

# Short Horror Tales

Book Bundle 1

By  
Ian Thompson

*(Free Sample via The Independent Author Network)*

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## Introduction

The aim of my *Short Horror Tales* is to give a quick, swift-paced read that will thrill and chill. I hope to make you feel for the characters you will briefly meet, and to surprise you with twists and turns. Many of the stories will feature monsters, though some of those monsters might be human. Often the protagonist of the tale will be faced with something utterly evil...

In *Glancing Blow*, there is a creature that is truly monstrous – but is it evil? Is it a bloodthirsty horror or a victim? I'll let you decide.

Ever done something risky? In *Hooker*, Nigel Fawson seeks out the comfort of a prostitute... and he is really going to pay the price for her services. If he was mindful enough to bring protection, will it be the right kind?

A derelict old house is the perfect setting for either a crime scene or a horror tale. In *Chained*, the two are combined... So, what could be worse than horrific evidence at a crime scene?

Let's get along to a lonely forest road. And maybe you should bring your waterproofs...

Ian Thompson  
July 2016

## Glancing Blow

My voice was my life.

In the ten years since I graduated from high school and leapt into the ugly real world of job-hunting, bills and rising debts, my voice had become everything. I'd sung as backup in a dozen different, crappy bands. I'd recorded readings for an internet audio-book company. I'd tried a stint as a stand up comedian and died on stage. I'd also done work on radio, and as a DJ, as an emcee, in advertising and in a range of voice-gigs on *Fiverr.com*. Finally, a week ago, I had hit it big. After a year of negotiations and pleadings, I had succeeded in getting a small recording outfit to let me cut an album of my music. It was hip-hop and rap meets opera, mostly vocal with some light backing tracks. Maybe no one would ever buy a copy when it hit the internet, maybe a million people would rush to buy it on day one. But it was my chance to do what I'd always wanted. And you've gotta chase your dreams.

The journey home was a three hundred mile drive and I had utterly enjoyed the first third of it. All I owned was a rust-bucket, four-door saloon that had seen better days five years earlier. With the accelerator pressed into the floor, it managed about fifty-five miles an hour – for short periods, or the engine overheated. As driving entertainment, the car offered a cassette player (*yes, it was that old!*), but this had died months ago, and so I used an MP3 Player with a portable speaker on the front passenger seat.

My album was on the Player, blasting at my eardrums as I rode through the night. High above, the full moon and an array of stars all seemed brighter than ever before. I had left the city behind two hours ago and now the road was flanked by thick forest. *Were those pine trees rearing alongside me?* I wondered. *I dunno. I'm a vocalist, Jim, not a botanist.* They sure smelled sweet and fresh on the air gushing through the partially-open windows. Best of all, the traffic had vanished about an hour ago. I practically owned the two-lane road. It was just me, the road and the forest as far as my eyes could see.

“Good God,” I said to myself. “This has been the best week of my life. Everything is so right.”

Unfortunately, it wasn't long before my luck changed. And everything went so wrong.

\* \* \*

Around 2 AM, a faint drizzle began. Specs of moisture grew on my windscreen and a faint downward haze was added to my headlights' glare. At first, the rain wasn't enough for me to need the wipers. Ten minutes later, heavier clouds had drifted-in to obscure half the stars above... and these unleashed their water as if I was some despised enemy. Rain came hammering at the car. The roof sounded as if a million tiny fingers were playing upon it. That steady, annoying drip started in the top right-hand corner of the rear window – a leak I had never had a chance to fix. The windscreen was awash and I had to switch the wipers to maximum to maintain any vision at all. I slowed down from fifty to under thirty miles an hour. Even in a car twice as good as mine, driving fast would have been reckless.

The music blaring from my MP3 Player was drowned-out by the percussion from the heavens. I didn't reach over to pause the player – that might have been reckless too.

A number of lousy possibilities entered my mind as I drove carefully. First, wet weather sometimes brought out the gremlins in my car's electrical system. It wasn't difficult to imagine my rust-heap coming to a shuddering halt at any moment. Second, in weather like this, you sometimes got an ass – maybe even a drunken ass – putting his foot down in the hope of “beating the rain” (whatever the hell that might mean). I really wouldn't like to meet one of those guys zooming in the opposite direction. Third, what would I do if I saw a hitchhiker? If I left him to the elements, he could end up with pneumonia. If I picked him up and he was a serial killer—

“Holy shit—”

When people are in an accident, they often use the phrase “appeared out of nowhere”. Usually, anyone hearing this thinks: *you'd have seen it if you were paying proper attention*. I swear I was paying attention. My eyes never left the road. My mind may have been wandering, but my focus wasn't...

It *did* appear out of nowhere. In one heartbeat, the road was empty. In the next, a dark, humped shape was darting through my right headlight beam and appearing in the left one.

I reacted faster than thought. What I did was dictated by a piece of advice my father had given me many years earlier.

He'd said: “Son, if a damn deer, cat, dog or whatever jumps in front of your car, you don't panic. If you spin the wheel hard and hit the brakes to avoid the bastard, you'll wind up crashing. Maybe

head-on into a tree. You might be dead or paralysed for life. Don't wipe yourself out for an animal: human life matters more. You slow and turn gently away. You might miss it. You might turn it into mincemeat. You might just give it a glancing blow. But both of you will stand a chance of coming out alive. Besides, if it was dumb enough to jump in front of a car, then maybe it's Darwinism in action."

So I took my foot off the accelerator and covered the brake pedal – while angling the steering wheel about twenty degrees, enough to run me against the edge of the tarmac, but not off into the muddy floor of the forest...

I didn't miss or mincemeat the animal. The very edge of the left-hand front bumper made contact with its flank. There was a sharp *click* of bone breaking – and the thing flipped over and spun in the air.

For a moment I thought I saw a whirlwind of flailing limbs. Heavy rain had undoubtedly obscured my vision – for no land animal has so many long, curling appendages...

Then the struck creature blurred past my side-window. A glance in my rear-view mirror showed a dark, twisted mass bounce three times on the road before coming to a halt.

I straightened the steering wheel and braked to a smooth stop. One tap of a finger silenced my MP3 Player.

Another look in my rear-view mirror revealed nothing but rain pouring and rebounding from the tarmac.

Many people would have carried on driving and left the animal to survive or die. I couldn't. Another lesson from my father was a more moral one: *You don't just leave a hurt animal. You make sure it's okay, you take it to help or – if it's suffering – you end its pain.*

As I opened the door and stepped out into the surging rain, I prayed the thing had already run off. Or limped off. Hell, I'd be happy to carry its injured body to my car, let it bleed all over the back seat and get the thing to a vet. One thought which turned my stomach was my having to smash its skull with a rock if I found the thing beyond help and in agony. I'd do it, but I'd hate to have to.

The rainstorm hit me with both its roaring noise and its battering force. Since I was only wearing a T-shirt and jeans – my coat being unwisely stored in the boot – I was instantly soaked to the skin. My slicked-back long hair transformed into a mess of rat-tails; my beard felt like a sodden sponge; and my clothing seemed to become liquid. Frenzied blinking fought to keep the water from obscuring my vision completely. I put my right hand over my eyebrows to shade my eyes from the rain – which did little good.

That big old mechanic's torch I owned would have been pretty useful then. Of course, it was back at my apartment, in the cupboard under the sink.

I leaned against the dripping car with my free hand as I walked alongside the vehicle. The metal was icy-cold – like I was quickly becoming.

I peered along the tarmac. I could see maybe fifteen paces.

Empty. Nothing there.

I smiled as I continued on. *The animal was gone. Probably under a tree, pissing itself laughing at the stupid human getting wet.*

No. When I got parallel with my rear bumper, I was able to make out a black shape on the road. No details could be gauged, but there was movement.

I cocked my head like a dog and tried to listen past the downpour. My mind expected a sobbing sound or maybe a howling... But all I got was a faint drift of another, strange noise. It was weird and oscillating, high-pitched and almost musical. The call resembled a whale's cries... which was damn ridiculous out there in the woods.

*It's the rain, I decided, it's playing tricks on my hearing.*

Four more nervous steps took me away from the car. I considered with bitter irony that some other vehicle might now come along and run over both me and my victim. Things like that happen every day.

"Be okay, you little critter," I murmured to myself. "Please God, don't be all mangled..."

I still couldn't see the thing properly. I knew it must be less than a dozen paces away now. Rain was distorting my view of the creature. I could determine a large rounded mass on the ground, over twelve feet across. Four or more limbs seemed to be squirming out across the waterlogged ground, like lashing whips. They threw up waves of water. Three more limbs – well, they looked like limbs, but surely couldn't be – were thrashing up into the air, making me think of slender fists shaking angrily at the sky. *Seven limbs? Crazy and wrong.* Besides, limbs have joints, they don't curve and twist around themselves like these things did. And their apparent size was wrong too – up to five feet long each, and tapering towards the end as if they were fleshy spikes...

Jutting from the left-hand side of the body was a shape that I guessed would turn out to be the head. Except it was too damn long – seven feet from the ‘shoulders’ to the tip of its snout, or whatever there was. I imagined that three quarters of this length was its neck, which was so thick I probably couldn’t have wrapped my arms around it. The head formed a bulbous end upon the neck and tapered away to the front.

I stood there dumbfounded for several seconds. My left hand scratched at my dripping beard and I shook my head.

“What the hell are you..?”

Ridiculously, I smiled as a movie flashback hit me. I’d just quoted Schwarzenegger in Predator. Maybe if I’d been wiser, I would have recognised this as an omen... and run for my life.

Instead, after a deep breath, I took a few more paces.

And I got my answer.

\* \* \*

A new kind of cold seeped into my flesh. It was birthed by disbelief and growing fear.

The thing I had struck with my car was no deer, wild dog, boar or any other normal creature of the forest. Or a normal creature from anywhere else I knew of.

There was no fur, rather a smooth, black hide that glistened beneath the downpour as if heavily oiled. The torso of the thing was a gelatinous sac – the flesh loose and rippling beneath rain-impacts. A spine and any other bones were buried deep in the fatty flesh. Along the sides, top and bottom of the thing there protruded thin, folded-up lengths that reminded me of either fins or bat-wings. I estimated there might be a dozen of these fins/wings and that they might stretch out between ten and fifteen inches if extended fully.

The neck was made of jelly-flesh like the torso, though the skin was heavily wrinkled and this suggested the neck could stretch out to almost double its considerable length. The head looked to be of harder material, and the back of it had a number of bulbous protrusions, evidence of sturdy bone-structure beneath. Either over-lapping folds of flesh or prominent bands of muscle gave the head the appearance of an immense closed flower-head. On top of this texturing, there were formations running from near the neck to the front of the head: each was a crenulated pipe, two inches thick, ending in a bulbous lump that was twice as thick. I could see three of these formations, evenly-spaced, which suggested a fourth out of sight.

Both the body and neck were motionless except for the thrashing impacts of rain and *possibly* some minimal movement due to breathing... So it was the limbs that held my unwilling attention the most. They had no joints – they were snaking, thrashing tentacles. Skin across these things was also black and smooth, however a patterning existed too. What to me looked like hundreds of tiny versions of the fin/wing shapes covered each tentacle – and these flexed horribly as the limbs continued their flailing. The small protrusions flexed in and out non-stop, pulsing faster than even the heightened beating of my heart.

I noticed, being closer now, that there were eight tentacles rather than seven. The eighth lay motionless, stretched out behind the creature like a tail. Clearly, the *crack* I had heard upon impact had been bones breaking in or above this appendage, rendering it useless.

Fear of whatever this thing might be or might be capable of, overrode my instinct to help a creature I had struck with my car. I found myself back-pacing even before I knew I wanted to retreat: my fight-or-flight instinct was saying *get the hell away from this damned thing*.

I had managed three steps in retreat and the horrible mass was beginning to fade towards obscurity behind the rain... When the creature suddenly turned its neck.

It moved so fast that I almost stumbled in reaction. The water covering the head was cast off in an angled spray and the very front of the mass was abruptly facing me. For a moment, there was nothing to see. The folded flesh or muscle of the head merely came to a tapered end – again, very like a closed flower-head. Then the four pipe-like formations set around the head flexed in unison, curving away from the great head – and the skin peeled back from their bulbous ends to reveal hideous eyes.

Each eye was a luminous pale yellow ball. The pupil was a ragged red slash across the centre, ebbing wider and narrower in the manner of a pulsating open wound.

From those grotesque eyes, I felt a sense of anger emanate. It was looking at the being who had dealt it a brutal injury and it was overcome with inhuman loathing.

Beneath the sac-body of the creature, the four able limbs slithered back and then flexed upwards. The body was raised four feet into the air. For a second it looked like a nightmarish oil derrick. Above the beast, the three higher tentacles whipped ever-faster...

I turned and ran with all the speed I was capable of...

And slipped to come crashing down upon my face.

*End Of Sample*

## Hooker

Nigel Fawson had never been so drunk in his life. Neither had he ever taken drugs before.

Tonight, though, was a special night. Considering what had happened this afternoon, a little liquor – or even a lot – plus some cocaine, couldn't make his life any worse. Could it?

Fawson was fifty-two. His age showed in the wrinkles around his eyes and mouth, and in the greying of his formerly coal-black hair, but not in the lean physique of his six-foot-three body. A good diet, little alcohol and two evenings a week playing squash, had kept him in good condition and given him a strong level of stamina. Stamina had been essential for his job in Sales – the work had been long and hard, enough to drop some of his colleagues into depression. Promotions had only come after years of service and had been well-earned. Still, he had a family to provide for and he was utterly dedicated to them. He had grown to love Melissa more and more in their twenty-three years of marriage, and their four-year-old son Mike was a Godsend after so many years of trying for children.

This afternoon, at Two O'clock, his boss had called him into his office and handed him a redundancy cheque. Fawson had been stunned to his heart – it was utterly unexpected and the firm was doing well, it didn't need to make cutbacks. The answer was that the shareholders were demanding a five percent cut in staff to increase their profits, and Fawson was one of the unlucky five percent.

He'd walked silently past his colleagues, emptied his desk and driven home. To find his wife in bed with his best friend. Melissa hadn't even been upset by his discovery. Her words would ring in his mind for the rest of his life:

"What do you expect, Nigel? You're boring and you work too many hours. And you're dumb... Like, did you really think Mikey was your son?"

For a moment, he had considered killing the pair. They honestly deserved it. But he couldn't. He still loved her more than he loved life itself, despite her unfaithfulness. He loved Mikey too. So he had packed a bag, got into his car and left.

For the next hour, the thought of suicide had flitted in and out of his thoughts. He had nothing to live for, so why not?

In the end, he couldn't kill himself. His opinions on religion were mixed, but he saw life as a miracle and not something to be squandered. However, when he had entered the seedy downtown bar later that night, there had been a self-destructive glimmer in the back of his mind. Turning up there, in his business suit, he might attract the wrong kind of attention. Fawson could get mugged and killed. He might die in a bar fight... And if he did, he wouldn't care.

\* \* \*

Fawson attracted the wrong kind of attention after an hour of steady drinking.

A rat-faced creep with long filthy hair, severe acne and a haven't-showered-for-weeks odour, dropped into a chair at Fawson's table. The former Sales Rep looked across and it took a moment for him to focus on the other man's face. The ugly rip in the newcomer's nose, from when a nose-ring had been torn out, made Fawson physically wince. Worse still, the stench of the stranger made him gag.

"Rough night, bud?" the creep drawled.

Fawson picked up the latest in a long line of whiskey shots and downed the final dreg.

"I'll drink to that. A night to make a guy appreciate how shitty life can be."

"A woman?" came the reply.

"Exactly." It was weird how Fawson felt suddenly willing to open his heart to this man. "Wife... soon to be Ex."

The creep winced. "Ohh, that'll hurt."

"Survived it yourself?" Fawson asked.

"Five friggin' times."

"Glutton for punishment, are you?"

"Got that damn right."

Fawson was trying to measure-up the stranger. In his drunken state, it wasn't easy. Plus, Fawson was used to dealing with businessmen over lunches, not reeking creeps in a dive of a bar. Surprisingly, the man was open and honest about what he wanted.

He pulled a small plastic baggie of white powder from a pocket and dangled it over Fawson's array of empty glasses.

“Wanna feel good for a while?”

The words “I never do drugs” were on Fawson’s lips. He licked them, as if to wash the reply away, and said instead:

“What do I... you know... do with the stuff?”

A wide grin spread across the spot-etched face. “Let me show you. Hold out your hand, palm-down.”

The drunk obeyed and his companion tapped out a fine line of white dust behind his knuckles.

“Now snort it up. Snort it deep, man.”

It was a crazy situation. In a bar Fawson would have normally avoided just to ensure his survival. About to do drugs for the first time with a man he couldn’t trust, who hadn’t even told him his name. The reasoning part of Fawson’s mind should have screamed at him not to do it – but that part of him was wallowing in sorrow, drunk into stupidity and simply didn’t care anymore. Fawson took a deep sniff of the powder...

And his mind seemed to explode.

\* \* \*

“Are you all right?”

The woman’s voice was a luxury to Fawson’s ears. Soft, gentle, utterly feminine and rich in kindness.

Fawson found his head nestled in his arms on the same table where he had been drinking. He drew his head up a few inches and his senses swam, luring him back towards oblivion.

“Holy shit.”

A chair squeaked as it was moved and Fawson heard someone sit. A waft of cheap fragrance entered his nostrils and he remembered the woman’s voice. *Had that been just now? Or yesterday? Or had it been a dream?*

“God, what have I done to myself?” he croaked. Fawson ran a hand through his hair. It was saturated in sweat and his skull felt hot.

“Honey,” the voice came again. “Just be grateful you only took one hit. And it was a tiny one at that.”

He raised his head further, amazed at how heavy it had become. The darkened bar seemed glaringly bright.

“I only had one... ‘hit?’”

She laughed. The new sound was musical and alluring.

“My friend, I was watching, just in case Shifty tried to lift your wallet. He didn’t have to. After one hit, you gave him a bunch of notes and he left in a hurry.”

“I bought his baggie?”

“No... I think you paid him to take it away, before you killed yourself.”

“I don’t remember. It must have been powerful stuff.”

The girl’s eyebrows rose. “Powerful? His shit is known to be ninety-nine percent talcum powder. If you hadn’t been so drunk, you’d probably have just sneezed and asked him what was supposed to happen.”

Fawson turned his head a little in her direction, but gave up. It was hard enough just staying awake.

“So, I guess I’m a failure as a wannabe drug-addict.”

“Yeah, you struck out. Good for you.” There was a suggestion of genuine care in the last three words.

“At least I can hope to make a decent alcoholic.”

“If that’s what you really want. Getting drunk is easy – any asshole can do it.”

He made a mammoth effort to raise and turn his head in the direction of the lovely voice. The task drained at his consciousness and made him feel woozy – yet it was all worthwhile. Whoever his companion was, she was the most beautiful woman Fawson had ever laid eyes upon. He estimated her to be in her early twenties. Her pale skin made him think of cream and honey; it was flawlessly smooth and amply revealed by her attire. Her long, golden-blond hair shone silky and lustrous. The rounded shape of her face drew his gaze across her inviting red lips, then over a slender nose and graceful cheekbones, to eyes that were large and very dark. Those eyes seem to hook him – to draw him in closer and fix his eyesight. Fawson found himself blinking hard to break the spell of the woman’s beauty. His peripheral vision took in the rest of his companion. Her physique was somewhere between slim and ample, a concoction of long limbs and subtle curves. All she wore was

a strapped-top white blouse, a short dark green skirt and high heels. She wasn't even wearing a necklace or earrings, and didn't need them to enhance her looks. Over her right shoulder was a small black bag.

The words, "You're breathtaking," stumbled out of Fawson's mouth before he could stop them.

She smiled – obviously hearing what he said – and replied: "Sorry, what did you say..?"

"You're... very kind," he lied. "Keeping an eye out for me and coming over to see how I was."

"My pleasure." She extended a hand. "I'm Valerie."

"Nigel." He shook her hand very gently, concerned that in his drunken state he might clench too hard. "And the pleasure's all mine."

She smiled again, and Fawson felt as if he was bathing in the glow of her expression.

"So, you willing to buy a friendly girl a drink?"

"Absolutely," Fawson said. He put his hands on the table to lever himself upright.

"Hey, slow down or you'll fall down," Valerie scolded. "Gimme a ten-spot and I'll go get us what we need."

He didn't hesitate. In seconds, she was sashaying her way to the bar. Fawson couldn't resist glancing at the slinking motion of her walk; he noticed at the same time how tall Valerie was – probably only four inches shorter than himself.

Valerie returned, but not with more alcohol. She bore a mug of steaming black coffee for Fawson and a dainty cup of cappuccino for herself. A plate of cheese sandwiches was also placed down in front of Fawson.

"Drink the coffee and eat up," she instructed, "if you want to feel better."

Fawson eyed the sandwiches and frowned slightly.

"I usually have rye..."

"Well, this is the 'house special' bread. It's called 'stale'. Eat up."

Overwhelmed by her beauty and personality, Fawson surrendered. He ate and drank, then rushed off to the bathroom to throw up. Ten minutes later, he returned – feeling a lot better.

Surprisingly, Valerie was still there.

\* \* \*

Valerie's eyesight had followed him from the toilet exit back towards their table. Fawson realised she must have determined how much steadier his balance and coordination were – he wasn't stumbling like a drunk anymore, just a little unsteady on his feet.

Fawson came to a halt at the table.

"Would you like me to get you another drink?" he asked.

She shook her head. For a moment, her long hair flew, then it cascaded around her shoulders to land perfectly back in place.

"Why," the girl said, "you heading for another shot of whiskey?"

"God, no." He sat down, smiling for the first time since the impromptu call into his boss's office. "Never again. I just thought you might like a glass of wine or something..."

"No. I don't drink alcohol. I need to keep my head on straight, in my game."

"In your game?" Fawson asked.

She leaned forward and whispered, as if in some conspiracy: "I'm a call girl. Hooker. Pro... Didn't you know?"

Feeling dumb, Fawson said, "No. You don't look... well, you know..."

"There's a sentence trying to claw its way out, isn't there?" she teased.

He shrugged. Something else came to him. "When you came over, were you..?"

"Trying to pick you up?" She giggled wildly. "No, I usually try for conscious men – it's easier. Checking on you was my good deed for the day."

"And thanks again."

"Besides..." Now she mimicked his earlier fumbled speech: "You don't look... well, you know... the type who'd pay."

Fawson was a little confused. On the way back from the bathroom, he had had ideas of talking to Valerie about his lousy day. Mostly about how cruel his beloved wife had been. He had anticipated a few minutes of comfort in speaking to her and in her replies. Now...

"Actually." Valerie's next word shattered Fawson's thoughts. "I'd better be going. Girl's gotta earn her rent, you know."

She stood up and Fawson felt his heart sink. A smile from the girl seemed to magnify his disappointment.

“You take better care of yourself, Nigel,” Valerie told him. “And get out of this neighbourhood.”  
Fawson had no idea, but his reaction was eagerly anticipated by his companion.

“Wait,” he said, and added in a lower tone: “Maybe I am the kind of guy you’re after. In fact, I’d love to be him.”

Another of her sweet smiles.

“Okay, come on. My place isn’t far.”

Fawson left with her, his sadness and bitterness subdued by tingling excitement and joy.

*The bait had been chosen, the line cast, and the prey was hooked. All that remained was to draw it in...*

*And feed.*

*End Of Sample*

## Chained

*"This is 15-Adam-20, calling in from Bachman Heights..."*

*"Got you, 15-Adam-20. What the hell are you doing out there?"*

*"We got word from a bunch of street-people about screams in this vicinity..."*

*"You been listening to winos again? Man, you're really wet-behind-the-ears, aren't you? Your partner should know better."*

*"Can the attitude for once, will you? We've been patrolling the area for five minutes – and now we've stopped because we've heard screams. My ears might be wet, but they work just damn fine."*

*"Okay, 15-Adam-20, do you need backup?"*

*"Backup? Send everyone you can. I've just looked over the back wall of 512 Bachman and there are skeletons littering the rear garden. Must be at least a dozen amongst the rubble and rubbish."*

*"Good God. Backup will be on its way ASAP. Stay put."*

*"That's a negative. You get the backup here, but we're going in to stop those screams. Can't take the chance that whoever that is will be dead before help arrives..."*

*"Proceed with caution, 15-Adam-20..."*

\* \* \*

Sergeant Conway met me at the entrance to 512 Bachman Heights. He was a tall, wiry-muscled black man, who was as reliable as sunrise. After college, he toured with a theatre group, performing across the state – then, for some reason, Conway became a cop. Over thirty years he grew into a seasoned Sergeant with a wicked sense of humour, who still loved to act.

"Well, let me introduce this property," he began. This was his real estate agent routine. "A real fixer-upper in an... *interesting*... area of the city. Began as a two-storey, three bedroom option, but was re-graded to a tall bungalow after the upstairs fell in. Air conditioning is the natural kind, on account of all the holes in the walls..."

I didn't laugh as I crossed the threshold into the hallway of a reeking ruin that was once a family home. Conway didn't expect it – I'd always reckoned his banter was a way of calming his nerves, and it calmed mine too. The hall was a dozen feet wide and extended back to what I guessed was a kitchen doorway; left and right there were other open doorways; the stairs rose up eight feet to end in a crumbling ruin. Whatever carpets the former owners might have left behind were buried under layers of fallen masonry, deposited junk and rat shit. The stench would have made the average citizen gag – sadly, it's something you got used to during fifteen years as a uniformed cop and then seven as a detective. I peered up and shined my torch towards the rafters of the roof. A few bats flitted around.

*What the hell did you little critters witness?* I wondered.

Looking back down, I saw another skeleton, six paces from the doorway. Surrounding it was a circle of plastic pyramids with numbers on them – placed by the crime scene tech's while they took photos. I knelt down beside the remains.

The bones weren't arranged in the normal manner. When a person dies and their flesh decomposes, the skeleton tends to be found lying fairly intact. In this case, the skull lay on the hip bone; bones from the arms and legs were mixed together; smaller bones from the hands and feet looked to have been scattered like confetti; sections of spinal column were everywhere. This was just like the fourteen skeletons outside.

And there was another matching characteristic to what we had found outside. The bones were pure white and clean except for a little dust. They looked... *polished*.

"What's the count, now?" I asked Conway as I rose.

"Forty-two. Most of them are in there..." He gestured to the open door on the right, beyond which I saw a group of waiting policemen. "...With *him*."

Someone strode into the hall from the left. It was the short, white-haired form of the deputy coroner, Tim Jacobs. From the way he limped, I knew his arthritis had him in a vicious grasp that day. When Jacobs saw me, he moved across to join us. No one shook hands – we were all wearing plastic crime-scene gloves. Jacobs took a notebook from his tweed jacket and flipped it open.

"I thought you were watching your grandson play baseball this afternoon, Tim," I offered.

"Would have been, but some dumb cop called home to tell his wife about this... And his son overheard the details and typed it up on Twitter as fast as his fingers could go. So, the press are crawling up the Mayor's ass. The Mayor's up the Commissioner's ass. The Commissioner's up the Captain's ass. The Captain's up my boss's ass... It's like a bloody proctologists' convention."

I shrugged. “And your afternoon off got cancelled.”

“Yep.”

“And in your expert opinion..?”

He pointed at the skeleton on the floor. “Oh, these folks are all dead.”

Sometimes I wanted to strangle the old man. I gave him my patented talk-or-die glare.

“I honestly don’t know how they died. There are a few broken bones – but no signs of gunshots, knife-wounds or blunt-trauma. They may not even have been murdered. They might have died of natural causes, then been brought here and stripped clean of flesh.”

“Stripped clean?” Conway repeated. “I assumed rats had—”

“No. Nothing gnawed on these bones. Something drew all the flesh off in such a way that the bones were left spotless. In fact, the bones don’t even have the usual marks upon them that show where muscles were attached. And it wasn’t done with acid, either. They look...”

“Polished?” I said.

“Hell, it’s as good a term as any. Dunno how it was done, though.”

“How about ID?”

“No wallets, watches, jewellery, clothes... All I’ll have to work with are dental records. I’m just glad that fillings and bridgework did survive.”

Muttering to himself, he left via the front door. Conway and I went to the right – and entered the room where *he* was.

\* \* \*

Four more cops waited inside and I knew them all. Daniels and Perkins had worked with me often; they looked like a pair of linebackers squeezed into police uniforms. Daniels was in his early twenties and still a rookie, looking like a white college kid who has only just begun shaving. Perkins was twice his age, a big black man with greying hair and the face and attitude of a drill sergeant. The other two, who I’d worked alongside recently for the first time, were middle-aged, slightly paunchy, beat-weary cops. Offer either one an early pension and they’d snap it up; they were sick of the job, but had nowhere else to go. Gyeong was Korean-American, easily remembered by his shaven head and irritable nature. Lee was the only woman here, but could probably have out-drunk, out-punched and out-driven most male cops; I couldn’t stand the permanent *ob-do-I-really-have-to* expression on her face.

The four nodded to me in deference to my rank of detective.

My attention shifted from them to the former living room we were in. It was roughly twenty feet wide by thirty long. To my right, two large windows would have let in light from outside, before the glass was shattered and someone boarded them up. Light was now provided by two Police lamps on tripods, set either side of the doorway, and these illuminated everything in stark detail. The left-hand wall contained a collapsed hearth and a doorway not far from where I had entered. The door was missing from the latter and a pile of rubble prevented access into the room beyond. The walls around us had suffered from an onslaught of damp, so that the plaster had rotted away and the bricks were visible. A white carpet of human bones stretched from halfway into the room to the far wall. They were pure white and had that horrible polished appearance.

When my gaze reached the far wall, it rose up the figure chained to the mould-covered bricks.

He was utterly emaciated. The jeans, T-shirt and jacket hung off him as if he was a living skeleton. His bare feet resembled bird’s claws, for the bones were so pronounced. The head was a narrow skull with skin painted on it and dark eyes deep in their sockets. His hair and beard were wild.

I noted additional details. The man was six-foot-two and might have weighed around a hundred pounds. Four metal spikes had been driven into the wall and short chains ran from these to shackles on his wrists and ankles; this held him in an ‘X’, upright and helpless. By sheer effort, the man was standing rather than hanging off the wall. His eyes shifted left and right to study the cops.

Conway said in a hiss: “How long has the poor bastard been stuck up there?”

I turned my attention to the crowd of policemen.

“Why the hell isn’t he in an ambulance and on the way to hospital?”

Perkins’ heavy baritone voice answered: “Sir, he doesn’t want to be freed. He’s been begging us to leave him here.”

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