

DENTON BRADLEY

WE LOVE LYDIA LOVE

SHE KNOWS ME, AND SHE'S happy, and she's not asking how or why. She's clutching me so tight that I can't keep my balance, and my shoulder collides with the open door. The door is heavy, dark wood with a circular stained-glass eye set into it. The eye, as blue as the spring sky, is staring at me as if it knows I'm a fraud.

From down the hill comes the sound of the car that brought me, winding its way back through the live oaks and cedars to Texas 27. Daniels didn't even stay long enough to say hello to his number-one recording artist. He said he'd leave the greetings up to me and the Christopher chip.

Stroke her neck. She likes that.

Yes. She's burying her face in my shoulder, biting, crying, Her skin is warm, and she tastes salty. She says something, but her mouth is full of my shirt. Her hair smells of cinnamon.

"Lydia," I say. My voice isn't exactly like Christopher's, but CCA has fixed me so that it's close enough. She shouldn't notice, but if she does, I'm to say that the plane crash injured my throat. "I tried to get a message to you, but the village was cut off, and I was burned, and my leg was broken --"

Not so much. We're the stoic type.

The whisper sounds like it's coming from my back teeth. I've been listening to it for two weeks, but that wasn't long enough for me to get used to it. I still flinch. I told Daniels that I needed more time, but he said Lydia would be so glad to see me that she wouldn't notice any tics or twitches. And by the time she settles back into a routine life with me -- with Christopher -- I'll be so used to the chip that it'll be as if it's the voice of my own conscience. So says Daniels. I'm not convinced, but I'll do my best. Not just for my sake, but for Lydia's. She needs to finish her affair with Christopher so she can move on. The world is waiting for her new songs.

And as a bonus, they'll get mine. Willie Todd's, I mean. Not Christopher Jennings'. Christopher Jennings is dead.

You are Christopher. Right. I know.

She's looking at our eyes. She thinks we're distracted, and she wants our attention. Her lips are moist. Kiss her.

You bet. I'll concentrate on being Christopher.

Being Christopher means that Lydia and I have been apart for ten months. She has

thought me dead, but here I am. She kisses me hard enough to make my mouth hurt. Her face is wet from crying, and she breathes in sobs. The videos make her look seven feet tall, but she's no more than five-four. Otherwise, she is as she appears on the tube. Her hair is long, thick, and red. Her eyes are green. Her skin is the color of ivory. Her lips are so full that she always seems to be pouting. I would think she was beautiful even if I hadn't admired her for so long.

I meaning me. Willie.

You are Christopher.

To Lydia I'll be Christopher. But to myself I can be Willie.

You are Christopher.

"I didn't believe it when Daniels called," Lydia says. She's still sobbing. "I thought he was mind fucking me like he usually does."

Say "That son of a bitch." We hate Danny Daniels.

"That son of a bitch." It seems ungrateful, considering that Daniels has just now returned us to her.

She's trembling. Hold her tighter.

A moment ago she was crushing me, but now she seems so fragile that I'm afraid I'll hurt her. It's as if she's two different women.

And why not? I'm two different men.

Carry her to the bedroom. When she gets all soft and girly like this, she wants us to take charge. You'll know when she's tired of it.

She weighs nothing. I carry her into the big limestone house, leaving the June heat for cool air that makes me shiver. When I kick the door shut I see that the stained-glass eye is staring at me on this side too. I turn away from it and go through the tiled foyer into the huge front room with the twenty-toot ceiling, the picture windows, the fireplace, the expensive AV components, and the plush couches.

No. Not in here. When she was a child, she went to her bedroom to feel safe. So take her to the bedroom. It's down the long hall, third door on the right.

I know where it is, and I've already changed direction. But the chip's yammering makes me stumble, and Lydia's head bumps against the wall. She yelps.

"Jesus, I'm sorry," I say, and think of an excuse. "My leg's still not right."

"I know," Lydia says. "I know they hurt you."

Who are "they," I wonder? There was a plane crash, and -- in this new version of Christopher's life -- a village. A war was being fought in the ice and snow around the village, but all of my injuries were from the crash. The villagers did their best for me, but there was no way to get me out until I'd healed, and no communication with the rest of the world. The soldiers had cut the telecom lines and confiscated the radios, but had then become too busy fighting each other to do anything more to the village. So if the soldiers didn't hurt me, and the villagers didn't hurt me, who are "they"?

There is a "they" in Willie's story, but while what they did to me was painful, they did it with my consent. Getting my album recorded and released is worth some pain. It's also worth being Christopher for a while. And it's for damn sure worth having Lydia Love in my arms.

On the bed. Pin her wrists over her head.

That seems a little rough for a tender homecoming, but I remember that the Christopher chip is my conscience. I let my conscience be my guide.

I still worry that she'll know I'm not him, but it turns out all right. If there's a difference between the new Christopher and the old one, she doesn't seem to be aware of it. The chip tells me a few things that she likes, but most of the time it's silent. I guess that at some point, sex takes control away from its participants -- even from Lydia Love and a computer chip -- and instructions aren't necessary.

She's sweet.

And here I am deceiving her.

But this pang is undeserved. In any respect that matters to Lydia, I am Christopher. I will live with her, recharge her soul, and give her what she needs before she sends me away. And then, at last, she'll rise again from the ashes of her life to resume her work. Willie can be proud of that.

You are Christopher.

Lydia and I have spent most of the past six days in bed. It's been a repeating cycle: Tears, sex, a little sleep, more sex, and food. Then back to the tears. According to what Daniels and the Christopher chip have told me, everything with Lydia goes in cycles.

But this particular cycle has to be interrupted, because we've run out of food. Despite her huge house, Lydia has no hired help; and since no one will deliver groceries this far out in the Hill Country, one or both of us will have to make a trip to Kerrville. But Lydia isn't supposed to leave the estate alone without calling CCA-Austin for a bodyguard. . .and if she were to go out with me, the hassle from the videorazzi would be even worse than usual. The headlines would be something like "Lydia Performs Satanic Ritual to Bring Boy-Toy Back from Beyond the Grave." I don't think she can handle that just yet.

But if I slip out by myself, I tell her, I'll be inconspicuous. Christopher Jennings is an ordinary guy. Put him in his old jeans and pickup truck, and no one would suspect that he's the man living with Lydia Love. I have the jeans, and the pickup's still in Lydia's garage. So I can hit the Kerrville H.E.B. supermarket and be back before the sweat from our last round of lovemaking has dried. It makes perfect sense.

But Lydia shoves me away and gets out of bed. She stands over me wild-eyed, her neck and arm muscles popped out hard as marble.

"You just got back, and now you want to leave?" Her voice is like the cry of a hawk. She is enraged, and I'm stunned. This has come on like storm clouds on fast-forward.

She's waiting for an answer, so I listen for a prompt from the Christopher chip. But there isn't one.

"Just for groceries," I say. My voice is limp.

Lydia spins away. She goes to her mahogany dresser, pulls it out from the wall, and shoves it over. The crash makes me jump. Then she flings a crystal vase against the wall. Her hair whips like fire in a tornado. All the while she rants, "I thought you were dead, and you're going out to die again. I thought you were dead, and you're going out to die again. I thought --"

I start up from the bed. I want to grab her and hold her before she hurts herself. She's naked, and there are slivers of crystal sticking up from the thick gray carpet.

Stay put. We never try to stop her.

But she already has a cut on her arm. It's small, but there's some blood --

She always quits before she does serious damage. So let her throw her tantrum. It's a turn-on for her. She expects it to have the same effect on us.

Lydia looks down and sees herself in the dresser mirror on the floor. She screams and stamps her feet on it. The mirror doesn't crack, but she's still stamping, and when it breaks she'll gash her feet. I have to stop her.

No.

This isn't right. But if Christopher would let her rage, then I must do likewise if I want her to believe I'm him. Even now, as she attacks the mirror, she's looking at me with suspicion inside her fury.

She expects arousal.

Having trouble getting aroused in the presence of a naked Lydia Love was not a problem I anticipated.

She stops screaming and stamping as if a switch in her brain has been flipped to OFF. The mirror has cracked, but it hasn't cut her feet. She leaves it and comes toward me, moving with tentative steps, avoiding the broken pieces of crystal. Except for the nick on her arm, she seems to be all right. The rage has drained from her eyes, and what's left is a puzzled fear.

"Christopher?" she says. Her voice quavers. Her ribs strain against her skin as she breathes.

She is looking at my crotch.

What did I tell you?

This was the one area I hoped the surgeons wouldn't touch, and to my relief they decided that it was close enough as it was. Christopher had an average body with average parts, and so do I. So they didn't change much besides my face and voice.

But the surgeons couldn't see me with Lydia's eyes. And now she's looking close for the first time. She's realizing that I'm someone else.

No. She's only confused because we're not excited.

Lydia stops at the foot of the bed and shifts her weight from one hip to the other. Her tangled hair is draped over her left shoulder. Her lips are even more swollen than usual.

"I'm sorry," she whispers.

Oh. Well.

Maybe I'm more like Christopher than I thought.

You are Christopher.

Shut up. I can do this myself now. Whoever I am.

LATER I take Christopher's beat-up white Chevy pickup truck and head for the H.E.B. in Kerrville. Lydia worries over me as I leave the house, but she doesn't pitch another fit. She gives me a cash card with ten thousand bucks on it, kisses me, and tells me to come home safe, goddamn it. As I let the truck coast down the switchbacked driveway, I glance into the rearview mirror and see that both Lydia and the stained-glass eye are watching me. Then the trees obscure them, but I know they're still there.

As I reach Texas 27, a guy in a lawn chair under the trees on the far side of the highway points a camcorder at me. He's probably only a tabloid 'razzi, but I wait until the driveway's automatic gate closes behind me before I turn toward Kerrville. After all, Lydia Love has more than her share of obsessive fans. That hasn't changed even though she hasn't recorded and has hardly performed in the three years since Christopher Jennings came into her life. But I guess her fans

know as well as I do that the phoenix will rise again.

And it will rise thanks to me. To Willie.

You are Christopher.

Thanks to both of us, then.

The pickup doesn't have air-conditioning, which says something about Christopher's economic situation before he met Lydia. I roll down both windows and let the hot breeze blast me as I follow the twisting highway eastward alongside the Guadalupe River. Kerrville, a small town with a big reputation, is just a few miles away.

Its big reputation is the result of its annual folk-music festival, but I stopped going to the festival two years ago. It seemed as if almost everyone was using amplifiers and distortion, trying to be Lydia Love. She's my favorite singer too, but some of these kids can't get it through their heads that if Lydia didn't make it big by trying to look and sound like someone else, they shouldn't try to look and sound like someone else either.

Like I've got room to talk. It's only now that I do look and sound like someone else that I have a shot at a future in the music business.

The supermarket's the first thing on my left as I come into town. After parking the truck, I find a pay phone on the store's outside wall, run the cash card through it, and punch up Danny Daniels' number in Dallas. Daniels is an L.A. boy, but he says he'll be working at CCA-Dallas until he can get a new Lydia Love album in the can. If he wants to stay close to her, he'd do better to relocate to CCA-Austin -- but when I pointed that out, he gave a theatrical shudder and said, "Hippies." I guess Dallas is closer to being his kind of scene.

He comes on the line before it rings. "Yo, Christopher," he says. "Except for that minor bout of impotence this morning, you're doing peachy-keen. Keep it up. And I mean that."

Unlike the original Christopher, I know that I'm being observed while I'm with Lydia. But there ought to be limits.

"You don't have to watch us screw," I say. "Sex is just sex. It's the other stuff that'll break us up."

"But sex is part of 'the other stuff,' Chris," Daniels says. "So just pretend you're alone with her. Besides, if everything continues going peachy-keen, I'm the only one who'll see it. And it's not like I'm enjoying it."

How could anyone not enjoy seeing Lydia Love naked? I wonder.

Or is that Christopher? You are Christopher.

Not when I'm on the phone with Danny Daniels.

You are Christopher. Let me think.

You are Christopher.

"The chip's talking too much," I tell Daniels. "It's getting in my face, and Lydia's going to notice that something's not right."

Daniels sighs. "We put everything we know about the Christopher-Lydia relationship into that chip, so of course it's gonna have a lot to say. I've already told you, just think of it as your conscience."

"My conscience doesn't speak from my back teeth."

"It does now," Daniels says. "But it won't last long. The shrinks say that Lydia would have given Christopher the heave-ho in another six weeks if he hadn't been killed, and now they tell me that she won't stay with the resurrected version for more than another three months. Then you'll be out on your butt, she'll do her thing, and everybody'll be happy. Including Willie Todd."

What about me?

You'll be happy too, because I'm you. Isn't that what you keep telling me? Now back off. Daniels sounds like he might be pissed off, and I don't want him pissed off. Not at me, anyway.

Why? You scared of him?

No. But I know where my bread's buttered.

"Thanks, Danny," I say. "We just had a bad morning, that's all. Sorry I griped."

The phone is voice-only, but I can sense his grin. "No problem. You need a pep talk, I'm your guy. And if you feel like chewing my ass, that's cool too. After all, you're Christopher now, and Christopher once told me that he wanted to rip off my head and shit down my neck."

"Why'd he -- I mean why'd I --" We.

"-- do that?"

"Because I told him he was fucking up Lydia's creative process," Daniels says. "Which he was. But I shouldn't have told him so. She was going to dump you anyway."

Or maybe I would have dumped her. Smug asshole never considers that.

I remember Lydia's rage this morning. No matter how beautiful and talented she is, that sort of thing can wear a man down. "I think she might be about half-crazy," I say.

Daniels laughs. "The bitch is a genius. What do you expect?"

Well, I guess I expect her to dump me, have her usual creative burst, and for the world to be in my debt. And for my first album, Willie Todd, to be released on datacard, digital audio tape, and compact disc.

You are Christopher. Yeah, yeah.

"Guess that's all, Danny," I say. "Just figured I should check in."

Why? He's watching us all the time anyway.

"Glad you did, Chris," Daniels says, and the line goes dead.

I head into the ice-cold store, and now that I'm off the phone, I have a moment in which all of this -- my new voice, my new face, my new name, my place in the bed of Lydia Love -- seems like a lunatic scare that can't work and can't be justified.

But CCA has the psychological profiles, the gizmos, and the money, so CCA knows best. If it makes sense to them, it makes sense to me too. And what makes sense to CCA is that Lydia Love's creative process has followed a repeating cycle for the past eleven years:

At seventeen, after graduating from high school in Lubbock, Lydia had a violent breakup with her first serious boyfriend, a skate-punk Nintendo freak. Immediately following that breakup, she went without sleep for six days, writing songs and playing guitar until her fingers bled. Then she slept for three days. When she awoke she drained her mother's savings account, hopped a bus to Austin, and bought twelve hours of studio time. She mailed a digital tape of the results to Creative Communications of America and went to bed with the engineer who'd recorded it.

The recording engineer became her manager, and he lasted in both his personal and professional capacities for a little over a year -- long enough for Lydia to start gigging, to land a contract with CCA, and to buy a house in a rich Austin suburb. Then her new neighbors were awakened one night by the sounds of screaming and breaking glass, and some of them saw the manager/ boyfriend running down the street, naked except for a bandanna. The sound of breaking glass stopped then, but the screaming continued, accompanied by electric guitar.

The next day, Lydia's debut album, *First Love*, was released at a party held in the special-events arena on the University of Texas campus. The party was supposed to include a concert, but Lydia didn't show up. She was in the throes of her second creative burst.

The music that emanated from her house over the next three weeks was loud, distorted, disruptive, and Just Not Done in that suburb. The neighbors called the cops every night, and at the end of Lydia's songwriting frenzy, one of the cops moved in with her.

The cop suggested that Lydia take the advance money for her second album and build a home and studio out in the Hill Country west of the city, where she could crank her amplifiers as high as she liked. He supervised the construction while Lydia toured for a year, and when she came home they went inside together and stayed there for a year and a half. Lydia's career might have ended then had it not been for the fact that both her tour and her second album had grossed more money than the rest of CCA's acts combined. So between CCA, the tabloid papers and TV shows ("Lydia Love Pregnant with Elvis's Siamese Twins"), and the continuing popularity of her music, Lydia's name and image remained in the public eye even if Lydia didn't.

Then the ex-cop showed up at an emergency room in Kerrville with a few pellets of birdshot in his buttocks, and the county sheriff found the alleged shooter making loud noises in her basement studio. CCA rejoiced, and the third album sold even better than the first two.

Lydia's next boyfriend lasted almost as long as the ex-cop had. He was your basic Texas bubba (Lydia seems to go for us common-man types), and he and Lydia settled into a happy routine that could have ruined her. But then he went to a rodeo and was seduced by two barrel racers. The photos and videos hit the stands and the tube before the bubba even got out of bed. When he tried to go back to Lydia's, he found the driveway blocked by a pile of his possessions. They were on fire.

Creative Burst Number Four followed, and that resulted in the twenty-three songs of *Love in Flames*, my favorite album by anybody, ever. Lydia followed that with a world tour that took two years of her life and made CCA enough money to buy Canada, if they'd wanted it. And it was while Lydia was on that tour, Daniels says, that CCA bugged her house. The corporation wanted to be sure that they could send help fast if she hurt herself in one of her rages.

When Lydia came home from the tour, she discovered that a hailstorm had beaten up her roof. She hired an Austin company to repair it, and Christopher Jennings, a twenty-four-year-old laborer and semi-professional guitarist, was on the crew. When the job was finished and the rest of the crew went back to the city, he stayed.

Christopher and Lydia had been together for almost eighteen months when Lydia agreed to do a free concert in India. They went together, but Christopher took a side trip to Nepal. On the way back to New Delhi, his plane detoured to avoid a storm, hit a worse one, and went down in a mountainous wasteland claimed by both India and Pakistan. The mountains, frequent storms, and constant skirmishes between the opposing armies made the area inaccessible, and all aboard the airplane were presumed dead.

Lydia remained in India for two months before coming back to Texas, and then CCA rubbed their collective hands. They figured that with Christopher now a corpse on a mountainside, they'd soon have more Lydia Love songs to sell to the world.

But six more months passed, and the studio in Lydia's basement remained silent. Death and grief couldn't substitute for betrayal and anger. CCA, and the world, had lost her.

Then one night a scruffy day laborer and aspiring singer-songwriter named Willie Todd was playing acoustic guitar for tips in a South Austin bar, and a man wearing a leather necktie approached him.

"Son," the necktied man said, "my name is Danny Daniels, and I sign new artists for CCA. How would you like to record your songs for us?"

To a guy who grew up in a Fort Worth trailer park with six brothers and sisters, no father, and no money, Daniels looked and sounded like Jesus Christ Himself. I'd been trying to break into the money strata of the Austin music scene for five years, and I was still lugging junkyard scrap by day and playing for tips at night. But with just a few words from Danny Daniels, all of that was over. He took me into a studio and paid for my demo, then flew me to Los Angeles to meet some producers.

It was only then that I found out what I'd have to do before CCA would give Willie Todd his shot. And although it sounded weird, I was willing. I still am. As Daniels explained, this thing should have no down side. After the breakup, I get my old face and voice back, Lydia's muse gets busy again, and CCA releases great albums from both of us.

So here I am in the Kerrville H.E.B., buying tortillas and rice for Lydia Love, the biggest Texas rock 'n' roll star since Buddy Holly. . .and for her most recent boyfriend, a dead man named Christopher.

You are Christopher.

But I'm not dead. Dead men don't buy groceries.

Dead men don't sleep with Lydia Love.

It's my seventh week with Lydia, and something I didn't expect is happening. As I've settled back into life with her, I've begun to see her as something other than the singer, the sex symbol, the video goddess: I have begun to see her as a dull pain in the ass.

Her rage before my first grocery run hasn't repeated itself, and I wish that it would. She's gone zombie on me. Sometimes when she's lying on the floor with a bowl of bean dip on her stomach, watching the tube through half-closed eyes, I wonder if she was the one who decided to end her previous relationships. I wonder if maybe one or two of the men made the decision themselves.

Why do you think I took that side trip to Nepal?

She has a gym full of exercise equipment, but she hasn't gone in there since I've come back. So I've been working out by myself to take the edge off my frustration, and I'm heading there now while she watches a tape of a lousy old

movie called A Star Is Born. A run on the treadmill sounds appropriate.

Even the sex has started going downhill.

We could look elsewhere. I was starting to, before the plane crash.

No. Forget I said anything. Lydia's just moody; that's part of what makes her who she is. It would be stupid of me to mess up a good thing.

Isn't that what you're supposed to be doing?

I don't know. Are we talking about Willie or Christopher? According to CCA, Willie is here to give Lydia someone to break up with, but Christopher ought to be here because he cares about her. So which one am I?

You are Christopher.

All right, then. We can't just let things go on like this, so let's try something. Lydia hasn't picked up a guitar since I came back, and neither have I. Maybe if she and I played together --

She's too critical of other guitar players. We don't like being humiliated.

In front of whom?

Ourselves. And the people behind the walls.

But CCA's already agreed to put out my album. They already know I'm good. What difference will it make if Lydia and I play a few tunes together?

CCA is putting out an album by Willie Todd. You are Christopher.

I don't care.

So I hop off the treadmill, and as I start to leave the gym, Lydia appears in the doorway. She's wearing the same gray sweats she wore yesterday and the day before. Her skin is blotchy, and she looks strung out. It occurs to me that she might be taking drugs.

Of course she is. When things don't go her way, she takes something. Or breaks something.

"I'm going to kill myself," Lydia says. Her voice is a monotone.

Oh shit.

Don't worry. This is old news. She craves drama, and if she doesn't get it, she invents it. Ignore her.

She's threatening suicide. I'm not going to ignore that.

I would.

Well, Willie wouldn't.

Sure he would. CCA wouldn't pick a new Christopher who didn't have the same basic character traits as the old Christopher.

Shut up. I've got to concentrate on Lydia.

But she's already disappeared from the doorway. I zoned out, and she's gone to kill herself.

No, she's gone to eat or get wasted. Or both.

Fuck off. Just fuck off.

That's no way to talk to yourself.

I run down the hallway, yelling for her. She's not in any of the bedrooms, the kitchen, the dining room, the front room, or the garage. Not out on the deck or in the back yard. But she could be hidden among the trees, hanging herself. She could already be dead, and it would be me that killed her. Just because I wanted a break, just because I made a deal with CCA, just because I flew off and died on a mountainside, leaving her alone and unable to write or sing.

And at that thought I know where she is. She's where her music has lain as if dead all these months. She's gone to join it.

So I find her down in the studio, sitting cross-legged on the floor. She's plinking on a Guild acoustic, but the notes are random. She's staring at the carpet, paying no attention to what she's playing. I sit down facing her.

She looks Like a toad.

No, she's beautiful. Look at her fingers. They're slender, but strong. Dangerous. Can't you see that?

Sure. But seeing it isn't enough.

She's still alive. That's enough for me.

"I don't think you should kill yourself," I tell her. The gray egg-crate foam on the walls and ceiling makes my voice sound flat and unconvincing.

"Why not?" she asks without looking at me. Her hair is tied back, but some of it has come loose and is hanging against her cheek, curling up to touch her nose. I'm close enough to smell the sweat on her neck, and I want to kiss it away.

If you touch her now, she'll go ballistic.

"Why not?" Lydia asks again.

"Because you wouldn't like being dead," I say. "It's boring."

"So's being alive." She has a point there.

Quiet. "It doesn't have to be."

Lydia's shoulders hunch, as if she's trying to shrink into herself. "Yes, it does," she says. "Life and death are really the same thing, except that life is more work."

She's still plinking on the Guild, but I notice that the notes aren't random anymore. They're starting to punctuate and echo her words. They sound familiar.

It's the progression for "Love in Flames," but she's playing it a lot bluesier than on the album.

It sounds good, though. It gives me an idea.

"I think you should do some gigs," I say.

Lydia looks up at me now. Her eyes are like stones. "I don't have anything new."

And except for the India concert, she's always refused to perform unless she has new material.

Well, there's a first time for everything. "So play your old stuff," I say, "only do something different with it, like you are now. Play it like it was the blues. See if it gets your juices flowing--"

I'm just able to duck out of the way as she swings the Guild at my head. Then she stands up and smashes the guitar against the floor over and over again.

I could have told you that she doesn't like being given advice.

So why didn't you?

Because I thought it was good advice.

Thanks, Christopher.

You are Christopher.

Whatever.

When the guitar is little more than splinters and strings, Lydia flings the neck away and glares down at me.

"I'll call Danny Daniels and have him schedule some dates," she says. "Small clubs, I think. And then I'm going to bed. See you there." She goes out, and the studio's padded steel door swings shut behind her with a solid click.

Now you've done it. When this doesn't work out, it'll be our fault. She likes it when it's our fault.

I thought you said, it was good advice.

But good advice isn't enough. Nothing is. Not for Lydia Love.

Apparently not for you either, Christopher.

You are Christopher.

WE'RE AT a blues club on Guadalupe Street in Austin on a Wednesday night, and it's jam-packed even though there's been no advertising. Word spreads fast. I'm in the backstage lounge with Lydia, and it's jam-packed back here too. The cigarette smoke is thick. We're sitting on the old vinyl couch under the Muddy Waters poster, and I'm trying not to be afraid of being crushed by the mob. CCA has sent a dozen beefy dudes to provide security, and I can tell that they're itching for someone to try something.

But Lydia, dressed in faded jeans and a black T-shirt, doesn't seem to be aware that anyone else is in the room. She's picking away on a pale green Telecaster, eyes focused on the frets. The guitar isn't plugged in, so in all of this cacophony she can't possibly hear what she's playing. But she plays anyway. She hears it in her head.

A spot between my eyes gets hot, as if a laser-beam gunsight has focused on me, and I look across the room and see Danny Daniels in the doorway. He's giving me a glare like the Wicked Witch gave Dorothy. When he jerks his head backward, I know it's a signal to me to get over there.

He's got our career in his pocket. Better see what he wants.

Why? You scared of him? Up yours.

That's no way to talk to yourself.

I lean close to Lydia and yell that I'm going to the john. She nods but doesn't look up. Her music matters to her again, SO few CCA and their shrinks.

I squeeze through the throng to Daniels, and he yanks me toward the fire exit. My new black-and-white cowboy hat gets knocked askew.

Out in the alley behind the club, I pull away and straighten my hat. "You grab some guys like that," I say, "and you'd get your ass kicked."

Daniels' face is pale in the white glow of the mercury lamp on the back wall. "You haven't been doing your job," he says.

I take a deep breath of the humid night air. "How do you figure?"

As if we didn't know.

I'll handle this. "I'm supposed to be Lydia Love's boyfriend, right? Well, that's what I'm doing."

Daniels tugs at his leather necktie. "You're supposed to behave as Christopher would behave so that she'll go berserk and kick you out. But you're obviously ignoring the Christopher chip's instructions."

I can't help chuckling. "The chip hasn't been handing out many instructions lately. It's been making comments, but not giving orders. So I must be behaving as Christopher would. After all, I'm him, right?"

Daniels shakes his balding head. "Not according to CCA's psychs. Christopher wouldn't reason with Lydia when she goes wacko. He gave up on reasoning with her a long time ago."

Never really tried. Guess you should have. Guess so.

"If the chip's lying down on the job," I say, "that's not my fault. I'm holding up my end of the contract."

Daniels grins.

Watch out when the son of a bitch does that.

"Our contract," Daniels says, "is with Willie Todd. But if you were Willie, you'd be behaving more like Christopher even without the chip. That's why we picked Willie in the first place. You, however, seem to be a third party with whom CCA has no arrangement whatsoever." He sighs. "And if Willie has disappeared, there's no point in releasing his album."

This is bullshit.

"This is bullshit."

Daniels shrugs. "Maybe so, Willie-Chris, Chris-Willie, or whoever you are. But it's legal bullshit, the most potent kind."

My back teeth are aching. "So if I have to be Willie for you to honor his contract," I say, "how can I be Christopher?"

You can beat his ugly face into sausage, that's how.

"Chris and Willie are interchangeable," Daniels says. "Both are working-class dullards who think they deserve better because they know a few chords. Any superficial differences can be wiped out by the chip. So I say again: Listen to the chip as if it were your conscience."

If I listened to the chip, Danny, you'd have blood running out your nose.

If he was lucky.

"I know you're getting attached to Lydia," Daniels continues, his tone now one of false sympathy, "but sooner or later she'll dump you. That's just what she does. It wasn't until Christopher's death that we realized she trashes her boyfriends for inspiration, but then it became obvious. So we brought Christopher back to life so she could get on with it. The only variable is how long it takes, and that's up to you. If you drag things out until CCA loses patience, Willie's songs will never be heard. And he won't get his own face back, either, because we won't throw good money after bad. He might not even be able to regain his legal identity. He'll have lost his very existence."

There are worse things.

"Willie's existence wasn't much to begin with," I say.

Daniels puts a hand on my shoulder, and I resist the urge to break his fingers. "Something is always better than nothing, Christopher. And if you go on the way you've been going, nothing is what you'll be."

Big deal.

"So what do you want me to do?" I ask.

"Only what the chip and I tell you," Daniels says. "If you don't like my conscience metaphor, then think of CCA, me, and the chip as the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Mess with any one of us, and you get slapped down with heavenly wrath. Mess with all of us, and you go straight to hell." He gestures at the club's back wall. "See, this kind of crap can't continue. Neither Lydia nor CCA makes real money from a gig like this. So your current directive from the Son of God is as follows: Go and spend thee the night in a motel. You still have that cash card?"

"Yeah, but --"

Daniels gives me a shove. "You, whoever you are, talked her into doing this gig. So she'll expect you to be here for it. But you won't be. So saith the Son."

No. We can't leave now. Not with Lydia about to go on stage for the first time since India. She'd hate me. Us.

Yeah. But that might be what she wants. She thrives on being treated like dirt. That's why she goes for guys like us. But we've been too nice lately, and it's screwed her up.

That's sick.

That's Lydia.

"All right," I tell Daniels. "I'm going. But I don't like it."

Daniels grins again. "Shit, neither do I. But it's for her own good, and yours too. If you weren't fucked in the head right now, you'd know that."

Come on. Let's get out of here.

I turn away from Daniels and walk off down the dark alley, abandoning Lydia to herself. My boots crunch on the broken asphalt. A bat flies past my -- our -- face, coming so close that we feel a puff of air from its wings.

Is Daniels right? Am I fucked in the head? In the soul, Christopher.

In the soul.

The stained-glass eye has become an open mouth surrounded by jagged teeth. Blue shards cover the front step, and they make snapping sounds as I come up to the door. I smell something burning. The stereo in the front room is blaring an old thrash-metal number about a murder-suicide. My back teeth begin to ache again.

As I cross the foyer into the front room, I see what Lydia has done. The picture windows have been broken, and the walls are pockmarked with holes. Some of the holes seem to be the results of shotgun blasts, and some have been punched with free-weight bars from the gym. The bars are still sticking out of some of these.

All of the furniture has been tom to pieces. The only things left intact are the AV components, which are stacked on the floor in front of the fireplace. But the cabinet that housed them is with everything else from the room -with everything else from the entire house, I think. Everything has been broken, shredded, crumpled, melted, or twisted, and then piled in the center of the room. A misshapen pyramid reaches three-quarters of the way up to the ceiling.

Lydia, wearing the jeans and T-shirt from last night's gig, is sitting atop the pyramid and using a fireplace-lighter to burn holes into white cloth that used to be drapes. She doesn't notice me until I cross the room and turn off the stereo.

"Christopher," she says, glancing at me with a distracted expression. "You're back." Her voice is thick. I wonder if she's taken pills.

No. Her eyes are clear. She knows what she's doing. If the shotgun's handy, she might kill us now.

"I'm sorry I left last night," I say, trying to think of a lie to explain myself. "Daniels told me it was my fault that you were playing a joint instead of an arena, and I was afraid that if I stuck around I was gonna pop him. So I went for a walk, but when I got back, you and the truck were gone. I tried to call, but my card wouldn't work. And I couldn't find a cab that would bring me out here at night. So I stayed in a motel."

Too much. She won't buy it.

"I thought your card didn't work," Lydia says.

We're meat.

Not if you back off and let me deal with this.

"It didn't work in the phone," I say. "But the motel took it." "So why didn't you call from the motel?" Told you.

Piss on it, then. I'm going to tell her the truth, including who I am.

Who's that?

"Don't answer," Lydia says. "Just turn on the VCR and watch the monitor."

So I do as she says. The monitor flashes on as the tape starts, and there I am, doing it with a brown-haired girl I've never seen before.

Yee-oww. Where was I when this was going on?

This never went on. I know that's the motel room we stayed in last night, because I recognize the bent corner on the picture frame over the bed. But I don't know that girl. So that can't be me.

Looks like us.

So it must be you. It's Christopher before the crash.

You are Christopher.

Yeah, but I'm Christopher after the crash.

Check out the hat on the floor. We were wearing it last night. We're wearing it right now. And it didn't belong to Christopher before the crash. It's brand new.

But I don't have a chance to figure out what that means, because Lydia has succeeded in setting the white drapery on fire. She waves it like a flag, bringing its flames close to her hair, so I move to yank it away from her. But she tosses it away before I can reach for it, and it snags on a chair leg sticking out of the pyramid. To my relief, the flames start to die down.

Lydia is staring at me now. "Tell me what happened last night," she says. "Tell me where you found that girl while I was sweating in front of all those people. Tell me whether you started with her while I was singing, or whether you waited until you knew I'd be on my way home. Tell me whether she can suck the chrome off a trailer hitch." She points the fireplace-lighter at me. "Tell me the truth, Christopher."

I look at the video monitor. The brown-haired girl and I are still going at it. The clothes on the floor are the ones I'm wearing now. The stamp on my left hand is the one that was put on at the club last night, the one that's still here on my skin. But that man is not me. I didn't do those things. We're watching an

imaginary past with false faces and artificial voices.

Whoa. Sounds familiar.

Danny Daniels. CCA.

"Where'd the tape come from?" I ask, turning back toward Lydia. But if there's an answer I don't hear it, because the fire, instead of dying, has jumped to some paper and plastic in the pyramid. I can still smother it with the drapery if I hurry.

But Lydia jumps down partway and jabs her lighter at my face, stopping me. The yellow flame at the end of the barrel is two inches from my nose. The brim of my hat scorches.

"Tell me the truth," Lydia says.

A wisp of black smoke rises to the ceiling.

All right, then. The truth. Or as close as I can get.

"I've never seen that girl before," I say. "Daniels faked that tape to split us up."

Just doing his job.

Right. This is the way things are supposed to be, and I'm supposed to help them along.

But I don't want to anymore, and I don't care if it costs me my album or my face or my name. Looking at her now, I realize that I only care about one thing: I love Lydia Love.

I know. So do I. But loving her isn't enough.

Lydia's upper lip pulls back from her teeth. "Why should Danny care who I'm with? He doesn't have a thing for me." The flame waves before my eyes.

"No," I say, "but CCA does."

"What --" Lydia begins, and then a deafening buzz buries her words.

It's the smoke alarm. The pyramid shudders with the sound, and Lydia loses her balance and pitches forward. My hat gets knocked off, and Lydia's flame bums across my cheek as I catch her and fall backward. We hit the floor as pieces of the pyramid crash down around us.

The video monitor is right before our eyes. The brown-haired girl's lips are forming a name over and over again.

Christopher, she says. Christopher, Christopher.

But that's not my name.

No. You are Willie.

But we are Christopher.

Sprinkler nozzles pop out of the ceiling hissing and begin drenching us. The fireplace-lighter sputters out, and Lydia drops it. Then she pushes away from us, snatches up a pump shotgun from behind the AV components, and runs from the room. The fire in the pyramid dies, but the alarm keeps buzzing and the sprinklers keep spraying.

We struggle up and go after her. The door to the studio slams shut as we come down the stairs. A glimpse before it closes shows us that the sprinklers aren't on in there. We try the door but it won't open, so we pound on it and try to shout through the noise of the alarm. The door isn't padded on this side, and the steel is cold and hard. We tell Lydia our names and the truth of why we put on this face and came back to her. We tell her about CCA wanting to get its money's worth, about the surgery and the chip, about everything we can think of. The burn on our cheek stings as the water hits it.

She wouldn't believe anything we said now. Even if she could hear us.

But we have to try. She has the shotgun. And last week she said she was going to kill herself --

The alarm stops, and we shout Lydia's name as loud as we can.

There are two quick explosions, and circular patterns of bumps appear in the door's metal skin. From the other side, Lydia's muffled voice tells us to go back to the dead where we belong.

Then comes the sound of an electric guitar, and of a scream fueled by betrayal and anger.

Lydia Love is writing songs again.

And we know what that means. It means that our name, or whether we even have a name, doesn't matter anymore.

We are --

Shut up. It doesn't matter.

No. We guess not.

We sit down to soak in the artificial rain.

ON THE DAY after our rerum to Austin, Danny Daniels called us at the motel and asked when we wanted to have the surgery to remove the chip and to return

Willie's face and voice to their pre-Christopher states. We'd had a night to calm down, so we didn't accuse him of using the sex video to give our relationship with Lydia a shove over a cliff. Of course he had done it. But his job, and ours, was to get Lydia Love to start producing again. We had a contract, and all he did was help it along.

And he lived up to his end of the bargain. We got Willie's face and voice back, more or less, and the chip was removed from our jaw. The doctors made a point of showing it to us after the operation.

As if a conscience could be removed so easily.

Quiet. Willie can't shake hands, think, and listen to Christopher all at the same time.

So let Christopher take over the social duties. Crash a few knuckle-bones.

Deal.

Today our album, Willie Todd, has been released on datacard, DAT, and compact disc. Just in time for Christmas. And thanks to Daniels, three of its tracks are already in heavy rotation on the audio and video networks. He even arranged for this release party at the Austin Hyatt Regency with a whole shitload of CCA bigshots and performers in attendance.

We asked Daniels if one performer in particular would be here, and he winked. But we don't see her anywhere.

The son of a bitch can lie without opening his mouth.

Daniels has done a lot for us, but we still don't like him.

Wait. There she is, by the waterfall, talking to a couple of CCA execs.

She might not want to see us.

Sure she will. We don't look like Christopher anymore.

There's a touch on our arm. It's Daniels. Our well-wishers melt away until we're alone with him beside the fake creek burbling through the atrium.

"Your hat's crooked, Willie," he says, giving us that alligator grin of his. "You want to make a good impression on her, don't you?"

"It's all right if I meet her?" we ask.

Daniels raises his eyebrows. "None of my business."

What a load. It's exactly his business.

"You've finished her sessions?" we ask.

He straightens his necktie. "Yup. Got the last four tracks in the can yesterday. She wants to call the album *Go Back to the Dead*, but we're trying to talk her into something more upbeat. My co-producers like *Once More With Love*, but I'm partial to *What Goes Around Comes Around*. We've gotta decide soon, because it has to be out by Valentine's Day."

"Valentine's Day?"

Cute.

"Yeah, her tour kicks off in New York on February 14," Daniels says. He nudges our shoulder. "How'd you like to be the opening act?"

Opening act. Right. You know what kind of act he wants us to be.

Should we refuse? Like we could.

We turn away from Daniels and start toward her.

"Attaboy," Daniels says behind us.

The CCA honchos move away from her as we approach. Her hair is even longer now, and her skin is smooth and healthy. Her eyes are a bright green, like sunlight shining through emeralds.

"You're Willie Todd," she says, extending her right hand. "I'm Lydia Love. Congratulations on the album. It's good work."

Our fingers touch hers with a snap of electricity. We jump, then laugh.

"Danny Daniels played me some songs from your own new album," we say. "They sound okay too."

She smiles at the understatement. "Gee, thanks." She tilts her head, and her hair falls over one eye. "Did he mention that I'd like you to open for me on the tour? Your music makes you sound like a guy I could get along with."

For a while, maybe.

But a while is better than never. A while is all anyone ever has.

"Maybe we could talk about it after the party," we say.

"Maybe we could," Lydia says.

And so the cycle comes back to its beginning. But now Lydia isn't the only one who can play the phoenix game.

Across the atrium, Daniels raises his glass to us.

Like the man said: What goes around comes around.

Or "Once more with Love."

So we might as well plan ahead. What name shall we go under next time?

One we can use for both of us. It'll avoid confusion.

If you want to avoid confusion, you're in love with the wrong woman,
Christopher.

My name is Willie.

Whatever. She's looking at our eyes. Her lips are moist. Kiss her.

We let our conscience be our guide.