

*In this chapter, Andy Lew has just been laid off from his job as the projectionist at the Colossus Theater after leaving the booth unguarded to go look at the aftermath of a car crash, allowing a pair of thieves to break in and steal the rare film they were showing. Despondent, Andy returns home, only to discover an unwelcome visitor- who has even more unwelcome information about the investigation into the murder of his brother, Stephen, whose severed head recently turned up after twelve years as a missing person...*

The trip home is fevered, the pain in Andy's ankle vacillating between crippling and non-existent, icy chills and unbearable sweats overcoming him by turns, the marquee lights and signs of the Deuce more hallucinogenic this evening than usual: neon phantoms and electric demons swooping down from on high with their luminescent wings spread and ready to swipe him up, goateed men in cassocks ringing bells on street corners and bellowing "Satan lives," hobos with fakir beards on their cardboard mats cackling at him and chanting curses in strange tongues. Andy pauses a few times to collect himself, to cower behind trash piles or huddle into the fetal position and rock for a few moments to calm his nerves, to snap his mind back to reality. This cannot be happening; cannot have his beloved Colossus taken from him; cannot imagine that he will never again sit in the booth and watch a film play out in the auditorium, that he will never again snip frames from a print on his workbench. What's more: without a regular paycheck, flight from the city is both more imperative and less possible. Must get home. Must be with her. Must slip the needle into his arm and forget tonight for a while.

Andy stops in the hall outside of his apartment door; sees it open; presses himself to the wall, looks both ways. In the past twelve years, has never experienced a break-in; has never had to worry about it; found that shortly after Steven left, shortly after *she* came into his life, his neighbors began to regard him differently, tenants stepping away from him in the hallway, whispering about him as he passed, pulling their children out of the stairwells when he came home; learned that stories about him drifted throughout the building, mounting in brutality over the years until the point that he has come to be regarded as something approaching Dracula. Two break-ins in one night; had figured that the kids in the projector booth were just a couple of hopheads blazed out of their minds and looking for a quick hock; wonders now what sort of mad conspiracy is working against him, working against *her*. Her. But for her, he would bolt, go hole up in some café or at the Last Chance, come back when he was sure the coast was clear; can't bear the thought of her in there alone with some intruder; digs his nails into his palms and slowly approaches his open door.

"Come on in, son, ain't here to bite you." The rich basso coming out of Andy's apartment is strikingly gentle, perfectly regulated in the speaker's voice box to soothe the listener. Andy's muscles relax as others tighten and in spite of himself he steps into his apartment. There, situated on Andy's cot, lit only by the light coming in from the hallway, is the ursine figure of Dick Valentine. Sleepy eyes regard Andy with something between whimsy and pity.

Andy freezes in the doorway. "You'd better have a warrant." His voice trembles. "Is that why... do you have a warrant?"

"We can talk in the hall, you want, but people gotta pass through. You standing there's gonna make it damn awkward. Think you'll be more comfortable in here, too, anyway." Dick looks around the room, at Andy's photos decorating the walls, shakes his head. Andy steps in, closes the door behind him, shuttering the men in darkness. Andy switches on the light; the walls of the room are greyer than he remembers.

"Looks like you had yourself a rough night," Dick says. "I'd usually say I'd come back another time, but..." He looks down at a rat sitting hunched in the corner, nibbling on the remnants of some long-ago discarded pizza. "...but I'd rather not come back."

"You can't go through my shit without a warrant," Andy says.

"Ain't here to go through your stuff. Ain't here to bite you. See my suit? This here's my talking suit. I was here to bite you, it'd be a lot darker. Don't like the blood to show up." Andy studies the outfit; looks familiar; realizes to his horror that it's the same design as his beige three-piece.

"All right then," Andy says. "Let's talk. And then you can get the fuck out of my apartment."

"Officially you haven't been notified of your brother's death yet," Dick says, leaning back on his elbows. "But unofficially I know that you run with Gator Hyatt, so I understand you've probably known for a while now."

Andy stares.

"Like I said. Unofficial. I've seen your jacket. You been a CI for Hyatt for five years now. According to him, you've given him sixteen collars. Bullshit. I know you, Lewinsky. You're a rat, but you ain't *that* kinda rat."

"Know a lot about rats, huh?"

"I do. Biology, zoology, they're hobbies of mine. Man in my line of work's got to have his hobbies. Keeps your brain from turning into..." Dick trails off, gestures to the room around him. "Scientists got it right, see, studying rats. You learn all you need to learn about people, studying rats. This city for instance. I heard some college professor—say, your cousin's one, ain't she?"

"Fuck her," Andy says.

"Uh-huh. So I heard some college professor is trying to figure out, 'Why's New York City got so bad? What's wrong there?' And he's hollering about all of this social, political bullshit, and I just wanted to be able to ask him, 'Son, you know what happens when you stick a bunch of rats in a cage?' Do you, Andy?"

"You're wasting my time."

"You stick some rats in a cage and everything's fine. They live together. Form a community. Hell, you got enough space you can have an entire city of rats. But you start to put more in than what it can handle and things start to change. See, rats look out for themselves. It's where the term comes from, though it ain't that apt. Now, a rat... a rat can look out for other rats, too. Care for them, support them. Make families with them. But then you start to take things away. Take away their space, their food. Rat stops thinking about the other rats so much. Keeps looking inward. Keeps trying to figure out, what do I gotta do for myself? And the more the rat asks that, the crazier he gets. Cause that's all he's thinkin' about. Not about gettin' away, not about makin' more space. Just his own damn fixation. Finally, not enough space, not enough food, whole bunch of rats lookin' out for number one, you know what happens? Rats start to eat. One another. Alive. And you got one rat chewin' on his neighbor while another rat's chewin' on him. Then 'fore long, you don't got any rats left at all. So, see, you learn a lot about people studyin' rats. And that's how I know you, Andy Lew. You'd eat a man sooner than turn him over to a group of people you hate more than life itself. So I know you ain't fed no one to Hyatt all these years. Which means you been givin' him *something* to keep your narrow ass on the streets..."

"I am a law-abiding American citizen," Andy says.

Dick chuckles, a deep, hearty bellow. "Sure, son. But here's the thing. Whatever sort of sicko arrangement you got, there's only one party I'm interested in, and it ain't you. Say what you will—or don't—but there's two men in this room who know that Hyatt's a sick piece of shit. I know there's boys

on the force turn they backs on a lot of stuff. Man's gotta do what he's gotta do. I don't worry myself over that, we leave one another alone, cause they know their lines, don't step over 'em. Hyatt ain't got no lines. We both know that. Men have a habit of turning up dead 'round him, lot more than any other boy on the force. The dope he brings in and the money he brings in from deals he busted up always seems like just a little too *little*, dig? And, too, you gotta look at the company he keeps. No offense."

Andy shrugs.

"There's a difference between a vice boy going undercover and going native, you know."

"Me," Andy says. "Why it matters."

Dick smiles. "'Course. You. You and Teddy McCarn."

"Who?"

"The man we found with your brother's head, son. Hyatt not tell you that?"

"Not the name," Andy says. He wonders if Gator's been holding out on any *other* names. "You gonna fry him?"

"Now, see, that's the interesting thing. See, I remember your brother going missing, remember it very well. One of my first cases, you know, you never forget your first. Twelve years ago."

Andy tries not to breathe too quickly. Could really use the needle right now. Wonders if Dick would mind so much; seems serious about this not-on-official business thing.

"Twelve years," Dick continues. "Now, you say the boy went queer, ran off with his new boy-toy. Talked to his buddies, seems like the sort of fella who'd have some hidden proclivities. Good for him. I got a few of my own. Story never sat right with me, though. Always seemed off. Kept seeming off, every year goes by that no one hears from him. His wife, his buddies. You. That little cousin of yours. Most boys decide to open up about that lifestyle, they decide, sooner or later, to try and reach back out, try and make some kinda amends. Especially these days, cultural climate being what it is. Not Steven Lew, though. When he disappeared, boy really disappeared."

"So?" Andy says. "Now you know. This freak killed him, this McCarn."

Dick smiles again, shakes his head. "Twelve years, Andy. Remember? Teddy McCarn got discharged from the United States Army last August. After *sixteen* years of service. Boy was in Saigon when your brother went missing. Whereabouts accounted for every... single... day."

Andy inhales raggedly. "So? He gets out of the Army, comes back here, shanks my brother. All the shit they got when they came back from the suck, what do you expect? These fucking hippie sons of bitches spitting on them in airports, I'd want to kill a bastard, too."

"Aww, I forgot what a flag waver you are. Always got a kick out of that."

"Ain't nothing funny about loving your country," Andy says.

"Not at all. It's just that you..." Dick looks around the apartment. "Well, you wouldn't *expect* it from you, would you?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nevermind. Point being is—and I can't keep stressing this enough—science is a wonderful thing. See, science can't nail it down exactly, but it can tell me this: Your brother's been dead a lot longer than since last August."

"Meaning what?" Andy says. Something clicks. He reaches into his coat, comes out with tonight's photos. Starts thumbing them rapidly, like a scrap book. Feels his breathing steady, his nerves calm.

"Meaning I'm not having Teddy McCarn held on charges of killing your brother. Improper disposal of a body, maybe. Not that."

Andy glances up over the rims of his glasses. "What?"

"Teddy McCarn ain't a killer. Sick fuck, though. See, I don't like him for whacking your brother, but I damn sure like him for the twisted SOB who dropped a tab of acid in the Kool-Aid at PS32's Christmas pageant last year."

Andy can't help but snicker; stifles a full-blown laugh. The pity in Dick's face is temporarily replaced by rancor.

"You *would* think that's funny, you nasty little fuck, wouldn't you? A bunch of little kids freaking out like damn hippies at Woodstock?" He stares with an intensity that even Andy finds unsettling. Both men recompose themselves. The gentility returns to Dick's voice.

"Teddy McCarn, though... Well, it don't make sense coming from him. Seen a lot of boys coming back from the other side as different men.. Was in Anzio myself and... Say, your old man was in the Big One, too, wasn't he? Think your cousin said that. Eastern Front?"

Andy stares at Dick; for the first time this evening he makes eye contact with him, Andy's ice blue eyes burning through the lenses of his glasses.

"Yeah," Andy says.

"Real sorry to hear what happened. I mean that. Your cousin says you're the one who found him?"

"Moving on."

"You're right. I'm sorry. For both of you." Dick pauses a moment, considers his own hands; looks apologetic. When he looks back up at Andy, he's business again. "But you know these boys comin' home done some awful stuff. I get that. Get the rage. The flippin' out, hitting the wife, the bar fight. Don't condone it. But get it. But dopin' a bunch of kids? Where's it come from? What makes a man drug school children... The same man we find months later dancing around the severed head of a man he almost certainly didn't kill? Like he's a brother in some old cracker horror story, trying to conjure some spirit?"

Maybe he was, Andy thinks.

"Not that we don't got a motive from him. Mr. McCarn, he ain't a shy one, no sir. Some boys like that, you bring 'em in, they get real quiet. Clam up. Go all spooky on you. Shrinks call it 'catatonia.' Other ones, they can't shut up, for all the damn sense it makes, babblin' about little green men, vampires, whatever kinda sick stuff they got bouncin' round in their brains. Mr. McCarn, though, he's all business. Can hear the military man in him. Yes, sir, no, sir, sits up straight in his chair, respects authority. Now, we ask him about PS32, you know what he says?"

"I'm assuming you're going to tell me."

"Says, 'Yes sir, that was me, sir.' Not accustomed to gettin' a confession so easy, myself. Not in a case like this. Man finds out his wife was having an affair, gets hot, puts a slug in her, realizes what he done, that's the kinda man starts sobbin' when you stick him in a room, spills everything. Something like this? I'm used to grilling loonies four, five hours without shit. 'Yes sir, that was me, sir.' Wild. Figure I'll press my luck. I ask him, 'Well, Teddy, why'd you do it, and why'd you have that head?' And you know what he says? Don't answer—I know you don't know. He tells me 'Sir, I went into the suck to kill commies for the good of this country, and I never got to put a bullet in a damn one.'"

"Sounds like a good man."

"Oh, just you wait. Mr. McCarn, he ain't done talkin'. Says he ends up back Stateside, steamed he didn't get to put a bullet in no Charlies, says he's even more steamed he didn't get a souvenir. That's what he called it. A souvenir. I ask him, what kinda souvenir you want to bring back, Teddy, you want a

post card, one of them flower necklaces—though, come to think of it, maybe that’s only the Hawaiians. And Teddy, he tells me, ‘All I wanted to bring home was a dead Red’s head.’ And then, he gets happy. Real happy. Ain’t used to seeing a man smile that big in the hot seat. And he says, ‘And *he* got me one.’ And I ask who ‘*he*’ is. And Teddy McCarn, he didn’t stop smiling. But he *did* stop talkin’. Teddy McCarn ain’t stopped smilin’ and ain’t talked again since that day. Boy even smiles in his sleep now.”

“This is all very fucked up,” Andy says. “Thank you for completely ruining my evening. Can you leave now?”

“See you got some pictures there,” Dick says. “Think I can guess it’s not anything I’d want to see. Now, me, on the other hand...” Dick reaches into his own coat, produces photos of his own. “These here, my pictures, I think *you* wanna see.” Dick extends the photos; tentatively, Andy moves forward, snatches them away, scurries back. He looks down at the photos. Looks back to Dick. Back to the photos.

“What the fuck is this shit?”

“Same thing your sister-in-law wanted to know, when she brought them to me... two years ago? Maybe three. Things like this slip your mind. Was getting set to move out of her place, knocked a baseboard loose moving the couch. Found her a nifty little stash. Couple of vials of morphine, couple of porno mags. Those.”

Andy squints to make out the details in the pictures. Dick’s pictures are much older than his Polaroids, monochrome and grainy, yet taken with more precise care than Andy’s hasty snapshots. He recognizes the place in the photos as his own apartment years ago, slightly cleaner, fewer holes punched in the walls, fewer photos pinned up. Recognizes, too, his brother’s old friend Ludo, head to toe black in his beatnik getup, mugging for the camera; here, spread across the old couch, smoking a joint; here, holding a pair of candles over his head like devil’s horns; and, here, in the last three photos of the series, his jeans down around his ankles, mounted on top of a half-nude figure, its eyes lolling in a narcotic stupor...

Andy tears the pictures in half, in fourths, in eighths, until they litter the ground like the multitude of mouse nests that already dot the apartment floor, then recoils from the shredded remnants.

“Fella in the pictures-- though I’m figuring you know-- *used* to be an asshole named Ludomil Dombrowski. Got hisself shot ten years back, trying to push baking soda to some boys in Harlem. And I’m figuring that you know who the other fella in those pictures is.”

“You don’t know shit,” Andy says. It comes out as more of a whimper than he’d intended. “What’ve you been doing with those, huh? Three years, you fucking degenerate? Is that how you get off?”

“What I been doing is thinking,” Dick says. “About what kinda man keeps those kinda pictures of his own brother. What kinda man keeps hanging around with the other fella in the pictures. Thought I’d come up with a few answers. Which is exactly why you ain’t seen my face for a good, long time.”

Andy stares.

“But, see, another thing I been wondering about a lot too, is what to do about Gator Hyatt. Cause you see, when the rats start eatin’ one another, it’s gotta start somewhere. Gotta start with one rat. You got yourself a whole cage of ‘em, just crammed in there, just right there on the brink... And then one gets it into his head that this is what he’s gotta do. Just one, chowin’ down on the nearest thing he can sink his teeth into. And then maybe he gets another one, and another one, but eventually he’s bitten enough, eaten enough his own damn self, that it gets everyone else on the move. But maybe, you stop that rat. Maybe you reach into the cage and you yank his ass out. Maybe you delay things. Maybe

just a day. Maybe a few days. But you still keep things going the way they been going for a little while longer.”

“Maybe all the fucking rats need to eat one another,” Andy says. “Maybe that’s what’s meant to be.”

“Don’t wanna find that out for myself,” Dick says. “What I do want is for Michael Hyatt’s racist ass to end up the same place as your brother’s.”

Andy loses track of how long both men are silent; Dick keeps his gaze fixed on Andy; Andy’s eyes move between the floor and Dick’s forehead.

“Yeah?” Andy says. “And why the fuck would I help some pig get what he wants?”

“Cause those pictures you just tore up? Those are the copies,” Dick says. “Those pictures are motive. Someone sees them, those pictures take your ass to the electric chair. But the thing is... I don’t want no one to see them. No one besides you. I want to burn them to ash. Because doing that lets a man walk away who maybe isn’t a good man... but maybe he’s a man who don’t deserve to be punished for *every* bad thing he done. You still like to play with yourself while people watch?”

“Why, you wanna see?”

Dick nods. “Thought so. Hyatt, he’s a wily fuck. Lotta fucks on the force, not so many of them wily. Any of them leather-wearin’ circus clowns tried to throw down on him, I know he’d see that comin’ down the block. He don’t let his guard down with them. He don’t spend time with them...alone... in their apartments. But, if he did. And maybe they got into it. Maybe things got nasty. Maybe Gator ended up with a bullet in his punk ass. Maybe I’d tell anyone who asked that it was self-defense, open and shut. And maybe I tell those same people that we never gonna figure out who did Steven Lew. That Steven Lew was a sad, lonely, fucked-up man who went into some dark corner of the world and never come out. And you know a cop’s always gonna listen when another cop’s talking.”

“And if your buddies on the force found out what you were talking about?” Andy asks.

“Who’d believe you?”

“Gator,” Andy says.

“Aw, son. Gator know I got it out for him. Don’t waste your breath telling the boy something he already know.” Dick checks his watch, rises from Andy’s cot. His head nearly touches the ceiling, has to stoop his shoulders to avoid bumping it. “You think it over, son. What you want your future to look like. Whether you want the rats to start biting sooner or later.”

Andy is surprised at himself when he opens the door for Dick to leave. Listens to heavy, trudging footsteps fade down the hallway. When he’s sure that Dick is gone, he drops the record on the player, starts up “Sister Golden Hair;” squats by his projector and sobs as he holds the lighter to the spoon. Is still sobbing when he slips the needle in and drifts away to a place beyond memory.