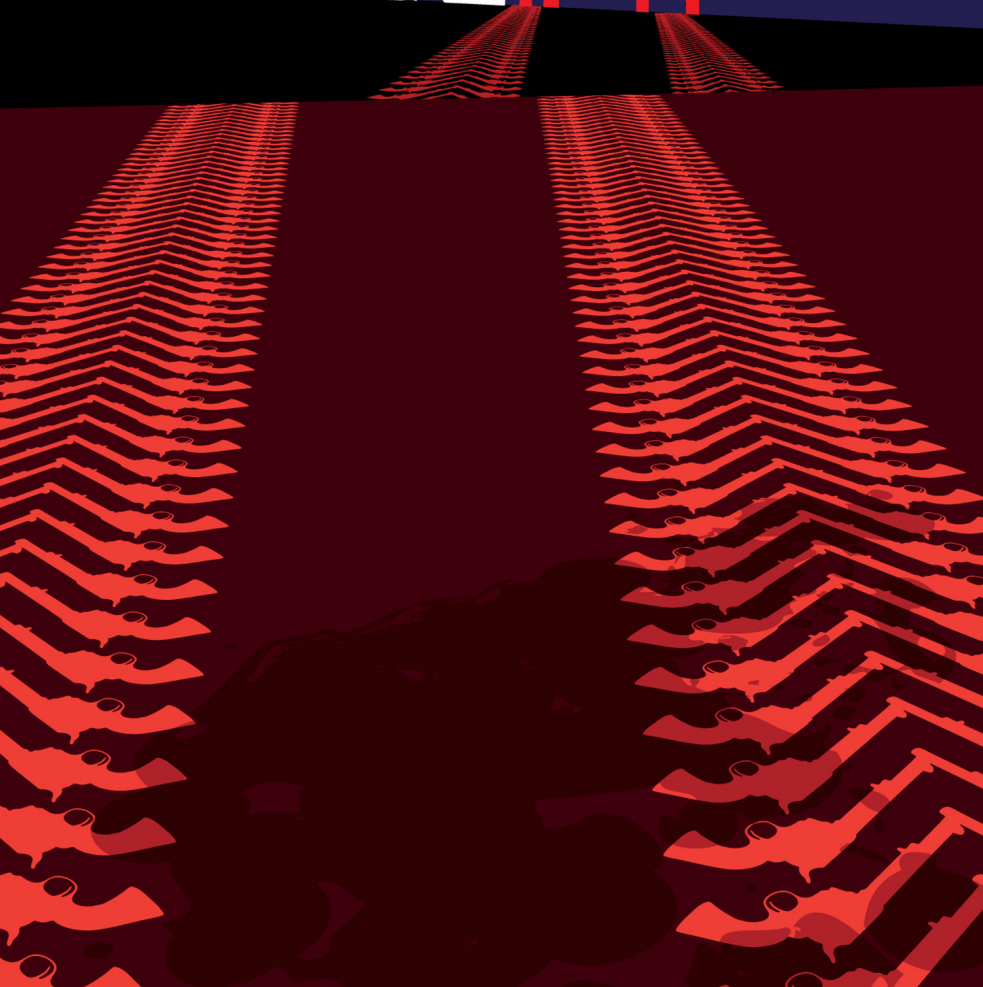


BLAKE CROUCH, JACK KILBORN & J.A.KONRATH

SERIAL UNCLE

AND EXTENDED CUTS



SERIAL UNCUT

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SERIALITY

UNCUT AND EXTENDED

BLAKE CROUCH, JACK KILBORN & J.A.KONRATH

The background is a solid, vibrant red. Overlaid on this are various black ink-like splatters and drips. A large, dense, circular splatter is positioned on the left side, with several long, thin drips extending downwards from its base. To the right of this main splatter, there are several smaller, more delicate splatters and fine, wispy lines that trail off towards the right edge of the frame. The overall effect is one of dynamic, expressive movement.

INTRODUCTION

The original version of SERIAL, still available as a free ebook, was a 7500-word horror short story written as an experiment. In less than a year, that experiment was downloaded over 200,000 times, and has received over a hundred scathingly negative reviews, with many people claiming it was the most depraved, awful thing they've ever read.

SERIAL UNCUT is over 36,000 words, much of it brand new. Along with the insertion of additional material too extreme for the original version, it also has a vastly expanded beginning and ending, including an extended section that originally appeared in the novella TRUCK STOP.

If you can handle horrific thrills, proceed at your own risk.

But if you suffer from anxiety attacks, nervous disorders, insomnia, nightmares or night terrors, heart palpitations, stomach problems, or are of an overly sensitive nature, you should read something else instead.

The authors are in no way responsible for any lost sleep, missed work, failed relationships, or difficulty in coping with life after you have read SERIAL UNCUT. They will not pay for any therapy you may require as a result of reading SERIAL UNCUT. They will not cradle you in their arms, rock you back and forth, and speak in soothing tones while you unsuccessfully try to forget SERIAL UNCUT.

You have been warned...



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PART ONE

TAMPA, 1978

“Didn’t anyone ever tell you about the dangers of hitchhiking?” the driver said. “You never know who’s going to pick you up.”

Donaldson wiped sweat from his brow and eyed the driver through the half-open passenger side window of the Lincoln Continental. The driver was average-looking, roughly Donaldson’s age, dressed in a dark suit that matched the car’s paint job.

“I’m roasting out here, man,” Donaldson said. And it wasn’t far from the truth. He’d been walking down this desolate highway for damn near three hours in the abusive, summer sun. “My car died. If you want to rob or kill me,

that's fine, as long as you have air conditioning."

Donaldson forced a bright smile, hoping he looked both pathetic and non-threatening. It must have worked, because the man hit a switch on his armrest, and the door unlocked.

Must be nice being rich, Donaldson mused at the fancy automatic locks. Then he opened the door and heaved his bulk onto the leather seat.

"Thanks," he said.

The car was cooler than outside, but not by much. Donaldson wondered if the man's air worked. He placed his hand against the vent, felt a trickle of cold leaking out.

"Happy to help a fellow traveler. I'm Mr. K."

"Donaldson."

Neither made a move to shake hands. Mr. K checked his mirror, then gunned the 8-cylinder engine, spraying gravel as the luxury car fishtailed back onto the asphalt.

Donaldson adjusted his bulk, shifting the .38 he'd crammed into the front pocket of his jeans. The pants were loose enough, and Donaldson portly enough, that he doubted Mr. K noticed.

"You're sunburned," Mr. K said.

"Sun'll do that to you."

Donaldson touched his bare forearm, lobster red, and winced. Then he flipped down the visor mirror, saw how bad his face was. It looked like his old man had slapped the shit out of him, and hurt almost as much.

“Your car a Pinto?” Mr. K asked.

“My car?”

“A Pinto. Saw one about five miles back.”

Donaldson contemplated the harm in admitting it. He supposed it didn’t matter. Before he’d abandoned the car, he’d wiped it clean of fingerprints.

“Yeah. Blew a rod, I think.”

“Why didn’t you wait for the police?”

Again, Donaldson deliberated before answering. “I don’t like pigs,” he finally said.

Mr. K nodded. Donaldson doubted the man shared his sentiment. His hair was short, he was well-dressed, and he owned a fancy car. Cops wouldn’t hassle him. They were too busy hassling people with long hair and beards and ripped jeans.

People like me.

The highway stretched onward, wiggly heat waves rising off the tarmac. There wasn’t much traffic. Only about twenty cars had passed Donaldson during his long walk, and not one had so much as slowed down. Bastards. Whatever happened to human compassion?

“Did you kill the car’s owner before you stole it?” Mr. K asked.

Alarm bells sounded in Donaldson’s head. He frantically pawed at his .38, but Mr. K slammed on the brakes.

Donaldson bounced off the dashboard, smacking his

sunburned nose hard. During the momentary disorientation, he was aware of Mr. K throwing the car into park, unbuckling his seatbelt, and pressing a thin-bladed knife under Donaldson's double chin with one hand, while digging the .38 from Donaldson's front pocket with the other.

"You should buckle up," Mr. K said. "Seatbelts save lives."

Mr. K stuck the knife into his breast pocket, belted himself back in, then hit the gas. The tires screamed and the Continental shot forward.

"I'm bleeding," Donaldson said, his hands cupped around his nose. He knew it was a stupid, obvious thing to say, but he was still dazed and trying to buy some time.

"Tissues in the glove compartment."

Donaldson dug them out, feeling more ashamed than hurt. This guy had gotten the better of him much too easily. As he mopped the blood from his face, Mr. K pressed a button to open the passenger side window.

"Throw the used ones outside, please."

Donaldson went through ten tissues, tossing each one onto the road whizzing by. Then he ripped one more into pieces, balled them up, and shoved them into each nostril, staunching the trickle. He kept an eye on Mr. K the entire time, alternating between watching the man's eyes, and watching the .38 pointed at him.

This is a real bad situation.

"I don't enjoy repeating myself, but you hit that dashboard pretty hard, so I'll ask one more time. Did you kill the driver before you stole the Pinto?"

Donaldson knew he was screwed, but he didn't want to get himself even more screwed.

"You a cop?" he asked, not sure if that would be a good thing or a bad thing.

The barest flash of mirth crossed Mr. K's face. "No. But your biggest worry right now shouldn't be getting arrested. Your biggest worry should be the hole I'm going to put in your head if you don't answer me."

The gears began to turn in Donaldson's head. *How the hell do I get through this? Talk my way out?*

"You won't shoot me," Donaldson said, surprised by how calm he sounded.

"No?"

"You'd ruin your car."

Again, a faint hint of a smile. "It's not my car. And you still haven't answered my question."

Mr. K thumbed back the hammer on the pistol.

Donaldson contemplated his own death—the first time in his life he ever had—and decided dying would be a very bad thing.

"I killed him," Donaldson said quickly.

Mr. K seemed to think about this. He nodded slowly. "Was it someone you knew?"

“No. Jumped him in a parking lot in Sarasota. Wouldn’t have wasted the bullet if I knew what a piece of crap his car was.”

Donaldson watched Mr. K’s eyes. They betrayed nothing. The two of them might as well have been talking about the weather.

“How’d it feel?” Mr. K asked.

“How did what feel?”

“Killing that man.”

What kind of freaky talk is this? Donaldson thought, but all he said was, “I dunno.”

“Sure you do. Did it feel good? Bad? Numb? Did it get you excited? Did you feel guilty afterward?”

Donaldson thought back to the day before. To holding the gun to the man’s ribs. Seeing the shock in his eyes when he squeezed the trigger once, twice, three times. Watching him flop to the ground in a way that had struck him as funny. The holes in his chest had made sucking sounds, blowing tiny blood bubbles.

“Excited,” Donaldson said.

“Did he die right away?”

“No.”

“Did you stay and watch him die?”

“Yeah.”

“How long did it take?”

It’s so strange that we’re both so calm about this.

Donaldson shrugged. "Few minutes, I guess."

"Did you do anything else to him?"

"Like what?"

"Did you hurt him first?" Mr. K raised an eyebrow. "Rape him?"

Donaldson scowled. "Do I look like a queer to you?"

"What does being a homosexual have to do with it? You had a human being at your mercy. That excited you. I'm asking if you capitalized on that opportunity. If you made the most of it."

Donaldson thought about it. The guy had been at his mercy. He'd begged for a while when Donaldson pulled the gun, and that was kind of a turn-on.

"I didn't rape him," Donaldson said.

"Could you have raped him?"

Donaldson licked some dried blood off of his top lip, let the salty, copper taste linger on his tongue. "Yeah. I could've."

This answer seemed to satisfy Mr. K. He was quiet for over a minute.

The road stretched out ahead of them like a giant black snake.

Empty swampland and blue skies as far as Donaldson could see.

I can't believe I'm telling him this stuff. Is it because he's threatening to kill me?

Or because he understands?

“How’d you know?” Donaldson asked.

“Know what?”

“That I stole that car?”

Mr. K offered a half-smile. “I saw the gun in your pocket when you stopped, along with your clumsy attempt to hide it. You should get an ankle holster, or stuff it in your belt at the small of your back. You obviously aren’t a Florida native, or you’d have a tan already. That means you flew in or drove in. If you flew, you probably would’ve had a rental car, and those are usually new. That Pinto was an old model. When you first got in, I noticed the powder burns on your shirt, and under your rather oppressive body odor, you smell like gunpowder.”

Donaldson was impressed, but he refused to show it. He knew a lot about being victimized. One way to stop being a victim was to stop acting like a victim.

“I asked how you knew about the car, not my gun,” Donaldson said, sticking out his lower jaw.

If Mr. K noticed Donaldson’s display of bravado, he didn’t react. “Your loose jeans didn’t jingle when you sat down in the car. When people abandon their vehicles, they take their keys with them. So I assumed it wasn’t yours.”

Donaldson appraised Mr. K again. This was a smart guy.

“How about you?” Donaldson ventured. “Did you kill the owner of this car?”

“Not yet.”

“Not yet?”

“He’s tied up in the trunk. I’m taking him someplace private.”

Donald worded his next question carefully. “Do you want to kill me?”

Mr. K drummed his fingers on the steering wheel.

Donaldson counted his own heartbeats, trying to keep cool until Mr. K finally replied.

“Haven’t decided yet.”

“Is there anything I can do to, uh, persuade you that I’m worth keeping alive?”

“Maybe. The Pinto owner you killed. He wasn’t the first.”

Donaldson thought back to his father, to beating the old man to death with a baseball bat. “No, he wasn’t.”

“But he was the first stranger.”

This guy is uncanny. “Yeah.”

“Who was it before that? Girlfriend? Family member?”

“My dad.”

“But you didn’t use a gun on him, did you? You made it more personal.”

“Yeah.”

“What’d you use?”

“A Louisville Slugger.”

“How did it feel?”

Donaldson closed his eyes. He could still feel the sting of the bat in his palms when he cracked it against his father’s

head, still see the blood that spurted out of split skin like a lawn sprinkler.

“I felt like Reggie Jackson hitting one out of Yankee Stadium. Afterward, I even went out and bought a *Reggie Bar*.”

Mr. K gave him a sideways glance. “Why buy candy? Why didn’t you eat part of your father? Just imagine the expression on his face.”

Donaldson was about to protest, but he stopped himself. When he broke Dad’s jaw with the bat, the old man had looked more surprised than hurt. How would he have reacted if Donaldson had cut off one of his fingers and eaten it in front of him?

That would have shown the son of bitch. Bite the hand that feeds you.

“I should have done that,” Donaldson said.

“He hurt you when you were a child.” Mr. K said it as a statement, not a question.

“Yeah. He used to beat the shit out of me.”

“Did he sexually abuse you?”

“Naw. Nothing like that. But every time I got into trouble, he’d take his belt to me. And he hit hard enough to draw blood. What kind of asshole does that to a five-year-old kid?”

“Think hard, Donaldson. Do you believe your father beat you, and that turned you into what you are? Or did he beat you *because* of what you are?”

Donaldson frowned. "What do you mean *what you are*? What am I?"

Mr. K turned and stared deep into his soul, his eyes like gun barrels. "You're a killer, Donaldson."

Donaldson considered the label. It didn't take him long to embrace it.

"So what was the question again?"

"Are you a killer because your father beat you, or did your father beat you because you're a killer?"

Donaldson could remember that first beating when he was five. He'd taken his pet gerbil and put it in the blender. Used the *pulse* button, grinding it up a little at a time, so it didn't die right away.

"I think my dad knew. Tried to beat the devil out of me. Used to tell me that, when he was whipping my ass."

"You don't have the devil in you, Donaldson. You're simply unique. Exceptional. Unrestrained by morality or guilt."

Exceptional? Donaldson had never felt like he was exceptional at anything. He did badly in school. Dropped out of college. Never had any friends, or a woman he didn't pay for. Bummed around the country, job to job, occasionally ripping someone off. How is that exceptional?

But somehow, he felt that the description fit him.

Maybe that's the problem. I've been trying to be normal all of these years, but I'm not. I'm better than normal.

I'm exceptional.

“How do you know this stuff?” Donaldson asked.

“The more you understand death,” Mr. K said, “the more you appreciate life.”

“Sounds like fortune cookie bullshit.”

“It was something I learned in the war.”

“Vietnam?” Donaldson had been exempt from the draft because he didn’t pass the physical.

“A villager in Ca Lu said it to me, before I removed his intestines with a bayonet.”

“Was he talking about himself?” Donaldson asked. “Or you?”

“You tell me. Did you feel alive when you killed your father, Donaldson?”

Donaldson nodded.

“And when you killed the owner of the Pinto?” Mr. K continued.

“Goddamn piece of crap car. I wish I could kill that guy again.”

“How about someone else in his place?”

Donaldson squinted at Mr. K. “What do you mean?”

Another half smile. “The man in my trunk. If I gave you the chance to kill him, would you?”

“What’d he do?”

“What did the Pinto owner do?” Mr. K countered.

“Nothing. But I wanted his car.”

“So you killed him for his car?”

“Yeah.”

“Couldn’t you have just pointed the gun and told him to give you his keys?”

“He would’ve called the cops.”

“You could’ve knocked him out. Or tied him up.”

“I guess.”

“But you didn’t.”

Donaldson folded his chubby arms across his chest. “No. I didn’t.”

“This man in the trunk. I promised him it would take a long time for him to die. Do you think you could do something like that? Draw out a man’s agony for a long time?”

Donaldson wasn’t sure what Mr. K’s angle was. “Sure.”

“Is that something you’d like to do?”

Donaldson shrugged. “I dunno. Never tried it before.”

“You know what the alternative is, don’t you?”

“You kill me.”

Mr. K nodded.

Donaldson made his decision in a nanosecond. “How do you want me to do it?”

“You can use your imagination. I have plenty of tools you can choose from.”

Donaldson stared off into the miles and miles of endless marshland. Thought about this strange request. Found himself becoming aroused.

“I’ll kill him,” he said. “And I’ll make it hurt.”

Mr. K checked his rearview mirror, eased his foot off the gas, and then drove onto the shoulder. He put on his emergency lights, then ordered Donaldson out of the car.

Donaldson didn't even attempt to run away. He walked around to the rear of the car without being told and waited, butterflies amassing in his stomach.

The man in the trunk was awake, completely naked, his wrists and ankles tied with rope. He was older, late forties maybe, and he squinted in the powerful sun. In his mouth was a gag made out of a rubber ball.

He looks positively out of his mind with terror.

Donaldson licked his lips again.

"I prefer clothesline," Mr. K said. "You can buy it everywhere, so it's untraceable. And it won't hold a fingerprint. Get him out of the car. Hurry, before another car comes by."

Donaldson muscled the man out. It wasn't easy. The guy squirmed and fought, and he was pretty heavy and tough to lift. Donaldson quickly gave up trying. Instead, he dragged him nude across the asphalt as the man moaned around his gag.

That's gotta hurt, Donaldson thought. But that's nothing compared to what I'm gonna do.

Mr. K took a tool case and a gas can out of the trunk, then closed it. He instructed Donaldson to pull the man into the marsh. It was wet, moss clinging to Donaldson's shoes, muck seeping through. High reeds seemed to reach out and tug at

the bound man, making it even harder to pull him.

After fifty yards, Donaldson was exhausted.

After a hundred yards, Donaldson was seriously pissed off. He hated being in the sun again, hated the throbbing in his nose and muscles, and hated this heavy son of a bitch for squirming so much and for being so goddamn heavy.

“That’s far enough,” Mr. K said. He set down the tool chest and opened it up.

Donaldson stared inside at the contents like a kid ogling presents under a Christmas tree.

“Can you give me my ball gag back?” Mr. K held out a rag. “It’s my last one.”

Donaldson unbuckled the gag from the man’s mouth, disgusted by the spit dripping from it. He handed it to Mr. K and then kicked the naked man in the stomach for making such a mess.

The man screamed. The first of many to come.

“I’ll pay!” he cried. “I’ll pay!”

“What should I use first?” Donaldson asked Mr. K.

“Try the ball peen hammer. Breaking before cutting or burning always seems to work better.”

The next two hours blurred by for Donaldson, his entire world reduced to hurting this unknown, screaming, naked man in this deserted marsh. Even Mr. K seemed to vanish to Donaldson, though he took pictures during the proceedings, and occasionally interrupted to offer advice or encouragement:

Don't cut there too deep. He'll bleed to death.
Try the pliers.
Tell him what you're going to do next. It makes it worse.
That part's particularly sensitive. Use the blowtorch.
He's not looking at you. Make him look at you, or cut off his eyelids.
He's passed out again. Use the ammonia rag to wake him up.
There's still a patch of skin there.
Now would be a good time for the salt and vinegar. Rub it in good.
It doesn't make you gay. Enjoy yourself. He's at your mercy.
How does it taste? Different than that other part you tried?
Try feeding his eyelids to him.
Don't worry, it's not your fault. He had a heart attack. It happens sometimes. You did well.

Donaldson sat nude next to the dead thing. The portly killer was covered with blood and bits of tissue, and he couldn't think of any time in his twenty-something years of life that he'd ever been happier.

Mr. K finished wiping off the cheese grater with a rag and some bleach, and placed it back into his tool kit. Then he told Donaldson to douse the corpse with gasoline.

"Fire will take care of any evidence you've left behind. But wait until I'm gone. I don't want you attracting any attention."

Donaldson emptied the can and stared up at Mr. K,

who stood silhouetted against the setting sun. He looked enormous.

Donaldson offered him the empty can, said, "Take me with you."

"You're naked and covered in blood, Donaldson. You'd ruin the interior of my car."

"I thought you stole the car."

"Stealing cars is for stupid children. The police have radios. It's too easy to get caught. If you manage to get out of here, remember that. You'd be wise to remember everything I've said to you."

"You're not going to kill me?"

"Why should I? Even if you remembered my license plate number, which I don't think you have, I just shot two rolls of you torturing a man to death. I have nothing to fear from you."

Mr. K picked up his toolbox and turned to walk away.

"Can I get my gun back?" Donaldson asked.

Mr. K dropped the box, took out the .38, and wiped it off with the rag. He emptied the bullets onto the ground and tossed Donaldson the weapon, then reached into his breast pocket and tossed something else at him.

Wet wipes, from a fast food chicken place.

"I'd recommend getting some of that blood off before you try hitchhiking again."

Donaldson nodded, picking a morsel of something out of

his front teeth. "Next time I won't get so much on me."

"There'll be a next time?"

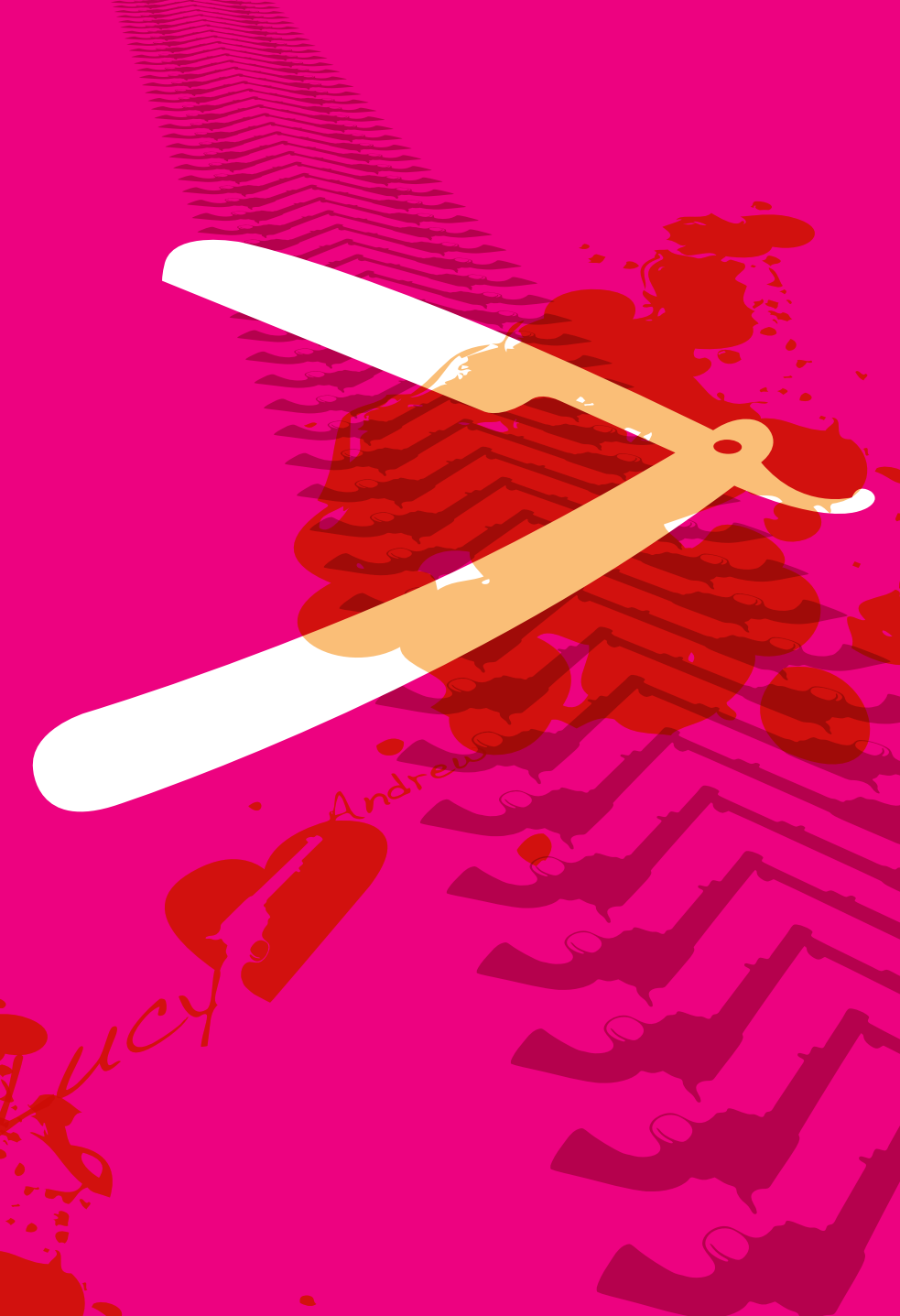
"Yeah. Oh yeah."

Mr. K stared at him for a moment, then lifted his toolkit. "Goodbye, Donaldson. I wish you luck on your future exploits."

"You, too."

Mr. K smiled. Not a hint of a smile. Or a half-smile. But a full one, like he was genuinely happy.

"And you be careful hitching," Mr. K said. "Never know who's going to pick you up."



PART TWO

INDIANAPOLIS, 1995

Lucy sat down at one of the few empty tables on the perimeter of the hotel bar and hoped none of the waitresses would notice her. She was fifteen years old, and even wearing the makeup she'd taken from her mother's vanity, she knew her chances of getting served a drink were remote. Worse, she was taking up real estate that legal customers willing to pay ten dollars for a mediocre glass of wine could have inhabited. And there were plenty of them about, the bar nearly full and the hotel lobby bustling with well-dressed adults older than her mom.

The convention didn't technically begin until tomorrow

morning, so none of them wore name badges. But she felt sure her eyes were passing over famous mystery writers, perhaps even people she'd read. The man she'd come to see, Andrew Z. Thomas, the convention's guest of honor, for whom she'd stolen her mother's car and driven six hundred miles on a learner's permit, had yet to make his appearance. Just the thought of him being in the same building made her knees feel weak.

"Hi there."

Lucy turned and met eyes with a waitress now standing at her table, a pretty girl, probably in college, her dirty blond hair drawn back into a ponytail.

Lucy said, "Could I just get a water, please?"

"I'm afraid you can't sit here, sweetie."

"Why not?"

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-two."

The waitress laughed. "I'm twenty-three, sister. You ain't twenty-two."

"Please don't make me leave. I don't—"

"I'll get in trouble if the manager sees you sitting in my section. I'm sorry."

Lucy stared at the waitress, then lifted her handbag off the table and climbed down from the chair. They'd already refused her a room because of her age. Now this. What a mean hotel.

She was two inches shy of five feet, and she felt even smaller threading her way through the groups of conversing adults in the lobby.

“—got a two-book deal for mid-six figures, which just strikes me as a crime considering his last didn’t even hit—”

“—switched agents—”

“—not sure if my editor’s coming or not. She was supposed to have finished my manuscript by now—”

“—and every time I turn around, Darling’s right there, like he’s stalking me or—”

The smell of cologne, perfume, wine breath, and cigarette smoke overpowering.

She broke out of the crowd and found a cluster of unoccupied chairs and plopped down in one. From this distance, the din of conversations mixed together like the static of a waterfall. She leaned back in the leather chair and stared up the full height of the twenty-one story atrium, the uncomfortable pang in her gut not all that dissimilar to what she experienced every day in the high school cafeteria. Invisibility. The people around her untouchable, unreachable, as characters in a movie while she watched them onscreen from the darkness of an empty theater. This sense, that had been with her for as long as she could remember, even before her father had died, that she wasn’t a participant in any of this. In anything really. Only an observer.

When Lucy straightened in her chair, she saw that a man

now sat across from her. He looked old to her, though he wasn't even thirty. Sports jacket. Khacki slacks. Sending out big wafts of cologne which she thought smelled pretty. He seemed either angry or nervous, and he kept looking at his watch like he was waiting for someone, but if he was, they never came.

She watched him, and the third time their eyes met, the man gave a thin smile and nodded.

He didn't have a name badge either, but Lucy took a stab anyway. "Are you a writer?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Are you a writer?"

"Yeah."

"Cool." The man looked at his watch again. "Are you here for the convention?" she asked.

"Yep."

"What books have you written?"

"Well, my first one just came out two months ago."

"What's it called?"

"*A Death in the Family*."

"I've never heard of it. What's it about?"

"Um, it's...well, it's like, it's about this big family in Portland who has this reunion and one of the older brothers is killed. Or rather he's found dead, and the police come and make everyone stay while they investigate. What you'd call a locked-room mystery, I guess."

“Is it good?”

“I like to think so.”

“Will they have it in the book room?”

“I don’t know. I hope so.”

“Do you have a copy with you?”

“Not on me. Look, it was very nice meeting you, but I have a, um...something to get to.”

“I’m Lucy.”

“Mark.”

Lucy watched Mark wander back toward the hotel bar where he stood on the perimeter of the crowd. He looked around and kept glancing at his watch. After awhile, he turned away and started back through the lobby to the elevators.

Lucy stood up and grabbed her handbag and followed.

The middle elevator in a row of three lifted out of the lobby, and through its glass, she could see Mark leaning against the railing inside, looking out across the hotel.

She watched it climb. Counted the stories until it stopped and then followed Mark’s progress onto the fourteenth floor, counting doors to the room he disappeared inside.

Lucy rode alone, watching the lobby fall away beneath her as the elevator car soared up the back wall of the atrium.

She walked the exposed hallway, the noise from the lobby faint up here and no one else about. From the door beside 1428, she grabbed a “Do Not Disturb” sign and hooked it on

the door to Mark's room.

Then she put her ear to the door, couldn't hear anything. Knocked.

In a minute, it swung open, and Mark, now wearing only a white oxford shirt and khaki pants, stood staring down at her, looking both confused and vaguely annoyed.

He said, "Yes?"

"It's Lucy."

"I'm sorry, what do you want?"

"I just wanted to see your book. The one you told me about."

"You followed me to my room to see my book?"

"Yeah. It sounded good."

"Look, maybe I'll see you downstairs tomorrow, and if you buy one of my books, I'll even sign it for you. How would that be?"

Lucy furrowed her brow and made what she hoped resembled a wounded expression. "Why don't you like me, Mark?"

"I don't...dislike you, I don't even..."

She put her face into her hands and pretended to cry.

"Jesus."

"You're the first real author I've ever met. I don't know anyone here."

"Where are your parents?"

"My mom's in our room watching 'Dr. Quinn, Medicine

Woman.”

He sighed. “If I invite you in—and only for a minute—will you stop crying?”

“Yes.”

“All right, come on in, Lucy.”

Lucy wiped her face and followed Mark into the hotel room. His suitcase lay on the bed, open but not yet unpacked, and Mark was bending over a cardboard box and trying to tear open the top.

“I brought twenty copies of *A Death in the Family*.” He pulled a trade paperback out of the box and handed it to her. Lucy thumbed through the pages, skimmed the flap copy on the back.

The cover was of a gravestone, the book’s title engraved into the stone above the author’s name: Mark Darling.

“Is anybody else sharing the room with you?” Lucy asked.

He tilted his head slightly, like he couldn’t comprehend the question. “No, just me.”

“I need to use the bathroom.”

“Right through that door.”

“Would you sign this for me while I pee?”

“Um, sure.”

She gave back the book and walked into the bathroom and closed the door.

“Write something good!” she called out from inside.

She did have to pee actually, and when she'd finished, she flushed the toilet and washed her hands and took all of her clothes off. She folded them and stacked them on top of her black Chuck Taylors on the toilet basin under a towel, then turned her attention to her handbag.

The marble of the sink was cold against the soles of her bare feet. She walked down to the end and crouched down beside the door.

She'd been in the bathroom more than five minutes already, and she crouched there another five, her legs beginning to cramp, before Mark's voice passed finally through the door.

"Lucy?" he said.

She brought her hand to her mouth to suppress the giggle. She'd imagined this a hundred times, and something about the moment finally being here struck her as funny and surreal. It was the strangest thing. Her body felt all tingly, like whenever she had been around Bobby Cockrell, the first boy in high school she'd had a major crush on.

"You've been in there awhile," Mark said. "Everything okay?"

She didn't answer.

"Lucy, I need to get back down to the lobby."

Silence, Lucy smiling.

"I'm opening the door, all right? Are you um...are you decent?"

She watched the doorknob turn and the door ease open.

Mark's head appeared.

"Lucy?"

She was right beside him, well within reach, but he didn't see her. Kept looking at the toilet, and then the shower, as if trying to piece together how this girl had vanished through the walls.

Lucy reached out and pulled the blade of her dead father's Zwilling J.A. Henckels straight razor through his windpipe in a quick, delicate swipe and the blood from his carotid artery sprayed her face and she squealed with delight as Mark clutched his throat and stared wild-eyed at her.

He staggered over to the sink and looked at himself in the bathroom mirror and all of that blood pouring out of his throat down the front of his white Oxford with a kind of disbelief, Lucy giggling as Mark tried to physically squeeze the opening in his neck back together but the blood kept coming and he gave up and started toward Lucy with a madness in his eyes but the floor was slicked with his blood and his feet shot out from under him.

He slammed flat on his back and his head cracked against the tile.

Lucy slid off the sink and stepped carefully across the floor, dodging the bigger pools of blood and watching a puddle widen around Mark's head, his eyes already beginning to glaze and his hands at his side.

She stood there watching him bleed out and when he finally stopped twitching and blinking, she set the straight razor on the sink. Lucy weighed eighty-three pounds at her last physical, and she figured Mark had at least a hundred on her, but the shower wasn't far. She only had to drag him over a two-inch lip and the blood on the floor provided decent lubrication for the job.

When she'd crammed him into the shower, she closed the glass door and looked at the bathroom.

Blood everywhere. Spots and spatters and streaks on the mirror, the walls, even the ceiling.

What a mess.

What a beautiful mess.

She got down on her knees and flattened herself across the tile and rolled through the pools of blood which were sticky and cool and gave off a dank metallic smell like a thunderstorm coming.

Lucy stood for a long time watching herself in the mirror, kept thinking it looked like she had the most lovely body art imaginable, how she wanted to walk naked through the lobby just like this and soak in the stares. What would Andrew Thomas think to see her like this? She suspected he might love her.

The blood was growing cold and beginning to congeal on her skin when she slid open the shower door and stepped inside. Bending down, she pushed Mark up against the wall

and curled up to him, her spine against his chest. She draped his arm around her and closed her eyes and went to sleep.

Woke in the middle of the night, cold and shivering. Turned the shower on full blast and let the hot water pound the blood out of her hair and her face. She collected her clothes from under the towel atop the basin—not a drop of blood on them—and grabbed the robe off the back of the door and slipped out of the bathroom.

Mark's wallet sat on top of the television, and she went through it and pocketed two key cards and two hundred in cash. She dressed and left the room. Rode down to the lobby which was mostly empty now save for a handful of die-hards who'd persevered beyond last call to sing drunken show tunes on a leather couch.

Outside, the autumn air was cool and scented with the spice of a city she did not know.

Wind blew between the skyscrapers.

The sidewalks were empty.

The streets were empty.

It felt strange to be out here alone, no sound but her footsteps on the pavement. Impossible that her father's funeral had happened today. She wondered if there were people still at her house comforting her mother and brother, or if they had all gone home.

The glow of a payphone caught her attention on the other

side of the street.

She ran across to it and dug some change out of her wallet, dialed the number.

Her mother answered on the fifth ring in a tired voice gone hoarse from crying.

“Hello?”

Lucy said nothing, just listening, her eyes filling up.

“Hello? Lucy, is that you?”

“Hey, Mom.”

“Oh my God, where are you? Are you okay?”

“I just wanted to tell you something.” She was beginning to tremble.

“What, honey? What?”

Lucy shouted into the phone, “HE LOVED ME, YOU STUPID BITCH! HE LOVED ME! I WISH YOU HAD DIED! HE’S THE ONLY THING I EVER FUCKING LOVED!”

She slammed the phone down on the hook and screamed inside the booth until her throat burned.

She’d left her mother’s car in the only parking space she could find—a three-hour meter four blocks from the hotel that had long since expired. There were five orange envelopes under the windshield wipers, and the right front tire had been booted.

She unlocked the car and dragged the guitar case out of the backseat, started back to the hotel.

The keycard worked on the second try, and she slipped into her room and locked the door after her. Stowed Mark's suitcase, his shoes, his wallet, and his sports jacket in the closet.

She'd left home in a hurry, jamming her favorite books, clothes, and a few toiletries into the first thing to cross her path—her brother's guitar case. Now she flipped open the clasps, opened it on the bed, and dumped everything out. Set to work choosing outfits for the convention and smoothing out the wrinkles.

Before bed, she went back into the bathroom, sat on the toilet seat just watching Mark lying motionless in the shower. She got down on her knees and stroked his hair, caressed her finger through the gash in his throat.

By four a.m., she was in bed in her nightgown, and already dreaming of what tomorrow might bring.

The hotel was crawling with people in the morning and Lucy had to wait five minutes to catch an elevator down to the lobby. She picked up her name badge and book bag from registration, bought a latte, and headed off to the first panel of the morning.

"Walking on the Dark Side: What Makes a Bad Guy Bad?" featured five mystery writers, only one of whom she'd heard of. But they were all entertaining. After the panel and with Mark's money, she bought each of their books from a cranky

Milwaukee bookseller named Katz.

Walking through the book room, where vendors had many of the participating writers' books for sale, she couldn't get over the thrill of being around so many people who loved to read. She never saw anyone reading in school. At least not for fun. And the few times she'd sat in the common area by herself with a book, she'd been bullied and mocked. The downside was that most of the people here were as old as her grandfather and many of them looked just as mean.

She took a table in a café downstairs and studied the schedule of events once more, looking for two panels to attend in the afternoon, though nothing caught her interest. Things didn't really get interesting until the star of the whole show arrived: the thriller/horror writer, Andrew Z. Thomas, was going to be interviewed in the main ballroom tomorrow at 11:00 a.m., with a signing to follow. She'd brought every one of his books with her to be autographed.

She sat in the lobby all afternoon, her attention divided between Mark's book, which she was really enjoying, and wanting to be with Mark in the shower again, and watching for Andrew Thomas, figuring if he was here, he'd have to walk past her at some point.

After the last panel of the day let out, the hotel emptied for an hour, and then slowly refilled again, everyone dressed

to the nines now, lots of sports jackets and evening dresses, the book bags exchanged for stylish handbags.

She'd been sitting in the same chair for almost four hours, and her legs felt wobbly and faint when she finally stood.

The hotel bar was packed. All the writers seemed to be there.

She strolled over and wandered through the bar which was becoming more crowded by the minute, searching the faces for Andrew Thomas, but he wasn't there.

Back upstairs, she ordered room service. Stayed in watching television and eating a lavish meal on Darling's tab. A few minutes past midnight, she climbed out of bed and dressed and wandered down to the lobby.

The bar was even more crowded than before, and she scanned the faces in the smoky lowlight, eyes passing over countless groups that constantly shifted and changed, the occasional loner who spoke to no one, the softer, restrained groups huddled on the perimeter.

At the furthest corner of the bar, she finally spotted the man she'd come to meet, and her stomach fluttered.

He sat on a stool, surrounded by a dozen attentive, smiling faces, all listening as he told some story whose words she couldn't begin to pick out from the impressive noise of all those conversations.

She stumbled forward into the outskirts of the crowd,

then elbowed and squeezed her way through the heart of it, until she stood just outside the group of people orbiting Andrew Thomas.

His face was fuller than the author photograph on his latest book jacket, and he had a few days' stubble shadowing his face, but he was undeniably...Andrew.

She'd never heard his voice, and it didn't sound anything like she imagined. He was more soft-spoken, and he had an accent. A southern accent. He was talking to a man seated to the right of him, but there were countless people eavesdropping.

"...so they show me the mock-up for the book cover, and I say, 'Guys, I know you've been really working on this thing, and I appreciate that, but you've just put a penis on the cover of my book.'"

The hovering crowd broke into laughter.

"They said, 'It's not a penis, Andy, it's a minaret.' I said, 'It's flesh colored, it has a shaft, and a bulbous head that appears to be ejaculating the title of my book! Could I please have a new fucking cover without a cock on it?'"

While everyone laughed, Andrew tossed back a shot of something.

The man standing behind him said, "Another shot, Andrew?"

"I buy you shots, Billy. Everyone in for a shot of tequila? Bartender! We need..." Andy counted the people around him.

“...thirteen shots of Patron Silver.”

Lucy stood watching him, mesmerized, trying to wrap her brain around the idea that the man whose words and stories she'd fallen in love with at twelve was sitting ten feet away from her, under the same roof, breathing the same air. She'd suspected it before, but last night with Mark Darling confirmed it: Andrew could read her thoughts. She knew he must have killed before because the way he described what it felt like for the killers in his books had been her experience exactly. She wanted to be closer to him, but his crowd had effectively cloistered him off from the rest of the bar.

Something was coming apart inside of her, this dark, mad need to connect with him, and for a moment the sound of the crowd dropped away. She stared at him, willing his eyes to meet hers, willing them to give her just a single slash of attention as the bartender lined up thirteen shotglasses and began to fill them from two bottles of Patron.

Andrew never looked at her. She watched the bartender bring the tray of shots, watched Andrew pass them around, heard the shotglasses clinking, heard the “cheers.”

And she was crying, invisible again.

She pushed her way back through the crowd into the lobby, moving quickly toward the elevators at the other end and telling herself there was still tomorrow. Andrew's book signing. Anything could happen.

When she walked into her hotel room, she stopped, lingering for a moment in the doorway, wondering if by some chance her room service food could have spoiled so quickly. No. It wasn't that. Of course.

She opened the bathroom and the waft hit her. Mark did not smell so pretty anymore.

She grabbed a towel off the rack and closed the door and tucked it against the crack between the door and the carpet. Lucy walked to the bed, kicked off her Chuck T's, and crawled under the covers. She hit the light. Closed her eyes. Opened them. The stink was still there. Potent and getting stronger every second. She turned on the light and sat up against the headboard. This was bad. First of all, because she couldn't sleep with the smell, and it would only get worse. But more importantly, when she brought Andrew Thomas up here tomorrow, the smell would totally gross him out, make a bad impression.

She hopped out of bed and walked into the bathroom. Opened one of the mini-bottles of shampoo and squirted the entire thing over Mark, who now looked purple and swollen. She cranked up the shower. As the hot water beat down on the corpse, she saw that it was leaking, and the heat only made the smell more intense.

She turned off the shower, grabbed the trashbag out of the waste basket beside the sink, and headed for the door.

Her bare feet tracked down the carpet toward the alcove

where the vending machines hummed. Down in the lobby, a hundred and fifty feet below, she could hear Irish drinking songs lilting up out of the bar.

She held the plastic bag open while cubes of ice rattled down out of the ice machine. Carried it back to 1428 and into the bathroom, where she plugged the shower drain and dumped the ice over Mark Darling. Her heart sank. The bag of ice had barely covered him. She was going to need a lot more.

After five trips, the ice was beginning to look substantial piled on top of the dead writer's chest.

After ten, she stepped into the shower and spread them around, felt a glimmer of relief as they nearly covered him. One more trip, maybe two, and she'd be done.

Lucy reached down and grabbed the bag off the floor.

As she started toward the bathroom door, it swung open. She froze.

A man stood in the threshold, and for a fleeting second, she thought it was Andrew Thomas, but he was wearing different clothes—a white tee-shirt and blue jeans. And his hair was messy, eyes still squinting like he'd just woken up.

He was staring at the blood spatters on the bathroom floor, and at the trash bag in Lucy's hand, and now at Lucy.

It seemed like an entire minute passed without either of them speaking, Lucy thinking about the straight razor in the bedside table drawer. Useless now. Her eyes moved around the

bathroom, looking for something with heft, or with an edge.

It surprised her when the man smiled. He said, “Who you got in there?”

She didn’t answer. She made fists to stop her hands from shaking but all it did was give her shaking fists.

“Quite a mess,” he said. “You’ve been a naughty little girl, haven’t you?”

He took a step forward, glanced in the shower.

Lucy’s eyes welled up. A sob escaped.

“No,” the man said. “No, no, no. Don’t cry.”

He knelt down in front of Lucy.

The eyes. She was going to have to blind him. Jam her thumbs in as far as they would go and run like hell.

“You don’t have to be afraid. What’s your name?”

“Lucy.”

Her hands had been at her sides. Now, she slowly raised them.

“Lucy, did that man in the shower hurt you?”

She nodded.

“What did he do?”

“He tried to rape me.”

She shot her thumbs at his eyes, but he parried right and jumped back, laughing. Lucy ran for the open door. The man grabbed her and pulled her into his chest.

“Shhh,” he whispered as she struggled. “Don’t scream, Lucy.”

She kicked her legs and tried to head-butt him as he carried her out of the bathroom into the hotel room and threw her onto the bed.

“Relax!” he said. “I’m not going to hurt you. I’m not going to get you in trouble.”

Lucy glared at him.

“You should be more careful, you know. Ten trips with an ice bucket in the middle of the night is bound to get somebody’s attention. Particularly if their room is next to the ice machine.”

“Mark was starting to smell.”

“Yeah, I noticed. But a few cubes of ice isn’t going to fix it. You here by yourself?”

She nodded.

“He didn’t try to rape you, did he?”

She just watched him, said nothing.

“That’s a nice piece of work in there,” he said. “That man must be double your weight, at least. How’d you pull it off?”

“I want you to leave.”

“Why?”

“Go!”

“Lucy, please. I know you don’t know me, but you can trust me.”

She stuck her chin out and fought back the tremor in her bottom lip.

“How’d you overpower that man?” he asked again.

“Straight razor.” She said it proudly.

“He flailed around a bunch, didn’t he?”

Lucy couldn’t help but smile. “Yeah. It was funny. But loud and messy, too.”

The man eased down onto the edge of the bed. “Why’d you kill him?”

“They wouldn’t give me a room. I drove six hundred miles to come to this conference, and then they wouldn’t even give me a room.”

“Cause of your age.”

“Yeah.”

“You ever done anything like this before, Lucy?”

She shook her head. “But I thought about it a lot.”

“Wait. This was your first time?” She nodded. The man got a big grin on his face. “Well, how was it for you?”

“Amazing.”

“Yeah?”

“The blood was beautiful. So warm. I took my clothes off and rolled around in it.”

The man’s eyes sparkled. “I remember mine like it was yesterday. I’d give anything to go back and do it again for the first time.” He reached his hand out. “I’m Orson.”

She shook it.

He looked around the room. “So our friend in the shower. Who is he?”

“A writer.”

“Oh, shit. What’s his name?”

“Mark Darling.”

“Never heard of him.”

She pointed to the box of books. “Those are his books over there.”

Orson went over to the box and lifted a book, flipped through it, glanced at the back. “This is his first novel. That’s good.”

“Why?”

“No one here probably knows who he is, so he won’t be missed. Come on, where’s your stuff?”

“Over there. Why?”

“Pack it up. You’re coming with me.”

“No.”

“You can’t stay in here, Lucy.”

“I’m not leaving with you.”

“Listen. Did you have fun cutting Mark’s throat, rolling around in his blood?”

“Yeah.”

“You want to have the opportunity to do it again?”

“Yeah.”

“Then you better listen to me. If you get caught in this hotel room with that dead man, they’re going to lock you up.”

“But I’m not even eighteen.”

Orson walked over to the side of the bed and sat down

next to Lucy. “Look at me.” She stared up at him. “I’ve been doing this a lot longer than you. If you were smart, you’d do what I say, maybe even learn a little something.”

“How many people have you killed?”

“Enough to know we need to get out of this room right now.”

She followed Orson down the hallway to the first room past the ice machine.

“It’s a two-room suite,” he said as he opened the door and let her in. “My friend’s next door sleeping, so let’s not disturb him. I think this sofa folds out into a bed.”

She dropped her guitar case on the floor and helped Orson unfold the sofa sleeper. Orson swiped a blanket from his bed and tossed it to Lucy.

“Now I have to be honest,” he said. “I’m a little worried you might want to cut my throat while I’m sleeping.”

“I won’t,” she said.

“Why don’t you give me your straight razor just to be on the safe side.”

“You don’t believe me?”

“I don’t know you, Lucy.”

She lay awake for a long time thinking how tomorrow was the last day of the conference, and in some ways, the first day of the rest of her life. She wasn’t going home. She knew

that. After Darling, how could she go back to geometry and biology and being a teenage girl in a suburban home? She could feel this stunning blackness flooding into her. It was filling her up so fast she could barely sleep, barely keep her eyes closed. She needed to see more blood. And soon.

She never slept. When the light began to push through the curtains, she sat up on the sofa and looked over at Orson on the bed, watching the man's chest rise and fall, thinking how he'd been smart to take the razor from her. Nothing would've made her happier than to slide the blade across his neck, maybe even taste his blood, let it run down her throat. She should've tasted Darling's. She imagined it would be so rich and even better than the wine her mother sometimes let her sip. Oh, well. Next time.

She rode down in the elevator with Orson and his friend, Luther, a tall, pale-faced man with long, black hair who was seriously creeping her out. He kept watching her with his big black eyes that held such an intensity she wasn't sure she ever wanted to see them alone.

They ate breakfast downstairs, the three of them sitting at a table in a corner, and the fourth time she caught him staring at her, Lucy couldn't help herself.

"Take a picture, dude. It'll last longer."

Orson looked up from his bacon and eggs. "What's wrong?"

“Why does your friend keep staring at me like that? It’s weird.”

Orson grinned and glanced at Luther, then back at Lucy. He leaned toward her and whispered. “He wants to kill you, Lucy.”

She felt a coldness spill inside her gut.

“Why?”

“It’s what he does. He can’t help himself. He’s sitting there imagining draining you in our bathtub. But don’t worry. I’ve told him you’re off-limits. Told him you might even be one of us.”

She glared at Luther. “You don’t scare me.”

He said. “You look like you’re scared, little girl.”

“Oh, you can read my thoughts? Well, if you could, you’d know I’m thinking how pretty your dark blood would look running out of your snow-white neck.”

Orson laughed out loud. “Isn’t she great?”

Lucy hadn’t averted her eyes from Luther, soaking in the psychotic malevolence.

“All right, listen,” Orson said. “I think we’re all a little hard-up for some fun. I had an idea while I was falling asleep last night. Darling’s room is already a wreck. Why don’t we all, together, find someone to take there this afternoon?”

Lucy’s eyes lit up. “Really?”

“Yeah, we’ll go right after Andrew Thomas’s speech.” Orson smiled. “I wouldn’t want to miss that.” He looked at

Luther. “What do you think? You brought your toolbox, right?”

Luther smiled, and it was the scariest thing Lucy had ever seen.

For some reason, Orson didn’t want to sit on the front row for Andrew Thomas’s speech, so Lucy sat by herself, her heart pumping as the man walked up onto the stage.

She stood with the rest of the crowd and applauded the guest of honor, then sat with rapt attention as Andrew read an excerpt from a work in progress, one of the most gruesome and awesome things Lucy had ever heard.

The book was called *The Passenger*, a horror novel about an unnamed, psychopathic hitchhiker who travels around the country getting free rides from people, then robbing and killing them most horribly. In the section Andrew read, the Passenger ties a man to the back of his own car and drags him down the highway for five miles.

The signing line stretched all the way around the bookroom. The eight books in Lucy’s arms were heavy, and by the time she got close to the table, her muscles were beginning to cramp.

She couldn’t take her eyes off of Andrew as he signed books and made small talk with the fans. When it was finally her turn, she set her stack of books on the table and smiled

and reached out her hand.

“Mr. Thomas, I am your biggest fan. I’ve read everything you ever wrote. I’m Lucy. I love what you read today. Will you sign my books?”

He shook her hand and smiled. “Of course.”

“Um, I’m sorry, Mr. Thomas can only sign three books.” Lucy looked at the woman standing behind the writer, a large woman in a horrific dress who looked like a librarian.

“But I want all of them signed.”

The woman pursed her lips. “If everyone brought eight books, we’d be here until Christmas.”

“But everyone didn’t bring eight books. Most only brought one.”

“Pick three. You’re holding up the line.”

Lucy glanced down at Andrew, flashed her puppy dog eyes.

“Margie, I think it’s okay to make one exception,” he said, grabbing the top book on Lucy’s pile and opening it to the cover page. As he looked down to sign, Lucy stuck her tongue out at Margie.

“So are you in high school, Lucy?” he asked as he went through the books.

“I’m in 10th grade.”

“Excellent. I think you might be the youngest person here.”

“When is *The Passenger* coming out?” she asked.

“Probably next year.”

“I can’t wait to read it.” As he signed the last book, she said, “Look, would you maybe like to get a cup of coffee after this? I’d just love to talk with you a little more.”

He smiled and pushed her stack of books toward her. “I’d love to Lucy, but I’m actually flying back to North Carolina in about two hours.”

“Oh.”

“It was great to meet you.”

Lucy lifted her stack of books and headed out of the book room. She might have cried if she didn’t have something else to look forward to.

“What about her?” Lucy said.

“No, I know who that is,” Orson said. “She’s a pretty well-known cozy writer. She’d never go for it.”

Lucy was sitting between Orson and Luther on a sofa at the edge of the hotel bar, the conference booklet open across her lap. Every writer in attendance was pictured in the booklet, along with a brief bio. It made the hunting so much easier.

“I see a possibility,” Luther said.

“Where?”

“Guy standing alone at the corner of the bar, looking around, talking to nobody.”

“Gotcha. Can you read his nametag?”

“No. Too far.” Luther stood up and pushed his way through

the crowd, passing within several feet of the mark. He circled back around and sat down on the couch again, said, “Richard Bryson.”

Lucy flipped through the booklet and found the man’s picture and bio. She read it aloud: “Richard Bryson is not only the author of *Against the Law*, a thriller about a corrupt police force, but the publisher as well. He is currently working on a new book.”

“Perfect,” Orson said. “Luther, head on up. We’ll be there in ten.”

Orson sat with Lucy after Luther had left, watching Bryson drink his beer alone.

“All right, Lucy, tell me how you’d get this man we’ve never met up to our hotel room.”

“Um, I’d tell him we have a party going on and invite him to come.”

“Okay. If some person you’d never met invited you up to their hotel room, would you go?”

“I don’t know.”

“The answer is no. You wouldn’t. Listen, look at me. You’re small and young, you have no physical strength, so if you want to do this, over and over and over again, without getting caught or killed, you have to be smart.”

She rolled her eyes. He was sounding a little like her mother.

“Oh, am I boring you? Get the fuck out of here then, you little brat.”

“You’re not. I’m sorry.”

“I’m trying to help you. So tell me. How would you get Bryson up to our hotel room?”

“I don’t know.”

“You ready to learn something?”

“Yes.”

“Vanity. Know what that is?”

She nodded. “When you’re in love with yourself.”

“Exactly. We’re all in love with ourselves. It’s our weakness. Our main failing. If you can play on that, if you can appeal to someone’s vanity without them knowing you’re doing it, you can get them to do anything you want.”

“I don’t understand.”

Orson stood up. “Follow me. Keep your mouth shut. And watch and learn.”

She followed Orson through the throng of people, stood behind him as he leaned his elbows on the bar and waited for the bartender to notice him.

After a minute, Orson began to look around, and when his eyes fell upon Richard Bryson standing right beside him, Lucy saw a huge smile break across Orson’s face.

He said, “Oh my God, you’re Richard Bryson!”

As the man glanced over at Orson, Lucy got her first

decent look at him. He seemed old as shit to her, at least fifty. His coarse blond hair was long and wavy and on the verge of turning gray, and he had what she thought was a gross mustache.

The man gave a skeptical smile that belied insecurity and said, “Um, yeah, who are you?”

“Well, for starters, I’m a huge fan of *Against the Law*. I thought it was the best book I’ve read this year.”

“Oh, well thank you. You know, I just made it available as an ebook.”

“A what?”

“An electronic book. I put it up on my website as a free download.”

“Oh, neat.”

Oh stupid, Lucy thought. Like people would ever want to read books on an electronic screen.

“Ebooks are going to be the future of publishing. I’m sure of it.”

“Are you working on a new book?” Orson asked.

“Yeah, I am actually.” Orson was right. Lucy saw Bryson beginning to come alive as he talked about himself.

“Can you tell me anything about it?” Orson asked.

“Well, it’s a sequel to *Against the Law*.”

“Oh, fantastic.”

“You know how Rodriguez died at the end?”

“Yeah, sure. That was so heartbreaking.”

“Well, he’s not really dead.”

“No kidding?”

“And he’s back and pissed off and looking for revenge.”

“I can’t wait to read it. Look, Mr. Bryson—”

“Please, Richard.”

“Richard, my name’s Vincent Carmichael, and I’m a freelance reviewer. I do stuff for Kirkus, Booklist, Publishers Weekly. I would love to do an interview with you and pitch it to PW or Kirkus. I think they’d be all over it.”

“That’d be great.”

“Do you have some time right now?”

“Um, sure.”

“What do you say we go up to my room? My recorder is up there and we can see what happens. By the way, this is my niece, Michelle.”

“Hi, Michelle.”

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Bryson,” Lucy said.

Bryson pulled out his wallet. “Let me just pay for my beer.”

“Get out of here.” Orson pulled a five dollar bill from his pocket and tossed it on the bar. “It is so good to finally meet you, Rich.”

He patted the man on the shoulder and pulled him away from the bar.

As they rode up in the elevator, Lucy marveled at the persona Orson had adopted: an attentive, personable book

reviewer who was utterly fascinated with the life and work of Richard Bryson. She didn't know how he controlled himself, because as the doors opened and they walked off the car onto the fourteenth floor, her body was beginning to buzz with anticipation.

At last, they reached the door to 1428, and Lucy pulled the keycard out of her pocket, her hands trembling.

She swiped the card as Bryson said, "You should ask me about my publishing company, too. I hate the big New York publishers, so I've decided to..." He stopped talking as Lucy pushed the door open, and she knew exactly why. A subdued but foul odor seeped out of the room into the hallway.

"After you, Rich," Orson said. He was glancing up and down the hallway, which for the moment, was empty.

Bryson hesitantly entered the hotel room and Lucy and Orson followed after him. Lucy heard the subtle click of Orson locking the door.

"My goodness," Bryson said. "Smells like something died in here."

"You can smell that?" Orson said. They had all passed the closed bathroom door and now stood in the dark bedroom. "It must be that sandwich half I threw away last night. It sure went bad quickly."

Bryson took off his sports jacket. "Do you mind if I use your restroom before we get started? That beer is moving right through me."

“Of course. Right through that door.”

Lucy stood next to Orson, watching Bryson disappear into the bathroom.

“Where’s Luther?” she asked.

“About to have some Luther fun.”

She could see the light come on under the door, the sounds of Bryson shuffling around inside.

“Orson?”

“Shhh,” he whispered. “Let’s just enjoy this moment together.”

Bryson said, “Oh God!”

Something crashed to the floor, and through the door came the sound of a desperate struggle, something banging into cabinets and walls, and then the meaty thud of hard punches.

Bryson went quiet, but there was still movement inside the bathroom. After a minute, the door opened, and Luther walked out smiling.

“Come see,” he said.

Lucy hurried over to the open door.

Bryson lay unconscious on the floor, hog-tied with zip-ties, and a ball-gag in his mouth.

“Nice work, Luther,” she said.

“You should’ve seen his face. He sat down on the toilet to take a dump, and just as he was starting to notice all the blood, I swept the shower curtain back and had Mark

Darling waving to him. Good thing he was on the toilet, 'cause he shit."

"Can I have my straight razor back?" Lucy said.

Orson glanced down at her. "Of course. But you know we aren't just going to kill him right away."

"Why not?"

He smiled. "Sweet, Lucy. So much to learn."

Richard opened his eyes fifteen minutes later, naked and shivering. The balls of his feet just barely touched the dead man sprawled beneath him across the shower tile. His wrists were stretched far above his head, the zip-tie between them hanging from an anchor bolt that had been screwed into the ceiling. A giant ball had been wedged into his mouth.

Orson sat across from him on the toilet. Lucy stood beside him, and Luther sat on the surface of the sink.

"I just want to thank you again, Richard, for taking the time out of your busy schedule to sit for this interview." Orson smiled and looked at Luther. "I think we should let Lucy go first. Okay with you?"

"As long as we get to stay in here and watch. Lucy?"

"What?"

Luther patted a red Craftsman toolbox. "I know you have a straight razor, but if you'd like to borrow anything in here, you're welcome to it."

"Look at you," Orson said. "Sharing."

Lucy saw Richard's eyes bug out when Luther opened the box. Hers did too. "What in the world?"

"I collect ancient surgical tools."

She lifted out a long cylinder with six tiny blades at the end. "What is this?"

"It's called an artificial leech. It tears a superficial wound in the skin and creates a vacuum to suck up the blood."

"It looks fun."

"Oh, it is."

She set it on the countertop and pulled out another tool. Richard's bladder let loose.

"That's in my top three," Luther said. The metal of the instrument was dark brown with rust and looked to be several hundred years old. It had handles at the end, that when pulled apart, made the other end open wide. "It's called a cervical dilator," Luther said, "but it works beautifully on gentlemen as well. It fell out of use, because it typically just tore the insides apart, as you'll see."

She pulled out a strange-looking knife.

"For circumcisions."

What looked like a pair of pliers, but instead of metal grippers, had a needle at the end.

"That's called a hernia tool. I know it looks cool, but it's kind of hard to use. Here, let me show you my favorite." Luther reached into the toolbox and withdrew a long metal tool with a gently curving shaft. "This is called a lithotome.

Shaft goes up the anus and then you squeeze the handle and a blade comes out on a spring release.”

“What was it used for?”

“To cut the bladder to release kidney stones.”

“Oh, this looks wicked.” She pulled out a hollow metal cylinder with circular blades at one end.”

“That’s a scarificator. Used for bloodletting.” He grabbed another tool. “This is a tonsil guillotine.” And another. “This is a trephine for skull drilling. Here’s a vaginal speculum, and these are hemorrhoid forceps.”

The toolbox was empty now, a veritable horrowshow on display on the bathroom sink.

“I dream of coming back as a Victorian doctor,” Luther said.

Orson laughed.

“Decisions, decisions,” Lucy said, reaching for the lithotome.

“It’s sad how he keep passing out,” Lucy said.

Luther was holding a bottle of smelling salts under Bryson’s nose.

“Yeah, you’ve got to be careful,” Orson said. “The biggest buzz-kill is when they lose too much blood. They just go into shock and die, and that’s it. Superficial cuts are key.”

Richard jerked back into consciousness and started to scream again through the ball-gag.

“These aren’t ideal conditions,” Orson said. “Of course, no matter what, we can’t take the ball-gag out of his mouth. What I’m afraid is going to happen is he’s going to throw up and choke to death.”

“I wish I could hear him scream.”

“Me, too. It adds so much more.”

Six hours later, they washed Luther’s surgical tools, left the remains of Bryson hanging in the shower, and walked out of 1428 for the last time.

It was almost nine o’clock and many of the conference attendees had already left, the lobby much quieter now.

Orson bought Luther and Lucy dinner in the restaurant downstairs, everyone happy for the moment, a quiet contentment settling over the meal.

“When do you guys leave?” Lucy asked.

“First thing tomorrow.”

“Can I come with you?”

“No.”

Lucy felt a lump swelling in her throat. “Don’t you like me?”

“Of course,” Orson said. “But I can’t take you with me, I’m sorry.”

“What am I supposed to do?”

“That’s for you to figure out. Are you going home?”

“No. And my car’s booted. I only have a hundred and fifty

dollars and my guitar case.”

Orson reached into his pocket, opened his wallet, pulled out a roll of bills. “Here,” he said. “This should get you started.”

Lucy thumbed through the money. Almost five hundred dollars.

“Thank you,” she said, but the sadness was still there. “How am I supposed to get anywhere? I don’t have a car.”

“You could hitchhike,” Luther said.

“That’s dangerous.”

“You’ll have to be careful,” Orson said. “Although, I have a feeling, it’s the poor people who pick you up that we should be more concerned for.”

Luther laughed. “You need to get your hands on some painkillers. Oxycodone. Something hard-hitting that you can drug people with. That’s the only way you’ll be able to overpower someone bigger than yourself. And let’s face it. Everyone’s bigger than you.”

“Seriously.” Orson reached across the table and touched Lucy’s hand. “You have to be careful. You have to learn to read people. One day, you’re going to meet someone out there like me and Luther, only they may not be so hot to take you under their wing. They might rather hang you up in a shower.”

“I’ll be careful.”

“How?”

“I won’t trust anybody.”

“Good.”

Lucy squeezed his hand. “Thank you, Orson,” she said. “I’m glad I met you. You too, Luther.”

Luther smiled. It was still scary, but for the first time, he didn’t look like he was thinking about killing her.

They walked Lucy through the lobby and out the revolving doors of the hotel. Bellhops were stacking suitcases on luggage carts and hailing cabs.

“You could stay one more night,” Orson said.

“Thanks, but I’m ready to go.” She wrapped her arms around Orson and squeezed him. “I’ll never forget you.”

He knelt down in front of her. “You’re a special girl, Lucy. You know what you are, and you’re not afraid of it, and I admire that. I admire the hell out of it.”

She turned to Luther and shook his hand, then lifted her guitar case and walked away from the hotel, out onto the sidewalk into the night.

Lucy had walked ten blocks before the first pair of headlights appeared in the distance.

She dropped her guitar case on the pavement, a small pit of nerves tightening in her stomach.

The car was getting closer.

She could hear its engine, and for the first time in her life, but certainly not the last, she stuck out her thumb.

A minivan pulled over to the curb and the front passenger window rolled down, a thirty-something woman smiling under the dome light.

“You need a ride, sweetie?” she asked.

Lucy conjured up a smile. “If it’s not too much trouble. It’s really cold out here.”

“I’ve got groceries in the front seat, but you’re welcome to climb in the back.”

Lucy pulled open the side door and stepped into the minivan, stowing her guitar case on the floor and sitting down beside a car seat, where an infant slept.

The woman looked back between the seats at Lucy.

“Just try to keep it down, if you don’t mind,” she said quietly. “As you can see, my little angel is sleeping.”

“No problem,” Lucy whispered, staring down at the baby, thinking, *No Luther, not everyone’s bigger than me.*



PART THREE WISCONSIN, 2007

1

Taylor liked toes.

He wasn't a pervert. At least, not that kind of pervert. Taylor didn't derive sexual gratification from feet. Women had other parts much better suited for that type of activity. But he was a sucker for a tiny foot in open-toed high heels, especially when the toenails were painted.

Painted toes were yummy.

The truck stop whore wore sandals, the cork wedge heels so high her toes were bent. She had small feet—they looked like a size five—and her nails matched her red mini skirt. Taylor spotted her through the windshield as she walked over

to his Peterbilt, wiggling her hips and wobbling a bit. Taylor guessed she was drunk or stoned. Perhaps both.

He climbed out of his cab. When his cowboy boots touched the pavement he reached his hands up over his head and stretched, his vertebrae cracking. The night air was hot and sticky with humidity, and he could smell his own sweat.

The whore blew smoke from the corner of her mouth. “Hiya, stranger. My name’s Candi. With an i.”

“I’m Taylor. With a T.”

He smiled. She giggled, then hiccupped.

Even in the dim parking lot light, Candi with an i was nothing to look at. Mid-thirties. Cellulite. Twenty pounds too heavy for her skirt and halter top. She wore sloppy make-up, her lipstick smeared, making Taylor wonder how many truckers she’d already blown on this midnight shift.

But she did have very cute toes. She dropped her cigarette and crushed it into the pavement, and Taylor licked his lower lip.

“Been on the road a long time, Taylor?”

“Twelve hours in from Cincinnati. My ass is flatter than roadkill armadillo.”

She eyed his rig. He was hauling four bulldozers on his flatbed trailer. They were heavy, and his mileage hadn’t been good, making this run much less profitable than it should have been.

But Taylor didn’t become a trucker to get rich. He did it

for other reasons.

“You feeling lonely, Taylor? You looking for a little company?”

Taylor knew he could use a little company right now. He could also use a meal, a hot shower, and eight hours of sleep.

It was just a question of which need he'd cater to first.

He looked around the truck stop lot. Pretty full for late night in Bumblefuck, Wisconsin. Over a dozen rigs and just as many cars. The 24 hour gas station had a line for the pumps, and Murray's Eats, the all-night diner, appeared full.

On either side of the cloverleaf there were a few other restaurants and gas stations, but Murray's was always busy because they boasted more than food and diesel. Besides the no-hassle companionship the management and local authorities tolerated, Murray's had a full-size truck wash, a mechanic on duty, and free showers.

After twelve hours of caffeine sweating in this muggy Midwestern August, Taylor needed some quality time with a bar of soap just as badly as he needed quality time with a parking lot hooker.

But it didn't make sense to shower first, when he was only going to get messy again.

“How much?” he asked.

“That depends on—”

“Half and half,” he cut her off, not needing to hear the daily menu specials.

“Twenty-five bucks.”

She didn’t look worth twenty-five bucks, but he wasn’t planning on paying her anyway, so he agreed.

“Great, sugar. I just need to make a quick stop at the little girls’ room and I’ll be right back.”

She spun on her wedges to leave, but Taylor caught her thin wrist. He knew she wasn’t going to the washroom. She was going to her pimp to give him the four Ps: Price, preferences, plate number, parking location. Taylor didn’t see any single men hanging around; only other whores, and none of them were paying attention. Her pimp was probably in the restaurant, unaware of this particular transaction, and Taylor wanted to keep it that way.

“I’m sorta anxious to get right to it, Candi.” He smiled wide. Women loved his smile. He’d been told, many times, that he was good-looking enough to model. “If you leave me now, I might just find some other pretty girl to spend my money on.”

Candi smiled back. “Well, we wouldn’t want that. But I’m short on protection right now, honey.”

“I’ve got rubbers in the cab.” Taylor switched to his brooding, hurt-puppy dog look. “I need it bad, right now, Candi. So bad I’ll throw in another ten spot. That’s thirty-five bucks for something we both know will only take a few minutes.”

Taylor watched Candi work it out in her head. This

john was hot to trot, offering more than the going rate, and he'd probably be really quick. Plus, he was cute. She could probably do him fast, and pocket the whole fee without having to share it with her pimp.

"You got yourself a date, sugar."

Taylor took another quick look around the lot, made sure no one was watching, and hustled Candi into his cab, climbing up behind her and locking the door.

The truck's windows were lightly tinted—making it difficult for anyone on the street to see inside. Not that Candi bothered to notice, or care. As soon as Taylor faced her she was pawing at his fly.

"The bedroom is upstairs." Taylor pointed to the stepladder in the rear of the extended cab, leading to his overhead sleeping compartment.

"Is there enough room up there? Some of those spaces are tight."

"Plenty. I customized it myself. It's to die for."

Taylor smiled, knowing he was being coy, knowing it didn't matter at this point. His heart rate was up, his palms itchy, and he had that excited/sick feeling that junkies got right before they jabbed the needle in. If Candi suddenly had a change of heart, there wasn't anything she could do about it. She was past the point of no return.

But Candi didn't resist. She went up first, pushing the trap door on the cab's ceiling, climbing into the darkness

above. Taylor hit the light switch on his dashboard and followed her.

“What is this? Padding?”

She was on her hands and knees, running her palm across the floor of the sleeper, testing its springiness with her fingers.

“Judo mats. Extra thick. Very easy to clean up.”

“You got mats on the walls too?” She got on her knees and reached overhead, touching the spongy material on the arched ceiling, her exposed belly jiggling.

“Those are baffles. Keeps the sound out.” He smiled, closing the trap door behind him. “And in.”

The lighting was subdued, just a simple overhead fixture next to the smoke alarm. The soundproofing was black foam, the mats a deep beige, and there was no furniture in the enclosure except for an inflatable rubber mattress and a medium-sized metal trunk.

“This is kind of kinky. Are you kinky, Taylor?”

“You might say that.”

Taylor crawled over to the trunk at the far end of the enclosure. After dialing the combination lock, he opened the lid. Then he moved his Tupperware container aside and took out a fresh roll of paper towels, a disposable paper nose and mouth mask, and an aerosol spray can. He ripped off three paper towels, then slipped the mask on over his face, adjusting the rubber band so it didn't catch in his hair.

“What is that, sugar?” Candi asked. Her flirty, playful demeanor was slipping a bit.

“Starter fluid. You squirt it into your carburetor, it helps the engine turn over. Its main ingredient is diethyl ether.”

He held the paper towels at arm’s length, then sprayed them until they were soaked.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Candi looked panicked now. And she had good reason to be.

“This will knock you out so I can tie you up. You’re not the prettiest flower in the bouquet, Candi with an i. But you have the cutest little toes.”

He grinned again. But this wasn’t one of his attractive grins. The whore shrunk away from him.

“Don’t hurt me, man! Please! I got kids!”

“They must be so proud.”

Taylor approached her, on his knees, savoring her fear. She tried to crawl to the right and get around him, get to the trap door. But that was closed and now concealed by matting, and Taylor knew she had no idea where it was.

He watched her realize escape wasn’t an option, and then she dug into her little purse for a weapon or a cell phone or a bribe or something else that she thought might help but wouldn’t. Taylor hit her square in the nose, then tossed the purse aside. A small canister of pepper spray spilled out, along with a cell phone, make-up, Tic-Tacs, and several condoms.

“You lied to me,” Taylor said, slapping her again. “You’ve got rubbers.”

“Please...”

“You lying little slut. Were you going to pepper spray me?”

“No... I...”

“Liar.” Another slap. “I think you need to be taught a lesson. And I don’t think you’ll like it. But I will.”

Candi’s hands covered her bleeding nose and she moaned something that sounded like, “Please... My kids...”

“Does your pimp offer life insurance?”

She whimpered.

“No? That’s a shame. Well, I’m sure he’ll take care of your children for you. He’ll probably have them turning tricks by next week.”

Taylor knocked her hands away and pressed the cold, wet paper towels to her face. Not hard enough to cut off air, but hard enough that she had to breathe through them. Even though he wore a paper face mask, some of the pungent, bitter odor got into Taylor’s nostrils, making his hairs curl.

It took the ether less than a minute to do its job on the whore. When she finally went limp, Taylor placed the damp towels in a plastic zip-top bag. Then he took several bungee cords out of the trunk and bound Candi’s hands and arms to her torso. Unlike rope, the elastic bands didn’t require knots, and were reusable. Taylor wrapped them around Candi

tight enough for her to lose circulation, but that didn't matter.

Candi wouldn't be needing circulation for very much longer.

While the majority of his murder kit was readily available at any truck stop, his last piece of equipment was specially made.

It looked like a large board with two four-inch wide holes cut in the middle. Taylor flipped the catch on the side and it opened up on hinges, like one of those old-fashion jail stocks that prisoners stuck their heads and hands into. Except this one was made for something else.

Taylor grabbed Candi's left foot and gingerly removed her wedge. Then he placed her ankle in the half-circle cut into the wood. He repeated the action with her right foot, and closed the stock.

Now Candi's bare feet protruded through the boards, effectively trapped.

He locked the catch with a padlock, and then set the stock in between the floor mats, where it fit snugly into a brace, secured by two more padlocks.

Play time.

Taylor lay on his stomach, taking Candi's right foot in his hands. He cupped her heel, running a finger up along her sole, bringing his lips up to her toes.

He licked them once, tasting sweat, grime, smelling a slight foot odor and a faint residue of nail polish. His pulse

went up even higher, and time seemed to slow down.

Her little toe came off surprisingly easy, no harder than nibbling the cartilage top off a fried chicken leg.

Taylor watched the blood seep out as he chewed on the severed digit—a blood and gristle-flavored piece of gum—and then swallowed.

This little piggy went to market.

He opened up his mouth to accommodate the second little piggy, the one who stayed home, when he realized something was missing.

Where was the screaming? Where was the begging? Where was the thrashing around in agony?

He crawled around the stock, alongside Candi's head. Ether was a pain in the ass to get the dose right, and he'd lost more than one girl by giving her too big a whiff. Luckily, Candi was still breathing. But she was too deeply sedated to let some playful toe-munching wake her up.

Taylor frowned. Like sex, murder was best with two active participants. He gathered up the whore's belongings, then rolled away from her, over to the trap door.

He'd get a bite to eat, maybe enjoy one of Murray's famous free showers. Hopefully, when he got back, *Sleeping Homely* would be awake.

Taylor used one of the ether-soaked paper towels to wipe the blood off his chin and fingers, stuffed them back into the bag, then headed for the diner.

“Where are you?”

“I have no idea.” My cell was tucked between my shoulder and my ear as I drove. “I think I’m still in Wisconsin. Wouldn’t there be some kind of sign if I entered another state?”

“Don’t you have the map I gave you?” Latham asked. “The directions?”

“Yeah. But they aren’t helping.”

“Are you looking at the map right now?”

“Yes.”

The map might have done me some good if I’d been able to see what was on it. But the highway was dark, and the interior light in my 1989 Nova had burned out last month.

“You can’t see it, can you?”

“Define *see*.”

I heard my fiancée sigh. “I just bought you a replacement bulb for that overhead lamp. I saw you put it in your purse. It’s still in your purse, isn’t it?”

“Maybe.”

“And you can’t replace the bulb now, because it’s too dark.”

“That’s a good deduction. You should become a cop.”

“One cop in this relationship is enough. Why didn’t you take my GPS when I insisted?”

“Because I didn’t want you to get lost.”

A billboard was coming up on my right. MURRAY'S - NEXT EXIT. That was nice to know, but I had no idea what Murray's was, or how far the exit was. Not a very effective advertisement.

"My interior light works, Jackie. I could have used Mapquest."

"Mapquest lies. And don't call me Jackie. You know I hate it when people call me Jackie."

"And I hate it when you say you'd be here three hours ago, and you're still not here. You could have left at a reasonable hour, Jack."

He had a point. This was my first real vacation—and by that I mean one that involved actually travelling somewhere—in a few years. Latham had rented a cabin on Rice Lake, and he had driven there yesterday from Chicago to meet the rental owners and get the keys. I was supposed to go with him, and we'd been planning this for weeks, but the murder trial I'd been testifying at had gone longer than expected, and since I was the arresting officer I needed to be there. As much as I loved Latham, and as much as I needed some time away from work, my duty to put criminals away ranked slightly higher.

"Your told-you-so tone isn't going to get you laid later," I said. "Just help me figure out where I am."

Another sigh. I shrugged it off. My long-suffering boyfriend had suffered a lot worse than this in order to be

with me. I figured he had to be incredibly desperate, or a closet masochist. Either way, he was a cutie, and I loved him.

“Do you see the mile markers alongside the road?”

I didn’t see any such thing. The highway was dark, and I hadn’t noticed any signs, off-ramps, exits, or mile markers since I’d left Illinois. But I hadn’t exactly been paying much attention, either. I was pretty damn tired, and had been zoning out to AM radio for the last hour. FM didn’t work. Sometimes I wish someone would shoot my car, put it out of my misery.

“No. There’s nothing out here, Latham. Except *Murray’s*.”

“What’s *Murray’s*?”

“I have no idea. I just saw the sign. Could be a gas station. Could be a waterpark.”

“I don’t remember passing anything called *Murray’s*. Did the sign have the exit number?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

I made a face. “The defense attorney never asked me if I was sure. The defense attorney took me at my word.”

“He should have also made you take my GPS. You see those posts alongside the road with the reflectors on them?”

“Yeah.”

“Keep watching them.”

“Why should—” The next reflector had a number on top. “Oh. Okay, I’m at mile marker 231.”

"I don't have Internet access here at the cabin. I'll call you back when I find out where you are. You're okay, right? Not going to fall asleep while driving?"

I yawned. "I'm fine, hon. Just a little hungry."

"Stop for something if it will keep you awake."

"Sure. I'll just pull over and grab the nearest cow."

"If you do, bring me a tenderloin."

"Really? Is your appetite back?" Latham was still recovering from a bad case of food poisoning.

"It's getting there."

"Aren't you tired? You should rest, honey."

"I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. I'll call soon with your location."

My human GPS unit hung up. I yawned again, and gave my head a little shake.

On the plus side, my testimony had gone well, and all signs pointed to a conviction.

On the minus side, I'd been driving for six straight hours, and I was hungry, tired, and needed to pee. I also needed gas, according to my gauge.

Maybe Murray could take care of all my needs. Assuming I could find Murray's before falling asleep, running out of fuel, starving to death, and wetting my pants.

The road stretched onward into the never-ending darkness. I hadn't seen another car in a while. Even though

this was a major highway (as far as I knew), traffic was pretty light. Who would have thought that Northern Wisconsin at two in the morning on a Wednesday night was so deserted?

I heard my cell phone ring. My hero, to the rescue.

"You're not on I-94," he said. "You're on 39."

"You sound annoyed."

"You went the wrong way when the Interstate split."

"Which means?"

"You drove three hours out of the way."

Shit.

I yawned. "So where do I go to get to you?"

"You need some sleep, Jack. You can get here in the morning."

"Three hours is nothing. I can be there in time for an early breakfast."

"You sound exhausted."

"I'll be fine. Lemme just close my eyes for a second."

"That's not even funny."

I smiled. The poor sap really did care about me.

"I love you, Latham."

"I love you, too. That's why I want you to find a room somewhere and get some rest."

"Just tell me how to get to you. I don't want to sleep alone in some cheap hotel with threadbare sheets and a mattress with questionable stains. I want to sleep next to you in that cabin with the big stone fireplace. But first I want to rip off

those cute boxer-briefs you wear and... hello? Latham?"

I squinted at my cell. No signal.

Welcome to Wisconsin.

I yawned again. Another billboard appeared.

MURRAY'S FAMOUS TRUCK STOP. FOOD. DIESEL.
LODGING. TRUCK WASH. SHOWERS. MECHANIC ON
DUTY. TEN MILES.

Ten miles? I could make ten miles. And maybe some food
and coffee would wake me up.

I pressed the accelerator, taking the Nova up to eighty.

Murray's here I come.

3

Taylor paused at the diner entrance, taking everything in. The restaurant was busy, the tables all full. He spotted three waitresses, plus two cooks in the kitchen. Seated were various truckers, two with hooker companions. Taylor knew the owners encouraged it, and wondered what kind of cut they got.

He saw what must have been Candi's pimp, holding court at a corner table. Rattleskin cowboy boots, a gold belt buckle in the shape of Wisconsin, fake bling on his baseball cap. He was having a serious discussion with one of his whores. The rest of the tables were occupied by truckers. Taylor didn't see any cops; a pimp

in plain sight meant they were being paid off.

The place smelled terrific, like bacon gravy and apple pie. Taylor's stomach grumbled. He located the emergency exit in the northeast corner, and knew there was also a back door that led into the kitchen; Taylor had walked the perimeter of the building before entering.

With no tables available, he approached the counter and took a seat there, between the storefront window and a pudgy, older guy nursing a cup of coffee. It was a good spot. He could see his rig, and also see anyone approaching it or him.

Taylor hadn't been to Murray's in over a year, but the printed card sticking in the laminated menu said their specialty was meatloaf.

"Meatloaf is good," the old guy leaned over and said.

"I didn't ask for your opinion."

"You were looking at the card. Thought I'd be helpful."

He examined the man, a grandfatherly type with thinning gray hair and red cheeks. Taylor wasn't in the best of moods—one toe was barely an appetizer for him—and he was ready to tell Grandpa off. But starting a scene meant being remembered, and that wasn't wise.

"Thank you," Taylor managed.

"You're welcome."

A waitress came by, wearing ugly scuffed-up gym shoes. Taylor ordered coffee and the meatloaf. The coffee was strong, bitter. Taylor added two sugars.

“Showers are good here too,” his fat companion said.

Taylor gave him another look.

Is this guy trying to pick me up?

The man sipped his coffee and didn't meet Taylor's stare.

“Look, buddy. I just want to eat in peace. No offense. I've been on the road for a long time.”

“No offense taken,” the fat man said. He finished his coffee, then signaled the waitress for a refill. “Just telling you the showers are good. Be sure to get some quarters. They've got a machine, sells soap. Useful for washing off blood.”

All of Taylor's senses went on high alert, and he felt himself flush. This guy didn't look like a cop—Taylor could usually spot cops. He wore baggy jeans, a plaid shirt, a Timex. On the counter next to his empty cup was a baseball cap without any logo. A few days' worth of beard graced his double chin.

No, he wasn't law. And he wasn't cruising him, either.

So what the hell does he want?

“What do you mean?” Taylor asked, keeping his tone neutral.

“Drop of blood on your shirt. Another spot on your collar. Some under your fingernails as well. You wiped them with ether, but it didn't completely dissolve. Did you know that ether was first used as a surgical anesthetic back in 1842? Before that, taking a knife to a person meant screaming and thrashing around.” The man held a beefy hand to his mouth

and belched. “Course, some people might like the *screaming and thrashing around part*.”

Taylor bunched his fists, then forced himself to relax. Had this guy seen him somehow? Did he know about Candi in the sleeper?

No. He couldn't have. Tinted windows on his cab. No windows at all in the sleeping compartment.

He took a casual glance around, trying to spot anyone else watching. No one seemed to be paying either of them any attention.

Taylor dropped his hand, slowly reaching for the folding knife clipped to his belt. He considered sliding it between this guy's ribs right there and getting the hell out. But first Taylor needed to know what Grandpa knew. Maybe he could lead him to the bathroom, get him into a stall...

Taylor froze. His knife was missing.

“Take it easy, my friend,” said the old, fat man. “I'll give you your knife back when we're through.”

Taylor wasn't sure what to say, but he believed everyone had an angle. This guy knew more than he should have. But what was he going to do with his information?

“Who are you?” Taylor asked.

“Name's Donaldson. And you probably meant to ask *What are you?* You've probably figured out I'm not a cop, not a Fed. Thanks, Donna.” He nodded at the waitress as she refilled his coffee. “Actually, I'm just a fellow traveler. Enjoy-

ing the country. The sites. The *people*.” Donaldson winked at him. “Same as you are.”

“Same as me, huh?”

Donaldson nodded. “A bit older and wiser, perhaps. At least wise enough to not use that awful ether anymore. Where do you even get that these days? I thought ether and chloroform were controlled substances.”

“Starter fluid,” Taylor said. This conversation was getting surreal.

“Clever.”

“So what is it exactly you do, Donaldson?”

“For work? Or do you mean with the people I encounter? I’m a courier, that’s my job. I travel all around, delivering things to people who need them faster than overnight. As for the other—well, that’s sort of personal, don’t you think? We just met, and you want me to reveal intimate details of my antisocial activities? Shouldn’t we work up to that?”

So far, Donaldson had been the embodiment of calm. He didn’t seem threatening in the least. They might have been talking about sports.

“And you spotted me because of the blood and the ether smell?”

“Initially. But the give-away was the look in your eyes.”

“And what sort of look do my eyes have, Donaldson?”

“This one.” Donaldson turned and looked at Taylor. “The eyes of a predator. No pity. No remorse. No humanity.”

Taylor stared hard, then grinned. “I don’t see anything but regular old eyes.”

Donaldson held the intense gaze a moment longer, then chuckled. “Okay. You caught me. The eyes don’t tell anything. But I caught you casing the place before you walked in. Looking for cops, for trouble, for exits. A man that careful should have noticed some spots of blood on his shirt.”

“Maybe I cut myself shaving.”

“And the ether smell?”

“Maybe the rig was giving me some trouble, so I cleaned out the carburetor.”

“No grease or oil under your nails. Just dried blood.”

Taylor leaned in close, speaking just above a whisper.

“Give me one good reason I shouldn’t kill you, Donaldson.”

“Other than the fact I have your knife? Because you should consider this a golden opportunity, my friend. You and I, we’re solitary creatures. We don’t ever talk about our secret lives. We never share stories of our exploits with anyone. I’ve been doing this for over thirty years, and I’ve only met one other person like us. I’ve run across a few wannabes. More than a few crazies. But never another hunter. Like we are. Don’t you think this is a unique chance?”

The meatloaf came, steaming hot. But Taylor wasn’t hungry anymore. He was intrigued. If Donaldson was what he claimed to be, the fat man was one hundred percent

correct. Taylor had never talked about his lifestyle with anyone, other than his victims. And then, it was only to terrify them even more.

Sometimes, Taylor had fantasies of getting caught. Not because he harbored any guilt, and not because he wanted to be locked up. But because it would be nice, just once, to be open and honest about his habits with the whole world. To let a fellow human being know how clever he'd been all these years. Maybe have some shrink interview him and write a bestselling book.

How interesting it would be to talk shop with someone as exceptional as he was.

"So you want to swap stories? Trade tactics? Is that it, Donaldson?"

"I can think of duller ways to kill some time at a truck stop."

Taylor cut the meatloaf with his fork, shoved some into his mouth. It was good.

"Fine. You go first. You said you don't like ether. So how do you make your—" Taylor reached for the right words "*—guests compliant.*"

"Blunt force trauma."

"Using what?"

"Trade secret."

"And what if you're too... *aggressive...* with your use of blunt force?"

“An unfortunate side-effect. Just happened to me, in fact. I recently picked up a tasty little morsel, but her lights went out before I could have any fun with her.”

“Picked up? Hitcher?”

Donaldson sipped more coffee and grinned. “Didn’t you know about the dangers of hitchhiking, son? Lots of psychos out there.”

Taylor shoved more meatloaf into his mouth, and followed it up with some mashed potatoes. “Hitchers might be missed.”

“So could truck stop snatch.”

Taylor paused in mid-bite.

“Your fly is open. And I saw how you were measuring the resident pimp.” Donaldson raised an eyebrow. “Have you relieved him of one of his steady sources of income?”

Now it was Taylor’s turn to grin. “Not yet. She’ll be dessert when I’m done with this meatloaf.”

“And once you’re finished with her?”

Taylor zipped up his fly. “I like rivers. Water takes care of any trace evidence, and it’s tough for the law to pinpoint the location where they were dumped in. You?”

“Gas and a match. First a nice spritz with bleach. Bleach destroys DNA, you know.”

“I do. Got a few bottles in the truck.”

Taylor still couldn’t assess what sort of threat Donaldson posed. But he had to admit, this was fun.

“Who was your first?” Donaldson asked.

“Dad. Fucker had it coming.”

“How’d you do it?”

Taylor ate more potatoes. “Ran him over. He fucked up one of my shocks, too. Bones caught up under the suspension, did a real number on a tie rod end.”

The older man chuckled. “That’s not something you can take to your local mechanic.”

“Hell, no. Fixed it myself. Took three car washes and a rainstorm before that car stopped dripping blood. How about you?”

Donaldson tipped his coffee cup. “Dad.”

“No shit?”

“I guess exceptional people like us think alike.”

Exceptional. Taylor liked that term.

“So how did dear old Dad meet his unfortunate end?”

“Baseball bat.”

“Never tried it. Fun?”

“Yeah. But too hard to clean. Even the aluminum models. Not even bleach can get those stains out. And not east to ditch in an emergency.”

Taylor finished up the last bite of meatloaf. It was good. A loose grind, so you could taste all the little parts that went into it. Taylor loved texture. Mouth-feel was even better than taste.

“Had many emergencies?” he asked Donaldson.

“A few close calls. Once I was even pulled in for a line up. But no arrests. You?”

Taylor grinned. “I’m a law-abiding citizen. Worst thing on my record is a speeding ticket.”

Donaldson slurped more coffee. “Never got a speeding ticket. Was pulled over for a broken taillight once. Had a guest in the trunk, and the little bitch kicked it out.”

“She was in there when the cop stopped you?”

“Indeed. And let me tell you, that will get your heart pumping.”

Taylor had no doubt. “What’d you do?”

“I turned around, shot her three times through the back seat, hoping it didn’t go through the trunk or that the cop saw me. Then I cranked open the windows to get the gunpowder smell out, pulled onto the shoulder, and hoped he didn’t notice the bullet holes in my upholstery. He didn’t. Let me off with a warning.”

“Would you have killed the pig or let him take you in?”

“I would have killed him,” Donaldson said. “I don’t like pigs.”

“You and me both, brother.”

“So, here’s the ten-thousand dollar question,” Donaldson asked. “How many are you up to?”

Taylor wiped some gravy off his mouth with a paper napkin. “So that’s where we stand? Whipping out our dicks and seeing whose is bigger?”

"I've been at this a very long time." Donaldson belched again. "Probably since before you were born. I've a lot read about others like us; I love those true crime audiobooks. They help pass the time on long trips. I collect regular books, too. Movies. Newspaper articles. If you've done the same research I have, then you know none of our American peers can prove more than forty-eight. That's the key. *Prove*. Some boast high numbers, but there isn't proof to back it up."

"So are you asking me how many I've done, or how many I can prove?"

"Both."

Taylor shrugged. "I lost count after forty-eight. Once I had one in every state, it became less about quantity and more about quality."

"You're lying," Donaldson said. "You're too young for that many."

"One in every state in the lower forty-eight, old man."

"Can you prove it?"

"I kept driver's licenses, those that had them. Probably don't have more than twenty, though. Not many whores carry ID."

"No pictures? Trophies? Souvenirs?"

Taylor wasn't going to share something that personal with a stranger. He pretended to sneer. "Taking a trophy is like asking to get caught. I don't plan on getting caught."

"True. But it is nice to relive the moment. Traveling

is lonely, and memories unfortunately fade. If it wasn't so dangerous, I'd love to videotape a few."

That would be nice, Taylor thought, finishing the last bit of meatloaf. *But my trophy box will have to suffice.*

"So how many are you up to, Grandpa?"

"A hundred twenty-seven."

Taylor snorted. "Bullshit."

"I agree with you about the danger of keeping souvenirs, but I have Polaroids from a lot of my early ones."

"Dangerous to carry those around with you."

"I've got them well hidden." Donaldson stared at him, his eyes twinkling. "Would you be interested in seeing them?"

"What do you mean? One of those *I'll show you mine if you show me yours* deals?"

"No. Well, not exactly. I'm not interested in seeing your driver's license collection. But I would be interested in paying a little visit to your current guest."

Taylor frowned. "I'm not big on sharing. Or sloppy seconds."

Donaldson slowly spread out his hands. "I understand. It's just that... you know how it is, when you get all worked up, and then they quit on you."

Taylor nodded. Having a victim die too soon felt like having something precious stolen from him.

"You don't seem like the shy type," Donaldson continued. "I thought, perhaps, you wouldn't mind doing your thing

when someone else was there to watch.”

Taylor smiled. “Aren’t you the dirty old man.”

Donaldson smiled back. “A dirty old man who doesn’t have the same distaste of sloppy seconds as you apparently have. I see no problem in going second. As long as there’s something left for me to enjoy myself with.”

“I leave all the major parts intact.”

“Then perhaps we can come to some sort of arrangement.”

“Perhaps we can.”

Donaldson’s smile suddenly slipped off his face. He’d noticed the same thing Taylor had.

A cop had walked into the restaurant.

Woman, forties, well built, a gold star clipped to her hip. But even without the badge, she had that swagger, had that look, that Taylor had spent a lifetime learning to spot.

“Here comes trouble,” Donaldson said.

And, as luck would have it, trouble sat down right next to them.

4

After filling my gas tank and emptying my bladder, I went in search of food.

The diner was surprisingly full this late at night. Truckers mostly. And though I hadn’t worked Vice in well over a decade,

I was pretty sure the only women in the place were earning their living illegally.

Not that I judged, or even cared. One of the reasons I switched from Vice to Homicide was because I had no problems with what consenting adults did to themselves or each other. I'd done a few drugs in my day, and as a woman I felt I should be able to do whatever I wanted with my body. So the scene in the diner was nothing more to me than local color. I just wanted some coffee and a hot meal, which I believed would wake me up enough to get me through the rest of my road trip and into the very patient arms of my fiancée.

I expected at least one or two catcalls or wolf whistles when I entered, but didn't hear any. Sort of disappointing. I was wearing what I wore to court, a brown Ann Klein pantsuit, clingy in all the right places, and a pair of three inch Kate Spade strappy sandals. The shoes were perhaps a bit frivolous, but the jury couldn't see my feet when I took the stand. I left for Wisconsin directly from court, and wore the shoes because Latham loved them. I had even painted my toenails to celebrate our vacation.

Maybe the current diners were too preoccupied with the hired help to know another woman had entered the place. Or maybe it was me. Latham said I gave off a "cop vibe" that people could sense, but he assured me I was still sexy. Still, a Wisconsin truck stop at two in the morning

filled with lonely, single men, and I didn't even get a lecherous glance. Maybe I needed to work-out more.

Then I realized I still had my badge clipped to my belt. Duh.

I quickly scoped out the joint, finding the emergency exit, counting the number of patrons and employees, identifying potential trouble. An absurdly dressed man in expensive boots and a diamond studded John Deere cap stared hard at me. He gave me a look that said he hated cops, and I gave him a look that said I hated his kind even more. While I tolerated prostitutes, I loathed pimps. Someone taking the money you earned just because they were bigger than you wasn't fair.

But I didn't come here to start trouble. I just wanted some food and caffeine.

I walked the room slowly, feeling the cold stares, and found counter space next to a portly man. I eased myself onto the stool.

"Coffee, officer?"

I nodded at the waitress. She overturned my mug and filled it up. I glanced at the menu, wondering if they had cheese curds—those little fried nuggets of cheddar exclusive to Wisconsin.

"The meatloaf is good."

I glanced at the man on my left. Big and tall, maybe fifteen years older than I was. He had a kind-looking face, but his smile appeared forced.

“Thanks,” I replied.

I sipped some coffee. Nice and strong. If I got two cups and a burger in me, I’d be good to go. The waitress returned, I ordered a cheeseburger with bacon, and a side of cheese curds. “Never seen you here before.”

The voice, reeking of alpha male, came from behind me. I could guess who it belonged to.

“Passing through,” I said, not bothering to turn around.

“Well, maybe you can hurry it along, little lady. Your kind isn’t good for business.”

I carefully set down my mug of coffee, then slowly swiveled around on my stool.

The pimp was sticking his chest out like he was being fitted for a bra, a few stray curly hairs peeking through his collar. One of his women, strung out on something, clung unenthusiastically to his side. Her concealer didn’t quite cover up her black eye.

“I’m off duty, and just stopped in for coffee and some cheese curds, which I can’t get in Illinois. I suggest you mind your own business. This isn’t my jurisdiction, but I’m guessing the local authorities wouldn’t mind if I fed you some of your teeth.”

The older fat guy next to me snorted. The pimp wasn’t so amused.

“The *local authorities*,” he said it in a falsetto, obviously trying to mimic me, “and I have an arrangement. That

arrangement means no cops.” He gave me a rough shove in the shoulder. “And I’m sure they wouldn’t mind if I fed you—”

I drove the salt shaker into his upper jaw with my palm, breaking both the glass and the teeth I’d promised. Besides being hard and having weight, the shards and the salt did a number on the pimp’s gums. Must have hurt like crazy.

He dropped to his knees, clutching his face and howling, and three of his women dragged him out of there. I did a slow pan across the room, looking for other challengers, seeing none. Then I brushed my hand on my pants, wiping off the excess salt, and went back to my coffee, trying to control the adrenalin shakes. I hated violence of any kind, but once he touched me, I didn’t have any other recourse. I didn’t want to play footsie with the local cops he was paying off, trying to get an assault charge to stick. Or worse, wind up in the hospital because some asshole pimp thought he could treat me the same way he treated the women who worked for him.

Better to nip it in the bud and drop him fast. Though I didn’t have to feel good about it.

I took a deep, steadying breath, and managed to sip some coffee without spilling it all over myself, all the while keeping one eye on the entrance. I’d hurt the pimp bad enough to require an emergency room visit, but if he were tougher and dumber than I’d guessed, he might return with

a weapon. I set my purse on the counter, my .38 within easy reach, just in case.

“You’re Lieutenant Jack Daniels, aren’t you?”

I glanced at the fat man again. Even though I’d been on the news many times, I didn’t get recognized very often in Chicago, and it never happened away from home.

“And you are?” My voice came out higher than I would have liked.

“Just a fan. You got that serial killer Charles Kork, the one they called the Gingerbread Man. How many women did he kill?”

“Too many.” I turned back to my coffee.

“I saw the TV movie. The one that became the series. You’re much better looking than the actress who played you.”

I was in no mood to be idolized. Plus, there was something creepy about this guy.

“Look, buddy, I don’t want to be rude, but I’m really not up for conversation right now.”

The fat man didn’t take the hint. “And you got Barry Fuller. He killed over a dozen, didn’t he? He was both a serial killer and a mass murderer, due to all those Feds he took out at that rest stop.”

I sighed. The waitress came by with my cheese curds. She set down the basket and winked at me. “These are on me.”

“Thanks. I could use some salt.”

I tried a curd. Too hot, so I spit it back out into my palm

and played hot potato until it cooled off. My biggest fan refused to give up.

“There were others in the Kork family as well, weren’t there? A whole group of psychos. I heard they killed over forty people, total.”

I really didn’t want to think about the Kork family, and I really didn’t want to have a late-night gabfest with a cop groupie.

But, on the plus side, knocking out that pimp’s teeth really woke me up.

When the waitress brought me the salt, I asked for my meal to go. The fat guy apparently didn’t like that, because he gave me his back and had an intense whisper exchange with his buddy; a younger, attractive man in a flannel shirt. The young guy nodded, got up, and left.

“Just one last question, Lieutenant, and then I promise I’ll leave you alone.”

I sighed again, glancing at him. “Go ahead.”

“Did you ever try to take on two serial killers at once?”

I popped a curd in my mouth. “Can’t say that I have.”

He smiled, lopsided. “Too bad. That would have been cool.”

The fat guy threw down some money, then followed his buddy out.

No longer pestered, I decided to eat there, and settled in to eat my cheese curds.

Taylor hadn't ever killed a cop. He came close once, a few years ago, when a state trooper pulled him over, and asked him to step out of his truck. Taylor had been ready to pull his knife and gut the pig, but the cop only wanted him to do a field sobriety test. Taylor wouldn't ever risk driving drunk, and he easily passed, getting let off with a warning and pulling away with a dead hooker in his sleeping compartment.

But he was itching to get at this cop. Taylor liked strong women. He liked when they fought him, refusing to give up. They were so much fun to break. Especially when they had such adorable feet.

As Donaldson suggested, Taylor had left the diner and gone back to his rig to grab the ether. Candi with an i was still out cold, but she held far less fascination for Taylor than this new prospect.

I'm going to have a little nip of Jack Daniels, he thought, smiling wildly. Maybe more than one. And maybe not so little.

For helping out, he'd let Donaldson have Candi. While Taylor wasn't into the whole voyeur scene, it might be interesting to watch another pro do his thing. Hopefully, it didn't involve any sort of sex, because he had zero desire to see Donaldson's flabby, naked ass.

Taylor grabbed the plastic bag—the ether-soaked paper

towels still moist—and met Donaldson in the parking lot.

“The best spot is here, in the shadow of this truck,” Donaldson said.

Taylor didn’t like him calling the shots, but he heard the man out.

“She thinks I’m a fan,” Donaldson continued, “so I’m going to call her over here, ask for an autograph. Then you come up behind her with the ether.”

“She’s armed. Her purse was too heavy to only be carrying a wallet and make-up.”

“I saw that, too. I’ll grab her wrists, you get her around the neck. We can pull her to the ground here, out of sight. How close is your truck?”

“The red Peterbilt, a few spaces back.”

“When she’s out, we throw her arms around our shoulders, walk her over there like she’s drunk.”

Taylor shook his head. “Only when we’re sure no one is watching. I don’t want a witness getting my plate number.”

“Fine. We can walk her around until we’re sure we’re clear.”

Taylor stared at Donaldson for a moment, then said, “She’s mine.”

Donaldson didn’t respond.

“I’ll give you the whore for helping me, Donaldson. But the cop is mine.”

Donaldson eventually nodded. “Fair enough. Is the whore cute?”

“Too old, fat thighs, saggy gut from popping out kids.”

Donaldson raised his eyebrow. “She’s got kids?”

Taylor laughed. “You into kiddies, Donaldson?”

“Any port in the storm. But you can have fun with kids in other ways. Did the whore have a cell phone?”

“Yeah.”

“Give it here.”

Interested in where Donaldson was going with this, Taylor dug the phone out of his pocket and handed it over. Donaldson scrolled through the address book.

“Calling home,” Donaldson told him.

“Can’t calls be traced?”

“They can be traced to this cell phone, but not to our current location. To do that requires some highly sophisticated equipment—which I highly doubt the local constabulary possesses.”

“Put it on speaker.”

Donaldson hit a button, and Taylor heard ringing.

“Hello?” A child’s voice, preteen.

“This is Detective Donaldson. I’m sorry to inform you that your mommy is dead.”

“What?”

“Mommy is dead, kid. She was horribly murdered.”

“Mommy’s dead?” The child began to cry.

“It’s an occupational hazard. Your mom was a whore, you know. She had sex with strange men for money. One of

those men killed her.”

“Mommy’s dead!”

Donaldson hit the disconnect button.

Taylor shook his head, smiling. “Man, that is low.”

“I’ll call him back later, see how he’s doing. This phone has a camera, too. Maybe I’ll send him some pictures of Mommy when I’m done with her.”

“What about the babysitter sending the cops here?”

“You think the babysitter knows what Mom’s job is? And even if she calls the cops, Murray’s pays them to stay away. Besides, we’ll be in your truck by then.”

Taylor thought it was reckless. But still, calling up a kid and saying his mother was dead was pretty good. Taylor considered all of the cell phones he’d thrown away, and cursed himself for the fun he’d missed.

Donaldson dug into his pocket and produced a pair of small binoculars. He held them to his face and looked at the diner.

“The cop is still working on her burger. She is a sweet piece of pie, isn’t she? *Jack fucking Daniels*. What a lucky day indeed. It’s a small world, my friend.”

“Not when you’re driving from L.A. to Boston.”

“Funny you should mention that. One of the reasons I’m a courier is to have a wide area to hunt in. I’m assuming you got into trucking for the same reason.”

“The wider the better. You shouldn’t shit where you eat.”

“I agree. I don’t think I’m even on the Fed’s radar. And

cops don't talk to each other from state to state. A man could keep on doing this for a very long time, if he plays it smart."

"So, what's your thing?" Taylor asked.

Donaldson lowered the binocs. "My thing?"

"What you do to them."

Donaldson did the eyebrow raise again, which was starting to get annoying. "Have we reached that point in our relationship where we can share our methods? You haven't even told me your name."

"It's Taylor. And I want to know, before I invite you into my truck, that you aren't into some sick shit."

"Define *sick*."

"Guts are okay, but don't puncture the intestines. That smell takes forever to go away."

"I'm not into internal organs."

"How about rape?"

Donaldson smiled. "I *am* into rape."

"I don't want to see it. No offense, but naked guys are not a turn-on for me."

"That's fair enough. We can take turns, give each other some privacy. My *thing*, as you put it, is to cut off their faces. One little piece at a time. A nostril. An ear. An eye. A lip. And then I feed their faces to them, bit by bit.

Taylor could see the appeal in that.

"How about you, Taylor?"

“Biting. Toes and fingers, to start. Then all over.”

“How long have you kept one alive for?”

“Maybe two days.”

Donaldson nodded. “See, that’s nice. I do all my work outdoors, different locations, so I never have time to make it last, savor it. You’ve got a little murder-mobile, you can take your time.”

“That’s the reason I’m a trucker, not a courier.”

Donaldson got a wistful look. “I’m thinking of renting a shack out in the woods. Out in the middle of nowhere. Then I could bring someone there, really drag it out. You remember that old magic trick? The girl in the box, and the magician sticks swords in it?”

Taylor nodded. “Yeah.”

“I’d love to build one of those. Except there’s no trick. Wouldn’t that be fun? Sticking the swords in one at a time?”

Taylor decided it would.

Donaldson peered through the binocs again. “Here she comes. Let’s get in position.”

Taylor nodded. He felt the excitement building up again, but a different kind of excitement. This time, he was sharing the experience with another person. It was oddly fulfilling, in a way his dozens of other murders hadn’t been.

Maybe tag-team was the way to go.

He clenched the ether-soaked paper towels, crouched behind a bumper, and waited for the fun to start.

The burger was good. The coffee was good. The cheese curds were heavenly. I had no idea why they weren't served in Chicago.

I paid, left a decent tip, then tried calling Latham to tell him I felt good enough to keep driving.

Still no signal. I needed to switch carriers, or get a new phone. It especially bugged me because I saw other people in the diner talking on their cell phones. If that *Can you hear me now?* guy walked into the restaurant, I would have bounced my cell off his head.

The parking lot had decent lighting, but all of the big trucks cast shadows, and I knew more than most the dangers of walking in shadows. I pulled my purse on over my head and tucked it under my arm, then headed for my car while staying in the light. The last thing I needed was the pimp to make a play for me. Or that—

“Lieutenant Daniels!”

—fat guy from the diner, who approached me at a quick pace, coming out from behind one of the rigs. I stopped, my hand slipping inside my purse and seeking my revolver. Something about this man rubbed me the wrong way, and at over two hundred and fifty pounds he was too big to play around with.

He slowed down when I reached into my handbag—a

bad sign. People with good intentions don't expect you to have a gun. I felt my heart rate kick up and my legs tense.

"Don't come any closer," I commanded, using my cop voice.

He stopped about ten feet in front of me. His hands were empty. "I wanted to ask you for your autograph."

My fingers wrapped around the butt of my .38. Confrontation, even with over twenty years of experience, was always a scary thing. Ninety-nine percent of the time, de-escalation was the key to avoiding violence. Take control of the situation, be polite but firm, apologize if needed. It wouldn't have worked on the pimp, who was showing off for the crowd, but it might work here.

"I'm sorry, I don't give autographs. I'm not a celebrity."

"It would mean a lot to me." He held up his palms and took another step forward.

I was taught that you never pull out your weapon unless you intend to use it.

I pulled out my weapon.

"I told you not to come any closer."

"You're kidding, right?" Another step. He was six feet away from me.

I pointed my gun at his chest. "Does it look like I'm kidding?"

He put on a crooked grin. "Is this how you treat your fans, Lieutenant? I don't mean any harm. You want to shoot an

innocent civilian?”

“I don’t want to. But I will, if I feel threatened. And right now I feel threatened. Where’s your buddy?”

“My buddy?”

He was lying, I could see it on his face, and I swirled around, sensing something behind me. I caught a flash of movement, someone ducking between two parked cars. I spun again, storming up to the fat guy, grabbing two of his outstretched fingers and twisting. My action was fast, forceful, and I gained enough leverage to bend his arm to the side and drive him onto his knees, my gun trained on his head.

“Get on the pavement, face down!”

He pitched forward, and I had to let him go or fall with him. Rather than face-first, he dropped onto his side and swung his leg at me.

I should have fired, but a small part of me knew I could be killing a guy whose only crime was wanting my autograph, and I had enough of an ego to think I could still handle the situation. I side-stepped his leg and rammed my heel into his kidney, hard enough to show him this wasn’t a joke.

That’s when his partner dove at me.

He hit me sideways, knocking me off my feet in a flying tackle that drove me to the asphalt, shoulder-first. His weight squeezed the air out of me, his hand pawing at my face, a cold, wet hand covering my mouth and nose, flooding

my airway with harsh chemicals. I held my breath, bringing my weapon up, squeezing the trigger—

The trigger wouldn't squeeze. The gun didn't fire.

Now the paper towels were in my eyes, the sting a hundred times worse than chlorine, making me squeeze my eyelids shut in pain. I felt my gun being wrestled away, and the small part of my brain that wasn't panicking knew the perp had grabbed my .38 by the hammer, his grip preventing me from shooting.

I still refused to breathe, knowing that whatever was on my face would knock me out, knowing when that happened I was dead. That made me panic even more, thrashing and pushing against my unseen assailant. I tried to kick my feet, get them under me to gain some leverage, but then they were weighed down the same as my upper body—the fat guy had joined the party.

So I went for the fake-out, letting my body go limp.

The seconds ticked by, each one a slice of eternity since I was oxygen-deprived. I could hold my breath for over a minute under ideal conditions. But terrified and with two psychos on top of me, I wouldn't be able to last a fraction of that...

One second at a time, Jack. Just don't breathe.

I felt that vertigo sensation in my head, my mind seeming to stretch out and twist around.

"Is anyone coming?"

“It’s clear.”

Stay still. Don’t breathe.

My eyes were stinging like crazy, and I wanted to put my hands to my face, rub the pain away.

Don’t. Move. Don’t. Breathe.

My chest began to spasm, my diaphragm convulsing and begging for air. In moments it wouldn’t be under my control anymore. I would breathe in those toxic fumes whether I wanted to or not.

Hold it in don’t breathe don’t breathe DON’T BREATHE—

“Too much and you’ll kill her.” The fat guy talking.

The hand over my face eased up, the noxious rag being pulled away. I wanted to gasp, to suck in air like a marathon runner, but I managed to take a slow, silent breath through my nose.

The fumes still clinging to my face smelled like gasoline, and by sheer will I didn’t sneeze or cough. I kept my breathing slow, like I was sleeping, even though my heart pounded so loud and fast I could hear it.

“She’s out. Grab an arm.”

I felt myself lifted into an upright position, my arms over their shoulders. Then I was dragged, my feet scraping against the asphalt, which tore at my bare toes like sandpaper. I bit my inner cheek. If I made a peep, they’d use the rag again.

“Her feet! Watch her feet! I don’t want them messed up!”

“Shh! Lift higher.”

Then I was completely off the ground. I tried to peek, to see where we were, but everything was blurry and opening my eyes made the pain worse. I could feel the weight of my purse still hanging at my side, and I had a dull throb in my shoulder where I'd hit the pavement, but it didn't seem dislocated or broken.

"It's this one."

My body was shifted, and I heard the jingle of keys and a vehicle door opening.

"I'll get in first, pull her up."

"Check around for witnesses."

"We're alone out here, brother."

Another shift, and then strong hands under my armpits, pulling me up, hands on my ankle, my right shoe coming off, and then...

Something warm and wet on my big toe.

Jesus... he's got my toe in his mouth.

His tongue circled it, once, twice, and then I felt the suction. Heard the slurping. Heard him moan.

This freak is sucking my toe.

Wet and sloppy, like a popsicle. I wanted to flinch. I wanted to scream.

Stay still, Jack. Don't kick him. Don't move.

His teeth locked on, scraping along the top and bottom, not enough to break the skin but enough to hurt, the pressure increasing...

I felt a surge of revulsion unlike any I've ever experienced, and my muscles involuntarily locked and my stomach churned, threatening to upload the burger and curds. I was half-hanging out of a truck, and I couldn't see, but I was going to take my chances and kick this bastard in the face, hopefully burying my shoe heel into his eye socket. It was two on one, and they had my gun, but I wasn't going to let him chew my toe off without a fight.

"Taylor, let's hold off until we get her inside."

My toe was abruptly released, and then I was violently shoved upward onto the fat guy's lap. I assumed he was sitting in the driver's seat of a semi. I felt his hot breath on my ear, and then the clammy touch of his lips. One hand pawed at my chest, tugging at my bra through my shirt. The other slid up my leg.

"Such a pretty lady," he said, nuzzling my neck. "I'm going to love feeding you your face."

Breathe slowly, Jack. Don't tense up and let him know you're awake.

When his lips touched my cheek it was like a taser shock, and my bile began to rise again.

"Take her in the back," Taylor said. "We'll bring her up to the sleeper."

The fat man gave my knee a final squeeze, then grunted as he hefted me up in his arms and shifted his bulk. Once again I was lifted, tugged, and pushed. I chanced a peek,

everything dark and blurry, wanting so badly to rub my eyes, and all I could make out was a ladder of some sort.

“There’s a handle on the trap door. Turn it.”

“Where?”

“Right above your head.”

I was shoved through an opening in the ceiling of the cab, then dropped unceremoniously onto a mat. It was hot. I smelled bleach, cheap perfume, and the copper-pennies stench of fresh blood. Also, underneath everything, was an odor that scared me to my core, an odor I recognized from hundreds of cases from more than twenty years or cases. A cross between meat gone bad and excrement that all the bleach on the planet couldn’t ever fully erase.

The stink of dead bodies.

People have died in this room.

“Warm up here.”

“When we get started, I’ll put the air conditioning on. I’ve also got recessed stereo speakers, for mood music, and an AC outlet up by the fire alarm, if you want to plug in any power tools.”

“I like power tools.”

“Give yours a tap, see if she’s awake yet.”

I heard a slapping sound, skin on skin, and then a feminine whine.

“She’s still groggy.”

“She’ll be up soon. I know she’s not much to look at, but

that really doesn't matter once you get started, does it?"

"Actually, Taylor, as grateful as I am to you for inviting me into your home, I've been reading about Jack Daniels for years. She's every killer's wet dream."

There was a long pause.

"What are you saying?" Taylor said.

"I'm saying I want the cop."

"We already agreed, she's mine."

"You can have her feet. I want her face."

"Maybe I want the whole thing."

Donaldson laughed. "You know, you remind me of my younger brother. I miss that kid, so much that I sometimes regret killing him. But I remember something my father used to say when we were fighting over a toy. He said, *If you can't share, then neither of you can have it.*"

Then I heard the unmistakable sound of my .38 being cocked.

7

Standing on the ladder, with his upper half through the trap door, Taylor stared at the gun in the kneeling fat man's hand. It was pointed at the cop's head, but Donaldson's eyes were focuses on him.

Goddammit, why did I let him grab the gun?

Taylor felt himself go dead inside, like his body turned

to ice. He chose his words carefully, keeping his voice even. “You know what, Donaldson? Maybe you’re right. Sharing seems like a fair thing to do, and it might even be fun. Besides, it would be a shame to deprive such a famous lady of either of our company. But I have to say that seeing you holding a gun makes me a bit nervous. We don’t want to make enemies of each other, do we?”

Donaldson smiled, shrugged, and then uncocked the gun and shoved it into his front pocket. “I appreciate your generosity, Taylor. Really, I do. And normally I wouldn’t be so ungracious to a fellow traveler. But this woman just does something to me. I haven’t been this excited in years.”

“I can see that.” Taylor was eye-level with Donaldson’s crotch. “Or maybe that’s the gun.”

“So let’s have a meeting of the minds.”

“Fine.”

Taylor relaxed a notch now that the weapon was out of play, but he had no doubt Donaldson would use it again. His original fantasy of tag-team action had been replaced by the unpleasant image of Donaldson tying him up and feeding him his own face. When there are too many foxes in the henhouse, the foxes kill each other. A shame, because Taylor was starting to like the older man.

“Since you agree to sharing,” Donaldson said, “would you be adverse to both of us going at her at the same time? You take the bottom half, I take the top?”

Taylor reached a hand behind his back and touched the folding knife clipped to his belt—Donaldson had given it back to him in the parking lot. Killing him right now would probably be the best bet, but the guy was big, and the knife blade was short. Unless he died quick, Donaldson would fight back and be able to grab his gun.

No, the knife wasn't the way to go.

But Taylor did have a sawed-off shotgun under his passenger seat. All he needed to do was jump down, lock the trap door, and grab it.

"Sharing would be okay." Taylor tried to look thoughtful. "But I want to look her in the eyes when I'm doing my thing. Be tough to do if her eyes were gone."

"They wouldn't be gone. They'd be in her mouth."

Taylor shook his head. "That wouldn't be good for me."

"I could leave her eyes alone. Maybe just take off her eyelids so she'd be forced to look. It could work. We could do a trial run on the whore, here."

Donaldson kicked Candi in her side. She moaned.

Taylor figured there were three steps beneath him. He would need to grab the door and tug it closed before Donaldson pulled his gun. He didn't know if the cop's bullet would go through the half inch steel the sleeper was made out of, but his shotgun slugs certainly would. Lots of damage, though, and it would make a lot of noise.

"I'm not exactly keen on a two on one. If you promise to

leave her eyes alone, and that she'll stay conscious and not die on you, I could let you go first."

Donaldson's face remained blank for a moment, then he raised his eyebrow.

"I appreciate your offer. I sincerely do. But I can't help but think that while I'm doing my thing, you might make some sort of effort to do me harm. Or perhaps lock me in here."

Taylor began to wish he never parked at this truck stop.

"We seem to be at an impasse."

"No," Donaldson shook his head. "I believe we can work this out. I have no desire to harm you, Taylor. And I am grateful for this opportunity. I shouldn't have flashed the gun. That was a mistake. I've been playing this game solo for so long, I wasn't thinking clearly. I know you have a knife on you, and probably some other weapons in the truck, and I fear I just began a war of escalation."

"I don't want to kill you either." It was the truth. Not that he had any real affection for Donaldson, but trying to muscle the dead fat man out of his sleeper and drag him to a river didn't seem like a fun time.

"We don't know each other well yet. But we're kindred spirits. Maybe we could even become friends."

"It's possible."

"How long will the cop be out for?" Donaldson asked.

"A few minutes, probably more. Pinch her, see if she flinches. When they're really under, they don't flinch."

Donaldson leaned over Jack Daniels and squeezed her breast. She didn't move.

"She's out. You have some rope?"

"More bungee cords in the trunk."

Neither man moved to get them. Eventually, Donaldson raised an eyebrow. "Are you a gambling man, Taylor?"

"I've been known to play the odds."

"Let's flip a coin. Winner gets first crack at the cop."

Taylor considered it. "I'd be up for that, if it were a fair toss."

"We could go in the diner, have our waitress do the flipping. I'll even let you call it. Would be good to get out in the fresh air, clear our heads."

"Let's say I agree. You still have me at a disadvantage."

Donaldson nodded. "The gun. Firing it wouldn't be smart for either of us. Cops might already be on their way, after what Lieutenant Daniels did to that pimp."

"I've got a solution."

"I'm listening."

"An empty gun isn't a threat. Hand me the bullets. But do it slowly, or else I might get nervous and lock you up here for a few days with no air conditioning or water."

"Fair enough."

Donaldson gently reached back into his pants and removed the gun. He held it upside-down by the trigger guard, and swung out the cylinder. Then he dumped the

rounds onto his palm and handed them to Taylor.

Taylor grinned.

Maybe this tag-team thing will work out after all.

"Are we good?" Donaldson asked.

"We're good. Let's hogtie this pig."

Taylor climbed into the sleeper, and after an uneasy moment of sizing each other up, the two of them began to bind the cop. Donaldson quickly got the hang of it, and they soon had Jack suitably trussed.

"You sure she's safe here?" Donaldson asked, admiring their handiwork.

"Never had an escape. Bungee cords are tighter than rope. The enclosure is steel, the lock on the door is solid. She's not going anywhere."

Taylor grabbed the cop's purse, wound it over his shoulder, and crawled down out of the sleeper after Donaldson. He made sure the trap door was locked, took what he wanted from the purse, and together they walked back to the diner.

8

The moment they were gone I rolled onto my belly and inch-wormed up to my knees. My hands were behind my back, the bungee cords so tight my fingers were tingling. I strained against the elastic, trying to twist my wrists apart,

but couldn't free myself.

More cords wound around my chest and upper arms, and encircled my knees and ankles. I flopped onto my side, wincing at the pain. My shoulder still hurt, and there was a throb in my left breast where Donaldson had pinched me. If he'd done it for a few seconds longer, I would have screamed.

Pretending to be unconscious seemed like a better choice than really being unconscious, but when they tied me up I realized that maybe fighting back and yelling for help when I had the chance might have been the better move.

Panic threatened to overwhelm me, and I began to hyperventilate. Fear and I were old adversaries. There was no way to squelch it, but if I kept my focus I could work through the fear. The goal was to not think about any potential outcome to this situation other than escape.

Still unable to open my eyes because of the stinging, I rolled to my left, hoping to bump into anything that would help me free myself. I hit something soft. I brushed my cheek against it. Foam of some kind. I rolled right instead, eventually coming up against something more suitable. Something hard, stuck into the floor. After maneuvering around onto my knees, I rubbed my hands against the object.

It felt like a board, only two feet tall, and thin. Midway down the side was some sort of protrusion. Though my hands were quickly getting numb, I could tell by the sound

when I jiggled it that it was a padlock.

I got my wrists under the lock, trying to wedge it in between my arms and the bungee cords. Then I took a deep breath and violently tugged my arms forward.

The elastic caught, stretched.

I pulled harder, feeling like my arms were pulling out of their sockets.

Then, abruptly, my hands were free, and I pitched forward onto my face, bumping my forehead against the padded floor.

I spent a few seconds wiggling my fingers, wincing as the blood came back, and made quick work of the other cords around my arms. Then I spit in my hands and rubbed them against my eyes. The stinging eased up enough for me to have a blurry look around the enclosure. There was moderate lighting, from an overhead fixture. I saw beige mats. A black slanted ceiling covered with sound baffles. A trunk. And a bound woman, her feet in some sort of wooden stock, my wrist bungee cord wound around a padlock on the side.

I unwound my legs, tugged off my remaining shoe, and crawled over to her, unhooking her bindings. "Can you hear me?"

The woman moaned softly, and her eyelids fluttered.

"You need to wake up." I gave her a shake. "We're in trouble."

“My... foot... hurts...”

“What’s your name?”

“My... foot...”

I cupped her chin in my hand, made her look at me.

“Listen to me. I’m a cop. We’re in a truck sleeper and some men are trying to kill us. What’s your name?”

“Candi. I... I can’t move my feet. It hurts.”

I turned my attention to the stock. I crawled around to the other side, wincing when I saw the blood. I took a closer look because I had to assess the damage, then wished I could erase the image from my mind.

“What’s wrong with my foot?”

“You’re missing your little toe.”

“My... toe?”

I studied the stock. Heavy, solid, the padlock and latch unbreakable. So I looked at the hinge on the other side. Six screws held it in place.

I scooted away from the stock, on my butt, and reared back my right heel.

“Stay still, Candi. I’m going to try to break the hinge.”

I shot my leg out like a piston, striking the top of the stock once, twice, three times.

The stock stayed solid, the screws tight. And if I tried kicking any harder I’d break my heel.

“Don’t you have a gun?”

I ignored her, turning my attention to the trunk in the

corner of the enclosure. I crawled over to see if there was anything inside I could use.

“Don’t leave me!”

“I won’t leave you. I promise.”

I found paper towels, paper masks, starter fluid, plastic bags, and a large Tupperware container. The lid had brown stains on it—dried blood—and I got an uneasy feeling looking at it. Fighting squeamishness, I pulled the top off.

It was filled with rock salt. But I could make out something brown peeking through. I shook the box, and it revealed a few of the brown things, small and wrinkled. They looked like prunes.

Then I realized what they were, and came very close to throwing up. I pulled away, covering my mouth. There had to be dozens, maybe over a hundred, of them in there.

That sick bastard...

“Did you find anything?”

“Nothing helpful,” I said, closing the lid.

“What’s in that box you were holding?”

Taylor was smart. He didn’t leave any tools, weapons, or keys lying around. I eyed the starter fluid.

“Candi, do you smoke?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you have matches on you? A lighter?”

“In my purse. He took it.”

Dammit. But starting a fire in the enclosed space pro-

bably wasn't a good idea anyway. However, the chest itself had possibilities. It was made of wood, with metal reinforced corners. I picked it up, figuring it weighed at least fifteen pounds.

"What was in the box!"

I muscled the chest over to Candi and knelt next to her.

"Hold still," I said. "If I miss I could break your leg."

I reared back, clenched my teeth, and shoved the chest into the top of the stock. There was a loud crack, but both objects stayed intact.

I did it again.

And again.

And again.

And again.

My shoulder began to burn, and the corners of the chest were coming apart, but the hinge on the stock was bending.

Two more times and the chest burst open, spilling its contents onto the mat, the Tupperware container bouncing next to Candi.

I hit the stock one last time. The chest broke into several large pieces. I grabbed one of the slats used to make the chest, and wedged it in the opening I'd made between the top and bottom of the stock. I used it like a crowbar, levering at the hinge.

It was slowly giving... giving...

Then the stock popped open like a shotgun blast.

Candi sat up abruptly, grabbing her ankle to see her injury for herself. Then the tears hit, fast and hard.

“Ah shit... that fucker.”

“We need to find a way out of here.”

“My toe...” she sobbed.

“Candi! Focus!”

Her eyes locked on mine.

“We need to start rolling up the mats,” I ordered, “find the way out of here before they come back.”

She sniffled. “They? I only know one. Taylor.”

“He’s got a buddy now.” I made a face. “And they’re armed.”

I watched Candi’s face do an emotion montage. Anger, pain, despair, then raw fear.

“I have kids,” Candi whispered. “A boy and a girl.”

“Then we need to find the exit, fast. Start pulling up the mats.”

“What time is it? My man, Julius, he’ll come looking for me when I don’t report back.”

I thought about the pimp, running out of the diner with his teeth in his hand.

“Julius, uh, probably won’t be coming to the rescue. Do the mats. Now.”

She wiped her nose on her arm, and then reached for the Tupperware container.

“Candi...”

“I want to see.”

She popped off the lid and squinted at the objects in the rock salt.

“What are these things?”

“We need to look for the exit, Candi.”

“Are those... *aw, Jesus...*”

“Don’t worry about that now.”

“Don’t worry? Do you know what these are?”

“Yes.”

“These are... *nipples.*”

“I know, Candi. That’s why we need to get the hell out of here.”

That seemed to spur her to action. I joined Candi in pulling up mats, and we soon found the trap door. I pulled on the recessed handle.

Locked.

I tugged as hard as I could, until the cords on my neck bulged out and I saw stars.

It wouldn’t budge.

“We’re going to die up here.” Candi was hugging her knees, rocking back and forth.

I blew out a breath. “No, we’re not.”

“He’s going to bite off our toes. Then our tits, to add to his collection.”

I reached up overhead, tugging at the baffling stuck to the ceiling. Under it was heavy aluminum. I did a 360, looking

at all the walls.

There was no way out. We were trapped up here.

Then we both felt it. The truck cab jiggle.

Oh, shit. They're back.

9

Fran the waitress was happy to flip a coin for the two gentlemen who had tipped her so well.

"Tails," Taylor called.

Fran caught the quarter, slapped it against her wrist.

"Tails it is. Congrats, handsome."

Taylor gave her a polite nod, then turned to judge Donaldson's reaction. There wasn't one. The fat man's face was blank. Taylor left the diner, his cohort in tow. It was still hot and muggy outside, and the lot was still almost full, but there weren't any people around.

"Are we cool?" Taylor asked as they walked to his truck.

"Yeah. Fair is fair. You'll let me watch?"

Taylor shrugged like it didn't matter, but secretly he was thrilled at the idea of an audience.

"Sure."

"And you'll let me do her face?"

"Her face is all yours."

"You should try it once. The face. You peel enough of the flesh away, you can see the skull underneath. I bet Jack

Daniels has a beautiful skull.”

Taylor stopped and stared at him. “You’ve really got a hard-on for this cop, don’t you?”

“I’d marry her if she’d have me. But I’ll settle for a bloody blowjob after I knock her teeth out. Do you still have Jack’s phone?”

Taylor had pocketed her phone and wallet. He tugged the cell out.

“Does Officer Donaldson want to inform the next of kin?” Taylor grinned as he handed it over.

“That’s a possibility. Might also be fun to call up her loved ones while you’re working on her, let them hear her screams.”

“You’ve got a sick mind, my friend.”

“Thank you, kindly. Let’s see who our favorite cop talked to last. The winner is... Latham. And less than an hour ago. Shall we see if Latham is still up?”

“Put it on speaker.”

The phone rang twice, and a man answered.

“Jack? I was worried.”

“And you have good reason to be,” Donaldson said. “Is this Latham?”

“Who is this?”

“I’m the man about to murder Jack Daniels. She’s going to die in terrible pain. How do you feel about that?”

There was silence.

“What’s wrong, Latham? Don’t you care that...” Donaldson squinted at the phone. “Dammit, lost the signal.”

Donaldson hit redial. The call didn’t go through.

They stood there for a moment, neither of them saying anything.

“I hate dropped calls,” Taylor finally offered. “Drives me nuts.”

“Cops.”

“I hate cops, too.”

“Behind you.”

Taylor spun around and froze. A Wisconsin squad car rolled up next to them. Its lights weren’t on, but the driver’s side window was open and a pig was leaning out. White male, fat, had something on his upper lip that an optimist might call a mustache.

“Did you men happen to witness a disturbance in the diner earlier?”

Taylor thought fast. But apparently so did Donaldson, because he spoke first.

“What disturbance?”

“Seems an Illinois cop got into a tussle with one of the locals.”

“We’re just passing through,” Donaldson said. “Didn’t see anything.”

The pig nodded, then pulled up next to the diner. He let his fellow cop out, then began to circle the parking lot.

"I had to lie," Donaldson said, "or else we'd have to give statements. I don't want my name in any police report."

"I'm with you. But now we've got a big problem. One of them is going to talk to our waitress, and she'll mention us. The other is taking down plate numbers. He'll find Jack's car, realize she's still here, and start searching for her."

"We need to move our vehicles. Right now."

Taylor nodded. "There's an oasis thirty miles north on 39. I'll meet you there in half an hour. You've got the whore's phone, right?"

"Yeah."

"Give me the cop's," Taylor said. "We'll exchange numbers if we need to get in touch."

After programming their phones, Donaldson offered his hand. Taylor shook it.

"See you soon, fellow traveler."

Then they parted.

Taylor hustled into his cab, started the engine, and pulled out of Murray's parking lot. He smiled. While he still didn't fully trust Donaldson, Taylor was really starting to enjoy their partnership. Maybe they could somehow extend it into something fulltime. Teamwork made this all so much more exciting.

Taylor was heading for the cloverleaf when he saw the light begin to flash on the dashboard.

It was the fire alarm. The smoke detector in the overhead

sleeper was going off.

What the hell?

Taylor pulled onto the shoulder, set the brake, and tugged his sawed-off shotgun out from under the passenger seat. Then he headed for the trap door to see what was going on with those bitches.

10

The moment the cab jiggled, I began to gather up bungee cords and hook them to the handle on the trap door, pulling them taut and attaching them to the foot stock. When that door opened, I wanted it to stay open.

Then the truck went into gear, knocking me onto my ass. Moving wasn't going to help our situation. At least at Murray's we were surrounded by people. If Taylor took us someplace secluded, our chances would get even worse.

I looked around the sleeper again, and my eyes locked on the overhead light. Next to it, on the ceiling, was a smoke alarm. I doubted it would be heard through all the soundproofing, but there was a good chance it signaled the driver somehow.

"Candi! Press the test button on the alarm up there!"

She steadied herself, then reached up to press it. The high-pitched beeping was loud enough to hurt my ears. But would Taylor even be aware of it?

Apparently so, because a few seconds later, the truck stopped.

I reached for the Tupperware container and a broken slat from the chest, and crawled over to the side of the trap door. Then I waited.

I didn't have to wait long. The trap door opened up and the bungee cords worked as predicted, tearing it out of Taylor's grasp. The barrel of a shotgun jutted up through the doorway. I kicked that aside and threw a big handful of salt in Taylor's eyes. He screamed, and I followed up with the wooden slat, smacking him in the nose, forcing him to lose his footing on the stepladder.

As he fell, I dove, snaking face-first down the opening on top of him, landing on his chest and pinning the shotgun between us.

He pushed up against me, strong as hell, but I had gravity on my side and I was fighting for my life. My knee honed in on his balls like it lived there, and the first kick worked so well I did it three more times.

He moaned, trying to keep his legs together and twist away. I grabbed the shotgun stock and jerked. He suddenly let go of the weapon, and I tumbled backwards off of him, the gun in my hands, and my back slammed into the step ladder. The wind burst out of me, and my diaphragm spasmed. I tried to suck in a breath and couldn't.

Taylor got to his knees, snarling, and lunged. I raised the

gun, my fingers seeking the trigger, but he easily knocked it away. Then he was straddling me, and I still couldn't breathe—a task that became even more difficult when his hands found my throat.

“You're gonna set a world fucking record on how long it takes to die.”

Then Candi dropped onto his back.

Taylor immediately released his grip, trying to reach around and get her off. But Candi clung on like a monkey, one hand around his neck, the other pressing a wet paper towel to his face.

He fell on all fours and bucked rodeo bull-style. Candi held tight. I blinked away the stars and managed to suck in some air, my hands seeking out the dropped shotgun. It was too dangerous to shoot him with Candi so close, so I held it by the short barrel, took aim, and cracked him in the temple with the wooden stock.

Taylor crumpled.

I gasped for oxygen, my heart threatening to break through my ribs because it was beating so hard. Candi kept the rag on Taylor's face, and part of me wanted to let her keep it there, let her kill him. But my better judgment took over.

“Candi.” I lightly touched her shoulder. “It's over.”

“It'll be over when I bite one of his goddamn toes off.”

I shook my head. “Give me the rag, Candi. He's going

away for the rest of his life. Depending on the jurisdictions, he might even get the death penalty.”

She looked at me. Then she handed over the rag and burst into tears.

That’s when Donaldson stepped into the cab. He took a quick look around, then pointed my gun at me.

“Well what do we have here? How about you drop that shotgun, Lieutenant.”

I looked at him, and then got a ridiculously big grin on my face.

“You gave him the bullets, asshole.”

Donaldson’s eyes got comically wide, and I brought up the shotgun and fired just as he was diving backward out the door. The dashboard exploded, and the sound was a force that punched me in my ears. Candi slapped her hands to the sides of her head. I ignored the ringing and pumped another slug into the chamber, already moving after him.

Something stopped me.

Taylor. Grabbing my leg.

Candi pounced on him, tangled her fingers in his hair, and bounced his head against the floor until he released his grip.

I stumbled out of the cab, stepping onto the pavement. My .38 was on the road, discarded. I looked left, then right, then under the truck.

Donaldson was gone.

A few seconds later, I saw a police car tearing up the highway, lights flashing, coming our way.

11

“Thank you, honey.”

I took the offered wine glass and Latham climbed into bed next to me. The fireplace was roaring, the chardonnay was cold, and when Latham slipped his hand around my waist I sighed. For a moment, at least, everything was right with the world. Candi had been reunited with her children. Taylor was eagerly confessing to a string of murders going back fifteen years, and ten states were fighting to have first crack at prosecuting him. No charges were filed against me for my attack on the pimp, because Fran the waitress had sworn he shoved me first. My various aches and pains were all healing nicely, and I even got all of my things back, including my missing shoe. It was five days into my vacation, and I was feeling positively glorious.

The only loose end was Donaldson. But he'd get his, eventually. It was only a matter of time until someone picked him up.

“You know, technically, you never thanked me for saving your life,” Latham said.

“Is that what you did?” I asked, giving him a playful poke in the chest. “I thought I was the one who did all the

saving.”

“After that man called me, I called the police, told them you were at Murray’s and someone had you.”

“The police arrived after I’d already taken control of the situation.”

“Still, I deserve some sort of reward for my cool-headedness and grace under pressure, don’t you think?”

“What have you got in mind?”

He whispered something filthy in my ear.

“You pervert,” I said, smiling then kissing him.

Then I took another sip of wine and followed his suggestion.



PART FOUR UTAH, ONE WEEK LATER

Donaldson kept one hand on the wheel. The other caressed the cell phone.

The cell phone with Jack Daniels's number on it.

It had been over a week since that fateful meeting. He'd headed southwest, knowing there was a nationwide man-hunt going on, knowing they really didn't have anything on him. A description and a name, nothing more.

He'd been aching to call the Lieutenant. But it wasn't the right time yet. First he had to let things cool down.

Maybe in another week or so, he'd give her a ring. Just to chit-chat, no threats at all.

The threats would come later, when he went to visit her.

He felt a tinge of sadness about Taylor's arrest. A shame,

losing a kindred spirit like that. But if the man had been willing to share, he wouldn't be in custody right now.

At least he kept quiet about me, Donaldson thought.

But that hadn't stopped Donaldson from putting as much road between him and Wisconsin as he could. He'd been so busy running from the authorities, covering his tracks, Donaldson hadn't had any time to indulge in his particular appetites. He kept an eye open for likely prospects, but they were few and far between.

The hardest thing about killing a hitchhiker was finding one to pick up.

Donaldson could remember just ten years ago, when interstates boasted a hitcher every ten miles, and a discriminating killer could pick and choose who looked the easiest, the most fun, the juiciest. These days, cops kept the expressways clear of easy marks, and Donaldson was forced to cruise off-ramps, underpasses, and rest areas, prowl back roads, take one hour coffee breaks at oases. Recreational murder was becoming more trouble than it was worth.

He'd finally found one standing in a Cracker Barrel parking lot. The kid had been obvious, leaning against the cement ashtray near the entrance, an oversize hiking pack strapped to his back. He was approaching every patron leaving the restaurant, practicing his grin between rejections.

A ripe plum, ready to pluck.

Donaldson tucked the cell phone into his pocket and got out of the car. He didn't even have to initiate contact. He walked in to use the bathroom and strolled out with his car keys in hand, letting them jingle a bit. The kid solicited him almost immediately.

"Excuse me, sir. Are you heading up north?"

Donaldson stopped, pretending to notice the man for the first time. He was young, maybe mid-twenties. Short, reddish hair, a few freckles on his face, mostly hidden by glasses. His clothing looked worn but of good quality. Donaldson was twice his age, and damn near twice his weight.

Donaldson rubbed his chin, which he knew softened his harsh features.

"In fact I am, son."

The boy's eyes lit up, but he kept a lid on his excitement. Any hitcher worth his salt knew to test the waters before sealing the deal.

"I am, too. If you'd like some company, I can chip in for gas." He hooded his eyes and quickly added, "No funny stuff. I'm just looking for a ride. I was hoping to get to Ogden by midnight. Got family up there. My name's Brett, by the way."

Well played, Donaldson thought. Friendly, a little desperate, making clear this wasn't a sexual hookup and that he had people waiting for him.

As if any of that would keep him safe.

“How do I know you’re not some psycho?” Donaldson asked. He knew that was pushing it, but he liked the irony.

“There’s a gas station across the street. I can top off the tank, pay with a credit card. All gas stations have cameras these days. Credit card is a paper trail. If anything happens to you, that would link me to your car, and I’d get caught.”

Smart kid. But not that smart.

The really smart ones don’t hitchhike.

“Won’t need gas for a few hundred miles.” Donaldson took off his Cubs baseball hat, running a hand over his gray, thinning hair. Another way to disarm the victim. No one feared grandfatherly types. “Until then, if you promise not to sing any show tunes, you got yourself a ride.”

Brett smiled, hefted his pack onto his shoulders, and followed his ride into the parking lot. Donaldson unlocked the doors and the kid loaded his pack into the backseat of Donaldson’s 2006 black Honda Accord, pausing when he saw the clear plastic covers on the front seats.

“My dog, Neil, usually rides up front with me,” Donaldson said, shrugging. “I don’t like him messing up the upholstery.”

Brett flashed skepticism until he noticed the picture taped to the dash: Donaldson and a furry dachshund.

“Sheds like crazy,” Donaldson said. “If you buy a dog, stick with short-haired breeds.”

That was apparently reassurance enough, because Brett climbed in.

Donaldson heaved himself into the driver's seat, the car bouncing on its shocks.

"Buckle up for safety." Donaldson resisted the urge to lick his lips, then released the brake, started the car, and pulled onto the highway.

The first ten miles were awkward. Always were. Strangers tended to stay strangers. How often did a person initiate conversation on a plane or while waiting in line? People kept to themselves. It made them feel safe.

Donaldson broke the tension by asking the standard questions. Where'd you go to school? What do you do for a living? Where you headed? When'd you start hitchhiking? Invariably, the conversation turned to him.

"So what's your name?" Brett asked.

"Donaldson." No point in lying. Brett wouldn't be alive long enough to tell anyone.

"What do you do, Donaldson?"

"I'm a courier."

Donaldson sipped from the Big Gulp container in the cup holder, taking a hit of caffeinated sugar water. He offered the cup to Brett, who shook his head. Probably worried about germs. Donaldson smiled. That should have been the least of his worries.

"So you mean you deliver packages?"

"I deliver anything. Sometimes overnight delivery isn't fast enough, and people are willing to pay a premium to get it same day."

"What sort of things?"

"Things people need right away. Legal documents. Car parts for repairs. A diabetic forgets his insulin, guy loses his glasses and can't drive home without them, kid needs his cello for a recital. Or a kidney needs to get to a transplant location on time. That's the run I'm on right now."

Donaldson jerked a thumb over his shoulder, pointing to the backseat floorboard. Brett glanced back, saw a cooler sitting there, a biohazard sticker on the lid.

"No kidding, there's a kidney in there?"

"There will be, once I get it." Donaldson winked at the kid. "By the way, what's your blood type?"

The kid chuckled nervously. Donaldson joined in.

A long stretch of road approaching. No cars in either direction.

"Sounds like an interesting job," Brett said.

"It is. Perfect for a loner like me. That's why it's nice to have company every so often. Gets lonely on the road."

"What about Neil?"

"Neil?"

Brett pointed at the photograph on the dashboard. "Your dog. You said he rode with you sometimes."

"Oh, yeah. Neil. Of course. But it isn't the same as having

a human companion. Know what I mean?”

Brett nodded, then glanced at the fuel gauge.

“You’re down to a quarter tank,” he said.

“Really? I thought I just filled up. Next place we see, I’ll take you up on that offer to pay.”

It was a bright, sunny late afternoon, clean country air blowing in through the inch of window Donaldson had open. A perfect day for a drive. The road ahead was clear, no one behind them.

“So seriously,” Donaldson asked, “What’s your blood type?”

Brett’s chuckle sounded forced this time, and Donaldson didn’t join in. Brett put his hand in his pocket. Going for a weapon, or holding one for reassurance, Donaldson figured. Not many hitchhikers traveled without some form of reassurance.

But Donaldson had something better than a knife, or a gun. His weapon weighed thirty-six hundred pounds and was barreling down the road at eighty miles per hour.

Checking once more for traffic, Donaldson gripped the wheel, braced himself, and stood on the brake.

The car screeched toward a skidding halt, Brett’s seatbelt popping open exactly the way Donaldson had rigged it to, and the kid launched headfirst into the dashboard. The spongy plastic, beneath the veneer, had been reinforced with unforgiving steel.

The car shuddered to a stop, the stench of scorched rubber in the air. Brett was in bad shape. With no seatbelt and one hand in his pocket, he'd banged his nose up pretty good. Donaldson grasped his hair, rammed his face into the dashboard two more times, then opened the glove compartment. He grabbed a plastic zip tie, checked again for oncoming traffic, and quickly secured the kid's hands behind his back. In Brett's coat pocket, he found a tiny Swiss Army knife. Donaldson barked out a laugh.

If memory served, and it usually did, there was an off ramp less than a mile ahead, and then a remote stretch of farmland. Donaldson pulled back onto the highway and headed for it, whistling as he drove.

The farm stood just where he remembered it. Donaldson pulled offroad into a cornfield and drove through the dead stalks until he could no longer see the street. He killed the engine, set the parking brake—the Accord had transmission issues—and tugged out the keys to ensure it wouldn't roll away. Then he picked a few choice tools from his toolbox and stuck them in his pocket.

His passenger whimpered as Donaldson muscled him out of the car and dragged him into the stalks.

He whimpered even more when Donaldson jerked his pants down around his ankles, got him loosened up with an ear of corn, and then forced himself inside.

"Gonna stab me with your little knife?" he whispered

in Brett's ear between grunts. "Think that was going to save you?"

When he'd finished, Donaldson sat on the kid's chest and tried out all the attachments on the Swiss Army knife. The tiny scissors worked well on eyelids. The nail file just reached the eardrums. The little two-inch blade was surprisingly sharp and adept at whittling the nose down to the cartilage.

Donaldson also used some tools of his own. Pliers, for cracking teeth and pulling off lips. When used in tandem with some garden shears, he was able to get Brett's tongue out in one piece. And of course, there was the muddler.

Normally wielded by bartenders to mash fruit in the bottom of drink glasses, Donaldson had his own special use for the instrument. People usually reacted strongly to being fed parts of their own face, and even under the threat of more pain, they'd spit those parts out. Donaldson used the plastic muddler like a ram, forcing those juicy bits down their throats.

After all, it was sinful to waste all of those delectable little morsels like that.

When the fighting and screams began to find down, the Swiss Army knife's corkscrew attachment did a fine job on Brett's Adam's apple, popping it out in one piece and leaving a gaping hole that poured blood bright as a young cabernet.

Apple was a misnomer. It tasted more like a peach pit. Sweet and stringy.

He shoved another ear of corn into Brett's neck hole, then stood up to watch.

Donaldson had killed a lot of people in a lot of different ways, but suffocation especially tickled his funny bone. When people bled to death they just got sleepy. It was tough to see their expression when they were on fire, with all the thrashing and flames. Damaging internal organs, depending on the organ, was either too fast, too slow, or too loud.

But a human being deprived of oxygen would panic for several minutes, providing quite a show. This kid lasted almost five, his eyes bulging out, wrenching his neck side to side in futile attempts to remove the cob, and turning all the colors of the rainbow before finally giving up the ghost. It got Donaldson so excited he almost raped him again. But the rest of the condoms were in the car, and befitting a man his age, once he got them and returned to the scene of death, his ardor probably would have waned.

He didn't bother trying to take Brett's kidney, or any of his other parts. What the heck could he do with his organs anyway? Sell them on eBay?

Cleanup was the part Donaldson hated most, but he always followed a strict procedure. First, he bagged everything associated with the crime. The rubber, the zip

tie, the Swiss Army knife, and the two corn cobs, which might have his prints on them. Then he took a spray bottle of bleach solution and a roll of paper towels and cleaned the muddler, shears, and pliers, and swabbed out the interior of his car. He used baby wipes on himself, paying special attention to his fingernails. He put his tools back into his toolbox. Everything else went into the white plastic garbage bag, along with a full can of gasoline and more bleach spray.

He took the money from Brett's wallet—forty lousy bucks—and found nothing of interest in his backpack. These went into the bag as well, and then he soaked that and the body with lighter fluid.

The fire started easily. Donaldson knew from experience that he had about five minutes before the gas can exploded. He drove out of the cornfield at a fast clip, part of him disappointed he couldn't stay to watch the fireworks.

The final result would be a mess for anyone trying to ID the victim, gather evidence, or figure out what exactly had happened. If the body wasn't discovered right away, and the elements and hungry animals added to the chaos, it would be a crime scene investigator's worst nightmare.

Donaldson knew how effective this particular disposal method was, because he'd used it twenty-six times and hadn't ever been so much as questioned by police.

He wondered if the FBI had a nickname for him,

some-thing sexy like The Roadside Burner. But he wasn't convinced those jokers had even connected his many crimes. Donaldson's courier route took him all across the country, over a million square miles of hunting ground. He waited at least a year before returning to any particular spot, and he was finding new places to play all the time.

Donaldson knew he would never be caught. He was smart, patient, and never compulsive. He could keep on doing this until he died or his pecker wore out, and they had pills these days to fix that.

He reached I-15 at rush hour, traffic clogging routes both in and out of Salt Lake, and he was feeling happy and immortal until some jerk in a Winnebago decided to drive ten miles under the speed limit. Irritated motorists tagged along like ducklings, many of them using their horns, and everyone taking their good sweet time getting by in the passing lane.

Seriously, they shouldn't allow some people on the road.

Donaldson was considering passing the whole lot of them on the shoulder, and as he surveyed the route and got ready to gun it, he saw a cute chick in pink shoes standing at the cloverleaf. Short, lugging a guitar case, jutting out a hip and shaking her thumb at everyone who passed.

Two in one day? he thought. Do I have the energy?

He cranked open the window to get rid of the bleach

smell, and pulled up next to her under the overpass, feeling his arousal returning.



She set the guitar case on the pavement and stuck out her thumb. The minivan shrieked by. She turned her head, watched it go—no brakelights. The disappointment blossomed hot and sharp in her gut, like a shot of iced Stoli. Despite the midmorning brilliance of the rising sun, she could feel the cold gnawing through the tips of her gloved fingers, the earflaps of her black woolen hat.

According to her Internet research, 491 (previously 666) ranked as the third least traveled highway in the Lower-Forty-Eight, with an average of four cars passing a fixed point any given hour. Less of course at night. The downside of hitchhiking these little-known thoroughfares was the waiting, but the upside paid generous dividends in privacy.

She exhaled a steaming breath and looked around. Painfully blue sky. Treeless high desert. Mountains thirty

miles east. A further range to the northwest. They stood blanketed in snow, and on some level she understood that others would find them dramatic and beautiful, and she wondered what it felt like to be moved by nature.

Two hours later, she lifted her guitar case and walked up the shoulder toward the idling Subaru Outback, heard the front passenger window humming down. She mustered a faint smile as she reached the door. Two young men in the front seats stared at her. They seemed roughly her age and friendly enough, if a little hungover. Open cans of Bud in the center console drink holders had perfumed the interior with the sour stench of beer—a good omen, she thought. Might make things easier.

“Where you headed?” the driver asked. He had sandy hair and an elaborate goatee. Impressive cords of bicep strained the cotton fibers of his muscle shirt. The passenger looked native—dark hair and eyes, brown skin, a thin, implausible mustache.

“Salt Lake,” she said.

“We’re going to Tahoe. We could take you at least to I-15.”

She surveyed the rear storage compartment—crammed with two snowboards and the requisite boots, parkas, snow pants, goggles, and...she suppressed the jolt of pleasure—helmets. She hadn’t thought of that before.

A duffle bag took up the left side of the backseat. A little

tight, but then she stood just five feet in her pink crocs. She could manage.

“Comfortable back there?” the driver asked.

“Yes.”

Their eyes met in the rearview mirror.

“What’s your name?”

“Lucy.”

“Lucy, I’m Matt. This is Kenny. We were just about to have us a morning toke before we picked you up. Would it bother you if we did?”

“Not at all.”

“Pack that pipe, bro.”

They got high as they crossed into Utah and became talkative and philosophically confident. They offered her some pot, but she declined. It grew hot in the car and she removed her hat and unbuttoned her black trench coat, breathing the fresh air coming in through the crack at the top of the window.

“So where you going?” the Indian asked her.

“Salt Lake.”

“I already asked her that, bro.”

“No, I mean what for?”

“See some family.”

“We’re going to Tahoe. Do some snowboarding at Heavenly.”

“Already told her that, bro.”

The two men broke up into laughter.

“So you play guitar, huh?” Kenny said.

“Yes.”

“Wanna strum something for us?”

“Not just yet.”

They stopped at a filling station in Moab. Matt pumped gas and Kenny went inside the convenience store to procure the substantial list of snacks they’d been obsessing on for the last hour. When Matt walked inside to pay, she opened the guitar case and took out the syringe. The smell wafted out—not overpowering by any means, but she wondered if the boys would notice. She hadn’t had a chance to properly clean everything in awhile. Lucy reached up between the seats and tested the weight of the two Budweisers in the drink holders: each about half-full. She eyed the entrance to the store—no one coming—and shot a squirt from the syringe into the mouth of each can.

Kenny cracked a can of Bud and said, “Dude, was that shit laced?”

“What are you talking about?”

They sped through a country of red rock and buttes and waterless arroyos.

“What we smoked.”

"I don't think so."

"Man, I don't feel right. Where'd you get it?"

"From Tim. Same as always."

Lucy leaned forward and studied the double yellow line through the windshield. After Matt drifted across for a third time, she said, "Would you pull over please?"

"What's wrong?"

"I'm going to be sick."

"Oh God, don't puke on our shit."

Matt pulled over onto the shoulder and Lucy opened her door and stumbled out. As she worked her way down a gentle embankment making fake retching sounds, she heard Matt saying, "Dude? Dude? Come on, dude! Wake up, dude!"

She waited in the bed of the arroyo for ten minutes and then started back up the hill toward the car. Matt had slumped across the center console into Kenny's lap. The man probably weighed two hundred pounds, and it took Lucy ten minutes to shove him, millimeter by millimeter, into the passenger seat on top of Kenny. She climbed in behind the wheel and slid the seat all the way forward and cranked the engine.

She turned off of I-70 onto 24. According to her map, this stretch of highway ran forty-four miles to a nothing town called Hanksville. From her experience, it didn't get

much quieter than this barren, lifeless waste of countryside.

Ten miles south, she veered onto a dirt road and followed it the length of several football fields, until the highway was almost lost to sight. She killed the engine, stepped out. Late afternoon. Windless. Soundless. The boys would be waking soon, and she was already starting to glow. She opened the guitar case and retrieved the syringe, gave Kenny and Matt another healthy dose.

By the time she'd wrangled them out of the car into the desert, dusk had fallen and she'd drenched herself in sweat. She rolled the men onto their backs and splayed out their arms and legs so they appeared to be making snow angels in the dirt.

Lucy removed their shoes and socks. The pair of scissors was the kind used to cut raw chicken, with thick, serrated blades. She trimmed off their shirts and cut away their pants and underwear.

Kenny and Matt had returned to full, roaring consciousness by 1:15 a.m. Naked. Ankles and wrists tightly bound with deeply scuffed handcuffs, heads helmeted, staring at the small, plain hitchhiker who squatted down facing them at the back of the car, blinding them with a hand held spotlight.

"I didn't think you were ever going to wake up," Lucy said.

“What the hell are you doing?” Matt looked angry.

Kenny said, “These cuffs hurt. Get them off.”

She held a locking carabiner attached to a chain that ran underneath the Subaru. She clipped it onto another pair of carabiners. A rope fed through each one, and the ends of the ropes had been tied to the handcuffs on the boys’ ankles.

“Oh my God, she’s crazy, dude.”

“Lucy, please. Don’t. We’ll give you anything you want. We won’t tell anyone.”

She smiled. “That’s really sweet of you, Matt, but this is what I want. Kind of have my heart set on it.”

She stepped over the tangle of chain and rope and moved toward the driver’s door as the boys hollered after her.

She left the hatch open so she could hear them. Kept looking back as she drove slowly, so slowly, along the dirt road. They were still begging her, and occasionally yelling when they dragged over a rock or a cactus, but she got them to the shoulder of Highway 24 with only minor injuries.

The moon was up and nearly full. She could see five miles of the road in either direction, so perfectly empty and black, and she wondered if the way it touched her in this moment felt anything like how the beauty of the those mountains she’d seen this morning touched normal people.

Lucy buckled her seatbelt and glanced in the rearview mirror. Matt had climbed to his feet, and he hobbled toward the car.

“Hey, no fair!” she yelled and gave the accelerator a little gas, jerking his feet out from under him. “All right, count of three. We’ll start small with half a mile!”

She grasped the steering wheel, heart pumping. She’d done this a half dozen times but never with helmets.

“One! Two! Three!”

She reset the odometer and eased onto the accelerator. Five, ten, fifteen, twenty miles per hour, and the boys already beginning to scream. At four-tenths of a mile, she hit forty, and in the rearview mirror, Kenny’s and Matt’s pale and naked bodies writhed in full-throated agony, both trying to sit up and grab the rope and failing as they slid across the pavement on their bare backs, dragged by their cuffed ankles, the chains throwing gorgeous yellow sparks against the asphalt.

She eased off the gas and pulled over onto the shoulder. Collected the spray bottle and the artificial leech from the guitar case, unbuckled, jumped out, and went to the boys. They lay on their backs, blood pooling beneath them. Bone and muscle already showing through in many places where the skin had simply been erased, and Kenny must have rolled briefly onto his right elbow, because it had been sanded down to a sharp spire of bone.

“Please,” Matt croaked. “Oh, God, please.”

“You don’t know how beautiful you look,” she said, “but I’m gonna make you even prettier.”

She spritzed them with pure, organic lemon juice, especially their backs, which looked like raw hamburger, then knelt down with the artificial leech she’d stolen from a medical museum in Phoenix several years ago. Using it always made her think fondly of Luther and Orson.

She stuck each of them twenty times with the artificial leech, and to the heartwarming depth of their new screams, skipped back to the car and hopped in and stomped the gas, their cries rising into something like the baying of hounds, Lucy howling back. She pushed the Subaru past fifty, to sixty, to seventy-five, and in the illumination of the spotlight, the boys bounced along the pavement, on their backs, their sides, their stomachs, and with every passing second looking more and more lovely, and still making those delicious screams she could almost taste, Lucy driving with no headlights, doing eighty under the moon, and the cold winter wind rushing through the windows like the breath of God.

She made it five miles (no one had ever lasted five miles and she credited those well-made snowboarding helmets) before the skeletons finally went quiet.

Lucy ditched what was left of the boys and drove all night like she'd done six blasts of coke, arriving in Salt Lake as the sun edged up over the mountains. She checked into a Red Roof Inn and ran a hot bath and cleaned the new blood and the old blood out of the ropes and let the carabiners and the chains and the handcuffs soak in the soapy water.

In the evening she awoke, that dark weight perched on her chest again. The guitar case items had dried, and she packed them away and dressed and headed out. The motel stood along the interstate, and it came down to Applebee's or Chili's.

She went with the latter, because she loved their Awesome Blossom.

After dinner, she walked outside and stared at the Subaru in the parking lot, the black rot flooding back inside of her, that restless, awful energy that could never be fully sated, those seconds of release never fully quenching, like water tinged with salt. She turned away from the Subaru and walked along the frontage road until she came to a hole in the fence. Ducked through. Scrambled down to the shoulder of the interstate.

Traffic was moderate, the night cold and starry. A line of cars approached, bottled up behind a Winnebago.



Donaldson pulled over onto the shoulder and lowered the passenger window. The girl was young and tiny, wearing a wool cap despite the relative warmth.

“Where you headed?” He winked before he said it, his smile genuine.

“Missoula,” Lucy answered.

“Got a gig up there?” He pointed his chin at her guitar case.

She shrugged.

“Well, I’m going north. If you chip in for gas, and promise not to sing any show tunes, you can hop in.”

The girl seemed to consider it, then nodded. She opened the rear door and awkwardly fit the guitar case onto the backseat. Before getting in, she stared at the upholstery on the front seats.

“What’s with the plastic?” she asked, indicating

Donaldson's clear seat covers.

"Sometimes I travel with my dog."

Lucy squinted at the picture taped to the dashboard—the portly driver holding a long-haired dachshund.

"What's its name?"

"Scamp. Loveable little guy. Hates it when I'm away. But I'm away a lot. I'm a courier. Right now, I'm headed up to Idaho Falls to pick up a donor kidney."

Her eyes flitted to the backseat, to a cooler with a bio-hazard sign on the lid.

"Don't worry," he said, taking off his hat and rubbing a hand through his thinning gray hair. "It's empty for the time being."

The girl nodded, started to get in, then stopped. "Would you mind if I sat in the back? I don't want to make you feel like a chauffeur, but I get nauseated riding up front unless I'm driving."

Donaldson paused. "Normally I wouldn't mind, Miss, but I don't have any seat belts back there, and I insist my passengers wear one. Safety first, I always say."

"Of course. Can't be too careful. Cars can be dangerous."

"Indeed they can. Indeed."

The front passenger door squeaked open, and the girl hopped in. Donaldson watched her buckle up, and then he accelerated back onto the highway.

Grinning at her, he rubbed his chin and asked, "So what's your name, little lady?"

"I'm Lucy." She looked down at the center console. A Big Gulp sweated in the drink holder. She reached into her pocket and looked at the man and smiled. "I really appreciate you picking me up. I don't think I caught your name."

"Donaldson. Pleased to meet you."

"Is that really your last name, or are you one of those guys who have a last name for a first name?"

"No, that's my first."

They drove in silence for a mile, Donaldson glancing between the girl and the road.

"Highway's packed this time of day. I bet we'd make better time on the county roads. Less traffic. If that's okay with you, of course."

"I was actually just going to suggest that," Lucy said. "Weird."

"Well, I wouldn't want to do anything to make you feel uncomfortable." Donaldson glanced down at Lucy's pocket. "Pretty young thing like yourself might get nervous driving off the main drag. In fact, you don't see many young lady hitchhikers these days. I think horror movies scared them all away. Everyone's worried about climbing into the car with a maniac."

Donaldson chuckled.

"I love county roads," Lucy said. "Much prettier scenery, don't you think?"

He nodded, taking the next exit, and Lucy leaned over,

almost into his lap, and glanced at the gas gauge.

“You’re running pretty low there. Your reserve light’s on. Why don’t we stop at this gas station up ahead. I’ll put twenty in the tank. I also need something to drink. This mountain air is making my throat dry.”

Donaldson shifted in his seat. “Oh, that light just came on, and I can get fifty miles on reserve. This is a Honda, you know.”

“But why push our luck? And I’m really thirsty, Donaldson.”

“Here.” He lifted his Big Gulp. “It’s still half full.”

“No offense, but I don’t drink after strangers, and I um... this is embarrassing...I have a cold sore in my mouth.”

The gas station was coming up fast, and by all accounts it appeared to be the last stop before the county road started its climb into the mountains, into darkness.

“Who am I to say no to a lady?” Donaldson said.

He tapped the brakes and coasted into the station. It had probably been there for forty years, and hadn’t updated since then. Donaldson sidled up to an old-school pump—one with a meter where the numbers actually scrolled up, built way back when closed-circuit cameras were something out of a science fiction magazine.

Donaldson peered over Lucy, into the small store. A bored female clerk sat behind the counter, apparently asleep. White trash punching the minimum wage clock, not one to

pay much attention.

“The tank’s on your side,” Donaldson said. “I don’t think these old ones take credit cards.”

“I can pay cash inside. I buy, you fly.”

Donaldson nodded. “Okay. I’m fine with doin’ the pumpin’. Twenty, you said?”

“Yeah. You want anything?”

“If they have any gum that isn’t older than I am, pick me up a pack. I’ve got an odd taste in my mouth for some reason.”

Lucy got out of the car. Donaldson opened the glove compartment and quickly shoved something into his coat pocket. Then he set the parking brake, pocketed the keys, and followed her out.

While Donaldson stood pumping gas into the Honda, Lucy walked across the oil-stained pavement and into the store. The clerk didn’t acknowledge her entrance, just sat staring at a small black-and-white television airing *Jeopardy*, her chin propped up in her hand and a Marlboro Red with a one-inch ash trailing smoke toward the ceiling.

Lucy walked down the aisle to the back of the store and picked a Red Bull out of the refrigerated case. At the drink fountain, she went with the smallest size—sixteen ounces—and filled the cup with ice to the brim, followed by a little Dr. Pepper, Mountain Dew, Pepsi, and Orange Fanta.

She glanced back toward the entrance and through the windows. Donaldson was still fussing with the pump. She reached into her pocket and withdrew the syringe. Uncapped the needle, shot a super-size squirt of liquid Oxycontin into the bubbling soda.

At the counter, she chose a pack of Juicy Fruit and pushed the items forward.

The clerk tore herself away from a video Daily Double and rang up the purchase.

“\$24.52.”

Lucy looked up from her wallet. “How much of that is gas?”

“Twenty.”

“Shit, I told him just do fifteen. Here.” She put a Jefferson on the filthy counter. “I’ll send him in with the balance, ’cause this is all I’ve got.”

“Don’t be trying to steal my gas.”

Donaldson was screwing on the gas cap when Lucy walked up. She said, “They still need five bucks. I’m sorry. It came to more than twenty with the drinks and gum. I’m out of cash.”

“No ATM?”

“Here? Lucky they have electricity. I’ll get you next stop.” She flashed a shy grin, sashaying her fingers through the air. “Cross my heart and hope to die.”

He just stared at her for a moment, then turned and

started toward the store. Lucy opened the front passenger door and traded out Donaldson's Big Gulp for the fresh drink. She tossed the bucket-size cup into a trashcan between the pumps and climbed in.

Donaldson was at the counter. Lucy glanced into the backseat at the cooler with the biohazard sign. She looked into the convenience store, back at the cooler, then spun quickly around in her seat and reached back toward the lid.

Empty. The inside a dull, stained white. She closed it again.

Donaldson's footsteps slapped at the pavement. She settled back into her seat as he opened his door. The chassis bounced when he eased his bulk behind the wheel.

"Sorry about that," Lucy said. "I thought I had another ten. I could swear my snowboarder friend gave me some cash." She stuck out her lower lip, pouting. "I got you some gum. And a new drink."

Donaldson frowned, but he took the Juicy Fruit, ran it under his nose.

"Thank you, kindly. Fresh soda too, huh?"

Lucy cracked open the Red Bull and nodded.

"Cheers. To new friends." She took a sip. A trail of pink liquid dribbled down the corner of her mouth, hugging her chin and neck, dampening her shirt.

Donaldson shifted in his chair and reached for the cup. He sipped on the straw and made a face.

“What flavor is this?”

“I didn’t know what you liked,” Lucy said. “So I got you a little of everything.”

Donaldson chuckled his approval, then turned the key and put the car into gear.

The winding county road ahead was pitch black, like driving through ink. Donaldson sipped his soda. Lucy watched him closely, taking periodic nips at her energy drink. The cool, dry air seemed to crackle with electricity as they climbed into the mountains.

“So is that really a guitar in that case?” Donaldson asked after five miles of silence.

“What do you think?”

“I’ll be honest with you, darlin’. You’re a bit of a mystery to me. I’ve been around, but I’m not sure what to make of you.”

“How so?”

“You’re young. But you’ve heard of Vietnam, I’m guessing.”

“I loved *Platoon*.”

Donaldson nodded. “Well then, you were practically there in the rice paddies with me, going toe-to-toe with the Cong.”

He drank more soda. Lucy watched.

“Took some shrapnel in my hip in Ca Lu,” Donaldson said. “Nicked my sciatic nerve. Biggest nerve in the body. Pain sometimes gets so bad I can chew through a bath towel.

Do you understand pain, little girl?"

"More so than you'd think."

"So you should know, then, opiates and I are friends from way back." Donaldson took a big pull off the soda. "So spiking my drink here hasn't done much more than make me a little horny. Actually a lot horny." Donaldson turned to Lucy. "You're about as musical as I am Christian. So you want to tell me what your game is, or do I take you over my knee and spank you right now like the naughty girl you are?"

Lucy said, "It's Oxycontin. Did they have that back in 'Nam, gramps? And you being one fat bastard, I squirted two hundred and fifty milligrams into your drink. I'm not some frat boy trying to roofie up a chunky freshman. I gave you the rhino dose."

She tested the weight of the Styrofoam cup. "Jesus, you've already gone through half of it? I'm actually more concerned you're going to die of a drug overdose instead of the fun I have planned."

She reached across the seat and squeezed his leg. "Look, you will be losing consciousness shortly, so we don't have much time. Pull the car over. I'd like to take you up on that spanking."

Donaldson stared at her, blinked hard twice, and stomped the brake pedal.

Lucy's seatbelt released and she slammed into the metal-

reinforced dashboard. Donaldson shook his head, then swiped the zip tie from his pocket. He grabbed a handful of wool cap and the hair beneath it and yanked Lucy up off the floor. She fought hard, but weight and strength won out and he cinched her hands behind her back.

Donaldson glanced through the windshield, then checked the rearview mirror. Darkness.

Lucy laughed through her shattered nose and ran her tongue along her swollen upper lip and gums—two front teeth MIA.

Donaldson blinked and shook his head again. Pulled off the road onto the shoulder.

“We’re gonna have some fun, little girl,” he said. “And two hundred and fifty milligrams is like candy to me.”

He ran a clumsy paw across her breasts, squeezing hard, then turned his attention to the backseat.

The guitar case had two clasps, one on the body, one on the neck.

Donaldson slapped the left side of his face three times and then opened the case.

A waft of foulness seeped out of the velvet-lined guitar lid, although the contents didn’t seem to be the source—a length of chain. Four pairs of handcuffs. Three carabiners. Vials of liquid Oxycontin. Cutlery shears. A creepy-looking instrument with six blades at one end. A spotlight. A small spray bottle. Two coils of climbing rope. And a snowboarding helmet.

The front passenger door squeaked open and Donaldson spun around as Lucy fell backward out of the car. He lunged into her seat, but she kicked the door. It slammed into his face, his chin crunching his mouth closed, and as the door recoiled, he saw Lucy struggling onto her feet, her wrists still bound behind her back.

She disappeared into the woods.

Donaldson took a moment, fumbling for the door handle. He found it, but paused.

He adjusted the rearview mirror, grinning to see the blood between his teeth.

“Should we let this one go, sport? Or show the little missus that there are things a lot scarier than a guitar case full of bondage shit?”

Donaldson winked at his reflection, tugged out the keys, yanked up the brake, and shoved his door open. He weaved over to the trunk, a stupid grin on his face, got the right key in on the third try.

Among the bottles of bleach solution, the rolls of paper towels, the gas cans, and the baby wipes, Donaldson grabbed the only weapon an upstanding citizen could legally carry without harassment from law enforcement.

The tire iron clenched in his hand, he bellowed at the woods.

“I’m coming for you, Lucy! And there won’t be any drugs to dull your pain!”

He stumbled into the forest after her, his erection beginning to blossom.

She crouched behind a juniper tree, the zip tie digging into her wrists. Absolute darkness in the woods, nothing to see, but everything to hear.

Donaldson yelled, “Don’t hide from me, little girl! It’ll just make me angry!”

His heavy footsteps crunched in the leaves. Lucy eased down onto her butt and leaned back, legs in the air, then slid her bound wrists up the length of them. Donaldson stumbled past her tree, invisible, less than ten feet away.

“Lucy? Where are you?” His words slurred. “I just wanna talk.”

“I’m over here, big boy! Still waiting for that spanking!”

His footsteps abruptly stopped. Dead quiet for thirty seconds, and then the footsteps started up again, heading in her general direction.

“Oh, no, please,” she moaned. “Don’t hurt me, Donaldson. I’m so afraid you’ll hurt me.”

He was close now, and she turned and started back toward the road, her hands out in front of her to prevent collision with a tree.

A glint of light up ahead—the Honda’s windshield catching a piece of moonlight.

Lucy emerged from the woods, her hands throbbing

from circulation loss. She stumbled into the car and turned around to watch the treeline.

“Come on, big boy! I’m right here! You can make it!”

Donaldson staggered out of the woods holding a tire iron, and when the moon struck his eyes, they were already half-closed.

He froze.

He opened his mouth to say something, but fell over instead, dropping like an old, fat tree.

Donaldson opened his eyes and lifted his head. Dawn and freezing cold. He lay in weeds at the edge of the woods, his head resting in a padded helmet. His wrists had been cuffed, hands purple from lack of blood flow, and his ankles were similarly bound. He was naked and glazed with dew, and as the world came into focus, he saw that one of those carabiners from Lucy’s guitar case had been clipped to his ankle cuffs. A climbing rope ran from that carabiner to another carabiner, which was clipped to a chain which was wrapped around the trailer hitch of his Honda.

The driver-side door opened and Lucy got out, walked down through the weeds. She came over and sat on his chest, giving him a missing-toothed smile.

“Morning, Donaldson. You of all people will appreciate what’s about to happen.”

Donaldson yawned, then winked at her. “Aren’t you just the prettiest thing to wake up to?”

Lucy batted her eyelashes.

“Thank you. That’s sweet. Now, the helmet is so you don’t die too fast. Head injuries ruin the fun. We’ll go slow in the beginning. Barely walking speed. Then we’ll speed up a bit when we get you onto asphalt. The last ones screamed for five miles. They where skeletons when I finally pulled over. But you’re so heavy, I think you just might break that record.”

“I have some bleach spray in the trunk,” Donaldson said. “You might want to spritz me with that first, make it hurt even more.”

“I prefer lemon juice, but it’s no good until after the first half mile.”

Donaldson laughed.

“You think this is a joke?”

He shook his head. “No. But when you have the opportunity to kill, you should kill. Not talk.”

Donaldson sat up, quick for a man his size, and rammed his helmet into Lucy’s face. As she reeled back, he caught her shirt with his swollen hands and rolled on top of her, his bulk making her gasp.

“The keys,” he ordered. “Undo my hands, right now.”

Lucy tried to talk, but her lungs were crushed. Donaldson shifted and she gulped in some air.

“In...the...guitar case...”

“That’s a shame. That means you die right here. Person-

ally, I think suffocation is the way to go. All that panic and struggle. Dragging some poor sap behind you? Where's the fun in that? Hell, you can't even see it without taking your eyes off the road, and that's a dangerous way to drive, girl."

Lucy's eyes bulged, her face turning scarlet.

"Poc...ket."

"Take your time. I'll wait."

Lucy managed to fish out the handcuff keys. Donaldson shifted again, giving her a fraction more room, and she unlocked a cuff from one of his wrists.

He winced, his face getting mean.

"Now let me tell you about the survival of the fittest, little lady. There's a..."

The chain suddenly jerked, tugging Donaldson across the ground. He clutched Lucy.

"Where are the car keys, you stupid bitch?"

"In the ignition..."

"You didn't set the parking brake! Give me the handcuff key!"

The car crept forward, beginning to pick up speed as it rolled quietly down the road.

The skin of Donaldson's right leg tore against the ground, peeling off, and the girl pounded on him, fighting to get away.

"The key!" he howled, losing his grip on her. He clawed at her waist, her hips, and snagged her foot.

Lucy screamed when the cuff snicked tightly around her ankle.

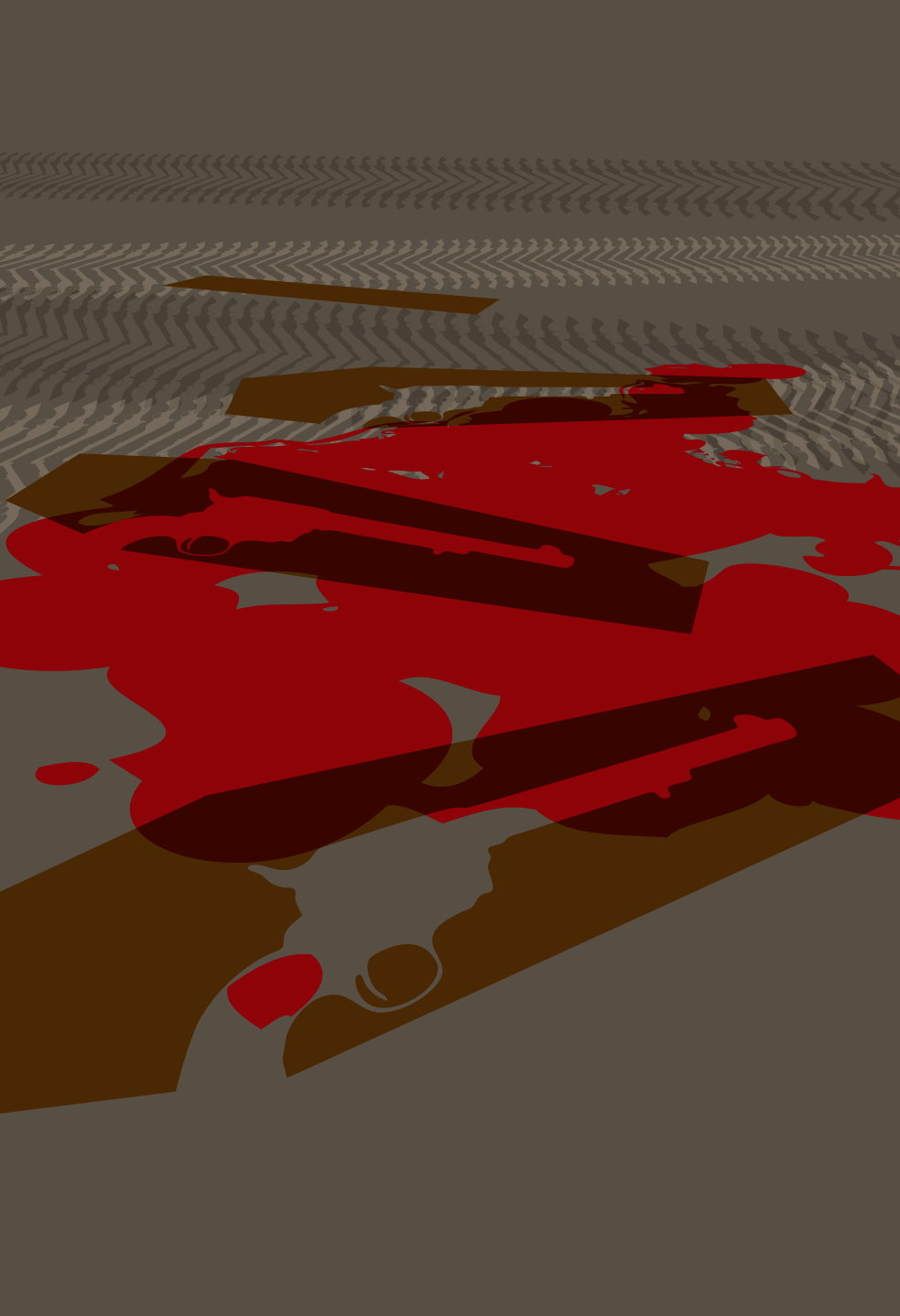
“No! No no no!” She tried to sit up, to work the key into the lock, but they hit a hole and it bounced from her grasp.

They were dragged off the dirt and onto the road.

Lucy felt the pavement eating through her trench coat, Donaldson in hysterics as it chewed through the fat of his ass, and the car still accelerating down the five-percent grade.

At thirty miles per hour, the fibers of Lucy’s trench coat were sanded away, along with her camouflage panties, and just as she tugged a folding knife out of her pocket and began to hack at the flesh of her ankle, the rough county road began to grind through her coccyx.

She dropped the knife and they screamed together for two of the longest miles of their wretched lives, until the road curved and the Honda didn’t, and the car and Lucy and Donaldson all punched together through a guardrail and took the fastest route down the mountain.



EPILOGUE THE NEXT DAY, LOCATION UNKNOWN

The TV droned on in the background.

“...is Gregory Donaldson, age 56, who was in the news a week ago for assaulting a police officer in Wisconsin. He’s been linked to over fifty homicides going back thirty years, and found hidden in the upholstery of his vehicle was a large collection of Polaroid pictures, apparently showing him viciously murdering numerous victims. The woman chained to Donaldson, as of yet unidentified, is described as a *person of interest* by the FBI. They’ve just released a statement suggesting that fingerprint and DNA evidence could point to her being a serial killer. A task force has been formed to try and close the books on dozens of unsolved murders spanning nineteen states that this duo

may have been responsible for.

“This is the arresting officer in the recent Marshal Otis Taylor case, Chicago Homicide Lieutenant Jacqueline Daniels, who encountered Donaldson eight days ago at a Murray’s truck stop on Interstate 39 in Wisconsin during her confrontation with Taylor.”

The scene on the television changed from the trench-coated reporter standing in front of the hospital to an attractive woman in a pantsuit being mobbed by reporters in a parking lot.

“There are predators out there,” the cop said. “We’ve been lucky to nail three in a week. But there are others. Many others. Recreational killers are incredibly hard to catch, but even the smartest of them screw up eventually.”

Hmm, Luther thought, turning his attention from the television set to the crying, bleeding man hanging from the ceiling.

Jacqueline Daniels... I really should look her up.

For the continuing adventures of Mr. K, read SHAKEN, the 7th Jack Daniels thriller by J.A. Konrath.

For the continuing adventures of Orson and Luther, read DESERT PLACES and LOCKED DOORS by Blake Crouch.

For the continuing adventures of Taylor, read AFRAID by Jack Kilborn.



AFTERWORD

In Which Blake and Joe Interview Each Other About the Experience of Writing SERIAL and SERIAL UNCUT.

BLAKE I know it must be a great thrill getting to work with me, probably the real reason you wanted to become a writer in the first place. Did the experience live up to the dream?

JOE I can't remember where we met for the first time. I think it was Jon Jordan (editor of the Crimesprez zine) who gave me one of your books and said, "Read this, this guy is sick like you." He was right. But to answer your question, yes, the experience lived up to the dream. I've collaborated on stories with several authors (Jeff Strand, Henry Perez, Tom Schreck, F. Paul Wilson) but nothing ever came so fast and furious, with so little need for revision. We cranked out

almost 8000 words in something like five hours. This might be a good place to talk about our co-writing process.

BLAKE You pitched this idea to me in an email: “Now, let’s consider hitchhiking. You aren’t supposed to go hitch hiking, because the driver who picks you up could be crazy. You aren’t supposed to pick up hitchhikers, because they could be crazy. Now if we were to collaborate, I write a scene where a driver kills someone he picked up. You write a scene where a hitchhiker kills the guy who gave him a ride. Then we get these two together...”

I was immediately hooked. As I recall, we each wrote our sections in isolation, and we didn’t share them with each other. When they were as good as they could be, you emailed me 200 words to kick off section 3, and I wrote back the next hundred words or so. You write much faster than I do so you pretty much just harassed me until I would email you back with my scene, or rather, my response to what your character had done. Do you remember the ground rules we came up with for writing section 3 together? I don’t think we had an end in mind when we started. Didn’t we just let it flow organically and hope it came out all right?

JOE We had no ending planned, and we weren’t allowed to get into our character’s thoughts. It was a straight third-

person observational point-of-view, with no head-hopping. Sort of like a screenplay. The action had to be on the page.

BLAKE What made this so fun for me was that it was like playing chess with words. I created my very evil character and gave her a certain MO. You created the vastly demented Donaldson and gave him an MO, however as we began to email back and forth the text for section 3, we didn't know anything about each others' characters. In fact, I tried to get my girl to sit in the backseat, but you wouldn't let her. You insisted she sit up front. I didn't know why, but I knew it couldn't be good.

JOE It was like we were really trying to kill each other. Which was fun to do with you, because you're just as twisted as I am. You were writing *LOCKED DOORS* at the same time I was writing *RUSTY NAIL*, and we both wound up with a similar gimmick independent of one another; all serial killers have families.

BLAKE You and I share a similar sensibility in the darker side of fiction. There have been other instances when we were working on projects that had similarities. Like in *AFRAID* and *SNOWBOUND* when we both wrote scenes with wolves and bear traps. We also both love beer.

JOE I'm about eight years older, so I've loved beer longer than you have. Might be worth doing a brief bio here, for those who haven't read us before. I write thrillers under the name J.A. Konrath, about a cop named Jack Daniels who chases serial killers. The books have some laughs, but also contain a lot of dark, scary parts, very much like the Taylor section of this novella.

Over the years I've gotten a fair amount of mail from fans, asking if I would ever do a scary book without any jokes. AFRAID was the result. Because it's no-holds-barred horror, I used a pen name, Jack Kilborn.

BLAKE My first two books featured suspense writer Andrew Thomas, who gets pulled into a nightmarish world even worse than the ones he writes about. My latest book, SNOWBOUND, is coming out June 2010. It deals with human trafficking, a missing mother/wife, the Alaskan mob, and an elite Mexican ex-paratrooper group who are muscle for the drug cartels (they're real and they are so freaking terrifying I don't even call them by name in the book). Want to talk about all the negative reviews SERIAL has gotten?

JOE Man, people sure are vocal in their hatred of this story. There have been hundreds of negative reviews on Amazon, Sony, B&N, and Apple, saying how sick and disgusting the

story is, and how we're both monsters for writing such a thing.

First of all, it's a horror story. Horror is supposed to push boundaries and freak people out. What did they expect downloading a story about serial killers? Dr. Seuss?

Second, SERIAL was free, for heaven's sake. It's not like anyone was ripped off by us. They get it for nothing, then tear it to shreds because they don't like horror. If I didn't find it so funny, I might be a little hurt.

BLAKE There have been some classic negative reviews. Clearly, a large group of people just downloaded SERIAL because it was free, without reading the explicit and redundant warnings you and I both went out of our way to post. The woman who wrote that she wanted to have a priest bless her Kindle and sprinkle holy water on it after it had been infected by SERIAL was my personal favorite. Did you notice that a new word was created in some of the reviews? I noted several people wanted to "unread" it.

JOE I also liked those who said that "free was too much money" and "I wish I could rate this lower than 1 star." I'd love to watch some of those haters read this uncut version. And then go to therapy to unread it.

BLAKE SERIAL UNCUT was your idea. How'd it come about?

JOE I'd been wanting to do this uncut version of SERIAL ever since I wrote TRUCK STOP. With TRUCK STOP, my goal was to unite the Jack Daniels series with the Jack Kilborn books. But then we got so many bad reviews saying how graphic SERIAL was, when in reality most of the violence is understated and off the page, that I started wondering what would happen if we really did pull out all the stops. If we added TRUCK STOP to SERIAL, and then put even more material tying it in with your novels, this would actually be a short book. A short book about six horrible yet very different serial killers, that linked together the majority of both of our work.

BLAKE From the first time you mentioned expanding SERIAL, I knew I wanted to do it, because I thought it would be fun to write some more about Lucy. And what you did with TRUCK STOP and bringing in characters from AFRAID and your Jack Daniels series seemed like so much fun. If you'll recall, my pre-SERIAL Lucy story was actually conceived in the Hyatt hot tub in Indianapolis at Bouchercon 2009 (the world mystery convention). You and I were talking about expanding SERIAL and what I could do with Lucy, and I came up with the idea of bringing in Orson, Luther, and Andy Thomas. Since we were at a mystery convention, and since Andrew Thomas is essentially a dark mystery writer,

it made sense to set my pre-SERIAL Lucy story at a Bouchercon-type of convention.

JOE From my end, putting this together was really easy. The opening section, where we learn how Donaldson got his start, practically wrote itself. Part of the fun of writing the original SERIAL was having two killers playing cat and mouse. With TRUCK STOP, I decided to see if killers could actually play well together. The opening scene, with Donaldson and Mr. K, was a nice precursor to those two scenes. Readers interested in the further adventures of Mr. K can find him as the main villain in the next Jack Daniels novel, called SHAKEN. Do you think it's more fun to write for the bad guys than the good guys?

BLAKE Bad guys are without a doubt so much more fun to write. And I don't know what this says about me, but I definitely find them easier to write. The idea of killers playing well together certainly was the foundation of my Lucy/Orson/Luther section as well. We think of serial killers as these loners, societal outcasts who can't connect to other human beings. I think it's fascinating to consider two such outcasts (or three in my case) finding each other and comparing notes.

My next novel coming up is called SNOWBOUND. It's a thriller about the search for a missing girl, and the horri-

fying place the search leads. What's up next for you?

JOE Besides SHAKEN, I've written two books in the TIMECASTER science fiction series under the pen name Joe Kimball. They take place in 2056, and the hero is Jack Daniels's grandson. I've also written two more Jack Kilborn horror novels that should be coming out soon. The working titles for them are TRAPPED and ENDURANCE, but titles change all the time, and I don't know what they'll eventually wind up being called. TRAPPED is sort of a semi-sequel to AFRAID, but it's a lot more visceral. ENDURANCE is also pretty intense. I also have a ton of ebooks available, including a lot of thriller and horror books and stories. What's up with you on the ebook front?

BLAKE I just uploaded a short story collection to Kindle called FOUR LIVE ROUNDS, and a horror novella called PERFECT LITTLE TOWN, and possibly an early novel. Jeroen ten Berge, the genius behind the SERIAL graphic design and illustrations (and my website) is designing amazing covers for these eBooks. He has a great website at www.jeroentenberge.com.

JOE Jeroen rocks.

BLAKE There's a bibliography after this interview,

along with some excerpts of AFRAID, SHAKEN, and SNOWBOUND. So what's next? Are we going to do a Jack Daniels/Luther story?

JOE Hell yeah, we are. And I'm not sure we're entirely done with SERIAL yet. Careful readers will notice that we never say Donaldson and Lucy are dead. I think we have a few more tales to tell about these horrible characters...



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- Whiskey Sour
- Bloody Mary
- Rusty Nail
- Dirty Martini
- Fuzzy Navel
- Cherry Bomb
- Shaken (featuring Mr. K)

Exclusive ebooks by J.A. Konrath:

- 55 Proof – Short Story Omnibus
- Origin
- The List
- Disturb
- Shot of Tequila

- Crime Stories – Collected Short Stories
- Horror Stories – Collected Short Stories
- Jack Daniels Stories – Collected Short Stories
- Suckers by J.A. Konrath and Jeff Strand
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- SERIAL by Blake Crouch and Jack Kilborn
(included in SERIAL UNCUT)
- Truck Stop by Jack Kilborn and J.A. Konrath
(included in SERIAL UNCUT)

Writing as Jack Kilborn:

- Afraid (featuring Taylor)
- Trapped
- Endurance

Non-Fiction

- The Newbie's Guide to Publishing

Visit Joe at www.jakonrath.com

By Blake Crouch

- Desert Places (featuring Andrew, Orson and Luther)
- Locked Doors (sequel to Desert Places)
- Abandon
- Snowbound

Exclusive ebooks by Blake Crouch:

- SERIAL by Blake Crouch and Jack Kilborn
(included in SERIAL UNCUT)
- Four Live Rounds – Collected Short Stories
- Perfect Little Town

Visit Blake at www.blakecrouch.com



THE FOLLOWING IS AN EXCERPT OF **AFRAID** BY
JACK KILBORN, NOW AVAILABLE EVERYWHERE BOOKS
ARE SOLD FROM GRAND CENTRAL PUBLISHING...

The hunter's moon, a shade of orange so dark it appeared to be filled with blood, hung fat and low over the mirror surface of Big Lake McDonald. Sal Morton took in a lungful of crisp Wisconsin air, shifted on his seat cushion, and cast his *Lucky* 13 over the stern. The night of fishing had been uneventful; a few small bass earlier in the evening, half a dozen Northern Pike—none bigger than a pickle—and then, nothing. The zip of his baitcaster unspooling and the plop of the bait hitting the water were the only sounds he'd heard for the last hour.

Until the helicopter exploded.

It was already over the water before Sal noticed it. Black, without any lights, silhouetted by the moon. And quiet. Twenty years ago Sal had taken his wife Maggie on a helicopter ride at the Dells, both of them forced to ride with their hands clamped over their ears to muffle the sound. This one made a fraction of that noise. It hummed, like a refrigerator.

The chopper came over the lake on the east side, low enough that its downdraft produced large eddies and waves. So close to the water Sal wondered if its wake might overturn his twelve foot aluminum boat. He ducked as it passed over him, knocking off his Packers baseball cap, scattering lures, lifting several empty Schmidt beer cans and tossing them overboard.

Sal dropped his pole next to his feet and gripped the sides of the boat, moving his body against the pitch and yaw. When capsizing ceased to be a fear, Sal squinted at the helicopter for a tag, a marking, some sort of ID, but it lacked both writing and numbers. It might as well have been a black ghost.

Three heartbeats later the helicopter had crossed the thousand yard expanse of lake and dipped down over the tree line on the opposite shore. What was a helicopter doing in Safe Haven? Especially at night? Why was it flying so low? And why did it appear to have landed near his house?

Then came the explosion.

He felt it a moment after he saw it. A vibration in his feet, as if someone had hit the bow with a bat. Then a soft warm breeze on his face, carrying mingling scents of burning wood and gasoline. The cloud of flames and smoke went up at least fifty feet.

After watching for a moment, Sal retrieved his pole and reeled in his lure, then pulled the starter cord on his 7.5 horsepower Evinrude. The motor didn't turn over. The second

and third yank yielded similar results. Sal swore and began to play with the choke, wondering if Maggie was scared by the crash, hoping she was all right.

Maggie Morton awoke to what she thought was thunder. Storms in upper Wisconsin could be as mean as anywhere on earth, and in the twenty-six years they'd owned this house she and Sal had to replace several cracked windows and half the roof due to weather damage.

She opened her eyes, listened for the dual accompaniment of wind and rain. Strangely, she heard neither.

Maggie squinted at the red blur next to the bed, groped for her glasses, pushed them on her face. The blur focused and became the time: 10:46

"Sal?" she called. She repeated it, louder, in case he was downstairs.

No answer. Sal usually fished until midnight, so his absence didn't alarm her. She considered flipping on the light, but investigating the noise that woke her held much less appeal than the soft down pillow and the warm flannel sheets tucked under her chin. Maggie removed her glasses, returned them to the night stand, and went back to sleep.

The sound of the front door opening roused her sometime later.

"Sal?"

She listened to the footfalls below her, the wooden floors

creaking. First in the hallway, and then into the kitchen.

“Sal!” Louder this time. After thirty-five years of marriage, her husband’s ears were just one of many body parts that seemed to be petering out on him. Maggie had talked to him about getting a hearing aid, but whenever she brought up the topic he smiled broadly and pretended not to hear her, and they both wound up giggling. Funny, when they were in the same room. Not funny when they were on different floors and Maggie needed his attention.

“Sal!”

No answer.

Maggie considered banging on the floor, and wondered what the point would be. She knew the man downstairs was Sal. Who else could it be?

Right?

Their lake house was the last one on Gold Star Road, and their nearest neighbor, the Kinsels, resided over half a mile down the shore and had left for the season. The solitude was one of the reasons the Mortons bought this property. Unless she went to town to shop, Maggie would often go days without seeing another human being, not counting her husband. The thought of someone else being in their home was ridiculous.

Reassured by that thought, Maggie closed her eyes.

She opened them a moment later, when the sound of the microwave carried up the stairs. Then came the muffled machine-gun report of popcorn popping. Sal shouldn’t be

eating at this hour. The doctor had warned him about that, and how it aggravated his acid reflux disease, which in turn aggravated Maggie with his constant tossing and turning all night.

She sighed, annoyed, and sat up in bed.

“Sal! The doctor said no late night snacks!”

No answer. Maggie wondered if Sal indeed had a hearing problem, or if he simply used that as an excuse for not listening to her. This time she did swing a foot off the bed and stomp on the floor, three times, with her heel.

She waited for his response.

Got none.

Maggie did it again, and followed it up with yelling, “Sal!” loud as she could.

Ten seconds passed.

Ten more.

Then she heard the sound of the downstairs toilet flush.

Anger coursed through Maggie. Her husband had obviously heard her, and was ignoring her. That wasn’t like Sal at all.

Then, almost like a blush, a wave of doubt overtook her. What if the person downstairs wasn’t Sal?

It has to be, she told herself. She hadn’t heard any boats coming up to the dock, or cars pulling onto their property. Besides, Maggie was a city girl, born and raised in Chicago. Twenty-some years in the Northwoods hadn’t broken her of

the habit of locking doors before going to sleep.

The anger returned. Sal was deliberately ignoring her. When he came upstairs, she was going to give him a lecture to end all lectures. Or perhaps she'd ignore *him* for a while. Turnabout was fair play.

Comforted by the thought, she closed her eyes. The familiar sound of Sal's outboard motor drifted in through the window, getting closer. That Evinrude was older than Sal was. Why he didn't buy a newer, faster motor was beyond her understanding. One of the reasons she hated going out on the lake with him was because it stalled all the time and—

Maggie jack-knifed to a sitting position, panic spiking through her body. *If Sal was still out on the boat, then who was in her house?*

She fumbled for her glasses, then picked up the phone next to her clock. No dial tone. She pressed buttons, but the phone just wouldn't work.

Maggie's breath became shallow, almost a pant. Sal's boat drew closer, but he was still several minutes away from docking. And even when he got home, what then? Sal was an old man. What could he do against an intruder?

She held her breath, trying to listen to noises from downstairs. Maggie did hear something, but the sound wasn't coming from the lower level. It was coming from the hallway right outside her bedroom.

The sound of someone chewing popcorn.

Maggie wondered what she should do. Say something? Maybe this was all some sort of mistake, some confused tourist who had walked into the wrong house. Or perhaps this was a robber, looking for money or drugs. Give him what he wanted, and he'd leave. No need for anyone to get hurt.

"Who's there?"

More munching. Closer. He was practically in the room. She could smell the popcorn now, the butter and salt, and the odor made her stomach do flip-flops.

"My...medication is in the bathroom cabinet. And my purse is on the chair by the door. Take it."

The ruffling of a paper bag, and more chewing. Open-mouthed chewing. Loud, like someone smacking gum. Why wouldn't he say anything?

"What do you want?"

No answer.

Maggie was shivering now. The tourist scenario was gone from her head, the robber scenario fading fast. A new scenario entered Maggie's mind. The scenario of campfire stories and horror movies. The boogeyman, hiding under the bed. The escaped lunatic, searching for someone to hurt, to kill.

Maggie needed to get out of there, to get away. She could run to the car, or meet Sal on the dock and get into his boat, or even hide out in the woods. She could hurry to the guest bedroom, lock the door, open up the window, climb down—

Chewing, right next to the bed. Maggie gasped, pulling

the flannel sheets to her chest. She squinted into the darkness, could barely make out the dark figure of a man standing a few feet away.

The bag rustled. Something touched Maggie's face and she gasped. A tiny pat on her cheek. It happened again, on her forehead, making her flinch. Again, and she swatted out with her hand, finding the object on the pillow.

Popcorn. He was throwing popcorn at her.

Maggie's voice came out in a whisper. "What...what are you going to do?"

The springs creaked as he sat on the edge of the bed.

"Everything," he said.



THE FOLLOWING IS AN EXCERPT OF **SNOWBOUND**
BY BLAKE CROUCH, AVAILABLE EVERYWHERE FROM
MINOTAUR BOOKS IN JUNE 2010...

1

In the evening of the last good day either of them would know for years to come, the girl pushed open the sliding glass door and stepped through onto the back porch.

“Daddy?”

Will Innis set the legal pad aside and made room for Devlin to climb into his lap. His daughter was small for eleven, felt like the shell of a child in his arms.

“What are you doing out here?” she asked and in her scratchy voice he could hear the remnants of her last respiratory infection like gravel in her lungs.

“Working up a closing for my trial in the morning.”

“Is your client the bad guy again?”

Will smiled. “You and your mother. I’m not really supposed to think of it that way, sweetheart.”

“What’d he do?” His little girl’s face had turned ruddy in the sunset and the fading light brought out threads of platinum in her otherwise midnight hair.

“He allegedly—”

“What’s that mean?”

“Allegedly?”

“Yeah.”

“Means it’s not been proven. He’s suspected of selling drugs.”

“Like what I take?”

“No, your drugs are good. They help you. He was selling, allegedly selling, bad drugs to people.”

“Why are they bad?”

“Because they make you lose control.”

“Why do people take them?”

“They like how it makes them feel.”

“How does it make them feel?”

He kissed her forehead and looked at his watch. “It’s after eight, Devi. Let’s go bang on those lungs.”

She sighed but she didn’t argue. She never tried to get out of it.

He stood up cradling his daughter and walked over to the redwood railing.

They stared into the wilderness that bordered Oasis Hills, their subdivision. The houses on No-Water Lane had the Sonoran Desert for a backyard.

“Look,” he said. “See them?” A half mile away, specks filed out of an arroyo and trotted across the desert toward a shadeless forest of giant saguaro cacti that looked vaguely sinister profiled against the horizon.

“What are they?” she asked.

“Coyotes. What do you bet they start yapping when the sun goes down?”

After supper, he read to Devlin from *A Wrinkle in Time*. They’d been working their way through the penultimate chapter, “Aunt Beast,” but Devlin was exhausted and drifted off before Will had finished the second page.

He closed the book and set it on the carpet and turned out the light. Cool desert air flowed in through an open window. A sprinkler whispered in the next door neighbor’s yard. Devlin yawned, made a cooing sound that reminded him of rocking her to sleep as a newborn. Her eyes fluttered and she said very softly, “Mom?”

“She’s working late at the clinic, sweetheart.”

“When’s she coming back?”

“Few hours.”

“Tell her to come in and kiss me?”

“I will.”

He was nowhere near ready for court in the morning but he stayed, running his fingers through Devlin’s hair until she’d fallen back to sleep. Finally, he slid carefully off the bed

and walked out onto the deck to gather up his books and legal pads. He had a late night ahead of him. A pot of strong coffee would help.

Next door, the sprinklers had gone quiet.

A lone cricket chirped in the desert.

Thunderless lightning sparked somewhere over Mexico, and the coyotes began to scream.

2

The thunderstorm caught up with Rachael Innis thirty miles north of the Mexican border. It was 9:30 p.m., and it had been a long day at the free clinic in Sonoyta, where she volunteered her time and services once a week as a bilingual psychologist. The windshield wipers whipped back and forth. High beams lit the steam rising off the pavement, and in the rearview mirror, Rachael saw the pair of headlights a quarter of a mile back that had been with her for the last ten minutes.

Glowing beads suddenly appeared on the shoulder just ahead. She jammed her foot into the brake pedal, the Grand Cherokee fishtailing into the oncoming lane before skidding to a stop. A doe and her fawn ventured into the middle of the road, mesmerized by the headlights. Rachael let her forehead fall onto the steering wheel, closed her eyes, drew in a deep breath.

The deer moved on. She accelerated the Cherokee, another dark mile passing as pellets of hail hammered the hood.

The Cherokee veered sharply toward the shoulder and she nearly lost control again, trying to correct her bearing, but the steering wheel wouldn't straighten out. Rachael lifted her foot off the gas pedal and eased over onto the side of the road.

When she killed the ignition all she could hear was the rain and hail drumming on the roof. The car that had been following her shot by. She set her glasses in the passenger seat, opened the door, and stepped down into a puddle that engulfed her pumps. The downpour soaked through her black suit. She shivered. It was pitch-black between lightning strikes and she moved forward carefully, feeling her way along the warm metal of the hood.

A slash of lightning hit the desert just a few hundred yards out. It set her body tingling, her ears ringing. *I'm going to be electrocuted.* There came a train of earsplitting strikes, flashbulbs of electricity that lit the sky just long enough for her to see that the tires on the driver side were still intact.

Her hands trembled now. A tall saguaro stood burning like a cross in the desert. She groped her way over to the passenger side as marble-size hail collected in her hair. The desert was electrified again, spreading wide and empty all around her.

In the eerie blue light she saw that the front tire on the

passenger side was flat.

Back inside the Cherokee, Rachael sat behind the steering wheel, mascara trailing down her cheeks like sable tears. She wrung out her long black hair and massaged the headache building between her temples. Her purse lay in the passenger floorboard. She dragged it into her lap and shoved her hand inside, rummaging for the cell phone. She found it, tried her husband's number, but there was no service in the storm.

Rachael looked into the back of the Cherokee at the spare. She had no way of contacting AAA and passing cars would be few and far between on this remote highway at this hour of the night. *I'll just wait and try Will again when the storm has passed.*

Squeezing the steering wheel, she stared through the windshield into the stormy darkness, somewhere north of the border in Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument. *Middle of nowhere.*

There was a brilliant streak of lightning. In the split second illumination she saw a black Escalade parked a hundred yards up the shoulder.

Thunder rattled the windows. Five seconds elapsed. When the sky exploded again, Rachael felt a strange, unnerving pull to look through the driver side window.

A man swung a crowbar through the glass.

Will startled back into consciousness, disoriented and thirsty. It was so quiet—just the discreet drone of a computer fan and the second hand of the clock ticking in the adjacent bedroom. He found himself slouched in the leather chair at the desk in his small home office, the CPU still purring, the monitor switched into sleep mode.

As he yawned, everything rushed back in a torrent of anxiety. He'd been hammering out notes for his closing argument and hit a wall at ten o'clock. The evidence was damning. He was going to lose. He'd only closed his eyes for a moment to clear his head.

He reached for the mug of coffee and took a sip. Winced. It was cold and bitter. He jostled the mouse. When the screen restored, he looked at the clock and realized he wouldn't be sleeping anymore tonight. It was 4:09 a.m. He was due in court in less than five hours.

First things first—he needed an immediate and potent infusion of caffeine.

His office adjoined the master bedroom at the west end of the house, and passing through on his way to the kitchen, he noticed a peculiar thing. He'd expected to see his wife buried under the myriad quilts and blankets on their bed, but she wasn't there. The comforter was smooth and taut, undisturbed since they'd made it up yesterday morning.

He walked through the living room into the den and down the hallway toward the east end of the house. Rachael had probably come home, seen him asleep at his desk, and gone in to kiss Devlin. She'd have been exhausted from working all day at the clinic. She'd probably fallen asleep in there. He could picture the nightlight glow on their faces as he reached his daughter's door.

It was cracked, exactly as he'd left it seven hours ago when he'd put Devlin to bed.

He eased the door open. Rachael wasn't with her.

Will wide awake now, closing Devlin's door, heading back into the den.

"Rachael? You here, hon?"

He went to the front door, turned the deadbolt, stepped outside.

Dark houses. Porchlights. Streets still wet from the thunderstorms that blew through several hours ago. No wind, the sky clearing, bright with stars.

When he saw them in the driveway, his knees gave out and he sat down on the steps and tried to remember how to breathe. One Beamer, no Jeep Cherokee, and a pair of patrol cars, two uniformed officers coming toward him, their hats shelved under their arms.

The patrolmen sat in the living room on the couch, Will facing them in a chair. The smell of new paint was still

strong. He and Rachael had redone the walls and the vaulted ceiling in terracotta last weekend. Most of the black and white desert photographs that adorned the room still leaned against the antique chest of drawers, waiting to be re-hung.

The lawmen were businesslike in their delivery, taking turns with the details, as if they'd rehearsed who would say what, their voices so terribly measured and calm.

There wasn't much information yet. Rachael's Cherokee had been found on the shoulder of Arizona 85 in Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument. Right front tire flat, punctured with a nail to cause a slow and steady loss of air pressure. Driver side window busted out.

No Rachael. No blood.

They asked Will a few questions. They tried to sympathize. They said how sorry they were, Will just shaking his head and staring at the floor, a tightness in his chest, constricting his windpipe in a slow strangulation.

He happened to look up at some point, saw Devlin standing in the hall in a plain pink tee-shirt that fell all the way to the carpet, the tattered blanket she'd slept with every night since her birth draped over her left arm. And he could see in her eyes that she'd heard every word the patrolmen had said about her mother, because they were filling up with tears.

Rachael Innis was strapped upright with two-inch webbing to the leather seat behind the driver. She stared at the console lights. The digital clock read 4:32 a.m. She remembered the crowbar through the window and nothing after.

Bach's *Four Lute Suites* blared from the Bose stereo system, John Williams playing the classical guitar. Beyond the windshield, the headlights cut a feeble swath of light through the darkness, and even though she was riding in a luxury SUV, the shocks did little to ease the violent jarring from whatever primitive road they traveled.

Her wrists and ankles were comfortably but securely bound with nylon restraints. Her mouth wasn't gagged. From her vantage point, she could only see the back of the driver's head and occasionally the side of his face by the cherry glow of his cigarette. He was smooth-shaven, his hair was dark, and he smelled of a subtle, spicy cologne.

It occurred to her that he didn't know she was awake, but the thought wasn't two seconds old when she caught his eyes in the rearview mirror. They registered her consciousness, turned back to the road.

They drove on. An endless stream of rodents darted across the road ahead and a thought kept needling her—at some point, he was going to stop the car and do whatever

he was driving her out in the desert to do.

“Have you urinated on my seat?” She thought she detected the faintest accent.

“No.”

“You tell me if you have to urinate. I’ll stop the car.”

“Okay. Where are you—”

“No talking. Unless you have to urinate.”

“I just—”

“You want your mouth taped? You have a cold. That would make breathing difficult.”

Devlin was the only thing she’d ever prayed for and that was years ago, but as she watched the passing sagebrush and cactus through the deeply tinted windows, she pleaded with God again.

Now the Escalade was slowing. It came to a stop. He turned off the engine and stepped outside and shut the door. Her door opened. He stood watching her. He was very handsome, with flawless, brown skin (save for an indentation in the bridge of his nose), liquid blue eyes, and black hair greased back from his face. His pretty teeth seemed to gleam in the night. Rachael’s chest heaved against the strap of webbing.

He said, “Calm down, Rachael.” Her name sounded like a foreign word on his lips. He took out a syringe from his black leather jacket and uncapped the needle.

“What is that?” she asked.

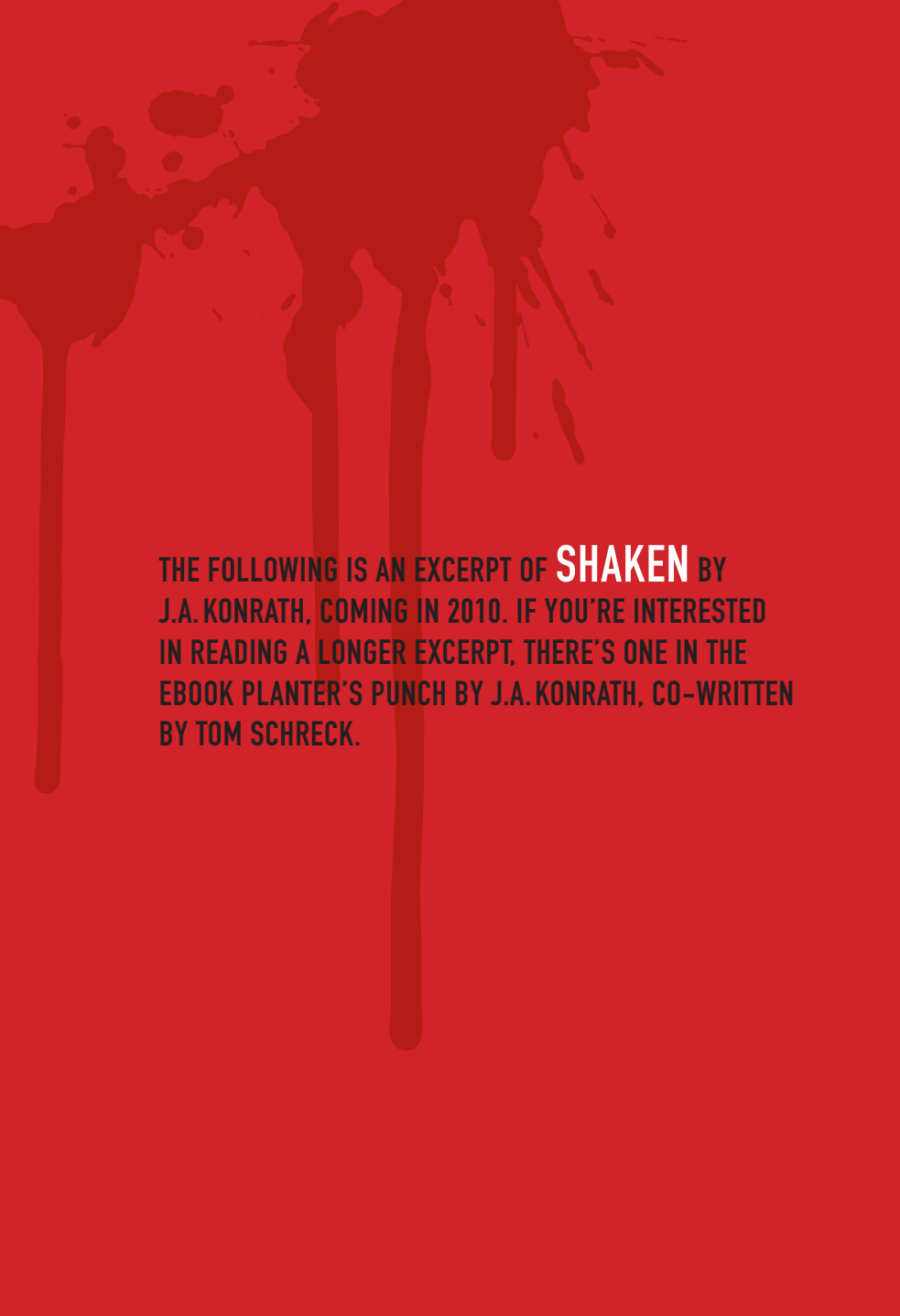
“You have nice veins.” He ducked into the Escalade and

turned her arm over. When the needle entered, she gasped.

“Please listen. If this is some kind of ransom thing—”

“No, no. You’ve already been purchased. In fact, right now, there isn’t a safer place in the world for you to be than in my possession.”

A gang of coyotes erupted in demonic howls somewhere out in that empty dark and Rachael thought they sounded like a woman burning alive, and she began to scream until the drug took her.



THE FOLLOWING IS AN EXCERPT OF **SHAKEN** BY
J.A. KONRATH, COMING IN 2010. IF YOU'RE INTERESTED
IN READING A LONGER EXCERPT, THERE'S ONE IN THE
EBOOK PLANTER'S PUNCH BY J.A. KONRATH, CO-WRITTEN
BY TOM SCHRECK.

1989, June 23

This guy isn't a killer, Dalton thinks. He's a butcher.

Dalton isn't repulsed by the spectacle, or even slightly disturbed. He stays detached and professional, even as he snaps a picture of Brotsky tearing at the prostitute's body with some kind of three-pronged garden tool.

There's a lot of blood.

Dalton wonders if he should have brought color film. But there's something classic, something pure, about shooting in black and white. It makes real life even more realistic.

Dalton opens the f-stop on the lens, adjusting for the setting sun. He's standing in the backyard of Brotsky's house, and his subject has been gracious enough to leave the blinds open. From his spot on the lawn, Dalton has a clear view into Brotsky's living room, where the carnage is taking place.

Though Brotsky has a high fence and plenty of foliage on his property, he's still taking a big risk. There are neighbors on either side, and the back gate leading to the alley is unlocked. Anyone could walk by.

It's not a smart way to conduct a murder.

Dalton has watched Brotsky kill two hookers in this fashion, and surely there have been others. Yet the Chicago Police Department hasn't come knocking on Brotsky's door yet. Brotsky has been incredibly lucky so far.

But luck runs out.

At least Brotsky has the sense to put a tarp down, Dalton thinks.

He snaps another photo. Brotsky's naked barrel chest is slick with gore, and the look on his unshaven face is somewhere between frenzy and ecstasy as he works the garden tool. He's not a tall man, but he's thick, with big muscles under a layer of hard fat. Brotsky sweats a lot, and his bald head gives off a glare which Dalton offsets by using a filter on his lens.

Brotsky sets down the garden tool, and picks up a cleaver.

Yeah, this guy is nuts.

Truth told, Dalton has done worse to people, at least as far as suffering goes. If the price is right, Dalton will drag someone's death out for hours, or even days. But Dalton gets no pleasure from the task. Killing is simply his business.

Brotsky is killing to meet baser needs. Sex. Power. Blood

lust. *Hunger*, Dalton muses, taking a shot of Brotsky with his mouth full of something moist.

If Brotsky sticks to his MO, he'll dismember the girl, wrap up her parts in plastic bags, and then take her severed head into the shower with him. When Brotsky returns, he'll be squeaky clean, and the head will be gone. Then he'll load the bags into his car and haul them to the dump site.

Dalton guesses it will be another eleven minutes. He waits patiently, taking occasional snapshots, musing about what Brotsky does with the heads. Dalton isn't bothered by the heat or the humidity, even though it's close to ninety degrees and he's wearing a suit and tie. Unlike Brotsky, Dalton doesn't sweat. Dalton has pores. He just never feels the need to use them.

Exactly eleven minutes and nine seconds later, Brotsky walks out his back door, dressed in shorts, sandals, and a wrinkled blue Hawaiian shirt. He's lugging several black plastic garbage bags. The man is painfully unaware, and doesn't even bother looking around. He walks right past Dalton, who is hiding behind the girth of an ancient oak tree, gun in hand.

The hitman falls into step behind the butcher, his soft-soled shoes silent on the walkway. He trails Brotsky, close as a shadow, for several steps and then jams the Ruger against the fat man's back. Brotsky stops cold.

"This is a gun, Victor Brotsky. Try to run and I'll fire.

The bullet will blow your heart out the front of your chest. Neither of us want that to happen. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Brotsky says. “Can I put down these bags? They’re heavy.”

Brotsky doesn’t seem frightened, or even surprised. Dalton is impressed. Perhaps the man is more of a pro than Dalton guessed.

“No. We’re going to walk, slowly, out to the alley. My car is parked there. You’re going to put the pieces of the hooker in the trunk.”

Brotsky does as he’s told. Dalton’s black 1989 El Dorado Roadster is parked alongside Brotsky’s garage. The car isn’t as anonymous as Dalton would prefer, but he needs to keep up appearances. The wiseguys he works for like Caddys, and driving the latest model somewhat compensates for the fact that Dalton isn’t Italian.

“Trunk is open. Put the bags inside, and take out the red folder.”

Brotsky hefts the bags into the trunk, and they land with a solid thump. The alley smells like garbage, and the summer heat makes the odor cling. Dalton moves the gun from the man’s back to his neck.

“Take the folder,” Dalton says.

The light from the trunk is enough. Brotsky opens the folder, begins to page through several 8x10 photos of his two previous victims. He lingers on one where he’s grinning,

holding up a severed leg. It's Dalton's personal favorite. Black and white really is the only way to go.

"I'm a teacher," Brotsky says. He has the barest trace of a Russian accent. "I don't have much money."

Dalton allows himself a small grin. He likes how Brotsky thinks. Maybe this will work out after all.

"I don't want to blackmail you," Dalton says. "My employer is a very important Chicago businessman."

Brotsky sighs. "Let me guess. I slaughtered one of his whores, and now you're going to teach me a lesson."

"Wrong again, Victor Brotsky. See the lunch box in the corner of the trunk? Open it up."

Brotsky follows instructions. The box is filled with several stacks of twenty dollar bills. Three thousand dollars total.

"What is this?" Brotsky asks.

"Consider it a retainer," Dalton says. "My employer wants to hire you."

"Hire me for what?"

"To do what you're doing for free." Dalton leans forward, whispers in Brotsky's plump, hairy ear. "He wants you to kill some prostitutes."

Brotsky turns around slowly, and his lips part in a smile. His breath is meaty, and he has a tiny bit of hooker caught in his teeth.

"This employer of yours," Brotsky says. "I think I'm going to like working for him."

2010, August 10

The rope secured my wrists behind my back and snaked a figure eight pattern through my arms up to my elbows. Houdini with a hacksaw wouldn't have been able to get free. The best I could do was flex and wiggle my fingers to keep my circulation going.

My legs were similarly secured, the braided nylon line criss-crossing from my ankles to my knees, pinching my skin so tight I wished I'd worn pantyhose. And I hate pantyhose.

I was lying on my side, the concrete floor cool against my cheek and ear, the only light a sliver that came through a crack at the bottom of the far wall. A hard rubber ball had been crammed into my mouth. I was unable to dislodge it—a strap around my head held it in place. I probed the curved surface and winced when my tongue met with little indentations. *Teeth marks*. This ball gag had been used many times before.

My sense of time was sketchy, but I guessed I'd been awake for about fifteen minutes. The first few were spent struggling against the ropes, trying to scream for help around the gag. The bindings were escape-proof, and my ankle rope secured me to a large concrete block, making it impossible for me to roll away. The ball gag didn't allow for more than a low moan, and after a minute or two I

began to choke on my own saliva, my jaw wedged open too wide for me to swallow. I had to adjust my head so the spit ran out the corner of my mouth.

Based on the hollow echoes from my sounds, I sensed I was in a small, empty garage. Some machine—perhaps an air conditioner or dehumidifier—hummed tunelessly in the background. I smelled bleach, which wasn't a good sign. Under the bleach I smelled traces of copper, human waste, and rotten meat, which was even worse.

Fighting panic and losing, I made myself focus on how I got here, how this happened. My memory was fuzzy. A hit on the head? A drug? I wasn't sure. I had no recollection of anything leading up to this.

But from the smells, and my past, I could assume whoever abducted me was planning on killing me.

Definitely not the way I wanted to end my new career.

1989, August 15

I didn't become a cop to do things like this.

The red vehicle pulled up and honked at me. It was one of those strange combinations of a car and a truck; I think they were called SUVs. This one said *Isuzu Trooper* on the fender. I found them to be too big and blocky, especially for an urban setting like Chicago. And with gas prices up to almost \$1.20 a gallon, I doubted the trend would catch on.

The night was hot, humid as hell, and I was sweating even though I was nearly naked. My candy apple red lipstick kept smearing in the heat, forcing me to reapply it. I had the whole block to myself, having chased the other girls away earlier. I'd done them a favor; action was molasses slow. Plus, the city was eight days into a garbage strike, and the stink coming from the alley was a force of nature.

"Your call, Jackie," my earpiece said. My partner, Officer Harry McGlade, waited in a vintage Mustang parked up the street.

"Aren't you bored with this game yet?" I said into the microphone. It was hidden in my Madonna push-up bustier; an item that should have been worn under a top, not as a top. *Jacqueline Streng, working girl*. I reached inside the cup and readjusted my boob. The transmitter was the size of a pack of cigarettes, but harder and heavier, the sharp corners not meant to be wedged tight against delicate female anatomy. It hurt. The wires trailed up my bra strap, and to the earpiece, hidden by my *Fredrick's of Hollywood* blonde Medusa wig.

"I'll be bored when I'm actually ahead a few bucks," Harry said. "Go on. Guess."

I squinted at the guy behind the wheel. The street was dark, but he had his interior light on while he looked around for something. Possibly his wallet. He was Caucasian, late forties, balding, thick glasses. White collar, probably married

with kids.

“BJ,” I said to Harry.

“Naw. I’m guessing something pervy.”

“He looks like a member of the PTA.”

“The clean-cut guys are always the perverts.”

“You said the weird-looking guys are always the perverts.”

“They’re pretty much all perverts. I’ll say foot fetishist.”

I actually didn’t know what a foot fetishist did. Something to do with feet, I assumed, but what? The Vice training manual didn’t explain that particular kink. I wasn’t about to ask Harry, because he’d make fun of me. It was hard enough being a female in the Chicago Police Department. Being a young female who did prostitution stings made me an easy target for potshots.

Not that I would be young for much longer. Today officially began the last year of my twenties. I was going to celebrate the happy occasion by watching TV and getting drunk. My boyfriend Alan was out of town on a business trip, and so far he’d neglected to get me anything. Big mistake. True, I didn’t want any reminders of my rapidly retreating youth. But we cops were big on intent. And forgetting your girlfriend’s birthday said a lot about your future intent.

Not that I had any intentions myself. His last name was *Daniels*, for chrissakes. I had a hard enough time getting

respect on the Job. If my name was Jack Daniels, I'd be the laughing stock of the city.

"You in or out, Jackie?"

"Fine," I said. "Ten-spot?"

"Make it twenty. I got a feeling."

Bald Guy honked again. I pulled up the elastic top of one of my black fishnet stockings, pulled down the hem of my hot pink spandex micro-mini skirt, and walked over to the car on painfully high, strappy heels. His window opened, and I stuck my head inside. The air conditioning bathed my face, cooling the sweat on my brow and upper lip.

"How are you tonight, sugar?" I asked, smacking my gum.

Bald Guy appeared nervous, jittery. Most of them did. Maybe because soliciting sex was embarrassing. Or maybe because they were worried that the hooker they propositioned was actually an undercover cop.

Imagine that.

"How much?" he asked without looking at me.

"How much what?" I asked.

"How much money?"

In order to make a clean arrest, and avoid the dreaded entrapment defense, the suspect had to be the one to bring up the subject of money. This guy cut right to the heart of the matter. Now he needed to mention what he wanted in exchange.

“Depends,” I said, playing coy. “What is it you’re looking for?”

“Something special. Can you quote me your, um, rates?”

“Sure. Head is ten. Straight is fifteen. Half-and-half is twenty. Round the world is thirty. Anything to do with feet is fifty.”

“No fair!” McGlade yelled in my ear. “You’re price-jacking!”

I hoped Bald Guy didn’t hear that, even though it was so loud my eyes bugged out.

“I’ve got kind of a strange request,” Bald Guy said.

I leaned in further. The air conditioning was wonderfully frigid, and the interior smelled like lemon air freshener. After four hours on the street, this was a little slice of heaven.

“Kinky is extra. Tell me what you need, big boy.”

“Actually, I’ll pay you fifty dollars if you just hold me for ten minutes.”

“Hold you?”

He nodded, his face puppy dog sad.

“We can’t arrest him for that,” Harry said. “Ask him if he wants to suck your toes.”

I ignored Harry, which wasn’t the easiest thing to do. Especially with him in my ear. “That’s all?” I asked Bald Guy. “Just hold you?”

“That’s all.”

His shoulders slumped. I felt kind of sorry for him.

“Tell him you’ve been on your feet all day,” Harry said, “and your toes are really sweaty and stinky.”

I wished I could turn the earpiece off.

“That’s kind of a weird,” I told the guy. “Don’t you have a mother or an aunt or someone else who can give you a hug?”

“No one. I just got divorced, and I’m all alone.”

“How about friends? Neighbors? A church group?”

Bald Guy shook his head.

Harry said, “Try taking off your shoe and sticking your foot under his nose.”

“I just need a little tenderness,” Bald Guy said. “Will you do it?”

He looked so devastated, so desperate. Plus his vehicle was air-conditioned and smelled nice. What more prompting did I need? I walked around the front of his car/truck and climbed into the passenger seat.

“Dammit, Jackie! Find another john!” Harry, in my ear. “There aren’t any laws against cuddling! Don’t waste our time!”

The earpiece really needed an off switch. In fact, so did Harry. The sad thing was, Harry wasn’t as bad as some of the other jerks I had to work with. What did a female cop have to do to earn the respect of her peers in this city?

I guessed it wasn’t dressing up as a hooker, offering BJ’s.

“Okay,” I said. “One quick hug. On the house.”

I opened up my arms, ready to embrace this poor clod,

and he handed me a latex glove. I backed off a notch.

“Are you sick?” I asked. “Contagious?”

“No, no, nothing like that. While you’re hugging me, I’d like you to stick your fingers up my bottom.”

No wonder he was divorced.

“And wiggle them,” he added.

“Mirandize that pervert,” McGlade said. “I’ll call the wagon and be right there.”

I opened my silver-sequined purse, reaching for my star and handcuffs.

“I’m a police officer,” I said, making my voice hard, “and you’re under arrest for soliciting a sexual act. Put your hands on the steering wheel.”

Bald Guy turned bright red, then burst into tears.

“I only wanted a little tenderness!”

“Place your hands on the steering wheel, sir. And for future reference, fingers up the wazoo really doesn’t qualify as tenderness.”

“I’m so lonely!” he sobbed.

“Buy a dog.” An unwelcome image popped into my head, of this pervert with some poor Schnauzer. “On second thought, that’s a bad idea.”

Bald Guy moaned, wiped his nose with his wrist, and then flung open his door and ran like hell. Which didn’t make much sense, considering that in jail he could probably find someone to fulfill his request for free.

“He bolted!” I yelled to Harry. “Coming your way!”

I pushed open my door and scrambled after him. Three steps into my pursuit I broke a heel and almost fell onto my face. I recovered in time, but my speed was drastically reduced. A penguin on stilts would have been faster, and looked less clumsy. I wasn’t about to kick my broken pump off—this wasn’t the nicest part of town, and I didn’t want to step on a dirty needle.

“He ducked down the alley, Jackie!” Harry said. “It lets out on Halsted. Run around and block his exit!”

Easy for him to say. He was wearing gym shoes.

I rounded the corner, hobbling as fast as I could, my spandex skirt riding up and encircling my waist like a neon pink belt. My purse orbited my neck on its spaghetti strap, and each time it passed in front of my face I reached for it and missed. Inside was my gmm Beretta, and I didn’t want to be charging into any alleys without it firmly in hand.

Honking, from the street. I wondered if it was the squadrol—a police wagon that picked up and booked the suspects we caught on this sting. No such luck. It was a carload of cute preppy guys. They hooted at me, pumping their fists in the air.

“What’s that sound?” Harry said. “You watching Arsenio?”

I skidded to a halt at the mouth of the alley, tugged down my skirt, and tugged out my Beretta.

The hooting stopped. I heard one of the preppies yell, “The whore is packing heat!” and their tires squealed away.

“Where is he?” I said into the mike.

“If he didn’t come out on your side, he’s hiding in the alley somewhere.”

“I’ll meet you in the middle.”

“It’s dark. Don’t shoot me by mistake.”

Harry didn’t mean it to be condescending, but he wouldn’t have said it if I were a man. I set my jaw, gripped my weapon in both hands with my elbows bent and the barrel pointing skyward, and crept into the alley.

The decaying garbage odor got worse with every step, so bad I could taste it in the back of my throat. I moved slowly, letting my eyes sweep left and right, looking for any place Bald Guy could hide. I came up to a parked car, checked under it, behind it.

“Jesus, the stink is making my eyes water.” Harry said. “It smells like some fat guys with BO ate bad cheese and took a group shit on a rotting corpse.”

Harry wore so much Brut aftershave I was surprised he could smell anything.

“You’re a poet, McGlade.”

“Why? Did I rhyme something?”

I stuck my head into a shadowy doorway, didn’t find Bald Guy, and went deeper into the alley.

Then I heard the scream.

It came from ahead of me. A man's voice, with a hollow/echoey quality to it.

Something horrible was happening to Bald Guy.

My whole body became gooseflesh. I just joined Vice two weeks ago. Even though I was still a patrol officer, and made the same pay, I jumped at the chance to wear plainclothes and ditch the standard uniform. But plainclothes turned out to be hooker-wear, and I felt especially vulnerable without my dress blues on. It wasn't easy being tough when you're wearing a micro-mini.

Another scream ripped through the alley. The little girl in me, the one who still woke up scared during thunderstorms, wanted to turn around and run.

But if I gave in to my fear, Harry would mention it in the arrest report. Then it would be back to riding patrol and answering radio calls, where I got even less respect.

I forced myself to move forward. Now my gun was pointing in front of me, toward the direction of the sound. The Beretta was double action and protocol dictated it stayed uncocked. The harder pull meant less accidental shootings. Theoretically, at least. My finger was so tight on the trigger that a strong breeze would have caused me to fire.

"You see him?" Harry asked. I heard him in my earpiece, but I also heard him in the alley, somewhere ahead.

"Not yet."

"Maybe he's screaming because he can't stand the smell."

I didn't think that was the case. I'd heard my share of screams on the Job. Screams of joy. Screams of sorrow. Screams of pain.

This was a scream of terror.

A clanging sound, only a few yards away from me. A Dumpster. I held my breath, heard whimpering coming from inside.

"He's in a Dumptser," I told Harry.

"Probably sitting in a big pile of rats."

I approached quickly. It was dark, but I could see the Dumpster lid was open.

"This is the police!" I shouted, hoping my voice didn't quaver. "Raise your hands up where I can see them!"

Bald Guy complied. But there was something wrong. Rather than two hands, I counted three.

I moved closer, and realized the third hand wasn't his. It belonged to a woman.

And it wasn't attached to the rest of her.

I felt someone touch my shoulder and jumped back. It was Harry.

"Looks like he got you a birthday present, Jackie. Quite a handy guy."

My stomach seized up, then I bent over and vomited, soaking my broken shoes and getting it caught in the fake curls hanging in front of my face. When I heaved for the final time, the transmitter popped free of my bustier and

plonked into the puddle of puke.

“Happy twenty-ninth,” Harry said.



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