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WARNING: May contain coarse language, violence, gore or sexual content. Reader discretion is advised.

Chapter 2. "Where's An Angel When You Need One?"

He woke up in a strange room. It was dimly lit, but got brighter the more he moved. A light came on to the right - lighting up a bathroom. In front of him was opened up to an open-faced closet. It had several items of the same type and color hanging in it. There were drawers below that with a few pairs of shoes next to it.

He got up and looked to the left. He found a door. He went to the door, opened it up and started to walk through, but noticed something there. It was Angel - lying there like always. She seemed...bigger...for some reason. He reached down and pet her soft, white belly as he always did. She started to purr. The vibration reverberated throughout her body. He stepped over her and looked to see where he was going.

He wasn't sure of where he was. It honestly looked like desert. It was something out of a travel magazine or historical magazine he'd seen once.

Something ran past him. It was Angel. The larger version he just saw. He chased after, but she was too fast. He got in his truck and drove towards the direction she was running. He started passing sand brick, shanty-style houses with the cloth roofs. She disappeared as if she fell in a hole, then reappeared a ways up. That meant that he needed to stop!

He smashed his foot into the brake pedal, but it didn't feel like he was stopping quick enough. The last ditch effort was to crank the wheel to one side. That made it so he would stop, but the sand would make it so he slid instead of flipping or sharply turning. It was the safest option at this point.

The rear of the truck released, then slid to a stop with a loud "*thud*" as the truck tilted to the right. At last! He was stopped. That was a relief.

He got out and saw what had happened. There really wasn't a road that continued this way. This was a ledge at the end of a 'T' intersection. He shut the door and went around the back. There, he noticed the brick wall built where the axle now rested. He got a bad feeling.

He looked around, but still only saw the sand brick houses and sand. That's when his eye caught a large, hazy figure pointing a gun - the only thing that was in focus - at him. He turned and dove behind the truck as a round fired off, echoed in the street, and shattered the window on the driver side. He hopped down the wall. It was about a four foot drop. He found himself against the wall underneath the truck. He braved himself and looked up to see where the figure was. Another round fired and embedded in the fender while he loosened his grip and fell in a heap. He quickly turned and pressed his back against the wall.

It was quiet for a long minute. He stayed where he was, trying to keep his breathing shallow and quiet.

"Hopefully, whoever that was thought I was dead," he thought as he took in and breathed out a welcome sigh.

Suddenly, the truck started and the wheel he'd tucked himself under started spinning and screaming against the brick. Smoke filled the air as he jumped back and crab walked away until he made it to his feet. The figure leapt out of the truck and started after him. He turned and ran in the direction he last saw Angel.

Darkness.

Light appeared through his eyelids. Muffled beeps could be heard to his left. Conversation to his right. His head was sending him signals of pressure - both inside and out. He slowly reached up and felt a bandage on his forehead and gauze wrapped around his head. Then, he noticed the IV in his other arm with a clip on his finger. His vision and hearing cleared up enough that he could see he was definitely in the hospital. A doctor was talking to Jon. Jon was clearly not amused. Or maybe that was just normal Jon?

“Mr. Beaucamp, now that Mr. Light is awake, let’s run a few tests and see about releasing him,” the doctor said.

The doctor set down the medical chart tablet by his legs and moved towards the head of the bed. He produced a flashlight from his pocket and proceeded to shine it in each of his eyes.

“Mr. Light, what day is it?” The doctor asked.

“Really, doc?” Jon asked.

“Right. Right. Let’s get you on your feet then.”

The doctor pulled back the sheet covering Troy. He walked to the other side and turned off the machines, then unclipped the pulse ox and pulled out the IV. He replaced it with a sanitized cotton ball and medical tape. The doctor pulled Troy’s arm upright and motioned for Troy to get up.

Troy swung his legs over and slid off the edge of the bed. His feet made contact and seemed sturdy enough. He pushed off the bed and made it fully to his feet. He teetered a bit, but was fine otherwise - despite his head starting to throb. Meanwhile, the doctor made his way back around the bed and faced Troy.

“Walk this way,” the doctor said and motioned with his hand for Troy to look him in the eyes.

Troy made his way towards the doctor and stopped in front of him.

“Well, Mr. Light,” the doctor began and reached for his tablet. “You look good enough to release you. Your clothes are in the restroom over there and…” The doctor paused and looked up at Troy. “Keep your head covered for at least a week with fresh dressing after every shower or bath. The headache should be gone in a few days. Take OTC painkillers for the pain and discomfort. Come back and see me if it lasts longer than a week.”

The doctor kept pressing or sliding his finger along different areas of the tablet as he talked and shortly after he finished speaking, then turned it towards Troy.

“Just a fingerprint in the box and you’re all set.”

Troy pressed a finger to the screen and it captured the valleys, ridges and whorls.

“Try to have a good day, Mr. Light.” Troy shook the doctor's hand. The doctor turned to Jon. “I’ll call you in a few days to talk decks, Mr. Beaucamp.”

“Yeah, yeah. Sounds good Dr. Price,” Jon said, then shook hands with the doctor.

Dr. Price led the way out as Jon followed. Jon stopped at the door and turned to Troy.

“G’head and git dressed. We gotta head to the station ta pick yer shit up. I’ll be waitin’ in the hall.”

Jon’s face went from neutral to concern. Or what Troy assumed was concern. It felt more of annoyance than anything. It just proved how much he didn’t know about Jon.

Troy went in the restroom and changed out of the hospital gown and into the clothes Jon picked up for him. Troy was thankful. The clothes left in the medical waste bin looked damp with blood still. It was unsettling to say the least. The more clouds that parted in his head, the more questions were raised. He filled in the blanks with pure imagination. Maybe Jon could fill him in on the way to pick his other things up.

Troy laced up his blood spattered shoes and made his way out into the hallway. Jon was leaning against the wall with his tree trunk arms crossed his whiskey barrel chest. He glanced over at Troy with a...Jon look.

“This wasn’t what I meant 'bout goin’ out an’ all that. Kinda the wrong way ta meet a lady, ya know?”

Troy shrugged his lip in a partial smile and let it go as he looked away.

“Come on. ‘Skit o’tta here.”

Troy looked at the road the entire way to the station. He couldn't stomach looking at the boss like this. Though, he was very grateful that Jon came. It wasn't like he had family or...friends. He glanced over at Jon.

"*Can I* call him friend?" He thought and looked back at the road.

Troy just looked out the side window and sighed. It wasn't exactly planned, but he caught the gist of what Jon was saying.

The station was a few blocks away from the hospital. It almost looked like a house. Single story, flat roof with slanted edges, and a big window looking from the parking lot into the lobby. They parked in a spot and exited the truck at the same time.

His eye caught one of the cruisers. The back door had clear tape with red lettering. He walked up and looked inside. There was something about the sight that made his face sour and feel flushed. There was the outline of his head and shoulder made of dried and caked blood in the back seat. His fist balled itself up and his eyes started to well up. A battle was going on in his head between the rage and the pain. Jon stepped in and put a slab of a hand on his shoulder.

"C'mon, Bubba. Let's getcher stuff," Jon said in the best form of 'comforting' he could achieve with his voice. "Leave the talkin' ta me."

Troy glanced over with a look of disappointment. It was met with the shittiest of eating grins.

Jon led Troy to the front door and held it as Troy passed through. Chairs lined the two of the walls of the alcove to the right. To the left was a security door and a desk behind bulletproof glass and bars. A younger gentleman officer in a very starchy, pressed uniform with a badge perfectly placed under his name patch, sparse mustache, and slick, combed over hair was behind the desk staring at his screen. It seemed too clichè.

Jon walked up to the window and tapped on the glass. "Hey, boss. Need the personal effects of my friend over here," he said, thumbing back at Troy. He placed his thick hands on the counter. "Name's Light. Troy Light."

The officer looked over at them both and nodded as he gnawed at his gum. He got up and walked over to a cabinet on his right. He pulled out a clear plastic bag from

one of the nooks and closed the drawer. He placed it on the counter. He pried the flaps apart and dumped the contents onto the counter. They clattered against the counter into a lazy pile. The card container popped open. The officer looked at it sideways, then at Troy with a raised eyebrow and paused, askew, gum chomping mouth before closing it. He bent over with a canted hip and tapped the screen a few times, then undocked a tablet that was stationed next to it. He slid the tablet under the hole in the glass.

“Mr. Bright, I’ll need your print there,” he said in his forced authoritative voice, pointing at the box in the lower corner.

Troy stepped forward and pressed his finger to the tablet.

“Alright,” the officer said and pulled the tablet from under Troy’s finger. “Let’s confirm the items,” he said as he docked the tablet. “One card case and cards,” he said, picking it up and setting it down before sliding it under the glass. “One set of two rings,” he said as he picked up two round objects and slid them under the glass.

“Really, Troy?” Jon said in a higher pitch of disappointment.

Troy groaned and pressed his lips together. His shoulders slumped and his head drooped. He lazily snatched them as his hand dragged along the counter. He shoved them into his pocket and looked away from Jon.

“Finally,” the officer continued. “One partial package of gum and one tube of generously used lip balm.”

Troy found it necessary for the ‘*pop*’ of the ‘p’, but it suited the man. Troy shoved those in his pocket, then placed his card holder in his other pocket.

“Any missing items are being held for the pending investigation. We will contact you when you may pick them up. Also,” the officer said, but hesitated as he placed the empty bag to the side. He reached over and grabbed a folder with a stack of paper in it. He pulled out a stapled stack with a business card on the front, then passed it under the glass. “Any questions you may have will be answered within this packet. If you need clarification on anything, don’t hesitate to call the number on the front or contact our online representative listed at the address on the back of the card. The vehicle is available for pickup at the address listed at the bottom of the first page. There will be an impound fee and cost of tow-...”

Jon slammed his massive fist against the counter. "You gotta be fff...rrrah!"

Jon stopped himself as Troy grabbed his arm. Jon looked at him - red with fury and veins springing from his head.

"Without your communicator, they can't contact you and you can't...how the hell are you so calm when that bi-..."

Troy squeezed his arm and shook his head. Troy turned and walked for the door.

"Have a wonderful day, gentlemen," the officer called out.

Troy just wanted this day to be over. His head was starting to ache worse. They got in the truck and buckled in.

"Un-fucking believable! You get pulled over and assaulted and treated like another drunk...fuckin' point oh-one!" Jon smirked and looked over at Troy. "You fuckin' lush," he said sarcastically and laughed a very Jon laugh.

He backed the truck up as Troy buried his face in his palm.

"But, then she tries ta shoot ya because ya...?"

Jon shook his head as they pulled out into the street. Troy stared out the window until they pulled into the impound lot. Jon broke the silence.

"Right. Let's getcher car back."

On the way to the impound office, Jon stopped and turned to Troy. He looked like he was going to say something, then didn't. Just as well. Troy really didn't feel like talking.

They got to the window of the aluminum shanty and Jon knocked. A fully bearded, larger fellow in a boiler suit looked over through the window. Jon looked over at Troy.

"Let me do the talkin'."

Troy sighed and shook his head as the man stood from his chair and walked to the window. Troy closed his eyes, but couldn't help his chest from shaking with a chuckle. He held his head as the movement jostled his brain. The window slid open.

"What can I help you with fellas?" Came the strained, raspy, high-pitched voice from inside.

Troy looked over at the man with the brown hair and red beard. "Lynn" wasn't a very fitting name for him. The voice wasn't what Troy was expecting either. Troy skewed his stance a bit to try his damndest not to laugh, but a quiet snort escaped despite his best effort.

Jon cleared his throat and said, "Hey, boss. Wer' here ta pick up the '29 Rebel that was brought in las' night."

Lynn nodded and started tapping at the keyboard to his left. Something started to print on the continuous fed dot matrix printer. It screeched and chunked as it passed over the paper. Troy didn't think they made those anymore. They were more outdated than his car.

"Can I get yer ID," Lynn said as he ripped off a chunk of the paper from the printer.

Troy pulled the card from his case and slid it in to the man in the midnight blue suit. Troy wondered if his nickname was "Tiny".

Lynn looked back and forth from the paper, then slid the card through a scanner and pressed a few buttons. He came back with the paper. He spun it around and placed a pen on it with Troy's ID, then nudged it over to him.

"Sign at the bottom, sir. And am I taking full payment from you or is your brother buying?"

Lynn snickered into a stupid chuckle. Troy glanced at Jon's priceless face. Troy quickly signed and tossed his bank card through the window. Lynn ran the card through a reader and passed a handheld unit over to Troy. Troy pressed his finger in the box on the screen. Lynn took the unit back as the receipt printed. Lynn handed it to Troy and ripped the other side of the form, then handed him a copy. Lynn brought up a plastic

index card file box and fingered through it. He passed the card over and pointed as he spoke.

“Yours is four dash twenny-nine. You can take yer truck back there. It’s the fourth row back to the East - pert’neer all the way down. All the numbers are painted on the ass-phalt. Take’r easy fellas,” Lynn said with a swipe salute along the side of his head.

“Yeah. Sure. Thanks,” Jon said and turned.

Troy took his receipts and folded them up, then tucked them into his pocket. They got in the truck and started for the remote controlled gate. It slowly slid to the side. There were yellow numbers painted on the drive ahead with arrows pointing directions. There were close to five hundred cars in here. Well, maybe four hundred seventy-nine if Troy’s was the last one in and all the other rows were full - since row five was empty. It seemed strange to him that they impounded so many vehicles. Not that he wanted to think about it. He really just wanted to get home.

Troy pulled the handle to get out of the truck when Jon parked.

“Hey.”

Troy looked over at him.

“Take the week. Can’t imagine you hammerin’ will do yer head any good.” Jon looked out the windows and looked as if he were tracking something. “Look, Troy,” he started and looked ahead.

Troy had never seen him like this. It was almost as if he was having a hard time saying what he was thinking. Uncomfortable was the mood. It was unusual for Jon to hesitate with his words.

“I’m honored that I’m your emergency contact...even though we really don’t know much about each other and, uh...” Jon looked back out the side window. “I’mma help ya through this. My lawyer is pretty good. I want you to stop by at the end of the week so we can talk.”

Jon looked over at Troy. He held out his tree of an arm and steel beam fingers. He held it palm up with his fingers slightly bent and thumb out wide.

“Alright, brother?”

Troy smiled and clasped his hand into Jon’s. Their palms slapped together.

“Right. Take it easy. See ya Sunday. Stop by the house. I’m makin’ ribs,” Jon said as he squeezed Troy’s hand and shook it slightly.

He let go of Troy and let him be on his way.

Troy slid out of the truck and shut the door behind him. He got in the car and started up the turbine. He didn’t feel like driving. He swore he was seeing things. Maybe the time off would do him some good. Maybe it was a sign he needed time to himself. He’d been working and going for several years, then working alone. He never took a break outside of days that they didn’t have work. Maybe it had gotten to him in ways he didn’t realize.

Jon waited and followed him out. It wasn’t that long ago Troy didn’t care for him whatsoever and pegged him for a stereotypical asshole boss. There was a lot of “tough love” and trust to see that he was a genuinely great guy and truly cared. It was no wonder he was a bit ticked off that Troy wanted to finish school. It was probably the reason why he offered Troy the foreman role.

Troy pulled in the driveway and waved as Jon drove past. His head was really starting to ache. He really wanted to lay down for a while. Angel was stretched out across the W.E.L.C.O.M.E. mat. He took an envelope that was tucked in the door. It was the seal of the state’s government. The front had the state’s attorney’s name stamped on the front, top left and Troy’s in the middle through the plastic window. Scratching Angel’s belly made him feel a bit better, but he wasn’t thrilled with what could have been inside the envelope.

He stepped over Angel and went inside. He tossed the envelope onto the table in front of the couch and went into the bathroom to get some pain meds. He found a bottle of the good stuff from when he smashed his thumb last year. He’d hit it so hard the nail fell off and fractured the tip of the bone. The nail finally regrew and there was a slight bend at the end of his thumb. He took it back. He did miss work for a few days. Not much of a vacation though.

Jon kept him busy in the winter plowing driveways or shoveling snow. If there wasn’t any of that, he would have him assist with home repairs from burst pipes to

broken furnaces. There were even some remodeling projects. They did become fairly close. Maybe. Jon kind of felt like an older brother. Not that Troy had the guts to say that out loud.

He took two of the tablets with him to the kitchen and grabbed the milk from the refrigerator. He tossed them in his mouth and gulped down several swallows of milk. It tasted like it was close to expiring. He put the milk away and wrote it on the dry erase board he had on the side of the fridge so he wouldn't forget.

He picked up the envelope and slumped down onto the couch. He tore open the envelope to find a court summons. It seemed the rumors were true. Jackie's husband was in jail on embezzlement charges. Any money he had was frozen in the accounts. The ex was thrown out of their home and living with her parents. It explained the summons to determine an alimony payment, even though they signed a document that would prevent this. He really didn't need this now.

The summons landed on the floor as he reached for the remote to power up the TV. The local news was reporting the weather. Another station was reporting the federal government's court ruling in favor of allowing other races and nationalities coverage under the Civilian Affirmative Rights Bill. Finally, more reports of actors and actresses disappearing from their homes and on-location trailers. One of the fanatical people they interviewed said it was "aliens" and how they saw lights and...

His eyes closed and he fell asleep.

This was different. He appeared on a hill next to a road. The hill led down to an alcove along the road cars could park and rest. It looked like the Grandiose Canyon area with the orangish sand. An RV was parked next to a large billboard that depicted a lady in a red plaid shirt with the sleeves rolled up and a brown leather vest holding a coiled whip. The words faded after the "Welcome To".

The sky was what grabbed his eye. It was...purple. The horizon was orange. Someone was moving around down by the RV. They appeared to be picking things up and taking them inside. No wonder. There was a massive tornado in the distance. There was no chance the RV survives. The sense of urgency he felt was as if that was family to him. It caused him to run down the hill.

Sunlight poked through the mini blinds and in his eyes causing him to wake up. He turned onto his side and passed out again.

He was walking down the street - downtown somewhere - as brick buildings passed by. He couldn't help himself from looking over at her. Jackie was so beautiful today. He was the luckiest guy in the world. He looked left and saw a clear crosswalk. He looked left and saw no vehicles coming or going. He looked back at Jackie. A small orange flame flickered off her face. Her face was on fire!

He panicked and looked everywhere for something wet to douse her face and extinguish the flames. There was nothing around. He looked back at her.

"Why aren't you helping me!?" She cried.

"Why wasn't she dropping to the ground and rolling...anything to put out the flames?" He thought.

Again he tried desperately for something, anything, to put out the flames. His shirt! He looked back and started to take off his shirt. It was too late. Her eyeballs had melted into the sockets, followed by the rest of her flesh. It was like a scene in those clay animation movies.

She fell to the ground with only the skull remaining of her head. He fell to his knees beside her. A sharp pain pierced his heart and tears streamed from his eyes. He looked around for help. There was a man there. Or so he thought. The tears blurred his vision.

He awoke with a shudder and gasped. Sweat soaked his shirt and his heart was pounding its way out of his chest in slow, forceful blows. He sat up on the couch and put his feet on the floor, his forearms on his thighs and hands dropped inside his knees as he gasped for air. Tears made their way down the creases of his nose and around his mouth - some finding their way into the corners of his lips. He didn't feel like crying, though he was sad and frightened by what he saw and experienced.

The banging in his chest stopped, the water dried and his breath caught. His dreams lately were getting stranger and more extreme. This was *definitely* some *much* needed time off. That, and maybe it was a good idea not to take any more of those pills.

He wiped his face on one of the only dry spots left on his shirt as he got to his feet. The sun was getting ready to take its own rest. The clock on the microwave announced that he'd been out for about six hours. The pain in his head was mostly gone. The point of impact reclaimed its place of attention when the neck back of the shirt slid against the bandage. It didn't last long, but it did remind him it may be time to change out the bandage and gauze.

Parts of the bandage pad stuck to the wound as he carefully unwound the wrapping and slowly pulled it back. The skin around the stitches was red and puffy. His eyes told a similar story. His entire life was red and puffy - held together by stitches.

He went to the overlook that night to try and pull himself together. He might have stayed longer, but he kept seeing a flashing light in the sky. He'd had enough of his delusions and decided not to go back home. Instead, he went to the Hamerjack's garage and tore apart some of the car.

The garage had some extra space in it ever since they sold the car to Troy when Mr. Hammerjack was told not to drive. His glaucoma was too severe. Mrs. Hammerjack parked outside today. The extra room allowed him to place the parts in it. He spent this and the following days tearing it down to the chassis, engine and drivetrain. Plenty of parts that needed to be replaced.

He would use Mrs. Hammerjack's vehicle to go to the salvage yard for parts. Parts stores didn't carry the parts he needed anymore. He did find a local fabricator that was ecstatic to produce the parts - being a Rebel enthusiast himself. The fabricator even offered to pick up the larger old parts to see if he could salvage them. Grinding, polishing and rustproofing them. *That* was a bit pricey, but well worth it in the long-term. The parts were fairly cheap to salvage or refurbish.

Money wasn't the issue though. The date of the meeting for Jackie's greed was for the middle of next month and the rest of the bills didn't come until the end of it. Besides that, honestly, his life was pretty boring. He kept busy working all year.

It took him all of one day to realize: After putting the car back together, then what? What in the world would he do next? It was no wonder Jon pushed him out of the house. That went well, didn't it? Why fix what's not broken? It got him into so much trouble.

Speaking of, Jon pulled in the drive and stopped by the house. Troy waved to flag him up to the garage.

"Troy! You're looking..." Jon paused and looked like he lost his words in Troy's filthy clothes. "Anyway, the station called. We can pick up the rest o' yer stuff. It seems as though..."

It was unlike Jon to be like this. He was off the moment he got out of the truck. Something was clearly bothering him. Much like after Troy confided in him the truth behind his divorce.

Jon collected himself and attempted to try again. "They closed the investigation, Troy, and...I think it's for the best if I don't...if I stay in the truck while you do that."

All Troy could do was sigh. He could feel his face warming and his blood boiling. He was disappointed more than anything. It truly felt like some theoretical force was preventing him from being happy. They had all the evidence in the world: The forehead bash, the bruise on his chest, the video from the officer and the cruiser...

The more he thought about it, the more his jaw ached from clenching his teeth.

Jon took Troy back to the house so he could get cleaned up and changed. Jon was silent for most of the way there. It was odd of him as he was hardly ever quiet. He finally turned to Troy while he stared out the side window.

"Do you want to press charges?"

Troy looked over at him and out the windshield. Jon kept looking from him to the road.

"Would you like me to have my lawyer meet with you?"

More back and forth as Troy thought.

“I’ll let you think about it. We can discuss it later.”

More silence. Troy could feel the headache coming back. He needed to settle himself down or it would be a migraine. He thought about Angel. He didn’t see her when he left. Matter-of-fact, he hadn’t seen her since he came back from the hospital. The concern calmed him down by the time he realized the truck was parked.

He was in and out rather quick. It was the same ordeal as before. ID, tapping, searching, confirming and leaving. The only good news was the officer handed him a little card on it with a phone number to the district attorney - who would be calling him in a few days. That must’ve meant that there was an ongoing investigation that didn’t involve his communicator. He suspected there’d be a call on there from Jackie. Maybe his grandmother sent him another video message. He could use one of those right about now.

He used Jon’s charger and turned it on. The first thing that popped up was the missed calls. Eleven to be exact. There were one hundred and thirty-one notifications on his Biography app. Most of them were from games and pleas from the other players. While it may be easier to clear the missed calls and voice messages, he opted to sift through the game requests and other notifications to delete them.

A bunch of people he knew from intermediary school and the university posted messages in reply to a posting from a former group project participant he met in an anatomy course. It seems he owned an Official Frequency Interceptor and listened in on the incident. An overzealous Justice major. Even Jackie commented on it. It only made him dread listening to the voice messages.

He didn’t listen to many in their entirety. He got the gist of them, skipped, then saved each one. The first was a “courtesy” call about the paperwork he received. Verification. Verification. Irritation about the lack of communication. Verification of irritation. Anger. Anger from the lack of communication. Irrational, belligerent yelling. Verification of that. Apology for the last several messages. Concern for his well-being. Thanking him for making his court date easier on her...

He’d had enough. He’d had *more* than enough. He wanted to drive his car over the overlook. He didn’t even *have* his car. And he couldn’t do that to Mrs. Hammerjack. It wasn’t even his so it made *zero* sense. He needed to calm down and clear his mind. Seeing things or not, the overlook was the only place he *wanted* to be.

Jon dropped him off and told him to remember tomorrow. Ribs. Talking about the lawyer and the district attorney. Non-alcoholic beer. Troy wanted to punch his laughing face for that last one.

He hurried to change back into his grimy clothes so he could get the Rebel in drivable condition. The hood of the Carter Classic just didn't have the same sturdiness of the Rebel's. After a shower and a change, he made a slight detour before heading out the door.

He was just glad he was here without incident. A light breeze carried a nearby lilac's fragrance his way. Miscellaneous insects carried their tune while the lights above flickered randomly. He reached over and picked up the H&GA 2077 9mm autoloader. He raised up the gun and looked at the moon reflecting off the barrel. He checked to make sure the bullet he put in it was still in the magazine, then slid the clip back in with a heavy sigh that cleared his thoughts.

He felt more relaxed than he had in about a week. There were rough days ahead and he needed to tackle each one as it came. He just needed to sort through the list.

He closed his eyes and thought, "First thing's first. I need to call the lawyer about Jackie's insane demands. Eat dinner with Jon and discuss legal ramifications for the police incident. Finish putting the car back together." He opened his eyes as the cool metal of the gun seeped through his shirt. "Figure out what steps I need to get back into college. Try and find out where Angel ran off to and what the hell is *that*?"

It sounded like lightning flashing mixed with arcing electricity making contact. He knew that sound from the lab he had on the effects of mass electrical currents on the anatomy.

He looked around at the lights marking the barrier to the drop-off. They were solar lights. He looked over. It wasn't the street lights. It wasn't any of the power lines in or outside of the town. It wasn't the substation. He was genuinely stumped. Nothing else in sight, near or far, could generate enough current to be audible like that.

Something caught his eye. Up in the sky. It flickered. It was that light he kept seeing. *THAT* light. The one he thought wasn't real. The one he thought was all in his head. There. Yet, a thousand times bigger than the speck in the distance.

“What...*is* that?”

A large object flickered three times and slowly disappeared.

“Was that a...praying mantis?”

His electrical question was answered. A large beam of light shot straight down from the sky to the ground with a sound of lightning, the hum of a large electrical source and popping sounds as it hit the ground causing dust, dirt and fire to leap up from the point of contact.

He froze. His heart felt like it stopped. His muscles tensed. He didn't know what to do or how to react. Just as the first, a second beam of light hit closer. A third even closer. The proximity caused his “flight” reaction to kick in. He leapt from the hood - the gun bouncing off the hood and clattering on the gravel - and found his face in the dirt. He started running as a beam struck over the Hammerjack house. He stopped as the house rippled, then disappeared.

“The car is quicker,” he thought - his first rational thought in the last several minutes.

He doubled back and started for a vehicle as a beam struck further away this time. His heart raced and he could barely breathe. The hope was alive that he wouldn't get caught in the fray. With the last strike hitting further away, there was a chance he could make it to the Rebel and escape whatever was happening. Just a few more steps and he could make it to the vehicle and escape. Just a few more steps and he'd be on his way to freedom.

“It's too late.” “I wasn't fast enough.” “I made a bad decision.” All thoughts that went through his mind as he held the handle of the Rebel.

A beam of light snapped and crackled as it illuminated the ground around him. He yelled in fright. He knew his life was over. He couldn't move. He couldn't breathe. His body felt numb. All of his hair felt like it stood on end. He lifted up his hand and watched as it slowly disappeared.

Then...darkness.
