

IRON Y



ROBERT
SHROUD

IRONY
THE ANIMAL

by
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To Chris

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Hush little baby don't say a word
And never mind that noise you heard
It's just the beasts under your bed
In your closet in your head

-Metallica, Enter Sandman

Part 1

Empty Nights

1

“I DON'T want to talk about it anymore. The job is the job. That's the way it's always been, that's the way it's always going to be.”

He could hear the words echoing in his head as if they were shouted in a canyon.

“If you don't like it you shouldn't have married me. You knew I was a cop when you said *I do*.”

The look of defeated anguish in

his wife's face when he stormed out of their apartment, worked a one-two combination with the words. He cringed amid the fog of the wee-morning fall air. As the canyon echoes and his wife's image began the next round, he pulled out of the loop.

Can't be on stakeout spazzing every few minutes.

Maybe this was a bad idea. Maybe he should have accepted his partner Reuben's invitation to dinner with his family. God knows, he hasn't had anything resembling a good meal

since Carol left.

“Kerplunk!”

At the sound, his exhale caught in his throat. He spun with his glock in hand. In that split of time he saw all his problems solved. He saw his wife back in his arms. He saw the headlines, *'Disgraced Cop Makes Good,'* and the mayor pinning on his medal—*“Good job, Detective, you’ve made the city proud today.”*

In that split of time he saw it all, right before he saw the alley cat scurrying away, after knocking an

empty soda can off the dumpster below. *Damn. Reign yourself in, Reg. You're jumpier than an office worker in a picnic sack race. Might be time to call it a night.*

He considered his options.

He could stay perched on the fire escape, inhaling wafting alley stench, and hope to god the maniac will strike in this neighborhood. His other choice was to get back in his beat up, four-year-old Town Car, limp home, and perform his nightly salute to the gin gods.

It was an easy decision.

He liked being on stakeout, but liked his gin better. Especially now, since there was no one to warm his bed. Detective Reginald Thomas Williams unlatched the metal clamp holding up the fire escape ladder. He waited for it to hit the pavement with a thud. Climbing down, he could already taste the Seagram's Extra Dry burning his throat. He reached the last step and turned to exit the back street, when his gin soaked dreams were interrupted.

"Hey, what is going on down there? Keep the noise down, or I'll call the cops."

He looked up to where the voice came from. Hanging out her window with a hair full of large, pink rollers, and a mean scowl, was an older black woman. The ladder thud may have ruffled her feathers, but his experience told him it was the neighborhood busybody. She was peeking out to see who was doing what, and whether she knew them or not. *No doubt gathering her gossip*

notes for the next day's yak-fest.

"Routine patrol, ma'am," he said.

"What are you *routine patrolling* in a garbage alley at two o'clock in the morning?"

"Keeping the city safe for you and yours, ma'am."

"Then catch the lunatic that is raping and hanging women up all over town, instead of trying to get your groove on with some hoe at two o'clock in the morning."

"Doing our best, ma'am."

"Fuck you *and* your best. I got a

daughter who is scared to leave her apartment to go to work. You and that best of yours ain't worth *shit*."

He could see lights coming on in other apartments. He knew before long everyone and their mothers would be fucking him and his best from their windows.

"We will take your suggestions under advisement."

"To hell with your advisement. Let me tell you something..."

He could still hear her. He made his last statement walking quickly

towards the street, and had crossed the shadow barrier between alley and sidewalk, but could still hear the shouting.

"Where are you going? I ain't finished giving you my suggestions for your *advisement*."

He could hear her neighbors from their windows asking her what was going on. She explained loudly about some raggedy cop trying to get his *rocks off*, while talking about being on patrol. He wasn't mad at her. She was an old nosy scallywag, but he wasn't

mad at her. She was just scared. Hell, the whole city was scared.

Beneath the overcast misty night sky, he continued his brisk pace to his car six blocks away. Old scallywags all over the city were in his ears—“*What are the cops doing while we are being slaughtered in the streets?*” He wondered that himself. *What were they doing with the Animal loose in the streets? The Animal, yeah, that about summed the bastard up.* The newspapers might as well call him the *Ghost* for as much evidence as

they had on him.

How can someone rape and kill three women in three months, hang them across the city from telephone posts, and not leave behind so much as a fart in the wind? It didn't seem possible, and yet, it had happened.

"Bah," he let out a quiet shout, "just got too much on my mind."

He picked up his pace, hit the last block to his car, and revisited his interrupted gin soaked dream.

2

THE INSTANT he inserted the key into the lock of his second floor apartment, he knew he had made a mistake. He should have plopped his ass back on that milk crate, on the fire escape where he was sitting, and rode out the rest of the night. Instead, he was inside drowning his sorrows.

What's done is done, he shrugged, and was about to leave the bathroom when he heard his wife's nag in his

head.

“So, the department frowns on clean hands?”

He smirked and applied a squirt of liquid soap. Like a subconscious clinging to memory driftwood, more and more lately, he had been hearing his wife’s soft but firm attentions.

When the garbage was getting full — *“You know, they pay sanitation men a good salary, but they won’t come up here to get it.”*

When he left his clothes lying around — *“I love you honey, but you*

will be wearing dirty underwear come laundry day.”

And, especially, when he came home in a foul mood from job related stress—*“It’s not a crime to give your wife a hug and kiss in this state, is it?”*

Whether it was tough love or a gentle hand, Carol had this way of breaking through his emotional wall. He scooped up the remote to catch some news, and reasoned her perceptual powers were inherited from her father’s side of the family.

Alan Hanson had been a therapist

for thirty years, before passing away the year prior. He wasn't the brightest bulb in the room, but had a way about him. He would look you in the eye when he talked, and look through you when you responded.

Carol would always say he had soft hands and a heart to match. His comprehension of the human condition enabled him to be a resident handyman to broken souls. One of Dr. Hanson's most admirable qualities was that he didn't move to some swanky residence, and set up

shop for elite clientele. He rented moderate office space downtown and treated anyone who walked in the door.

Reg saw a lot of her father in Carol. They both were smallish in stature with hearts of gold. Alan had many patients. Carol had one. Too bad she decided hers was a lost cause.

He poured a shot and gulped, clenching his neck muscles after swallowing. The burn soothed the back of his throat. He poured another,

duplicating the ritual. 80-Proof, water-logged eyes, glanced around the apartment. He had been hearing Carol's nag in his head, but hadn't exactly been listening to it.

Newspapers, clothes, case notes, pizza boxes, and a number of empty fifths of gin were strewn about the living room. He had to fix the place up in case Carol did come back. If she walked in on what he was looking at, he knew what her exact words would be.

"Reginald Thomas Williams, what

the hell have you been doing in here?"

He chuckled to himself at the look he imagined on her face. Her eyes would be slits, her mouth pouted, her brow furrowed, her hands on her hips, and her chest heaved to show she was serious.

If that didn't tell him she meant business, the *'hell'* would have. Carol didn't curse unless agitated, and the most she would let out would be *'hell.'*

She was a professed Christian and tried to adhere to the requirements,

but if you ruffled her feathers, she wasn't afraid to get in your face and let loose her *'hell'* on you.

It was his conscience meter, a sign that he had gone too far in something. When she would unfurl her *'hell,'* along with his full name, it was time to reverse course. But he also knew what else it meant. It didn't just mean *'hell'* for whatever he had done, it meant to *'hell'* with your job, Reginald, I can't take it anymore.

Carol loved hard. The pressure of dealing with *the visit* every cop's wife

feared would wear on her from time to time. After talking it through for an hour or two, he would suggest a couple of nights out on the town, maybe a solo weekend away at her mother's.

It always did the trick.

The one time it took longer than a weekend, and lasted a week, was when he asked his partner Reuben to swing by his place and pick up a case file. He had been running late that morning and forgotten it on the kitchen counter.

Reuben felt the need to look down and check the shine on his shoes, just as Carol was opening the front door. She saw what she thought was an indication of bad news, with a somber Reuben about to look up and deliver the dreaded message. She clasped her hands over her mouth and shrieked before Reuben could say a word.

It took Reuben fifteen minutes to convince Carol that he wasn't dead. And another fifteen for them to reach him, as he was in a meeting with his

Captain at the time.

Thirty minutes of torture is how she described it when he arrived home that evening. The next few days were a cornucopia of '*hells*' for everything he did. He had no choice but to pack her off to her mother's for a week.

After seven years of marriage, and a year removed from the incident with Reuben, Carol had been gone five months. *No phone calls, no letters, no texts, no nothing.* That's how he knew she wasn't coming back. Even

at the height of her distress, whenever she went away, she would leave some kind of message for him. Something along the lines of, "*Keep the apartment clean,*" or "*Eat something besides pizza.*" Not this time. This time there wasn't so much as a fart in the wind.

"*Hell,*" he said, and poured another shot.

The thought of eating something before turning in sounded like a good idea. The TV anchor's words found him, before his stumbling fingers

found the remote's power button.

"Breaking News. The terror of Bay City, designated by some media outlets as the *Animal*, has struck again. Authorities are not releasing detailed information on the victim, pending family notification. But what we can tell you is that it occurred in Kawkawlin. We go now to our own Angela Gates, who is live on location. Angela?"

"Thank you, Katie. I'm here on the scene in Kawkawlin, where the Animal's latest victim has been

discovered. As you can see behind me, the deceased was found strung up to that telephone post in hog-tie fashion.”

Reg watched in abject horror the neighborhood he left hours ago.

“An anonymous source described this killing as the most gruesome to date. Standing beside me is a woman who says she may have gotten a glimpse of the assailant. Ma’am, can you tell us your name?”

“I ain't telling you my name, but I'll tell you what I saw.”

"Okay, then, tell us what you saw."

"I got up to get me a glass of win ...

I mean water, and I hear this noise in the alley outside my window. I looked out and saw this scruffy guy near the fire escape."

Reg blinked rapidly, thinking it was the gin playing tricks on him. He lurched to the edge of the sofa to get a better look at the screen.

"I yelled down at him to cut out the noise or I would call the police. You know, because that alley is where hookers from Market Street come

with their Johns."

Nope, it wasn't the gin. Front and center, big as day on his thirty-two-inch screen, was Ms. Scallywag herself.

"Did you get a good look at him?" the reporter asked.

"I'm getting to that. Anyway, he looked up at me and said something about being on patrol, like he was the police. I'm part of the building watch, and my watch commander didn't say anything to me about police being in the back alley that night."

"Are you saying he was a police officer?"

"No, I'm saying that is what he said. If you stop interrupting me, I'll tell the story. I said to him what kind of patrol you doing in the alley at two o'clock in the morning? If you're a cop, why don't you catch this Animal person running around killing people?"

"What was his response, if any?"

"He said something about advisement and ran off down the block. I'll bet you he was the killer.

Ain't nobody going to be in a hooker-alley at two in the morning, unless he is looking for a hooker."

"Have you talked to the authorities about being a witness?"

The sound of the shot glass breaking against the television wasn't as loud as Reg thought it would be. He had been aiming for Ms. Scallywag, but missed and hit the power button at the bottom of the set.

Before the anger and self-pity took over, he thought about going to

the scene to help out. *Yeah, that's a good idea. Show up smelling like a liquor store with a suspicious back alley story.* No one but his partner knew he was using his off days for Animal stakeout.

Reg stared at the black screen and wondered about his life and where it was going. He blamed himself for the death of the Animal's latest victim. *Who is this maniac? Why is he doing this?*

"I had him. I was right there."

He lowered his head into his

hands, and just as the Carol argument-tape started to play in his head again, the phone rang. Reg knew who it was before the second ring. If he didn't answer, Reuben would come over to see if he were okay. He didn't want that.

"What's up, partner?"

"Hey, Reg, you heard?"

"About the Bay City Bastard? I heard."

"A pissing shame. When are we going to catch this freak?"

"I feel you, Rube." Reg glanced at

the cable display above his now gratefully unbroken Magnavox.

4:30AM. "We can get together before I go downstate and bang heads about it."

"You're halfway in the bag, aren't you? Guess I don't have to ask how tonight's field trip went. Sorry, Reg, you'll get him next time."

"This time would have been nice."

"7:30, 8:00, Krissy's place?"

Reuben said.

"8:00AM sounds good. See you then."

It couldn't be helped that Reg's first thought when thinking of his partner was *good man*. What else could you say about a guy who marries a woman and adopts her two kids as his own? Reuben has also been there every step of the way for him, from the accidental shooting six months ago, to this whole Carol fiasco now.

Reg glanced at the cable box again —4:35AM. He had the 8:00AM at his sister's restaurant, and then another pow-wow session with Carol's

mother. He sighed and grabbed for the fifth of gin and one last shot, before a quick nap.

HIS EYES rolled over the heavy set black woman on the television.

Interesting, him thought, *the cops are setting traps?* It certainly wasn't he in that alley, as the plump female witness suggested.

He was out doing the deed, doing what he was born to do, doing what now came natural. And, surely, if it wasn't he, it was probably as the scruffy man told Aunt Jemima—*it*

was a cop.

Him cringed and jerked his neck at the thought of cops. Him hated cops because they were trying to stop his fun, trying to stop Him from what he liked to do. *Play with the pretty ladies.*

Jeremy said they will never get caught. Jeremy taught Him a lot of things, but most important was how not to get caught. Him did not always think and talk right. Sometimes Him got confused. No matter, Jeremy will come again next month and they will

get to play again.

The urgent need to cut and taste the juice was overwhelming. The creamy red liquid drove Him, called his name, beckoned for another savory drop. It was fascinating. It danced in the light. His reflection showed in a pool of it. And there was nothing better than the taste.

It tasted better than pizza, and pizza was his favorite. It was smeared with red paste. Watching one made at the shop around the corner was one of the things Him liked to do. The

sweet nectar of life is what they called it on a show once. It was sweet alright, but mostly bitter. The sweetness of it was the blood itself. Thinking about it like he was doing was going to lead to cutting, and having a drop or two.

Jeremy didn't like it when he did that. He said it made people take notice of the marks and ask questions. But Jeremy wasn't always around, and if Him did it soon after Jeremy left, and it wasn't too deep, Jeremy would never know.

At first the thought was that Jeremy knew everything, even when he wasn't around. Him knew better now. Jeremy could not see all, and that allowed for small pleasures until his return. Watching the pie man around the corner making a pizza was one. Another was playing with his life-sized, red painted latex doll.

It wasn't only the blood Him liked, but also the caressing of the smooth skin. The look of terror in the eyes of the pretty ladies was exciting too. When his fancy from the touching

and glee from the dismay were met, it was time to cut. It was also time to think about something else. If not, the night would end with pulling up his sleeve and reaching for his blade.

Besides, hadn't he just finished drinking? Wasn't there enough power juice in his stomach already? *Yes, power juice!* Him swore the blood had special powers. There was always the feeling of strength afterward. It was like nothing could hurt Him, not even ...

Him changed the path of his

thoughts and quickly centered on the power juice again. *How would it feel to be covered in it head to toe? Probably like God*, he decided, as the image lingered in his brain. Nothing would ever hurt Him, nothing ever again.

4

"WOO-HOO-HOO! Look at you. Showered, shaved, and suited. You sure it's just Carol's mother you're going to see?"

"Yeah, yeah," Reg waved him off, pouting a grin. "How is Gloria and ... hold on a second, let me check in with sis first."

"Go ahead, *player*, I'll order up. The usual?"

"Yeah, yeah."

Reuben signaled the stout, greasy-aproned counter man. "'Mi compadre, two potato eggs with swine on the side."

'Krissy's Red Lion Diner,' the neon sign read on the inside of the large, rectangular window, looking out onto the street. Brandishing a wide grin and prideful swell, Reg liked to stop on the other side of that sign and stare inside. He would reminisce about the scrawny lilliputian he protected growing up, and the split lip he got for challenging the

schoolyard bully, when he tried to look up his sister's dress.

Amazing how shy and withdrawn she used to be, that at 28, she would be running her own place. Kris was three years his junior and already reaching for the stars. The last time they spoke she was thinking about renting the bakery shop next door for expansion. The owner was being evicted over a lease dispute.

Reg stopped before entering the swinging double doors leading to the kitchen. He turned to survey the main

dining area. If his sister changed something and had to tell him about it, as was the case twice before, she would be miffed. Not overly so, but it pinged at her confidence.

He read her disappointing expressions as—*‘If you don’t notice alterations in my life, maybe you don’t care for me like you used to.’* With him being so consumed with Carol’s leaving and the Animal’s antics, he had no doubt the sentiment was growing.

He scanned the imitation marble

counter, flanked by its traditional red stools. *Nothing new.* He stared carefully at the checkerboard tiled floor, as well as the booths across from the counter stools. *Again, nothing.* He knew it was something, noticeable when he walked in, but what? *Geez, nine years on the force and crimes scenes, this should be whipped cream.* He glanced up at the ceiling.

"Got you this time, sis."

Reg sauntered through the waiter doors to the kitchen area. The

penetrating aroma of an assortment of breakfast foods made his empty morning stomach growl louder. He considered assaulting the Accu-Steam grill, and participating in a Nathan's style eating contest. Two things stopped him. Rafael, the world's most territorial cook, would cleave off his fingers. His sister would cleave off the rest. He made a right turn instead down the short corridor to Kris' office, and knocked on the door.

"Busy, Rafael." The rushed

response came from inside the office.

"Come back in fifteen minutes."

"Health Inspector, ma'am," Reg said, sounding as official as he could.

"Health Inspector? You people were here last week." Kris opened the door. Her tight lips curled upward.

"Reggie!" She jumped in his arms.

"Whoa sis, whoa." Reg gasped for air under her vice grip around his neck. "I'll let you pass the inspection, if you let me breathe."

Kris unwrapped from around him and pinched his goatee hair between

thumb and forefinger. "Right after I pluck all these little hairs off your chin, Mr. Health Inspector."

"Ow." Reg massaged his chin when she let go. "You do this to all the people with the power to shut you down?"

"Stop it, big baby, like I could really hurt you. That Health Inspector stunt wasn't funny, by the way. I have had it up to here with those guys."

"Doubt some guy checking grease traps could ruffle you."

"Maybe not ruffle, but irritate,"

she said.

Reg sat stiffly in the small wooden chair in front of her desk. "When are you going to get a better chair in here for visitors?" He bounced up and opted for the low-back recliner, against the far wall.

"I don't want anyone feeling comfortable sitting across from me. This is my office and I want people to know that, *especially* your fellow Inspectors."

If getting this far didn't do it, that statement told Reg all he needed to

know. She wasn't *little Krissy* anymore, who needed to be protected from the world. It would take a bus-load of Health Inspectors to get under *grown up* Krissy's skin. He watched her make her way behind her L-shaped desk, with the padded high chair, and began to feel that sense of pride in the well of his chest again.

"The pleasantries behind us, *where the hell were you?* I've been leaving messages all week."

"Look, sis, I'm sorry ..."

"Don't *sorry* me," she snapped, "I don't want to hear it. You promised you wouldn't flake on me again."

His week-long gin bender had managed to do what a busload of her nemeses couldn't. He was under her skin.

"I get it. You aren't exactly yourself with everything that is going on."

Kris got up from behind her desk and picked up the uncomfortable chair. She lugged it over to the recliner and sat in front of him.

Gazing tenderly into his eyes, she took one of his hands in hers.

"That doesn't mean there aren't people who care about you, people who want to help you through this."

"Sis—"

"Let me finish." She held both his hands, one in each of hers. "It seems like there are only dreary days ahead without her. But I love you my brother and will not let you fall into the abyss. If that means giving up this place to give you my full attention, I will."

Reg wanted to shield his pain from her. He wanted to pull his hands away and say, *Come on, sis, I'll be okay.* He couldn't.

She said, "I leaned on you for years. It's time I returned the favor."

His sister hugged him tight. He didn't tell her to let go.

BROTHER AND SISTER separated when Reuben knocked on the office door.

"I don't want to rush you, partner, but..."

"One second," Reg called back.

They heard Reuben's heavy steps fading down the hall. Kris returned to her desk. Reg trailed for a last word.

"Guess this means I'm the sister now," he said.

"Ha-ha, hee-hee-hee, you wouldn't survive as a woman, *trust me*. You'd have a heart attack with your first period. Go before you give Reuben one."

"I'll stop by when I'm done, and then I am headed downstate."

Reg stared dumbly at her lack of reaction, as if he couldn't believe what he was not hearing. His sister always had something to say when he told her he was going downstate.

Her brow furrowed at his blank, wide eyes. "I don't *even* have anything

to say about that woman today. She is what she is, and that's not going to change. Besides, I figured that's where you were going when I saw you all dolled up."

"Dolled up?"

"You said you wanted to be a girl, right?"

"Yeah, yeah." His lips smirked off-center, as he passed her desk on his way to the door.

"Well, you did," she laughed.

"By the way," he said, "the new light fixtures brighten up the place."

For the length of the narrow corridor, and as the walls expanded into the kitchen, the sounds of his sister giggling like a school girl delighted his ears.

"Okay, Nervous Nelly," Reg said. He slid into the windowed booth, opposite Reuben. "What do you have for me?"

"About time." Reuben shoved a half empty plate aside, and plopped down an inch-thick case file.

"Barbara Drowns, Shirley Grieves, and Debbie Mourns. All prostitutes, all

in their twenties, all dead. All sliced up like Halloween pumpkins and hog-tied to telephone posts around town. Barbara in Munger, Shirley in Glen Eagle, and Debbie along Midland Road. There was evidence of sexual assault in all cases. Also, and not released to the press, each had some kind of weird symbol carved above their left breasts. Popular consensus is the occult. Crime scene evidence is negligible. Lacerations to the flesh show no signs of a pattern, save the symbol, and, in fact, appear frenzied.

The cutter may have been aroused by what he was doing, possibly excited by the sight of blood."

Reg listened intently, chewing on a slice of bacon and making connections in his head. *Munger, Glen Eagle, and Midland Road*, three neighborhoods lined up in sort of a half arc on the map. It's what made him choose Kawkawlin for his surveillance. It was the next area closest to continuing the arc.

He turned out to be right. But whether the killer was working by

design or chance, he didn't know. If anyone in the department still listened to him, this nightmare would be over. They would have bagged the Animal last night. Unfortunately, he was damaged goods since the incident. His judgment was constantly double checked, and his every suggestion glossed over.

It was all done respectfully, of course. He was once the up and coming star on the force, destined to make Captain faster than anyone before him. Now, he was

contaminated stock, with six months left in his mandatory counseling. He called in favors to sneak peeks at case files, and ran surveillance traps on his nights off to redeem his reputation.

Reg shoved another sliver of bacon in his mouth. He tried to convince himself that sooner, rather than later, things would turn.

"On to last night's debacle," Reuben continued, "*Angela Anguish*. Caucasian like the others, symbolized and sow-tied like the others, a prostitute like the others, and

unquestionably dead like the others.”

Reg hung his head and frowned in disgust at the last victim.

“Here are the cherries, partner. Found on the body of Angela Anguish, and none of the others, were microscopic flakes of red paint.

Captain Freeman has forensics on double time matching the brand. And, *get ready for this*, one of the guys at the station dabbles in all that numbers and star stuff. He noticed that the killings are coinciding with the *moon*.”

Reg cocked his head, still chewing.

"The *moon*?"

"Yep, the *freaking moon*, man."

"Rube, make some sense, quick."

Reuben laughed, then looked back down to the paperwork.

"According to an Officer

Menendez, the slayings have been occurring in the *Lunar Cycle*. He says here that the moon has the appearance of being full for about 36 hours. It is within these 36 hours, every 29 days or so, that the Animal has been claiming his victims."

Reg would have thought Reuben was pulling his leg, if he hadn't mentioned Menendez, and used the words *Lunar Cycle*. It wasn't his jesting style. Reuben was more —“*Evidence is linked to Mr. Krabs, who was last seen in the vicinity of Bikini Bottom.*” His two recently adopted daughters had been influencing his whole line of thinking.

"What are you trying to tell me, Rube, that the *Wolf Man* is real?"

"You wish, at least then we would have some DNA. The task force thinks

some kind of moon worshiping cult. They began working that angle with the symbol this morning."

"Hmm."

"Hmm, what, Reg?"

"I'll let you know." Reg shoveled a forkful of starchy eggs into his mouth.

"Have to go."

"Where?"

He took a bite of toast and polished off the last of the heart attack meat, and slid out of the booth.

"Hopefully, to get some answers."

Reuben caught up with him at the

door.

"Not without me. I know that look. You're onto something."

"Aren't you on duty? Overtime to help out at home?" Reg said.

"That's why I am coming with you. If something happens, I will be there in an official capacity, and you won't get in trouble."

A gust of wind flailed their ties leaving the diner.

"Fine, but we take your car, and I'm driving."

Part 2

Skeletons

6

"WHAT A NIGHTMARE. Traffic is stalled for blocks."

There was another mile to the Interstate, where they would be on the road for half an hour, and Reuben's CRV had travelled a foot of blacktop in ten minutes. It being early October, the virgin fall had yet to grant Reg his preferred cooler temperatures. But he took solace that the summer scorch was in his rear-

view mirror. Thanks to global warming, sixty degrees with a medium headwind would have to suffice.

The masses pined for beach weather. His sister *loved it*. Reg could never get past the clingy sweat, sweltering heat, suffocating air, and taking of two steps and feeling like you wanted to pass out.

Air conditioning was nice if you could afford it, but you couldn't stay inside all day. You had to come out eventually. That is when unforgiving

yellow death compressed on you like a Ferrari piston, until you prayed to the gods of winter for deliverance.

He glanced over at Reuben for agreement, as if his thoughts were spoken aloud, and not just inside his head. Reuben was swept up in I-pod heaven. From the teeny-bopping, rhythmic beats blaring through the headphones, it was the kind of music his girls would listen to.

"Hey," Reg tried to shout over the music, "*when did you get an I-pod?*"

Reuben removed his left ear bud.

"Huh?"

"I said, when did you get and I-pod?"

"Not mine. Gloria and I bought it for little Maria's birthday, last week."

"Could have *fooled* me. Looked like yours a minute ago."

"I'm testing to see if the songs loaded properly."

"Suuure, you're right."

"Just drive," Reuben said, re-inserting his ear piece. "WE NEED TO GET OUT OF THIS TRAFFIC."

Reg kept his eyes on Reuben, who

was mouthing the words to *his daughter's songs on her I-pod*. It wasn't as if there was anything else to look at besides the bumper sticker on the car ahead of them—*I brake for BOOBS*.

When not huddled in a passenger seat with his knees kissing glove compartment doors, Reuben stood 6'2. He was chunky around the middle, chiseled up top, perpetually clean shaven, and had wavy, creamy hair. A superman curl hung in the middle of his forehead. Reg wondered

if the curl is where his power came from. His Puerto Rican partner could bench press four hundred pounds. Reg could only get as high as two-fifty.

He wished nothing but happiness for Reuben and his wife, Gloria. *But especially Gloria.* Prior to Reuben, most of her involvements seemed to have one theme in common. They liked to swing at the air and sometimes Gloria's face got in the way.

Reuben *is* a good man, but there

was something Reg was curious about. *What happened to his wife's former boyfriend?*

No one accused Reuben of anything, but when Gloria's old flame showed up for one last sparring session, about two months into the couple's courtship, he vanished a day later. He was never seen again. There were street rumors which nothing became of, all of which involved Reuben.

This was before they were partners, so there was no decorum

for introducing the topic. What was he supposed to say? "*Hey, Rube, how did you sleep? Oh, and by the way, did you snuff your wife's ex?*"

Reg turned back to the road and read the *BOOB* sticker again. Reuben is a good man, but Reg was in no hurry to get on his bad side.

HIM CARED not for the nasty sex Jeremy wanted with them. It was disgusting. Maybe that is why Jeremy wore a baggie on his *pee-pee*. It was even nasty to him.

Did the word *pee-pee* just move in his head?

Him slammed his forehead with the palm of his right hand. Jeremy said not to think words like that. It made Him sound like a little baby

who was stupid. Jeremy said if words like that came into his mind, he was to slap his forehead as hard as he could. That would remind Him to think right, so the talking could be right.

Him did not like the sting in his brain from the blow. More and more, following some of Jeremy's rules was not to his liking.

Don't cut yourself.

Don't speak this way.

Get rid of that stupid red doll.

Him liked his friend, but not his

rules. That's why the red doll was back. Jeremy said to get rid of it. The back of the closet was out of sight, and rid from Jeremy's mind, until last week.

Him was lonely without his doll. Jeremy may have come first, but the doll was there when Jeremy wasn't. Now that his friend was back, he wanted Him to just throw her away? The doll kept the urges in check. The doll gave company. The doll was his friend. She didn't talk, but she did not have to. All she needed to do was be

cut, and her red paint to fly off like blood.

Marlene had shoulder length brunette hair, full breasts, and a hairless crotch. As he gazed adoringly at her disfigurement from many nights of use, Him could see that she was ready for a fresh coat of paint.

He knelt to retrieve the cans of spray beneath the bed, and thought about when Marlene first came. His therapist had suggested it. It was either keep cutting his arm and be committed, or get the doll. Him never

wanted to be locked up again, so he got the doll.

It is why Jeremy would find out at his next visit that Him was quitting.

The night before was great. The last few months have been good too. But watching Aunt Jemima on the T.V. got his brain moving. If cops were setting traps in alleys, and more and more people were paying attention, they would eventually get caught, no matter what Jeremy said.

Doctor Hilliard taught actions and consequences in session. Hilliard

said that there was punishment for bad things. Him knew it when the suggestions to kill were first made by his friend, a couple of months ago. Still, the chance to cut on someone besides the doll, and himself, was too great to pass up.

Jeremy showed Him tricks on escaping detection. They worked and fun was fun. The cage was no fun.

In the cage there would be no doll.

In the cage there would be no pizza.

In the cage Him would be next.

The thought of the cage
shuddered his body, as he stood
Marlene in the corner of his
basement apartment to dry.

STREAKING DOWN I-75 at sixty miles per hour, with the wind blowing in his face, was therapeutic. The mild fall air flowing over his freshly cropped dome invigorated him. Reg forgot about Carol, the Animal, scallywags, gin, and even Reuben in the passenger seat.

He imagined being on top of a mountain. As the elevated wind rushed past him, he thrust his head

skyward and stretched his arms wide. The sensation of freedom was *incredible*.

He conjured up a log cabin abutting his mountain. His arduous descent commenced with log fire, bear rug, and grilled sirloin aspirations. *Then came the avalanche.*

"Yo," Reuben said, initializing the rock slide, "Earth to Reggie."

"Huh?"

"Where were you just now?"

"Fantasy land. What's up?"

"Feel like telling me where we are

going now?"

Reg hit the automated window control, so they wouldn't have to talk over his rushing wind.

"No problem. That is, if you're finished *checking* the songs.

Frankenmuth."

"What the heck is in Frankenmuth?"

"Answers."

"I'll bite. How are we going to find a solution to the Animal case in another city, much less Frankenmuth?"

"Well it was ... hmm ... about nine years ago, when I was still in training."

"At the academy? What has that got to do with—"

"Breathe, Rube, and let me fill you in."

Reg conveyed for his song analyzing partner, events which took place around the time of his academy training.

"You're shitting me."

"No shit here."

"A cult nine years ago in

Frankenmuth that practiced moon worship, ritual sacrifice, and sexual deviancy?"

Reg nodded.

"I've never heard of it, big deal, I'm not researching lunacy up the Interstate. But how could it have not turned up with everything that has been going on?" Reuben said.

"Want to take a stab at it before I tell you?"

Reuben glanced out the windshield thoughtfully, then back at Reg. "Money?"

"Some of the people involved in the cult were connected to the Mayor, and the Mayor was connected to KIWI Incorporated. So, by association, KIWI Incorporated was—"

"—connected to the cult," Reuben finished his sentence. "Wow, KIWI Incorporated, one of the biggest conglomerates on the East Coast."

"For sure. And Mayor Swartz was up for re-election with a butt-load of city contracts set to expire in the next term. Contracts ranging from computers, software, hammers, toilet

seats, urinals, and the vending machines in every school and city owned building.”

“Mucho dinero,” Reuben whistled.

“And if you're KIWI Incorporated, and you own subsidiaries that supply all of those products, it would be nice to have an inside man. A scandal right before the election wouldn't be good for shareholders. Some cheese exchanging hands and Presto! What moon worshiping cult your honor? We're not familiar with that case.”

"No shit?"

"No shit."

Reuben's brow furrowed.

"Something still doesn't track. The case never saw the inside of a courtroom, but there had to be arresting officers, back up officers, people at the department who knew the bust was going down."

"Not necessarily. The Desk Sergeant thought the tip he received that same night was a hoax. He only sent over a car to cover his ass.

Between the arriving unit, the unit that responded to their call, and the

desk officer, there were only five or six people involved."

Reuben threw up his hands. "Now you're shitting me. More units *had* to respond. I can imagine the call over the box."

"Pranking teens," Reg said.

"Say what?"

"The Mayor's aide involved managed to bend the ear of a uniform. One municipal phone call later and mischievous teens were all the rage."

"No shit?"

"I keep telling you, Rube, there's no shit over here. Do you need me to pull over to a rest stop and get you some?"

"Funny, but one more thing, *Mr. Shit-less.*"

"Lay it on me."

"If everybody was paid off to keep quiet, and obviously did, how did you find out about it?"

Reg explained the client referred to Dr. Alan Hanson, Carol's father. A former law enforcement official out of Frankenmuth who was

experiencing night terrors and guilt, from the things he had seen.

What the man told Alan stained his soul. He had to tell someone. It was the only time Reg knew of Alan violating a patient's confidence. Reg could hardly believe his ears, but wasn't surprised. In his almost two years on the force by then, he had seen the kinds of atrocities people could inflict on one another.

It hardened him.

There were a lot of gin soaked nights in the beginning. If it wasn't

for Carol, he'd probably be like a good deal of the hollowed eyes he saw mulling about the station every day; a functional alcoholic. He was aware that he wasn't too far away at the moment.

"Gee-zus," Reuben said, after hearing the tale. He had no more questions.

"No shit," Reg said, reaching for the window button and his wind. He left his partner to sort out what he'd just heard. "No shit."

"QUACKENBOS, QUACKENBUSH, Quail, Quam, Quandt, here it is, *Quarterman*. Found him," Reg called over his shoulder to Reuben, who was sitting in the car.

"Got him?"

"Roger Quarterman, Mission Ridge."

Reg scribbled the address on the yellow post-it he got from the owner of the taco stand. "Thanks for the

White Pages."

"You going to buy something?"

"Rube, you want a taco, or burrito, or ... what else do you sell?"

"Tacos, burritos, enchiladas and frankfurters. Pepsi, Sprite, and Mountain Dew. I also have chips."

"Hey, Rube—

"Nah, knock yourself out."

Reg wasn't hungry, but didn't want the favor to go unrewarded.

"I'll take a Pepsi."

As he ferried the wet-napkin wrapped can back to the CRV, his

thoughts turned to his wife. Carol often sighed favorably, after a few gulps of her favorite soft drink.

If they had been blessed with children, Reg could imagine he and Carol with something along the lines of Reuben's Honda. He knew she wanted kids, and he had verbally agreed. In the depths of his heart, he vacillated. Since it hadn't happened in seven years of attempts, it was easy to assume that it wasn't meant to be.

He was a thirty-one year old black man married to a white woman a

year younger. They could deal with the racial bullshit. Kids were another matter. He would dread having to explain to little Jeffrey or Sarah how their grandmother was a bigot. And if she were to say anything ignorant, they should ignore her.

Reg turned the ignition key in the compact SUV, and wondered at what age his children would begin to notice the looks of scorn.

“Daddy? Why is the man at the bus stop mad at me?” he could hear his little Sarah asking.

“He's not mad honey, he's just stupid,” he would have to respond.

Forty years removed from Dr. King's speech, and people still had trouble grasping the concept of equality. The relevance of his thoughts was insignificant. Carol left him, and by all indications, wasn't coming back.

Reg glanced over his shoulder for oncoming traffic, and pulled out of his curb side space. He got to the stop light at the end of the block, before realizing he didn't know where he

was going. *He was spazzing again.*

"Rube?"

"Yo."

"Know where Mission Ridge is?"

"You don't?"

"If I did, would I be asking you?"

Directions and a bag of chips later,

Reg hopped back in the CRV and drove toward what he hoped would be a break in the case.

"Mission Ridge, right there,"

Reuben pointed at the fastly approaching street sign.

Reg turned onto the short row of blocks and attempted to ignore the uneasiness in his gut. All the way down the turnoff street, Harlan Drive, each passing house waxed more extravagant than the one before. Nothing about the pattern changed turning onto the Mission Ridge cul-de-sac.

The smell of money was in the morning air. People with means weren't keen on intrusions into their space. Truthfully, no one was keen on intrusions into their space. But

politicians, and as a trickle-down effect law enforcement, tended to respond to the rich quicker than on average. He and Reuben were miles out of their jurisdiction, *in the wrong neighborhood*. Reg wanted to be in and out of there faster than a lightning strike.

"That's the house," Reuben motioned diagonally across the street. A woman in a late model, silver Elantra, was pulling out of Quarterman's driveway.

Reg waited for the Elantra to pass,

then turned into the winding driveway. Quarterman's small mansion estate shortly came into view. An expertly manicured lawn glistened beneath large bay windows. He parked behind a Mercedes in front of the sizable home. They got out, rang the bell, and waited.

"I need to talk to you about something when we're done here."

Reg nodded at Reuben's whisper.

"What do you want?" An ill-tempered voice assaulted them from the other side of the heavily paned,

glass door.

"Roger Quarterman?"

"Who wants to know?"

"Could we have a few words?" Reg added.

"I said, *who wants to know?*"

"Face to face would be better."

"There will be a bullet in *your face*, if you don't go away, or tell me *who wants to know.*"

"Calm down, Roger, we're all on the same side here," Reg said. Most cops knew what that meant.

No sense offering their names

until they determined whether Roger was the canary type. It stood to reason, if he took a bribe he probably wasn't, but there was the safe and sorry thing to consider. The locks unfastened hastily, and angrily, if that were possible, and they were finally face to face with him.

"Where you from? I've never seen either of you before."

Reg cringed. He quickly forced away the distorted expression, and hoped the complete wreck of a man standing in front of him hadn't

noticed.

Quarterman's half open eyes were blood-red. His knee-length, formerly white, terry cloth robe appeared as if it hadn't been washed since his days on the force. His t-shirt and jeans beneath, stained with various unidentifiable substances, matched the ragged weeks' worth of salt and pepper growth on his face. A faint hint of cannabis wafted up Reg's nostrils from inside the house. He forced himself to look into Quarterman's red, peppercorn eyes,

and not at the sizable dark brown stain, on his white shirt, competing for attention.

"Mr. Quarterman, we're from Bay City."

"What do a couple of badges from Bay City want with me?" he said, casting a wary, crimson eye at them.

"Could we talk inside?" Reg said, his uneasiness about the neighborhood returning.

"Tell me what you want, and I'll *think* about it."

"Artemisians," Reuben blurted,

turning up his nose.

Reg placed his hand in the middle of the wood framed door when he saw Quarterman about to slam it in their faces.

"Off the record."

Quarterman squinted. He scanned them from head to toe, then expanded the crack in the door to get a better look around the outside of his home. Seeming satisfied, but still scowling, he waved them in.

The second Reg stepped into the living room it was obvious

Quarterman had a maid service. He had readied himself for his own apartment twenty times over. Empty pizza boxes, liquor bottles, newspapers, clothes, and two feet of dust strewn about. *Not so.* The house was immaculate. It was as if the maid had just left. Reg remembered the young woman pulling out before they arrived. *The maid had just left.*

The contrast of Quarterman looking and smelling like he spent the night sleeping at the bottom of a clothes hamper, and the freshly

dusted shine on high end furniture, confused Reg's senses. One had the aroma of fresh pine, and the other of bear scat in the woods. He didn't know whether to crinkle his nose or breathe in deeply.

He and Reuben took the plush sofa. Quarterman opted for a leather recliner across from them.

"So, you want to know about the Artemisians?" he said, stumbling more than sitting into his E-Z Boy.

"Yes, there's this case—"

"Don't care. But I would like to

know how you came to be at my door?"

"Long story," Reg said, not wanting to divulge the information.

"Want to know what I know, tell me what you know."

Reg reluctantly gave up his Alan Hanson story.

"Hanson was a good egg. Sorry to hear about his passing. I'm not going to blame him for telling, if that's what you're thinking. Truth be told, I'm glad you guys are here. Not even my ex-partner likes strolling down

memory lane when it comes to the Artemisians."

"I gave up my story, what's yours?" Reg said.

"What do you want to know?"

"Everything you remember."

"Off the record, *right?*" he asked, and reached into his robe pocket for an unfinished, finger-sized joint.

Way off the record, Reg thought, as Quarterman put lighter to joint. He appeared to be as high as he could get. That wasn't about to stop him from getting higher. Reg took a pass

on judgment. If they were about to hear *details* of the story told to him by Carol's father, Quarterman probably needed to be higher.

"The Artemisians," he said, after exhaling, "they weren't pure because there were men in the group. But make no mistake, the bitches were in charge."

"What do you mean by pure?" Reuben asked.

Quarterman's eyes popped, momentarily revealing a circumference of white outlining

their wine-red high.

"You guys don't know nothing? You just got my name and came straight over here?"

Reg said, "We already had your name, but yes, we came straight over."

Quarterman waved the joint at Reg's explanation. A bulb of ash fell to the polished hardwood floor.

"From what I researched after it all went down, the Artemisians are a feminist, Neo-Pagan group that worships the moon and nature and

shit. They are supposed to look out for one another, like sisterly love— oh, and they believe God is a woman."

Reuben took out his pad for some unofficial notes.

"Ah-ah-ah, off the record, remember?"

"This is for me, so I can ..."

Quarterman shook his head slowly.

Reuben put away his pad.

"Where was I?" he continued, both the toking and the story. "Right, so they were into this woman God and

stuff, but what the book doesn't say is all the crazy shit they did in worshiping her. Man, if I could show you what I saw."

"Telling us will suffice," Reg said. He feared Quarterman wouldn't be coherent much longer.

"I'm getting to it, I'm getting to it. Where was I? Oh, yea, *man*, you should have seen the shit we saw when we walked in there. There were people in cages around this campsite. They had ten foot torches lit in a circle, and in the middle of the circle

they had this ... they had this ..."

Quarterman stopped and produced a bottle of Jack Daniels from the recliner's side pocket. Following a swig that put Reg's drinking habits to shame, he picked up where he left off.

"In the middle of the circle of torches they had a woman strung up, hog-tied to a wooden post. She was beaten and cut to pieces. Lacerations everywhere, man, and some weird symbol carved on her titty. I'm looking at this and thinking, *what the*

hell, with my mouth open, and then I see—*toke*, I see—*toke*, hold on a second."

Toke-toke-toke, extinguish, blow smoke.

"I see people around the edges of the camp having sex. I couldn't believe it. I turned to my partner, Roach, and said, '*You ready to bust these sick bastards?*' And you know what Roach said to me? '*Not yet, Roger. We should wait for backup and witness as much as we can.*'"

Quarterman paused to gulp Jack

Daniels. Afterward, he hacked out a phlegm-filled cough, and continued his tale.

“What the hell? I wanted to bust some heads and Roach wanted to keep watching. He was right about the backup, but I think he was turned on. Guess I should have figured that, with him having a name like Roach, right? Shoot, where did I put that damn bottle?”

Bay City's Finest remained silent. Reg had heard some of it from Alan. Reuben heard what Reg remembered.

Now they were getting a firsthand account.

"Ah, here it is, good stuff. Care for a shot?" Quarterman extended the lip of the open bottle toward them.

When Reg's head shook left, Reuben's shook right. When Reg's swung right to complete the refusal, Reuben's went left. They continued the opposite pendulum a few more rotations.

"Your loss." He shrugged and turned up the bottle. When he was done, he slid his hand into the same

robe pocket which surrendered the half joint, and yanked out a whole one.

His onlookers engaged in a second act of pendulum aerobics. Reg wondered if he would be okay to drive, if he left there with a contact high.

"You were saying?" Reg nudged Quarterman back towards the death camp.

"I was saying what? I didn't say anything."

"Artemisians?" Reuben reminded

him.

"Oh, them. I thought you said I was saying something, because I didn't remember saying anything. I mean, did I say something?"

Quarterman's words were beginning to slur. He was still coherent, so Reg let him be.

"The Artemi ... Artemi ... *fucking moon worshipers*. So, I said to Roach, *'Let's go. Let's do this.* Then I take a good look in the cages, and I thought, *no way! No blasted way!* You know what they had in the cages? Did

Hanson tell you? *Kids*. Ten, eleven, twelve year old kids. *I was ready to bust a nut over bagging these guys.* Then I squint my eyes like this, see here?"

He showed them his squint.

"And I'm looking, and looking, and trying to make this out, and *fuck me, the kids were who these sick bastards were having sex with!* To hell with Roach if he didn't back me up. *To hell with them all.* I jumped from behind my cover near the back porch, and said, '*Nobody move.*' Roach, deciding

to back me up, said, *'Freeze, Frankenmuth Police Department.'*

Detective partners had an idea of what was coming next. It was the reason Quarterman couldn't sleep, the reason he went to Alan in the first place, and the reason he was sitting there baked out of his mind.

The Artemisians were prepared for such an event. All scattered with but one thought in mind—*get out of the line of sight of the two shooters on the roof.*

If one of their services was ever

interrupted, their plan was to eliminate every potential witness against them, and escape in the mayhem. The snipers began shooting, the shot children began screaming and dying, and the worshipers ran as if the bullets were meant for them.

They didn't get far. The entryway to the underground passage constructed as their contingency collapsed weeks before. Since it went unused until then, there was rarely need to check it. Having carried out

their depraved practices for years without consequence, they were overconfident.

"When they couldn't escape, they fell down like sheep, begging for mercy and throwing out credentials. Roach talked to one and then had me speak to the Mayor. A whole lot of threats and hush money later, here I am. The two shooters are the only ones who got away. Well, they *all* got away, but you know what I mean."

Quarterman took his biggest toke yet, and exhaled just as deeply. The

living room air surrendered to his cloud of THC.

"I shouldn't tell you this, *but to hell with it*. I'm tired of being KIWI's butt boy. Fuck them, and fuck Mayor Swartz."

He took another quick toke, and let out finally, "*There was a survivor, man.*"

“A SURVIVOR?” Reuben said.

“Alan never said anything about a survivor,” Reg added, just as shocked.

“I didn't tell him—*TOKE*—I wanted help, but I couldn't have people poking around for survivors. Asking questions of the ex-Mayor and KIWI was one thing, they could deny any allegations, and the story would probably go away. But if anyone found proof, it would blow the whole

thing out of the water.”

“Why tell us now?” Reuben said.

“Because, man, look at me. You don't have to say it, I'll say it for you, *I'm screwed*. I can't go a day without scorching my brain, my sweats and night terrors are back, and if I want to get laid, I have to call the hooker-maid service. They clean your house and then your *pipe*, if you know what I mean—*toke*.”

“Would you be willing to help us find this survivor?” Reuben said.

“I don't know, man.”

"Come on, *Roger*, it's too late for your case, but if you help us with this one, maybe your conscience will give you a break."

"I guess—"

"No guessing." Reg backed his partner's play. "Give us what we need, and maybe you will get a good night's sleep."

Quarterman considered what both men were telling him. He considered what they went on telling him, as he considered what they told him. If he gave this up and KIWI got

wind of it, they would come after him. The same men who threatened his family when he was hesitant to take the payoff. The same KIWI goon squad who ordered him away from counseling.

If he knew his mother was going to die just seven months later, he might have called their bluff. His fiancée flew the coop with his Ninja Blender, soon after the substance abuse began. There was no one left to intimidate him with. Ex-Frankenmuth Police Officer Roger

Quarterman had held it in for nine years. It was time to let it out.

"The last few years I lost touch, but I know who you can talk to."

"Who?" Reg asked.

"The Boot Lady."

"Boot Lady?"

"The Boot Lady," Quarterman confirmed the title.

"Who or what, *exactly*, is the Boot Lady?"

"A specialist who deals in counseling children. They call her the Boot Lady because of that nursery

rhyme, you know, *'There was an old woman who lived in a shoe, she had so many children she didn't know what to do?'* Except, she's not really old or anything. In fact, it crossed my mind a couple of times to—"

"We get the point," Reg cut him off. "Where can we find this *Boot Lady?*"

Quarterman gave them the *Boot Lady's* address as he remembered it. Reuben wanted to make a quick exit. Reg convinced him to stay, in case their witness gave up any more

nuggets. They hung around long enough for Quarterman to polish off his second twister, and drink the Jack Daniels down to a third of the bottle.

He talked some more about Dr. Hanson, KIWI, Roach, and life in general. None of it was helpful, save to give them insight into a tortured soul. About the time he offered them cold pizza, Reg figured they had gotten all they were going to.

"Listen," Reg said, as soon as they stepped outside, "this Boot Lady is not likely to pack up shop before

tomorrow. You go ahead to the station. I'll do what I have to do. If our perp stays true to form, we have twenty eight days before he kills again."

Reuben agreed.

"Good. Drop me off at dear old mommy-in-law's, and I'll hop the train back to Bay City.

"RIGHT HERE is good."

"But there's another block and a half to go."

Reg got out of the car when Reuben pulled over.

"I'll walk the rest of the way. It'll give me time to prepare for her."

"I don't know how you stand it."

"Carol. I think about her giving me Carol, and most days I can hold my tongue."

"Better you than me," Reuben smirked, as he sped away from the curb.

Reg kept his cool around his mother-in-law, Madelin Hanson, for more than just Carol's sake. Bigotry is born of ignorance. If he responded with an equal opposing force, he would prove himself as ignorant as she. He also frowned on the idea of providing her ammunition to discuss with her like-minded friends. It is why he *'dolloed up,'* as Kris put it. Whenever Madelin thought of him,

and his *ghetto blackness*, she would have no choice but to conjure an image of a *dolled up* brother, in a sharp suit.

Reg made sure Reuben was out of sight. He reached into the concealed pocket inside his jacket, and pulled out a miniature bottle of Seagram's Extra Dry Gin. He drained the short under a clear, afternoon sky. As he licked residual gin off his lips, Quarterman came to mind.

He couldn't ever get that bad, could he? No, never.

It will take more than a broken heart, a criminal case—*no matter how insane the assailant*— and an ignorant in-law, to drive him that far. He returned the empty bottle to its hiding place, and strolled past the last set of homes leading to his wife's childhood residence.

The neighborhood reminded Reg of a quaint little town painting. Enclosed by railroad tracks, it was an isolated island brushed with row houses, in a five square block area. If they could stand the roaring train

noise, he imagined homeowners caught a break in the purchase price.

He rang Madelin's doorbell and was met with silence. He rang again. There was a peek out an upstairs window, but moments later, still no response.

"Madelin, give me a break, I saw you peek out the window."

Eventually, she opened the door, and wasted no time in making him feel welcome.

"Why are you here?"

Reg smiled, though he didn't want

to. He refrained from grabbing her by her fluffy blouse, and screaming into her double-chinned, flat face.

"Remember me telling you I would stop by today?"

"I remember saying I'd appreciate if you didn't."

"Madelin," he sighed, "you don't like me, but we do have something in common. Carol, remember?"

"Not anymore."

Reg bit down on his tongue, hard.

"Have you heard from Carol?"

"Why would I tell the man who

oppressed her?”

He would not be happy about it later. He would go through an entire fifth that night not being happy about it. He was supposed to represent *his* people. He was supposed to keep his cool for Carol, and because Alan Hanson was an honorable man. Neither were there, however, and he lost it.

Reg rushed forward, took her by her fluffy blouse, and bull-rushed her back inside her home. He slammed the door with his foot, and bent to get

in her face.

"Your husband was my friend, so I kept quiet. Your daughter was my wife, who I loved with all my soul, so I bit my tongue. But you just crossed the line. The only thing being oppressed around here is your skull. If you know where Carol is, or heard from her at all, and don't tell me, I'm gonna ... I'm gonna ..."

Madelin Hanson wanted to scream. Her mouth was open, but no sound would come out. He had

pounced on her so quickly there was barely time to shriek. Now she was alone with him. "*He is a police officer,*" her husband and daughter assured her, "*You have nothing to fear from him.*" They were wrong. She was about to be raped and murdered, and her half-naked body left to rot. At the horrifying thought, urine released from Madelin Hanson's innermost place.

The ringing startled Reg, until he associated the sound with a phone.

He glanced at it on the foyer table, and back to Madelin. Wretched horror lined every crease in her face. He still simmered from her ignorance, but the phone lifted his veil of rage. He saw the severity of her terror for the first time.

He released his hold on her fluffy blouse. Madelin crumbled to the ground. *He was in trouble.*

Quarterman may not have been a canary, but Madelin has had feathers for as long as he has known her. Nine years on the job down the toilet,

because he couldn't take a little ribbing from a *wee-minded* bigot.

Quick, what's the play? She is scared of black people, scared of me. I can use that.

He crouched and took hold of her fluffy blouse, lifting her off the ground. He disliked what he had to do, and when he smelled the fecal matter, he felt worse. He glared fire at her anyway.

“If I hear anything about this from anybody, I'll be back. And so mad, I don't know what might happen. Tell

me you understand. *I want to hear you say it.*”

Madelin Hanson eeked out a terrified ‘yes.’

The phone sputtered its last ring. Reg let her down easy and left, breaking into a brisk walk toward the train platform. He thought of Carol and what she would have said. Of Alan, and what his counsel would be. His last thought before changing direction, but not speed, for the liquor store was of Quarterman, and how he could never get that bad.

"REG, WHAT IT BE?"

"How's it hanging, Dukes?"

"Short and to the left."

"They have implants for that."

"Not on a cop's salary."

"Ain't that the truth."

Reg ended the conversation. He hadn't settled into his squeaky desk chair, before he heard his name again.

"Williams," Officer Dubinski called

from across the station.

Reg looked up to see Dubinski's head jutting out of Captain Freeman's office.

"Cap wants to see you."

Great, Reg thought, the man without an inside voice all over my hung over ear.

Captain Lawrence Freeman, a master at departmental politics, but a mean hombre when he had to be. Reg hoped Freeman wanted to see him for something simple, like an unsigned form from his last report. If

not, and he got the dreaded *Freeman Stomp*, the footprints would be stuck to his backside for days.

"Cap, you wanted to see me?" he asked from the doorway.

"Come in, have a seat, close the door!"

Damn. More than an unsigned form.

"No problem," he said, and did as told.

"Williams, how you holding up?"

"Could be better, could be worse, you know."

As most under his command were aware, Freeman did know. It was one of the Captain's greatest assets.

Despite the politics and stomping, he never forgot what it was like to be out in the streets. "*You don't root through the garbage every day without coming away with a smell,*" he always said.

"I received the six month report from Silverman. I wanted to see for myself how you were holding up."

"Doing the life dance, Cap, that's all."

"Silverman agrees you are doing

as well as can be expected, but raised some concerns.”

Uh-oh. Reg shifted a quick eye at the office blinds. *They're open. Good.* Everyone knew if the Captain was going to stomp on you, he closed the blinds.

"Concerns?"

"Silverman thinks there is something brewing underneath."

"Brewing?"

"Yes, *brewing*. Like sitting on a powder keg with a lit fuse. You could blow up or fizzle out. I told him if

that's the case, then half the guys on the force have *something brewing*. He said your situation has extenuating circumstances."

"You mean my wife," Reg said plainly.

"Yes, Williams, your wife!"

Freeman softened his tone. "By the way, I was sorry to hear about that. This *damn job* breaks up more marriages than I can count."

"Cap, I assure you—"

"Can it, Williams." His tone picked up again. "You think you are the first

cop to kill an innocent, or have his wife run out on him? This job is not for everyone, but those that it is for are expected to perform it vigilantly and *soberly*.”

Reg wanted to tell Freeman about his Animal surveillance. About the lead he and Reuben uncovered the day before. He wanted to say that he did take the job seriously, and nothing was brewing. It wouldn't do any good. He could see it in the Captain's eyes, in everyone's eyes. The only way he was going to earn

back their respect was to crack the Animal case.

Freeman said softly, "Anytime you need to talk or just blow off some steam, I'm here. The door swings both ways, and no, I don't mean my back door."

"Got it."

"Now get out of my office and tell Dubinski to get his bony ass back in here. I'm not finished with him yet."

"Sure thing, Cap, and thanks," Reg said, getting up to leave. Reuben was there to greet him at his desk.

"Detective Williams, as I live and breathe, you look like hell. Been praying to the gin gods again?"

"And got a hangover straight from the throne of Seagram's."

Reuben handed him a two pack of Advil.

"Looks like you have experience with the gods yourself, only you come prepared."

"Strange, isn't it, the gin and rum gods answer prayers the same way? What did El Capitan want? Was it *Keep up the good work*, or, *The door*

swings both ways? Hold it, let me guess, *The door swings both ways?*"

"Yeah, but I think he was coming on to me this time. I could swear he winked when he talked about his back door."

They both laughed.

"What do you say, we wait about fifteen minutes for your meds to kick in, and then brief Kowalski on the lead?"

Kowalski? Jackhole. That should be his first name instead of Adam. It should be Jackhole Kowalski. Reg

wasn't prejudice, but Kowalski had *earned* his nickname, *The Polish Prick*. He did anything to get ahead, including spreading rumors, case hampering, and brownnosing the brass until his color matched Reg's skin.

When the Prick and Detective Fred Derbins were both up for promotion two years back, Fred's case files began going missing. Unexplained flat tires, and extended delays on his background requests, plagued Detective Derbins for weeks

on end.

Captain Freeman told Derbins that it was a run of bad luck, and in the case of his backgrounds, system overload. The off-luck and overloaded systems lasted just long enough for Kowalski to secure the promotion. Then—*WALA*—all was right in Derbins' world again.

The flat tires and missing case files could have been bad luck, but when Kowalski was seen around town with the *hot little number* from records, people began to whisper. It

was Reg's *bad luck* that Adam Kowalski was the lead detective on the *Animal* task force.

Reg leaned forward in his squeaky chair, and motioned Reuben to the empty seat beside his desk.

"What if you and I worked the lead, and if we get anything solid, we take it to Kowalski? You saw how baked Quarterman was. He could have given us the address to the Russian Space Station."

"Thought you might feel that way. That's why I didn't go to him straight

off. One thing, though, we tell Freeman."

Reuben's eyes expressed firm sympathy. Reg knew it was the best compromise he was going to get. He didn't like it, but his partner was right. Telling Freeman would cover *their* back doors.

"Soon as I talk to him, we're on our way."

When Dubinski finally slumped out of Freeman's office, toting footprints on the back of his uniform, Reg hustled over.

"Got a second, Cap?"

"Swings both ways."

Reg smirked, remembering his conversation with Reuben.

"Cap, this lead fell into my lap concerning the Animal case, and I was wondering—"

"What did Kowalski say?"

"Kowalski and his task force are swamped with call-ins. Didn't want to throw one more on the pile. I was hoping to follow up myself. Me and Reuben, that is."

Freeman cocked an eye at him,

seeming to mull over the proposal, then said, "Alright, Williams, you're taking initiative, I like that. Work your case load until lunch, and then follow up on this lead. Do that every day for the next three days. Hand over whatever you find to the task force. I'll tell Rivers to take it, no questions asked."

As Reuben's eyes had earlier, Freeman's told Reg that it was the best deal he was going to get. All he had to do now was crack the case in three days. Hopefully, the *Boot Lady*

in Frankenmuth would come through
for him.

Part 3

HIM

"YOU SURE this is the right address?"

"Yep, 146 East Jefferson," Reuben said.

"A residence?"

"Twenty first century tweeting Reg. Some shrinks work out of their homes."

Reg shrugged. "Put in somewhere and let's find out what *Madame Foot* knows."

"Be right there," a woman's voice

responded to the doorbell, from inside the quaint, white Colonial home. When she opened up, the delightful aroma of blueberries rushed up Reg's nostrils. The Boot Lady wiped her hands on a blue-stained towel, slung over her shoulder.

"Excuse my mess. I'm making marmalade. Can I help you?"

Quarterman spoke the truth. She was no old lady out of a shoe. In the doorway stood a woman in her early forties, with neatly cropped Brunette

hair, naturally puckered lips, and the deepest marble-green eyes Reg had ever seen. Her skin was a light mocha-latte and looked like it would taste just as good.

"Are you Mrs. Boot ... I mean, Sandra Whitfield?"

"Who's asking?" she smiled, showing off large, pearly whites, stained a hint of blue.

"Detective Reginald Williams." He motioned to Reuben hovering next to him. "My partner, Detective Reuben Garcia. We're from Bay City, ma'am,

and were wondering if we might have a word?"

"Come in, and call me Sandy."

Sandy dropped them off in the living room and departed for the kitchen. She returned after a short delay, with the towel on her shoulder a deeper shade of blue.

"Have to keep an eye on marmalade, or it will burn easy."

Across from the leather sofa where she seated them, Sandy eased onto a matching love seat.

Reg said, "You didn't seem

surprised when we told you we were cops, or from Bay City."

"I was hoping you guys would come and see me, sooner rather than later."

"Why you?" Reuben raised an eyebrow.

"The Animal murders," she said in a way that implied *'Duh, what else?'*

Reg said, "I'm a little confused."

"I've been reading about the case in the papers for the past four months. At first, I wasn't sure. By the third one, I was confident they were

connected to the Artemisians."

"Come again?" Reg said.

"This will go a lot smoother if you act like Roger Quarterman sent you, and you know a little about what I am saying."

"How would you know who sent us, Mrs. Whitfield?" Reg asked.

She sighed deeply. "First, I asked you to call me Sandy. Second, Roger Quarterman was the only one who seemed to care about what happened that night. If anyone talked, it was him."

Reg said, "Granted, Sandy, but why wait for us to come to you?"

"As Him began to open up, a KIWI representative showed up at my door with a gun. I got the message."

Sandy swiped a hand on the towel over her shoulder, leaving a tiny blue streak in one of the few remaining white patches of cotton.

"I gave in, but with an addendum. I keep my mouth shut, *unless asked*. I think they relented knowing no one would come asking when they were done."

Reg heard the intimidation story from Quarterman. Nothing new there. But something caught his ear early in her explanation.

"Did you mean to say '*him*' began to open up, or was that a slip of the pronoun tongue?"

"I meant *Him*, or rather, Johnathan Fare. Sorry, after all those years of counseling, even I refer to John as *Him* sometimes."

"How's that?" Reg said.

Sandy's timid laugh tickled Reg's ears.

“Suppose I should explain.

Johnathan Fare was referred to me by the city when he was eleven years old. They had done all they could and gotten nowhere. I nearly screeched in horror when I first saw him. He was dirty, malnourished, and riddled with scars from head to toe. His blond hair was tangled down his back in a frizzy lion’s mane. He looked like something out of the wild.”

Sandy swiped a hand on the towel again. Reg wondered if she was wiping off blueberry residue, or

tensely reacting to recalled horror.

“He spent the first day sitting right where you are. He was curled in a ball, rocking back and forth, a post-traumatic glaze in his eyes. Every time I got inches from him, he would scream at the top of his lungs. *My God*, I thought, *how am I going to help him?*”

Reg said, “How *did* you help him?”

“I placed food at the foot of the sofa, and returned later for whatever wasn't eaten. I gave him a chocolate bar for a reward if he finished the

whole plate. He caught on quickly, and soon was getting one every day.”

Sandy wiped both hands this time. Reg was sure she wasn't aware she was doing it.

“Several months of this produced an observation. Every month, for a couple of days or so, Johnathan was more extroverted. It was as if he was someone else, or maybe there was someone else inside of him.”

Reuben beat Reg to the question. “Someone *inside* of him?”

“It didn't conform to the

definition of split personality, but there was definitely someone else there."

"Like a dominant one?" Reg said.

"Johnathan was part of a group of children who were abducted to, how shall I say ... service the needs of the cult."

Reg assumed as much after he heard Quarterman's tale from Alan, and then from Quarterman himself. It still assaulted his ears to hear it again.

"They killed the sacrifice at the

beginning of the lunar cycle. Drug euphoria and degradation of the children followed. They kept the poor souls in cages on the Head Mistress' property."

"Twenty four hours a day?"

Reuben asked.

Sandy nodded.

"And this non-definition split personality?" Reg said.

Sandy averted her eyes. Her chest rose and fell heavily. "The Head Mistress charged a fee for sex with the children outside of the ritual.

Since he was one of the fairer children, Johnathan was chosen a lot. The cult members would simply stroll up to his cage, point, and say, *I want him.*"

Reg's teeth clamped tighter. He didn't notice when Sandy wiped her hands again.

"This went on for the five years they held him captive. After a while, say, two years, he began shielding himself with Jeremy."

"Jeremy?" Reuben said
Sandy nodded.

"If Johnathan recessed and someone else emerged—"

"Not recessed, Detective Williams, *shielding himself*. Johnathan and Jeremy were cognizant, simultaneously."

"How is that possible?" Reuben said.

"Imagine a painting of a landscape, mountains, trees, and the horizon. Multiple personality disorder is painting a city on top of the landscape. Johnathan put in a few houses, some farms, and a couple of

windmills. The original then is not hidden, but accentuated."

"Why not let this Jeremy take the reins?" Reg said.

"There were aspects of Johnathan's captivity he liked. The only unbearable part was the sex."

Reg held up a forefinger. "Just so I'm clear, you're saying that when it came time for them to use him in that way, he *poofed* up Jeremy, and when it was over, he *poofed* him away again?"

"Yes."

"Why Jeremy? Why not Bob,

Harry, Sebastian?" Reg said.

"The woman who gave him birth told me Jeremy was the name of his imaginary friend as a child."

"Curious," Reuben said. "What part of his detention *didn't he mind* sticking around for?"

"The cutting and the blood.

Johnathan would imagine doing to his captors what they did to their victims. He couldn't, of course, and turned the abuse inward. The wounds that littered his body when I met him were self-inflicted."

The towel rested in Sandy's lap now. She made use of it.

"Also, they often gave him blood to drink. It ultimately became his favorite food. Thankfully, I achieved a measure of success in weaning him."

"How did Jeremy feel about the blood?"

"Indifferent, if I had to guess, Detective Garcia. He was there for the sex. Sadly, post release, it proved difficult for Johnathan to shut out his creation during the lunar cycle. By then, it was near an automated

function, like breathing.”

The towel fell from Sandy's lap. She picked it up, wiped her hands, and continued.

“What you might find interesting is that Jeremy was the smart one. I'd swear he was restricted to the left hemisphere of Johnathan's brain.”

Reuben shot up from the sofa and pointed at her. “This is *bullshit*. You knew who the killer was and did nothing. How do you sleep at night, lady?”

Sandy also bolted from her

loveseat. She got in Reuben's face. "Excuse me for wanting to live, so I *could* sleep at night. You *judgmental asshole*, I had to see my own counselor after talking to that kid for half the day. My marriage *didn't* survive the trip. Did you know that, detective? *Did you?*"

Even amidst the yelling, and all he had just heard, Reg couldn't help smile. He hadn't seen anyone stand up to his partner like this in some time. Reuben was more than twice her size, and she didn't give a damn.

"How many skeletons in your closet, *Detective Garcia*? A shit-load, I'll bet. By the way, I told you I knew the Artemisians were *involved*, not that I knew who killed those women."

"You just gave us the *prime suspect*. This Johnathan, or Jeremy, or *whoever*. He's got to be at least twenty by now."

"Johnathan couldn't be the killer," Sandy cried.

"Why is that, Doc? You tell me, why is that?"

"He is dead, you moron!"

14

REG TOOK his cue and came between them. He convinced Reuben to cool his jets outside, and focused his attention on the now sobbing psychiatrist. Sandy directed him to a bottle of Cognac in her kitchen cabinet. He fetched it and sat beside her on the loveseat.

"Forgive my partner. *This case* has tweaked more than a few noses."

"No reason for him to disrespect

me in my home," she said, after a second sip of Hennessy.

Reg allowed the cognac to do its work and finished what they came for.

"You lost it back there."

"I pictured little Maria and Isabella in those cages ... *and what if this twisted freak decides not to limit himself to prostitutes?* Gloria sometimes works the late shift with her cleaning company—"

"I get it," Reg stopped him before

he got riled up again, "but losing your cool didn't help. Moving on."

"Thanks for covering," Reuben said.

"Not the first time, and knowing you, won't be the last."

"Says *Casanova*. Did you get any info we can use, or was the writing I saw you doing in your pad her phone number?"

Reg craned his neck away from the passenger seat. "What have *you* been drinking, partner?"

"*Puh-leese*. I saw your face when

she opened the front door. And when I shot you a quick look in the middle of her tirade, you had heart shaped stars in your eyes."

"Now, now, Rube, I'm a married man."

"Which reminds me, remember I wanted to talk to you about something outside of Quarterman's place?"

"Uh-huh," Reg said, peeking cautiously at Reuben. He had a feeling he wouldn't like what was coming.

"Gloria is throwing a little dinner

party Saturday night. You're invited."

Reg made a mental note to trust his feelings more often. Gloria Garcia only threw *little dinner parties* to play matchmaker. Usually, between a fellow officer spiraling toward singular eternity, and one of Gloria's sundry girlfriends. The few he and Carol attended crashed and burned.

"I'll be straight with you because we're partners. Gloria is concerned you might be going over the edge, with Carol leaving and all."

"Gloria is concerned, huh?"

"Yes, and so am I. You haven't been out since she left, you use your spare nights to patrol alleys, and you've been doing a lot of praying lately, if you know what I mean."

It was 5:30 in the evening. The sun emitted its descending orange glow in the West. Reg cast a melancholy eye at the sinking ball of fire, and because of Garcia concerns, wondered anew if Carol was ever coming back.

"My birthday party last year, a woman named Abigail. You took one

look at her camouflage painted nails, and asked who let *G.I. Jane* in, remember?"

Reg did remember. He also recalled a husband overseas.

"Why would—?" The answer dawned on him before he finished the question. A husband overseas and a war going on were not conducive to lengthy unions.

"Aw, Rube, the woman's husband is *dead*. If he was alive last year, she can't be over it yet. She's probably still a basket case."

"It happened a week after the party, and no, she is not *still* a basket case. Thanks to Gloria, she is adjusting well, and finally ready to date again."

Reg raised a discerning eyebrow. "Put the sob stories together and hope they wipe each other's tears, is that it?"

"Two souls coming together at a time of need for them both can be a beautiful thing. You disagree?"

Wow, Reg thought. That last comment sounded like it came

straight from the mouth of Mrs. Gloria Garcia, *Matchmaker Extraordinaire*. Obviously, the kids weren't the only part of his new family exerting their influence on his partner.

"If I promise to think about it, can we drop it?"

"If you promise to stop by for a drink, even if you don't eat, we can drop it."

Reg sighed and nodded defeat.

"8 PM, Saturday night, it's a date ... er, I mean dinner," Reuben said.

"You said it right the first time. You strong-armed me into a date."

"Gloria will be thrilled. And now that the dirty work is over, what says our *Boot Lady*?"

"Nice to know that my sex life is not the only thing on your mind," Reg said.

Reuben laughed. Reg didn't.

"After a few sips of Hennessy, our Boot Lady said that around the time of his eighteenth birthday, Johnathan was killed in a traffic accident. It really shook her, because they had

been making excellent progress. With a medication regiment, she managed to eliminate Jeremy's influence."

"Eighteen, huh?" Reuben said.

"Yep, and coincidentally, eighteen is when her sessions with him would have ended. She refers clients to one of her colleagues at age of consent. However, it did strike her as odd, when she visited Johnathan's family to pay her respects, the mother had no idea he was dead."

"I was right. This guy could be our killer," Reuben said.

"Not so fast, *Sherlock*. She said she attended the funeral, and plain as day in the casket was Johnathan-slash-Jeremy Fare."

"Oh, well, I'll send her a gift basket."

"Not so fast, *Columbo*."

"Have you been watching the sleuth channel again?" Reuben said.

"Nope, just like watching you squirm."

Reg laughed. Reuben didn't.

"She also said that a year after Johnathan's death, a doctor *C. Hilliard*,

if I am remembering the name correctly, called her for any files she might have on Fare."

"How does that prove me right or wrong?" Reuben said.

Reg swerved the SUV onto the Interstate entrance ramp. "Doesn't either way, but I'm not sure I buy Hilliard's story."

Reuben propped an elbow on the passenger door frame. He leaned his cheek into his fist. "Hmpf. Sounds pretty straight forward to me."

"You said it yourself, Rube, in your

own not-so-subtle way. Johnathan is the *perfect suspect*."

"Yeah, Reg, but unless you are suggesting some type of wraith killer, our *perfect suspect* doesn't fit. What am I missing?"

"The sleuth channel, probably. But, seriously, I would like to have a word with this *Dr. Hilliard*."

A word indeed, Reg thought, *and a look into Hilliard's eyes*. His working theory was that KIWI didn't have the killing gene. The cover up gene, for sure, every conglomerate had one of

those—*Cold Hard Cash*.

But if you wanted someone dead, you killed them. You didn't pay them to keep quiet, or scare them away from therapy. And you certainly didn't give in to a hundred and thirty pound children's specialist, who threatened to expose you if anyone came asking.

Johnathan himself was the convincer. He was the biggest threat to the cover-up. Why let him be processed through the system and live to almost eighteen?

Reg admittedly had no counter for the funeral, but that is why it was called a working theory. He needed to talk to Hilliard, get a look into his eyes, and he needed to do it soon. There were only two days left until he had to hand over what he knew to *Prick Kowalski*.

HIM WATCHED the man behind the counter spreading red paste onto the dough.

"More sauce, please," Him said, as the pie-maker reached for the mozzarella. Him wanted to keep watching the *food-blood* being spread. It didn't make the pizza taste any better, it was just his favorite part of the making process. He stood beside the counter, admiring every swirl

before the cheese went on. When the dough was saturated to his satisfaction, he zig-zagged tables to one in the corner of the shop, to wait for his dinner.

The brass bell affixed to the parlor door jingled. A woman that reminded Him of Dr. Whitfield strolled in. She had the same complexion and similar green eyes, but the forehead, nose, and hair were wrong. The forehead was flatter, the nose broader, and the hair was in braids, snaked across her scalp.

Him missed Dr. Whitfield, and the chocolate bars she gave. The store on the corner sold chocolate bars. It wasn't the same. Whitfield's bars tasted better. Hilliard tried to give chocolate bars. Him did not want them. Hilliard bars were not Whitfield bars. Nobody's bars were Whitfield bars. *Too bad she was dead.* It would be better to be with her than Hilliard. Whitfield never changed his medication. Whitfield never made him work. Whitfield was prettier.

That is why when Hilliard said to

get a doll, he picked one that looked as close to Dr. Whitfield as possible. But even though the doll looked like her, Whitfield was not the one in his thoughts when he was cutting it. His mother, Marlene, was.

Marlene was in his thoughts anytime there was cutting. It was her fault Him did not think right. It was her fault Him was in the cage. It was her fault Him had no friends. It might even be her fault Whitfield was dead.

“Want something to drink with your order?” The pie-maker called

from the front of the shop.

Him looked past the fake Whitfield, to the assortment of beverages in the cooler.

“Hawaiian Punch, the big one.”

Him took his pie and drink and left the pizza shop. He stepped off the curb cradling his bounty, and was nearly hit by a fast moving SUV.

“What the—you see that idiot?” Reuben said.

“Takes all kinds, brother, takes all kinds. Hey, he just came from Grampa Tony’s. I could go for a pie. You?”

"No can do, *compadre*. Gloria has my favorite waiting, homemade spaghetti and meatballs. *Spanish style*. We can swing by for you, though."

"Nah," Reg said, and spied for a place to pull over, "I'll get out and double back."

"How are you getting home?"

"Do you want to see your wife and kids and *Spanish style* meatballs, or worry about a Bay City officer, armed with a gun, making his way home?"

Reg slid the CRV into a vacant

corner space on the next block, and got out. Reuben clamored his 6'2 mass into the driver's seat.

"*Manana, player*, and remember, Saturday night, eight o'clock."

"As if you would let me forget."

"One love, baby," Reuben said, as the CRV reentered traffic, "*One love.*"

A pie, a bus, and a brown bag stop later, Reg was tucked in his apartment for the night. He locked his glock and badge in the bedside nightstand, before stripping down for a shower. The symbols of his

profession had made his wife nervous. Keeping to the ritual of locking them away every night, even though she was gone, was his way of keeping hope alive.

As the pelting waterfall assaulted his body, Reg smiled grateful at Carol talking him into the Deluxe Massage shower head.

“Waste of money,” he’d told her, *“a shower is a shower.”*

He ate those words with every soothing droplet which bored into his skin. In the midst of his meal, and

steam rising all around him, the bane of his mental existence returned. *Is Carol gone forever?*

The train of thought led him onto the tracks of their last argument. Though the accidental shooting had been a month behind them, it reinforced his wife's prejudice against police work. His increased drinking habits in those thirty days did nothing to assuage her fears. An inevitable showdown, ever since the incident with Ruben, when she thought he was dead, boiled over the

rim of the pot that night.

“It’s rough right now,” he tried to reassure her, “but things will get better. We discussed that you would have these feelings, and agreed to—”

“I didn’t agree to have a family, and for my kids to grow up without a father. It’s not fair, Reginald. Not to mention I would be without you, too. There are other jobs besides being a cop.”

It went on like that for the whole evening. He finally snapped and went out for a drink to clear his head.

When he returned after midnight she was asleep. The next morning he slipped out without rousing her. She was gone when he got home from work late that night.

Reg quit reminiscing and palmed the Dove bar from the soap tray. He couldn't let Carol continue to dominate his thoughts. Reuben was wrong, but that didn't mean he wasn't right. Certain needs were building, and dating was dating, not marriage. He would let this Abigail know he wasn't looking for anything serious.

He wouldn't let on, however, that he would drop her faster than Usain Bolt could run, if his wife came back to him. Revealing that little fact would put a damper on his horizontal aspirations.

He flipped off the spigots, *whooshed* the shower curtain aside, and pat himself dry with the towel draped over the bathroom sink.

None of it really mattered. He wouldn't like Abigail anyway. She wasn't Carol.

“IF YOU make me run, I'm not going to be happy when I catch you,” Reg yelled in vain, then took off after his suspect.

“Got your back, partner,” Reuben said. He hopped in their unmarked unit.

Reg sidestepped a rotund, spindly-legged elderly woman, pushing a shopping cart. He picked up his stride again. The plan was to

wrap up his caseload early, and get a jump on tracking the Animal leads to ground. Benny Giovanni was mucking up the works.

“Arf! Arf!”

A Chihuahua tied to a fire hydrant nipped at his heels.

Feisty little critter.

Reg was gaining on a suspect whose reason for running eluded him. A simple approach, to ask a few simple questions, had set him off. Benny ‘*The Hustler*’ Giovanni would pay for making him sweat out his

good shirt. A shirt Carol bought him last year, along with silver cufflinks and cashmere socks, as incentive to accompany her on a visit to his mother-in-law's. Mixed feelings, but Benny would still pay.

His suspect cut into *Dark Poet Cleaners*.

Why would anyone name a cleaning service 'Dark Poet?' Did you get a free poem with every bill over \$20?

Reg didn't know, considering until that moment, he had never been

inside. He burst in panting like the Chihuahua he passed. A bandana-clad hipster behind the counter pointed a gnarled finger toward the back of his store.

Reg leapt the counter and barreled through a double line of clothes, hanging on standing racks. The plastic blouse around one of the garments latched onto him. Freshly laundered, ready for pick-up apparel went sprawling, twisting, and tumbling to the ground. He ripped away the dragging garment snagged

on his silver cufflink, and ran on.

"Sorry," he yelled over his shoulder.

Benny, I swear, when I catch you...

He slashed through the rear door and eyeballed the grimy backstreet for his suspect. He didn't have to look far. At the end of the alley, where it let out into the street, Benny was stretched out on the pavement being handcuffed by Reuben.

Reg wheezed his way over and pulled out the handkerchief his wife always made him carry.

"I do all the work and you get the collar?"

"Traffic is a bitch at this hour," Reuben grinned. His large teeth were set inside an equally large mouth.

"Maybe, but I don't see you dripping like a faucet."

"You're the fast one. I let you do your thing."

"Yeah, well, next time we'll see what you got."

Reg wedged his foot between Benny Giovanni and the ground. He flipped him onto his back. The onset

of swelling in their runner's split lip meant that Reuben had already given him the, '*don't make me chase you again,*' speech.

"This had better be good, Benny."

"I got unpaid child support."

"*Pffft.* You will have a hell of a time paying it behind bars." Reg yanked him to his feet. "And you owe me one dry cleaned shirt."

REG'S FINGERS pinched the ignition key in his four year old Lincoln. He looked up at Reuben, standing beside the car with his hands in his pockets.

"Are you sure you don't want to come with?"

Reuben shook his head. "I'm doing lunch with Gloria and the kids at the mall."

"Cool. I'll call if anything comes up."

"Oh, Reg?"

"Yeah?"

"Saturday night—"

"Eight O'clock, date with death, I know. Thank the gin and rum gods it's only Thursday."

The Town Car choked, sputtered, and fired up.

"You need to get that looked at," Reuben yelled over the engine noise.

"Maybe Abigail knows someone. I'll ask her Saturday night. Later Gator."

Reg lurched out of his department

parking space and returned to his working theory. It was 2:00PM. If his theory led anywhere now, he would have to hump late into the evening. *I'm gonna remember that, Benny,* he thought.

He fished his note pad from his jacket and saw that Dr. Hilliard's address resided on the border between Frankenmuth and Bay City. Since his shotgun was having family time, Reg sucked his teeth and dusted off the GPS from the glove compartment. The small electronic

device always got him to his destination with a fair amount of accuracy, but using it made him feel like a child with a coloring book. He had to stay within the electronic-road lines.

Driving should be a free, uninhibited experience. One should allow for clear fall days and brisk wind-fairies, to infuse primal roaming instincts with a yearning for the wild blue yonder. Much like ancestors of old, Reg thought, in the days when they stomped the African

plains. They ruled the Serengeti mounted atop regal grey beasts embellished with majestic tusks of ivory.

A horn blared behind the Town Car.

"Dude, some of us have places to go!"

Reg returned to his own century. He stuck the coloring book to its Velcro perch on the dashboard, and hit the gas.

The nurse seated behind the

reception desk wore a bee-hive hairdo beneath a tiny, white nurse's cap. Reg kept a smirk in check at the unusual sight.

"I'm here to see Dr. Curtis Hilliard."

"One moment," the nurse said. She answered the phone ringing to life in front of her. "*Dori Grey Behavioral Center*, may I help you?"

His subdued smirk widened, at the miniature white ship riding a wave of hair. She ended her phone call. He tightened his lips.

"You were saying, sir?"

"I was hoping to speak with Dr. Hilliard?"

"Do you have an appointment?"

"No, but—"

"Dr. Hilliard sees patients by appointment only."

"I'm a detective with the Bay City Police Department."

"I see," she said, and eyed him as if he were the one with the outdated clump of hair on his head. "He is with a patient. If you're willing to wait, I'll inform him you are here."

Reg settled into a soft-backed chair in the waiting area. The Dori Grey Behavioral Center afforded you what a private institution was supposed to. Privacy, immaculate white walls, and aromatic fresheners that concealed the odors of patient care. Dori Grey lacked the trademarks of its inner-city public cousins. A string of tired buildings rife with medicinal stench, and partly robed patients, wandering the halls.

Another feature that no self-respecting, public institution would

be caught dead harboring, was silk screen reproductions of famous artists. Draping the pristine Doris Grey walls were Gauguin's Nafea Faa Ipoipo, Van Gogh's Starry Night, and Whistler's Mother. Whistler hung behind the nurse's station, partially obstructed by an ocean of beehive waves.

Reg didn't recognize the other mimeographs hung in the poshest crazy-house he'd ever been in. To keep his enthusiast spirits up, he clung to those he did.

An office door adjacent to Whistler's Mother swung open. A blond, blue eyed man, wearing LEVI's and a Members Only jacket, exited. Reg's immediate thought was '*male runway model.*'

Blond hair! Blue eyes! Model! Didn't Dr. Whitfield go on about how handsome Johnathan Fare was? It was why he was picked so often, she'd said. Could this be him, or rather, Him?

The handsome stranger fit the part, in both age and appearance. But so had two others on the drive there,

including the guy who beeped Reg away from the African Plains.

What are the odds of running into the Animal in some obscure doctor's office? About as likely as hitting the lottery in every state, on the same day, he thought. Besides, he still didn't know if Johnathan Fare was his man, or if his reach of a suspect even resided among the living.

A shorter, plump man, with horn-rimmed specs and a three piece suit wrapped around his belly bulge, emerged from behind the runway

model. He spoke to the receptionist.

"Akira, hold my calls a while longer. I have some files to look over and don't wish to be disturbed."

"Certainly, Doctor Hilliard, but there is someone here to see you."

"Oh? I've no appointments scheduled."

Akira pointed at Reg. "This gentleman here."

"Dr. Hilliard," Reg stood to greet him, "Detective Reginald Williams of the Bay City Police Department. Might I have a word?"

Reg extended his hand for a shake. He towered over Hilliard by at least three inches. The doctor's fingers were stubby, his palm clammy, and his expression puzzled. Reg swiped his hand on the back of his trouser leg after letting go.

"Is this about those building permits on my South Side properties?"

"No, Dr. Hilliard, this has nothing to do with building permits. Can we talk in your office?"

Hilliard gave him a dubious once

over, and then extended an arm toward his office. So far, Reg's working theory was taking the day off. The doctor wasn't nervous or fidgety, just confused, as anyone would be if the police showed up at their door, unannounced.

Reg accepted the invitation and strolled into a picturesque cliché. The aroma of books emanated from the shelves of a pine bookcase, lining the right wall. It reminded him of his high school library. A place he would have frequented more often, if the girls he

chased back then were smarter, *or if he were*. The large panel window, behind a modest Oak desk, bathed the doctor's spacious office in late afternoon sunlight. As he neared the illustrious L-shaped couch, rooted in the middle of the room, the scent of fine leather replaced that of book bindings. An atmospheric fern was nestled in a corner by the window.

Flush against the wall to his left, stood the only unusual feature in the room. *A life-sized replica of Newton's Balls*. Reg's distorted reflection in the

shiny, silver orbs, made its way to the brown leather wingback chair, facing Hilliard's desk. The doctor sat when he did, and spoke first.

"If this is not about building permits, then what?"

"Dr. Sandra Whitfield," he said quickly, hoping to get a reaction.

"Afraid I am not familiar with that name."

"Sorry, Doc, thought you might be. She is a children's specialist out of Frankenmuth."

"I assume by that you mean

therapist?"

"Her distinction is treating traumatized children."

"Sorry, still never heard of her," Hilliard said with a straight face.

"Perhaps it was another Dr. Hilliard, at another Dori Grey Behavioral Center, who she said called her about some files." Reg saw a tick of surprise in the doctor's eyes, or maybe an awkward blink, he couldn't be sure. "Got it written down somewhere, Doc?"

"I'll check."

Hilliard vacated his Eames chair for a large filing cabinet beside the fern. He fingered through a thick row of manila folders, pulled one out, and returned to his desk.

"Let's see, Sandra Whitfield. Ah, yes, here we are. Forgive me, detective, it was so long ago."

"You remember Mrs. Whitfield, and the patient you called about?"

"Looking at it now, yes. I was conducting a study on schizophrenia and multiple personality disorders. I heard about a patient she once had

under her care, so I phoned to see if she would share her files."

"How is that, Doc?"

"What?"

"That you came to hear about this patient of hers?"

Hilliard glanced up at Reg over his horn-rimmed glasses. He pulled at his starched collar, as if the fit were suddenly too tight.

"Doc?"

"Let me see here," he said, shuffling papers on his desk.

He's fidgeting. The theory might

come to work after all. It didn't mean Johnathan was alive, but the main reason he'd come to see Hilliard, was for the answer to the question he'd just asked. How did Dr. Curtis Hilliard find out about Johnathan Fare, when he wasn't in the loop to begin with?

Reg smiled at the tiny bubbles of sweat breaking out on Hilliard's forehead. The doctor looked as nervous as a man about to be audited for the first time.

"Doc?"

"Funny thing," Hilliard said, still

shuffling papers, "I don't seem to have recorded how I heard about her patient."

Reg got up and strolled over to the life-sized replica of Newton's balls.

"Whitfield's patient was a very unique case. Seems to me you would remember how you heard about him, even if you didn't write it down." Reg smoothed a hand across one of the enormous silver orbs.

"Well, detective, we *are* talking about some time ago. There are days I can't remember my own birthday.

Heh-heh, you know what I mean."

Hilliard fingered his collar again.

"Maybe you overlooked it." Reg stepped toward him and reached for the file. "Let me try. Two heads are better than one, right?"

"I can't." Hilliard rose and clamped the file to his chest. "Doctor patient confidentiality."

He had a day and a half to get a break in the case. No way was some stuffed shirt, horn-rimmed, psycho-babbler, about to spit the hook and wriggle free. This case reeked.

Everyone involved stunk of the odor. The Artemisians got away with abusing and murdering children, and the rest aided in the cover-up. He was getting that name out of Hilliard the Malcolm X way if he had to—*By Any Means Necessary*.

"Oh, you're going to tell me a name, Doc. If not ..." Reg removed the glock from his shoulder holster. He clunked it, and his badge, down on Hilliard's Oak desk. "... you and I are going to have a very serious conversation. Get my *drift*?"

Hilliard's eyes popped wide. He swallowed hard. "I ... I see."

Once Reg saw that the file was fake, filled with hospital invoices, he knew his working theory had punched the clock. He planted his fists on the sitting doctor's desk.

"Where is he, Doc?"

Hilliard sighed. "Take a seat and I will tell you what I know."

"I'm done taking seats on this one. Tell me what you know, before I really lose my temper."

"No." Hilliard's eyes met his. "I

will tell it my way. You can beat me to a bloody pulp, but that won't get you the information."

Reg wanted to backslap the smug out of him. He wanted to pick up his glock, cock it, and place a bullet through the bridge of Hilliard's nose. He grit his teeth under the thought, as the glock settled back into its holster. He latched his badge to his belt and grudgingly took a seat.

"Make it good and quick, Doc, or we are going to start talking about bloody pulps again."

"There is no need to continue to threaten me. I said I would cooperate. *Crikey, a lot of good silicone mannequins and fake funerals accomplished.*"

"What's that?" Reg said.

Hilliard's chest and gaze fell. He slumped in his chair. "Johnathan Fare is supposed to be dead to everyone but me. They faked his death and buried a silicone mannequin. It was all very convincing, they said."

Reg nodded slowly. He marked another victory for a theory, like the

Donna Summer song, that was working hard for its money.

"You have to understand, I had no idea who Johnathan was when he was referred to me."

"Referred to you by whom?
KIWI?"

Hilliard looked up. "If you are familiar with other aspects of the Fare case, it will make this a lot easier. Are you?"

Reg stared at him grimly, not saying a word. He wondered if the receptionist got a good enough look

to pick him out of a lineup.

The doctor attended to his self-tightening collar. "Okay then, let's assume we're on the same page. I got a call from a KIWI representative, using the former Mayor as a reference. The caller asked if I would be willing to take on a client."

"Why use the Mayor as a reference?"

"During his first run for office, I discreetly treated Mayor Swartz's sixteen year old son. Substance abuse and depression, the norm for well-to-

do teenage rebels. If any of his son's troubles leaked, it would have hurt his chances in the election. They didn't. For that, KIWI felt I was right for the Fare case."

"Go on."

"When Johnathan first came to me it was difficult. He was used to Dr. Whitfield's mothering approach. So, in the same way KIWI led Whitfield, and others, to believe Johnathan had died in an accident, I told him *she* was dead. Over time he accepted it, but I needed more insight, and phoned the

good doctor for her files."

"Why? You just said he accepted Whitfield's death."

"He came to accept it in a way, yes, but began cutting and shutting down in session. After reading how his self-mutilation stemmed from watching the cult slaughter their victims, I suggested we find him a life-sized doll. A temporary measure, until we could get him to stop cutting altogether."

Reg entered the *State of Disbelief*, a place he frequented so often lately,

he wondered if the capitol was
Stunning.

"You allowed a mentally ill,
potentially homicidal, patient to get a
human-sized representative, and cut
and slice on it as he pleased?"

"I wouldn't put it in those words."

Reg sprung from his wingback
chair and turned away, to keep from
re-arranging Hilliard's dental work.
He paced the room with his right
hand cupped over his forehead, his
left on his hip.

"It didn't occur to you, Doctor,

that maybe, *just maybe*, he would tire of the doll and want a *live subject*?"

"There were risks, but the benefits far outweighed—"

"Your risks may have gotten four women killed, and God knows how many others. Have you been reading the papers, Doc?"

Hilliard stood in heated defiance of his own. "If you are suggesting I am somehow indirectly responsible for these Animal slayings, I will have you know—"

"No," Reg shot a stern finger of

blame at him, "if Johnathan Fare is the killer, you are *directly* responsible."

"Crikey, no way—"

"Come on, *man*." Reg waved a backhand of disgust. He wished it could have been across the doctor's temple, instead of from across the room. "You read about those women being murdered, and how they were sliced and hog tied, and you never once connected it to your *nutcase* of a client?"

"There were minor similarities,

but nothing that would warrant—"

"Want to know why you didn't connect the dots? Because, if you did, those fat checks from KIWI would stop coming. Then your client would be in jail, and you and your KIWI representative on the run."

"I have a daughter of my own, you know, and besides, there was no evidence released, no clues to the identity of this Animal, no description, no nothing."

Reg froze mid-pace. Hilliard had him there. The lack of evidence in the

case was a consistent source of aggravation. But he refused to believe Hilliard had no idea his client may have been a serial killer.

"Alright, Doc, let's say you've been gallivanting around with blinders on these past couple of months. Did anything about your treatment change, say, four months ago?"

"Don't know off hand. I would have to check the file."

Hilliard penguined his portly frame over to the same cabinet that produced the fake file, extracted a

genuine one, and returned to his chair.

Not wanting to miss a word, Reg hulked over the doctor's desk.

"Four months ago? Hmm, here we are, five months ago I changed his medication."

Reg picked up Hilliard's copy of the DSM-IV off his desk, and whacked him across the left side of his head with it.

Hilliard yelped from his chair and thudded to the floor. He landed sprawled on his back. Reg straddled

him, the DSM-IV still clutched in his hands.

"Bullshit, Doc. You should have suspected *something*. One more question. Right answer, I leave you alone. Wrong one, I hit you again."

"What are you—?"

"*Shut up.*" Reg gripped the heavy tome on both ends. He raised it overhead. "What color was Fare's doll?"

"I had him spray paint it red. *Happy now?*"

"Yep, but you won't be, because

that was the *wrong answer*."

Reg slammed the book on Hilliard's face. The doctor's head double-dribbled the floor, knocking him cold. Reg scooped up the Fare file, and hurried past Whistler and the Beehive, out of the facility.

He heard Akira's scream from the Dori Grey parking lot, and assumed she had found her boss stretched out on his office floor. When Hilliard regains his senses, his KIWI contact will be his first call. Reg's day and a half just got squeezed to—*get to Fare*

before they do.

Part 4

The Hunt

THE TOWN CAR'S odometer climbed to 70mph. As he weaved through Interstate traffic, Reg barked into the dashboard mounted cell phone.

"I've been staking out the city for this guy, and he was right under my nose."

"You sure Fare is our man?"

"As sure as I was in the Darber case that the husband did it. One problem, though."

"What?"

"Get to him before KIWI does."

"Don't they already know where he is?"

"Let's just say I had to creatively maneuver some obstacles to get the information."

Reuben understood. Once upon a time, he creatively maneuvered a few obstacles himself. "How far out are you?"

"Twenty minutes."

"Great work, Reg, and don't worry, until we are ironclad, I'll keep the lid

on. I know you want your redemption."

Reg smirked, thinking about Reuben being a good man again. He gave him the address.

"That *is* close to home."

"Rube?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks."

"De nada, partner, just remember, Saturday night—"

"Yeah, yeah, meet you at the quarterback, Senor Ballbuster."

Reg smiled again, and turned his

right blinker on for a pass. His fleeting grin stretched taut when his mind returned to the Animal.

Johnathan Fare was as much a victim as those he victimized. Dr. Whitfield's case file read like a B-movie horror script. According to what he remembers, Fare wasn't kidnapped at all, his mother sold him to the Artemisians. *Sold him!*

Reg *zoomed* the Town Car around a Hyundai hatchback, and visited his favorite state again.

If it was true, and Johnathan's

mother did sell him to the cult, then Lilith Fare's death in a home invasion was well deserved. According to Hilliard's notes, it happened six months after Johnathan arrived on his doorstep. That would have made it *before* he called Whitfield for her files.

Reg glanced at the dashboard clock—5:30PM—and wondered if Fare had anything to do with his own mother's death. *Probably not, or the killings would have started then, instead of four months ago. Fate just*

stepped in and righted a wrong with a vengeance.

He cursed under his breath when he saw a glut of rush hour traffic ahead. He would have to call Reuben back and tell him forty five minutes.

"READY?" Reuben said.

"For four months now. Ain't nothing to it, but to do it." Reg pounded on the hard wood door of the address uncovered from the stolen file. No answer. He knocked again, calling out, "*Bay City Police. Open up.*"

A mum house persisted. He gave Reuben the nod to check around back.

Reg recognized the home's

architectural design, as part of the Mayor's *'Bring the Suburbs to the City'* campaign, a few years back. Abutting two story homes, each with a large artificial patch of grass in its backyard, built smack in the middle of North Bangor, Reg's neighborhood. *It was the stupidest idea he had ever heard of.*

“If people want to live in the suburbs, they move to the suburbs,” he remembered telling Carol. “Why would anyone pay for the comfort of a house, to get the noise of the city?”

It didn't make sense to him, which, of course, meant Carol loved the idea. They were yin and yang when it came to things like that. And like the yin and yang symbols, they balanced each other out.

Reg knocked again. "*Bay City Police.*"

Him didn't think much of the knocking noise at first. People visited Raul and his wife all the time, but never bothered the basement area. There were good feelings toward

Raul. He worked at the health center and would always have a smile, and sometimes even a chocolate bar.

Hilliard probably told Raul of his like for chocolate.

But when a deep voice said—“*Bay City Police*”—Him freaked out.

In the three years Him had lived there, the cops never came to the door. *What did this mean? What do they want?* Him’s thoughts were abuzz like a hive, same as the hive he saw on the nature channel the night before. His brain moved from Hilliard

and consequence sessions, to the Artemisians and the cage; to the women Jeremy made them hurt, to the Artemisians and the cage; to no more pizza and chocolate, to the Artemisians and the cage.

Why did he listen to Jeremy? *Why?* *Why?* Him's pupils bounced around like pinballs in eye socket bumpers. The shaking and shuttering came next, followed by uncontrollable spasms of cold fear. The cage was all consuming in his thoughts. The cage and the *nasty sex*.

"It's not fair. I was going to quit. The last one was the last one. Him was going to tell Jeremy no more—"

{Will you shut up? This is no time for your little baby ramblings,} the voice shouted inside his head.

"Jeremy? What are you doing here?"

{Saving your ass. Snap your trap and let me think.}

"No, Jeremy. Him will not listen anymore. You said we wouldn't get caught, and now cops are banging upstairs. You said you knew

everything to do right, and now cops are banging upstairs. You said they would never know, and now—"

Johnathan Fare's balled right fist swung through the air and punched him in the nose. He *'thwapped'* on the hard basement floor like a slab of raw meat on the butcher's counter.

{I said shut up, Johnnie, dammit. I'm trying to think.}

Him lay on the floor with a bloody nose. He did not like the words in his head. There was no like for being called Johnnie, and no like for Jeremy

anymore. Jeremy was always mad, always punching him for something that was said. Him would like to be the one punching Jeremy for once.

{Stupid, didn't I protect you from the men who wanted to stab you with their meat sticks? And the women who wanted to ride you like a fucking thoroughbred in the Belmont Stakes?}

"Yes," Him garbled through the blood bubble that popped over his mouth.

*{This is no different. Get up and wipe your nose, or you **will be** in the*

cage again, and this time, I won't be there to protect you. Remember how Whitfield took me away?}

"I remember," Him garbled again, wishing Whitfield were there now.

{Then get up, Johnnie boy, and let's get moving.}

Johnathan rose unsteadily and stumbled to the bathroom for a towel. He weaved behind him a spotted red trail on the finished, grey basement floor.

There was no choice for Him. Jeremy was in charge. That is the way

it was when he was around. It wasn't always that way. There was control over Jeremy at first. Him could make Jeremy come and go whenever was needed. But the more Him needed, the stronger Jeremy became.

He lifted a towel from the rack to wipe his nose.

{Wet it first, stupid.}

Johnathan wet the towel under the faucet and cleaned himself.

"How are we going to get out of this, Jeremy? The cops are still knocking. They will be down here

soon."

*{They **are** still knocking, but has anyone answered?}*

Johnathan quickly finished with the towel. He turned off the water and strained his ears. He could hear the cops banging. They were shouting about having a word with whoever was inside the house. No one answered them.

{See? Raul isn't home, and his wife is probably out shopping. They will have to come back another time. Meanwhile, Hilliard will move us

somewhere else.}

What they heard next was no knock, but a loud crash, and then splintering wood.

Reuben heard the same noise from his rear position and sprinted for the front of the house. He arrived in time to block his partner from entering the residence.

"We don't have a warrant."

Reg stared through Reuben and into the great beyond. In the year and a half he had been Reuben's partner,

he had no reason to want to hurt him, until now.

"If you want this to stick, we have to do it *by the book*," Reuben said.

"That means getting a warrant for the premises."

Reg knew he was right. *Hell, everyone was right.* Carol was right for leaving him. Madelin was right for not wanting her daughter to marry him. Scallywag woman was right, and he was a scruffy cop. His sister was right too, because he was on the edge of the abyss, standing on a banana peel.

He didn't care anymore.

"Rube, you're a good man, but get out of my way. If that bastard is in there hiding like I think he is, I'm going in after him."

Ever since the bullet meant for a gang member, took an honest man away from his family, he cared less and less. Carol saw it and tried to save him. He should have listened.

"This is *crazy*. You want to groundhog your career for *this guy*? I want him badly as you, but this is not the way." Reuben probed deeper into

cold, silent eyes. “Holy—! You’re not going in to bring him out, you’re going in to kill him, aren't you?”

Reg’s unapologetic stare spoke for him.

“Oh, man. This is not going to bring Carol back, and it sure as hell ain’t gonna make you righteous again.”

“Maybe, but it’ll make me feel good.”

“Let’s slow down a minute here, Reg. *Slow down.*”

“The Animal dies, Rube. It’s a win-

win. Read the file. I'll get to feel good about taking out a monster, and he will never see the inside of a cage again."

"Just like that? Blam and he's dead. When did this happen?" Reuben said.

"Somewhere between knocking on the door and kicking it in, I knew he had to die. And I have to be the one to do it," Reg said.

"Then two people will die, cause you have to get through me first." Reuben backed up a step, filling the

doorway with his bulk.

Reg stared him down a moment, then said, “You’re right, Rube, I’m sorry. Don’t know what I was thinking.”

“That’s more like it.” Reuben relaxed his stance. “Don’t worry, partner. If he’s inside, he won’t get past us.”

“I hear you. Hey, why don’t you go call it in, and I’ll play doorman. Make sure nobody gets in or out,” Reg said.

Reuben’s legs stiffened again. His eyes did the same. “You fake me left

and then go right, is that it, partner?
Not cool, Reg.”

They exchanged grim stares. A clatter of empty metal garbage cans, coming from the rear of the house, ended the standoff. Detective partners bolted around a bed of hydrangea bushes. They descended on the backyard in time to see their prime suspect hurtling a property fence.

“Johnathan Fare. Bay City Police. Stop right there,” Reg called after him.

"I'm going for the car. Do your thing." Reuben bailed for the sedan parked in front of the house.

Reg backed up a step, took a running start, and vaulted the waist-high divide after the Animal. *Nothing else has been easy, why should this be any different?* He jumped two more 'Bring the Suburbs to the City' fences, but hadn't gained a step on his suspect.

In chasing down Benny Giovanni, Reg felt the pain of his slack workouts. Carol's absence had

zapped him of physical fitness enthusiasm. He felt more pain now. Benny didn't jump any fences, or trudge through fake, wet mush-grass, in his getaway. If he had, he might still be free.

He breathed heavy. Sweat exploded onto his brow. With every step, he felt the effects of too many gin soaked nights. By the fourth fence he was winded. There were three fences left to hurdle, before the yards gave way to open neighborhood. Fare was already over two of them. Reg

sucked in a mound of air and picked up his pace. He had a feeling Reuben wasn't going to save him on this one.

Him wanted to scream. *How did they find Raul's place? How could they know the name?* Johnathan Fare jumped over the last backyard fence leading to the street. He narrowly avoided crushing a stray cat beneath muddy heels. Him didn't know where they were running. Jeremy was leading the way.

{Across the street. Fire escape. See

Johnnie boy climb.}

Too concerned about the impending cage to care if he was hit, Him raced into the middle of traffic.

Reuben swerved to avoid hitting him, and plowed into a fire hydrant. His head bounced off the steering wheel, like a basketball off the famed parquet of Boston Garden.

Reg hopped the last fence. He gulped his second wind and paused to have a look around. He saw water blasting thirty feet into the air from

the busted hydrant. Reuben sat slumped behind the wheel of the smashed-in sedan, holding his head. He spotted Fare on the opposite side of the street, leaping for the bottom rung of a fire escape ladder.

Quickly, and without second thought, Reg made the choice that had to be made. He scooted through the falling water and pulled Reuben away from the deluge. He sat him propped against an adjacent building.

"Look at me." He shook him by the shoulders. "Are you going to be okay?"

Can I leave you here?"

"Ugh."

"Fare is getting away."

Reuben's head bobbed a sleeper's nod. "Go after him," he mumbled into his chest.

Reg grabbed the nearest passerby he could find, a redheaded teenager all of 100 pounds.

"You got a cell phone?"

"What the hell? Let go of me."

"I'm a police officer." He showed her the badge on his hip, and pointed at Reuben. "So is he. Call 911 and say

officer down. Understand?"

"Yeah, okay, whatever."

He expressed the importance of the call one last time, and turned to see Fare climbing onto the roof. Reg galloped after him.

{ACROSS THE ROOFTOPS.}

Jeremy pointed, Him acknowledged, and Johnathan made a running jump to the next building. He cleared the eight foot expanse in a landing roll. Springing to his feet, he continued the course agreed upon.

Him was in good shape, but only because Dr. Hilliard forced his workouts in the health care gymnasium. Lifting the weights and

jumping the jacks was fun sometimes, but not every day. Him said no at first, but Hilliard insisted as part of his therapy, so he said yes. When it came to both Hilliard and Jeremy, Him was getting tired of having no choices. But seeing as he had no choice, Him did as he was told.

Johnathan managed the next gap between buildings and repeated his rolling technique. The abandoned warehouse was three rooftops away.

Reg stumbled off the fire escaped

and onto the roof. He heaved a lungful of air. Bent at the waist, he saw his suspect hopping rooftops.

Figures.

Every second he watched Fare, put more distance between them. He stood upright, heaved his lungs full, and took off. As he jumped to the next rooftop, it occurred to him that if he hadn't looked in on Reuben, his suspect might be in handcuffs right now.

Reg stuck the landing, and kept running.

“Yeah, yeah, and if the sky grew grass, it would be the ground,” he said to his thoughts, then jumped to the next building.

*"He's still following us," Him said.
{Plenty of hiding places in the
warehouse. Remember where you ran
and hid with the first one, because you
were scared of getting caught?}*

"Uh-huh."

*{That stupid cop will never find us.
None of the stupid cops will find us
there.}*

Johnathan Fare picked up speed and jumped the widest expanse, onto the warehouse roof. He erupted from his signature roll and sprinted for the landing door. In his haste, he failed to notice his nose had begun to bleed again.

Reg paused to catch a breath. The last gap was two feet wider than the others. He leaned over the side of the building, peering down to the street. The front of the warehouse was boarded up. *Good.* He assumed the

back was the same. Experience told him the building most likely had a breach somewhere. A *vagrant doggie door*, his colleagues called it. He hoped Fare didn't know where it was.

{*Stop.*}

"We have to hurry. The cop—"

{*I'll hit you harder this time.*}

Johnathan Fare halted abruptly between the first and second landings.

{*Listen.*}

"To what?"

{I don't hear any sirens.}

"They will come. We have to hurry."

{Shut up, Meathead.}

Him did not like being called Meathead, either.

{We're going to hide and wait for this cop to come down. If we get rid of him, maybe no one will know where we are. He was the only one I saw chasing us.}

"No, they will put us in the cage."

{Stupid, we can get away.}

Him's brain moved on what his

friend said. They would definitely go in the cage for the women they hurt. If Jeremy knew a way out, and it meant killing only one more person, that wasn't so bad, was it?

Him's brain moved on it a moment longer, and he decided it wasn't such a bad thing. Especially, since great excitement sped his heartbeat, at the thought of cutting and slashing on the cop. Johnathan Fare heard Reg enter the building from above.

{Cage or freedom, Einstein?}

"Freedom."

Reg cringed when the corroded roof door creaked on opening. The sound echoed down into the building. *If he didn't know I was coming, he does now.* A floor by floor search was his first thought, before he noticed the drops of fresh blood.

Fading sunlight peeked through small stairway windows on each landing. The stench of urine, decaying building sediment, and decades old machinery oil, crept with him and his

glock down into the gloomy heart of the warehouse. The blood trail led through the entrance to the ground floor. Either Fare was hiding on that floor, or he was long gone through the *vagrant doggie door*.

Reg took position beside the entrance, with his back against the wall. He held the glock gripped in both hands, chest high.

"Johnathan Fare, police. I'm not here to hurt you," he lied, "or accuse you of anything, I just want to talk."

In the musty silence that followed,

Reg remembered Whitfield's casefile. Fare hated being called by his birth name.

"Him, are you there? I know you're not a bad person. You just had a run of rotten luck. Could happen to anyone. Come out and talk to me about it. I can clear some things up for you. What do you say?"

Him felt surprise when the cop mentioned his name. He hated both names, but Him was better than John, because his mother named him John.

The only person who gave enough respect, to call Him by the name he liked least, was Dr. Whitfield.

The cop said he wanted to clear things up. Him didn't want clear things. Control over people always telling Him what to do, is what was wanted. Whitfield started to give it, but she was taken away. Could this cop give what was wanted, like Whitfield tried to?

Reg took the continued silence as a sign that his hidden exit did exist.

He peeked quickly through the doorway to survey the room. Scary, deep shadows littered the landing. The only light seeped through small holes in the plywood boarded to the windows.

“A flashlight would be nice, but there’s no Ben & Jerry’s in hell, either. Nothing to it but to do it, Reg,” he said, and cautiously entered the first floor of the warehouse.

Four steps in, he was startled by a dazzle of movement to his left. Iron knuckles crunched his cheek—*fwapp!*

Reg stumbled sideways and fell, spraying up a heavy cloud of sawdust. His glock clanked through the cloud and came to a sliding stop, ten feet away. Fare was on top of him in an instant, delivering jackhammer blows to his face.

Reg deflected as much as he could with his forearms. He bucked his hips, and his attacker's balance was skewed momentarily, but Fare reset quickly and continued his vicious assault.

In a last ditch effort to stave off

the approaching blackout, Reg mustered his strength and bucked his hips a final time. He might as well have been in hell, hoping for that pint of Ben and Jerry's. His attacker's surprise attack proved too much.

His last sight before losing consciousness was the Levi's wearing, male model, who strolled out of Hilliard's office. He had hit the lottery in every state on the same day, but would never see a dime of the money.

ON HIS RETURN trip from blackout central, the first thing to greet him was an excruciating headache. If someone told him an anvil had been dropped on his head, he would have asked if they were sure it wasn't two.

The second was that he was tied up. His hands were behind his back, his knees bent, and his ankles latched to his wrists.

Hog-tied!

Reg strained against his bonds to no avail.

*Bastard's got me wrapped tight.
But where? What is this place?*

He lay on his left side, atop a large, stone slab, carved in the shape of a table. His sole view was a jaggedly hewn rock wall, several feet away. He struggled to pendulum over on his right side.

Immediately, a high-wattage bulb on the opposite rock wall stung his corneas. The reverberating pain made his head feel as if a third anvil

had been dropped on it. He squinted and blinked until the pain subsided back to two. As the rest of his senses joined him in consciousness, the aroma of raw sewage stung his nose. He had chased a drug runner under the streets once. It was a smell you didn't forget.

Left of the blinding light, a metal storage unit built into the wall extended the height of the eight foot cave. Canned goods and food stuffs covered in years of neglect littered dusty shelves. Four fifteen gallon

whiskey barrels, stacked in pairs, flanked the storage unit. He tilted his head upward. Against that wall were corroded folding chairs, and a large, black metal trunk.

If this place was what he figured, the black trunk probably contained a *change of clothing, short wave radio, flashlight, batteries, a tool set, and heavy rope*. All standard supplies for an underground bomb shelter.

This must have been where Fare was headed all along. Pulsating jabs of frontal lobe pain accompanied the

thought. He saw no sign of his captor, but that didn't mean he wasn't near. And if the way he was tied up was any indication, he was in for a night that did not offer the prospect of ending on a positive note.

"WHAT TIME do you have?"

Officer Dukes turned his wrist to the black dial on his Seiko. "10:30, Rube."

"Pick it up, people," Reuben said. "I want a light in every crevice in this basement. If we find Fare, we find Reg. Where are the homeowners?"

"Upstairs. Kowalski's got them under a microscope," Dukes said.

"Bitch on a stick," Reuben

muttered. He had hoped to get a shot at the homeowners, before Kowalski got his paws on them. Captain Freeman had put him in charge of the basement team, only because he pissed a cop fit about staying involved.

“No way am I going to the hospital,” he’d told Freeman. “You gave this lead to me and Reg, and I’ll be damned if I let you take it away now.”

Kowalski had been in earshot of the conversation. The Polish Prick

glared at him, as if to say, *'I won't forget this.'* But Reuben had meaner dragons to slay. Like finding out where in *satan's hell* his partner had gotten to, and whether he was still alive. The last thing he remembered was Reg climbing a fire escape. At least, that's what he thought he saw. His head was in a vice grip of fog at the time.

The vibrating buzz of his cell phone interrupted the beginnings of a plan to gain access to the homeowners.

"Rivers, tell me you have something, anything."

"Just talked to a witness who says she puts two men jumping across rooftops. Time frame fits."

"Come again?"

"She figured they were high on PCP or something. Saw them go into the old industrial parts warehouse. If we were still partners, and you had gone missing in pursuit of a suspect, I know what I would do right now. Five minutes, Reuben, before I call Kowalski."

“I owe you,” Reuben said, and ran to find Freeman.

It took less than a minute of the five, to tell his boss he changed his mind about going to the emergency room. Then, as if headed home for a plate of Gloria’s steamy *Arroz Con Pollo*, Reuben whisked his hefty bulk to the nearest patrol car.

He had skimmed the Fare file they found in Reg’s car. He understood why his partner wanted to kill him. It’s likely no amount of therapy will cure someone as sick as Johnathan

Fare. It wasn't a matter of *if* he killed again, but when. The miracle was that it took so long for him to start.

Whatever the case, sob story and all, Reuben understood one other thing. *If Fare hurt his partner, he would do some killing of his own.*

As he swerved the patrol car in the direction of where Reg was last seen, apparitions of the late B.J. Ortiz flooded his thoughts.

Part 5

Up is Down

A HEALTHY AMOUNT of fear kept you alert and breathing in the streets. This was different. This was a fear of being carved up like a Tribal Totem pole. The crime scene photos Reuben showed him days ago, at the diner, leavened Reg's apprehension. It also didn't help that he knew Fare would probably drink his blood. Approaching footsteps added shudder icing, atop his growing

anxiety cake.

*{Told you he wasn't going
anywhere. We tied him up good.}*

"Yeah, Jeremy, you told me. Now,
let me—"

*{I'm going to have a little fun with
this one first. In fact, until it's time for
you to do your thing, Johnnie boy, I'll
take over.}*

Something happened to Him.
Something that in all the time of
Jeremy being around, never
happened before. Him felt a floaty,
dreamy sensation, and then his soul

was sucked into a vacuum of darkness. *He didn't have control anymore.*

{Jeremy, what's happening?}

"Quiet, retard. I don't need you bothering me in my head, while I am trying to have some fun with ..."

Jeremy held up Reg's ID from his wallet. "... Detective Reginald T. Williams. So, you ain't just a regular flatfoot?"

This is not right. Him is supposed to be out. Jeremy is supposed to be in.

As if possessed, Johnathan's left

arm flailed through the air,
threatening to topple him over.

"Hey, mental midget, did I do this to you when I was inside? Calm down, or I'll leave you in there to stay."

Transposed Johnathan's left arm dropped to his side. Him was still freaked out, but did not want to risk being left inside.

{I don't understand, Jeremy. How did I get in here, and you out there? I didn't know you could do that.}

"Johnnie boy, I swear, if you say one more word, *you will never get out*

again.”

Him did not speak, because if that happened, it would be one more word.

What in the name of the exorcism of Emily Rose is going on? Was Reg hearing what he thought? Jeremy is back? He isn't supposed to show up for another month.

According to Dr. Whitfield, Jeremy was the aggressor. He had been gaining leverage as time passed. So much so, she used an experimental drug to nullify his influence.

Reg was fairly confident he could talk Him down with promises of no cages. The fact that Dr. Whitfield was still alive was the ace up his sleeve. Jeremy being there, *and apparently in charge*, put a new shade of lipstick on his dilemma pig.

"*She's a looker,*" Jeremy said, slobbering over a picture of Carol in Reg's wallet.

"Listen, Jeremy—" Reg started.

"You know who I am? Good. I would hate to have to play bumbling idiot to fool you."

The shrill in Jeremy's voice raked through Reg's pounding headache. It wasn't nails on a chalkboard, but close.

"We can come to a mutual understanding. You haven't hurt me yet, and as for the others you have hurt—"

Jeremy sneered, baring his teeth. He grabbed the rope connecting Reg's ankles to his wrists, and twisted him onto his stomach. He lifted him away from the table and let go.

Reg's upper chest and face met

the rock floor like a new neighbor. He teetered briefly, and came to rest right side down, facing his captor. In the seconds it took for the magnitude of Fare's strength to register, a boot to his gut rocked him back against the base of the stone slab.

"OOOMPF!" Spittle, and all the air he had ever breathed, jettisoned from his lungs.

"Pee Wee Herman has retreated to his playhouse. You're dealing with *Jeremy* now."

Reg saw the Lugz boot

accelerating toward his forehead at a hundred-miles-per-hour, then blackness.

FLUORESCENT LIGHTS flickered on in the dilapidated warehouse. *Finally*, Reuben thought. He had been making good time, considering his department issue flashlight was his only weapon against the shadows. But now that the Calvary had gotten through to Electric Light & Power, he could pick up the pace.

And pick up the pace he'd better, before that same Calvary rumbled in,

wanting to know how he managed to get there thirty minutes ahead of them. Thank the investigative gods he was able to wiggle through a gap in the boarded plywood, in the rear of the building. If not, he might still be out there with them.

Reuben completed the third floor as thoroughly as he could in haste, and exited the fire door. Powerful, determined legs hopped two steps at a time up to the fourth floor landing. He stopped abruptly.

A blood trail?

The path of red crumbs led both up to the fifth floor, and back down to the one he'd just completed searching. He didn't cloud his mind with the thought of whose blood it might be, but rather, where it originated.

Had to start from above. They came in through the roof.

Reuben reversed course, taking the steps down three at a time. He followed the trail to the first floor. If his instincts were worth anything, the gathering of droplets uncovered

behind the landing door, had to be two to three hours old.

He spotted a larger patch of blood fifteen feet away, and bounded over to investigate. It looked to him more like an impact splotch, rather than drippings from a wound.

If Reg was chasing Fare, and Fare was bleeding, he could have followed the trail into an ambush.

Detective Reuben Garcia balked at what the evidence was telling him. His partner was six feet, two hundred fifteen pounds, could bench press a

lot, and was one of the fastest men on the force. He had seen Reg take out a wrestler-built security guard, with one punch, when the guy was stupid enough to provoke him.

I wouldn't even want a part of Reg if he was riled up. No way could Fare have ...

Reuben whipped his glock in the direction of a peripheral flash. The item he saw lying under a rusted industrial cutter, returned him to his depressing theory. He darted over, saw the blood on Reg's badge, and

stormed back to the droplets to see if there was more trail to follow.

REG CAME to his senses for the second time, and for the second time was aware of the scourge of throbbing in his head. He awoke facing the high wattage bulb. He squinted *and ughed* the four anvils down to three.

The *Lugz Tractor Trailer* that crashed into his face hadn't changed the cavern, but *he* was different. Dried blood caked tight on his brow,

and cheeks, told him so. As did the sizable lump on his forehead, from where the blood had oozed.

He had been hogtied for hours, and could barely feel his numb limbs attached to their sockets. The cold, foul-smelling breeze goose-bumping his skin, was another matter.

I'm naked? No, not naked, stripped down to my boxers.

The thought was as sluggish as it was disturbing. It made his head feel like there was a never-ending chorus line of anvils being dropped on it. He

gingerly maneuvered his head to scan the bunker. He spotted Fare sitting in one of the folding chairs, next to the storage chest, nodding off.

This is it.

If he held any hopes of escape, and avoiding being sifted like wheat by the devil in the Animal, he needed to get free. Take Fare down while he was half asleep. On even terms, and at current strength, Fare would rag-doll him from one rock wall to the other.

Detective Reginald Thomas Williams gyrated, manipulated,

wrestled, struggled, twisted, turned, and silently cursed the ties that bound him. He thought of Fare waking and discovering what he was trying to do. He thought of the Artemisians, and the horrors they committed against innocent children. KIWI Incorporated added fuel to his determinate fire.

His thoughts turned inward, and how his downfall began with a stray bullet that killed a family man. A family man whose funeral he was kept from attending, because of

politics.

The gathering storm of anger helped him loosen his ties. But the final thought which allowed him to slip his left hand free, was of Carol. If it took re-convincing the world that the earth was flat, he would be blissfully reunited with his wife.

Hurry up, Reg, get the leg knots off. Take this sick bastard out before he wakes up.

His heart pounded. The anvils fell on his head harder and faster. Numb fingers bungled over tangles of rope,

pulling and loosening frantically. Every muscle in his body screamed in defiant ache. His lower back felt as if there was an assassin's dagger sticking in it. If he managed to get out alive, he would need a week to heal.

Got it!

The shrill voice from behind ripped through his elation. *"Where do you think you're going?"*

Fare tackled him off the stone slab, and onto the bedrock floor. Immediately, wild fists connected with the back of his head.

{*You said he couldn't get free if his life depended on it.*}

"Shut up, Johnnie."

Reg wasn't about to let Fare get the best of him a second time, no matter who was calling the shots in the *Cuckoo's Nest*. He combusted the fumes of his strength and flung off his attacker.

Fare hit the stone wall, below the high wattage bulb. He *thumped* down on his backside. Reg wasted no time reveling in the achievement. He fought gravity on rubbery legs and

wobbled over to him.

{Here he comes, Jeremy. Give me control—}

"Dammit, John, I said no. Now you will never get back *control*."

{But you said...}

Their distracting conversation was cut short by a right to their jaw, followed by a left cross. Their head slammed off the wall. But they were more resilient than their flatfoot attacker anticipated, and managed a hard kick to his stomach.

Reg backstroked out of control

toward the stone slab. As he flipped over the pillar, crumbling onto the unforgiving ground on the other side, the last word the Animal spoke replayed in his head—*Control!*

That is what this whole thing is about. Him had it, Jeremy wanted it. Jeremy finally managed to take it, and Him wanted it back.

He remembered something Dr. Whitfield told him, following her blow up with Reuben.

“I was trying to build his confidence in making decisions on his own,

instead of being manipulated by others. Whether it was the Artemisians, Jeremy, or anyone else."

Reg changed his mind about killing the Animal. Like Dr. Whitfield, he now wanted to help. It didn't mean Fare wouldn't pay for his crimes, but in the play he was about to make, he would leave that part out.

He forced his body parts to their feet. "Him, I know you can hear me inside of Jeremy. That is *your* body. *You* are in control. Don't let Jeremy tell you what to do anymore. I know

you want to make your own decisions. *Dr. Whitfield* told me so.”

Jeremy snickered like a hyena foaming at the mouth. “You gotta stop, man, you’re killing me. You think the retard can take back control, just because he was born in this body? *Johnnie boy is never seeing the light of day again.*”

“That’s what he wants you to think, Him. It’s not true. Dr. Whitfield is alive. She’s not dead like Hilliard told you. She’s alive and wants to help you get control. All you have to do is

come out.”

{*Whitfield alive? Could that be true? Did Dr. Hilliard lie?*}

Jeremy sneered, baring pink gums, and jumped on top of the table to tower over Reg.

“Don't listen to this sack of shit, Johnnie. He's a lying *flatfoot*.”

Remember the cage? If you listen to this sack of balls, you're going to be in a cage for the rest of your life. Isn't that right, Detective Piss-ant? Tell Johnnie boy the truth, *if you can*.”

Reg saw him coming this time. He

sidestepped Fare's lunge and cold-cocked him in the left temple. He followed the Animal's stagger to the end of the table, and hit him again.

Johnathan Fare torpedoed into the wall storage unit. Dust, expired food stuffs, and rusty shelves exploded around him. Instead of pouncing on him again, Reg continued his play.

"I wasn't lying, Him. Whitfield is alive and I can prove it. She told me she used to make you blueberry marmalade, and you liked the

marmalade more than chocolate.”

Him considered that the cop was telling the truth. He gave enough respect to know what was really wanted—*Control*. He spoke like Whitfield used to speak, and gave confidence Him could make it on his own. If Whitfield *was* alive, and she must be, or how would the cop know about marmalade, then maybe Him could finally get control for good.

Jeremy shook his head free of cobwebs, and growled up at Reg like a *real animal*. He scrambled upright,

slipping on packages of meals-ready-to-eat, before gaining his balance.

"You should have killed me when I was down. Now it's time for *you* to go inside, flatfoot. *Inside of hell.*"

Jeremy pulled Reg's glock out of the front pocket of baggy jeans.

"Any last words?"

"It's now or never, Him. *Now or never,*" Reg pleaded.

"Ha! Personally, I would have gone with *fuck you*, or *kiss my balls*. You just wasted your last words on earth on a *retard.*"

Jeremy took aim at the flatfoot's hairy, barreled chest. He cackled a high-pitched Joker's laugh and pulled the trigger. Then confusion hit him like the bullet was supposed to hit the cop.

{What the shit? I know I shot that flatfoot right in his—Dammit! Johnnie boy? Him? I didn't mean any of those things I said. You're not a retard. You're the smartest person I know. Just let me out to finish what I started, and I promise, I will give you control again.}

"No, Jeremy. You are the one never getting back out."

{Half-wit. You let me out right now, or I swear, when I do get out, you'll be sorry. Give up control, retard.}

"I am in control now, and I like it," Him said.

"Okay, Him, you got what you wanted. Hand me my gun and we can go see Whitfield, and put you in charge for good."

Him had taken control, but hadn't lowered the gun aimed at Reg's chest.

"Not too fast, R-Reggie. That is

your name, right? Reggie W-Williams?"

"That's me. Now, let's be calm and not do anything bad."

"I am in control, and I don't want cages. You said Whitfield is *alive*?"

Reg nodded. "How else would I know about the marmalade?"

"And you speak like Whitfield says is the truth?"

"What do you want to know?"

"Promise there will be no cages."

The tormented look in Fare's eyes pained Reg, but he didn't want to lie

to the kid. He began to see what Dr. Whitfield must have seen, the day Johnathan walked into her home. Beneath his golden locks and the anguish in his sea-blue eyes, there was a lost child crying out for help.

"How about a *big room* like this one? No cages, just big rooms. Would you be okay with that?" Reg said.

"I could live in a big room," Him said. "I live in a big room now, in the basement. What about Whitfield? I will see her like you said?"

"Johna—I mean, Him, if you hand

me that gun right now, I'll make sure Whitfield visits you every week for at least an hour."

Him believed everything the detective said, *and was wracked with guilt.*

Startling both men, Reuben burst into the underground chamber, a white-knuckle grip on his glock. He saw two things, but reacted to only one. A beaten, bloody, underwear-clad partner surprised him, but wasn't the sight he reacted to. Their suspect pointing a weapon at Reg

was the sight that garnered Reuben's aim, and fire, into Fare's chest.

"Reuben, no—!" was as far as Reg got in protest.

Johnathan Fare screamed. His wail of pain echoed through the underground chamber. As Reg's face pinched tight in anguish, the Animal clutched his chest and collapsed onto the grimy bedrock.

“I WON’T apologize for taking the shot. The guy had you reserved for a morgue slab. It was him or you,” Reuben said.

“Not the point. I had him talked down. He could have gotten help. Now he’s got dead,” Reg said.

“Excuse me, detective,” the paramedic said.

Reuben stepped around the EMT, allowing him access to the other side

of Reg's face.

“Help from who? King Neptune and his undersea gang? The guy was a killer, Reg, plain and simple. He was a killer, the freak in his head was a killer, and they had a taste for blood, literally.”

“Again, not the point. There could have been a saving grace out there for him. Dr. Whitfield, maybe. Some other doctor. A new medication. Something to put that kid back on the right track.”

“Here you go, detective.” The

paramedic filled Reg's hand with several packs of 800mg ibuprofen. "These should get you through the next couple of days. You sure you don't want a lift to emergency, just to be sure?"

Reg probed a finger at the golf ball sized lump under the bandage on his forehead. "Ow. Smart move, Reg."

"Are you sure—"

"I'll live," he patted the bearded paramedic on the shoulder, "thanks for patching me up." Reg pressed his hands into his thighs and tried to

hoist off the ambulance tailgate.

“Whoa there, Kemosabe.” Reuben caught him before he fell to the asphalt. “You going to make it home? Maybe you *should* go to eme—”

“I’m fine. Just a little dizzy spell, is all.”

“Williams. Garcia. Over here, now.”

Detective partners rolled their eyes at the clear night sky. Reg’s dizzy spell passed, but at the sound of Captain Freeman’s bullhorn, his anvils came back. He put one rubbery leg in front of the other and stalked

behind Reuben. They came upon an erect, stern-faced Freeman. He looked to be posing for the lone photographer already on the scene, secluded behind cautionary tape surrounding the warehouse.

Freeman glared at Reuben first, then Reg. “I’d rip both of you new asses, if I didn’t think you’d shit all over the street. And you, Williams, your first call should have been to me, or the task force, not your partner.”

“I wanted to be sure I had the right m—”

“You think I’m stupid? Like I just got off the boat from, *‘buy whatever bullshit that comes out of your mouth,’* land? You wanted to bag the suspect yourself. That’s why you came to me in the first place.”

“To be fair, Cap, we did bag the guy,” Reuben said.

Freeman’s hard stare chisled into Reuben’s eyes. “You’re not in the clear, Garcia. Two screw ups don’t make a broken clock right three times a day. Soon as you got the call from screw up number one, you should

have been in my office.”

Freeman continued to glare down both men. Reuben fiddled with his pants, adjusting his belt. Reg tried to keep the two sticks of butter he was standing on from melting. He watched another photographer pull up on a side street. The unusually tall man hopped out of a black van, and struck up a conversation with the first. Freeman let out a heavy sigh. Screw up attention turned back his way.

“However ... as Garcia pointed

out, you did collar the suspect. You deserve some credit for not letting your screw-ups stop you from getting the job done. Congrats for returning a sense of security to the city.”

“Thanks, boss,” Reuben said.

“That’s Captain Boss. And you’re still on the clock, Garcia. I want this incident from screw-up to bloody conclusion on my desk before you clock out.”

Reuben’s eyes dropped back to his belt.

“And you,” Freeman nodded at

Reg, “You look like burnt black licorice. Medics clear you to go home?”

“Just now,” Reg said.

“Then be there and away from here. Garcia will drop off the paperwork for your report, and come back for it sometime tomorrow. Monday morning, be in my office.”

“Will do, Captain Freeman,” Reg said. He glanced past Reuben’s sunken head at the photographers. Both were snapping away, lighting up the crisp night with continuous flash

pops.

“What are you waiting for, Christmas? Dismissed,” Freeman said. He turned away from them and motioned toward officers guarding the warehouse. “Dubinski, get over here. I have a job for you.”

Reuben said, “Come on, partner, I’ll take you home. And don’t worry about Saturday night. I’ll explain it to Abigail.”

Following behind Reuben to the patrol car, Reg grinned. It hurt his face. He grinned at the hurt.

A SICILIAN PIE warmed in the oven, a deluge submerged the city outside his window, and a virgin fifth of Seagram's Extra Dry begged to be consumed.

He'd been trying to wait for Reuben, who promised to stop by after his dinner party. In the interim, Reg cleaned the apartment, discarding weeks of pizza boxes, gin bottles, and old newspapers. Even the

Hoover was paroled from its closet prison, and the floors given a good suction.

Fare had roughed him up pretty good, both in the ambush and underground bunker. Captain Freeman was right. He looked like burnt black licorice two nights ago, and still did. The golf ball sized lump had shrunk to a marble, but still hurt. His ribs weren't managing any better. Jeremy's kick bruised two of them. The reflection staring back at him was as painful as it was grotesque.

Bah, it doesn't matter, he thought. The case was solved, the *Animal* was out of commission, and he had a feeling things would be looking up.

He flipped off the bathroom light and abandoned his chilly porcelain surroundings to check on his pie. All the way, he shook his head at the clip of Johnathan Fare playing in his head. Of him screaming, clutching his chest, and collapsing to the ground. *A shame he had to die*. Reuben said he couldn't be helped. Reg disagreed. The hammer fell in Reuben's favor. Now

that Johnathan was dead, *he couldn't be helped.*

Reg closed the oven door and cranked the heat up a notch on the dial. *Crispy crust is the only way to go.*

Johnathan Fare getting help may not have been in the cards, but perhaps justice for the atrocities he suffered will be. Captain Freeman promised to get in touch with Frankenmuth authorities, to investigate the Artemisian cover-up. Reg hoped that meant inserting an enema up their asses, and slamming

them on whatever came out.

As for his own troubles, he would bring flowers and Madelin's favorite sparkling wine to her house next week, and apologize. One of his uniformed white friends would have to go with him to get her to open the door. But once she did, he was confident he could coax her into receiving his peace offering. Under the influence, Madelin is susceptible to sound reasoning. He might have remembered that the first time, if he wasn't so preoccupied with Carol's

leaving, and catching the Animal. Now that the bad guy is caught, *scratch that, dead*, there was only Carol's leaving to focus on.

Sometime after making good with Madelin, he would take a few weeks off to look for his wife. Their blissful, matrimonial reunion setting would entail a candle lit dinner, Luther Vandross, lasagna baked from scratch, and the *blissful* part, *Carol Hanson Williams*. Her hazel eyes of seduction would be all the aphrodisiac he needed. The same

eyes captured as a monument to beauty, in the picture he kept in his wallet.

A giddy spell shook his body at the thought of holding her in his arms again. *I'm coming for you, baby, I'm coming.* He scampered back into the bedroom to change out of his robe before Reuben arrived. The nightstand alarm read 10:30 PM. He thought again on his wife's eyes, and even about the funky little beaded necklace she liked to wear.

As he slipped on his favorite black

cotton T-Shirt, Reuben's knock echoed through the apartment. A cheerful hum on his tongue, Reg hurried to let him in.

"What's shaking, partner?" he said.

Reuben carried an overnight bag. His face was shiny with rain. His frown like that of someone who had lost his best friend, in some horrific accident. Along with the puffy sacks under Reuben's eyes, Reg put two and two together and came up with dinner party marital dispute. *Must*

have been a whopper to make Reuben cry. Hope Gloria is okay, he thought.

Reg took the overnight bag, closed the door, and ushered him to the living room sofa. He sat beside him, placing the satchel between them.

"Want a shot?"

"Sure, Reg, I'll take one."

Reuben sounded possessed by the demon of depression. He wouldn't look up. He sat, slumped like a lump, with tears streaming down his cheeks. A trembling hand clasped the offered drink. He gulped the shot.

"Rube, I don't know what happened, but I got your back. Stay here for as long as you need. *Mi casa es su casa, hermano*. Don't want to talk about it, that's fine, too."

Reuben extended his shot glass. Without a word, Reg filled it again to the top of the line. Same as before, Reuben gulped like a thirsty man, then cleared his throat.

"I love you like a brother, and Gloria likes you too. There's no easy way to tell you this, and if I don't just say it, I'll never get it out."

Reg rubbed his back for support.

"I'm here for you."

"They found another of Fare's victims underground, not too far from the bomb shelter."

Reg's rubbing hand stiffened.

"I-It was C-Carol." Reuben wiped his face on the back of his jacket sleeve. "Freeman thinks it happened when Fare's medication was first changed, five months ago. Like maybe Jeremy wasn't fully back, but still influencing him to kill."

Reg's hand fell limp off Reuben's

back, plopping on the overnight bag. He felt himself floating. The air around him grew thinner, making it hard to breathe. He had heard the words, but wasn't sure what they meant. He needed to hear them again, needed to clarify their meaning.

"What did you say?"

"Reg, I just want you to know—"

"My question was, *what did you say?*" Reg glared at him. His chest felt heavy.

Reuben stared glumly down at the vacuumed apartment floor. Between

tears rolling down his cheeks, he said, "The Animal killed your wife, Reg, and I'm sorry."

There were the words again. No mistaking them this time. His suspension returned. Ten feet in front of him, he fixated on the black, thirty-two-inch television screen. Reuben was no longer in the room. Then there was no more room. Reg stared deeper into the darkness, swearing he could make out an image within the onyx heart of his Mitsubishi.

It was just him and the black screen. A screen on which he had watched the lives of others play out, and often laughed at the outcome. A screen which was now broadcasting a show of a different kind, because the image he thought he saw came into focus.

It was himself. He was slipping on a banana peel, and falling into the abyss.

He felt the falling where he was sitting, and realized he was no longer watching it on the screen. *He was in the abyss.* Falling toward what, he

didn't know. It was strange. He had just heard that his wife was killed, and possibly sliced up a hundred different ways, by a psychotic, homicidal maniac, and he was as light as a feather.

"Reg?" Reuben said, snapping him back.

His head turned buoyantly in Reuben's direction.

"I called your sister. She said once I told you, she wanted you to call her right away. Kris thinks you'll want space, but said she would come

tonight if—”

“You told her before you told me?

You bastard.”

“I was looking out for you. That’s why I bought my bag to stay the night.”

Reuben’s words reached his ears filtered through the abyss. The only thing Reg heard was that his best friend told someone else first, that his wife was dead. Sister or not, he should have been the first to know. Suddenly, the man sitting across from him wasn’t his friend at all, but a

stranger invading his space.

"Leave, Rube."

"I bought my bag. I'm staying the nig—"

"Get the hell out, now."

Reuben saw the wicked in Reg's eyes, and relented. At the door, he said, "I'll sleep downstairs in the car. If you change your mind, buzz me and I'll come up for a drink." His heartfelt offer was answered by a slamming door.

Reg floated back to his seat on the couch in front of the screen. Maybe he

shouldn't have kicked him out. If Reuben hadn't found the blue prints for an underground bomb shelter, he would be dead right now.

Screw him. He should have told me first that Carol is... that Carol is...

"Oh, baby, I'm sorry. I should have been there to protect you. I should have listened to you." He lowered his head into his hands and wept.

His stream of tears became indistinguishable from the falling rain outside his window. The rain cleansed the atmosphere. His

anguished tears washed away his compassion for humankind. If the world could take someone like Carol, it deserved whatever it had coming.

He was sobbed out, six shots in, and suspended again when his sister's call came through. He couldn't think of any more names to call himself, so he started from the beginning. By the time the phone stopped, without being answered, he'd covered half the book.

Burning food stench wafted through his dark place. On his way to

chucking the bulk of his dinner in the trash, he took the phone off the hook. The rumbling in his belly forced him to salvage two of the least charred slices. If he was going to sit in front of the television, drinking and floating all night, he should at least eat something.

Reg hovered back to his perch of air, slices in tow. He snatched up the remote to distract himself from the ironic thought which popped into his head.

Carol was the one who feared a

visit, telling her he had died by a suspect's hand. He was the one who had received it instead.

He pressed the power button, and an announcer's voice joined him in the room. It was the tail end of a late night infomercial.

"... Bought to you by KIWI Incorporated. And remember, if it is not built KIWI, it's not built right."

Rage entered Detective Reginald Thomas Williams' soul. He now had a companion down in the abyss. A companion that wasn't the silent

type.

*{Are you going to let them get away
with this?}*

"No, no I'm not."

FIN.

Thank you for your patronage.

Irony 2—*Gin Soaked Dreams*
On sale now for .99 cents

About the Author

I could regale you with a biography which would include snippets of my life. I could highlight for you over forty years of both accomplishments and failures. Well, maybe not failures, I've never read an 'about the author' that included falling out of a tree in their youth.

I have no grandiose yarns to spin here. I am just a guy who has always wanted to be a writer. I have been writing off and on since the age of twelve. What I want to do more than anything, is concentrate on delivering you, the reader, quality works. If I can

do that, then I believe over time you
will come to know more about me
than you ever wanted to.

Sincerely,
Robert Shroud.

Also by Robert Shroud:

Irony 2—Gin Soaked Dreams

Irony 3—Summer 2016

Deep Within

Sticky Buns

Contact

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Thank you again for your patronage.