

Amphetamine Logic

By Nathan Cain

Alan pounded on the door and waited. A few seconds later he heard the locks turning. The door opened a crack, still on a chain. Empty eyes, the pupils dilated, deep black pits, stared back out at him.

“What do you want?” a woman’s voice said.

“Charlie.” Alan replied.

“Charlie ain’t here,” the woman said.

“Charlie?” Alan called out. “It’s Alan. Let me in.”

“Open the goddamn door!” a voice in a back room boomed out.

The woman shut the door. Opened it again a second later, just wide enough for Alan to slip inside. As soon as he was in she slammed the door and locked it. There were three locks, not including the door chain.

It was noon, but all the curtains were drawn, leaving the apartment dark. The woman was a scarecrow swaddled in a crimson bathrobe, her cheeks sunken and her black hair sticking out in all directions. Alan had never seen her before. She took a seat on a battered plaid sofa in front of a badly scarred wooden coffee table and started scratching her spindly left arm with the claw-like fingers on her right hand.

“Charlie’s in the bedroom,” she told Alan, not looking at him.

To get to the bedroom, Alan had to step around cardboard boxes filled with old paperback novels. Charlie collected them, going to used bookstores and flea markets and buying them in bulk. He divided them up by genre and alphabetized them. As far as Alan knew, Charlie had never read any of them.

Charlie was seated on the dirty mattress that served as his bed, his legs crossed, a pile of Harlequin Romance novels in front of him. A cigarette clutched in his left hand had burned down almost to his fingers. He wore a pair of ripped jeans and his stringy brown hair, shiny with grease, hung down in front of his face.

Charlie picked up one of his novels, scrutinized the cover, and then set it back on the floor. Charlie did not look at Alan as he entered the room and took a seat on a kitchen chair. One leg was shorter than the others. It wobbled.

“You got some of that good shit of yours?” Charlie asked.

Alan reached into his pocket and fished out a bag of speed. He tossed it to Charlie, who looked away from his books long enough to snatch it out of the air.

Charlie shook the bag, staring at the crystals. He leaned over, reached his hand under a pillow and came out with a pipe; a long glass tube with a bowl at the end. Charlie stubbed his cigarette out on the floor and got down to business, emptying some of the crystals into a hole in the bulb at the end of the pipe. He picked his Zippo up off the floor, sparked it and held it under the bowl. After a few seconds the meth started to heat up, forming a white vapor. When it did, Charlie sucked on the end of the pipe, pulling the vapor into his lungs, holding it, his eyes watering, before letting the smoke out, coughing a little.

The scarecrow woman appeared in the doorway. “You gonna smoke without me?” she asked, alarmed.

Charlie refilled the pipe, passed it to her. She knelt, holding the pipe to her lips. Charlie held the lighter under it. She sucked at it, closing her eyes, filling her lungs. She pulled away from the pipe, rocked back and forth and exhaled. Rose. Left the room.

Charlie held the pipe out toward Alan, who shook his head. Charlie shrugged, put the pipe on the floor. "What's up?" he asked.

"Gonna need your help," Alan told him.

"With what?"

"I want you to hold some equipment and chemicals for me."

"I don't know," Charlie said. "I don't have a lot of room here, and I don't want to get caught with that shit. I'm not a cook, man. They'd put me back in prison forever if they found that shit in here."

"It'll just be for a day or so, and I'm willing to pay."

"Why you moving this stuff?"

"It's just time to move," Alan said. "I can't stay in one place for too long."

"How much?" Charlie asked.

"Five hundred."

"Just for a day?"

"Yeah. I just need to keep it safe until I can move it into my new place," Alan said.

"This shit we're talking about, is it explosive?"

"Not if you don't touch it."

"When do you think you'll be moving?"

"Today."

"That's some short notice."

Alan stood up, pulled five one hundred-dollar bills out of his pocket and waved them at Charlie. "Yes or no?"

Charlie took the money.

"I'll be back later," Alan said.

As soon as the door had closed behind him, he heard the woman clicking the locks back into place. Alan almost felt bad lying to Charlie. He had always been a good customer, but things were getting complicated and that went against his mantra: *Keep it simple*. Alan made speed and sold it. That was all he did. Now he had to extricate himself from a bad situation.

Alan drove his pickup to the lab. For the past six months he had worked out of the kitchen of an old cabin in the mountains. The main selling point was the isolation. It was a mile up a dirt road that no one had any reason to travel. Alan's closest neighbor was a half a mile away. That was just fine with him.

The kitchen table and sink were cluttered with glassware. A large blue plastic barrel of chemical waste stood in the corner. It gave off a sharp, toxic smell. Alan gathered up some chemicals, put them in a box, and took them out to the truck. He put the box in the bed and threw a tarp over it. He made a couple of more trips, making sure he took anything of value. He left the glassware. The last thing he carried out was a large cardboard box full of red pseudoephedrine tablets, enough to make five pounds of speed, by Alan's calculations. The pills were the only thing he really needed. Everything else could be replaced.

Alan went back into the house and picked up a brown glass bottle off the kitchen table. It was three quarters full of ether. He unscrewed the cap and held the bottle at arms length so the fumes would not overpower him. He took a rag from his back pocket and poured some of the ether over it. His hand was chilled as the liquid evaporated. Once the rag was soaked he stuck it in the bottle and lit it with a cigarette lighter. He threw the bottle at the back wall and ran. He heard the shattering glass and the whoosh of the flames as they spread, soaking up the fuel, felt the heat on his back, but he did not turn to look.

Club X-Scape was on the east side, down by the river. It was the only strip club in town. The club's parking lot was about half full. Alan parked his truck and went up to the door. The bouncer nodded and let him pass. He went in and sat at the bar. Darlene, the bartender, put a Bud in front of him. He took a sip then turned to look at the stage.

A frail looking girl with bleach blonde hair, wearing nothing but a black g-string and red heels was shaking her ass to "Superfreak" as several bored men watched. She had about ten dollars worth of singles tucked in her g-string. Alan watched as she leaned over to take another proffered bill with her teeth.

"Kinda thin, don't you think?" Darlene asked.

Alan shrugged. "Different strokes for different folks. I like a woman with curves myself, but a lot of people don't. She new?"

"Just started yesterday," Darlene said, wiping down the bar with a wet rag. "Wayne hired her."

"Speaking of Wayne, is he around?"

"You know damn well he is."

"Yeah," Alan said. He took a long swallow of beer and got up off his stool, and walked across the room. Knocked on Wayne's door.

"The fuck you want?" Wayne yelled.

"It's Alan."

"Come in."

Alan pushed the door open. Wayne was at his desk, lining up some of Alan's crank on a hand mirror. His bald head, which was tilted in Alan's direction, glistened with sweat. He put down his razor blade and picked up a piece of a straw, snorted the drug, leaned back in his chair, winced, wiped some tears away with his stubby fingers.

Wayne was the only person Alan had ever met who could use meth and not lose weight. He'd been using since Alan had hooked up with him six months ago, and he still weighed three hundred pounds. Wayne settled back in his chair and tilted his head forward, making the roll of fat around his neck jiggle. Alan thought of Jabba the Hut.

"I've got the girls all lined up," Wayne said. "We're going to make a shitload of money off this."

Alan sat. "We've hit a snag."

Wayne leaned forward, resting his forearms against the edge of the desk. "What kind of snag?"

"The lab burned. Someone must've torched it, because I didn't have anything set up."

Wayne said nothing for a minute. "The lab burned?"

"That's what I just said."

"You think someone torched it?"

"Yeah."

"Why would someone do that?"

"To cover up what they stole, and make trouble," Alan said.

"Stole?"

"Yeah. My best guess is that someone stole my chemicals, and then set fire to the lab."

Wayne laced his fingers together and glared at Alan. "How would someone know about the lab?"

"I don't know," Alan said. "I'm the only person who knows where the lab is."

"Obviously you ain't," Wayne said. "This is a very serious problem. I've promised girls and drugs to a very powerful man for a very big party, and if I don't come through there's going to be trouble."

"What about your private stash?" Alan asked.

"I didn't just promise him enough for the party. I told him there'd be a couple of pounds. Told him we had a good setup, and that he should invest so we could expand. If I show up with a few grams I'm gonna look like a chump." Wayne leaned back in his chair and pointed a finger at Alan. "Find out who did this. Someone is out to get me. To get us. To make us look bad. If we get that shit back in the next twenty-four hours you've still got time to make a batch."

"I don't have a place to cook."

"I'll find one. Hell, you can do it in the basement here, if you have to."

"I'll see what I can do," Alan said.

Wayne opened his desk drawer and pulled out an old military issue .45. Pointed it at Alan. "You don't seem very fucking concerned about this."

"Whoa. Whoa." Alan held his hands up in front of his face. "Put that thing away. You're getting paranoid. We're partners. We're in this together. You don't believe me about the lab, watch the news tonight. I'm sure it'll be on there. I'll find out what happened. Just put the gun away."

Wayne put the gun on the desk. Rubbed his hand over his face. "You're right. I've got to stay calm. My heart feels like it's gonna explode."

"Lay off the speed," Alan said, as he stood. "That shit'll kill you."

Alan went back to Charlie's and grabbed a box of chemicals from the back of the truck. He carried it up to the apartment, set it on the floor. Knocked. The woman opened the door, still on the chain.

"What?"

"Let me in. Charlie's expecting me."

The woman looked down. "What's in the box?"

"It's for Charlie."

"Charlie don't want it," the woman said. She slammed the door.

Alan pounded on the door again. He did not need to be seen standing in the hallway with a box full of meth ingredients. He picked up the box and turned to leave. He was halfway down the stairs when he ran into Charlie going the other direction.

“Where the fuck were you?” Alan asked. “That crazy bitch you’ve got in there wouldn’t let me in.”

“Went to get some beers,” Charlie replied, holding up a twelve-pack of Coors Light. “Amber’s been up for about four days. She tends to get a little crazy after a while. Thinks everyone’s out to get her.”

“No shit.”

“Come on, I’ll let you in.”

Alan stood aside to let Charlie past, then followed.

Charlie knocked on the door.

“I told you Charlie don’t want it!” Amber yelled.

“How the hell do you know what I want?” Charlie replied. “Open the door woman!”

There was scampering inside the apartment. Locks turned. Amber threw the door open. “Charlie, that son-of-a-bitch who was here this morning...” Her voice trailed off as she saw Alan. Her eyes went wide and she turned and ran into the bedroom, slamming the door.

“Fuckin’ crazy bitch,” Charlie muttered as he closed the door. “Put that shit in the corner.”

Alan set the box on the floor. “I’ve got another one in the truck,” he said.

“That’s cool,” Charlie replied, popping the top on a beer and plopping down on the couch.

Alan retrieved the second box of chemicals. He left the box of tablets under the tarp.

“Wanna beer?” Charlie asked when Alan returned.

“Sure.”

Charlie tossed a can to Alan, who caught it and opened it. It foamed, and Alan held it up to his mouth, sucking down the froth. “That your girlfriend?” Alan asked, nodding toward the bedroom door.

Charlie shrugged. “Met her at a party a couple of weeks ago. She came home with me. Never left.”

“You let her stay?”

“She does the dishes.”

“When’s the last time you cooked? Hell, when’s the last time you ate anything?”

Charlie shrugged again. Took a drink. Wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Beer count?”

“No.”

“Coupla days then.”

Alan chugged the rest of his beer. Dropped the can on the floor. “I’ve got to run. I’ve got things to do.”

“When you gonna come get this shit?”

“Day or two,” Alan said, heading for the door.

When he closed it behind him he didn’t hear any locks snapping into place.

Alan went home to his trailer and tried to relax. He took the pills in and put them on the floor, got a beer from the fridge and channel surfed for a while. Nothing on. After an hour, Alan got into his personal stash. He didn't indulge very often, but he wanted to be high. It would help him work up the nerve to do what had to be done.

He poured some of the crystals out of the baggie and crushed them with his drivers' license. The finer the powder, the less it hurt, and the faster it started to work. He rolled up a twenty from his wallet and snorted two long rails, one in each nostril. After a few seconds his sinuses began to burn, and his eyes began to water. Alan leaned his head back and closed his eyes. The pain disappeared, replaced by exhilaration. His heart beat faster, thumping against his ribcage. His mind started to glow. Everything was going to be fine. By this time next week he would be in a new town, with a new lab, and he would be working for himself again: Living the American Dream.

Alan settled back in front of the television. Started flipping channels again. Looked at his watch. Two hours had passed. His cell phone rang. He checked the number: Wayne. He let it go to voicemail. Make him squirm. Ten minutes later the phone rang again. Alan didn't even look.

The third time he picked up.

"What?"

"It was on the news."

"I told you it would be."

"You found anything out yet?"

"Give me more time."

"We don't have more fucking time!" Wayne's voice was strained, near hysterical. Alan smiled.

"I'll call you back as soon as I learn something," he said, and hung up. He went to the refrigerator for another beer.

Alan picked up the phone again around midnight. Wayne had called back several times. Alan had turned off the phone. He turned it back on. Dialed Wayne. Wayne picked up on the first ring.

"This better be good news."

"I found the shit," Alan said.

"Where?"

"You know that guy Charlie, comes into the club sometimes?"

"Skinny fucker?"

"That's him."

"How'd he find the lab?"

"Must've followed me," Alan said.

"How'd you find out he had it?" Wayne asked.

"He bragged about it."

"Stupid fuck."

"Yeah," Alan agreed. "You know where he lives?"

"Yeah," Wayne said. "I know. Meet me in the parking lot in half an hour. Do you have a piece?"

"No."

"That's all right. I'll bring an extra one," Wayne said, and hung up.

When Alan arrived Wayne was already there, hunched behind the wheel of his Mustang, smoking. Alan got out of his car and into Wayne's. Wayne handed him a brown bag. Inside, a snub nosed .38. Alan flipped the cylinder out, made sure it was loaded. He stuck it in his pants and pulled his shirt out to cover it.

"You ready to do this?" Wayne asked, flicking his cigarette butt out the window.

"Yeah," Alan said. "I'm ready."

"Follow me."

Alan got out of the car. Wayne eased his bulk from behind the steering wheel, and waddled through the parking lot and up the stairs. He stopped to catch his breath halfway. Alan fingered the gun beneath his shirt.

Wayne got his second wind, and made it up the stairs. Alan was close behind him. When they got to Charlie's door, Wayne pulled his fist back to pound on it, but Alan reached out and turned the doorknob. It was open. Wayne pulled his .45 out of his waistband and stepped inside. Alan drew his gun and followed.

Charlie was on the couch, a carton of books between his feet. His pipe was on the armrest. He looked up startled, clearly wired. He looked past Wayne, and locked eyes with Alan. He started to say something, but stopped when Wayne raised his gun.

"Where's the shit you skinny fuck?" Wayne said.

"Hey," Charlie said, putting up his hands. "What the hell's goin' on here, man?"

"It's very simple," Alan said, nudging his way past Wayne and walking over to Charlie. Alan brought his gun up, and then spun around, firing two quick shots into Wayne, who flopped onto his back. Alan felt the floorboards shake when the fat fuck hit the ground.

"Dude," Charlie said. "What the fuck? This is not cool. This is not cool. Oh, shit. Oh, shit. You just killed that dude in my living room."

"Calm down, Charlie," Alan said. "Just be cool."

Alan walked over to Wayne as Charlie continued talking. He picked up Wayne's .45. Shot Charlie once in the gut. He leaned down and put the gun back in Wayne's hand. Tossed the .38 on the couch next to Charlie. He surveyed the scene. Two dead bodies and a lot of meth ingredients. Perfect. Just a couple of business partners who had a disagreement.

Alan was halfway down the stairs when he heard someone behind him. He glanced back over his shoulder, and saw Amber, still wearing the red bathrobe. She was holding Wayne's .45 in a trembling hand. Alan's gut clenched. He knew he had forgotten something.

"He said I was paranoid," Amber said. "But I'm not paranoid." She started to bring the gun up and Alan started running. The first bullet slammed into the wall inches from his head.

Alan hit the parking lot at full speed, but Amber was right behind him, squeezing off rounds, screaming, over and over: "I'm not paranoid. I'm not paranoid."

When Alan reached his truck the door was locked. He was reaching for his keys when the bullet hit him low in the back. He slid to the ground, one hand still in his pocket, gripping his keys.

Alan rolled onto his back and clutched at the exit wound in his stomach. It didn't look good. Amber had run out of bullets. She also seemed to have forgotten Alan was there. She stood in the middle of the parking lot, still holding the gun. Repeating her mantra.

Alan heard sirens. Police. He hoped they killed the bitch.

Nathan Cain blogs about crime fiction from independent presses at Independent Crime (<http://indiecrime.blogspot.com>). He was written for newspapers in Georgia and North Carolina.