

Crispy Critters

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BOOKS BY THEO CAGE

SPLICER (2012)

BUZZWORM (2014)

SATAN'S ROAD (2014)

THRIFT SHOP (2014)

ON THE BLACK (Fall 2014)

DAREDEVIL'S CLUB (2015)

EMERGENT (2015)

When I was a teenager, I discovered a cache of well-thumbed paperbacks that a friend's uncle kept stored in his basement. That summer was my first introduction to Robert Heinlein, Frederic Pohl, Isaac Asimov and HP Lovecraft.

Up to this point, my only exposure to short stories were the anthologies – Amazing Stories, Weird Tales, etc. So I eagerly gobbled up that whole, musty library. But when I cracked the spine on my first Lovecraft horror story - it was like being infected by an addictive parasite. No one could create atmosphere like Lovecraft - or dwell on the gruesome details so lovingly. I still can't get some of those images out of my head.

Now I am no Lovecraft, but I've always wanted to write a short story that scored high on the creepy-crawly meter. But modernized. And what could be more revolting than a child molester? And two retired guys with too much time on their hands - and revenge etched across their sclerotic hearts.

Theo Cage

Crispy Critters

Leo wound the monofilament line around the man's neck with practiced hands, the shiny tether sparkling in the light of their high-powered flashlight. Gordon stood over their captive, holding both of his wrists as the pedophile struggled, jerking his arms back to quiet him for at least the tenth time in the last fifteen minutes. Leo was in his seventies, retired over twenty years, but his hands were as steady as a seamstress's - his large meaty fingers working the fine line like a surgeon.

The mono was Gordon's idea. He had no idea where it came from. He had spent his working life as a firefighter, then a fire inspector - not the most creative career choice. But now, the project he and Leo were working on had lit a fire under them, no pun intended. Gordon loved the open-ended quality of their work together. No bosses. No routine. Every job, a fresh new adventure.

The pedophile squeaked this time, his voice slowly but certainly being cut off by the thin line wrapped around his throat. And his eyes were wide now, big yellow saucers in the dim light of his filthy bungalow. Leo and Gordon had worked on this effect for some time and made a lot of mistakes. But they had it now, and they relished the recipe as if it was the colonel's special own. You don't want a man thrashing around and doing damage, but you also don't want him sedated so much that he misses the point. It's a fine line. And the point of this exercise is all about that fine line.

The man they held, his chest bare and his arms covered in needle tracks, was Nelson Parrish. He was about forty, thin, no more than 120 pounds, which made this whole process a lot easier than it normally was. Plus the roofies they gave him made wrangling him easier too.

Parrish lived in a rented house on a broken down street in northern Phoenix called Cable Road. His neighbors hated him, avoided him assiduously. After all, he was a known child rapist just released from Clayton maximum in Minneapolis. The FBI now published the names and addresses of all known released sex offenders. You could look it up on the Internet with very little difficulty.

A neighborhood group called *Mothers for Sanity* had pasted a poster on the light pole just down the block with a grainy picture that didn't really do Nelson justice. He had shaved the eighties mustache the day he was released. Gordon found that odd. Why would you want to spend one day more in prison than you had to looking like a cop from *Hill Street Blues*?

Leo and Gordon were going to give Nelson what he deserved. Well, not exactly what he deserved. They didn't really have the stomach for that. Nelson's record showed that he had abused at least five young boys all under the age of twelve over the past ten years. How do you pay someone back for that kind of atrocity? They had given it a lot of consideration and couldn't come up with a balanced response. Mostly they wanted him just gone. They weren't in this for kicks. They were doing a job no one else wanted to do or had the balls to talk about. They didn't really give a shit about what the bleeding hearts thought. They

had worked hard their whole lives, raised families, paid their taxes. This piece of shit was only a turd in the yard no one else wanted to bury.

Leo finished the fine detail on the monofilament. The line was now digging into the grey unshaven flesh of Nelson's neck, fifty-pound test, the thickest they could find at a local sporting goods store. They used mono because it was plastic, would quickly melt away in the high heat of the fire and not leave a carbon trace. The idea was to make this look as much as possible like an accident. Nelson was just another lackadaisical smoker, drifting away on a cheap rayon couch that would soon be his funeral pyre.

Nelson was having a hard time controlling his arms and his legs, but you could see in his eyes that he was wide-awake.

Leo moved back to inspect his work. The pervert looked like an insect trapped in a spider's lair. He smiled. Then he knelt down and picked up a plastic cup from the floor. He had filled the small container with gasoline from a spigot he had installed himself under the right rear wheel well of his 1993 Ford F150.

He held the yellow cup above Nelson's face. Nelson tried to turn, but when he twisted, the nylon line cut deeply into the flesh of his face. Leo carefully let one-drop fall into Nelson's open right eye.

Nelson jerked like a bug that had fallen into an open flame. Then Leo put the cup down carefully on the floor again. He took his time, mindful of spilling anything on the carpet that could leave even the smallest trace. He knew time wasn't a problem. Nelson had no friends - no lady callers. The only visitor might be his parole officer, but not likely at one in the morning.

Gordon then took his cigarette lighter out of the pocket of his windbreaker and held it in front of Nelson's face.

"Five boys you destroyed. Even a sick puppy like you knows that's not right. And you're probably thinking to yourself right now, I just couldn't control myself, couldn't fight the urge. Yeah. I hear the urge is strong. But you should have tried harder. We should take a steel poker, heat her up real hot, and drive that thing right into you. That would be justice of some kind. But that might get the medical examiner interested. So we are going to try something else."

With that, Gordon flicked the starter on the lighter. The gas in Nelson's eye burst into a small flare of light. It sizzled for a few seconds, burning off the salty moisture in his tear duct. Then the eye went opaque like a boiled egg white.

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Gordon Cleary saw the two detectives walking up his front walk from his upstairs bedroom window. Cheap suits and a Crown Vic sedan - that was all the information he really needed. Plus they walked like cops - like they deserved to be there.

He closed the curtain, hoping they hadn't seen him, and took a deep breath. He had played this scenario out in his head many times. After all, he was a pro.

He was just surprised they were on to him so quickly. He would have guessed it would have taken at least a half-dozen deaths before an investigator could put enough clues together to triangulate on him. What kind of mistake could he have

made that put him on their radar? Then he realized his mistake. There had been six deaths. He had almost lost count.

As Cleary made his way down the stairs, there were thoughts buzzing around in his head that surprised him. For a brief moment he actually considered taking out the two cops. Had it really come to that? He was going to transition from murdering perverts to police officers because they might get in the way of his master plan? He shook his head as if to toss the thoughts aside. As a fire inspector, he often thought of criminals as hopelessly unimaginative. *You're surprised we showed up?* And here he was doing exactly the same thing. Six simple acts of revenge and someone was on to him already. Like spontaneous combustion - sometimes it just happens.

The doorbell rang, echoing in the tiny hallway. Cleary cleared his throat. A doorbell chime can mean so many things. In this case, potentially, the end of everything he knew and loved.

He opened the front door, wearing old blue jeans and a worn T-shirt; he fit the part of the retired fire fighter perfectly.

The first cop on the stoop was about six feet tall, black, with a serious expression on her face. The second, standing behind her a few steps down, was younger, blond, probably at the bottom of regulation height for a cop. Or maybe it just looked like that since he was standing in the shadow of his partner.

The blond looked bored, which caused Cleary to relax a bit. Or maybe that was the cop's strategy - play it cool and get you to drop your guard. But right then, something in their faces told him they hadn't come to make an arrest. Not today anyway. Cleary guessed some old firefighter's intuition had kicked in. Now he was feeling more curious.

"Gordon Cleary?" said the woman. Cleary put on his most disarming smile; pushing all of his nervousness down where it couldn't be seen.

"That's me," he said.

"We're working on an investigation and wondered if we could ask you some questions."

"Sure," said Cleary, stepping aside in the small hallway. "You want some coffee?"

The tall cop looked at blondie who shrugged. The coffee question was always a good one. If they were coming to slam your head against the living room wall and cuff you, caffeine wasn't necessary. The female cop told Cleary she probably had enough coffee to last her a week, but thanks anyway.

Cleary led them into his kitchen - green linoleum floors, cupboards painted years ago in a pale green color his late wife used to call mint. They sat down at the kitchen table. Also mint.

"How can I help?" offered Cleary, hands open, leaning forward slightly - the international symbol for *I have nothing to hide*. Meanwhile, his heart was winding up to warp factor five.

"I'm detective Cyn Bathgate," then she pointed at her partner. "This is detective Scott. We're working on a fire investigation we thought you might be able to help us with."

"Always happy to help a fellow investigator."

"The fact you worked with the Fire Department for so many years is the reason we're here actually. We have an arson case - at least we believe it's arson - and wondered if you'd look at the file."

"This a cold case?" asked Cleary.

"No. It's recent. Three days ago. On Cable Road. A small bungalow burnt to the ground."

"Why do you think it's arson?"

She looked at her hands for a few seconds, folded together on the tabletop. Then she smiled, looking a bit embarrassed. "Nothing based on the scene actually. Just a suspicion. There have been three very similar fires in the past twelve months, all the homes of pedophiles. They all occurred while the owners were being reintroduced into society."

Cleary almost laughed. Re-introduced? Is that what you call it when you invite a rabid dog into your backyard?

"Somebody's burning pedophiles?" Cleary asked.

"That's my guess. But I don't have any hard evidence. You worked on a lot of arson cases. Ever seen anything like this?"

"You know, there are enough psychology books on fire starters to fill a small library."

"I didn't know that," Bathgate answered.

"Arsonists are fascinating. Some of them just love to burn things down. They have personality issues. Low self-esteem usually. Watching a fire makes them feel important; gives them power over others. Then there are the pros. Fire is just a means to an end for them. Which do you think it is?"

The blond cop perked up. "We think it's revenge."

Cleary thought about that for a moment. "Someone whose kid was abused you mean? Or a family member?" he asked.

"Could be. But amateurs usually leave a lot of clues. Traces of extenders. Kindling. Unlocked doors. There's none of that," said Bathgate.

"You know your stuff, detective," said Cleary.

"Not as much as you."

"What do you need from me then?" asked Cleary.

"We'd appreciate it if you would visit the site tomorrow. We'll be there at noon. We just want your opinion."

Cleary looked up at a calendar hanging on the end wall of one of the kitchen cabinets - the only thing in the room less than ten years old.

"You've got my curiosity up now. Sure I'll be there." Bathgate gave Cleary her card with the address of the destroyed home - what Cleary would call the *fireground*. "But don't forget. It's been six years since I've worked on a case. I'll be a bit rusty."

The tall cop smiled and shook his hand. "I think you underestimate yourself, Mr. Cleary. From what I hear, you were ... uniquely suited to your work."

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Bathgate and Scott got back in their unmarked sedan. Bathgate looked back at the house wondering if Cleary was watching them. She was sure of it.

"He doesn't rattle easy," said Scott.

"Are you surprised? He's probably interviewed hundreds of sociopaths in his career. I'm betting after a while you start thinking like them. But I was watching his wrist. His pulse was way up."

"Still pretty cool for a guy out of action that long."

"I wouldn't say he was totally out of action. I'm guessing he's doing a bit of freelancing," she said.

"So what happens tomorrow?"

"We bring him to the site of the fire. We watch him go through the wreckage. Ask him a lot of questions. See what we can learn."

"Then make an arrest?" asked Scott.

"I didn't say that. We don't have an open and shut case. We need a lot more."

"What about his truck?" Bathgate nodded. It was all they had. On the night of the fire, a neighbor two blocks over had called in a suspicious vehicle. An older Ford truck was parked in front of her house and since two families on her street were out of town, she was worried about a break and enter.

When the Phoenix Police patrol car arrived, the truck was gone, but the woman had recorded the license number. When they checked the plates, they learned the F-150 belonged to Gordon Cleary who lived in Cold Canyon, about ten miles north of downtown Phoenix. *An expert on arson parked two blocks away from a suspicious fire at two in the morning.* Not enough for a grand jury, but a thought-provoking question for Cleary tomorrow, while he had his nose down in the charred timber, hoping he hadn't left any clues behind.

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Cleary pulled up in front of the sidewalk that led to a blackened pile of lumber and a crooked chimney poking up into the Chinese elms, the remains of Parrish's little bungalow. The firefighters had done a good job of containment. A faded picket fence belonging to the neighbor on the right showed some signs of bubbling paint and chars, but both adjoining houses went largely undamaged. That was all about proper water management and the right wind direction. But the fire department could never save Parrish's little pre-war home once it ignited - too much old paint, dry paneling and wood chips in the attic. Cleary knew, after all. He had checked before they started the fire.

The two cops were standing at the edge of the debris, careful not to get burnt charcoal on their clothes or hands.

"Detectives," said Cleary.

"Mr. Cleary," said Bathgate. "You know this area at all?" Cleary thought that was a strange question to start things off.

"I fought fires all over this city for thirty years, detective. Why do you ask?"

"The Fire Department told us these houses were a problem, but didn't explain why."

Cleary nodded. "Age mostly. These bungalows and two stories were built in the 40's and 50's. They used a wood construction method called balloon framing that isn't used anymore. Basically, the walls are like chimneys and the fire and heat shoot right up the insides. Creates a very fast burn. And in those days, they

didn't use fiberglass or treated fibers for insulation - they used wood shavings. Lights up faster than kindling.

"So this was just a fire waiting to happen?"

"Unless people remediate these older homes, they are living in a fire trap."

Cleary walked up to the edge of the foundation, which was now just a concrete pad piled high with charred timbers and the remains of appliances and a blackened furnace. He looked up at the tall detective. "I really don't know what I can help you with here. You must have a fire report from the inspector."

"Yeah. They say the owner fell asleep on his couch while smoking. Cigarette burned a hole through the couch, which started the fire. Guy never woke up."

"Did they say what kind of couch?"

"Poly something."

"Probably old. Before fire resistant chemicals were used. Highly flammable. And once they get started, they produce very high heat, which spreads the fire quickly. Also pumps out poisonous gas. Which is likely how your victim died. But an autopsy can confirm that. Burnt lungs - or not - will tell the story."

Bathgate just stared at Cleary for a moment, saying nothing. "The ME said death from asphyxiation. Chemicals released from the couch."

"Pretty typical," Cleary added. "The hot gas burns out their lungs. It only takes seconds. Did you test for accelerant?"

"You just said the couch ..."

"You brought me here because you think this is arson. That almost always means gasoline or kerosene traces."

"They had a dog here, clamoring around in that pile of burnt wood for about an hour."

Cleary looked over at the debris. "Dogs are sometimes more accurate than the laboratory. They're trained to sniff out the by-products of accelerants. Saves a lot of time."

"They didn't find anything. So that means what?"

"Ninety percent of arsons involve the use of gasoline or solvents. If the dog didn't find that, you don't have much to make a case."

"What about the other ten percent?" asked the detective.

Cleary frowned. "Kindling usually. Piled up furniture or wood scraps. Sometimes if there are a lot of drapes, an arson can start there. You can look for certain V-shaped burn patterns to determine the point of origination."

"This place had no drapes. The owner preferred tinfoil taped to the windows."

Cleary shrugged. "Poor man's window coverings. You can buy them at Piggly Wiggly," he said. The two cops seemed out of questions.

"Okay, detective," said Cleary. "Old house, dry as a popcorn fart - just waiting to light up like the fourth of July. The fire inspection office does a thorough review and comes up with nothing more than a guy with a nicotine addiction, smokin' home-rolled or maybe a joint, while he dozes off in front of the Shopping channel. Do you know how many people died from smoking accidents last year? Hundreds. So what makes you think this isn't just an accident?"

"Three cases just like this one over a space of twelve months, all in the greater Phoenix area." Cleary turned to the blond cop who seemed fascinated by a distorted light bulb lying in the grass. Glass melts at over six hundred degrees,

thought Cleary. They called that a *pulled bulb*. The direction of the pull was a clue to origination. This was quite a fire. He wished he'd seen it. And the cop had the number wrong. There were six house fires - but the zone was bigger than she had thought to examine. *Hey, give credit where credit is due.*

"Three convicts?" asked Cleary.

"Three child molesters."

Cleary made a face. "You expect me to feel sorry for those perverts? Maybe someone is doing us all a favor." Both cops looked at him. "Do you have kids?" asked Cleary.

Bathgate squinted at Cleary, evidently not liking the question. "I don't see what that has to do...?"

"You don't see what? You don't worry about your kid being grabbed by some monster?"

"Cleary! Let's stay on point here. You're the expert on arson. Could you plan a job like this? Start a fire without making it look like arson?" she asked.

"There are two kinds of arsons: people who burn their houses because the insurance money is worth more than the pile of sticks they live in, or kids who have behavioral problems. 99% of intentional fires match that pattern. You are really going out on a limb here.

If you hate the pervert next door, why not run him down with your car or fake a home invasion. Why go to all this trouble?"

"Good question," said the female cop, too quickly for Cleary's liking.

"So am I done here?" Cleary pointed at the tangled pile of burnt timber looking like a giant game of pick-up-sticks. "Cause I'm not crawling through that crap unless someone is paying my cleaning bill."

The blond walked over and for the first time got involved in the discussion. Up close he looked a lot older. "Where were you, Mr. Cleary, on the evening of June 12th?"

"Where was I?"

"It's a simple question."

"A week ago? Tuesday? Playing cards with a buddy. We play Poker ever Tuesday night."

"And your truck?"

Cleary looked from one cop to the other. He was beginning to see where this might be going.

"What time?" Cleary said.

"Early morning. About 2:00 AM."

"You see my truck, Detective? A rust-bucket 1993 F-150. It has over 200,000 miles on it. Held together with plastic bondo and faint hope. Not what you could call reliable. But what can you do on a firefighter's pension?"

I was driving my buddy home late, when the truck stalled. We pushed it to the curb and ..." Cleary was thinking ahead as fast as he could. Leo would back him on any story he shared with him. But if he said they took a cab, it would be too easy to check the time and dates with the taxi operator.

"And?" said the blond cop.

"So we hitchhiked home."

"Hitchhiked? At 2:00 in the morning?"

"Just got lucky, really. A young kid saw two grandfathers stuck at the side of the road and took pity on us. We got home, grabbed my friend's car and battery cables and drove back. Gave it a boost. I was in bed by four."

Cleary knew the two cops wanted to exchange glances, but they were far too professional to give anything away. *His truck* thought Cleary. Someone had ID'd his truck sitting a few blocks away from the house they had torched. Could be a police officer or a nosy neighbor that called it in. That was a huge mistake. The police could have shown up quicker, the neighbors might have gotten involved - and two old guys could have walked right into the end of their careers as *The Revengers*.

"I'm a suspect?" asked Cleary, trying to damp his anger down. They were just doing their jobs. No sense getting bent out of shape. "Because my truck was seen near here?"

"You have to admit, it raises some interesting questions," said the blond.

Cleary looked from one cop to the other. He could see the accusation in their eyes. He guessed they were both past making assumptions. Now it was just a hunt for evidence. Was there any point in trying to distract them?

"I spent fifteen years fighting fires and another fifteen inspecting them. Proving arson isn't that hard. Nailing the perpetrator - almost impossible. All that procedural stuff you guys use on a typical crime scene like DNA, fingerprinting and fibers - don't mount up to a pile of donuts on a typical arson case. You need a confession, detectives. Otherwise, you ... well, you're basically fucked."

Bathgate didn't even blink. Cleary guessed she had already thought about the challenges in this case. "I'll need the name and the phone number of your poker playing friend." Cleary gave it to her. Then he said his goodbyes and got into his truck.

Just for effect, he held the gas pedal down before turning over the starter, intentionally flooding the carburetor. He knew this truck intimately, had bought it new twenty years before. As soon as he could smell gas rising up from the engine, he turned the ignition. The starter groaned several times then he turned the ignition off.

Cleary looked at the blonde cop who was now almost to his passenger door, heading for his cruiser. He raised both hands in exasperation, looking angry, and got out and flipped up the hood release. Just as he got the engine cover open, the two cops rolled past him and disappeared up the road.

Assholes, thought Cleary. *Won't even help a senior citizen.*

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Tuesday night poker had been a tradition with Gordon Cleary and his four close friends for almost twenty years. They were religious about the weekly game; despite marriages, children growing up, divorces, sickness and funerals - they had all adhered to one tradition that remained unchanged; twenty-five cent ante, dealer's choice, everyone helps pay for the snacks and beer.

Larry was the first to go. He was a short, wiry firefighter, never married. Had his first and last heart attack chasing some kid down the back lane who broke a branch off his favorite crabapple tree. And he wasn't going to hurt the kid -

probably just wanted to talk to him and give him a bag of green apples to take home.

Now the poker team was down to four. There was talk of replacement, but Cleary would have none of it. Larry wasn't just a guy they happened to play cards with. He was funny and warm and would always pay for more than his share of the food pot.

He also saved Cleary's life once. They were part of what is called an interior attack; four firefighters holding hoses, deep into an industrial warehouse, finally beating back the flames after hours on the site.

Cleary was pushing forward when he felt a tug on his arm. He turned and saw Larry through his flash hood and breathing mask, tugging him back. Cleary didn't understand. They were clear, and the flameover was rolling back, a sign that the origin of the conflagration was under control.

Cleary wanted to kill the fire; put its lights out. But Larry wouldn't let go. If it was anyone else, Cleary would have pulled away thinking the other guy had lost his nerve ... but this was Larry. He was a firefighter without an ego - he just did what he thought was right. So Cleary slumped his shoulders, expressing his sense of defeat and turned - just as the roof, sixteen feet about them, collapsed.

Larry had sensed something. Later he said it was a sound, but you can't really hear anything in full gear. Cleary knew it was all instinct.

So Cleary was not the least bit interested in replacing Larry. They would have to do with four.

Then Tim got divorced, met another woman and moved with her to Texas when her company transferred her. Now they were down to three. Three players make for lousy poker. But Cleary refused to take on replacements.

Now here it was Tuesday night, years later, and it was just Gordon and Leo. They both had a beer in front of them, sitting in Cleary's kitchen, a worn deck of cards sitting on the table that they hadn't touched for an hour - although Leo said he wouldn't mind a game of solitaire to clear his head. Poker night lately had become strategy and planning sessions, only the stakes were much higher than a \$30 pot full of quarters. They were looking for justice.

"What do you think, Gord? Are those cops onto us?" asked Leo. Cleary looked across the table at his friend of fifty years. How rare is that? Someone you can put up with - even enjoy their company - for five decades. He felt blessed.

Cleary had called Leo the minute the two cops drove away and told him the story. Leo got a call a few hours later and repeated the tale of the hitchhiker. The cop had delved into the story in some detail. In the end, Leo said his memory wasn't what it used to be and couldn't remember all the details - finally, a decent use for garden-variety senility.

"They have some circumstantial evidence, enough to fuel their interest, but not enough to get a warrant. That'll keep them up at night though. And I'm a big puzzle for them. Having no record and no priors - and no obvious motive. I remember as an inspector, that kind of thing would make me doubt myself. Ninety percent of the time cops know the suspects they're dealing with. It's like a club. I don't belong to the club."

Leo took a careful sip of his beer. He wasn't a big drinker. He could nurse a long neck for two hours. He also didn't seem worried. And he had already said he wanted to keep going.

"Look. This is your call," said Leo. "They have your name and you're the fire guy. I'm in 100% if you need me."

Cleary looked tired. Without the game they called *Crispy Critters*, they had nothing anymore. Might as well turn off the lights. And a pathetic game of two-person poker wasn't going to cut it either. Nothing had the clean concise edge that tracking down pedophiles and sex maniacs delivered. Nothing. It was like a five-alarm every time.

Cleary sat forward. "This just ups the ante, Leo. We have to be smarter. And they're only looking at four cases. They don't know about the other two yet. So, like I said yesterday, let's look a little further afield. Do some traveling."

What Cleary meant was stop focusing on just Phoenix proper and consider cities within one or two hours' drive. Or longer, if it came to that. Cleary knew that the only way they would ever get caught was red-handed. And how likely was that? So extending their territory just improved their odds.

Leo had been spending some time over the last twenty-four hours going over the Arizona Sex Offenders online database, specifically looking for targets that weren't in Phoenix.

All the info they needed was on the web. There were thousands of offenders in the database, and the online info included names, birthdates, gender, age and current location. Leo eliminated anyone in an apartment or multi-use housing. They didn't want to start a fire that could accidentally kill innocent bystanders. Also, too many opportunities to be seen by people in the area. Leo wanted a stand-alone house, typically a small renter or something owned by the offender.

The next step was to determine classification levels. Sex offenders were rated on their risk to reoffend and their danger to the community at large. Level 3 was the worst - and that was their focus.

Finally, Leo would look at their actual offenses - people who caused harm, who were true predators. Those were the ones that made it onto their hit list. Why were these people tracked on a National database available to everyone with their picture and complete address information? Because the law was hopeless. They knew who was going to reoffend and who was a danger to the community. So did they keep them locked up longer? Of course not - they couldn't. The courts wouldn't allow it. So all they had left was to list these psychopaths on a public website with their last known address. Don't have time to check to see if there is a sexual deviant living right on your street? *Well, that's just too freakin' bad isn't it.*

Leo had a short list, which he brought on a piece of paper, hand-written. That was one of their rules - nothing on a computer. Clean out your browser history after every search. Create one manual list. Never cut and paste. And after Poker Tuesday, they burned the list and started over. That's the way it was. If the cops came back, the first thing they would do is confiscate technology. Ninety percent of cases were made nowadays by a computer tech on the police payroll doing forensics work on some poor idiots laptop. Nothing was safe on a personal computer - all those files you think you deleted - a clever tech can resurrect in minutes. And juries eat that Sherlock Holmes' shit up.

Leo unfolded the list and flattened the edges with his hand.

"I know this is going to surprise you, Gord, but I found a perfect *Crispy Critter* in Palm Springs."

Cleary raised his eyebrows. Though Palm Springs was only an hour away from Phoenix, he somehow never imagined a slimy reprobate holed up in a fancy house there.

"Palm springs has a low rent division like everywhere else." He showed Cleary his notes. "This is David Torrance. He's a Level 3. Lives in a small bungalow on 52nd Street near the Industrial Park. Checked it out on the Palm Springs Tax Roll site. He owns it. Has for years.

And he's a bad guy, done a lot of nasty stuff. Spent eight years in Yuma's Dakota Level 4 unit. Released about a year ago. He's 42. Restrained from going within five hundred yards of any school or kindergarten - and for good reason. He likes to kidnap kids and keep them as his personal pet for days. What do ya' think?"

"I think you should consider very carefully whether you want to join me on this case," said Cleary.

"Think I'm too old for this, do ya'?"

Cleary couldn't help but smile. "Leo, you're tougher than a horny javelina pig on Red Bull. And you know it. You're also the only guy I know over seventy, who has two girlfriends and a prescription for Viagra that keeps being renewed. But if you walk away now, they could never implicate you. Remember we've been lucky. No screw-ups or bad breaks yet. They're bound to happen eventually."

"I think we're on the side of the angels," said Leo, taking another drink.

"That's not a defense in court," said Cleary, swallowing the last of the lukewarm backwash sloshing around in the bottom of his beer bottle. *The first swig was always the best, full of bright promise; the last swig, almost a solemn duty.* Maybe he could get that engraved on his tombstone.

"Well, Gord, I signed up for the whole tour. And you're the general. If this is on the to do list - dump one more sleazy pervert into hell's dumpster - then, I'm your man."

Cleary raised his empty beer bottle, and Leo tapped his against the side.

"Done. A deal signed with the devil. Palm Springs, here we come," announced Cleary. "My old clunker may not make it there and back. Maybe we should take your station wagon instead this time."

That was, as it turned out, mistake number one.

:

Cleary and Leo had used the same tactic to get inside the sex offenders houses six times before.

Just outside the neighborhood, Cleary would pull over into a back alley or a shopping mall and put on his bunker gear. This was the complete outfit a firefighter would wear before going into a major fire - yellow Nomex pants, a fire resistant yellow coat, boots, black rubber gloves, flash hood, firedome helmet and face shield.

In many U.S. cities, firefighters made appearances at schools and kindergartens to prepare children in case they are ever confronted by one of these yellow monsters during an actual emergency.

Cleary was six foot two. He bought the turnout gear at an auction for a fraction of the ten thousand dollars a full kit was worth. Leo thought he looked like a rubberized version of Godzilla.

Cleary then squeezed himself back into the passenger seat and let Leo finish the driving duties. They parked this time in a back lane behind a dumpster - less noticeable by nosy neighbors. And Cleary rubbed peanut butter he had brought across the license plate, so it was less readable in the dark.

Their rule was simple - if anyone at all saw them - they would turn back; a fully kitted firefighter was the epitome of official and trusted in most communities - but hardly forgettable.

Torrance's little bungalow had a handy side entrance hidden in the shadow of the house next door, three steps up to a concrete porch. Leo stayed back in the shadows; his bag of goodies stuffed into his backpack.

Cleary knocked on the door, already sweating in the heavy suit. The side light went on and the side door opened. Cleary recognized Torrance from his picture on the sex offender's site. Torrance looked surprised - just like they all did. Who expected a firefighter at their door at one in the morning?

Cleary had to yell to be heard around the fire hood and head harness.

"There's been a gas leak in the area, sir. I need to come in and inspect your furnace." Torrance didn't even reply - he just opened the door wider and let the spaceman into his home. Cleary tromped into a small living room and turned. Torrance still looked speechless, wondering perhaps if the firefighter could even hear him through all that rubber armor.

"Where's the furnace?" yelled Cleary, making gestures with his big black rubber gloves. Torrance led him into the kitchen to a large closet near the back door that led out into a tiny backyard.

Leo had snuck in the opened front door and followed the two men into the kitchen. He was wearing a black nylon jacket and had a fake set of ID around his neck that said *Ned Healy, Arizona Gas*. He opened the side zipper on his backpack and pulled out a Colt 45 he owned. Nothing fancy, just a gun the size of a baseball bat. He waited for Torrance to turn around, which he eventually did when Cleary nudged him.

"Shit," he said. "What the fuck is this all about?"

"Sit down, asshole," said Leo, his face hard. He hated the guy the instant he saw him. He wanted nothing more than to pistol-whip the little creep. Torrance sat reluctantly on a wobbly kitchen chair tack-welded together in the sixties and reupholstered at least three times.

Cleary pulled off his helmet and face hood and rubbed his head. His glove came away slick with sweat.

"What about the gas?" asked Torrance.

"You're safe for now, David," said Cleary. "But if you so much as twitch, my friend here from the gas company will shove that Colt up your ass and shoot your balls into Mexican airspace." Torrance turned to Leo.

"Hey, Ned. You're the one who's going to get his balls removed." Torrance didn't look cowed anymore. He was fully awake - had smoothed down his short brown hair that was sticking up, and was getting feisty. Leo looked worried. Was this guy on drugs or just stupid?

Cleary had taken the two blue pills from Leo and mixed them in a glass of water from the sink, which was full of dishes. That was Cleary's second mistake. He should have known that was a lot of dishes for just one guy.

"Here! Drink this. It will save you from the effects of the gas."

From behind Leo came a female voice, full of sleep and high-tar cigarettes.

"You take my husband for some kind of bird brain? You drink that shit yourself if you think it's so great."

Standing in the hall was a woman about five feet tall and nearly as broad as she was high. She was wearing a stained nightshirt that couldn't hide pillowy breasts, stomach and hips. Her hair was tinted bright red with yellowish-white roots exposed and flared out down past her shoulders like a wild alien sagebrush.

When she smiled, which she was doing now, she revealed tiny yellow teeth with gums so receded you could see the angry stumps of the roots. She was holding a shotgun - a big two-barrel job that looked rusty and unused - that she was swinging back and forth between Leo and Cleary.

"I said drink that shit," she growled. "If it's good enough for Davy, it's good enough for you." David got up, smiling a partially toothless grin and joined his girlfriend.

"Yeah. Let's see how you boys do. Medicine is good for ya'," said Davy.

Cleary just stared. At this point, he would rather be shot than helpless on roofies with this pair.

"Feeling shy?" the woman said? Okay. Let's try this. Davy, you take gasman's gun there. Good. Now you shove it into the fireman's nut sack. Well now, aren't you bein' enthusiastic." Cleary jumped, but held his ground. The woman gestured with the barrel of the gun to Leo. "Now, you lift your hands up, grandpa, and walk over to that table and drink that *pick me up* just like it's the nectar of the Gods. Or your fireman friend there is gonna lose something precious in exactly ten seconds. You ever been on one of those fireman nudie calendars, Mr. Fireman? Well, you won't be after what we do to ya."

Cleary glared, his mind racing, his eyes on Leo, who was reaching for the water. Leo took the glass, raised it in a toast to his attackers and drank half of it. When he stopped, Red wiggled her gun at him again.

"Now, now. Finish everything up before you leave the table. You know those are the rules." Red stumped across the kitchen and pushed the shotgun into Leo's temple. Leo finished the glass and looked over at his friend.

Cleary estimated they now had about twenty minutes or so before Leo became paralyzed - totally conscious, but unable to move a single muscle.

"I think you boys have been up to no good," said Red. "I heard about a couple of fellers, guys like Davy here with an occasional itch for younger meat, who were burned up in their houses. Imagine that! Could they have spontaneously combusted? Yeah. Don't look at me like that Mr. Yellow Submarine guy. I can read. And you look like a friggin rubber dingy standing in my kitchen." She pulled

up a chair from the table and sat down. Davy was still standing by Cleary with the Colt 45 aimed at his groin.

"We're going to have us some fun tonight, Davy. These two clowns just walked into our life and we would be disrespecting of our good fortune not to take advantage. You think so, hon?"

"If these guys were coming to fry us - I think we should fry them back," answered Davy.

"In time, my darling, in time. Meanwhile Gas Guy, maybe you should sit down on the floor there so you don't topple over and scratch the fine furniture." Leo slumped down, already looking unsure of his legs. Cleary watched him. It had to be psychological. No way could the Rohypnol be acting so quickly.

Leo's head eventually nodded forward, and his chin hit his chest. Davy gave him a kick in the side and Leo barely reacted.

Red had left the room for a few minutes and came back dressed in a cheap flower print dress made from several yards of garish fabric that could only have been a bedspread in a former life. Could the Chinese factory workers even imagine a person needing a dress big enough to cover a king size bed? Red was jubilant though.

"Got anymore of those pills Mr. Fireman?" Cleary shook his head. He was seated now; sweat running down his forehead. The suit was like a walking sauna.

"That's too bad. Maybe we could slip some to Davy and have a bit of a party here." Davy had gone through Leo's jacket and found the car keys, which he was holding now. He gave Red a puzzled look.

"Don't worry, sweetie. You will get your turn," she said. "Now. Where's the car?"

Cleary turned to her and gave her a blank look. Red sighed. "This will go a lot smoother if you would be more helpful. I thought firefighters were there to serve." Red looked over at Leo who was now comatose. "I can tell this guy is a friend of yours. I saw the look on your face when Davy kicked him. Am I right? Ah ... the silent type. Well. If you don't want to talk, that's fine by us. But every time you give us the silent treatment then we'll do this. Davy give Mr. Gas Guy a serious boot to the head."

"No!" shouted Cleary.

"Look, the rubber dinghy speaks," laughed Red.

"Don't hurt him. This was all my idea," said Cleary.

"The suit and everything?"

"Yeah. He's just ... he shouldn't be here."

"No, he shouldn't. But was he helping you on all of those houses? The ones you burnt?"

"No." Cleary lied. "That was just me."

Red laughed and scratched one breast with her free hand. "You lie like a rug. That's what my Momma used to say. One of her favorite sayings actually, until I cut her tongue out with a box cutter." Davy groaned and Red looked at him.

"They found you on that stupid sex offender site so don't growl at me. That picture of you they used would curl paint. But they didn't find me there, did they. Cause if you had, Mr. Fireman, you would have stayed the hell away from us. Davy here? He's a child who sometimes likes to have sex with other people of

roughly the same intelligence. That would be a six year old, I'm guessing. Meanwhile, I'm a much greater threat to the community. The community just doesn't know that yet. But you're gonna find out first hand." She stood up and tried patting down her wild hair.

"Now we don't want to mess up our little love nest here. So, what you're going to do is, you're gonna pick up your friend, cause you're a big, tall strapping firefighter, and you're gonna carry him out to the car. Or, we could just carve him up in front of you right now, if that's what you'd like. Show you what he's made of - so to speak. What do you say?"

:

Carrying Leo to the station wagon was far from easy for Cleary. First, he hadn't fire-carried an adult for over ten years. And second, Leo was way past relaxed and therefore almost impossible to pick up. All of Leo's muscles were completely at rest. Cleary felt like he was carrying a dead man, a thought he didn't want to dwell on long.

When they got to the station wagon and looked in, Red started to laugh. The back storage area and the back seat were packed with green garbage bags full of trash.

"You boys recycling?" she asked, waddling her way to the passenger seat.

Cleary shook his head. The garbage bags were his invention - and Leo's hobby. As a fire inspector he learned that green garbage bags full of paper trash, like the kind you would normally find at the end of your curb on trash day, burn at very high temperature - usually over five hundred degrees. And they left no telltale clues like gasoline did. They were the perfect arson's tools.

But they took a bit of work to assemble. Leo would collect newspaper and cardboard, crumple the paper up as tight as possible and cram it into these large green trash bags. Once done, they were easy to carry, if not a bit awkward, and anyone who saw you carrying some down a dark alley just figured you were out doing chores. They had filled the station wagon with as many as they could force inside and still close the doors. Red opened the back door and pulled out several bags to make room, which she tossed into the alley. Then she stopped and kicked one a few times until it ripped open.

"Paper? These bags are full of paper." She looked at Cleary, who was standing in front of Davy, his arm starting to shake. Then she started to laugh like a mad woman, her sides shaking and her chest heaving under the thin fabric of her dress. Cleary noticed for the first time she was wearing hiking boots.

"We may need these, Davy. They are going to come in handy. So you, Mr. Fireman, throw your friend in the back onto the pile. It'll be nice and comfy for him. And you sit there where I've made you some space in the back seat. Davy's going to have his gun on you full time while I drive. You try anything, we put a big hole in your rubber dingy."

Red started the wagon and roared out of the alley, blowing a cloud of blue fog in her wake. She had a heavy foot. Cleary looked back at Leo who was partially buried by the garbage bags, his eyes open and reflecting the street lamps as they

flashed by. Cleary couldn't imagine what Leo might be thinking at this moment. Probably taking stock, maybe going over the good times one more time. Or wondering what his two girlfriends were doing right now and whether he would ever see them again.

Leo had told Cleary once that he thought starting fires was kind of like sex; that he had even gotten a bit excited once while lighting up a pile of tinder. He probably wasn't thinking that now though, with a very uncertain future lying ahead of them.

Cleary turned back to stare at Davy. He was pretty much out of ideas. He imagined the most likely scenario was death in the desert. These two psychopaths were living out some perverted dream of domination and torture that he had kindled in them. And now the two firefighters were just along for a very bumpy ride.

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Bathgate's cell phone started to vibrate on her bedside table. She looked at the time - saw it was 1:05 in the morning. She spent the last two days on the graveyard shift and the first time in a week she gets to have a normal night's sleep, her partner wakes her up.

"This better be good," she said.

"I think I know who the next target is."

"You mean the arsonists?"

"Have you ever looked at this sex offenders website?"

"I don't work Vice, remember? We're Homicide."

Scott ignored the sarcasm. "It classifies all state offenders from category one to three. The last four perverts who died in fires were all rated three - the worst offenders."

"So?"

"That eliminates over 95% of these guys. In the whole state, there are only ten."

"I'll sleep better knowing that. If you'd let me."

"But you know what else they had in common?"

"Low self-esteem?" she answered, remembering Cleary's comment.

"That and the fact that the victims all lived in or rented a single house. Whoever is torching them wants the fire contained."

"Philanthropists."

"What?"

"Nothing. So why are you calling me?"

"In the whole state there are only ten category three offenders, only eight of those live in houses. And six have already died in fires."

"Six?"

"We missed two."

"Shit."

"And I learned something else. All the fires occurred on the second Tuesday of the month, like clockwork. So now we know who is next on the list and when the fires will be started."

"Second Tuesday of the month? Poker night?"
"Yeah. And that's tonight. It's happening now."
"Double shit!"

:

Ten minutes east of Palm Springs on Christopher Columbus Highway, lay the loneliest expanse of desert you have ever seen; miles and miles of saguaro and jumping cholla and baked red sand.

Red pulled off Highway 10, the same route Leo and Cleary followed to get to Torrance's one-story, and followed a gravel road north into the scrubland. Leo was still completely comatose. Cleary checked him once to see if he was still breathing; to make sure he wasn't going to suffocate on a garbage bag.

At one point, Davy almost dozed off, and his gun began to sag, but before Cleary could grab the weapon, Red jabbed her boyfriend hard in the side with her sausage-like fingers, and he jerked awake. Just as Cleary was beginning to berate himself for the third time about missing an opportunity to wrestle the gun from Davey, Red turned and stopped the wagon. Nobody said a word as they listened to the big engine tick as it cooled in the light breeze.

Red pried her door open and squeezed herself out of the seat, waving at Davy to get around to Cleary's side and help with the rag doll in the back. Davy wasn't gentle with Leo. He basically grabbed his legs and pulled. Leo's head hit the back bumper hard and then struck the sand with a hollow thunk. Davy then dragged him around to the front of the car. Cleary tried to help, but Red shoved her shotgun into his shoulder blades so hard, it brought tears to his eyes and made him step back.

"Your buddy is going to have to fend for hisself. You on the other hand can help with the kindling." She meant the garbage bags full of paper and cardboard. She was no dummy. Cleary hauled out twelve bags and heaped them in a pile about twenty feet from the wagon.

"Now we're going to have us a BBQ, Davy. I brought our gas can we use for the lawn mower. There's only a gallon or so in there, but I think that will do. Save half though."

Davy then soaked the garbage bags with gas and put the plastic fuel tank to the side. Cleary was watching Red. He could see she had something in mind.

"I know your friend here took some roofies. So he is awake and probably paying close attention to the situation. He just can't move a thing. I think I saw him blink once, but that's about the full of it. I was roofied once, and I know what it feels like. It ain't too much fun. So I was thinking, what could be worse than to watch yourself being burnt alive, not being able to move a muscle, but feeling every last stick of pain? Pretty sick huh? Well, that's what's in store for you and your buddy. We're going to feed you to the fire real slow."

"You're going to need some wood then," Cleary said. "There ain't enough mass there to keep a fire going for more than ten minutes."

"Oh. You are the fire expert aren't you? And where am I going to find wood in the middle of the desert?"

Cleary shrugged. He was buying time and keeping an eye on Leo. He didn't have a watch, but he guessed he had taken the pills about forty-five minutes ago. They should last a few hours. He needed to do a lot of stalling.

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"When do you suppose this guy lights these places up?" asked Scott. "It's not something we talked about." He had his hands on the display screen, looking for directions.

"I don't know. Cleary's truck was reported around one-thirty the last time and was gone by two when the patrol car shoved up."

"Thirty minute's response time. Damn! If they had been there in fifteen, we might already have this guy in custody."

Bathgate turned down a side street. They were only a few blocks away from Torrance's home. "We've got an all-points out on the truck. But there are probably two patrol cars in the whole division this time of night."

They pulled up in front of the bungalow. "Lights are on," said Bathgate. They both drew their service revolvers and closed the car doors quietly. They went around the side, Bathgate creeping up the walk to the front entrance visible from the side yard. She looked in the curtainless window. A yellowish light was illuminating the kitchen. She tested the door, which was unlocked.

"Police. Open up!" Bathgate waited, but there was no sound coming from the house. She opened the door expecting to see the furniture piled up or the drapes pulled down. She was imagining catching Cleary in the act, maybe a lighter in his fist. Scott came around from behind the house and joined his partner in the kitchen. There were dirty dishes in the sink, but the one small bedroom was empty. No sign of struggle was evident, nothing broken. But where did the tenant go?

"This a change of MO? Or just some guy who decides to go for a walk at two in the morning?"

"Not just a guy. There's make-up in the bathroom and women's clothing in the closet. Looks like a couple lives here."

"Torrance has a girlfriend? I guess that's a good thing. As long as she's older than ten."

"Judging from her dresses, I'd say she's a size XXX. She's a grown up woman alright."

"And they're both gone. This doesn't look good. This doesn't look good at all. Maybe Cleary finally met his match."

:

Red had pulled Leo's backpack out of the wagon, which she had on the ground and was rifling through in the harsh illumination from the station wagon's headlights. She pulled out a bundle of rope and a plastic baggie full of pills.

"Ah. Here we go. Now we're ready to party." She threw the rope near the pile of garbage bags and opened the baggie. She walked up to Cleary, who was seated

against the side of the car, Davy standing next to him - his gun aimed at Cleary's face.

"Your turn, Mr. Firefighter. How many do ya' think?" She held out her pudgy hand and showed him the blue pills. They looked huge to Cleary. Had Leo bought some kind of super-roofies?

Cleary didn't answer. There was no right number. Once he swallowed any amount of those pills, he was for all intents and purposes dead. With both him and Leo paralyzed, they didn't really have a hope. So what was the point of co-operating?

"Do I have to force them down your gullet like a sick puppy?"

"Just shoot me, already," said Cleary. "I'm not taking those pills."

"But I have a funny feeling you will. Davy, give me that gun. Now go and kick the living shit out his sleepy friend over there."

Cleary hung his head. Leo was probably dead anyway. Would it be better to go by concussion or burnt alive? He knew the answer, but he couldn't stand to watch his friend being beaten. He would gladly trade his life for Leo's, but he didn't think that was in the cards. Now was the time to make one last-ditch effort to save themselves before it was too late.

Cleary watched Davy shuffle over to Leo, who was lying stretched out, his arms by his side. Red turned at that minute, anxious to witness the first kick, licking her lips. Cleary leapt up at the woman, actually surprised at the speed he was capable of in the heavy suit, and knocked the gun out of her hand. She screamed, but before he could reach the Colt, lying at the base of a cholla cactus, she toppled down on top of him, all three hundred plus pounds, and started beating his head with her meaty fists.

By this time, Davy had run up and snatched up the revolver. Red gave Cleary one final angry slap across the head, then struggled up from the ground, her sweaty arms coated in sand. She smiled down at Cleary, her cheeks as red as apples.

"We're going to have fun with you, boy. I guarantee it." She now had the shotgun in her arms again. She grabbed the baggie of roofies on the ground and bent down, her knee on Cleary's chest. "Eat these!"

Cleary shook his head. Red raised the shotgun and brought it down hard on Cleary's nose. He groaned and reached up to feel his face, forgetting he still had on his firefighter's gloves. Red then pried his mouth open with the barrel of the shotgun and dropped two blue pills into the back of his throat.

"Swallow or I'll mash your nose into a pulp." She took both of her puffy hands and held them over his mouth and nose. Cleary was wriggling, but he couldn't take his eyes off the barrel of the revolver Davy had pressed into this forehead. Unable to breathe through his nose, Cleary finally succumbed and swallowed the dry little pills, which felt bitter at the back of his throat. Maybe the last thing he would ever taste, he thought.

Red got up and dusted off her dress, which was billowing in the breeze. Cleary laid back, trying to quell his panic, almost wishing this was all over. Then he heard the first whoosh of ignition as Davy lit the pile of garbage bags, flames already several feet high and lighting up the area. Red moved over and grabbed Leo's feet, turned his body easily and threw his legs onto the fire.

"Feel that, Mr. Firefighter? Feel the heat? Was that how those guys you burnt felt?"

Both Red and Davy had turned, their eyes on the flames like children watching their first fireworks display. Cleary rolled over. He knew he didn't have much time. He thought "What the fuck!" What have I got to lose?"

Cleary pushed himself up on his fat rubber mitts; his fire suit feeling like it weighed a hundred pounds. He struggled up on one knee. Red was still entranced by the big yellow flames licking up at the night sky. She had sidled up next to little Davy, so close that Cleary wouldn't have been surprised if he saw them take each other's hands.

He stepped up behind Red and raised his arms. She never saw his long shadow - so mesmerized was she by the flames and the frozen look of fear on Leo's face.

Cleary fell on them then, taking both in his arms, diving into the fire like a bizarre kind of circus performer. Red let out a yelp, but Davy went silently into the flames, trying to turn to protect his face. Cleary felt Red collapse beneath him face-first into the gasoline-charged pyre and he pulled Davy in tight with his right arm, so he couldn't roll away.

The first thing that struck Cleary wasn't the heat or the rising gases in his nose, but Red's wild hair, igniting like a Roman Candle. She had obviously put on hair spray before leaving the house - an excellent accelerant. This completely distracted Red, who began clawing at her head instead of kicking herself free.

Cleary looked over and saw Davy's eyes, which were glowing red against the black sky. Then his head went right into the flames, between two garbage bags that were bursting into new life as their contents spilled out and joined the growing fire.

Red was trying to roll now, but Cleary could tell she was disoriented and probably couldn't see, her eyelids likely gone, and her pupils popping like fresh grapes on a barbecue.

Cleary kept his head down behind the bulky body of the woman, the rest of his torso and arms protected by the fire gear. He could feel the heat and some of the fire-resistant rubber was starting to separate and bubble, but for another minute or two, he would be protected from the worst of the flames.

Davy was the first to stop moving. Swallowing and breathing the hot gases rising off the flames would instantly sear and destroy lung tissue, so he essentially was no longer able to process the oxygen that his brain needed to survive.

Red had not yet surrendered, but she was close to death. Her skin on her sides and arms was charred and blistered in areas; the blackened surface and underlying fat split open like the casing on a burnt sausage. The only things still moving were her legs.

Cleary pushed away from the fire, to test her condition, and she barely moved. He lifted himself off of the woman, who was now mostly naked except for her hiking boots, and grabbed Leo's arm and pulled him from the fire.

Bathgate had called in their location and reported David Torrance and the unknown woman as missing. She didn't know what else to do.

Then their radio crackled to life. Dispatch had received a call. Someone was reporting a fire in the desert, up in the canyon next to Highway #10, which was pretty suspicious at two in the morning on a weeknight. Bathgate got directions. On the way up the highway west of Palm Springs, Scott had his eyes on the hills to the north. He couldn't see anything yet.

"Think this is just a coincidence?" asked Scott.

"I think they just moved the party," said Bathgate. Following the directions, she turned off the highway and headed north up a road that was barely a one-lane path through the scrub and cacti. They were climbing now, into the foothills of the ridge, into Pinkham Canyon. Then the road ended and Scott could see a dull glow off to the east - a fire just about ready to die out.

They turned into the desert and drove toward the glow, dodging cacti as they went, just as the wind started to pick-up. Eventually, Bathgate slowed and squinted into the night.

The fire was completely gone now, not even embers remaining. A fire without wood, she thought, staring into the raw night beyond their headlights. How strange!

Lying on the ground up ahead was a shape that at first defied recognition. Bathgate was reminded of a sea creature - a small beached whale or a baby hippo, the moonlight reflecting off the rounded flesh. When they stopped, Scott stepped out of the car first, his gun out of his holster, shielding his eyes from the dust whipping around him.

"It's a woman," he yelled, standing close to the body. "Maybe Torrance's girlfriend. She's the right size. But she's naked. And burnt bad."

Bathgate got out of the sedan, her stomach roiling. The bizarre scene in front of her had made the small hairs on her arms stand at attention.

"And I'm guessing that's Torrance. Dead too. They're lying side by side, like they were laid out on purpose."

"What do you think?" asked Scott.

"I don't know what to think. It looks like a ritualized killing. But it still involves fire."

"Seems like a lot of trouble to go to. Why wouldn't Cleary just stick with the original plan and leave them in the house?"

The storm was getting worse. Bathgate looked over at what was left of tire tracks in the desert floor. Within minutes, they would be gone. And they didn't look like truck tracks either, which raised another question.

What was left of the fire, blackened pieces of paper and cardboard, were also being swept away. All they really had were two bodies, one with the clothing burnt off and her hair gone, the other with a face so badly charred they would probably have to use dental records to make an official ID

Bathgate turned to her partner, "Call it in. I'm going to catch some sleep in the car. Wake me when you see the ambulance. There's nothing I can do until they get here."

:

At seven AM the next morning, a dark-blue Crown Vic rolled up in front of Cleary's little two-story. The ex- firefighter's truck was parked on the street, the hood still up, and one tire flat.

Bathgate knocked on the front door, and Cleary answered, still in his pajamas, two bandages across his nose. He led her in. This time she did take the coffee offered.

"Truck still acting up?" said Bathgate.

"Yeah, I think it's ready for the scrap heap. Kind of like me," laughed Cleary. "Where's your partner?" he asked.

"He's in court," she said. "What happened to your nose?"

"I was jacking up the back of the truck to change the tire. The jack slipped, the lever kicked back, and I almost broke my nose. Hurt like hell."

"So you don't know anything about the death of David Torrance last night?"

They were back in the small kitchen, a very sad looking deck of worn cards sitting in the center of the table. "This another one of those perverts you're trying to protect?" asked Cleary. Bathgate lost her relaxed demeanor momentarily. "A killer is a killer, Cleary. Whoever's doing this is no hero."

"I don't get it," said the retired firefighter. "We keep meeting, but you never arrest me. Am I a suspect or do you just like the conversation?"

Bathgate tapped her fingers on the tabletop for a few seconds. Cleary noticed she had chewed one nail down to the nub. A worrier, he guessed, wondering what worried her the most. "The storm last night destroyed all the evidence. But you know that. You're a lucky bastard," said Bathgate.

"I don't feel that lucky," said Cleary. Bathgate stared at him, looking like she wanted to say something more.

"I'm a data geek," she said, as if that would mean something to him. He lifted his eyebrows. "The arsons I have been working on were never classified as homicides."

"I thought as much," said Cleary.

"I saw a correlation between a number of house fires and their occupants. All registered pedophiles. There wasn't even a murder file created, probably would never be."

Cleary got up and poured more coffee for himself. He couldn't help but look at the second drawer on the right. Leo's Colt 45 was lying in there, loaded. He had made a point of picking that up before he left the scene. Bathgate seemed like a nice woman, so he wasn't thinking about hurting her. Just him, if necessary. He wasn't going to prison at age 72. No way.

"But then your luck ran out, Cleary," she said. They locked eyes for a minute, neither saying anything. "Now I have two mysterious deaths in the desert and a commander who wants answers. And the media won't stop calling."

Cleary was sitting now, but he still had his eyes on the drawer with the gun. He was wondering how long it would take for a body full of wear and tear, like his, to get to the counter and get the safety off.

"But you have no evidence," he said, casually, wondering where the calmness in his voice came from.

Bathgate pulled a plastic baggy out of her jacket pocket and slid it across the table to Cleary. "I guess you forgot this behind when you high-tailed it out of the desert last night." Cleary looked at the pills in the dirty plastic container blankly. "Probably when you saw our headlights coming."

Cleary noted that the evidence wasn't re-bagged. That meant her fingerprints were on it, along with Leo's. He didn't understand. Did she want him to pick it up? Was this a trick?

"I don't know what this is," he said.

Bathgate gave him one of those withering cop looks that said "*Why are you fucking with me?*"

"The woman who died in the desert? Her name was Charity Floyd. She was worse than Torrance. Sexual assault. Attempted murder. Fraud. A list of priors longer than a Stephen King novel. A very nasty character. I know, I arrested her once."

"So?"

"So, I think it's a good time for you to retire from the revenge business. Cause if you keep it up, I will catch you. Prison is a lousy way to spend your retirement years."

Cleary thought about his postage-stamp yard and the patches of weeds. He wasn't sure if he could take her advice, but he could offer her some hope. "I was thinking of taking up gardening."

"Good idea," she said.

Cleary was still trying to find something in her eyes that would give him a clue as to why she had given him the only evidence she had. He couldn't find anything. Cops were good at that. But he knew something she didn't. His fingerprints weren't on the bag.

Bathgate stood up then and thanked him for the coffee. At the front door, she stopped and turned to him. "Did someone in your family have a run-in with one of these pedophiles?" she asked.

Cleary colored slightly, his voice rough. "A grandson."

Bathgate nodded, the briefest expression of pain flashing across her face. Then she opened the door.

"A month ago, a stranger tried to get my daughter into his van," she said. "Luckily, she put up a fight and ran away."

Cleary swallowed, thinking how close we come every day to disaster.

"By the way, the small blue pills in the baggie are roofies, but you probably know that," Bathgate said. "And just so you know, possession is illegal if you don't have a prescription. The bigger blue pills are more interesting - I have no idea why they are mixed in with the others. They're generic Viagra."

Cleary couldn't help but show surprise, but before he could open his mouth, Bathgate walked down the path, climbed into her car and drove away.

Cleary went back to the kitchen and stared at the baggy, then shook his head in amazement. Leo was upstairs in the second bedroom recovering from the second-degree burns to his ankles and calves and sleeping off the roofies. Somehow he had mixed up the roofies with his own pills.

Last night, Cleary had hauled Leo into the station wagon and driven away from the two bodies in a hurry, wondering when he would start to lose control of his body and possibly go flying off into a ravine or ditch somewhere, likely killing them both. Or be eaten alive by coyotes while he watched helplessly, unable to move a muscle. But nothing had happened.

Well, he didn't mean that exactly. Something *had* happened. Something he hadn't felt for a very long time - and was still feeling - the results of a double dose of Viagra that had been force-fed to him the night before.

Cleary took the bag of pills and fed it into the garburator. "I guess there's hope for me yet," Cleary said, to no one in particular, and then went upstairs to check on his friend.

THE END

AN EXCERPT FROM THE #1 AMAZON NOVEL **BUZZWORM** BY THEO CAGE

Police officers call Washington DC 'the District'. But we still say it like we're spitting out a mouthful of beer that's gone punky. It's not a feel-good word for politicians. Or for homicide detectives, of which I am the latter.

Washington used to be the murder capital of the free world. Over four hundred homicides a year. We've gotten better, but only marginally. I think we are now number three or four. Some consolation.

Angela, my ex, left me in 2001, the worst year for the city. And mine too. I can't blame her though. Bullets were as common as houseflies and generous overtime easily paid the alimony payments. I think I ate dinner with her that last year maybe a dozen times. Even that may be an exaggeration. You'd have to ask my daughter Kyla. She was the only one counting.

Something happens to cops when they can no longer cope with the workload. The pressure of facing a fresh new homicide case every single day starts to eat into you, to hollow you out. You feel like a spent shell.

The only reason I drag myself to the job everyday is the hope that a case, any case, not even necessarily my case, will be solved. I'm not talking justice here. Just a solved friggin' case. Because once you feel overwhelmed, it's not simply a matter of changing careers.

The victims live in your head forever. So you take the files home with you on weekends, to bed with you at night, into your nightmares. They don't disappear if you decide to take that cushy job as Security Director for Rothmans over the line in Reston, Virginia. Too much time on your hands just makes the hollowness ring in your ears - like a stomach-churning background noise that never seems to go away.

The caseload is better now though. But a lot of good detectives ended up leaving for low-stress jobs in the burbs. But I can't go there. Angela lives out in Arlington with her new husband and I don't know what I would do if I bumped into him at the Piggly Wiggly parking lot.

Something I'd probably regret, but nothing new there.

So I still live in the Palisades, where I grew up as a kid in Washington. My home is on a leafy street in a non-descript bungalow that I bought from a former homicide partner - who moved out to a better life in McLean.

McLean is the county where the famous CIA Headquarters sits behind locked gates. You can feel like you live at the centre of the universe in McLean, but not have to face a shooting gallery every day of your life. How is that fair?

And that's ironic, because this morning I am reporting to a homicide called in by that very same CIA, only this one is located in a little known building inside the city limits of Washington proper. They call it Building 213. You get there through the Washington Navy Yard at the south end of the city, next to the Potomac River.

Captain Ipscott gave me orders to report to Building 213, alone. A strange request. I've never been asked before to leave my partner behind, although sometimes I've got to admit, I've felt that way myself. Emile always has my back, but he's not really what you would call a people-person.

Maybe the CIA knows something I don't.

I've heard rumors about 213 - everyone who lives in Washington has. We all know that this used to be the head office for NPIC, the National Photographic Interpretation Center, before it was absorbed by the Department of Defense in the nineties. NPIC used to interpret spy satellite imagery for the rest of the Intelligence community. They also had hundreds of interpreters on staff to who watched foreign TV broadcasts, and monitor telephone and email traffic. Serious stuff even for the town that built the White House. What they do now is anyone's guess.

I had never been to Building 213 before. It's hard to believe I have spent all these years in Washington and within spitting distance of Langley, but have never had a run in with the spooks or their handlers. I count myself lucky. The FBI was another matter. They were ever-present in this town, and I had good reason to believe I would again be sparring with *the dark side* before the week was over.

The Navy Yard is aptly named; a gravel parking lot filled with row upon row of red brick buildings separated by narrow lanes. Finding the building was easy - it was east of building number 212 and just west of 214. There was nothing about the appearance from the outside that would give a visitor any hint as to the buildings real purpose.

Once inside the out-of-place steel and glass entrance, I entered a lobby that looked out on a feature wall of the same red brick. I was surrounded by what was likely very thick bulletproof glass. By the inner door was a camera and speaker. I was asked to provide ID. I purposefully took my time looking for my badge and then passed it quickly under the camera lens. There was a pause then the voice at the other end got serious and asked for a longer look.

"Maybe you should send out your Security guy. A Mr. David Dodge. He's expecting me. This is a police matter."

I straightened my tie simply to give me something to do with my hands. I really wanted to rip the video camera off the wall. I'm a big fan of surveillance technology. I

also gave big brother a flash of my revolver, which was strapped to my shoulder harness. The chrome handle always looks impressive on a color monitor.

The door clicked ominously and a short woman stepped out into the enclosed lobby. I'm about six foot four and she might have been able to reach my chin with her hands - if she stretched and stood on tiptoes. Not quite a little person, if that's politically correct; just a very short woman with a very serious look on a face that hadn't seen much sun this summer.

"Hyde", I said, "D.C. Homicide."

I don't shake hands so I didn't offer.

She introduced herself as the head of the Technology Group. Vienna Jobime. She pronounced it 'how-beam'. She wore a light blue smock, like a scientist would wear in a laboratory. She led me through the lobby, down past the brick wall. A security guard asked for my ID again and passed a wand over me. I lifted my jacket and pointed to the gun. He waved me past. We stopped at a bank of modern elevators. Since the building was one floor, I had to guess we were going down. How far I couldn't guess. I could only imagine the labyrinth below.

"What do they do here at Building 213?" Or even a better question, where were the brass? In a case like this, management was always hovering nearby like a bunch of male lions after a kill. At this particular time they were real conspicuous by their absence. Of course here, they probably just watched you on their monitors. Kept their hands clean that way.

"Jo," she said again, "Just call me Jo." She looked up, really meeting my eyes for the first time "Our jobs on 3B are pretty ordinary by anyone's standards. We study satellite imagery. Computer-enhance photos. Monitor telecommunications. The man who died? Frank Scammel? He was part of the photo enhancement team."

We stepped out of the elevator, when the doors opened, into a non-descript hall. "You'll have to wear this badge," she said, handing over a security card with a chrome level, which meant she had to stretch up to it, held a single camera lens. She faced the lens and passed her ID card through a slot on the plate. The door unlocked loudly. As they passed through into a large open space, I turned to her.

"Is that one of those systems that scans your eyes?"

That comment amused her. "No, actually it's much more sophisticated. The camera actually recognizes my face."

We stepped into a larger workspace. Deserted. "What if I look exactly like someone else or I have a brother that looks a lot like me, only not so good looking?"

She was warming to me. I could see it in her face. "It's very accurate. If we took ten photos of you at different distances, under different light, added a mustache or a beard, even intentionally shot it out of focus, then asked the computer to match your face right now against a million others - it would still find all ten in about 999 out of a thousand searches." I whistled. "You still need the card as a backup though. To fool our security you'd need an employees pass card and a nearly identical face. Pretty unlikely, I'd say."

We arrived in a large computer workroom lit largely by the glow of dozens of large color computer monitors. Still no humans in sight.

"Coffee break?" I asked.

"We asked most of our personnel to leave this area for a few hours. Partly due to security," she waved at the screens, "and partly to give you some elbow room."

"I'll need to ask them some questions."

"That can be arranged privately," she said, holding a side door open. This was a smaller room, the walls covered with large color photos - some old politicians, military equipment, airplanes and weapons, a shot of Beyonce in bed with George W. Bush. When Jobime saw me eye it she explained, "George was in on the joke."

I stepped up to the large framed photograph. "It's amazing how good they've gotten at this stuff. The shadows are perfect . . ."

"Scammel was one of our best. He'd been with us for over twenty years, almost back to the punch card days." She paused, then swallowed. "He is lying over there behind that desk. We haven't touched anything or gone near the body."

"Do you want to leave me here for awhile?" I asked her.

"It's OK. My father was a doctor. I saw lots of blood by the time I was twelve." I wasn't convinced. I'd seen a lot of blood too, but that didn't make it any easier.

We walked around a large desk unit, and there was Frank Scammel, the programmer/designer. There was more than a lot of blood. He was about forty-something, longish thinning hair. He wore a white Grateful Dead T-shirt, a laughing skull on the back leering up at me. He was lying on his face, blood surrounding him on all sides, one arm tucked underneath. He was a big guy, almost as big as me. Only more fat. Or at least I liked to think so. Soft and white around the middle too. I walked around the pool of congealing blood. He's been here for a while.

"When was it reported?"

"Four this morning our shift supervisor rang in and found him. She called out one of our security people, David Dodge."

"And Dodge. What did he do?"

"He cordoned off this room, and locked down the building. Then called Washington Homicide."

"Locked down?"

"No one leaves. No one enters. Standard stuff."

"You're saying since four o'clock no one has been allowed to leave?"

She nodded.

"Why didn't we get a call until 7:25 AM?"

She hesitated. "Lock-down takes a while. You can talk to Dodge about it. Internal security matters . . ."

"Excuse me?"

"The project he was working on?" she pointed to the body. "We had to remove the files and documents."

I scratched my head, my eyes narrowing. "That's evidence, Jo."

"It's also national security. The work we do is highly classified," she said flatly.

"You move evidence, Ms. Vienna, you break the law. It may be national security, but it's still breaking the law."

"My orders come from the Director at Langley. That's our law around here. You can talk to him. He reports directly to the President."

I glared at her for a minute, then turned back to the body. She threw in the reference to the President like it should end the conversation. I was guessing I wouldn't be talking to either the President or the Director of the CIA in this case. I would be buried in the

basement along with all the other old files. Then I smiled, a big self-effacing grin that I hoped would be hard for her to resist.

I shook my head. The brass was always there. Sometimes you just couldn't see them. But you could always smell them.

"You CIA types. National security. Covert operations. The problems of the world on your shoulders. Weighty matters. And then here lies Frank, valued employee, now dead. And I'm just a cop off the streets who can't do a damn thing to help you figure out why. Cause the evidence's gone." I closed my book and filed my pen away in an inside pocket. Then I turned for the door.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Gonna call the boys in blue to come pick up this mess. Not much more I can do here."

"But you haven't even looked at anything, done any investigation!"

I stopped, shoved my hands into my coat pockets. "I know a cleaned room when I see one. You people are good. Really good. All that's left is the blood. And I'm sure you have something in your bag of tricks to make that go away too."

I reached for the door, and then turned back to the color wall photo. "By the way, can I get you guys to do one of those with me in bed with Beyonce too? That would look great in the rec room." She stared at me. I stood there, my shoulders hunched over, trying to look as guileless as possible.

"I . . . can't believe that . . . "

"The Beyonce thing? Hey. It's no big deal. I know you're the CIA. You got bigger fish to fry."

"I don't have time for games, detective."

"Too busy re-writing all those rule books?"

Jo's complexion was turning pink. "The Washington Police tell us they're sending their best detective. You show up, take one look at the . . . "

I Pointed. "Crime scene?"

"Yes. One look at the crime scene, and then you disappear for lunch. We have donuts in our cafeteria too, you know!"

I squinted at her. "Ahhhh. A donut joke." I looked at my watch, a scratched Seiko that was a gift many years ago from my wife. "Usually it comes quicker though. Right after the introductions."

She stared at me.

"What was Frank working on?" I asked.

"I told you, I can't say."

"OK. Why not just give me a hint - before anyone else shows up. I promise I won't phone the Post."

She put both hands in the pockets of her lab coat. "Video. He built programs that manipulated video. I can't say anymore and I don't see how it's relevant to his death."

"Video's of?"

"Detective Hyde, imagine a foreign country is preparing an attack on one of the military installation owned by an ally. They think it only holds a few tanks, a few planes. No big problem for them. We take photos inside and then manipulate them so that it appears that the area is bristling with deadly technology. A dozen F-18's. A few bombers.

We create a video out of the imagery. We send it out to the news media. They broadcast it. The enemy sees it. It cools their ardor for the attack."

I was impressed. "But Frank's not the only guy who knows how to do this stuff. Hollywood is full of them."

She closed her eyes - started to take a deep breath - and then winced. Her father may have been a country doctor, but it still hadn't prepared her for the smell of death in a small closed room. "He was one of the best, but you're right."

"No motive there then? No international incident. But then, you guys have already figured that out."

"Pardon?"

"There *was* a murder at Langley. In '67. You didn't think we knew about it? You people were so deep into the cold-war thing then, you probably thought it wasn't even necessary to call the good old Washington Police."

She folded her arms. "I obviously wasn't here in '67. I wasn't even born yet."

"But you knew about it." She sat down in one of the computer chairs, swiveled back and forth for a moment. "So, what do you know about Frank?" I asked, pulling out my trusty 'no batteries required' note pad again.

She sounded weary. She was a classic A type, ready to wind down into tears, but working hard to hold it back. "He was a technoid. Built his own graphics stations. Wrote some of the first software we used for simulations back in the nineties. Quiet type. As you can see, a bit eccentric for the CIA. But some kind of genius, really. He kept to himself. And for all we can tell, he died because of a computer virus. I guess that's appropriate."

I stood back on my heels, stretching. It had been about twenty-four hours since I slept last. "Computer virus? Now I thought those things only messed up computers. You think they're going after people now, too?"

She was searching for the height adjustment on the chair, her feet not quite touching the floor. "I don't know what to think. We've been sensitive to this virus business ever since a sixteen-year-old kid shut down the entire early-warning system in the late 90's. With a virus he wrote in his high school computer class."

I moved around the room, expecting our forensic team to arrive at any minute. "Yeah. I heard about that one. I don't remember any bodies involved though."

She took a deep breath. "We have what is supposed to be the most sophisticated computer firewall system in the world - a wall that stops everything. Nothing gets through . . . that is, until about two months ago. We've had dozens of hits since then."

I looked up from my notes, so Jo explained, "Every time we get a security breach we call it a hit. This thing comes in, messes up files, screws up whatever it can, then disappears, like a hit and run driver. It's even started leaving messages with our staff."

"Have you got copies?"

"You mean copies of the message? Only one. We got lucky and captured one yesterday."

I squinted at her. She expected I would have lost my patience by now. "Pictures. Movies. Some of it pornographic."

I frowned and shook my head. "Just another sicko hacker on the loose?"

"When you say hacker, that infers someone getting access over high-speed data lines. The techs assure me that can't happen here. Even God himself couldn't place a call into this building if we didn't want him to."

"So how does the virus get in?"

"We don't know. And since this thing is definitely a virus, it still has to be in here somewhere. It's what they call a worm. It wiggles in and then goes into hiding, waiting to pop up again. In a way, it's never gone. We've got some worm expert from Canada working on it as we speak."

I stopped writing. "You had to import a worm expert? The CIA couldn't come up with one of their own?"

"It's a specialized field." The obviousness of that statement hung in the air for a moment. *Worm experts*. I didn't think it was appropriate to laugh in the company of a fresh corpse so I just chewed on my lip.

"You think Frank was involved?"

She shrugged, not really surprised by the question. "His job was to create very realistic but false environments. Real enough to fool the other guys. One of our technicians said the virus was like watching MTV from Hell. So we can't rule the possibility out." She jumped down off the chair. "That stays here by the way. As I said, this is all very classified."

"Could this have been a game for him? A little espionage of his own? Was he happy?"

"Who knows?" She was clearly puzzled by the question. "I thought he liked the work. But he was pretty much a loner. Divorced for ten years. Had a daughter, but he never talked about her. Not much of a life outside of his work."

"We'll need the computers he had in this room before you cleaned it. All of them. There may be something there that gives us a clue as to what he was up to. You going to let me look at those other files? The one you captured?"

"Of course."

I scanned the room one more time. "I don't know about this virus. But I do know he wasn't killed by a computer bug."

"He died at precisely the time we had a record of this virus violating his computer."

"Coincidence," I said.

"How can you be so sure?"

"Frank was in a hurry to die. There's no sign of a struggle. Pretty hard to have another person slice your abdominal wall open and not get their foot prints in the offal."

"Wha . . ." She looked up, shock blasting the color out of her cheeks.

"I've seen it before. It's not pretty, but it works, Frank committed Hari Kari."

"My God!"

"And he did it with the sharpest thing he could find in a hurry - which means this wasn't very well thought out."

"With what?" she asked.

"A screwdriver," I said.

NOTES FROM THE AUTHOR

I hope you enjoyed the short story *Crispy Critters*. If you have any comments or opinions I would love to hear them. Just write me at theocage@gmail.com

To be notified of new releases and FREE promotions only, please follow the author at [Theo Cage Newsletter](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Theo Cage is the pen name of Russell Smith, a Canadian author. He graduated from University with a Fine Arts degree, fully prepared to live out his life as a struggling artist. At some point however, purely by accident, he fell into the fascinating world of advertising - which led to two decades creating TV, radio and print commercials. His love of technology then led him into programming, computers and the web. He currently works in the IT sector as a senior manager.

Russ is a voracious reader - consuming between 50 - 100 fiction and non-fiction books per year. His favorite writers are Michael Crichton and Elmore Leonard; his favorite topics science and biology. Combining this love of technology and thrillers led to his first novel "Buzzworm", chronicling a deadly super-virus that infects the US intelligence community, and "Splicer" which deals with the hazards of biotech research.

Russ currently lives in Oakbank, Manitoba with his nature-loving wife. He is currently working on his next novel and painting whenever he finds time.