

Screwing the Pooch
Revised Edition

by

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Milton's Pickle

[Provo, Utah](#)

Milton Sonntag sat in the dirt, bent forward at the waist, legs akimbo. His head drooped at a threatening angle, a skin-and-bone frame giving him the look of a broken marionette. The front of his dirt-stained tee shirt absorbed the first copious onslaught of blood flow. Philip Tanner's wallop was unexpected, and delivered in a manner so quick, Milton's head snapped backward. The violence of Tanner's blow threw his skinny body to the sandy hardpan of the abandoned quarry with butt-jarring power. A burning stab of pain brought Milton's eyes back into focus.

Blood drops had formed craters in the powdered dirt between his legs. Milton's brain buzzed with activity, formulating calculations in a mad rush. He shooed the numbers away as he would ravenous ants on a jelly donut. Tanner had given Milton another bloody nose, without provocation, and for no other reason than he could. Milton felt humiliated and as pissed off as a seven-year-old can get.

A grunt pushed its way between his teeth. This time he wasn't going to run home crying. This time he wasn't going to give Tanner the satisfaction. The blood from his nose began to slow and that was good, Milton couldn't wait much longer. He had to get home fast, clean up and fabricate another story to explain all the damage. Gently, he touched his swollen nose.

"Ouch," he mumbled, "here's another pickle for sure. I really hate your guts, Tanner."

How many times had Milton's nose stopped Tanner's fist? The total eluded him, but the information was filed somewhere in his memory banks. At the moment his *crazy brain* as he'd come to think of it, was busy calculating the number of red blood cells in the average drop of blood. Then, it began to multiply that figure by the number of bloody craters between his legs. Milton tried to stand, but the movement made his head throb like a bad toothache.

His infernal, internal CPU continued to manufacture equations. "Stop it," he yelled, but like the rest of the world, crazy brain ignored him. Milton hummed, mentally blocking the mathematical calculations driving him nuts. He looked all around, over his shoulder, and seeing no one, he shouted, face flushed red in frustration, "You do this at least once a week you bully prick."

A shot of fear pierced his chest. What if Tanner was still within earshot? He waited, holding his breath, but the bully was gone and Milton was alone. It seemed even the abandon quarry where he and his tormentor played cars ignored him, refusing to acknowledge his bellow of rage with an echo.

The blood globules thickened. The time between drops increased with each breath he took. The dollops went on creating their bloody craters, but they were shallow and smaller. Milton's crazy brain shifted gears and began to formulate different equations. These mathematics dealt with the density of the smaller drops and the depth of the craters they created.

Disgusted, he forced the numbers away. Milton knew the workings of his mind were unique, his teacher had remarked on his talent more than once. But mental gifts required discipline and he didn't have time to practice control. Milton was, after all, only seven and his main concern was finding a way to explain the blood and damage to his face before momsy got home from work.

Milton's *pickle problems* involved school as well as his play time. Even on school grounds he wasn't safe. Leonard Brown and Myron Duncan were two of Tanner's cohorts in mayhem. If Milton's nemesis was mad at him for, *you pick the reason*, Duncan and Brown descended on him at recess. Tanner was smart, he stayed behind the scenes, orchestrating the bruised arms, black eyes and bloody noses. The teachers remained none the wiser. Milton cursed his ongoing bad luck, for him, life was one big pickle problem after another.

Milton's parents brought him to Provo a year ago. The past twelve months were nothing short of agony for him, like being kicked through the gates of Hell on a daily basis. It all began when the family moved into the rented double-wide trailer two blocks from Olmstead Air Force Base. At first, Milton was wide-eyed with wonder. The desolate beauty of the desert-like landscape was a stark contrast to the farmlands of Thompson, Iowa where he grew up.

His mother, Ava Sonntag, was wide-eyed, too, but wonder wasn't her eye opener. Her assessment was more precise and dealt specifically with the entire environment. She despised the small, broken-down trailer and shabby trailer park. Hated the noisy, classless, beer drinking people, surrounding them. Airplanes roared overhead at all hours. The dry, stifling heat during the day and the bone chilling cold at night. Ava made her complaints known each evening during dinner. Milton watched his father, Murray, sit with head in hands, night after night as momsy made the evening as miserable for Milton and Murray as it apparently was for her.

"There's a million things I hate about this dump," she'd yell, "and I've only begun to count. You're going to hear about them every day. You hear me, Murray Sonntag? Every day until you get us out of here."

Three weeks later Murray Sonntag was dead.

Ava, a bitter woman before, now rivaled the bite of a cyanide capsule. Suicide was covered in Murray Sonntag's policy, but the insurance company wouldn't pay until it completed its investigation. The weeks passed and Ava dried up. Her spirit puckered and her personality shriveled. Her persona drew inward like Milton's luck, like the skin of a dried up sour pickle. When the shock of his father's death wore off nothing else mattered to Milton except maybe Philip Tanner, his temper tantrums, and penchant for inflicting bloody noses.

Twelve months of misery and Milton was tired. He was worn to the bone by his bitchy, nosey mother. He was weary of Tanner and his bully friends and really bored with bloody noses. He'd put up with enough, he thought. He was supposed to enjoy being a kid, right? Yeah, that was bullshit.

Milton sniffed and ran a finger under his nose. The bleeding had stopped. He pushed up on legs that wobbled and his thin frame wavered. Milton bent double and sucked deep gulps of the dry Provo air until his head cleared.

He was smaller than the average seven-year-old. Clothes hung on his skinny frame like they do on a wire coat hanger. Mommy swore if he didn't eat more, the wind would blow him away. Sometimes Milton wished mommy's exaggerations would come true. At least then he wouldn't have to worry about getting smacked in the nose.

Milton gathered his cars and put them in his paper sack. He pulled a Timex watch from his pocket. It belonged to his father and he found it on the floor, under the fold down utility table. He'd kept it hidden from mommy, she had wasted no time throwing away every personal item his father ever owned. Milton ducked through the hole in the wire fence. He only had an hour before mommy got home from work.

He ducked-walked through the narrow tunnel of oleander bushes, his mind working on a new story. He was tired of making up stories. Milton found it boring to invent excuses for his scrapes, nosebleeds and bruises. Taking punches was no fun, but he had no real friends and loneliness left him feeling nothing but anger and emptiness. At least, he mused, when he felt the pain of a Tanner punch, he felt something. Was that a pickle or what?

"*Maybe it's time you did something about Philip Tanner,*" Mr. Pickle Solver whispered in his head.

"Okay, what?" Milton said and pushed through the last of the flowering oleander bushes.

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Two

Ratty Double-Wide

Milton studied his facial expression in the tiny bathroom's medicine cabinet mirror.

"I'd be justified," his likeness said.

He adjusted, a more emphatic look was needed. He addressed his image a second time.

"Philip Tanner is a trailer park bully and he bullies me around school, too."

Milton watched for some sign of understanding from *Mirror Brother*. Milton's alter-ego nodded. He didn't like the knot on the bridge of Milton's nose and he wasn't nuts about the

yellowing bruise stains under his left eye. "*You have to take care of yourself, Milt,*" Mirror Brother sympathized, "*Tanner is nine, you're only seven.*"

Milton nodded acknowledgment and began to dress. "When he wants someone to play cars, I'm his buddy," Milton said and glanced up at the mirror. "When other kids are around, or I don't play right, he punches me in the nose. I've had more bloody noses than anybody alive. I'd bet on it any old time." Milton paused to glare at the mirror, daring disagreement.

"Who are you talking to, Milton?" Mom'sy's voice was a cigarette rasp sawing through the flimsy bathroom door.

"*There's loopy momsy,*" Mirror Brother said. "*Lucky there's no keyhole, she spies on everything.*"

Milton tilted his head toward the door and made a circling motion with his index finger. He winked and said, "Nobody, Mom, I'm practicing for share time."

"Well, hurry up. You've been in the bathroom long enough. Breakfast is ready. You hear me, Milton?"

"Yeah, Mom, I'm coming. Be right there." Milton stared at the hollow core door.

"*Remember when momsy walked in the bathroom and you were in the tub?*" Mirror Brother said. "*You happened to be scrubbing your balls? You remember?*"

Milton nodded and stared at his reflection. "I remember," he said. "She threw a first class fit. I still don't know what that was about, but boy, momsy's got one big busy-body problem."

Milton liked cleanliness, but momsy only allowed one bath a week. She believed bathing more than once a week weakened the body and encouraged sickness. Mom'sy was strange. The bath thing was just one of her idiosyncrasies.

Am I destined to become a bumbler like momsy says? he wondered. Milton had to admit it looked that way. He was in another pickle with the bloody tee shirt story. How was he supposed to know crawling under a trailer was against park rules? How was he supposed to know he could have voided the rental agreement? He made up a story about chasing a ball under the mobile home. He told momsy he bumped his nose on the trailer's frame. That little fib cost him a two week grounding.

Now, when he got home from school, he had to stay inside. Mom'sy ordered him to clean and dust...no TV. Milton looked in the mirror. There was a twinkle of mischief in Mirror Brother's eyes.

"*One a these days I'll arrange an accident for dear old momsy. Bullies and busy-bodies shouldn't be allowed on our planet.*" Mirror Brother looked serious. The words echoed in Milton's mind where even momsy couldn't eavesdrop.

Would things be different if dad..? he wondered. The mirror, with its spider web crack in the corner, stared back at him. Milton pulled a clean tee shirt over his head and buckled his pants. He brushed at his straight dark hair and leaned closer to the mirror. Predictable. When he was short on time, he couldn't find his part.

"Milton? Your breakfast is on the table. What are you doing in there?"

Milton opened the bathroom door. "I was combing my hair, Mom. Geez"

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Three

Winks and Gun Barrels

The Southeast Asian war lingered in the minds of many Americans in 1977. The Armistice was two years old, but America remained torn with dissension. Murray Sonntag was fresh from two tours of duty in the jungles and rice paddies of Vietnam. There was little market for Murray's mastery of electronic theory in Thompson, Iowa. When the offer came of a promising job opportunity, an Air Force engineering project in Provo, Utah, it was the answer to a prayer.

Murray looked forward to the promised challenge. He wanted to immerse himself in his technical expertise, fill his mind until it overflowed. A brain submerged in electronic theorem, he hoped, might displace the vivid images that plagued his sleep.

Night after night dreams brought him vivid details depicting the torn bodies of his buddies. They screamed at him to save them. Begged him to help them find relief, but he was afraid to go to them. Perhaps mathematical equations, along with advanced electronic formulation and design, would do what his pills could not. He prayed the equations would silence the stuttering roar of automatic weapons fire. Maybe mathematics, working complex equations, would smother the screams and if not, he would punish the guilt he felt in his own way.

From the beginning, Ava Curry Sonntag argued against the move. She was sure she would hate Provo and she did. She hated the whole idea of leaving Iowa. She hated her new husband for taking her away from Thompson and what she perceived as security. Murray never told his wife that his mother, a wealthy landowner, was against his marriage to Ava Curry from the start.

Murray tried to sell the ratty rented mobile home they were forced to settle on, as a new and temporary adventure. Ava wasn't buying it. After five days in Provo most of their clothes, dishes and personal items remained in boxes. Ava's bitter invective, slathered like thick creamery butter on her demands to return to Iowa, reached her husband's ear each minute of every day...and night...and day...Murray had reached a turning point.

Milton came home from another day of school cranky. He hated being the new kid. A dry-eyed momsy met him at the door. The strange, almost triumphant, look in her eyes told him his new kid problem was about to become insignificant. In bitter tones momsy recited the actions of his cowardly father that morning.

"I tried to have a calm and rational discussion," she said. "I told your father I wanted to move back to Thompson. He ignored me and tried to hide in the back bedroom. He closed the door, but I stood right there and told him I wasn't done and neither was he. He didn't answer so I pushed my way in."

Milton was ready to run as momsy took hold of the broom. "Your father was sitting in the corner with his deer rifle between his knees. I was shocked. I couldn't say anything."

With the broom handle, momsy pantomimed the act of putting a rifle barrel in her mouth, jerked it away and scowled. "He looked at me and winked. He winked, Milton, and pulled the trigger."

Milton stared at momsy standing on the doorstep of the trailer. Her expression, her posture, the entire tableau was burned into his consciousness. There was no horror on momsy's face. He saw only frustration at the inconvenience of being stuck in Provo.

Momsy pulled Milton into the trailer, all the while complaining about the police and the coroner's people. "It took hours to get them out of here. I had to clean up the mess when they left. We'll go out to eat. I'm too tired to cook."

The trailer smelled of blood, bleach, cordite and shit. Milton's mood went from cranky to pissed. How could she think of food? *I gotta get out of this trailer*, the thought ran like a fleeing deer through his mind.

"Do you know what time it is in Thompson, Milton? Is there a one or two hour time

difference? I can't keep it straight. I have to call Grandma Sonntag. She'll send us the money to move back home. Oh God, I can't wait to get out of this shit hole."

Milton told his mother there was a one hour difference and ran outside to throw up.

Bertha Sonntag attended Mass every evening at six o'clock. Ava waited until eight-thirty Iowa time to call. "The old gas bag ought to be done with her gossip gathering by now," she muttered as she dialed. Bertha answered on the third ring.

"Hello, Mama Sonntag, it's Ava. I'm calling to tell you about Murray. He shot himself this morning. He's dead, Mama Sonntag. I'm sorry."

Ava waited. The sounds of electronic transmission crackled and whispered in her ear. She waited and stared at the clock. "Milton? I think Mama Sonntag fainted. Should I hang up and call 911 in Thompson? God, if she's had a heart attack...I'll be rich," she whispered.

"Mama Sonntag? Are you there? Are you okay?" Ava looked around for Milton.

Bertha Sonntag's voice had the same crackling hiss of the telephone's electronic static. "Do not refer to me as Mama, you bitch. I am Mrs. Sonntag to you, you miserable whore. You drove him to end his life. I told Murray you were no good...a sponger...a gold digger. Now you're the murderer of my son. As long as I live, you're not welcome in Thompson. You come here and I'll make your life Hell. You have no idea what misery is, but I'll be glad to show you. Do I make myself clear? You send Milton to me, I'll care for my grandson. But you, bitch, you can sell the waste between your legs if you can and when that's gone you can rot in Hell."

Ava didn't tell Milton he was welcome at Mama Sonntag's house. Had he known, he would have found a way to get to Thompson. Instead, for the twelve months following his father's suicide, he suffered momsy's vitriol, rants and complaints. He wasn't pissed at his father any longer for his abandonment. Now, he sympathized with his dad and the deep despair he must've suffered.

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Four

Orem Grammar School

The bell rang and a lot of desks were still empty. Mrs. Moine read off a long list of students absent due to illness. Leonard Brown and Myron Duncan were among the missing.

"The flu is going around, boys and girls. If you sneeze or blow your nose, please wash your hands. In addition, everyone please remember to use soap and water after visiting the restrooms." Mrs. Moine wrote *Wash Hands* at the top of the blackboard in big block letters.

Milton was elated. Brown and Duncan couldn't do Tanner's bidding, at least for the next day or two. With the bully buddies out sick, he stood a chance of going home without bruised shoulders and arms. Getting a pass on a bloody nose was close to a sure thing.

Milton was the last to present his share. He had prepared a report on European air pollution. "Dangerous chemicals in the air are eating away The Acropolis," he read from his paper, "a Greek Icon that can't be replaced." His classmates stretched and yawned. Mrs. Moine seemed the only one interested in the destruction of the environment and the architectural wonders of Greece.

At recess Milton's heart nearly stopped when Philip Tanner tapped him on the shoulder.

"Hi," the bully said.

Milton took a step back fearing the worse. "Hi, Philip."

Tanner smiled his lemon-twist smile. "You seen the new dirt pile out by the quarry?"

Milton shook his head.

The bully leaned closer, his breath smelled of tuna fish and Doritos. "I don't know who put it there, but it's really cool. We could make tunnels, mountain roads, all kinds of bitchin' stuff. Wanna play cars after school?"

Against his better judgment Milton nodded yes. The bell rang and recess ended.

Milton's class dismissed fifty minutes earlier than the higher grades and he ran all the way home. He crossed the main road, cut between two vacant single-wide trailers, and slipped into the thick growth of oleander guarding the east side of the long, narrow trailer park. The wall of flowering plants swarmed with honey bees and he swatted them away as he duck-walked through the dense growth.

Parents of adventuresome boys and girls were not aware of the low, narrow tunnel slicing around and through the oleanders. Milton approached a rusted wire fence with a large hole cut from the chicken wire. Beyond the fence a sandy shelf led to the lip of the abandoned quarry. One afternoon, Milton scooted on his stomach to peek over the edge. It was a long drop to the bottom. A layer of rust colored muddy water covered the floor of the pit. Rocks, some as big as a house, pushed up through the soupy mire.

Milton slipped through the hole, the dirt pile was hard to miss. Tanner wasn't lying or trying to sucker him. There was no plan to get him alone and beat him up for the millionth time. He headed for the double-wide he and momsy called home. It was time for a peanut butter sandwich.

Bus schedules determined the time of day momsy arrived home from work. If she made all her connections, she stepped through the door at four o'clock, but most of the time it was four-fifteen, give or take.

Milton gulped down his sandwich with the help of a glass of Kool-Aid. He grabbed his play clothes and changed in record time. After loading his cars in his paper sack, he got *The Box* from under the bed. The box contained an American Toy, Model D-1, Dump Truck. Momsy had purchased the truck for Milton's last birthday. "I spent the money because you don't have a father anymore. I hope you appreciate it," she'd said.

It didn't replace his dad, but Milton thought it was really neat anyway. He ducked through the hole in the wire fence and carried his bag and truck box to the dirt pile. Tanner wasn't around and Milton dropped to his knees to size up the work area.

"Hey. Whatta' ya' think you're doing? That's my side of the pile."

Milton jumped and looked over his shoulder. Tanner's head poked through the opening in the fence. The bully scrambled to his feet, he was shirtless and his well-formed nine-year-old

body looked formidable. "I said, what are you doing fucking around with my dirt?"

"I didn't know it was your side, I didn't see your name on it anywhere's." Milton shrugged his small shoulders and frowned into the late afternoon sun.

Tanner hitched up his patched Levi's and ambled forward. "Don't try being a weissenheimer, Pluto. Move your butt to the other side."

Milton didn't argue. He gathered his stuff, but his gaze lingered on his handiwork. There was a cave scooped out for his truck and a smaller one to house his cars. He had shaped and tamped a road into the side of the dirt pile connecting his two cave garages. It was good work. He hated to leave it, but starting over was better than a bloody nose. For the next thirty minutes things went well.

Milton was making truck noises with his lips lost in his trucker world. He had a full load and the road gang was waiting at the top of the mountain. It was the toughest haul of the day, but Red Beauty could get the job done.

He made growling sounds as he pushed the dump truck to the top of the pile. Like any experienced trucker, he had the pedal to the metal, but he overreached. His fingers slipped and Red Beauty surged forward, bouncing over the top into Tanner's territory.

"Jesus. What do you think you're doing, you boney little shit?" Tanner's roar echoed off the walls of the quarry.

Milton stood and scrambled backward. "I'm... I'm sorry, my fingers slipped. I'm..."

Tanner rose above the dirt pile, his face twisted with rage. "You fucked up all my roads, you asshole." He bent and scooped a dirt clod from the pile, firing the missile at Milton's head. The dirt clod had formed around a jagged piece of limestone. Milton was slow to react. On impact the dirt exploded into dust, the limestone carved a deep gash in his forehead. Blood gushed from the cut and Milton dropped to his knees stunned.

Tanner's face turned white. "Oh, fuck," he said and ran for the fence. Dropping to hands and knees, he scrambled through the opening.

Milton clapped a hand over the cut. Tears mixed with blood streamed down his cheeks. He gathered his toys and ran for home, praying momsy would be late. Wiping blood from his eye and dodging oleander limbs, he began to fabricate his story. By the time he cut between the two vacant single-wide trailers, he had a good start on something promising. If momsy knew he played at the quarry...

Milton sat at the small, fold-down, utility table, holding a damp washcloth to his forehead. The bleeding had stopped, but the gash stung and his head ached. He tried to clean himself up, but smears of blood marked his chin and neck. This was a real pickle. His stories were starting to sound phony even to him.

Momsy came through the door and Milton saw the look. The day had not been one of her best. Ava's thin, pinched face looked even thinner and pinchier than normal. She glanced at him and stopped, hand still on the doorknob. It looked to Milton as if she were playing the game Statue Maker. "My God, child, what have you done now?"

He was halfway through his story when he mentioned Tanner's name. Momsy went crazy. How was Milton supposed to know she hated Tanner's mother more than she hated Milton's cowardly dead father. He quickly learned Philip Tanner held third place on momsy's hate list.

She didn't give him a chance to finish his story. How it was an accident, how Tanner tried to

help. Milton almost wet his pants when momsy returned from the bully's trailer, a grim, bitter look on her face. "I told that Tanner bitch a thing or two. I told her we'd sue." She dipped her head for emphasis.

The whole scene was in the running for the worse night of his life. Milton groaned and went to bed.

Milton stared at the desktop, the surprise quiz Mrs. Moine had devised long finished. He wondered where and how Tanner would find him and take his revenge. A gauze bandage covered the cut on his forehead. Milton stole a glance at the clock dreading recess. Chances were excellent Tanner got a treat for beaming the Sonntag brat, but that wouldn't matter. The bully would want Milton, the squealer's, blood on his knuckles.

The faint sounds of the classroom barely intruded on Milton's daydreams. He and dad were talking about the movie they'd watched on TV: *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. "That could happen couldn't it, Dad? Spacemen could make time stop, couldn't they?" he murmured.

"What did you say, Milton?" Mrs. Moine called out.

The kids around him laughed and embarrassment burned Milton's face scarlet. Mrs. Moine rapped on her desk. "Quiet, please. Now, what did you say, Milton?"

Sitting up straight, Milton said, "I'm sorry, Mrs. Moine. I was thinking out loud."

The recess bell rang. He shuddered with fear as the kids scrambled from their desks, pushing and shoving toward the door. Milton looked around, he and Mrs. Moine were alone in the classroom. He crawled out of his seat and with a hesitant step he headed for the door.

"Are you all right, Milton?" Real concern colored Mrs. Moine's voice.

He glanced over his shoulder. "Yeah. I guess," he whispered and skulked through the doorway. He knew certain death awaited him. Well, at least a bloody nose. He checked the immediate area, but he was alone on the covered walk. Settling against the cinderblock wall, he watched and waited for Tanner or his cronies to find him.

Recess lasted fifteen minutes. There are times minutes seem to stretch into hours and Milton spent the first ten standing next to the classroom door. It seemed every kid in school passed by, but Tanner failed to cross Milton's field of vision. He shuffled his feet, thirsty, but uneasy. With a few minutes left, he inched his way down the corridor toward the end of the building and the drinking fountains.

Milton allowed his fingertips to drag along the rough cement surface of the cinderblock building. He ignored the prickle and scratch on his fingertips as his head moved like a metronome. He scanned the playground to the left and ahead. At the corner of the building he expelled a pent up breath. No danger. He turned the corner and the long porcelain trough with six water fountains beckoned him. A cool drink of water was waiting, but so was Philip Tanner.

Milton trembled. *This is it*, he thought, *I can make a run for it...maybe. If I'm fast enough, I can make the classroom.*

"*That'll just put things off*," Mr. Pickle Solver whispered in his ear. Milton stood his ground and trembled harder.

Tanner sneered, swaggering forward, muscles bulging. Bigger. Milton was sure Tanner had grown taller. The bully pushed his face within an inch of Milton's nose, his clothes reeked of rancid potato chips and sour sweat.

"My mom bitched at me for two hours. You squealed on me, you fuck. I gotta wash dishes

for a week because of you. I'm gonna beat your boney ass. You hear me? I ain't got the time now, but I'll get you. We'll settle when no one's around." Tanner gave Milton's cheek a quick slap.

When the final bell rang, Milton was first out the door and he ran all the way home.

Milton sat at the utility table pushing his supper around on his plate. Mommy slid into the tight bench seat opposite him frowning at her son's lack of appetite. "Milton. What's the matter with you? Aren't you going to eat? I work all day and I'm tired. I come home to cook for you and you don't even taste the food. Can't you at least give me the courtesy to eat something?"

He swallowed air and mimicked regurgitation. Milton put on his hang-dog face and said, "I'm sorry, Mom. I don't feel good. Can I have some Pepto-Bismol? I think I'll go to bed."

It was eleven when mommy came into the dark bedroom. Milton saw the time on the alarm clock's luminous face. He pretended sleep while she settled into the adjoining twin bed. Her snoring started within seconds. He recognized the signs, mommy had another whiskey night while watching her television programs.

Milton couldn't sleep, he continued to visualize the beating Tanner promised. No one could help him. Telling mommy or Mrs. Moine would only make the beating worse. It was up to him, he had to stop Tanner and temporary measures would only prolong the agony. As far as Milton knew, he was stuck in Provo forever. Whatever plan he could devise had to settle the Tanner problem until he could escape Provo.

He stared at the dark ceiling. Images and ideas were examined and discarded by his creative mind. Like a vision from a TV magic show, a solution came to him. He examined the plan from every perspective his imagination could conjure. Structure and planning were the keys to success. If he were meticulous with his planning, Tanner wouldn't bother anyone again. He etched the basic tenets of the idea into his memory banks. That done, Milton tucked his hands under his head and began to formulate the strategy to carry it off.

The rest of the week Milton bee-lined it home. He stayed inside everyday including the weekend. Consigning Saturday and Sunday to the stuffy trailer was the hardest part of his plan. When the air grew close with the warmth of two bodies, he could smell his dad's blood. Sometimes the odor of cordite and shit joined the copper taste of blood and he wanted to run outside and throw up.

Sunday afternoon Tanner walked by stopping to stare, his face red with frustration. Tanner was doing his damndest to look intimidating, but his rigid, fist clenching scowl only made Milton smile as he peeked at his enemy from behind the window curtain.

The image of Tanner's frustration made the previous week of self-imposed imprisonment worth the effort. That night, he saw his dad's face in the bathroom mirror. Milton blinked thinking, *imagination*. But Murray Sonntag winked at his son and Milton had to smile. A whiff of cordite and blood followed him into the bedroom.

"What more do I need," he whispered. Milton turned off the light and curled up on his side.

Monday morning found Milton's resolve weakening. Dragging the plan out could be dangerous, he reasoned. Tanner's look of red-faced frustration on Sunday reinforced this train of

thought.

At school, Milton feigned indifference, acting as if Tanner's threats were over and forgotten. Duncan and Brown were back from their bout with the flu, hail and hearty. Milton went about his business ignoring Tanner's bully buddies, too.

Following their leader's example, Duncan and Brown ignored Milton. Tanner and friends were lying up in the weeds, hatching their plans, Milton knew it. They didn't want rumors of bad blood circulating when he got his face stomped in. Milton wasn't stupid or naïve, Tanner and his bully boys wanted to skate on the consequences of Milton's coming beating. Freedom of suspicion for the act was their first order of business.

Milton smiled. "We'll see." He skipped down the corridor and was home by two-fifteen. The final bell for Tanner's class would be ringing in thirty minutes. The terrifying situation Milton found himself in was turning into an interesting game. A game he found fascinating and exciting at the same time. He would implement his plan right away, dragging it out through the week would only make him nervous. *It's not the smartest way*, he thought, *but what the hell*. Milton giggled, it was an exciting decision. The smaller, younger and weaker would have to defeat the bigger, older and stronger. Concern over failure never entered his mind. Cunning and guile remained on his side and they were Milton's two most formidable weapons.

With forty-five minutes to go, Milton relished the prospect ahead. He changed his clothes and packed his cars. He put his bag and dump truck box by the door. His plan wasn't foolproof, he knew. If all went well, everything would be over in thirty minutes. Mommy would get home fifteen minutes later. It was Nat's ass timing, but he would have to make do. *Still time for a peanut butter sandwich*, he thought and made it a quick one.

A few minutes later, Milton strolled by Tanner's trailer. He paused to tie his tennis shoe, stretched and dallied. When he was certain he'd been spotted, Milton picked up The Box and car bag and took the shortcut between the two single wide trailers. Ducking into the oleander, he glanced over his shoulder and caught Tanner dodging behind the nose of the vacant single wide.

Milton hurried into the jungle-like tunnel of oleander. At the fence he broke off a small piece of the nearest bush. Moving to within a foot of the quarry's lip, he dropped the green stalk on the ground. Here retreat would have to stop giving him no room to maneuver. *If I have to maneuver I'm dead anyway*.

Milton ran to the dirt pile and walked backward counting steps. There was no time to rehearse, his plan would have to work the first time. He emptied his cars by the dirt pile and filled the empty truck box with a few hands full of sandy dirt before replacing the top.

Not a moment later Tanner crawled through the fence his eyes pinched down in a scowl. With brown stained teeth he leered at Milton and stood, fists on hips. "Hi, Millie-ton, you little shit. I'm going to beat your ass raw," he crowed.

Milton jumped up and held the dump truck box like a shield. "Please? Don't hurt me. I didn't mean to tell on you. My mom wouldn't let me explain."

Tanner slow-stepped his way toward Milton. "You ain't talking your way out of this one, you boney punk. I'm gonna stomp you good. You won't tell on nobody...not ever again."

Milton backpedaled, cradling the dump truck box in his arm. He saw the oleander scrap from the corner of his eye. "Please, Philip. I'll give you my dump truck, okay?"

"Pleeeesssee? I'll give you my dump truck, okayyyyyy. Tanner mimicked Milton in a high singsong voice. "I got your truck anyways, dumb shit. You won't be in no shape to stop me." Tanner stepped closer, his hands balled into fists.

"Let me show you, Philip. It's like brand new. Your mom won't believe I gave it to you if

I'm all beat up. Let me show you."

He tilted the box toward his chest and lifted the lid. The top tumbled from his fingers and Tanner's attention followed the cardboard's fluttering path.

His plan was working. The difference in height, Tanner's downcast gaze, both played their part. The fine, sandy dirt exploded in the bully's eyes. He yelped in surprise and his hands flew to his face, but too late to do any good.

Milton picked up the lid, giggling as Tanner rubbed his eyes. The more he rubbed the more irritation and pain he caused. "I'm gonna kill you, you little bastard. Oww. Owww. You're dead. Oww. Milton? You hear me? Owwwieeee."

Milton dropped the empty dump truck box next to his cars. Tanner was rubbing and growling. When Milton spoke to him, he jumped. "I'm sorry, but you scared me. I didn't mean to hurt you. Let me help you get some water."

Tanner swung a fist at the sound of Milton's voice. "Being nice ain't gonna do you no good. You're gonna pay," Tanner moaned, "I promise you're gonna pay."

Milton bobbed and weaved like a prize fighter in the ring. *This is really fun, I'm going to remember this for a long time.*

"Okay, okay," Milton said, "but maybe you'll feel different after you clean your eyes."

He touched Tanner's elbow with his fingertips. "Will you let me help you to the water?"

Tanner groaned. "Oh, Jesus. My eyes hurt so bad," he whined. "Show me the water, but if I let you go you gotta give up the dump truck and keep your mouth shut, too. Got it?"

"Thanks, Philip," Milton said and took hold of Tanner's arm. "I've got you. Follow me. The hose is right over here. A couple more steps. That's good..."

"There ain't no hose around here you dumb shi... Tanner's mouth puckered in terror as his next step found only air. Milton let go.

Arms cart wheeling, Tanner tipped to the side, rolled on his back and disappeared. Milton didn't see the result of the bully's fall, afraid to venture too close to the edge. There was the beginning of a scream, but it stopped as abruptly as it started. Milton heard a sucking splash and then nothing.

Milton gathered his cars and dumped them back in his sack. He laughed as he picked up his box. "You're right, Philip, we ain't got no hose, but I guess you found the water okayyyyyy."

~ 0000 ~

Five

Ratty Double-Wide...Again

Detectives of the Utah County Sheriff's Office knocked on the Sonntag's door several times during the following two weeks. A Captain with the CID unit of Olmstead Air Force Base stopped by for a chat. Milton thought it was all very exciting. Momsy thought it was a big pain in the behind.

Four weeks following Philip Tanner's disappearance, Milton came home to find momsy packing. She hummed off key as she worked. To his astonishment, she smiled at him. "Milton. Come here. What toys do you want to take with you? Not too many now. We can't have a lot of luggage on the bus."

Milton stared. He couldn't remember the last time he saw momsy smile. It wasn't the

prettiest sight he ever saw, but better than her usual pinched look.

"What are you staring at, Milton? Our ship's come in. I got a phone call this morning at work. Grandma Sonntag died and she never changed her will. She left her house and all the properties to your father, but since he took the coward's way out, everything goes to his family and that's us. It's just pure poetic justice."

Momsy giggled and the sound scared Milton silly. He threw his books down on the divan and collapsed, heart pounding. The news was hard to take in. He was leaving Provo and boarding a bus for Iowa. He was getting away with murder. Momsy was giggling like the teenie-bopper girls he watched at the middle school. The relief was overwhelming and his urge to laugh strong, but he was afraid momsy would think he'd gone nut-so. He not only held the record for most bloody noses, but he had to be the youngest murderer ever. He laughed anyway, a hard, contagious guffaw. His pickle days were going to be over for good.

Momsy watched her son double over on the couch. "Yes," she cackled, "it's wonderful, isn't it? Oh, this is a banner day for the Sonntags. I got the insurance check this morning, too, delivered by messenger. I saw the size of that check and quit on the spot. You should've seen the look on Mr. Todd's face."

Milton turned off the rest of momsy's prattle. The first swift high of relief was gone. He felt empty, his adventure over. But one question remained: Would he be given another opportunity to play the mind over muscle game? The pull of excitement and the rush of fulfillment left a huge hole. Milton wouldn't be satisfied until he could fill that hole one more time.

Will I see Mirror Brother again? he wondered, *Or is the trailer's mirror his home?* "Will you come with us?" he murmured.

Momsy looked up and sighed. "Who are you talking to, Milton?"

Milton shook his head, slapped the divan's cushion and guffawed louder. Murder and its taste is an acquired one and once acquired is insatiable. Milton winked and momsy's cackle grew louder.

~ 0000 ~

Bearclaw at the CoffeeCaker

[Venice, California - 2006](#)

The broad display window facing Pacific Avenue shuddered. A second gust of wind made the plate glass quiver, the sound like the rolling flap of a huge banner. The big man at the counter turned toward the noise as a flurry of fat rain drops added to the wind's brief attack on the window. In the quiet of the CoffeeCaker Coffee Shop the clatter was reminiscent of the sound of pea gravel he used to throw against a neighbor's shed. It was a mindless exercise he practiced to alleviate black fits of adolescent rage that overwhelmed him at the age of twelve.

He dropped his head and ran thick, gnarled fingers through his shaggy hair. The wild, coarse tangle claimed neither the color black or brown, but something in between. A full beard covered his face, it's snarling mass competing with his hair for the wilder look. The combination gave him the appearance of an unattended bougainvillea, sans flowers.

"Partly cloudy with sunshine in the afternoon my ass. So much for Good Morning L.A. and their weather report," he muttered.

A bellow of wind, followed by the drumming of rain, shook the window again. A phone warbled at the back of the coffee shop. After three irritating yodel-like sounds it stopped. The big

man straightened against the short back of the counter stool. He rotated his head in a slow circle rolling his huge shoulders and yawned.

He wore a black Maxwell, the color faded by years of use. Under the overcoat, a bright orange sweatshirt covered his massive torso. Faded Levis and well worn Pipe Dragon pull-on hiking boots completed his rumpled ensemble. A belch produced a sting of acid in his throat. Despite the indigestion, he wished for another pastry. He sighed instead and leaned forward for a sip of coffee.

Fingernails tapped at the cash register in front of him. The big man smiled beneath his curly beard. He'd heard her approach. A whisper of nylon and the faint swish and thump of the kitchen's café door gave her away. Eyes down, Lincoln Pascoe picked up his spoon and swirled the coffee in his cup. "It's the rain," he said and reached for the creamer.

"What do you think? It's never rained before?" Nancy Twigly's voice dripped with victimized sarcasm. "Rain's got nothing to do with it. It's tax time, damnit. I don't suppose you worry about that kind of stuff, but my customers do. They get tight with a buck around April fifteenth."

"Look on the bright side," he smirked, "summer's in a couple of months. IRS'll get their money, customers'll take vacation time. You can go broke for real. Take bankruptcy."

"Yeah whatever," she said. "You ought to be a comfort counselor at the hospice. Nobody gets near the register, okay? I got to go to the can."

"Don't worry, Nance. I'll guard your fortune with my life, miserable though it might be."

Nancy Twigly slapped Pascoe's hand. "Sorry babe, Shamaz switched your stuff again, you've got the sweetener."

Lincoln heard the smile in Nancy's voice. "The Mad Syrian's still pissed. You shouldn't have slammed the cash drawer on his hand. You busted his finger, you know?" Nancy smothered a laugh.

Pascoe looked in her direction. His cat's-eye green irises seemed alive. "He shouldn't put his fingers in your cash drawer. Not when you're in back."

The sound of Nancy rearranging the sugar butler reminded him of a dancer doing a soft-shoe on sand. Her fingernails combed through his coarse, wavy hair and he flinched in surprise.

"You're getting wild. I'll have to take you to the storeroom pretty soon. I'll be right back." Her voice was soft as if the meaning of her message was their conspiracy.

"Better pick your words, Nance. What'll the customers think?" The faint wisp of Nancy's nylon encased thighs teased his ears as she walked away. He stared into the black hole that was his sight, nodded and said, "Yeah right, blinky. Shit."

A clattering racket from the kitchen echoed in the lunchroom. Pascoe beat a soft tattoo on the countertop. It had to be Shamaz, taking his frustrations out on Nancy's flatware again. *The little bastard is lucky, he thought, he can see the source of his aggravation.*

A wild anger seized him. Gritty pressure pushed at the back of his dead eyes. *Three years. I should've grown used to this blind shit by now.* Self-pity stomped its way through his head and a tear spilled from his right eye. "Fuck." He spit the word knowing he was alone, but not really caring if he wasn't.

Pascoe lifted the frames of the Photo chromatic glasses he wore and dabbed at his eye. He couldn't even make tears in both eyes. Wild frustration charged through his mind. "Jesus, I hate this crap," he muttered.

"Hey Pascoe, my coffee can't be that bad. You okay?"

The sound of Nancy's voice, so close, made him jump. His head swiveled in her direction.

"What? You're sneaking up on me now?"

Nancy's fingernails rapped out a tattoo on the register. Pascoe caught the change in cadence. She was embarrassed and the snap of her nails, hard and fast, told their story. He'd come to know her nervous habits as well as he knew his own. Over time, he learned to sense her moods as easily as he could sense heat and cold.

Their friendship had deepened; evolving into a closeness he thought would never be his again. Nancy didn't probe, she didn't question his past. She knew almost nothing about him and demanded even less. She accepted and befriended him as is and gave him a measure of her trust. All that and yet she imagined him without employment..homeless...a penniless bum.

"You must've been out there somewhere. I don't catch you that often. What's going on, you got something against my haircuts?" Nancy's voice was a soft purr.

"Eye leaks once in a while, that's all." he said.

More dishes crashed and rattled. The volume on the kitchen's radio cranked up. Pascoe sucked on his lower lip tasting Bearclaw icing on the bristle of his beard.

Nancy sighed. "Ah, shit. The sooner the better, I guess. Watch the register, babe, I'm going to fire the Mad Syrian."

A mid eastern instrumental, sharp flutes and ear grinding strings, vibrated through the coffee shop. "What the hell's going on? You firing Shamaz? Not because of the cash drawer crap, I hope?" His questions went unanswered. Loud music masked the sounds of the kitchen's café door...Nancy was gone.

Guilt gnawed at Pascoe's conscience. He slurped his coffee and thought of his own anger-filled, violent past. He was wild and crazy in those days. Shamaz, with his temper tantrums, wouldn't be on the same chart.

Old bitterness and frustration came back, hitting him like a three-hundred pound lineman. At least then, he could see who was fucking with him. Memories came roaring back like a cranky bear coming out of hibernation and cords of ligament popped on his jaw. Back in the day he could see his enemy coming..."

~ 0000 ~

Two
Compton, California
1989

Hector Salvador Dominguez saved Lincoln Pascoe from prison. The big, muscular kid who put two of Compton High School's top football players out of commission for the season got his attention.

At first the coach was furious. The unnecessary fight and the resulting damage were difficult to believe and he demanded to know what weapon the player's assailant used. When told the assailant used nothing but speed, strength and fists the coach was intrigued. A sophomore, name of Pascoe, he was told, accepted the challenge of two varsity defensive tackles. Within seconds the football players were unconscious on the ground and an EMT unit was called for assistance.

Further investigation revealed the sophomore, Pascoe, had a rep as the campus bad-ass. Still, his feat was stained by a fantasy-like stigma. The two varsity players had a combined weight of nearly five-hundred pounds and had their own rep as tough young men. Hector Dominguez decided to investigate this Pascoe character's background fully before making a recommendation

for disciplinary action.

Pascoe, Dominguez learned, had little in the way of a family life. His father was a huge man who mourned the death of his wife in childbirth by blaming the child for her demise. Pascoe's home life had no balance: no love, tenderness or forgiveness was available, only bitterness and anger prevailed. Barnabas Pascoe tolerated his offspring for the first few years of his development. Then, at the age of eight, the boy began to experience the vengeance his father would wreak on the him as he grew older. Now, with Pascoe in his sixteenth year, Dominguez found cruel justice in the fact Barnabas Pascoe lived in fear of his own son.

The Director of Athletics, Compton High School, or Coach Dom as he liked to be addressed, thought it was a miracle Pascoe stayed in school and wondered at the boy's motivation. His deportment was appalling, his scholastic achievement bordered on atrocious. Under normal circumstances, his poor standing would merit expulsion. Pascoe's opportunities for an education had become tenuous at best.

Coach Dom decided to talk to the boy about football. The high school's team might provide a means of redemption for Pascoe. In the bargain, a yes from the young man would provide a ferocious football player to help replace the two Coach Dom lost for the season.

Pascoe would never forget Coach Dom's first words as he settled behind his desk that day. "If you play football for me you can hit people all you want. You just gotta hit clean. You want to hear more?"

The bad ass of Compton High made the smartest decision of his life. He nodded and mumbled, "Yeah."

Pascoe fell in love with football. Thanks to his passion for the game, he was forced to study. He worked hard and discovered the process of learning was enjoyable. He possessed a quick intelligence, which in turn encouraged and nurtured a probing curiosity. Pascoe studied hard, turned his life around and earned a football scholarship to USC.

In his senior year the Trojans coaching staff made book on Pascoe's ranking in the professional draft. To everyone's surprise, the big defensive linebacker didn't get the call. Pascoe found out later his notoriety scared the pros. They feared his well-earned *wild man* reputation. Pascoe didn't give a shit what the NFL thought. At six-five and two-hundred-eighty-eight pounds, he maintained a five percent body fat ratio. Like a roadrunner stalking a sidewinder, he moved with stunning speed and eye-boggling quickness. He could feint and turn in the open field like a fleeing cottontail. Canadian football wanted him and the NFL had no chance to change its mind. The Vancouver Eagles snapped him up. Big bucks and an off-season home in Los Angeles sealed the deal.

He proved devastating in his debut with the Vancouver Eagles. Pascoe brought his college enthusiasm and maniacal energy to the professional ranks. During his first game, a commentator dubbed him *The Mortar Man*. "When Pascoe hits people," the commentator quipped, "they don't go down, they blow the hell up. The Eagle's crazy linebacker sold tickets faster than the club could get them printed.

Four wild years screamed by and Pascoe lived each one over the edge. He had money to burn and partied swimming in booze, women and music. Though offered other mind-altering substances, he found the good sense to turn them down. He found women a far more stimulating high and he tried them all, every shape, size and proclivity, but a month prior to the start of his fifth season, Pascoe's wild life came to a screeching halt.

The Mortar Man, with several teammates and guests, were on a preseason barhopping fling. He and his entourage strolled into West Hollywood's Viper Room, Pascoe with a lady on each

arm. A laughing young woman leaving the cabaret collided with him. The infamous Alyssa Bienbleu bounced off the equally infamous Lincoln Pascoe torso. He was struck dumb and could only stare. Alyssa stopped laughing and looked him up and down. The renowned twenty-year-old model, with the face of Claudia Schiffer and the body of Heidi Klum, crossed her arms, beamed a smile and cocked her head. "Well?" She said.

Pascoe fell in love, hard, fast, and he was sure, for good. Older teammates offered him their advice, the model, they warned, only loved *The Life*. Pascoe's ego said his teammates were nuts. Alyssa loved the big, handsome, linebacker, tough guy. Alyssa, he hoped, would help him build the family he coveted. He dreamed of a houseful of children and love. A life he only experienced as an outsider as he grew, enduring his father's beatings.

For seven months following their wedding, Pascoe's assessment of his new wife's motives proved unshakable. Love and luck were on his side. Then a hard, low clip by a three-hundred-thirty pound lineman, redefined Pascoe's good fortune.

A shattered ankle, coupled with severe ligament and muscle damage, led to three surgeries. The surgeries required months of rehab. The hoped for results failed to materialize. Medicine's inability to cure brought with it the ultimate cataclysm...no contract renewal. Pascoe had no idea what came next. He had blown most of his money on bullshit. He still had his youth. His overall health was excellent, and above all, he had his brain and a Liberal Arts degree from USC. *Now*, he thought, *is a good time to use my education*.

Driving home from a physical therapy session, he decided law school might appeal to him. Alyssa was emphatic about starting a family, in the field of modeling youth was fleeting and her career had to come first. Modeling paid well, Pascoe couldn't argue the money factor. His fingers beat out a rat-a-tat rhythm on the steering wheel. "Why the hell not?" He wondered out loud. "I'll make a damn good lawyer."

Pascoe was eager for a new challenge. From the garage, he limped into the kitchen, his excitement building. He wondered what time Alyssa would get home. He was anxious to run the law school idea by his wife. *Maybe I can manage Alyssa's career*, he thought and laughed at the idea. He entered the dining room visualizing the negotiation of contracts for his supermodel wife. *What a blast*. "God," he muttered, "I hope she comes home sober."

Pascoe recalled a wrap party he had attended. The photographers and models got down and dirty, and at times, drunk and crazy, but Alyssa was disciplined. Or was that just when Lincoln was around, he wondered.

His eyes refocused and he realized he was missing the most important wrap party of all. Bare walls and empty carpet greeted The Mortar Man. Enthusiasm and ideas for a new career crumbled like the bones and ligaments of his ankle. The quiet house was like something out of a drunken nightmare, the cleared rooms mocked him. He limped into the bedroom and reality hit home with a vengeance. The big walk-in closet stood open and empty. Alyssa's clothes, shoes and the mink thongs she giggled into each day were gone. The wall safe gaped at him from the back of the room. A tiny halogen light winked as if the yawning steel mouth had a joke to share. Alyssa's seven, 20 carat diamond tennis bracelets, one each to match the karma of her cycles, were gone.

Pascoe's dream of an athletic career was destroyed. His beautiful wife vanished with all she could carry. Law school and a new career were nothing but a foolish dream. His brother footballers were right. Alyssa Bienbleu loved *The Life*. The pain of his injury was nothing compared to the agony of Alyssa's betrayal. Pascoe knew he would never put his trust in a woman again.

He spent a month living on Black Jack and peanuts. He had enough sense to drink and hang with his former teammates and they stopped the fights before he killed someone. At last, his road-roomy had enough and stepped in. Several attitude sessions with his former linebacker coach helped get his head screwed on straight.

Pascoe tapered off the booze and started thinking about his future again. It would be a future devoid of trust in anyone or anything. He knew now he was better off alone. Alone, no one could get close enough to destroy him again. Alone, there would never be another Barnabas to beat him or Alyssa to betray him.

Early on a Sunday night Pascoe entertained a ten-ounce steak at his favorite restaurant. He watched two men approach his table. The smaller of the two extended his hand. Lincoln's eyes locked on the platinum Rolex Chronograph and diamond pinky ring.

The middle-aged man smiled and said, "Bertram Caliph. Perhaps you've heard of me, I'm called The Caliph. I hope I'm addressing the correct gentleman. You are Mr. Pascoe, are you not?"

Lincoln put down knife and fork and took The Caliph's hand. "Call me Lincoln. Have a seat."

Caliph and his attorney took seats opposite Pascoe in the banquette. "I'll come right to the point," the Caliph said, "I operate a business unique to California or anywhere else for that matter. I'm sure you've heard of my services: Caliph's Custom Limos and Lifestyles?"

Pascoe cut a piece of steak and paused before forking it into his mouth. "I hope you'll excuse me, I'd like to finish this while it's still hot."

Caliph nodded in his attorney's direction. "Calm," he said, "unimpressed and good manners, too. All good."

Pascoe chewed and swallowed. "I'm overwhelmed by your approval. What can I do for you?"

The flamboyant entrepreneur steepled his fingers showing his watch and pinky ring to best advantage. "Right to the point," he said, "beautiful, let's get to it. I'm in the market for a front man. Not a pretty boy, but someone like you, hard and tough enough to back it up. I maintain a select clientele. Some are famous and some are infamous. The associate I choose will have to be tactful and low key. I need a classy type neck breaker and I'm told you might fill my requirements."

The Caliph leaned closer and held Pascoe's eyes. "Straight story, okay? I need a savvy individual, a man who can wear a tux or get his hands dirty. I need a man willing to work beside me in the shop when necessary. I've heard you might be that man, yes or no?"

Pascoe's finances left a lot to be desired. He decided this was not a time to play hard to get. "When do I start?" he asked.

The Caliph clapped his hands and looked at his attorney. "Tomorrow morning at nine?" The attorney nodded approval.

Caliph opened a soft looking calfskin wallet and handed Pascoe a card. "We'll begin by enrolling you in a firearms training class. You'll need to be licensed to carry a concealed weapon. Please forgive our interruption of your dinner, it's on me by the way."

Pascoe nodded as they rose to leave. He poured the remainder of his split into a flute and pushed his plate to the side. The attorney and Caliph were a making their way through the

restaurant when Lincoln called out. "Hey, Caliph?"

Bertram Caliph turned.

Pascoe raised the flute. "Don't bother with the firearms training class. I'm licensed to carry in California, Oregon, Washington and Vancouver, BC. and thanks for the steak."

He got home before ten, something he hadn't thought of doing since Alyssa disappeared. He pushed back in the recliner and stared at the ceiling. *Who knows? This might be a start, he thought. If I meet the right people... Maybe a shot at the movies?*

Six months later, helping out in the shop, an arc-welding machine went berserk and Lincoln Pascoe went blind.

Bertram Caliph gave no warnings concerning the defective arc welder. He'd nursed the machine along while arguing warranty language with the manufacturer. The corporation, a major conglomerate, stonewalled its responsibility for repair or replacement. The Caliph's disregard of safety and the manufacturer defect did not bode well for the corporate world. The Caliph and his Hollywood money machine took a fatal blow.

One of The Caliph's clients, a well-connected attorney, was impressed with Lincoln Pascoe. He'd watched the brash, no fear wild man play football. Herman Gold entrusted his family to Pascoe's care on several occasions. The firm of Gold, Stahl, and Brunt filed the lawsuit. The insurance carriers settled before the ink dried on the filing stamp. Pascoe put ten-point-eight-million in his piggy bank. The result of the lawsuits remained the bright side of Pascoe's misfortune. The Canadian footballer left the courtroom one rich son-of-a-bitch. His attitude personified the term. The Mortar Man despised his luck and cursed the nihility of his visual world.

Pascoe refused all offers of help and rehab. He bought a building in Venice, a Hail Mary pass from the beach. While the top two floors were refurbished, he worked on feeling sorry for himself. He passed through that period by shopping the finest in furniture and accoutrements his millions could buy. With that accomplished, he outfitted the condo for sightless living. The finality of that step helped him face his reality. He began blind rehab The Mortar Man way, Pascoe hit it hard and blew it to hell and gone.

On his first neighborhood walk, he stumbled over a crack in the sidewalk. Pascoe fell against the large display window of the CoffeeCaker Coffee Shop. Why the glass failed to shatter was a mystery. He looked on the accident as an omen, it being his first good luck since the arc welder accident.

Nancy Twigly, lessee and operator of the coffee shop, brought him inside and seated him at the end of the lunch counter. She poured a cup of coffee. "I don't suppose you have fifty cents for the coffee, right?" Her sarcastic voice sounded tired and defeated.

Pascoe dug in his pocket and found some paper. Nancy snagged a dollar bill from the crumpled mass he offered. She punched the keys of the cash register and he grinned when he heard the snap of a half dollar on the countertop.

"That was a ten spot, wasn't it?" he said, his grin visible through the stubble of his growing beard.

The air moved in front of Pascoe's face. Nancy Twigly's breath smelled of something fresh with a hint of mint. "It was a buck and you damn well know it, buster. That's all you got." She moved away then and the smell of her was gone.

"You've got pretty teeth," she said, "but you're the dumbest asshole on the planet. What's with walking around blind as a damn bat? You trying to get yourself killed?"

Thirty months later, Pascoe still indulged in a daily stroll through the neighborhood. He

arrived at nine-fifteen each morning, give, or take ten minutes. His end of the counter remained empty and waiting. The limited counter space was a perfect fit for him.

He managed his small territory in a proficient manner. Presiding opposite the cash register, he enjoyed his morning Bearclaw and coffee. In the process, he savored Nancy Twigly's daily bitching, more so as time passed. The CoffeeCaker's sporadic customer base never realized the big, rumpled man with the wild hair and beard couldn't see.

~ 0000 ~

Three
CoffeeCaker Coffee Shop
Venice, California - 2006

Voices raised over the din of the radio broke in on Pascoe's memories. A dish shattered and then another.

"Shamaz. Stop it. I'll take that out of your check." The tone Pascoe heard in Nancy's voice was new, she sounded over-the-top pissed.

"You take nothing, bitch," Shamaz yelled, "you fire me because blind guy say I'm thief. I'm no thief. I sue you, bitch."

Nancy screamed right back. "You put that down you little shit. Put it down now or I'll beat your ass. Get out. Take your fucking money and get out of my kitchen."

Pascoe stood and shrugged out of the Maxwell, it dropped over the back of the counter stool.

"I go, damn bitch, but I don't forget. You remember, I don't forget." Shamaz's voice was low with a menacing edge Pascoe couldn't miss.

Pascoe didn't like what he heard and started for the kitchen. As he came around the counter he heard the back door slam, but he was moving fast. Only Nancy's sharp cry could have brought him up short.

"Pascoe stop. Stop. Don't move, your boot's caught on the register cord." Nancy's hands gripped his arm.

"Are you all right?" His voice was a tight bubble of ice in his throat.

Nancy ignored the question and turned him around. "What are you doing behind my counter? Blind guys aren't supposed to wander around. What the hell..? Sit."

"Listen. Nance. I don't want to mess in your business, but I didn't like what I heard from the kitchen. What's going on, you didn't fire Shamaz on my account, I hope? Are you okay?"

Nancy made no sound, but he knew she was close. The scent of her skin and hair was refreshing, like a barrel of clean rainwater. The faint odor of starch and freshly ironed cotton gifted his nostrils. She cleared her throat, but Pascoe heard a soft snuffle.

"Don't get worked up," she said. "You're no superhero blind or not. You're more like a blind bullshitter." She hiccupped.

The catch in her voice sent a stab of anger through his chest. "Okay, Nance. I'm blind, but I ain't the local tackling dummy. Why the tears? Did that little prick hurt you?"

The rustle of her clothing told him she was putting distance between them. When next she spoke, he could tell she had moved behind the counter.

"Fuck off." Her weak voice betrayed her. "Shamaz couldn't hurt me on his best day. I'm... I'm not used to big, blind bums trying to save my ass that's all."

The scuff of paper napkins was loud in the empty coffee shop. Nancy blew her nose. "Talk

about hating this shit? I'm closing my doors. How's that for summer vacation bankruptcy? The Syrian had to go. I owe back rent. The bank called this morning. They declined my loan application, thank you very much. I guess its back to what I do best."

Pascoe fumbled, searching for words and something to do with his hands. "Okay, I'm not thrilled you're closing, but you got another line of work, right? I hope it's something you enjoy."

He felt foolish. He was hurt, but not for himself. The sound of desolation in Nancy's voice squeezed his heart with icy fingers. *Lame, he thought, you're so lame. She's losing her dream just like you lost yours. Jesus, you're smooth, Pascoe.*

He straddled a stool and dropped into the seat wiping a hand through his beard. "What did you do before you opened The CoffeeCaker, Nance?"

The catch was back in her voice. "You don't want to know what I did. I don't want to know. The problem is we all got to eat, right? Watch the register, I'll be right back."

He heard the kitchen's café door swish and thump. *She's hurting, I can feel it. She's going to cry it out in the bathroom.* That supposition fired a new kind of anger in him.

His mind pulled him back to the night of his first encounter with Alyssa. He had the same ache in his chest that night. Pascoe was doing what he swore he'd never do, but a warm rush of blood suffused his face. He knew he had fallen in love. Frustration smoldered in his brain. *Goddamnit, I've got no right. I can't take care of myself,* he thought.

The sound of defeat ringing in his mind, the helplessness that overwhelmed him, all quickly turned to rage. Fingers curled into fists and he was ready to fight, but he couldn't see the enemy. There were no men to pound into dust. In the darkness, Pascoe heard the quiet voice of Coach Dom: *When you've run out of options, don't fight phantoms. Stop. Take a breath. Think.* He turned on the stool, listening to the emptiness around him and knew he was alone.

The CoffeeCaker occupied half the ground floor of a four-storied office building. Three blocks away Pascoe's building and penthouse apartment offered him an ocean's panorama he couldn't see. Thirty months, give or take a day, he fumbled his way from his home to this little piece of lunch counter. He spent hundreds of quiet morning hours with Nancy. From the beginning, he knew they had one thing in common, they were both alone. Later he sensed they shared something more significant, they each mourned the loss of a dream.

Pascoe tripped over curbs and cracks in the sidewalk. He fell many times, more than he cared to count. He cut and bruised himself from knees to nose, but his bullheadedness paid dividends. His mind compensated for the lack of sight. Feel, smell, auditory stimulus, all the gifts he took for granted increased, some in dramatic fashion.

Pascoe learned the intimate nuances of the neighborhood he chose to call home. Over the last year-and-a-half he began to view Nancy as a trusted friend. She cut him no slack, and with the exception of his counter space and stool, gave him no ground.

He wanted this relationship to take on a special meaning. The Mortar Man took pride in the trust Nancy invested in him. Would she allow him to be more than just her watchdog? *Listen to yourself,* he lectured. *You're one selfish bastard.* He heard the kitchen's door swish and thump. Pascoe shook his head grumbling, "Two years I've banged myself up and now she's closing down. Where am I supposed to get my Bearclaw and coffee?"

He heard Nancy choke and draw a shuddering breath. She was trying to stifle the sounds of her tears and their refusal to stop. She didn't want him to know and that knowledge gave him hope Nancy might care, too. At the same time it made him feel like shit. Pascoe would follow Coach Dom's advice. He would step back...stop...and think.

He pulled on his overcoat. "That you, Nance? Still raining?" He made his voice light,

pretending to misinterpret the sounds she made. "You coming down with a cold? Don't breathe my way, please."

Nancy cleared her throat. "I've got two weeks. Don't be a stranger, I like your company. Besides, you'll need a haircut and trim. Now get the hell out of here I'm busy."

Pascoe ducked into the misting rain and headed in the direction of his building. A smile exploded on his face before he took two steps along the sidewalk. She said she liked his company. His smile grew bigger. It felt as if his head might split in half. He lifted his face into the misting rain. *I need to get serious*, he thought though he felt a laugh building in his chest.

Pascoe jammed his hands in the pockets of the Maxwell. Nancy worked her ass off and now her dream had turned to shit. *Not again. Not another last hope wasting itself on real life*, he thought. His mind focused, as it did when he geared up to deal with any business decision. There must be something he could do.

The Mortar Man shuffled through one idea and then another. Scenario's played through his mind like movie previews. Every solution he considered failed in the face of one fact...Nancy would not take charity. Independent came to mind when Pascoe thought of her. He smiled, thinking how she viewed her cash register watchdog. She treated him with respect and trust, but imagined him living in doorways and cardboard boxes. Refusing to act in the face of stubborn independence was not acceptable. There had to be a way. A slow grin twitched and grew under his wild and tangled beard. He had an idea.

"I'll make a few phone calls," he said and laughed out loud.

A passing pedestrian said, "What?"

Pascoe dropped his head, mumbling and ranting in unintelligible language. The tactic worked wonders time and again.

~ 0000 ~

Four

CoffeeCaker Coffee Shop...Alone

Venice, California - 2006

Nancy rested one knee on the vinyl cushion of a banquette and stared at the sun dappled street. Vaporous cloud trails splashed the plate glass with noonday shadows. The sun was at its zenith, but as the minutes ticked away deep shade would darken the CoffeeCaker side of the street. Pacific Avenue looked naked and cold despite the warming trend that began the previous Sunday.

Cars flashed by in the golden glow of the noon hour. Random breezes threw scraps of paper down the sidewalk. Some tumbled and flew a few feet. One flattened itself against the window, fluttered there and peeled away to disappear like a puff of car exhaust. Four days had come and gone and no Pascoe. Nancy frowned. The empty counter stool looked forlorn. Four long days and Nancy was worried. She had saved his bear claws, but three were stale. Number four would go that route by the end of the day.

"Cut the sentimental bullshit," she mumbled, "what else can I expect from a bum?" She was nervous though, she hoped he wasn't hurt or sick.

God only knows, she thought, *bums get into all kinds of crap. What the hell am I thinking? He's a bum and I can't fall for a homeless bum so forget it. I can't fall for anyone in my line of work.* Nancy put the thought out of her mind.

What about the bum part? she wondered. She tapped her nail on the windowpane. Pascoe looked unkempt with his tangled hair and beard, his clothes all rumpled like he slept in them. She tried to recall his having an odor about him, but nothing came to mind.

His smile popped into her mind. *He had the whitest teeth.* She thought back over the last couple of years. She couldn't picture him wearing dirty, torn or patched clothes.

Nancy shrugged. "Ask me if I give a shit." She turned from the window thinking she had to hit the can.

Like the splash of a cold ocean wave, sadness washed over her. She was lonely. Lonely for Lincoln Pascoe. The empty coffee shop seemed hollow and devoid of life without him. Nancy unplugged the register and crossed to the café door. She felt guilty leaving the machine unattended. One last look and she hurried through the kitchen.

"Where the hell did you get to, Pascoe?" The voice of a cranky child rang in her ears, its whiny sound made her sick. Nancy coughed and cleared her throat.

A giggling fit hit as Nancy worked her pantyhose down. She pictured Shamaz rushing through the front door. The little shit would struggle to pick up the register and then run away thinking he had his payback. She pulled off a few sheets of paper. "He'll be in for a surprise. Six dollars and eighty-eight cents don't buy much payback." She giggled some more.

At the mirror she sighed and brushed a tear from her cheek. She leaned forward to catch the light. "I still look okay," she whispered.

She made a face. At thirty, Nancy pushed six-foot in low heels. At one time she considered modeling. The agencies said her figure didn't compliment present day designs. Too full, they said, whatever the hell that meant.

Her long legs and small rump were her best physical assets. She couldn't understand people thinking she resembled Bridget Fonda. For one thing her eyes were a cold gray, she hated their color.

Nancy washed her hands, one more act of hopeful futility. In the last four days she served seventeen cups of coffee, nine donuts, one grilled cheese sandwich and a glass of water. When she used up the last of her food stock she would have to close the door. The old life. There was nothing left but the old life and Nancy Twigly remembered it well...

She arrived in Los Angeles on May 2, 1994. Nancy celebrated her eighteenth birthday at the Greyhound bus station in Rock Creek, Wyoming. Some birthday, she had cowered in the ladies room until the westbound bus was ready to board, terrified her brothers would find her.

She stepped off the bus in L.A. with one carryall and three thousand in cash. She worked every job a teenaged girl could find in and around Rock Creek. Several times she talked her way into some real lulus. Nancy managed to squirrel away most of her earnings. Not an easy task when her older brothers were addicted to cocaine.

Her mother was no help. She was a drunken woman savaged by a scumbag husband. Later she was beaten into submission by her own drug-demented sons. Nancy tried to help, but she was young. She had to learn her lessons the hard way. No one can help those who want no help. After three years of misery, she took her life savings and fled.

Like thousands of young women before her, she came to find Hollywood. She came to be an actress. She did the necessary research. Nancy Denise Twigly came from Hicksville, Wyoming, but that had nothing to do with her intelligence or persistence. She planned to get a job. She would join an acting group. Nancy thought the Pasadena Playhouse intern program would do just fine.

Outside the bus station she scanned the newspaper racks. She needed an apartment, the cheaper the better, and she needed a job. Nancy knew nothing would come easy. It never had and she had no expectations it ever would. The Los Angeles Times sounded like the newspaper she needed. As she pulled her copy from the machine she felt a tap on her shoulder.

"Excuse me? Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you. You look a little lost. Is this your first time in Los Angeles?" The young man said, took a step back and smiled.

Nancy looked him over. He appeared no older than twenty-five. He was dressed well and seemed polite, but Nancy no longer trusted impressions. Her brothers looked harmless, too.

"It's my first trip," she said, "but I have relatives here and I'll be staying with them. I don't need any assistance."

The young man took another step back. "Oh. Sorry again. I didn't mean to imply that you... I didn't think you were having trouble. I thought you might need directions, that's all. You're very attractive, if you don't mind my saying. Tall. Nice posture."

The man reached into his coat and offered Nancy a business card. "My name's David Stockerfield. I'm a talent agent. I represent models, actresses, writers. I have a couple of painters under my wing." At Nancy's look of disbelief, he laughed. "I like diversification," he said.

Nancy gave the man a second look before accepting his card.

He nodded. "Oh, I know what you're going to say. I'm too young, right? Well, I'm thirty-two, but don't spread that around. Everyone thinks I'm the boy genius. I run the agency for my dad, he's retired, but he taught me all the tricks. If you're interested in talking, give me a call and set an appointment. Bye for now." He gave her a wave and walked away.

Nancy would remember her first encounter with David Stockerfield for many years. He looked so innocent. He acted so well mannered. Four months of minimum wage jobs found her out of work and down to her last fifty bucks. Nancy called and scheduled the appointment.

David Stockerfield Talent Associates occupied a worse for wear building on Harold Way. Nancy had a hard time finding it. Harold Way inhabited a short stretch of asphalt dead-ending at Van Ness and the I-101 freeway. Just off Bronson Avenue, between Sunset and Hollywood Boulevards, the area's inhabitants would've been flattered to hear it described as seedy.

Nancy set the appointment for one o'clock in the afternoon, but left her apartment at ten. Bus connections and miscues brought her to the dingy vestibule of 5801 Harold Way at twelve-forty-five.

The roar of traffic on I-101 set up a vibration she could feel in the soles of her shoes. The hallway, dark and stained in places, urged her to turn and bolt. The need for money drove her forward. She found the door marked David Stockerfield Talent, took a deep breath, and entered.

To her left a large Asian woman filled a larger swivel chair. The chair occupied a cramped corner of a small reception room. Outdoor carpet, a muddy brown color, covered the cement floor. Sparkles glimmered gold and silver on lime green walls. The ceiling held two fluorescent fixtures embedded in acoustic tiles. The vinyl foam squares were stained here and there by old

water leaks.

Nancy closed the door. The Asian woman didn't look up from the papers she continued to shuffle. A picture on the wall drew Nancy's attention. A young girl with bright red hair and large green eyes, smiled from a tangle of naked bodies. Her breath caught. *What the hell am I getting into?* Her panicked brain cried *run*. Her survival instinct said, *wait...you're broke*.

The Asian woman's voice ended the stalemate. "Can I help you, honey?"

Nancy licked her lips. Her mouth felt drier than the dirty sidewalk she'd just traversed. "I'm... My name's Nancy Twigly. I have a one o'clock appointment, but I'm not..."

The Asian woman smiled and picked up a pair of half glasses. She tilted back and cocked her head, her eyes darted up and down, here and there. She nodded. The chair she surrounded creaked and she leaned forward on gelatinous elbows.

"I know, honey. You don't like the looks of this dump or the pictures on the wall. You're thinking you made a big mistake and maybe you should get the hell out of Dodge, right?"

Nancy stared. She was scared, but too stubborn to show it.

The woman nodded. Her fat, flat face made a perfect oval. "I know, sweetie. I've seen... Oh God, who knows how many youngsters like you. They all have the same look on their face."

The heavy woman extended a balloon shaped hand. "I'm Peek." She laughed a small, dainty sound. "Dave calls me his little Pekinese. He's a cutie, don't you think? I'm the associates of David Stockerfield Talent and Associates. Let me tell you, honey. I'm the first hurdle you've got to jump. I don't need my glasses to see you got it. This dump? Don't let this fool you. We'll show you how to make gobs and gobs of money. We'll keep you safe, and most important, we'll keep you healthy."

She pulled a tissue from a box amid the rubble on her desk and pointed. "Have a seat, Nancy is it? You have a seat. Dave is running a little late. Dave runs late all the time. He likes to talk, but he's the best in the industry, baby lamb and so am I"

It took six years to rid herself of Peek Kawashima and David Stockerfield. She made money. She made films that would make the Mitchell brothers blush. When her two-year contract came up for automatic recycle for the third time, Nancy informed Stockerfield Talent she would be moving on.

Dave and Peek were calm and accepting with her decision. This worried Nancy a great deal. She made Stockerfield and Associates a great deal of money. Her films ranked among the top five in demand, her fan mail alone topped the other stars by the hundreds.

Two months following Peek's tearful goodbye, Dave Stockerfield paid Nancy a visit. Word of her entry into the high-end escort business had found his ear. "We taught you all you know," Stockerfield said. "Peek and I feel we should have a training percentage, say fifteen off the top?"

Nancy smiled. "Why don't we talk in the bedroom? I think much better lying down, don't you?"

Nancy used the spiked heel of her dressing slipper, hooked firmly in Stockerfield's scrotum, to get his attention. With painful tugs for punctuation, she convinced the would-be pimp he should stick to the production of porn films. Lest he change his mind, Nancy introduced him to Montrose Kellshell. Six-foot-seven, three-hundred pound Montrose put a massive arm around Stockerfield's shoulders. "Should you have thoughts pertaining to further discussions, please get in touch. I'll be delighted to hear your proposals." Montrose said with a nod, winked and pushed Stockerfield through the door. "Bye-bye."

Nancy smiled thinking of Montrose. *What would he be into now? It hasn't been that long ago*, she thought. *Thank God I didn't burn my list.*

She smoothed a corner of her lipstick, hoping her old Johns would be glad to see her back in business. No one could say she didn't give the straight life a shot. She squeezed her eyes, feeling the burn of tears.

"Yeah," she said. "At least I know my place in this fucked up world." Nancy hiccupped back a sob.

Crossing the kitchen, she made a mental note to get in touch with Montrose. She pushed through the louvered café door and stopped. Lincoln Pascoe's Photo chromatic lenses were just beginning to lighten. He sat at his corner spot, on his index finger he twirled a ring with a single key attached. "What does it take to get a Bearclaw and a cup of coffee?" He said, his eyebrows disappearing into dark clods of hair hanging on his forehead.

A force as stunning as the current through defibrillator paddles struck Nancy in the chest. A cold, hollow place she had nursed for years was pierced. The void filled with sweet syrup, thick and hot. The bubbling mass burned, but soothed at the same time. Tears flooded Nancy's eyes. An involuntary sob escaped and her throat closed up. She tried turning the sound into a cough.

"Still fighting that cold? Don't breathe on me, please. I hope you washed your hands back there." Pascoe nodded in the direction of the kitchen.

"Don't worry about my hygiene, Lincoln Pascoe. Jesus, you look like shit. Where the hell you been? What's that you're wearing?"

Pascoe looked down and then laughed at the absurdity of the act. Huge upper body muscle threatened to pop through the thin tee-shirt material. Its bright orange color screamed for attention. Across the front stretched black lettering yelled: MORTAR MAN. Below, smaller lettering announced: Vancouver Eagles Football.

Nancy's hand shook as she served Pascoe's coffee. She put a Bearclaw on his plate. "That's the freshest one," she said. "I saved the others, they're a little stale, but you can take them home or...well...home?"

The sagging front door scraped on its threshold. Nancy saw a short, barrel-shaped man standing just inside the doorway. His suit was Italian silk, the shirt and tie he wore were of a similar material. The man carried a large leather satchel. "Pardon me. I'm looking for Ms. Nancy Twigly?"

"If you're from the landlord, you're early. I've still got ten days, so can it and buzz off, buster." Nancy's fingernails thrummed on the register and Pascoe smiled looking smug.

The man came forward extending his hand. "You must be Ms. Twigly. I've been advised you brook no nonsense."

Force of habit made Nancy take his hand. Her gray eyes drilled holes through the man's silk shirt and tie.

The natty dresser ignored her stare and put his satchel on a nearby table. When he turned back he held a bound sheaf of papers. He extended a Conway Stewart fountain pen. "I need your signature and I'll be out of your way. The places are marked," he said, an expectant look on his face.

Nancy backed away and shook her head. "I don't sign shit until I know what I'm signing."

The man put the papers and pen on the countertop, his grin growing wider. "We have a slight misunderstanding, allow me to explain. My name is Herman Gold. I'm an attorney. This document is a deed of trust. It conveys ownership of this building and its surrounding property to

you, Ms. Nancy Twigly. The client I represent has two stipulations before conveyance can proceed. One: You assume responsibility for property taxes beginning tax year 2007. Taxes are paid until that time. Two: My client wishes to acquire a ninety-nine year lease, at one dollar per year, on the front corner countertop space and one counter stool. My client is The Mortar Corporation. Mr. Lincoln Pascoe, CEO, intends to pay for coffee and bear claws as he goes."

Herman Gold lurched forward as Nancy's long legs turned to jelly, but he wasn't fast enough. She melted into the floor behind the cash register eyes fluttering.

Pascoe laughed and slapped a hundred dollar bill on the counter. "Ninety-nine years in advance and here's your key, Nance. I've got a duplicate on my keychain. If you're okay with it, we can talk about a partnership. Nance? Hey...is somebody going to tell me what the hell's going on around here?"

Behind the counter Pascoe heard the rustle of clothing. He leaned to the side and down toward the sound. A puff of breath smelling like fresh mint brushed his face. Nancy said, "What kind of pa...partnership did you have in mind?"

Pascoe bent forward until his nose touched hers. "The kind where I love you until you're too old to care."

Nancy held his bearded face in her hands, brushing her nose against his. "You think you can last that long, huh?"

~ 0000 ~

The Puppy Murders [On the Move](#)

It was midsummer, I'm sure of it. I know because I wasn't cooped up in a hot, crowded schoolroom, itching, scratching and smelling eraser dust. Soon I would be assigned a desk in another new school. I would be the new guy. Again. I would have to adapt and quickly if past experience was any teacher. I yearned for a little more time. If only there were a few more weeks of summer.

I kept telling myself to cool it, I'd been in this jam before. Then again mom and dad said this time things were going to be different. This time my dad built a brand new, permanent home and this new neighborhood would be our last new neighborhood for a long time.

Last or not, new schools were a crapshoot. As if that wasn't enough, I was only eleven-years-old. Add the final zinger it was my last year of grammar school. It was all enough to superheat a small, prepubescent brain like mine...

~ 0000 ~

One ***Compton, California*** Summer - 1949

Nineteen-forty-nine. Looking back it was my banner year. In that magic year I had bigger dirt clods to harvest and bitchin' throwing rocks to gather. I needed friends and playmates and I was looking for kids who could share kid secrets. I ventured outside that first day looking for someone my own age. Maybe I would find some guys who liked to play guns or catch. Hide and

seek and kick the can would be good. Capture the flag would do just fine, I had high hopes. It was overcast that first day in the new neighborhood, hot and muggy. Right off the bat a kid came out of the house next door. Wonder of wonders he was about my age.

We sniffed around each other. We nodded. We kicked the dirt with our bare feet. We yeped and noed. We did the dance and then got around to names. The kid stuck his finger in his ear and said, "Name's Quentin Kingman..." His voice trailed off and then he finished with, "I'm ten."

I didn't offer my hand, I was afraid I'd come away with earwax. "Jim," I said. "I'm eleven. Man, that's the weirdest name I ever heard."

"Yeah it is," Quentin said, "I hate it, but what the heck." That was it. We were friends.

A huge sycamore tree stood on the corner across the street. Thick branches, full of broad leaves, spread a blanket of shade at its base. In the shelter of the shade a little guy crouched in the dust. He looked up a couple of times, but ignored us for the most part. The kid was making mounds out of the thin, powdered dirt at the base of the tree.

"Who's the shrimp, what's he doing?" I jerked my thumb in the direction of the corner.

Quentin shrugged. "Come on."

We tiptoed through the rocks and weeds in the street's meridian watching for cockleburrs. We crossed without incident and surrounded the shrimp, who went on scooping up little mounds of dirt. It looked like he wanted to make mountains, but instead ended up with a few skinny pillars. Quentin nudged the shirtless little guy with his toe. "What're you doing, Fireball?"

The shrimp looked up and smiled, three front teeth on his lower jaw were missing.

"Nothing," he said. "Making piles."

Quentin looked at me and pointed. "This is Larry Schmidt, everybody calls him Fireball. You ought to see the little shit run. He's greased lightning, boy."

I stuck my hands in my pockets. Fireball looked like skin and bone to me. I wondered if he was goofy or slow in the head or something. "How come you're making dirt piles?" I asked.

"Nothing better to do." He grinned at me with a crafty squint to his eye. "Wanna race for a nickel?"

"I ain't got a nickel, kid. Besides, if you won I'd have to kick your butt." I was smirking when someone up the street yelled, "Hey Quentin, what're you doing?"

I looked up. Several houses away a kid stood in his front yard, hand shading his eyes.

Quentin hollered back, "Hey, Donny, come here a minute. This is Jim, he lives in the new, pink house."

Donny waved, sort of, and sauntered back to his front porch. The kid started to fiddle with the lace on his tennis shoe. I ignored him. When I glanced up again Donny looked like he made up his mind, he ambled our way.

I smiled. *Strange kids and strange neighborhoods*, I thought, *here we go again*. Quentin's voice interrupted my reverie.

"Where you from, Jim?"

I shrugged and hoped I looked as cool as I felt. "Ah, we lived in Downey for a while. Before that we traveled around the country a lot and then my grandma died and we lived in Guttenberg, Iowa."

Quentin had his finger in his ear again. "What's a Guttenberg? Never heard of nothing like that."

"It ain't a something, dummy, it's a town named for the guy that printed the first bible. Ain't you ever heard of the Gutenberg bible?"

Quentin shook his head. "We got a bible, but it ain't named Guttenberg or Gutenberg or

whatever you said."

"Never mind," I said and gave Quentin my tired glare. "It ain't important anyways. Guttenberg's a farming town on the Mississippi river. You've heard of that ain't you?"

Quentin stared at me. "Course I've heard of the Mississippi. M-i-s-s-i-s-i-p-p-i." He looked smug, but then his eyes got big. "Have you really seen it? Honest, Jim?"

I looked down the street, making Quentin wait for my answer. The kid named Donny saw me watching him and stopped in the middle of the street. He looked back in the direction of his house as if someone called him. I laughed when he looked back at us. I thought he might be the type that would think I was laughing at him and that made me feel good.

Quentin said, "Jim?"

I clapped Quentin on the shoulder. "Listen buddy. For three years we lived two blocks from the river. My dad used to take me down there twice a week just to swim. Other times we took our fishing poles and caught sunfish for dinner."

"Nah," he said. "I think you're pulling my leg."

"You come on over if you don't believe me. Ask my mom, she'll tell you I ain't lying. After that, you'd better not call me a liar again or I'll sock you in the nose, pal."

I glanced up the street. Donny was fiddling with the limb on a little tree that looked half-dead. A woman's voice cut the silence.

"What are you doing to our tree? Get away from there, you little delinquent. Go home and ruin your own trees."

Donny jumped, but recovered and raised a middle finger in the direction of a house to his left. He continued down the sidewalk in our direction and I thought maybe he wasn't such a bad guy after all. I felt a pat on my arm. I looked at Quentin. "What?" I asked.

Quentin had his face scrunched up. "Come on, Jim, don't be mad, okay? I ain't calling you a liar, honest."

"Ah, forget it, okay?" I said.

"Did you go to school in Gutterburk?" Fireball squinted at me waiting for my answer.

I couldn't believe he was serious, but he was, sitting on his haunches, eyes cupped around his eyes and that silly smile on his lips.

"It's Guttenberg," I said, "and 'course we went to school. What do you think?"

He stared, a grimace on his face like he caught his toe in a slamming door. "Did you have summer vacation like we do?"

"Geez," I said. "Sure we had summer vacation. What's with you? Don't you know nothing?"

Fireball looked like he was about to bust out crying. "I'm sorry," he said and hung his head, "I ain't never been no place besides here and El Segundo."

"Ah, don't get excited," I said, "it's okay. We traveled all over. I guess I figure... And it's Guttenberg, remember that, okay? Ya' got that, Fireball? Okay, forget it." I felt sorry for the little guy, but I didn't want to appear soft either.

Fireball said, "What'd you do in the summer, Jim? Did you swim in that river all the time and catch fish?"

"Nah," I said watching Donny approach the corner. I knew he was within earshot so I added, "I got two uncles back there. They got big old farms with lots of cows and horses and pigs and chickens and stuff. My uncle Bill gave me a horse. His name's Pal and he's mine. When we go back there I get to ride him as much as I want."

Fireball jumped up, but Quentin crowded closer and said, "You got your own horse? Honest to God?"

Fireball's hand beat a tattoo on my forearm. "What's he look like? Is he big? What color is he?"

"Whoa. Whoa. Hold it a minute. Pal is a big horse, he's a white Palomino and he likes crabapples. When we lived in Guttenberg I used to stay with my uncles on their farms for the summer. I got to do all kinds of farm stuff. We got up real early in the morning and worked all day."

I stepped around Fireball and leaned back against the trunk of the sycamore. "My Uncle Bill said I worked so hard he was going to give me Pal. He said Pal could stay on the farm where he could run free and be with the other horses, but Pal's mine. That's what he said."

A loud voice filled with cigarette phlegm made us all jump. "Larry? I see you. Get over here, I need milk and eggs from the store. Hurry up."

A scrawny looking woman with a blue kerchief tied around her head leaned from the doorway of a weathered, ramshackle house. Her face was pulled down in a terrible squint, I remember thinking she looked like a witch. She waved her hand once and then again, an impatient gesture, before ducking back into the house. The screen door slapped the doorframe, cracking in the still, muggy air like breaking glass.

Fireball looked at us and said, "Shit." He smiled his gap-toothed smile, waved and took off running down the sidewalk, heading for the old house sagging at the back of the large corner lot where we stood. The front of the property was fenced. Picket boards, once white, were cracked and faded. Like the house, the elements had cooked and peeled the paint away.

The Donny guy finally made his baby-step way to the corner. I ignored him and touched Quentin's shoulder. I nodded my head in the direction of the saggy wood frame building. "That Fireball's house?"

Quentin kicked at the piles of dirt. "Yeah. He's got a bunch of brothers and sisters. They live on welfare, ain't got no dad."

I looked at him. "Welfare? What the heck is that?"

"I don't know for sure," Quentin said. "I heard my dad say they get a check once a month from the county. All's they got to do is live there, I guess."

"Wow," I said. "That's a pretty bitchin' way to live."

Donny was giving me the once over and I returned the favor. He was my age, a little shorter than me, but well built. His Levis were worn white and threadbare at the knees and he had on a dirty white tee shirt. My instincts said: *This guy thinks he's the Kingfish around here.* My inflated self image said: *We'll see about that.*

Donny looked me up and down once more and stuck out his hand. "Hi," he said.

Our handshake was straight out of a Dead-end Kids movie, Mugs McGinnis giving the new kid the old squeezola.

I knew it was coming, I'd been this route before. We stood, braced, squeezing and grinning until Fireball came charging back down the sidewalk. The diversion gave us both a valid excuse to back off.

"Hey, guys. What are you going to do? Wait for me, okay? I'll be back in no time, okay?" He took off like his pants were on fire.

Donny said. "So you got a horse, huh."

I just nodded and stared at him. He heard most of the story, I knew it and he knew it. That day we decided to ignore each other, but I was sure, one day soon, Donny and I would square off.

Past experience taught me a few lessons. Being the new kid, it was important to establish a

couple of things. First: I had to prove I was a regular guy, but no candy-ass. Second: I needed to show everybody I took no shit. In my brief eleven years I always found a way to impress those points of order on new friends. I'd caught a glimpse of an old broom in the gutter earlier. A brilliant idea came to me. I would show these kids, especially *Kingfish*, I was a daring and resourceful tough guy. Eleven-year-old logic...don't ask.

I wandered over and picked up the broom. The bristle end was nothing but a ragged stub worn down to the stitching. I hefted the thing like a lance. "Hey, guys. I got an idea. Watch this." I laid it on thick adding a big grin of mystery.

I stuck the old broom through my belt at the small of my back, and using hand and footholds on the trunk of the sycamore, I climbed. Three smaller trunks branched off at the crotch. I was at least ten feet off the ground. It sure didn't look that high from the sidewalk.

The trunk was about four feet in diameter. Where the tree divided itself the offshoots were smaller. I considered climbing higher to impress my audience, trunk stems soared another twenty feet in the air. Big branches grew every which way. I decided my audience was thrilled enough.

I pulled the broom from my belt and struck a match from the pack in my pocket and yelled, "Hey guys, you ready?" Sure of my audience's attention, I set the stubs of straw on fire.

Donny and Quentin watched from below. I imagined they were watching me in awe. My intrepid, inventive bravery, probably struck them speechless. In reality, they no doubt thought I was a little brain damaged. The straw broom was just starting to flame when a commanding voice yelled, "Hey you. What the hell you doing? Put that out before you catch the tree on fire."

I looked down and saw a kid with brilliant red hair scowling up at me. The redhead was bigger than us and he looked pretty tough. I knew he was older, but I was stuck, I couldn't back down. With cockiness I didn't feel I said, "Okay, I'll put it out."

I let out a shout, a yelp I thought sounded like a fierce war cry, and tried to throw the broom like a spear. All the weight was on the burning end. The broom dropped, flaming end first, heading straight for my new friends.

Everybody ducked and jumped back. The broom hit the gutter and exploded in a shower of embers. A few inches to the side and I would have beamed Quentin, Donny and the redhead. Quentin and Donny took off running for their homes. The redhead yelled, "Get your ass down here, you dumb shit. Put this fire out."

My audience was gone, but I was compelled to continue my bluster. I hollered down, "You want the fire out? Okay, I'll put it out." I unbuttoned my Levis and tried to pee on the burning broom.

The redhead said, "I'm going to get a bucket of water. If you know what's good for you, you'll run and hide, you little ass."

As soon as he left for the water I shinnied down the tree and ran home. I stayed in the house the rest of the day. Not long after the burning broom debacle, I met the redhead. Over the next three years we became good friends. Don, Big Red, Morrison and I learned we had a lot in common. For the past sixty-four years we've maintained that close friendship.

There's a macabre twist to this tale of boyish foolishness. Had I not choked back my fear of a meeting with Big Red? Had we not experienced an immediate feeling of simpatico? If those *had not's*, had not come to pass, I would not have gained the wherewithal to commit murder.

Don Morrison is ignorant of his contribution to the act that stalks my dreams. It's right that he is unaware, he only provided the tool. Sixty-four years ago, I, with free will and brash bravado, welcomed a piece of hell into my soul.

It huddles there flickering: now bright, now dim. It is a cursed lamp that lights my nightmare

kinescope. It casts maddening images of a torturous death I inflicted on another living creature. The images of that atrocity torture me with hellish dreamscapes I cannot escape.

~ 0000 ~

Two
Compton, California
Summer - 1952

I turned fourteen in March, Don Morrison would turn seventeen in November. My body had undergone changes during the intervening three years. The dumpy broom burner's body of 1949 now topped out at six feet. I was a slender one-sixty-five and towered over my neighborhood buddies. I liked the new me and pushed my advantage at every opportunity. As for Donny Van Franken, he and I settled into an uneasy *Kingfish partnership*.

Don Morrison, the most industrious of our group, gave up his paper route. At sixteen, Big Red landed a job with Sears, Roebuck & Co. He got discounts on all kinds of neat stuff. The neatest were Daisy BB guns with minor to moderate damage. Don could buy these beauties for a song. The cheapest model, a single shot, was two bucks. The premium repeater went for seven-fifty.

Every kid in the neighborhood wanted one. Don took orders and collected the money. A few days later he would come home with Daisy Air Rifle cartons. They all had Red Ryder and Little Beaver pictured on the top flap.

When I heard about the BB gun deal, I scrambled like a maniac mowing lawns, washing cars and raking leaves. I would do anything to earn a buck or two toward a BB gun. Don Van Franken was smart and thrifty. He had money saved from his allowance. After Morrison himself, he was the first in the neighborhood to get a repeater. Wouldn't you know, it was in first class condition. Donny showed me a small scratch on the barrel. You needed a magnifying glass to see it.

The rest of the kids, one by one, walked out of Big Red's yard with their Daisy Air Rifle prize. Only a few remained gun-less like Fireball Schmidt and me of course. Me? I wanted the repeater, naturally. Only the lever action with the wooden stock and rawhide thong hanging from the breech would do.

Fireball would have taken a repeater or a single shot. Hell, even a no shot would've made him happy, but I was sure that wasn't going to happen. He was too little to go out and earn money, nobody would hire a little kid like him. His mom? She was on welfare. She was lucky to have enough to buy food. I had learned there was nothing bitchin' about being on welfare.

Every day Morrison went to work was a day of anticipation. Those who scrounged the money couldn't wait for him to get home. One day he arrived with two Daisy Air Rifle boxes under his arm. Quentin Kingman and a new kid, Leonard Markus, waited with salivating expectation. Quentin was jumping out of his skin. Morrison came out of the house, but he only carried one box. He handed it to Leonard. Big Red looked at Quentin and said. "Don't have yours yet. Maybe next week."

Kingman's mouth dropped open. "What?" he said. "I don't get it. I'm getting a single shot, the cheapest one. Other guys got their single shots right away. How come I got to wait? Who's the other box for, you brought two, right?"

Morrison stepped closer to Quentin. "None of your bee's wax, buddy. Next week. Got it?" Big Red went back in the house.

Markus ripped his box open and pulled out the gun with all its accessories. Quentin watched for a while then mumbled, "What the hell's wrong with Morrison? Is he mad at me, anybody know?"

When no one spoke up, Quentin ran off, wiping his face with the tail of his tee shirt. Everyone wondered what was going on. Don Morrison never explained his reasons for penalizing Kingman, the episode has remained a mystery these many years even to me.

The day after the Morrison-Kingman confrontation, I wandered around my driveway, bored and disgusted. I was still three bucks and change shy of my repeater. From the Schmidt's dilapidated, one car garage I heard: POP...POP...POP. It was the unmistakable sound of a Daisy Air Rifle.

The pathetic old garage sagged at the back of the Schmidt property. Teetering amid gouged asphalt and waist-high weeds, it looked like it would only take one good push to collapse it. I followed the sounds and jogged across the street. Someone was shooting inside the listing garage. One of the doors hung at an angle, ready to drop off its rusted hinges. I peeked around the edge of the dry, cracked wood. In the dark, musty smelling interior, Fireball looked like a lump of shadow crouched on the dirt floor.

He was on one knee, a Daisy repeater, wooden stock, leather thong and all, hugged to his cheek. He was drawing a bead on a row of empty cans perched on bowed fire blocks. He pulled the trigger and missed the cans. Again and again he missed every shot. The cans rocked now and then, but a warm breeze, blowing through gaps in the warped wood siding, caused the movement. The tin containers seemed to mock Fireball's errant eye.

"Hey," I hollered louder than necessary. Fireball had a Daisy and I couldn't believe it. Worse yet, he had a repeater and I was still gun-less. He jumped and looked around. When he saw me he gave me his Fireball smile and held up the rifle. "Look what I got, Jim," he said and laughed.

I walked in the garage sporting the deepest shade of green the sin of Envy ever produced, but I had to be cool. "That's pretty neat, Fireball," I drawled.

"Ain't it the bitchin'est thing you ever saw?" He held it out, offering to let me hold it.

I ran my hand over its surface. There wasn't a scratch on it. It was brand new. There was nothing wrong with this one. I handed it back and he grinned with the damnedest look on his face. Ever see a little boy cradle a baby in his arms or maybe a puppy?

"Where'd you get the gun, Fireball? I asked. "Did your mom buy it for you? Is it your birthday?"

His grin got bigger. He shook his head no like little boys do, their whole body in motion. "I can't tell you, Jim. I promised I wouldn't and I won't, okay?"

I gave his shoulder a pat. "That's okay, Fireball. You should keep your promises. Keep practicing and when you get better we'll let you in on the BB gun fights. We're gonna have some good ones soon as everybody has their guns."

Fireball took his rifle back. "Aw, they won't let me. They all think I'm a shrimp, but I ain't so little."

I put my hand on his boney shoulder. "Listen. If I tell the guys you're in? Well, you're in, little buddy, but you got to promise not to tell your sisters or brothers. If they tell your mom, she'll blab to our moms. You know what'll happen then, right?"

He looked at me, his eyes all big and solemn. "If you tell the guys I can play, I swear. I won't tell nobody nothing."

I stuck my nose in his face. "You're gonna get shot a few times. You get hurt you gotta promise you'll tell your mom it was an accident. Nothing about BB gun fights. Promise?"

Fireball shook his head yes like little boys do, his whole body in motion. Then he cocked his head. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure," I said.

"You ever write a letter to your horse?"

I started to laugh, but realized he was serious. "Hey, come on Fireball, you know horses can't read letters."

"Yeah, I know," he said. Fireball leaned the Daisy against the splintered two by fours holding that flimsy garage together. It was hard not to grab the BB gun and rub it against my Levis to get the dirt off.

He picked at his dirty fingernails. "I really wanted to ask you something else about the farm. Is it okay?"

"Go ahead," I said.

"What did you have to do to earn a horse?"

I was surprised by the question. Fireball didn't strike me as someone who did a lot of thinking. I wondered if I was underestimating the little guy.

"I did all kinds of stuff," I said and kicked at a dirt clod, one of many that pockmarked the garage floor. "I helped fix fences. I killed chickens for dinner. I helped slaughter pigs at harvest time. Let's see. I plowed once, drove a tractor and disked a field. All kinds of stuff, why?"

"Ah, I just wondered is all. I've never been on a farm. I didn't know what you do there." Fireball's face brightened and he pulled at my arm. "Hey Jim, Sharon's in the bathtub. Wanna do a peekie?" He giggled, his toothless lower jaw jutting forward. He looked like a baby about to scream in delight.

~ 0000 ~

Three

The Simple Request

Summer - 1952

Over the next few weeks I played best buddy and big brother to Fireball. I was able to wheedle the Daisy BB gun secret out of him. The gun the little guy had was brand new and I had a hunch where it came from, but it was fun to know for sure. Don Morrison buying a new Daisy repeater for Fireball would've been a juicy tidbit to pass around. Stature increased in direct proportion to the nature and amount of hot neighborhood gossip a guy possessed.

I was sorely tempted at times, but I kept Fireball's confidence and respected Don Morrison's secret. I don't know why I did, I had a selfish streak in those days. I was desperate to prove how strong, tough, and hip I'd become...how *Kingfish-like*.

Morrison delivered the Daisy of my dreams a few days later, "like new" almost. It had one small dent and a scratch I hardly noticed. I spent the rest of the afternoon shooting in my backyard. I learned the air rifle had one major flaw. The dent had damaged the air chamber. At random times air pressure would fail. I stomped in the house that night disgusted with my bad luck, but Morrison had warned us about flawed merchandise. No buyer's remorse. No returns.

No refunds.

I remember closing my bedroom door, throwing the Daisy on the bed and crying like a child in frustration. The next morning I sat at the breakfast table one sullen camper. Dad was long gone to work and mom didn't pay attention to my attitudes. Mom and I didn't get along too well and most mornings I got out of the house as soon as I could. I had no doubt she was as relieved as me when I disappeared after breakfast.

That morning, I rinsed my cereal bowl in the sink and someone rapped on the backdoor. Through the blinds I could see Fireball standing on the back porch. My black mood was still there when I opened the door. "What do you want?" I said giving him a nasty glare.

Fireball backed away. "Hi Jim," he smiled and rubbed at his nose. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Geez," I said and heaved a big sigh. I pulled the door closed and followed him down the steps. "What do you want, Fireball? Shit, I ain't even awake yet."

He looked down at his bare feet and mumbled something.

"What did you say?" I swatted at his shoulder and he backed away.

"My mom wants to talk to you," he said. His eyes were still on his dirty feet.

I watched his facial expressions and mentally paged through the last couple of days. I stepped closer to him and said, "I didn't do nothing."

Fireball brought both hands up to his head and scrubbed his buzz cut, giving the stiff bristles a Dutch rub.

"She ain't mad at you. It's... See, I told her you could help, you know? You're my best friend and I told her you'd know what to do."

My chest swelled up and so did my head. My black mood vanished, but I stalled, I didn't want to appear eager and fall all over the compliment. I rubbed the back of my neck and paced a little. I finally sat on the porch step and leaned on my knees as if in deep thought.

"Okay. What's up?" I said.

Fireball grinned before saying, "You gotta see. Can you come over? I don't mean right now if you can't, you know? Later, maybe? Okay?"

I stood up. "I got a few things to do," I said all business, "I'll be over later."

The old Fireball smile split his face. "Thanks, Jim. Thanks. I'll tell mom... You going to come right now?"

I frowned and Fireball turned and ran across the street. I finished up in the kitchen and then fooled around in the bathroom until mom started getting suspicious. I messed around my bedroom for a few minutes, I even straightened my bed. When mom saw what I did it would shock the hell out of her. I couldn't think of any other reasons to stay in the house so I went out the door yelling, "I'll be outside."

I took my time crossing the street. Fireball had left the gate open and I could hear their dog, Lucy, barking somewhere in the house. I walked around to the back door and knocked. Lucy barked louder and then I heard a commotion. The ruckus was followed by Fireball busting through the kitchen with Butch, Ronnie and Brenda trailing along behind. The only member of the family missing was Sharon, Fireball's older sister.

He pulled me inside, the screen door banging shut behind me. The kids all stared at me. Brenda's mouth sagged open her finger hooked over her lower teeth. Her tongue flicked back and forth over a dirty fingernail. Fireball cranked his arm in the air calling, "In here. This way, Jim, in here."

I was three steps into the kitchen when Mrs. Schmidt appeared in a doorway to my left. Her

right eye was squinted shut against the curling smoke of a cigarette. She cradled an old, rolled up towel against her left breast. She waved her hand at the children. "You kids get in the living room. Go on. Clean up that damn room. Hurry up."

All four Schmidt siblings turned and scampered away. Grace Schmidt focused her attention on me. "Jim, you seen Lucy's litter yet?"

I shook my head. "No ma'am I haven't," I said. "Fireball said you wanted to talk to me."

She drew hard on the cigarette and held the smoke for a long time before it flowed in twin streams from her nostrils. I was mesmerized, I couldn't remember seeing anyone smoke like that before. Her hoarse, phlegmy voice got my attention.

"He said that, did he?" Her grin was more of a scowl.

"Yes ma'am," I said.

Her hair was wrapped in its usual kerchief. This one green with little yellow flowers all over it. She jerked her head in the direction of the room behind her. "Come here," she said, turned and disappeared through the doorway.

My mouth went dry and my heart was thumping and jumping like crazy. I don't know what I expected, but whatever waited on the backside of that doorway made me nervous. Despite my fear, I obeyed and crossed the room. Mrs. Schmidt was standing in her service porch next to a big box. Lucy, the Schmidt's mixed breed bitch, lay in a bundle of old rags suckling five pups. The room stank of wet dog fur and canine birthing.

Mrs. Schmidt dropped a fold from the old towel in the crook of her arm. A scrawny pup lay feet up, its head lolling off to one side. It let out a squeak, its stumpy legs pawing at the air, once or twice. Lucy barked and started to get up, but Mrs. Schmidt shouted, "Stay."

Lucy settled back down with a growl.

The pup squealed again. Its little ribs stood out, straining against a hairless hide. The pup's eyes were closed, but bulged from the tiny skull like two peas in a dry pod. Lucy barked some more and Fireball's mom dropped her cigarette on the cracked cement floor. That broke the spell and I looked at Mrs. Schmidt's stern face.

"Well, can you do something or not?" She said staring at me as if I knew what she wanted.

My face must have telegraphed incomprehension. Mrs. Schmidt coughed, her frustration obvious in the sound of her voice. "Jesus Christ. Larry didn't say a word to you, did he?"

I shrugged. "He said you wanted to talk to me, that's it."

Mrs. Schmidt stared for a beat at the pup and then covered it with the fold of the towel. "Larry told me you were raised on a farm. That you know all about sick animals."

My eyes must have bugged out of my head. "What?" I said, my disbelieving voice soft. I felt like finding Fireball and giving him a smack.

She shook her head. "Damn kid lied to me, I had a hunch, damnit." She rapped her knuckles against her forehead. The cigarette hanging from her mouth lost its ash on her housedress and she brushed at the embers.

I was scared. I didn't want Mrs. Schmidt to start yelling. I didn't know how this could be my fault, but it had to be. I must've messed up or answered wrong or done something, I was sure. Mom was never bashful about telling me I couldn't do anything right.

I reached out and touched her arm. "Fireball didn't lie, Mrs. Schmidt. I wasn't raised on a farm, but we lived near two of my uncles in Iowa. They both had farms and I spent a lot of time with them."

She looked at me. Her face had a high cheekbone hard look with sunken skin and a small, square chin, deeply lined. I'd never noticed her bright, cornflower blue eyes before, but they were

easy to miss, their brilliance effectively hidden by deep eye sockets and the shadow of her brow. Fireball's mom had the hollow look of the Okie's who fled the Dust Bowl of the 1930s.

"So," she said. "You can take care of this? You've put down animals on your uncle's farm, right?"

I didn't know what she was asking. I was scared and I knew my voice was going to come out weak. I looked over my shoulder to make sure Fireball hadn't slipped up behind us.

"Mrs. Schmidt," my voice trembled, "I don't know what you mean. I'm only fourteen. I..."

The woman I made fun of and thought of as a witch seemed to shrink before my eyes. The look on her face scared me. I remember thinking, that's what defeat looks like. The tiny pup in her arm squeaked and then bawled.

Her eyes glittered with moisture. "Lucy will kill this pup if I put it back with the rest. It's weak, been so since it got born. It couldn't get around the other pups to feed. Now it's sickly and Lucy won't let it suckle. She'll kill it and eat it if I let her."

I looked at the dog and her litter. I felt cold all over. I'd never heard of such a thing. "Your dog will eat its own puppy?" Thinking back I must've sounded stupid as well as incredulous to Mrs. Schmidt.

She reached for the cigarettes in the pocket of her housedress. "Jesus Christ, boy. You lied didn't you? You didn't kill nothing on those farms, did you? Your uncles didn't teach you nothing on those farms, did they?"

She mumbled to herself and walked in a tight circle. When she stopped, she looked me in the face but her sunken eyes were now filled with merciless pity. "Animals kill their weak and eat them. If they don't the predators will. This pup is suffering and it's going to die." To this day, I've yet to hear a voice as flat or cold as the one she used that day.

She looked down then, seeming to deflate. Her shoulders quivered and her flat, cold voice went soft. "I can't kill it. When Larry said you grew up on a farm, I thought maybe you could..." She shook her head and her voice trailed off. Mrs. Schmidt's emotional makeup that day bordered on schizophrenic, although at the time I wouldn't have known the meaning of the term.

Comprehension finally slapped the back of my head. She wanted me to kill the pup. I risked a look at her eyes. I know she saw fear on my face. I was too young to understand the implications of the word desperation, but I saw its definition written on every line marking Grace Schmidt's lean, weathered cheeks.

I've really pulled a good one this time, me and my big, stupid mouth, I thought. Those words kept running back and forth like a chicken will in front of a wire fence.

Big Red Morrison's face leaped into my mind. He wasn't that much older than me, but he was the breadwinner in his family. He knew how to stand up and be a man. I had grown tall and big shouldered. I looked like a man, but I wasn't a man.

I acted like some kind of bad-ass big shot, but I lied about the time spent on my uncle's farms. I lied about helping to kill chickens and pigs. The biggest thing I ever killed was a potato bug. Now I would have to stand up. It was that or never look into a mirror again. Never look into Fireball's eyes again. Mrs. Schmidt had no one to turn to but me. Yeah, no one to turn to but me. I let that mantra run around in my head a few times. In the silence of my mind I bragged in a vain attempt to build up my shaky confidence.

I took a deep breath. *I can do this. I must do this, but how?* I'd watched dad kill chickens for Sunday supper by wringing their necks. *I could wring its neck,* I thought, but dismissed that idea when the visual image made my skin crawl. I could drown it, all I needed was a bucket of water. Simple. I felt like grinning. Then, a picture of the blind pup struggling, sinking, choking on

water, filled my mind. My stomach lurched and I ruled that one out.

Mrs. Schmidt struggled to hold the pup and light her cigarette. I was running out of ideas. I took the packet of matches from her hand and struck a light for her cigarette. In that brief span of time my quick, brilliant mind formulated a solution. I was amazed I hadn't thought of it sooner. I'd shoot it.

Fireball's mom met me behind the garage fifteen minutes later. It took me that long to run home and load my Daisy full of BB's. Two shots at most would do the trick, I figured. The pup would be dead, quick and clean.

I met her in the high weeds on the side of the garage away from the house. She laid the pup in a small area clear of the tallest weeds. She left it on the old towel and backed away. "You don't have to do this, Jim," she said. "I shouldn't have asked you. Maybe you'd better go on home."

I looked at the helpless little pup. Its sparse white coat had the beginnings of little black spots. It lay on its back, tiny legs flailing at the air. It tried to cry, but its mouth only produced a tiny squeak.

I swallowed something about the size of a pillow. "It's okay, Mrs. Schmidt, I can take care of this." I gave her what I thought might be a confident smile. "You can go in the house if you want." My voice shook like it did after a winter night's visit to the outhouse in Guttenberg.

BB gun poised, it dawned on me I was about to do something irrevocable. This was foolish, a stupid mistake driven by nothing but ego. My self proclaimed brilliance was a foul taste at the back of my throat.

I felt cold and shaky. *Could I shoot and kill. Could I? I couldn't chicken out, not now. Once, twice and it's over,* I told myself. *I'll be a man,* I told myself. *I can do this,* I lied to myself and I pulled the trigger. I had aimed for the chest, a heart shot, but I flinched. The first BB hit the pup in the throat. It cried out and kicked with renewed strength.

I levered another BB into the air chamber and shot again. This time I hit the mark. The pup jerked. A small bubble of blood turned into a rivulet and stained the pup's short, white hair. It wretched, twisting it's little body in pain. I imagined I could feel the agony of the animal. Its mouth opened and closed as if in silent pleas for mercy, but I was merciless.

I levered for another shot and the Daisy chose that moment to lose air pressure. The BB bounced off the pup and disappeared in the weeds. Tears blurred my vision. I tried again, but the damn gun wouldn't fire. I raised the stock, but I knew one strike would break it. Without any conscious thought I stepped forward and stomped on the pup's head. I heard and felt the cranial bones burst under the sole of my sneaker. I let out a howl, the sound of which I'm not likely to forget and ran for home.

Several weeks passed before I could again sleep through the night without nightmares. A lot about me changed after that day in 1952. My personality changed and I found myself seeking out a different group of "friends."

Don Morrison and I drifted away from each other and I began to hang around with some bad guys I thought of as cool. After all I was a killer, right? Quentin and Donny Van Franken steered clear of me for a while and so did most of my other friends in the neighborhood.

Fireball on the other hand looked up to me like I was some kind of James Dean, like the anti-hero character he played in the film, *Rebel Without a Cause*. Fireball might've seen himself

as my sidekick, my *Sal Mineo*, who knows?

When I felt like being in a good mood, I let Fireball hang around. I used him as a gofer, but I treated him okay and didn't pull any shit on him. I was *Mr. Big Hearted Guy*, a legend in my own fantasy world.

~ 0000 ~

Four

Over My Shoulder From South Carolina

The metamorphosis from boy to man, girl to woman is not completed by a progression of years. Growth, coupled with the maturity of the body, does not necessarily accomplish maturity of the mind as well. I believe the lessons we learn in childhood become guideposts as we mature. The need to adapt to new places, playmates, friends and environments inured my personality.

Ego driven braggadocio will birth a willingness to lie. Lying to enhance a position with others will lead to the inevitable: *Put up or shut up*.

The murder perpetrated on the Schmidt's defenseless pup played an important role in my life. I learned a great deal from the experience and eventually took several giant strides forward on the road to manhood. I learned life, weak or strong, is precious and should be preserved if possible. I learned lying to friends and those you love will only lead to more lies until all is lost.

I learned that becoming a man or woman is a lifelong task. It is a labor of love and hate and lust and lies and disappointments and failure and on and on.

Nineteen-forty-nine is a heaven of wonderful memories that included a new permanent home for my family, new friends and new adventures for me. Nineteen-fifty-two saw my self absorption and thoughtless bravado lead me into Hell. I survived that first visit and vowed I would never return.

Though many years have passed, my memories of that time and that act remain vivid. Crushing that poor pup's head, however, pales in the face of other images. In the Technicolor nightscape that plagues my dreams, I envision the spotted pup. I see his silent screams. I see the tiny holes created by the BBs. I see the pellets bounce on the pup's bloodstained coat. Over and over the BBs rebound and roll away. Over and over the shiny copper winks in the sunlight before disappearing into the blood soaked grass. The spotted pup's paws flail the air as its silent mouth cries. The pup screams in agony, so much agony that God in His Heaven surely must have winced.

~ 0000 ~

The Brass Rail

[Alameda County Jail, Oakland, California](#)

June 8, 1982 - 3:06 a.m.

Ray Martelli sat on a metal bench staring at the stained cement floor. The jailers took his tie and belt and would've taken his shoelaces, but he slipped his feet into loafers that morning, Lucky me ran through his mind. He was going to wear wingtips, but the pounding headache that woke him before the alarm that morning dictated something without shoelaces. He shook his big, shaggy head. What was he doing here again? What was he thinking? Down deep, in that place he

didn't want to acknowledge, he knew the truth, He was killing himself and well on the way to killing his marriage.

"Hey chump. What'chu looking for? What'chu you in for, man?"

Martelli raised his eyes. A tall, stick of a kid stared at him, eyebrows raised, waiting for an answer. A throb of pain hammered Martelli's left eye and he felt self-control slipping away. *Drunk driving, you fucking moron, what do you think?* Rage at his stupidity challenged him to bellow the words out loud, but he held back.

He had a buzz on, no doubt about it, but drunk? Not drunk enough to start a jail fight. Damn straight. Martelli glanced around. Besides, he was outnumbered. He dropped his gaze and ignored the dorky kid, returning to his study of the stained cement. He needed an excuse, something he hadn't used before, but it was hard to focus. He was in deep shit with his wife, Cheryl, and he knew it.

After the booking crap he made his call. When Cheryl answered the phone he told her what happened, swearing he was sober. As the last of his justifications dribbled from his lips, he listened for his wife's response. Her silence lingered...stretching out to infinity. He tapped on the mouthpiece with his fingernail.

"Cheryl?" His voice sounded whiney, even to him, and that feeling sucked him deeper into the pit of self-pity he'd so carefully excavated. "Baby, say something," he said.

"Good-bye, Ray," Cheryl said and hung up.

Her failure to anger and yell at him scared him. In the past his wife's recriminations would start with the phone call from jail. After a week of cold silence, broken only by her invective, he would chide her for nagging. Bad luck, he always called it. If his lawyer failed to reduce this DUI to a reckless driving charge her nagging would be good advice ignored once to often. Martelli's luck would run out and his job? What job? Three drunken driving arrests, that was no joke. He knew the score. It would be the DUI course all over again. The old circle jerk deal, sitting around slobbering about inner demons. *What incredible bullshit*, he thought. Martelli smirked and his thick fingered hands curled into fists. *I'm in the shithouse for sure after this fiasco.*

Martelli blinked blurry eyes thinking of the finality in Cheryl's voice. Her silence drove a stake in his chest. *What if she left me?* He cringed with the thought. *I couldn't live with that failure, she'd take the kids. Might as well cut out my heart.* A whimper slipped past his lips.

His eyes lost focus and the stains and dirt of the cement floor swirled turning into a sea of puke. He had to fix this with Cheryl. That idea cleared his vision and the jail's floor came back into focus, stains and all.

There's no one to blame for this stupidity but me. I'll beg Cheryl for mercy and forgiveness. I'll go into treatment. I'll join AA. This time I'll do it. The desperate promise gave him new hope.

Eyes burning from cigarette smoke and lack of sleep, Martelli searched the dirty cement floor for other ideas, other plausible arguments for clemency. A hard-nailed finger tapped at the top of his head.

"Say what? What you say, man?"

Martelli blinked new tears away and raised his head. The streetwise kid again. New rage boiled in his chest. *What's with this fucking asshole, tapping on my head?* He pulled a deep breath. *Easy. Easy*, he told himself.

Raymond Antonio Martelli came into the world big and reached his adult height of six-four at sixteen. In high school he played football and in the off season fought in Golden Glove competitions. His years spent working in sales rewarded him with a good living for his family,

but threw in a paunch from the rich food and booze for a bonus.

His belly and body support structure lived in the two-fifty neighborhood now. Only his early participation in athletics sustained his underlying musculature. This despite the last few years he had dedicated to debauchery. Martelli and his family celebrated his forty-second birthday two months past, but he could still cause liver damage with his left hook and he could make almost any smartass piss blood for a month. He looked up at the kid with his streetwise voice and sucked his teeth. Sanity said: *Jail ain't the place to lose your temper, pal.* Ray felt a tendon pop in his jaw.

The mouthy kid wore baggies and held them up with his left hand, elbow akimbo. A black Oakland Raiders jersey hung from narrow shoulders. The jersey's color matched the tone of the kid's skin and his shaved head glistened in the harsh fluorescent light. A cigarette dangled at the corner of his mouth. The trailing smoke pulled his face into a squint giving him the look of a stroke victim.

Martelli wrinkled his brow. "What did you say to me?"

"What you mean, what you say? Do I sound like I talk funny to you, boy?" The kid sneered and looked around.

"I'm not in the mood for conversation," Martelli said.

"I not in the mood for conversation," the kid mimicked in a loud voice. "What you? Some kind a big shot? You look more like a fairy to me. What's you wearing? That one a them seersucker suits? That fit you, seersucka'. You look like you make a good punk. I gots a friend over in the other cellblock needs a new punk. What you think, boy?"

Martelli straightened from his hunched position and stood. He realized he no doubt looked like an easy mark, with his hangdog posture, but now the street tough took a step back and he followed the kid's retreat. "I think if your friend needs a punk ass," Martelli said, "you fit the bill real good, Billy Goat. Why don't you go over there and get your hemorrhoids fixed? You'd best leave me be, okay?"

The cigarette dropped from the kid's mouth. He waved his free hand and continued to back away. His eyes searched the tank, but the other inmates were paying no attention. "Be cool, man. Be cool. I just jiving you. You cool. You got any smokes, man?"

Martelli felt a surge of pity. *The kid's trying to keep the animals at bay*, he realized. He glanced around, a dozen inmates sat on bunks. Late arrestees used the floor, knees drawn up and hard eyes glaring. At three in the morning Martelli was the only suit in Alameda County jail. He blew out a breath and flopped down on the bench. "I don't smoke, man, but if I did you'd be welcome to them," he said and waved the kid away.

They turned him loose at six-thirty. Martelli slipped his tie under the collar of his shirt and used a glass showcase in the lobby of the jail as a makeshift mirror. His reflected image appeared clouded and dissected by smudges and dust on the glass.

He leaned in squinting at the mottled likeness he saw. The glass seemed to clear for a moment, and in that instant, he saw the youthful Ray Martelli, full of confidence and promise. The vision hit him like a Mike Tyson left jab, hard and hot under the heart.

Martelli took a step back, eyes burning, head pumping up like a helium balloon. A long wooden bench was bolted to the wall and he flopped down as nausea rolled through his bowels like a sudden plate shift on the Hayward fault. When his vision cleared and the nausea passed,

Martelli went for the pay phones lined along the wall by the street door.

Thirty minutes later he was in a cab heading for Orinda. The arresting CHP officers took pity on him the previous night and parked the company car in the well lighted lot of the 24 hour Safeway supermarket. That courtesy saved him an expensive tow and storage charge bill.

He caught the cab driver's eyes studying him in the rearview mirror. *Can't blame the guy for worrying about his fare*, he thought. He was worried, too, all he had left was forty bucks.

The house was dark when he climbed from the company car. Martelli glanced at his watch, 8:10 a.m. *The kids should be slamming out the door on their way to school. The kitchen lights should be on.* The angry call of a blue jay and hasty flutter of sparrow wings emphasized the silence. "What the hell's going on," he muttered.

Martelli stepped through the front door and a spike of fear nailed his bowels to his backbone. The house and its cold, empty atmosphere kicked him in the balls. "Cheryl?" He cringed at the querulous sound of his voice. "Donnie? Samantha? Little Ray? Panic exacerbated the whiney sound of his voice. "Answer me. Daddy's home."

He found a note on the refrigerator's door:

Ray,

Don't bother trying to contact me or the kids. I'm filing for divorce. I've had enough of your late nights and drunk driving phone calls. I told you the last time, IT WOULD BE THE LAST TIME. I'll be sending for the rest of my things and the kids extra clothes and toys. If you have any feeling for me or the kids you won't fight this, you know you're wrong. I want to sell the house. I'm willing to split the equity evenly. A Realtor will call you with the papers. When you clean yourself up, I'll drop the restraining order and allow you to see the kids. Until then, I'll see you in court. My attorney will be in touch. Cheryl.

He crumpled the paper and threw it across the kitchen. Pushing shaky fingers into his eye sockets he wished for a gun, something big to take his head off and end it quick. He sobbed, opened the cupboard under the sink and jerked the paper towels off the holder. The roll bounced across the floor unraveling as it went. Wadding the few left in his hand, he soaked them in water and swabbed at his face. Martelli stared through the kitchen window and slammed his fists into the countertop in helpless rage.

He stumbled through the service porch into the garage. A half gallon of Petrovitch vodka awaited his pleasure, hidden in a brown paper bag behind his toolbox. There would be no reason to hide the booze any longer. He stripped the bag, threw it in the corner and turned the bottle in his hands, staring at the gold and blue label. Jumbled thoughts pushed their way through his head: *I have to get them back...get them back. I'll join AA...I swear...I'll quit, I promise...Cheryl?*

Martelli returned to the kitchen with the vodka bottle cradled in his arms. His eyes were blurred by hot tears that trickled through the stubble on his cheeks. "Please, God," he muttered, "I'll stop. I promise I will. Not today, please? Just not today."

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Two

Office Time

April 18, 1986 - 7:06 a.m.

Something wasn't right. The morning sneered at him like it got up on the wrong side of the bed. Martelli sneered back, he and Friday morning would start off even. "Another shit day," he croaked at the darkening sky.

He locked the front door while a tiny voice railed in his head like a jilted lover. *Every day is shit. Cheryl's gone and you're a drunk*, it said.

Martelli only saw the kids once a month...supervised. He looked at his watch, wondering how many more days before he could see them again. He couldn't read the little number, his eyes blurred and then he felt the sting and pressure in his sinus. *That's right, bawl like a baby, you weak-kneed son-of-a-bitch*.

He wasn't sure what was going on. More often than not he found himself on the verge of tears and talking to himself. A cold cramp seized his stomach. Icy fingers of nausea clutched and twisted his gut. He looked at the front door. *Maybe just a quick one. Chase the sick and clear my head*, but he shook off the temptation. Hopelessness leaked through his brain like a foul diarrhea. He cleared his sinuses and hocked the product in a bush growing by the stoop. *Stop feeling sorry for yourself*, he lectured. Martelli frowned, eyes tight. *I'll find a way out. I always do don't I?*

Maybe you don't want a way out, the voice said, *what about Cheryl and the kids, Mr. Genius?*" He drew a stuttered breath, the voice scared him, but he tried to square his shoulders and ignore his feelings of guilt.

A faded yellow Ford huddled in the driveway. Above him the sky roiled in a dirty, overcast way. Frigid raindrops spit in his face. Martelli opened the car's door and an icicle wind speared his back like a frozen meat cleaver.

He leaned on the door and a few fat raindrops pelted his head. The popsicle globules leaked through his hairspray blazing icy trails behind his ears. The gelid fingers squiggled under his shirt collar. "April in the San Francisco Bay Area. Ain't life grand?" he murmured and scowled at the dark, churning sky. Next door a dog barked as if to answer his question.

Martelli squinted at the small, ranch style home he rented. It was almost identical to the home he and Cheryl had shared. *How long ago?* the voice asked. *Four years*, he thought.

He'd have to stop the procrastination and get off the booze. When he got them back, maybe Cheryl, him and the kids could give it a coat of pain. They could make it their first family project. Martelli smiled for the first time in days.

I've heard enough, the voice yelled. *You'd better think about your Goddamn problems at the office. Remember? O.S. & D? Get your family back*, the voice mocked, *I'll quit. I'll join AA, just not today. Your full of shit, Martelli*. He made a face and grunted at the voice in his head. "Everyone thinks it's so fucking easy."

Martelli squinted at the gray, tumbling sky once more and hocked and spit and rolled into the Ford. Cocktails from the previous night tingled at the back of his throat. He debated which scenario he hated most. Entertaining clients he couldn't stand or the guilt burning his gut when he drank too much.

He cracked a window heading west on Ygnacio Valley Road. The company's LTD had circumnavigated the odometer once. Until it warmed up, the old beater belched oily blue clouds of smoke from under the dashboard. Martelli would've bet it had turned twice, but who was counting?

He thought of the company car Red Rover Freightlines provided for him in a different life.

A new Ford Galaxy every two years. He chose the color and could pay for extras if he wanted something special. He screwed that job up in royal fashion.

An acid burn bubbled at the back of his throat with the memory. As if three DUIs weren't enough, he went to Hell after Cheryl left. He was lucky the company allowed him to resign, saving him a little slice of dignity. Landing the Merchant's Intermodal job was like hitting five numbers on the lottery. After the Red Rover debacle, he was unemployed for more than a year. His reputation in commercial transportation was like old feces, rotting below the trap of the trucking industry's toilet bowl.

Martelli caught a red light before the freeway on ramp. A crumpled pack of Winstons stuck in the corner of the windshield caught his eye, a remnant of last night's drunk. He shook one out and hacked a cough into his fist. "Screw it," he said. *How can a man stop smoking when his damn car won't?* The 1975 Ford wheezed and dieseled, but refused an answer. The lighter popped and Martelli puffed the Winston to life. The light turned green, he coughed, stomped on the accelerator and felt spiteful pleasure at the scrape of smoke on his raw throat.

Moderate traffic on I-24 surprised him. *Some lucky stiffs got away early for the weekend*, he mused and chewed on his cheek. He kept to the slow lane afraid to challenge the old Ford anymore than necessary. Despite his care, the LTD rewarded him with a new tick. Over the sound of the all news radio station, the tick increased in volume to a knock. Martelli tried to ignore the hammer like clack in the hope it would go away. The Ford would not be denied, however, it had prepared an orchestration of its own composition. A diabolical internal combustion symphony, produced for Martelli's listening pleasure. A pre-ignition rattle chattered in perfect time with the new ticking, knocking, clacking...clacking...

Jesus Christ. I don't need another problem on my plate. He slammed the steering wheel with a closed fist and glanced in the rearview mirror. A new Toyota Camry disappeared in the blue-gray cloud of the LTD's exhaust. Ahead the black, yawing maw of the Caldecott Tunnel coaxed him into Oakland. The cigarette in his fingers trembled. He pushed the glowing butt through the cracked window. "Nerves," he muttered to the windshield.

Nosing through the tunnel on the Oakland side, a cascade of pounding rain engulfed the LTD and traffic came to a halt. Martelli's knuckles turned white on the steering wheel. He shook as if he were clinging to the last life preserver on the Lusitania. His thoughts turned to the fifth of vodka stashed in his desk.

By the time he made the post office, eight o'clock had come and gone.

From Oakland, the commute on the infamous I-17 is a life threatening experience. Martelli bounced into the mud and gravel lot of Bay-Fast Trucking unscathed. His rented office quarters occupied the basement of the local trucking company's terminal building. He parked as close to the stairway entrance as possible. The Ford gave one last exhausted rattle and clack and died of a wheezy knock.

Vicious sheets of rain pounded rust spots on the hood of the company junker. Martelli blinked at his reflection in the rearview mirror, he was only postponing the soaking. Tucking the mail under his coat, he climbed from the car and ran for the stairs. The irritating trill of the phone echoed in the stairwell. He sloshed down the cracked cement steps and fumbled with the office door's lock. Cursing, he stepped inside and threw the mail down, but the phone died as his hand touched the receiver.

Martelli checked his watch: 8:45 a.m.

"Sal. That had to be Sal. My kind of luck," he groaned. "Shit. Shit. Shit."

He belched and felt a burning in his chest. Sour coffee and glazed donut paid him a return visit. Shrugging out of his overcoat, he opened the bottom desk drawer. An unopened MasterCard bill glared up at him. Martelli ignored it and lifted a pile of files. His fingers wrapped around the neck of the vodka bottle. *How about the credit card?* he wondered. *Maybe there's enough for a cash advance. It couldn't be that easy, could it?* His laugh was short and bitter to his ears.

He stared at the bottle of cheap, supermarket vodka. *Another chance*, the voice said. *Don't open the bottle, that's all you have to do.* The voice sounded tired. It was getting weaker and that knowledge made him feel stronger. Fear jerked Martelli's thoughts back to reality. Reality was the O.S. & D. report. Reality was the sale of a pallet of damaged coffee. Reality was the missing money, money he spent paying up overdue restaurant tabs.

He cracked the seal of the vodka and tossed the cap on the desktop. Raising the bottle in a toast, he said, "Here's to the mold on the walls of my plush basement headquarters and another fucking banner day at Martelli's Fantasyland."

The space heater hummed at his feet. Martelli took another pull on the vodka and chased it with a mouth full of Pepsi. He tried to concentrate on his call report, but the O. S. & D. thing tugged at the back of his brain. Eleven hundred bucks...*might as well be eleven million*, he thought. His sarcasm floundered in the face of despair. Twenty-eight hundred of his credit card's three grand limit was spent. A call to the bank verified the amounts and the courteous MasterCard representative declined his request for an increase in the credit line. Martelli squeezed his eyes tight, berating his folly. When he sold the damaged coffee, he shouldn't have cashed the damned check. *God, what a dumb shit, I am.*

He jerked in his chair and looked around the room. *Was that an echo I heard? Did I shout?*

He glanced upward hoping the office personnel on the floor above hadn't heard him if he did. The vodka's warm, numbing fingers climbed behind his eyes. *If the fucking company sent my expense checks on time, I could've settled the tabs.*

Martelli stared at a new wet spot growing in the corner of the ceiling. *How in Hell am I supposed to convince clients we operate a superior service from a shit-hole like this?* he wondered. The burning sensation came back. Crawling into his throat from his stomach and pushing its bitter, coppery taste onto the back of his tongue.

"Ah, shit." Martelli hung his head and rubbed his temples. Tears filled his eyes. "Sometimes I wish you'd..." He couldn't finish the thought out loud.

"Stay positive, ass-eyes, think," he whispered and levered forward. His elbows slammed the desktop, but he felt nothing as he shoved misshapen knuckles into his eye sockets. *Solve the problem why don't you?* His vision lost focus and he shook his head. *Right. I'll sit my ass on the toilet and shit some green.* Martelli whimpered and thumped his fists on the desktop. He took another hit from the bottle and held the liquor in his mouth.

You're an alcoholic and you know it, don't you? the voice whispered.

He shook off the meddlesome nag in his head and its accusations. *Bullshit. No way. I can put it down anytime. It helps me relax, helps me think straight.* He slapped the desktop for emphasis, but Cheryl pushed her way into his head. *If it's true you can quit, why am I gone?* she

asked.

Martelli could hear the sorrow in her voice. "I'm gonna quit, sweetheart," he said. "I'm gonna quit, I swear. I'm gonna pay off this O.S. & D. shortage and get clean. I'll never drink again and we'll be happy, I promise..." Cheryl and the kids. His sixteen year umbilical cord to a happy life, Martelli wanted that back, he wanted it all back despite Ellie Telcher, the new woman in his life.

Ellie. Ellie. What can I do about Ellie? The dirty guilt that proved him worthless came rushing back and demanded an audience, but the Ellie problem would have to wait. Sal Bonafazio, his boss, was a more formidable problem at the moment. Sal was watching him like a hungry cat watches a crippled mouse. There were so many things he had to clean up, but like his mother used to preach: *Start sweeping at your own front porch.*

Martelli shuddered, capped the vodka bottle, and set it to the side.

Salvatore Bonafazio, Vice President of Operations, Merchants Intermodal, was against the decision to hire Martelli from the get-go. Bonafazio was overruled by board chairman Frank Ventura, but that didn't stop him from wanting Martelli's scalp.

Bonafazio started to build his case the day Martelli took over as terminal manager, Oakland, California and he continued his scrutiny daily. Bonafazio would find the right reason eventually. When the boss was out for blood, he'd find an artery sooner or later and Martelli would get his final check. The VP kept a list of his slip-ups and Martelli had no illusions about the malevolent intentions of Bonafazio.

The VP of Operations was based in New York, but distance didn't deter his checks and double checks on every detail of Martelli's performance. Bonafazio loved to jerk his chain and opening the terminal office late gave Bonafazio one more link of chain to jerk. Halfway through the mail Martelli gave up. There was no need to open the rest. Bonafazio was holding up his expense checks again.

The phone rang and Bonafazio's face popped into his head. Martelli glanced at the vodka bottle sitting at the side of the blotter. He grabbed it and pushed it between his legs. Guilt put the burn of discovered indiscretion on his cheeks.

"Merchants Intermodal, Ray Martelli." His voice sounded raw to his ear, throat dry and sticky. White noise hissed in his ear.

"Ray? It's Ellie."

Martelli gulped a breath. "Ellie, how are you doing? Surprised you're calling so early. No work last night?"

"I worked." Ellie sounded pissed. "I wanted to catch you before you made plans for lunch. We need to talk, but not at my place."

Jesus, I'm a fucking train wreck. "You sound serious," he said. "How about a hint?"

"Just say yes, Ray. Please? Meet me at the Brass Rail, 11:30, okay?"

He frowned thinking of the O. S. & D. report: Overs, Shorts and Damage. If he didn't find a solution soon Bonafazio would hang him out to dry. *Ask her.* The thought flashed in his mind. *Ask Ellie for a loan.*

"God, you're a desperate prick." He was unaware his whisper was audible.

"What did you say? Ray?" Ellie said.

A headache attacked his eyeballs beating like another heart. "Nothing," he said. "Thinking

out loud is all. Listen, honey. Can you give me a clue? I've got a mountain of work. If I don't catch up..."

Call waiting beeped and Martelli's heart thumped painfully on his sternum. *Bonafazio. This one has to be Bonafazio, I know it.* A lightning shot of fear went through his chest. *Does he know? Has he found out?* Guilt fueled more worry.

"Ray? You still there?" Ellie asked.

He blinked and licked his lips. A quick flash of rage screamed at the weakness he felt in his bowel. "Hold on, Ellie, got another line."

Martelli punched line two as if it were Bonafazio's nose. "Merchants Intermodal, Ray Martelli."

"Try getting to the office by eight..."

I'm bucking a lost cause. The realization pushed Martelli's attitude into full throttle recklessness and he interrupted Bonafazio's tirade. "I'm on the other line," he said and punched the hold button.

"I'm fucking toast," he mumbled, but a boozy smile lightened his face. He hit line one. "Ellie? I'm sorry, I got Sal on the other line. I've got to go, hon. I'll be there, 11:30. Bye, babe."

Martelli pulled the vodka from between his legs. Half the bottle was gone already, it was full an hour ago. He stared at the gold cap. *This is it,* the voice was desperate, *you can leave it capped and stop right now.*

He shrugged, spun the cap and took a pull on the bottle. A swallow of Pepsi chased the burn. "Damned if I can stand a quitter," he mumbled. Bonafazio waited and Martelli punched the winking light, girded for battle.

"It's raining pitchforks and hammer handles out here," he said, "you cab around The City. Out here we drive ourselves and sometimes we have a problem called traffic. Capisce?"

Bonafazio's sandpaper voice rasped up a notch. "What are you, a smartass? You work for me, remember? Watch your mouth. Get to work on time."

Martelli waited for more. It wasn't a long wait.

"I want two things from you." Bonafazio's graveled voice rattled through the earpiece. "First, explain the discrepancy in the O. S. & D. reports. We're interested in a shipment of damaged coffee consigned to HomeCooked Foods. If we get past that, you can tell me about your lack of new customer calls for the past two weeks."

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Three

Brass Rail Lounge and Grill

Alameda, California - 10:48 a.m.

Dim illumination washed the interior of the Brass Rail restaurant in gloom. From his left Martelli heard a clatter of crockery and the tinny rattle of flatware. The Brass Rail's servers were setting up for the lunch trade. He turned right and crossed a narrow hall. A cigarette machine flashed multicolored light on the wall of an alcove to his right. A pay phone crowded the opposite corner. To the left, a hallway led to restrooms, storerooms and the kitchen.

He saw the back of Gary Simons as he moved down the slats dealing ashtrays. With deft familiarity the bartender placed a small glass receptacle at equidistant positions along the bar. Martelli settled on his favorite stool in the corner. His mind reeled with thoughts of Bonafazio

and his third degree. From the questions and tone, he knew the VP bought little if any of his story. He leaned on the red Naugahyde bar cushion and it creaked in protest.

Simons heard the plastic's groan and turned. He smiled, cocked his head and checked his watch. "Hey," he said, "it's my man, Ray. Little early, big man. It's only ten to eleven." The bartender paused at the waitress station, setting the leftover ashtrays aside. He picked up his Marlboros and lighter and stopped in front of Martelli, dropping his habit in the well.

Simons nodded at the cigarettes. "Just in case. I know you're trying to quit." He offered his hand. "How's it hanging, my man? Little vodkie sodie?"

Martelli nodded and the game began. He loved all of it: Gary's humor, the smell and taste of the bar and its muted ambiance. He loved the cushioned rattle of the dice when they were shaken in their leather cups and the clack and clatter as the ivory cubes bounced on the bar's top.

"Just a taste, please," Martelli said, "in a chimney, no fruit."

Simons shook out a Marlboro and flicked his Bic. He drew deep and set the burning cigarette atop the hard pack. "What? You think I got a case of amnesia?" He began building the drink.

Martelli grinned. "Naw, you ain't brain dead yet, just a little slow is all."

Gary snapped a cocktail napkin beside Martelli's hand and set a sweating, tall glass spot center.

"You eating today, big man, or just sucking 'em up?" Gary pulled a lung full of Marlboro.

"Damn, you do that good, Martelli said licking his lips. "Put it on a lunch tag, Gair. Ellie called, wants to do a little mangia."

"What time? I'll reserve a table," Simons reached for the house phone.

Martelli shrugged. "She said eleven-thirty, but you know Ellie. Early. Late. Mood of the day, all that happy horseshit." He drained the glass. "She sounded upset. Wanted to talk. She wouldn't give me a clue. You know her pretty well, any scuttlebutt? Ideas, maybe?"

Simons put a refill on a dry serviette. "Ah, listen, man," he said, "I don't want to get in the middle of something."

Martelli wiped sweat from the fresh glass. "Get in the middle of what? Come on, Gair. What the hell's going on? I'm in shit up to my eyeballs already, I don't need any more grief."

The bartender leaned close. "Ellie called me, early this morning, and said she wanted a quiet table." He straightened, raising his hands in surrender. "Honest to God. That's all she said. Nothing else."

Martelli shook his head and drained his glass. "Well, it sure as hell ain't romance she's setting up. I could tell she's pissed about something. Maybe she's dumping me. Might be a good thing. Might do a little changing myself, get Cheryl and the kids back home."

Simons shot him a look, but ignored the mention of Martelli's ex-wife. "Maybe Ellie wants to borrow money," Simons said. "Maybe she found a new boyfriend, who knows? I hope she's tired of your big old sweaty ass. Maybe she'd take a liking to a tight little body like mine. I could handle that."

"You're still stuck on her, huh?" Martelli laughed "Well, here's your chance, buddy. I doubt she's looking to borrow money, but if that's the deal she's out of luck. She'd be better off talking to the commode in the ladies room. Damn things get more deposits than I do."

Simons offered Martelli a Marlboro. "How long you been banging that sweet lady, man? Four, five years now? I intro'd you guys, at the Elegant Plow, remember?"

"I remember," Martelli took light from Simons' offered Bic, made a face, and coughed. "Five years? It's been five years? Jesus," he said and coughed again.

The bartender squared the Bic on his pack of Marlboros. "So. What now? You thinking of going back to your wife? I wouldn't set you up with Ellie if I thought you were going back to your wife, man. She's good people, don't dump on her, okay?"

Martelli took another hit on the Marlboro, the cigarette tasted uglier. "Gimme a break, Gair. Ellie had a thing for me. Come on, man, you know that's true. You were spinning your wheels where she was concerned. Don't go postal on me, man. Come on."

Simons shrugged. "I'm just saying, you know?"

"Five fucking years. That's just scary, man." Martelli squinted through curling smoke. "You ever get up in the morning and look in the mirror? Wonder who the hell that is staring back? You know? I mean, boom. You fucking blink and your life's gone...all gone."

"Come on, man. Don't start with the melancholy shit." Simons raised his eyebrows. "Uh, oh. You're about to learn the bitter truth. The foxy one just walked in."

Martelli turned, but the hallway was empty. He looked at Simons who shrugged. "Maybe she's going to hit up the commode. You think?"

"Good, Gair. That's good. Go ahead. Set her up, same as me." Martelli swallowed his drink and pointed to his empty glass. "Pump this up while you're resting, might as well get ready for some action."

Simons delivered the cocktails and wiped the mahogany as Ellie parked her tight skirted bottom on the barstool adjoining Martelli. Her choice of seat gave him a glimmer of hope for a nice afternoon.

Simons beamed. "Hi, gorgeous, he said," and leaned across the bar for a kiss.

Ellie bent forward and pecked his lips. "Hi, your-own-self, cutie"

The bartender smiled, smacked his lips and picked up Martelli's tag.

"Look at this guy," Martelli eyed the empty lounge, playing to an invisible audience. "Gets a kiss from the goddess of love and all he thinks about is running my tab. Boy, talk about a company man." He turned and lifted Ellie's hand to his lips. She ignored him and put her purse on the stool to her right.

"Hi, babe," Martelli said, turning her hand over and kissing her palm. "You're looking great, sweets." He snuggled her neck. "Mmmmm and you smell yummy. Good enough to gobble."

Ellie leaned away, pulling her hand into her lap. "Stop it, Ray. Just... Don't start, just don't. You're drunk, aren't you?"

Ellie's hand fluttered up from her lap. She signaled her nervousness, but Martelli failed to notice. She touched her hair, frowned and picked up the glass with its red plastic straw. She shoved it in his face. "What's this? Who told you to order my drink?" Ellie shook the glass and the ice tinkled splashing a few drops on the bar. She faced forward, set the drink down and pointed. "I don't want you ordering my drinks. You understand me?"

Martelli looked bewildered and stared at her, but Ellie turned away and pawed in her purse. He hung his head and looked at the bar's top through tangled eyebrows. "This morning I thought I was looking at disaster, now I see its Armageddon." He turned his head and stared at Ellie's back. "I'm a little high, but so what? That's vodka soda I ordered for you. You know? Vodka soda?"

He gulped the last of his drink and raised the empty in Gary's direction before dropping the glass in the well. The brittle, cracking sound made Ellie jump. Simons eyed his drinking buddy and inspected the glass before building a refill.

Martelli could see Ellie's left cheek and eye in the round mirror she used. He watched her blink and dismiss him. She dabbed at her face. Martelli blew a cheek full of boozy air. "Why did

you call me?" he asked, "to fight? Okay fine. You don't want the drink? I'll drink the damn thing," He grabbed the glass she'd set in the well.

Ellie kept dabbing, her voice a soft murmur. "You don't remember a thing, do you?"

"Remember what?" he said and took a sip of Ellie's drink.

"I called you last night," she said, her voice rising. "You were supposed to meet me when I got off. You don't remember what you said, do you?" She glanced over her shoulder. Ellie's eyes dripped with disgust.

"What did I say?" Martelli was lost. "You didn't call last night. I had clients. I don't remember..."

Her left eye blazed from the compact's mirror. "I'm not surprised, you don't remember. You couldn't put two coherent words together when you answered the phone. Of course, you didn't have any pronunciation problems when you called me a whore and a bitch."

Ellie did something with her little finger and eyebrow.

Blood pounded behind Martelli's eyes, he was close to losing it. "Ellie? For God's sake. I wouldn't do that. Make some sense, will you?"

His teeth snapped together and he faced forward. The heavy caliber impact of a migraine hit his forehead. A wave of nausea swept through him. He belched up something bitter. This time it put a definite copper aftertaste on his tongue. Martelli pushed the foul sampling back into his churning bowel.

Simons and Ellie exchanged glances. The bartender shrugged and put a refill on the napkin. Martelli held both glasses to his brow, the cold wetness felt wonderful. Ellie's purse snapped shut. He watched her from the corner of his eye. She faced forward and snatched her drink from his hand.

She put the glass down empty, the ice rattling like old, dried bones. "I didn't want to discuss our relationship at the bar, but this is so typical of you. I asked Gary for a quiet table, but here you are blitzed again. You've turned into a drunk. I don't need a drunk. You said you love me, but you're in love with the booze. What's happened to you? What's turned you into an alcoholic? God, how pitiful is that?"

The boozy fog, his pleasant, friendly place to hide, was threatened. He remembered that morning, leaving the house and looking into the sky. Something looked wrong. He knew it, saw it coming. A shit day, he called it, but he was wrong. It was more, a lot more, but a better description eluded him.

"I'm not an alcoholic, Goddamnit," he yelled. "You'd better watch your fucking mouth." Martelli couldn't mistake the sound of fear in his voice.

Simons stepped in front of his old friend. "Hey. That's enough, man. Take it easy. Don't get crazy on me. I think you've had enough today."

Martelli's face turned red. "What the hells happening here? Who are you people? What the fuck's going on? Gair? Are you really Gary Simons?"

Ellie bunched Martelli's coat sleeve in her fist. She shook his arm. "Listen to me. I don't want to see you anymore, understand. You need help, you're killing yourself and I'm not going to watch you die. I'm drowning here. This is a dead-end for you and for me."

The guttural clearing of a throat sounded from behind them. A familiar sandpaper rasp sent an icicle ripping through Martelli's body. "You've got good instincts, honey. Besides being a drunk, he's a thief and a first class loser."

Ellie swung around and Martelli followed a beat behind her. He blinked, too drunk to show surprise, but his skin oozed cold sweat. The fuzzy looking figure standing in the hall's archway

sounded like Sal Bonafazio.

Ellie's face blushed scarlet. She snatched her purse and slipped off the barstool. Brushing past the thin, dark man, Ellie left the Brass Rail, not bothering to look back.

Something popped behind Martelli's eyes. He saw his life as a ridiculous game. Bonafazio had him...blindsided him. He was in town all along and the phone call that morning laid the groundwork. Martelli walked into the VPs trap much like a Pavlov dog salivating at the sound of a bell. Martelli eyed his boss, winked and sniggered.

Bonafazio was dressed in his uniform of the day...black. A tailored trench coat and soft hat were added to his normal business ensemble. The head gear turned Bonafazio's garb into side-splitting comedy in Martelli's mind. The black fedora made the New York VP look like the hit man in *Godfather II*.

Martelli reached back and grabbed his drink lifting the glass in a salute and smirked. "Quick trip from the Big Apple, Sal? May I say you look absolutely divine? I suppose the funeral we're attending is mine."

Bonafazio put out his hand. "I'll take the keys, smartass. You're done. Fired.

Martelli turned to set his glass on the bar and the movement taxed his sense of balance, he slid to the side. Bonafazio stepped forward and pushed him back on the stool.

"You're a pathetic human being," he said. "Worse than I imagined."

Martelli slapped the keys in the Bonafazio's hand. "Fuck you, man, he said. "Have a nice flight home, huh?"

He started to swing around and Bonafazio's hand dropped on Martelli's shoulder. At his former employer's touch, he lunged off the stool in an attempt to rush his boss, but Bonafazio easily sidestepped the drunken charge and shoved Martelli back on the barstool.

Momentum and weight turned him back toward the bar. The first thing he saw was the face of Gary Simons. The bartender's eyes were as big as the Brass Rail luncheon plates.

Bonafazio dropped an envelope on the bar. He stepped in close so Martelli could see him. "That's your final check. It includes everything: vacation, sick pay, expenses, and thanks to Mr. Ventura, a severance. I hope you're not so drunk you can't understand me. If you are, maybe your friend here will explain when and if you sober up."

Martelli laughed, he had no choice, inside he was screaming.

"You think this is funny?" Bonafazio said. "I'll give you funny. You've got until Monday, midnight. A cashier's check better be on my desk. The figure is eleven hundred, sixty-three bucks. If it's not there Merchants Intermodal will press charges. Theft, willful and wrongful sale of goods in Interstate Commerce. You'll do jail time...long jail time and we'll insist on it. Now, you capisce that?"

Martelli dropped his head on the bar making no sound. He didn't move as he heard a rustle of clothing. Silence followed until Simons' voice whispered in his ear, "Ray? he's gone."

Feeling sick and dizzy, Martelli slipped off the barstool. Without looking up he fumbled in his wallet, found the MasterCard, and threw it on the bar. "Run my tag, Gair. Put thirty extra on it, okay? You keep ten, I'll need twenty for a taxi."

Simons picked up the card. Several regulars had drifted in. They sat at the bar watching in silence. All were long time drinking cronies of Martelli's. He clutched at the bar cushion, chin down and swaying in silence until Gary returned.

"Ray? Hey, man. Here's your card and thirty cash. You can catch me later. It's okay, man." Simons pushed a pen in his hand. "You gonna be okay, man?" Gary grabbed the envelope and shoved it in Martelli's coat pocket.

Martelli scribbled his name on the signature line. "I gotta pee," he said and walked carefully away. He turned after a few steps and looked in Simons' direction. "I won't be seeing you for a while, I'm gonna get clean. Cheryl and the kids are gonna come home. We'll have you over for dinner soon as we put a coat of paint on the house." Martelli grinned and said, "It's gonna be our first family project."

Simons shook his head and watched his old friend disappear into the hallway.

~ 0000 ~

Four

Brass Rail Parking Lot

Alameda, California - 11: 52 a.m.

Chilling cold burned the side of his face. Martelli opened his eyes and a brown, watery grit stung his pupils. He tasted asphalt, oil and dirty sand, the flavors surrounding his tongue. He drew a breath and foul water hit the back of his throat. He choked, gagged, retched and tried to rolled over.

A gust of wind sent a spike of numbing pain through his head. Something ugly was caught in his throat. Martelli pushed up on all fours, but he couldn't pull a breath. He felt smothered and retched again before dropping on his face.

He shook...so cold. He found breath for a cough and the lump moved, but he couldn't get enough air, he coughed again. A sheet of ice formed inside his skull and began a downward movement freezing tissue, organs, blood, anything it touched. Sick. Oh God, he was so sick. Something bad bubbled upward and he heaved, heaved and heaved again.

"On his side. Get him on his side." A voice in the fog around him yelled.

Someone was hollering. At him? Martelli didn't care, he concentrated on getting more air to breathe. Another violent, racking heave shook his body.

"It's blood," the voice said "He's bringing up blood, we've got to move."

Something hit him on the back. Something else, big and vile, raked his tongue. Martelli spit and coughed and found air...sweet, wet, rain-misted air. Hands pulled at him. A siren burned his ears. He tried to open his eyes. Too hard.

"Get him up on three, one...two...three."

That voice wants me to get up, Martelli thought. *Too tired. I'm tired. I can't help it. I have to breathe.* He tried to scream, but his voice was gone.

Something stung his arm as he was being lifted. He swayed side to side, the movement brought sickness. Hot, foul liquid, full of that copper taste, climbed through his chest into his mouth. Fast.

"Turn his head," the voice yelled "Turn his head, damnit. Okay. Okay. Hold him. Yeah. Better he gets it all out."

Martelli tried to say something between heaves. *What the hell's happening?* he wanted to know. His bowels loosened and erupted, his pants filling up and humiliation brought sobs from deep inside him.

"Let's go. Move it. Heart rate...?"

"Slow and erratic. You got a BP?"

"Yeah. I got sixty-eight over forty-six. He's shutting down."

"Hey, I'm a friend. Is he going to be all right?"

"Can't tell, man. Back off. We've got to roll. What? Oh, shit. Hit him with the paddles."

A loud burring sound came from the bowels of the ambulance. Simons saw Martelli's legs lift from the gurney: once...twice...three times.

Both EMTs grew quiet. Shoulders slumped the paramedic nearest the doors turned reaching to close them.

Is...? Simons didn't get to finish his question.

The EMT looked down searching the bartender's eyes. "You a friend? What's this man's name?"

Simons' voice sounded as weak as the legs holding him up. "Martelli," he said. "His name's Ray Martelli. He's really a great guy. I hope..."

The EMT stared at Simons for what seemed like a long time. "He have a lot of friends in there?" The EMT indicated The Brass Rail Lounge and Grill with a nod of his head.

"Sure," Simons said. "Everybody likes Ray, super guy."

The EMT's grin turned deadly cold. "Well this great guy must've laid out here for quite a while, throwing up blood. Too bad nobody in there put him in a car and got him to a trauma center. Your good buddy's dead. What was your name? Simons? With friends like those in there, I wish you a lot a luck, Mr. Simons."

The EMT slammed the doors and the ambulance pulled away throwing gravel and rain water on the bartender's black uniform slacks.

~ 0000 ~

Rot Like Me

[Bell's Grove, Florida](#)

September 25, 2000

Vincent Pollazo pulled on his skivvies and left the bathroom. He paused, uncertain which way to turn...left...right? To the right, he remembered, and long, quick strides took him in a half circle past the three storied, atrium-like, foyer separating the west and east wings of the house.

"Shit...shit...shit," he muttered as he made his way to another new bedroom in another new, but no less opulent, corporate house. He was already running late.

Confusion was a consistent part of Vincent Pollazo's daily life. Another house, another town, that was nothing new for the well-traveled high school sophomore, but two moves in a school year, that was unusual. In this case, his father's emergency transfer turned out timely and to his advantage. Doctor Roman Pollazo's short assignment in Aiken, South Carolina was a lifesaver were the teenager was concerned.

A production line failure at the company's Florida plant saved Vince a lot of awkward questions. Questions the Aiken County Sheriff's detectives were sure to ask sooner than later. Vince desperately wanted to avoid any inquiry concerning his relationship to certain freshman and sophomore students, specifically female freshmen and sophomores that had gone missing.

Vince locked the bedroom door. At the computer he typed his password, logged onto the Internet and typed in: Alumnisearch.com. He signed on and typed: Bell's Grove High School, Bells Grove, FL, class of 1999. He was about to open the Yearbook section when a sharp rap of knuckles rattled his door.

"Vince? Time to rock and roll, son," Roman Pollazo called through the door.

He glanced up. "Right with you, Dad. Pour me a cup, okay?"

"Who was your maid last year? Get a move on, boy."

Vince's concentration remained on the monitor. He clicked on Table of Contents, Cheerleading Team, and his eyes pumped up. *Fantastic. So many fine looking babes in a hick town like Bells Grove, who would've guessed?* He smiled and slapped his chest.

The tall, dark-haired sixteen-year-old threw his dad a snappy salute. Doctor Roman Pollazo returned it and accelerated away. The steel blue BMW scratched a patch of black rubber on the pavement. Vince watched the M3 Series hang the corner. *Dad sure is a card...yuk...yuk*, he thought, *always trying to be his buddy...what a fucking joke.*

Bell's Grove High occupied an ancient looking building and Vince's eyes tracked the façade of his new high school. *Shit, what a dump, must've been built in the stone age* ran through his mind.

Three brick stories challenged the canopied shade provided by huge oaks, Ficus and gum trees. Ivy devoured a stone fascia surrounding four glass paneled mahogany doors. Vince looked at his watch: 8:00 a.m. Classes started at eight-thirty sharp, Mr. Dole, his counselor, made that point clear and suggested Vince arrive thirty minutes early. "Our orientation program is designed to make your transition a pleasant one," Mr. Dole had said with a smile. The gaunt, balding man's stretch of lips was more a grimace of pain than a note of welcome.

A scattering of kids prowled the hall and gave Vince the new guy look. A few years back it would've bothered him, but now he expected it and enjoyed the attention.

As chief design engineer for Colby Electronics, his father's responsibilities required flexibility. When product design flaws developed, Doctor Roman Pollazo was transferred to the vicinity of the problem plant. Long stay, short stay, the family's environment was predicated on the difficulty of the problem. The corporation recognized the hectic and uncertain lifestyle its demands imposed. The doctor and his family received lavish compensation for their trouble. For Vince the new guy look had become the price of admission to the lavish lifestyle he enjoyed.

He knew he could easily pass for a high school senior. On a few occasions he'd been mistaken for a college man. Vince stood six-two in his gym socks with black hair that marked his high forehead and tumbled over his brow and ears in tangled locks. Thick eyebrows came close to meeting above his nose. It was the only feature of his face he hated. His eyes, a dark chocolate brown, looked soft and trusting, like those of a puppy.

The balance of his face was a rectangle, the jaw line firm, but not square. Girls liked his big white teeth and deep dimples. By age fourteen his eyes, smile and dimples got the babes attention and he learned quickly how to capitalize on his good genes. As he grew older what he gave them on the soft leather seats of his mom's Escalade made the ladies glad they were female. Some of those ladies might've differed with Vince's take on his backseat activities, but he didn't really give a shit.

Vince took his time cruising the corridor. He wanted to get a lay of the land, a feel for his hunting ground. That he would catch a load of shit from Mr. Dole was a given, but Vince couldn't care less about that either.

His heart jumped into his throat when he saw her. Like a crazed reggae drummer, the organ banged a beat on his tonsils and Vince found his voice just in time. "Excuse me? Hi. I'm new. Could you point me in the direction of the office, please?" Vince turned on his little-boy-lost look.

The girl stood at least five-ten. Her long honey-blond hair highlighted eyes of dark amber. She gave him a direct look, no hint of shyness. She looked familiar, someone he should recognize and then he realized her features reminded him of a young Sharon Stone. Her eyes seemed to swallow him. Vince's breath caught and his brain scrambled around for something more to say. She offered her hand saving him a moment of embarrassment.

"I'm Rachel Givens and you'd be?" She said.

Vince grinned, loving the cool touch of her fingers. "Vince Pollazo, we just moved here."

"I got that part," she said. "Hi Vince, hope you like Bell's Grove. If you go straight, the office is the third door on the left." She tossed her hair and pointed.

"Thanks, hope I see you around." He fought to control his eyes, but no matter how hard he tried they dropped to her chest.

"That's a possibility," Rachel said watching his eye movement. "You look like football material. I'm sure Coach will check you out, too. If you make the team you'll see me around. I love watching you big, rough guys bump into each other. Bye for now." She tossed her hair again and rolled her hips down the hall.

Vince watched, hypnotized, until she disappeared into a group of students. He smiled and turned toward the office. *Slow down, man*, he cautioned himself. Since leaving Aiken, each morning he made that promise to his reflection in the dressing room mirror. *But what's a guy supposed to do when he meets a Rachel Givens?* he wondered. *She pushes all my buttons.* He decided scoping out the other girls wouldn't hurt. Might take his mind off those great tits and hot ass.

Pushing through the door of Administration a vagrant thought tugged at his memory. *There's something else about that girl. Something familiar and its got nothing to do with Sharon Stone.* The vague, uneasy feeling passed when he spotted Mr. Dole staring at him with a scowl on his face.

By the end of the first week of October he'd changed his mind. Vince decided he had to have Rachel Givens and so he set out to pick a *best bud* candidate who could boost his chances. A sixteen-year-old classmate was his lucky choice. The guy Vince decided on had unbeatable qualifications. Bland, pasty-faced, Bob Givens was Rachel's fraternal twin. *With bona fides like that*, he thought, *pasty Bob is a shoe-in to score position number one on the Pollazo team.*

Bob Givens, Vince figured, could be put to good use. With him playing her brother's best friend, honey-blond Rachel, with the hot amber eyes and incredible body, would soon be his bed partner, he had no doubt.

One major hurdle stood in the way of Vince's plan and his name was Joe Tabler. Givens and Tabler were best buds and ran in the same circles. They shared the same sun sensitive, pale complexions and dressed in frumpy, hippy-like attire, but the similarities ended there. Givens was withdrawn while Tabler was outgoing and the consummate school politician.

To Vince's amazement, Joe held the inside track with the sweetest of sweet-things on campus. His awesome black book contained the phone numbers of the best dates in Bells Grove. As a bonus, Tabler recorded inside information on every teacher: likes and dislikes, habits and weaknesses, test strategies, homework assignments...you name it.

As if he needed additional talents, Tabler was the school's comedic relief. There was only one solution as Vince saw it and he put his *two best buds plan* into action. *Dad always deals in*

redundancy. Why, Vince though, shouldn't I?

October 24, 2005 marked Vince's fourth week of classes. He was making slow progress. Word around campus said Givens thought Vince was a really cool guy for a rich bitch. Vince didn't like being referred to as a bitch, but he understood some kids thought it was way cool to talk the black-rap-bullshit-talk. Tabler was coming along, but he was guarding his friendship with Givens like a jealous lover.

Vince repeated his cool it mantra by the hour. This time he would not push. No more debacles like Aiken. That fiasco scared him, but in a strange way it excited him, too. Taking control gave him an incredible high. Showing the chicks who was boss got him off.

~ 0000 ~

Two

Aiken City High School
Hornets Football Stadium – 1998

The week following his hot date with Ann Whilly she avoided him. Vince knew he was in trouble when she called him on his cell, her voice like a snow-cone, no syrup, just ice. Ann insisted they meet for a talk. They settled on the football stadium at seven o'clock. Practice would be over, he told her and they would have some privacy. If he'd known how crazy she was going to act, he would have suggested a cruise in the Escalade, but she blindsided him. When Ann arrived, she marched up to him, and eyes flashing dangerous levels of anger yelled, "I never wanted to go all the way."

He looked at her in disbelief. "Hell, all you chicks act like that, how's a guy supposed to know? You give it up and later you're sorry. Jesus, you think your pussy's a national treasure or what?" Vince was incredulous, he just didn't get it.

His lack of regret and respect brought Ann up short for a beat.

Vince watched with wary eyes. *Hell, the others didn't act like this*, he thought. *They didn't make a federal case out of it. I'll tell her how many of them loved it, that ought to shut her up.*

But in the next instant Ann's face twisted in rage and that quick Vince's own fury seethed, making his head throb. Her look of contempt made him feel like he'd turned into something too vile to be human. A pile of monkey shit, maybe. Color, the bright rose of sunrise, suffused his face. He wanted to hurt her, put her in her place, but she was first to brake the momentary silence.

"You made me feel dirty," she said through gritted teeth, "and you're not going to get away with it."

He forced himself to calm down and tried his best hangdog expression. "Baby, you are the best lover ever. I thought you wanted to talk about going steady." He tried his trademark, dimpled smile, hoping to defuse the situation.

Ann sneered, tears streaking her cheeks. "I've heard about your other girls. You're such a fucking liar. Look at you, pretending. Now you want me to believe you give a shit. I'm going to tell my dad."

Vince couldn't believe his ears. "What the hell are you talking about?" he growled. "You

practically dragged me inside you, you wanted it just like me." Sudden heat boiled away all restraint filling him with an all-consuming anger.

Ann slapped him. "You lying bastard. You raped me. I told you to stop and you hurt me. My dad will make you pay. You're going to jail, you fucking arrogant prick."

Vince felt like he had been hit with a bucket of bubbling hot water. His face pulsed red like a flashing stop light. The right hook he threw took Ann just below the temple between her left earlobe and cheek bone. The impact sent a subtle shock all the way up his arm into his shoulder.

It was a well placed punch, delivered with maximum power. Ann twisted with the force of the blow. Body slack, she dropped and rolled like a piece of paper thrown into the wind. A maniacal energy he'd never felt before possessed him. Vince kicked her in the rib cage and then in the side of the head. He wore high end white leather cross trainers and the kicks were hard enough to send shocks of pain through his toes into his foot. He fell to his knees and grabbed her by the throat.

"You say anything to anybody, you won't be breathing long," he hissed. "We're rich, you dumb bitch, it'll take forever to get me in court. Before that happens you'll disappear, you understand?"

A surge of powerful energy filled his hands. He let himself go, his body melding into a dangerous, joyous place where his fingers dug deeper into the soft yielding flesh of Ann's throat. He kept digging...deeper...crushing...punishing.

As quickly as it came the mad rage left him. Vince jerked upward bringing her face close to his. Her head lolled back and to the side, her body loose, like some rag doll with half the stuffing missing.

Vince looked at the purple face of Ann Whilly and realized where he was...a moment of panic seized him. He dragged her body into the deeper shadows of the bleachers and looked around. The gray darkness of the football stadium couldn't hide the swollen tongue or the bloody hemorrhage of the small veins in her eyes. He realized his hands were still locked tight around her neck, his fingers buried in her flesh. He forced them open and dropped her body where he stood. "I gotta get the hell out of here," he mumbled.

Vince gauged the distance to his mother's Escalade. It looked no more than fifty yards. He scanned the Athletic Arts building. Interior lights were off and the security lights over the entrance were on. Vince made a 360 degree turn scoping the area with care. No quiet lovers ready to scream. No potheads toking their joints around the deserted stadium. His heart hammered in his chest. The danger, the excitement, he could barely contain the ecstasy that coursed through his veins and arteries. A spasm rocked him and he ejaculated into his boxers.

The sound of crickets resumed a few feet away. He was alone, he was sure of it. He pushed the Escalade's remote twice and a tweak of the SUV's horn was joined by a brief flash of lights. All locks had opened.

The excitement set up more sensations in his groin. He broke out in a nervous sweat. The bitch could've been serious trouble, but that only heightened the thrill. How to get rid of the body, that problem needed a solution and he smiled. *I'll fill her stomach with rocks and dump her in the swamps*, such a simple way out. She could've been like the others, called him an asshole and moved on, but he realized he was glad she didn't.

If dad finds out about this, I'll lose the Beamer on my eighteenth birthday, he thought. *That would totally piss me off*. Vince checked his pocket for the knife, it was there like always. No one would find out, he'd see to that for sure.

Two and a half years passed without a peep from anyone. Aiken was now only an exciting memory and mom and dad were happy as clams. All he had to do was maintain his stellar performance as dutiful son...no sweat.

Vince sat naked on a moist towel, lost in memories of old conquests while he yanked at his socks. Dampness from the shower lingered on his ankles and feet acting like wet glue on the cotton material.

"Hey, Pollazo. What's with the socks? You trying to give us a longer look at the family jewels?" Tabler smirked and pulled up his boxers.

Vince glanced at Tabler. The guy was starting to joke around and that could mean acceptance. He decided to be cool, give a little sarcasm back. "You really that dumb, Tabler, ever had jock itch? Know how you get it? Warm, damp places like the shower room, that's how. The fungus gets on your feet, put your feet in your underwear and bingo you got it. Socks first no jock itch." He winked to soften the bite of his words.

Tabler stared at Vince. "You're screwing with me, right? You're pissed cause I blocked that pass, right? It's only practice, man."

Vince didn't crack a smile.

"Ah, shit," Tabler said. "You ain't kidding are you?"

Vince slipped into his underwear. "You start scratching your crotch in class, you'll find out."

Bob Givens struggled down the aisle dragging a laundry bag. The coach assigned towel jockey duty and each student had the job for a week. Vince handed over his towel and Givens grabbed Tabler's at the same time, stuffing both in the huge laundry bag. "Kidding who about what?" Givens said and pulled the drawstring tight.

"Jock itch, man," Vince said scrambling into his turtleneck, "we're talking jock itch."

"Socks first, dude," Givens said. "Every time."

Tabler frowned. "Thanks, DUDE. Why didn't you tell me before?" He slapped the side of his locker making it reverberate like a kettle drum.

"You never asked," Givens said. "Besides, you don't pay attention anyway. I always do socks first." Givens shrugged.

Tabler reached into his locker. "Fuck you guys. Some fucking friends you are, thanks. Okay, retard like me, I probably won't remember Halloween, neither." He turned, shirt in hand. "How about that, Bob?"

"You'll be there," Givens smiled and shook his head, "like every Halloween. You're a big talker, Joe."

"Hey, Vince," Tabler said ignoring Bob's dig, "wanna help out Halloween night? It's a kick in the ass."

Vince finished tying his Nike Vapor Trainers. "Help doing what?"

Givens collapsed on the bench. "It's our high school's special project. Every Halloween our service club splits up the residential areas and patrols while the kids do their Trick or Treat thing."

"What's with the parents," Vince said, "they can't watch out for their own brats?" he sneered. "Shit man, I got better things to do."

Givens shrugged. "Guess you're out of luck, dude," Givens said, "too bad, huh, Joe?"

"Yeah," Tabler said tucking in his shirt, "I guess it's you, me and all those cheerleaders."

Man, that's what I call shitty duty."

Givens started to drag the laundry bag down the row of lockers. "Better think it over, Vince," he said over his shoulder."

Pollazo checked his watch.

"You got a date, man?" Tabler said.

"Naw," Vince shook his head, his thoughts on women. "Thought I'd check out beautiful downtown Bells Grove. I hear there's fine looking babes strutting their stuff in the afternoon."

Tabler laughed. "What, no car? Gotta catch the bus, huh? I thought you rich dudes got all the goodies you wanted."

"Go whack-off, Joe," Vince raised his middle finger, "I hear it cuts down on all that teenage hormone shit."

Tabler wrung his hands, his face scrunched up as if about to cry. "Ooooh, Bob. This dude is touchy...touchy," he moaned.

Givens dropped the laundry bag and threw his arm around Tabler's shoulders. Together they moaned, "Oooooooooohh."

Vince bunched a fist. "You guys want a taste of the Pollazo Pulverizer?" He turned away, but realized he might be making a mistake. He softened his face and turned back. "Okay, sign me up for do-gooder duty, but be prepared to kiss my ass later." He grinned.

"See?" Tabler nodded at Givens. "Told you he'd help, Vince ain't an asshole like you said, Bob-ho."

Vince stood at the locker-room door. "Cut the comedy. What's the scoop?"

"Out front next Monday. We meet at four-thirty and..."

"Good enough," Vince waved, "you can fill me in tomorrow, I got a bus to catch, remember? Later, dudes."

Beth Pollazo grinned a flush of pride on her face. "I don't care what you say, I think it's wonderful. You want dad to pick you up? What time will you be finished, honey?"

Vince stepped out of the Escalade. "It's no big deal, Mom. I'm trying to fit in, okay? We're pulling guard duty for little kids. They'll be home eating candy by eight o'clock. I'll take the bus and be home about nine. If it's later I'll call, okay?"

"Be careful. I know it's a small town, but you never know." Beth ducked her head to look up at Vince.

"Okay. Okay, Mom, okay. Geez. Look at me." Vince pounded his chest. "You think anyone wants to mess with this?"

Tabler ran up and slapped Vince on the shoulder. "Hey Vince, this your mom? Hi, Mrs. Pollazo. I'm Joe. Don't worry, we'll get him home."

Beth Pollazo smiled. "Nice to meet you, Joe. Oh, Joe are you okay? You look pale as a ghost."

Tabler laughed. "Ah, just a little grease paint for the kids," he snickered. "Really, Mrs. Pollazo, I'm fine, but thanks for asking," Tabler backed away from the car.

"Well, I'm sorry if I embarrassed you," Beth said and smiled. "You boys be careful out there."

Vince closed the Escalade's door. "Night, Mom." He elbowed Tabler. "Wave dude, wave and walk or we'll be here all night."

The bus, donated by Bells Grove Baptist church, made its first stop. The Sector A volunteer stood and the Bells Grove volunteers cheered. The young woman bowed and yelled, "Don't let Leslie get you."

The volunteers whooped and catcalled and waved their flashlights at her departure. Givens, Tabler and Vince sat at the rear. Their assignments, the last drop off points, included the rural sectors of Bells Grove. Vince turned and faced his friends. "Who's Leslie?"

Bob spoke before Joe got a chance. "She's a fifty-year-old myth, bullshit. She's a Bells Grove ghost story. Leslie Mosher got raped and murdered back in the fifties. Local legend says she appears every Halloween looking for her rapist."

"Right. So that's the local scary story, huh?" Vince snorted. "Where's all these cheerleaders you told me about? You fed me a line a shit, right?"

The driver, a stocky fireplug of a man, barked over his shoulder. "Watch your language, son, you're working with small kids. Keep a civil tongue in your head or get off the bus."

Vince ducked his head at the eyes he saw in the buses big rearview mirror. "Sorry," he said, and leaned into Givens. "What's with that guy?" he whispered.

Voice rising above the roar of the bus's tires, Givens said, "He's a Baptist and an asshole, so what's new? Don't worry about girls, you'll see plenty tonight."

Vince hunched his shoulders and looked at the bus driver's back. "Jesus Bob, keep your voice down. I ain't looking for trouble tonight. How about Rachel, she going to be around?"

Givens winked at Joe. "Don't worry about old Stan the Man at the wheel, his bark's a hell of a lot worse than his bite, right Joe? I wondered when you'd get around to my sister," Givens gave Vince a leer. "She's blood, but I don't blame you, man, She's a stone fox."

Vince sighed. "No shit. I'd hoped to get a little closer, get to know her better, you know? I've hardly seen her the last few weeks."

Tabler shook his head. "You're wasting your time, man," he said with a smile. "Rachel's a high class broad, goes for really cool dudes like me."

Vince snaked an arm behind Givens and slapped the back of Tabler's head. "Asshole," he whispered.

"Forget her, man," Givens leaned forward. "She's foxy, but she's stuck-up, too. Lives in an igloo, man. She's one cold woman most of the time."

"That's just great, Bob, now you tell me," Vince said.

Tabler nudged Givens' shoulder. "Tell him about Bells Post Road, man."

Givens made a face. "Shut up, Joe. There's nothing to tell."

Vince watched the looks passing between his two friends. "What? Oh, please. No crap about what's her name," he said.

"It's Leslie, Vince," Tabler said, "Leslie Mosher, but Bob's right, it's nothing. You're working Vineyard Estates. Those houses border Bells Post Road, that's all." Tabler dropped back against the seat.

"All Joe means," Givens cut in, "is there ain't nothing on Bells Post Road, just Mosher property and it's all weeds, dead orange trees and grapevines. We don't let the kids go down there. Old man Mosher's an asshole, he chased some kids last year with a shotgun. Just keep the kids away from Bells Post Road, that's all Joe meant."

Vince saw Tabler shoot a worried look at Givens who seemed to ignore the jokester. Instead,

he began to tell a story about Tabler and a past Halloween escapade.

Vince listened, grunted and nodded. Givens seemed intent to stretch it out. The laughter sounding forced, a way to fill the time. Vince felt relief when the driver called out, "Sector D."

The bus pulled to the curb and Joe got up. "I'll catch you dudes later. You got your cells on?"

Vince and Givens nodded. Vince saw another kid precede Joe down the aisle. Joe stepped off the bus and stuck his head back through the door. "You guys keep your eyes peeled for Les... For cheerleaders, okay?" Tabler stared at Givens, then nodded and winked. He ducked back as the hydraulic door slammed shut.

The bus crawled away from the curb. Vince turned in his seat to watch Joe wave from the sidewalk. Vince stared, he could've sworn he saw the hydraulic doors slam on Tabler's neck. At least that's what he thought he saw...

Vince felt a sharp jolt in the side and he jerked around. Givens held a flask low in his lap. He winked and dipped his head before glancing up at the driver. "Want a quick pop?" Givens indicated the flask and winked again.

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Three

Vineyard Estates

October 31, 2000

Vince paced the sidewalk bored silly. "Sector F for fucked," he mumbled and checked his watch: 8:00 p.m. His sector, the small sub-division called Vineyard Estates lay dead, like the empty weed choked land beyond it. All night he'd seen one cheerleader hanging on the arm of her boyfriend. Big deal. Vince was pissed. *I've been had* kept running through his mind.

He shuffled along Merlot Drive. On Zinfandel Place and Chardonnay Walk a scattering of kids ran on the sidewalks. *Why don't these little assholes go home?* he wondered. He felt like whacking a few in the back of the head to get their attention.

Vince paused at the cinderblock wall marking the boundary of Vineyard Estates. Open land stretched between the wall and Bells Post Road beyond. High weeds, thickets of bare trees, dark blobs of bushy plants and tangled grape vines filled the ominous landscape. His watch said: 8:05. *What the hell*, he thought, *I'm gonna be out here all night anyway*. He glanced up at the sky. *Might as well scope out Bell's Post Road*.

A quarter moon popped from behind a bank of clouds. Vince staggered and sweat broke out on his forehead. He shook his head. *What the hell did Givens have in that flask?* he wondered. Faint light dotted the tangled vegetation, but Vince paid the spooky landscape scant attention. He felt weird, his stomach rumbled. He'd walked the full block before he realized how black the night grew as he left the streetlights of Vineyard Estates behind.

Bells Post Road looked exactly as Givens and Tabler described it. Vince brought his own powerful flashlight along and he was thankful for the forethought. The beam swept the sidewalk catching the end of the cement in its bright glow before he stumbled off the abrupt end of the paving. The road, once asphalt, stretched away broken and cracked. Stubborn weeds poked through the ruined surface.

On the far side of the street, a hundred or so feet from the corner, a ramshackle Victorian home hovered over a weed filled lot. Half the roof slumped inward and broken shards of glass

hung from the window frames. Vince blinked to clear his vision. *Is that the Mosher place?* he wondered. Farther along the road, he saw a smaller cottage crouched amid a tangle of oleander, bougainvillea and wisteria. It was almost hidden from view, a-hundred or so yards to his right.

That's the Mosher house, he thought. *Jesus, what a dump. Who the hell would want to live in that piece of shit?* The image shimmered and Vince felt light-headed again.

As he turned away, squeezing his eyes and fighting a sudden nausea, a weak porch light winked on. Two kids in costume stood on the saggy porch. *How the hell did they get by me?* The landscape looked wavy, swimming in his field of vision. He shook his head. "Shouldn't drink on an empty stomach," he muttered and belched.

The door of the cottage opened and a thin, stooped old man slammed his cane against the doorjamb. His white beard flashed bright despite the anemic porch light. "Goddamn you. What the hell you doing on my porch? Get the hell away from here. I'm gonna get my gun." The old man ducked back inside.

The kids turned and ran down the steps. As they emerged from between the shrubs, a third, larger shape joined the group. They ran toward Vince, slowing as they approached. He swung his flashlight in an arc. "Hold on. Stop. You kids new around here or something?" he barked.

Vince put the flashlight on each child's face. Two boys looked about ten stared back with scared eyes. The kids looked familiar, he wanted a closer look, but his flashlight's beam illuminated a taller, older girl and he forgot all about the boys.

She stood behind the two kids shielding her breast with a black lace fan. Vince stared and his heart knocked in his chest. *Is that Rachel Givens?* He looked closer and saw that the girl's hair was a deep red color.

The taller boy pointed to the girl. "She dared me to ring Mr. Mosher's doorbell. I did it, now I'm getting outta here." Both boys darted around Vince and vanished in the darkness.

Vince put the flashlight on the girl's face. She brought the fan up shading her brow. "Not in the eyes, okay?" she said her voice a soft purr.

Vince thought he saw a smile twitch at the corners of her mouth. "What are you doing out here, scaring the kids?"

Vince moved the flashlight's beam over the girl's body. She wore a Flamenco dancer's costume. A large black comb protruded from her thick red hair. A black lace veil attached to the comb and wrapped around the girl's lower face. It continued down and around her neck and over her left shoulder.

With a snap of her wrist she closed the fan and lowered her arm, brushing the fullness of her breast. She was beautiful in an intriguing way. There was something about her that struck a familiar cord.

"Maybe I like scaring kids," she said, her voice having little inflection. She held up a paper bag. "I've got all the candy I want."

Vince put the flashlight on her face again. Could this be Givens dressed up like a girl? Joe Tabler would kill for a practical joke this good.

"Tell me something, honey. Who're you supposed to be? The Ghost of Leslie Mosher, maybe? Boo...I'm really scared." He laughed.

Vince watched her face. If this was Givens in drag he was playing his part to the hilt. Vince began to wonder if he might be wrong and hope he was way off base. *Holy shit, what if it really is Rachel Givens? What if she set this up to try him out?* Vince tingled from the waist down with the thought.

The girl snapped her wrist and the fan covered the lower half of her face again. Her eyes

seemed to look at him with remembrance, she stepped closer. "I feel like we know each other," she said. "Do you feel a connection? My name's Eisel Rehsom." She giggled at the look her name painted on Vince's face. "I know. I know," she said. "It's a weird name. It's German. Everybody calls me Elsie. In answer to your question? No, I'm not the ghost of Leslie Mosher. I've heard her story though. Everyone in Bells Grove has heard it I guess.

"Everybody but me," Vince said. "My buds shined me on about it."

"It's no big secret," Elsie said. "Her parents wanted to surprise her with a sweet-sixteen birthday party. Leslie didn't want to spoil their surprise and so she agreed to take her younger brothers out for trick or treat."

She paused and took a step closer to Vince. "They called at the vineyard owner's home first, the boys teasing their older sister all the way to the mansion. Leaving the Bells' home, she pretended to be mad and chased them through the hedgerows. When the boys emerged on the other side, laughing, Leslie was nowhere to be found. The boys ran home and told their parents. The Mosheres searched everywhere, but Leslie was gone.

"Wait a minute," Vince said, "didn't anyone think about calling the cops?"

"Oh, yeah," Elsie said. "They called the police right away and word spread. The search went on all night. Around four in the morning a police officer took a shortcut through the vineyard. As he passed an old tool shed, he heard moans and weak cries for help. The cop found Leslie beaten, raped and sodomized. She died later that day on her sixteenth birthday. A nurse in the room said Leslie woke from a coma and Mrs. Mosher asked if she knew who'd attacked her. Leslie said he was big, with dark curling hair. Before she died she said in a clear voice: *I'll find him, Momma. I'll find him and then he'll rot like me.*"

"I hate that creepy story," Elsie shuddered. "Now I've got goose bumps and it's your fault. Just for that you have to tell me your name."

Vince didn't know what to think. This girl had him running up his own ass. He hated the thought of being made a fool. He decided he wouldn't take any chances. "You know my name, Bob. I ain't falling for your crap." Vince reached for the Flamenco dancer's arm. "Let's go where there's more light, I want to look you over."

Elsie twisted away and Vince slapped the barrel of the flashlight against his thigh in a flash of anger. The costumed girl whirled once, twice and moved closer to take Vince's hand. She wore matching black lace gloves and he could feel her cold fingers through the material. He sensed those fingers would be strong.

She guided the flashlight, moving the bright beam over and around her full figured body. She smiled and Vince felt a quiver of excitement. "You really think my name's Bob? Come on, you haven't told me your name yet."

The skin of her neck and face gleamed creamy white in the weedy moonlight. He began to wonder...*is she for real?* "Vince," he said. "Vincent Pollazo, I'm new in Bells Grove."

Elsie laughed. "You don't look new to me. So... You're taking care of the kids, huh? Well Mr. tall, dark and handsome, I'll bet you take care of girls better."

She laughed again and the husky sound aroused him. He felt her hands moving at his crotch. He looked down, but there was nothing there.

She stepped closer looking into his eyes while her fingers moved to his wrist. Elsie's eyes were dark. Vince couldn't see the white of the sclera. He smiled feeling a tremble in his lips. "I do all right. How old are you? You look damn fine, how come I haven't seen you around?"

He tripped over his words and felt woozy again. Givens and his flask on the bus flashed through his mind.

She rubbed his forearm. "I'll bet I'm old enough for you, I'm almost sixteen." Her teeth flashed neon white against the deep red lipstick she wore.

Vince pulled his arm away and stepped back. It was like waking from a dream. He eyes kept going in and out of focus. "Ah, this is bullshit," he said. "Where's Joe, where's that little prick? Over in the weeds with a camera, I'll bet. Come on out, Joe, I ain't falling for this shit," he yelled.

He aimed the flashlight into the brush moving the bright beam in an arc: left...right...left and right again.

Elsie drew the lace away from her face. "You really think I'm a boy?" She turned and walked toward the old sagging house. She beckoned him with a crook of her finger. "You're not afraid of the Bells house are you? Come with me, I'll prove I'm not a boy."

Vince watched her glide through the weed choked yard. She stopped at the cracked porch steps. "You're not afraid are you?" Her lips puckered in a pouty, sexy way. "That would be a shame."

Vince couldn't believe this was happening and looked left and right and back toward Vineyard Estates. The black night with its weeds and brush appeared to be his only audience. If this was a joke, Tabler and Givens would be laughing their asses off by now, he was sure of it. He put the flashlight on her. She dropped her candy bag and stood hands on hips. The stance accentuated her perfect figure.

Vince shook his head and gestured with the flashlight. "I'm warning you. If you're fucking with me I'm going to beat the shit out of you and Tabler, too."

Elsie Rehsom paused in the doorframe of the old house. As Vince approached she smiled and said in that soft purring voice, "I'm not fucking with you, but who knows? Maybe I will."

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Four

Henry's Diner – Halloween Night

Bob set a Coke down in front of Joe and slid into the booth. The smell of frying potatoes and grilling hamburger meat filled his nostrils and he made a face. "What time is it?"

"Same time it was five minutes ago," Joe said. "When are you going to break down and take a watch? Jesus Christ. Take a Timex if you're so chicken-shit...it's 9:30."

"Why so jumpy?" Joe took the wrapper from his straw. "She told us to get lost. Haven't you figured it out yet? Leslie knows what she's doing, don't sweat it, dude."

"Fuck you." Bob pointed a shaking finger at his brother. "Just...fuck you, Joe. This isn't your responsibility. I'm older. I'm supposed to be in charge. What do you care. I was the one who lost her, remember?"

Joe slumped down in the booth. The volume of a kid's CD player drowned out Henry's old timey jukebox. The heavy thump of drum and unintelligible Hip-Hop street jive rattled the windows of the diner. Several girls burst out laughing and started talking at once. Joe leaned forward. "There you go again. First off, we're only a few minutes apart and *WE* lost her. Why's it always your fault? I was there, too. We trick or treated the Bells mansion. We *BOTH* teased Leslie. She chased *BOTH* of us through the hedgerows. One second she was behind us and the next she was gone. How is that *YOUR* fault? It was *OUR* fault, okay?"

Bob ignored his twin and looked around the crowded diner. No one paid them any attention.

He couldn't remember if they were plugged in and he brushed the sweating glass of cola with his fingertips, they didn't pass through the glass. He sat up straight and turned away from the throng of kids crowding Henry's. Bob pushed his glasses up on the bridge of his nose and motioned Joe closer. "We're plugged in so keep your voice down."

"Okay. Okay. You just piss me off sometimes with your older brother bullshit. By the way. Nice job on those kid bodies. Where'd you dig them up on such short notice?"

Bob's mouth drew into a tight line. His eyes glittered like hard green emeralds. "Finding those bodies is just one of the reasons I'm in charge. I'm not going to argue with you or Leslie. At 10:00 we'll go back to the Bells mansion. I swear, if that fucker hurts her I'll make him wish he could die."

Joe laughed. "Jesus, Bob. You act like we have real bodies or something. There's no way he's going to hurt Leslie. Speaking of bodies, brother Mosher, where'd you get that piece of shit thing you're wearing? Your breath smells like hot, rotten meat."

Bob Mosher drummed his fist on the tabletop. His face reflected a fury his twin had never seen before. "You're a smart guy, Joe," he said. "Smarter than me, but sometimes... Forget it. I'm glad you're my brother, even though you think you're a comic. Problem is, sometimes you're too much the comedian and not smart enough."

Joe Mosher slumped. "What kind of cryptic shit is that and what's it supposed to mean?"

The noise level increased, Henry's Diner rocked going full blast on Halloween night. Bob motioned his brother closer. "The Pollazo transfer screwed up my planning. I woke you too early, didn't figure on your special talent being that special. The job you did on the electronics and software at the Colby plant was a little too well done. Leslie had to make do with Ann Whilly's body and it was in bad shape. I took one that was in the ground too long and gave you the new one. I had to reconstruct the heads for all of us and take care of the high school records. It's a miracle we've made it this far."

Joe took his brother's arm. "We made it this far because of you. We've been looking a long time. You think we got the right guy this time?"

Bob shook his head. "Vincent Pollazo isn't the right guy even if Leslie said she felt the rhythms. She's said that before, right? Hell, I don't know, maybe this time she's right. If he's a blood descendant of the guy who... If he's a blood descendant we can take him and be free of the curse."

Joe leaned across the table putting his face close to his brother's ear. "You really think she's right, Bob? I think she's right. That Pollazo bitch, his mom, she sensed something. She caught on to my, shall we say, unhealthy coloring? I think Leslie's right. Please say she's right, okay?"

Bob looked at Joe's hand on his arm, his fingers had disappeared into the cloth of Bob's shirt sleeve. "Watch what you're doing, Joe." He nodded his head toward the tabletop and his arm. "Fingers, Joe. You've got to stay focused."

Joe pulled his hand away and dropped it in his lap. "Sorry," he looked around, "nobody's looking at us, okay?"

Bob Mosher felt discomfort and that was making him irritable. He knew Joe must be feeling it, too, although Joe had the best body, the freshest one. Bob's unease was something akin to wearing a tight shoe. A hot, sweaty, pinching feeling permeated his entire spiritual being. They had to find a meat cooler, break in and unplug. Without a meat locker the dead flesh they animated would continue to rot, attracting dogs, wild varmints and worst of all, humans. "We've got to get out of here and find a supermarket or meat storage company," Bob whispered.

Joe beat the tabletop like a bongo drum. "You it...you the man, my brother. Let's do it."

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Five

Pollazo Home – November 1, 2000

The raucous buzz of the alarm rattled his brain. Vince rolled over and stuck his head under the pillow...didn't help. He reached out fumbling for the off button the incessant burring sound that hurt his head. *God*, he thought, *I feel like shit*. He sat up, hanging his head. Something ran up his spine on squiggly feet. Vince felt a wet crawly sensation in his groin.

"Uhggg." He tried to clear his throat. The odor of decaying meat came to his nostrils. The smell reminded him of a filthy mattress, smelling of piss and cobwebs and thick dust. The old Bells house. "Jesus Christ," he moaned. How the hell did I get home?" He didn't have a clue. Vince got his robe and his stomach jumped as he headed for the bathroom.

Under the shower's hot needle jets his skin responded. The crawly, dirty feeling faded. He tried to remember how he got home, not recalling much after following Elsie into the ruins of the Bells mansion. In fact, except for the memory of seeing her dress drop to the filthy floor, his mind was a blank and then...

A vision flashed in his mind. Elsie stood by a broken window with pale moonlight diffusing her costume. He saw a mattress scattered in a corner. Elsie smiled, pulling the black comb from her hair and her lace veil came with it. She dropped both on the splintered wooden floor. In his mind's eye gauzy light surrounded her body. She reached behind her back and Vince heard the sound of a zipper. Elsie's hands moved up to the back of her neck and she loosened a tie. The top half of her costume fell forward and she lowered it to her waist.

Vince's heart jumped in his throat. He remembered Elsie's milky-white skin glowing in the otherwise gloom-filled room. An ugly slash beginning between her breasts traveled downward running in a jagged line toward her pubic bone. It was a brutal scar, yet he remembered how appealing it appeared, somehow sexy. Her breasts rose up, so perfect, so firm and proud. The smell of filth in the room filled his nostrils, overwhelming his senses. His stomach lurched, but at the same time he noted he had gone rock hard.

He felt a chill and cranked the hot water knob. He remembered looking for his clothes, they had disappeared, gone as if he'd forgotten to dress that morning. He couldn't remember taking them off or where he'd put them. The moist, moldy smell of the filthy mattress came back, burning his nose with its sickening stink. How had he ended up lying on that mattress on his back? He recalled looking up and Elsie stood above him. He realized then how all this happened didn't matter. Vince remembered his captivation, his fascination as she stepped out of the dress and the beautiful porcelain apparition he desired more than anything else straddled his hips. He saw the spray of freckles dotting her tight, achromatic stomach. Above her bright red pubic thatch the brutal gash yawned wide showing moist purple lips.

Vince groaned as he thought of Elsie's bright, rose-colored areolas engorged with blood. Her nipples quivered, so beautifully erect. She dropped on him. Hard. Impaling herself on his member. She rode him, pounding and lunging savagely into his pubic bone. She screamed and he begged her to stop. *The cops will hear for sure*, he remembered thinking. *Someone will hear her screams and moans*. Then it didn't matter who heard what, instead, the moon brightened and Vince was fascinated by the fine carrot red strands of her pubic hair. How it shimmered in the

feeble murk of the tattered room.

He saw movement in that fine curling hair and thought he must be seeing shadows. Terror filled him as he remembered a fat worm wiggling its way from between their bodies. The pale white thing crawled onto his lower stomach, its head elongating as it advanced. It bucked and nodded its body until a snout had grown more than an inch long into a needle sharp beak.

More fat things squirmed from her pubic hair. They belched out writhing, twisting, twirling and spinning with each of her violent thrusts. The squiggling wet worms grew their pointed beaks as they crawled upward through his pubic hair. To his horror they began to burrow into his belly. There were hundreds of them. As she bottomed on his pubic bone more of the grotesque creatures ejaculated. Vincent Pollazo screamed and screamed and Elsie screamed with him.

Cold water hit his face and he stepped back, sucking in a shuddering breath. Vince shook as he reached for the faucets. He sobbed. The skin of his right hand was mottled and turning blue-black in front of his eyes. He tried to scream, but coughed instead.

Something cold and vile came up from his chest. He gagged and spit a marble-sized mass of maggots that splattered on the tub's wet surface and slid, squirming toward the drain. Vince's body convulsed and a meaty sounding splat followed, loud over the shower's drumming spray. He looked down, his body, from waist to toes, seemed to be rotting in front of his eyes. The stippled patches looked like muddy footsteps.

Ugly blue-black blisters bubbled and drained thick yellow pus. He watched his genitals, filled with fat writhing worms, follow the cluster of maggots to the drain. Vince choked and clutched his throat and collapsed backward, his head bouncing off the sloping back of the tub.

The shower curtain jerked aside and Eisel Rehsom's eyes bulged wide, her black irises floating in blood. Purple lips stretched into a leering grin. Black gums and rotted teeth made up her rest of her grotesque smile.

The apparition bent forward and opened its belly. Fist-sized rocks coated with the thick, viscous remains of her entrails tumbled into the tub. The thing's breath on his face smelled of swampy water and foul decay and it whispered over and over: *He's going to rot like me, Momma. I've found him and now he'll rot like me.*

Vince's distended stomach clutched and he retched the odor matching the smell of the thing's putrid breath. Maggots cannoned from his mouth and Vince's eyes rolled upward. In his final moments of sanity, Vincent Pollazo found clarity: *Eisel Rehsom...Eisel Rehsom...the name wasn't German. Eisel Rehsom was Leslie Mosher spelled backward.* As Vince screamed Leslie Mosher's rotting body faded away and in its place, he saw his mother, her eyes were filled with terror and revulsion. She stared at the horror, mouth open and one hand clutching her throat.

Vince tried to scream for help, but he strangled instead, his mouth filling with more maggots. The squirming larvae rode a thick jet of pus that splattered the face and white linen lounging pajamas Molly Pollazo wore. She wiped the slimy, squiggly mass from her face. Her eyes followed the pieces of her son as they dropped off into the tub. His flesh, slithering with maggots, slid into the drain creating a small pyramid of wreathing creatures. Her son's scrotum and penis topped the glistening pile.

Molly Pollazo's scream crawled up from her throat, but quickly gave way to a high-pitched laugh instead. Her son's rotting flesh looked like a shimmering mound of dog shit and somehow that seemed terribly funny. She threw her head back and screamed with laughter.

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Six

Bells Grove High School

Wednesday - November 1, 2000

Rachel Givens caught up with Bob and Joe in the hallway. "Have you guys heard the latest about Pollazo? She stifled a laugh.

Bob looked around and pushed at his glasses. "Where the hell have you been? We couldn't get near the Bells place last night. What'd you do? Why'd you leave us hanging like that?" One look at Rachel's face and Bob backed off. "So okay, what's up with Pollazo?"

Rachel motioned Bob and Joe to follow. She led them to a drinking fountain alcove. With their backs to the corridor she put her arms around their shoulders and pulled their heads together. In a hushed voice she said, "I worked Pollazo all night. I didn't want any company so I fixed it, blocked you off, you're not the only one with the energy talent, brother."

Bob started to pull away, but Rachel only tightened her arm.

"Let me go," he whined. "It's your energy that's kept us here looking for *YOUR* killer. You could've told us."

Rachel's voice came out a guttural growl. "Keep it down. I died first and you have no idea what that feels like. You don't have a clue about the hate that drives me. How could you? Now listen close. I think we might be finished, it's different this time. Pollazo's mother found him puking in the tub this morning. He thought he was rotting away."

She laughed and the low quiet sound made Bob and Joe cringe. "He was screaming about maggots and his balls falling off, silly boy. Mr. Vince Pollazo died of a heart attack and mommy Pollazo went to the funny farm babbling about a pile of dog shit with a penis and fat worms and maggots."

Rachel chuckled, filling the alcove with her odorous decayed breath. A girl with books clutched against her chest tried to push through their tight little semi-circle. "Excuse me, please. Can I get a drink?"

Joe and Rachel stepped to the side. The young girl shuffled forward, wary of the wicked grins the trio had on their faces. The rancid smell of decay filled her nostrils and she quickly backed away. "I... I don't think I'm thirsty after all." She ducked her head and hurried away.

Rachel looked at Bob and Joe and her borrowed face almost snapped in half with her wide grin. "I'm ready to rock and roll, how about you guys? What say we unplug right here. Right now?"

"You mean just leave the bodies here," Joe said, "just like that?"

"Leslie?" Bob shook his head and said, "Remind me not to cross you...ever." Bob gave his twin a nod. "If you're game so am I."

"Let's give these kids something to talk about," Rachel said with a giggle in her voice. "At least until next Halloween."

Her laugh, a chilling sound, was loud enough to silence the chatter, hoots and laughter in the halls. Kids screeched in terror as three rotting bodies collapsed like hot-air balloons after an unexpected flameout.

~ 0000 ~

Dear Daniel

One

[August 17, 2000](#)

Winchester Hospital
Dr. Daniel J. Celinski c/o da Vinci Robotic Surgical Wing
41 Highland Avenue
Winchester, MA 01890

Dear Daniel,

I hope this letter finds you settled and comfortable in your new surroundings. I've heard there's no cold weather like New England's cold weather, have you found that true? I hope you have all the warm clothing you'll need for the chilly months ahead. I guess I sound like your mother, but I can't help worrying about you, alone, and so far away from home. I hope you'll send me your new home address when you have time. After reading what follows you may decide you'd rather not communicate with me any longer. The blame, if that is to be your decision, will be mine not yours.

How do I begin to tell you the truth about your old man? It's not an easy task, I've kept my secrets inside for many years. Life offers alternatives at various times. I stepped down the wrong path at thirteen, my first year of Junior High School, when I met Lamont Johnstone. He and I hit it off from the get-go. We both had a wild streak, and though we came from different economic and ethnic backgrounds, we were like twins separated at birth. Lamont and a few of his friends initiated me into a club they called the Blood Angels. Five years later, I'd turned eighteen and figured I'd paid my dues. I'd seen changes in that five year period that I interpreted as a warning. I had no doubts how my end would come if I remained an active Blood Angel. I also knew there was no such thing as an inactive Blood Angel and so I began a slow withdrawal from the gang life.

Compton's street gangs were changing in drastic ways. Turf wars, once fought with knuckles and bicycle chains to protect neighborhood territory, escalated into serious hostilities involving knives and guns. Instead of pure territorial rights, battles were fought for control of drug trafficking, prostitution, loan sharking, bookmaking or anything else that turned an illegal buck. Lamont watched the change in me as it happened. He knew what was going down, but more importantly, he understood. There had always been something between us, a special bond, that in the long run probably saved my life. But one summer night, I made some stupid choices and the end result proved disastrous. In a panic, I took a coward's way out, reaching out to my old associates and begging Lamont for a favor.

My payback for that decision took up ten more years of my life. I served my self-imposed sentence in an environment filled with lies, cruelty and death. I was part of a group who enforced the laws of our treacherous world. Our activities, now and then, are considered crimes in straight society, but I'll freely admit, I suffer no guilt for the acts I committed during that time. The people I dealt with were inhabitants of the world they chose. They knew the rules before they made a commitment to participate in the violent life we led.

My life changed when I met your mother, she was a rare creature I would gladly have given my life to protect. We married and raised you together, sharing a deep pride in your accomplishments including your graduation from medical school. Now, you're safe in a new career, far away from me and what is about to happen. Since your mother's passing, I've thought long and hard about the path I have chosen to take. She died far too young, but in a perverse way it is a blessing for she will not be alive to witness the carnage I'm about to unleash. I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me, son. I know it won't be easy for I have yet to forgive myself. I think my greatest sin was in not taking responsibility for my actions at the time, but then I realize how foolish that sounds. There is no greater crime than that for which I am guilty.

August 17, 1956 haunts my memories. Forty-four years have passed and yet that night has remained an open wound in my soul. I pray it will begin to heal with my actions of the next few days. The following is my confession. I tell you now to cushion the blows that may follow.

~ 0000 ~

Two

Compton, California - 1956

At the hospital, my mother insisted her firstborn son be named in remembrance of her grandfather, Ezekiel Polowski. My dad went along, but never called me anything other than son or Zeke. One of my first memories is overhearing my mom predict I would be trouble some day. It's my belief that childhood memories remain imbedded in our psyche for life. The proof I offer to substantiate my claim stems from the dedication I gave to the fulfillment of her prophecy. Rest assured, I did my damndest to live up to her expectations and I regret wasting a good portion of my life doing so.

During my school years my friends called me Ski. My teachers hardly referred to me at all, but when they did, they called me Zeke or Mr. Celinski. To say I was a disruptive influence would be an understatement. I suppose in the beginning it was my way of getting noticed. It was only later, through experience, I learned getting noticed wasn't cool. Getting noticed made enemies, gained the attention of cops, juvenile authorities and guys out looking to make a rep.

In the beginning my antics were limited to penny-ante bullshit. As I grew older, butting heads with authority figures got out of hand. I was the guy who was up for anything. I and my friends talked a tough game and we backed it up any way you wanted.

My smart mouth attitude led to teacher confrontations, fights with my peers and suspension after suspension. My no fear attitude and righteously bad friends ended my days as a public school student. Today, most of the *friends* I hung with are dead or in prison. The public school system kissed me off after the ninth grade. In my sophomore year of high school I managed to get expelled from a parochial school known for handling problem guys like me...go figure.

Continuation school, an arm of the LA county juvenile justice system, was the last stop for me. In continuation school I was given a job assignment with a local company. I was expected to work thirty-six hours a week. Each Wednesday, I had to complete four hours of school work: reading, writing and whatever.

I was one step away from CYA, the California Youth Authority. One more scrape on my part, I was warned by the head screw, and I would be sent uptown where my tough guy reputation would be put to a real test. I got a little smarter, kept my big mouth shut, and did my time. Any brushes I had with authority during that period I limited to the misdemeanor category.

Six, long, boring months passed before I turned eighteen and could wiggle off the juvie hook. I watched my temper and toed the line, but I couldn't stay out of trouble entirely. The crimes I committed during my CYA period involved cars: speeding, racing and reckless driving to name a few.

August 17, 1956, the ninety day suspension of my driving license had come to its end. One more ticket they warned at my DMV hearing, and I would be taking the bus for a year. I left the hearing room that day unrepentant, sneering at the fools who thought they could tell me how to drive my hot, cherry, 53 Chevy.

One more...one more...everything was one more. I'd spent a big chunk of my paychecks on my car and loved to street race. During my suspension I worked on my car. I milled the head and had it port and relieved. That combination increased compression, pumped more fuel to the cylinders and removed exhaust gases a lot quicker. I saved for weeks and bought an Edelbrock intake manifold and two Stromberg 97 two barrel carburetors. I had the engine balanced, bored and stroked and added a full race cam and solid lifters. All this I did in the name of horsepower. I'd turned my Chevy overhead six into a gas guzzling monster, but it would blow most cars off the street.

The tragedy began on a muggy, simmering Friday night in August. I sat in my driveway, slumped behind the wheel of the Chevy, watching the day's last gasp disappear into a scarlet, purple and black horizon. It was perfect beer weather and I was ready to chug-a-lug a brew or two, but there was one minor problem, I was only eighteen.

Phil Keats and Danny King walked up my driveway snickering about an old joke or it could've been a new girlfriend. Old jokes and new girlfriends were synonymous terms describing our luck with the opposite sex. My mood lightened with their company, but they were no help beer-wise. Phil and Danny were seventeen and according to society's rules, we were screwed.

On that sticky, uncomfortable night we were date-less and cash poor, but I told my buddies to hop in anyway. I cranked up the Chevy and careened out onto McMillan Street. I'd decided tonight we would find a way to raise a little Hell. In Compton that was always easy to do.

At the gas station we pooled our money. After counting twice we still had ten bucks and change between us. I pumped two bucks worth of Ethyl Hi-Test in the Chevy's tank. That left us with eight bucks to spend on pickup chicks or beer.

Loud and restless, we cruised our hometown's streets. It wasn't long before an ice cold beer was sounding better than the pickup chicks looked. The smoke from our Pall Malls roiled from the car's open windows. We laughed, ranked each other out, and yelled at the chicks strutting their stuff.

The parking lots of the Clock and Willows burger dives were jammed. My raked, spiffy-cool, Chevy was chosen off several times. It burned my butt to back off a drag race, but the thought of losing my license was a steel toed boot kicking at my memory's ass. Instead of racing, I tooled around looking for a hitchhiking soldier or sailor. A grateful military guy would agree to buy under-aged kids like us some beer if we took them where they wanted to go.

It took an hour to find a hitchhiking sailor and strike a deal. In return for a ride into Long Beach, he bought us two six packs. We dumped the sailor off and checked our finances. We had eighty-three cents left between us. At twenty-eight cents a gallon that bought three gallons of

regular, more than enough to get us home.

Nosed hood in the pavement, rear bumper in the sky, my raked Chevy blew the doors off the slow pokes on Long Beach Boulevard. We made it back to Compton in seventeen minutes flat. I pulled into the empty parking lot of a grammar school behind the Rosecrans drive-in theater and gunned the engine. The 22" glass pack mufflers rapped a tattoo on the hot air of the quiet night. We were on home turf, in one piece and without the speeding ticket that would take my license for a year. It was time to celebrate.

King, Keats and me went to work on the twelve 16 ounce cans of warming Lucky Lager beer. We smoked more Pall Malls and retold jokes we'd heard fifty million times. The beer flowed and the familiar jokes grew funnier as punch lines were flubbed. Keats and King started playing grab-ass and I slapped the seatback for attention. "Hey," I yelled, "somebody toss me the church key."

Keats found it in his pocket, but dropped the beer opener between the side panel and the seat cushion. With his beer can clutched against his chest, he knelt on the seat and peeked over his shoulder at me. He snickered and jammed his hand into the tight opening and snickered again.

"Get your ass outta my face, fairy," King yelled and slapped Keats on the butt.

King and I both saw a waxed paper packet sticking out of Keats' rear pocket. "Hey, Keats," King yelled in a louder voice, "what's in the back pocket?"

I cringed and thumped the top of King's head. "Somebody's gonna call the cops you keep yelling like that...fucking dumb shit," I growled.

"This what you're bitching about, Ski? Keats flipped the church key in his hand. "Thought I lost it didn't you?" he flopped back on the seat and took a gulp of beer.

King rubbed his head and nudged Keats with his elbow. "Hey man, what's in the back pocket?" He used a stage whisper and gave me the eye.

Keats blinked at King and reached for his back pocket. At the crackle of paper, he smiled. "Oh, yeah." He held up a pack of Chinese Poppers. "Ain't this bitchin'? Almost forgot. Found these left over from the Fourth," Phil belched.

I stared over the back of the seat and blinked. The beer high gave everything a foggy look. "Hey," I said, "that's cool man, but ain't no fun blowing them off here."

"Hold on," King said, "wait a sec. Remember that holy-roller church? I'll bet they got their doors open tonight...whatta' ya' think?"

He Groucho Marxed his bushy eyebrows up and down, up and down giving us a snide smile.

"Are you thinking what I think you're thinking?" Keats said grabbing King in a head lock, "that's the coolest idea you've had tonight." He gave King's flat-top a Dutch-rub.

I laughed my ass off until I saw Keats' beer flop over on the seat. He'd shoved the can between his legs before making his grab for King. As my two buddies squirmed around on the back seat, beer ran in a bubbly rivulet between his legs. It looked like Keats was taking a foamy leak on the floor of my backseat.

"Hey. Hey, Phil. Goddamn man, watch your beer. My fucking car's going to smell like a cheap beer joint."

"Let go. Let go," King yelled for the umpteenth time, "I gotta pee. I gotta pee."

We all had to pee and piled out, lining up at the back of the car. I sighed and leaned back against the bumper. King and Keats followed suit. Over the top of the corrugated aluminum fence, the drive-in's big movie screen was visible and it held our attention as we emptied our bladders. The second feature, Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein, was on the screen. Lou Costello executed his trademark double-take as the Wolf Man placed a paw on his shoulder.

Costello's facial expressions: saucered eyes, air filled cheeks and little bow mouth, were comedy punch lines all by their lonesome. We didn't need words or sound, I laughed so hard it felt like my gut was about to bust. Then, King peed on his shoes, and the beer hysterics went off the charts.

The beer was long gone and all that remained of our cash-poor investment was a woozy, happy feeling, bleary eyes, and in my case, a headache. We drove back through the neighborhood and cruised south on Cookacre, the street swimming before my eyes. Had the holy-roller church not been so close, we may have ended our night at the base of a tree or telephone pole.

A bankrupt dance hall took up the corner of Atlantic Avenue and Compton Boulevard. Cookacre ran parallel to Atlantic and crossed Compton Boulevard behind the dance hall now called the Free Gospel Church of Christ.

A year earlier the down-home-style Evangelical church bought the lease on the hall. It began its boisterous services a short time later. Two emergency exit doors opened at the rear of the hall. One was located near the corner of Cookacre and Compton Boulevard. The second door was at the south end of the long building. One or both doors were opened for ventilation during the summer evening services.

I coasted across Compton Boulevard engine off and headlights out. I saw an open spot and guided the car against the curb. It was a little after nine o'clock and the neighborhood was pitch black. Someone had used a rock, a BB or pellet gun, to take out the streetlight. The exit door nearest the corner stood open. Dim gray moonlight, puddled by the shadows of a big eucalyptus tree and elephant ear plants, splashed the cracked and chipped sidewalk with shadows.

Organ, accordion, banjo and tambourine music rolled out the open door like joyous thunder and washed over the hot asphalt, hitting the side of my car like a crasher wave slamming the shore of Manhattan Beach. The air vibrated with sound, the surge of shouting and stomping feet rapped on the side of my sweaty face. The noise set up a painful pounding in my head, its rhythm beating time with the musical reverberations. A hot nail of pain drove itself between my eyes, stepping up the volume of my headache misery. A tiny voice of caution screamed for my attention when Keats started laughing and King joined in.

"Hey, shut up, man." My booze altered mind wasn't ready to listen to the tiny voice or the laughter from the backseat. "What the fuck's the matter with you guys? Wanna get us caught?" I slapped at the back of the seat.

King and Keats crouched on the rear floorboards still cracking up. They buried their faces in the seat cushion. I faced front, headache roaring behind my eyes, and started to lose my cool. "You assholes wanna do this or not?" I barked. The more they laughed the more pissed off I got. "Can it, you fucking pricks. We're gonna get caught if we keep fucking around."

Keats and King calmed down. Keats took the wrapper off the firecrackers and twisted the fuses into a single tight string. I checked my book of matches. The night air was dead calm we would only need one or two.

"Ready?" I said and looked them in the eye. They nodded, their lips pulled down in a tight line. I knew they were holding back their stupid laughter and as long as they did I was okay. I unscrewed the dome light bulb. Keats pushed the front seatback forward and jacked the door handle.

"Leave it open," I whispered.

The three of us crossed the street and crawled up on the open doorway. Heat and fine wisps of blue smoke billowed through the open door. Overflowing tin ashtrays littered the hardwood flooring. From somewhere up front the amplified voice of the preacher screamed above the din of music, extolling his flock to a higher plane of frenzy. People jumped from their metal chairs, some with cigarettes hanging from their lips. They stomped and clapped their hands to the music.

The place reeked of sweat, cigarettes and the sweet smell of lilies and camellias. The preacher and his rowdy music bellowed in my ears. We watched, awestruck, for a short time, but the spell broke as the music came to a halt and the preacher shouted, "Are you ready to be baptized in the name of the Lord, Jesus?"

Keats held up the pack of firecrackers and pointed to the fuse. I shook my head and mouthed a silent, *wait a minute*.

People began to shuffle toward the front of the hall. We couldn't see the stage from our vantage point, but from the look and sound of the moving crowd, the pastor was going to be busy for a while. An organ began to play and the voice of the preacher shook the rafters. "Shout out sinners. Testify for the glory of the Lord. Do you accept the Lord Jesus as your Savior? Let me hear that testimony, sinner."

Someone at the front of the hall began to wail. The wail was cut off by a huge splashing sound. I fished the book of matches from my pocket and Keats held the packet of firecrackers steady. I no sooner lit the fuse when Keats made a perfect throw. The firecrackers slid under the rearmost row of metal chairs where a few people remained seated. We didn't wait for results, but jumped to our feet and ran for the car. I never dreamed firecrackers could be so loud or go off so fast. The machine-gun explosions were deafening. Screaming and chaos replaced riotous music and joyous shouts. I heard roars of anger that drowned out the screaming.

I'd left the keys in the ignition. That was the smartest of all the dumb moves I'd made that night. By the time the Chevy cranked to life, raging, infuriated men poured from the church's rear door. Had both exit doors been open, we would have been dead meat for sure.

"Jesus Christ. Get in the car," I screamed above the shouts of the irate churchgoers.

Keats shoved King and he tumbled into the backseat. I pulled away from the curb, the sound of my pipes, spinning wheels and smoking tires drew the crowd's full attention.

King was trying to pull the passenger door shut. The smell of burned rubber mixed with the muggy night air. I reached the end of the block and glanced in the rearview mirror, several pairs of headlights winked on and swung into the darkened street behind us. An icy feeling of fear shot through my stomach and turned my bowels to water.

"Oh shit," I yelled, "they're coming after us."

"Oh, shit," King moaned, "oh, shit."

Keats slapped the seatback. "You're always bragging about your hot Chevy. Floor this son-of-a-bitch."

Lights off, I roared up one quiet residential street after another. A grouping of three cars, headlights gaining and receding, managed to stay with me. The fuzzy head I had experienced earlier was gone, replaced by adrenaline and panic.

My eyes were burning and teary. My sweaty hands slipped on the steering wheel. King and Keats hollered in my ear depending on how the chase was going. I was beginning to think I wouldn't shake the enraged holy-rollers. Then, after three tire screaming turns and a run through several alleys, the following headlights were gone and I hoped they were gone for good.

I wasn't taking any chances. I skidded into a tight right turn, traveled half a block and made

another quick left. I ran two stop signs on a backtrack and saw no headlights. Two more rights were for insurance, the last one a sliding, rubber burning brody that had us all laughing with relief. I laughed until I saw the waving flashlight. I laughed until I saw three little kids jumping and clapping their hands as they skipped into the street. I laughed until I heard the screaming shouts: "Stop. Stop. Stop."

A dark shape flashed at the corner of my eye. My right headlight shattered and there was a heavy, sickening thump. Shards of exploded glass raked the side of my car and something dark flew off my right front fender. I saw a flashlight cartwheel across my windshield.

The heavy crunching bump of the impact shook me. In the next instant, the car was pulled to the right by another, lighter impact and I swerved back to the left. I felt the ass end of the Chevy skidding to the right and instinct took over. I swerved back right and came within a gnat's ass of wiping out a parked car.

The horror took place in split seconds, but played like a slow motion movie from Hell. I downshifted, hit the gas hard and burned more rubber fishtailing down the dark street. I didn't stop...I couldn't stop...I was terrified.

I don't know how I managed to avoid being caught. I don't know how I came away without plowing into a tree or some other group of parked cars. I don't know how I avoided all those things and more because I was driving blind. Tears filled my eyes and rolled down my cheeks.

"Are they dead?" I yelled. "Did you guys see them? Did they get up?"

Silence was the only thing coming from the backseat.

"What did you fucker's see?" I screamed. "Did they get up? Did I hit the kids?"

Keats' voice was quiet and soothing in my ear. "It's okay, Ski. Let's just get home in one piece, okay?"

Saturday morning dad was usually the first to arrive at the kitchen table. A cup of coffee, ashtray and smoking Pall Mall would be within reach of his right hand. In his left he'd be holding the Press-Telegram newspaper, folded just right for easy, one hand reading. That Saturday morning dad wasn't home. He was up the coast near Port Hueneme working overtime on a military job and bringing home the big bucks for his family. Lucky me.

Fridays, after dad left for work, mom usually paged through the paper looking for the weekend grocery ads. Mom was never interested in Saturday's newspaper. Lucky me again.

I was up and dressed at seven. Mom was still in bed, taking advantage of dad's absence and sleeping in for a change. I was sure the paper would have coverage of the brutal hit and run on Friday night. Chills ran up and down my spine as I thought of my car, hidden away in the garage. Lucky me three times.

If dad were home, the evidence of my murderous rampage would be in plain sight, sitting in the carport. My beautiful Chevy, with its crumpled right fender and broken headlight, would be visible through the Venetian blinds covering the glass panels of the back door. Hair, blood, pieces of clothing, Hell I didn't know. When I put the car in the garage late Friday night, I was afraid to look. It was dark and I didn't want to turn on a light and draw mom's attention.

I had taken a circuitous route home. King lived next door and Keats only a few houses away, so I didn't have to drop them off. I didn't sleep at all that night. I tossed and rolled and sat on the edge of the bed and prayed. I prayed hard until I saw the gray light of dawn seeping through the Venetian blinds.

I collapsed around that time and slept for an hour, but on waking, my eyelids felt like sandpaper. Each time I blinked, claw-like scratches pulled at my eyeballs. I tiptoed through the living room and crossed the kitchen to the back door. The paper, folded and banded, lay under the carport roof. I could see the big, black, headline print and I squeezed my eyes tight shut.

There was little that scared me, but this was a new experience. I made up my mind to give myself up. I would swear I was alone. I would swear it was my reckless actions that caused the death of the innocent little kids. Staring at the newspaper in the driveway, I wondered how many years I would get in prison. Would they convict me of manslaughter? Or would it be murder? If it was murder would I get the gas chamber?

"Oh, God," I whispered and choked back a lump in my throat. I looked over my shoulder making sure mom hadn't snuck up on me. The enormity of my stupidity overwhelmed me. I had thrown my life away on a senseless, foolish, drunken prank. I'd treated my life as if it had no value. My next breath was a shudder. A sharp pain bit into my chest and I felt like I might want to throw up.

I realized I wanted my dad sitting at the table, I wanted to talk to him, ask him to help me and get his advice. When should I give myself up? I wondered. How? We couldn't afford a lawyer, I would have to ask for a public defender. They were good, I knew because there was a TV show called *The Defenders* and they always won their cases.

I felt a surge of relief when I realized I couldn't turn myself in with just mom here by herself. I would have to wait, I had no choice. Then I realized whatever I did whenever I took that last, fatal step, I would have to do it alone and I started to shake.

I left the newspaper lying in the driveway. The best course of action was no action at all. Not for a while at least, not until dad got home. I wanted to appear normal and normal for me was a big bowl of Wheaties or Cheerios.

I had no appetite, but I heard mom stirring and filled a bowl anyway, forcing the cereal down my throat. Big gulps of orange juice aided in moving the soggy, mush to my stomach. Before I'd finished the first burning symptoms of indigestion hit like a blowtorch bursting into flame.

Mom came in the kitchen as I was rinsing my bowl. "Have you made your bed and cleaned your room?" She glanced at me over her shoulder waiting for my denial.

"I'll make the bed," I said stealing sidelong glances at her. Was she suspicious? My face burned. At least the normal tone of mom's nagging sounded safe for now.

"Take your dirty clothes out to the laundry room," she added. "I'm doing the washing today."

"Yeah. Okay, Mom." Head down, I headed for my bedroom.

"Turn your socks and underwear right-side-out. I'm not your maid, you know," she called after me.

"Yeah. Okay, Mom," I mumbled. As I turned the corner into the hall I gave her the finger. "Jesus, what a nag."

An hour later mom was in the laundry room. I was messing around my room, putting stuff away, dusting the chest of drawers, my nightstands, hoping I could throw up. Every few minutes I would go out to the kitchen and look at the newspaper lying on the driveway. I wanted to get it and look, but I was afraid of what I might see. Would they have a description of my car? License number? Color? They couldn't have seen the license number. It was too dark and I was too far away from the pursuers, right? Yeah. Did mom go in the garage? I wondered. I tried to see if she was still in the laundry room, but the small window told me nothing. There was no use keeping

an eye on her. "Ah, shit," I said and went back to my bedroom.

A burst of burning indigestion sent me running to the toilet. I heaved and heaved, but all I left in the toilet bowl was a thin, bitter tasting yellow bile. I rinsed my mouth and flushed. I was on my way to the kitchen for another look at the driveway when someone knocked at the backdoor. My heart stopped until I saw Keats through the blinds standing on the back porch. He was swatting his open palm with our folded and banded Press-Telegram. I jerked the door open.

"Hey, Ski. Hey, you seen the paper, man." He stepped in the kitchen and nodded toward the living room. "Your mom and dad around?"

It was a good thing for him he whispered the question. A movement caught the corner of my eye. Mom came out of the laundry room lugging a big plastic basket full of damp clothes. The clothesline was out back and I noticed she wore her apron full of clothes pins. She wouldn't be around for a while.

"Shut up and gimme that paper," I snapped. "What's the matter with you?" I snatched it from his hand.

"We're in deep shit, man," Keats said. "I stopped at Danny's, but nobody answered the door. I don't know whether he spilled his guts or what."

Keats grabbed my chair at the kitchen table and sat down. I knew things must be bad, he was shaking. I pulled it together quick. I couldn't show weakness now, not in front of Keats, not in front of anybody.

"Cool it," I said. "You and Danny...you guys got nothing to worry about, I won't squeal on you. Besides, you guys were just riding in back. You weren't driving the fucking car. The only thing they'd have on you is not turning me in. Course, we know that ain't gonna happen, right?"

Keats leaned back in the chair and nodded.

I turned away from him. Nausea was a tight fist in my stomach. I had the urge to heave my guts, but I pushed it away. "How bad is it?" I said looking out the kitchen window.

"It's bad man. A boy and his dad are both dead. The old man managed to push the two little girls away. The paper says the boy tried to save his dad. Jesus, Ski. What the fuck are we gonna do?"

The breath was sucked from my body and a sob looked for the air it needed to escape my throat, but I closed it off. Instead I shuddered, instinct dictated survival at all cost. "Listen, man. Get to Danny. Call him, bang on his door, whatever you got to do. All you guys gotta do is keep your mouths shut. You fuck up...you guys tell anyone about last night, I'll fucking kill you both, understand? I got nothing to lose. I already killed a kid and his dad. There ain't a lawyer in the world gonna get me off on that, man. You live with it, just like I'm gonna live with it. You got the picture, man?"

Keats' face turned white and he stared at me like he didn't know me. "Jesus, Ski. I'd never squeal on you," he murmured.

I punched his shoulder. "I know. I know. I'm thinking about Danny though, I'm not so sure about him."

"Danny won't say nothing," Keats shook his head "Not to his parents anyhow. His mom and dad work twenty hours outta the day, he hardly sees them. I think he's just scared. He probably thought I was the cops pounding on his door." Keats tried a weak laugh and it came out sounding like a choked sob.

I was thinking fast. First I had to get rid of the car. I had a ton of money in that thing, but I couldn't keep it, no way. I was trying to figure a way out and a flash of guilt tried to take over. I pushed it away and started scheming. I had to find a way to skate, a way I wouldn't have to pay

for my crime...I remember thinking...*just like old times.*

I grabbed Keats, stood him up and took the paper from his hand. "I got a plan. You get to King and I don't give a shit how, just do it. You tell him what I said and remind him of Lamont and Tiny Earl. If I ain't around, they will be, you got that straight in your head?" I poked his forehead for emphasis.

"It'll be okay," Keats said, "no problem, Ski. Don't say nothing to Lamont about us, okay?"

"You got a deal for now, but don't let me down. Get going and call me after you talk to King. I'm gonna call Lamont.

Keats looked stricken, his eyes turning teary. "I thought you said..."

"I got to get rid of my car, dork," I said. "Now. Today. Just do what I told you and you'll be okay."

After Keats left I placed the call that would haunt me the rest of my days. It was a long conversation, but we worked out a plan. I would give Lamont a call as soon as mom left to go grocery shopping. The market was around the corner and up the street a block or so. Mom always walked, said it was good exercise, but she always made me take the shopping cart back. While she went to the market, Lamont and Tiny Earl would show up with a closed van. We'd load up the Chevy and drive through the night to Tijuana, Mexico. You could sell anything in TJ, especially American cars, and with Lamont and Tiny Earl along there would be no problems getting back home with the cash.

Lamont was one of the founders of the Blood Angels; Compton's most feared street gang. Tiny Earl was an enforcer and both were my friends, long standing. I was trying to get away from the gang life and this favor would hook me back in, at least until I worked it off and then some, but a deal was a deal. I would follow the rules or receive a visit from Tiny Earl and his boys. The cops would take what was left of me to jail. It didn't take long to decide I would do as I was told.

That's all of it, Daniel. That's the story of my early life and how I lived it. I'd be a liar on top of everything else if I told you I made the right choice that Saturday morning. I took what I thought was the easy way out and it worked...perfectly. I should say it worked to all outward appearances, but that night has remained a boil on my conscience all these many years.

I left the paper on the kitchen table that morning, open to the headline. Mom, dad and I commiserated about the horrible hit and run over Sunday morning breakfast, right before we went to mass.

Dad and mom congratulated me on getting rid of my expensive, gas eating hot rod. They urged me to buy an economical car. A gas saver. Junior college was going to be expensive and what if I wanted to go on to four year college? they wondered.

"Plan ahead," dad told me. If he only knew.

While your mother was alive, while you were in school, I didn't want to burden either of you with my guilt, but fear played a role in my silence, too. I always been afraid...terrified you and your mother would turn away from me. I wouldn't have had the guts to live with that kind of pain. As you can see I'm as much of a coward as my past actions indicate.

I tell you this now, not so my life might reflect on you, but because the life you have chosen shines like a bright sun on me. You have begun your practice in Winchester. You're safe. You are a healer and your accomplishments have helped to empowered me to do the right thing.

I love you, Daniel. Always will, Dad.

~ 0000 ~

Hank Straker – Security Analyst

One

[Long Beach, California](#)

When I was young, and too damn dumb to know better, I jumped into a marriage bound for perdition. The Hell went on for twenty-nine months. Toward the end, I turned Henry Daniel Straker into a drunk. One positive triumphed over all the negative chaos. My ex-wife's mother loved me like the son she never had and refused to let me go. Agnes Lisa Morre became the mother and father I never knew. I called her Mopa and I'll never forget her.

Nine years later, late summer, 1955 and eight days by my thirtieth birthday, I'd dressed in my best suit. My black Oxford's gleamed, winking back nervous smiles at my self-conscious gaze. I stood at the front of a small Lutheran church, ready to take marriage vows with the only true love of my life, Joan Iris Tate.

We returned from a glorious honeymoon in time to vote in Riversbend County's election for county offices. The following morning, as I enjoyed a fine, home cooked breakfast, I learned my status as *acting* Sheriff for the County of Riversbend, Wyoming, was made permanent by the many folks I served. I felt like I'd hit a double sweepstakes winner for sure. I was a fortunate man and I was thankful.

Joanie and I envisioned a long, slow life of contentment, discovery and the joy of shared accomplishment. Looking back, the past thirty-one years have flashed by like race cars at an Indianapolis 500. Looking back, I'm amazed at what precious little time we had to savor the delights we promised each other on our wedding day.

The joys we envisioned for our life together were not defined by political power, money or influence. Instead, like most average folks our successes and failures soared or crashed, depending on luck and the goals we set and accomplished. Like most, Joanie and I worked as a team through the hard, brutal struggles life serves up. Out of the chaos we label living, Joanie and I managed to build on our loving relationship.

Despite many disappointments, the major one being no children, Joanie and I fashioned our life. It filled up over the years with hills of exultation and valleys of despair. It filled up with life lived, dreams realized and ambitions we hoped to yet achieve.

My job enforcing the law in Riversbend County was routine for the most part. We'd get a scare every now and again and my small department was dealing with one of those when I hung my coat in the mudroom that moldering September afternoon of 1986. I walked into the kitchen looking for Joanie and my supper, but instead, I found a scene reminiscent of Bobby Goldsboro's 1968 hit song, *Honey*. I found Joanie balled up in a dining room chair, head on the table, coating the surface with her tears.

The dusky late summer afternoon smelled of blistered asphalt and the dying leaves of the hardwoods dotting our property. The heat and fragrance of that day marked the beginning of new trip to perdition. This time the tour of Hell was arranged for two and the names on the tickets were Joan and Hank Straker.

Our doctor, during a routine physical, found a mass in my wife's left breast. Joanie emphasized the word, *mass*, as opposed to lump. Not wanting to alarm me, she consulted with

several doctors over a period of weeks. Joanie suffered her fears in silence, waiting for a final recommendation. Meanwhile, I went to work, day after day, immersed in my law enforcement duties, oblivious to my wife's continuing anxiety. That evening we sat at the dining table while Joanie gave me the consulting doctor's diagnosis and treatment plan.

The physicians characterized the mass as suspicious. The collective diagnosis was possible malignancy and urged an immediate biopsy under general anesthetic. Based on the findings, surgeons would remove the mass, continue with a radical mastectomy or execute any of the lesser procedures available. The early morning hours were closing fast when we came to our first decision. I think Joanie was relieved to hear me say I wasn't satisfied. Throughout the long night of discussion and reflection, my mind continually returned to an incident of several years past.

A young doctor and his family were on vacation, camping and hiking in what we call our hill country. His thirteen-year-old daughter and ten-year-old son went missing, separated from the family on a hike. Our volunteer search and rescue team found the two kids in seventeen hours. They were returned to the family none the worse for wear. The doctor pumped my hand and swore he would be forever in my debt.

"If you ever take a trip further west, to my hill country," he said, "and find you're in need of any medical assistance please call on me." Doctor Jonathan Neal handed me his card. "I'm trained in the Thoracic Sciences, but I have many connections in the Long Beach, California medical community."

I spent the best part of the following day researching various breast cancer surgeons and treatment centers. I found Jonathan Neal ranked one of the five top breast cancer surgeons in the country. Long Beach Memorial Hospital where he practiced was rated among the ten best in America for its MemorialCare Breast Center. Long Beach Memorial and Doctor Neal sounded like a winning combination and Joanie agreed.

A few days later at the office I copied the list of long distance numbers I had called during the morning and afternoon. On my way out I stopped at the desk of Betsy Adells, our dispatcher and office manager. She looked up with a question in her raised eyebrows, gave me a smile and said, "Will you be on the air, Hank?"

I handed her my list. "When you get the phone bill watch for these numbers and send me the charges, I'll send you a check." I drew an envelope from my breast pocket and handed it to her. "Give this to the county attorney when you see him. It's my resignation. Joanie's sick and we're leaving for California."

Betsy's smile disappeared. She paled and began to cry. I didn't have time to comfort or explain my wife's difficulties, even though Betsy was a dear friend. My conscience tugged away at my tongue, but urgency was a louder voice in my ear. I dropped my badge and service weapon on the desk. "Sorry Betsy," I mumbled, "it's been my honor to work with you. Say goodbye for me, okay?"

I walked away my mind already in the car and on the way to Long Beach, California.

~ 0000 ~

Two
Long Beach, California

That was six years ago. I'm sixty-seven now, alone, and have trouble remembering things at times. I guess most would say I've given up since Joanie let the breast cancer kill her. I know,

that sounds selfish, cold and brutal, but I mean it in a loving way. Joanie fought hard, in the end, however, she fought for a bunch of delusional hopes we both lapped up like hungry puppies.

I still dream of the night she died. It was late when the pain eased up to a bearable level and Joanie had one of her lucid periods. We were able to talk things over and I promised her I would be all right and learn to do for myself. She squeezed my hand and said, "You've got to loosen up, Hank. Stop worrying, about me, I'm going to a better place, I can feel it. Have fun and find a new love. Promise me you'll live your life."

When I nodded she went all quiet and her eyes fastened on mine. She walked up inside my head and showed me how courage and love should look. After a long silence, she smiled that smile, the one that breaks my heart to remember. She gave my hand a few pats and turned her head on the pillow. Not a minute passed before she slipped into a coma. A few hours later she let go and died.

I sat there and died with her, but my damn heart keeps beating and I keep existing. I have trouble remembering things at times, but I remember that kind of shit. I remember I lied with every promise I made to Joanie. Those reassuring lies, made with the best intentions, still bother me at times. Then I remember that scary Saturday night not long passed. A burglar violated my dead wife's home. I remember how bad I wanted to kill the son-of-a-bitch and I'm at peace for a while.

~ 0000 ~

Three
October 3, 1992

It was late on a chilly afternoon when I called my neighbor to say I wasn't feeling well. Earlier in the week Marlene Westerly, three doors down, talked me into attending a mixer dance put on monthly by the Los Coyotes Senior's Club. I knew at the time the mixer idea wasn't going to work, but Marlene, bless her heart, was doing her damndest to get me involved. December was coming on faster than the headaches I get from an overdose of bourbon. I was well into my Yuletide funk and December 26th was only eighty-five days away.

Joanie's death on that date is like a black hole in my universe, the memory of her passing sucking me dry. Every year my depression seems to increase until I'm physically worn to a nub. My desire to bumble around a senior center or participate in any other activity tumbles down to zero.

I didn't do a damn thing that Saturday. I spent most of the day reading in my chair. At five I got up and did a few exercises for balance, worked at my tai chi and tried a kata or two, but my heart wasn't in it. After a shower I wrapped up in my robe and stared at the slim pickings in the pantry. I slurped up a bowl of soup pretty fast. Appetite, like a lot of things, sneaks up on me. I washed the dinner bowl, rinsed my glass and turned on the TV. Bad choice as usual. The news was depressing as Hell and old game shows or Roseanne Barr re-runs didn't float my boat either. At eight-forty-five I hung up my robe for the night.

I turned on the bedside lamp and prepared the bed clothes. Joanie used to do that, but after four years of her being dead, I had to learn to do for myself. I sat on the edge of the bed and picked up the pencil and notepad I keep on the nightstand. I had sharpened the pencil that morning, but it wasn't until I picked it up that night that I noticed it was down to a stub. I made a mental note to replace it...that's a good joke most seniors will appreciate.

Every night before bed I write a note to Joanie. I tell her about my day and most times I say the words out loud as I write them down. I laugh a little, as if she's sitting across the bed listening, nodding and laughing with me. I try to make my humdrum days sound funny and exciting to my dead wife. It's one of the things I do to keep her with me. Keeping her alive, if only in my imagination, keeps me sane and breathing.

I crawled into bed and switched off the bedside light. The room was swallowed in dark so infinite I couldn't distinguish the white of the bed sheet. My head settled into the pillow and that's when the realization hit me again, but harder this time.

My lungs fill with air. My heart slams against my breastbone and my brain functions, but my spirit is gone, I thought. I'm a shell. A waste of time and space.

These crazy, incoherent thoughts bounced off my consciousness like some marimba mallet striking a hellish gong. Tears filled my eyes and something gave way. A cold, voracious, black hole sucked all my desire for life into its eternal pit.

I thought of my Colt forty-five in the closet, locked and loaded. All I had to do was ear back the hammer and put the barrel in my mouth. If I pushed my head into the pillow I wouldn't make much of a mess. I thought of poor Nora Dean, my cleaning lady, who came every two weeks. I couldn't leave the small mess I might make or the shock of finding my body for her to clean up and dream about the rest of her days.

"Tomorrow, I'll head out to the garage," I muttered. "It's time I picked up my ticket for the bullet train." Promise completed, I closed my eyes. Now that the decision was made, I felt relief and drifted off thinking of Joanie and the way she looked on our wedding day so many years ago.

Dreams began soon after sleep found me and an encore performance of my nightly horror show was on the playbill. In these night dreads I revisit the past two years, the pain-filled weeks in and out of hospitals, Joanie suffering all manner of indignity. I watch her tire and hear her weak voice, begging me to let her quit. *Oh no*, I say and squeeze her hand. I smile, but it's the cold, cruel grin of a deathwatch and Joanie knows, I can see it in her eyes.

You have to fight, I growl. You can't give up. Do it for me. Endure a little more misery for me. It will be all right, if you just fight a little longer.

I woke with a burning sensation crawling from my stomach to my chest. I got up, swallowed a quart of Maalox, and paced. Guilt ate me from the inside out, but it wouldn't feast on me for long. I had my own form of cancer and it was a bitch to treat, because it wasn't physical. My cancer was the hate I had for life without my friend, my wife, my Joanie.

I got back to the bedroom and imagined my forty-five calling to me from the dresser drawer. *Was this part of another dream*, I wondered. "Get it done," I heard someone say. I sagged and sat trembling on the edge of the bed. I couldn't remember having a night this bad. I flopped prone, and drained of energy and dropped off again, but this time the dream stayed away. The twisted misery that plagued my sleep each night was gone for once, but it wasn't doing me any favors. The sleep that took me was a restless one.

Someone slapped at my face and I opened my eyes to a white-hot light that stung my eyes. It was like being snow-blind. A voice behind the flashlight growled, "Why ain't you at the senior's mixer?" Before I could reply, I was yanked from my bed, not appreciated at age sixty-seven.

My sleep fogged brain was having trouble putting together a coherent thought process.

Experience and the instinct it breeds took over. I made a show of losing my balance and fell against the nightstand. The lamp, clock and my notes to Joanie scattered on the floor. I groped around amid the chaos and my fingers closed on the stub of my pencil. The intruder yanked me to my feet, pulled and jerked on me stretching the neck of my tee shirt. He dragged me down the hall while I stumbled trying to keep up.

He pulled me into my office, a converted back bedroom, and pushed me to the floor. He surprised me by turning on the overhead light. The man bent close to my face and removed his ski mask, grinning like a barracuda in heat. Showing me his face was not a good sign. The man was confident in his control of the situation, but more importantly, he didn't plan to leave me around to ID him. The bastard figured me for a terrified old man and he was right, but he screwed the pooch in a couple of important areas.

Something new took possession of me, something I hadn't felt in a long time. I was pissed off, and for the first time in several years, rage consumed me. A fury filled my mind, so quick and so full it displaced any desire to end my life. This burglar reminded me it would be sacrilegious to allow this dumb shit to take away the only good promise I made to Joanie the night she died.

I watched the burglar and schemed awhile. I would find a way to use his mistakes to my advantage. Picking our home that Saturday night, and shining his damned flashlight in my eyes, was the man's first mistake.

He showed me his fist and said, "Sit tight and keep shut, old man. I hope you ain't so scared you piss your boxers." He laughed and turned his back on me. I studied his moves as he swaggered in the direction of my desk.

"You don't know what you're dealing with, sonny," I whispered thinking only I, in my head, could hear. "You saw these gnarled hands, gray hair and saggy neck. You put that together and wrote me off. Old, scared and helpless, huh? We'll just see about that."

"What are you muttering about, old man?" The burglar looked over his shoulder and gave me a snarl. "You'd better shut the fuck up you know what's good for you." He laughed and put his attention back on the desktop.

Like molasses poured on French toast, a rapturous calm oozed throughout my brain. It was the calm of a man pushed to the limit and with nothing to lose. He had put his hand on my head and shoved me to the floor like a child, pushed in a corner for bad behavior.

I wedged my back against the wall and worked my fists into the carpet. I sat without movement. The ecstatic calm had its way with my body as well as my mind. I remembered Joanie's words on that sweltering September night of 1986: No matter what happens, Hank, I want your solemn oath you'll live your life and be happy.

I smiled and put my head against the wall. That memory was like Joanie sitting at my side, giving me one of her pep talks. Well, I had two things going for me: my gentle appearance was one and the burglar's own arrogance gave him his second strike. I made ready to use those tools and see that he struck out once and for all.

The burglar had a hundred pounds on me. While he plundered my personal correspondence,

I studied his broad back and watched him move. His step was flat-footed, slow and ponderous. Fluidity in his movements was nonexistent and this meant he was more muscle than flexibility.

I couldn't imagine what this thug wanted in my house. I'm not rich and my retirement pay and Social Security is just livable. I tried to understand, what could I have that would be of value to the likes of this man? To supplement my income, I had taken a few jobs analyzing residential security and recommending systems. Now and then I would take on a few small time investigations, husband or wife cheating stuff. Nothing. I couldn't think of a damn thing to rate a home invasion. At least, at that moment I couldn't put anything together.

He tore at my desk like he was having a high old time. Finding nothing of interest, he turned to my four drawer filing cabinet. The burglar rummaged through the top drawer grunting and shaking his head. In the second drawer he stopped his pawing of my files about halfway through. He bent close and I saw his penlight pick out an individual folder. I was too far away and too low to see much more, but I saw how his body relaxed. Whatever it was he was after, he'd found it.

A coldness moved through me, an icy calm that came over me when answering a robbery in progress call or the like. My knees were bent, my legs ready to push upward. I pulled my heels up tight, close enough to touch my butt. My hands curled, knuckles pressed into the carpet. When he came for me I was going to push up fast, the wall and my legs would help with leverage and momentum.

I wear a watch on my right wrist, and yes, I wear it to bed. It's a habit I've developed over the years. I used to wear a big, rubberized divers watch. After years of its weight, chafing in winter, sweat rasping in summer, my skin had grown thin. Of late, I was prone to rashes and develop little sores. Now, I took to wearing a flexi-band watch on my right wrist and the stub of my pencil was tucked under the flexi-band. The sharp point of the pencil dug into the heel of my hand. The slight pain gave me a feeling of serenity.

The burglar never produced a weapon, but that didn't mean he wasn't hot. If he was carrying a gun he could shoot me where I sat. I didn't allow that possibility to clutter my thinking. In this neighborhood, filled with God fearing Christians, a gun shot would rate a call to the cops in the time it takes to kick off a shoe. In any event, if I was going to be shot, there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it and so I watched and waited. My mind hopped around like a barefoot boy with a cocklebur in his toe and my chaotic thoughts returned to the overhead light.

The burglar had no fear of being exposed. I remembered his growl behind the dazzling flashlight beam: "Why ain't you at the senior's mixer?"

Who was this guy? I wondered and how did he know about my invitation to the mixer?

The gauze like blur of confusion, brought on by my abrupt awakening, was finally starting to lift. It wasn't unusual to see lights on at the back of my home. I kept nocturnal hours on occasion. This time of year was the exception. This time of year, with Joanie on my mind, I didn't get much work done. It followed then that someone had catalogued my habits months earlier. This had something to do with a job or related activity I'd performed earlier in the year.

The questions begging answers were: How did the burglar know about Marlene Westerly? How did he know about the senior center activities? How did he know I was Marlene's special *social activities* project?

Those *how dids* would go unanswered for the present. When my eyes came back in focus the burglar was staring at me. I studied his eyes for some sign of intention, but he showed me nothing. He jerked as if slapped by an invisible hand and pushed away from the filing cabinet, crossing the room and pointing a fat, stubby finger at me. "What the fuck you doing, old man? Why you poking your nose in other people's business?"

He spoke through his nose and business came out sounding like bid-ness. He didn't seem to require an answer, but stood over me staring at nothing. The moment stretched out lasting a minute or more. I've seen similar behavior in other felons. This guy was a violent man, but to kill, he had to dig around in his darkness and find the necessary rage. When he did, he would pull it up where he could feel it and taste it. He needed a hateful fury for what he was about to do.

In the next instant the man reached down with his right hand, a swift move, and grabbed a handful of my hair. He didn't realize my legs, pushing up and against the wall, were helping to lift me. He felt confident, comfortable and in complete control.

I saw his eyes turn colder, his mouth pull down tighter. This man had found his insanity and the madness he embraced was his to use in a hummingbird's heartbeat. I stood up tall on tippy toes looking helpless. Whatever he saw on my face he liked. I guess I look scared when someone's pulling my hair out by the roots. He giggled and reached under his jacket for the small of his back, but I had worked the pencil into my fingertips by that time.

My hands were moist with the sweat of fear. The pencil pinched in my fingers like a big pushpin. I brought my hand up fast and jammed the sharp tip into the side of his neck. I wiggled it twice: up and down...twice: back and forth. The move took two or three seconds tops.

His eyes got big and his body went rigid. A hot, thin stream of blood shot over my right shoulder, hit the wall and speckled my cheek. The burglar saw it and screamed. His left arm shot upward and knocked my arm away. I don't think he realized what had happened. I think the shock of the pencil's penetration worked like a temporary anesthetic.

The spurts of blood increased with his heartbeat. He stepped away from me, his eyes blowing up like soap bubbles before they burst. He groped with the fingers of his gloved right hand and found the pencil. In that instant he made his third and last mistake of the night...he pulled it out.

I must have hit the jugular vein or the exterior carotid artery. When the pencil came out, the tiny hole expanded with the force of the man's blood pressure. Thin spurts turned into cannon shots of blood and his face blanched chalk white. He coughed as if clearing his throat and dropped on his back. He blinked up at me and his body jerked when I stepped over him. At my desk I put my bills, notes and correspondence back in order...taking my time.

I heard a gurgling croak as I picked up the phone. The dial tone hummed in my ear and I turned to look at him. My would-be killer's eyes met mine, his mouth opened and closed, opened and closed and then he was still. I pulled my chair back into place and sat down.

My hands are a little arthritic so it took me a while to dial the police. A crazy thought came to me just as the emergency operator answered my call. *This prick has saved my life.* I felt like laughing, but didn't want to leave the 911 operator with the wrong impression.

I sat forward and stared at the body of the man sent to kill me. The rapturous calm stayed with me and I remembered my forty-five in the dresser drawer. I couldn't imagine what time I would get back to bed, but I was willing to bet my forty-five wouldn't be calling my name again for a while.

I shook my head in disbelief. It took this hired assassin, and the schmuck who sent him, to make me realize my life was precious. *Maybe I'll get a sign made: Hank Straker, Security Analysis. A little advertising, who knows where that might lead?*

I heard the whoop-whoop of the sirens and got up to pull on a pair of sweatpants. It was going to be a long night and I realized I'd worked up quite a thirst. Good thing I always keep a few long neck Buds in the fridge for emergencies.

~ 0000 ~

Endnotes

[April 7, 2013](#)

Hi and thank you for your purchase of the 2013 Revised Edition of Screwing the Pooch. My name is Jim Bergstad. As you might have noticed I've chosen a new pen name in the hope it will be make it easier to locate me and my books on the Web. I hope you enjoyed your trip through Pooch-Land. I hope you were thoroughly entertained and if so I encourage you to spread the word among your friends and family. I'd like to get to know you better and what better way to start that process than to tell you a little about myself.

I've enjoyed a varied work related career including trucker, firefighter, Supervisor of the Guest Relations Department of a major television network and thirty years of management and entrepreneurial pursuits in the field of transportation and logistics to name a few. I retired for the last time in 1998 and began to seriously consider a new career writing genre fiction. To that end I have studied and worked hard to improve my craft.

Late in 2006 my wife and I escaped to a small community in South Carolina where I hoped I would spend my days writing, painting and playing a little golf. After five years of heaven, however, I've been dragged, kicking and screaming, back to California where my wife and I have renewed our relationship with our three sons and eight grandchildren. Our two daughters remain in Florida with their families which include four more grandchildren who in turn have produced two great-grand children. Four additional great-grandchildren reside in Arizona with their families.

My work has appeared in Literary Journals like The Jimson Journal, Midwest Literary Magazine, The Quill, Indie Searchlight, Scissors and Spackle, Pedigru Review, The Monarch Review and The Feathered Flounder. The original Screwing the Pooch Collection, published in 2009, received excellent reviews and won the Reader's Choice Gold Medal Award for Best Fiction of the year.

Please look for the Hyde's Corner Trilogy - Book I No Man's Land available now for a free download promotion ending May 31, 2013

Coming soon ... watch for Doors of Perdition, another collection of short stories exploring the dark side of the human condition.

For questions, comments or friendly banter email: woodsidepubgroup@gmail.com