

Lox awoke around dawn to bare stone walls and the dying echo of a scream that was not his. He strode down the lightless hall, grabbed his shotgun from the locker, lurched out into the torrential rain. Heedless of the growling sky, he tore down the police cordon and marched through the bomb-crater. Mud sucking at his feet, squeezing between his toes. He ripped through another section of ribbon. Had time to notice Tweed with its fast shoes on, turgid and black as the leaden sky. Then the oak stood before him, stubborn and complacent as it soaked up the rain. He raised the sawn-off to his shoulder, sighted and fired. Sighted and fired again. A flock of screeching sparrows scrambled for the sky on adrenalin wings. Some didn't make it. They tumbled from the branches and lay twitching in the mud around him.

*There.*

Silence.

He strode back across the crater towards the house.

But never made it.

Where does one life end and another begin?

For Lox it was face down in a sea of mud.

Legs that would no longer support him. Arms like meat on a butcher's hook. Trying to burrow into the liquid earth where blood and bone lay fused with cosmic dust in the teeming rain. Down into the cold expanse of everlasting oblivion.

Then he heard the voice.

And nothing would ever be the same again.