

Shields REO

Chapter 27: Mitch

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27. Mitch

The blue and black ballpoint of the comm log had been bleeding and rainbowing through overlapping arcs of red penned scribble when all drifting boundaries quickly snapped back into pixel boxes.

“More metal than your momma’s kettle.”

The voice scraped down the hallway, followed by a duet of chuckling and cackling. My inner dolphin gave me ten seconds or so with Sheila's plugged-up Shore’s Edge paperwork before their arrival. I made a note that, for the days when I would be stuck in the office at normal quitting time, I needed to get a beacon installed on his car so I could excuse myself to the attic as soon as he pulled into the parking lot.

“Lookie here, the Good Prince Fuck Job presides over His Kingdom of Wailing Tears and Soft Palmed Overreaction.”

Keeping on the multi-colored inks and artificial handwriting variations of the freshly created comm log, I pondered the odds of whether Mitch would leave His Majesty and His Kingdom to ends more fruitful than the exchange of unpleasantries or if I would need to summon the catapult in order to create a little work space.

Without regard to my positioning, Mitch made his way over the moat.

“What’s all that shit?”

“The top layer is where Neil treated this office like his own holeless outhouse. The rest is the rest.” I looked up. “You’ve got some dust on your Sunday finest.”

He looked down the nicked arm of his cuffless grey sweatshirt and pushed off a cloud roll on to my floor. “Sheetrock from Hacker.” After a few more eroding sweeps, he thanked me with, “Did you ever even go out there?”

“Unfortunately, presiding over the throne all day did not present much time for a leisurely trip to the woods.”

Mitch’s companion stood behind him, just inside the door. He had a deep widow’s peak in a sanded buzzcut that he accentuated with a pointed goatee terminating at the top button of a gritted hunting flannel. A backpack hung off of his wrist and I noticed a small athletic bag on the hallway floor just behind him.

“Well, I don’t know what that crazy bitch told you but it’s less than one panel of damage. One of the welds popped on a feed. They must have been blasting the water when they were there because it took us a good 20 minutes to even find the drip. If we hadn’t had to open up the wall, we could have just resurfaced it and everything would have been as if it never were. Craij is going back tomorrow to paint.”

“I will tell Maiden,” ahem, “Becky of your triumphs abroad. So, you guys heading to class now or what?”

“Huh?”

I nodded to Craij’s tote. He looked down and then stared back at me from black orbs, a tight-lipped smile emerging from his neck tats.

Mitch returned the same. “Nope, no class for us. More of a meeting.”

A rolling, volcanic chuckle came out of Craij’s checkered cover.

“Well, I wouldn’t want to keep you from the gavel drop and, no offense to you, Craij,” his lips remained tight and lifted at the edges as he kept his eye socket voids fixed, “I’m sure they won’t start the new business of farting on plastic or whatever before the officers arrive. Thanks for the update on Hacker, though. That’s good for all of us.”

Again Mitch turned to his wind-worn backup man and they rolled out lava grins.

“You know, Chase, I’d let you know where we were going. I’d even consider inviting you to come with us but I’m sort of, well, actually extremely famous for this sixth sense that I have of knowing when one man wants to buttfuck another man. Now, I didn’t get the feeling earlier when I was in the hall, but the second I stepped into this room, I have to tell you that it nearly knocked me back into the wall.”

“You know, Mitch, I myself have never been renowned for

having this gift in my body for being able to feel the anally inclined intentions of others but, and again Craij, I mean no specific offense – “ Craij remained unchanged and I hoped that he didn’t pride himself on being the type of guy who had a blade on his brass knuckles, “But maybe you are getting a cunt hair of interference from two guys carrying go bags and grinning at each other as they get ready to go to a meet-up. Now, I can’t say I spend an expert amount of time pondering the nuances of seat hitting so maybe that disqualifies me from having an opinion in this conversation but I can honestly state that the love that only one man can share with another had not crossed my mind today until you walked in the door.

“So, maybe there is just some sort of weird coincidence going on here. But, as I said, I am no layman, to use the literal definition of the word.”

Mitch returned his opinion on my observation by dropping his half of the previously shared grin.

“Mr. Pietrosky, are you a competitive man?” Craij’s mouth percolated the words like tumbling pellets.

“Craij, I know we haven’t formally met but there is no need for formality.”

“Alright. Chase. But are you?”

At the lower line of my eyesight, the folders on my desk began to butterfly into each other as the left side of Mitch’s face drew up.

“The reason I ask is that I’ve got two hours right now for the meeting and I don’t want to spend it standing here watching you two watch each other. Load up and you can knock it out when we get there, discussing buttfucking until your thighs go bald.”

Mitch blew out a gasp.

“So, assuming I am a competitive guy, where am I knocking it out at?”

“Seamless,” Mitch nodded his head back, letting his eyes drop to his cheeks. “Half off Tuesdays. We’re going to change. But you have to wear what you have on. I don’t want you fucking up the test somehow.”

“I can’t say I feel the need to pass a test,” I chinned back, “But I do feel it might be less than gentlemanly to turn down such a generous invitation.”

I had almost finished reviewing Sheila’s considerable efforts at replicating a bona fide sales file for Shore’s Edge when Mitch and Craij refilled my doorway. Mitch had changed into an overprint black t-shirt on to which fell his wetted hair. Craij had on a different flannel but, in comparison to his previous appearance, he might as well have just walked in front of a power ventilator, something along the lines of the contractor’s version of a dry clean.

The sun had set hard by the time we crossed the parking lot.

Craij opened the back seat door and tossed his bag and himself in before there could be an exchange over who would ride shotgun in the Cherokee. As the engine turned, body panels began to tremble in deep guitar and bass wave crashes overrun by a full firing drum kit bouncing off of the windows. Buried in the drop-tuned wall, I made out a growl of, “All bodies. Contortion.”

Mitch swung out the SUV as I watched Craij in the rearview mirror bend down and reach underneath my seat. A mental image of a wire garrote emerged into my head just as Craig emerged with a fifth of Jägermeister, the top of which he duly unscrewed and inserted into his beard hole, tipping the base toward the ceiling. He then thrust it between the front seats. The driver looked at it and then me. I took the hint, finding the bottle right around the half drunk weight.

“And you wonder why I wonder,” I slouched down as much as I could but, in our elevated position, I would have had better luck at a handstand than getting a discrete pull in the front passenger seat. As I got a gulp of the licorice liquor, a hand with a black spade tattoo tapped me with two plastic cups. Mitch locked up the wheels four cars short of the stoplight ahead.

“Keep that bottle down. You don’t want to be attracting attention.”

“Like suddenly stopping a SUV in the middle of a block for apparently no reason?”

“Exactly. Everyone has to pitch in. And don’t go nuts filling the front seat cups. I’ll take a half.”

In observance of this newly acquired custom, I straightened up, temporarily cushioning the bottle between my shoes, and then I poured an index, middle, and ring into each of Craij’s plastic glassware tandem and deposited them in the cup holders, planting the hip flask back in the arches of my lace-ups.

“How about a little – “ Craij began.

“No,” our motor operator stared into the rear view. “When we get there.”

He took the cup I had half-filled for him out of the center console and then returned it with half as much.

“O.K. I can understand that,” the back seat retreated, “Did you hear back about the shit vac?”

“I told Sam to grab a roll of duct tape and some contractor bags and then to get those good kitchen gloves and a dolly if he didn’t want to scoop it out. But anything he got in that house, he had to clean.”

“So, did he do it?”

“He either did and it’s done or he didn’t and turned in his keys. He’s not one to hold his tongue in the face of any sort of difficulty but once he’s done pissing up the walls, he always

digs in, until the next chance he gets to try out another opinion.”

“Sam found a shop vac filled up with shit over on 1441 N 36th St,” Craij filled in for the only one in the car who didn’t know the backstory.

“Yeah, up on the second floor. It was a newer Ridgid. Sam sent me some photos. It didn’t look too bad,” Mitch grabbed his cup and finished it, then pushed it in front of me and swiveled it back and forth. “That is, except the weight, the smell, and the fact that it had been full of shit.”

“Did they have a kennel up there?” I took Mitch’s cup from his hand and stuck it in the console and then grabbed mine. My intention had been a full drain but the volume attempt coupled with the black candy finish so offended my taste buds that my throat began to water and seize.

“No, this had nothing to do with dogs, at least not in any way that I know of.”

“Well, I don’t know,” the back seat announced, “Maybe with a roll of duct tape and contractor bags, you could put something together.” Craij followed up with a staccato burst of laughter that Mitch joined in support.

I couldn’t tell if my traveling companions caught me in my schnapps injection rejection jerk but I used their additional noise to draw in a few careful planes of air. Pre-vomit saliva drained back from the top of my throat as the muscles began

to release. A few more test breaths gave me some confidence that I would not bile the dashboard just yet so I pulled the bottle from between my shoes and re-filled Mitch's cup, making sure to top off mine before handing the black glass back, the spade hand snatching it just as it began to round my shoulder.

"My guess is that whoever bought that dump didn't get on it right away," Mitch raised his cup and Craij met it with the bottle. I threw in to the toast but kept my enthusiasm in check until the first few sips rolled down and away without further physical protest.

"And, so at some point the neighborhood junkies and drunks let themselves in. The pipes are gone so they probably shit in the toilets until the pile got so high that they couldn't squat over it anymore and then made their way to the bathtubs and maybe even the sinks. Once our shiny new real estate mogul finally comes in to start work on his little quick-buck ghetto-bang, he finds the doo-doo mountains, and tried to clear the waste lines. And I'm guessing that's as good a time as any to ponder walking on an investment when you've filled up a shop vac with so much butt fudge that you can't lug it down the steps. If you found yourself on the fence and needing a reason as to why inner city property ownership might not be for you, I'm thinking that would be it."

My focus having been on my passengers for this strange trip rather than the trip itself, I found myself surprised to look up to see Mitch turning a red light into a yellow as we crossed 60th Street on Howe.

“We’ve got to start wrapping up the booze cruise. Sometimes they have a bouncer at the entry to the lot and they generally frown on guys rolling in on a four wheel tavern.”

Finishing off my cup, I said an improvised prayer to Saint Martin that we would be switching to adult booze once inside Seamless. Mitch dropped his empty into mine and then rolled down his window and dropped them out.

“I am responsible for cleaning up plenty of other people’s shit in this city,” he said, rolling up his window and not bothering to look at me looking at him. “Every once in a while, they can clean up a little of mine.”

“Should I finish off this bottle and toss it?” asked the man in the limo seat.

“It’s your night, man, but if I get pulled over, it’s a lot easier to explain away a couple of plastic cups than a hundred pieces of Jäger bottle.”

The sun beaten aluminum siding of the single family development houses on Howe blended quickly into a few blocks of LBJ-era strip malls in various stages of occupancy and board up, with construction coalescence stopping abruptly at a small creek, over which a concrete bridge ran us directly into a canyon of quickly rising tip-up assembly centers and pole barn warehouses. Cyclone fence walls topped in razor wire overhangs ran along the sidewalks until they were stopped by an anomic tower of mixed brick that then

unraveled into an equally impressive wall of black, spike-peaked wrought iron flanking an open gate over an unmarked parking lot apron.

An empty sentry station just inside the lot greeted us as the Cherokee traversed a cracked plain of asphalt sheltered by industrial yard peaks to the east and west. On our new windshield horizon, a long, low slung brick façade crowned in brand new neon Fillmore font reading “Seamless” greeted us at the tarmac's end.

The sour times of the opening car shot had disappeared and now instead the travel Jägermeister had served to whet my appetite for a more barrel-aged beverage. As such, I found myself a little disappointed when Mitch parked the Cherokee a row behind the open toothed section of cars in front of us, making for a hike to the entrance. He looked into the rearview, killed the ignition and opened the door.

“I’ll meet you inside. I’ve got to make a call,” Craij dug in his backpack.

I fell out and followed Mitch. “I can’t figure out if this is a crowning achievement of government zoning or a blazing example of aldermanic graft.”

“This is as good a place for it as any. Granted, it isn’t convenient to the office or my place or Craij’s place or I’m assuming your place – unless you secretly like to wander commercial graveyards at night - but I’ve been to worse.”

The parked cars picked up density in what seemed to be a surprising volume for what one could only assume had to be an off-night for a gentleman's club.

"The neon looks new."

"It isn't that old. Craij said this used to be some rinky dink scrap yard titty shack."

I could recall.

"This guy, Zamir, he had a club out near Vegas or some shit. He lost it through some Vegas shit, as they say tends to happen to most people when dealing in Vegas shit, but apparently walked away with a suitcase full of cash. The story goes that he escaped the desert and bought out this weeping-nipple rubber along with their licenses and the whole nut. Then he dumped a ton of cash into it. I don't know what it looked like before – "

"Lucky you are for it," I kept to myself.

"- but it's pretty nice inside, way better than Rustler's or North Poles." My strip club Sherpa cleared his throat. "Then again, I am sure a man of your rarefied tastes has never had the desire to set foot in such a place."

"I've never been much for stepping out." As we made the red deck carpeting of the front steps, I turned to look back at the Cherokee, "I've always preferred the call in."

“Is that so?” Mitch turned as well, the Jeep a full footed punt and a few friendly bounces away. “Forget about Craij. He’ll be in when he’s off the phone. Sometimes it takes a while.”

We turned and made our way up the stairs, greeted by a man in a three button black suit hung open, its glossed lapels dangling from the boulders of his shoulders over the mound of his belly. He had a watermelon head with short black hair cut close and parted over his third shift white skin, the paleness of which stood in comparison to his in-ear comm link, a device which probably had been advertised as “natural” in color but looked tanned in comparison to his cheek.

“No weapons, no drugs, phones off and in your pockets. Any phone that leaves your pockets can be claimed at the city end of the garbage disposal we use to discipline touchy expatrons. You will both need to consent to a pat down before entering. Arms up.”

I followed Mitch. The evening wear clad warden patted quickly but thoroughly, with each deep, swift stroke from the back of his hand seeming to indicate that he had been giving us a rare glimpse into his sensitive side. When he finished with me, he looked back to my traveling companion.

“Where’s the biker guy, the one with the pointy beard?”

“Why, are you a few short inside?” they exchanged in half laughs, “He’s coming. He had to make a call.”

“Alright. I’ll be waiting for him. Last time I walked through,

there were still a couple of chairs at the quiet end. Please pay at the cashier and,” his mouth dropped into a clenched chin grin as he opened a climbing faux gothic castle door, “As always, enjoy the hospitality of the entertainers and staff here at Seamless.”

Through the entry and down the hall sat a heavily made-up cashier in a booth on a three foot riser.

“It’s forty each, boys.” I reached into my jacket but Mitch had already opened up his wallet and fished out three brightly colored glossy passes from what looked like a stack of ten.

“Oh, I only need two, sweetie,” she extended an arm covered in a black sheer blouse to pluck a pair from his hand. He pulled tight to the booth for a closer chat.

“Oh, that’s right. I thought your buddy looked a little different. But there is three of you.”

Another black suit stood to her side in the hallway and, as she accepted the last offered pass, the jacketed gate keeper stepped over and separated two heavy crimson curtains hanging from the building sky and, in doing so, unleashed a humid blast of Marshall amplified guitar.

Through the heft of the fabric passage, visuals slipped, slid and dithered on systemized red, purple, and white lights bouncing from chromed, spinning poles and overhead glitter balls. Hair flipped. Thighs clenched. Torsos spun. Palms pressed on the edge of the stage. I followed Mitch under a

piercing fret board run to a few stools on the back side of the belly-up oval. Genetic intelligence told me this would be the low traffic end of the bar, furthest from the main stage, although the Ibanez riff blasts followed us clear to here as anywhere.

I pulled two twenties from my wallet and nodded to the bald headed bartender sporting a jacketless version of the bouncer garb. A peak of body ink broke the white of his collar as he leaned in.

“A round and tubby Makers and ice. And – “ I looked to Mitch, who had been nesting in his bucket stool as if he had been getting ready to lay something, “And?”

“Two High Lifes. On this asshole.”

“On this asshole. And whatever you’re having,” I laid on the bar.

Bald grabbed two bottles from the kick cooler as he mountain topped a tub with ice before pouring Makers into a dome over the meniscus, a gesture for which I felt grateful even after I figured that, following my first sip, the bottle had been 20 percent augmented via the municipal tap.

Our Man of the Barren Hair changed out a Jackson with a few bucks and then turned stone faced to Mitch. “So, who’s the faggot?”

“Good question. He followed me in from the parking lot.”

Bullet Head smirked a lip at Mitch who nodded back with the same. Then they both reached a right arm over the bar that ended in a laugh.

“No Craij?”

“On the phone.”

Hairless put his left palm to his nostril and snorted. “Long call?”

“He’ll keep it in the car.”

“Maybe I’ll join him.”

“Sometimes it is nice to have some company on those calls.”

Now came my turn for a hand over the bar. “I’m just kidding about the faggot thing,” I gave Hairless’s hand a shake. “I’m Deacon. But you dress very well, faggot or no.” Deacon gave me a wink.

Mitch found this hilarious. “This is Chase. Too soft for the field and too handsome for the mirror. He’s our desk boy. He spends his days adjusting his tie, trying on different airs, and choking the worm to our boss’s daughter, which is sick by the way. Sick. If you are going to do that in the bathroom, it should be in the bathroom at home.”

At that and with considerably less fuss than his counterpart,

Craij took a seat next to Mitch while managing to drain the neck and a good piece of the body of his Champagne of Beers in the process.

“Thanks,” he nodded to Mitch, who handed the nod over to me.

“Thank you, Chase, sir.” He raised his bottle to a toast, shaking slightly at the wrist despite an elbow on the bar.

I raised my glass, met by two bottles and a nod from Deacon. “In appreciation for getting me out of the office,” I interrupted with a quick taste, “At least I hope it is still appreciation tomorrow when my, or our, clients start carpet bombing me about all the shit buried on my desk.”

After a proper dousing all around, I turned to the man with all of the big bottles. “I’m happy to buy one for you, Deacon. Unless you have some sort of rule against Tuesday night drinking degeneracy.”

“I don’t have a rule like that and I’d be happy to have one. However, the owner is a man of rules, at least as far as they pertain to anyone who has to pee standing up, and he keeps these suited butchers around here just in case someone gets forgetful.”

“Well, I’m good then. I always pee sitting down. I tend to miss less that way while I’m reading.”

Deacon scanned the bar amused and then stepped over to

Craij, who had already downed his beer and began rotating the bottle halfway at a time on the thickly polished surface in front of him.

“Yeah,” he reached into the breast pocket of his flannel and pulled out a surprisingly thick fold of cash. “And, um, let’s fucking, let’s, let’s fucking hit some Jamos.”

Mitch looked over as his confederate thumbed through his wad. “Good call.”

“Good call. Yeah, fucking great call. And no kids until Wednesday night,” the just announced father looked at me. “Don’t get me wrong, I fucking love my kids, I love fucking having them around, fucking hanging out with them, but I also love them when they’re away.”

The inside run of a long, softened skin arm rubbed over my shoulders on its way to slinking an obviously familiar hand down the neck attached to the t-shirted torso next to me.

Looking over to our caller, she stood about as tall as Brooke but with long, dark brown, tightly fallen hair that draped the neck of her topless torso. It flashed in my head that, as thin as she had been, a little bit more strip club time made her a safe bet points-and-bones candidate. But today, right now, she looked young enough to still carry a high school grudge and she held her narrow limbs cotton and delicate.

Our bare guest pressed between our plush cupped perches and, out of polite instinct, I tried to make a little space as she

whispered into Mitch's ear but, through fate and design, my seat stayed firmly rooted, the left side of my body on top of the long, Vaseline-lotioned lines running into the barely legalist of the code-required bottom string she pressed to me.

She thrust out a petite featured face, whipping back a side of her hair, allowing Mitch to speak softly and directly. Our visitor then flipped a light feather of her mane across my cheek and placed her face in front of mine.

“Hi Chase, I'm Lacy. Do you want to buy me a drink?”

Of course I did.

“Of course I do.”

I nodded over to Deacon as Lacy raised a long index finger. He grabbed a bottle of Highland Park 12 off of the call island in the center of the bar, pouring it on a handful of stones in a mini rocks glass and splashing it with a shot of water.

“Ten.”

Eying the small mound in front of me, I noted that our liquor dealer had returned what I thought would have constituted a tip from earlier. Topping it off, I pushed the paper pile to the edge of the drink mat where Deacon plucked it up with a gracious forehead tilt before tamping it into the tip jar wine bucket behind him.

Pivoting, Lacy slid herself over my knee.

“Hi, Chase.”

Mitch leaned in and over the bar. “Lacy, if anyone is going to make a man out of Prancing Duke Fairycock here, it is going to have to be you. I’d buy him the first one on my preferred customer discount but I’m not one to believe that you can ever really want or appreciate anything if you don’t pay for it yourself.” Mitch slugged out of his American lager, “In fact, it is going to take a minimum of two with Lacy just to get me to consider him interested. Not in spending money. In women.”

“I think two would be the only place to start but, and I don’t mean to be rude...”

“You don’t have to mean it, and even if it comes out rude, I won’t mind,” she put one arm over my shoulders and the other on the knee between her legs.

“Um,”

“‘Um’ means ‘gay’,” Mitch translated.

“‘Um’ means I have to get up for a second to secure a sufficient compliment for the lady, assuming here that the traditional cash method is still the preferred manner of expressing appreciation.”

“I take cards.”

“Beautiful, I have no doubt that you do. But, as an old

fashioned gentlemen, please allow me to do the heavy lifting and kindly point me to your fine establishment's ATM."

Lacy pulled her face closer and I met the deep brown on black of her eyes. With a hand on my chin, she brushed her lips with mine as she nudged my head toward a gray machine down the bar and on the opposite wall, a dozen feet before another splitting suit stood at a terminal near a door opening with a neon stating "Private". The lady on my lap then pushed a spiky heel against the bar and spun us out into the walkway, giving another glance of hair across my chin. As she stood up, she reached her wrist out along her long arm in the direction of the cash machine.

A part of me expected an escort but, after a few steps, I turned back and instead found my stool freshly occupied, the drink I bought her raised to her cheek, as Mitch twisted in her direction and Craij leaned in around him.

The automated teller spit out a surprising amount of small bills, producing a pile such that I instinctively scanned for observers, finding only the glance of the dark jacketed cashier chaperoning the private dance lounge. It took two attempts to grasp the stack out of the hopper but I made it into my own Craij wad and seated it in my pocket next to my proper wallet.

I had fully disappointedly but fairly realistically expected Lacy to have continued on her tip walk. But on turning back to the bar, she still sat, holding rapt my navigators. I had two steps to reach them when she swung back to me.

“Ready now, Duke? Or do you have to take a piss or call your girlfriend or check voicemails or maybe you have another excuse these two haven’t had a chance to tell me yet?”

My proud betrayers grinned in unison as if they had both just discovered that you could put whiskey in a coffee thermos.

“Lacy, I would hope that, unlike my announcers’ obvious biases, you would not let the good looks fool you. Or, for that matter, the impeccable dress.”

She stepped out of my former perch and took my hand back in the direction of where my newly pocketed money had come from.

“Forty,” the semi-tailored man behind the register instructed.

“Ninety,” Lacy replied.

“Yeah?”

“Chase?”

“Don’t get my math wrong but I thought two by 40 equaled 80.”

“Chase, sometimes 40 times three equals 90.”

The rack-suited pillar behind the cash receptacle took note while pretending not to notice as I pulled an awkward fleece of tens and twenties from my wad, the distribution having been the result of the seemingly purposeful randomness of my

recent encounter with the Bank of the Wall.

Lacy laid a hand just beneath my elbow and led me up a step and into a maze of darkly lit, high sided booths. After a few gratuitous turns, she sat me in a corner nook and then sat her legs across my lap.

“The rest of this song doesn’t count.”

The high, split-tailpipe operatic that is Sebastian Bach announced that it knew a thing or two about a sweet little sister and I didn’t find myself in a mood to argue with the voice on the speaker or the lady at my waist.

She let her thighs split as her heels slid backward across the floor. Pulling her legs back together as her breasts rubbed over my knees, she bent over in front of me, her hands at my feet, and then she flipped up, wrapping her calves around my jaw as the rest of her weight landed on my thighs.

She then pushed backward on to her feet and slid into a more booth friendly conversation pose on my lap.

“So what is it that you do?” She put her elbows on my shoulders and pushed my face into the ridge between her self-supported, stand up breasts.

“I fuck people out of their houses.”

“No shit?”

“No shit.”

Lacy slithered back again and repeated her flip but this time, she threw her thighs over my neck as she arched her back to a full hand plant on the floor. Her thong rubbed into my nose, the silk and its stitching feeling both soft and cheap. Among other thoughts, it dawned on me that she probably took offers on a rather robust markup for her broken-in work uniforms.

Twisting back toward my lap, “I’ve fucked a few people out of a few things. But they never made too much of a fuss.”

The Skidsters led into a rumbling Mike Starr baseline and I knew he would shortly be joined by Jerry Cantrell and Layne Staley making another trip into the flood.

“Put your arms up, Chase.”

“If this is a stick-up, I’m awfully impressed with where you’ve concealed your gun.”

“There would only be one pretty uncomfortable option and my Glock wouldn’t fit, I can guarantee. Put your arms up, smartass.”

I complied and Lacy stepped up on to the bench seat, her heels next to my slacks, digging into the short felt cover of the padding.

“You can put your hands on my calves but don’t creep. I don’t want to accidentally snap your neck.”

Further obeying, I took hold just below the knee as she stroked her thighs across my cheeks. Even while she flexed, the skin of her lower legs felt as velvety as everything else she had thus far touched to me, strong but subtle, precise, controlled.

She grabbed my hands and placed them on her bare cheeks underneath her panty line cut as she dropped to straddle me on top of my belt.

“So you are enjoying this?” she rubbed up and down my protruding slacks zipper.

“That’s just my phone.”

“Hmm...” She backed off slightly and looked down at the sliver of space between us. “That would seem like an uncomfortable place to keep it.”

“Well, there’s some other stuff down there, too.”

As Layne finished belting out, “If I would, could you?” the DJ came over the P.A.

“Hey guys, get your tips ready for Amber, making her Seamless debut this week.” Then a couple of guitar chugs gave way to Greg Graffin proclaiming, “I can't believe it, the way you look sometimes.” Lacy sat back, throwing her arms over her head, flipping the length of her russet hair side to side and shaking from her shoulders to her hips in a lap-bound

swivel.

“This is one of my songs. I love Bad Religion.”

“No shit?”

“No shit.”

“What, were you like, two when this album came out?”

“I think I was five actually. I went out with this older guy when I was in high school and he was super in to them. He had the crossed out cross tattoo on his wrist and the whole deal.”

“That must have been great at job interviews.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure he never had one of those.” Lacy then drummed an arm above her head and sang along, “And then you told me how bad you had to suffer. Is that really all you have to offer?”

She finished her tribute through the last slams of the song as it gave way to another announcement. “Venice, Scarlett, Lacy, get ready to take the stage.” At that, Jimi started into his guitar haze.

“Last one, Your Excellency. Then I gotta go to work.” She glided back to the floor, then stepped back on to the bench, turning in front of me and pressing my head back into the chair pad with the back of her thighs, a faint whiff of heat and moisture moving from her skin to my mouth. Then she sat

down, reverse cowgirl, and flipped her hair and her head back on to my shoulder. Her heels pressed into the sides of my hands and she grabbed them and placed them on her thighs while nuzzling into my neck with a series of gentle lip kisses running up, just below my ear.

“It’s a hundred to go the VIP room later. We’ll be there for 20 minutes. And it is a lot more private,” she exhaled into my ear’s canal and it wrapped me through my knees.

“That’s definitely a possibility.” The words ran down her thin shoulders and over the small arcs of her breasts to the top of her nipples.

“That sadly sounds like a ‘no’,” she breathed.

“It is more of a ‘I need to keep to an eye on the jobs that brung me’. They said two hours and they were gone and I frankly am still evaluating the terrain when it comes to them.”

Those were the words, the pressure in my slacks notwithstanding.

“You don’t have to worry about Mitch and Craij,” spun from the sweat of her mouth along every nerve in my ear and down through my wrists.

“Hearing Mitch’s name whispered in my ear is the only thing that I can think of right now that is going to allow me to walk out of here upright.”

Every layer of my neck vibrated as Lacy giggled. She put her lips on the lobe of my ear and then pulled closer, running her tongue behind its curve before dropping her teeth on the top. After a hard breath pause, she blew another small laugh straight into my thalamus.

After a few more turning grinds on to my lap accompanied by the taste of her hair flips, she tossed off my arms, stood up, and spun.

“I can whisper Mitch’s name into your ear again but I’d rather give you a minute to sit. I’ve gotta run. To be continued, when you buy me another drink after my tip walk. Whatever those two told you about leaving after happy hour, I’ll believe if it I ever see it happen.”

I took the minute and a few after to sit and finally left in flat pants, finding the way out much more direct than the trip in. The subterranean lighting of the private dance area made for a strobe light concussion explosion as I made my way past the beady eyes of the lap dance cashier.

The floor of the club rocked up and down as a ship at sea and the navigation across the rising and falling deck that led to my stool took considerably more concentration than should have ever been required over a poured foundation.

Deacon grabbed an ice scoop and topped my tub and then followed up with a gratuitous half dump of the Maker’s bottle and a nod of his head.

Mitch turned from Craij and slapped my shoulder with the back of his hand. “We didn’t think you were coming back.”

“Quite frankly, short of some Sawzall surgery, I didn’t know if I would make it back.”

Craij pounded the heel of his fist on the bar. “I fuckin’ called it. I fuckin’ called Lacy for him.”

“His fucking drink melted,” Craij’s boss turned to him, “It can hardly count as a call if he had already spent half an hour on the bounce bench.”

Craij squint-eyed his supervisor, his cheeks tightening over the curl of his facial hair when a short, busty, fully curved blonde jumped on his back.

“Happy Tuesday, Captain.”

“Happy Tuesday, Star.”

“Ready to go back?”

Craij pivoted his chair and Star took his hand, returning over the rolling floor that I had just successfully voyaged.

Mitch turned back to me but before he could run his mouth in some sort of defense of his pro-Chase-homo position, a similar, slightly stockier blonde gave him the same treatment.

“Hey baby, I’m coming up again so do you want to go right

now?”

He stared over to me and then looked at his visitant. “Yeah.” Then he turned back.

“Don’t let me stop you.”

Mitch flexed his forehead and then accepted the escort.

I took a deep draw out of my tub and turned my attention to the main attractions on the front stage as my thigh started to vibrate. Pulling out the phone that I never turned off and holding it underneath the edge of the bar, a message came in from Sheila:

With Emma and Doe. You can’t still be working.

I looked up to my liquor practitioner, who I found facing bottles on the island.

“Deacon.”

He turned and walked over.

“Yeah, Chase.”

“Between you and me, if Mitch and Craij are my ride, am I out of here in the next 30 minutes?”

“Between you and me, Chase, if you are going back with them, I hope you don't have to work too early tomorrow. But if

30 is a hard number, I got a guy that runs a private cab.”

“I'd hate to be an ungrateful guest but is sooner than 30 a problem?”

Deacon tilted back. “Look, man, if you need to go, let me make a call.”