show and it wasn't his friend he just heard about... This couldn't be true... could it?

All the hugs and hello's were long forgotten with the devastating news just spoken. Everyone now stood close and silent; even though Carl and Jen had had some time for it to sink in, they still didn't believe it themselves.

Especially Carl. And he had even seen what happened...

Joe and Carl had gone to the track the night before. It was a perfect Saturday night, clear and starfilled with the sun going down slowly, almost as if it never wanted to set. The conditions were perfect for bracket racing and Joe was trying to perfect his launch in the SS. He had gotten his times down into the very low 11's with poor traction and with the cooler air he felt sure that this run was going to be a solid high

10. He had bolted on a new set of slicks after the last run and felt really good about getting hooked.

His last run was against a heavily modded Supra in the left lane running a 10.88 dial. Joe had dialed a 11.0 thinking that, hey, if I do break out, no problem – at least I still had my best time so far.

The SS rumbled to the line, staging first. He had a paltry .12 handicap on the lights. The SS launched and hooked solid, the M&H's wrinkling and holding – much better than any launch he had with the big Donovan'd motor. He launched at the stall speed and was g-o-n-e, the Big Block unwavering as the heavily built auto banged Joe's head off the seat back with each shift. The slip would later show an impressive 1.56 60' time, the best he had gotten to that point. Joe had a huge grin plastered on his face if one could have seen it beneath the full-face helmet - the run was that good and he knew it.

But at the 1/8th mile mark, his right front tire hit a sheet metal screw that no one saw and that had fallen from beneath a Civic that had ran that lane right before him. It was a screw that the guy had dropped down into the motor compartment and thought that had fallen on through to the ground somewhere back in his pit area; a screw he was using for a cable tiedown to his power supply for the Amps in the hatch area, and when he dropped it, he just grabbed another from the multi-pack on the floor in the back seat.

However, somehow Joe's tire found that same screw - at speed. The investigation would later show that his tire didn't go flat right then. What happened was that as he approached 95 mph, the friction of the tire rotation forced the screw into the tire just at the edge of the sidewall/tread area and immediately caused a catastrophic failure of the tire. All from a tiny #8 phillips sheet metal screw. The sudden depressurization and explosion of the right front tire, which immediately shredded, caused Joe's SS to veer violently to the right, smacking hard into the wall and then careen wildly off of it. Still, it was survivable at that point due to the cage and Joe's safety gear. But fate would play a strange and unfortunate hand in the accident.

Carl was coming down the return lane in his Mach I and saw Joe's car suddenly veer into the wall. He felt his heart leap into his throat and a scream escape his lips.

"NOOOOOOO!!!!!!"

The Supra driver had launched exactly .12 seconds behind Joe with a rare identical reaction time and was trying hard to reel in the SS when he saw a puff of dust from the right front of the car and a sudden, violent movement of the F-Body to the right, glancing HARD off the wall and spinning even harder yet - twirling...

BACK ACROSS THE TRACK INTO HIS LANE!

He stomped on his brakes but in spite of having one of the best aftermarket brake setups possible, it still wasn't enough. He locked the tires up as almost in slow motion he saw the black Camaro spinning slowly in a clockwise fashion back across the right lane... he saw the tail lights, the right rear fender, the door and front fender that was crushed pretty good from the contact with the concrete barrier, the tire beneath it just a tangled mass of smoking rubber... he saw the driver – a guy he didn't know but now would never forget - trying desperately to steer into the skid but having no luck at all, as the car was backing now toward the divider line between the two lanes, the laws of physics cruelly following through...

He saw the car continue to rotate as his foot was trying to go through the floorboard of the Silver Mark IV, appearing now that their paths were going to at the very least cross at a very inopportune time... he saw the nose of the SS now, it's huge hood scoop with the white letters DONOVAN clearly visible as the rotation continued... all the while coming into his lane...

He pitched the Supra hard to the left, trying to avoid contact, the driver's door of the SS now squarely in front of him.

He couldn't go anywhere because he had nowhere to go... he hit the side of Joe's Camaro at over 80 mph, the right front fender of the Mark IV T-boning the door of the SS. He saw the driver's head snap and roll sickly into the A-pillar and then suddenly snap back, the impact crushing Joe's door into the cage and on into his side, his helmet smashed on the edge of the A-Pillar and the Cage...

The two tangled cars were scrubbing speed off now as if in some macabre dance of death, the metal grinding and tearing along the wall, human and metallic screams filling the air, all of it finally coming to a halt about a 80 feet from the finish line in a cloud of smoke, mist, and dust. The people in the stands stood hushed and watched in silence as the EMS squad raced down the tarmac, lemergency lights flashing while the EMT's and Paramedics inside were trying to prepare mentally what they never wanted to see. Couples held hands, babies cried, but the announcer was speechless.

Everyone just knew it was a bad one....

The cars at the lines were turned off now, the staging lanes slowly dying down as people rushed to the fence to look and see who was involved in what.

Carl sat stunned, his car stopped in the return lane as he twisted and turned within his car, trying to look back at the wreckage. Inside he felt sick and nausea raced through his body... he knew it was not good...

It wasn't...

Carl's eyes were filled with tears as he finished telling them what happened. No one spoke... they just sort of stood there together, everyone crying and numb... Joe had been one of *them*, not just another guy. They had gone back a long way. From even before his Viper and long before the Cuda.

And now, Joe was dead... *how could that be????*

The rain began to fall softly outside the garage door... steadily at first then harder, the sky sullen and gray. In the distance, thunder could be heard while life continued on for those who lived in the world beneath the rain.

Darker Shade of Fear - Part 9

The Biggest Dog Bites Hardest

Sitting quietly in the slowly darkening room, he had a chance to remember Joe. Often, ever since Joe's death, memories would come back – some, out of nowhere; like rain that falls at times from a nearly cloudless sky, hitting his face with the wet, cold drops. Which only made him remember how much Joe liked the rain...

Carl watched the evening shadows disappear from the floor and realized that he hadn't eaten since breakfast, nearly 12 hours ago, just before he had left for the church. Which only made him think of Joe again; how they would go to breakfast and tell bench racing stories (usually outright lies but they both laughed about them); how they would spend a lot of evenings working on Joe's SS or any of a thousand other projects it seemed Joe or Carl had going on. The sadness then washed over him once more like a cold chill and he never, ever felt so alone as he did just now...

He thought that a Tuesday was a horrid day for a funeral for your best friend... even if it WAS a sunny one. And he began to cry once more because he knew how much Joe liked the rain...

Dan sat exhausted on the sofa, Sally sitting quietly next to him... both of them were numb, having just returned home from the dinner held after the service. Like many, they wondered where Carl had gone and like most, no one really ate anything. They spent most of the time just mingling with other friends of Joe or his family, trying to find some sense as to why *it* had happened but not having any luck. So they usually ended up trying to remember how great Joe was, or how he loved racing, or how about when he showed up with the Donovan in his Camaro? And so, Joe was remembered for how he lived – not how or why he died. After all, they agreed, he had died doing what he loved best.

Racing.

And how many of us actually get to die like that?

"Dan, was that Megan at the gravesite?"

The question startled Dan from his thoughts. He had seen the woman in the Black dress and hat that shielded most of her face, thinking that she seemed familiar. But she had kept apart from everyone else; standing close to some tall guy and another woman he didn't know who also was in black.

"I don't know, Hon... it *might* have been her. I just didn't pay attention..."

"I think it was *her* Dan." The emphasis in Sally's voice could not be missed.

"Well, I could understand her wanting to come. She knew Joe for a long time."

Sally mulled that thought for a moment.

"Yeah... I suppose you're right. I just thought if it *was* her, she would have spoken, don't you?"

Dan undid his tie and tossed it onto the coffee table, his jacket already across the one side of it.

"Maybe she just felt uncomfortable, especially how things ended between us all back then. But who knows? Maybe it wasn't even her anyhow?"

Sally looked at her watch. "No, it was her, Dan. It had to be her... I'm sure of it." "How can you be so sure, Sally?"

"I can't explain it, Danny. I just *know*... and she's not back in town for something good, either. Just wait and see..."

Sally's words hung in Dan's ears heavily. He didn't say it but he knew what she meant.

Because he felt it too...

Carl headed out into the cool night air. Having decided that Joe would kick his ass for sitting around and moping just because he was all 'dead and gone', he went out to the garage and slipped inside through the walk-through door. To his left were the light switches and flipped them all up to the "ON" position. Immediately the hum of twelve 8-foot long fluorescent lights (sixteen tubes in all) broke the silence in the garage, the lights gleaming off the Mach 1's black paint and his red Ram 2500 on past that. The four bay garage was cavernous but not always, especially when Joe brought his Cam.

Damn!!! Got to stop thinking like that, mumbled Carl to himself. Joe would surely be pissed if he knew how sorry he was feeling for himself right now...

He took in the smells of the garage. Odors of pine, of oil, of gasoline (some very high octane at that) and rubber and steel and concrete all inundated Carl's senses. He walked around to the driver's side of the Mach I and pulled the door handle up to open the door. The dome lights came on immediately and illuminated interior. Funny, he thought – but not in sadness. The first time he saw Joe's SS with the Donovan was just outside in the driveway that one sunny morning when he was admiring the Mach I.

He sat down inside on the seat and slid his legs on inside. His hand instinctively reached for the shifter, his left foot for the clutch. The garage door opener was tucked inside the console, out of sight of prying eyes that may look inside the windows when he had it parked out somewhere. He flipped the lid up and hit the small gray button. Immediately, the soft 'whir' of the door opener joined the hum of the fluorescents and he could feel the coolness of the air sweep in beneath the opening door.

He knew then what he had to do. It was how he wanted to remember Joe.

He wanted to go racing and beat someone – bad.

He quickly slid from the car, walked over to the bank of light switches and flipped them off, then got back into the Mustang. The key was always in his pocket and he slid it into the ignition, enjoying the sound of the chime which politely reminded him with its "Ding... Ding... Ding..." that his door was open with the key in place.

Carl pulled the door shut gently enough to close it but not slamming it. Rotating the key he heard the fuel pump energize and bring up the pressure. He rolled the windows down with the power buttons and breathed in the cool air deeply.

Yeah... tonight was the night to do this.

Rotating the switch on around, he heard the engagement of the starter and its push to begin the turning over of the rotating mass of steel and aluminum. The Modular motor fired immediately and settled into a steady low pitched rumble at idle. He released the parking brake, depressed the clutch pedal and snicked the tranny on over into "R".

Smooth as silk, he thought. Smooth as silk – but brutal, even for a 'New' car. Especially with what he had just done to it the week before the 'crash'. Why not test that tonight, he wondered. Why not indeed?

Carl backed out of the garage and hit the door opener again. He watched the door glide down, the light from inside disappear on the concrete apron. He allowed the car to back down the slight incline of the drive and out onto the road. Just down the road was Joe's house and he wondered what would happen to it now? It didn't matter, he guessed. Joe had no use for it now.

Nudging the Pro 5.0 shifter into "1", he let the clutch out slightly and felt it begin to grip the pressure plate. The car rolled forward on into the night, its headlights stabbing into the darkness like two deadly white knives looking for a victim.

He wouldn't have to look far for the first one...

Pulling out of the drive-thru carryout, Pat and Sol headed in towards the Metro district. Often a good place to park and shine while swapping tales of street bravado with numerous other hyper-hormonally driven youth who owned powerful (or more often than not, powerful *looking*) cars. The Westgate Bowling Alley ("Home of Thunder Alley!!") parking lot was one of the favorite hotbeds of street racers. Tonight was no different.

As they pulled into the lot, they noticed several people milling around what looked to be a new '03 Terminator.

"Is that Tark?" asked Sol. "I haven't seen him around for several weeks. Wonder what he's been up to?"

Pat nodded to no one in particular.

"Yeah, it's him. I heard over at the speed shop he sold his twin turbo Cobra to some guy on eBay and had bought a new '03. My guess is that that is the one. You know – his Cobra never *did* run the same after he blew it out at the airport that time running that Buick guy named Wade."

Sol nodded. He had seen that race and it was over almost at the start line. That was definitely a serious Buick there that night...

They parked and got out of the car, the doors shutting causing many to turn and look at the deep blue street machine.

Pat's car was eye candy to most. Its blue paint was deep and wet looking. The chrome wheels were a superb accent to the paint and the lack of chrome elsewhere only emphasized the look. Not many Z06's looked as good as Pat's. Nor, did many have the ponies under the hood that his did. Nearly 500 hp to the rear wheels thanks to the mods he had paid to have done. After all, he didn't have a lot of time but he knew guys who DID – guys like Lingenfelter who knew Pat on a first name basis.

John had pulled the stock Z06 mill and performed his magic with the internals as well as the intake and exhaust. Signed and certified by the dyno in John's shop (496.7 rwhp, 522 rwtq), the Z06 was a snake killer who loved to feed on Cobras in particular. Pat had spent a lot of seat time in the Vette and had the shifts down solid. Tonight would be the inaugural street races for the car whose rear plate read –

U R DEAD

In minutes, the first challenges were issued. Pat had hooked a guy with a big block Ford in a late '60's Falcon and they were back to the lot in less than 30 minutes, the Falcon owner's wallet lighter by two hundred dollars. This of course raised even more interest and a few accusations of using 'Nawssss'. But Pat had the hood raised and offered the crowd the chance to look. But no NOS bottle or lines could be found – there weren't any.

So next up was a Tark's buddy, Nash. Nash had a healthy '98 LS1 Camaro that had seen several street races. It was no match either against the Z06, having lost by over 5 cars. The word was spreading among the crowd – the Z06 of Pat's might just be *the* king badass car for the night.

Just as the crowd was buzzing about the Vette, they could hear the rumble of a V8 approaching from the south. A few turned to look as the moths and bugs circled in the light of the mercury vapor lamps above the parking lot. The headlights of a late model Mustang could be seen approaching, the blinker indicating the driver's desire to enter the area. As the car pulled in, the headlights went off with only the parking lamps remaining lit as it circled the area slowly, the windows down.

"Hey Sol, isn't that Carl?" asked Pat.

"Yeah, I think it is. I haven't seen him all summer but that's definitely him. Hey – did you hear about –

"Joe? Yeah, I heard. Man, I couldn't believe it either" answered Pat, not letting Sol finish. They watched Carl circle once more before he pulled straight into towards where all the people were. Brashly, he pulled right up into the crowd in front of the Z06 and simply stopped, letting the car idle.

People downwind noticed a rich, semi-sweet aroma escaping the side exhausts (just installed days before the 'crash' with Joe's help) and they couldn't overlook the noisy whine coming from beneath the hood of the black Mustang – a car that was *supposed* to be naturally aspirated. Still, the Shaker hood was in place – but it was definitely shaking.

Pat looked at the Mach 1 and then smiled – actually, sneered. Catching Carl's eye's, he cast a line.

"Whacha got under the hood there, Carl? Sounds pretty seerrrrrr-iiii-oooouuuussss!"

Carl just looked at Pat without speaking. He chose to ignore him altogether by getting out of the Mustang and leaning against the driver's side fender, the cool air filling his nostrils with life. Too bad Joe couldn't see what was about to go down, he thought. He spoke...

"Anyone here interested in running me tonight? I've got five hundred dollars that says I'll take any of you."

The crowd was silent but Pat spoke up.

"You serious Carl? Man, I mean, you don't really mean that do you? After all, you don't even know what people have here tonight."

Carl ignored him, having figured out quickly that Pat's Vette was the center attraction this night. And you don't get *that* much attention if you're second dog off the porch.

Carl's refusal to answer only served to piss Pat off – just what he hoped would happen.

"I ASKED a question – CARL!" fumed Pat. Having gone from the big gun to being ignored didn't wear well on Pat's ego. Carl smiled to himself – Joe would have been proud.

He turned now to face Pat.

“Pat! I didn’t know that was *you* there. Where’s your Civic with the big double wing?”

Pat had been a ‘Wannabe’ racer for a few years before he hit it big in the market and got out before it fell. His money flowed freely and he tried to erase the “Fast and Furious” image he had cultivated so hard before. But many wouldn’t let him forget it. Carl was one of the many.

Pat continued to steam, small beads of sweat breaking out on his forehead as his anger rose.

“You know Carl, I liked Joe. He was a nice guy and I’m sorry to hear about what happened. But that doesn’t give you the right to come in here all hard and stuff and start disrespecting people.”

Carl’s stare was pure ice water.

“Pat, you and I have never seen eye to eye. And I doubt that tonight will be no different. Is that your Z06? Or is it your Daddy’s?”

Pat’s eyes flashed. Not many knew that his Civic was actually paid for by his father. The Z06 was indeed his. But that didn’t stop the snickers in the crowd.

“Tell you what, Carl. I’ll be glad to take your cash tonight... I’ve already won some good money already – from guys much better than you. But yours will spend too. What’s the deal?”

“Heads up Pat. I know all about your car actually so I’m not running you blind. You wanna see under MY hood? Or would you even know what you were looking at anyhow?” More taunts...

Pat’s blood ran cold now. He had no way to go but out on the street.

“I heard the blower, Carl. I’m not deaf. And I’m not worried either. Let’s go out to the airport. There are already some people there.”

Carl smiled. “Let’s go play, Pat. Yes. Let’s go play...”

People scrambled for their cars. This was *one race everyone* wanted to see....

Less than 20 minutes later, the Z06 and the Mach 1 were heads up at the ‘Start’ line. Tark held the money, and Stacey – a leggy brunette who nearly spilled out of her top

– held the flashlight. Numerous cars lined the side of the ‘track’, including Wade, Tark’s old nemesis with the 10 second Buick. Now here he was at the same track where he had ran Tark’s T/T Cobra and beaten it when Tark blew the heads nearly off the block. Ironically, it was Wade who helped Tark rebuild his car and a friendship was formed.

Stacey looked at the cars to her right and left. In her hand was a yellow rubberized Eveready flashlight with the black end cap. She could smell the aroma of high octane fuel, hear the rumble from the V8’s and smell the rubber from the brief burnouts both drivers had done prior to pulling to the line. It all came down to this minute, this night for the two drivers before her.

The air was almost chilly now with the clock approaching midnight. But no one noticed, not with two heavy hitters at the line. Most sided with Pat, having found good reason to appreciate the blue Chevrolet with gobs of torque. But there were also some that didn’t like Pat because, well – he was Pat. They felt he hadn’t ‘paid his dues’ so to speak; that he had only ‘bought’ performance; not earned it. Either way, it was going to be a good race.

Both drivers had pulled on helmets and had cinched up their belts tight. Carl had his black Bell on – the one with the red numbers “572” emblazoned upon its front. Pat wore a simple white Simpson. Both were full face and neither driver noticed the perspiration on their necks.

Oddly, Carl didn’t feel so alone anymore...

They watched as Stacey began the count...

Blink 1

The RPMS were up now, the clutches depressed but out slightly, both motors about 3200 rpms....

Blink 2

Carl brought his RPMS up a little more – he was now nearly 3600 rpm. The Vette was steady at 3200...

BLINK 3!!!!

Both drivers dumped their clutches and the mechanical unloading of a combined 1000+ horsepower began. As the clutch pedals sprang upwards, heavy duty pressure plate springs slammed the clutch faces against the rotating flywheels and locked onto the surfaces. The torque load was placed along the drive lines in hundreds and hundreds of pound/feet and the rotational forces tried to tear the drive shafts loose from beneath both cars. But they held as designed.

At the same nano-second, the twisting effort of the driveshafts upon the ring and pinion caused the tires to begin to rotate forward but the physics of trying to move a stationary body made the axles try to twist free from beneath the bodies. Still, all of that held as well. The enormous torque was then shouldered by the suspension and the body, with the front of both cars trying to rotate skyward with the suspension keeping them in check.

And so the launch began. Both cars launched at identical times. Had there been a tree and a clock present, RT's of identical .50's would have flashed on the boards.

At the far end of the track a long black car was parked. The two occupants were also out for the evening of distraction to an unpleasant day. Knowing about the abandoned airport, they had picked up some takeout and headed out waiting for the nightly run of street racing. Tonight would not disappoint them.

Carl and Pat were even through the first two gears. Surprisingly to Pat, he could not pull the Mach 1. But then again, the Mach 1 hadn't pulled him either.

Yet.

As both drivers readied for the 2-3 shift, the car in the right lane began to ever-soslightly creep ahead. Not even those at trackside could tell but it was happening.

The end of the track was nearing now, both drivers having hit the 3-4 shifts perfectly. But the driver in the left lane felt the heaviness of an approaching loss seep into his bones. And almost simultaneously, both noticed the long black car parked adjacent to the Finish Line with its parking lamps on.

Inside the long black car, Megan nudged Sarah.

"I think he's got him, don't you Sarah?"

Sarah nodded silently, having just taken a bite of her sandwich.

Crossing the finish line, Carl wasn't even sure who had won.

But Pat was. Because he had a good view of Carl's rear spoiler – it was even with his door.

Both cars braked hard, turned around in the end area and headed back up toward the crowd. Pat was sick. Not only had he lost to a damned Mustang, but he had just proven Carl was right. Neither noticed the Mercury start up and pull in behind them, gliding toward the crowd.

Carl felt good. He knew what he would do with the money – he would refuse it. After all, it was never about the money anyhow. It was about winning. Just then, he noticed the second set of headlights behind Pat's Z06 and he wondered who those might be?

As they pulled into the Staging area of the unofficial track the Mercury pull up behind them. They turned and saw the plate –

ANNIL8R

Just as Carl was exiting the Mach 1, the crowd could hear yet another built car pulling into the airport. Turning to watch, they saw the unmistakable shape of rectangular headlights. It was a white car and it sounded like one with a big Turbo and more.

It was Dan in his white TR. And behind him was another surprise -someone looking for some mechanical salvation.

It was Sally.

In a GNX -that wasn't *exactly* stock either... and that wore a plate that many found interesting

STOMPER

A Darker Shade of Fear - Part 10

Wet Oranges...

The cars slowly left the airport... much quieter than when they had arrived, cooler heads prevailing to everyone's satisfaction. After Dan and Sally had pulled in, Megan (with Sarah riding shotgun) pulled up alongside but then continued on out the exit road. Carl had won his race with the Z06 – but just barely; still a win IS a win – and it seemed for the briefest of moments (like those randomly rare times when the sky is a deep, crimson-rose color... just before sunset on a late fall evening) that an all-out race fest was about to ensue.

They were there... all of them it seemed. Except one...

As Carl led the procession up towards the start line, the breeze changed suddenly. No one had noticed how the stars and the moon had become hidden in the short time they had arrived at the abandoned airport. Nor had they noticed that the wind gusted occasionally, causing the rotting hangar doors to creak and moan in the night like lost souls of past times, begging for release to an oblivion unknown.

As the lights approached the crowd, the gusts became harder yet and thunder could be heard rumbling in the distance. A few in the crowd looked back over their shoulder, or perhaps covered their eyes from the glare of the headlights to try and scan an ominous sky. When they looked long enough, nearly hidden flashes of light, some of them roaming across the heavens could be seen deep within the crowds.

Rain was coming and it was coming fast.

Dan had stopped and stepped out of the White Buick, the gusts whipping the collar of his jacket up against his face and made his hair flatten against his head. He had to squint and did so as he waved at Sally to stop near him. He ran over to the passenger's window which she had rolled down.

"We can't run tonight – not with the weather that's blowing in. Take the X on home and I'll be right behind you."

Sally nodded, rolled up the window and headed on out the exit, the first to leave. Dan got back in his car and as he went to pull the door closed – it was stopped midway.

By a woman's gloved hand.

It was Megan... standing with a red umbrella above her, her hand solidly on the door of the Buick.

"Hello, Dan. It's been a long, long time..." Those words seemed to make the wind stop blowing. Or was it ever really blowing at all?

Dan looked up into her eyes but couldn't see them. He could only look, not in a good way. More like the way you try not to stare when you pass by a bad car wreck and you want to look away, knowing that looking directly at the scene may bring bad things to your memories. But you can't. And so you look, your eyes taking in the broken and scattered glass, the mangled metal, the bodies slumped or sprawled on the road, the pain sometimes evident, sometimes not; your eyes feeding those views to your brain to recall later, over and over and over...

Dan felt those same deeply sad feelings and emptiness as he searched for Megan's eyes. Cold ran down his back and through his blood; a deep bone-numbing cold, so firmly did Megan grasp his emotions. And even that set off a flood of emotional combat for his heart – he KNEW that he loved Sally, and only Sally. His sun rose and set upon Sally's face and she was his universe.

But for some unknown and mysterious reason, hearing her say his name – HIS NAME

– set something off in his mind.

The dreams...

And suddenly he was somewhere else... in an orange grove on a rainy Tuesday morning, dark and gray. He was wet to the bone, having walked in the grove for hours it seemed, trying to find someone but trying to hide from someone else. Who WAS it that he was hiding from? He didn't know...

So all he could do was run... run as fast as he could and try to find the house with the yellow glow in the windows that meant it was dry and warm inside.

Inside...

Away from the rain. Away from the smell of rain, heavy and dank. Away from the smell of too-ripe oranges, oranges that had fallen from leafy green trees to lay on the wet, emerald grass glistening with diamonds of raindrops that surrounded hundreds of fallen oranges.

He looked at the oranges and realized they weren't really oranges at all.

They were eyes... staring at him. Not blinking, but all of them following his every movement. They were everywhere; like the television sets in a major department store all tuned to the same channel. Those eyes all looked and rotated in his direction, no matter where he tried to hide. They saw him... they saw his heart... they saw his soul...

So all he could do was keep running through the wet orange grove with the orange-eyes following him, getting wetter and wetter and wetter...the trees becoming closer together and he had to watch where he stepped for fear of stepping on an orange/eye... the leaves grabbed at his wet skin and clothing, pulling him in toward the trees...

It was getting darker and darker - what time IS it??? - his watch, wet with rain drops showed nearly 10am but it was as if darkness was falling...

and those eyes...

"Hello, Megan..." his voice trailed off. "Yes, it has been a long time." Where were her EYES? She didn't say another word but simply handed him a piece of paper, turned and left and got into the long black car. Dan watched her drive off, not really aware that he was holding the scrap in his left hand. He felt so very, very cold and he noticed that several cars were leaving, intermittent drops of rain could be seen in the headlights' glare.

He slid on inside the Buick and closed the door. Reaching down to his left on arm rest he pushed the power lock button forward and heard the satisfying sound of the locks securing him inside. Reaching over onto the left side of the instrument panel, he rolled the dome-panel light dim control upward to turn on the over head lights and looked at the paper in his hand.

It was folded three times and had apparently come from a spiral bound steno tablet. She hadn't trimmed the greenish cast paper and the rough edges remained where she had torn it free.

He held it for a moment, the rain coming harder now on the roof and windshield of the car; a steady, driving staccato beat. Rumbles of thunder and flashes of lightning were much closer now and a few cars pulled alongside as if to look in but seeing the interior lights on, they merely honked and moved on out onto the road and sped away into the wet night, leaving Dan finally alone with the paper.

His eyes tried to not look at the words but he could not NOT look at them. He glanced up for a moment and then looked back down, holding his breath. In his hands were the first written words he had seen from Megan in many years and still, her handwriting made him nervous. Was he REALLY over her, he asked himself???

Then, he realized what he had read and he sucked in his breath, hesitating to let it out. He felt hot all at once, the chill now gone. The windows on the car were fogging up, and he had to loosen his jacket, so shaken was he by the words. He tried to look out of the windows and then realized that he was all alone now, in the midst of a storm and he knew that Sally would be worried.

He tossed the paper to the passenger seat and reached for the key, turning it in the ignition.

The car fired and ran smoothly but just as he slid his hand down to the T-handle shifter, it died. He tried to start it again, the wind blowing very hard now, rocking the car as if a giant invisible hand was trying to tip it over.

"RRRR-rrrr-rrrrrrrr-rrr..." No luck.

Again and again he tried. And still, the car would not start.

Better let the starter cool for a minute, he thought to himself. Damn! Why didn't I grab the cell phone????

Then he noticed lights out on the highway coming from the south. They seemed to be slowing... slowing... slowing...

The car slowed to a crawl by the entrance of the airport and then stopped. Dan could see it was a long, dark car with odd headlights and fog lights in the lower part of the fascia. It looked oddly familiar... who was it?

The car then pulled into the airport ever so slowly, turning its headlights directly at Dan's Buick.

But then it stopped... about a hundred yards away.

The driver of the mysterious car then hit the highbeam switch, causing the fogs to go off and at the same time, nearly blind Dan. Fear now gripped his heart... cold, illogical fear. Who was in the car???

He could see sheets of rain falling in the glare of the headlights facing him... then, a figure seemed to appear in front of the lights. In just a moment, another figure joined the first and they stood in the rain facing Dan. He could feel their eyes upon him and he felt naked and powerless before whoever had him in his helpless state before them.

The figures disappeared as quickly as they came and then the lights went out. He was effectively blinded by the sudden change of brilliant incandescent light to utter darkness. Then, a large bolt of lightning flashed and he could see that the car was backing out of the airport drive and he could see the plate in the flash.

ANNIL8R

He tried the key once more and –

“VROOOOOOOOM!!” – it started. He quickly pulled it into gear and headed out onto the highway but the other car was gone. Was it really there at all???

He felt fear grip his heart even tighter as he turned back, back towards home and to the light and safety it would bring. On the floor of his car, the paper from Megan rustled from the air movement within the car. He reached over and across the console to pick it up, the words glaring at him in the passing light as he went beneath the dripping streetlights.

“I knew you then, I know you now, I watched you then, I watch you now...

What was whole is split, what was split did die, But you never left and so I cry...

The rose will bloom when spring doth come, The rose will die, in winter's sun.

What was will be and what could not, will... I loved you then...

I love you still”

He was angry. He did not want Megan to know him, much less to still love him. How could she DO this to him???

The rest of the note hung in his mind, its words taunting him....

“Orange County Raceway Park.... Tuesday Night... Track rental 9pm – Midnight... By invitation only.

I'm waiting...”

OCRP was about a one hour drive from Dan's house. He had to know more before he would tell Sally about it, he decided as he pulled into the drive and on into the garage.

Scurrying on inside, he nearly knocked Sally over at the door. She had been crying.

“What's wrong, Sally?” he asked, shaken even more now...

She didn't answer at first, instead sitting down at the table in the dimly lit kitchen looking at Dan sadly, fear mixed in as well. Her robe was open and revealing much but Dan didn't notice...

“Someone just called Dan. The said to look on the porch and then hung up... the voice was really... scary...I think it was a woman's voice...” She sobbed again

Dan headed for the door but Sally's voice stopped him – cold.

“Here's what was out there Dan. It was a piece of paper taped to our door... read it...”

Taking the paper into his hand he knew immediately it was the same kind as the note Megan had given him at the airport. He read it slowly, listening to the ticking of the mantel clock in the living room, the whooshing sound of the water softener running through its backwash, and Sally's soft sobs...

"What now is yours used to be mine, What have you now is only time..."

A change will come, a life will end, A lover go, a loser – win...

Orange County Raceway Park.... Tuesday Night... Track rental 9pm – Midnight... By invitation only.

Bring it... to lose it."

Dan sat down in the chair to Sally's left and touched her hand... it felt cold and sadness seeped from its surface.

"What's this all mean, Danny? What IS this all about?"

"I don't know – yet. But I'm going to find out." Dan reached on over to touch Sally's face...

"Here look at this..." He handed her the note he had gotten. "Megan gave me this right after you left..."

Sally jumped as if she had been jolted with a bolt of lightning.

"MEGAN???"

"Megan gave you THIS?"

She read the note and sat silent.

"What are you going to do Dan? She's crazy! What are WE going to do???"

Dan felt empty and hollow at first -but then, a rush of confidence begin to wash over him as an idea began to form in his brain. He even smiled a little at Sally and he didn't really know the details. But he DID have a plan – and ANY plan is better than NO plan at all...

"Oh, I think we'll think of something... Here's an idea..."

A Darker Shade of Fear - Part 11

Darkness covers a multitude of sins...

The sun was hidden behind heavy, dark clouds while the city tried to get moving. Even though it was a weekday (Tuesday), it felt like a rainy Saturday. Alarms went off only to be silenced by the convenient 'Snooze' button – time and again. It was almost as if there was a common dread about the day.

Many even had odd dreams; some, nightmares. Nearly no one gave a thought to the fact that this day was October 31. All Saints Day... Halloween. The day that most only knew as the time the little ones dress up and go about the neighborhood in search of big candy bars, popcorn balls and maybe the grand prize – a caramel apple wrapped in wax paper. And even though everyone knew that there were indeed psychos out there who might put a razor blade in an apple, or a wire in a candy bar – or worse – still, there was always the life sustaining thought – it won't happen to me.

It won't happen to me. Maybe to someone else.

But not 'me'...

Sarah pulled up close to Megan who was still sound asleep. Having done a serious check over of ANNIL8R the night before, both girls' muscles were sore from all the leaning and crawling around the car they had done before the night ended.

Shortly before midnight, they finished and both collapsed on the sofa after kicking off their sneakers and sliding out of their outerwear. Sarah got up and walked to the kitchenette.

"Megan? Do you want a glass of wine? I'm going to have one before I get a shower... God... my back is KILLING me... would you give me a backrub later?"

Megan was curled up in one corner of the huge davenport, her legs tucked up with her head resting on her chin. Even though Sarah still had on her 'everyday' Victoria's Secret' Angelwear, Megan was only in her blue thong, having preferred to free herself of the encumbrance of the large cup bra.

"Sure...why not?" she mumbled, her hand pointed at the TV with the remote firmly in place.

Sarah gathered the drinks and came back to the couch.

"Where's your bra, silly?" she chuckled. "It's not that time already is it?"

Megan leaned back and shook her endowments at Sarah with a wicked grin. "Why not? I know you enjoy them, don't you?"

Sarah could only smile, knowing full well EXACTLY how much she (very often) 'enjoyed' Megan's attributes – above AND below the waist. Meeting Megan was her dream come true indeed.

The girls finished their wine, Sarah slightly ahead of Megan. She rose and slid her bra off her shoulders and flung it playfully at Megan.

"See you in the shower?" she asked coyly.

Megan sprang from the couch, trying to step out of the thong as she attempted to shoulder past Sarah. Sarah in turn smacked her bare bottom as she let her get past

– just to enjoy the view of watching Megan run naked through the flat.

In seconds, both were busy scrubbing the oily residue from each other's skin. Which led to what it always did...

The water was very, very hot; the steam rising from the glass enclosed oversized shower. The shower was one of the many selling points of the flat to Megan, having noted it was plenty large enough for two or even three willing participants. She had only been in it once with three people; she smiled at that memory as she continued to rub Sarah's back with the soapy wash cloth.

Sarah turned and faced Megan, not speaking. Megan lowered her hands to her sides, her eyes riveted to Sarah's. Slowly, Sarah leaned forward, her lips scant millimeters above Megan's, then – upon them. The kiss was long and slow... the steam continued to rise and both girls sensed that it was definitely getting warmer in the shower...

Megan's hands reached for Sarah's sides and then on around, pulling her closer and into her own nakedness. Their bodies were wet and slippery from the body wash, their hair matted and tangled in a garden scented mass upon their heads... Megan's hands reached the small of Sarah's back and then slid lower... and lower... and lower, finding and then exploring once more that which she sought - but also, that which she knew so very well.

Sarah's hands weren't idle though either. They were busy appreciating the natural curves and valleys of Megan's breath taking body as their kiss continued. Lost in time and in each other, the night was only beginning... morning would have to be dealt with when it got there...

And so their morning began, nearly as the night had only hours before. In bed, naked, and groggy.

Megan finally stirred, her eyes not opening just yet.

"What time is it?"

Sarah glanced over at the clock, knocked askew from the two-time Snooze attack.

"It's nearly 10. Don't you have to be somewhere in an hour?"

Megan jumped awake at the realization that she had less than 30 minutes to get up, dressed, and out the door to take the car over to the speed shop to dyno it.

"Yikes! I've GOT to get my butt moving!" She jumped out of bed, the effort causing her cleavage to bounce wondrously before Sarah's appreciative eyes.

"Ah Megan, can't you take it later. I would like a little more of what we had last night..." she purred.

But Megan was having none of it.

"Not now. Maybe later sweetie, but not now."

Sarah pretended to pout, pulling the sheet below her hips, trying to lure Megan back to bed. "Just make another appointment for later today... can't you?" Her purring continued as she parted her thighs.

Megan was stopped in her tracks, absorbing Sarah's beauty was too much to ignore. Her eyes explored the areas her lips, tongue, and hands had been only hours before. But in the end, pursuit of a goal won out...

"Sorry baby. There's nothing more I would rather do than have some more fun with you - you know that, don't you?"

Sarah smiled and nodded, caressing the inside of her thighs with both hands but knowing there was no deterring Megan.

"I'll be back, Sarah. I'll be back..." Within minutes she was dressed and gone, ANNIL8R heading out into the dreary Halloween morning, the exhaust reverberating from the sides of the buildings as it crested the hill and was gone from sight...

"Dan, do you think this will work?"

"I don't know, Sally. I THINK it will..." his voice trailed off from beneath the hood of the GNX, noting it was almost 6pm. Where DID the day go???

"I HOPE it will..." he continued. "The thing that worries me most isn't the race tonight

- that's just things mechanical. I think we can take the Merc. It's Megan that I'm most concerned with. She's up to something Sally - I just know it. If you could have seen that odd look on her face at the airport that night; felt the weirdness in her hand as she handed me the note, and heard the way she sounded? It was creepy..."

"Well... do you think she's... uh.... Crazy?"

Dan disappeared back beneath the hood of the GNX.

"I don't know, Sally... maybe... maybe we're just ALL crazy. Afterall... we don't have to go to the strip tonight. Maybe we're crazy to even play along. But I do know there will be some good cars there tonight and maybe, just maybe, Megan only wants to play with our minds a little, you know? Just to sort of get her digs in? Who knows? Either way, we'll be ready."

Sally nodded, handing Dan another gapped plug from the bench.

"I hope it all comes out, Danny. I'm tired of this crap; this whole "ANNIL8R" thing has been bizarre from the get-go. Maybe she'll just leave us alone."

Dan just mumbled an "Un-huh".

"I heard at the salon yesterday that Megan's got some serious money. Some inheritance and all I guess..."

Another "Un-huh..."

"What do you think she's REALLY up to Dan? Any guesses? You don't think she wants you back do you?" Sally's insecurities were showing, he thought. With that he stepped from beneath the hood and turned to pull Sally close.

"Baby, it doesn't matter WHAT Megan wants. I only want you."

Sally beamed and leaned up to kiss him.

But the fly in the ointment was another matter... another matter indeed.

Carl busied himself with his final preparations on the Mach I. He looked down at the mill before he closed the hood, always admiring the flat black shaker scoop he had adapted to work with the blown motor. The Diablo chip, the Reichard racing pulley, the Kenny Bell Blower, and all the other goodies were ready.

"Bring it" he thought.... "Just go on and bring it."

In numerous garages, the evening's work was about to wrap up, the fun – about to start.

Timing was checked. TBS positions were checked and rechecked. Cans of high octane race gas were filled. Tire pressures were checked and trailers loaded. A Tuesday evening track rental was rare and everyone who could was going to take part. Cars were readied to load on the trailers. Others were readied for the drive. Some were close; others, like Dan and Sally, had a bit of a drive before them. Still, they were coming...

Word had spread fast around the racing community. Something BIG was about to go down. It wasn't for money or for a trophy. No... it was for what mattered most to anyone who chose to pursue a life in Staging Lanes – Respect. Tonight would bring that – for some.

For some, it WOULD be fun. For others, it would be a disappointing evening. For a few, it would be frightening. For two, it would be very dangerous.

And for one person – it would be their last evening to enjoy life at all...

No one but Megan knew he was coming to the track. Most had long forgotten his name; many from indifference. Others, because they *needed* to forget about him. Megan had never forgotten him; partly because of what he had done wrong, mostly because of what (for her anyhow) what he had done right...

Fortunately, he lived very close to OCRP. He had accumulated quite a record in the years since he had moved away – both on the track, and in the local law enforcement data bank. Nothing TOO felonious... just enough to keep him on the local constabulary's radar screen. He had crossed paths with Dan and Sally and Megan – even Harry – long ago. But, only Megan had kept in touch. He was good at something she needed and tonight, she was going to need it – in spades...

His hands worked deftly in the engine compartment. The fiberglass hood sat upon the roof of the car, having been placed there by his longtime pal and himself the night before. Since he didn't work a full time job, he had all day to get ready.

He was going to need it.

Big block Mopars were never an easy tune. Monster sized ones were even more challenging. Especially ones with blowers.

Rico smiled. "Do you think she'll be ready?"

"Oh yeah... she'll be ready all right. She'll definitely be ready."

Rico looked down at the huge valve covers, the oversize plug wires disappearing into the boots dead center.

Hemi's were like that – they could rip out your heart in frustration and they could steal your soul with their beauty. But you could never, ever not look at one and not feel something.

As the sun slowly set, having finally been revealed to the populace when the front went on through just before sundown, the sky was red and angry. A cold breeze was blowing, kicking up leaves and dead weeds, causing them to scurry across the entryway in front of the Park. Fortunately, the track ran west to east, the builders having the foresight to eliminate drivers having to squint into a setting sun when they were at the lights.

The leaves on the surrounding trees were all varying shades of brown; many of the ones that had already fallen were clustered around the base of the cyclone fencing surrounding the complex. OCRP was a favorite site for many IHRA and NHRA events so the upkeep was first class. The track crew, resplendent in their brilliant orange shirts emblazoned with a variety of patches, performed their tasks professionally and with pride.

And it showed.

Georgine who manned the primary entrance along with Hal, watched the cars coming in. She noted with particular interest those on trailers because they seemed to be special in her eyes. Hal however was drawn to the combatants who were driven there. In his mind, those were the REAL cars, not some fancy 'Trailer-Queens'.

They didn't have to take any entry fees this night since it was a track rental. So, this would give them some time to watch the cars while they handed out a paper they had been asked to give all the entrants asking them to convene for a drivers meeting at 8:30pm. They didn't have long to wait to see some cars. By 7pm, there was a line outside the entrance waiting to come in.

They watched Mustangs of sorts of aspiration (including 4 different '03 Terminators), Camaros, Oldsmobiles (including a rare '69 H/O, Pontiacs (Hal in particular enjoying the sight of the green '64 with what sounded like a very healthy big block Poncho under the hood), a couple of AMX's and a Javelin, several Turbo Buicks including two different GNX's (only one was a real one – Sally's – the other, a clone), two different Sycloes (one essentially stock – one definitely not) and even a Typhoon that had benefitted from some serious upgrades, a Porsche 911 Turbo (Georgine pegged the year correctly as an '87 model), several Mopars including two Challengers, a Duster, a Demon, a new Crossfire, and a deep red '69 'Cuda with a flat black hood that had a very evil sounding whine to it. They also watched a '70 LS6 Chevelle, a '69 Chevelle SS (a beautiful Marina blue L78 car with a black vinyl top – tubbed and wicked), three different Nova's (two of which were big block cars, one a 427 beast) and a black '56 Chevy that had a 502 crate motor hidden beneath the hood.

"So, which one do you think is going to win?" mused Georgine.

Hal thought for a moment...

"I don't know... but I bet it won't be the one that looks like it should..."

He was more right than he ever could have known...

A Darker Shade of Fear - Part 12

Evil triumphs when good men do nothing...

He was the next to last car to arrive at OCRP, Georgine and Hal admiring the blown Mopar as it slid by their hut with an idle that sounded like a barely muffled ProStock ride. He had barely enough time to park his car and leave Rico in the pit lanes to start getting the slicks bolted on and head over to where everyone who was actually going to be racing was standing around listening to Megan. She was standing in front of the Merc go over the layout for the evening. But, not wanting to break tradition, he didn't hurry even for that. As he walked up behind the guy with the 911, he decided that maybe he would just lay low for the evening, at least for a while. No sense wasting good gas on easy pickings, right?

Rico had followed him over in his Ford Harley Davidson Special F-150 with the slicks and tools beneath the tonneau cover in the back. Actually, he had set up the bed of the truck as a mini pit tool area, even having mounted an air compressor and carrying one of the NASCAR one-stroke floor jacks. Kneeling down on the concrete, he slid the jack beneath the rear of the Challenger T/A and positioned the lift cradle right below the pumpkin. With one quick downward movement, the rear of the Dodge was in the air and the tire changing began.

"Ok, one more time for those that maybe came in late" she said, her stare directed at the man behind the 911 owner. "For the first two hours, it's run what you bring. Enjoy the track rental and get all the runs in you want. I'm told we've got about 28 or 29 drivers listed who want to run so you should get plenty. But at 11pm, that stops."

She paused watching a few of the early comers head back over to their cars which opened up some room for Zane to slide up closer. She continued.

"At 11, we'll start with the grudge matches. I've got about 10 or 12 of them listed so we get those out of the way pretty quickly. At 11:30 that's when everything else stops and I'll tell you at that time who is going to do what. I paid for the rental; I get to make the rules. I can tell you this – my car will not be running anyone until 11:30

– I've already beaten every one of you at one time or another...." Heads nodded in the crowd, those having met up with ANNIL8R before had no objection they could offer to her statement.

Now she turned towards Dan and Sally who she at first didn't see in the crowd. A slight grin changed the deadpan expression on her face to something a little more friendly. Sarah just leaned against the fender of ANNIL8R wishing she had worn warmer clothes and wondering if Megan was *really* going to follow through with what she had told her that morning...

"Dan. And Sally... how absolutely *lovely* to see you tonight." Her tone was hard to read. Some thought she sounded sincere – Dan and Sally thought otherwise. *Zane took a special interest in how they just stared blandly at Megan, memorizing what they were wearing and their faces. That information would be handy later...*

"I'll see you guys at 11:30. You don't have to run anyone here either if you don't want to. Actually, you may want to save what you've got for later. You will definitely need it." Her smile was gone now, at least the one she had for Sally. She turned and headed for the tower with Sarah in tow and disappeared into the evening's shadows.

"Weird, huh Sally?" pondered Dan.

"I don't know if it's so much 'weird' as it is downright creepy, Dan. I don't think Megan is all there but hey, who am I to judge. I just hope our plan works and no one gets hurt."

Dan nodded in agreement as they headed towards their cars. Most others were already headed to the staging lanes but not them. At least not yet. They were just going to watch and keep their eyes open. The TR and the X were locked up safe and secure parked where they were so they headed to the bleachers to see who could walk the walk...

Within 30 minutes, everyone knew who had the smoke and who didn't – at least of those who were running. Most cars were low 12's or high 11's -except for two. Zane's Challenger ripped easy low 11's and everyone knew he was letting off at the big end. A couple of times, the brake lights were lit as he crossed the traps.

"Why's he pulling that crap?" asked Sally.

"Well, I don't know who this guy is but I've heard about this Plum Crazy Challenger. As far as 'why' he's letting off? My guess is he wants to make some money about midnight."

Sally thought for a second and then nodded silently in agreement. Oddly, the old “Fox in the Henhouse” story popped in her mind, just as another cool gust sent more leaves scurrying on the stones beneath the bleachers. The moon was already high in the sky and seemed to be playing hide and seek behind dark clouds. It’s funny how your mind can play tricks on you, she thought. She was *sure* that she heard a wolf howl – but there are no wolves around this part of the country. Right?

The sudden blast of exhaust brought her mind back to reality as she saw the purple Challenger come to the line against the LS6 Chevelle. Eleven some seconds later, she saw the reflection of the Challenger’s teal lights on the side of the Chevelle, the “Win” light tripping in the Mopar’s lane.

And so it went.

The 911 got in several runs but only beat one car – a young girl driving an LS1 T/A. Everyone else he ran he lost to – and he lost *bad* to the Challenger, as did nearly everyone else. The ‘56 Chevy with the 502 held up pretty good until about the eighth mile mark... but then Zane just walked off and left him, beating him by about 4 car lengths. With the brakes on.

But oddly, there was one other car who came late and got into the fray around 10:30 that was merciless against everyone who lined up against him. It was a silver ‘97 Supra that was obviously way past the BPU stage. He seemed to be avoiding the Challenger (or so it seemed to Zane) until shortly before 11. That was when the driver walked over to Zane’s pit and asked him if he would run him in a grudge match. Zane was sitting in a lawn chair and watched the guy walk up, thinking it was odd he still had his helmet on. He laughed out loud when the guy challenged him. Zane had watched the Import run – he was impressed of course, seeing it rip off low 11’s. But he knew he had the Supra covered – but the Supra driver didn’t know it. Why not make some money on this, he thought?

“Tell you what, Supraman... I’ll run you for a grand. How’s that?” Rico, who was sitting nearby, didn’t even look up. He just kept twirling the ratchet while holding onto the socket, enjoying the clicking sounds as it rotated around and around and around...

The driver just stood there for a moment and then reached into his left pocket and pulled a folded stack of bills. Peeling off 10, he held them up for Zane to see while he put the rest back.

“My money will be at the tree in 5 minutes and so will my car. I trust you and yours will be there too.” He quickly turned and walked away toward the starting area.

Zane was surprised to say the least. But he sure wasn’t against taking the guy’s money.

“I’ll be there” he called out. “I’ll be there alright.” Man, this was going to be even easier than he thought.

Dan looked down at his watch. 11:02 pm it read.

“Well, who’s running who?” he asked Sally. They saw 13 different pairs of cars back in the staging lanes; the last two were the purple challenger and the Supra that had been terrorizing the lanes for the previous half hour.

“I don’t know most of the Danny, but I AM interested in watching the last two run. What’s your guess?”

Dan craned his neck to see the last two cars before he answered, giving him time to think for a moment.

“The Hemi will take him. Hands down.”

Sally waited for a moment then answered.

“Nah... I don’t think so Dan. Tell you what - I’ll bet you an ice cream that the Supra will beat him” she grinned as she slid her arm around Dan’s shoulders and pulled up close to him, the breeze ruffling her soft, raspberry scented hair against the side of his face.

Dan chuckled. This was one of the many, many things he loved about Sally – she always liked a good challenge.

“You’re on. I can taste it already. Make it triple chocolate, ok?” he teased back.

“Make mine butter pecan there, Mr. Smarty Pants. You’re gonna lose so don’t even think about chocolate.”

Dan smiled once more. “We’ll see...”

Most of the grudge races were close. Two Turbo Buicks (an '86 T-Type against the '69 Chevelle and a WE4 against a TTA, the TTA losing even with a 12.2 time slip) ran but not against each other but they probably should have. They both walked their opponents fairly easily. Two Sycloons ran each other with the race being ultra close. The winner had a 12.98 against a 13.0 for the loser with identical .44 R/T's. A woman driving a '70 W30 ran her husband in his '71 GSX – and showed him the vertical taillights above the oval exhaust tips. Dan and Sally agreed it would be a long weekend for that guy. The '64 GTO ran someone in a 2001 WS6 T/A – and lost by more than just a couple of car lengths in spite of his 389 Tri Power being very healthy. A guy in a AMX ran a buddy in his built 340 Demon – and smoked him easily, stunning everyone in the stands. Seems the AMX wasn't stock – it had a transplanted SVO Ford Crate Motor 5.0 under the hood feeding a built C4 going back through a Dana rear that was spraying enough NOS to fog Cleveland. Talk about your mixed marriages... Either way, he got the win light.

Even Carl got some revenge against a loudmouthed buddy with a heavily tweaked '99 SS. The Mach 1 promptly pulled the SS by a couple of cars in spite of the 150 shot of spray the built LS1 was using. There, that ought to shut the assclown up, thought Carl with his big grin. A LOT of grudges were settled it seemed.

Finally, the Challenger and the Supra were behind the water boxes.

Both warmed their tires at the same time and everyone in the stands were hushed. Even the other drivers, including the embarrassed Porsche driver, were all at the Cyclone fence or in the bleachers to see the Clash of the Titans – Part 1.

No surprise to anyone, the blown Hemi won the pseudo-burnout contest, doing a John Force style smoker a hundred yards past the staging beams. The Supra simply boiled the hides until a nice white fog covered the rear half of the car and pulled up, watching Zane backing up and hearing the crowd's approval for the prelims.

As both cars lined up and broke the Prestage beams, the crowd was all on its feet. Even Megan and Sarah were watching from the tower, Megan standing near the Microphone for the PA, waiting to announce what was coming up after this race was over.

In the stands, numerous side bets had been placed. Money was going to change hands soon and not just in small amounts.

Blink Both Pre-stage bulbs were lit for both lanes. Zane waited for the Supra to stage first, figuring that the Supra would want to build boost. But surprising, the Silver car just sat there too. Then, Zane pulled on into the Stage beam with a curse. *Blink* Time to show this guy what he's not shown ANYone yet tonight. Hell hath no fury like that of a Blown HEMI... The Supra immediately followed into the Stage beam. *Blink*

The tree began to fall.

Blink First amber. Both cars had the RPMS up, the HEMI rumbling deeply with hundreds more cubes than the inline six of the Supra, its blower's butterflies cracked just a little and the Supra's Turbo spooling up while it sucked hundreds of cfms of intercooled air through its train-car size front mount. But the Supra was no Library Saint itself – it was noisy but in a much different tonal spectrum than the Challenger. However, another interesting item was the transmissions the cars had. The HEMI was a Lenco type tranny, the Supra had a built auto. Zane would be yanking levers – the Supra just had to point and shoot.

Blink Second amber. Both cars now were full against the transmissions. The torque application to the drive trains was enormous with each motor trying to tear itself free of the motor mounts. Boost in the Supra was now near 4 psi and climbing quickly.

BLINK Third amber – both drivers began their launch each aiming for the perfect .40.

Blink GREEN! Both cars were already rolling now, the torque twisting the drive trains harsh enough to lift the noses of both cars. The Supra stayed planted – the Hemi lifted both wheels 6 inches off the pavement as it launched with a deafening roar. Even with its nose in the air, the Challenger got the lower 60-foot time – a 1.54 to a 1.59. Things were looking grim for the Supra and the poor guy didn't even know it.

At the eighth though, it was neck and neck. The shifts were flawless and right at the top of the power band for both cars. Those farther down the track could see the enormous butterflies gaped open on the 6-71 as the purple car tried to leave the ground with each shift.

At the far end, Rico saw it coming. He saw the launch and laughed as the HEMI reached for the sky, knowing that Zane had finally let it all hang out. Then, just when he thought the Supra was done for, he realized that it was not even close to being over. From his view, the Supra looked to actually be pulling ahead.

In the stands, everyone cheered at the wheel stand and watched in awe as the HEMI headed down the track with the Supra seemingly welded to its side. Dan marveled at how far technology had come. If someone had thought even just 15 years ago that an inline six-cylinder import could even dare launch with an elephant, he would be laughed at. Now, it was obvious that size truly does not matter. Well, not much anyhow. Maybe he would have to buy that Butter Pecan after all...

Megan and Sarah waited for the electronics to announce the winner. It was simply impossible to tell from their vantage point who had the lead.

Zane looked over to his left as he grabbed 4th and saw the Supra still at his side.

“Damn!” he cursed, trying to shove the pedal on *through* the floorboard. The HEMI was definitely going to bust the 10’s and he knew it. But so was that damn Ricer.

The Supra jockey listened to the music of the modified Mark IV screaming like a banshee in full song as he kept the HEMI close. Would he pull it off? The traps were only a second away.

Those at the finish line, including Rico, could not agree with who won. They all ran back a little to see which lane got the win. Everyone gasped and few cheered when the bulbs lit up for the far lane.

The HEMI had a 10.33.

The Supra’s board showed a 10.35 *and* the win. His .41 R/T won the race over Zane’s .44.

The crowd was stunned! A bird had killed the Elephant.

Zane was shocked to see he had lost when he picked up his slip at the shack. He knew it was close – but not that close. But the numbers didn’t lie. Now, not only was he a thousand dollars lighter, this just HAD to have screwed up what was going to happen later.

He settled himself after a moment.

No, it didn’t have to change all of it. Not the really good part, anyhow – right?

Sally looked over at Dan with a smug smile. “I’m not going to say anything. Well, other than ‘Make it a double’”.

Dan laughed but still stunned at what he had just witnessed.

“Well... I guess there is the proof that there IS a replacement for displacement.”

Sally smiled and nodded just as the PA crackled and squealed, Megan finally getting the knobs right in the booth. Everyone hushed and looked up at the closest speaker.

“I want to thank everyone for coming out tonight to the track. I’ve been waiting a long time for tonight and soon, you’ll see why. Many of you here know me; many of you don’t. But I doubt if there’s any of you that haven’t heard of the Black Mercury I drive.”

Heads nodded in agreement as the murmuring died down completely.

“I want to see five people at the base of this tower in five minutes. Dan and Sally – you know who you are. Zane. And Jenny – the Supra driver.”

The crowd was stunned once more – it was a *WOMAN* driving that car, they asked each other incredulously? And who was this Rico fellow?

“And lastly, I want Joshua to meet me there too.”

Dan and Sally were now stunned. Joshua? Wasn’t he the guy with the badass Cobra a couple years back that was in a fiery crash?

It seems it is – the one and the same. What could HE possibly have to do with the events of the evening?

Unfortunately, they would find out in less than an hour...

A Darker Shade of Fear - Part 13

We All Value Something...

Dan and Sally headed down the bleachers and joined up with the surprise driver of the evening, Jenny, who had just beaten the HEMI with her Silver Mark IV (not the same Jen who was Carl's girlfriend, who at first was what they had thought when they heard the name). It was the first time anyone could see this Jenny's face since she had kept her helmet on ever since arrival. She was slender and small boned with short-cropped red hair. Freckles dotted her nose and cheeks and her green eyes seemed to accentuate her high cheekbones.

Noticing that Sally was near, she nodded a hello as they neared the tower base.

There, they saw the others assembled. Joshua had changed radically in appearance. He now had a shaved head and apparently had been working out with gusto. Megan stood closest to him with Zane to her right (who appeared to be saying something to Rico and Megan). As the trio approached, the conversations stopped and Megan (with Sarah behind her) just smiled as the stopped in front of the others.

"Well, here's the deal. I've beaten every one of you – other than Jen and I'm pretty sure I can take the Ricer too. But this isn't the street we're at, as you know. Tonight we'll see who's got what when it matters most."

Her grin disappeared and she looked directly into Dan's eyes. "Do you remember what I told you when we left the courtroom that day?" Dan had no clue where she was going with this and his blank look said so.

"No, Megan... not really. I recall that you were pretty upset as was I but I don't remember you saying anything monumental." Megan's face remained expressionless.

"Now Daniel, think... think HARD. I made you a promise. Remember?"

Sally moved closer to Dan and pressed against him, the night air even chillier. The others seemed to be keenly interested in what Dan was about to say next – other than Jen. She thought it was a very awkward moment and shifted her weight nervously from one foot to the other.

Still, Dan could not recall and the questioning was beginning to piss him off. "I give up Megan. I never was as good with the head games as you are, so go ahead and clue us in, ok? We've got some racing to do."

Megan still did not reveal any emotion. "I told you that I would have it all someday, Dan – remember? I told you that someday, you would learn that it's very important to keep valuable things close and safe. Remember now?"

A chill crept up Dan's spine with those words. He DID now remember that phrase, how Megan's voice seemed to be hollow and empty but at the time he just chalked it up to emotions. Now, a lot of things were beginning to seem uncomfortably creepy.

"Had any good DREAMS lately, Danny boy?"

My god! How could she know about those dreams, Dan wondered. His face may have been calm but inside he was anything but calm. How could she know?

"How about you, Joshua? Any good DREAMS lately?" Joshua grinned wickedly through perfect teeth. "Oh yeah, baby... I've been dreamin' REAL good."

Sally had had enough. "Ok Megan, cut the crap. What in the hell has this got to do with us racing here tonight? Either set it up so we can run or we're out of here. This is not anything like we thought it was going to be so put up or shut up."

Megan's face was stone. "NOTHING is like it ever should be Sally... I thought of all people, you would know that." Sally's eyes were burning holes through Megan but Megan didn't care. Off balance and out of their environment was exactly what she wanted.

"Aw, c'mon Sal – just havin' a little fun here! Lighten up!" Sally glanced up at Dan who only shrugged his shoulders. He was definitely confused big time.

Megan changed directions completely, which seemed even more odd. "We're going to run three races here – only if you are willing to lose your car. How about it? Wanna run for titles tonight?"

Jen spoke first. "Nah, I'm outta here. I've got too much invested in my car to risk it to some sleazy dyke like you." Apparently, the touches by Sarah were not unnoticed by everyone. She turned and briskly walked away.

Zane spoke next. "Not me, man. I've already lost to you Megan. I've got other things to do anyhow." His last sentence seemed purposeful and scripted, something that Dan picked up on quickly. Zane left the area and headed back to the Pits leaving Joshua, Rico, Dan, Sally and Megan alone.

"You guys remember Joshua, don't you? Remember the little fire incident at the finish line when he was running Joe's Viper a couple of years back?" Joshua's face was stone once more, oblivious to the glances his way by people trying to remember what he looked like back then.

"Hey, Rico" interrupted Megan. "Don't you need to be somewhere?" Another odd glitch in the moment noticed by Dan and Sally as they watched Rico form an "Uhhuh" on his lips and disappear in the same direction as Zane moments earlier.

"It looks like it's down to the three of us – almost like old times, eh Danny boy?" Now it was Dan's turn to lose his patience.

"Megan, Sally's right. Is that what this is all about anyhow? A 'You' versus 'Me' thing? Jesus, Megs – what is with you anyhow? Life's too short for this crap. If you want to run – and Lord knows you've got possibly the fastest car that's seen this area for some time – then let's run. If you want to keep playing spook fest and twilight zone, we're outta here. Now what's it going to be?"

Dan moved a step towards Megan to emphasize his frustration. She only grinned, not worried in the least.

"Bingo! You've guessed it right, Danny boy! It IS all about you and me and it always has been. So tonight is payback time for me Dan. I'm going to run you in your choice of cars since I know you brought Sally's X and you've got your TR. Heads up, no get out of jail free car, no passing go and if I win, I get your car. You win – and you won't – you get ANNIL8R and I'll disappear."

Dan noticed that some of the crowd had left but that most of them were still in the bleachers craning their necks to see what was going on. The music on the PA kept anyone from hearing what was said, so most figured it was just some friendly wagering being done between Dan and Megan.

"Sally, what do you think?" Dan seemed to have found his zone now that all the cards were on the table – or so he thought.

"Go for it. You can beat the bitch Dan and she knows it." Her glare towards Megan said even more of what she was thinking.

Megan ignored the insult and simply said "Meet me at the line in 10 minutes." With that, she turned and left but not before catching Joshua's stare and nodding her head in Dan and Sally's direction. Dan didn't see the subtle signal nor did either of them notice that Joshua went in another direction.

Dan looked at his watch as he and Sally strode toward the cars – that would make it midnight on the dot. 'How ironic is this?', he mused. Racing a witch at midnight on Halloween? He could only chuckle at the irony.

Joshua walked out to the parking area to his vehicle, a black '03 Suburban with all the glass blacked out. Inside the vehicle was an assortment of hardware items, including rope, tape, shovels, and something much more sinister – two Glock 21's in shoulder holsters, both with full magazines of .45 caliber Remington hollow points. He slipped one holster around his frame, donned a dark red windbreaker, jumped in and started the Suburban listening to the custom installed Duramax (with the Allison 5 speed auto, donated by a wrecked 3500 4x4) smooth out. He then pulled the truck around to the staging lanes, turned off the lights and secured the truck, all the while smiling to himself as he ran through the plan in his head. Everything else was in place – it was simply a matter of waiting for the inevitable to take place. Yes indeed - revenge IS a dish best served cold (and without warning). By now, someone else should be taking care of business.

A shadowy figure had walked up behind Sally who standing alone back of the start area. She didn't know that he put his hand inside the jacket and brought a gun's muzzle forward until she felt it jab hard into her back. She drew her breath in sharply and started to scream/turn just as the attacker whispered "Keep your mouth shut, don't move, and it will all be fine. Come with me."

Sally was now completely frozen in terror. She did not know who was behind her and jabbing her ribs but she DID know what a gun felt like. She felt the pressure from its muzzle try steer her to her right and back around, toward the big GMC that she saw pulling up just a moment ago. Fear now gripped her soul as she couldn't begin to imagine how much danger she was in but she knew it had to be very, very grim if she was being abducted at gunpoint. Nor could she imagine why OR who was behind it? She wouldn't have long to wait to find out.

Nearing the Suburban, she heard it start and saw a gloved hand reach around her to open the door. For some reason, the glove looked familiar. Even in the midst of her terror, lights began to go off in her head. Where had she seen a glove like that before???

Meanwhile, the clocks showed 11.58 as both cars pulled to the line. Rico's voice came over the PA.

"Ladies and gentlemen, here is the race of the year." Rico's ambition to be a radio DJ had some merit.

"No one and I mean NO ONE has beaten the Mercury you see in the left lane. In the right lane, we are going to see Buick's finest itinerant of the Turbo Buick world – a GNX. I'm told that the X is not stock and I believe it. I'll say no more – enjoy the race."

With that, Rico bailed out of the announcer's box and descended long staircase out the back of the building toward the big SUV close by. Making sure that no one was looking, he opened the back door gate and jumped in, slamming the door behind him.

ANNIL8R was in the midst of the burnout, the line-lock holding the big sedan in place as the 29" tall slicks were beginning to heat up and vaporize the water on their surfaces. Within seconds, the entire water box area was a white cloud. The line lock was released and ANNIL8R lunged forward as the slicks bit hard. It then pulled up just short of the beams and waited for the X.

The GNX with Dan behind the wheel mirrored the burnout but with slightly less smoke and pulled up even with the Merc. For a few seconds, the cars just sat there idling as the crowd wondered why they didn't pull ahead. Then, just as Joshua's watch beeped and announced it was midnight, ANNIL8R pulled into the pre-stage beam and the light went yellow.

The X pulled in right behind it and now both "Prestage" bulbs were lit.

Immediately, the sound of both cars changed as the drivers began to add some throttle in anticipation of creeping into the "Stage" beams. Both were running open exhausts but the Buick's V6 sounded offbeat compared to the rhythmic pounding of the Mod Motor under boost. Eerie shrieks and whistles were rising in pitch and the crowd was hushed. Oddly, no side bets had even been discussed. The mood was eerie and somber and the wind had suddenly ceased just as the moon disappeared entirely.

As ANNIL8R broke the "Stage" beam first, a bat swooped down and nearly hit the windshield of the X just as it was moving forward. Everyone could see that something must have startled the driver since the car jerked to a sudden stop which caused the body to lurch nose down. Then, it moved on into the light and now all ambers atop the tree were lit as the drivers essentially floored their accelerators hopefully timing the proper launch boost to coincide with the time to release the hordes beneath the hoods.

The sounds of boost screamed into the cold night air just as some in the stands thought they felt a few cold raindrops on their faces. The dash mounted boost gauge in the Merc showed 3... 4...5...6psi and yet the trans brake held it all in check.

Over on the A-pillar, the Autometer Boost gauge was also moving upward slowly as well – over 6 psi and only the first amber had lit on the tree.

BLINK The second amber came on.

Joshua could see the Stage Bulbs light and started the truck just as Rico had jumped in.

"You got everything man?"

Joshua nodded.

"Good. That's real good... this is gonna be interesting."

As the second amber lit, both drivers began to put pressure on their trans brake switch and then released them just before the third amber illuminated. Their timing was perfect – both had identical .40 R/T's.

Immediately, both cars lunged forward hard and the crowd cheered. Two black warriors from two different worlds were now locked head to head in mechanical combat with only one possible winner.

ANNIL8R was from the prep finishing school where finesse was everything and image meant nearly as much as function. From the gleaming high intensity fog/driving lights to the base coat/clearcoat paint to the modular motor with barely over 280 cubic inches now developing several hundred horsepower, the theme was technology reigns supreme. It had leather and buttons

galore, dual zone air conditioning, and reading lamps at every corner. It came with enough braking force to stop an aircraft carrier and the tires alone cost more than the whole factory rear end of its antiquated foe. It even had four doors. It had a list price when new and bone stock of nearly two and a half times that of its adversary and had a ride so smooth, one would think he was in a limo and not a sports sedan.

In the other corner was a car from days gone by, where sharply angular lines and rectangular headlights were the norm. When Disco was in and Ecstasy wasn't a pharmaceutical. Stock, it had handling best described as adventurous and alert – inducing. Its braking system was a nightmare with guaranteed headaches for its owner down the road. And yet, it commanded more respect when new than any other car of its generation. And even now, though its V6 gave away 2 cylinders and nearly 20% of displacement, it didn't matter – 16 year old technology or not, it still could kick some serious ass – thanks in no small part to the power adders sitting at each front corner of the valve covers. The drive train was now bullet proof from the input shaft to the hardened and over sized wheel studs. The Centerline wheels were light and reduced rotating mass by several pounds, a huge factor in developing speed off the line. It's transmission was a work of art, massaged by Vince Janis in Akron, Ohio and built to be capable of handling 1600 horsepower and still be streetable – barely, but still streetable. The Driveshaft was hardened aircraft aluminum, surrounded by a bright red Safety Loop to keep it in place in case the u-joints might fail. However, even that was unlikely – they were straight out of the NHRA F/C parts bins.

Dan had decided that perhaps a new plate would be fitting for the car and had just installed it that morning. Sally had chuckled at the suggestion at first but when she saw the plate she couldn't agree more.

TRMN8R Asta la vista, baby...

The noise from the lanes was overpowering and several in the stands covered their ears. Even the sound lowering qualities of the turbos could not hush sufficiently the deafening roar of nearly 1800 horsepower being released upon the world. In less than 1.4 seconds, the 60 foot line was crossed, side by side.

Joshua and Rico watched the two figures approach the SUV with the one in front reluctantly doing so. The interior lights had been switched off so when the door opened, it stayed dark. However, they had donned ski masks just to be even safer so identifying them would be hard – as if that would even be possible.

Sally climbed into the back seat and was shoved violently across the dark leather to the other side. She turned to look for the first time at who had brought her to this moment but couldn't make out the face – it had some sort of mask on.

“Turn your head around. I'm going to blindfold you.”

At first she defied the order that came from the front seat but then she recognized the voice just as she got jabbed harder in the ribs by the gun that was now visible. She complied and felt the blindfold flop over her head and then the lights went out. She then heard another door open and shut and felt someone slide next to her and her abductor and whisper something but she couldn't make it out. Then, all was silent once more.

She heard the truck start and then felt it start to move in a wide sweeping turn before it straightened out picking up speed quickly. She had no idea which direction they were going and she was scared, wondering if Dan would have to identify her body. Tears filled her eyes when she thought of how sad he would be to have to do that and oddly, that made her very angry...

At the eighth mile, the cars were still dead even to the naked eye. The crowd was all on its feet but not one had noticed the abduction that had occurred right beneath their noses. The race held all their interests.

Dan's head jerked back hard as the 2-3 shift came on. The nose of the X stayed low and true though as all the horsepower was put to use at the rear wheels and not wasted in incorrect body pitch or movement. He felt a bead of sweat on his upper brow and the tickle of its movement as it tried to move down beneath his helmet. The focus was on making sure the transmission shifted as programmed and so far, so good. This was definitely shaping up to be a very, very tight race.

Joshua and Rico were silent as was Sally's abductor. They all stared intently out the windshield as they drove quickly down the return lane with the lights out. Their goal to meet the cars on the return road at the shack would work flawlessly.

The finish was coming up quickly. Both speedometers were reading nearly 130 mph and there were a few hundred yards to go before the beam would be broken. It was then that Dan noticed that he couldn't see the nose of the Mercury in his peripheral vision anymore. It had fallen slightly to the rear.

In 9.68 seconds, the old school Titan had humbled the prep boy gigolo. And, with over a tenth to spare – the Merc ran a 9.79 which was a great run; just not great enough. Dan felt good... real good. He knew Sally had to be cheering at the gate even as he led the Mercury onto the return road.

As he turned he saw a shape of a big truck or SUV down near the time slip shack and it was sitting sort of crosswise on the road. Slowing as he approached it, he saw a person waving for him to stop. Figuring it was someone needing some help he did so, not paying attention to the fact that the Mercury was right up against his rear bumper which prevented an exit.

As he stepped out of the X with his hands on the door glass as he began to step around, he saw the figure step into the headlights. The GNX's grumbling exhaust note sounding agitated to only be idling as he tried to identify who was in his headlights next to the SUV.

It was Megan! How could THAT be???

Then, who was driving ANNIL8R if this was Megan? He only had a second to think that thought as he saw Megan grinning at him until he felt the hard jab of a gun barrel in his lower back and heard the whisper "Let's go speedy – someone wants to talk to you."

As he walked around toward the SUV, he heard it start up as Megan said, "Climb in. Winners deserve to ride not drive, right Danny boy?" The contempt in her voice was as heavy as the fog that eerily was beginning to creep in visibly in the headlights of the truck that had just came on. Thankfully, the rain had stopped he thought distractedly.

He started to speak but was jabbed hard again when he did. Wisely, he decided that maybe now was not the time.

As Megan pulled open the door, Sally heard her voice ordering someone to put a blindfold on Dan. 'Thank God! Dan is here with me' she had time to think before she realized that now they both in some very deep trouble.

Zane finished tying the blindfold behind Dan's head and shoved him into the truck next to Sally. He could hear sounds of movement from what must be four or five other people in the truck but couldn't tell who was who due to the blindfold. He heard the driver pull the transmission shifter into gear just as he heard a door open and someone get out then slam the door.

He could hear the familiar 'Ca-chunk' sound of the door to the GNX being closed as well as the change in the motor as someone put it in gear. As he felt the truck roll back in what must be an attempt to turn around, he could hear both cars pass ahead of them and then the truck pull in behind them. They only went a short way before they turned perpendicular to the track and out a gravel drive onto the side road parallel to OCRP.

No one spoke until Sally asked, "Where are you taking us?" He heard a voice say shut up, just as he heard the sound of duct tape being ripped – twice.

Suddenly, he smelled – then felt – the nearness of the tape, just as it was slapped over his mouth, nearly covering his nose and making it hard to breath. The smell of the plastic was powerful and he knew that Sally had been given the same treatment too – he could hear her whimpering, near crying. For the first time in a very long time, Dan felt afraid though not for him. He was afraid of what they might do to Sally.

A Darker Shade of Fear - Part 14

Dying to meet you...

In the darkness they rode for what seemed like an hour. Sally had slid over next to Dan and he could feel her trembling against his side. Oddly, he was calm as he recalled some of the dreams from before. He also felt a shiver race up his spine as he remembered the bizarre note that Megan had given him days earlier.

"I knew you then, I know you now, I watched you then, I watch you now..."

What was whole is split, what was split did die, But you never left and so I cry...

The rose will bloom when spring doth come, The rose will die, in winter's sun.

What was will be and what could not, will... I loved you then...I love you still"

It was the *I love you still* that troubled him most but he wasn't sure why. Perhaps the unknown was what made it troubling? The fact that Megan had no reason to love him anymore – his connection with her was long dead. Then the gnawing, nagging reason slowly crept into his understanding... perhaps she intended to hurt Sally.

Megan followed closely behind the caravan in ANNIL8R. Directly ahead of her was the GNX driven by Zane. She giggled as she thought about the terror she could hear in Sally's quivering voice just before she slapped the tape over her mouth. She could see the beads of sweat on her forehead, glistening in the dome light's harsh illumination. She liked the idea of having bound Dan's and Sally's wrists with the same tape... tape that cost so little but worth so much at times like this. Tape that would be used to create memories – or, to erase others.

This would be a night she would make sure that Dan would never forget – even though he would want to - for the rest of his life...

Zane enjoyed the feel of the Buick in his control. The car was one he had secretly envied for years and to have the steering wheel in his hands was almost too good to be true. So what did it matter if it wasn't *his* car? If it all went as Megan said, it would be his – just for the asking.

He watched the brake lights of the Suburban come on and followed it as it turned into an old abandoned airstrip, just off of Miller Road. They were way out in the country now, in an area surrounded mostly by farms that were covered with orange groves. The pavement of the access road was wet with dew and he could see the tracks from the GMC in front of him.

The caravan continued coursing its way back to what was the old parking area/control tower section of the former airport. All the buildings save one were long since rotted away, the fairly new hanger-like structure was a stark contrast to the pieces of foundation and block strewn about the concreted area, interspersed with weeds that were now dead.

As they neared the large silver building, the driver in the GMC hit a door opener and the huge sliding doors pulled apart as the entryway lights came on. Inside, it was dark but the headlights from the vehicles seemed to dance off of several shiny forms of metal and polished wheels. Zane, who had never been in the building but had heard Megan speak of it once, was shocked to see the outlines and shadows of what looked to be several performance cars of all makes and genres. Nearest the door was a what had to be new Porsche 911 TT AWD sitting beside what appeared to be a '71 GTO Judge in Orbit Orange. Beyond that he couldn't tell other than to see the outline of what might be a '67 or '68 Shelby. To the left of the door he saw another Marauder with no plates but what looked to be an identical car to the one Megan was in behind him. Next to the black Merc sat a late model Cobra Mustang as well as a Subaru WRX STI. He could also see the grille of what looked like a Viper of some vintage but he couldn't see it well enough to tell what it was exactly. Either way, he knew he was now near what Megan had jokingly referred to as "Motor head Heaven".

The GMC pulled up and stopped just outside the doors of the building with Zane to its right and Megan directly behind the large SUV. As she stepped from the car, she could smell the diesel's exhaust and rotting oranges in the night and felt her face sting from the cold wind now whipping the leaves across the macadam. She pulled her parka up close and could feel the weight of the Sig in the right pocket, comforted by the thought of its part in her plan.

The driver and front seat passenger got out of the Suburban and each opened a door. The driver pulled Sally out to his side; the passenger pulled Dan out to his. Both of them were cold, having not gotten used to the fall weather now upon the area. Dan struggled to see beneath the crack in his blindfold but all he could see was the ground and some shadows upon it. Then, he heard Sally being shuffled ahead of the truck and he was pushed in the back to move forward with someone holding his left

arm for balance. He could tell they were now very close to a building because the warmth of its interior hit his face like Florida sunshine. He could hear huge fans moving heated and dried air toward and around him. The **Click** of several switches (lights?) could be heard and then he realized that yes, lights were coming on because he could barely make out a dim glow from beneath the blindfold. Some sort of electrically operated doors were now humming closed it seemed behind him and then latches were heard being actuated.

Abruptly, someone was behind him roughly removing the blindfold and suddenly the brilliant light from within the building assaulted his eyes. His wrists ached from being pulled so close together and he looked frantically for Sally, seeing her over to the other side of what now struck him as some sort of storage building loaded with very fast cars. Some people he had seen at the track were inside, and Megan was standing with her back to him watching some seedy character remove Sally's blindfold.

As soon as it was off, Sally's eyes locked with Dan's and they both felt better because of it. Almost simultaneously, two of Megan's accomplices pulled the tape from their faces. Both winced as they felt the sticky material trying to remove the first layer of skin. The guy behind Sally pushed her towards Dan and on past Megan. Megan turned only after she whispered something to the guy nearest her who then exited the building through a solid steel door. She turned to face her hapless victims but stood silent for a brief moment, just looking from Dan's face to Sally's and then back. An odd grin was on her lips and her eyes were dark and spooky.

"Come on Megan – it's time to end this little charade of yours." Dan was never one to hold back.

She only smiled as she approached him.

"I'll give you that, Danny boy... you always wanted to tell me what to do. But things are a little different now, aren't they? Hmmm?"

She circled Dan slowly, her hand upon his shoulder then near his neck. She touched the skin lightly as she stepped behind him and then on around, her eyes looking at Sally all the while. Then, as she neared Dan's shoulder, she scratched his neck hard with her nails, which made Dan jerk away.

"Aw... c'mon Dan. I'm just playing... did I hurt you?" she teased.

Dan saw her hand in her right pocket now and then it came out with a pistol in her grip. He didn't speak but he heard Sally gasp. They both felt their fears rise in their throats, as they knew they were not likely to be able to talk Megan into doing the right thing.

As Megan stood in front of Dan she paused – then, she brought her right knee up sharply into his groin and the lights blinked in his eyes as the pain surged through him. He didn't fall but he wanted to throw up so badly that he could taste the bile. He stooped slightly at the shoulder as two guys grabbed his arms to keep him from either falling or lunging towards Megan. He could hear their chuckles and he hated them for doing so.

Megan laughed as she spoke.

"Did that hurt a little teensy, weensy bit Danny? I hope it did – because you deserve everything that is going to befall you tonight. You see, I brought you out here for a reason... a very GOOD reason. I owe you something Dan and I want to give it to you. And you Sally..."

She turned on her heel to face Sally and stepped right in front of her.

"You, you little whiny, husband stealing bitch – oh, yeah, you... well, you're going to get yours too. But that will be later. Actually, I've got a proposition for your husband that, depending upon his choice and how it works out, will either just kill you – or, it will kill you."

She had the Sig now near Sally's face, rubbing the cold blue steel against her left cheek.

"Does that feel good, Sally? Cold, hard steel feels so sexy, I think. Do you like it, Sally?"

Sally didn't flinch. Her eyes never left Megan's and now she was too mad to be frightened. They had to find a way out of the building, her and Dan. They needed to get away and see if they could still make their plan work. But how?

Megan turned back to Dan.

"Dan – look over your left shoulder."

He turned and saw the cars with the Marauder catching his eye first.

“Am I supposed to be impressed with what must be your car collection, Megan?”

She smiled. “Well, the car you raced tonight was not the same car that raced you a while back on the street. THAT car over there is the car that left you sitting at the light. That is the car that has never been beaten. THAT is the car known affectionately as “ANNIL8R”.”

“You see, Dan – you didn’t *really* win tonight; because you didn’t REALLY beat the best car. So that’s why I brought you here – for a ‘private’ race. With some very interesting stakes for you if you win and some very serious ones for you if you lose.”

Dan’s mind was whirling with concern. It was very obvious that Megan had lost touch with reality with the gunplay, the abductions, the threats and the attack just moments ago. His stomach still reeled with nausea as the pain in his groin throbbed horribly. “Megan, I’ll say this one time. Let us go and I’ll see to it that you get the help you obvious-“

BAM!

She kneed him once more in the groin and now he fell hard to the ground, the pain blinding him and the tears soaking his face.

“SHUT UP YOU BASTARD!!! I don’t need ANY HELP!” she screamed at him as she leaned over him. Two thugs restrained Sally as she tried to go over to Dan’s crumpled body.

“Lift him up, Zane. Get him to his feet” she hissed.

Zane and another picked Dan up but he could barely stand. The pain was unbelievable and suddenly he lost the fight to keep it down. He bent forward and vomited hard, gagging at the bitter taste in his mouth as his stomach emptied itself.

Megan laughed.

“You better get to feeling better Danny. You’ve got a race to run. And trust me – you do NOT want to lose it. It will mean the world to Sally on how well you do.”

She laughed as she walked away.

“Get him cleaned up, Zane. They’re out taking the tarps off the strip now and prepping the race area. We’ll be ready in about 30 minutes. Then – it’s Showtime...”

A Darker Shade of Fear - Part 15

The first cut is not always the deepest...

Dan watched Megan walk away and out of the corner of his somewhat still blurred vision he saw another woman walk out of a room in the corner of the building, turn and head toward her. Megan stopped as soon as she saw Sarah and smiled.

Sarah hugged Megan warmly and then walked over to Sally while Megan headed on over to the Merc. The guys had all left the building except for two. Sarah stopped just short of Sally, gave her a long, slow look and then turned towards Dan.

She walked over slowly having seen what Megan had done to him earlier and stood before him. One of the guys was now removing Dan's bindings from his wrists as the other was doing the same for Sally.

"Does it still hurt, Dan?" She sounded genuinely concerned but Dan knew it was a ruse.

"Yes. It hurt. But I'll live so don't worry about it, ok?" The sarcasm was heavy in Dan's voice, even if the pain was equally evident. Sarah just smiled.

"That Megan can be so mean, can't she? I know what a temper she has! But you know what, Dan? She is sooooo good at kissing and making up..." Sarah grinned and walked over to the other Mercury where Megan was opening the hood by reaching through the open driver's door. As she was raising it, Sarah walked up behind her and reached around from behind, cupping Megan's ample chest in her hands and then kissed her neck. Megan leaned back against her and sighed, the hood popping on up to full open.

"I've missed you, Megan..."

"I know... but it will be over soon and we can catch up. Doesn't that sound like fun, Sarah – catching up?" Megan now turned to face Sarah as Sarah's hands slipped free. Whispering softly, she spoke in her ear.

"Do you think he knows?" Megan asked as she reached her hand beneath Sarah's sweatshirt. Sarah shook her head as she cast a glance in Dan's direction, leaning her body against Megan's.

"Nah... he doesn't have a clue – yet. Ahh... yes.... Right there... But he will... he definitely will soon." Megan's hand had found its quarry and felt the pliant softness and warmth silky skin. She kissed Sarah slowly as her hand emerged again from beneath her lover's shirt. "We'll do more catching up later. Right now, we need to get to work – after I explain a few things to Danny boy"

The guy behind Sally led her over to a couple of chairs and instructed her to sit. Sitting there, she watched the other guy lead Dan over to the Merc where Megan leaned against its black fender. Sarah was sitting in the car in the driver's seat.

"Listen up, chump. Megan's gonna explain the rules of the game here, ok?" The guy gave Dan a little shove, just to prove pecking order. It only added this guy to Dan's growing list of people he 'owed' something to.

"Dan, remember a long, long time ago when Harry was still alive and he told you about him and me?"

"Go on." Dan was short on patience and had no time for a lecture – he needed to find a way out of there and fast. Sally looked like she was going to lose it any minute with the guy sitting next to her and a gun on his lap.

"Well, remember you getting all noble and stuff and decided that 'we' weren't worth saving? Even though I begged you to give us a chance once more? Remember that Dan?"

"To have a chance, Megan, you have to love each other. You obviously did not love me or you wouldn't have been polishing Harry's knob every chance you two could sneak off."

Megan just grinned. Not quite the reaction Dan thought he might see...

"Well, Dan, if you must know I DID love you. Yes, I got tangled up in something with Harry I didn't know how to get out of at first but then I didn't care. It didn't look to me like you cared so I guess I just got swept away. But hey, that's all in the past, right? In the past indeed..." Megan's face was smiling but her eyes showed something much darker.

"The past can never be relived, can it Dan? But all too often, some of us tend to live in the past don't we? Like you, sweet Dan... you couldn't wait to hook up with that little bitch, Sally, could you? I'm sure you felt like the white knight every time you were with her didn't you? I bet you still do."

Dan's fists were clenched but he knew this wasn't the time or place to set Megan straight. That would come soon enough he hoped – but not here.

"Well, I've got another huge surprise for you but first, I've got another surprise for you. Sally – come here."

Sally stood up and walked toward the three, finally stopping near Dan.

"Over here Sally. It's time he knew. You haven't told him, have you? You didn't already ruin the first part of 'our' little secret did you?"

Suddenly, Dan's blood ran cold. The way Megan talked to Sally had an eerie tone in her voice. A tone of – what was it? – familiarity...

Before Dan's eyes, he saw a transformation in Sally. Where before she was scared and crying, she now was grinning. She stepped over to Megan and kissed her hard on the mouth before she turned to face Dan with her arm around Megan's waist.

For the second time tonight, Dan wanted to throw up. Beads of sweat broke out on his forehead as he knew now that the plan he and Sally had made would NOT occur

– Megan surely had been tipped off. His options now were slim and none.

"Surprised Dan?" asked Megan.

He didn't speak... actually, he was unable to speak. Sarah got out of the car, came around behind Sally and leaned against her putting her arms around Sally's waist. The three girls now all grinned at Dan.

"Why Sally? Why?" was all Dan could say.

"Money, Dan. It's all about the money. But this isn't all of it, is it Meg? Is you-knowwho here yet?"

Megan didn't have to answer. A deep voice from within the office spoke.

"Hey, Danny – it's me."

A tall sinewy figure walked into the light. Dan was stunned beyond belief – it had to be a ghost.

It was Harry.

"How can you be alive? I SAW you die at the street race that night. That guy shot you and I know you were dead!"

Harry chuckled, the same childish chuckle that Dan knew from the years he and Harry had hung around together. It was Harry all right.

"Well, Dan – for a few seconds, I was dead, at least that's what they told me. But hey, miracles of medicine, you know? Here I am!"

Dan's world crumbled even more – Sally walked over to Harry and hugged him close, grinning at Dan all the time. For the first time in his life, Dan was scared. He had no ally here. He had no backup plan. And the deceit cut deeply to everything in him that was man – he had been duped and duped good. By the best of them it seems.

Harry and Sally.

Megan read his mind. "Feeling a little, shall we say, alone Danny? Oh, and in case you're wondering, I know about your plan. Carl won't be coming Dan. Sally turned off the GPS just to make sure and besides, she never told him and I'm pretty sure you didn't either. Did you Dan?"

If it was possible to sink lower in despair, Dan just did. Here he was, in the midst of crazies and in the middle of nowhere. No one knew where he was. And NO one was coming to help.

"Hey, Dan – I've got an idea." It was Harry, mocking him.

"Let's you and I have a little race. That would be fun won't it? Maybe that will take your mind off of everything. I've always wanted to run that X of yours but of course, I couldn't – I was 'dead'! Ha-ha-ha!"

At first, racing was the furthest thing from Dan's mind. But then, an idea popped into his brain. Maybe, just maybe, a race might be just the ticket out of here. He had to forget his feelings for now. He had to get out of there to fight this fight another day. He had seen the pistol tucked in Harry's belt. He saw the others with the guns and he knew his only chance was to run.

Megan spoke again, reading his mind once more.

"Oh Danny, you aren't so foolish as to think that we would let you escape from here are you by allowing you the means to do so in your own car? There is only ONE road in and out of this place Dan – the others were torn up and made into farm land long ago. This is my uncle's old farm – one of them anyhow. Uncle Darrel always loved this place. He said it was the best place in the state for oranges. And he was right – he made a fortune off this old land. Best of all – he died and left it to me!"

She continued. "So, don't go thinking you're going to fake a race and then bolt out of here Dan. There's nowhere to go but out the road we came in on. And right now, the gates are closed and two of my guys are waiting for you if you DO try it. I'm sure they would love to try out their new AK's I just bought them. It would be a shame though to see holes shot into that car of yours – but make no mistake, they will – if you try to get away."

But Dan didn't really care. NO matter what Megan or Harry or even Sally said, he had to find a way out of there. "Ok, Megan. I know what you mean. So what's the REAL deal here? You said it was about the money. What money? It looks like you've got plenty – why mine and Sally's?" He then realized how stupid it sounded to say "mine and Sally's" after the disclosures he had just seen.

"Oh, Dan. We don't want your little nest egg. We want your Company's. I think that's a LOT of money isn't it?" She was right – his firm was in the top 20 of Fortune 500's most profitable companies – worth hundreds of millions. He knew that at any given time, he had the codes to transact cash amounts of 250 million dollars or more from one account to another.

And now, so did Megan.

"Look over there." She pointed to a table near the office that had a computer set up on it with several cables strewn about. One cable snaked down the table, across the floor and through the wall to a satellite uplink outside.

That was when it all began to make sense, if crime ever made any sense. Sally of course knew that Dan had the account numbers and all the info necessary to make transactions for his firm. But when did Sally and Megan get together? He still racked his brain on this one...

"We're going to make a friendly little wager on tonight's race Dan. You win – you walk; but we still get your money. You lose? Well, let's just say dead men don't walk. By the time someone finds you here, we'll be long gone."

Dan laughed which amused Megan. She knew where he was headed.

"So why should I give you the info Megan if you're probably going to just kill me anyhow? You kill me, you don't get the money. And someone will figure it out one way or another, sooner or later. You'll be caught – all of you. You have to know that, don't you? So why should I even let you bust my company if you're just going to kill me anyhow?"

He was sure he had made some sort of impression.

He was wrong.

"Bring him out here, Harry." Megan's voice was ice once more.

Harry went into the office where some scuffling of chairs was heard. Dan could here what sounded like a muffled voice and then he saw the source.

Harry was hustling Carl out of the office towards the group. Carl's arms were tied behind his back and tape was across his mouth and his left eye was nearly shut from a vicious looking bruise surrounding it. Apparently they hadn't gotten Carl without some resistance. The though made Dan happy for just a moment.

"You see Dan, Carl here is our insurance. You run, we kill Carl. You try anything funny, we kill Carl. Now, you wouldn't want that to happen would you? You wouldn't want THAT on your conscience for the rest of your life would you Danny? You would run away scared and maybe even get away, knowing that you left Carl's body behind?" Megan circled around Harry and Carl, her Sig again drawn and in her right hand, sliding it up and down and around Carl's back and chest.

Again, Dan was sick and he knew she was right. He couldn't leave Carl behind. If he did, Carl would die and he knew it. Running was not the option now.

"So here's the deal Danny. You give Stan over there – he's the geeky, computer guy at the table – the account info and password. He'll upload the info and prepare the transaction. Then, you and Harry have your race. You win, you and Carl get left here to walk out on foot and we'll be long gone. You lose – well, let's just say you don't want to lose. Got it Danny? It's all about the winning now. So give Stan those numbers or we'll kill Carl – now." She abruptly put the pistol to Carl's head and thumbed off the safety.

"I mean it Dan. NOW! If we have to kill you we will because I'm sure we can get the codes from the info Sally brought from your safe, somehow or other. Either way, just make it easy on all of us and give Stan the numbers -NOW."

Hoping to buy some time for Carl and himself, he gave in. "Bank of America, account number 234 2190T, access code TR98TT, password "2U8Y9G838." Stan entered the data.

"Got it Megan. I'm in." He continued to type furiously as he prepared to send millions offshore.

"Ok Danny, that's enough for now. Curt here will take you to your car in a moment. Harry, are you ready?"

"I'm ready, Meg. I was BORN ready." Harry grinned. The same old Harry, Dan thought – joking even in the face of danger.

Megan walked over to Dan and stood in front of him, her face squarely in Dan's.

"Remember Dan, no funny stuff or you'll never see Carl again. Race Harry heads up. You'll like the track. The first 330 feet of it is heated via coils just beneath the track surface. The surface temperature is kept a steady 75* when the temps drop and it's sprayed – you'll hook great! Of course, you need to as you know! And, it's dry thanks to the work of the crew. This is where we test and tuned ANNIL8R so I can vouch for it – it's a perfect track. Any questions?"

Dan shook his head. He was too busy thinking to ask one anyhow.

"Ok, go with Curt. If you need race gas or alky, he'll get you hooked up. Meanwhile, we'll keep Carl nice and cozy till you get back."

Dan and Curt turned to walk out when Sally spoke again.

"Dan?"

He stopped and turned to face her.

"Sweet Dreams..."

A Darker Shade of Fear - Part 16

"Come into my parlor", said the spider to the fly...

Dan walked out of the building followed by yet another one of Megan's boys. He walked with Dan over to the Buick and stopped just short of it to look the car over.

"You know, I've heard about these things – the GNX's – most when I was growing up. I was 9 when this car was made. I just don't see why everybody says they're such a badass. It looks like a shoebox and can't be any sort of chick magnet."

Somehow, Dan found what he said funny, in spite of the predicament he was in.

"So, what exactly kind of car do you like?"

Dan was halfheartedly trying to engage the guy, hoping for something that might give him an idea.

"Man, I'm a Camaro guy myself. I've got a really badass V-6 with an exhaust off of a LS1 Z/28, some dubs and ultra low profile tires, and a killer Alpine setup with Polk speakers. Plus, I put new Accel Yellow Wires on it and tinted the windows. I would love to run up against one of these babies on the street – you know, V6 against V6 and all. Sorry man, I forgot your name – I'm Dustin." No hand extended but none was expected given the situation.

Dan realized the guy was dead serious. If the guy had been listening really hard, he might have been able to hear Dan's eyes roll.

"Well, Dustin, I'm Dan. Not necessarily nice to meet you like this you know. And yeah, that would be interesting all right, your car against mine. Maybe someday we'll cross paths again – under different circumstances and all and you'll get your chance and I'll get mine." Dan emphasized the last three words probably a little more than he wanted to but he had lived the knowledge that this 'kid' could only dream about.

Changing subjects, Dustin spoke again. "Dan, hope you do ok in the race. That black car in there – the Marauder – is DEFINITELY sick. I've seen it pull the wheels out here on the track. I don't know if you saw them or not but there are wheelie bars on it now. I really don't think you'll have a prayer here, Dan. No offense or anything"

I guess I didn't see that after all. Must have been thinking about something more important like saving my ass than looking at bolt-ons... Something once more Dan decided that was just better left unspoken.

Dustin left just as Dan opened the door to the X. The key was still in the ignition so he was greeted not only with the warm glow from the dome lamp but the chime reminding him to take out the key. Oddly, they both gave him some hope but he just couldn't figure out why...

Megan and Sally were sitting in the office. The window behind Megan's desk afforded a clear view of building's contents and now that all the lights were on, Sally could see that there were several cars of various makes and vintages in the building. One that caught her eye was a yellow Enzo Ferarri.

"I didn't think they were bringing that car – the Enzo – to the States?" she half stated, half asked, while pointing in the general direction of the million dollar exotic.

"Well, initially they weren't – but I got one. It's nice to have connections you know. Actually, it's just in storage here – like a few more of them are – for a plastic surgeon from Jersey. Guess he gets a lot of work out there. Must be a bunch of UGLY people huh? Ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Megan looked up from the folder she was looking at as she laughed – it was a secret document that Sally had gotten for her from Dan's file regarding his company's holdings. Had she been able to provide for Megan the numbers and passwords needed, there was a good chance that Dan would have already been dead and Carl would never had been grabbed.

"You know Sally, I was really surprised that day you and I talked, especially after what you told me! I guess no one ever really knows a person until it comes around to money, now do they?"

Megan smiled at Sally but had an odd glint in her eye that Sally didn't understand but she chose to ignore it. Changing directions, she scooted her chair up closer to Megan's desk.

"You're going to kill him right? Both of them? Isn't that what you told me? I don't think we should leave any chance of discovery like you said."

Megan put down the folder, rose from her chair and came around to kneel beside Sally's chair. Reaching up with her right hand, she brushed a lock of hair from Sally's forehead and smiled.

"Sally, you don't have to worry. When Dan gets to the end of the track, Harry has got a little surprise waiting for him and that car of his. And as far as Carl goes, let's just say that I hope he can swim with cement shoes. We're going to drop him off at the lake after we leave here."

She paused for moment to ponder her pun.

"Drop him off! I said 'Drop' – I slay me, I'm so funny! That's a good one! Hey – I've been meaning to ask YOU something... what was the 'Sweet Dreams' remark you said to Dan as he left supposed to mean?"

With the evilest of grins she smiled. "Oh, nothing really... just something Dan used to say to me before we would go to sleep at night. I thought it was appropriate since he's getting ready to, you know, go to sleep so to speak!" Megan liked the answer and grinned.

Sally laughed heartily and then reached over to hug Megan. Megan's face was next to hers and she slowly turned it facing Sally's. Their lips were less than an inch apart, their breath hot on the other's face. Slowly, Megan placed her lips on Sally's and pulled her hard against her. Reaching out with her long left leg, Megan kicked the door shut. Now, it was just Sally and Megan alone in the office.

Megan reached over and locked the door and then pulled the vertical blinds shut. Sally was standing now too, watching every move of Megan's and breathing hard – she wasn't sure if she could go THIS far, but it was too late to back out now...

Megan pulled her sweater over her head revealing her ample cleavage and the fact that she wasn't wearing a bra. "Come here Sally, I've got something I think you'll like...."

Dan was sitting in the X in the left lane – *no reason to have picked it he decided, it just felt luckier* - just ahead of the burnout box with his mind racing furiously in an attempt to get a handle on the situation. His options were essentially none and he knew it. Megan knew it, Sally knew it and Harry knew it. Hell, even Dustin knew it – he could see it in his eyes and hear it in his voice. The night had never been so dark.

He could smell peaches – so strong was the scent that he at first thought it was an air freshener he had left in the car. But it wasn't – the smell was outside and was coming through the vents of the car. Reaching over with his right hand, he slid the Heat/AC controller to the left and into the "Off" position. The fan was already at the "Low" position but he was getting tired of smelling peaches. He watched as Dustin was putting some water down in the box from the green hose and shiny silver nozzle. The tree was lit, the track tarps were gone, the track lights were all on and he even could clearly see the boards 1320 feet away, although it WAS beginning to look and feel like a fog could roll in anytime. His watch ticked loudly in his ear – time was disappearing fast. Way too fast...

The rumble of an open exhaust V8 could be heard now over the sound of the X. In his rear view mirror, he could see a car approaching the staging area – it was the *real* ANNIL8R – the one from the building. THIS car was definitely different from the one he had just ran (and beaten) a few hours before. Its exhaust note had the unmistakable tone of a blown and heavily force fed motor. If he didn't know better, he would have sworn it sounded almost like a muffled fueler – if that was even possible. What was it that Dustin had told him? The other one had Turbos – *this car* had a big Roots blower on it?

He had to admit – for just a second there, it was nice to think about cars and racing. Not the fact that in all likelihood he would be dead in minutes – unless he could come up with a plan.

In seconds, both cars had pulled into the water boxes and did their burnouts to warm their tires. And even though ANNIL8R's exhaust was L-O-U-D, nothing sounded as good to Dan as the sound of the motor in the X. Harry pulled to the line ahead of Dan. Oddly, Dan DID notice the wheelie bars.

I guess you were right after all, Dustin... guess I never noticed them before.

Both cars were up to the first light. Dan didn't even know if it was going to be a Pro Tree or regular...

Once more, something I should have been told about – YESTERDAY!, he thought in his best Adam Sandler voice.

It was too late to change things now. In less than 10 seconds, he better have a plan because the first 'Staged amber just went –

BLINK

His transbrake was set and he was up against the converter fully. Harry was essentially in the same position, waiting for the Pro light –

**BLINK!!!* All three ambers lit!!!*

Dan's reactions were good enough to see that he had to launch immediately. But he could also hear that Harry had gotten the jump on him. Not by much – but some. Glancing at the boards down the track he saw the R/T's -.52 for him; .49 for Harry.

Not bad Danny boy... not bad at all for not knowing which damn tree you were facing...

Both cars hooked hard. Dan could tell that the VHT was ripe and the track was warm, in spite of the slight misty fog that seemed to have just become visible seconds before they launched. The glare in the headlights made an eerie glow and actually seemed to get heavier with each second.

Now that's a fast moving fog... Probably another one of Megan's tricks... Then, he had to acknowledge that for as much as Megan was a control freak, Mother Nature was out of her league...

They passed the eighth mile with Harry holding a half car length lead and ever so slightly gaining. The roar of both exhausts startle the nightlife surrounding the abandoned strip/race track. A huge owl swooped down out of a century old Oak causing droplets of moisture from the shaken limbs to patter on the leaves below. A raccoon scurrying along the ground with a rotting peach in his left front paw, stopped just outside of the cyclone fence and watched with interest as the two NOISY monsters passed him by, perhaps wondering where THEY were going in such a hurry. At least he had his peach... off into the thickening fog he went.

Damn! This FOG is unbelievable! IF Harry wasn't beside me, I don't know if I could even see him! How did it fall so fast???.

Dan felt beads of sweat on his brow as the finish line was drawing nearer, although he was pretty sure he was side by side with the Merc but not sure when that happened. ANNIL8R's roar was deafening, even with the blower, almost taunting him like some half-visible psycho with a scream of impending death to the listener. He knew he was about out of track and time both – it was now or never. Either the X had the balls – or it didn't...

Megan embraced Sally and backed up against the desk, nearly knocking Sally's purse off. It fell to its side and gaped open as their bodies were pressed hard together, their kisses deep and lingering. Sally was leaning Megan against the desk and her hand slid over to her purse, looking for that special object she had brought along if this situation would present itself. Reaching inside, she found it and it felt cool and smooth in her hand.

She continued kissing Megan passionately, her left hand pulling Megan's face into hers. She brought her right hand up alongside Megan's bare skin and slid the object up her side. Megan grinned, even in the midst of kissing, thinking of the pleasures that were about to come. Until she heard the click of the safety being toggled to "Fire" on the Desert Eagle now pressed against her left temple. The kissing stopped as did the fondling. The mood was definitely lost...

Sally stepped back and pointed the .357 Magnum squarely at Megan's chest, the smooth blue steel of the barrel reflecting the fluorescent lights above, the hum from those same lights now oddly very loud. Megan spoke first...

"I should have known. You want it all don't you? You realized how easy this was going to be and now you don't want to share – you just want it all. You selfish, arrogant BITCH!" But Megan wasn't nearly as angry as she sounded. She stood up and began to step towards Sally. Outside, they could hear the exhaust of the cars, knowing that the race was now in full progress.

"Don't move another step Megan or I swear to God, I will blow your chest wide open." Sally sounded a lot more convincing than she felt.

COULD I really do it? Could I kill her here if I have to? Yessss... I believe I can..."

Sally's finger tightened on the trigger. Megan kept moving closer, barely an arm's length separated them now.

"You don't have the nerve, Sally. C'mon – you're not a killer. Tell you what – just put down that gun and I'll forget all about this little tiff we had. We can still do it just like you said at first – 50/50. C'mon... put it down... just... put... it... down..."

Suddenly, a door slammed from somewhere else in the building, diverting Sally's attention for just a nano second. It was all the opening that Megan needed and she took it.

Kicking high and hard, she knocked the gun from Sally's hand. Half-nude or not, killing Sally was now the only thing on her mind. "And why not? She was going ME, right? Serves the bitch right – I'll just take it ALL!", she thought.

Sally's forearm nearly snapped from the force of the kick. As she felt the gun fly out of her hand, she barely had time to cover her face from the return kick Megan aimed at the side of her hand. Fortunately, Sally deflected it or she would have been unconscious.

But at the same time Megan had her stunningly powerful left leg high in the air intent, on knocking Sally out of the fight, she made herself vulnerable. And Sally was too well trained to not see the opportunity.

Ducking beneath the deflected kick, Sally lunged into Megan hitting her hard with her left hook straight in Megan's stomach.

"OOOMPH!!!" The air left Megan's lungs from the sharp up thrust to the diaphragm that caused her breasts to heave and sent doubling her over. It was the opening that Sally was looking for.

As Megan's face came down, the pain evident on it as she fought to regain her breath, Sally's right fist was coming up and caught Megan squarely in the nose. The hit forced her back over backwards and down to the floor with a plop like wet cement. Immediately, blood spurted from both nostrils and Megan's eyes were watering furiously. Sally pounced on her again and struck her hard with her left fist on the jaw, knocking Megan out cold, her head to the side with a bloody broken nose.

Sally jumped up quickly and grabbed Zip Strips from her purse. She rolled the still unconscious woman over and began binding her wrists behind her back and then her ankles with the plastic ties. Using two long strips, she tied the two bindings together. Standing up she heard the shifts from the cars, realizing that she must have just heard the 3-4 shifts since the volume was fading fast.

Grabbing some Kleenex from Megan's desk, she daubed at the bloody knuckles and then found two red shop towels to wrap them in. They hurt bad but she couldn't wait

– the race was about over and she had to move fast to finish her deeds.

Reaching into her purse, she picked up the small two way radio. Depressing the Talk button, she spoke.

"Nightsounds are the best sounds."

Beneath the driver's seat and fastened to the seat rail with gray duct tape, a red 'RCV' light illuminated and the UHF radio strapped there and carried Sally's voice to any who would be listening. Above the roar of the exhaust as the X crossed the finish line in the soupy fog, Dan heard Sally's voice.

Interesting... very interesting...

A Darker Shade of Fear - Part 17

I've been dying to meet you...

Dan and the X crossed the finish line less than 2 tenths of a second ahead of ANNIL8R. The sound of both motors dropping rpms in the dead-still night air reverberated for miles in spite of the low dense fog that seemed to be lifting at the far end of the track faster than it came it. Its eerie glow in the headlights seemed to add a surreal touch to the time passing; time that may run out in mere seconds if Dan's hastily built plan didn't work.

And even Dan didn't like his odds. But for Harry, the odds were getting better in spite of his surprising loss.

As Dan slowed to make the right turn onto the return lane, Harry pulled abruptly in front of the gate and blocked Dan's access. Inside the Buick, Dan realized now that he had precious few seconds to spare. His mind raced, trying to grasp something – anything – that made sense and would allow him a chance to get away, grab Sally, and get the authorities before it was too late. For all he knew, it may already be too late for Carl and Sally both. The cold icy hand of fear crept up his spine as he sat there in the fog, his headlights on the driver's side door of the Merc, waiting, watching to see what Harry was going to do. To his right, he could see the headlights of a pair of vehicles heading down the track toward them – in just a moment, his plan would not work at all; right now, it had a snowball's chance in hell to work.

It was now or never – he had no choice.

"Let's dance..." he laughed. "C'mon, Harry... let's dance."

Sally took one more look at Megan's groggy form on the floor, happy that no one had tried to enter into the room, admiring her work with the duct tape she found – work that would ensure Megan's silence for at least a little while. Peering out from around the blind, she could see Sarah talking to two people but there was no sight of Carl. Sweat beaded up on her brow; she had heard the motors go silent at the end of the track – she hoped that Dan was still alive, but she couldn't be sure.

She crept over to the doorway and ever so slowly rotated the locking mechanism. She flipped the switch to turn the lights off in the room just before she cracked open the door. Peering out from within, she could still see Sarah's back. She thumbed the safety to "Off" on the big auto in her hand and pulled the door back slowly...there was only one way out of the building, only one way to get to Dan and hopefully Carl, only one way to freedom.

And Sarah was directly between her and that way out...

Dan saw the door of the Marauder start to open and Harry's leg appear beneath the opening. The door swung open more and Harry's hand was on the top of the door now, his head beginning to rise above the window. Had Harry been listening, he would have heard the sound of the Buick's motor drop slightly in revs as Dan pulled the shifter back into "D" from "N". Just as Harry stood up, he had less than a second to realize that the Buick's headlights were aimed square at him with the only thing between he and Dan being sheet metal and glass.

The Buick's motor roared and the turbo screeched sucking in the cold night air as the X roared toward the side of ANNIL8R. Harry was nearly clear of the door now, his right hand rising above it with the big Colt auto rotating into a direct line of the driver's side of the Buick's windshield. His hope to get Dan to step out of the Buick was obviously not going to have a chance to work, he thought to himself.

It was all as if in slow motion... the door of the Merc swinging open more and more, Harry's finger pulling down on the trigger of the .45, the nose of the X scant inches from the opening door, Dan's foot harder and harder pressing against the accelerator, the brilliant orange/white flash of Harry's gun firing... the spider-webbing of the windshield of the X, just above Dan's face, the glass then exploding inward as the X hit ANNIL8R's door and catching Harry squarely with the side of it... Dan saw the door collapse into Harry's body as the nose of the Buick crushed into him as well...

He saw Harry looking coldly, directly into his eyes, the warmth of blood trickling over his face as he looked back at Harry now fatally pinned against the Merc and onto the grill of the Buick... then, he watched Harry grin as he pulled the gun up somehow and pointed it right into the broken windshield of the X. Dan saw the muzzle flash just as he tried to duck but he never heard the roar...

Sally heard the noise from the other end of the track, from the sound of the Buick's motor racing suddenly to gunfire. The gunfire was enough of a distraction that Sarah and the two guys looked toward the nearest window and that was the break she needed. Sally bolted from room and was only a few feet from the exit when she heard someone yell "She's out! Grab her – NOW!"

Sally knew she would never make the doorway before the guys would be on her. Her only choice was to turn and fight. With the ferocity of a cornered Wolverine, she turned, leveling the Desert Eagle in the direction of the two guys lunging in her direction.

They halted – for a moment.

"Aw, put the gun down, missy..." leered one of them. "We ain't gonna hurt you."

Their Jerry Springer Show qualifying grins told her better.

She spoke calmly. "Take one more step – either of you – and you'll be dealing with a permanent limp."

The silence was deafening. Then, the smaller of the two men decided that she was bluffing.

He was wrong.

He never even got a full step before the slug tore his left kneecap and most of the attaching ligaments and tendons away. He crumpled to the bloody floor screaming as the other man took off running, abandoning Sarah without hesitation.

"So what say YOU, Sarah? Interested in some Family Medical Leave? Come on... just take one little step and I'll be glad to help you get those benefits that seem to be hard to come by for people of your, shall we say, 'lifestyle'."

Sarah backed away slowly but not before asking, "Where's Megan?"

"She's taking a breather right now. Something about her sinuses bothering her." She could see the tears in Sarah's eyes now. Obviously, Sarah did not have the spine for violence that her lover did.

Sally watched her turn and walk away then she headed for the exit. As she walked out into the air, she heard another gunshot and oddly, she suddenly felt very, very alone. The damp air brushed her cheek like the hand of death itself, cold and light. As she rounded the building, she could see the taillights of the Suburban disappearing down the track as well as those of a smaller SUV or pickup. The silence of evil was all around her and Dan was a quarter mile away. Despair gripped her strongly as she realized she didn't have a way to get down to where Dan was – no matter his condition.

Until she saw the big bike sitting near the side of the building. She ran to it and saw the key was still in the ignition. Not even noticing that it was big Suzuki (or even caring) she straddled it, pulled in the clutch, flipped the key and saw the green neutral light and lit it off. Just as she did, she saw a young man come running toward her – it was Dustin.

"Hey lady! Where ya going with the Bike?!"

She answered him by waving bye, her gun tucked down between her waistband. All she knew was that she had to get to the end of the track to see if Dan was still alive...

Dan felt the shock in his chest as if he had been kicked by a Clydesdale. Oddly, it didn't hurt – the bullet entering his body shoved him violently against the seat of the Buick, shattering his collar bone and coming to rest just beneath the skin of his back. His breath was coming shorter and shorter... oddly, he felt very warm but he knew that if he blacked out, he was dead for sure. Looking back out the shattered windshield, he saw Harry slumped over the mangled door of the Marauder, his right hand empty and frothy blood dripping from his lips. Dan struggled to open the door, hearing the sound of approaching vehicles and knowing that sooner or later, he was going to run out of options. As he stood outside the car, pain raced through him and he realized his left arm was totally useless. Flopping the front seat back, he reached under the small flap he had created beneath the driver's side of the rear seat for his revolver. It was there and felt good in his hands. He had hoped to get to it before Harry made a move but that plan went out the door before he had a chance.

Grabbing the revolver (a Colt Anaconda), he stood up feeling the pain again ravage his body. He thought for a moment about

whether he should make sure Harry was dead then realized that he didn't have the time. He had to get out of sight before the vehicles pulled up.

Running on pure adrenalin, he darted over to the far side of the Merc just before the SUV's pulled to a stop, maybe 50 feet from the X. He heard something else then as the diesel died in the night – a motorcycle at full bore, barreling down upon the SUV's. From his hidden vantage point, he saw the headlight of the bike coming closer and watched the driver of the Suburban step out to see who the rider was. Before he could see it wasn't who it SHOULD be on the bike, Sally had her gun aimed right at his chest.

"Mister, I don't know who you are but unless your friends bail out of the truck with their hands up, you are going to die right here and now."

He could tell she was serious. Sally had the headlight of the bike on Bright, blinding anyone who tried to look at her. But what she didn't see was the passenger in smaller SUV slip his door open and step out, only because he was in her blind spot. She also didn't see him sneak to the rear fender of the truck and raise an assault rifle aiming in her direction.

She did hear the metallic click of a safety coming off and that's when she fired. She had one guy in her sights, she didn't know about who might be aiming at her but by God, she was taking someone with her.

She didn't see the man with the AR – but Dan did. Before he could squeeze the trigger he got two surprises. The first was the blinding flash of Sally's magnum going off and dropping the Suburban driver to tarmac with a nasty groin wound that most likely would change his gender, the second was feel of a .44 caliber slug nearly tearing his right arm off his torso, spinning him around and slamming him to the ground, his Bushmaster clattering to the pavement.

Dan stood up and cautiously walked toward the SUV's. He thought he could see someone else inside but he couldn't be sure.

"Sally! There's someone inside the Explorer! Be careful!"

They could hear some muffled noises, almost as if someone was trying to scream but couldn't. As he approached the truck, Sally came from the other side, making sure the Suburban was empty after grabbing up the guns dropped by the other two. Looking in through the open passenger door, Dan saw a welcome sight – it was Carl, his hands still bound and his mouth taped over. Fear that was on his face only moments earlier was now erased by genuine gladness at seeing a friend. Dan laid his revolver on the roof of the SUV and reached in with his good hand to pull the tape off of Carl's face.

"Damn, Danny! I thought we were ALL dead!"

"So did I Carl... so did I..."

Sally was at Dan's side. Tears were in everyone's eyes... Dan felt very, very tired and had to sit down while Sally removed Carl's restraints.

"What's that noise?" asked Carl, hearing something like sirens approaching in the night. Sally stood and looked and could see flashing lights nearing the complex and turning in. How the police found out she didn't know – she just knew she was glad to have Dan at her side but she was very worried at the amount of blood he had lost.

"You saved my life Danny... you saved my life." She was crying, nearly sobbing but not in sadness – perhaps in release of all the pent-up emotions.

"No baby... you saved mine" he tried to smile through the pain...

As the door of the ambulance closed, Sally sat next to Dan on the gurney, Carl at her side.

"So Dustin called the cops?" asked Carl.

"That's what the detective said," breathed Sally.

"I guess they had been watching Megan for some time now but Dustin was the one who tipped them off. Seems like not all of Megan's money was clean. She had a tidy little import/export business going with stolen exotics, helped along by Harry's connections with the underworld."

Dan winced at the mentioning of Harry's name.

"Sally?"

"Yes, Dan?" She leaned over him, noting how hard it was for him to speak, partly due to the wound and partly due to the painkillers coursing through his veins.

"Harry. Is... he... really dead? This time, I mean?"

Carl answered for her.

"Oh yeah, he's dead all right Danny boy. I watched them zip up the black body bag... after they picked up his lower legs off the ground that had been severed by the door."

Dan winced, knowing that he had no choice but still feeling all the worse knowing that he did what he did. Tears welled up in his eyes as memories flooded back - memories of happier times he and Harry had shared - and he turned his head away from Sally. He heard the ambulance driver put the vehicle into drive and felt it begin to move forward - hopefully as their lives would move too. Still, he knew he had no choice about what happened tonight...

"Listen Danny... do you hear that?"

He turned back toward her, and saw that she was smiling at him.

"What? What is it you hear Sally?" He felt her hand brush the tears away.

"The sounds of the night before the next day of our lives Dan.... Sounds that I wasn't sure we would ever hear again. You know, Dan - Nightsounds... the best sounds of all. All in night we no longer need fear."