

Carl was tired. The high of the heroin was leaving, the evening was winding down. Randall had been giving him shit about continuing to use. It was time to go home.

“Hey...why donchu rea'me?” The words almost unintelligibly slurred together.

Neither Carl nor Randall had noticed the large kid looming over the couch.

Carl glanced up. “Sorry bud, show's over for the night.” He turned back to Randall, still frustrated that his friend was beating him while the leaving was happening. Stupid friend.

“Why...cantdoit?”

Carl looked back up at the kid. He was big, and drunk. Probably six three, maybe six four. Two forty if he was a pound. The kid had one of those beards that was made up almost exclusively of neck hair. As if all of the hair on his chest was migrating north and just hadn't quite made it to the chin. Carl could feel the leaving and his argument with Randall filling him up. He was getting cranky and this neck-bearded douche was not making things easier.

Carl carefully licked his lips, he had already started scanning the guy without even realizing it. He pulled together every ounce of civility he could muster and replied.

“Sorry, no.”

The big drunk guy stared down at Carlton with his eyelids at halfmast. He looked over to Randall but saw no help coming so he returned his impaired gaze to Carlton. He wobbled ever so slightly as he spoke as if the effort to speak took away from the concentration required to remain standing.

“I...wanchu...toread...me.” The kid spoke slowly, imagining that he was carefully enunciating each word. Just to make it perfectly clear for the dumb psychic that was having a hard time understanding what he wanted. “D'you...unnerstand...me?”

Randall exhaled slowly and leaned back into the faded cushions of the frat house couch. His friend Carl wasn't just an eerily good psychic. His friend Carl was also a very sharp wit. And had little patience for heckling and catcalls and people that thought they were smarter. Randall had seen Carl rip people to shreds, really embarrass them, just using his words and his “psychic” ability.

Randall could sense the same thing about to happen to this poor schlub. He began muttering, “Walk away, just walk away,” under his breath as his eyes darted back and forth between his friend and the kid.

Carl took a breath. He was mad. At Randall, at the heroin for leaving, at three more weeks of school, at everything. But he wasn’t mad at the guy goading him. Not yet anyway. Carlton stood up slowly, a good four inches shorter and at least seventy five pounds lighter than the kid wobbling in front of him. The stench of alcohol reeking out of the kid’s neck beard. Carlton looked at the guy’s eyes halfway closed and wondered if the kid had just fallen asleep.

“I’m done for the night.” Carl started. “I only do one reading a day, preserves the aura. Tell you what, next week, come find me a little earlier in the evening, and I’ll do my best to do your reading...” Carl softened his face and gave the kid a half smile.

But as the smile crossed his lips, the kid (the really drunk kid) put his hands up in front of his body, palms facing out, toward and pushed Carl. Backwards onto the couch.

“Yurrr noteen rill!” The drunk kid slurred. And for emphasis, “NOT...EVEN.”

Randall put his hand to his mouth. “Oh shit,” slipped out between his fingers.

Carl burned slowly. It was another week until his next hit. The heroin leaving his body, leaving him alone and longing. Carl often tried to be in bed by the time the high wore off. Made the leaving that much more bearable. But he had been feeling especially good tonight. That, coupled with the looming loss of his friend Randall, had made him stay at the Sigma house. Enjoying the remaining celebrity of being a big fish in a little pond.

Carl knew that in a few weeks it was all over. Randall had a high paying job for some finance company. And Carl, he had nothing. Some slim hope of still getting into grad school (fat chance), but if that didn’t pan out, he had nothing. Not a place to live, not a job, not an idea. Things were about to change, for the worse. He felt a little bit like that kid in that Stephen King story he read when he was a kid. Wore the pages down to nothing reading about Gordie and Chris going to find a dead kid’s body. The kid in that story could feel the summer slipping away and his friends slipping away. Things were a-changin’. Carl could feel that same desperation that

Gordie felt. Trying to hang on to something wonderful that was about to slip right through his fingers.

He rubbed his eyes, stood, and squared his shoulders, still a good four inches shorter than the mountain of a kid that had just knocked him backward. It all ran through his mind. Gordie, the leaving, Randall, his future...and Carl was pissed.

“You want a reading, you miserable wad?” Carl’s voice was low, but just loud enough to catch the attention of anyone still sitting in the front room.

The big drunk kid took an involuntary step backward, unsure of what had just happened. Usually he could throw his weight around and it was enough to be big. And drunk. Ninety five guys out of a hundred wouldn’t step back up on him.

Carl stepped forward, in almost perfect synchronicity with the kid stepping back. “You really want me to read you?” His eyes already scanning, up and down the kid, shoes, clothes, haircut, everything. “Well let me start with the basics you meaningless little douche. You are struggling with spring practice this year. Thinking of telling coach that you don’t want to play anymore. Am I right?”

(eyes down, away)

Even as drunk as the kid was, the tells were all there. Carl continued, “But you don’t want to tell him the real reason, do you? What’s the real reason? You know I know, but do you want...

(eyes widened)

...me to say it out loud? Right here. In front of all of these people?” A quick scan confirmed for him that “all of these people” really amounted to about eight. Not including the big drunk kid and himself. “You want me to let go in front of the whole school the reason the reason the big bad football player can’t play football anymore?”

The flurry came so fast and with so much venom the kid with the neck beard had simply stood and absorbed it. He couldn’t find a word, any word to spit out in defense. He was so drunk that even if he had found a word, it probably would have come out as incoherent babble anyway.

“Carl...” Randall tried to intervene. Leaning forward and putting his hand on his friend.

The look Randall got caused him to recoil too. Not to the degree that the poor drunk kid had, but he pulled his hand from his friend quickly, recomposed himself and simply said, “Okay.” He put his hands up in front of his chest and slid back on the worn cushion of the couch. Randall shook his head ever so slightly. Knowing what was coming.

Carl turned his attention back to the stunned football player and scanned again. “Nothing to say about that?” His voice was not threatening, it remained low. As if they were the only two in the room. But it carried with it a control that was unnerving. It was almost cordial, except it wasn’t. It was the voice of a man that knew all of the secrets and was just waiting for the right opportunity to spill them.

Carl paused. He could see the kid struggling to say something trying to figure out how to get away. But Carl could feel something else. The girl, Selena, that he had read earlier in the evening, that one had felt good. He could tell he was on point and that he was nailing it. He had been feeding off the crowd and feeding off the heroin. It had been a good read.

But now it was different. It was feeling even better. It was feeling *stronger*. He could see the twitches and flinches. He scanned. The smell of the drunken ass in front of him filled his nostrils. The rush of his panicked breathing filled his ears. Oh, baby, this was going to be a good one.

The kid tried to mumble something. A tunnel was beginning to form. Carl standing at one end and the drunk with the neck beard at the far end. Very far.

“I tell you what,” Carl smiled and reached out to the kid. His arm longer than he ever remembered it. The kid’s flinch was so big and comical, he looked like someone having the world’s biggest napjerk, except he was awake. Carl almost laughed. Behind him he heard a snort of laughter from someone.

“I tell you what,” Carl repeated placing his elongated hand lightly on the kid’s shoulder. “We can keep the reason between us...”

(shoulder muscles relaxed)

...and talk about something else. Let's talk about the future." Carl's voice had become smooth. Effortlessly engaging the kid while scaring the living shit out of him. "Your future. I see...I see...Well I see a ram...

(where the hell had that come from)

...and lots of money...

(wide eyes)

...and a draft."

(what the fuck was he saying)

"Imma get drafted by the Rams?" The kid managed to sound both scared and thankful at the same time. "The L.A. Rams?"

Carl had no idea where the Rams thing had come from. Nothing about the kid screamed L.A. or Rams. Carl scanned again, head to toe. No signals, no tattoos, nothing.

"Thass my fay...fay...favorite team."

"Yes, you get drafted by the Rams." Carl decided to go with it. When you're hot, you're hot. "And you make it all of the way through training camp, all of the way to second string. In the first game of your professional career you get in, sometime in the second half. You get in the game and you get a sack. Take the quarterback down clean. The place goes nuts. Your jersey is on the screen. Parents, back in Baltimore..."

(baltimore why baltimore)

...are watching on T.V. So proud, jumping up and down. But they are in Baltimore, not at the game." Carl could see the kid but he was no longer scanning him. In the tunnel there was only room for two. He didn't see twitches or eye movements. And even the kid was starting to look a little fuzzy around the edges. "There's a tube in his nose. Your father's nose. They aren't at your house are they?" Carl didn't even sense the muscle flex in the kid's shoulder. Tightening in fear. Nor did he see the kid try desperately to drag his eyes away from Carl's. "It's only your mother jumping up and down. Your dad is in a...hospital bed. Yes. With tubes and wires."

Carl's face had gone blank, his eyes were just slits. He tried to scan, but it was a useless effort, the tunnel was so narrow, but there was no need. The information was just there, pouring in from somewhere. He kept it flowing.

“He's in a hospital...It's cancer. Yes. Cancer and he can't leave. He's watching from his bed, with your mother right next to him. She's jumping up and down. You've made them so proud. They never thought you were going to amount to anything. No. They thought you were a mistake. Just happened. Something to put up with, just keep you alive, get you through. A mistake.”

Somewhere far behind him. Far, far behind him Carl heard words from someone. Someone he used to know. The words were calling his name, telling him to stop. Carlton Wiley was not stoppin' for nobody, no how. Not when the read was this fucking good.

There was a small whimper from the shape in front of him.

Carl didn't stop. Couldn't. “But now they are proud. Oh so proud Teddy...

(had he known it was teddy)

...of what you've accomplished. Of what you've become. After the game you go out. With the team. One of the boys. Oh yes Teddy, you are part of the team, you've hit the big time and your parents are so proud, even though they never wanted you. Later that night, after the drinking and carousing you drive home. Life is glorious Teddy!”

“The car you hit has four teenage kids in it. Two survive. Two are killed. At least it's instantly, so you don't have to worry about them suffering. No Teddy, those two didn't suffer at all. Just like you. You don't suffer either. Your door flies open. You had certainly meant to latch your seatbelt, hadn't you Teddy. You usually latched that seatbelt up good and tight. But not this time. No. Your body tumbles from the open car door at some ungodly speed. The cops find your body twenty yards away. Twenty yards! Teddy, do you have any idea how fast you have to be going to throw a two hundred and fifty pound...

(two fifty six)

...two hundred and fifty six pound man that far? Sixty feet Teddy. The coroner says your neck broke on impact. Death was...

(is)

...is immediate. Your body is flown home to Baltimore. Your father is able to make it to the funeral. He missed the game, saw it on T.V. But he makes it to your funeral in person. So does your mother. They are both so proud. But they feel so much guilt. You had been a mistake. If only they had been more careful...hadn't made the mistake in the first place, maybe those innocent kids wouldn't be dead. Huh, Teddy."

Carl's eyes opened, although he was fairly certain they had never been closed. The tunnel of his focus expanded. The front room of the Sigma house came back into view and Carl could see the fingers of his hand. They were bone white where they dug into the shoulder of the now weeping drunk kid slumped in front of him. Carl tried to uncurl the claws at the end of his arm. Damn they hurt. How hard had he grabbed the poor drunk s.o.b?

"That's enough Carl!" Randall's voice hissed in his ear.

Carl pulled his hand off the kid's...

(teddy's)

...shoulder. He tried to focus. The room was silent. The only sound was the sobbing of the kid in front of him and some ambient music sneaking in through the open kitchen door. Some old eighties song.

"Come on." Randall in his ear again, "that's enough. Let's get out of here."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I think you've made your point."

Carl flexed his fingers, they ached. His eyes made a quick pass around the room. What had he just said? Done? The girl that had been sitting on the couch opposite still had her phone up, recording the whole thing. But her expression was not the usual. Her eyes were wide and non-blinking. Her mouth was just open enough to show her perfectly white teeth. Carl's eyes darted to the others in the room. Their expressions were no different. It wasn't the joyous disbelief that normally came with one of his reads. No. The disbelief was there, but it was strained through the faces of something else. Something that looked like fear.

The girl on the couch thumbed her phone and brought it down to her lap. The expression on her face didn't change. "Whoa" came out of her unmoving mouth, no louder than her exhaling breath.