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E STREET ALLEY

A Novel

by

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You wore our expectations like an armored suit.

– Michael Stipe, REM

Chapter 1

I'll do what I can to color-correct — the lens of memory will have to be our Photoshop — but that'll be a bit later because we're opening in grainy, pre-digi black and white. A film-school shot complete with the kind of nausea-cam you'd pay nine bucks for at the Angelika. But we're not in the Village. No, we find ourselves at its Left Coast mirror: Venice, So-Cal, circa 1999.

The freaks are on the street — turbaned guy playing battery-powered Stratocaster on roller skates, steroidal blow-up boys pressing black weights toward the pale sun, grandma Astro selling fortunes in her string bikini — but back from the beach the real freaks are playing their tweeky games. A hyperkinetic man in standard black — T-shirt, jeans, Docs — scrambles out of a Benz SUV. Black, of course. Cell to the ear. Money in the meter. The passenger door opens. A tall blow-dry stretches long legs out the passenger side. Work boots and Carhardts. But this is no worker. The torso is lean. The designer flannel of the shirt billows, drapes just the way a shirt should. Perfect amount of stubble on the chin. Up-to-the-minute shades. Botoxed forehead.

The small man scuttles, churns the pavement. Dink-toed feet cramming twenty-seven hours into twenty-four; time is the enemy of the short man. Botox lopes easily, a thoroughbred, man of the hour; time is a languid non-issue. Yet, he doesn't want to waste it and so he's asking, Sure he's there?

“Trust me, all right, buddy?” says the scuttler. “Will ya trust me? Look, there’s his bike right there.”

The motorcycle is an off-white Kawasaki Police 1000. The idea of the thing gives Blow Dry pause. He has an unhappy history with men in blue.

“Dude, the guy’s a cop? You didn’t tell me he was, like, a cop.”

“He’s not, like, a cop. He’s had as much trouble with them as you have. He bought the bike at auction over in the valley, buddy. The guy can’t afford four wheels. Did I tell you he’s broke? Did I tell you he’s here? I told ya, buddy. Never misses a day. The guy’s fugged up, but at least he’s disciplined about it.”

The fug-up in question is in the stinking bathroom of the Novel Café. He’s slapping cold water over a hangover head. Blood vessels shrink. Pain recedes. Drips stick to last week’s stubble. Eyes resign to the empty paper towel box. His pug face is meant to be dried on a sleeve anyway.

The Novel poked out of the north side of the Venice/Santa Monica line and for a time it had been fashionable — in a beat-poet, coffeehouse kind of way — with the Benz-and-Bulgari crowd. It had represented a dangerous foray into “alternative” lifestyle. Ogle the weirdoes and take the latte on the run. Then Starbucks and another chain opened on Main Street and hoovered the life out of the Novel. The predictable plastic of those bean water joints made The Novel too skeevy for the yummy mommys of Santa Monica and their knobby-tired baby strollers with shock-absorber suspension and yoga mats under the arm on Saturday mornings. Even the recent transplants and pale tourists drifted away from The Novel. Starbucks was mobbed; it just like what they had back home.

Take a Frappacino to the beach, Madge. Watch the freaks from a safe distance.

And who could blame them? The function of a tourist is to be stupid, the trajectory is one of sheepish drift. Tell me what to eat, what to look at, which maps to buy. Connect the dots between large signs that spell out the scenic vistas. Seek the shack with a blue “i.” Take of picture of me here. I’ll take you over there. Mark my passage. Tourism is pilgrimage, crusade. Tourism is truancy from the rational sequence of hometown events, a vague quest for a new and golden mirror. Show me who I could’ve been, where I could’ve lived. Show me my higher self. Tourism is religion in the time of television. Don’t like your reflection in Palm Springs? Try Ibiza. The lei didn’t buoy your spirits? Maybe the Blarney Stone. Check out the New Age Mall in Sedonna. The green of the motherland. The red of the desert. Click the remote. Project yourself into new realms. American Delusion, don’t leave home without it. They liked their coffee just the way they made it back home.

If any of that kind of easy money found it’s way to Venice it was to chic eateries with trendy names like Chaya where they swapped it for Merlot and martinis, sea bass sliced in strips, stacked into a tower, drizzled with something called a coulee. Phillipino in the men’s handed out mints and towels. The pug at The Novel uses his sleeve.

The Novel was the default, home to junkies, drunks, and screenwriters in need of a place to work. The lines between us blurred. At The Novel you could plug in, sit all day over a cup. The barista had green hair. She preferred the junkies, drunks, and writers over the Bermuda shorts and Map-To-The-Stars crowd any day. She made rounds with a pot. She poured free refills. She kept a tab for the pug. When he had money he paid it. She never hounded him for his dough. She liked the pug. She slept with him sometimes.

Behind her counter and above the kitchen was an ill-planned loft. The heat from the stoves and dishwashing machine — along with the thick smell of grease, coffee, and Mr. Clean, industrial strength — made it almost unbearable. For some though, the heat and stink were fair trade for the swish and gush of the Hobart to drown out coffeehouse blabber. It was hell-hot up there but it was empty and the noise was white and it didn't matter if I worked shirtless. The loft was my spot. I'm the pug.

The stairs creaked as I climbed. The railing was beaded with condensation from the new frozen drink machine — management's pathetic attempt to lure the Madges back. I sat behind the Mac and re-booted. Hot grease and burning coffee rose in invisible waves of brown. Punching letters into the screen, I moved away. Exit through the screen with each jabbing keystroke.

FADE IN

EXT. A DESERTED BEACH – DAY

A heavenly white, tourist-brochure sand beach stretches to the horizon. Not a soul in sight. We pan along a breaking wave. The sun catches the curl, turns it to whirling diamonds. The wave tosses its riches on the empty beach. The diamonds scatter, melt.

But wait, there's something more in the break. A dark shape. A black hole in the diamond curl. It hits the beach with a waterlogged thud. It's a human sound, a man's body. Bloated and disfigured, the flesh is bitten, torn off in chunks. A seaweed halo garlands the head. The half-eaten face wears an expression of surprise.

“Buddy, what the fug, buddy!” The voice is piercing, loud and shrill over the gurgle of the Hobart. It brought me back. Buddy knew right where to find me.

His real name was Sidney Lernstein. He was a fast-talking producer with a first-look deal and a tic that gave him away. Whenever Sidney wanted something he’d either begin or end with “buddy.” Sidney talked a lot. Sidney wanted a lot of things. Everyone in town knew Sidney as “Buddy”.

He’d successfully networked half of Hollywood by playing men’s league hockey at the Ice-O-Plex in the Valley. A few years back, some of the guys from *Independence Day* started renting the ice on Sundays. They invited A-list talent to pretend to be tough. Good players knew enough to let the movie stars and fat-ass producers blow by them. It was the lying game on ice. Buddy was a star. He was a wiry little center who could score fine, but pass? Fuggedaboutit.

A-list, schmooze-a-thon hockey was the new networking phenomenon in L.A. In the Seventies it was sex, drugs, and disco. In the Eighties it was A.A. In the early Nineties you’d meet your producer at Esalen, or his own private ashram. Then Iron John and Maxim magazine kicked the sensitive man of the Nineties in the balls and he limped off into a bad memory. By ninety-nine the best networking was done in boxing gyms, hockey rinks, the odd strip joint. Well-waxed sport utility vehicles filled the lots. The return of the man’s man. It would do until the next fad.

“Buddy, you look like a fuggin mess, buddy.”

Buddy and I went back. We’d made a movie together. The flick got him the first-look deal. It got me a ride with the boys in blue. Buddy gave up puck when he landed his

first-look. I fell off the map and landed in group. He bought a big house with a view of the bay. I moved into his basement.

He day-traded in his office on the lot; I killed time writing at the Novel. He had movie stars come to his house. I rose up from the depths to drink with them. He had hookers and blow. I had collection agents. He told me to stop crashing his parties. I told him he was snorting a hole in his nose. He told me to find my own place.

I found my own place and gave him my number. He said it was for the best. Keep in touch. We'll do lunch.

I kept in touch. We didn't do any lunches. He called me at all hours of the morning. I'd always talk; I wasn't sleeping much anyway. I listened. I gave advice. I was his cocaine confessional. I advised him to read my spec scripts. Then the nosebleeds got to be too much, and Buddy cut out the blow. He called a lot less after that so I had to call him. I told him I needed some rewrite work. He stopped returning my calls.

"Buddy, you don't call you don't write," said Buddy as he stepped into the loft.

"Your finger break, Buddy?" I asked. My phone was disconnected, cell phone shut off too for lack of payment, but he didn't know that.

"Buddy." He stretched it out like "Buuuuuuddy." Hand on my shoulder, friend-like. Small hand, tight and strong. Wiry center who put the puck in the net all by himself. Behind Buddy came a lanky poof trying to look manly in a Ralph Lauren work shirt. Those were the days when the five-picture deal wasn't enough — you had to look like you could plow the north forty too. He had a gaunt, familiar face. Actor, I figured.

"Writers," said Buddy to the actor.

The actor creased his bee-stung lips into a knowing grin. Nose straight, cheeks hollowed — five to one he'd had his molars pulled. He knew what Buddy meant by “writer.” He knew the code of rolling eyes in that particular manner that meant “difficult,” “precious,” “pain in the ass.”

The actor's hair was coiffed, gelled into frozen tufts of devil-may-care spontaneity. Posture learned from training on stage. Trained in the theater, he'd tell you. Three syllables in theater. Thespian. Three syllables there too. Now he can't find his way off the stage. Forever holding camera. Bad actor, I figured.

“David Birchfield meet Mick Kerry,” said Buddy. The Bushmilled tumblers rumbled. David Birchfield, yeah, youngest brother of the Birchfield boys — a handful of half-rate actors who'd made a living off their oldest brother's genuine talent. David Birchfield was a Godsend to the Enquirer and The Globe; He O.D.-ed on coke and heroin at the Paramount in New York. He shook hands like a guy pretending he didn't have anything to prove.

I put my shirt on. He took his sunglasses off. I almost had to laugh; God didn't make eyeballs that color.

“I loved your film,” he said, sitting like he was afraid the chair would leave him diseased. “Really worked on a lot of levels.”

I told him thanks and then I lied a little, too. Love your work, babe. We all played at the lying game. It was like ping pong, volleying a little white sphere of untruth. Tap theirs. Spin a few yourself. Mark the match with an extra cocktail to help you forget all the smiley lies. Buddy backhanded a few for good measure, and we all waited until it was time to move on.

“Is it hot in here or is it me?” Classically trained to state the obvious.

“Buddy, we brought you something,” said Buddy, when the time came.

Buddy tossed a script onto the table like he was ante-ing up. It had a blue, three-initialed agency cover. “Incredibly Cold Management,” is how I read it. I opened to the title page: “BURN by David Birchfield.” I scanned from “Fade In” to “Over.” I didn’t need to turn the page to see what came next. When you’re a certain type of down-and-out they don’t bother prettying it up when they rip you off. I was that certain type and Burn was by me, Mick Kerry. I’d written it two years before.

Buddy bored into me with producer eyes. Birchfield was mildly curious. I let them hang. I let the moment slide, expand out into the waves of invisible brown. So I didn’t have the bleached teeth; I could still hold camera.

“That the real color of your eyes, David?” I asked when the long moment was up.

“Mostly,” he said suspiciously, fat lips pursing over bleached teeth. His eyes were the blue of the new Gatorade flavor. Buddy’s were ink-black, all real, trying to bore into me. Trying to stop the pug.

“So how do you choose? I mean, do you wake up one day and say, ‘I just feel blue-eyed today’? Or do you match your eyes to your—”

“Buddy, can you not step on your dick for once, buddy?”

“I’m just talking here, Buddy, and I’m wondering how he—”

“Buddy, shut the fug up. We got a proposition for you.” He rocked up on the balls of his Docs, leaning in, chair up on two legs. Wiry hand on my shoulder again. Eyes boring. He wasn’t stopping the pug.

“And while I’m wondering, David, maybe you can tell me how long it took you to get your name centered just right on the title page of my fucking script.”

Wiry hand letting go. The phony eyes shot a look over at Buddy as if to say, “Why are you letting him say these things to me?”

I threw a look Buddy’s way too. Mine said, “Why is his name on the title page of my fucking script?” This was a bit blatant, even for Buddy. We were L.A. friends who went back, and this was not out of bounds of how to treat an L.A. friend who you went back with, but it sure was near the edge.

“David, lemme get you a coffee,” said Buddy as he jumped up from the table.

“Soy mocha latte,” said David. He glared at me with the Gatorade eyes and the plucked brows. He ground his molar-less jaw, clenched it, pretended he was barely holding back from smacking me. Course that would never happen because then it wouldn’t be pretend and he’d have to work through it all by himself.

“You’ll help me, won’t you, Mick?”

“What happened to ‘buddy?’” I asked.

The stairs creaked and Buddy slipped on the condensation near the freezy machine. He popped up, glaring at me as if the Slurpee machine for the Madges was my idea. I followed him to the line at the counter and waited for him to say it.

Then he said it: “What the fug is wrong with you, buddy?”

“I don’t care to see his by-line on my script. Some great mystery about that?”

“He wants to be a writer now, buddy.”

“Fine. Thousand hacks in town already. One more won’t hurt. He can plug in over there and play screenwriter like the rest of us.”

The screenwriter hack in line in front of us — Pentium laptop in a Halliburton case like some James Bond wannabee — turned and glared. Hacks at the Novel didn't want the truth. They preferred to think they were unique, special, and I knew why they played it that way, but I was years past that delusion.

“He wants to do the film, buddy.” Whisking the freezy condensation off his pants, looking for something to wipe his hands on. “I can raise money on him, buddy.”

David Birchfield was a minor name and that's what you needed in those days and still need now because Hollywood is an old machine and names are what it runs on. Buddy made the kind of low-budget projects that were backed by the studio and trotted out on the film festival circuit. People still called them “indy films” because it sounded cool, but there was nothing independent about them. The bean counters at the studio knew how they'd get their money back before they spent a dime on anything.

There are two ways to make your money back on an indy, even a non-indy indy. You win a festival—Sundance, Cannes, Toronto, Berlin, or even a little one like Telluride —and sell the film in the ensuing hype fest. Or you hire names. The best are the ones who'd been someone once. Just below the radar, they called it. They'd work for scale and maybe they become someone again. Tarantino did it with Travolta in *Pulp Fiction*. Before that flick he was doing baby voices. Fast-forward and he's *Swordfish*, opening hundred-million-dollar action pix. But David Birchfield was no John Travolta and we weren't talking about just a little below the radar.

“That guy couldn't get arrested in this town,” I said.

“He's worth two and a half here and one point two in France, buddy,” said Buddy.
“The Frogs love him.”

The hack with the James Bond case in front of us half turned and nodded at me to confirm Buddy's numbers. In L.A everyone's a junior agent. It's a sport, like going to the dogs.

"Who's gonna bond a film with him in it?" I asked Buddy. "Contingencies for overdose are pricey."

"Buddy, I don't need a bond. His brother will co-finance with the studio."

"As long as Speedball up there gets writing credit?" I asked. The unique junior-agent hack took his skinny latte off the counter and grinned know-it-all at me. I had a quick fantasy of beating him senseless with his Pentium. I shook it out of my head and made a mental note to bring it up in group.

"Soy mocha latte, double Americano, and a Keith Richards," said Buddy to Tanya Green Hair, the barista. At least Buddy remembered the Keith Richards. Four shots of espresso in a mug of French Roast. It was my drink; I'd built up a tolerance to the dark stuff.

Anyway, Buddy remembered and you can't help but like a guy, at least a little, for remembering your drink. Then he went and blew that little bit of me liking him all to hell.

"He's directing too, buddy."

"No soy," said Tanya, her tongue-stud sparking the light.

"No soy?" Buddy said incredulously.

"No soy," she repeated, cocking a hip, aiming an attitude at Buddy. Tanya was lithe, cut, her skin was porcelain under a black T-shirt from a cyber-punk band called "Email from Atlantis." They were local talent with an underground following. They played next door at Murphy's and Tanya had been given the T-shirt by the lead. I was

secretly jealous of the guy. She cut the sleeves off and wore it often. The black looked good against the white of her skin. Tanya was all about black and white and she didn't like Buddy one bit. Tanya didn't play the lying game and she didn't give a shit who had a first-look or whether they were above or below the line. "Go down to Starfucks, they got plenty there."

"Make it with skim milk," said Buddy.

"Skinny mocha latte," said Tanya in a way that skewered Buddy's masculinity. Tanya didn't play ping pong. She said the things the rest of us wanted to say. Tanya made coffee. That's what she did. She didn't want to be a movie star. She didn't want a three-picture deal. She was still young and going nowhere seemed like a viable option.

It made me like her. I liked her a lot. We slept together sometimes, but in the daylight we adhered to an unspoken pact of casual acquaintance. We pretended we barely knew each other. Our secret brought dark intimacy to the thing between us. It had the dark coolness of the casual fuck and it gave us power over the mundane. I think it made us feel like we were a part of a town of crosscurrents beneath the surface, but we'd kept that a secret from one another too. We pretended to like it that way.

"Put some of those brown sprinkles on it too," said Buddy.

"Sprinkles," repeated Tanya as she pulled down on the lever of the espresso machine. It was a gleaming old Bevanda DiDios with ornate brass and a manual lever handle. Working the lever gave Tanya's arms savage definition and with her sleeves cut off, customers couldn't help but watch the bis and tris at work. She had a tattoo on her shoulder. It was of a toaster with two slices flying out of it. I'd asked her about it once. Why a toaster? She'd said, "What's the frequency, Kenneth?" Question with a question.

That was Tanya. White bread flying free of the toaster. She played that espresso machine like some gothic organ. She gave Buddy the sprinkles and a wilting look at no extra charge.

“So, he gets writing, starring, and directing credits,” I said. Buddy nodded. “Even though you know I wrote this script to direct myself.”

“Buddy, there’s a fine line between having balls and being fuggin’ delusional. Know what I’m saying here, buddy?”

“I’ll add it to the list of things I’ll bring up at group,” I said.

“Aren’t you done with that yet, buddy?”

I told him I wasn’t and he gave me a look that said it was my fault and maybe it was. The look was a reference, a reminder of an altercation I’d had with my wife’s lover. The lover was the director on our film. They called the guy Lucky, as in Lucky sperm club. It was an old nickname, an old joke.

My wife was the lead. Her name doesn’t matter; she’s a nobody too. During the film she spent a lot of time with Lucky, the director. They worked hard, honed their craft. They worked in private. They worked in the wardrobe trailer. They were ratted out by the script supervisor. He was gay and had a crush on me. He had AIDs and wanted to share his good fortune. He told me where to find them. I found them. My wife was brushing her teeth with his cock.

They were right to call him Lucky because he was. He was lucky I didn’t kill him. I came close enough though, and after I was done and out of the trailer, he went after her. Smacked her around good. Later they told the judge a different story. The drunken pug had flown into an unfounded jealous rage, assaulted them both.

I learned that judges like simple stories. She got the house and car. I got three years of anger management group therapy. It wasn't the last time the wrong guy would take the fall.

"You shoulda had me get you a good Jew lawyer," said Buddy. "You never woulda—"

"I had a good Jew lawyer," I said, "and you did get him for me. He was one of the D.M.C. boys."

Buddy was quixotic; he had no memory for failure.

"Right, well, you never know what—"

"So he gets all the above-the-line credits," I said, changing the subject.

"A good lawyer woulda got you offa that sure as spit, buddy."

"He gets above the line and I get ... what?" I asked again.

Now Buddy smiled. We were talking, which meant he was selling. And when Buddy was selling, Buddy was happy. Buddy's father had been the best mobile home salesman on the West Coast. Whole trailer parks, entire villages, small towns bought from Sidney Lernstein, Senior. Land in Lieu Seller Financing? He'd invented that. Didn't exist before Sidney Senior. Buy the plot of land — tenth of an acre — by signing a paper. Then use the land as collateral, in lieu of cash down. Never mind the thirty percent interest. Roof over the head, that's what makes you a man. American dream in a double-wide.

Sidney Senior was a force, a mover. Known up and down the coast. Sidney Senior got 'em the hookup deal. Woulda left millions, too, if it weren't for the trouble with the

IRS. Sidney died in more debt than all the people he sold double-wides to. Still, he had left Buddy with one thing that no government could ever take. Buddy could sell.

“Never mind, buddy,” said Buddy. “Sorry to bother you with it, buddy. If you don’t want the deal, a title isn’t going to matter.”

“Don’t produce me, all right, Buddy? I’ve known you too long.”

“‘Story by’ and ‘associate producer’ credit, buddy, if you help him rewrite. Marty Schwartz at the studio will pay your fee. Five hundred a week for the rewrite and a ten-K production bonus on the first day of principle. I know it doesn’t sound like much, but this will put you on the map, buddy.”

“That was the line you used when you sold me on *Fade To Blue*,” I said. That was the film we’d made together. The one with the questionable oral hygiene practices. The one that hadn’t quite worked out.

“And it would’ve been true if you hadn’t gone off your fuggin’ meds,” he said. “Look, buddy, Marty will know you wrote it. You think anyone is gonna believe he wrote it? Listen, the film does well they’ll be waiting on line for you. It tanks and you never heard of it. It’s win/win, buddy.”

“A hundred grand for the script and I’ll take a walk,” I said.

Tanya yanked. The machine hissed. Steam vented out the side of the bowl. White slices flying free.

“A hundred grand, buddy? The script is all fugged up. It’s been floating around for two years. It’s way too dark.”

“Then why’s Tony Montana over there want to do it?”

“Cause he wants to spend the winter skiing, buddy.”

That made sense. The script revolved around the most expensive act of eco-terrorism in history. It was set in Vail.

“Fair enough, what’s it worth to Aton Birchfield to have his black sheep brother out of town for six months?” I asked. “I’d say a hundred grand was a bargain.”

“I’m trying to build your career here, buddy.”

“Did you read Digital Atlantis?” I asked.

“I’ll get to it,” he said.

“It’s the best script I’ve written.”

“Buddy can you stay focused on one thing, buddy?”

“You promise to read it right away and two months later you still haven’t and I’m the one who needs focus?”

Tanya banged the dead grounds out of the bowl and refilled.

“I read the script,” he said. Tanya was on the handle again. The growl and hiss.

“And I think you need a break, buddy.”

The toaster bulged. Two white-bread slices flew free.

“I need it back so I can go out with it.”

“Buddy, it’s over the edge and going out with that would just confirm what they’re already saying.”

“I’m not letting Botox boy take writing credit on my script.”

“I’m trying to help you, buddy,” he said and I gave him a look that said, Gimme a break and so he went on the offensive. “Look at yourself, buddy! You’re not even fit to be fed to the machine any more.”

The mention of the machine was a coded attempt to connect to an earlier time when there were more bright things inside both of us. The machine was Hollywood and it ran on the ideals, dreams, and passions that were willingly sacrificed by thousands of saps just like me. They came with their fresh-meat souls and, if they were lucky, left with money as a replacement. Most got sucked dry and never made enough to buy back what they'd lost. Too ashamed to go back to the heartland or the right coast, they stayed and sucked it out of others. They prowled L.A., empty husks in leased SUVs. Buddy and I had mocked them. It was one of the things we had in common ten years ago.

I can't say exactly when he'd changed. I don't suppose there was a defining moment. He just made fun of the P.I.B.s (People In Black) less and less and didn't notice his closet going noir. He had an office on the lot now, and I was in group.

You couldn't beat the machine and I was past believing the get-in-make-it-big-and-get-out myth. I knew I'd have to sell a chunk — you always sell a chunk — and maybe I doubted that there was enough left to sell, but the one thing I didn't doubt was what I knew about Buddy's deal.

“At the end of the day, Buddy,” I said, “that's a good script with real juice. You want to sell me out? Get Marty or Aton Birchfield to write the check.”

“So we've agreed on what you are, now we're just haggling over price, buddy?”

“We're all whores, Buddy.”

“That's seven fifty, Ace,” said Tanya. Buddy dropped a whole quarter into the counter intelligence jar and started back toward the stairs with the skinny latte. Tanya caught my eye and stuck her finger down her throat. I shrugged as if to say, we all gotta dance.

Buddy and I were friends, after all, which may be hard for you to believe. But believe this: when you're a boozed-out, has-been in L.A. anyone who'll still talk to you is a friend. What the hell, Buddy was still talking.

David Birchfield met me with the Gatorade eyes. He'd softened them up a bit and dropped the I'm-going-to-kick-your-ass pose. He had on the lying-game face. He sipped and said, something about lactose intolerance, like I cared. But since I heard it for what it was — here's my weakness, what's yours — I smiled like maybe I did care.

"I love this script," said Birchfield working off my smile and trying to build a bridge. "It's kind of a downer, but with a new ending I think we can work with it."

I gave him a look that was as much a lie as anything that had come out of his mouth. That's how you do it when you've been at it a while. You lie without opening your mouth and the conversation proceeds as if you'd actually told the lie.

"You two will be a great team to punch it up," said Buddy.

I used the lying look again. Then the actor went and stretched things, as actors will do.

"I loved the way you made me feel like I was right on the slopes," he said. After my divorce I'd escaped L.A. and spent six months in cold places researching it. Mountain towns had been my rehab. They'd kept me from going all the way over. Even with the tourists and the marketing pap and all the rest of the resort machinery, the mountains had the pure honesty of ice and snow and gravity. And now the actor was stretching his lies into my mountains. It was a place the lying game didn't belong.

"Brought me back," he said. "I was something of a shredder, back in the day."

"Yeah?" I said, thumbing the script on the table, "Which day?"

His look said, Did you forget we were playing the lying game?

Buddy said: “He knows how to ski, all right?”

“Sure,” I said. “So we’re going to work on this together, David?”

“You could come over to my place up Laurel Canyon.”

“Laurel Canyon,” I said. “Swank.”

He took it for a retreat back into ping-pong. He said: “It gets me by.”

Sweet pad and a spoonful of smack and you’re good to go. But I didn’t say that. I said: “You work on a Mac or PC?”

He glanced at my PowerBook on the table like it was an electronic enemy.

“Mac,” he lied. “But, I don’t actually do the typing when I write.”

“The typing will be my job,” I said.

He smiled. The dumb writer was getting it. Buddy stared into his coffee. I unplugged the Mac.

“So you’re more of a dictator?” I asked, unplugging my laptop.

“I write, I just don’t type,” he said.

“Right.” I slid the Mac into a briefcase and David Birchfield gave me two perfectly plucked question mark eyebrows. His forehead didn’t wrinkle and I thought that was a good trick. But that wasn’t the trick that mattered.

David Birchfield had access to money, which was the trick that made up for everything. That was why Buddy was there and that’s why I was still at the table too. It wasn’t like I needed to sweat into my clean shirt, wondering about his eye color.

“So we’ve got a deal, buddy?” asked Buddy.

“Hey David, what did you think of the big set piece in act three?” I asked Birchfield.

“That was the big chase, right?” he said, clearly pleased with himself.

“Right. Who dies and how?” I asked.

Birchfield stared blankly through swimming-pool blue.

“You really do have to step on your dick every time, don’t you, buddy?”

“He didn’t even read the script,” I said, talking to Buddy like a judge in sidebar.

“I gave him all the beats,” said Buddy, talking as if Birchfield wasn’t even there, and in a way maybe he wasn’t. He was interchangeable and so were we. Cogs.

Then David Birchfield smirked and something in my head exploded. I bit down on it. I pressed it back.

“Your feet are your best insurance policy,” is what they said in group. I swallowed down what was coming up and zipped the briefcase. I stood. I held tight. I looked down at the two of them, sitting at my table, sweating.

Buddy tried one more time: “C’mon, buddy, this is your chance to get back on track.”

The brown waves rose. The swish and gurgle were punctuated by bursts of hissing release. Tanya worked the handle and the toaster bulged. White slices flying free. I took the deep nose-breaths they advised in group. I stepped outside myself. I tried to look at it fresh.

Buddy might’ve been right; maybe it was a way to get back on track. He’d take his fee on the front and throw the two losers together; whether it worked really wouldn’t matter to him. Me? I’d spend hours listening to David Birchfield talk on his cell phone,

chase him from chic bar to chic nightclub, maybe watch him Hoover some lines. In the end the script would be a worse mess than ever.

Then one of his brother's handlers would read it and there would be no first day of principle photography, no ten-K bonus. There's a limit to how much juice family buys in L.A.

After the thing got circular-filed I'd chase Marty Schwartz at the studio to get the grand for spending two weeks with Speedball. In the end I'd get next to nothing, which was what I had now. I gotta go, I told them.

"You're in, right buddy? I'll bring the papers by, buddy."

I gotta go, I told them again.