
REPORTING LIVE

DON'T FIND YOURSELF, CREATE YOURSELF

E. C. WARD

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CHAPTER 01

San Francisco was in the distance. A golden glow fell over the Golden Gate. The bright red mixed with the growing pinkish-orange sunset to make a beautiful panorama. Almost too good to leave behind, but what was beyond the gateway were sights and sounds more worth the journey.

Arthur drove the mahogany Corvette up a hilly street and parked to take in the view. He was the happiest teen in the world behind the wheel of a powerful car, but the hum of the engine wasn't the main tune he listened to. There was something else, more important, coming through the speakers.

Arthur's dad, Lovie, tapped his hands to the beat on his knees as the song played. He tapped them in perfect rhythm and timing to the song. It was his song playing, one he made himself. He followed along with it as naturally as his own heartbeat. When the last chord played, Arthur nudged his arm across the center console.

"Play it again, Dad," he said.

Lovie smirked. "Boom-ba-boom." He reached down underneath the seat, still humming along to the solo part, and lifted an Akai Pro drum machine. He pressed a button and the song played

again, this time with the semi-live backing of a perfect stretch of drum recording. They nodded their heads along to the beat.

“The beat’s almost finished,” Lovie said, “but it’s missing something... maybe a saxophone.”

“Leave it to me, Dad,” Arthur offered. “Look, boom-ba-boom.”

They both took a break from following the song and laughed together, in a different kind of shared rhythm. “We’re headed to the top,” Arthur said. “Us.”

“You promise?” Lovie asked. Arthur nodded. Lovie tilted his head, a half-shake, a suspicious smidgeon of disagreement. “You know how I feel about promises...”

“If you’re gonna break ‘em, don’t make ‘em,” Arthur said. “I know, Dad. I know.”

“Why are you so smart?” Lovie asked.

“Cuz you are,” Arthur said. “Hey, if we don’t make it big –” He quickly turned the steering wheel and the Corvette’s chassis shook briefly. Lovie looked concerned at the state of the car as the wheels dug into the gravel spot. “I’ll become a Nascar driver.”

Lovie leaned over and held the wheel tight. “Slow down. Someone needs their license first.”

Arthur let go of the wheel and sank back in his seat. Disappointment was written on his face.

“I’ll become a reporter,” Arthur said. “My destiny. Like Mom says.”

Lovie grinned. He shifted his hands to Arthur’s hands and moved them back up into position on the wheel. “Grab the wheel, Art.”

Arthur nodded. He gripped the wheel tight. In his mind, they just had to go straight on - into the sky, and drive on streaks of sunlight. But the road ahead went down out of sight and merged into a monotony of traffic below. If only they could rise above it. That was the route Arthur pretended to take.

“I’ll be in the passenger seat,” Lovie said. He shifted from tapping his knees to the sides of his machine as it produced the sounds down to the still-active metronome counting the beats as they passed. One by one, shorter than seconds counting something longer than a moment.

That moment passed five years ago, but Arthur still remembered it. He rediscovered it in his own bedroom, under a layer of dust. The Akai Pro was still there, musty from disuse with a bit of rust from poor conditions. His hand trembled over the setting buttons. He pressed one and Lovie’s Song started playing.

He turned it off after a few seconds. The glimmer of golden rays and gorgeous sunsets was gone from his eyes. The magic the song had was lost to time. The sun shone bright despite his darkened heart. Sprinklers kicked on to water the manicured lawn out front.

Arthur took a step outside onto the balcony and lit up a joint. He did a slow, almost pained, walk down to the porch. The two-story Mediterranean style home sat in a quiet and polite suburb near dozens of similar homes. An upscale community for up and comers. And, he was there, with his old, dead dreams.

He glanced up at the sky. All those golden rays and beautiful sunsets. They still came around from time to time, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that they were all for someone else. Not for him. The sun didn’t shine down on him the same way.

Arthur could hear the hum and occasional thud of bass from the TV. Minnie had the volume up so she could sit and stew more effectively as the news took more and more dour turns on her mood. She clenched her teeth a little when Michael Johnson, news anchor for the local news station, came on. He looked just like Arthur. What bothered her is how they were different.

“Coming up,” he news casted, “San Francisco Pride is this weekend. We’ll give you our list of the hottest LGBTQ clubs to

visit." Minnie's face tightened with anger, like she bit into a hot lemon.

"Arthur" she shouted. "Where are you?"

Arthur heard her loud and clear, and a neighbor probably did as well. He didn't imagine for a second something was wrong. He got in just in time to hear the next headline drop.

"Plus, marijuana and the workplace, it's complicated. We'll explain later in this broadcast."

She turned and locked eyes with him. He went red.

"KCB12 hired a black anchor," she said.

"That's great for them," he replied, trying to evade any emotion, to deny her the weird satisfaction of sharing her rise with another person. "Maybe you could give him some pointers?"

She tensed her mouth again. "Do you know who I ate lunch with today?"

Arthur scowled. That was one conversation he didn't want to be present for. He left through the front door and slammed it on his way out. Minnie looked concerned. Her good intentions went unseen through the veil that Arthur put up in front of his own face.

It was a gorgeously sunny afternoon. Arthur hopped on his semi-electric throttle bike, self-powered, and rode it through the Tenderloin neighborhood. The bright sunlight made all the needles and human feces much easier to notice. He knew better than to avoid them - he'd end up cutting the wheel too hard and faceplant right through them if he tried. He just rode over them and hoped nothing clipped his tire.

Homeless, hopeless addicts hung around liquor stores and smoke shops for last minute scraps of pity to get their fix. Legally or otherwise. When one bathroom banned them, the herd moved elsewhere for cleaner pastures. The cycle would repeat, season by season, because as far as the city was concerned there just wasn't any other solution to try.

He pumped the breaks in front of a three-story glass structure. Calling it a building seemed like an insult to proper architects. It was all glass and steel, a cage for the KRX 6 News crew to work out of. Arthur chained his bike up to the rack next to the other “lackey mobiles” and strode up to the entrance. He checked his watch, glowered, and went inside. 2:45. Too late to break news, too early to break it.

A “Wall of Fame” was there to greet him and everyone else that came inside. On it were the kindly faces the community relied on in the past to report breaking news stories. It took five photos of random dudes before he saw the somewhat unfamiliar smiling face of Minnie. He gave it an annoying scowl, hoping it would reach her back home, and went off to the office.

His first stop was the producer, Kev. An older man, old enough to still be able to find use in newspapers, two whole generations before Arthur’s, yet they still shared the same workspace. Minnie was framed in a portrait above him. She was everywhere Arthur had to be, making the time he had to see her at home even more unwanted.

“Hey, Arty,” Kev announced behind his desk. He leaned over a newspaper with a groan and traced his finger diagonally to speed read every section in sight. The headline was for a major drug bust. Dozens arrested, it seemed. “I have to edit a video in twenty minutes. I’m going in my bubble.”

“Same,” Arthur said. Arthur picked up on reading newspapers for very specific reasons. Working in the medium he had to be on top of how people wrote stories, how much better his could be if given the chance, and most importantly - what was for sale nearby he could grab without issue.

He saw an ad for an Akai Pro 3000 under the Entertainment section. Listed price was \$1,475.

“Fuck,” he said under his breath. He balled up the newspaper and threw it in the trash. Kev glanced over, on the fringe of diving fully into his work.

“Everything ok?”

“I’m fine, Kev,” Arthur insisted. Kev didn’t quite believe him. Arthur trudged over to his desk, adjacent to Kev’s. He sat down and started typing. They both went deep into their work for hours until the early evening rolled around. The sun was just about to start setting, but the heat from the mid-day wouldn’t drop until much later. Arthur was fully immersed in what he was doing.

His fingers were slightly off the keyboard at points. He still typed, but something distracted him. He typed to a rhythm, and occasionally typed out the wrong word. He was typing along to Lovie’s Song, which he blasted over his headphones. When he got fully lost into what he was doing, his hands left the keyboard and reached up at the screen. At the wheel.

He took the wheel. He gripped it and it felt good. He felt in control again.

“What’s this?” Kev asked. “A new dance?”

Arthur saw Kev come out of the blind spot in his vision and grip the invisible wheel, trying to imitate Arthur’s movements. Arthur was so shocked he ripped his headphones off and shot up to his feet.

“Hey,” Kev asked, “is everything good between you and your mother?” Arthur looked stunned but tried to play it off.

“Couldn’t be better. Why?”

“She quote, “doesn’t want your career going up in smoke?”” he asked.

Arthur gave him a blank stare. “No clue, Kev.”

“Good,” Kev nodded.

The two were set to return to work, and Arthur to play off his own shameful display, when Rich the lead anchor ambled in. He was the same age as Kev but twice as handsome, with ten times pay, leaving plenty for luxury vacations and cosmetic touch-ups.

He poked Kev's stomach as he passed. "Looking lean, Kev." Kev gave a defeated, placated smile.

He tapped Arthur on the shoulder. "Brotha, tell your mother to lay off the anti-aging cream. Hell." Arthur blankly handed him a stack of papers. "My young writer. Let's see." He flipped through them and scanned them. Not so much read them as he searched for familiar errors. "Brotha, avoid the passive voice."

"I didn't," Arthur said "I -."

"Team," Rich said, slapping the papers in his hand for attention, "what does good writing equal?"

Kev raised his hand and replied, "Great reporting."

Rich rewarded Kev with a smile and dropped the papers on Arthur's desk. They spread out like melted ice cream.

"Improve that," Rich said, "and you'll be reporting like your mother in no time."

Arthur felt his face tighten up, like a primetime anchor's face under Botox. "Can't wait. My destiny."

Rich nodded and turned away. He hiked up a small carrying case on an open desk.

Kev nudged Arthur. "You familiar with Broadway Street? A drug bust happened there this morning."

Arthur nodded. He knew the area well enough. After five years in San Francisco, he knew the whole place and every filthy area to avoid.

"There's a bar there," he said.

"Perfect," Rich said as he dabbed a makeup sponge on his face. "Grab a backpack and head over. You need practice."

"A drug bust?" Arthur said as he rolled his eyes. "Nobody robbed a music store or something?"

“Kev will send the info to your email,” Rich said, finishing the touches on his money-making appeal. “Oh, and brotha, don’t mess up the merchandise. It’ll come out of your check.”

“You’ve got nothing to worry about,” Arthur said as he sat down to prepare for travel. “I’ll stay alert.” Rich gave him another toothy smile, right into the secret middle finger Arthur raised underneath his desk.

Three hours later - 10:24, Arthur rolled out. He was dressed for his best. He had a dapper black suit on as he rode his bike down the lonely waterfront. The Bay Bridge gleamed along with the moon in the distance. Now a foreboding enclosure, like grand steel bars of a prison over the water. A prettier kind of Alcatraz. Though to some it was plain pretty, namely a couple who were kissing on the pier by the railing. He couldn’t help but look on with a bit of longing.

He arrived at 10:45, a half-town crossing given the late-night traffic. Everyone had to have a night off and it just had to be then. Broadway Street stood out by being brighter at night than it was in the day, though not with the same solid solar coloring. There was bright pink, magenta, mauve, maroon - all the colors of a red-light district. Strip clubs, massage parlors and seedy fortune tellers with multiple “reading rooms” lined the area.

Arthur took a break and a load off his heavy carry. He sat on a bench and used it to check through his backpack. He had a camera, a tripod, a portable battery for charging, a microphone, a few dozen feet worth of different cords, and a bottle of whiskey. That wasn’t part of the proper TV camera set-up, but it wasn’t useless. He took a swig and sighed with a relaxed look. He needed all the relaxation he could get.

He felt a buzz near his thigh. He thought he sat on a needle - but it was his cell phone. A call from Minnie- almost as bad. He pulled it up and caught the voice mail.

“Rich told me you’re practicing?” she asked. “I want proof.”

He shoved the cell phone back down into his pocket. "Shit." No whiskey could undo that kind of pressure. He needed something harder - like real poison - to melt his new stress. He rubbed a hand down his face just in time to spot a homeless man, who looked years older than he was, as he hobbled down the street with a book in the death grip of his hand.

"You look clean," the man said, a bit urgently, "but is your soul clean?"

Arthur stood up and held his nose as he rose to meet the man's immediate presence. "What a great smell you brought over here."

The homeless man waved the book around, fanning his smell around the area. "I'll sell this for ten dollars. What do you say?"

"Not now, dude," Arthur protested. "Move." He set up the tripod and the camera, plugged in the microphone and readied himself to stand in front. The homeless man remained, just out of shot, an unplanned stage audience for his self-made spectacle.

Arthur took one final internal lap of preparation, smoothed out his hair, and looked dead on as the camera recorded. He spoke with a clear, professional dictum. "Dozens of people sit behind bars tonight."

"Get that hate outta your heart." the homeless man shouted. Arthur was flustered but kept a straight face and adjusted his microphone closer to his face - but not to block it. There was a rule and ratio to follow. Close enough to be heard, far enough to be seen. Hiding the mouth was like hiding the words and to the watching audience, it was like hiding the truth.

"Police say they are associated with a drug ring responsible for selling cocaine across the city. It happened here on Broadway."

Another interruption - but worse. The homeless man broke the unspoken rules, jumped in front of the camera, and bared his whole ass to the viewfinder. Arthur could see it reflected in the playback on the panel flipped his way. The man hiked his pants up and sprinted away laughing before Arthur could do anything.

That was why solo reports were hell to do, especially at night. No extra security to keep the crazies out of focus.

He went again, with a pause so he could try and hide it in an edit. "And with San Francisco Pride Celebrations in full effect this weekend, officers are searching for -"

He threw the microphone on the pavement and broke it in half. His frustration won out over professionalism. He stepped forward and switched off the camera to hide the rest of his shame. Across the street was a sign for Vesuvio Bar. It was clean and bright and invited him in. He packed up the camera, the biggest parts of the microphone, and went inside.

He was blasted in 15 minutes. The surroundings were what did him in. He was the most stuffily dressed man in the bar. The only sign of black clothing in a land of rainbows. Pride flags hung from the wall like banners. Patrons swayed on the dance floor to a pop beat with double-boosted bass. The bar was chock full so much that some pairs were sharing seats, cheek to cheek. Arthur chugged some tequila. The pre-game whiskey accelerated his headway, and after half a second glass, the bartender caught on to his state.

"You're done," they said. Arthur scowled at them. "I don't care."

Arthur was left to smolder quietly on his own. A group of five, three ladies and two dudes, came up and sat next to Arthur. They didn't mean to crowd him out, but he felt them all up in his space. They laughed and clapped together about something. They were having a good time. Arthur tried to laugh along to something they said. Then they got up and left. Because of him - maybe. That's what he thought.

When they were gone, Arthur spotted an older black man sitting alone, slowly drinking with a lazy half-smile on his face. Not a happy smile, just one to fill up some feeling in his face, because if he wasn't smiling, he'd look so much worse than he did. Arthur saw a grim future of himself in that man. It may as well have been him.

He could have left, but the thought didn't reach his mind before a far safer option presented itself in the form of song. He pulled out his headphones connected to the only song that mattered to him and clicked play. Lovie's Song, a song just for him to enjoy, hit his ears, and he was the only one who could hear it. The rest of the bar was noisy, but right there at his seat things were calm and melodic. The sound of simpler times that he missed.

"Move over."

Arthur reached forward and grabbed the wheel. It was right in front of him, floatier than he remembered. Like the Corvette wasn't resting on gravel but floating through the air - riding on golden rays of sunset. Then an accident. He veered off course. Over the cliff, into a fall - and caught himself with one leg on the ground.

"Scoot over, weirdo," a short, burly man insisted. "Hello?"

Arthur looked confused. His delay allowed the short man's taller friend to yank his headphones off right as the chorus started.

"Who the fuck wears headphones in a bar?" he said, in a snide mocking tone.

Arthur swung with a claw grip and snagged his headphones back. "What the fuck are you doing?" he huffed.

"Make some room," the tall man demanded.

Arthur shook his head around. "There's plenty of room, bitch. Don't touch my shit."

The bartender heard that and stopped pouring a drink. The tall man balled up his fists and raised them in a loose, half-serious fighting stance. Arthur, drunk and agitated, saw it as a threat. He reached for the nearest standing solid object- a tequila bottle - and swung it bottom out. The rest of the liquid splashed out around his feet with each heave.

“I’ll give you little faggots till the count of three to back the fuck up.”

Arthur’s growl elicited a shocked gasp from the bartender. The short intruder shoved his hands into his pocket. The tall one put his hands up and turned to the bar.

“The fuck you call us?” the short man asked.

SLAM

The bartender raised their voice. “Hey, suit and tie. Out.”

Arthur’s face twisted with rage. “Me? Me? Why me? They started it.”

“I don’t give a fuck. You dropped the F bomb,” they explained. Arthur set the bottle back on the bar, kicked the contested chair over, grabbed his backpack and stormed out in a jagged pattern. His two temporary opponents sharpened their eyes at him and sent dagger glares into his back.

Just a few minutes later he returned to his bike, back aching and mind flaming. He reached for the keys to the lock but touched a joint and his lighter first. He tried to light it, but to no avail. The tequila wasn’t that much of an accelerant. His joint was soaked, along with part of his pantleg. The lighter wouldn’t spark either, too much time soaked in booze messed with the mixture. So, he threw it across the street.

There was a liquor store just a few minutes away. That was true of most parts of the city but especially for Broadway. He staggered in and checked the clerk. The same pride flag was on the register, just a small paper taped to it, but it got on Arthur’s nerves.

“Let me get a large lighter and a pack of Raws,” he asked.

The clerk, attempting to be helpful or entrepreneurial, pointed to a few rows of other things. “No flavored tobacco? Grape Swisher Sweet?”

“And a pack of Raws,” Arthur repeated with no volume control. The clerk nodded and went to get his order. Arthur turned to check out the store when he spotted two black butts jiggling as they strutted in, dressed like supermodels who were out to have some consequence-free fun. Just what Arthur needed. They strolled to the back of the store and Arthur kept his eyes on the prizes the whole time. He pushed off the counter and went to confront them.

“Hey, ladies. Where we headed?”

The two turned to greet him. Bubbles and Lavender, the prettiest dropouts of RuPaul’s Drag Race on the block.

“Yikes,” Arthur hushed. He cleared his throat and turned away with a “Nevermind.”

The two glared at him. “Ha-Ha,” Lavender mocked. “Nice suit, Al Roker.”

The clerk had his stuff ready. “That’ll be five even.”

Arthur slapped his cash down on the counter and peeked over at the trans girls. “The circus in town?”

He must have thought to say that to himself, but it came out and Lavender got in his face. “What’s that, Bozo the Clown? You’ll be bald in five years.”

Arthur scowled and turned the other cheek. He grabbed his stuff in a flimsy plastic bag and turned for the door. “I’m sorry. Nice dresses... ladies.” He waited for a look of passing apathy or a cold shoulder to dismiss him, but they kept their glares hot and ready at him. “Happy Pride Month.” He rushed off with a chuckle.

He got back quick and tested out his new lighter. It worked great. He lit his joint and hit it. He tried to gaze at the stars, but there were barely any to be seen in the heart of a busy all-nighter district. The few he did see twinkled at him, promises of light to come and evening rays to shine down on him some other time. He was so relaxed he didn’t hear the two guys from the bar

charge out from behind a car until they were close enough to shove him down.

“Who you call a faggot?” the tall one said. Arthur regained his footing, cocked his fist back and punched the tall one in the face. He went reeling and the shorter one came in to cover for him. He reached into his pockets and pulled out a knife. All Arthur’s drinking and smoking was for nothing. In that moment, he was sober.

“Thanks for the backpack,” the assailant said. Arthur grimaced and dropped his bag. That was why solo reports were so awful. It was a task to either get a story or become a story. The tall one went around Arthur’s back and bound his arms so his shorter friend could give Arthur a solid knee to the gut. It was preferable to a stabbing. He could survive losing his stool in his pants, but not cold metal in his stomach.

“Guess what happens to weirdos who talk shit?” the knifer asked. He was enjoying himself a bit too much. Arthur had eyes of panic and couldn’t think of a safe answer. “Not sure? Okay.” The blade made contact. Right on Arthur’s cheek.

It was a shallow but wet wound, far beyond the scope of any kind of shaving accident. A real, practiced and intended cut. He felt blood pour out in an instant and it got worse when he had to move his jaw, and therefore cheek, to scream. Arthur leaned forward. In his desperation, his first and most important priority was not ruining his one good suit. Blood even stained on black.

“Now the other side, pretty boy,” the attacker said. He waved the knife around gleefully, like he was playing with the blood on it to keep it from dripping off. He reached up to follow through, but they were all interrupted by the sudden thudding of footsteps around the corner. It was Bubbles, the trans girl from the smoke shop. She was watching nearby and rushed in to help.

“Bitch, what the fuck?” Lavender hollered after her.

Bubbles staggered to a stop and whipped out a pocket pistol. It was officially a gunfight. “Enough. I’ll shoot.”

The two men laughed and tossed Arthur aside on the sidewalk.

“You trannies brought the big guns, huh?” he said.

Lavender joined in at last. She pulled out a projectile-nozzle pepper spray can and aimed it at the taller goon. “That gun reminds you of something. Don’t lie, Lurch.”

Bubbles lost her patience and fired a shot into the sky. Most likely to land on a roof, or a car hood. The two men scurried off down the block. Arthur, meanwhile, was overcome with guilt and shame and terror. He took out his wallet and handed it up, assuming the position of the continuing victim. “Take it,” he said. She kicked it away. He held his face to try and stem the bleeding. He hoped, for a moment, things would look up.

“What’s in the bag, Scarface?” Lavender asked.

He looked down. “Nothing.” He held his hand to his cheek and focused on the pain. The blood ran down his palm and into his sleeve. “I swear.”

She didn’t listen. He heard her unzip the camera bag.

“Bitch, this will do,” she said.

Bubbles beamed from ear to ear. “Knob Hill, here we come.”

“No, please.” Arthur said. He reached out his bloody red hand and tried to crawl for it. Bubbles aimed her gun at him. That was far worse than just a knife.

“Listen,” she began, “I’ve never saved and killed a motherfucker at the same time, but don’t try me. Hands up.”

Arthur was beside himself. He held up his hands. He wasn’t sure what hurt worse anymore; his pride, his cut, or the tears that ran down and stung at his wound while the whole pride parade made off with his career. By the time the two were gone, his buzz kicked in and he just stopped caring. He got on his bike and rode home. It took some doing and some extra miles, but he managed to get back through the rejection rows to the well-made property line.

He got in after 1 and washed the whole day off in the shower furthest from Minnie's bedroom. Then he toiled in his bedroom trying to clean up his wound. It was a paper-thin line, not enough for stitches but surely enough to scar, from the cheekbone down near the mouth. He couldn't stop bulging it from the inside of his mouth, either.

He put on a bandage and called it good enough. The antiseptic would help it heal, and it would only start to sting in the morning when his liver sorted out all the problems he threw into his body. He absent-mindedly reached for his headphones, but they were gone too. Part of the deal he was forced to make for his life.

He still had the drum machine on the dresser. He looked at it, guiltily, and went to bed....



CHAPTER

02

Going out on the town in the middle of the night, a reporter will either get a story or become the story. Arthur went back to work the next afternoon with an ice pack in his pocket, a missing backpack of studio equipment, and a fresh cut on his cheek as the center point of an unrecorded story. With no video or audio to run with, he had to rely on his writing skills to sell what happened to him. Kev and Rich were his solemn witnesses to his testimony. He worked up some good camera-ready tears and a shuddering voice going over the events in his head. He had a rage in his recollection but hid it under his sadness.

“Slow down, brotha,” Rich said. “Say that again?”

Arthur touched his bandage. The pain helped him wince on command. It wasn’t quite as bad as he made it out to be. “And after the sixth guy showed up and cut me, they stole the bag and ran off.”

Rich handed him a tissue, right on top of his most apparent wound, like he was trying to hide it for him. “Brotha, I hate to do this... but it’s still coming out of your check.”

Arthur balled up the tissue and threw it in the trash can nearby. “But that leaves me with nothing. I need a new... suit.”

“Look on the bright side,” Rich said with a smug grin. “Makeup will cover that scar and those thieves can’t work a professional camera.”

Arthur sighed enough to roll his shoulders a little in disappointment. Then, a flash - like a bursting lightbulb in his brain. He snapped his fingers. “The serial number.”

Rich got the same idea on a delay. Kev leaned in with commitment.

“Is registered,” he added on, “by the SFPD. Good luck trying to sell that thing. Pointless.”

Rich seemed pleased and turned to leave. He got what he was after, sort of. Arthur, however, didn’t share Kev’s complacent satisfaction. He narrowed his eyes in thought and went deeper. Just like any decent story, there was always something under the surface.

He worked through the day on reduced duties to compensate for his trauma. Every hour he felt his cash slipping away into the hole that he dug himself. That evening, after 10, he was leaving just before the custodial staff. An old janitor swept the front steps of KRX 6 to keep out all the dust from the dried-up feces that blew in from further in town.

“Take care boss,” Arthur called out as he passed.

“All right, youngblood,” the Janitor gruffed back.

Arthur strode up to his bike rack to unlock his only means of transport on the night streets. It was a recipe for disaster, as he proved just the other night. Anything could happen after the sun went down. He bent down to undo his chains and heard a car slow down right next to him, a little too close to the curb, which blocked his way out. A baby blue Honda.

Bubbles and Lavender stepped out of the doors. Arthur was shaken and halted like a deer in headlights.

“KRX 6 News?” Bubbles said. “Really?”

Arthur heard the Janitor chuckle in his low, throaty voice over by the door. “Youngblood gay as hell.” He turned with an embarrassed look and tried to finger-wag down the girls.

“Shut up,” he warned. “Shut up. Shut up.”

“Get in the car,” Bubbles insisted.

“Fuck you, freak,” Arthur said, a bit more aggressively than he had to, but his masculinity was on the line.

Bubbles slapped Lavender’s butt. “Go ahead, girl.”

“Watch me work,” Lavender said as she flipped her hair. She sashayed up to the Janitor who was eager to give her no piece of mind. “Yoo-hoo. Mister custodian man. I’m Arthur’s baby mama. Can I please use the little girl’s room?”

“Baby mama?” he questioned. He shrugged his shoulders. He was too old to get caught up in any kind of young person’s mess. “Oh, okay. Come on in I guess.”

Arthur tried to step in and stop him, but Bubbles forced herself to the front.

“Get in,” Bubbles warned, “or she introduces herself to your co-workers.”

Arthur looked back in desperation at the Janitor, who was fighting back laughter. He wheezed like an old tire letting out air in a rhythm. Arthur kicked a chunk of sidewalk off the ground and stomped into the shaky Honda. Soon after, Lavender rejoined them and kept him sitting in the back for the long ride.

They arrived just about half an hour later outside of the End Up Club. Arthur wondered how he ever ended up in such a state and realized that’s not what the meaning of End Up was about. The whole building was surrounded with a queue of people waiting to get in. He saw all the colors of the rainbow in the hair and shirts of the patrons. Not just men of varying degrees but non-binary and queer and lesbians and transexuals, and a few other letters of the rainbow alphabet that he never knew existed.

The Honda rolled up to the front. Bubbles lit up a joint and shared it with Lavender while Arthur was left to sniff the residual burn.

“No one will touch that little camera of yours,” Bubbles claimed.

“I’m not stepping a fucking foot in there,” he insisted.

Bubbles took a smug toke. “Your mommy used to work at that station. Minnie, right?”

Arthur huffed out the burnt smell in his nostrils. “Nope. Wrong lady.”

Bubbles chuckled. “You weren’t hard to find.” She tilted the rearview to get Arthur in it. “You wanna make mommy proud, right?” Arthur sneered with the corner of his mouth and rolled the window down. Bubbles, up in the front, stole control away and kept it up before hotboxing the car with a layer of smoke along the stained roof. “Shoot a promo video for the club... for Pride weekend. Then edit the video like you do those news stories. Make it come to life.”

Professional extortion. Arthur rolled his eyes. Of all the things they could have asked for, that was a bridge a bit far even for him. They were basically forcing him to compromise his career in news and sink to the terrible lows of commercial editing, which might have higher pay, but was a creative dead-end he wanted to avoid. But he also didn’t want to be blackmailed into a shameful early retirement. Minnie would kill him.

“That’s it?” he said. “Your name?”

“Bubbles.”

Arthur chuckled. “Bubbles? Bubbles? Why do you have a name like Bubbles?”

Bubbles took the mocking slight in stride and pulled out her pocket pistol from the center console. “I’m so delicate, I might burst.” She cocked the gun and twisted her tight torso to aim it at him. “Any more questions?” Arthur shook his head. “Oh, and

try to leave tonight... your mommy will know all about you and Lavender.”

Lavender turned and handed over a piece of paper. “My info, baby daddy.”

He snatched it away and glowered with displeasure. He got out begrudgingly and adjusted his suit while his new “producers” got toked up and loose enough to start work. Doing news, even just a fluff piece for a bunch of fluffers, was no amateur deal. He could read a perfectly written script, but bad shots and minimal B-roll would turn it into a waste of effort. He already had a good idea of how to make it look professional enough to satisfy them, but the end result wouldn’t be immediate. He needed their patience and time to get this done and the way they basically threw his camera bag, which was 45 pounds, at him indicated that they had neither.

They ambled around the club and through the line of people to the basement steps away from the main entrance. Arthur saw a few signs in the windows, ‘NOW HIRING DJ’ in plain bold font typed on tye-dyed construction paper. Bubbles and Lavender steered and pushed Arthur forward and kept him from getting distracted or from looking for chances to get the hell away from them. He hoisted the camera up onto his shoulders and balanced the other side of his body with the rest of the equipment in his bag.

“So, what’re your titles?” he asked.

“Bartenders,” Lavender answered.

They reached the stairwell that went into the exclusive access of the club. A bouncer stood firm and wide at attention. He stared into his compact mirror as he dabbed makeup on his cheek with a sponge. He had glitter lipstick that sparkled obnoxiously. He let the three in down the stairs and even greeted them with a twirl.

“Good to see ya,” he said. Bubbles and Lavender blew him a kiss each while Arthur shielded his disgust by holding his face to the camera.

They entered the kitchen where a dozen cooks and other staff mopped the floor and washed plates from an earlier buffet rush. The slipshod crew ambled in while Arthur took some scenic footage of the area. Until his viewfinder was eclipsed by a dark moon.

“Not the kitchen, smart guy,” Lavender insisted.

Arthur lowered the camera but made a mental note of what he managed to record. Bubbles and Lavender escorted him to another stairwell that led to the second floor. The stairs were rainbow, and the walls were sequined. A fierce woman stood in an annex hallway with a drag queen. Arthur saw the woman tap on her nose and receive a small bag of cocaine from the queen. The group was set to go past them, but Arthur dared to snap some quick footage first, right as the woman turned to leave.

“The fuck?” she shouted. She stomped up and nudged Arthur’s camera away. “You a narc or something? Watch yourself.” Arthur recalled his last verbal spat and didn’t want a new mark on his cheek, from lipstick or cheap iron.

Lavender stepped in and waved the woman away. “Cool it, Snow White. Take that shit to the bathroom.” The drug holder and her dealer scowled and scurried off to a dark corner and disappeared around the bend. Panic swept across Arthur’s face. Lavender checked him and elbowed him to carry on, just enough to stir him back to his senses.

The crew went into an upstairs suite and hustled through the crowd of people that were gathered up and jiving to a distant house-style beat. Arthur tapped Lavender from behind. “What beat system do you... people use?”

“Boy, what?” she replied. “Just walk and shoot.”

With permission, Arthur filmed. He made a panoramic shot through the crowd, nice and cinematic. Attention capturing. It would put the audience right in the middle of the action, but also slightly above it. Shoulder-height or so. He spent extra time on the decorations. He took rising shots, from floor to ceiling, of the Polynesian theming of the room. Tiki heads, bamboo arrangements, tropical plants some real some plastic and wooden pole carvings that were not at all subtle about the intent of the sex-charged atmosphere.

Bubbles and Lavender acted as pseudo-bodyguards to keep people out of Arthur's framing while he worked for them. Once they felt like he got what they wanted, or like he was screwing around, they pulled him away to another place to take more shots. They brought him over to a banquet table where nine sharply dressed LGBTQ+ individuals wine and dined.

Lavender took the charge of introducing the members one by one. "There's Queenie and October." Queenie, in a top hat, tipped it to him while October, similarly old-fashioned drag act, waved to him. "That's Angel, Patty, and Diamond." The sparkling trio raised champagne glasses to him, which were only second in brightness and tipsiness to themselves. "And last but not least, Yuki and Yoki." The bearded Asian drag queens blew Arthur a kiss each. "He's filming all the fun tonight."

Yoki made an exaggerated pigeon-toed lean forward. "And the Pride competition on Saturday?"

Lavender shook her head. "It's just a one-time thing."

"Oh," Yoki said. She got down off the table and pulled a stack of money from her bra. "Before I forget." She handed it over to Bubbles and Lavender who thumbed through the cash to count it. "That covers this month."

Bubbles tilted her head with an annoyed, unenthusiastic smirk. "Good thing I smoked."

"You two aren't the only ones here," Yoki complained. "I'm trying."

Yuki glanced at Arthur and caught his attention. "Shoot around the main ballroom. Take the elevator to the right."

"Fine," he agreed. He glared at Yuki and covered himself by using his focused look to readjust his camera.

Bubbles and Lavender stayed near Arthur as they led him to the dance floor by elevator. It was just after midnight and the club was just about full. It was peak time, and the floor was positively bustling with half naked bodies. It was warm and humid. The viewfinder nearly fogged up. He thought the camera would go up in flames.

"Okay, news boy," Lavender commanded. "Do a twirl." She nudged him forward. He shot back an unwilling glare as he stumbled right into the side of someone covered in scented body oil.

Arthur got right in the mix and gave a little spin. Some of the dancers turned to him and showed their star power for the half second they'd get to be in the final edit. If at all. He made a few more sweeps like that, just strolling through the crowd. A few of the particularly hyped-up dancers tried to get him to groove with them but he made it clear he was just there to be an observer.

His camera ended up focusing on the DJ booth that was over the dance floor. It was a simple setup overall and looked like there was room up on the stage for three DJs to be coordinating the playlist. He figured he could get some decent shots from up there.

Then a bald, shirtless man - no hairs in sight anywhere on his body - slipped in front of Arthur mid-dance step and struck a pose. "Sometimes what you're searching for is right in front of you." His hands were up, and hips were pushed forward. He looked down at Arthur who jerked his head to the side. The man stuck out his tongue. Somehow it looked like there were no bumps at all on it. Arthur stepped backwards into the crowd with an eerie lead-away shot of the man in his viewfinder.

Yuki's voice lilted into the club through the speakers. "Last song. Last song." The siren-like announcement fell over the crowd with a brief hint of sadness. It seemed like the night was just getting started, but the smell of sweat and hard work seemed to indicate most of them were there and dancing for long enough.

The last song was a love ballad. Everyone paired up and danced. Bubbles came through the crowd like a solo wrecking ball and headed for Arthur. He gulped with dread that he was about to be asked to dance.

"I'm heading home," she said, with a sigh. "Go to the DJ booth and record everyone before they leave. Then you're free to go."

Arthur nodded. "We even?"

Bubbles seemed over whatever mad contempt she started the evening with. Maybe it was the weed or the hope that Arthur's video would somehow lead to a pay raise. "Yeah, we're even."

Arthur grinned and headed straight for the booth. Bubbles watched as he wove through the bodies and looked contented. Arthur set up at the DJ booth. There was no one to ask for permission. He set up his camera on the tripod and got a few steady shots closed-in on couples, good shots for B-roll and for overdubbing. It was what they wanted, he thought.

He kept filming as couples left the dance floor. Some lingered, dancing to their own tunes inside their heads for a bit, until it was time for them to leave as well. A few blew kisses to the camera up in the booth. He decided it was a perfect time to take more shots of the interior, real-estate style, to show off the club itself with no one to get in the way. But Yuki stormed in before he could even dismount his camera to block his view.

"Everyone's gone," Yuki declared. "Bounce."

Arthur got off his camera and glanced down at the DJ booth. It was more bare bones than he expected. Some of the machines

were not even plugged in. They basically just had a Mac laptop and a surge protector with a few cables for the stereo connectors.

“What equipment do you use?” he asked.

Yuki looked him over and scanned him for weak points. “This video better be good,” she warned with a fierce baritone. She strode down the hallway and turned a corner, which left Arthur alone in the least-observed spot of the club. He took the chance and analyzed the recording equipment. Musical equipment. His favorite kind of high-tech junk.

Hidden underneath the booth between some unused decks, he saw something bizarrely familiar in perfect condition. An Akai Pro 3000. “What?” he hushed. He picked it up and palmed it all over. It wasn’t sticky or tacky or covered in disused dusty bruises. “You see this?” he asked, turning up to the sky. He hoped Lovie was just as excited as he was.

Arthur knew the machine like the back of his hand. He pressed a few buttons to test it out and -

“WELCOME”

The identic beat of the Akai Pro bumped and synthed itself out, a short scale of building notes made of dozens of instruments that amounted to beeps, bops and “Boom-ba-Boom!” from Arthur. He rubbed the machine’s side and flipped another switch.

“START MIXING” it declared through the speakers. Arthur plugged it in to test it out. He thought he was alone, or at the least, would be utterly unbothered by the trans-mafia that ran the place while no one was there. However, he was not alone. He went to work on the buttons and added a drumline, a synth track, adjusted the BPM and the scale rhythm. In under a minute, he mixed a solid funk rhythm using old-style retro synths and fake bass. He reduced the snares and added a warped trumpet which sounded bizarrely like a distant muffled voice.

Bubbles and Lavender stepped out of a far-off corner bathroom and spotted Arthur down in the mixing booth.

“Well, well,” Bubbles said. She and Lavender watched as the music took Arthur back in time. He grooved along - grabbed his steering wheel out of midair, then replaced it with a microphone on the table. He spoke into it - feedback - adjusted it through the output slider and tried again.

“Yo yo yo! Another day, another adventure with your boy, Arthur Williams. So, let’s get this party started!”

Lavender laughed. “What a dork. Right, Bubbles... Bubbles?”

But it was too late. Bubbles was dancing, a funk-paced twerk and twist, utterly entranced with Arthur’s split-second mix.

Arthur was dismissed. Once his ‘set’ ended, the duo picked him up, pretended they didn’t notice, and dropped him off at his bike with all his gear. So, he still had to pedal home. He got home by 2:00 in the morning, crept in so he didn’t wake his mom, and headed up to his room with a renewed vigor and purpose. He had the mixing bug and needed to quell it.

He stuffed the news bag under his bed and set up his laptop. He found Lavender’s details in his pocket and smirked at it. It was not a happy meeting, but it gave him a pleasant memory that he wanted to run with. He searched for some programs, things he’d bookmarked and saved and even downloaded before, but never used. Then he plugged in his phone and installed them with his touchscreen mix deck. Now he just needed the mixer.

The old Akai Pro on his dresser. He picked it up. It felt hollow compared to the one he’d just used. The rust and faded signs of age stuck out even worse after having a clean, new model in his hands for such a short but productive time. He looked it over for the right outlet and plugged his phone in.

“Come on,” he hushed. The machine booted to live and the voice, just as synced as before but far crustier, also spoke out.

“NOW SYNCED. BEGIN.” He turned the output speaker volume way down and played Lovie’s Song. Then, from his phone, he started to make adjustments. He added a saxophone to the beat.

A few scales at first, then some jazz flare, made it sound good. Then a drum rhythm, which it was still missing. It was all coming together.

“Save,” he said. He pressed the button. The song started over and recorded itself. Briefly. It stopped part way through the chorus. Arthur got flustered and started to press a few buttons. “What?” He thought the speakers conked out, so he tried to route them through some old ones he had lying around. They pumped out nothing but soft white noise and a few crackles. The lights on the Akai turned off. His phone was still synced, so he tried to work the console from there, but nothing. No music. “No,” he said. “No, no no - please.”

He dove under his bed for a cord and switched outlets, hoping that was the problem. “Work, work.” He pleaded but the machine did not hear him. It stayed off. He tried cycling it more than once but all he got was a hollow, metal click from the device each time. The switch turned on nothing. He froze in place, crouched on the floor with tears barely welling up in his eyes.

The next morning, just before 10 and with precious little amount of sleep, Arthur descended the stairs not quite ready to start his day. He rubbed his hand across his face. His fingers caught the edge of his scar. It was healing up nicely, but still had a way to go. Just a long, jagged bump. He had a CD in his hand in a jewel case.

Minnie was vacuuming, which helped Arthur wake up because no one could sleep through such a racket, when she caught sight of an old, framed photo of Lovie. It was a headshot - a hopeful album cover for the future, which he even signed. Her eyes wandered off it and filled with regret. She turned off the vacuum. “Arthur, come here,” she called. Arthur hustled in with his CD. Minnie gasped when she saw him. “Goddamit, what happened to your face?”

Arthur nearly forgot. Not that he had it, that she didn’t know. “Cut myself shaving,” he said.

“Cut yourself shaving?” She grabbed his face by the chin and turned him to the side. She wasn’t buying it. “I’m calling the cops.”

He nudged her hand away. “I’m fine, Mom. I can handle it.”

“Bullshit,” she protested. “Someone handled you.” Arthur rolled his head toward the door and his body followed. “Hold it.” She stopped Arthur in his tracks. “Get back over here.”

She spotted the CD in his hand. She’d seen it before. In her days they used tapes, and as things evolved, she felt everything change. The business she thought she knew transformed in ways she couldn’t work around. She grabbed the CD and popped it into the DVD player to check what was on it. The rough cut of Arthur’s debauched street report played immediately.

“Dozens of people sit behind bars tonight,” Arthur reported. Then he was interrupted.

“Get that hate out of your heart.”

Minnie saw what happened next. Arthur grimaced at the camera, then at the man, then the footage kind of sputtered out. She turned the TV off and glared at Arthur.

“I’ll do better next time, Mom,” he said.

She snatched the photo of Lovie from the wall.

“How many times have you visited him?” she demanded as she shoved the photo in Arthur’s face.

“I,” he stammered as he stared into his dad’s hopeful, soulful eyes. “I’ll ask Rich for more stories. I need practice.”

“Answer me,” she demanded again. Arthur froze. “Answer me.” she insisted. There was no fight in Arthur at all. No protest or excuses. The light that kept him going just kind of faded out behind his eyes. “Leave,” she demanded.

“Mom, I -”

“And get a haircut before it gets busy,” she snapped. “You look a hot mess.” She slapped the photo down on the couch as she

made her way past it to pack up the vacuum. Arthur grimaced. He felt his scar stretch a little as his face deformed into a frown. He left, and Minnie watched him leave with a displeased look on her face. More regret, from the father to the son.

Arthur took his mom's advice and biked down to the barber shop on his side of town. The side with less, but never no, homeless feces or random night-time stabbings. It was one of the oldest barber shops in the city with a pole from the 1800s and everything. Even the chairs were fantastically antique and uncomfortable. In the many years since its founding, it transitioned into a Black-owned place with the "classic" ten hairstyles for African American men on the wall. Each framed from what looked like a different era. Two were afros.

Ted, the barber, not too old of an adult compared to Arthur but a man comfortably adjusted in his lot in life, lined up Arthur's hair as he sat in the chair. "Stop shaving your face and come to me, fool. You trippin."

Arthur cracked a nervous grin as the clippers and scissors came down. "I hate to ask, but can I pay you next time?"

Ted stared at his clippers and the scant work he already did. "Damn, you lucky we go back... like that hairline." They both laughed. The front door jangled. Dro, a young man, been drinking for years despite just turning 21, paraded in. His presence was enough to turn the clippers off as Ted turned his way. "Look at you! With your free ass!" They hugged. "Nigga, you was in and out."

"Like the fast-food restaurant," Dro said. "Hook me up with a shave."

"Say less," Ted said. "I'm almost done."

"Almost?" Dro said. He nudged Arthur on the knee. "Nigga, I made an appointment. Get up."

“Dude don’t call me that,” Arthur said, with an awkward grin. Dro looked him over. He saw the scar, and Arthur’s slumping defensive posture. He saw a victim. In prison, he saw a bitch.

“Dude?” he repeated incredulously. “Oh, you one of them weird ass niggas.”

“Dro,” Ted said, “I’m almost done. This is my news station homie. He has to look the part.”

Dro curled his lip and took a seat in the far corner, vexed and annoyed. He glared into the mirror and dared Arthur to make reflective eye contact. “Niggas gossip more than bitches these days.”

Arthur sat up in his seat. “What was that?”

“Nothing...” Dro said. “I respect how you make a living.” He snickered under his breath.

“What do you do for work?” Arthur asked.

“I’m a pharmacist,” he said, in a very rehearsed and confident way.

Arthur chuckled. “Is that right? Tell me, how many people do you cure with your medicine each week?”

Dro became unamused and stood up to stomp towards Arthur. Arthur bolted up and Ted got between them.

“Ted, who is this pickle headed –”

Ted stopped Arthur from saying anything he’d regret.

“Art, chill.”

“Yeah, Art,” Dro said, flashing his golden teeth. “Chill. My grill cost more than your whole life.” He pulled up his hand, fingers pointed like a gun, and pulled the trigger on Arthur.

“Dro, are you fucking crazy?” Ted said with concern. He pushed Dro’s hand down. Dro stood, unwavering. “Leave... and the next shave is free.”

Dro settled down and went for the door, seeming placated. He pushed it open but paused to turn and give Arthur another rich smile before he hustled off. Arthur sat back down in a fluster with his forehead balanced on his thumb knuckle.

“We don’t just report on crime, Ted,” Arthur protested, “I swear. We cover sports sometimes.”

“Course you do, Art,” Ted said. Arthur took a long breath to calm down while Ted finished up on his hair.

After all of that, he was hungry and headed to a nearby burger joint for a quick and early lunch. They were just about to stop serving breakfast, just five minutes left for the extended window that ran until 10:30. It was more of a brunch than a lunch. Arthur lethargically picked at his food at a corner table with his neatly re-cleaned head down. He picked at his fries and peered outside. A baby blue Honda caught his eye and summoned up a feeling of dread.

“No way.”

His instincts told him to take flight. He hid under the table, but not even a moment later and he heard

“It’s another day, another adventure with your boy, Arthur Williams.”

Bubbles. With her high pitch of a voice that cracked on high notes and couldn’t sink quite low enough for ballad solos. Arthur reluctantly sat back up above the table as Bubbles and her constant cohort Lavender sashayed towards him.

“Thought you two left?” he said.

Bubbles snatched some fries from Arthur’s plate. “So, where do you DJ? Or produce or whatever?” She daintily put a fry in her mouth and chewed it with a cheek over-inflated.

“I don’t,” he said.

“So, how can you make beats like that?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “We’re even. Remember? Bye.” He waved her away like he was gently guiding a fly away from his food. Lavender took offense and sat across from him. She tugged his tray away and replaced it with a phone.

“Look, fool.” A video of the End Up Club was on her screen where people were dancing. “Already 100 likes.”

Bubbles locked Arthur into his seat. “There’s a Pride competition tonight. Winner takes home five grand.”

“I already have a job,” he said.

“You look off to me,” she said.

“I’m tired,” he bluntly stated.

Lavender rolled her eyes at Bubbles. Bubbles stared down Arthur with a focused look.

“Listen,” she said, “we’d split it three ways... think about it.”

Arthur’s eyes filled with regret as he recalled the event of the previous night. The dead Akai on his floor, and the active living one in the dance hall. The cost between the two, his piss-ass position at the station, and Lovie’s Song. He envisioned it.

“Five grand, huh?” he said. He smirked at the girls. “Fuck it. I’m game.” Bubbles’ eyes grew wide in excitement. Their uneasy, frankly toxic, relationship was about to blossom into a fantastic send-up for all of them. Or crash and burn into a sinking pile like the ones which littered the streets of the city...



CHAPTER

03

Saturday night at the club. The End Up Club was topped out with tops and bottoms. The crowd swayed around the ballroom. October stood in the DJ booth and used the mic and standard mixer to sing an R&B tune karaoke style to the crowd down below. She had her own mix-ups and accented, vibrational hums when she just forgot the lyrics. Didn't matter much, the crowd loved it. They gave her a round of applause which could be heard back in the hallway where Arthur and Bubbles waited. Arthur paced back and forth, nervous over his upcoming chance. Bubbles was completely relaxed with a blunt in hand and a cloud over her head.

"You ready?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said. "I guess."

Bubbles' eyes tightened in suspicion. "You're nervous. That's my guess." Arthur froze up at her insinuation, which made her cock an affirmative eyebrow at him. "You really had me going, Arthur. You've never performed a day in your life, have you?"

Arthur thought about all his training up to that point being on camera and all the lessons he learned from the news station, then threw it all away. "I can do this," he told himself.

Bubbles remained entirely unconvinced. “Fuck it,” she said. She started to stretch her legs in a windmill kind of motion. “I used to dance. I’ll go up.”

“No,” he said.

“Why?” she asked. “You’re not a producer, remember?” She looked into Arthur’s eyes. Something told her to believe in him, even if he didn’t seem trustworthy, he had a determination about him that she couldn’t deny. “Okay, okay, okay. You want to perform here?” He nodded. “Then you’ve got to perform! Be yourself. Let go!”

The prospect of being himself and letting go sent a wave of terror through his face, but he nodded in agreement to follow her advice. This wasn’t his scene, it was hers. What she said was what would go. Everyone out there was just being themselves.

The time came. He stepped out of the hallway and into the DJ booth. His eyes went straight to the Akai Pro 3000 in perfect working condition. Almost enviously, with a hint of bitter regret, that it lived while his was dead. Yuki leaned in front of him to the microphone.

“We have one more contestant tonight. He goes by the name –” She slid the mic under his mouth, which caught an unprepared breath.

“Arthur,” he said. “Arthur Williams.” The crowd laughed. It was the first government name they’d heard all night. They weren’t the crowd he ever expected to be playing for. He packed away the dreams of playing for any crowd long ago. But the long, winding road of fate led him there. Nowhere to go but right down the road. He took a deep breath, nodded, and flipped the switch.

The default beat played. It was simple bass and drum - boom, tish, boom boom, tish. He added an extra boom. Slid in some synth, readied more instruments, built up a drop and then sent out the funk. In seconds, he had the whole club in a groovy atmosphere. The audience nodded along to the beat as it built up. Then Arthur took the mic.

“Yo yo yo!” He started with a burst of enthusiasm. He let go. He was himself. “Another day, another adventure with your boy, Arthur Williams. So, let’s get this party started!”

The crowd cheered and whistled along. He heard a menagerie of voices out on the floor, but one resonated stronger, from behind. In the back of his mind, like a memory.

“Grab the wheel, Art.”

Lovie’s voice sent Arthur into a grim state, but he stayed determined. He closed his eyes, one hand on the board and one on the wheel. He went back to his favorite memory, inside the Corvette, surrounded not by pulsing lights, but by music and twilight sun on a long coursing road.

He turned to the beat, up the hilly street. Then down with the slide while the crowd vibed. Rev up, climb the hill, make the drinks spill. Fast change, shifting lanes, across the windowpanes.

He saw Lovie in the passenger seat. They locked eyes; he felt the beat. Had a smile in his soul, couldn’t say goodbye. Gave Arthur the wheel, let his dreams fly.

He grabbed the mic and went full hype.

“Say Boom-ba-Boom!”

And the crowd screamed,

“Boom-Ba-Boom!”

“Say -- Boom-Ba-Boom!”

“Boom-Ba-Boom!”

He worked the console and faded the instruments out into a final, all-brass sendoff bar, then held the machine up high as the song hit the end of the road. The crowd cheered. He took a step back in awe of what he did. He was only half there but he knew it was a wild ride.

Bubbles and Lavender jumped for joy over the set. It went way higher than either of them expected. Arthur rounded the corner and spotted them. He darted to Bubbles. They locked eyes and

when he came at her they hugged, then immediately backed off. Lavender greeted him with a pat on the back.

“Not bad, Bozo,” she said. Arthur nodded. He did better than he thought, but he couldn’t dwell on it or talk through his feelings. Yoki rounded the corner next to call on him.

“Can all the contestants meet on the dance floor?”

Arthur held his head high and went out. The ballroom cleared out to give space for the five contestants. Arthur, October, and three...other folks stood in the middle of the dance floor, in a parted sea of partying souls who still had a bit of the groove from the sets flowing through them. Arthur saw some people “wheel” at him. Not mockingly. They were glad to see him. It was a weird feeling, being there. Unexpected, but hopeful. Bubbles and Lavender peeked from across the room. Yoki took over the DJ booth and the speakers with the mic.

“Okay,” she started. “After speaking with management...” Tension grew. Arthur glanced up to the heavens. Bubbles and Lavender held their hands. “October! You win this year’s competition!” The crowd applauded as October put her hands to her face and screamed.

“Fuck this,” Arthur said. He punched the air next to his thigh and turned to the exit.

Bubbles and Lavender were livid. “Are they serious?” Bubbles remarked.

“October,” Yoki continued, “you take home the grand prize of five thousand dollars. Everyone else, thanks for playing. Oh, and two-dollar shots all weekend.” The crowd continued cheering, for the shots.

Bubbles turned to Lavender. “See if you can talk some sense into them.” Lavender nodded and hustled off to the usual meeting place. Bubbles, meanwhile, saw Arthur heading for the exit. She ran after him, bulldozed her way through the crowd and just got him by his coattails. “Hold up, champ.” Arthur froze

and saw Bubbles behind him, running her equivalent of the 40 in 4, except twice the distance and about 30 seconds. "I owe you a drink. Least I can do."

"You sure management won't stop you?"

"Shut up," she said. "Come on."

Arthur obliged her and followed her through the sticky crowd as they continued to sway to the next setlist, with October baked into the middle of the debaucherous dance floor. Meanwhile, the gracious losers sat at the bar. Bubbles formed a buffer between them and her rising star, Arthur, as they downed tequila shots. Angel took the glasses from them and glowered at Bubbles.

"It's someone's shift," she said tauntingly.

Bubbles blew her a sarcastic kiss. "Love you."

Arthur poked Bubbles on the shoulder with his hand. "Who does that drum machine belong to?"

"The club owns it," she said, shrugging. Not seeing the obvious bond he had with it.

"Well, set up another competition right here right now," he insisted. He put his hands down like he was already about to work the mixer in real time.

"Chillax, puppy dog," she said. "It doesn't work that way."

"Why not? You people are all blissed out and shit."

She rolled her eyes. "Well, we people are having a Pride Parade tomorrow. You can meet other producers there. I'll even bring the sound equipment. We can make some cash."

Arthur chuckled. "Tomorrow's Sunday."

"Pride Sunday," she said.

He nodded along. "The parade is at Dolores Park."

"And? Is that a problem?" she asked.

His eyes narrowed with a distant discomfort. Something like an upsetting memory that rose a bad feeling in his guts. He

shook his head from the thoughts and refocused on mastering that dream machine. "Let... let's make money. But here, in this club. It just makes sense."

Bubbles scowled and took another shot. Lavender came up with a beer in her hand and passed it off to Arthur. "I talked to everyone. If you don't turn L, G, B, or T... don't quit your day job." Arthur smoldered internally. He capped the beer and chugged it to douse his disappointment. That was that. It all boiled down to discrimination. Didn't matter where or how, someone was always trying to put him down.

The girls saw him off out front. He was tipsy but not drunk. Also, bikes aren't cars. Lavender gave him a light push to help get him going. He waved them farewell, a much more pleasant sort of parting than he thought he would give his former attackers, but that's life in San Fran. Some people lived with hate, but none of them lived across the Golden Gate. Allegedly.

Bubbles sighed. "Girl, you got some weed?"

"Bitch," Lavender swung back, "I'm mad your little experiment didn't work."

"We'll survive," she said. "We just need a side hustle."

Lavender sniffed at the air. "Hold up." Something penetrated through the usual acrid mixture of salty sea water and distant feces lightly masked by weedkiller and corporate building HVAC discharge. It was a dankness that could out darken the night itself. "You smell that?"

The girls turned to the source. A fedora-donned black man strode forward looking like a mobster who shopped at a thrift store and got lucky to pick out a suit with no pasta-sauce stains on the front. Bubbles took a whiff of what he was chieffing on, a hand-rolled cigarillo with a smoke so flavorful it almost came out green. She whistled at him and rubbed her fingers together.

Dro stopped and nodded at her. Moments later, the three strolled down Market Street and approached a parked Mercedes

with tinted windows. "Right here," he said. The car shifted slightly from movement in the back seat. Queso, a chulo from the slammer, struggled to get suited up as required before he could step out. Same getup - fedora, shades, and a Little Italy that was more little than Italy. Bubbles waved a pair of \$20s in the air while Lavender stood at her side, defensively. The boys nodded and shook hands.

"They need an eighth of Gelato," Dro instructed.

"Fasho, nigga," Queso nodded.

Bubbles chuckled. "Cute outfits."

Lavender saw an opportunity to vogue and struck a Madonna album cover with her hands. "Strike a pose, you two."

Dro glared at her under his shades. Queso handed Bubbles a bag of weed for the cash.

"Pride Sunday," he said. "Everybody wants to stay up."

Bubbles looked the bag over. It was weed, all right. "And?"

"Let's give them something to help," Queso said to his potential partner. "They'll trust it coming from you."

"Weed?" she asked.

"Naw, nigga," he said. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a baggie of fine, white powder.

Lavender laughed. "You're full of shit. Sniff it."

Queso obliged. He took his pinky nail and scooped up just a smidge to sniff down. "Help us help you... and your friends. We split it four ways."

Lavender and Bubbles shared an epiphany moment and gasped together. Bubbles turned to the pair with an approving look in her eyes. "Well, well. Let's talk."

Dro smiled with his gold teeth, which caught the lights in the always-on streets and sparkled a bit.

The night passed. It was Pride Sunday, and even though it was the Sabbath, the news never took the day off. In fact, it couldn't. Not at KRX 6, where an impressive new story just hit the desk of their lead anchor.

Arthur sat sipping coffee. His hangover was long gone but the exhaustion from last night still settled in. Meanwhile, Rich paced back and forth with a freshly written script. His eyes darted through it while Kev stood by for emotional support.

"Brotha, you're living in the now," Rich said positively. "This 'Gay Club Discriminates Cis Black Man' story. Hell, it's like you were there." Arthur choked a little on his coffee at the baseless insinuation that he could neither prove nor disprove. Rich helped him out, and congratulated him, with a solid pat on the back. "Hell, you paid us back. Go grab a backpack, under one condition."

"What?" Arthur gulped.

"You can't keep our equipment overnight," he said, half joking but also completely mired in a corporate memorandum. He saw the bandage on Arthur's cheek and made a very noticeable glance at it. "For obvious reasons." With that done, Rich took the script and headed out. Arthur and Kev fist bumped behind his back and went to their desks to talk stuff out.

"And guess what, Arty..." Kev reported, "Your dream came true. Someone broke into Jim's Music Shop."

"The shop off Sutter?" he asked.

"Nope. Mission Street location. Next to Dolores Park."

Panic swept across Arthur's face. "Dolores Park? Are you sure it's that shop?"

"Positive," Kev said.

Rich returned patting makeup on his face to tone down his glare. "Brotha, after your practice run, return the backpack and take the rest of the night off. Good writing." He swung himself

around to Kev's side of the desk and poked him in the gut. "Let's get some grub."

"I'll drive," Kev offered.

They sauntered off while Arthur clutched his cell. He pressed the button on it, but nothing played. Nothing was saved. Just a memory of what it should have sounded like, clouded out by the thud and thumps of the music he made last night. He shoved his cell into his pocket and stormed out to do something to take his mind off the event.

He geared up and headed for Jim's Music Shop near Dolores Park. Broken glass was still all over the floor. A police notice was posted on the wall next to the front door declaring it an active investigation, the kind that lasted anywhere from ten hours to ten years with progress ranging from slim to none. Arthur chose the front door rather than the glass riddled new entrance and held his camera up.

"Hi, sir," he greeted to the owner. "Sorry about your shop." He approached the elderly gentleman, who stood cross-armed and squint-eyed from both the age and the jaded cynical anger behind the counter. "Care to talk about it?"

"Oh, yes, that's what I want," he said as he fixed his glasses. "More cameras in my goddamn face. I've told you damn reporters everything I know."

"Sorry," Arthur said, lowering the camera. "I'm just here for practice." He looked around and saw a corner hosted by a sign that read BEAT MACHINES AND PIANOS. "Mind if I shoot some video of the scene?"

"Why not?" the owner said, dejected. "Place is a dump." He watched Arthur move up and down the aisles as he recorded what was there, what wasn't, what was taken, what was damaged, all eventually leading him to the beat machine corner. "So," the owner called out, "they must be getting you ready for the air?"

"Something like that," Arthur replied.

“Well, I’ve had so many damn reporters over I can’t keep track.”

Arthur hoveled his view up to the corner that met the ceiling where a small black security camera was situated. “At least you caught the robbery on video.”

“That camera up there?” the old man pointed out. “Shit, my surveillance ain’t worked in years. I call that intimidation.” Arthur got a shot of it anyway while his eyes wandered to something still on the shelf. Something priceless, yet untouched by the burglars. An Akai Pro 3000. Arthur took a closer look at it and reached out to touch it - to test it. See how it felt to work.

The phone rang in the backroom. The old owner flinched in surprise and grumbled out a “One sec, kid,” before he went out of the room to answer it. Arthur waited for him to get out of sight.

He stopped recording, stuffed the camera in his bag and snatched the Akai Pro without thinking twice. He charged to the exit and was just about to leave, hand on knob, but stopped. He caught sight of someone. A witness, over against the wall, carrying a heavy bag in a cheap looking suit with a bandaged scar on his cheek. The man clutched a coveted beat machine no longer in production. Arthur recognized the man. He was the begrudgingly burgeoning cameraman for a local news station that hated himself and had unfulfilled dreams. Arthur sympathized with him.

It was a mirror, but that moment of reflection made him realize what he was about to become. He thought of the kind of place he might end up, the people he would meet on such a disastrous downgrade of his life. It frightened him.

He returned the beat machine to the shelf. In that moment it felt heavy, weighed down by his own guilt. The store owner returned in a hustle to see Arthur, camera packed, looking dejected and shamed.

“I’m sorry,” Arthur said. “I’m really sorry.”

The store owner heard Arthur's sincerity and was stunned. He wasn't playing him up for a bit or a soundbite. He didn't know why, but Arthur's truthful regret reached him, and it made him feel better knowing someone, a reporter no less, had enough heart to feel for him.

"Don't apologize, kid. My wife and I opened this shop twenty-five years ago. It was our dream. I'll find a way... for her."

Arthur took a deep look at the store owner and saw a twinkle in his eye. A bit of hope was still left, somehow. With his story in his bag and a better feeling all around, Arthur left and found himself nearer than he expected to the staging grounds for the Pride Parade.

The residential Victorian style townhomes that surrounded Dolores Park had a perfect view of what Arthur was keenly aware of and partially involved in. That was just enough incentive for him to stay a distance away. The Park was already clustered with groups of colorful parade-preppers. He watched from the seat of his bike until his eyes finally scanned Bubbles and Lavender, done up even more marvelous than usual, and he smiled. His smile didn't even pull at his scar or hurt.

He started to slink toward the crowd, eyes lit up, fingers ready to work magic on a beat machine.

"Art!" Ted called. "Ay, Art!" Art peeked down the street and spotted Ted in workout gear. He hustled on over like he caught Arthur in a rear-ender. "Bro, what the hell are you doing?"

"Just," Arthur struggled for a good excuse and shrugged his bag on his shoulders. It was heavy. So, he did it again. "Working out."

Ted looked over to the crowd in the park. "To that gay ass shit?" he laughed.

"Naw, dude," Arthur protested. "I was stretching. I've been biking all day."

"You need a ride?" Ted asked. "I'm headed your way."

Arthur looked over at his...friends? The word didn't sit right in his head. It'd been just a few days. It wasn't them. It wasn't JUST them. There was something about them that was fun in a new and different way that he liked to be around. The mood, the tone, the unexpected and bright scenery. It felt worth checking out again. And he couldn't help but think back to his set, pumping that crowd up who accepted him immediately when he was just being himself.

"Bro," Ted said in a low voice, "those fags make me sick. You ready?"

Arthur saw Bubbles and Lavender get up from the park bench and wander off.

"Yeah," he said. "Let's roll." He rolled his bike off and followed Ted to his car.

Meanwhile, the parade was close to starting. Dro and Queso leaned on the parked Mercedes on 18th street, north of the park. They each held a backpack in their arms. They had the same disguises on in broad daylight where it was marginally less conspicuous. Bubbles and Lavender appeared from down the hill, huffing their way up the steep incline in a trudge towards them. Bubbles stepped forward with her arms out like a wide receiver anticipating the football.

Dro tossed the backpack to her. "Make that shit disappear," he said. Queso threw his to Lavender, who initially caught it, then let it fall with a distressed expression.

"My nail! You little Speedy Gonzales, fake Richard Ramirez, Menudo -"

Bubbles saw the break. It was chipped, angled bad like a mouse came and took a bite out of the ceramic. "We'll go to the salon on Monday," Bubbles offered. "Let's go, girl." The two hustled back down the hill and went straight back to the crowd. Dro smiled again and the sun caught on his teeth at a job well passed off.

Arthur, on Ted's suggestion and obligation, went back home. He went upstairs and decided to put his lie to good use. He started to do some pushups on the floor while he looked at the two cameras he had - one for work and one for "work" under his bed. He heard his door open and stopped mid-press.

"Arthur," Minnie said, "I made -- Oh, you're still working out. Good. Well, mac n cheese is on the stove. That's healthy."

"Thanks, Mom," he said. He stood up and dusted off his knees. "Mom, can I borrow \$1500... for a new machine?" He tilted his head to the scrapped old Akai, now nothing but a monument to decorate his dresser.

She chuckled. "Like I said, I made your favorite." She sauntered away as if expecting Arthur to be right at her heels. He went back down to the floor.

"Be right there," he called. He went at a furious pace, up and down, all the time thinking about a whole mix of things in his brain and how to sort them out into a sequential, meaningful report....



CHAPTER

04

It was five o'clock somewhere. That place being San Fran's historic Pacific Heights neighborhood full of hilly streets and cable car climbs. Bubbles and Lavender stared up the long walk they had to take to reach the peak and continued their journey.

"Bitch, my feet hurt," Lavender said. She attempted to strut away on a simpler plane, but Bubbles yanked her arm back in.

"Come on."

They shared a reluctant sigh and started their march up the hill. The non-stop gruel was made even worse in platform heels. They reached the top, looked out over the city from its elevation, then turned to the connecting street where they had to continue. Downhill. Which, in platform heels was even harder. It wasn't easy being runners even if they only walked. They toughened up, and half an hour later, got to where they were going.

It was always late night in the Tenderloin's porno district. It was like what every diehard Christian imagined Las Vegas to be, nothing but sex shops and porno theaters. Except this was in the heart of a great American city. Neon signs swirled with fancy decorative features which made the whole row look a different

color even under the sunlight. It was overpowering to behold for a normal person.

Barkers tantalized the crowds that passed by, mostly of men - straight men - to indulge themselves at their establishments. They all had the same set on the menu. Live nudes, big boobs, naked desire. Touching was not a guarantee. Strip joints blended with brothels, legal or otherwise, and the porno theater had a line and a tired, over-tan girl in a skimpy two-piece out entertaining the guests who were waiting on the street.

Bubbles and Lavender maneuvered through the sticky crowds and approached a faux queen who could have used a little more time in the make-up factory before leaving the house. She was leaned up against a stop sign.

“Hey, hold up,” the queen said, in a gruff construction worker type of voice. She tapped her nose at Lavender.

“How much?” Lavender asked.

“Half gram.”

Lavender reached into her bra and pulled out a small baggie, just about that size. Then they got close to each other, as if they were inspecting their own goods. The exchange happened quick.

“Thanks.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Lavender nodded with a forced grin. “Tell your friends.”

Bubbles and Lavender continued down the block on their hustle.

“See?” Bubbles said, “that wasn’t so bad.”

Lavender was uneasy and it showed. In her gait, in her shoulder sway. She looked like an amateur on the catwalk with first-time jitters “Let’s keep moving.”

“What’s wrong?”

Lavender looked around. Plenty of people in sight without a break in traffic. “We should leave this corner. We don’t want to draw any attention.”

“Bitch, what?” Bubbles said. “Drawing attention is what we do. We can’t help that we’re fabulous.” Lavender rolled her eyes and stormed off. Bubbles looked bewildered and followed. It was a simple game, and they were doing fine. They strolled through the seediest district for another hour and scraped away at their supply slowly. By a quarter to seven they stopped in front of a tiny, weatherbeaten apartment complex. The kind that needed money for repairs from renters which never actually got spent on the building itself. A perpetual disrepair but still had the San Fran premium rent.

Bubbles and Lavender felt the weight of plenty of stares. They weren’t in the sort of fabulous, gorgeous, or spectacular setting they were dressed for. But it was all they had. They strode in like they owned the place, but quietly because they didn’t want the tenants to believe they were responsible for the state of things. They got to the big yellow paper posted on their door. EVICTION, a lot of dates and a ton of fine print for the fines they could expect.

“We’re fine,” Bubbles said. “Everything is fine.” Lavender gave her a concerned look. “I’m sure we made enough.” Bubbles tore down the notice and crumpled it up. She trudged in and tossed it into an overstuffed bin which was taken directly from the street some time ago. It still had singe marks from the bum fire that it was once used for. Their shared space was unkempt, just one huge, disorganized dressing room.

Lavender sat on the couch next to a pile of clothes mixed in with some discarded papers and flyers. Bubbles opened the fridge, ignoring the other eviction notice on it, and took a slice of pizza that was chilled to the point of being rock solid.

“Girl, you need to eat,” she said. “We need our strength.” Bubbles noticed Lavender’s worn down and worried look. “You good?”

“I’m all right,” Lavender said.

Bubbles ambled over across the messy floor and sat on the couch. “Listen, this was a one-time thing. After tonight, we’re through with Dro.”

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

The two friends hugged. Lavender’s cell phone rang and interrupted them. She pulled it out and remarked at the caller ID with “Fuck.”

“What?”

“Dro wants us to meet at the City College Reservoir.”

“Reservoir? I was born at night, but not last night.”

Lavender snapped her fingers. “That part.”

“Tell him we meet at the End Up. The alley, so it’s low key.” Bubbles grabbed her pistol from the counter and checked it over with swift, mechanical precision. “And remember. I flaunt, you snatch” Lavender nodded.

The sun was just nearly setting when they arrived. They hustled to the back alley of the End Up club and side-stepped some fresh sidewalk dookie on their way into the concrete valley between the buildings. They leaned against the fence that blocked the way down into the kitchen. Lavender had both bags cradled under her arms. That gave Bubbles the free hands she needed to keep her pistol close by.

A Mercedes pulled up, just on time. All the way into the alley where the kitchen loading was handled for the club. Dro cracked the window down. His eyes went straight to the gun. “What you got there, Bubbles?”

She held it up and held him up. “You tell me.”

“Relax...” he said. “I’m just a pharmacist.”

Lavender grimaced at his rehearsed line. “Where’s Queso?”

“What?” he said.

“I know your black Mr. Clean looking ass heard me,” she snapped back.

Dro leaned back in his seat with a leathery creak. It covered up the sound of Queso, who was in the back with a pistol in his hands, who couldn’t help but hiss out a giggle.

“Say it again,” Dro demanded.

“Where... is... Queso?” Lavender repeated, slowly and sternly.

Queso was nearly ready to reply with his grip hard on his pistol.

“Chill,” Dro said, for both of them to hear. “He ain’t feeling well. He stayed home.”

Lavender handed the bags through the car window. “Here, Mr. Pharmacist.” Dro grabbed the bags and yanked them over to the passenger seat.

Bubbles cocked her pistol. “Easy, Dro. I’m watching you.”

Dro leveled a cool stare down at her. He reached one of the bags into the back and used it to lower Queso’s gun down. “Not yet,” he whispered. Queso nodded in agreement. Dro took a wad of cash from his pocket and stuck it out the window like he was feeding an animal at the zoo. “Take it easy.” Lavender snatched the cash fast, as if he would take it back if she waited. Bubbles kept her pistol drawn, but despite that, Dro poked his head out the window with a grin. “That’s both your cuts. Counted it twice.”

Bubbles and Lavender counted through it. Their rage and indignation slowly faded out to relief. Dro revved his engine and cranked the gear into reverse. “We never met,” he instructed. He backed out of the alley with a tire screech and hit the road again. Bubbles shoved her pistol into her waistband and nearly fell into the fence, bending it harshly.

“Lord have mercy,” she sighed. Lavender waved the cash in her face like a fan to cool her off and show their earnings. They hugged and almost pranced around together.

“Should we rent out a loft?” Lavender said, dreamily. “With the high ceilings?”

“No. Let’s get a muthafuckin duplex.” They laughed and split the cash, even shares apiece. “Head home and put that up. I’ll be there after work.”

“Okay,” Lavender agreed. They left going opposite ways, Bubbles to the front to help open up and Lavender down the alley where Dro left to get home faster. She was so enthused she ignored the sounds of dangerous driving as the Mercedes did a full U-turn just down the road, under the hill. Queso readied his gun in the back and rolled down the sidewalk-side window.

Bubbles, meanwhile, stuffed the cash safely in her bra and exchanged it with a joint. She ambled back into the alley to smoke it, no reason to get seen early by some passing patrol car looking to make trouble. She didn’t want to lose her pay-out to a bribe. That was when she heard the hum of a familiar, sinister engine, and her nerves flared up. She went to the edge of the alley and turned the corner to see the slick chrome of Dro’s Benz creeping into view.

“No, no,” she hushed.

Lavender was too busy counting money to see. She didn’t see what was coming as the Benz crept forward and Queso hung out the window.

“Lavender!” Bubbles grabbed for her gun and took flight. “Lavender!”

Lavender glanced back just in time to see Bubbles. Not Queso. She turned her back to the car. The only thing she saw was her bestfriend, gun drawn, racing toward her like she was about to die. Lavender turned and finally saw the Benz. She tried to

sprint away, but Queso shot three times. Cash flew into the air. Lavender collapsed to the ground.

“Police!” A cook heard the noise outside and came out for a break. He saw the whole thing and was in hysterics. “Police! Police!” He ran back around the fence and inside with a scream.

Queso dove out of the car and rolled onto the pavement to snatch up the money that fell from Lavender’s hand. Bubbles aimed at him. She centered the sight and didn’t even think about issuing a warning. He saw her and snapped his gun up at her. He shot first and hit her in the arm. She dropped the gun and wavered back behind a dumpster for cover. Queso stood up with a sneering grin, fistful of cash, and hand full of death. He was about to approach his cornered prey when he heard police sirens and the loud rev of the Benz.

“Fuck that!” Dro called out. “Get in! Get in!”

Queso turned, dissatisfied. The cook came back out again and pointed at Queso, as if to memorize his appearance for later. “Police!” he screamed over and over. Queso snarled and jumped back into the Benz as the tires gripped road. It sped off with him and some of the money recovered.

Bubbles emerged with a bleeding arm, but her pain was an afterthought. Lavender was far worse. Her back was blood red. It clashed with the rest of her outfit. Also, she was dying fast. “I’m sorry, baby,” Bubbles said. She turned to the cook. “Open the gate! Let me in!”



CHAPTER

05

Sunday evening. Arthur sat on his bed and watched the mounted TV propped up right near his decayed Akai, a monument to his dreams deferred and ambitions set aside, but for how long? He felt revitalized after his workout and more dedicated than ever. He had a story to catch up on, the unheard and unnoticed human side to the music shop break in no one else covered. He couldn't get it out of his head, not just his own regretful lapse into blatant thievery but the deeper hit it registered to the store owner's story. A man who was living for someone no longer here. It hit him hard.

Then Rich came on the screen and spoiled his mood.

"Breaking news to report. Police are responding to a shooting near the Castro." Arthur leaned his head up. That was the district with all the gay clubs. Rich continued. "Behind the popular LGBTQ night club... the End Up." Arthur sat up in fear. "This just in from my producer. Police believe the victim... worked at the club."

Arthur jumped out of bed and ran for his bike. It took him an hour to pedal into town and get to the club where a crime scene was already set up. The club was shut down for the night. Tape

blocked the entrance and alleyway. Two officers scanned the area with flashlights. One turned and flashed Arthur to a halt.

“You, stop!” he insisted.

“Sorry, sir,” Arthur said. He kept his hands steady on the handles of his bike so he couldn’t be misconstrued as reaching for anything. “My name is Arthur Williams... I’m a writer for KRX 6 News.”

“Area is off limits,” the officer said. “Move it.”

Arthur held a hand up and reached for his wallet. The officer grew tense. Arthur handed him his state ID, and the officer shoved it back at him. “What’s this prove? Beat it, or I’m arresting your ass for trespassing.”

Arthur realized he should have brought his camera and not pedaled out in a tank top and shorts. He also missed the window on being a first reporter by an hour or more if his station got the story when they did. He stormed off and turned to the club, hoping to see someone in or out of it that could give him some hope.

He went around to the other side of the block and saw Yoki out near the entrance smoking in a ruminant pose. He pulled up next to her in a fluster. “Who was it?” Yoki turned and blew smoke in his face. He didn’t flinch. “Please.”

“Fuck you,” she said.

“I get you’re upset,” he said. “I’m sorry... who was it?”

She wiped a tear from her eye. “Lavender.”

Arthur froze up and leaned himself off his bike. “Where...” he started. “Where’s Bubbles?”

Yoki looked in his eyes for any deceit or distrust and decided to let him in. She opened the doors inward and invited him past the tape into the kitchen. Arthur saw her on the floor, tears on her face and blood all over her arm. He helped her up. She went

over to the sink to wash out the wound and massaged her skin until the bullet in her arm popped out.

“Motherfucker!” she exclaimed. The bullet clattered into the water and went down the drain. Arthur paced around and handed her a towel to finish cleaning up and press the wound together. She snatched it and started to do a quick wrap.

“Why did you leave the scene?” Arthur asked. Bubbles treated her wound with rubbing alcohol. Arthur glared at her. The panic she felt didn’t seem to match the mood, per say. She was more frustrated than sad, while he stood by and had to wipe a tear away. “You worked for the shooters, didn’t you... why?”

“Why did you run to a bunch of queers for help? Money, right?” Arthur backed up. Bubbles winced and continued to work the wound. “Why you still here? You don’t know how it feels.”

Arthur’s eyes narrowed and filled with sorrow. “Who did it?”

“You’re so gangsta, Arthur. I’m sure you know them.”

“Try me.”

“Fine. One goes by Queso.” Arthur shook his head. Cheese was the first thing that came to his mind, obviously. “The other is some ugly bald motherfucker named Dro.”

He jumped. “The Pharmacist!”

“You know him?”

“He was in my barbershop the other day talking shit.”

“Your thumbs hurt? Call your barber.”

“He wouldn’t snitch. Not over this.”

Bubbles gave him an angry look. “Just focus on yourself. Leave.”

Arthur was annoyed. He wanted to help and be there for a friend. Someone he finally felt comfortable calling a friend, however conditional it was. He thought all she saw in him was a camera boy, a man looking for a story who never stopped finding things to say, truth or not. And he saw someone who was left

broken and scarred by a tough life that just kept getting tougher. A woman who didn't want help from anyone, even when she made mistakes.

"Fine," he said. He left annoyed and went back home. He was angry enough to give off a presence that no one wanted to fuck with, which kept him safe on the long pedal home. He was exhausted, physically, and emotionally, from getting worked out and worked over all day. He passed into the living room, which was dead silent as his mom was resting in her bedroom instead of staying up to watch the late-night programs with wistful dissatisfaction.

He saw an unplugged TV on the dresser and stopped for a moment. He thought back on what he still had to do, what he could do, still in a mood to help but in his own, mischievous way. He was a news writer, not a news reporter yet. So, if he wrote something... it would be news....



CHAPTER

06

Tuesday. Arthur arranged for a meeting at Fisherman's Wharf, also known as the open-air Seagull aviary and conservatory. It was the seagull domain. There were enough of them to block out the sky if they took flight, thus it was the responsibility of board walkers to keep them grounded with fatty fried dough and potatoes. The air had a thick scent of seafood, enough that it blocked out the smell of the ocean itself. People could get fresh cracked crab legs out of a stall or clam chowder in sourdough bread bowls that were just slightly burnt along the bottom. Postcards showed a fogless view of the bay with the Golden Gate Bridge and Alcatraz in sight.

Cafe de Casa was nicely bustling. It was an upper scale, but not celebrity-level establishment with a very bright atmosphere and an open flow-through main room exposed to the street, half in and half out with just enough of an awning to shield against rain. Arthur chose the turf option, straight steak with vegetables boiled in purified salt water straight out of the ocean, allegedly. He sat across from KCB12 anchorman Michael Johnson, who enjoyed his meal with a side of fond memories.

“I never reply to fan mail,” he said, “but I saw your photo and your last name. Your mother was my favorite reporter growing up.”

“Oh, yeah, same,” Arthur said. He paid more attention to his steak than the conversation about his mom, but it was his “in”, and he wanted to get in good favor with his invitee. Good enough favor that he might pay for their meal, and then some. “I want to be just like her... you’re not so bad yourself.”

“What about your father?” he asked.

Arthur straightened up. This was a conversation he didn’t want to slack on. “He was a music producer.”

Michael chuckled. “That’s interesting. He make anything in the top 100?”

“Well.... no.”

“Oh. So, aspiring music producer.” Arthur glared lightly. Michael didn’t notice as he reached into his pocket and pulled out a small mirror to stare into. He framed it just so, dead level like he would with any evening broadcast. “Reporting live from KCB12 News, I’m Michael Johnson, your lead anchor.”

Arthur gave him a courteous slow clap. “Bravo. And the daytime Emmy goes to -.”

Michael handed the mirror across the table. “Your turn.”

“No, I’m okay,” Arthur said politely. “Thanks.”

“No, seriously,” Michael nodded. “I want to see it... Williams.”

Arthur took the mirror, framed it, did all the work he needed to do, straightened his posture, and spoke in a clear and professional tone. “Reporting live from San Francisco, Arthur Williams, KRX 6 News.”

Michael clapped with excitement. He saw a little of Minnie in the lad and it sent him back a good ways. Arthur grinned and bowed his head as he handed the mirror back. A waiter interrupted their rehearsal exchange with a bill.

“Here you go, Mr. Johnson.”

“Took you long enough,” Michael said.

The waiter took a long look at Arthur. “Mr. Johnson, who is this? Your brother?”

“He comes from good stock,” Michael said with a wink. He handed his plate up to the waiter. “The steak was a little bloody. I think an extra fifteen would have worked wonders.”

“Of course,” the waiter agreed. “I’ll remind our chef.” The waiter frowned and hurried off to the kitchen. Michael placed his credit card down to cover the whole meal, proving he was in a favorable mood.

“You need a ride to the bus stop?” he asked.

Arthur, instead, asked for a better favor. “Um, Mr. Johnson,” he cleared his throat to correct himself, “Michael... can I check out KCB12 with you? I didn’t want to bother you.”

Michael smiled. He shook his car keys out of his pocket. “Let’s ride.” Arthur gave a toothy grin and nodded in excitement. His enthusiasm was well placed as a simple cover. Michael was excited to be winning favors with his idol’s son, and Arthur had his own plans in the shadow of the veteran reporter.

They arrived together at KCB12 news studio. Michael brought Arthur in, got him a guest pass, and invited him to sit across from him at his desk. The whole arrangement was way above what Arthur was used to at KRX 6. Rich wouldn’t even pass dress rehearsals in the building.

Michael leaned back in his seat behind his wide and fancy desk. “I stuck by my guns. I report on what I want, when I want. It took your anchor Rich thirty years to get that kind of respect.” He kicked his feet up on the desk corner, which seemed cleaned off specifically for that purpose.

A woman came in with a hustle in her step and a thick clipboard of printouts. The state she was in with a messy bun

and a pantsuit missing a top button led Arthur to believe that she was a Producer, but despite that, was not the one in charge.

“Boss,” she began, “there was a murder –”

“-- Can’t you see I’m having a conversation?” Michael snapped.

“Sir, I know the A.C. in here feels great –”

“-- Get on the phone and find us some stories. We’re losing daylight.”

She stormed off. The exchange left Arthur with a burning curiosity. “Why don’t you leave the station?”

Michael scoffed. “That’s pond scum shit.”

Arthur, now declared as pond scum, persisted. “So, how do you get the stories first?”

Michael laughed at the question. Like it was as innocent as a child asking a father why the sky was blue. “Fuck coming in first. It’s about markets. We’re in the top ten, baby.” Arthur nodded. That was what he wanted to hear. “We are lead anchors. We sit back, look handsome, and get paid.”

Arthur smiled and stood up. “Can I grab a card... so I don’t have to fan mail you again?”

“Of course,” Michael said. He waved his hand to a small stand on his desk that dispensed business cards like rigid tissues. Arthur reached down to take one gingerly. Then he saw Michael check his cell. Arthur nabbed several instead. He left without saying much else to anyone else and got back home after 5.

Arthur ambled into the sound of soul music and found Minnie dancing lightly in the living room with a glass of red wine in her hand. She set the glass down when she heard the front door and called out without breaking her groove.

“Arthur, I heard you’re really coming along at work.”

“Thanks, Mom. I’ve been thinking, I know you don’t want to give me money since I’m a grown man and all, but I wanted to buy a new suit. And some make up.”

Minnie's eyes grew with excitement. She snatched her purse from the dresser and pulled out some cash. "Here," she said. Arthur took the cash steadily. Not too quick or greedy and not cautiously like he didn't deserve it. "That should cover everything." He counted it up quick. Minnie stepped forward and gave his good cheek a light pinch. "I'm so proud of you."

"Thanks, Mom," he said.

He spent a good long while getting into town, near Chinatown to the Nordstrom Downtown location, and along the way he met up with someone who knew a bit more about fashion than him. It wasn't quite her scene, but Bubbles gave some honest critique on what suits to pick, what accented his good traits, and the makeup he needed to cover up his scar.

They left together with arms filled with bags of garments and clattering plastic makeup pouches. Bubbles took a fair share of the load off him, and they strolled up the busy street together. It was a good chance to keep her distracted from the buzz around the weekend. The Club was set to reopen with one less bartender, and the quiet in Bubbles' house wasn't nearly as comforting as the constant sarcastic presence she was used to.

They passed into Chinatown and checked out the scenery. There was always something going on that gave locals an excuse to decorate. Paper lanterns hung on utility poles overhead. People conversed in front of pagoda styled buildings.

A group of skaters passed by who were taking a break from their street grinding to do some people watching, and they just happened to catch Bubbles in their view.

"They can't be serious?" one exclaimed. Arthur froze up. He side-eyed the group as they continued rabbling.

"Hell no. I'll pass," another said. They laughed together. Bubbles caught on to what they were saying just as Arthur did, but instead of freezing up she turned and waved them off.

"In your dreams."

“Yeah,” another said. “Or my nightmares.” The boys went on giggling. Bubbles glanced at Arthur, who wasn’t taking the insults in stride and backed away in discomfort. The light left her eyes a bit. She dropped the bags and stormed off toward Union Square. Arthur picked the bags up and followed her.

“Bubbles, wait.”

“Bubbles?” the skater laughed. “What the fuck is a Bubbles?”

Arthur ran into the Union Square Plaza. He was one of about 180 people toting bags full of stuff and everyone had the same precarious gait where they were terrified of spilling their goods out into the filthy street. He saw Bubbles sitting on a bench on the corner and rushed over to her.

“Bubbles?”

“You’re good,” she said, waving him off. “Go back and hang with your friends.”

Arthur took a seat beside her, visibly regretful. He said her name again, trying to pry at her with good intent.

“I get it,” she said. “You have more in common with them. I get it.” Arthur shook his head and reached into his pocket to pull out a joint. She looked insulted. “What? You think you can just win me over with some weed?” He sparked it up and let it catch to the point of letting off a thin, sizzling smoke trail so she could take a whiff. “Is it Indica?” He passed her the joint. She reluctantly snatched it. “Least you could do.”

Bubbles leaned back and took the edge off. Arthur stayed by her side while people passed them by, all busy and involved with their own lives, not looking for drama or anything to start with others. Two ladies strutted by laughing together with light handbags and shopping totes in their elbows. Arthur saw a sadness sweep across Bubbles’ face.

“She’s in a better place,” he said.

“Any place is better than this. Especially for us.”

"You'll always have the memories."

"What if that's not enough?"

Arthur glanced up at the sky. "Sometimes that's all you've got."

Bubbles took a drag of the joint and let out a puff of smoke which vanished into the air almost instantly. "Can I ask you a personal question?"

"Shoot."

"Why don't you talk about your dad?"

Arthur's face tightened with unease. "What?"

"I feel like I know everything about your mom. Where's your dad?"

Arthur lowered his head and leaned forward, then sat back with his head plain and level. "He... he died in a car accident a few years back."

She gasped, sucking a cloud of smoke back down into her lungs to gestate twice before it leaked back out through her nose. "I'm sorry, Arthur."

"It's fine," he said. "I'm fine."

"I'm sure he's very proud of you."

He chuckled. "That's funny. Why would he be proud of me? I'm a reporter. Just like Mom wanted."

"She just wants what's best for you."

"How about what I want?"

"Baby, that's the burden of having a parent. They're far from perfect. And every mistake they make chips away at us." She nudged Arthur. "But you're a grown man now. It's up to you to glue the pieces together. You think my parents approved of my lifestyle?" He gazed at her, seeking advice. "When my parents kicked me out, I went through it. I blamed myself for all the black eyes and lost time."

"How'd you get over it?"

“Who said I did? You just take it one day at a time, baby.”

Arthur shook his head in defeat. “I don’t think I can face her alone. And my dad’s beat... I can’t.”

“You never tried to... talk to him?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what I would say.”

Bubbles took a grip of Arthur’s hand. “You have me now. Listen, boom-ba-boom.” She started to beat box. Poorly, but with spirit. She was channeling his set from the club, he could tell. It was still on her mind so many days later. Even through the trauma of losing her friend, it stuck with her. His song that he made on a whim.

“Okay, check it,” he said. He nodded to the beat. Bubbles went into percussion only and gave him the rest of their space on the bench to fill it with his own flow. “Dad, I wish... Dad, I wish I could take this pain away. I wish we could cruise around the city for just one more day.” Bubbles stopped and looked at Arthur in awe. Even without the beat, he kept going. “Dad, I wish I didn’t miss you. They preach all this masculinity shit, but if you were here, I’d kiss you.”

“Wow.” She put her hand on Arthur’s thigh.

“And despite you leaving me, I still love you.” His final bar set him to finally look up. He was lost in his own flow - in a different kind of drive than usual. A few people got a load of his performance, then turned away once it was over. However, he didn’t feel their eyes. He felt Bubbles, applauding him, and a set of eyes higher up looking down on him with pride.

Bubbles laid her head on Arthur’s shoulder as he contemplated the evening sky. When all the gold was gone and the dark was left, he knew there were still stars somewhere beyond the city lights....



CHAPTER 07

It was a gloomy day in the bay. Arthur gripped the old Akai Pro drum machine under his arm and approached a familiar tombstone mixed in with all the fancy memorials and artsy crypt faces. A simple grave with an embossed photo - same one as Minnie kept in the house - and the name Lovie etched into the stone. His eyes started to well up with tears.

Bubbles saw him struggle and put a confident hand on his shoulder. "You got this," she said. Arthur took in a deep sigh. He put the drum machine down over the grave and let it rest with his father. The beat it once carried was dead inside, along with the circuits and wires. It was just as dead as the man who used to be its master. Bubbles comforted him with a hug as he stood and started to cry.

Once Arthur straightened up, he joined Bubbles in her Honda and they sped through town. He was dressed in his new blue suit - deep navy-royal like national anchors wore. He dressed for the role he didn't even want but needed. And his bandage was off. Clever makeup hid his scar and blended into his complexion with ease. Even covered up a few of his other blemishes nicely.

Arthur took out his cell phone while they went past the various fringes and outsides of town. He scrolled through a list of briefings and stories yet to be covered for the taking.

“An elderly woman got jumped downtown?” he confirmed.

She shook her head. “Keep going.”

“A string of liquor store robberies in Chinatown?”

“No.”

He tapped to scroll a little further, and something caught his eye. “Shots fired... at the City College Reservoir last night?”

Bubbles pumped the brakes off on the side of the street. “I’ll get out here.” She parked it close to the curb by a coffee shop. When she hopped out, Arthur swapped seats, and scooted it up a bit to get close enough to the wheel. He gripped the wheel and heard a tapping on the door.

“Don’t crash, Arthur,” she warned.

“Don’t worry,” he nodded. “I got this.” He readjusted his necktie with a determined look.

He arrived at the scene around 4, just in time for an afternoon or early evening slot, to a police line. The Reservoir was fully closed up by an encirclement of trucks and cars and yellow tape that fluttered in the breeze. The reservoir itself was dried up. The wettest spot around was the covered up crime scene where blood may have splattered and soaked into the terrain. Two officers waved Arthur down to stop. He cleared his throat and straightened up his back a bit.

The officer got to his window. Arthur rolled it down. “Turn around,” the officer commanded. “This is closed to the public.”

Arthur hesitated for a moment, then spoke with a deeper tenor of confident authority. A commanding and charismatic voice, not just similar but tonally identical to

“It’s all right - Michael Johnson, from KCB12 News.” He fished out a few business cards from his coat kerchief pocket and handed one to each of the officers. He waited for them to take the bait. He wasn’t an exact match for Johnson, there were years and some hair issues perhaps. But they were both Black, and the officers weren’t.

“Hey,” the other officer commented, “yeah, I watch you every morning while I cook. My wife loves you.”

Arthur nodded to him. “Well, I’m Michael Johnson, your lead anchor.” Spot on performance. The officers laughed and waved him through.

“Come on through, Mike.” Arthur nodded positively and drove up to the media circle at the top of the hill. A senior officer paced around with a note in his hands while other officers held the line to keep the media circus at bay. There were six people already at the scene, but fortunately, none from any major network stations. No one who could pierce through his disguise. No one who knew the real Michael Johnson behind the camera like Arthur did - the man who left the field work for the interns and dead-ends.

Arthur parked the car and stepped out to straighten his jacket and roll his neck. One of the media folks saw him and seemingly recognized him.

“Hey, is that - are you Michael?”

Arthur paraded over and handed out his card. “Nice to meet you.” He kept up the act as best he could and handed out cards to everyone who approached. Only one didn’t, a shifty guy with an aggressive and distrustful look. Arthur saw best to avoid him entirely. “Feels good to be out. My producer likes me in the office.”

“Shit, wish mine did,” the media head said. The group chuckled together. Then the Sergeant approached and waved them all in.

“Hello, everyone,” he greeted. “We’ll keep this brief.” Arthur huddled in with the media members and took out his cell phone

to record from the hip. "Several shots were fired here last night. Upon arrival, officers found the body of one male victim. We currently have no description of the suspects involved." Arthur leaned in closer to the details. "But with the recent spike in crime... police are offering a \$30 thousand dollar reward for info leading to some arrest. Thank you."

"I knew it," Arthur hushed with a confident grin. The crowd quickly departed to stretch the official statement into as many words as they needed. The distrustful and shifty man stayed behind and spoke up.

"Do the job yourselves!" He turned and let out a muted "Repulsive", an insult for himself which Arthur barely picked up. Instead of avoiding him, Arthur approached and twisted himself around to get more info.

"I heard," Arthur hushed, "they let those thugs out in a week, ridiculous. I don't pay taxes for this shit." The man looked at him more favorably, his distrust faded to a general jaded pride. "Michael Johnson. And you are?" Arthur extended his hand, and the man gripped it.

"I'm Tim Ronald," he said. "From SF Free Speech Radio."

They shook hands and walked off together a short ways.

"So, any leads?" Arthur asked. His phone was still on and recording, despite him ambling it slightly away from his new piece of interest.

"I mean," he started, "people call in about The Orange Lounge. A bunch of drug dealers supposedly hang out there. But my listeners... they call in about a lot of things."

"The Orange Lounge?"

"Orange Lounge," he nodded. "They play hip hop. Shit like that."

Arthur nodded knowingly. Once Tim turned to return to his eco-van, Arthur dashed to the Honda with his story newly revived. He had a destination and plenty of time to break the story of his career. Or better yet, a story to break his career.



CHAPTER

08

That evening, work continued. Arthur followed the story with his partner, Bubbles, to the Orange Lounge. Not to be confused with *The Orange Lounge*, which was the split-level relaxation area of a cheap bayside motel. Orange Lounge was a proper night club venue with a very general crowd. To say it was a hip-hop club was a disservice, most people seemed to shy from the dance floor between major sets and hung out at the bar or in lounge-style seating all over the place. And it wasn't the kind of club Bubbles frequented, though she didn't hate the stares that came her way when she entered.

Arthur eyed up the DJ booth. If he knew anything about night clubs, DJs were the easiest people to talk to for information.

"Let's split up," he said.

"Okay," she agreed. She bounced off in her own direction while Arthur went to the booth. He got in pretty easily. He was a young black man in a nice suit - the people on guard assumed he was a high roller making a request. The DJ himself was really into his job. Once Arthur arrived with his business card, the guy put on an automatic track and let it play while they chilled in the back to talk.

“Bro,” the DJ chuckled gladly, “I was a communications major in college. Now, I’m a producer.” He glanced at the card. “Damn, Mike. You big time.”

“Thank you,” Arthur said. His eye caught a glance of an Akai Pro 3000 on the table as part of the mixing deck. All things in due time. “So, what does it take to become a producer?”

“Shit, you’re looking at it,” the DJ said. “Being a DJ opens doors. You get a feel for what people want.”

“Thanks, dude... side question.” Arthur glanced back at the door, to clear the coast. “You know where I could find some –” He tapped on his nostril. Same gesture he saw the hoes at the End Up Club using. The DJ gave a wry chuckle.

“Okay, okay. Big Mike likes his nose candy. Shit, I’d check the bar.” Arthur gave him a quiet peace sign. “Aight, Mike.” The two slapped five, clasped, shoulder-checked and bumped off. Arthur’s new destination was set. He perused through the crowd nonchalantly toward the bar. His eyes were locked down on the bar, at the barista behind it and the people up front. Then they wandered a little bit to a woman downing a shot of vodka. She caught him looking. Arthur turned away and did a double take to look again. She did the same.

“Hello,” he said, with a casual approach.

“Hello,” she replied.

“Do I know you?” he asked.

“I don’t think so,” she said.

“No?” They both grinned at the same time, maybe due to the awkward air or maybe just from enjoying the exchange. “Why are you smiling?”

“Why are *you* smiling?” she flirted back.

“I don’t know,” he said bashfully. “I’m Arthur.” He extended his hand, and without pause, she took it. They got up and started dancing on an edge of the floor just as a high-bass groove came

on. They grinded for a bit until she got back up and pressed her back into his chest.

“Who’d you come here with?” she asked over the noise.

“A.... friend,” he declared. Arthur took a sweep of the crowd but didn’t catch the distinct appearance of that friend, and assumed she was off on her own to do the work she came to do.

Bubbles, meanwhile, was across the dance floor and swayed alone to take in a view of the crowd. She felt a bit of jealousy for all the couples but not enough to stop her from grooving all over herself. More importantly, she spotted a roped off entrance to the VIP section. She nodded to it and danced her way up to the unguarded passage when she felt a heavy hand grip her from behind.

“You’ve got a lot of dip on your chip,” a large and unsociable man said. He was audibly drunk and a whole weight-class above average. He pushed Bubbles over to get her to twerk. Bubbles reared back and booty-checked him to shove him off.

“Seriously?” she said, exasperated. “Could you buy me a drink first?”

Another man showed up, sipping a bottled beer with a cackling smile. “Nigga, y’all gay as fuck.”

“No, I’m not!” his offended friend denied.

“So mature,” Bubbles mocked. “Grown ass men.” At that point she got some very distasteful looks. She scurried away toward the VIP section, but the two men followed her and spoke up once they realized who they were dealing with.

“Get the fuck out, faggot.” The large man demanded. “Take that shit to your side of town.”

Bubbles turned, hot and sassy, and got doused by the other guy’s beer which he shook up and sprayed at her. “You transformer.” Anger swept across her face. She reached for the nearest implement on the nearest table and held her own liquor bottle in combat position.

Meanwhile, Arthur and Kim's consensual grinding continued.

"What's your number?" he asked.

"My number?"

"Yeah, your number."

He was going all in. He might as well enjoy himself during work, like the pros did. Kim reached into her skinny pants and pulled out her flat, thigh-warmed phone.

Glass broke across the dance floor. Loud enough for most people to notice.

"What's going on?" Kim asked.

Arthur scanned the room and saw the altercation from across the way. Bubbles swung a broken liquor bottle around, sharp end out, at two dudes who were trying to wrangle her.

"Gotta go," he said. He rushed through the dance floor and shoved the smaller offender over with a running tackle. He got between the big man and Bubbles. "Back the fuck up," he warned. The large man stomped forward. Arthur pushed off of him and stepped backwards. "Move it."

The scene was becoming too hard to ignore. Kim crept up with the rest of the crowd and saw what side Arthur was taking. And she wasn't impressed. "Is this your...friend?" she asked.

Arthur glanced around. The whole club was glaring at them - at him, first. He put his fists up and put on his best reporting live voice. "Don't watch me, watch TV. Assholes." Bubbles gazed at Arthur with admiration. She put the bottle down and put her fists up as well. Arthur turned to Kim with the same dejection. "That goes for you, too, biscuit head."

Kim gasped, speechless. "Fine! Weirdo!"

Arthur felt confident and proud. Up until the security guards came in. Unlike the End Up Club, the Orange Lounge sprung for proper private wannabe cops.

"You four. Out!"

Arthur and Bubbles strutted off with pride. Up until they got outside and sat on the curb. The other two that were called on didn't leave at the same time. Some optional roughing up may have been in order to keep them in line. Bubbles lit up a joint to take the edge off the whole affair.

"Sorry for cock-blocking," she said.

He waved it off. "She smelled like a grape swisher sweet." They laughed over it for a moment before returning to silence. "Why did you help me... that night at the liquor store?"

"Did you know this weed is Sativa?" she mentioned.

"Bubbles..."

"I never liked this strain, but I took a chance... and it's not bad." She passed him the joint, and her meaning.

"Yeah," he agreed. He took a puff and gazed at her. "It's different."

Bubbles grinned. He reached over and hugged her tight. He saw the club was letting people out. A huge crowd dispersed. It was still too early for quitting, just after 10, so it was clear the mood got soured from the confrontation and turned a bunch of people away. The foot traffic slowed to a halt outside the doors as people wondered where to go.

Bubbles scanned the crowd. "Maybe they're at Onyx? Or Beauty Bar?"

"Maybe," Arthur said.

Just a few seconds later, a suspicious duo in fedoras and shades ambled out of the Orange Lounge main doors. They were behind the crowd but distinct enough to bounce Arthur and Bubbles to their feet. Dro and Queso were on the move.

"Come on," Bubbles hushed. They sprinted away from the crowd and made their way to the blue Honda. They staked out the street and waited for the familiar rumble of a Mercedes to speed off. When it did, they followed it, a few car lengths behind, all the way to the on ramp of the highway.

“Looks like we’re headed to the Reservoir,” Bubbles said. “You brought that little camera, right?” Arthur reached down to the floor of the passenger seat and unzipped his bag underneath the seat. He was ready for a live report.

They overtook the Benz well ahead of the intended off-ramp and got to the Reservoir first. The blue Honda stood out in the late evening, but it wasn’t alone. Another car was already there. Bubbles drove even further away, avoiding the scene and the waiting people, to stay clear of the whole eventual scene.

Once they were far enough up the surrounding road, Arthur got out and stealthily crept up the embankment and under the fence to find a good spot for his footage. He slunk down into the Reservoir itself, on the shallowest grade. The whole thing was empty, and he could have hung out at the dry basin all night, but the climb back up would be strenuous. He crept over to the corner closest to the entrance where the other car, and its passengers, were waiting.

Soon enough, the rumble of the Benz came by and drove up close to the meeting point. Too close. The man out in the dark flinched away when the car drove up. There was an exchange at the window, and then a hotter exchange as Dro exited the front seat. Arthur hooked his feet over the edge of the reservoir and aimed his camera at the exchange in real time. He got it on tape as Dro emerged, approached the man, and snatched a bag which was handed over before darting back to his Mercedes.

“Yo, Dro! Where’s my half!?”

The passenger door of the Benz flew open. Queso ducked out and shot the man multiple times with a pistol. The man collapsed on the inclined road. Arthur flinched at what he saw - real, live murder. He couldn’t easily push that footage to public TV. His flinch also caused a fragment of the dried earth along the reservoir’s edge to crack and tumble down with a thud. It was nothing compared to the gunshots, but any sound in the silence of night was loud enough to spook the drug runners.

Dro glanced up the road and saw the glint of the camera and its holder. “Queso!” he commanded. Queso stepped out and aimed at Arthur. His bullets barely missed and hit the dried rim of the basin.

“Shit!” Arthur exclaimed. He slid back and ran along the steep ledge in a desperate flight back to the winding road. He winded himself within a minute and had to turn to look back. The Benz was gaining, just slowly, along the narrow reservoir road. “Shit!” Arthur gritted his teeth and picked up the speed toward the Honda. Bubbles could see that things were not going well.

“Shit! Shit! Shit!” she slapped the wheel of the car. She unlocked the door and let Arthur jump in.

“Drive. Drive.” he shouted. The car ripped the dirt and sped off. Arthur was rattled around in his seat until he got settled back. He smacked the dashboard. “Make a right!” Bubbles cut the wheel to the right. “Left!”

“You know we really gotta get you driving.” she commented. They sped down the road without a vehicle in sight and hit the highway without the Benz in pursuit. They were clear for the night, or so it seemed.

The next day, Arthur went to work like normal. He found a story and was planning on how to break it. He wore his snazzy suit, recently dusted and spot-cleaned from the grass stains at the reservoir. He also had a flash drive on his computer. Kev and Rich came around and hovered over him.

“What’s that, Art?” Kev asked.

“I convinced my mom to buy me a camera the other day,” Arthur said, twisting the truth.

“Good, brotha,” Rich said, patting Arthur on the back. “You never know when you’ll stumble upon a great story. Remember - if it bleeds, it leads.”

Arthur smirked and nodded. “I’m happy you feel that way. Watch this.” He opened the file on the drive and let it play out.

He started his recording on the walk up along the reservoir, no sounds but his feet crunching along the path. Then the walk up along the inner embankment. The camera came to rest at the edge of the reservoir with the two men in sight, just as the Mercedes pulled into view. He snap-zoomed on it as Dro got out and followed up to the man and the bag exchange. The rest played out in a wide pan, from Dro retreating to the car to Queso emerging and shooting the man. Blood splattered everywhere and decorated the pavement.

Kev and Rich jumped back when they saw the gunshots. The on-board microphone managed to pick it all up. Arthur had the camera to the ground to keep it steady, but once the first shot rang out the view shifted a bit as his body flinched and nudged it. That sent the dead man into center frame as he collapsed, bloody and twitching on the scene.

“Rich,” Kev said, “I’ll blur out the gruesome parts. He’s gotta go live on this.”

“No other station has this video,” Arthur said with a sly laugh.

Rich nodded slowly. “You’re going live at eight. A KRX-clusive... get it, brotha?” Arthur nodded and got out his makeup sponge to cover up his scar. He had to be reminded usually. It didn’t hurt him anymore when he smiled.

Showtime. 8 sharp. The whole city was tuning in to see what was what in the world, and a couple hundred or maybe a few thousand were tuning into KRX 6. But they would be the privy viewers to see and know the truth about their fair city. One of those people, who was not watching and instead tending to some onions in her kitchen, was Minnie.

She answered her vibrating cell phone with her knife hand. “Who is this?” She pulled it away and saw that it was already an audio message, from Arthur. She played it out.

“Turn on KRX 6 News,” was all he said before cutting out. She also heard a bustle of news and media crew in the background behind him. Her eyes went wide with surprise. She rushed to

her bedroom and turned on the TV straight to KRX 6 news. She was face to face with Rich - an unpleasant surprise - but held out hope for what came next.

Rich began his report. "Shots fired at the City College Reservoir. One man left dead... and it's all caught on camera. Arthur Williams is live from the reservoir with details."

Minnie sprung up to her feet and applauded just before it cut to the scene.

She wasn't the only one who turned to the news at that time. Ted's Barbershop was bustling with customers and their carry-ins who took up a corner to play dominos while Dro sat with a blade to his face to clear off his post-prison stubble.

"Ay, Ted," Dro called, "turn the game on."

Ted grabbed the remote from his dresser and turned the TV on to a static field. He cycled the channels. "One sec." Then he stopped and went back when he saw a familiar face. "Yo, hold up. That's Art! That's Art!"

Arthur was reporting live from the scene. "The shooting happened Thursday night. Let's take another look."

"That's my guy!" Ted exclaimed. "Let's go!"

Dro rolled his eyes. He'd rather stare at his own self or Queso in the mirror view than watch that wimp make a broadcast. He tilted his head up slightly and checked it out anyway and saw a suspiciously familiar car and a very familiar man who was shot several times. A scene he lived just the other night taken from another angle.

Then he saw himself and Queso in mugshot form.

"The suspects on your screen are Alexandro 'Dro' Wilson and John 'Queso' Quesada, both twenty-one years of age."

The TV cut off. Dro was left in shock. He saw the whole barbershop glare at him in the reflection of the mirror and turned with a low chuckle. "That's fake news."

Arthur's broadcast continued, whether people watched it or not - and he hoped they did.

"These suspects are also connected to a shooting from the End Up Club that left one person dead." He reached into his suit blazer and took out a photo of a black trans woman leaning against a bar in denim shorts. "This was Lavender. She worked at the club. She was murdered by these suspects. She was only thirty years old." He held the photo steady, a substitute for a proper graphic overlay, and let a professional silence take the air for a moment.

Bubbles, who was just a few feet away, his only "crew" to speak of, watched on in admiration. She saw him talking not into a simple tripod camera with a microphone, but into the hearts and souls of thousands of people. Just like at the club. He was in his element.

Arthur put the picture away while he gave his send-off. "Reporting Live from the City College Reservoir, Arthur Williams, KRX 6 News."

At home, Minnie jumped for joy and immediately turned away from Rich's follow up. It was the greatest eight-minute segment of her life. "Oh, my God. Yes. Thank you, Jesus." She swayed out of the room and went back into the kitchen on a one-woman parade. It was the happiest she'd ever been hearing a murder report.

Most people were not happy with the news. Not the way it was delivered, but the content itself.

Ted pushed his razor against Dro's neck to keep him in place. "Don't move," Ted warned. Dro froze up. Ted's arm shook from his own anger. "Nigga, I should -"

A gunshot rang out inside the shop. Ted jerked away. The blade slowly dropped from Dro's neck as Ted wavered back with a hole in his chest. He hit the wall and the blade dropped. A few more shots sounded and each one hit Ted in the chest. Just like on the video. Queso waved his pistol at the frightened customers.

“Any of you niggas call the cops and that’s what happens,” he shouted. “Y’all got it?” They nodded in fear. Dro got up and wiped off his uneven face. He threw the barber drape over Ted’s body and flashed his golden grin to the crowd.

Meanwhile, Arthur was on his victory lap. For as long as it might last. He said his piece, and frankly, that was all he really needed. He was still processing just how that report made him feel, if it was where he wanted to be and what he wanted to do. Bubbles drove him to the station where he took his equipment bag and ran in for the follow up.

He went to his desk to see that it was occupied. Rich and Kev were both pacing behind the occupant as he flipped through scripts and sized up Arthur’s whole arrangement like an auditor. Arthur dropped his bag once he noticed who it was.

“Hello, brother,” Michael said as he stood from the seat.

“Hey, Mr. Johnson,” Arthur said. “You lost?”

He approached Arthur with a very purposeful, wrathful stride. He most certainly was not lost. If anyone, it was Arthur who was in the wrong place.

Bubbles waited outside with a puff for good luck and awaited Arthur’s return. A Land Rover pulled up behind her and parked in front of the station. Not a crew car or a news van, just another person maybe waiting for some opportunity to show up at the door. The window rolled down and Bubbles caught a glance at who it was. She sashayed over excitedly.

“Hi, Ms. Williams,” she greeted. “How are you?”

“I’m fine,” Minnie replied. “How are you?”

“Good. It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

Minnie got that plenty of times. She’d shown her face to the whole city frequently in her career, but she hadn’t done so in quite a while to acquire a...new kind of fan. “Do I know you?”

“Oh, how rude of me,” Bubble said, extending a hand. “I go by Bubbles. I know your son, Arthur. You raised an incredible young man.”

“You said what?” Minnie asked with her eyes wide open. It was not at all what she expected to hear.

Inside, Arthur was sat down in his chair while Michael stood over him, hands planted on his hips like a stern, upset - downright raging fatherly figure.

“Am I wearing lipstick?” he asked.

“What?” Arthur said.

“I said am I wearing lipstick? I want to look pretty while I’m getting fucked.”

Arthur shook his head. He didn’t have an answer. “I’m sorry, Mr. Johnson.”

“I got a call from a DJ about fucking nose candy?” He lowered his posture to get in Arthur’s face. “Apparently, we had a great time?”

Arthur shrugged a shoulder. “Good for you. Glad you finally got out. Now, back up.”

Michael smirked in a predatory way. “I can solve any story. I’m the best anchor in the fucking Bay Area. You must really think I’m stupid, don’t you, Williams?”

“I don’t think about it that much,” Arthur admitted. “But give me a day or two and I’ll get back to you.”

Rich glanced at Arthur in shock. “Brotha, what’s gotten into you?”

Arthur just stared back, blankly. He knew what he said and what it meant and did it anyway. Michael tapped Rich out of his stupor with a warning. “Fire his ass! Or I’m suing the whole goddamn station.”

Rich got between them. "That won't be necessary, Mike." He nudged his arm towards Arthur to get up. "I'm sorry, brotha... you've got to go. You left us no choice."

Arthur stood up. "What about my last check?"

"It'll be in your mailbox in a week or two. Look out for it."

Arthur turned across the table to Kev. "I didn't mean to get us in trouble. I swear."

"I know, Arty," Kev nodded, "but this isn't going to work out."

Michael chuckled. "How touching. Goodbye, Williams." Arthur glared at Michael, grabbed his bag, and hurried out. He already got the story he, and everyone else, needed. He outdid them all and didn't mind falling because of it. But the disrespect made him mad. He stormed out and was surprised to see not only his mom, but Bubbles with her.

"Mom..."

Minnie smiled at him. "Let's go home, superstar."

"Mom...I can't."

Minnie's eyes narrowed in discomfort. "I met your friend, Bubbles. They're... nice."

Bubbles frowned a bit from the unheard, almost hidden, second meaning of her words.

"Mom," Arthur declared, "I'm moving out."

"What?" Minnie said. "Boy, hurry up. I'm tired, hell."

"No."

"No?" she said. "You just had the single greatest moment of your life and yo -- you're still smoking weed. Aren't you?" Arthur glared at her judgmental tone. "Answer me. Now." Arthur reached into his pocket and pulled out a joint. "No," she warned, as if he was still a little child about to eat something she told him not to.

“You see this?” he said. He reached up and tore the joint apart. Little flecks of dried grass flickered out. “Don’t need it. I tried a different strain... I’m smoking that now.” Bubbles grinned at him.

Minnie’s eyes welled up a bit with tears. “It’s your life, Arthur.” She got in her truck, stared at Arthur, and shut the door. Arthur watched as the truck drove off. He felt immediate regret but stood with his decision on the sidewalk. Bubbles rubbed his shoulder to comfort him. They got into her Honda and drove off into the night, somewhere to collect themselves and cool off from their major report.

They didn’t notice the Mercedes, now a wanted car roving the streets on a dare, and the two reported fugitives inside. Dro and Queso watched the distinct blue Honda drive off from an alley near the KRX 6 news station. And they followed.

A while later, Arthur and Bubbles were on Mission Street in between multiple bars that all blared indistinct Spanish music. They joined a mass of drunk pedestrians who chased their alcohol with spicy foods to make the best of a worse morning yet to come. Arthur and Bubbles celebrated his liberating report with burritos on the long main road walk.

“Not bad,” Bubbles commented. “Needs some hot sauce.” Arthur chuckled in agreement. Bubbles glanced up ahead at the road. Something, somehow, alerted her to the presence of a car. The music surrounding her was loud enough to drown it out, but she still *felt* the thrum of the familiar, lethal engine. “Arthur!” she shouted. Arthur gasped. He spotted the Mercedes on its approach. They tossed their burritos and sprinted in opposite directions.

Dro and Queso stepped out of the Benz and aimed their own guns at either target. Dro shot and hit a random street observer in the thigh. The man fell over and screamed while clutching his bleeding leg. Queso hit a homeless woman in the neck. The street revelry turned into a blood curdling panic. The crowd became a stampede to flee the area in any direction.

Arthur and Bubbles both found their way to a junkyard entrance one street away. They darted in while Dro and Queso gave pursuit. "You're both dead!" Dro shouted. They ran into the junkyard where Arthur and Bubbles maneuvered over a mountain of rusty cars and other junk to take the high ground. Dro slipped on an errant wrench. "Fuck!" He fell to the pavement and Queso, not even half a step behind, tripped over him. "Get up!"

Arthur and Bubbles ran all the way to the back of the lot and cut through an abandoned garage. Dro and Queso recovered in time to shoot at them just as they were still in sight. Dro hit a pillar which spat concrete out like dust. Queso's shot shattered an old window. Their targets slipped through the building and led the pair inside to breathe in all the dust and fiberglass that hung in the air. It only exacerbated their straining lungs, and they took a break to pant and catch their breath.

"Move!" Dro ordered. He and Queso busted out into the street, darted through an alley where they saw some movement, and wound up back in the crowd again. Their earlier shots sent the outdoor patrons of many bars into a panic. There was a rush to get indoors and just as much of a panic to keep those doors closed. They holstered their guns to blend in and looked around.

A mother screamed with her two children in her arms. Pandemonium struck the streets. Normally it would be worth a chuckle for the hardened pharmacist, but he knew he was being mocked. Every second there were two dead bodies in front of him was a moment they were getting away with it. He couldn't see up or down the street because of the people. Dro hopped up onto a fire hydrant for a little more visual clarity and scanned the roads. He saw them almost a whole block away and pointed Queso to them.

They crossed the street mid-traffic and stuck near the center line as cars honked on their way past. Queso waved his gun at them to threaten them into speeding or stopping. Once one

stopped, they managed to cross the rest of the road and ran up to where Dro spotted them last as they ducked into Clarion Alley.

Dro and Queso broke apart the crowd and plowed their way into the alley, which was brightly decorated with all kinds of street art, celebrating culture and satirizing politics. Arthur and Bubbles were hustling along as fast as they could. Bubbles outpaced Arthur by a fair bit. "Arthur!" She reached the end of the alley and spun in place to find the next place they could run. She spun a bit too quick and ran back-first into a patrolling cop.

"Hey!" he exclaimed.

Bubbles turned and noticed just who she bumped into and went into a desperate flight to get his attention. "Help! Help!"

The cop was overwhelmed. "Calm down, calm down."

"Please! My friend!" she pointed to the alley.

The cop wasn't sure what to do, or what pronouns to address her by. All he knew was she was acting hysterical, it was late at night, there was a panic one street up and drug freak-outs were more a part of his job than traffic tickets. So, he reached for his gun. And she just kept shouting "My friend! My friend!"

"That's enough!" he yelled. "Hands up!"

"You don't understand!"

He pulled out his pistol and aimed at her. "Put your fucking hands up!"

Bubbles grimaced and raised her hands. Then, a gunshot.

"No!"

Bubbles turned sharply toward the alley and darted up the block.

"Hey!" the cop shouted. "Get back here!" He squeezed the mic on his shoulder. "Shots fired! Shots fired!" He chased Bubbles down to the exit of Clarion Alley.

Arthur was on the ground. He winced on the pavement and reached back. He gripped his left butt cheek. It was pierced and bleeding with a bullet from afar. A deep, muscular, fatty wound that threw him onto his stomach on the hard ground.

Dro and Queso ambled up, guns swinging at their sides, and both aimed to finish the job. Dro took the point-blank aim straight at Arthur's head.

"Night-night, nigga." He reached his finger up and gripped the trigger. A gunshot rang out and echoed through the alley.

Dro fell backwards. His chest was wounded. Queso looked up and saw Bubbles. He aimed at her, but in his rush to retaliate, he missed the cop next to her, who had a solid shot at him. Queso, seeing he was outgunned, turned to run. The cop shot him in the back, and he fell face first into a murky puddle. Bubbles rushed over to console Arthur.

"You okay!?"

Arthur nodded in pain and felt the warm blood spill off the peak of his ass cheek up his pants and into his shirt. "Yeah."

Bubbles leaned down and kissed him on the cheek - of his face, which smudged his makeup away. Dro and Queso squirmed on the pavement for a while as the sirens closed in and the police medics took the whole lot of them away. They apprehended two fugitives, a black trans woman, and the reporter who helped break the story which led to the arrests.

Arthur was in the hospital all night to get patched up. He was promised a full recovery with some resting time and assured that his butt would be back to its proper form in no time. The other two, meanwhile, were patched up and had their lives saved only to be reintroduced to the penal system the moment they woke up.

Arthur was the first into the police station to be processed and released as an unfortunate victim. He had his crutches prepared and a thick wad of cotton taped around his waist to his ass. He

was met by the police sergeant - who recognized him from the first shooting media circus - who brought him an envelope.

"You made our jobs a hell of a lot easier," he said. He handed Arthur the envelope with the reward money. "Great reporting."

"Happy to help," Arthur nodded.

The sergeant glanced down at the crutches. "You must have really wanted a raise?"

Arthur chuckled. "Something like that." Arthur pushed himself up, steadied himself with a crutch and shook the officer's hand.

Arthur crutch-walked his way out of the station and spotted Bubbles leaning against her parked Honda.

"Hey, handsome," she greeted. He limped up to her and handed over the envelope. Thirty thousand dollars - like ten whole months of rent - was right there in their hands. They hugged.

The real victory lap was just about to start. They headed over to Jim's Music Shop right as it opened at nine. Jim himself wiped down the cash register with a wet wipe. The floor was swept up and the investigation was closed, and his most prized inventory was still there for purchase. Arthur went in with a wad of bills in his pocket and approached the counter.

"I'll have an Akai Pro 3000, please."

"Oh," Jim said. "Look who's back." Arthur grinned. The owner took the machine off the rack and rang it up. "That'll be \$1475"

Arthur slapped the cash on the counter. "Here you go."

"I'll grab your change," he grinned. Arthur's eyes fixed on the music machine. He just had one stop left. He never swore he'd never come back, just that he was moving on with his life. Moving out of his mom's place and into his own. Out of her shadow, into the light. But rent forms and applications took some time to get started, so until then he hung out in his room with his new Akai Pro 3000.

He set it up on his dresser, took in a deep breath, and pressed the button...



CHAPTER

09

A month passed since Arthur was let go from the KRX 6 team. He finally got his last paycheck in the mail. Although that wasn't what got him moving out of the house. He drove a mahogany BMW up the street, his hands finally on the wheel in a real way, no longer depending on a stealable bike. He pulled up along the curb of the DMV. His driving instructor unbuckled his seatbelt and gave him a thumb's up. "Your license should be in the mail in two weeks," he said. Arthur nodded and shook his hand.

Arthur got out and saw his mom waiting for him. Just in case, but also hopeful things would work out. She came up to him and they hugged, not a permanent parting but certainly one she wasn't expecting so soon.

"Thank you, Mom," he said. "For everything." Arthur got back into the driver's seat and turned on the engine to turn on the stereo. He chose that model because it could bring the noise better than most studio set ups, a moving music lab for him to show off. He played a song that was loaded into the onboard system. The screen lit up with a digital scroll of the name: *Arthur's Song*. It was Lovie's Song, every beat Arthur knew by heart, with a saxophone riff that completed it.

Minnie stood by the open window and snapped her fingers along with it. "That's what you've been working on?" she said as she swayed a little. "I see why you didn't like your old job." Arthur poked his head out and grinned at Minnie. Then he turned to the other seat. The passenger seat.

It wasn't empty. Not to him. And he grinned back. Arthur grabbed the wheel, put his foot to the gas, and drove off down a sunlit path. Minnie waved him good-bye while the tunes poured out. Every street he passed was an audience to his rhythm. He turned heads and cracked smiles all the way out of town, across the bridge, and up to the hill climb on the renovated shoulder. What used to be a dirty-paved lookout point was turned into a paved shoulder years later. But the view was still the same.

He could see it all, under golden rays of sunlight, a city of dreams by the ocean. All the people down there - they suffered sometimes. But when they didn't, the music was always loud, and so were the lights. Just as the sun went down, the lights turned on, and Arthur could see all those dreams for miles.

Once the sun was fully set, he drove back in and navigated through the streets to the End Up Club. He parked in a designated spot right next to a preserved graffiti portrait of Lavender dancing with flowers in her hair. He gave it a long look before he headed in, through the kitchen, around the back and into the DJ booth.

Bubbles was there waiting for him, warming up his seat with a set. He set up his Akai Pro 3000 and readied the crowd for his own set of beats. The floor was packed. Some new faces were there as well as plenty of old. Bubbles handed over the mic just as the first beat started dropping.

"Yo yo yo! Another day, another adventure with your boy... DJ Arthur Williams. So, let's get this party started!"

He tapped on the Pro and let Arthur's Song play out - a grooving tune with boosted bass and a heartfelt message that everyone could love. He and Bubbles shared a contented smile as she danced by his side right where the magic was made.