

Chapter One

from the novel

WORLD CLA\$\$

by

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THIRTY-TWO-YEAR-OLD TED Monroe and his exorbitantly priced genetic optimum wife Alison (a select cocktail of genetic material grown in a test tube), were sprawled on the sofa in their upper echelon A-Class town house. Their eyes were blank, lifeless. Each was dressed in the same attire they had worn to the previous evening's A-Class party. Normally their servants would have changed them and put them to bed by now, but neither Ted nor Alison had the energy to summon them, and all servants were under strict orders not to enter their private sanctum without first being summoned.

Their entire adult lives had been consumed with one A-Class party after another. In the wild days of their youth, when hearing of an A-Class party being held abroad which sounded promising, they would immediately jet off to attend. Half of those parties had turned out to be disappointments, and as the years passed they had learned to become more discriminating in which parties they would choose to attend. Each had agreed that this was a positive step in their maturation process.

Ted reflected on the previous night's party. It had everything by any A-Class standards: the most exquisite and beautiful A-Class people one could hope to gather in one place; the priciest wines and champagnes; food catered in by one of the city's trendiest restaurants; the very best and latest in artificial stimulants; the smartest A-Class conversation to be heard anywhere—and he knew this to be true because everyone at the party had remarked that this was so—and yet he and Alison had found themselves sitting glassy-eyed and bored by the entire affair.

By now they had done it all, seen it all, taken it all, and with each passing day it had become more and more difficult to find something, anything, which would cause within them even a snippet of arousal. Jaded, was the word, he thought. The last event to stir any excitement at all had been six weeks ago when Ted, after an especially boring A-Class party, found himself asleep at the

wheel when Alison began screaming and shaking him in a frantic effort to alert him to the highway bridge abutment they were about to crash into. Wide-eyed with terror, he and Alison screamed as they hit that abutment at seventy miles per hour. The airbags released and had saved their lives. Both were rendered unconscious and were unable to get around very well for a few weeks due to soreness and stiffness; however, neither would forget how alive it had made them feel to think that they were about to die.

So taken by the experience were they, they tried to duplicate it, not at seventy miles per hour but at forty, and not against a bridge abutment but against an abandoned brick warehouse. A momentary rush was felt just before impact when the possibility the airbags might fail to release crossed their minds, but other than that both agreed it was a rather boring and predictable affair.

Ted knew he was blameless in choosing his lifestyle. There could be only one eldest son, only one William Monroe VII. He was plain old, upper echelon A-Class Theodore Monroe. Big deal. He used to blame himself for his feelings of inadequacy. It was only over time that he realized it was not his fault at all but that of his parents. If they'd only had a third son, or a fourth, it wouldn't have been so bad. At least then there would have been others with which to share the misery of not having been born first. So he knew as he sat there that

it was the fault of his parents that he was as inconsolable as any upper echelon A-Class member could possibly be. He knew it was their fault that he was too tired to reach for the service remote so that he could buzz the servants to come undress them and put them to bed.

"Ted . . . " Alison managed after several seconds.

"Yes . . . " Ted answered.

"Servants," was all she could muster.

While moving only his eyes, which in itself caused considerable pain to the eyeballs and to the muscles controlling them, and which took no small amount of effort, an effort of which he was justifiably proud, he spotted the service remote on the coffee table. It wasn't so much that he would have to move in order to press the little black button on the remote that would alert the servants they were needed, it was more the torturous effort of having to think about having to move that defeated any further thoughts along these lines. He cursed himself for not allowing the servants into their private sanctum without first being summoned.

"Can't," was his reply after several minutes and it was left at that.

Outside Ted and Alison's private sanctum, William Monroe VII brushed past Ted's butler. "Out of my way, Weldon."

"But, sir . . ." Weldon stammered.

William entered Ted and Alison's sanctum and wasted no time in getting to the point.

"Ted, I'm not going to mince words. Father left for the capital this morning for the quarterly. He said that unless you give up this kind of life, start contributing, you'll be cut off."

Ted and Alison sat bolt upright. "Cut off!" both screamed in unison.

"You heard me—cut off." Will turned on his heel and left, once again brushing past a befuddled Weldon.

"Alison, we've got to think," said Ted. "We simply can't be cut off. We could wake up one day and find ourselves in B-Class, or C . . ."

"Perhaps even D-Class," said Alison.

Haunted visions of D-Class and nonclassified neighborhoods he and Alison would drive through whenever particularly bored and ever searching for new sources of amusement appeared before his eyes. The exquisitely hideous character of those neighborhoods, especially the deep, inner city neighborhoods, offered a novel degree of distraction; however, the sheer peril in exposing themselves to these neighborhoods had made it unwise to continue doing so.

Ted and Alison remained in their private sanctum for the better part of two hours endeavoring to come up with a solution. Any number of ideas had been proposed and rejected.

"It's no use," said Ted, "I can't think of a thing."

"Nor can I," replied Alison.

"It's this . . . having to think," said Ted. "It's . . . it's . . ."

"It's awful," said Alison.

"Yes, that's the word—awful. I know what let's do. We'll ingest artificial stimulants and go for a drive. Get away from all this thinking. To a nonclassified neighborhood perhaps."

"Do you think we should?" asked Alison.

"Why not? We'll not make a routine of it as we had done before."

Alison remained unconvinced.

"Other than plowing into the bridge abutment," said Ted, "has there been anything in the past year that has even begun to approach the rush of driving through a nonclassified neighborhood?"

"Well, no, but . . ."

"Well, there you have it. If nothing else it will provide a much needed distraction from this monotonous business of having to think."

"Yes, yes you may be right," said Alison. "It may be just the thing."

As Ted and Alison drew closer to one of Summit City's more insidious nonclassified neighborhoods, the familiar sense of restless anticipation began

to take hold, causing each of their senses to become keenly aware of their surroundings. Ted nervously tapped the steering wheel while Alison fidgeted anxiously in her seat.

While exiting the freeway and approaching their first stop signal, Alison made a visual inspection of each door lock while Ted double and triple checked his gas gauge. That their grotesque fascination for these places had never waned in all of the trips they had made there was a constant source of amazement for the two. Even the light signal they were now stopped at held a certain degree of perverse attraction. Not only had it been covered with graffiti to the point where the original paint could scarcely be seen, but a sign attached to it had been smashed in, covered in graffiti, and was hanging cockeyed by a single bolt.

Chuck was a nonclassified, twenty-four-year-old low-level dealer in artificial stimulants. It was his practice to occupy the abandoned tenement house he now stood before so that anyone wishing to purchase these stimulants could do so. Previously he had conducted business from a street corner selected for him by his superiors. Law enforcement would make token arrests of those conducting business on these street corners, Chuck among them, but if he was ever going to amount to anything, he would tell himself, he couldn't let minor setbacks such as getting arrested deter him from achieving his ultimate goal: that of attaining high-level dealer status.

He had worked hard for the upgrade enabling him to deal from the abandoned tenement house, or ATH as it was known in the business, as law enforcement rarely bothered with nonclassified dealing areas. He had apprenticed as a low-level dealer's assistant and had worked his way into his current ATH position in less than six years, an impressive feat considering four of those years had been spent in jail.

He considered himself lucky in that he fell in with the right bunch of people who always had access to first-rate stimulants, which Chuck would let go at a lower price than that of his competitors, absorbing the loss out of his own pocket. Profit was relative, after all. Word of mouth soon spread that Chuck was the man to see for top quality stimulants at a fair and reasonable price. They also knew that Chuck could be trusted and would come from blocks around to purchase from him. From these individuals always came genuine smiles, genuine questions as to how things were going, genuine slaps on the back, and genuine, 'You take care now's.' Chuck valued such sentiments and worked all the harder to maintain that trust.

His superiors thought he was crazy, but so long as they got their share they didn't care if he saw no profit at all. Chuck believed in profit, alright, but he was working his long term plan. He was a young man with a vision. He got along just fine on what he made. He didn't need that high-rise apartment in the A-Class sky just yet.

The mistake so many people made, in his estimation, was that they insisted on gouging the customer for short-term gain, and a customer so gouged would never again trust the person from whom they were purchasing. Chuck knew that the majority of these purchasers were going to be somebody's customers for life, and that they may just as well be his.

He did, however, draw the line at credit, for the stimulants he sold were of such quality that it was never known if one of his customers might serve themselves an amount exceeding their body's limits to manage them, and if a customer was no longer alive then he certainly wouldn't be able to settle his debts. Some of his customers would argue that even if this did occur, their wife would be good for it, or their brother would make good the debt, or their child would eventually have enough in their piggy bank to cover it, with some willing to sign over an IOU entitling him to that piggy bank. But Chuck would have none of it and the matter of extending credit was soon dropped.

His lower prices had landed him in hot water—nearly got him killed on one occasion—with rival dealers, but he had his own people backing him and those rivals were ultimately forced to back off, indeed were eventually forced to drop their own prices, though Chuck's prices were always just a shade lower.

Chuck believed in coming through for the customer, and when arrested would make use of his one phone call by relaying to a trusted standby that the shop was now theirs. Further redundancy measures had been put into place should his replacement, too, be arrested, this to ensure his customers would

not find it necessary to go elsewhere to purchase stimulants during his time away. His customers were touched by such thoughtfulness and would bring him a fruit basket, or a gun upon his release from jail. Having a dealer you knew was going to come through for you mattered to customers.

Although grateful for his ATH position, he felt he had paid his dues as a low-level dealer and was contemplating going to his superiors to request an upgrade to a mid-level position when he saw the upper echelon A-Class vehicle, one he had seen before, driving slowly down the street in his direction. He hadn't seen it for months but he knew it was the same car. He'd never forget that gold, custom-designed, upper echelon A-Class Designator on the car's grill.

When he had first seen the car months ago he thought it must have belonged to a high-level dealer who had made it into A-Class and was checking up on the old neighborhood, but as the car passed he saw that there was a couple inside. He reasoned that they had either taken a wrong exit off the freeway and had gotten themselves lost, or they were in the area to purchase stimulants.

It was extremely rare for anyone of A-Class to venture into nonclassified areas to purchase stimulants; however, if their own dealer had exhausted their supply and there was absolutely no one else they could turn to, they would come—hardly ever at night—but they would come.

Although these A-Classers were desperate, they were certainly no fools, the majority of them, anyway. While staying in their cars they would let it be known

that they were carrying a gun. The dealer, for his part, would let it be known that he, too, was carrying a gun. As a show of good faith, each would be allowed to hold a gun on the other until the deal was done, at which time the dealer would slowly back away and the A-Class purchaser more often than not would peel rubber from the scene.

A-Class individuals foolish enough to arrive unarmed would invariably have their vehicle's Class Designators and wheel covers stolen while the deal was being made, not even learning of the thefts until arriving home. And without fail they would be charged twice the going rate. This Chuck would never do. He considered himself a man of principle, and as such extended the same rates to one and all.

As he continued to watch the slowly approaching vehicle he concluded that they couldn't be lost, not twice in the same area. They must be in the market for stimulants. He let them get away once and wouldn't do so again. They were probably on their way to another dealer and were dreading the encounter. He would show them that even in a nonclassified neighborhood, purchasing stimulants could be a pleasant experience. And besides, if they liked his stimulants and were impressed that he didn't attempt to gouge them, they might come back, perhaps even tell some of their friends. And people like that could put you on the fast track to high-level dealer status but quick.

He decided to take the initiative and approach the vehicle as it passed. He was about to do so when three of his regular customers appeared. The tall, skeletal looking one with a face drawn so tight it looked as though his cheekbones might pop out of his skin at any moment, and who looked forty-five but was probably twenty-five, was the first to greet him.

"Hey, Chuck, how's it goin'?"

"Hold on, Stick," Chuck said, "I'll be right with you." He then addressed the remaining two, "Hey man, how you doin'? I'll be right with you."

The two answered that they were doin' fine but would be doin' a lot finer once they got some stimulants.

By now the A-Class vehicle was about to pass, and Chuck, with his arm raised, stepped in front of it.

Ted and Alison were relishing their first nonclassified neighborhood tour in months, pointing out all the sights to one another when they saw the nonclassified young man step in front of their vehicle. They had been approached before when touring nonclassified neighborhoods and Ted had instinctively floored the gas pedal, leaving behind streaks of rubber ten feet long. But no one had actually stepped in front of their car before, in effect forcing them to stop.

Ted's first instinct again held sway and his foot hit the gas pedal. A fraction of a second behind his first instinct came a second telling him he couldn't run

the person over and his left foot hit the brake. Both instincts were insistent and he continued flooring both pedals, creating a deafening roar of the engine along with the high-pitched sound of squealing rubber.

Chuck's customers watched the initial leap of the A-Class vehicle hit Chuck, knocking him on his backside, and immediately pulled their guns they kept stashed down the front of their pants.

Ted saw the guns being aimed, and while Alison screamed, a third instinct took over. He slammed the car into reverse, leaving a sizable patch of rubber in front of them.

"Duck!" Ted yelled just as several bullets pierced the windshield, spraying flying shards of glass in all directions. Ted kept his head low as bullets continued slamming into the car, peering over the dash just enough to work the car into the other lane to avoid colliding with any vehicle that might be coming up behind them. They went through an intersection and Ted hit the brakes. He yanked the car into drive and sped off in the direction of the freeway.

Glass from the near shattered windshield littered the dash, seats, their clothes and hair. Neither spoke as they made their desperate dash toward the freeway and to freedom, passing cars left and right, slowing at intersections only to avoid being t-boned.

There were few areas of the windshield where Ted could obtain a clear view of the road, and as he struggled with this two thoughts had entered his mind:

had the radiator been hit, and if so would it hold out long enough for them to make the freeway without overheating the engine and killing it; the second being the mad hope that law enforcement would see them driving like maniacs and give chase.

When they saw the first sign indicating that the freeway lay just ahead there were whoops and hollers. Ted pounded the steering wheel with a maniacal glee. "Yes! Yes!"

"That . . . that was better than the bridge abutment," Alison said as Ted sped into the lane that would take them to the freeway. "They were trying to rob us! They tried to kill us!"

Ted hit the on ramp, plunging into traffic at eighty miles per hour and bulling his way to the fast lane amidst angry looks and angry car horns.

"I feel so alive!" Ted roared.

"Oh, Ted, you were wonderful, just wonderful," Alison gushed. "It was like a movie. Oh, I'm so proud of you." She reached over to brush away pieces of glass from his hair but quickly drew back, wanting to savor the moment for as long as possible.

"Alison . . . that's it, that's it!"

"What's it?"

"That's how we can contribute. We'll start a business that tours nonclassified areas."

"But, Ted . . . "

"We'll start with a few touring buses—bullet-proof the windows, the radiator, the motor. We'll use tires the CEO of the country uses. They can't be shot out. It'll be as safe as walking into a movie theater to watch a horror movie."

"Why, why you're right," said Alison. "If people knew they were going to be safe, why it would make all the difference."

Finally there was something to give them a sense of purpose in life, something to strive for, and with the wind rushing in from the mostly shattered windshield, and with the shards of glass still in their hair and on their clothes, they were at long last beginning to feel that life was indeed worth living.