

Prologue

People have strange ideas what it's like being a private detective. Ideas they've formed from television, movies, and books. Which, of course, means ideas they've formed from fiction. I can't think of a single fictional private detective's caseload which even mildly imitates mine. Murder, international jewel thieves, drug smugglers, foreign spies, super scheming madmen, and drop dead gorgeous provocateurs just aren't a part of my daily routine. If they were, I would've found a new line of work a long time ago. I'm not a superhero. Bullets don't bounce off of my chest. And yes, I am

someone who's afraid to die.

An average normal day for me is exactly the same as an average normal day for most people. Boredom, tediousness, and repetition. I'm not complaining, mind you, I'm just telling you the way it is. Incidents of daring, physical excitement, just don't jump into our life very often. If they did, private detectives wouldn't be private detectives for very long. They wouldn't be private detectives for very long because they wouldn't be alive very long.

But once in a great while, a case comes up that stands out and demands to be noticed. A case that's rarer than any precious, highly lusted after jewel. A case which is, without the slightest exaggeration, a once in a lifetime thing. That's exactly the kind of case I've chosen for you to read here. It's a case marked by wounds, feuds, and shadows. The wounds are deep, the feuds are complex, and the shadows are as relentless as the rock that dogs the cursed.

Sisyphus of ancient Greek mythos. And, oh yes, there is one other thing I must tell you about this case. It is my last.

Chapter One:

It had been a dreary, lifeless day at the office when the phone started to ring. Its voice was loud and annoying, but my partner and I welcomed the intrusion. Business had been steady of late, but the cases themselves had been mind numbingly repetitious and tedious. So, when the phone interrupted the dullness of golden silence, both of us made quick grabs for the phone. Maybe, just maybe we thought, an interesting case was about to come our way.

I'm sorry, I haven't introduced my partner and I, have I? Being the gentleman that I am, I'll introduce my partner first. Her name is Alexandria(not Alexandra) Sanos. Alexandria is seven years or so younger than I am.(I'm 47) She's also a few inches shorter than I am. (I'm 5'9") Her facial features are small and modestly attractive.

Alex is a woman of a normally calm, impassive disposition, Sophia Loren hips, and heavily curled dark brown hair.

A woman of well-hidden complexity, she still carries with her the shadows of a less than idyllic childhood. She has never seen her birth mother, who abandoned her to a dispassionate orphanage. As she grew older, she passed in and out of foster care before being adopted at the age of twelve. The people who adopted her were an older, middle aged couple. And while they didn't neglect or abuse her, they were emotionally distant. Not the kind of people who kissed, hugged, and displayed free and open displays of genuine affection. The personality defect only reenforced Alex's feelings of inadequacy, worthlessness, and isolation.

Marriage and joining the police force were supposed to help her quell a large part of the darkness of her childhood past. Instead, in the end, they only made the darkness take on an even deeper

shade. The marriage was good in the beginning. Carl gave her the outward love and affection she so desperately needed. A couple of years into the marriage, though, an unforeseen became known. Alex couldn't become pregnant without seriously jeopardizing her life.

She tried to have a child once, miscarried and almost died. A year or so later, Carl wanted her to try and have a child again. Alex refused, and the marriage was never the same after that. They remain married to this day, but in name only. Why they are still married, I don't know. They are no medals for staying married. And each person only gets one brief, shot at life. So, if a marriage is bad, really bad, with no hope of it being good, get the hell out, I say.

Alex's time on the city police force was no less debilitating. She clashed often with her superiors. Most of the arguments centered around crime prevention versus crime reaction. She believed everyone benefitted from spending more time, money, and effort

trying to prevent crimes, instead of just sitting around and waiting for them to happen and arresting people. Take drugs. Every year scores upon scores of people are put in jail for drugs. Does this cause less street drugs to be available.? No. Does this cause less people to do drugs? No. Well, few people agreed with Alex. And even fewer people did so openly. This and the general daily inside politics on any police force only pushed her into deeper emotional hole. There were no promotions, no commendations, no recognition of any kind.

With nothing but shadows in both her personal and professional life, Alex sought solace where so many people before her have. Alcohol. Cheap wine and expensive liqueurs to be precise. Within a year, she was an addict. Hitting absolute rock bottom a year and a half later, she checked into AA, quit her job, and put both booze and the polic department behind her.

Alex is, in both mind and body, a true individual. She

believes in unseen cosmic creators of her own design and shuns all forms of organized religion. She dresses well, but ignores overpriced, over hyped designer brands and the ever changing chosen style of the day. Her friends are few but carefully chosen. Alex is a person of rare character who disdains pretense in her view of people, institutions, and herself. She is a person, if need be I would die. And that is no lightly given statement from someone, who at times, is completely overwhelmed by thoughts of death. I said it and I meant it.

As for me, I'll try to be as brief as possible. My hair , thin on top and thick in the back, is a mix of gray and black. So far the black is winning. But not for much longer. My stomach is protruding more outward with each passing year. I have a huge head.(No, I don't mean ego. I mean the actual size of my skull.) My eyes are expressive, dark brown, and are lined underneath by deep, half-moon

circles.

I've been married twice. The first one ended quickly and rightly so. The second one wasn't like the first. The second one had substance. Hell, it had everything a good relationship should have. But one, never to be forgotten day, my wife Sarah left the house with our daughter Shelley and never came back. The only times I've seen either of them since is in my dreams.

I have no immediate family. Both of my parents are dead. And I am an only child. Alex is my only close friend. I worship no deities of any kind, I'm cheap, and I have a natural, inborn distrust of groups.(Two's company, three's a crowd, and four's a goddamn mob.)

To me, life is largely a game of 'Let's Pretend'. Let's pretend lies are truth. Let's pretend the road to happiness is lined with technological toys. Let pretend delusion is reality. Let's pretend all

of us are not born of the same savage tribe. I could go on with many more examples, but I won't. At the root of all these countless little games within games is that human beings are very determined to never grow up. One day it will be our undoing.

As for my work history, I've had many different jobs. Like Alexandria, I used to be a cop. And my time on the force wasn't any more pleasant than hers. My troubles centered around a differing opinion about what to do with rogue and corrupt officers. I had no tolerance for them. Left alone, they bring the whole force down with them. To serve and to protect is supposed to apply to the public not to crooked co-workers. Like Alex, I could get few of my fellow officers to agree with me. And even fewer to say so in public. Frustrated and going nowhere, I quit the force after five years.

In my first three years as a private detective, I went through four partners. I even spent some of that time with no partner. Then

Alex, came along .The day she walked into the office we had a long talk over a fresh pot of coffee and quickly hit it off. I was so taken with her, I hired her then and there without hesitation. That was just over seven years ago and we've been partners at the Baying at the Moon Detective Agency ever since.

I'll tell you right out though, that our relationship is difficult to put into an easy fit, neatly wrapped box. We're business partners and friends, to be sure, but something more too. Something that's really hard to explain.

The two of us, for example, have spent an excessive amount of time together. We've shared long hours in the office even when it's not professionally required. We've also gone out socially a few times too. And though we've never gone to bed together, the possibility of it has been there. What has stopped us, I don't know. Not on moral grounds, that's for sure. At least not on my part.

There are a lot of questions between us. A lot of questions, but few answers. Do I love her in a romantic sense? I don't know. She's someone I care about deeply, the only person who's made life bearable for the past seven years. She'd do anything for me. Someone who'd risk her life for me. On more than one occasion, she's enticed me with her wiggling stocking covered toes. She is also someone who insanely insisted on drinking the last cup of coffee every day. Such had been the case again today, this late gray afternoon in March.

"You took the last cup of coffee again," I said seconds before the phone would interrupt our conversation.

"Make another pot. It'll be the most work you've done all day."

"Funny, Alex. You know I don't drink coffee this late in the afternoon."

“Sorry.”

“No, you’re not.”

“You’re right, I’m not.”

Just then, with my hand not more than five inches from the receiver, the phone rang. My hand raced to the receiver like a coiled cobra ready to bite its prey. I would get to the phone first this time, I thought. This time, I’d actually win the race. I grabbed the receiver, put it to my mouth and said:

“Hello, ---” It was the only word I

“Baying at the Moon Detective Agency. How can I help you?” Alex had beaten me to the phone yet again. Damn.

Our office, by the way, consisted of a pair of cramped adjoining rooms and one undersized window. There is no to date, fully loaded computer operation at work here. Computers cost a lot of money. Besides, our

agency is a small outfit dealing with mundane, trivial matters. A computer isn't necessary to do our jobs. So why have one then? Why buy something expensive that's unnecessary?

The city we do business in is Wannabe, Pennsylvania, a gray musty city of just over 100,000 people. Few do well here. Most do not. The few do everything they can to keep things that way. And the most, they, for the most part, just stand there and take it.

They buy and consume and play with all of their hi-tech little toys like small, unthinking

Children, easily bribed and easily amused.

There is evil in this town. The evil of unfettered power and limitless greed. The evil of the few. Per capita, this brand of evil is as high here as it is anywhere in the country. And the few, they are so proud of what they do.

As for the detective agency, it was doing well enough to have

us comfortably in the black. Too many cases, though, involved sexual infidelity. This kind of case repeated often enough can affect your psyche in ways you thought weren't possible. Sex and all of its darker tones can become an addictive fixation.

Since Sarah left me, my only involvement with sex has been with these darker tones. Pornography, prostitution, and affairs with married women have all been a regrettable part of my personal resume the last few years. I offer no excuses or alibis. It's a part of me I hate, but couldn't seem to shed.

So, when the phone rang as it did on the day of March 3rd , I hoping for two things. We had a case to work that would make us some decent money. And two, the case didn't involve sex in any way.

I hovered over her, staring down at her, and waiting for the call to end. Alex, for her part, played the situation for all it was

worth. With her shoeless, stockinged feet up on the desk, and a half smoked cigarette in her mouth, she paid little attention to me. Occasionally, she'd look up at me, wiggle her toes playfully and smile the most rueful of smiles.

I would, in turn, shift my attention away from the phone call and onto her cute little wiggling toes. It was a ploy she used often with me. And I, being the toe wiggling sucker that I am, fell for it every time. Before I could snap out of this strange suggestive fixation, the call was over and Alex had already started to play a new game.

“We may have a client,” she said.

“What kind?”

“It involves a woman and her sister.”

“That’s two women.”

“We know one of them.”

“What’s her name.”

“I’ll tell you,” she said then proceeded to leave the air empty of words.

“Well? Are you going to tell me or not?”

“Yes.”

“Are you enjoying this game of yours?”

“Not as much as wiggling my toes.”

“Spill it all out, will you? Start with the client’s name.”

“Gina Wilson.”

She smiled devilishly while looking up at me through the top of her eye sockets.

“Come on Alex. Why do you have to give out information like its wartime food rations? Who is Gina Wilson and what does she want us to do?”

Alex took a big drag on her cigarette, then blew a big cloud

of smoke directly in front of her. Which, by no coincidence, is exactly where I was standing. Then a sudden change came over her as her face took on a deep, darkly sullen expression. The change was equally noticeable in her tone of voice.

“The woman said it involved her sister and that it’s a serious matter.”

“Define serious.”

“No.”

“Can’t you just say exactly what you’re talking about?”

Who’s the sister?”

“Donna. Donna Winters. You snooped for her once before.”

“Donna Winters?”

“Yes.”

“Donna Winters. The name’s familiar, but I can’t remember the case.” I was lying. I remembered the case. All too well.

“Her husband is Sonny Winters. “You know, William
“Sonny Boy” Winters of Winters Brothers Inc. His family----.”

“I know all about his family.”

The Winters family, this particular Winters family, is a long time big money family in Wannabe. Sonny’s great grandfather started the family business over one hundred years ago. Since then, a lot of money has been made. Some of it legal, some of it not. Of the illegal activities, the Winters family has had business dealings with some of the most brutal regimes in human history.

Privately, the Winters family had a fanatical obsession with living secretive homebody lifestyles. Despite their dark business ethics and their loner lifestyles, the Winters family has always been held in the highest regard in the upper echelons of Wannabe society.

As for the Donna Winters case itself, I got in to deep. Emotionally, physically, and every other way. And I knew the

second I heard Donna Winters name, it would happen all over again.

”When are we supposed to meet the sister?,” I asked.

“We aren’t going to meet the sister. You are.”

“Me? Just me? Why not you?”

“I need to go home.”

She didn’t say she wanted to go home. She said she needed to go home. A subtle, but important difference. I didn’t push or pry into the why of it. I just let it go.

“Okay,” I said. ‘I’ll go by myself. What’s her address?’”

“You’re not going to her. She’s coming to you.”

“To the office?”

“No, the bar.”

“Bar? What bar? There are a thousand of them. We have the highest per capita bar rate of any city in the world.”

“Quit exaggerating, will you? The bar right here in this

plaza.”

“Should I take the car? I mean I could walk, but fifty yards is far. I might pull a muscle. Or worse, I might give myself a heart attack.”

“Forget the jokes, okay Neal? I’m not in the mood.”

“Fine, but I do have one or two questions. What time is the meeting.”

“Four.”

I looked at my watch. It was almost quarter to four.

“I guess I’ll go now,” I said. “Maybe I’ll get a drink.”

Alex’s eyes widened at the word drink. Was it because I so seldom drank or was it something else?

“Did you give her a description of me,” I asked.

“Yeah. Short, thick headed and crazy.”

“Who’s making jokes now?”

“Shut up and go to the bar.”

Alex started to say something else, but stopped herself with an abrupt halt of the tongue. I turned and headed for the door with the intention of not saying another word. But when my hand got to the doorknob, a question popped into my head. So, I turned back to look at Alex. Her eyes were closed and her head hung as low as it could go without actually hitting the desk.

She was dragging on her cigarette in a strange sort of way, as if she was trying to draw something out that couldn't possibly be there. Her lips then moved to form words, but they only came out in soft, inaudible mumbles. Her mood was as dark as I'd ever seen it before. And that was only because she didn't know I was watching her. Alex's normally impassive guard was down.

“Alex, would you like to talk about it?”

“Talk about what?”

“Whatever the hell’s bothering you.”

“Right now the only thing bothering me is you.”

“So, you’re okay then.”

“Yeah, fine.”

She didn’t sound fine.

“Just go will you Neal. Go meet this Gina Wilson. Find out her story. Call me later with the details and we’ll get started on the case tomorrow.”

“Alex?”

Alexandria raised up her head slowly and looked at me through the clouded haze of cigarette smoke. Her eyes were sad, a way down into the far depths of your being kind of sad. I started to walk back toward her, but she put up a hand to stop me. It worked. I stopped.

“Go,” she said. “Leave. If you miss this woman and lose a case for us, I’ll chew both your ears off.”

“If you say so.”

“I say so.”

I wanted to say something, anything that could ease the deep seeded pain inside her. But sometimes, words are so pathetically useless. This was one of those times.. So, I walked out, leaving Alexandria alone with her pain.

I stepped outside thinking that a few deep breaths of air might help clear my head a little bit. But even that wasn't meant to be. It was raining. A hard and heavy downpour. It was cold too, no more than forty degrees. The cold I'd expected, the rain I had not. I pulled up the lapels of my deep gray, knee length coat, lowered my head and headed left sidewalk to the bar. For a short walk, it lasted a long time.

I was on my way toward a potential client, but all I could think about was Alexandria. Just as I arrived at the bar and opened

the door, a long crash of thunder shook the darkened sky. I stepped into the bar, pulled back the lapels of my coat, and wondered if Mother Nature hadn't just delivered an omen of things to come.

Chapter Two:

Stepping out of the rain and into the bar was a welcome relief. I'd only been out in the rain for a few seconds, but it had been long enough to send a deep chill right through to my aging bones. The older I got, the more the cold and rain affected me. And not for the better. This kind of rain was the worst kind of all. The kind of rain that was so debilitating to your mood it would make Mary

Poppins (If she was a real person, if she lived in Wannabe, and if ---, just forget it)

John Samuels, owner and sole enforcer of the bar, was standing near the door the door when I walked in. He was involved in a conversation with someone I'd never seen before. Of course, that's not saying much. I rarely drink. And on the rare occasion I do, I'm usually doing it at home by myself.

John's a five foot ten inch black man with a just beyond medium build. When I say he's black, I mean black--like coffee without a single drop of cream. He had wide, natural smile and a calm easy going manner that was always on display for everyone to see. But behind the smile, I sensed a deep, well hidden anger at life. Not so much for what it had done to him, but what it had done so many others.

John was a good man and he ran a clean bar. A clean bar that

welcomed anyone in regardless of any particular persuasion you brought with you when came in the door. As long as you didn't cause trouble, John didn't care what your background was.

“Neal, man, how's it going?” John asked while flashing that famous smile of his.

“Still standing, John. How about you?”

“I'm getting by okay. You here for business or pleasure? Or both?”

“I'm meeting someone here. A woman. Hopefully it's a case with a little meat to it this time.”

“And a lot of money.”

“That too.”

His flat to the skull cheekbones rose up a half a notch as he let out a low deep throated laugh.

“Any chance you and she might---,” he asked.

I checked the clock. It was nearly five minutes to four.

“John, you know it wouldn’t be ethical for me to do that.

“Just checking Neal.”

John was well aware of the consequences the one and only time I did get sexually involved with a client. He was watching out for me like an older protective brother trying to head off a repetition of a past disastrous error in judgment.

“Thanks,” I said.

“For what?”

“You know.”

“No problem. What’s this woman look like anyway?”

“Don’t have a clue. She’s looking for me. Alex gave her a description.

At the mention of Alexandria, I looked up and saw all of the mirth had gone out of John’s face. His dark brown, close set eyes

had narrowed and assumed a somber pose. Putting his small, roughened hands on my shoulders, he leaned into me and spoke for my ears only.

“Maybe I shouldn’t tell you this Neal, but---”

“What is it? Something serious?”

“It’s about Alexandria.”

“What about her?”

“She’s been in here a lot lately.”

“Yeah, well, she’s more sociable than I am.”

“Man, if she was just in here socializing, I wouldn’t have even brought it up.”

“You mean she’s been in here---”

“Boozing. Hard too. Something’s pushed her back into the abyss. I can see it in her eyes.”

My body started to sway like it had been caught in a swirling

crosscurrent wind. I tried to force myself to say something, but nothing would come out. A very rare occurrence for me.

“I thought you should know Neal. I thought it was for the best.”

I nodded my head, mumbled some incoherent babble and went to sit down before I fell down. I took a stool at the bar.

Son of a bitch, I thought. Son of a mother fucking bitch. Alex has been clean since the day we partnered up. What happened to cause her to fall back into, as John put it, the abyss. How did I not know? How did I not see it? Were there obvious signs and I just missed them?

The contemplation, I knew, was useless. Hell, maybe there were no tell tale signs at all. Some people are damn good at hiding their drinking addiction. The important thing was that she was drinking again.

Cassandra, one of John's daughters was tending bar that day and finally brought herself over to take my order. She was a thin stomached, thick shouldered woman with short, dyed blond hair. Her disposition was generally sour and for me, she made no exception.

"Rum and cola," I said. "Jamaican. The dark stuff."

I wasn't sure, but I think she growled at me. I swear the woman could scare a grizzly back into hibernation.

"Anything else?", she asked.

"Yeah, is Dianne around anywhere?" Dianne was Cassandra's sister and the youngest of John's two daughters. Dianne was lighter skinned than either father or sister, a deep brown cocoa. Her natural disposition fell somewhere between John and Cassandra, making her much easier to be around than her sibling.

"You trying to play my sister?," Cassandra asked. "You disgusting old man. You're old enough to be her daddy."

“Ease back on the hostility, will you. I’m not making moves on your sister. I was just wondering if my drink could be served by someone less, well, ---. How can I say this? Someone who doesn’t always have her claws out.

Another growl from Cassandra, but it was a short one, completed in the time three seconds before she left to make my drink. Two minutes later, I had my drink. But before I even managed to squeeze my second sip, in walked Gina Wilson. Eyes turned from every corner of the bar to track her as she came in and scoured the place looking for a man of my description.

Gina was a description unto herself. Standing at five feet eleven, she was a wide shouldered, big bodied woman with medium cut auburn hair and dark green eyes. And when I say big bodied, I mean muscle and bone, not fat.

She came up behind me and just stood there lurking without

saying a word. After a few seconds of this, I'd had enough and broke the silence.

"Gina Wilson?"

"Yeah. You Caterski?"

"You found your man."

I offered her the stool immediately to my right. She refused. I offered to buy her a drink. She refused that too. She was all business this one.

"I don't want to talk here," she said.

"Then why in th hell did you ask to meet me in a bar?"

No response. No acknowledgment of any kind.

"My car's out back," I said.

"Out back where?"

"Behind the plaza."

"Couldn't you just have used the parking lot like everyone

else?”

“I don’t like crowds. Especially when they bring their cars for company. People in this town drive like they have a death wish. Theirs and anyone who gets in their way.”

“I found that out. On the way over, my cab was almost hit three times.”

“You should try walking. Things are so bad for pedestrians now, insurance companies have started offering human road kill coverage.”

The joke was a good one, I thought. Gina, though, didn’t think so. Which, to me, was no reflection on the joke. Gina, I sensed, suffered from a major physical defect. No funny bone.

“Can we go now,” she asked.

“Yeah, let’s go.”

Outside, nothing had changed. It was still cold, still raining,

and still deeply depressing.

“I know a way we can avoid most of the rain,” I said.

“There’s a hallway outside my office that leads to a back door. My car’s right there.”

“Okay.”

“You said you took a cab here?”

“Yeah.”

“You flew into town.”

“Yeah.”

“But you didn’t rent a car when you got here.”

“No.”

Gina was being very clipped with her answers. If she had been anymore clipped, she would’ve said nothing at all. She was hiding something, but I didn’t have a damn clue as to what the hell it was. And I knew demanding an answer from her would get me

nowhere. So, I turned and showed the way to my office hallway and the back door. Gina, stalking behind me like a hungry predator after prey, followed right at my heels.

By the time I reached my car, I had a pressure sized headache the size of Mount Rushmore. I unlocked the door quickly, climbed in, and fell into the drivers' seat. I wanted to drive around while Gina gave me the details of what she wanted done. But Gina insisted we sit still. So, we sat still. When was the last time this woman didn't have her way, I wondered. Ever?"

"I need to record our conversation." I said.

"You're the detective."

A verbal jab, no doubt. Her tone indicated just a pinch of understated sarcasm. I ignored it, pulled out my mini-cassette player.(Anything case related, I automatically record)

"Okay," I said. "What's this all about?"

“Donna Winters.”

“Donna Winters, as in wife of William “Sonny Boy”
Winters.”

“Yeah. She’s in trouble.”

“What kind of trouble?”

“Sonny Winters kind of trouble.”

”Are they still married?”

“Legally, yeah. But the marriage is a sick joke.”

Gina rolled up her big hands into a tight, knuckle cracking fist. She had the look of many years of volatile frustration on her face.

“I wouldn’t know anything about their marriage,” I said feigning ignorance. Gina knew I was lying and let me know about it.

“You handled a case for Donna before,” she said. “But she changed her mind after you brought her overwhelming evidence

against Sonny. It wasn't your fault."

So, Gina knew about my previous case involving Donna. She obviously knew about the case itself. What else did she know about that she wasn't saying? Did she know that Donna and I---? Did she know that we had---? I wish she'd turn and let me have a good, long look at her full profile. The close set eyes, the long, flat cheek line, the taut, thin lipped mouth. My skill for reading faces and their expressions for signs of dishonesty was higher than most people. But Gina was very deliberately going out of her way to prevent me from having the opportunity. Maybe it was just as well, I thought. I had things to hide myself. Maybe there'd be a lot more to lose than to gain from a face to face confrontation.

"I'm going to explain the whole thing to you," Gina said.

"Donna and Sonny had a fight. A violent fight. He hit her repeatedly. She thought he was worked up to kill her right there. But

the fight was interrupted. Business. Sonny took a call, then left.

Before he came back, Donna packed up what she could and went to a hotel. She's at the hotel now, but even I don't know which one."

There was a pause while Gina checked her emotions and worked to slow her suddenly accelerated breathing. I didn't let the pause go easily by. I used it to mull over what Gina had said. It was a plausible story. Very plausible. But was it completely true? Mostly true? Partly true? Or not true at all? Sonny Winters was certainly capable of what Gina had accused him of and much more.

"Donna knows he's mixed up in illegal activities," Gina said.

"The Winters family committing crimes isn't exactly news. Hell, it's a long standing family tradition. The big question to be answered here is: Is there proof? The kind of proof that can convict a man like Sonny Winters. Massive, overwhelming, and watertight.

"I don't know. She's kept it to herself so far. But I do know

that Donna is in genuine fear for her life. She believes if Sonny finds her, he'll kill her. She wants you to pursue the illegal activities angle and help put him away.”

“These illegal activities. Could one of them be microdots inside coffee beans?”

“Mr. Caterski, this isn't the time for humor.”

I wasn't trying to trivialize Donna's situation. I wasn't trying to demean or degrade it in any way. I was just trying to ease back my mood a shade or two. The rain, the cold, the subject at hand were all working with uniform precision to bring darkness to bear upon my tattered psyche.

This sort of darkness often snuck up on me out of nowhere. But not this time. This time I saw it coming. Yet, I was still powerless to stop it from dragging me down toward the abyss and trying to drown me.

Humor was a weapon I used to fight off these attacks, a defense with a strong, eternal power of its own. It has saved me many times in the past. Saved me from giving in, giving up, and letting myself drown. People so often misunderstood. In this case, there was another reason for my attempt at humor. It was a mask, a thick protective outer face to hide behind.

The mask allowed me to show someone a glib, calm, and brash exterior while inside I was a weak, trembling mass of fear. The fear here was that a obsessively held secret might be exposed, Gina would see it, thus seeing the real me.

“I want to see Mrs. Winters,” I said.

“I told you I didn’t know where she is, didn’t I?”

“Can I at least talk to her?”

“This is for you,” she replied handing me a thick envelope.

I took the envelope, opened it, and slowly eased out its

contents. My eyes dilated to five times their normal size when they saw what I held in my hand. Money. A large sum of money. Ten thousand dollars to be exact.

“That is to help convince you to help Donna,” she said. “You and your partner. There’s more when the case is over. This is just upfront money. In case something happens to Donna, she wants you to keep going after Sonny. So, are you going to take the case.”

“I am, but I can’t speak for my partner. I’ll talk to her and see what she says. Once I put the money in front of her, I don’t think she’ll take much convincing.”

“When will you know?”

“Later today. I’ll call with the news.”

“No, I’ll call you.”

Why she was insisting on doing it that way, I didn’t know. She had her reasons, I’m sure. But what was in back of them.

Something harmless? Or maybe something darker and more nefarious? I should've asked her what those reasons were but the ten thousand dollars in cash she'd given me had clouded my brain with a dizzying, temporary lack of judgment. Somehow though, as Gina prepared to leave, I did manage to ask her a few questions.

“Just a second,” I said.

“What is it?” The frustration in her voice was obvious. “I thought we were done.”

“Just a couple of questions. It'll only take a minute.”

“Go ahead.”

“Where are you from?”

“Maine.”

“What do you do there?”

“Lobsters.”

“What?”

“I catch lobsters.”

I stifled the comedian in me, the part of me that wanted to say: “Well, that sure beats catching crabs.”

Instead, I answered with a standard, non-comedic response: “Boats, traps, the whole deal?”

“Yeah, the whole deal. I own the business. I own it, run it, and work it.” I pity any man dumb enough to cross her, I thought. “I’m leaving now Mr. Caterski. I’ll call you. I don’t know when, but it’ll be late. Around ten or so. Goodbye.”

Sitting there in the car and watching Gina disappear into the mist covered rain, one thought was uppermost on my mind. This woman, this big, physically intimidating sister of Donna Winters, had yet to allow me a prolonged, full look at her face.

* * * * *

An hour after I got home, the phone rang. I was hoping it was

Alexandria, but it wasn't. It was her husband Carl. What the hell did he want, I thought, and why was he calling me about it? We weren't close, we weren't distant, we weren't anything at all.

"This is Carl."

"Hey, Carl."

"Is Alex there?"

"No." He didn't believe me. He didn't say so. He didn't need to.

"Do you know where she is?"

Hmm, I said to myself, what would be a believable lie? The lie came easily, and to my surprise, quickly as well.

"We got a case today. She's out working on it. It's more complicated than our usual case. I came home to get a little rest, then I'm going back out to work on it myself."

"She's not answering her phone."

“The battery’s probably down. She must’ve forgot to charge it. Is this any kind of an emergency Car!?”

“Not the hospital kind, no.”

“How about this, I’ll go out and look for her.”

“You’d do that for me?” His voice contained a couple of tablespoons of suspicion and rightly so. I’d never done him any favors before, so why would I start now?

“Yeah, sure,” I said. “No problem. She probably just lost track of time, that’s all.”

“You think so?”

“What else could it be? You’re husband and wife and you love each other like hell.(The biggest lie of the entire conversation, without a doubt, but it slipped out as free and as easily as all the others)

“I guess you’re right,” he said.

“Sure I am. She’s working. If I find her, I’ll have call you.,
okay?”

“Okay.“

Whether he accepted any or all of this, I didn’t know. But at least it got him off my back and off the phone. He hung without saying another word.

I couldn’t be sure what Alexandria was doing, but I could make one hell of an educated guess. She was in a bar somewhere boozing it up. John Samuels, the owner of the bar near our office, said she’d been in his place a lot lately. She was a recovering booze junkie who’d fallen off of the wagon and right onto her face. Son of a fucking bitch.

What caused this fall, I had no way of knowing. Whatever it was, it had to have been something traumatic. But what? Something to do with Carl? Is that why he called me? Did something traumatic

happen between them? Something that caused her to leave him?

Seven different kinds of hell. That's what all of this was.

Seven different kinds of hell. Gina's going to call me later about the case, and I hadn't even had a chance to talk to Alexandria yet. Worse still, I didn't even know how to reach her. Her phone was either turned off or run down. So, calling her was not an option. Knowing she was at a bar wasn't much help. There was only about a thousand of them around town. Hoping for an astronomical break, I went to John Samuels place first. But she wasn't there. I checked at a half dozen other places with the same result.

Tense and restless, I went out to visit a woman I know. A woman who, on a strictly part time basis, provides special services for people. From time to time, I sought out these special services. It's not something I'm proud of. It's not something to be proud of. It's pathetic is what it is. It's a part of me I hate, yet it's a part of me

all the same. I'd tell the woman its debasing and degrading, but I'm too busy debasing and degrading myself. That being said, there is no justification for it being illegal. Cigarettes are legal, correct?

Alcohol is legal, correct? How much death, misery, and harm are caused by cigarettes every year? How much death, misery, and harm is caused by alcohol every year? Does prostitution cause more death, more misery, and more harm than cigarettes and alcohol?

Anyway, it was a little after ten when I got home. I wanted to check my answering machine, to see if either Alex or Gina had called. But before I even put my key in the door, I heard someone behind me calling my name.

"Neal," the voice said. "Neal, it's me, Odessa from across the street."

I turned and saw Odessa Wright, a neighbor of mine standing at the curb.

Odessa was a fifty something dark brown woman with puffy round cheeks, small liquid eyes, and a short rotund body. Contrary to her last name, little in her life was going the way she'd like it to. A no account husband, a jailed son, and a negligent, thoughtless daughter were doing all they could to make her life miserable.

She kept her chin up most of the time, complained little, and pressed on with the daily routines of her life. Odessa was the only neighbor I had any kind of a relationship with. Neighbors on my block just weren't, well, very neighborly. For a woman of her size, Odessa could move damn quick when she wanted to. She came running like a wide whirlwind across the street to my front porch. The trip winded her, but only a bit.

"There was a woman on your front porch a little while ago," she said. "She was drunk and passed out."

"Describe this woman."

“Short, dark features, long curly hair.”

“Shit,” I said in a low whispered voice. “Alex. It has to be Alex.”

“I didn’t know what to do at first. I didn’t want to call the cops and get her into trouble. But I didn’t want to just leave her there either.”

“She’s not at your house is she?”

“No, I couldn’t take her there. James is home and he wouldn’t allow that. (James was Odessa’s husband.) I’m lucky I got him to help me out at all.”

“Where is she then?”

“Your patio out back. I took her there myself. She was as wet as a fresh caught salmon. She must’ve got caught out in the rain. I covered her with a couple of blankets, poor thing.”

“Thanks Odessa, you’re a damn fine woman. I’d kill your

husband and run off with you if I was any kind of man.”

Her face rose up in a slow flushed smile. I’d flattered her and her enjoyment of it was plain and easy to see

“Neal, you say the sweetest things.”

“I’ll take it from here. Thanks again.”

“Neal?”

“Yeah.”

“I may be nose-y for asking this.”

“Asking what?”

“Who is she?”

“My partner at the detective agency. Alexandria. She’s an alcoholic. She’s been sober. But now she’s drinking again.”

“Oh.” She didn’t know what else to say. Was there anything else to say?

“Well, I’d better go now.”

“Okay. Bye, Neal. Stay warm.”

“The older I get, the more difficult staying warm gets.”

Quickly and quietly, I went to the patio, got Alexandria, and carried her inside. I took off her damp clothes, toweled her off, and despite a cloying disgust, admired the alluring contours of her naked goose bumped flesh. When the urge to leer thankfully passed, I dressed her in my underwear, a t-shirt and boxer shorts and put her warmly to bed. With my body racked by seven different kinds of tired, I went upstairs, fell onto the bed and waited for Gina to call. But the call never came. With warm drink, warm memories, or warm body to comfort me, I fell asleep with a strong, uneasy feeling that something had already gone wrong.

Chapter Three:

Struggling through a long night of restless sleep, I woke up to the startling sight of Alexandria sitting on the edge of my bed. She was nurturing a steaming, freshly brewed cup of coffee. The coffee smelled good, and surprisingly, so did Alexandria. How could that be, I thought, my sense of smell is supposed to be dead?

Was it a phantom smell, an imaginary call back from the days my sense of smell still functioned, or was it merely a strange aberration, a temporary reprieve from an unpleasant norm? Can't you stop analyzing it, a voice in my head said, and just enjoy it while it lasts. Yes I can, I answered, and I did.

“I made a fresh pot of coffee,” she said. “Would you like some of mine?”

“Sure.” I was an unapologetic caffeine addict. Especially after I first wake up. I can’t function without it. I often dream of the day when someone would come up the idea of an IV drip that would be set to a timer, go off at a certain time, and drop two or coffee into your system right before you wake up. Wouldn’t that be a great thing!

Alex handed me her cup as I sat up in a more drinkable position. Her hands brushed lightly against mine. Purposely so, I believe.

“Neal?”

“Yeah.”

“How did I get here last night?”

“You passed out on the front porch. I wasn’t home, but my

neighbor across the street saw you and came to your rescue. She put you on the back patio, then came over and told me when I got home.”

I swallowed a large dose of caffeine, I mean coffee. Alex looked raggedy as hell. Her hair was all over the place, a real knotted up, chaotic mess. Her eyes looked even worse. Bloodshot, broken, lost.

“Neal?”

“Yeah.”

“This woman who helped me. Could you thank her for me?”

“Sure, but she didn’t do it to get thanks. She’s not that kind of person. She even covered you with two of her blankets.”

“How sweet of her. I guess there still are some decent people in the world.”

“Yeah, but finding one isn’t always easy, even in a crowd.”

“Especially in a crowd.”

“You know, you could’ve gotten into serious trouble last night. I’d like to know where you are when you’re out----”

Alex turned her head away. Her face was a picture of pain mixed with lesser tones of sorrow and shame. I wanted to know what had caused this renewal of her whorish relationship with alcohol. I drank more coffee and waited patiently for her to tell me, but she never did. Instead, she turned the tables on me and put the sense of pain, sorrow, and shame back on my shoulders.

“When I came here last night and you weren’t home, where were you?”

Now it was my turn to look away. After a long, uncomfortable silence, Alex put a hand on my shoulder and spoke: “I guess we’re both running high on the pathetic meter, huh?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

She brought her eyes straight up to mine and examined me in a way I'd never seen before, lustily, raw primitive lust. It was then that I became embarrassingly aware of my having gone to bed naked.(I did that sometimes)

“I don't like the way you're looking at me,” I said.

“I like the way I'm looking at you. I don't care if you like it or not.”

“Are you always this way after a hard round of drinking.”

“When was the last time a regular woman looked at you this way?”

“By regular, you mean, not a prostitute.”

“Yeah.”

I drank the rest of the coffee. It had gone cold., just like tone of this conversation. I let the question pass. Undaunted, Alex pressed on in the direction she wanted to go.

“Neal?”

“What?”

“You saw me naked last night, right?”

“Yeah, it couldn’t be helped.”

“Did you like what you saw? Am I still---.”

“Enticing?”

“Yeah, enticing. Or am I too used up, too run down, and too old?”

“Alex, whatever your problems are, your body isn’t one of them.”

“Thanks.”

“No problem.”

“Neal?”

“Yes, Alex?”

“Could we, uh, you know----. I mean as long as we’re in bed

together and you're already naked----”

“I can't. Not like this. Maybe tomorrow. Maybe next week. But not today.”

“I understand.” She didn't understand. She didn't understand at all. “You'll pay a woman who care nothing about to have sex, but you won't have sex with me for free. Okay, then, have it your way. Give me fifty bucks and then everything will be okay.”

“Alex, I think you should call Carl.”

“Fuck Carl.”

“No, that's your job, Alex.”

“That's exactly what it's been all these years. A job. A spiritless, emotionless, thankless, job.”

Bringing up Carl's name wasn't the best idea I've ever had. Hell, it was just plain stupid. Carl, at the very least, was a mirror cause of her running back to booze with trembling, desperate arms.

And at the most, he was a major cause of this self- destructive return.

“Speaking of jobs,” I said, hoping to jump the rails and get onto a easier and smoother track. “We’re supposed to start working a case today.”

“Case? What case?”

“Yesterday at the office, Gina Wilson called, remember?”

Pictures of Donna Winters bullied their into my mind’s eye. The scene was haunting and brief. Those sad calling eyes, a face caste in one quarter light and three quarter darkness.

A trickle of blood lay sickly at the edge of her right upper thigh. She was naked. Shivering and sweating simultaneously, as if attacked by opposing, contradictory viruses. Then the entire scene faded slowly away and all that was left was this feeling of vast, dark nothingness.

“Neal?”

No answer from me.

So Alex called my name again.

Still no answer from me.

The third time she called me, she made sure I'd answer she cold slapped me hard across the face. I looked over at her with eyes returning from a sad, faraway place.

"Where were you just now," she asked.

"Nowhere."

"I don't believe you."

"I don't care if you believe me or not."

"You don't want to tell me."

"No."

Alex didn't pursue the matter any further. She let the subject drop and ran off onto safer, more comfortable ground.

"About this case, did you officially accept it without talking

to me first?"

"Yes, I did."

"You know the rule. If we are going to work a case together, we both have to agree to it."

"Before you rip into me, I have two things to say in my defense."

"I don't want to hear them."

"This isn't a sex case."

"That's not enough."

"Winters is up to neck in criminal activity. Probably all felonies. If we find the evidence to put him away, we could put him away for a hundred years."

"That's still not enough."

"How about ten thousand dollars with the possibility of more later on."

“What did you say?”

“Gina Wilson paid us ten thousand dollars and said, if things work out, there’d be even more.”

“Where is it? Is it here? You didn’t take a check, did you? No, you wouldn’t do that. Cash. What did you do with the cash? Did you put it in the bank? You don’t have it here, do you?” Where is it? Where? Where? Where?”

“Downstairs on the coffee table.”

Alex ran out of the room so fast I got a mild case of wind burn. I heard her open the envelope with the money in it, count the bills, count them again, then giggle like a teenage girl. This was the official opening of the case.

“Alex,” I shouted down the stairs, “does this mean you’re willing to take on the case.”

“No, Neal, I really don’t need five thousand dollars right

now. So, I'll just have to say no."

Sarcasm. Pure, fun loving sarcasm. I loved it, but that was mostly because it was coming from Alexandria.

"Alex."

"Yeah, what is it? I'm trying to have sex down here."

"Sex? With who? There's no one down there except you. You don't mean---."

"With the money, Neal. Ten thousand dollars. Oh, yes."

"I hate to interrupt your orgy of dead presidents, but I did have a question."

"What is it?"

"Do you know where your car is?"

"No."

"Does that bother you?"

"Sorry, I only agreed to one question. I am disconnecting

now.”

* * * * *

Later that same morning, at a little past nine thirty, an uninvited fist began pounding on my front door. Alex and I had been milling around the kitchen at the time and neither one of us wanted to go to the door, but she had a legitimate excuse not to go. She was cooking breakfast for herself. I had no such excuse, so I had to be the one to go see who the pounding fist belonged to.

“Move a little faster will you,” she said “That pounding is going to split my head right in half.”

“Whose fault is that?”

I went tot the front window, took a sly peek through the blinds, and saw the owner of the pounding fist. It was instant recognition. I knew him. Unfortunately. He was a cop and he was trouble.

His name was Larsen. Steven A. Larsen. And the A stood for asshole. He was a detective now. A pathetic joke to any decent cop on the force. But that's the price decent cops agree to pay for adhering to their sacred vow of silence. They've only got themselves to blame. And then they wonder why public trust is so hard to come by. Scandinavian toned and in his mid-forties, Larsen was operating on his own self-interest plane.

He'd become a detective despite his natural inborn inclination for thuggishness and repeated, well-guarded whispers that he was dirty. He knew how to play the political game that's required to move up the ladder, and he played the game well. I wouldn't be at all surprised if the dumb son of a bitch become police chief one day.

Larsen had histories with both Alex and I. To say we didn't like each other would be one of the biggest understatements of the

year. To me, he was a rotting branch and rotting branches should be cut off and removed before they take down the whole tree. Of course, that's just my opinion. I'm not a professional gardener or anything.

I wished like seven hells that I could've avoided letting Larsen into my house. I didn't need to have psychic abilities to know something bad was going to happen. I just didn't know how bad that bad would be. So, resigned to a negative inevitability, I opened the inside door, but left the outer door locked.

“Open up,” Larsen said in a loud churlish voice.

“What the hell do you want?” I answered as calmly as I could.

“Open the goddamn door.”

“The door is open.”

“Not the screen door.”

“It’s glass Larsen, or did you miss that? It’s March. Too cold and too early for a screen.”

“Open the fucking door or I’ll rip it off of its hinges.”

He probably would’ve too. Asshole. Big, ignorant, ugly, asshole. So, I opened the door and let him in. His partner, a smaller ruddier skinned man quickly followed him in. He wasted no time in introducing himself..

“I’m Torelli,”

“Don’t introduce yourself to him,” Larsen said. “This isn’t a fucking social event.”

“Have a seat,” I said. “I’m going for coffee.”

“Donna Winters is dead,” Larsen blurted out with every intention of doing me harm.

I stopped, turned, and looked at him viciously through the sides of my eye sockets. Was this some sick little perverted game of

his, I wondered, or was it a dark, devastating truth? After a silent second or two, I sized up that this was no game. Donna Winters was dead.

If the situation hadn't already been tense and ominous enough, Alex walked into the room with coffee in one hand, a plate full of eggs in the other, and a cigarette dangling between her lips. And, of course, she was still dressed in my underwear and nothing else.

At first, she didn't even notice the intrusion. Her head was down and entire attention was on consuming the eggs. She sat down and started shoveling them into her mouth like someone who hadn't eaten in two days. Which very well could've been the case.

"Well, well, well," Larsen said to Torelli. "Isn't this a cozy little picture of domestic tranquility. A love nest for incompetent ex-cops. You just never know what you're going to see when you step

into someone's house, are you?"

Alexandria's head came up slowly, suddenly realizing there were two too many people in the room. Her lips formed a natural, reflexive snarl when she saw one of those people was Steve Larsen.

"What the hell is he doing here?"

"It's about Donna Winters," I said while turning my back on Larsen.

"What about her?"

"She's dead."

"Dead?"

"Dead."

Alexandria put down her coffee and looked up at me with fixed, uncomprehending eyes. Eventually, her eyes moved away from me and to Torelli.

"Donna Winters is dead," she asked. "No joke?"

“No joke,” he replied. “She was found around one thirty this morning.”

“Where?”

“In a car.”

“Where was the car?”

“The parking lot on Nomore Street.”

“The one just a couple of blocks from here?”

“Yeah.”

The parking lot referred to here wasn't far from my house. Hell, it was damn close. In this particular case, so damn close it unnerved me. My hands began to tremble and a cold sweat rolled across my brow.

“I don't understand why you're here,” Alexandria said to both of our uninvited guests. “We had nothing to do with her death.”

At the time, I'd wished I would've thought to say this. Her mind was working better than mine and I wasn't recovering from a long, hard drinking session.

Larsen stood up. Or was he already up? I don't remember if he or Torelli had ever bothered to sit down.

"How did she die," I asked, finally thinking of something relevant to say.

"A bullet," Larsen answered.

"One bullet?"

"To the head."

"Homicide?"

"Suicide."

"You're a suicide detective now?"

"This is a definite suicide Caterski, and don't try to make it into something else."

“Something else?”

“You know what I mean. Trying to promote yourself by turning it into a homicide.”

“You’re the master promoter Larsen, not me. I was lousy at it remember? Couldn’t keep my big mouth shut.”

I sat down. I needed to sit down. The hell with Larsen and Torelli, I said to myself, if they don’t want to sit down.

“We still don’t why you’re here,” Alex said.

“Your agency card was found in her car,” Larsen said. “Do you know her?”

“No. But he does.” Alex then pointed her piece of toast right at me.

I decided right then that I didn’t like having a piece of toast pointed at me. Especially that piece. It was accusatory and half-eaten.

“She hired me once a long time ago,” I said while ignoring the powerful urge to deny everything. “What does that have to do with now?”

“Just putting a few pieces of the puzzle together, that’s all,” Larsen replied

“It’s a funny thing about puzzles. Sometimes people try to force pieces into place they obviously don’t fit. It’s easier doing it that way, of course, but in the end the picture comes out all wrong.”

I knew Larsen was holding a card up his sleeve about why he and Torelli had come here, but when he threw it down, it exploded like a grenade going off in a closet full of glass.

“She had a picture of you with her when she died. It was cupped in her left hand. We had a hell of a time getting it out.”

“Do either of you want a cup of coffee,” I said desperately trying to blot out what I’d just heard.

Torelli started to say yes, but his partner stopped him.

“Cut the crap,” Larsen said. “you stupid little perverted Polack. Mrs. Winters had a picture of you when she died. Not her husband, not her children, you. Why would she do that Caterski? Why would she do that if you were just a nobody p.i. she hired once years ago?”

I couldn't move any part of my body. Not my arms, not my legs, and certainly not my mouth. I'd been locked and frozen in time and place like a victim of temporary suspended animation.

Alex, fully aware of my immovable plight, came to my rescue and answered for me.

“Mrs. Winters had just hired us again.”

“Why?” Torelli asked, finally involving himself in the conversation. Or should I say interrogation?

“Same reason as before. Extra marital fucking.” A lie, but did

Larsen and Torelli know that. Doubtful, but who could be sure.

“Extra marital fucking,” Larsen said while looking right at Alex. “Sounds like a subject you know a lot about.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“I would think the meaning was obvious. Look at you, dressed in the Polack’s underwear, eating an early morning breakfast in the Polack’s house---“

“And?”

“You’re married, aren’t you?”

“Officially, yes. Unofficially, no.”

“That’s the kind of answer I’d expect from a greasy little slut like you Sarros.”

“Larsen,” I said finally regaining the use of speech, “cut the low ball routine. Now.”

“Stay out of this, Caterski. This is between me and the slut.”

“Torelli, put a muzzle on this rabid dog of yours.”

Alexandria was up and out of the chair in a hurry. Larsen was coming toward her. He moved like a mad hippo approaching a helpless disabled victim. Slow, with every reason to prolong the feeling the nearly orgasmic feeling of terror and menace.

Alexandria’s emotions were a half and half mixture of rage and fear. Her eyes were moving rapidly back and forth between Larsen and me. My eyes, for their part, were everywhere, and back again. I stood there unmoving, torn between taking down Larsen’s and doing nothing at all. I didn’t want to be the one to go after Larsen. I wanted Torelli to do it. He was his partner. But Torelli wasn’t moving. He was afraid of of his partner. He was afraid because he’d seen this scene before. He knew what Larsen was capable of. He knew about the capability of inflicting severe pain and injury on anyone, even his own partner.

“Steve,” Torelli called out in a weak enfeebled voice. “This isn’t necessary. They haven’t done anything to justify---.”

“It’s never necessary,” I said. “He just likes to hurt people for the fun of it. He’s a fucking sadist. Are you going to do something about it or not?”

“Why don’t you do something?” Larsen asked without ever taking his eyes off of Alex. “You care about this five dollar whore, don’t you? Well, come on in and save her from the monster who wants to mess her up.”

Since the day I first met Larsen, I wanted to shove his ugly face right into the back of his skull and he knew it. He’s baiting me to do something just so can personally pull my investigator’s license, press criminal charges against me, make them stick, and send me off to jail. But I had no choice. I had to take the bait. Alex’s health was at stake.

Larsen kept coming forward. He was within inches of Alex now. I couldn't wait any longer to go after him. I looked around for something to hit him with. Something with a little heft to it. I decided on a wall clock. Not one of those light plastic ones. This clock was a much thicker, much heavier ceramic clock. Larsen was going to find out what time it was the hard way.

Then it happened. He put his hands on her. In less time than it took to sneeze twice, he had her pinned hard against the wall. Then he went for her throat. Without a thought or look toward Torelli, I lifted the clock off of the wall and quickly went for Larsen. As I did, I somehow caught Torelli out of the corner of my eye. He was coming right for me and he had blackjack raised high in right hand. It was aimed at my thick, Slavic skull.

I avoided the blow to the head, instead taking flush across my right elbow. A white hot shock of electrified pain ran down my arm

and I let go of the clock. A second blow never came. All Torelli wanted was to stop me from hitting Larsen with the clock. Having accomplished that, he put the blackjack away.

Alex, in the meantime, had freed herself. I hadn't seen how at the time, but later she told me she had pushed her lit cigarette into the outside of Larsen's left hand. This would explain the cursed cry of pain that I heard. Alex said she then got Larsen off of her permanently by peeling his right thumb off of her, pulling it back toward him until it broke. This would explain the second cry of pain that I heard.

I went to Alex and backed her up to put some space between us and Larsen. Soon enough Larsen regained his voice and issued a clear, unmistakable threat.

"I'll have your license for this," he said. "Both of you."

"Let's go," Torelli said. "We're not even supposed to be

here.”

“What was that?” I asked.

“Nothing.”

“So, this isn’t professional at all. It’s personal. Well, you go ahead and try and pull our licenses. We’ll just have to make public your little indiscretion here. Maybe we a few others from your past while we’re at it.”

Still nursing his broken finger, Larsen looked at me, then at Alexandria.

“Private dicks,” he said. “You’re all a bunch of ---.”

“Better to be a private dick than a public one.”

“You’re a real witty son of a bitch Caterski. Too bad you don’t even know where your wife and kid are. They ran away from you, didn’t they? They ran away because they knew what a sick, perverted asshole you are. They ran away and they’re never coming

back.”

Larsen and Torelli finally turned and headed for the door. They were leaving. But Larsen wasn't done talking just yet. I was deaf to anything he said now. Knowledge of his words was solely due to my tape recorder.

“You're a nothing Caterski. Do you hear? A nothing, a useless, dumb Polack living in a neighborhood full of niggers, spics, chinks, and poor white trash.”

I didn't even see them go. My head was down and I was completely entombed by closing dark shadows. Sarah and Shelley, Donna, old scars, old wounds, they'd all come back to torment me once again.

I sat down on the couch. Or maybe, I fell down. I can't say for sure either way. My head was off somewhere, drifting further and further away from the welcomed chains of an ever rising past.

Something brushed my cheek. Was it a kiss? Had Alexandria sat down next to me on the couch?

My mind floated into a middle world, an existence that lay somewhere between sleep and consciousness, a place where it was not possible to tell fantasy from reality. I could hear Alexandria's voice in my ear. Berating me, consoling me, and keeping my body still. Her form was like medicinal blanket covering me with a soothing, healing warmth I hadn't experienced in a long, long time. I was lost and she, being my only guiding force, was trying to bring me back home.

The t-shirt she'd been wearing came off, bearing two small mother of all tits. We were soon swaying, moving to the music of a quiet spring serenade. We clung to each other desperately, as if our lives depended on it, as if we would literally die if we let go.

Thirty and some odd minutes later, I was drawn back to the

cold, blistered hands of full reality. Alex, it seems had passed the time smoking and playing out an unknown fantasy of her own. Soon after the two of us put the floor firmly under our feet, she suggested we should go to the parking lot where Donna Winters had died and have a look around. I didn't think the trip would produce any tangible evidence, but I agreed to go anyway.

With the sun fading in and out like a slightly loosened light bulb, we walked to the parking lot. It was only a short distance and I'd hoped the walk would help my tattered will a little. But my hopes, once again, proved to be futile. The walk didn't help one atomic bit.

The scene of where Donna Winters was found dead was no scene at all. There was no car, no missed personal items, no signs of any kind that a once living human being had been found dead here less than twelve hours before. There wasn't even the well noted

yellow police tape to mark off the area in question.

Silent and somber, Alex and I went back to my house. Was the case over already? Or had it just begun? We didn't know, but we didn't have to wait long to find out. Fifteen minutes or so after our return, there was another knock at the door. As my hand neared the doorknob, I pictured the dead body of Donna Winters laid out flat on the cold metallic coroner's table. Reality drove the scene quickly from my mind. A reality driven by a team of wild, mad horses whose legs churned a tireless path toward the jagged cliffs of a dark, personal hell.

Chapter Four:

It was Gina Wilson at the door. She knows, I thought, she knows Donna is dead. But how? How could she know? It couldn't have been in the morning paper. Donna was found dead too late for that. Maybe Gina had watched the early morning news on tv. The

death certainly must have been mentioned. When I opened the door and let her in, I wondered if she was going to tell Alex and I the source of her knowledge or if she would guard it and keep it to herself.

Gina was wearing the same parka she had on the day before. The hood was up, hiding her face and whatever else she was trying to hide. I offered her coffee. She declined. She dropped down onto the chair without bothering to take her coat off. For a time, it seemed as if she was just going to sit there for the rest of the day saying nothing to no one.

She didn't speak. She didn't move. The suffocating silence went beyond even the most durable forms of toleration. I left the room first. Twenty minutes later, Alex did the same. When Gina finally did say something forty plus minutes later, it was a single barely heard sentence.

“I have things for you to look at in the car.”

The sentence brought Alex and I back into the living room in a rush of creaking floorboards. We asked Gina to repeat her sentence with a little more volume just to be sure what we’d heard was correct.

“Do you want to go,” Alex said to me, “or do you want me to go?”

“I’ll go.”

I was glad for the chance to get out of the house, even it was only for a few minutes. Death had gotten into the house and had completely taken over. Death was always doing this to me. Crashing in and out of nowhere, a dominating unwanted house guest. Unwanted and uninvited.

Death didn’t care about manners or invitations. Death could do whatever she damn well pleased. So she did. Here she was again,

in my house and following me around like an obsessed lover who refuses to give you a minute's peace. Death, among other things, had ruined my ability to have pets. And if I could forgive her for everything else, I could never forgive her for that.

As much as I would've liked to avoid death for the rest of the day, I couldn't stay outside forever. So, after fifteen minutes of slow and no movement, I returned to the house with two boxes in tow. These boxes, damn them, were hard to carry. They were too wide cornered to be carried one under each arm. This forced me to put my hands underneath the boxes and carry them in one on top of the other.

When I groaned my way back inside, I looked over at Gina and dropped both boxes right on my feet. She was standing up now and facing me. The parka was off and her face, figure, and hair were out in the open light to see clearly for the first time. Her skin

was taupe beige. Her hair, of course, wasn't red. No one's hair is actually red. Just as white people aren't actually white. No, Gina's hair was auburn. Was this it's natural color? Who knows?

Now that I got a true, full look at her, I could see she was more than just big. She was well-muscled too. The kind of well-muscled you see in those strongest women competitions. However inappropriate sexual feelings were at this particular place and time, I can't say. I will say, though, something more than my resolve stiffened while I stood there watching her.

"I should've brought them in myself," she said as a matter of fact "But I'm not thinking too clearly today because----- because----- Donna is dead."

"Yes, we know," Alex replied as she stepped in from the kitchen with another cup of coffee.

"How could you know? Did you see the early morning

news?”

“No, we heard it from a couple of pointy headed house guests.”

Gina didn't have a clue who in the seven hills Alex was talking about. So, I performed an easy to understand translation.

“There were two city cops here. Detectives. They're the ones who told us.”

“Detectives? Why were they here? Do they think Donna was murdered?”

Her tone, to me, carried just a pinch too much of the unbelievable.

“They don't think it was a homicide.”

“Then why were they here?”

“Neal has a past with----. We have a past with her. We also have a past with the two cops.”

“What does that have to do with now?”

“Nothing really. One of the cops is a real hard case. He carries grudges like a mangy dog carries fleas. And he has a grudge against-----.”

“Anyone with a triple digit I.Q. and two cents worth of human decency,” I said.

“I think I’ll have that coffee now,” Gina said.

Alex made it plain that I was the one who play the servant.

“Neal, be a good boy and get the coffee, will you? It is your house, after all.”

Gina stood up and moved to the couch. Alex was on the couch too, but left a little middle ground between them. Me, I went for the coffee, of course. While pouring two cups in the kitchen, I pursued a couple of mild pieces of curiosity concerning Gina.

“You have a car today?”

“What?”

“The car in the driveway. Is it a rental?”

“Yes.”

“You didn’t have it yesterday?”

“No.”

“You took a cab to our meeting.”

“Yes.”

“Did you come right from the airport to our meeting?”

The coffee pot sat on the counter a half a foot from the doorway. I could see Alex staring at me with those small impassive eyes of hers. She didn’t want what I was doing and wanted me to cease and desist with my off-handed interrogation. I shrugged my shoulders, stuck out my tongue at Alex, and changed the subject.

“What are in the boxes?” I asked.

“What?”

Was she hard of hearing, or did I always start out mumbling? Or was it both? I repeated the question, this time with a notable increase in volume.

“I don’t know for sure,” she said. “Everything in the boxes belonged to Donna. I haven’t had time to go through them and see what’s exactly in there.”

I brought Gina her coffee, then went to the boxes and stood over them. My back was facing both Alex and Gina. I bent down, gave the boxes a superficial pass then cut them with a sharp kitchen knife. Behind me, Alex and Gina began conversing.

“I should’ve done more for her,” Gina said. “She was my sister. But we never got along, not as small children, not as adults.”

“I had no brothers or sisters,” Alex replied. “At least, none that I knew of. Didn’t have parents either. I was abandoned and left in an orphanage.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Why are you sorry? You had nothing to do with it. You weren’t my mother.”

“I just meant it’s an awful thing to happen to anyone.”

“Forget it, I knew what you meant. But the worst things in life are beyond words. And the best thing to say, in these situations, is to say nothing at all.”

I’d just finished cracking open the boxes for a look inside. The contents were a strange mix bag. I wondered to myself if these contents were a puzzle of some kind. There were tattered pictures, a few badly cut newspaper clippings, a crow’s feather, personal diaries, comb, a locket, a video disc, and a ribbed and tied locket of hair. Of all of the things contained in those boxes, two of them received first priority. The diaries and the video disc.

I needed to examine them privately on my own and without

any interruption. So, I went upstairs and left Alex and Gina talking on the couch. There were four diaries in all. The first pair were from Donna's youth.(Primarily her early teenage years). The second pair were from her years as an adult. (There was no primary period of focus here).

With a well-worn comforter around my shoulders for warmth, I sat on the bed and read from those diaries. These diaries were Donna's world.. And once I found myself totally inside this world, I had a lot of trouble finding my way back out again.

There were no doors or windows in this world. There were no locks and keys. The air was thin, musty, stagnant. No amount of clothes could've prevented the chill I felt as I read those diaries. The chill was internal and couldn't be easily explained. Despite repeated efforts, it just couldn't be explained away. I'm going to show you some of what was written in those diaries.

There will be seven passages in all: Three from her youth diaries and four from her adult diaries.

Youth Diaries Passage #1 : Father has taken another bitch to his bed. I hate him. I wish he would either go away or die. I hate mother too. Father treats her cruelly, yet she just stands there and takes it. He abuses her mentally and emotionally. He takes everything and gives nothing. He wears two faces, one in public, one in private. The public face is kind, generous, and compassionate. It is also as phony a smiling politician. He has everyone fooled. They think he is a great man. If only they could see him as we, his loved ones, see him. If only they could play peeping tom for a day or two and look through the stained windows of our loveless home. Then they could see him as he really is and not what he pretends to me. Why is mother martyring for him? Why? Does she expect a reward or medal for staying married? I don't know why, but I am

convinced that I am already doomed. It is just a feeling I have.

Youth Diaries Passage #2: They took mother away today. Father tells everyone who will listen that she is just going away for a rest. Among other things, he is a very convincing liar. Everyone outside believes him; everyone inside knows where mother is really going. A mental hospital. She is gone from this house of seven hells and she is not coming back.

If I do not shed any tears for her, who will? But can I? Can I? I honestly do not know. If there was any hope of turning fate over on it's head, it is over now. Father says locking mother up had to be done. He says there was no one to care for mother and she was not capable of taking care of herself anymore, poor woman.

“What about you?,” I ask him. “Why can't you take care of her? She is your wife. Don't you care at all about her, about what happens to her? Did you ever care? You say it's for her own good,

but like so many other scheming hypocrites, all you ever really thinking about is what benefits you.“

Then he hits me and knocks me to the floor. He hits me because he knows I'm right and he knows no other way to defend himself. I am then dragged to my room by the hair and locked in for the rest of the day. The lock means nothing. I wouldn't have come out anyway.

Youth Diaries Passage #3: I'm pregnant and I'm going to be married in a couple of months.(To William "Sonny" Winters) He is not a decent man. I'm sure this man will treat me badly, just as my father treated my mother badly. It's in his eyes to do so. He'll mask it, of course, playing that upper class social game to perfection.

You know the game I mean, don't you? Playing the role of a caring father and loving husband for all of the others of his ilk to see. Once home, the true man removes the mask of pretense, no longer

needing it to suit his aims. Despite this, I am willing to marry him.

I have to get out of this house or I'll kill father. I know I'm capable of it. I've fantasized about it many times. He is a cruel, abusive, bastard of a man. To be rid of him is one of the two reasons for my marrying William. The other reason is as old as humanity itself. He is a rich man. A very rich man. Our house will be big and full of servants.

I know this is a sinful way to live, but I have known no other way. I have been spoiled for the meaningless fineries that a wealth lifestyle can bring. I am not a person of strong character. I am weak, too easily swayed by so many low baser instincts. I cannot get love, so I demean myself with repetitive abuses of sexual trysts. None are with William. He is too busy making money, loving himself, and fucking other women to notice or to care.

I will have everything people in this country want, everything

they dream about, everything they lust after, everything they spend their lives trying to possess like greedy, selfish children. Big, expensive houses, fancy, expensive cars, the finest, most expensive jewelry, art, furniture, champagne, caviar, and lobster fresh off of the boat. Servants to feed me and bathe me. And yes, even wipe my plump upturned ass if I ask them to. I will have it all. Soon, I will utter the infamous vow, “I do” I will have everything then and I will have nothing at all.

That takes care of the passages from her youth diaries. Now, for the passages from her adult diaries. The first one is from early in her marriage, somewhere between the first and second year.

Adult Diaries Passage #1: It did not take long for things to go bad. He(Sonny) is always gone. I curse him when he is away. Then again, I curse him when he is here too. He is a whore. Sex, money, power, prestige, he whores for every one of them. Here in these

veiled walls of Usher, secrets lie everywhere. Some are well hidden, known only to the participants of the crime. Some are not so well hidden and known to everyone who has the ill-fortune of living here. Like everyone else here, I will wear the mask of illusion and deceit. I can carry it off, easily and without restraint. I am, if nothing else, a superior actress of life.

Adult Diaries Passage #2: (Nearly Three Years Later) I am pregnant again. He (Sonny) is no comfort to me during these times. In truth, his behavior worsens. There are many forms of human cruelty and he is a master craftsman at all of their more subtle, more easily disguised forms. In public, he can do no wrong. In private, there is no wrong he would not do.

Suicide has entered my head as a possible alternative. I have contemplated its many different forms. I have studied their degrees of violence. I have studied the ones which are the quickest and least

painful. I have also contemplated the ones which could most easily be propped up to look like homicide. In the end, I always stop short of taking that last step into the abyss and I surrender myself into holding onto life. Is this a good or bad thing? I do not know. But either way, I lose.

The third and four passages jump a considerable amount of time into the future. Eleven and a half years to be exact.

Adult Diaries Passage #3: If I thought having children would help to lighten the darkness that encrypts me, I was wrong. They have only ended up making my life more filled with hopelessness and despair than ever before. There is nothing that can save me now. I am not sure if I even love them anymore. I do not know if I am capable of love anymore. Did I ever love them?

I can say with near certainty that I will not reach my forty fifth birthday. Exactly how and when the end will come, I cannot

say. I do know an act of violence will be the game's final card. By someone's intentional hand, the killing blow will be delivered and I will into the eternal abyss.

There is no changing the nature of this outcome. Whose hand will be responsible for the deed, I do not know. William, certainly, is an obvious possibility. His father, that breeder of brain infected hybrids, is another. The children, who knows?

There is one person, though, I fear more than all others. A person who is easily the most capable and the most likely to pull off this killing. A person with deep, long standing psychological problems. A person living in this very house. Me.

The seventh and final passage that I've chosen to put down to paper are the last words Donna ever wrote in her diary. This passage was written just one day before her death.

I am sitting here on a hotel bed waiting for the end to come.

Death is close at hand. No longer lurking in the shadows at the peripheral edges of my sight, she has stepped out into full plain view. I am cold, tired, and alone. There is no one here to comfort me, no one. I have to go now, someone is knocking at my door. It must be room service, but did I call them? Did I?

I am not sure. It is these damn pills I took. They have my head a little scrambled. I really do not feel good at all. As soon as room service leaves, I am going to lie down for a little while. Or maybe I will just.....

The second I finished reading my first pass through the diaries, I knew I'd have to do it again. And then, maybe, just maybe, a third and final time. This case, I noted, had heightened my masochistic tendencies for self-punishment. Repeatedly reading Donna's diaries definitely fit into that category.

If that hadn't been enough of a self-inflicted wound, I

decided to watch Donna's homemade video. That was a dumb thing to do, a really dumb thing. When I made an intuitive guess on the content of the video, I knew it wouldn't be easy to watch. A note attached to the front of the disc was short and pointed, the hand belonged to Donna.

Since the beginning of human time, civilizations have created myths of many different stripes. Myths which contain devils, demons, and gods as sources of the worst sort of deeds known to mankind. Why was all of this creative effort necessary? To account for all of this unflattering darkness of life, we need to look no further than ourselves.

Watching that video, once again, took me to the darkest depths of my being. It's not a pleasant place to be. Shame wrapped around me like an ancient Egyptian king wrapped for burial. I'm not going to get into the explicit details of what was on the video. Let's

just say it's pornographic and a little bit more than that. Donna had without my knowledge, recorded us having sex. One angle dominated the recording. A direct close up of Donna's face.

All the while I grabbed, pulled, penetrated, slapped, and used her, I saw her face. Nothing except her face. And on it always there for the eye to see was a mask of numb, embittered death. A death I, in my own way, helped to bring about. Or so I convinced myself. There were others to blame too, but I didn't have to live with them. I did, though, have to live with myself.

After turning off the tv and the dvd player, I just sat still and stared at the floor for a long, long time. I don't know how long exactly, but when Alex stepped into the room and broke the spell, the hour was early evening.

"Gina fell asleep," Alex said. "She ate a little, but not much. Where exactly does this put us?"

“We’re going ahead.”

“With what? You heard Larsen. They’re calling it a suicide.”

“Forget Larsen Even if it is a suicide, we still have another angle to pursue.”

“His criminal activities?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t think this is a good idea, Neal. I think we should just walk away. No, actually I think we should run away. As far and as fast as we can.”

Alex was one hell of woman. The money to be made from this case was more than we’d ever seen before. Despite this, she was thinking more about me. The irreparable damage this case could do was not to taken.

“Did you get anything useful out of Gina?” I asked

“Talking to her was like walking through a minefield with

snowshoes on. She doesn't want to go back to the hotel. She doesn't want to be alone."

"Don't tell me she wants to stay here?"

"Yeah."

"What?"

"There's more."

"Well?"

"So do I."

"You too? Is there a neon sign outside flashing the word 'Vacancies', 'Vacancies', 'Vacancies.' This is a small house. Small for even one person, let on three. This house is a damn shoebox with windows. Beds. I don't have enough beds."

"You and I could, uh----."

"Share a bed?"

"Yeah."

I closed my eyes and just sat there for a short time while I contemplated all of the bonuses and repercussions of accepting Alexandria's offer. The temptation to say yes was strong. But then, so was the temptation to say no. Such is life.

"No," I finally said to her.

Alexandria's lips were quivering with hurt. Then came a trembling rage filled fear. She took off the tee shirt and shorts and stood there right in front of me like an Amsterdam prostitute displaying her wares in a street side window.

"Do you think I make such offers all the time," she asked. "Huh? Is that what you think? Or is it that body has no appeal for you."

"You know that's not true. Why are you----"

"Why am I what? I'm cold, lonely, and confused.. And I want to fuck. Not emotionless, pretend fucking like I did with Carl.

I want something real, warm, and---

Something to shake me out of this walking coma I'm in."

"Alex, I----"

"It's all right," she said suddenly drained and highly embarrassed by her unfettered display of emotionalism. It wasn't like her at all. It was too much----- ---too much like me.

"Do me a favor," I replied. "Keep the offer open. My no is just for today. Maybe later, in a day or so, maybe then we----."

"Sure."

The past twenty four hour had rubbed my nerves raw. Having Donna Winters involved in my life again. A case with her as a client. Then less than a day later she's dead. But a case still remains. And even in death, Donna will remain too. Then there's Alex and her drinking. Her passing out on patio. Her wanting to have sex with me.

I could've stormed out of the house, but it's my house, and I had nowhere in mind to storm to. I might've scattered my brains to the paint peeled walls, but I didn't have access to a gun. Alexandria didn't have hers with her and I didn't know where it was at. So, with no other options popping into my fat Slavic skull, I went to bed and tried to sleep. The attempt was not only successful, but easy as well. Then, as so often happens with me, my sleep was invaded by a dream.

I was standing by the front window in the living room. It was raining, a cold hard pneumatic rain. A quarter of an hour later, though, the rain begins a fast, eye blurring process of shape shifting into snow. Once the transformation was complete, the flakes fell fast, heavy, and thick. In less time than it was naturally possible, the once darkened ground had been completely laid white.

Then, somewhere out of the clouded night sky, came a crow.

A single, purposely isolated crow. It was a rare of thing to see. Crows were sociable, group oriented creatures They lived in well developed societies that emphasized family, friendship, and commitment. They weren't loners, either by nature or by inclination. Crows did everything, everything as a group. So, what I was seeing would seem to be a nearly impossible thing. A lone crow, with no others in sight. Yet, there it was landing on one of the two square plots that made up my front yard.

For a minute, the crow seemed content to just wander around blindly on the snow covered ground. I'd always liked crows and I'd always liked to watch them. They'd been badly mislabeled by humans, I believed. And this dark, undeserved reputation is probably what first drew me to them.

This particular crow had my full attention. I stared with an interested intensity that held no logical explanation. As I watched,

the bird stopped its mad wandering and flew up and landed on the gutter just my front dormer window. The crow then, just didn't look at me with an anonymously distant sort of curiosity. No, this crow looked at me as if it knew me and was trying to communicate with me.

The crow, as I studied it, looked frail and sickly. Its feathers had lost its natural black sheen. Its beak had been chipped off at the end. Its wings, while still workable, were tattered and aged beyond their years. That crow, that lone weakened crow, sat on the narrow sill and held me in its gaze. The creature was definitely trying to tell me something. But what? Then, after protracted series of attempts, resigned itself to failure and flew away into black, snow filled sky. There the dream ended. And so did my sleep. Shaken by the dream, I sat up in bed, pictured the crow once more, and wondered just where I'd seen those eyes before.

Chapter Five:

It would be three days until Donna Winters funeral. Three long, tormenting days. It was a strange time. Alexandria and Gina were now full fledged occupants of my house and their was enough

darkness surrounding me to blind a night goggled owl. I wasn't taking Donna's death well and I wasn't even doing a modest job of hiding it.

Alexandria confronted me about why I was so weighted to the ground with mourning. And she confronted me more than once. In fact, it became a part of the daily routine, like making coffee, ignoring the neighbors, or cursing out a suicidal driver who almost killed you because he or she couldn't wait a few seconds for the light to change

Alexandria just couldn't figure out why I was taking the death so hard. She couldn't understand the excesses of my grief. To her, Donna Winters was merely another on our client list. She knew I was acting as if Donna were merely a former client. I was acting as if----, as if----, as if this was deeply personal. My level of sorrow was too high and too intense to be a strictly professional loss. Hell, I

was supposed to have met her a couple of times in my life. You don't come apart at the hinges over someone you barely knew.

Alexandria probably pushed me harder on the subject if she hadn't been distracted by a plague of personal problems herself. As for Gina Wilson, I don't know what she made of my darkened mood concerning her sisters death. I wondering if she knew something about Donna and my real past relationship and was keeping it to herself. I also wondered if she'd already read at least some of Donna's diaries.

Gina and I said little to each other over these three days. I didn't like the way she kept looking at me with fiercely judgmental eyes. Twice during that three day span, I heard her creeping around upstairs while all of us were supposed to be sleeping. It was odd, unexplainable behavior for someone claiming to have a rigid, unbending sense of right and wrong.

Gina wasn't the only one exhibiting odd behavior. I was guilty of more than my fair share myself. I went to the funeral home that was handling Donna's services. Well, that isn't the strange part. The strange part was when I went to the funeral home. I went there when no one else was there. Excuse me, I should've said when no one else alive was there. I, you see, wanted a private viewing.

I used lock picks to get in. To a burglar, lock picks are essential tools of the trade. For me, they weren't an essential tool, but I owned them anyway. I've had them a long time. Even when I was a cop. I've never made breaking the law a matter of easily alibied convenience. Breaking into a funeral home shouldn't have been one of those rare occasions, but at the time I made myself believe that there could be no more special occasion than this.

I wanted to see Donna one more time. Alone. Completely

alone. I had to. I just had to. And how else was I going to accomplish it if I didn't break in. I couldn't have gone through the regular services with all those and all that chatter. Even I could've gone through it, how could I have explained my presence there? No, it was either see Donna this way or not see her at all. Not seeing her wasn't an option.

Have I said before how much I hate funeral home directors. Stinking, filthy, goddamn rich. And for what? So the deceased can stretch out and relax in a luxurious, three thousand dollar bed. The most comfortable sleeping accommodations you'll ever have and you have to die to get it.

Just how nonsensical is our culture anyway. Thousands of dollars just to say goodbye someone. Burial plots with a view. For who? It's absurd. From beginning to middle to end. It's another modern world racket that everyone accepts without question.

Nod and move along, nod and move along. That's all you're ever supposed to do. Questioning things is frowned upon. It's a real career killer. I ought to know.

As for the cursed investigation, Alex and I were at each other about when to go to Sonny's house to interview everyone. She wanted to wait until a day or two after the funeral. I wanted to be a real bastard about it and go the same day. Well, eventually Alex had her way and we waited.

We weren't exactly sitting around doing nothing during those three days. We concentrated on information gathering. Donna's family background to be precise. This type of work is always a trudge. (Going over old certificates, records, newspapers, etc. is a migraine inducing, back bending endeavor.) My personal emotional past with Donna made this work painful in other ways too.

Every piece of information we dug up made a case for

Donna's death being a suicide. A grandmother and an uncle had committed suicide. A couple of other relatives with serious psychiatric problems. Then, there was Donna herself. She had a case history with psychiatrists that had enough information to fill a book. She'd been treated and medicated for depression. She'd been treated and medicated for alcoholism.

Over the years, Donna had been a patient of several different psychiatrists. Seven to be exact. There were two that she'd been to more than the others. A Dr. Stanley Wyman and a Dr. Rebecca Allen. Both were reluctant to talk to us at first, but time and a little persuasion slowly brought them around. After all, there was no client to protect anymore, right? Donna was dead and the information we received would never be seen by anyone other than us. Once the doctors were convinced of our sincerity in the matter, they gave us the information we wanted.

Even though Donna had never actually attempted suicide, both doctors said she'd talked about it often. The case for suicide was mountainous by this point. The information all ran counter to my desires. I wanted the case to be a homicide. And I wanted that prick Sonny to be the guilty bastard who did it. Last of all, I wanted to be the person responsible for proving his guilt. But there was nothing to back my desires up. Not so far. And this only made my darkened mood even darker.

Alex had two officially inside contacts she could call on for help. One was a cop who worked in the records department. He wants to remain anonymous, so he will. The other is a close personal friend of Alex's. Her name is Simone Eldritch and she works in city's coroners' office. They had met initially when Alex was a cop and they quickly struck up a friendship.

Even though Alex's time as a cop didn't last, the friendship

did. Despite the fact that they don't see each other half as much as they'd like to, they remain close personal friends. They talk often to find out how the other is doing and share a laugh or two. Alex called Simone and asked her for any private information on the death of Donna Winters. Simone called back within a day with some interesting news.

Not only had there been no autopsy done, there hadn't even been a preliminary examination. Donna's body had been taken directly from her car to the coroner's office, but was never examined. Simone tried some subtle, gentle probing for pieces of information from Dr. Stephens, the head coroner. All she received in response to that was a curt reply to mind her own damn business.

Simone wanted to get a look at Donna's body herself, but never had the means and opportunity to do so. Donna's body remained at coroner's office, covered and untouched, until 10 a.m.

the next morning, where it was taken directly to the funeral home. Strings had been pulled. But by whom? And for what reason? The whom, without a doubt, would have the surname Winters attached to it. The why insinuated something other than suicide was the cause of death.

I wish Alex and I could've gotten some help from the local media in our investigation. But that was like wishing Dracula was going to be a donor for a drive at the Community Blood Bank. It just isn't going to happen. The local media here in Wannabe suffers from the same disease as most of the national news media. *Cranius insertia corpus anus.*(Loose Translation: Heads Inserted in Corporate Ass). They would be no help to the investigation. The reason is obvious. They do no investigating. It's all just another brand of entertainment now.

The day of Donna's funeral arrived. I went. Why? Self-

mortification is the only reason I can think. What other reason could there be? I wanted to punish myself some more. And in the process, I got more than I bargained for. The ceremony at the cemetery was a real show. I'll never forget the impressive list of Wannabes' who's who. Businessmen, politicians, lawyers, police officials, etc. Then there was the orchestra, the fireworks, and the doves. What a show. What a show.

I stood far off in the distance and watched this three ring extravaganza. Somewhere between a rock and a hard place. Well, actually I stood behind a five foot high headstone and watched the service through a small pair of binoculars. I should've stayed home. I should've, but I didn't. Alex and Gina didn't go. Gina had gone to the Mass right before though.

I was having a hard getting a true read on Gina. Something in me believed she was working a separate, deeper agenda than the one

she was playing out to Alex and I. Gina's grief was real. There was no doubt about that at all. Alex and I both saw it close up from the morning she showed up at my house. But grief alone is no sign of innocence. Guilty people can have grief too.

I wanted to keep a close eye on Gina during the days following the funeral. The obvious person for the job was Alex. The two of them weren't great friends or anything, but they did keep reasonable company together. That was more than I could say about Gina and I. We kept no company at all. Gina didn't like me and she made no pretense about showing it. If she was going to tip anything off, it wouldn't be with me around. It had to be Alex, drinking and all.

Now to the matter of the visit to the Winters' waterfront house. The house was oversized and overpriced. But that's the whole point, isn't it? Showing off to the world. Look what I have and

you'll never have. The house was part of a five acre estate and was a stunning combination of classic ostentation and modern greed. It was big, bricked, two storied, and had more windows than any four houses on my block. The place was monstrously wide too with as much girth as I've ever seen on a single structure home.

The area the house was built on used to be a wilderness home for squirrels, raccoons, deer, and other forms of natural wildlife. Then along came a gang of moneymaker real estate developers and voila' the wilderness and its inhabitants are gone.

Now you have structures here, structures there, structures everywhere. Public buildings, private buildings, condos, hotels, and homes. And on and on and on. Money spent by the few, for the few, and of the few. Beauty must have a price, you see, a price as high as an elephants' eye. And the price is monetary of course. It just couldn't be any other way.

We knew Sonny Winters was a have, but we didn't realized how much of a have until we pulled into the long arcing driveway that led to the house. The gray shores of Wannabe Bay were within sight from the back of the house. The view, to put it mildly, was panoramic and must be seductively picturesque during those nights of warm, red summer sunsets.

There was no chance of a like that on the day Alex, Gina, and I were there. No, no, no. There was no chance of that. The day we were there, the air was cold and the sky was a beaten down black and blue. The whipping winds were bitter and cut through everything in its path. Including clothing, flesh, and bone.

As the three of us approached the house, my often wandering eyes picked up movement at a second story window. A curtain parted, enough for me to see an inquisitive head and nothing more. Then, a second curtain appeared and another inquisitive head

appeared. Being in one of my many strange moods, I stopped, looked up, and waved first to the head on the left, then to the head on the right. The head on the left waved back, the head on the right disappeared back behind the curtains.

Alex, Gina, and I were quite a sight standing there at the Winters' front door. Me, with my sleep deficient eyes and ratty, unshaven face. Alex, with her chaotic, unwashed hair, dark sunglasses, and wearing my clothes. Gina, well, she was just being Gina. Large, intimidating, and heavily muscled.

I pounded the thick, solid gold door knocker five times in a slow, syncopated rhythm. A minute passed. Then two more. Finally, the door opened and a tall, rigid humorless man appeared in front of us. His skin was ashen gray, his eyes plain brown and even set. He was short, flaccid, and bald. He was younger than he looked, mid-fifties I'd say. He'd been at this job for a long time, by the look of

him, too long. Whatever he'd been as a man before he worked here, this job had taken it out of him.

“Must you knock so hard, sir? he said. “The house is in mourning. There's been a death in the family.”

“We need to speak with Mr. Winters,” I answered. “Urgent business.”

“Which Mr. Winters, sir?”

“There's more than one?”

“There is William and there is George, father and son.”

“George, George is here.”

“Do you know him, sir?”

“No.”

“Then why did you act as if you did?”

“I was trying to be funny?”

“You failed,” Alexandria said. “Look, Mr. -----”

“Winslow,” the bald man replied.

“Mr. Winslow, we’re private detectives. We understand this is a bad time, but we need to come in and talk to Mr. Winters. We also need to talk to anyone else who’s here too, I guess.”

“May I ask what’s this in reference to?”

“The death of Donna Winters,” Gina said speaking for the first time in hours.

“Your names please,” Winslow said.

Alexandria answered for the three of us.

“Alexandria Montarros, Neal Caterski, and Gina Wilson.”

“Wait here.”

“Can’t we wait inside?” I asked. “It’s colder than a virgin’s tit out here.”

“No sir,” Winslow answered, ignoring my colorful reference.

“No one is allowed in the house until they receive permission to do

so. You are going to have to wait here.” With that little piece of disappointing news, Winslow the bald butler went away.

As soon as he left, Alex and I started right in on each other.

“As cold as a virgin’s tit? When was the last time you had your hands on a virgin’s tit?”

“It’s a saying. An old wintry expression.”

“The expression is ‘As cold as a witches’ tit’”

“Maybe the witch was a virgin. Did you ever think of that?”

“Why bring it up at all, for Christ’s sake. Every second you wasted talking is another second we have to stand outside.”

“Quit bitching Ms. Montarros. Where in the seven hells did that name come from?”

“Montarros is my family name.”

“You mean your maiden name?”

“No, my family name. I’m no maiden. Do I look like a

maiden to you?"

"I want to know why you introduced yourself as Alexandria Montarros. Montarros hasn't been your name since----."

The front door opened and we were escorted inside by Winslow .

"Mr. Winters will see you in the library," he said.

We were led straight back, then to the left down a long narrow hallway. The walls were bare except for lighting fixtures. Because each of the three fixtures contained a single low bulb, the hall couldn't help but to create a strange ancient world atmosphere. As if Alex, Gina, and I were being led to a secret meeting with a rival king

The library was at the farthest end of the hall and you had to pass three other rooms before coming to it. The first of these three rooms was a game room. And in the game room were pool tables.

Alex had a passion for pool and the sight of the tables through a partly open door and the temptation to go in was too strong for her to conquer it. She went in. Surprisingly, so did Gina. Why, I didn't know. All I did know was when the time came to talk to Sonny Winters, I would be alone.

If Winslow was surprised that Alex and Gina had disappeared, it didn't show on his face. Hell, nothing showed on his face. He just opened the door to the library, waited for me to go in, then closed the door and left.

The first thing to catch my attention were clouds of headache inducing smoke. Cigar smoke. My malfunctioning sense of smell prevented me from breathing in the foul odors emanating in the room. Still, the cigar still had the power to do nasty things to head and stomach. This time would be no different.

I hate cigars. Have I failed to make that clear to you? I hate

them. To me, they look like tightly rolled turds. Even though I could no longer smell them, the memory of the smell was enough to bring a show of disgust to my face. As for Sonny Winters, he brought a show of disgust to my face too. I just didn't let him see it.

Sonny is a man of average height and weight. He has no distinguishing facial features, no long, jagged scar, no small beady eyes, and no wide, hellborn smile. Nor did he have a pitchfork, pointy horns, or a tail. At the age of forty five, Sonny was by all physical accounts an extraordinarily ordinary looking man.

“Pull up a chair, pull up a chair,” he said with overdone cordiality. “It's Caterski, right? Your name I mean.”

“Yeah, Caterski.”

My eyes did a slow, methodical scan of the library. The room was rectangular with ceiling to floor shelves of books occupying the eastern and western walls. The room's only window and a marble

encrusted fireplace took up most of the northern wall. The inner core of the room was stuffed with vases, two sculptures, an antique rocking chair, two moderate sized Persian rugs, four antique reading lamps (two of which were lit), a large heavy bodied mahogany desk, a matching chair, a specially crafted dark colored settee, and a matching coffee table.

“Is this room always laid out this way?, I asked. “Or did you do this just for me?”

“Just for you?,” he answered. “How could I have done this just for you? I didn’t even know you were coming.” Somehow, he didn’t sound convincing.

“Just joking Mr. Winters. “ I didn’t sound too convincing myself.

“Sit down Mr. Caterski and tell me why you’re here.”

“Didn’t your man Winslow tell you?”

“Yes, but I wanted to hear it from you. Make it as short as painless as possible.”

“Fine, but I’ll stand if you don’t mind. We’ll talk and I’ll scan through your wall to wall book collection.”

“A book man, huh?”

“A book whore, actually.”

“Whore? That’s a strange way of putting it.”

“Yes, it is. I hope you don’t object, but I have to record this conversation for professional purposes. My memory isn’t what it used to be and I can’t write fast without missing a lot of detail.

A long silence followed. I stood in close proximity of Winters and tried to casually eyeball him. His entire face was masked a thick cloud of protective cigar smoke.

“Run your recorder,” he said. “What’s the point? What is this all about?”

I put the recorder down on the desk, turned it on, then walked away to peruse some books.

“We’re here,” I said, “because we’ve been hired to pursue a case.”

“A case against who?”

“Not against someone, for someone.”

“For who, then?”

“I can’t tell you. Client, detective privilege. You do understand the concept of privilege, don’t you?”

“I’m familiar with it. Who’s this we you mentioned earlier? So far, all I’ve seen is you.”

“Alexandria, Gina, and me. Gina you know. She is your big, wide, very judgemental sister-in-law. Alexandria is my partner in a detective agency.”

“Is Gina the one who hired you?”

“Would I be so stupidly obvious as to bring her here if she was the one.”

“I don’t know you well enough to judge the level of your stupidity.”

Brushing my hands across a series of books, I stopped suddenly and removed one from the shelves. An old hardbound copy of Homer’s ‘Odyssey’(Not an autographed edition)

“This is an impressive library,” I said. “Do you read them or is it just for show?”

“Both.”

‘Odyssey’ went back on the shelf and I began scanning more books as I steadily moved west along the wall. A dozen or so steps later, I stopped again. Another book had caught my eye. I pulled it out and opened it somewhere near the beginning.

“Well,” Winters said, “are you going to start asking me

questions about Donna's death? Or are you just going to stand there reading---."

"Crime and Punishment by----."

"I know who wrote it."

"It's about this guy who----."

"I know what it's about."

"Imagine my pulling this book out. It's funny when you think about it. Funny in a dark, ironic sort of way."

"Funny? My wife is dead. Do you consider that funny.?"

"No."

There was a lot of emotion invoked into the air then. All of it by me. What had I done? With one word, one small simple everyday word, I'd given too much of myself away.

I knew Winters had heard in my voice too because he stood up and waved the wall of smoke away that separated us. When the

smoke cleared, I saw him staring at me through the corners of his eyes. I saw fire and suspicion there. And something else I wasn't quite sure of.

"I'm ready to start asking questions now," I said in a notably questionable voice.

"Go ahead Caterski. The sooner you ask them, the sooner you'll leave."

"What kind of a relationship did you and your wife have?"

"Not a good one, I'm afraid."

"Why?"

"A lot of reasons."

"Name a few of them."

"I expected things she couldn't give; she expected things I couldn't give."

"What kind of things?"

“Big things, little things.”

“Such as?”

“She wanted---.”

“To be treated decently once in a while.”

“I wanted----.”

“A brainless toady slave.”

“You’re interrupting me.”

“Sorry. It wasn’t a good marriage; it wasn’t even a bad marriage. Why not just get a divorce and put an end to the misery?”

The question raised both his eyebrows and his ire. For a man who prided himself of being in control of his emotions, Sonny Winters suddenly found himself struggling against the urge to lose control and take a big, fat swing at me. His voice was tinged with the struggle that was going on inside of him.

“We don’t get divorces,” he said.

“We?,” I replied.

“The Winters family.”

“Oh, that we.”

“You’re smirking at me, aren’t you, you snide Polish fuck.”

“When you said ‘we’ a second ago, are you sure you didn’t mean you?”

“Check the record, detective.”

“We’ve already done some checking on you.”

This revelation didn’t surprise him at all. He didn’t cough, clear his throat, or make any movements in his chair. If he made any gestures, they were silent ones. I had wanted to lead this discussion and I had wanted to do so from beginning to end. I was supposed to take him where I wanted to go, not the other way around. It was he who was supposed to be off balance, to sidestep, and to retreat. He and he alone. It wasn’t going that way though. We were going to

take turns leading, pushing the other into a direction he didn't want to go. It was a matter of two stubborn wills and who's will, in the end, would prevail. Or would either of them prevail?

“What is really about?,” Winters asked.

“Death,” I answered solemnly.

“Really? I thought maybe you're fighting a class war here.”

“A rich man puts his foot to the poor man and it's called free market enterprise. A poor man puts his foot to the rich man and it's called class warfare.”

“You do have a way with words.”

Winters circled back around his desk and sat down. He slowly lit up another air clogging cigar and began puffing away until he was completely encased in smoke.

“Do you know what I have on my desk?, he said. “Short, but informative profiles of you and your partner.”

I put 'Crime and Punishment' back on the shelf and took my time walking over to the shelves on the opposite sides of the room. My head was swirling. Thoughts of Donna were attacking my brain. Pictures of her were assaulting my inner eye. The cigar smoke seemed to be following me, taunting me with its insidious presence. I could hear Donna's voice in my head She was calling my name. My eyes closed, opened, then closed again. Slightly off balance, I staggered and bumped into something.

Donna's whispers turn to screams. Screams of the dying. Begging, pleading, moaning for help. But there was none. She was alone. Her body trembled wildly, shaking in the midst of total abject fear. Barely on my feet, I reached for the shelves for support. Donna's face, the gun, and her right hand. The hand clenches and the hammer starts back. Donna's face again, the hammer moves to mid-stroke. The choice is still there to go either way. The hand could

either preserve life or take it away.

Donna's face for a third time. The gun hand shows one final show of force and strengthens its pull on the trigger. The hammer starts forward. Donna's face for the final time. Bang! Now the scene takes a long withering fade to black. This wasn't a psychic episode on my part. It was just a systematic, fictionalized reenactment. A reenactment of Donna's irrational mindset and the haunting final moments of her life.

Death has done this sort of thing to me before, but not to this debilitating degree. What is in the mind when a foregone death is but seconds away? What trauma, what thoughts, what emotions triumph over all others? It scares me that I want to know these things. Yet, I seek them out anyway. Sometimes with a dark self-destructive brand of enthusiasm that can be described, at the very least, as troubling.

I came out of this episode leaning against the bookshelves

with my full weight. Without the bookshelves, I feel as if I'd fall right to the floor. I leaned on them hard, not knowing when I'd be able to stand on my own again. Winters, for his part, knows something dark is at work within me, but he's not sure what. But he knows I'm weaken and vulnerable.

“You're twice divorced,” he said. “Your first wife hated you and played you for a fool. Your second wife abandoned you and took your only child with her. The child's name is Shelley. She was so young at the time your wife took her away she probably has no memories of you. You've failed at every job you've had before you became a cop. Then you failed at being a cop. And now you're failing at being a private detective“

A part of me just wanted to turn and get the hell out of there. Another part of me just wanted to kill Winters. In the end, I did neither. Hoping to bide myself a little time to

think, I moved down the east wall and around to the fireplace. The warmth of the fire against my face helped to clear my mind of its disorientation. But not enough. I needed something more. So, I went to the room's only window and opened it.

I took in long, deep swallows of air. The cold rushes of air brushing my face was a welcomed relief. Like mild, therapeutic fingers that gently brought me back from the debilitating ill effects of the past few minutes. Retaliation came quickly.

"I expected more from you Winters," I said. "But that has always been a problem of mine. I expect too much from everyone, including myself."

"Caterski, what are you babbling about?"

"You know about us. Well, we know about you too. The real you. The private you. The you no one outside this house gets to see."

"You're bluffing."

“Am I?”

The smoke had cleared from around Winters and his desk. For the first time since I'd arrived, he showed no interest in lighting up. His cigars and lighter were still within easy reach, but he made no moves to touch either one.

“The gun,” I said.

“What gun?”

“The one your wife shot herself with.”

“What about it?”

“Where did she get it?”

“Not from me.”

“Was it yours?”

“Didn't I just say 'not from me'?”

“Pay attention. The second question was different from the first. The first refers to who gave her the gun. The second question

refers to who owned the gun. Did the gun belong to you?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"No. The police haven't informed me who the gun belonged to."

"They never asked?"

"No."

"Did your wife ever own a gun?"

"I think you've seen too many Columbos, Caterski. You've pegged me as a murderer and now you're going to dog me until I confess."

"We don't work that way. Once we leave here, you probably won't see us again.

Unless, of course, something warrants us coming back here."

Winters was ready for another cigar. He put one in his mouth

and bit off the end. He bit off more than he should have, so he threw the cigar and brought another one to his lips. He then sat down in the chair, snuffed a small piece of the end, lit the cigar, and began puffing madly away. As the air all around him filled up with smoke, he stood back up, went to the window, and closed it. He then stood there looking out of the window, dragging smugly on his cigar like a haughty, spoiled brat.

Up to this point, he'd exhibited no signs of a husband in deep mourning. Or any mourning at all for that matter. His voice hadn't cracked or wavered. There had been no words, of sorrow, love, and regret. Was he feeling any of these things? With his hiding in the midst of the smoke for so much of our time together, I couldn't really tell. After an extended silence, I pressed on with my questions.

“How many times did you beat your wife.”

“I never beat my wife.”

“Not even the night she ran off.”

“I hit her once and knocked her down. Is that a beating?”

Suddenly, thoughts of Donna’s diaries crept back into my head. I didn’t want Sonny to know about them. But I liked the idea of using what’s in it against him.

“How many affairs have you had over the years?, I asked. One or two? Or twelve or more?”

“This has no relevance to my wife’s death.”

“It goes to the character of the accused.”

“What, you’re Perry Mason now? I didn’t know you had a law degree. And I didn’t know that my library was a substitute courtroom.”

“You’re not going to answer, then?”

“I don’t have to.”

“No, you don’t have to.”

“Do you know the main reason for the fight the night she left?,” he asked then answered. “She said she had another man.”

“Did you believe her?”

“She said she was in love with this guy, the only man she’d ever loved.. She wanted a divorce so she could marry him. When or where they met, I don’t know. But according to Donna, they had a torrid affair years ago and now, all these years later, she was planning to-----.”

For a second or two, I lost the feeling in in my fingers and dropped a Kafka book on the floor. Had my heart skipped a beat just then? Maybe two? It must’ve because, for a brief moment, everything went black. Then a big rushing distorted roar came into my ears as if a giant hand had just rescued me from drowning. I couldn’t let the subject continue in its current direction. I couldn’t. So, I desperately flung myself into another line of questioning and

hoped for the best.

“Did your wife have any enemies?” I asked “Anyone who was capable of murdering her.”

“Only me.”

“No enemies then, besides you?”

“No.”

“What about your children? Are any of them hateful and screwed up enough to murder their mother?”

“They’re all hateful and screwed up.”

“Enough to kill their mother.”

“You’re just going to have to ask them that yourself, I’m afraid. I was never very good with kids.”

“Good at having them, but not at raising them?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay Winters,” I said, “I have a new line of questioning to

pursue.”

“Go ahead Caterski. Keep fishing for something that’s not there.”

“Where were you when JFK was shot?”

“What?”

“What about RFK?”

“Caterski, what are you-----.”

“Dr. King?”

Winters wasn’t amused. That’ a damn shame really. I was trying so hard to please him, the little rat fucking bastard.

“Caterski,” Winters said without being asked, ‘I did not kill my wife.’”

“Should I take your word on that?”

I picked up the Kafka book that I’d dropped earlier and began skimming through some of it. It was near the end when-----.

“Hmmm,” I said, “this is an interesting book. It’s Kafka’s ‘The Trial’, one of his few full length ‘t novels. It’s about this guy who-----.”

“Caterski, I didn’t kill my wife.”

“You’re repeating yourself. Isn’t that a clear sign of low intelligence?”

“My word is as good as gold to some people.”

“Is it your word that’s as good as gold or your money?”

“I didn’t kill my wife.”

“You said that already, twice.”

“Well, its true god dammit.”

Frustrated, I slapped the book shut and put it back on the shelf. What was I expecting from Winters, a confession? Maybe I should’ve tortured a confession out of him. People in law enforcement have done it. People in government have done it. For

such people, any confession is a good confession. It doesn't matter if it's a false confession. It doesn't matter if the person is confessing for no other reason than to stop the pain. It doesn't matter what is truth and what is lie. It doesn't matter that their justification for it is delusional,, based solely on who's doing the act and not the act itself. An act that would otherwise be condemned as a horrific, inhuman, and a perversion of all that is acceptable behavior. No, I wouldn't torture Winters. But I couldn't stop the temptation from ringing in my ears.

“Caterski,” Winters said, “I want this investigation of yours finished by tomorrow.”

“And if doesn't finish by tomorrow?”

“I can make your life miserable.”

“You're too late. It's already miserable. You can make it more miserable, of course, that's up to you. But you can't just make

it miserable. You're years behind the curve for that."

Then, wanting to end this interview with a big, shocking bang, I did something stupid. I tipped my down card, my ace in the hole.

"Donna kept diaries," I said. "And I have them." Then, purposely avoiding Winters' eye, I went to his desk, picked up the recorder, and left the room.

Chapter Six:

As I moved down the hallway toward the game room, I believed I was being watched. I saw no one, smelled nothing, and heard nothing. Yet, somehow this belief only grew stronger the farther down the hall I went. Not until I put my hands on the slightly opened game room door, did this belief go away. There the belief came to an abrupt and drastic end.(This belief would return later)

There was only one person in the game room when I got there. A female. Neither Alexandria nor Gina was this female. No, I didn't know this female. This female was a tall, night haired young, twenty something girl with bright, oversexed eyes. Her ravenous

hair laid short and thin on a small, round face. Her clothes, a tight v-cut black cotton blouse and low rider back zippered skirt, were definitely not off of the rack. Paid for with plastic no doubt, as was her puffy lipped, million dollar smile.

The game room, large and under lit, was so crowded with grown up toys to paly with you couldn't take three steps without running into something. It was a game addicts' nirvana, a sensorial potpourri of sights, sounds, and high priced altered realities. Video game systems, pool tables, a ping pong table, an air hockey game, vintage year pinball machines, and a state of the art virtual reality game were all in this room. Upon entering the room I took a quick look around, then spoke to the rooms' sole occupant.(Besides me, I mean)

“Where's Alex and Gina?”

“Who?”

“Alex, short pool playing brunette. Gina, your large auburn haired aunt.”

“Oh, them. There not here.” She flashed her contact induced green eyes at me.

“I know, I can see that. Where did they go?”

“Not to the same place.”

“That doesn’t tell me much. Hell, it doesn’t tell me anything at all.”

“Gina went upstairs.”

“Where upstairs?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why did she go upstairs?”

“I don’t know.”

She ran her fingers through her short, black hair with a loose, exaggerated manner.

“What about Alex?”

“In the kitchen, I think.”

“Doing what?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you really not know, or are you purposely holding back on me. These questions aren’t intrusive or personal for Christ’s sake. Can’t you open up just a little bit. So far, I’ve only begged for crumbs from you and you won’t even give me that. You’re one of Donna’s kids.”

“Yes/”

“Which one?”

“Sylvia. Adrienne and George were here a few minutes ago, but they’re gone now.”

Beads of sweat swarmed across my face like bees on a sweet, fresh honeycomb. The room was on the chilly side. Why was I so

warm then, I asked myself. Why was I sweating. If anything, I should've been cold. But I wasn't. I was warm. Yes, I definitely warm. Was Sylvia having some sort of subconscious affect on me? Sylvia then, with no sign or warning, leapt toward me with such a nimble suddenness that I nearly jumped out of my skin. She shimmied up to me and rubbed her small, firm, nubile tits against my chest.

The leash reigning my will was fraying at the bit. I didn't how long I had it in me to resist the temptation to-----, to----- . Part of me wanted to go, to just turn and get out of there as fast as I could. I wasn't likely to get any useful information out of anyway. Another part of me, a darker part of me, wanted to stay. To dive right in and satisfy my base primitive lust.

Then, with the same nimble suddenness that brought her to me, took her away. She backed off, moving away from me, and

staring at me with eyes of

Sylvia, the young seductive tease was gone and another Sylvia had taken her place. I've heard of rapid mood swings. Hell, I've had plenty of them myself. But Sylvia, I think, had set a new land speed record.

“Something to drink?,” she asked.

“Cola.”

“Nothing stronger?”

“No.”

“Not like your partner, are you? She drank and smoked.”

“Did she ask any questions?”

“A few.”

“Have you ever been treated for schizophrenia?”

“No. Why do you ask?”

“No reason.” No reason like hell. I wanted to know if her

behavior was an act or was actually a part of a real split personality.

Sylvia went to the rooms' refrigerator and pulled out a cola for me and herself. The sound of two can tops cracking open soon followed. My questions now concerned the death of Donna Winters, Sylvia's mother.

“What's your father like?”

“Which one?”

“You can't have two fathers.”

“Cats can have two fathers.”

“Are you a cat?”

“No.”

“Then why bring it up?”

“I didn't mean literally. I meant that I have a public father who's considerate, generous, and loving. And I have a private father who's-----.”

“Brutal, selfish, and cold.”

“You know about that?” Her bright, green tinted eyes looked up at me in full, genuine surprise. “You’re aware of his two personalities, or were you just guessing?”

“Just guessing.” An obvious lie to me, but I hoped not to her.

Sylvia’s body tensed considerably as she moved away from me to attached herself to a high priced video game system. She swallowed a couple of long slugs of cola, handed me the can, then started to play a game. I don’t remember the name of the game, but so many of its counterparts, it had an overdose of murder, blood, and mayhem. It didn’t take long for Sylvia to become intensely and maniacally transfixed.

“Don’t just stand there looking stupid and impotent,” she said. “Ask me whatever you like.”

“Is your father capable of murder?”

“Definitely. But then, that’s the longest list ever to exist.”

“Was he home the night your mother died?”

“I don’t know, I wasn’t here.”

“Was anyone capable of killing your mother?”

“Did she have enemies, you mean?”

“Yeah.”

“Not outside this house.”

“Meaning who exactly?”

“Family. All of us.”

“Did you love you mother? Or did you hate her? Or both?”

Sylvia turned sharply away from the game she was playing and roughly snatched both cans of cola out of my hands. Her face was taut and guarded. I couldn’t see, I just couldn’t see what laid behind the mask. She turned sharply again, this time away from me and to the door

“Are you leaving?,” I asked.

“No, you are. I’m bored with you and your questions. I want you to go. Now.”

“It’s your home.”

“This is no one’s home except my father’s.”

She went to the doorway in a hurry and did so without peering back at her shoulder at me. I moved slowly, purposely so.

“Can’t you move any faster than that?,” she asked.

“When I want to.”

“Well, I want you to now.”

Ignoring the order, I kept my slothful pace to the door. I was reading to leave without another word passing between us, but she stopped with a look and a question,

“Are you the one?”

“The one, what?”

“Never mind, just go. Go and don’t come back..”

“It’s your house.”

“I told you before----.”

I left the room and closed the door before she could finish.. I stood there in the hall for a few seconds, staring down and away at the floor. I knew what Sylvia was referring to when she asked me if I was the one. I purposely put her off. It was a subject I wanted no part of. So, I avoided it. But how long could I keep doing so? In time, I would have to talk about it to someone. But how much time? And how many times?

I didn’t know the answers to those questions. I did know, though, that I would talk about it. Not for closure. I don’t believe in closure. The past is always with you. It’s not a cold, uncomfortable room that you can just walk out of, close the door, and forget you were ever there. No, I would need to talk about this for a different

reason. To purge myself of the demons raising havoc with my core being. The demons which sprung to life from a tenuous coma with the news of Donna's death. The effort to purge, in the end, maybe for naught, but the effort had to be made. The state of my being was at stake. That's fairly important stuff, I'd say.

After leaving the hallway, I returned to the foyer to pause and think a little bit. I wondered about Sylvia's behavior. Was the whole thing some sort of act, or was it real? She had shown no outward signs of grief or loss. She only became emotional when I asked her about love and hate regarding her and her mother. Was their guilt at work inside Sylvia? If so, what was the nature of the guilt?

After a few minutes in the foyer, I went upstairs to find Alexandria, Gina, and maybe one or two clues. Once I got to the top of the long, straight and narrow staircase, I decided to look for clues first. But where should I look for them. The house was far too big to

conduct a room by room search. There were rooms all along a southern facing wing of the house and there were rooms all along a northern facing wing of the house. The southern rooms were occupied by servants; the northern rooms were occupied by the Winters family. I went north. The trip would have both expected and unexpected consequences.

I would have to go into Donna's room. Doing so was as compulsory as eating, sleeping, or drawing in a new breath of air. Compulsory even though it promised to be of little help in the investigation of Donna's death. I had to go there. I had to go. I had to. That was an expected consequence of going to the northern side of the house. The unforeseen consequence would be the presence of a reincarnation of Donna in one of the other rooms. A flesh and blood shadow that would dilate my eyes, numb my mind, and just for a second or two, stop my weakened heart.

Chapter Seven:

I was drawn to second room on the right. Why? I couldn't put it into words if I had a thousand years to think about it. But something led me there. Whether it was a push or a pull, I don't know. In the end, it didn't matter. What mattered is that I was there.

The door was open a crack and I tried without success to take a look inside. So, I knocked lightly on the door and waited impatiently for an answer. There was none. I knocked again and waited. And again there was no answer. Nine times out of ten, I would've walked away in such circumstances, but this was the one time in ten I would stay.

I eased the door open little by little until I saw, standing at the opposite end of the room, a young woman. A touch over five foot six, she showed slightly more flesh and had much more hair than Sylvia.. Standing full faced to the window, she was dressed simply in a long sleeved cotton blouse and jeans, both of which were colored off black. This young woman was Adrienne, the other daughter born to William and Donna Winters.

“Excuse me,” I said in a low sympathetic voice.

“What is it?,” she answered without turning to face me.

“Have you seen a woman named Alexandria or your aunt Gina? I’m looking for them.”

Adrienne, I sensed, was different from her sister. I was trying to ease my way into her confidence. I didn’t want to just blurt out the nature of what I wanted to say to her. It was a decidedly different approach than I one I used with Sylvia.

“Gina is down the hall in mother’s room,” she said.

“Alexandria is downstairs in the kitchen. But that isn’t what you really want to ask me, is it?”

“No, it isn’t.”

“Mr. Caterski, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Are you hungry, Mr. Caterski?”

“No, thanks. My stomach isn’t in a good mood right now.”

“Thirsty, then?”

“Something warm.”

“Tea?”

“Sure.”

“Black?”

“Fine.”

“Any particular kind?”

“Surprise me.”

“Okay.”

“Maybe it will calm down my stomach.”

“Mine, too.”

“I’ll just be a minute.”

“Take your time.”

Adrienne reeled in her gaze and went to a bed side phone sitting a couple of steps away. She was unsteady on her feet and walking even a few feet proved trying. I stepped forward in order to

get a decent look at her face. But either by chance, or by design, she turned her profile away from me and toward the wall. Having failed to get a better look at her face, I used the time to make a quick inspection of the room. There wasn't much to see. There was so little to see, in fact, if there had been any less there would have been nothing in the room at all.

Adrienne's bedroom, like all other rooms in the house, was large. But unlike all other rooms in the house, it was decorated in a complexly minimalist tone. What was in the room is what needed to be in the room. Nothing more. A bed, a dresser, and a night table. The room color was a quiet pastel. Such a color in a room is supposed to lighten moods and provide some sort of general emotional harmony. I doubt, though, that things had rarely, if ever, been achieved here. When finished with her call for tea, Adrienne returned to her sentinel staring out the bay view window.

“The tea will be brought up in a few minutes,” she said. “Do you want to ask me questions now or wait until the tea gets here.”

“Now if it’s okay with you.”

“It’s okay. Go ahead.”

“Were you in the game room a few minutes ago?”

“With Gina, Alexandria, and my brother and sister?”

“Yeah.”

“Yes, I was there.”

All I could see of her was her long, dark hair. Straight and possessing a high, natural sheen, it rolled well past the collar and didn’t stop until it reached somewhere near the middle of her back. Frustrated by this singular view of her, I continued the interview.

“Did Alex ask you any questions.”

“Alex?”

“Alexandria. I call her Alex.”

“Oh yes, I see. Yes, she asked questions while she played pool.”

“And you answered them?”

“All of us answered them.”

“You, Sylvia, and George.”

Doubling up on interviews with the same person is never a bad idea. Even if both interviewers ask entirely the same set of questions. The person can slip up, make a mistake, and let out a valuable piece of information. Or they can sound suspiciously perfect, repeating word for word what had been said previously, and in exact with others who had been interviewed on the same topics. I was not in the mood for a long, detailed interview with Adrienne. I just was not up to it. So, I did all that I could to keep things moving forward.

“Mind if I use a tape recorder?”

“If you have to.”

I crept to within a few paces of Adrienne and put the recorder down on the night table. She, in response, stepped a pace or two away to the right. Determined to a full, front view of her face, I sat down on a corner of the bed and waited for to return to the window. I mulled over which questions to ask her. Which ones, I wondered, would elicit the best responses.

“How many times have you met Gina?”

“Not many. No more than four.”

“In your life?”

“Yes.”

“When was the last time?”

“The funeral.”

“Before that.”

“I’m not sure. It’s been a long time.”

“Do you remember the occasion?”

“She has a business. She probably wanted money. “

“Do you have an impression of her?”

“I have no real opinion of her at all. As I said, I’ve only met her a few times in my life. And beside the funeral, I have no real memory of her.”

“What kind of relationship did she have with your mother? Did they communicate a lot? Were they close in any way?”

“It wasn’t easy being close to my mother. But she wasn’t the only one. The entire family had the same problem. That applies to communication too.”

Adrienne spoke with the kind of calm assuredness that can persuade you to just naturally accept what she was telling you was the truth. But why, I still wondered, did she insist on keeping her

back to me in this way? Was it to hide grief? Was it to mask a natural shyness? Was it because she was lying to me and this was the only way to keep from giving herself away?

“Do you believe in ghosts?,” I asked. Where in the seven hells that question came from, I couldn’t tell you.

“Ghosts? What kind of ghosts?”

“The kind that haunt your dreams.”

“Why would you ask me a question like that?”

“I just wanted to know if you’ve dreamt about your mother since---.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be asking me about my mother and father?”

“Hasn’t Alex already done that?”

“Yes, but I thought-----.”

“Thought what? She was thorough, wasn’t she?”

“Yes, but I-----.”

“You miss your mother, don’t you Adrienne?”

“Yes.”

“You loved her, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Were you the only one?”

Both of her hands came rushing up to cover a down turned face. She started to shiver a little bit, as if she had suddenly been hit by an unexpectedly bitter wind.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “I shouldn’t have gone there.”

“It’s okay, I just----. I mean sometimes I----.”

“Breakdown and cry?”

“Yes.”

“Is that why you’ve kept your back to me?”

“Partly. Where is the damn tea anyway?”

“I think I should be going. I’ve been here too long already.”

“Do you really have to? You haven’t been here long. There are still a lot of questions you haven’t asked me yet. Where was I when my mother died? Where was my father? My sister? When was the last time I saw my mother?” The plea in her voice was strong, strong enough to even make a deaf man hear. It had a quality that was all too familiar to me. Clinging, desperate, tormented, just like-- --, just like a woman I used to know.

I took a few steps toward the door, then stopped. I heard another plea for me to stay. A soft, mournful, “Please”. I took a couple of more steps toward the door, then stopped. Again. This time it wasn’t the words that stopped me from leaving. It was a touch of the hand on my upper right arm. The touch closed my eyes and weakened my knees to the point of near collapse.

I fell into another world then, as my mind drifted back to a familiar place and time. A place and time in the not too distant past. In a clear and precise, frame by frame style, that past came surging up to the moment of the here and now. Then I heard the plea yet again. "Please stay."

Who made the plea this time? Was it Adrienne? Or was it-----. Or was it the both of them? I didn't know. I didn't know. Reality and dream were bending into each other. The past and present had arced up and joined together in a blind, mad rush. They were all bleeding, twisting, and intertwining into each other. I opened my eyes and turned around. Then Adrienne turned around. The instant I saw her face, I saw someone else's face too. Someone I used to know, someone I used to-----.

She had the same high rounded cheek bones, the same thin, slightly jutting tip of the nose, and the same full. Flawlessly sculpted

lips. The similarities were so striking that I couldn't help----. I just couldn't help to be drawn to them all over again. She had the same big, wide brown eyes and the same long nailed, long fingered hands.

There were dark similarities too. Her face had suffered a beating, Not the worst of beatings, but none good were they? She had the same bruised left cheek, the same darkened left eye, the same dry bloodied nose. I reached out to her, took her hands in mine, and pulled her toward me. Discretion had slipped quietly out of the room.

I took her cheeks slowly into my hands. She offered no protest, no physical signs of resistance, nothing that said she wasn't in full agreement with what I was doing. I leaned forward; she leaned with a slight tilt back. Then we kissed. A light, but deeply impassioned kiss. Her lips tasted juicy sweet like a ripe cherry fresh off of the tree. And then----, then-----. A servant came into the room.

It wasn't Winslow. This servant was female. A tall, thin forty something female.

“Here's the tea you asked for,” she said.

The words were like a hard slap in the face and brought me back to reality with a thud. I opened my eyes and saw Adrienne standing there right in front of me with her mouth still opened from the kiss. I nearly jumped out of my skin at the thought of why the kiss had happened. Adrienne rolled her tongue slowly across her lips as if she was trying to recapture the taste of the kiss. Her large brown eyes fixed on me, staring hard with both desire and incomprehension.

What the hell is wrong with me, I thought, kissing Adrienne because she looked like Donna, her mother. I must be losing my mind. What was left of it to lose. Get a grip will you, I shouted to myself. Okay, you screwed up. But it's over now Get on with the

business at hand. Get on with it, then get the hell out of there. My head was pounding, my stomach spinning, and I desperately needed to go home, and get some sleep.

“I’m leaving,” I said with morose abruptness.

“Do you have to?”

“Yes, it’s definitely time to go.” I’d moved to within a two or three steps of the door when Adrienne stopped me cold with this short, blunt line.

“How much to kill him?”

“What?”

“How much to kill my father.”

“You’re asking the wrong person.”

“Not even for twenty five thousand dollars?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Not because I’m not capable of killing. I am certainly capable. Under the right conditions, who isn’t?”

“Why, then?”

“All sorts of reasons.”

“I can’t believe we’re even having this conversation.”

“In this place anything is possible.”

“Waiter, check please. I’m in a hurry. Goodbye Adrienne, it’s been both interesting and strange.”

I headed for the door without looking back. I heard Adrienne trailing no more than a step behind me.

“Wait,” she said. “Come back. Don’t you want to kiss me again and pretend it’s-----.”

“Gina,“ I called out, “are you up here somewhere. Gina.”

“Wait, Mr. Caterski.. Don’t go, please. We can even fuck if you want to. You can close your eyes and pretend it’s-----.”

“Gina! Gina!”

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of. And I wouldn’t mind.”

Desperately leaving Adrienne behind, I left her room and went looking for Gina. I found her in a room at the farthest end of the hall. It was Donna’s room. Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed, Shiva, and whatever other gods you care to name. I crept into the room as if the floor had been booby trapped with mines. The room had been stripped bare of everything except the paint on the walls. No bed, no dresser, no closet full of clothes, nothing.

This condition had sent Gina into a rage. A rage she had just begun to act out. It was too strong and virulent to restrain. There was a large screwdriver in her right hand and just started using it to attack things. First a window, then a wall. Then a wall and a window. Then two more windows and a wall. I shook my head and cursed my luck. I just couldn’t seem to avoid strange situations.

Maybe it was the damn house, I don't know. But I asked myself, were the strange situations following me or was I following them?

The longer I stayed in this room, the more it got to me. I saw Donna's face, I heard her voice, I felt her touch. My entire body flushed hot, even the room was filled to its very edges with cold. The muscles in my arms and legs began to tremble low and uncontrollably. I didn't have a clue what was happening to me. But I knew that this room, in some way or another, was the cause.

I had to get out of there. And by out of there, I meant the room, the house, and that entire area of town. And I wanted to get out of there as soon as possible. Which meant I didn't want to wait for Gina's screwdriver assault to burn itself down to its last ember. Who knew how long that would be? So, I walked up behind and put my hands on her. A bad error of judgement on my part.

Gina spun around as if she'd been on a coiled spring pivot

and punched me in the face with her left hand. It was a vicious shot, like getting hit flush with Thor's mighty hammer. The punch knocked me to the floor, though I have no memory of falling down. I was hit, then I was down. It hurt like a motherfucker (Nothing hurts worse than a motherfucker. Nothing).

I screamed and clutched at my nose. My eyes teared up so much I couldn't see.

And blood. There was plenty of blood. God, how I hate the sight of it. Especially when my own. I sat there on the floor and waited for my eyes to clear, my ears to stop ringing, and my nose to stop bleeding. So much for leaving as quickly as possible. All in all, I was on the floor a damn long time. When my eyes could actually focus enough to see again, I looked up and saw Gina standing over me.

“Goddamn you,” I said, “you did that on purpose.”

“No, I didn't.”

“The hell you didn’t.”

“No, really. I was lost in a daydream and-----.”

“And punching me in the face brought you out of it.”

“You don’t understand. I was thinking about----.”

“Christ, you’re a pathetic liar. You hit me because you wanted to.”

“And why would I want to?”

Gina bent over her wide bearish body and stuck out her right paw as an offer to help me up. I refused.

“You go down and find Alex,” I said. “I’m going out to the car.”

“Shouldn’t you clean up first? You have blood all over you.”

“Really? Is that what this is? Blood? I ran my tongue slowly around on my lips. “Mmm, my guess would ‘ve been a vintage year Chardonnay. But if you say it’s blood, then it must be blood.”

A fitting piece of sarcasm, I thought. Gina didn't think so. She understood it easily enough though. It wasn't complex or sophisticated. Yeah, she understood it all right. But she hated it too. And I was fairly certain, she hated me too. I stood up on my own and, once assured of my balance, I headed for the door.

"I'm giving you five minutes to get Alex," I said, "and get both your asses to the car. I'm leaving whether you're there or not."

"Are you staying on the case?"

That question took a lot of nerve to ask. I didn't stop to answer it. This house was a strange place of cursed madness and, if I didn't get out of there in the next two minutes, I was going to go mad myself. I ran(yes ran) out of the room, down the hall, down the stairs, and out of the house. The first rush of outside air was sweet. Not sweet because it was warm and caressing. No, this air was sweet simply because it was not the Winters home. But before I could go,

before I could leave this damnable place, there would have to be one more confrontation with Sonny Winters. It would be brief and, once done, a hard rain would fall again.

Chapter Eight:

I was still waiting by the car for Alexandria and Gina, when a started backing out of the two Winters garages. It was an expensive car, a really expensive car, German made and black as moon covered night. Who do you think was driving this car? None other than Sonny Winters himself. I was prepared to let him pass by

me unnoticed, but he couldn't pass up the opportunity to start something up with me again.

“Are you still here?” he asked.

“Yeah, I'm waiting for hell to freeze over. I'm just standing here watching the house, waiting-----.”

“This isn't a game Caterski.”

“I didn't say it was.”

“I didn't kill my wife.”

“Physically, you mean?”

“Is there another way?”

“Mentally, emotionally, psychologically.”

“My memory isn't what it used to be. Could you do me a big favor and tell me all of the cases where someone was prosecuted for mental murder? Why don't you go home and accept the fact that there is no case here. You're playing a game you just can't win.”

“I thought you said this wasn’t a game.”

Winter’s hands wrapped tighter around the steering wheel and squeezed themselves into a tight, white knuckled grip. By the look on his face, I believed him to be fantasizing about wringing my neck. He was deep into this fantasy until I brought him out of it by kicking the front passenger door. Winters jumped as if he’d been zapped with an electric cattle prod. A quick smile touched my lips.

“You were off in la la land,” I said.

“You’re the expert on la la land. You’ve lived your whole life there.”

“Not all of it. Just enough of it to get me from one day to the next.”

“Poor Caterski. He tries so hard, but he just can’t seem to get anywhere. He has his own rules, but he just can’t get anyone else to play by them. Not the rich he despises, not the poor he admires.

Poor, poor Caterski.”

I was smiling. At the time, I didn't know why. It was a smile filled with menace and the thought of revenge. My subconscious was obviously up to something, but hadn't let my conscious in on it yet.

“I'm telling you,” he said, “no good can come of this for you. The more you pursue this, the more uncomfortable it's going to get.”

“You're repeating yourself again. You really should stop doing that.”

“You don't understand the gravity of what I'm saying.”

“You're wrong. I know exactly what you're saying. I have ears. I can hear. You know people. You know people who smoke cigars in darkened rooms. Evil people for whom no act is too vile, too degenerate, to walk away from. People without one microscopic piece of humanity or conscious.”

“You're babbling Caterski.”

“So, you’re threatening me, is that it?”

“I’m not threatening anyone. I’m-----.”

“Cautioning me.”

“Right.”

“You’re concerned about my health.”

Just then Alexandria and Gina came out of the house. Gina, walking slightly out in front, was talking to Alexandria in a loud, angry voice. Alexandria, a step and a half behind, stared at the ground and gave nothing except indifference to anything being said to her.

“Look Winters,” I said, “two more members of your fan club are coming to see you.”

“What?” He couldn’t see Alexandria or Gina. I was blocking his view.

“Alex and Gina. They’re headed this way. Oh, and Gina

looks like she's in the mood to snap someone's neck."

"Where? Where? I can't see a thing. You're blocking my view."

"You couldn't see if had maps, a compass, binoculars, and arrows pointing the way."

"Bullshit. I have perfect vision."

"Perfectly selective."

"I've got to go. I've already wasted too much time talking to you."

"What about my time?"

"What about your time?"

"Doesn't it count?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because you're a nobody."

“And you’re a somebody.”

“Right.”

“A rich somebody.”

“An unbeatable combination.”

“So, time is only precious for people with big wads of cash stuck up their ass.”

“Go home, Caterski. Go home and give up this investigation. You’re a loser. Go home and lose.”

“Winters, when this is all over, we’re all going to lose.”

Then, without another word between, Winters puts up his window, turns the stereo on high, throws the car into gear, and starts to drive off. My car keys are in my hand. Somehow, just then, the keys gain a life of their own. They jumped forward and bit into the passenger side door. By the time Winters had pulled fully away, there were a pair of long jagged scars covering most of the right side

of his very expensive German made car.

“Naughty, naughty,” Alex said in a voice of subtle playfulness.

I turned halfway around to answer her and saw her leaning on the passenger side of the car. She had her back to me.

“How long have you been standing there?,” I asked

“Too long.”

“Facing that way?”

“Yeah.”

“Where’s Gina?”

“The back seat. I think she’s thinking up new ways to murder her brother-in-law.”

I walked slowly toward her and she, in response, turned slowly around to face me.

“And maybe me too,” I said.

“Just because she cracked you once in the face.”

“There’s more to it than that.”

“Something to do with Donna.”

I tossed her the keys to the car.

“You drive.” I said.

“Is that an order?”

“Get in and drive Alex. And don’t ask any more questions about Donna and me. Not today.”

With a quick, upward glance she looked at me with a registered and restrained acceptance. She let the matter drop. I knew she was pissing mad at me though. She was as mad as a backed up wolverine in fear of its life. She believed my not opening up about Donna was my simple revenge for her not opening up about her drinking. She could’ve been right about that. Hell, she probably was right.

I could've been trying to get even with her and not even realized it. Or maybe I had realized it and just wouldn't admit it. Revenge, after all, doesn't have to be obvious, violent, and full of murderous intent. There are many different types of revenges with smaller, subtler, less physically destructive natures. Natures that exhibit themselves every day against people you care deeply about, people you want and need in your life, and people you'd even give up your life for. Like Alexandria now, or Sarah and Shelley in the past. Or maybe even----.

Alexandria had just turned away from me when it started to rain. A heavy rain. Not a cats and dogs kind of rain. No, this rain was heavier than that. More like horses and buffalos. Hoping to avoid a thorough soaking, Alexandria ran around the front of the car and got into the car and out of the rain in three seconds flat. Me, I didn't give a goddamn about getting out of the rain. I just stood there

for about thirty seconds or so, then calmly walked over to the driver's side of the car and tapped on the window. Alexandria slid the window down halfway.

“What’s wrong with you?,” she said.. “Get in the damn car. Now!”

“Give me your gun.”

“What?”

“Give me your gun.”

“What the hell for?”

“I’m not getting the car until you give me your gun.”

Confused but compliant, she reached under her left arm, took out the gun and handed it to me. I took the gun from her, thanked her, pointed the gun in the air, systematically fired off the entire clip. I then got in the car, gave her back her gun, and closed my eyes before she could examine me with a cold, impassive stare. I waited

for her to say something. Anything. A scold of some kind. A good, old fashioned ‘What the fuck is your problem’ or something along those lines. Alex didn’t say anything like that. In fact, she didn’t say anything at all. Instead, it was the ever judgemental Gina who spoke up instead.

“A pervert, a pagan, and a lunatic. A real triple threat.”

Sliding easily into the world of dreams, I ignored Gina’s insult and fell fast asleep. Alex, bless her, took my part and defended me. How do I know? My tape recorder was on the seat between us and still running.

“We can drop the case right now,” Alex said.

“But I paid you all that money.”

“You paid? I thought you said it was your sister’s money”

“It, it was Donna’s money. I just meant----.”

“Yeah, yeah. I know what you meant. You don’t like the

company you're keeping Gina Wilson, goddess of purity and light.”

“That is not I meant.”

Alex may have turned to look at me at this point. I don't know for sure, but it seemed like a logical conclusion given what she said next.

“Can't you see he's all twisted up inside. Or haven't you noticed? Or have you ever noticed anyone beside yourself.”

“He's a-----.”

“He's been good to me. And good for me too.”

“Good for-----.”

“All you want to see are his faults.”

“Well, he's got----.”

“I'm telling you Gina. He's unique. The good kind.”

“How is he different than any other kind of man?”

“Give me a minute and I'll tell you.”

“You have one minute, starting now.”

“Wise ass.”

“You just wasted two seconds.”

Alex grumbled a little under her breath, then fell completely silent. She was thinking. Time passed. Fifteen seconds. Thirty seconds. Forty five seconds.

“Okay,” Alex said, “I have an answer for you.”

“Well?”

“His eyes. That’s what’s different about him. His eyes.”

“His eyes?”

“Yeah.”

“What about them? They’re brown just like billions of other people in the world. So what?”

“Look inside them.”

“I have.”

“No, you haven’t. All you’ve looked at is the surface.”

“Blah, blah, blah. You’re talking jibber jabber.”

“Look inside his eyes damn you. Then you’ll see.”

“See what?”

“Everything.”

“What exactly is everything?”

“The whole wide world.”

“Bah, you’re playing word games. It’s something both of you like to do. But I have no taste for it.”

“No skill at it either.”

“Go to hell. I told you. I’ve seen his eyes. There’s nothing special about them or him.”

“Is it that you can’t see or don’t want to?”

“Maybe you see too much. Things that you want to see, but aren’t really there.”

“No, I see it because it’s there.”

“And why can’t I see those things.”

“Simply because you don’t want to.”

“Really! Then if you’re so good seeing things, you must’ve seen that you’re in love with him.”

That pointed accusation not only killed their conversation, but it also buried any desire to talk to each other for the rest of the day. I, of course, hadn’t known at the time what had caused this mutual agreement not to speak to each other. I didn’t find out to the following day when I played back the tape.

Anyway, when we arrived home my mood was as black as the back end of a three mile cave. I was in a rare mood to get good and goddamn drunk. I had a bottle of Jamaican rum(the dark stuff) in my liquor cabinet that had barely been touched. I pulled out the bottle and poured myself a quick drink. Alex stared for a minute or

so, studiously searching my face for answers. At first, she thought I was acting out some sort of sick joke.

Soon enough, she realized I was as serious as a man could be. I was tired, cold, angry, heartbroken, and depressed all at the same time and all to an alarmingly high degree. I was, as they say, in a bad, bad way. I knew it. And looking at me in a close extended way, Alex knew it too.

“You’re going to feel guilty about this later, you know,” she said.

“I know, I know.”

“And do you know why?”

“Because I’m encouraging you to drink, instead of trying to talk you out of it.”

“Well, I’m telling you, you shouldn’t feel any guilt. It’s not your fault if I drink. It’s mine, all mine. You have no say in whether

I drink or not. It's up to me. Not you, me."

"Yeah, I know. Still I-----."

"Listen, we're both going to drink. Why not together?"

Drinking alone is hell. I know. You don't want to drink alone."

"I haven't got drunk in a long, long time. I barely drink at all, but there are at least seven different storms flaring up inside my head right now."

"And if you don't find shelter?"

"Then they all might come together and kill me."

"That bad?"

"That bad."

"Then let's find shelter together."

"And tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow you can go back to being yourself."

"Which is?"

“A godless, perverted, lunatic.”

We both laughed.

“Somehow that sounds better coming from you,” I said.

“Maybe that’s because you’re in----- . Maybe that’s because we’re such good friends.”

“Is that it?”

“What else could it be?”

I got the rum, Alex got the amaretto and the two of us sprawled out on the living room floor and drank. And drank. And drank some more. With each drink, the storms raging inside my head calmed. For a brief time, all of the torment was dead, buried, and forgotten. But this alcohol induced state of existence didn’t last long. It couldn’t have been more two hours after I’d gone to sleep when I began to dream. A strange dream. (Of late there had been no other kind)

It was cold. Seven different kinds of cold. I was clothed, but not enough to protect from the bitter, swirling winds blowing in from the west. I was down on my knees looking for something. I don't know what. Then it began to snow. The flakes weren't white as normal flakes are. These flakes were black. Then I saw that they really weren't flakes at all.

They were leaves. Leaves from thousands of dead withered roses. Black roses. Then the petals came down. Dead petals. Dead petals and dead leaves were pouring down on me as if to cover me completely and bury me alive by sheer relentless volume. I tried to stand, but my normally powerful legs wouldn't support me. My entire being begins shaking uncontrollably. There is a presence hovering over me. I look up.

I see a small winged shadow pass over my head again and again and again. There's no body to see. Only shadow. With each

pass, the shadow drops lower and lower to the ground. This thing, whatever it is, has come for me. My body is now shaking in equal measures of cold and fear. Again, I try to stand. I want to run, run like a frightened cheetah fleeing a pack of pursuing hyenas. Again, my legs fail me.

I am weak. Too weak to stand and flee. So, I crawl. Yes, I crawl. To where, I don't know. All I know is that I'm crawling. Crawling, crawling, crawling away from this shadowed thing that's pursuing me. What is this thing? What, in the name of life, is it? What is this thing that's pursuing me?

I still can't see it, but I know it's there. Yes, its there. Terrifying. Terrifying not just it's there, but also because there's nothing I can do to make it go away. I am helpless. I can't wish it away. I can't reason it away. I can't curse it away. There's no physical strength left in me to fight it. I can't think clearly. I can't

think at all. There's no way out. There's no chance of escape.

I reach out a blind hand, but there's no one there to take it. My eyes and head are heavy, weighed down by some crushing unseen force. I can't keep either of them up. I haven't the strength to even do that. My head is the first to fall, dropping down on the hard, unyielding ground. My eyelids, like a pair of heavy marbled mausoleum doors, slam shut. My searching hand is still airborne, flinging wildly about and waiting vainly for someone to take hold of it and take me far from harm's way.

I realize, in time, what has come for me. What has stalked me with a firm emotionless indifference. Death. She'd arrived by way of a team of smelly, half blind, ball less old dogs. This description came, as she stood over me, from Death herself. In came in a colorful, darkly humorous fashion.

She'd just arrived on the scene and she, being Death, wanted

to say something profound. To her, saying something profound was a part of the job. A necessary part of her daily comings and goings. She couldn't come for someone and not say something profound. It just wasn't done.

Every time she opened her mouth, though, the dogs would interrupt her train of thought with a mixed chorus of whines, barks, and howls. These interruptions went on for quite some time. Longer than I could've possibly measured laying on the ground in a cold, nearly comatose stupor. Death was, to put it mildly, a little upset.

“Goddamn you dogs! Here I am, Death herself, and look what I am forced to tolerate. A bunch of smell, half blind, ball less old dogs dragging me through the coldest, snowiest hell on earth. And for what! A pathetic loser of a Polack detective. Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed, and Vishnu. I have had it! I am not hauling this son a bitch's carcass anywhere.”

“Do what you want with him,” she said to the dogs. “You mangy, four legged excuses for transportation. Eat him, lick him, hump him, or piss on him. I don’t care. I’m leaving. Do you hear! I’m leaving without him and without you. Goodbye and bad luck to every damn of you. That includes you too Caterski. If somehow, you still happen to be breathing.

Then death, full of prideful indignation, turned on her heels and left. At first, her steps were heard easily, crunching into the thinly sheeted snow with extreme and bitter force. The steps die quickly in my ears and the only sounds left to my ears were noises made by the pack of dogs. The damn things were sniffing me, damn them. Were the animals hungry I thought? I hoped not. How recently had they eaten? Had Death purposely starved them? Maybe they’d sniff me, decide they liked what they sniffed, and make a raw, hearty meal out of me.

Would I feel it if they did? Or were my legs too cold even feel being eaten?

Hell, did I even really care if they ate me or no? Somehow managing to open my left eye a half an inch, I saw the dogs. I watched them as they circled slowly around me. Soon after, it became easily apparent, that the dogs weren't going to eat me. Why? I don't know why. Maybe eating human flesh is against their religion. Maybe they were some sort of strange breed of wild vegetarian dogs. Or maybe it was simply a digestive problem. Maybe humans were just too hard to swallow.

Do you want to know what those dogs of Death actually did do? They pissed on me, that's what. They pissed on me until their bottomless urine wells ran dry. After that, they laid down and went to sleep. Snoring all the way too, the smelly, half blind, ball less little sons of bitches.

I woke up then and the strange dream of Death and dogs ended. I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep the rest of the night. So, I dug out an old book and spent the rest of that early morning reading. Joseph Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'. Appropriate choice, I thought. I read the entire book straight through without pause. And when I was done, I shut off the light, laid in the dark, and waited for the rise of another morning sun.

Chapter Nine:

There were more interviews with the Winters family the following day. Of them, only two are noteworthy. One was with Jack Winters, Sonny's father. The other was with Teresa Wilson, Donna's

mother. The interview with Jack Winters occurred just before sunset. It took place at his house. Which, like so many of Wannabe's biggest promoters, was located outside the city in the suburbs.

This suburban home was one of three houses owned by Mr. Winters. The other two were located in Bridgeport, Connecticut and Fort Lauderdale, Florida. To be blunt, Mr. Winters didn't want to have anything to do with us. He didn't want to talk to us. He didn't even want to let us in the door. All he wanted to do was slam the door in our face and make us disappear. Winters, though, didn't get what he wanted. I put my foot down. Literally. I put my foot down right between the door and the frame. It's a simplistic maneuver that's as old as doors themselves.

Mr. Winters eventually gave and told the butler to let us in. Winters retreated quickly out of sight and the butler told us to wait in the foyer while he went and got Mr. Winters. The butler, a pale

nondescript white male in his early fifties, then disappeared and was never seen again. Alex and I stood in the foyer for over fifteen minutes without seeing anyone. Jack Winters wanted us to wait. So, we waited.

When Mr. Winters finally came out of a reception room located to the right of the staircase, he wasn't exactly pleasant. A man with a tall, thin body and average, non-distinctive features, he wasn't someone who could intimidate anyone with his physical presence. So, he used his most potent and effective weapon. His family name.

Mr. Winters told us, in as many words as possible, that if we pursued an investigation any further that we would lose our investigator licenses. He said he would call the mayor, the police chief, and a few other well placed people and file formal complaints against us. He went way above and beyond the call to beat us over

the head with verbal intimidation. The man just wouldn't shut up. He droned on and on and on about the family name, their prestige, their vaunted place in local history and all the rest of that 'I'm somebody, you're nobody' bit. His message to us was clear. We were flies and the Winters family was a giant can of bug spray.

What was the most interesting about Mr. Winters blustering was the fact that Donna Winters, his daughter-in-law played no part in it at all. Her death, like her life, meant nothing to him. What mattered to him, what really mattered to him above all else, was the preservation of the highly exalted family name. It wouldn't be sullied, it wouldn't be dragged into the mud, it wouldn't be tarnished even in the slightest way. His daughter-in-law was of no consequence whatsoever. Not living; not dead.

The other interesting aspect of our visit here was Mr. Winters refusal to talk to his wife Francine. His refusal was absolute. There

was no moving him. Not only could we not talk to her, we couldn't even be on the same floor of the house as her. This cold, self-serving attitude brought both Alex's and my back up. Alex pulled out a cigarette, lit it, and blew a huge cloud of smoke right into the face of Mr. Winters. He wheezed, coughed, and frantically waved his hands around as if a mad bee was buzzing his nose.

"I think we'll be going now," I said.

"If you have any sense," Mr. Winters replied, "you will forget there ever was an investigation."

"This isn't over."

"Then I have no choice but to use my influence against you."

"Who are you fooling with that protect the family name crap," Alex said. "Anyone's who ever had to live in one of those shanty shack houses you built knows what kind of people the Winters' family are. Anyone's whose had to deal with the family

business knows what tree rot you are. Hell, even your protectors, the ones you threaten to sick on us, know what you really are. So, go ahead and send your rabid, blue blooded guard dogs after us if you want to, but please spare us the purity of the family name crap. An elephant with four anvils tied to each leg would have a better chance of flying.”

“Nice speech,” I said proudly.

“Thanks, I’d like to go now.”

Alex dragged hard on her cigarette, blew more smoke into Mr. Winters’ face then flicked the butt onto the glossy white pristine floor.

“We didn’t get to ask one goddamn question,” she said when we got back to the car. “I think we’ve boarded the train to nowhere and it’s not going to stop to let us off.”

“Then we’ll jump off.”

“Even if it kills us?”

“Hopefully we can catch a curve. The train will slow down, then we’ll jump off.”

“If you say so.”

“We’re going back to my house, right?”

“I said I wanted to stay, didn’t I?”

“Yeah, but you never said for how long.”

“What is this, another interrogation?”

“Forget it.”

I got in the car and slammed the door shut. Too hard evidently, because Alex rolled her eyes to the side and glared at me. The eyes themselves remained their usual impassive selves. But I knew what thoughts were going on behind them.

“I need a drink,” she said.

“No, you want a drink.”

“Same thing.”

“No. Wanting and needing are not----.”

“You mean like porno and prostitutes?”

“That wasn’t necessary.”

“Neither was your crack about my drinking.”

“Look Alex, I worry about you, okay. I care about you. Is that wrong? Is it?”

“And what, I don’t worry about you? About what’s going on inside your head and how it’s affecting you. The heavy circles under your eyes, the bad dreams, the guilt you feel about----.”

“Can’t you just tell me what started you drinking again?”

“No.”

“Then there’s nothing left to say.”

“Not tonight there isn’t.”

Alex and I didn’t say another word to each other all the way

home. Not while riding through the perfectly manicured streets of Snobby Time Hills.(Not its real name)

Not while riding across a dozen or so roller coaster streets on the upper east side. The off range glow of the street lights cast shadows that only seemed to heighten the sullenness of our brooding faces.

When we finally arrived at the house, I got out of the car and went inside without so much as a single glance over my shoulder. Alex leaned on the car horn three or four times just to annoy me some more, then drove off for another round of wagonless living. Every light in the house was off and Gina's big, sleeping body was wedged tightly onto the living room couch. I stumbled upstairs in the dark, fell into bed, drifted off into another night's fitful sleep.

* * * * *

The interview with Donna's mother was the next morning. I

went alone. Alexandria wasn't even in good enough shape to get out of bed before I left. Gina was up, though I wish she wouldn't have been. The only reason she bothered to speak to me was to cast aspersions on my character. So, anytime she decided to keep her mouth shut, I considered it a short, but peaceful holiday. I contemplated super gluing her lips shut, but I couldn't find the tube. I also thought about stapling her lips shut, but I was all out of staples. Oh, well. Just as I was preparing to leave for the interview with Donna's mother, Gina couldn't let me go without throwing more aspersions in my face.

“Pornography is evil,” she said.

“What? What did you say?”

“Pornography is evil.”

“How do you even know I look at pornography?” No answer.

“Did you find out on one of your cat burglar excursions upstairs

when you thought I was sleeping?”

“Pornography is evil,” she repeated.

“I’m going to talk to your mother. Would you like to come along?” “Again, no answer. “Is ignoring your mother evil?”

“Not my mother.”

“What about your sister? You know, the one who’s dead now.”

No answer, yet one last time. The conversation ended there. Gina went back to watching tv and I left for Teresa Wilson’s house. It didn’t take long to get there. Around twenty minutes, I’d say. Teresa Wilson’s house was in a neighborhood bordering the city’s south central limits. The house itself was a roomy, rectangular, and banked at the top of a steep dropping slope. The neighborhood was well to do, but of a much lesser affluence than where Sonny, her son-in-law lived. It was also of a lesser affluence than Teresa was

born to and lived in for much of her life.

Teresa, a woman of sixty plus years, was as frail looking as someone could look. She was a hunched over five foot three or four and had the same shade of hair as a used scouring pad. I'd describe her frame, but she didn't have one. She either lost it or someone stole it, I don't know which. But it was gone. It was definitely gone. Her eyes, though, bore watching. They were a light misty gray, so light it was hard deciphering the irises from the outer white. They were quick, those eyes, and they were sharp. And most of all, they had power. The power to see inside you, to go beyond what you pretended to be, and to go through to the nexus of what you really are as a human being. I'll tell you, I've never felt so vulnerable and so afraid of someone who looked so physically pathetic and withdrawn as this woman.

Going into her house, I had expected more of what I'd

received from both Sonny Winters and his father Jack. The same open, contemptuous hostility. The same superior air. The same circle the wagons and defend attitude. But what I expected isn't what I got. Which goes to show how ineffectively useless preconceived ideas often turned out to be.

There were two distinctive centerpieces of subject matter that I had in mind for the interview. Teresa's Wilson departure from the family early in Donna's life Was it by force as Donna stated in her diary? Or was it a voluntary departure that, for whatever reason, Donna had lied or had illusory memories about. The other point of emphasis for this interview was the relationship between Donna and her mother. With an emphasis on the last couple of years.

Before I could get to any of that, I was forcefully led through a tour of the house.(If one can forcefully be led by a frail, muscle less sixty plus year old woman)

The furnishings of the house, though of obviously high quality, darkened the mood of the place with their thick, musty colors and unnecessarily cramped arrangements. The air was heavy and hard to inhale in easy, natural breaths. There were few windows, unusually few, and their size was uniformly small. When was the last time any of them had been opened to let in outside air, I wondered.

The tour seemed to be an unspoken part of a tour/interview package deal. She was eager for company, I could tell, even from the looks of a lowly private detective like me. Once the tour had officially ended, Teresa led me straight to the kitchen for tea and conversation. The tea was English. Earl Grey, I believe. I can't remember how many cups I had. It was a lot, I know that much. The cups were demitasse, mind you, not your standard mug. But still, I drank a lot of tea that day.

It was somewhere in the middle of the first cup, I think, when

the interview began. But too often during the conversation, Teresa Wilson would alter the direction we were pursuing and take us into places I didn't want to go. . I don't how, I don't know why, but I had no say in the matter at all. I was completely helpless to stop her. The kitchen, encased in a low, murky light, was entrancing. The spell, it appeared, could only be broken, when Teresa Wilson wanted it to be broken.

“As you can see Mr. Caterski,” she said, “I live alone here. Well, not exactly alone. I do have someone who cooks and cleans for me. She's upstairs right now. She has a room up there. You don't need to talk to her, do you?”

“I don't think so, no.”

“Are you married, Mr. Caterski?”

“Divorced. Twice. Why do you ask?”

“I thought maybe you'd like to meet her. She is a pretty

young thing. I could introduce you.“

“Maybe some other time, uh--”

“Teresa.“

“Teresa.“

She looked at me then, for a long time without saying a word. Sipping her tea, she seemed to be examining me with those still gray eyes of hers. This close eye to eye scrutiny made me uneasy, so I took my eyes off of her, put them on my teacup and waited hours for her start talking again. Well, not actually hours.

“You’re here because of Donna, aren’t you Mr. Caterski?”

“Yes.”

“You want to know what I think about her death?”

“Yes.”

“You want to know whether I think it was suicide or murder?”

“Yes.”

Our eyes met and the first thing that crawled into my head was a long series of unanswerable questions. They came quickly, without pause, one right after another. The tea kept coming and I kept drinking. I just couldn't help myself. What was going on here? Was it Teresa? Has this woman somehow hypnotized me? Had she put something in my tea? Was it the house? Was it a combination of the two? I don't know. I don't know. one

“I was never in a mental hospital,” she said without my ever broaching the subject. “If someone told you that, then they are deceiving you.”

“It was Donna who said it. Why would she deceive?”

“Why does anyone deceive, Mr. Caterski. Ego, money, power, the chance to extricate one's hand from the cookie jar.”

“And if it's impossible to detect the deception, even if you

know its there.”

“Then shoot the deceiver, shoot yourself, or move on.”

“And what if there’s so much deception it becomes a knotted up mess that’s so intertwined there’s no possible chance to unravel it and see the thing for what it really is.”

“Shoot the deceiver, shoot yourself, or move on.”

Teresa had her eyes on me without blinking. She was hawking me, playing predator to my prey. The urge to run the hell out of there was drumming madly in my ears. I didn’t run away though. Something made me stay. What? Who knows?

“Did you have any contact with Donna in the last years?” I asked.

“No.”

“Three months?”

“Aren’t you descending instead of ascending?”

“You didn’t answer the question.”

“I didn’t?”

“No, you didn’t.”

“I wonder why?”

“So do I.”

“Is there anything else you would like to ask me Mr. Caterski?”

I sat there drinking from an empty cup and stalling for time. My eyes were everywhere but on Teresa Wilson. She was laughing at me. Laughing at my incompetence. I could hear voices in my head, taunting me, mocking me, spitting at everything I tried to do. I closed my eyes in the hopes it would help me concentrate. I then pulled my hands off of the table and sat very still.

“Is there something wrong,” she asked after an extremely long minute of silence.

I didn't answer. Another minute passed. This one longer than the one before.

"Mr. Caterski," she said. "Either say something or leave. It's your choice."

I had something.

"You live alone isn't that right Teresa?"

"Yes."

"How long?"

No answer.

"More than five years? More than ten? Fifteen? How long Teresa? "

Still no answer.

"You live alone and you're going to die alone. Do you realize that Teresa? You're going to die alone. Doesn't that frighten you? Well, doesn't it? It frightens me and I'm not as old as you are. Nor

am I as-----.”

“Please, don’t----.”

“Don’t what, Teresa? Don’t what?”

“Please, just stop. Please.”

I stopped, but my eyes remained closed and my hands stayed off of the table. For the first time since stepping into this house, I had both control of myself and Teresa Wilson. I had to seize this advantage and gain something from it before it slipped away from me. Time was precarious. Maybe I had no more than a minute.

“Have you had any contact with Donna in the last three days?”, I asked again.

“Yes. She called me on the phone.”

“A hotel phone, pay phone, or cell?”

“I don’t know. She didn’t say.”

“When was the last time you had contact with her before

that?”

“Not since----. Not since I went away years ago.”

“Then you really were admitted to a mental hospital?”

“Yes.”

“For how long?”

“Four and a half years.”

“And you never came back to live with your family?”

“I didn’t have a family anymore. Donna got married, Gina ran away, and my husband abandoned me.”

“Did you ever try to have contact with Donna after she married?”

“Twice. I went to her house. I did not get to see her. Sonny refused to let me. The second time Sonny came and threatened me. He said he had the power to have me committed again. This time for life.”

“And you took this threat seriously?”

“Could I afford not to? I knew him. I knew what he was capable of doing. He was not bluffing. Not that one; not that time.”

“Did you try any other kind of contact?”

“Yes. I wrote letters but Sonny intercepted them. I called but they never got through.”

Was this information true? Had Teresa gone back and tried to re-establish a relationship with Donna and Sonny had stopped her? And had Donna really called Teresa on the phone recently? Or was all of this just more deception? These things would all need to be looked into. I turned off my recorder. I was ready to leave. I her so.

“Do you want me to walk you to the door?, she asked

“No, that’s not necessary. I’ll find my way out.”

“You’re leaving for sure, then?”

“Yes.”

I stood in the kitchen doorway with my back to her. Her voice had a sudden desperate loneliness to it. Teresa's eyes were on me again, intently focused on my position. This time they showed the vulnerability that's in all of us. I knew loneliness too, yet the nature of it was of a much different kind than hers.

Old age and poor health. The subject of it had crossed my mind many times before. Here, in this particular place and time, it had cropped up again. The passing of time. The deterioration of health. A culture that dismisses it, demeans it, discards it. Friends, loved ones, one by one, they are swallowed up by the that final swallowing march into the sea. The becomes trapped, caged inside a prison shell that holds you in and keeps you from doing things your mind is calling you to do.

Abandoned by life, abandoned by society, abandoned by the very people who should care about you the most. Betrayal all

around. Wait until it happens to you, you say. Blinded by the arrogance of youth, they will laugh and walk smugly away. Shaking myself loose from Teresa's desire for me to stay a little longer, I started, once more, for the door. The harsh dragging of chair legs against the floor told me Teresa was getting up to follow me.

"The gun," she said as my hand reached the doorknob.

I stopped, but I didn't turn around.

"What gun?" I asked.

"The gun Donna was shot with."

"Do you know where it is or who it belonged to?"

"Yes."

"To which question?"

"The second one."

"And-----."

"It belonged -----, to me."

Teresa came up behind me and put papers in my hand. Gun ownership papers. A nine millimeter Mauser. The gun was legally hers.

“Donna told me Sonny was going to kill her if he found her,” she said. “She came here and I gave her the gun. I told her to kill him before he killed her. She was not here more than twenty five minutes and she was gone again. Twenty five minutes. That’s all I had. Twenty five minutes in twenty five years.”

“Goodbye Teresa.”

“Goodbye. I’m glad you came Mr. Caterski, even if you are not. Visitors are rare for me. Very rare.”

“You did keep up with the goings on in Donna’s house though, didn’t you? Through someone living down there.”

“Yes.”

“One of the servants or one of the children?”

“I am not going to tell you.“

I thought about that for a second or two, then opened the door and went outside. It was dark. Very, very dark.

Chapter Ten:

Nine days passed. All of the lurid fantasies I'd conjured up in my life about living with two women had died quick, heartbreaking deaths. Where should I start? Let's try Gina. First off, her behavior became more and more suspicious with each passing day. She skulked and tiptoed around the house like a cat creeping through a minefield of large sleeping dogs.

Unlike Alexandria, though, whose light feet could somehow avoid the groaning of the floorboards, Gina found every one of them. She wouldn't have lasted twelve seconds with those sleeping dogs, but she didn't think she needed to be cat quiet. She purposely picked times for her brief excursions to be in the early a.m. when Alexandria and I were supposed to be sleeping.

Whether Alexandria was a light sleeper before she started

drinking again, I don't know. But she certainly was one after. Her bouts of sleep were shorter and more fitful than mine. And like me, she'd often just lay in the dark, awake and unmoving. So when Gina went on one her little middle of the night walks she was usually heard by at least one of us. Sometimes both.

What exactly was the goal of these excursions neither Alexandria nor I could figure out. Dresser drawers would be opened, examined for their contents, and closed back up again. Papers were rummaged through. Obviously, Gina had an intended prey in mind. But what? There was nothing of any real value in the entire house. No vaults filled with cash. No gold bars painted over and hidden in the basement. No painted over Van Gogh's or Picasso's. Even if these things had been in the house, I doubt Gina would've touched them. What she was looking for didn't have any monetary value. She was interested in something else.

And if these strange wanderings through the house weren't enough, there were two occasions when she took the matter one step further and left the house. She even went so far as to use Alexandria's car for transportation. I can't remember which two nights they were exactly, but I do remember Alexandria each time coming out into the living room and proclaiming in a low, calm voice:

“The bitch took my car. The bitch took my car. That mountain sized, muscle loaded bitch took my car. If she scratches it, I'll harpoon her ass to the grille.”

Each time I'd come stumbling down the stairs and say something like:

“Getting a little excite, aren't you?”

“It's my car. I'll get excited if I want to.”

“She's not stealing for Christ's sake. She'll bring it back.”

“She had a car, remember? She rented one. Or, at least, she said she did. What

Happened to that car?” That was a good question.

“It’s just a thing, Alex. A dead inanimate thing.”

“What else do I have but dead inanimate things? Where are all of the live animate things for me to get excited about? Where are they, huh? Where? Do you see them?”

“What about me?”

“What about you?”

“I’m a live animate thing.”

“You are? No fooling?”

“I’m going to turn on a light.”

“Leave it dark.”

“I don’t want to.”

“I said leave it dark!”

I ignored her request and turned a light on. She was standing less than three feet away from me. Her eyes were half wet with tears and half fired with anger. And, oh yes, she was as naked as a newborn babe.

“You did that on purpose,” she said. “You knew I didn’t have any clothes on.”

“How could I know that?”

“Because I know you. You have better night eyes than some cats. You just wanted a better look and humiliate me at the same time. Well, is that all? Or do you want to pinch my tits and finger my cunt too?”

“Jesus, Alex.”

“How about, Neal? I’ll lay on the floor and spread my legs for you. You’d like that, wouldn’t you? Yeah, you’d like that. You like watching, don’t you? You like watching better than actually

doing it.”

“That’s enough! Go back to bed. Go back to bed and shut that cruel fucking mouth of yours.”

“More cruel than yours?”

“Make that cruel with a pinch of bitter.”

“More bitter than yours?”

A staring silence fell heavily across both of our faces.

Something was on her mind. No, it was more than one thing. It was three things to be exact. The first one had her arms pinned behind her back. The second one had grabbed her by the hair and pulled her head so far back she thought her neck would snap. And the last one had cracked open a bottle of Kahlua , warmed up a mug full and poured it right down her throat. The three, working together as a team, then shoved her to the floor and left.

This was all symbolic, of course, but Alex refused to explain

it to me any other way. There were three things bothering her. That's the only specific detail she told me. Everything else would be guess work/ And I had too many disturbances going on inside my head to spend an excessive amount of time wondering what was going on inside of Alex's.

The entire situation at my house was like a stark, loveless play. A play about a bottomed out man being slowly driven to madness. Step by step, turn of the screw by turn of the screw, my will was becoming less and less resistant to the cold, detached realities of life.

Neither Alex nor Gina were helping with any of the small, routine household chores that pop up everyday. You know, all of the things everyone hates doing, but have to be done. Dusting, sweeping, laundry, cleaning dishes, making coffee, and cleaning up after yourself. You know, that kind of stuff. I had to do all of them. And I

had to do them for three people. I guess the old saying ,‘Little things mean a lot’ is true. I just didn’t think it’s supposed to mean a lot of bullshit. Which is exactly what it means in this case.

The investigation wasn’t going well either. Alex and I went out and interviewed a lot of people we hadn’t interviewed before. People who knew the Winters’ family socially, co-workers at the Winters’ family business, and, a couple of off the record cops. I went through Donna’s diaries a second and third time. I listened to my tape recorded interviews. Alex listened to her recorded interviews a second time. None of it added to what we already had. Which wasn’t much. We couldn’t even locate the hotel Donna had been staying at when she died.

A lot of effort was being put into this case with little result. Sonny Winters was a whale sized asshole, no doubt. But can’t arrest people and put them in jail for that. If you could, there just might be

more people in prison than out. And hell, we didn't need to do an investigation to know that Sonny Winters was a monumental asshole. We already knew that.

There was no proof that Sonny had murdered Donna. There was no proof that anyone had murdered Donna. Most of the evidence in this case, in fact, pointed to suicide. The investigation, to put it mildly, was going nowhere. Then, as if all of this nowhere news wasn't hard enough to take, my own house started to rebel against me. A crack in the ceiling was getting worse by the day and leaked every time it rained. The toilet leaked. The microwave and the clothes dryer died about three and a half hours apart.

Oh yes, I almost forgot to put this down on paper. A campaign was initiated to persuade me to drop the case. First came the slashed tires(All four of them). Then came the shattering of the rear window and the windshield. After that, the words 'Stupid

Pollock' were spray painted across the hood and trunk. What really upset me about having 'Stupid Pollock' painted on my car wasn't the intended insult directed at me. It was the fact that the author couldn't even get the spelling right.

Polack is the proper spelling for a slur aimed at a person of Polish descent. Pollock is the proper spelling for a slur aimed either at deceased painter Jackson Pollock or a well known commercial fish of the North Atlantic. So, assuming the author meant to slur me and not a dead painter or a fish, then he misspelled the slur. I was mad. I mean really fucking mad. If some asshole is going to go to all of the bother of slurring you, at country coming to. I don't think it's too much to ask ignorant bigots to be literate. Isn't it enough that they're ignorant? Do they have to be illiterate too?

Can't some enterprising person start school and help these people out? There's just no excuse for having such a high

ignorant/illiterate rate in this country. Have we no standards at all anymore? Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed, and Vishnu what is this country coming to?

If you think everything I just told you was a mess and then some, wait until you hear this: I was kidnapped. No joke. No playing around. I was kidnapped. The ploy they used was terribly old fashioned and unimaginative, but I fell for it. I never saw it coming. Not even after he arranged the tire slashing, glass smashing, and graffiti slandering on my car. I knew he wasn't the type to physically come after me himself. I knew if really wanted to hurt me, or even kill me, he would pay someone else to do it. Yet, I never expected the kidnapping.

I don't know why, but I didn't. I guess I expected a more overt, outward approach. Run down by a car. Shot. Stabbed. Beaten. Something along those lines I was fully prepared for. But not

kidnapping. And certainly not the means Winters used to pull it off. Here the way the entire episode played out:

I was leaving the office by way of the back door. I was alone. My car, as usual, was the only car at the curb. My eyes and head were both cast down. This day, like every other day since this case started, had gone as well as pissing into the wind. All I wanted to do at that point was go home, go to bed, and avoid contemplating the stress relieving capabilities of suicide.

I was outside, stepping around the front of my car, when I heard a noise coming from my right. The sound had an odd metallic tinge to it, meaning it involved the large metal garbage bin sitting almost fifteen yards away. At first, I just ignored it. Times were difficult for a lot of people in the area and sometimes people will rummage through it looking for anything they can use. Clothes, food, recyclables, you name it. They're desperate. Otherwise they

wouldn't be such acts of public degradation and humiliation. Then, there's the plaza's occupants. They dump all their unwanted stuff in the bin. So, figuring the noise was the result of one of these two scenarios, I kept moving.

But then came the muffled sounds of a struggle. I heard voices. Two of them, one male and one female. I stopped. The struggle became louder. Then came more disturbing sounds, Clothes being torn. Hard slaps to the face. Cries of pain. I looked up towards the direction of the sounds. I saw nothing. The garbage bin was blocking my view.

Something is wrong, I thought, so I started toward the bin. Concerned, and more than a little cautious, I gave the bin a wide berth. Quickly and quietly, I move out into the street. When I finally could see around the bin and to the source of the noise, I stopped and took in the scene playing out in front of me. There were two people

pressed tightly against the wall. One was a tall, fat twenty something male, the other was short, bone thin teenage girl. Both were white. Or should I say peachy?

The twenty something fat guy is mauling the bone thin girl with a very precise sort of violence. She is whimpering and fighting back in roughly equal measures. I move in, like a goddamn fool, with no sense of danger to myself anywhere in my head. The only I saw was for the girl. Which is exactly what I was supposed to see. I rushed in.

The fat man's back was to me so I figured I could disable him without too much trouble. I continued to move in. The first I wanted to do was grab him by the hair and pull him off of the girl. But he didn't have any hair, damn him. Twenty something years old and he's bald. On purpose!(Whoever thought bald could thought of as cool. This just shows you how fucked up cool can be.) Unable to

go for his hair, I decided to run at him hard and hammer him on the back of the neck. I hit him. I hit him again. Again and again. Finally, the fat man went down and stayed down.

Swelling with quiet pride, I stepped over the fat man toward the girl. She was a real mess. Her jacket had been ripped open and thrown to the ground. As had her white, button down blouse. She wore no bra. Her small, flapless tits laid cold, bruised, and exposed to the world. Her brown, salon curled hair lay straggled across her face. The girl's body shook as if it had been attacked by a bad case of malaria. I bent down, picked up the blouse and jacket, and slowly handed them to her.

“Put these on,” I said.

“Thanks,” she answered while catching me in her fearful eyes.

“What happened?”

“I was shortcutting behind the plaza. He was hiding behind the bin. I didn’t see him.”

“You don’t have to explain it to me. You can do that later if you want. Let’s just get out of here, okay?”

“Okay.”

She put her blouse and jacket on slowly, seemingly to buy herself some time to regain at least a small part of her composure. She took a step or two forward as if to let me lead her away. But then she came to a quick terrifying stop. A trembling right forefinger pointed to where her fat assailant lay on the ground.

“He’s moving!,” she screamed. “He’s moving!”

Still having no inclination of where the real danger happened to be, I turned around to face the fat man. But hell, he wasn’t moving like the girl said. He wasn’t moving at all. Not a finger, not a toe, nothing. Was the girl suffering from shock I wondered. Did she just

imagine seeing him moving due to hysteria? It would be understandable under the circumstances I said to myself.

Then, as quickly as a long jagged lightning bolt flashes down from the sky, it hit me. Or, to be more precise, injected itself into the back of my neck. It was a harsh, bitter sting. A needle. A hypodermic needle. It felt as if I'd been stung by a three hundred and twenty pound bee. It was some sort of homemade hand delivered mickey juice. The dose was heavy because it dropped me to the ground in less time than it takes to sneeze. Sprawled out on the ground and about to lose consciousness, I recited a well known verse in a mumbled, staccato voice:

Row, row,

Row your boat

Gently down the stream.

Merrily, merrily, merrily

Life is but a dream.

A dream.

A dream.

Life is but a dream.

Then I closed my eyes, laid my head gently on the sidewalk,
and went to sleep.

Chapter Twelve:

Place and time had abandoned me. Full, clear consciousness had gone its own way. I travelled to another world. A dark world of shadows, smoke, and demons. What was reality, what was unconscious dreaming, and what was pure, manic hallucination, I just can't for sure. Known faces, unknown faces, and no faces at all. They all wore masks. Even the ones I couldn't see. Some wore as many as six or seven. Few were flattering to human vanity, even though their bearers thought vehemently to the contrary. Then, the faces went away. All of them.

Voices their place. Voices, disconnected from their corresponding faces, circled the air near and so near to me. These voices covered the entire range of human modulation, tone, and pitch. Some seemed in no way human at all. Then, too, the voices went away. All of them. Then I was alone.

I had the sense that I had been put underground. But who knows? The room I was in had no windows, therefore no light. Darkness surrounded me, bathing me in a blind, hopeless despair. There were no binds to tie me down. There was no need for them. The room was six by six. The door was made of titanium.

To further humiliate me, I had been stripped of all my clothes, dragged through the mud, and my picture repeatedly taken by synchronized flash cameras from every possible angle. There was no bed or chair in the room. And most importantly of all, no toilet. After the initial onslaught of faces and voices, I saw or heard no one for the rest of my captivity. But they were there all the same. Their eyes were watching me, enjoying my suffering, reveling in my sorrow. It was their way.

I screamed not loud, but silently, nearly shattering my eardrums from the inside out. I screamed time and time and time

again this way, wailing across the unconscious mind. from wounds reopened and exposed to the dark unforgiving air of the tormented self. There were times when I wanted to be dead. I begged for it, pleaded for it, and yes even prayed for it. But I wasn't going to die. I wasn't going to die because my captors didn't want me to die. What did they want? They wanted to degrade me, humiliate me, demean me, torment me, and scar me.. And they succeeded and beyond at each and every one of them.

For the, it was an art form. A form they'd carried out many times before and had perfected to the smallest detail long ago. There would be no punches, no kicks, no cuts, bruises, or contusions. Isolation. That's what it would be for me. Isolation. Cold, dark isolation. It was a subtler, more nuanced approach than the one taken by the kick your face and jolt your balls crowd.

The only thing required to carry out this approach was time.

Wait. That's all they had to do. Wait. Wait for the hunger, the thirst, and the demons to take their toll on my body and my mind. Wait for me to fall into a deep, overwhelming unconsciousness. Wait for me to crawl ever nearer to nearer to death, but not so close that I couldn't be brought back to the land of the living. Then they would just pick me and dump me in the midst of open civilization.

Their insidious plan would've had a better chance for success if not for one thing. Much of what they did to me, I had already done to myself. Many times over. Many days, many months, many years. The isolation. The demons. The inward torment. Darkness filling my entire being, slowly rising up over my toes, climbing unstoppably upwards like a slow tide taking its time, prolonging the inevitable outcome of complete, all encompassing submersion. Then would come the abyss.

The time came for them to let me go. I don't remember this

time. I don't remember anything at all. I wasn't in a good state in any sense. I have no recollection of the conditions of this release. How? When? Where? I know none of it. My first memory after being released was waking up in a hospital with a severe case of still alive. Malnutrition, dehydration, hypothermia, pneumonia, anemia, I had them all and then some. I had plenty of visitors during my long stay at the hospital. Alex was the first.

“Jesus, Neal what happened to you?”

“I got suckered.”

“By who? Winters.”

“Who else? But there's no way to prove it.”

“I didn't know what to think. You went missing. Days went by. I thought you were---- were-----.”

“Dead.”

“Yeah. This happened all because of the case?”

“The case figures into, no doubt. But there’s something else behind it.”

“What?”

“Personal hatred.”

“Winters hates you personally? Because of this investigation and the one you did before.?”

“Partly.”

“What’s the other part?”

“I was fucking his wife.”

The room fell into a deep silence. I closed my eyes. Alex pulled the room’s only chair closer to the bed, then turned it around to face me. She sat down hard and let out an emotion filled sigh.

“That explains a lot,” she said. “Your reaction to Donna’s death. I didn’t understand before. But now----. Still, you don’t completely fall apart over fucking. It had to be something more”

“There was something more.”

“She was in love with you?”

“Maybe.”

“You were in love with her?”

“My wife thought so.”

“That’s what broke up your marriage.”

“Divorce is one thing. But to take off to who knows where. And to take your only child. You didn’t deserve that. By punishing you, she’s punishing herself, and worst of all, she’s punishing your daughter.”

I said nothing. What was there to say? Agreeing with Alex wouldn’t change anything. It wouldn’t bring my wife and child back. Alex took my silence as a sign that the subject was closed. So, she moved on to something else.

“So, where do we stand with the case. You’re not still going

ahead with it, are you? Not after----.”

“Drop it if you want to.”

“What do you want?”

“I don’t know. But you can get out right now.”

“You’re not actually thinking about going ahead with case, are you?”

“Do you want to know the way it will appear to be or the way it really is going to be?”

“Both.”

“It will appear to all unwanted eyes that the case has been closed.”

“But----.”

“But appearances can be deceiving.”

“So, you’re going ahead with the case.”

“Yes.”

“You’re playing a dangerous hand.”

I fell asleep then, right there out of the blue. It snuck up on me from behind and sucker punched me into unconsciousness. Days passed. Time moved like a turtle dragging an albatross tied to an albacore tied to an anvil. I wasn’t sleeping well. I wasn’t eating well. They told me I was improving, but they weren’t inside my skin. Alex came to see me everyday. Some days we talked a lot; some days we barely talked at all.

One day, the third or fourth of my stay, I thought I saw Donna in my room. An apparition? Or was it Adrienne? A live human being. I can’t say for sure. It was late at night. Visiting hours had long since ended. I’d been given painkillers and a sleeping pill, so I was groggy as hell. My eyelids were barely open; my conscious mind was barely on. She came into my room and stood next to the bed. She took my right hand and brought it up to her lips and kissed

it. She stood there smiling down at me never letting go of my hand. This was the last thing I saw before going to sleep. When I woke up a short time later, she was gone and the whole seemed like a dream. Maybe it was. Maybe.

A couple of more days passed. My physical continued to improve. Slowly. I ate more. And I slept more too.(Though still not nearly enough) There was one night when I wished I hadn't gone to sleep at all. I had a nightmare. At least, I hoped it was a nightmare. Because if it wasn't----- . Anyway, here's how it went:

One by one, people began filing into my room. Ordinary looking people. They carried with them an appearance of doing the world no harm. People with a look of genuine decency and concern for the human condition. But these were not ordinary people. These were evil people. People with meglomania sewn into every pore, every fiber, every living cell of their being.

They are master manipulators who aren't just indifferent or apathetic to human suffering and death, they actively seek out avenues to cause them. The ends justify the means is the creed they live by. They will do anything to get what they want. No act is ever so destructive, so perverse that it's off the table. And there they stood, a small group of them, in my hospital room. They completely encircled the bed two deep. Among them, on my left, was William 'Sonny' Winters. He spoke to me. He was the only one of the visitors to do so.

“You are here because I wanted you here. If I had wanted you dead, you would now be dead. But I did not want you dead. I wanted you alive. I wanted you alive because I wanted you to suffer. And I got what I wanted. Sooner or later, I always do. Just like everyone else here. Except you, of course.”

“We are people who want a lot and we get it. You are

someone who wants very little and does not even get that.”

“Did you and your----. What should I call these other people with you? Friends isn’t right, is it?”

“How about associates?”

“Good enough, I guess. Did you and your associates come here just to tell me something I already know?”

“No, one reason we came here was to laugh at you.”

“You couldn’t have done that in some darkened room smoking a cigar.”

“We’ve already done that. But it is not the same. This is much better, much more satisfying.”

“Well, now that you’ve satisfied yourself, will you get the fuck out of here.”

“Not quite yet, Caterski.”

“What else do you want for Christ’s sake.”

“I wanted to make sure we are clear on where we stand.”

“Of the two of us, you’re the only one who can stand for any length of time. Me, if I stand for more than a couple of minutes, I’ll fall right on my face.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I know. We’re clear Winters. No more investigation.”

“That means no more interviews with family members, co-workers, or anyone else.”

“You didn’t have to come here for this either, did you? You could’ve just sat and waited to see what I’d do.”

“Yes, I could have done that. But this way is more effective at discouraging any lingering ideas you might have about continuing on with your work.”

“Well, are you satisfied now? Are you finally going to get the hell out of here and leave me to my misery.”

“There is one last thing.”

“What now?”

“The diaries.”

“You want them.”

“It is the only guarantee that they aren’t made public in any way.”

“The pathetic media in this town could almost guarantee you that.”

“There are other means of going public.”

“You can have them.”

“When?”

“Whenever I get the hell out of here. I’ll mail them to you. Is that the end of it? Will you go now?”

“Yes, we’ll leave you to your misery now.”

Winters and his associates then slow marched out of the

room and were gone. I woke up seconds later. Then I went back to sleep. Then I woke up again. Then I went to sleep again. This is the way I spent the rest of the night. Alternating back and forth between sleep and wakefulness. The spells of wakefulness were too long; the spell of sleep too short. That dream with Winters got to me. I couldn't get it out of head..

It was only a dream I kept telling myself. Only a dream. It wasn't real. Winters and those other people weren't really in my room. It was all in my head. These statements were all rational, logical, and true. But that didn't stop me from being haunted by the dream. That didn't stop me from feeling a touch or two of fear. Yet I knew, despite the haunting, despite the fear, I was still going to investigate Mr. William 'Sonny' Winters.

The day finally came when I was well enough to be released from the hospital. Not well, but well enough. Alex came down and

picked me up. Nothing was said on the way home. Not by her, not by me. The silence was calming, meditative. It did the both of us some good.

When we arrived home, I got out of the car on my own. But Alex helped me up the front steps and into the house. I fell instantly onto the couch. I mean I literally fell onto the couch. Alex looked me over.

“Liquids, food, and sleep,” she said. “You need to take it easy for awhile.”

“I want. to take a shower.”

“Can you manage to shower without help?”

“It would be more fun with help.”

“More fun for who?”

“Me.”

“But not me.”

“Well, as long as its fun for one of us, I thought.”

“Yeah, I know what you thought. You’re something else Neal, you know that. You really are. You could’ve died.. You still look half dead even now. Yet, you can still make a run at me.”

“What run? I need someone to hold me up just to take a shower.”

“Not if you take a bath.”

“Bath? I could pass out and drown/”

“Not if I go in there with you.”

“You changed your mind.”

“I meant the bathroom, not the tub.”

“Damn, I thought I had you there.”

“Nice try. I’ll come in when you’re in the tub. Now go.”

The bath was uneventful.(If you don’t count the two times I fell asleep and slid under the water) The meal of coffee, meatloaf,

mashed potatoes was also uneventful. (If you don't count the time I fell asleep in the mashed potatoes) Then I went to sleep for real. For twelve hours. The next day it was nine. The day after that it was eleven. My physical improved enough for me to stand on my own two feet without feeling as if I would tip over and hit the floor at any moment.

I was more worried about how Winters drug and grab routine would affect me psychologically. There have been times in my life when I have fallen into a very deep, very dark place. So deep and so dark, in fact, that I wasn't if I had the strength and will to pull myself back out again. It's a place where the darkness covers you so completely it frightens like no other fright you could ever know.

It seeps its way through every pore of your skin, invading blood and bone until it has occupied every atom of your body and your inner being. What truly worried me wasn't that this episode of

captive isolation was going to take me to this place. What truly worried me is that I would go to the place, get lost, and not be able to find my way back out again. After all, how many times can you toe the edge of the abyss and not fall in.

There were three human beings occupying this house. Three people living in the same small place. Yet, in some sense, each of us was alone. Each of us had our own shadows following behind us, sometimes silent, sometimes whispering, and sometimes mocking. But always there. Always there. Always. We were all longing for something. Something far away and out of reach. Something lying out there in the cold, dark mist of the great beyond. Something unreachable. Yet, we reached for it all the same.

Another week passed since the day I returned home from the hospital. Gina was at the house only to shower and sleep. The rest of the time she was out. Where she was going, what she was doing, or

who she was seeing is anybody's guess. She moved around damn good for someone who's supposed to be almost completely unfamiliar with this city and the outlying suburbs. Alex tried tailing her a couple of times, but Gina shook her off each time. Alex said Gina seemed to know right from the start that she was being followed. Alex also said Gina acted as if she'd been through this before. Now, how does a lobster woman from Maine know about such things, I don't know. But hell, there's a lot I don't know.

I should've had Gina checked out the same damn day she came to us with this case, but I didn't. I shouldn't have had to think about it. It should've been an automatic, reflexive response. This failure gave further proof how much Donna has always affected me. She'd brought a million miles of hell, havoc, and chaos, into my life time I opened the gate and let her into my life. Now, I'd let her in again and the hell, havoc, and chaos had returned. And her death

only heightened their intensity. If there had been any hope of resolving these conflicts before, there was no hope now. Hope died when Donna died.

Her hold over me holds no explanation. I don't understand it. I never have, I never will. Yet, it is there. It has been there from the day I first became involved with her. And it will probably be there until my last day of life. I couldn't escape her. I'd tried. Over and over and over again, I'd tried. A thousand different ways on a million different days. With all that I am and all that I will ever be. The spell that she'd cast on me was unbreakable. Even in death. Whether that death was suicide or murder, I still didn't know with absolute certainty.

I did know one thing for sure though. I wanted William 'Sonny' Winters to pay retribution. What kind and to what degree I hadn't figured out yet. But the wheels were turning. I knew it

wouldn't be long before I'd finalized the last details of what I wanted to do. I wasn't so righteous, self-deified, and delusional to call this retribution justice. Justice is a word abused and misused at least a thousand times a day. It is a word, to me, with no clear, precise definition.

Justice. It sounds so pure and noble, doesn't it? Many people claim they know the exact meaning of the word. Many people will claim they know how to apply it with exact certitude for every applicable event. But many people claim to know many things, when oftentimes they know little or nothing at all. And too often, these are the very same people who are running things. People in positions of power, wealth, and influence.

Whatever I wanted to call my retribution against Sonny Winters, my options for carrying it out were severely limited. My house was being watched. There was no doubt of it. There were eyes

out there. Dark eyes. Predatory. Lying low. Watching. Waiting .to track my every move. And a wrong move now, I believed, would cost me my life. There would be no more warnings. They were through with warnings. This time it would be death. They were in a killing mood.

In that, we had something in common. I, too, was in a killing mood. My heart and head were both in a very dark place. I had a gun and I was ready to use it. The worst part of my nature, the side of me that I fought to control, had escaped and was now roaming free. I had a plan in mind to carry out against Sonny Winters. I prayed this plan would work. (And I never pray) I prayed because if this plan didn't work, there was a good chance I would take my gun and-----. That is, if someone didn't get me first.

Chapter Thirteen:

I contacted only one person to help carry out my plan against Sonny Winters. One person was all I needed. A hacker. A hacker among hackers. This person is categorized as a criminal by law enforcement. But I'm not in law enforcement. I'm a private investigator. Given the fact that most of my investigations are routine and require no sophisticated technical abilities, I rarely have had to call on him for his services. Now was one of those times.

For obvious reasons, I can't give you his name. I can't give you his computer name either(For the same obvious reasons). He prefers the name: 'El Conquistador Grande'.(The Mighty

Conqueror). I prefer the name: 'El Gusano' (The Worm). And because I'm the one writing the story, El Gusano is the name that will be used. If he wants to be called The Mighty Conqueror he's going to have to write his own book.

El Gusano is a short, thin Latino, Caucasian, Asian, African, Latino. His family ancestors moved around a lot. They slept around a lot too. Gusano used to live in Wannabe, but left years ago. His normal day job is as a computer technician. What he does specifically, I don't know. I don't care either. His black ribbed hair sits too close to the scalp like grass that's been drastically over mowed. There's a small diamond stud earring in his left ear.

The man, despite the appearance of being in his late teens, is actually close to being thirty years old. There's a highly developed grade of intelligence behind those dull brown eyes of his. This high grade of intelligence is offset by raging snobbery, greed, and self-

importance. I don't like him and he doesn't like me. This wasn't a problem because we had nothing that be called any kind of a relationship. The only contact we've had has been rare and one sided. I call him when I need his special services.

Why does he help me when I ask him to? I'll tell you. When I was cop I caught him in illegal activities.(Hacking, what else?) I could've busted him, but I didn't. His crimes, to me, were harmless and undeserving of doing a decent stretch in prison. So, I didn't report his crimes. But I kept a complete record of them for future reference. There were also one or two crimes that I caught wind of after that as well. So, I use this knowledge against him in order to get him to do occasional jobs for me. Our conversation this time, like every other time, took place on a computer.

“Hello there, Gusano.”

“I want you to know you're interrupting some very important

business.”

“This is Caterski from Wannabe.”

“No shit. Who else calls me Gusano? What do you want?”

“I need your help.”

“Why did I ask? Why? That’s all you ever want.”

“I always pay, don’t I?”

“Go away, I’m busy.”

“Doing what?”

“I’m not telling you.”

“I know what that means.” (He’s up to something illegal
again)

“Caterski, will you please----.”

“Five minutes is all I asking for. Five minutes.”

“What did I do to deserve you?”

“Deserve? Deserve? If human beings all got what they

deserved we'd all either be six feet in the ground or have a permanent place in a padded cell."

"You don't think much of the human race, do you?"

"History will do that to you."

"What do you want Caterski? The sooner you tell me the sooner you go away. You're already knee deep into your five minutes."

"I need a b&e. Actually, I need two of them."

"Who are they and kind of info do you want?"

"William 'Sonny' Winters is the first one. He's local."

"I know. I used to live there remember? Everyone in Wannabe knows the Winters family."

"The other one is Gina Wilson. She lives in Maine. I don't know what town. She has a lobster business. I don't know the name of it."

"I don't know what town. I don't know the name of her business."

Are you holding out on me just to make this harder for me.“

“One: I need this stuff fast, so making it harder for you goes against my interests. Two: This isn’t hard for you. Nothing on the computer is hard for you. Three; You’re a fucking putz.”

The other end went quiet for a long time. Gusano was the type of person who can insult people up, down, inside, and out and think nothing about it. But if you give it back to him, he gets hurt and bothered. I knew that ahead of time, of course, so I had no excuse for saying it. It was stupid. Luckily for me, Gusano stayed with me.

“You may continue know,” he said.

“Fore Gina Wilson, I want you to check on her business. In the red or in the black. Debts, loans. Check on any vices she might have. Pull up her phone calls. I want to know if she’s had any contact with anyone at the Winters’ house or any of her other

relatives here.. Look at her travel. See if she's been to Wannabe before now."

"Is that it?"

"For Gina Wilson, yeah. Now I need to tell you what I want for Sonny Winters."

"Go ahead."

"Bank accounts, foreign and domestic. Big deposits, big withdrawals. Trips, foreign and domestic. Phone calls, foreign and domestic."

"What are you looking for?"

"Anything illegal."

"How far back do I go?"

"Six months."

"Anything else your royal pain in the ass?"

"Give me a few seconds, I'm thinking."

“Watch out world, Caterski’s thinking again.”

“The world could do worse than listen to me. And it proves every damn time the sun rises in the east.”

“A Polack philosopher waxing poetic as the world corrodes and decays.”

“Why do I waste my time talking about anything to you?”

“Your time? Who cares about your time. It’s my time that really counts.”

“To who?”

“To me.”

“Who the hell are you?”

“I’m a somebody.”

“Only to you, are you a somebody.”

“Is any one else necessary?”

“You’re a somebody because somebody thinks so and that

somebody is you.”

“Exactly. You know what else Caterski?”

“What?”

“Your time is up.”

So, ended our conversation. Before I even had a chance to shut down the computer, the phone rang. It was Alex’s police contact. He, too, shall remain anonymous. The man was a little skittish by nature according to Alex. Nerves of slivered glass she told me. The contact was expecting her to answer the phone. So, when a male voice came on the line, the conversation almost ended before it even started. Luckily, he stayed on just long enough for me to introduce myself.

“Is the line clear?”, he asked.

Yes.”

“It’s not tapped.”

No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Are you lying to me“

. I had to stifle a laugh over that last question. It is easily one of the most comically absurd questions in history. Think about it, one person asking another person if they are lying. How many times has anyone yes to that question? Do you want to another equally absurd question? Are you sleeping? Yes, I’m sleeping.

“I’ll give you what was in the official report first,” the informant said.

“Go slow, I’m writing it down.”

“Mrs. Donna Winters. Age: 45. Race: Caucasian. Sex: Female. Wounds: Single gunshot from a .9mm Mauser pistol. Bullet entry point: Right temple. Cause of death: Single gunshot wound to

the right temple. Status of death: Suicide. Status of case: Closed.”

“What about the body?” I asked. “Were there any marks on her? And the car, what was the status of the car?”

“This is from the official report. The victim was fully dressed at the time of her death. She suffered no other injuries other than the fatal gunshot wound to the right temple. The car, a dark gray Mercedes, was found parked. The engine was off. All windows and doors were closed. Is there anything else?”

“Did someone call it in? Or did a cruiser happen by and see the car?”

“It was called in.”

“What time?”

“1:18 a.m.”

“A name?”

“No name. Anonymous.”

“Mr. or Miss?”

“What?”

“Man or woman?”

“The report doesn’t say.”

“Shit.”

“Time of death?”

“Between 11 and 11:30.”

I was writing as fast as I could, but I still had trouble keeping up with him. He’d started out slow just as I asked him to, but then he started speeding up more and more as he went along. My head was with him the entire way. But my writing hand was lagging behind. I asked him to go through the information again. It took some time a little persuasion, but eventually he agreed.

“Okay,” I said. “We’ve done the official version. Now, let’s hear the unofficial.”

“There’s jewelry missing.”

“Jewelry?”

“Jewelry.”

“What kind?”

“The expensive kind. Three or four pair of earrings, a gold diamond encrusted watch, and four necklaces. Two pearls and two diamonds.”

“Was there a box?”

“A box?”

“A jewelry box.”

“No, no box. Rumor has it that the jewelry was found in the car, but never made it downtown.”

“So, somebody at the scene took it.”

“Yeah.”

“Do you if her husband was at the scene?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know or you don’t want to know.”

“Would I have called if I didn’t want to talk.”

He’s up to his nose in hesitation. He wanted to sound offended by my doubting him, but this was just a stalling tactic to bide for time. Doubt had crawled into mind through the back door and he was having a hard time dealing with it. Doubt over the rightness of what he was doing. For a few seconds, I thought he’d just walked off and left the phone dangling. I didn’t hear anything at all. I thought I’d lost him and was to hang up, when he finally decided to come back on the line.

“The official report is full of lies,” he said.

“What kind of lies?”

“There was no gun found at the scene.”

“Yet, they instantly ruled it a suicide.”

“Yeah.”

“Not exactly proper police procedure, is it?”

“No, not exactly.”

“There’s one other thing I need to tell you.”

“Go ahead.”

“Mrs. Winters was bruised.”

“What kind?”

“Strangle marks on her neck.”

“Anything else?”

“No. Do you think Sonny Winters murdered his wife?”

“I don’t know. Some of the evidence says yes, some of it says no.”

“It must’ve been him who pulled strings to alter what went the official reports.

What other reason could there be.”

“There are one or two other explanations.”

“Such as?”

“Someone else murdered her and was trying to frame Sonny. Someone else found her after she killed herself and was trying to frame Sonny.”

I rubbed my eyes and let out a long, teary eyed yawn. I needed sleep. God, did need sleep.

“My name stays out of this no matter what, right,” he asked.

“No matter what.”

“Is there anything else?”

“No, that’s it. Thanks.”

“Alexandria was decent to me when she was here. There weren’t many----- I like to help her out when I can. Which isn’t often.”

“I know how you can help her some more.”

“How?”

“Call her. Not a business call. Leave that out of it. She’s having a lot of personal problems. She needs reassuring voices.”

“Aren’t you doing that?”

“I’m trying, but she won’t let me in.”

“Maybe you’re too close.”

“Maybe.”

“I’ve got to go now. Bye.”

“Okay, thanks.”

I hung up the phone hoping to go lay down for awhile and get some sleep. But I’d barely started upstairs to my bed, when the phone rang again. This call, unlike the first, was short, fast, and one sided.

“The will is being read at 9 a.m. Monday morning at Sonny Winters’ home. Be there. It will be worth your while. More Winters

family fun. A peeping Tom look behind the scenes. You will not want to miss it. But it will not be what you think. So think beyond what you see and what you hear. Think beyond to what really is and not what it just seems to be. Goodbye, Mr. Caterski.”

The phone call ended there without my ever getting the chance to ask a question or even a single word. The call was cryptic enough, telling me things without really telling me anything at all. I couldn't even tell if the caller was male or female. The voice had been purposely scrambled to disguise it. But the caller, whoever he or she was, had failed in realizing the purpose of the call. I wouldn't be going to the reading of the will.

I followed this phone up with two outgoing calls. A couple of fences and a couple of middle ground thieves I knew. I asked them if they knew anything about hot, high class jewelry being sold since Donna Winters died. Their answers were all negative. So, I told

them to keep their eyes and ears open and let me know if anything turns up.

After that I crawled into bed. I fell asleep reading Baldwin's 'No Name in the Street' and listening to Gary Moore's slow blues guitar crying just for me. I don't know when Alex and Gina came back. I didn't know and I didn't care.

When I woke up the next morning, there were pictures of Sarah, Shelley, Alex, and-----, in the palm of my right hand. I don't know how they got there. I don't remember digging them out of my wallet the night before. I don't remember looking at them or even touching them.

Who else would put them there but me? It had to be me, didn't it? It was the only plausible answer. Then, while laying there in a groggy, barely awake glaze, I suddenly understood why those pictures were in my hand. Three of the four people in those pictures

had left me. And the fourth one, I believed, was about to do the same. To me, she now seemed to be walking on the other side of destiny, a far away place where I couldn't reach her. She, like all of the others, would walk away and leave me to live in the dark abyss alone. A place I'd been to a million times before.

Chapter Fourteen:

It was just a little past 7 a.m. Monday morning and I was slumped over on the living room floor. I was nursing the second of five cups of coffee. I pulled at the comforter that had somehow slid off my right shoulder. Despite the coffee and comforter, I was cold. Gina came out of the tv room looking fully alive and freshly pressed. People who can jump right out of bed and into complete consciousness annoy the hell out of me. I envy them too, the little guttersnipe bastards.

“You need to shave,” Gina said.

“You need to -----,” I replied then stopped before I finished the sentence.

“I need to what?”

“Nothing. It’s just that you could’ve come out and said something more decent like: ‘Morning. How did you sleep?’. But I don’t know why I expected anything different from you. Talking to you is the same as beating a horse to death that’s already dead.”

“That makes no sense.”

“Well, then it fits in perfectly with everything else that’s going on, doesn’t it?”

No comment from Gina.

“Are you going to the reading of the will,” she asked.

“No. Are you?”

“No.”

“Can I ask why?”

“No. Can I ask why you’re not going.”

“It won’t help our case. Besides, I thought you’d be going

and you'd give me all the details.”

I needed more caffeine, but I didn't have the energy to get up and go to the kitchen. Wasn't there some imaginative person out there who could invent I.V. drips for coffee? Wasn't there? I don't think that's asking too much, is it? So, it's not a necessity. So what? What's a necessity in this consumer hog heaven culture we live in? Our culture seems more concerned with the luxuries than the necessities. You know what necessities are, don't you? Affordable health care, affordable housing, livable wage jobs, chemical free food, air, and water. Our culture has trouble delivering those things. But its real damn good at delivering hi-tech toys to play with.

“So, you're not going to tell me why you're not going,” I said.

“No.”

What game was she playing? She didn't want to go to hear

the reading of her own sister's will. Not even out of pure human curiosity. Not to know whether she was included in the will. Did she already know what was in it? Was that why she didn't want to go? Because she didn't need to go. I raised up a little bit and looked at her through the tops of my eye sockets. She stood only a few feet away from me near the end of the hallway. Wearing a pullover cotton blouse and form fitting casual slacks, she was covered from head to toe in gray.

“Turn up the furnace,” I said, ‘I’m cold.’”

“I’m not.”

“I didn’t ask if you were cold. Turn up the furnace.”

Gina went to the thermostat, clicked it up a notch, then walked head up to the front window. Once there, she drew down on the pull string that opened the curtains. Light came into the room in a small, muted dose. But it was more than enough to cause me to

squint and turn my eyes away.

“Why did you do that?”, I asked in a rougher tone than I intended.

“I just wanted to let in a little light.”

“Couldn’t you have asked first? I didn’t want any light.”

“But its hardly any light at all.”

“Enough to bother me.”

“Fine, I’ll close the curtains.”

Gina pulled hard on the draw cord. Too hard. Down came the curtains, rod and all.

“Sorry,” she said.

“Why don’t I believe you?”

“In order to believe, you have to trust.”

“Why don’t I trust you?”

No answer. She stood there in the exact same spot, unmoved

and unmoving. It took an appearance by Alexandria coming down the hall to budge the hall hogging Gina from her spot. The two women passed each other, exchanged solemn non-committal looks, then quick, easy dismissals. There was no hint of camaraderie between them, but then again there was no hint of animosity either.

“You’ve been wanting to know what’s wrong with me,” Alexandria said. “I’ve finally decided to tell you. It’s an infamous list of three. I want no interruptions, smart ass remarks, not even a burp from you. You better get it all the first time because there will be no replays, understand?”

“Yes.”

“Now do you have anything to say before I get started? Anything at all.”

“No.”

“Good. Here it is, short and not so sweet. Carl and I are

finished. Over, done, divorced. He's found someone else. They've been fucking since November. He says he loves the little shit. I've got almost ten years on her. I'd like to tie her down and----

“And?”

“And nothing.”

“Look, Alex I----.”

“I heard you decided not to go to the reading of the will.”

“Yeah.”

“Good idea. We don't want to give Winters the idea we're still on the case. What could we get out of it anyway? Even if Sonny inherits everything, we still wouldn't have proof he murdered his wife. And I think it's a good idea for you personally.”

“You mean going there might get me killed?”

“No, I meant just being in that house again. Donna and everything that she conjures up in your mind.”

“Conjures is a good word to use when discussing Donna.”

“I need coffee. Lots of it.”

“Go sit down. I’ll get the coffee.”

We sat for a time in silence, drinking coffee, and enjoying each other’s company. I wanted her to tell me more about the ‘The Infamous List of Three’ as she called it. So far, she’d only told me about one of them. What were the other two? I was curious, but not enough to ask her about it. If she was going to tell me, it would have to be on her terms, in her own time and in her own way. The silence went on this way between us for three quarters of an hour, when the phone rang. Alex answered the phone. She pushed the button for speakerphone. This is how the conversation went:

“Hello.”

“The reading of the will has been cancelled.”

“Cancelled? What happened?”

“The will. It’s missing.”

“Missing? When was the last time it was seen.”

“Not since it was put in the safe.”

“When was that?”

“Two years ago, I believe.”

“Who has access to the combination.”

“Only Mr. and Mrs. Winters.”

“Was it written down anywhere.”

“Mrs. Winters didn’t need to write it down. But Mr. Winters had written it down and kept it in the library.”

“Is any of the family there?”

“No one except the servants. Mr. Winters is at his office.

Adrienne is at work.

I don’t know where Sylvia is.”

“What about the son, George.”

“A hopeless drug addict. He hasn’t been seen since you were here.”

“Is anyone looking for him?”

“No. Not even his father..”

“Any idea where he might be?”

“No, I have no knowledge of such things.”

“Has he done this before?”

“Yes, but never for this long.”

“Something in your voice is telling me you think this time is different.”

“Yes.”

“I’ll look for him. I can’t guarantee anything. All I can do is try.”

“Thank you.”

The conversation ended there. Alex went out to the kitchen to

get more coffee. I said nothing on her way past me. I wanted to know what the hell she was doing promising to look for Winters' son. But I kept it to myself. I said nothing concerning the matter at all. By the time she came back out of the kitchen, the subject of George Winters was securely, but not so neatly tucked away.

"I know I should've asked you this when I first saw you today," Alex said. "How's your health?"

"There are times when I feel okay. There are times when I feel brutal. But I have yet to feel the way I used to. I may never get to that point."

"You need to give yourself more time. It's only been a short time since you've been out of the hospital."

"Time heals all wounds, huh? You know what I have to say about that. Bullshit. I know I had problems before. But they were psychological, emotional problems. At least I had my physical

health. I never dealt with physical problems before. Now I feel like I'll never get back my physical health. My back, my right leg, my stamina, my strength are all giving me problems."

"I've been giving you problems too haven't I. You had enough of your own without adding mine to the mix. Neal, I-----."

"What?"

"I'm thinking about quitting you."

Alex didn't say another word. She didn't say another word because she couldn't. She started crying right then and there. I'd never seen Alex cry before. I stood up and went to her. I held her in my arms for what seemed like a long time. Her head rested heavily against my right shoulder. Her crying stopped.

"Let's take a drive," I said.

"Okay."

I'd hoped the drive would help both of us, but there wasn't

one settling thing about the drive. Not even the normally calming, tree lined scenery that draped itself across much of the lower west side of Wannabe. The arms of the boulevard trees and the arms of the curbside trees stretched out far enough to touch fingers over the road. In the summer, the thick arms along with plentiful leaves combined to completely block out the sun.

But here, now, in the early days of spring, there were no leaves. No leaves at all. And the arms, with their hands and fingers laid bare, were powerless to help Alex and I. When we arrived home, I went inside right away. Alex decided to stay in the car for awhile. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, so I just wandered aimlessly around the house while waiting to decide.

I went into every room without giving much thought as to what I was doing or why I was there. Then, I went through every room a second time. I'd started on my third trip around, when I

suddenly realized something. I hadn't seen Gina. And more disturbingly, I hadn't seen any of Gina's stuff. I went to the living room window looked to the curb. Then, I went to the side window and looked to the driveway. Gina's car was gone. Something inside me said this time she wouldn't be coming back. Then another suspicion came to me. I went upstairs and searched a secret hiding place that no one else supposedly knew about. It's where I'd stashed away Donna's diaries. I opened the hiding place and confirmed my suspicions. The diaries were gone. And with their departure another shadow was born.

Chapter Fifteen:

The day after Gina left, Alexandria left too. Unlike Gina, I knew Alexandria was leaving. I also knew where she had gone. She went to stay with Simone. I knew this without knowing it. If you know what I mean. Simone was a friend, a dependable friend.

Alexandria confided in Simone. Often more so than me, I'd say. Simone was single too, which made it easier for Alexandria to go to her, and when the occasion arose, stay with her.

Even though I knew Alexandria's whereabouts, I would not be calling or visiting her. If there was going to be any further contact between us, she was going to have to initiate it. Whatever turmoil that was going on inside her, I knew I played some small part in it. Calling her or going to see her would only worsen the situation between us. It was a damn hard truth to be resigned to, but I had to face it. I had to meet it square up and in the eye. I wouldn't go to her. She would have to come to me. That's the way it had to be.

Two more days passed. On the first day, I laid around a lot trying to nurse some of physical self back to its former self. I also did a lot of feeling sorry for myself. It was something I was very good at. In fact, I'd almost perfected it into an art form. I guess all

my practice over the years paid off. I thought about Sara and Shelley a lot. At least a hundred times. I chastised myself for missing them so much and wishing every day that would come back to me.

I thought about other things too during those days. I thought about what I wanted to do with myself after all of this Winters business was over. I thought about whether I still wanted to be a private investigator or not. I thought about Alexandria and whether I would ever see her again. I thought about a lot of things. There were no easy answers to any of these questions. And no readily available ones.

On the second day, I received a call from someone I would've never expected to call. Someone who wanted to remind me that there was a proper order to things and that messing with that proper order can provoke some unpleasant results. And that I, Neal Caterski, was indeed messing with the proper order of things. This

person, as you might guess, wanted me to promise to stop my messing right then and there on the phone.

“Hello.”

“Is this Mr. Caterski?”

“Yeah, who’s this?”

“The mayor.”

“The mayor?”

“Yes, Mr. Caterski, the mayor.”

Son of a fucking bitch, I said to myself. I didn’t need to psychic to know what this was all about.

“You’re calling about Sonny Winters, aren’t you?”

“Yes, that’s exactly why I called.”

“Who would’ve ever guessed. I thought maybe you wanted to tell me you were resigning.”

“Even if I was, why would I tell you?”

“You heard about what I’ve been going through and you wanted to cheer me up. Politicians resigning always cheers me up.”

“That’s not funny Mr. Caterski.”

“It is to me. Listen mayor, I know why you called and I know what you’re going to say. So, I’ll say it for you. Sonny Winters is a great man, an upstanding member of the community, a pillar of virtue and integrity. He is a saint, a man whose soul is woven of pure virgin cloth. Am I warm mayor?”

“Well, I-----.”

“Sonny Winters is a loving husband mourning the death of his dear beloved wife, a devoted father to his three lovely children.”

“Caterski -----.”

“You wanted to tell me to drop the investigation? No, it couldn’t be that. I’ve already dropped the investigation. Hell, my partner isn’t even with me anymore.”

“Actually, I

knew about that already.”

“Why am I not surprised?

“The reason I called was -----.”

“The diaries.”

“Yes.”

“I don’t have them mayor. I did have them, but I don’t any more. You, Winters, and everyone else sleeping in that overcrowded bed of yours, can choose not to believe me, but it’s true.”

“Where are they?”

“With Gina Wilson, Donna Winters’ sister, wherever she is.”

“I went out for a drive. When I came home they were gone.”

“So, as far as your concerned, the Winters’ matter is over.”

“Yes, mayor. I dream of a time when I’ll never hear that name again.”

“That’s good to hear Mr. Caterski. You’ve finally come to

understand how things work.”

“I knew that all along mayor.”

I hung up, went upstairs, and fell into bed. I was tired. It was early in the morning, but I was already tired. Worn down and worn out. I went to sleep. And then came another dream. Another bad dream.

I was sitting on the front porch. My head was down and resting on a pair of upturned knees. It was early morning, the early moments of sunrise, and a group of birds were chirping boisterously in the near distance. A soft, cool breeze massaged the back of my neck as wearied eyes remained closed. A chill struck suddenly, soon to be followed by goose bumps rolling out across the entire length of my arms. My eyes opened then and my head rose completely up.

Standing there, not more than six or seven inches away from me, was Donna Winters. Our eyes met. But the intensity of the

bitterness and the sadness caused me to look away. Donna then circled the house and went to the backyard. I stood up and followed her. Once there, Donna, moving to a slow unheard rhythm, began to dance. To dance one final dance before leaving, this time once and for all eternity

I couldn't take my eyes off of her. Her face was flawless, as it had before time and life, had exacted their heavy toll. I wanted to share this dance with her, but she wouldn't have me. She would dance, but only alone. If I wandered too close to her, she'd hit me or push me away. The, she'd laugh, a laugh that was strangely frightening and seductive at the same time.

After picking myself off of the ground for a second time, I stumbled back to the porch steps and sat down. A light mist followed. It was cold and it began to rain. The mist thickened, making it harder to see. Harder to see Donna. I wanted to back

inside, to escape the heavy mist, rain and cold.

“Donna,” I said, “come in the house with me.”

Donna stopped dancing, but made no move toward the house. Instead, she motioned for me to go to her with the forefinger of her left hand. I went to her without hesitation. I was full of anticipation for the desperate sweetness of another embrace. A short, electric kiss and a hug so warm it could a city block on the bitterest day of winter. But neither the kiss nor the hug came. In their place, she whispered a sentence or two of low intelligible words. When I asked her to repeat them, she sternly shook her head no and slowly turned to leave.

I was determined not to let her go. The mist and the cold no longer bothered me. It wasn't they who had changed. It was me. I couldn't feel them on my clothes anymore. I couldn't feel them on my skin. I couldn't feel them in my bones. There was Donna and

there was me. Nothing else.

She ran out of the backyard at a speed well beyond what I thought she was capable of. I tried like seven hells to catch her, but my feet couldn't coordinate the proper traction on the moist, wet ground. By the time I reached the front of the house, Donna had already put a considerable amount of distance between us. And to make matters worse than they already were for me, a dense, multi-layered fog rolled in from seemingly nowhere.

I called out to her at least a dozen times or more, but her only response was to put more distance between us. Forgetting a drastic rise in the sidewalk near the end of the block, I hit the upgrade, stumbled, and fell. I shouted for Donna to stop. I shouted so loud and for so long that my voice went hoarse, then silent. Without getting up, I looked straight out in front of me. But there was nothing to see. Nothing except the fog.

The chase had ended and I had lost.. Donna was gone and there would be no getting her back. I was tempted, so tempted to just lie there on the ground and die a slow, cold, miserable death. My death, after all, would be no great event. It wouldn't even qualify as a mildly, minor event. Who needed me? Who would miss me? Whose life was I an integral part of? No, my death would be of no great loss but me. Was that enough for me to stand up and carry on with life? Was it?

Then, while still lying on the ground, the strangest thing of all occurred. I heard a sound coming toward me.. A low rhythmic sound, a beating of a bird's wings against the wind. The sound grew stronger as it neared me and lower itself in the sky. I knew, without seeing, the bearer of those wings. A crow. A low flying, solitary crow. When my eyes actually saw the bird cutting gracefully through the breaking fog, I experienced another flash of intuitive knowledge.

Then this crow, this dark as night solitary crow passed over me and called out in a loud, stringent voice what I thought to be my name. I rolled over quickly as this bird continued on its path, low and to the west. The black dot of this flawed, glorious bird kept getting smaller and smaller and smaller, until it faded completely from my view. But this was just a dream. A dream. Just a dream. That's what I kept telling myself. It was just a dream. That's what I keep telling myself even now. A dream. It was just a dream.

I wish I had the power to be more persuasive.

Chapter Sixteen:

It was early Friday evening when I contacted my hacker acquaintance. It had been more than a week since I hired him to find

information on Sonny Winters and Gina Wilson. I was concerned that he hadn't done what I asked him to. So, we had our second online chat.

“This is Caterski.”

“I just got home a few minutes ago. I suppose you want a status report.”

“I was just wondering -----.”

“I do have other things to do, you know. I have more important priorities than you.”

“Like cracking secure security systems.”

“That isn't all I do. I do have a job. I do have outside interests”

“I just thought maybe you forgot about me, that's all.”

“You are easy to forget, I'll give you that.”

“Well, are you finished?”

“I finished your little project two days ago.”

“Two days! This case hasn’t been out of the shit hole since it started and you’ve been sitting on this for two days.”

“Relax, will you. You’ll get it today.”

“Today?”

“I’m going to deliver it in person.”

“You’re coming here?”

“Yeah, I have some business up near there. As soon as I shower, I’m heading out. Where do you want to meet?”

.Hmmm. Where did I want to meet? Where? That was a good question. I’m hungry, so I’ll make it someplace to eat. Someplace I liked, but hadn’t been to in a long while. Someplace Gusano, my hacker acquaintance would loathe. I knew just the place.

“Do you know the Greek place?,” I asked.

“Which one?”

“The one between 9th and 10th with a church across the street.”

“Yeah, I remember the place. You want to eat there?”

“Yeah.”

“Why, for god’s sake?”

“I like the food and I like the atmosphere.”

“You like the food and the atmosphere? The food is a gas producing, artery clogging, heart attack inducing nightmare. The atmosphere is

“Quit bitching, will you? It’s been around a long time. The place is a local landmark.”

“So are potholes, a lack of nudity, crazy fucking drivers. I’d like to argue with you some more, but I don’t have time. I’ll be there around 8:30, if nothing comes up.”

“It better not.”

“This case has really gotten to you, huh Caterski?”

“Shut up and sign off.”

He did as he was told. He shut up and signed off. If only it could be that easy every time.

Restless and more than a little hungry, I went to the Greek place early. Void of sophistication and high brow airs, the diner was a long time local institution. It's location, like much of this city's east side, was in a poor to low middle class neighborhood. A small, square Catholic church sat across the street and a couple of non-descript, not going to last very long businesses, sat directly on its left and right. Inside the place was plain. Plain counters, plain stools, and plain booths. The food was a different story. The food anything but plain. The enticing aromas alone are worth paying for. If you have a fully functioning nose of course. Which I don't.

But I did have the memories of these aromas locked securely away in a protected corner of my brain. At certain times, at a specific moment in time, I could unlock the moment and set it free. Just as I did here, sitting in a walled booth in this small, unpretentious diner.

The hot dog, the fresh warm bun, the special sauce that covers the dog. Then comes the chili and all of its spices and herbs. And, of course, there's the fries. Those Greek sauced, cheese covered fries. The memories of how they smelled came flooding back to me cracked open dam. Pure, powerful waves of aroma, soon followed by the strong clean waters of taste. I relived and savored those memories with mouth open and eyes closed. I hadn't noticed time pass by so quickly. Nor had I noticed the man I call Gusano standing next to me.

“Earth to Caterski.. Earth to Caterski. Houston we have a problem. A moron who's lost in space.”

“Sorry, I was -----.”

“Off in another place and another time..”

“Something like that.”

In his possession was a bowl of chili, a slew of crackers, bottled water, and three thick manila envelopes. The displeasure of being here was marked clearly on his face. I savored that too. He sat down and moved slowly in on the chili.

“Did you have a decent trip?,” I asked.

“Do you care?”

“Not really, no. But you didn’t have to ask, did you? You could’ve just gone along with it. Now you’ve ruined any chance we had for a decent, cordial conversation.”

“You did that by picking this place to eat in.”

“Sorry.”

“No, you’re not. You picked this place on purpose. Me

ruining my clothes with food stains would make your day.”

When the man was right, he was right. Seeing spill food on himself would make my day. But not quite as much as something golden in those three manila envelopes.

“The b&e’s,” I said. “Did you get anything that can put Winters away. Some inarguable, irrefutable evidence that even he can’t wiggle out of.”

“That’s your job to figure out. You’re the detective. I’m just a lowly gatherer of data.”

Gusano finally got around to eating his chili. Up to now, he’d been playing with it like a child with a plate full of spinach. He put two spoonfuls in his mouth, then spent the next two minutes chewing it and washing it down. He kept crumbling crackers into the chili until it reached the point where it appeared he had put chili into a bowl of crackers instead of the other way around.

“Do you always do that?” I asked.

“Do what?”

“Chew your food excessively.”

“Yeah. I’m a little paranoid of choking to death, okay?”

“You had a bad episode choking on some food?”

“Yeah.”

“Want to talk about it?”

“No.”

“I’ll talk about it if you want to. I don’t mind.”

“No.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“Whatever you say.”

“You know Caterski, we’ve only met face to face four times.

Four too many times.”

“Give me the envelopes.”

He ignored me and spooned two more helpings of chili in his mouth. More excessive chewing followed. Even more than before.

“I want to see the money first,” he said.

“What did you say?”

“I want to see the money.”

“Look, I know we’re not friends and we’re never going to be friends.”

“That’s an understatement and a half.”

“But you know me damn well enough to know that I wouldn’t cheat you. You’re sitting here in your expensive, hand stitched, vested suit and you’re acting like a two dollar street punk.”

Gusano was smiling. I hated it when he was smiling. Why? Because the only he’d ever smiled in my presence is when he’d gotten skin. Just like now. I took the money envelope out of the

inside pocket of my jacket and put it on the table. He picked it up, looked inside, and immediately began shaking his head.

“This isn’t enough money,” he said/ “Do you know how much money I make in a week? Huh? Do you? I should keep the manila envelopes and walk right out of here.”

“Listen, Gusano -----.”

“Don’t call me that, I don’t like it.”

“I don’t care what you like. I don’t care what you earn. I also don’t care about your illegal little hacker misadventures. I paying what I can afford, goddamn it.”

“Caterski, ----.”

“You’re not leaving here with those envelopes/ We made a deal. I’ve lived up to my part of it. Now it’s your turn.”

“Poor Caterski. Poor, poor Caterski. A working class slob with no money to burn.”

I pictured him then with a foot long hot dog stuck up each nostril while I held my hand over his computer obsessed mouth. It was a picture I wished I could've transferred to canvas and hung in an art gallery to be enjoyed by all.

“You do want to make it back home, right?,” I said.

“Threatening me?”

“No, I just want you to shut the fuck up about money.”

“A low class slob with a low class vocabulary.”

“Care to compare I.Q's computer boy? The results might put a wrinkle in that neatly pressed face of yours.”

“I never said you were stupid.”

He scooped another helping of chili into his fat mouth. I pictured giving him a fat lip to go with it. Even though it would result in a drastic improvement in his looks, I refrained from acting out my fantasy. It wasn't easy, but I managed to keep myself under

control. Barely.

“This current climate must really be hell fo a guy like you,”
he said.

“Spring is always hell around here.”

“That’s not the climate I was talking about.”

“You mean the case I’m on?”

“No, not that either.”

“Spill it out, will you? I’m not in a guessing mood.”

“I’m talking about the political climate.”

“I’m not in the mooded for that either. You know me and you
know my views. Stop trying to goad me. Put the envelopes on the
table, take your money, and go.”

“The world isn’t as glum as you make it out to be.”

“Certainly not your world.”

He slid out of the booth and stood up. He pulled off the

napkin that had been tucked inside his shirt collar. He was ready to go. Hell, he'd been ready to go three seconds after he'd arrived here.

"One thing before you go," I said.

"What?"

"I might have another job for you."

"What? Another job? You've got cajones bigger than the head on Mount Rushmore."

"There's more money in it for you. A lot more money. More money than even you has ever dreamed about."

"That's not possible. I've dreamed about owning the world."

"That figures. You know what I meant."

"Where is this dream money coming from? Certainly not you."

"The money will come from the job itself."

"What's the job?"

“Financial Armageddon.”

“You want me to poor boy somebody, is that it?”

“Give that man a Cuban cigar.”

“Who?”

“If you need more than one guess, you’re twice as dumb as you look.”

“Sonny Winters.”

He started smiling like a CEO with a government bailout check in his hand. It’s a greedy world my friends. A shameless, goddamn greedy world.

“Are you going to take it on,” I asked.

“Do you even need to ask?”

“This is what I want. I my partner to get a piece. I want the daughter’s to get a piece. I want a few, to be named later, organizations to get a piece.”

“And you?”

“I want a piece too. I’m retiring.”

“And how much do I get?”

“I’ll decide everyone’s piece later. If it comes to that.”

“Sure, if it comes to that.”

Gusano was trying to mask what he was thinking. But the green in his eyes and the green in his smile gave him away. He was planning to carry out my plan of Financial Armageddon as soon as he got home. He wasn’t going to allow for the possibility of my not giving him the go ahead.

“You’re not going to wait, are you?”, “I asked.

“Well, as long as you -----.”

“All right, go ahead if you want to. But you better play it the way I want it played. If you go against me, you will end up in a small cell for a very long time. Remember that.”

“How could I forget? You remind me ever time we communicate.”

“Well, the next time we communicate will be the last. I’m out of the business for good.”

“You’re quitting?”

“Isn’t that what I said? Twice.”

“Yes, but what are-----.”

“Nothing. I’m going to take my share of the money and-----.”

“Live off of it for the-----.”

“What is all this? You’re not actually concerned about me, are you? Haven’t I made myself plain enough for you? I’m quitting my job. I’m leaving the city. And I probably won’t stop leaving until I’m out of the country.”

“Caterski, -----.”

“Go away.”

“But, I -----.”

“I said go away. So, go. You didn’t even want to be here in the first place. Now go, will you? You don’t want me to get up and help you out. Not in the mood I’m in.”

He left, giving the bell on the door a mighty clang. I didn’t know where he was parked. I didn’t want to know. Five minutes after he left, I left too. I couldn’t have been watching where I was going because I stepped out of the diner and right into the path of a young girl. We collided, with her getting the worst of it. She staggered back and to the right, but she didn’t fall down.

“Sorry,” I said, “I didn’t see you.”

“No one ever sees me. I have a see through body.”

“Shouldn’t you home kid?”

“Yeah, I should.”

“Why aren’t you then?”

“What are you, my mother or something?”

“Sorry.”

“You’re good at being sorry, aren’t you?”

“Damn good at it.”

“Did you have to swear.”

“Sorry.”

“Ha! Got you to say it again, didn’t I?”

“Yeah kid, you did.”

The girl was fourteen, no more than fifteen. He eyes slid over to diner, stayed there for a second or two, then came back to me. I don’t know what it was about her exactly that made me think of Shelley. Was it a spark of the same color hair and eyes? Was it her expression that Shelley had even as a small child, deep set and sullen. Or maybe, just maybe, it was nothing more than her age.

“You’re hungry, aren’t you?”

“You figured that out, huh? You should’ve been a detective.”

“I am.”

“What?”

“I’m a detective.”

“Sure and I’m Cinderella looking for a new pair of glass slippers.”

This girl had a natural distrust of adults, I could see that. But who knew how much of it was justified and how much of it was just a byproduct of a kid’s warped imagination. I pulled out my private investigator’s license and pushed right up in front of her nose.

“You really are a detective,” she said.

“I said I was.”

“People say a lot of things. You going to turn me in Sherlock?”

“For what?”

“Breaking curfew.”

“You doing anything wrong?”

“No.”

“No pillaging, plundering, or war mongering.”

“No.”

“Then I’m not going to turn you in.”

“You’re a strange man, do you know that?”

“You’re not the first to tell me that. You won’t be the last.”

“You know something?”

“What?”

“I like you.”

“Why?”

“I can’t say really.”

“It’s a short list kid.”

She stood there quietly for a few seconds, deep in thought

about something that was weighing heavily on her mind. But, in short time, she pushed it aside and brought her full attention back to me.

“Why are being so nice to me? Standing here and talking to me.”

“It’s a cruel world, kid. A world of suspicion and paranoia. You’re guilty even if you’re innocent. It’s hard being decent to anyone. If you do, you’re up to something.”

“What?”

“The truth is----.”

“You feel sorry for me? Is that it? Well, to hell with you. I don’t need your pity. I don’t want your pity.”

“It’s not pity, kid. The truth is I have a daughter and I haven’t seen her for a long time. Centuries.”

“And we’re about the same age?”

“Yeah.”

“You one of them deadbeat dads, mister? My dad is a deadbeat. I hate him. I hat his fucking guts.”

“Watch that hate thing, kid. It can get away from you and you could end up-----.”

“Do you have to keep calling me kid. I’m not a goat, you know.”

“Sorry.”

“Let’s not start that routine again.”

“To answer what you asked before. I’m not a deadbeat dad.”

“Then what are you exactly.”

“My wife ran off.”

“And took the kid.”

“Yeah.’

“Why?”

“It involved another woman.”

“Sex.”

It was more complicated than sex. Much more complicated. Too complicated to sum up in a few words in passing. Besides, I wasn't in the mood to go through all that anyway. Not for a kid, not for anyone.

“Bye, kid”, I said, “I've got to go“ I started for the curb.

“Wait.”

“No.”

“Please.”

“I can't hang around anymore, kid. I'm working a case and you're holding me up.”

“Really? You're on a case. Anything good?”

“Donna Winters, the woman they found dead in the parking lot not too far from here.”

“But they ruled that a suicide. The case is closed.”

“Officially. But I’m not a cop. I’m working unofficially.”

“You think her old man did her in?”

“Maybe.”

I checked for traffic across the four lane road. There wasn’t any. I crossed. When I opened the door to get in my car, I realized I wasn’t alone. The girl had followed me across the street.

“I have something to tell you,” she said.

“I’m not listening.”

“I know something that may help you. Are you interested?”

“No.”

I got into the car, threw the envelopes into the front seat, and started up the engine. The girl had yet to give up or go away. When she spoke this time, she got my full, instant attention.

“I know someone who was in the parking lot the night Donna

Winters died.”

I shut off the engine and asked her to repeat her last statement. I wanted to verify what she said. I wanted to make sure my ears weren't playing tricks on me. She repeated it. Then she repeated it a third time. Each time the words were exactly the same.

“Do you believe me?,” she asked.

“Should I?”

“What is there to lose?”

“Nothing more than I've already lost. Go ahead, kid. Tell the story. But make it the short version, okay.”

“The guy's a street hustler. He's into fifty different things. And forty nine of them are illegal. He was in the parking lot working a deal. At least, that's what they say.”

“Who is this jack of all trades?”

“Covington. Ty Covington.”

“Would he talk to me?”

“For money, he’d sell out his momma on Mother’s Day.”

I eyed the Greek diner across the street, let them linger there for a moment or two, then brought them back to the girl.

“Here’s thirty bucks,” I said. “Eat yourself silly. “Keep whatever’s left.”

“You’re giving me money, no strings?”

“No strings. But don’t tell anyone I gave it to you. Keep it to yourself. Now give me Covington’s address so I can get out of here.”

She gave me Covington’s address and I wrote it down on one of the envelopes. His place wasn’t far from the diner. Not far at all.

“What’s your name, kid?” I asked.

“Rose. Few petals, but many thorns.”

“Well, Rose, I know you’re probably immune to advice from

adults, but I'm going to give it to you anyway. Get off the street. You're young. Too young to give up yet. I don't the deal of what's going on at home. Whatever it is, the street isn't the answer. Get off this road you're on now. If you stay on it too long, you won't be able to back off."

"Can you guarantee me something better?"

"Guarantee? Put that idea out of your head right now. There is no guarantee. Life is not a washing machine."

I started up the car, eased it into gear, and started off on my way home. The entire way there, I just couldn't help thinking about Shelley. Where she doing was, how she was doing. Was she doing okay? Or was she hurting deep down inside like Rose? Did she, did she even remember me even a little bit? Or had I been permanently erased from her young fragile mind.

Or did she now, did she now hate me with a pure, unfiltered

ferocity that would last the rest of her life. Maybe Sarah had completely programmed the child's mind against me. The more I thought about these things, the more I wanted to cry. All the time, that's exactly what I did. I cried. And I felt no shame in doing so. The shame came solely from the knowledge that I had no one to blame but myself.

Chapter Seventeen:

There was a surprise waiting for me when I got back home.

Well, actually there were two surprises. One good, one bad. One outside the house, one inside. Alexandria was all dolled up and standing on my porch steps. I was so excited to see her, I jumped out of the car, ran to her, and kissed her full on the lips. The kiss lasted for some time. When we finally eased apart, we stared at each other awkwardly for awhile before regaining our senses enough to talk. She was dressed to the nines, but her face belied the state of her fancy attire. Her cheeks were sunken, her eyes were shallow, and it hurt like seven hells to see her this way.

“It’s been a long time since anyone was that glad to see me,” she said. “A long time.”

“What’s the occasion?”

“Occasion?”

“You didn’t get this dressed up just to come here and see me.”

“Yes, I did actually. We need to talk and I thought we could do it over a late dinner.”

“Oh.”

“Is something wrong?”

I looked down at the manila envelopes under my arm. The last thing Alex wanted to do was talk about the case. She was here on personal grounds, not business. Me, I wanted to go inside, get something hot to drink, and pour over the contents of the envelopes.

“What’s in the envelopes,” she asked in a state of forced curiosity.

“Information.”

“Sonny Winters information?”

“Can we go inside? I’m getting a chill.”

“Sure.”

This is where the bad surprise came in. I unlocked the door,

opened it, and the two of us stepped inside. What we saw wasn't a sight for sore eyes. No, this was a sight that made eyes sore. The house had been trashed, completely and thoroughly trashed. From one end to the other, upstairs and downstairs, everywhere and everything. The reason for it damn obvious to me. Winters didn't believe me when I said I didn't have the diaries. I'd told mayor so. Then this news either went directly from the mayor to Winters or passed through an unseen, well connected grapevine.

“The diaries. What else could it be?”

“It's hard to find something that's not here.”

“I told the mayor I didn't have them. And I know the news either directly or indirectly got back to Winters.”

“And Winters, not trusting you had to find out for himself.”

“And now he has.”

“What are we going to do about this mess?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Do you want to clean it up?”

“No.”

“Neither do I.”

“I’ll make a pot of tea then and we’ll go over what’s in those envelopes .”

“Thanks, Alex.”

“Only for you, Neal.”

Those were the last words between for quit some time. I guessed within a short period of time that the entire exercise would prove to be a pointless waste of effort. Nothing in these envelopes would give us irrefutable evidence that William “Sonny” Winters had murdered his wife. But there was substantial proof that he had committed crimes. A long series of crimes. Embezzling, tax fraud,

theft and importation of national antiques and artifacts from a dozen different countries, and arms sales to a dozen more countries.

I stood up after a long bout of reading and analyzing and instantly felt unsure of my balance. At first, I just chalked it up to being rigidly immobile for an extended period of time. But then a deep chill came over me and I began shivering violently from shoulder to shoe. There was a strong, overwhelming queasiness in my stomach and a growing dizziness in my head.

“I don’t feel so good,” I said.

“You don’t look so good either,” Alex answered. She touched my forehead with the palm of her hand. “You don’t have a fever.”

“Do I have a pulse?”

“Well, your eyes are open.”

“People have died with their eyes open.”

“You’re right, I’d forgotten. Sorry.”

“Forget it.”

“Is there anything I can do? Anything I can get you?”

“There is, as a matter of fact.”

“Medicine? Tea? Name it and I’ll get it for you.”

The entire room began to fill up with a thick, swirling brightness. My body swayed badly as if caught up in a virulent strain of seasickness.

“I know what you can get me,” I said.

“Name it.”

“You can get me -----.”

“I can get you -----.”

“You can get me a pillow because my head’s about to hit the floor.”

And then there was darkness and after that there was -----

nothing. I passed out right there on the living room floor. When I woke up a short time later, I was propped up against the couch and looking straight into the eyes of Alexandria. I couldn't tell if she was initially more concerned than angry, but I knew she was feeling both.

"I passed out," I said.

"I know."

"How long?"

"A lifetime."

"You mean this is another life? It looks as pathetic as the last one."

"Maybe you should go to a doctor."

"Maybe I should."

"You don't look well."

"I don't feel well."

Alex brought her hands up and placed them gently against my cheeks. Then she kissed me. A long, tender, quivering kiss. Was it a goodbye kiss, I wondered. And then, I let the wonder quickly pass. I didn't want to think about the question. And more importantly, I didn't want to think about the answer. But right then and there, one thing was certain about the kiss. It had put some strength back into my knees and some life back into my will.

“Are we done here?,” Alex asked.

I hesitated to answer. I thought she was asking me if our relationship was over. But what she was really asking me was were we finished looking through all of the information my hacker acquaintance had given me.

“What exactly are you asking me?,” I said.

“Whether or not we've finished looking through all of these damn papers. What did you think I meant?”

“I don’t know. I guess my brain is still fogged up. We’re done as far as Winters goes. But I still want to go over the papers involving Gina.”

“What are you going to do with all of this information? Have you thought about that?”

“There’s plenty of evidence against him. But who do I give it to? Certainly no one locally. Winters could have ties that run right down to the state capital then takes a hard right all the over to D.C..”

“Make copies. A lot of them. Send them to different places and see what happens. It’s the best chance you have of making something stick.”

“It’s as good of an idea as any I had. ”

Alex let that remark go by without comment. Instead, she steered the conversation onto a slightly different plane.

“I received an anonymous phone call about Donna Winters’

will,” she said.

“And?”

“The call said Donna had a history of making out wills, then tearing them up.”

“Is this what happened this time?”

“Not according to the caller. The caller said the will was still in the safe when Donna had that big blowup with Sonny and left. If that’s true, there’s no way for Donna to have tore it up.”

“Gina’s a possibility.”

“She’s more than a possibility.”

“The caller give you something about that?”

“Gina was completely cut out of the last will. Evidently, one of the reasons Donna kept changing her will was her indecision about her sister.”

“But how did Gina find out?”

“The most likely answer is that Donna herself told Gina..”

I went to the front window and drifted off into some quiet faraway place. When I came back from that place, Alex was at my side, holding my hand, and resting her head on the edge of my shoulder.

“We should’ve never taken this case,” I said.

“I suppose you’re right. But the money Gina gave us. We’d never seen that kind of money at once in our lives.”

“I laid out a lot of money to get that information on Winters and its useless. When you said you wanted to go eat and talk, we should’ve just got in the car and left.”

“It’s okay Neal, really. We can talk just as easily here as anywhere else.”

“What about food?”

“Pull something out of the freezer and nuke it in the

microwave.”

“There’s an oven ready meatloaf I can make. Add French style green beans, mashed potatoes and gravy and we have ourselves a full fledged, home made meal.”

I couldn’t even remember the last time I’d fussed over a meal for anyone other than myself. It might have been as far back as when Sarah and I were still together. Early in our marriage we shared the cooking duties. Which, most of the time, were plain, ordinary, nothing fancy affairs.

Alex and I had our talk while the food was cooking. We talked while walking through the neighborhood. We talked about many things. Life, love and heartache, humor, absurdity, and nonsense. Then we were done talking, we came back inside, sat down and enjoyed a good, quiet dinner together. I would’ve liked it to be a candlelit dinner, but I only had two candles in the house. One

was broke down to a nub and the other one had more lean to it than the leaning tower of Pisa. So, that idea was out.

Shortly after the meal was over, Alex said goodbye and left. She agreed to go with me to talk to Covington. The next day, I thought, might the last time I ever see Alexandria. This idea saddened me. But before I descended too deep into self-pity and despair, I called Ty Covington, told him my name, and told him what I wanted. He was a hard sell. A real hard sell. But eventually he agreed to a meeting the next day. He insisted on picking the meeting place. I said fine. But he wouldn't tell me where right then and there. He said he'd call me back the next day and give me the location. I reluctantly agreed.

On way or the other, I told myself, the Covington interview is where this case is going to end. Tomorrow, then, would be its final day of life. Then it would be burned, turned into ashes, and scattered

to the four winds. Lost, but not forgotten. Before going to see Ty Covington the next day, I had one other piece of this Winters business to take care of. Going over the information regarding Gina Wilson obtained by my hacker acquaintance. But that, too, would be taken care of the next day. Sometime in the early morning. I had nothing left in me for this day. Nothing left except go to bed and sleep. Maybe, just maybe, I could find some comfort there.

Just before going to bed that night, I had a short, imaginary conversation with my bedroom mirror.

Me: Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the sorriest bastard of them all.

Mirror: You are, you pathetic Polack son of a bitch.

Me: I thought so.

Mirror: You were a damn fool to even ask."

Me: Sorry.

Mirror: Well, you ought to be. Now shut the damn light off will you, I'm trying to get some sleep here.

Me: Sorry.

Mirror: You sure are.

Chapter Eighteen:

Saturday. It didn't take long for the fun to begin. At a little after 8 a.m., Carl showed up. You know, Alex's soon to be ex. He was drunk. Drunk and chock full of incoherent, wild eyed, violence. He wanted to break me into fifty different pieces, put them back

together again, then break them apart all over again.

Me? I was barely awake. I'd only been awake for about twenty minutes and hadn't even finished my first cup of coffee yet. Under no circumstances did I want to fight Carl. He was a lot bigger than I am, and, because of the alcohol, a lot meaner too. I opened the inside door, but left the outside door locked. He saw me standing there and the veins were all throbbing the same coded message: Kill him. Kill him. He fucked my wife and ended our marriage.

I didn't know what to do. Physically confronting him was not an option. One of us would end up dead. Neither was trying to reason with him. Carl's brain was in Crazy Town and brains residing in Crazy Town weren't known for their ability to participate in calm, rationale discussions. When he began pounding on the door like an uncontrollable madman, I stood there for a few seconds and wondered no one had ever thought about having tranquilizer guns

that could be used on people. Out of control elephants get tranquilized. Out of gorillas get tranquilized. Why not humans? No, out of control humans get tasered or shot. Must be more of that brilliant human logic at work, don't you think? Or do you think?

All I could think of to do was to let Carl rant until he eventually ran out of steam, gave up, and went home. But hell, I thought, that could take a hell of a long time. So, I closed the door and walked away. If he would've had a gun, I would've played the situation differently. But he didn't have a gun.

Rain came then, a thick steady downpour. Carl's tirade lessened almost immediately. Three or four later, the tirade was completely gone. Great, I thought, he'll get in his car and go home. But he didn't. He stood there, soaked to the bone, and looking like an absolute fool. But he wasn't leaving. No just yet. He'd come to get some satisfaction and he wasn't going anywhere until he got

some.

When I saw him go to the trunk of his car and pull out the tire iron, I thought he was going to smash the glass in the outer door. But he had his sights on other game. Namely, my car. I had already spent a lot of money repairing my car from the first time it was mauled. Now, I was going to have to do it again.

The windshield took a bit of work, but it was the first thing to go. The two driver side windows were next. Then came the rear window. And finally, the passenger side windows. Out of steam and breathing heavily, he called me on his cell phone.

“That’s for fucking my wife and ending our marriage, you shit faced little bastard. You’re lucky I didn’t bring a gun motherfucker.”

Carl then stumbled to his car, got in, and drove off. I was standing there in my living room stunned and more than a little

confused. Where in the seven hills did he get the idea that Alex and I had fucked? Where? Certainly not from me. Alex must have told him that. But why?

I wanted to go lay down and sleep for a day or two, but I couldn't. Within ten minutes of Carl's departure, Ty Covington called and set our meeting for one o'clock. It was to be, of all places, a downtown coffeehouse. There were a small number of coffeehouses in Wannabe and all of them were in the downtown vicinity. I called Alex and told her time and place of the meeting. She said okay, but sounded bad doing it. I said nothing about Carl and his visit.

I still had something to do between then and the meeting. Go over the information on Gina Wilson and see if any of it implicates her in any way to Donna's death, tampering with the crime scene, stealing Donna's will, or some combination of two or even all three.

Let's start with her phone records. There have been numerous calls back and forth from Gina's cell phone and Sonny Winters cell phone. They started three and a half weeks before she told me she'd arrived in Wannabe and ended the day of Donna's death. There were also numerous calls between Gina and Donna. The time frame for when they started and when they ended were the same. There were daily calls to Gina from someone named Howard B. Willmore, a man who bears an identical modus operandi as a loan shark. There was also plenty of calls from a female loan officer of the bank where Gina has her money. And there were a long list of calls from someone Long Tom Fitzpatrick, a man with his hands in several pies, some of which reach the middle echelons of organized crime.

As for Gina's financial situation, you can probably already guess that she had a warehouse full of problems. Her business was

hemorrhaging heavily in the red.. She took out a second mortgage on her home. She had massive credit card debt. At the very least, Gina could've lost her business, her home, her car, and a large percentage of her worldly possessions. At the most, she could've lost her life.(see Howard B. Willmore and Long Tom Fitzpatrick)

I cut my examination of Gina's background short. The time was approaching to go see Ty Covington and hear his version of what he witnessed the night Donna died. I was hungry and needed to get something on my stomach. I ate in a hurry, which is not good for the digestion. And I ate a lot of processed food, which is not good for the digestion or any other part of the human anatomy. Politicians have spent a lot of time, money, and effort running at cigarette companies. When are they going to do the same with the food companies? There are scores and scores of statistics concerning how many people get diseases and die prematurely from smoking

cigarettes. Where are all the statistics concerning how many people get diseases and die prematurely from bad food? And have you ever noticed how much more good food costs than bad food? Stop telling everyone what's good for them. Make it affordable for them.

I was a few minutes late picking up Alex to go the coffeehouse. From the second she got into the car, I knew she didn't have any booze in her and she was hurting because of it. She was a nervous wreck. She fidgeted the entire drive to the coffee house. She flipped, flopped, twitched, tremored and shook. She bounced around like a small, super ball caught in the spin cycle of a mad washing machine. It wasn't until we were within a few blocks of the coffeehouse that we started talking.

"I'm not parking in front of the coffeehouse," I said. "I'm parking a couple blocks away."

"No change for the meter? Or are you refusing on principle?"

“Both.”

“I thought maybe it was because you’re so cheap.”

“That too.”

“Go ahead. I’m not allergic to walking. Maybe the air will do me some good.”

“Do you mind where I park?”

“As long as it’s not in the middle of someone’s living room.”

“I can’t guarantee much, but I can guarantee that.”

I parked the car two blocks over and one block up from the coffeehouse. I checked my watch. We were a little late. It was five after one. To me, this was no big deal. But who knew if it was a big deal to Covington or not?

The coffeehouse, a converted bus depot, was narrow but long. It’s a strange place, this coffeehouse, with every manner of human being you could think of patronizing the place. I’d only been

in the place once before and that was while working a case too. I'd never been in this place for purely social reasons. Never been and never will be. It's hard to put into words, but there's something about places like this that I don't warm up to.

As we came in, my eyes went off to the right, while Alex's went straight back. Covington had proclaimed himself to be a six foot, lean, prime looking man. I didn't see anyone matching that description where I was searching. The first thing to gain my attention was a chess game being played by two sixty something seniors. One guy was white, the other guy was black. The white guy was playing black; the black guy was playing white. The game was somewhere in its latter stages by the look of things, but I couldn't tell if either of them was winning.

I brought my eyes away from the chess game and back to the center of the coffeehouse. I saw business types, musician types,

social climbing back stabbing types, computer types, but I didn't see anyone matching Covington's description.

"I see him," Alex said. "I think."

"Where?"

"Back at the counter to the left. Long black leather coat. Big over the top hair." She pointed to the man she'd described.

"The guy with a coffee in one hand and a cell phone in the other?"

"Yeah."

"I missed him somehow."

"What did you do, leave your Sherlock eyes at home today?"

"Maybe they were steamed up by overpriced coffee."

"Let's go find out if he's the guy."

"Lead the way. Age before beauty."

"But I'm both younger and better looking than you."

“Well hell, just forget it then.”

We walked to the counter in split formation with one of us ending up on each side of the man we presumed to be Ty Covington. We introduced ourselves and ordered coffee. He introduced himself as Covington, took his coffee, palmed his phone, and sat down at a nearby table. A couple of minutes later, Alex and I got our coffee and joined him at the table. The first and most obvious thing anyone was likely to notice about Covington was his hair. There was no better way to describe it than to call it a mane. A thick brown, waved over mane, an almost exact replica of the kind worn by a lion.

“So,” I said, “you have something to tell us?” I wanted this meeting to be all business. No distractions, no extra bullshitting, just business.

“Did we agree on a price?”

“What’s the lowest you’ll go?”

He told me. His lowest, in my opinion was still too high. I told him so. He wouldn't haggle. Everybody haggles I said. Everyone except him, he said. I thought about all the money I'd spent during the course of this case. Car repairs, house repairs, paying people. It added up to thick chunk of cash. But then I thought about my hacker acquaintance and our plan to plunder the Winters family fortune. I thought about my share of it. I agreed to Covington's price.

"Are you ready to talk now?," I asked. "Or do I need to shine your shoes first?"

"No, I already have someone to do that for me. Thanks for the offer though."

"That wasn't an offer. That was sarcasm."

"I know."

"Well?"

“Well what?”

“Are you ready to talk now? I’m not in the mood for dancing. You do understand, don’t you? Whatever patience I had when this case started died a long time ago. I’ve been jacked up and jerked around from the beginning. I even time in a hospital after being led up the golden path of near death. So, say what you have to say right now or we’re leaving.”

Covington slugged down the last of his coffee, then ran a slow hand across the entire length of his mane. I looked over at Alex and caught her sneaking a couple of shots of liqueur into her coffee. She hadn’t heard a word of what had been said. And she didn’t look to be in the mood to start anytime soon.

“I was up there conducting business,” Covington said.

“Where exactly?”

“In that open space between the two buildings.”

“The old grocery store and the short plaza.”

“Right. I deal going on. I had this guy on the hook and we were about to finalize the thing, you know.”

“And?”

“Then this whole ‘Twilight Zone’ thing starts to happen.”

“Twilight Zone,” Alex said, infusing herself into the conversation for the first time. There was a little more flush now to her cheeks and a lot more calm to her manner. Both were due to the liquored coffee, no doubt. She took another sip, swallowed hard and repeated the only two words she’d said so far: “Twilight Zone”.

“A car came into the parking lot,” Covington said. “It’s lights were off and it kept circling around as if it couldn’t find a place to park.”

“What kind of car?”

“The moon was full and the sky was clear. So, there was light

enough to see.”

“And?”

“It was a Mercedes. Can’t be sure of the color. But it was dark toned.”

“Did you see who was in the car?” I asked, putting myself back into the conversation.

“You’re jumping ahead of me Marlowe. Slow down.”

“Okay, okay. What happened after the car parked?”

Then a sudden thought struck Covington. He hadn’t been paid yet. Not a dollar, not a dime. Nothing. So, he stops talking right in the middle of his story. He wants his money and he wants it now, he says. All of it.

He stands up and purposely towers over me in my seated, leaning forward position. His coat is open and I can see a pistol holstered on his hip. He smiles a masterful smile of power and

intimidation. He passes by me and goes for more coffee. Alex goes too, but at a much faster rate than Covington. She's wants for coffee, which means she wants more booze.

Alex returned first. She didn't need sugar. She didn't need cream. All she needed was her liqueur. In it goes. First in the cup, then in her. Our eyes haven't met since we arrived here. And they don't meet now. There's an ever widening gulf between us and I don't know how to fix it.

A minute or so later Covington comes back. He's moving even slower than when he left. When he finally reaches our table, he lets out a snort of disapproval. He expected his money to be there when he returned. It's not. He then sat down and took a big swig of his coffee before putting the cup back down on the table

He and I sat there in a rising tide of aggressive tension, eyeing each other suspiciously. Time passes in thick, minute particles.

Nothing is said by anyone. He is younger than I am, taller than I am, and armed. He is also, on any given day, more to violence than I am. I can see it in those dark, heavy lidded eyes of his. Physicality is his world, his domain, the one place where he can invade, conquer, and reign.

“You don’t care, do you?” he said to me.

“No, I don’t.”

“But I do,” Alex said, then opened her coat to show him the pistol holstered under her left arm. “And I’m too close and not drunk enough to miss. Besides, you’re not stupid enough to draw in here. So, just calm down, drink your coffee and finish your story”

Alex then turned to me and said in a quiet voice: “What the hell are you doing? I thought you wanted to end this thing as fast as possible. Get in, hear the story, and get out. Put the money on the table, damn you, and don’t waste another second doing it. Let’s end

I been purposely trying to provoke Covington into violence because the answer was no. Sure, it could've been that or it could've been a touch of dyspepsia and a lack of sleep. I hoped then, as I hope now, that it was the latter and not the former. Otherwise, I just might -----

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“Finish the story,” I said, putting the money on the table.

“And don't stop until you're done.”

Covington picked up the money, counted it, then put it away.

“Where was I?” he asked himself. “Oh yeah, I remember.

The car pulled up, circled around for awhile, then stopped. After that, nothing happened for at least five minutes. Then someone got out of the car. Someone big, wide, and wearing a dark colored parka.

”

This was Gina, I thought to myself. Covington continued.

“This guy(I didn't bother to correct him) just stood there

staring back into the car. This lasted two or three minutes. When the staring stopped, he pulls something from underneath the parka and leans into the car. Then another car pulls into the parking lot.”

Alex and I exchanged sideways glances. A second car? What was a second car doing there? And who was driving it? The most likely scenario all along was that Gina alone altered the scene to implicate Sonny as a murderer. The presence of a second car threw that theory into the waste bin with the label garbage attached to it. Covington pressed on with his story.

“The second car was a Mercedes too. Same make, different year. The color was dark like the other one, but they might not have been the same. The second car pulls up close to the first car, with the guy in the parka in between. The guy in the parka turns around and has a conversation with the driver of the second car. The driver of the second car gets out and walks over to the other car, with the guy

in the parka close behind.”

“I need to interrupt your story,” I said. “Give me a general description of the driver of the second car.”

He did. And while this general description could’ve applied to millions of other people, it also could’ve applied to one person. Sonny Winters. Especially when you add a general description of Sonny’s car. Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed, and Vishnu. Gina and Sonny together. Covington closed in on the end of the story.

“The two of them lean into the first car. They’re in this position for a couple of minutes. They come back out. They stand aside and talk some more. The drivers’ side door is open and I can see inside. There’s someone in the front seat. This someone is slumped back and isn’t moving. The guy in the parka and the one he was talking to walk over to the second car, get in, and drive off. And I get the fuck out of there.”

“No gunshot?,” I asked.

“No gunshot..”

“Are you staying or going?”

“Staying. I’ve got other business here.”

“We’re going. Come on Alex, let’s go.”

I stood up and Alex soon followed. Both chairs stayed the way they were, out and away from the table.

“You know,” I said to Covington, “it would be healthier to pick another line of work.

“I don’t remember telling you what that was.”

“You didn’t. And I don’t know the specifics of it. But I could guess it in three tries or less. And all three come with long jail sentences or short life spans.”

“I didn’t make the world Caterski. The world made me.”

“The convenient motto of the damned.”

“I’m not afraid of jail. And I’m not afraid to die.”

“Then you’re a fool. But hell, you do have a lot of company.”

Alex led the way out. I followed a step or two behind. Once outside, I buttoned my jacket and pull up the lapels to act as a buffer against the piercing cold air. I closed my eyes and a long, slow sigh pressed through my chapped, trembling lips. Alex and I walked back to the car right in the face of a rising wind. A hard, bitter rain was about to fall. Again.

Chapter Nineteen:

Alexandria and I made it to the car just before the downpour came. But we didn’t drive off right away. There was an end coming. An end between the two of us and our relationship. This day would be the last day we ever saw each other. The well of tomorrows had finally run dry. Alexandria knew it; I knew it. So, we sat unmoving in car, delaying this end as best we could. But

there was no delusion within us that we were anything less than powerless to stop it. We talked. First we talked about Ty Covington's story. Then we talked about Donna Winters' death. After that we ----- . Well, we'll get to that later.

“What do you make of Covington's story?,” she asked.

“Whether it's true or not?”

“Yeah.”

“What do you think?”

“We didn't know him, he didn't know us. We got onto him by accident. He got money from us, true. But that doesn't necessitate lying. A guy like that isn't going to do anything without being paid. He always wants compensation.”

“So, you think his story is true.”

“I think so, yes. What about you?”

“I agree. How else could he have described Gina and the two

cars, if he wasn't there?"

"His story, though, just knots everything up even more. There were no screams, no struggle, and most importantly of all, no gunshot."

"If Gina was helping Winters make it look like a suicide, then who came by, took the gun, and fixed the scene as a homicide?"

"There aren't many possibilities, are there?"

"Everyone in a position of authority was working for Winters, not against him."

"That only leaves the children."

"What about Gina?"

"Gina? Gina was helping Winters. We just went all over that."

"What if she started out helping him, then backtracked to the parking lot and reset the scene to set him up?"

“I don’t think so.”

“Why not?”

“Look what Winters did to you when you got in way. Gina came and went without any attempts to do her harm.”

“True. But what if Gina convinced Winters that I was the one who rigged the scene?”

“You couldn’t have. You didn’t know she was there. The only person to have contact with Donna in the days before she died was Gina.”

“Again, true. But Winters didn’t know that. And you can bet the mortgage that Gina never told Winters she had contact with Donna before she died. When Donna ran off, Winters could’ve had it in his head that she ran right to me.”

“Did Gina tell him about the two of you? Or did he already know?”

“I don’t know.”

“So, what do you think happened that night? Gina killed Donna and asked Winters for help? Or the other way around? Or they worked the murder together? Or ---.”

“No more ‘or’s’ please.”

“Are you just going to let the whole thing drop?”

“I’m going to make copies of everything I have and send it out to different authorities. It will up to them whether they go after Gina and Winters. I’m out of it.”

“Can you live with not knowing for sure?”

“I’m going to give it a shot.”

The rain was now hitting the car in a slow, syncopated style. Its rhythm, to my ears, sounded like a dirge playing just for me. All talk of the case was dead. A new subject was then born to take its place. A subject no less difficult to broach than the one we had just

finished. But Alex was the one person I could talk to about it.

“About Donna.”

“What about her?”

“I want to explain -----.”

“You already told me about the two of you, remember?”

“Did I?”

“Yes. Now it’s my turn.”

Alexandria asked me to turn on the car’s heater. So, I did.

The two of us waited in silence for the car to warm up. She spent the time tracing abstract figures on the fogged up window. Me, I just sat there daydreaming. A pastime for which I have a rare genius it would seem/ When the heat reached its intended setting, the two of us began to talk again. A different subject this time, a different mood.

“My mother,” she said, leaping right into the deep end of the conversation, “wants back into my life.”

“Your stepmother? You haven’t had anything to do with her since -----.”

“Since I turned eighteen, I know. No, it’s not her. It’s my birth mother. She’s tracked me down and wants to be a part of my life.”

“Your birth mother? Shit, is this what pushed you back into---.”

“That and a couple of other things.”

“Am I one of those things?”

“Yes.”

“Should I leave it at that?”

“Should you? I don’t know. But do I want you to? Yes.”

I started up the engine, let it idle for a minute or so, then put the car in motion.

“Let’s get you back home,” I said.

“To your house?” she answered, then embarrassingly realized her mistake.

“Is there anything else we need to cover before we -----.”

“Say goodbye? Yes, there is one thing. Good news, too, for a change.”

“Really? Good news? What is it?”

“Starting Monday, I’m back in rehab.”

“That’s good Alex. I hope you can make it stick this time.”

“No more than I do.”

“You know, I just thought of something. I haven’t seen you smoking lately.”

“I’m trying to quit that too.”

“Both things at once? Is that a good idea?”

“No, but I’m going to try it. If it doesn’t work out, I’ll go back to smoking and try to quit that later. But nothing will make me

go back to drinking. Nothing.”

I wasn't sure who she was trying to convince more, me or herself. I hoped it was herself because whether I was convinced or not didn't matter a damn. She was the one who needed convincing. The only one. Then, it came, the news I'd been dreading most of all. I tensed both hands on the steering wheel and clung to it as I were being pushed into the well of another abyss.

“There's something else,” she said. “About my quitting the agency. It's going to permanent, I'm afraid.”

“You told me before you were quitting.”

“I know. But I wasn't sure then if it was temporary or not.”

“And now you're sure.”

“Yes. You do understand, don't you.”

“I think you were sure before.”

“We can still call each other or go out to dinner once in

awhile, can't we?"

Alexandria was desperately trying not to completely shut the door between us. A door with no knobs to turn, no hinges to pop, and no pins to pull. Once closed, this door would stay closed. Once closed, the temporary would become permanent. Alexandria didn't want this to happen; I didn't want this to happen. But the door was closing and there was no way to stop it. Alexandria, with the phrasing of her words, was attempting to ease a wedge between the door and the frame. A small, fragile wedge that would keep the door, and a possible future, open.

When we arrived at her house, she instantly went for the door and tried to jump out without looking back. But I selfishly grabbed a hold of her left arm and wouldn't let go. It was a pathetic gesture. A fleetingly, pathetic gesture. I could only delay her leaving, I couldn't stop it. I didn't have the power. In the end, the gesture wouldn't

change a thing. But, at the time, it seemed beyond my abilities not to do it.

At first, Alexandria fought like a cornered wolverine to get away. But my hold on her was unbreakable, and once she resigned herself to this fact, her resistance ended quickly. Her head remained down as a protective means to avoid meeting my eyes. I pulled her to me and held her in my arms. There were no kisses. There were no words. I just held her, and she, in turn held me. Sometime later, maybe a minute, maybe an hour, we broke apart. I closed my eyes as the passenger door opened, I kept them closed as the door slammed shut. And when I opened my eyes back up again, Alexandria was gone. Gone forever from my life.

Later that same evening, a crazy idea came into my head. I wanted to build a funeral pyre. A homemade, makeshift pyre. A pyre for Donna. There was one appropriate place to hold this ancient

sacred ceremony. Donna's waterfront home. First, I'd wait until sunset. Then I'd gather up what I considered to be all of the necessary elements for the pyre. Then I'd drive down and pick the perfect place for the pyre, a place hidden from all prying eyes. There was such a place and I knew exactly what it was located. So, I waited, gathered, and then drove.

When I approached the chosen spot, I took great care not to be seen. I came to this place by taking a wide arcing western berth. It was about a half mile from the Winters' house. The sun was completely down. Black and blue clouds had obliterated both moon and stars. I made one sweep of the house with my binoculars, checking the western face for lights. I saw nothing but darkness.

Convinced I was safe from prying eyes, I started gathering wood for my pyre. In time, a miniature pyre was formed. The pyre was then ceremoniously set on fire. When the fire had gained a

strong foothold, I began putting items in one by one and watching them burn. I stood there for a time, completely drawn in and hypnotized by the immense, overwhelming power of fire. It could create. It could preserve. It could destroy.

I closed my eyes and stepped closer to the fire. The warmth of the flames brushed lightly against my face, hands, and clothes. I lowered my head slowly down and hoped against all logic and reason that this ceremonial act would somehow help end at least a small part of my suffering. This lasted for a minute or so, when I felt the barrel of a gun snugly against my spine.

“Who are you?,” the gun owner asked, “and the hell are you doing here?”

The voice was female and familiar. I recognized it immediately. It belonged to Adrienne Winters, Donna’s youngest daughter.

“The who is easy,” I said. “Neal Caterski. The why is a little more complicated.”

“Caterski, really?”

“Yeah, really.”

“Don’t move.”

I didn’t move. And when I say I didn’t move, I mean I didn’t move. Not a twitch, tic, or blink of an eye. Nothing. Hell, I even held my breath. Slowly, the gun eased away from my spine. Adrienne retreated three or four steps, then circled wide to my left. A few steps later and she was standing on the other side of the fire facing me.

“It is you,” she said.

“One last time before the stage curtains slam shut.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Purging the past. Or trying to anyway.”

“The part with my mother in it.”

“Some, or all of it.”

“You’re not sure?”

“No.”

“How likely are you to succeed?”

“The odds are against it.”

“But you had to try.”

“Wanton desperation.”

“I’m going back into the house now, Mr. Caterski.”

“Is there anyone else besides you in there.”

“Let’s see, my mother is dead, my brother is dead, my -----.”

“Your brother is dead? You’re certain?”

“They found him three days ago. Face down at the beach.

Overdose, so they say. Guess who was the lucky person who had to identify him?”

“Who else? Hell, that’s not even the end of it. My father’s gone.”

“What? Gone?”

“Surprised? You shouldn’t be. You caused it.”

“And what about your mothers’ death? Did I cause that too? And your brothers’ death? Are you going to add that to my accomplishments?”

The lack of passion in my voice didn’t surprise me at all. The ability and the will to summon up emotion, even in short, mild doses just wasn’t there. My eyes, which had been fixed on the gun in Adrienne’s hand, returned to the fire burning between us.

“I need to ask you something before you go back inside,” I said.

“What?”

“Did you arrange things to make your mother’s death to look

like a homicide?”

“Me? And what do you mean by arrange things?”

“Taking things from the car they found her in.”

“What things?”

“The gun that killed her. The gun that’s in your hand right now.”

We stood facing each other silently in the dark. Minutes passed by this way until Adrienne came over to stand next to me facing the same side of the fire. The silence continued a little longer. Then, as readied herself to return to the house alone, she spoke to me for the last time.

“Could I talk you into going inside with me for a little while?”

I said nothing.

“Forty five minutes, maybe an hour?”

I still said nothing.

“A half hour? Please Mr. Caterski. A half hour, no more. I swear.”

“No,” I finally replied. “I can’t. There’s too many ghosts in there.”

“You believe in ghosts?”

“Not the kind you mean.”

“What other kind is there?”

“The kind that live inside your head. You have them, I have them, just about everyone has them.”

“What do you think I should do?”

“You really want my advice?”

“Yes.”

“Check into a hotel. You’re going to be coming into a large amount of money soon. Take it and leave this place.”

“Where would I go?”

“You could try your grandmother.”

“My grandmother?”

“Your mother’s mother. You have had contact with her, haven’t you?”

“You know about that?”

“I knew she had contact with someone in the house. I figured it was you.”

There was a long pause.

“You figured right,” she finally said. “My grandmother and I have talked on occasion.”

“Then I suggest you go to her. If only for a little while. Maybe she can help decide what to do.”

“Maybe.”

“I shouldn’t have come here. I’ve just made everything

worse.”

“Not for me.”

“No, for me Adrienne.”

“Goodbye, Mr. Caterski.”

I turned and started to walk away. But before I'd even taken a handful of steps, Adrienne stopped me with a question.

“Did my father really murder my mother?”

“Do you want an honest opinion or do you-----?”

“No soft soap please.”

“You already know the answer, don't you. You heard something, saw something? How else could you have gone out and rearrange the scene the way you did. That was you, wasn't it?”

“Yes.”

“Then are you asking me just as a formality to confirm something you already know.”

“Yes.”

“Fair enough. The answer to your question is yes.”

“Thank you..”

“No problem.”

“Mr. Caterski, before you go I’d like to tell one more thing.

Most of what was said about my mother was a lie.”

“Kid, most everything about this case was a lie.”

I then went home and very uncharacteristically drugged myself to sleep. It wouldn’t be the last time.

Chapter Twenty:

In the four days following Alexandria's leaving me, I received three unexpected letters in the mail. The three letters were authored by three different hands and arrived on three different days. The first one, computer typed and double spaced, was a ready mix of lies, truth, and gray murky world of the in between. And of everything included in this letter, the truths were the hardest to take. There is no need for me to name its author. Once you start reading, the writer's identity will become clear to you.

'You hacked into my accounts, didn't you, you Polack son of a bitch. But it wasn't you personally was it? You hired someone. I thought my accounts were hack proof, but there is no such thing, is there? Do you know

what I think, Caterski? I think you've been sitting around all these years waiting for a chance to take a run at me. Since the day Donna rejected you and married me. You couldn't let it go, could you? You just couldn't leave behind you and move on. The love was too strong and so was the hate.

Right and wrong didn't have a damn thing to do with any of this. Vengeance. A well-read, intelligent, thinking man, yet you still couldn't escape the primitive call of revenge burning inside you. Is there any hope at all for mankind, Caterksi?

What are we really? Huh? What are we as a species? Have we progressed through the ages? Or have we learned nothing at all? Do you know what I think? I think the caveman's heart still beats within us. We've learned to stand up, shave, wipe our own ass, and communicate through various forms of language.

But what motivates us? What are the things that dominate our

lives and rule our large skulled heads? Selfishness, jealousy, hate, arrogance, vengeance, and power. And because we are creatures of logic and reason, we can justify anything we do. We can spine virtue into sin and sin into virtue. He we are in the modern world Caterski, here we are. A cell phone in one hand and a Cro-Magnon club in the other.

I suppose you think I'm some kind of inhuman monster. I suppose you think I never loved Donna, that I never even tried to love her. Well, if that is what you think, you are wrong. I did try. Yes, I did try. You of all people, though, should know what that was like. Donna was a hard person to love. Impossible? I do not know. But it was well beyond me.

And it was no easier for her to love than to be loved. Donna did not love me. Donna had trouble loving anyone. Even herself. Why? I do not know. Maybe it is just a whole conglomeration of

things, a series of indecipherable hieroglyphics. I tried to understand her Caterski. For a long time, I tried.

So, we have reached an end you and I. And before I go, I want to tell you something. I did what you think I did. And the reason I did it is because of you. I did it not only because of what Donna was running away from, but also because of what she was running to. I killed her and I should have killed you too.

Goodbye, Caterski. You are a fool. You could have had anything you wanted. Money, position, power. Only one thing stopped you. You could not wear the mask. That is all there is to it. Wearing the mask. You can be whatever you choose to be behind the mask. Anything at all. Yes, you can go without a costume. But you can never go without the mask. You have to have the mask, Caterski. You have to have the mask.'

The second letter, like the first, was typed and double spaced. And also like the first letter, the person who authored it was not a member of the Neal Caterski fan club. The only real differences between the two letters is in style and length. Again, I'm refraining from revealing the identity of the person who wrote it. Again, in time, you will learn this for yourself.

To Neal Caterski:

You never had a clue, did you? Not exactly a great detective, are you? You should try another line of work. You know, something you're actually competent at. There I was living in your own house and working against you all the while. You and that drunk partner of yours.

I don't know if you're going to believe this or not, but I am going to tell you anyway. I didn't play a part in this drama willingly.

Sonny Winters knew things about me. Information. He used it against me to blackmail me into helping him. He told me if I helped him he would make all of my problems disappear. And if I didn't help him, he'd make me disappear. He is a cruel man. I'm not going to lie to you and say there was a deep love between Donna and me. There wasn't. But I didn't want her to die. It was either her life or mine. I had no choice. The sorrow you saw on my face was real. I'll have to live with this for the rest of my life. Actually, I don't believe you're such a bad detective Mr.Caterski under normal circumstances. But these weren't normal circumstances. Sentimental pathos clouded your otherwise capable mind.

You must know by now, of course, that I stole Donna's diaries. They made good kindling for the fire one night. Now, there's nothing left but ashes. I don't know what my sister saw in you Mr. Caterski. Nor do I know what your partner saw in you. Both of

them have said there's something special about you. But I say they're wrong. There's nothing special about you. Nothing.

There's just one more thing I like to touch on before I go Mr. Caterski. The night in question. It was all so easy. Donna trusted me. She called me and I went to her. But what she didn't know is that I called Sonny right after she had called me. Donna also didn't know that I'd taken a room in the same hotel as hers. So, when she called me on my cell phone, I was already there. I went to her room and played the part of loving, involved sister. Sonny was on his way to the hotel.

I spiked her drink and put her out. Sonny arrived and I let him in. We snuck Donna out to the her car and put her in the front passenger seat. I drove Donna's car, Sonny followed in his car. We went for a drive. Sometime during the drive, I remembered that huge empty parking lot. We drove there. After we arrived, I got out

the driver's seat and got out of his car and circled around to the passenger side of Donna's car. He put the gun in her hand, put the barrel against her temple and squeezed the trigger.

The letter breaks off there with formal ending.

The last letter, hand written in a broad sweeping scrawl, was the shortest of the three. The shortest and also the most unexpected.(This is an understatement of massive proportions, as you will see for yourself in a second)

My Love,

I am sorry that the necessity of this letter has come to be. But here it is. Whenever the time comes for you to read it, I will be gone from this life. I will be dead. I hope that you are not

taking this too badly. I hope you can move on and find a future with enough joy and serenity to allow you to carry on with the fight. You are a decent man, my love. Too decent for me. I am sorry I hurt you so. I am sorry I came between you and Sarah. I am sorry for everything. If I ever loved anyone, it was you. And how you loved me, I will never know. I did not deserve it. Goodbye, my love. I hope you can forgive me someday.

Yours Eternally,

Donna J. Winters

Chapter Nineteen:

Alexandria and I made it to the car just before the downpour

came. But we didn't drive off right away. There was an end coming. An end between the two of us and our relationship. This day would be the last day we ever saw each other. The well of tomorrows had finally run dry. Alexandria knew it; I knew it. So, we sat unmoving in car, delaying this end as best we could. But there was no delusion within us that we were anything less than powerless to stop it. We talked. First we talked about Ty Covington's story. Then we talked about Donna Winters' death. After that we ----- . Well, we'll get to that later.

“What do you make of Covington's story?,” she asked.

“Whether it's true or not?”

“Yeah.”

“What do you think?”

“We didn't know him, he didn't know us. We got onto him by accident. He got money from us, true. But that doesn't necessitate

lying. A guy like that isn't going to do anything without being paid. He always wants compensation."

"So, you think his story is true."

"I think so, yes. What about you?"

"I agree. How else could he have described Gina and the two cars, if he wasn't there?"

"His story, though, just knots everything up even more. There were no screams, no struggle, and most importantly of all, no gunshot."

"If Gina was helping Winters make it look like a suicide, then who came by, took the gun, and fixed the scene as a homicide?"

"There aren't many possibilities, are there?"

"Everyone in a position of authority was working for Winters, not against him."

"That only leaves the children."

“What about Gina?”

“Gina? Gina was helping Winters. We just went all over that.”

“What if she started out helping him, then backtracked to the parking lot and reset the scene to set him up.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Why not?”

“Look what Winters did to you when you got in way. Gina came and went without any attempts to do her harm.”

“True. But what if Gina convinced Winters that I was the one who rigged the scene?”

“You couldn’t have. You didn’t know she was there. The only person to have contact with Donna in the days before she died was Gina.”

“Again, true. But Winters didn’t know that. And you can bet

the mortgage that Gina never told Winters she had contact with Donna before she died. When Donna ran off, Winters could've had it in his head that she ran right to me.”

“Did Gina tell him about the two of you? Or did he already know?”

“I don't know.”

“So, what do you think happened that night? Gina killed Donna and asked Winters for help? Or the other way around? Or they worked the murder together? Or ---.”

“No more ‘or’s’ please.”

“Are you just going to let the whole thing drop?”

“I'm going to make copies of everything I have and send it out to different authorities. It will up to them whether they go after Gina and Winters. I'm out of it.”

“Can you live with not knowing for sure?”

“I’m going to give it a shot.”

The rain was now hitting the car in a slow, syncopated style. Its rhythm, to my ears, sounded like a dirge playing just for me. All talk of the case was dead. A new subject was then born to take its place. A subject no less difficult to broach than the one we had just finished. But Alex was the one person I could talk to about it.

“About Donna.”

“What about her?”

“I want to explain -----.”

“You already told me about the two of you, remember?”

“Did I?”

“Yes. Now it’s my turn.”

Alexandria asked me to turn on the car’s heater. So, I did. The two of us waited in silence for the car to warm up. She spent the time tracing abstract figures on the fogged up window. Me, I just sat

their daydreaming. A pastime for which I have a rare genius it would seem/ When the heat reached its intended setting, the two of us began to talk again. A different subject this time, a different mood.

“My mother,” she said, leaping right into the deep end of the conversation, “wants back into my life.”

“Your stepmother? You haven’t had anything to do with her since -----.”

“Since I turned eighteen, I know. No, it’s not her. It’s my birth mother. She’s tracked me down and wants to be a part of my life.”

“Your birth mother? Shit, is this what pushed you back into---.”

“That and a couple of other things.”

“Am I one of those things?”

“Yes.”

“Should I leave it at that?”

“Should you? I don’t know. But do I want you to? Yes.”

I started up the engine, let it idle for a minute or so, then put the car in motion.

“Let’s get you back home,” I said.

“To your house?,” she answered, then embarrassingly realized her mistake.

“Is there anything else we need to cover before we -----.”

“Say goodbye? Yes, there is one thing. Good news, too, for a change.”

“Really? Good news? What is it?”

“Starting Monday, I’m back in rehab.”

“That’s good Alex. I hope you can make it stick this time.”

“No more than I do.”

“You know, I just thought of something. I haven’t seen you

smoking lately.”

“I’m trying to quit that too.”

“Both things at once? Is that a good idea?”

“No, but I’m going to try it. If it doesn’t work out, I’ll go back to smoking and try to quit that later. But nothing will make me go back to drinking. Nothing.”

I wasn’t sure who she was trying to convince more, me or herself. I hoped it was herself because whether I was convinced or not didn’t matter a damn. She was the one who needed convincing. The only one. Then, it came, the news I’d been dreading most of all. I tensed both hands on the steering wheel and clung to it as I were being pushed into the well of another abyss.

“There’s something else,” she said. “About my quitting the agency. It’s going to permanent, I’m afraid.”

“You told me before you were quitting.”

“I know. But I wasn’t sure then if it was temporary or not.”

“And now you’re sure.”

“Yes. You do understand, don’t you.”

“I think you were sure before.”

“We can still call each other or go out to dinner once in awhile, can’t we?”

Alexandria was desperately trying not to completely shut the door between us. A door with no knobs to turn, no hinges to pop, and no pins to pull. Once closed, this door would stay closed. Once closed, the temporary would become permanent. Alexandria didn’t want this to happen; I didn’t want this to happen. But the door was closing and there was no way to stop it. Alexandria, with the phrasing of her words, was attempting to ease a wedge between the door and the frame. A small, fragile wedge that would keep the door, and a possible future, open.

When we arrived at her house, she instantly went for the door and tried to jump out without looking back. But I selfishly grabbed a hold of her left arm and wouldn't let go. It was a pathetic gesture. A fleetingly, pathetic gesture. I could only delay her leaving, I couldn't stop it. I didn't have the power. In the end, the gesture wouldn't change a thing. But, at the time, it seemed beyond my abilities not to do it.

At first, Alexandria fought like a cornered wolverine to get away. But my hold on her was unbreakable, and once she resigned herself to this fact, her resistance ended quickly. Her head remained down as a protective means to avoid meeting my eyes. I pulled her to me and held her in my arms. There were no kisses. There were no words. I just held her, and she, in turn held me. Sometime later, maybe a minute, maybe an hour, we broke apart. I closed my eyes as the passenger door opened, I kept them closed as the door

slammed shut. And when I opened my eyes back up again, Alexandria was gone. Gone forever from my life.

Later that same evening, a crazy idea came into my head. I wanted to build a funeral pyre. A homemade, makeshift pyre. A pyre for Donna. There was one appropriate place to hold this ancient sacred ceremony. Donna's waterfront home. First, I'd wait until sunset. Then I'd gather up what I considered to be all of the necessary elements for the pyre. Then I'd drive down and pick the perfect place for the pyre, a place hidden from all prying eyes. There was such a place and I knew exactly what it was located. So, I waited, gathered, and then drove.

When I approached the chosen spot, I took great care not to be seen. I came to this place by taking a wide arcing western berth. It was about a half mile from the Winters' house. The sun was completely down. Black and blue clouds had obliterated both moon

and stars. I made one sweep of the house with my binoculars, checking the western face for lights. I saw nothing but darkness.

Convinced I was safe from prying eyes, I started gathering wood for my pyre. In time, a miniature pyre was formed. The pyre was then ceremoniously set on fire. When the fire had gained a strong foothold, I began putting items in one by one and watching them burn. I stood there for a time, completely drawn in and hypnotized by the immense, overwhelming power of fire. It could create. It could preserve. It could destroy.

I closed my eyes and stepped closer to the fire. The warmth of the flames brushed lightly against my face, hands, and clothes. I lowered my head slowly down and hoped against all logic and reason that this ceremonial act would somehow help end at least a small part of my suffering. This lasted for a minute or so, when I felt the barrel of a gun snugly against my spine.

“Who are you?,” the gun owner asked, “and the hell are you doing here?”

The voice was female and familiar. I recognized it immediately. It belonged to Adrienne Winters, Donna’s youngest daughter.

“The who is easy,” I said. “Neal Caterski. The why is a little more complicated.”

“Caterski, really?”

“Yeah, really.”

“Don’t move.”

I didn’t move. And when I say I didn’t move, I mean I didn’t move. Not a twitch, tic, or blink of an eye. Nothing. Hell, I even held my breath. Slowly, the gun eased away from my spine. Adrienne retreated three or four steps, then circled wide to my left. A few steps later and she was standing on the other side of the fire facing

me.

“It is you,” she said.

“One last time before the stage curtains slam shut.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Purging the past. Or trying to anyway.”

“The part with my mother in it.”

“Some, or all of it.”

“You’re not sure?”

“No.”

“How likely are you to succeed?”

“The odds are against it.”

“But you had to try.”

“Wanton desperation.”

“I’m going back into the house now, Mr. Caterski.”

“Is there anyone else besides you in there.”

“Let’s see, my mother is dead, my brother is dead, my -----.”

“Your brother is dead? You’re certain?”

“They found him three days ago. Face down at the beach. Overdose, so they say. Guess who was the lucky person who had to identify him?”

“Who else? Hell, that’s not even the end of it. My father’s gone.”

“What? Gone?”

“Surprised? You shouldn’t be. You caused it.”

“And what about your mothers’ death? Did I cause that too? And your brothers’ death? Are you going to add that to my accomplishments?”

The lack of passion in my voice didn’t surprise me at all. The ability and the will to summon up emotion, even in short, mild doses just wasn’t there. My eyes, which had been fixed on the gun in

Adrienne's hand, returned to the fire burning between us.

"I need to ask you something before you go back inside," I said.

"What?"

"Did you arrange things to make your mother's death to look like a homicide?"

"Me? And what do you mean by arrange things?"

"Taking things from the car they found her in."

"What things?"

"The gun that killed her. The gun that's in your hand right now."

We stood facing each other silently in the dark. Minutes passed by this way until Adrienne came over to stand next to me facing the same side of the fire. The silence continued a little longer. Then, as readied herself to return to the house alone, she spoke to me

for the last time.

“Could I talk you into going inside with me for a little while?”

I said nothing.

“Forty five minutes, maybe an hour?”

I still said nothing.

“A half hour? Please Mr. Caterski. A half hour, no more. I swear.”

“No,” I finally replied. “I can’t. There’s too many ghosts in there.

“You believe in ghosts?”

“Not the kind you mean.”

“What other kind is there?”

“The kind that live inside your head. You have them, I have them, just about everyone has them.”

“What do you think I should do?”

“You really want my advice?”

“Yes.”

“Check into a hotel. You’re going to be coming into a large amount of money soon. Take it and leave this place.”

“Where would I go?”

“You could try your grandmother.”

“My grandmother?”

“Your mother’s mother. You have had contact with her, haven’t you?”

“You know about that?”

“I knew she had contact with someone in the house. I figured it was you.”

There was a long pause.

“You figured right,” she finally said. “My grandmother and I

have talked on occasion.”

“Then I suggest you go to her. If only for a little while. Maybe she can help decide what to do.”

“Maybe.”

“I shouldn’t have come here. I’ve just made everything worse.”

“Not for me.”

“No, for me Adrienne.”

“Goodbye, Mr. Caterski.”

I turned and started to walk away. But before I’d even taken a handful of steps, Adrienne stopped me with a question.

“Did my father really murder my mother?”

“Do you want an honest opinion or do you-----?”

“No soft soap please.”

“You already know the answer, don’t you. You heard

something, saw something? How else could you have gone out and rearrange the scene the way you did. That was you, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"Then are you asking me just as a formality to confirm something you already know."

"Yes."

"Fair enough. The answer to your question is yes."

"Thank you.."

"No problem."

"Mr. Caterski, before you go I'd like to tell one more thing. Most of what was said about my mother was a lie."

"Kid, most everything about this case was a lie."

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My Love,

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Yours Eternally,

Donna J. Winters

Epilogue:

Two and a half weeks have passed since I received Donna's posthumous letter. A lot has happened. I sold my house and just about everything else I owned. I didn't sell my car. It was old and beat up and not worth selling. So, I just went out to my driveway, shot it, and put it out of its misery.

I'm not living in Wannabe anymore. Hell, I'm not even living in the U.S. anymore. I'm not going to say where. Thanks to the unsurpassable skills of my unnamed hacker acquaintance, I now have more money than I've ever even dreamed of before. My hacker acquaintance has assured me that Alexandria has received her share. So has everyone else that was on my list to receive shares. I've verified this myself through a series of phone calls.

Alexandria seems to be doing okay. She hasn't had a drink since we said goodbye. She's still smoking, though not as much as she used to. Her divorce has already gone through. In record time

from what I understand. Alexandria made few demands. She just wanted the marriage to end as fast as legally possible. And Carl, given his position, put up little resistance. The divorce has been good for her. Don't get me wrong. Divorce is never a good thing. But it can be a better thing. Better than what you had. And this definitely so with Alexandria. She even landed herself a new job already. An investigator for a prominent defense attorney.

As for Sonny Winters, he has also chosen to leave the country. He reasons for leaving, though, were slightly different than mine. Even all of his powerful, well connected friends couldn't save him from the heat that had come his way. I had made dozens of copies of the evidence I had against him and sent them to a wide variety of places. Many of these places included foreign countries. The same foreign countries that Winters had stolen priceless antiques and historic artifacts from. I wasn't sure how hard anyone

inside the U.S. was going to pursue charges against him. So, I thought pressuring him from outside the U.S. was a sound countermeasure. And it proved to be the best thing I could've done. When the pressure started to build from the outside, then pressure started to build from within too. I'd wanted him to go to jail for killing Donna more than anything else. But looting his family fortune and putting him on the lam was a decent alternative.

Gina Wilson seems to have walked right off of the face of the earth. I have found no trace of her anywhere. Either Howard B. Willmore the loan shark or Long Tom Fitzpatrick the man with organized crime connections got to her or she voluntarily. Did Winters take care of all her monetary problems like he said he would? Did he give her an added bonus on top of that for the part she played in her sisters' death? Where is she now? Is she even still alive?. I don't know. I can't even begin to guess. I'm still having

trouble buying her story about Winters forcing her to participate in the murder. Winters is capable of anything, no doubt. Her behavior and manner while she was in my house were not the actions of a victim of circumstance. I think she participated in the murder willingly. The murder itself could've even been her idea for all I know.

Epilogue

As for me, I'm holed up in a hotel with a woman named Mari Dovetail. She looks as if she's been through seven different kinds of hell too. She won't tell me what they are, but I know they're there. I know the look. I've seen it many times in the mirror.

I don't know how many days we're actually going to be together, but it really doesn't matter a damn. It could be a couple of days. It could be a week to ten days. I don't know. But at this point, I'll take whatever I can get. Any day that I'm not alone is automatically a better day.

Where I end up and what I end up doing are questions I have no answers for.

Maybe that will change soon. I hope so. Because my mind is still

trapped inside a very dark and lonely place. Trapped like a sea captain riding off course and blinded by a raging, coastal storm. A sharp, craggy cliff isn't far off. There is no lighthouse beacon to warn me off if I get too near. There's no one on board I trust enough to share my fears with. I am surrounded by people, yet I am alone.

All there is for me to do now is seize the rail, keep my head down and hope the storm passes soon. If not ----- . If not, what then? I don't know. I don't even want to think about the possibility of it. After all, what good could come of it?